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Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Western Esotericism (*Aries*), Masonic Studies (*Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism*), New Age Studies (*JASANAS*), and neo-Pagan Studies (*Pomegranate*).

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

Volume 2, Issue 1 – Acting Editor’s Introduction

The first article by András Máté-Tóth (University of Szeged, Hungary), “Public Religion in Central and Eastern Europe: Towards an Investigation of José Casanova’s Theory,” is an ambitious study of the development of secularization theory by Casanova (and to a lesser extent his interactions with the work of Charles Taylor). Máté-Tóth is concerned to clarify inconsistencies in discussions of secularization, and to test Casanova’s extension of this theory against the post-1991 development of democracy (in various forms) in Central and Eastern Europe, and the role of “public religion” in these nations. This research contributes to knowledge about the interaction of religion and political systems in modern and contemporary cultures.

The next contribution is by Raymond Walter Radford (University of Sydney) and is titled “‘You people don’t know what the truth is ... Truth is obsolete’: New Religious Movements and Possible Future Scenarios.” This is an examination of the first six issues of a graphic novel, *Transmetropolitan*, by Warren Ellis. The story is about journalist Spider Jerusalem’s adventures in the world of imagined future cults. Radford uses William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark’s classic work on cult formation (the psycho-pathological, entrepreneurial, and subculture evolution models) to analyze the future religions that Ellis invents in *Transmetropolitan*. He also considers two notorious real-world new religions, Shoko Asahara’s Aum Shinrikyo and Jim Jones’ Peoples Temple, both associated with violence.

The third article, Carole M. Cusack’s “NXIVM, Religion, and ‘Cults’: Keith Raniere as Charismatic Leader and Transgressive Criminal,” is an analysis of a contemporary spiritual teacher, Keith Allen Raniere (b. 1960), known as Vanguard, and the organization he co-founded with Nancy Salzman (b. 1954), known as Prefect, NXIVM. NXIVM has been called a deviant spirituality and a pseudo-religious “cult”. Raniere manifested qualities and engaged in activities familiar from earlier leaders of NRMs, including David Berg of the Children of God and Jim Jones of People’s Temple; these include sexual relationships with multiple followers, paranoia about enemies, violence towards backsliders and apostates, and the intentional sexualization of children. Cusack argues “cult” is a problematic term, and that Raniere’s status as a convicted criminal is the clearest indication of NXIVM’s true nature.

The fourth research contribution is Mo Quirk’s (University of Sydney) “Disaster is the Thing with Feathers: Tragedy, Voids, and the Mothman as Animist.” The Mothman, a humanoid figure with wings and red eyes, was a short-lived apparition in Point Pleasant, West Virginia in 1966-1967, who has gone on to become culturally important for the community. Quirk uses the interrelated frameworks of Animism and Paganism to analyze the Mothman

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phenomenon and chronicles the development of a pilgrimage-like mode of travel to Point Pleasant, which was popularized through publications like John A. Keel's *The Mothman Prophecies* (1975). The Mothman has become a totem of Point Pleasant, and the town celebrates him with an iconic statue, and an annual festival.

The issue concludes with three book reviews that address new religions and new age phenomena. It is an honor to assist with the production of this issue.

Carole M. Cusack
University of Sydney

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In memoriam
James R. Lewis
1949 - 2022

Public Religion in Central and Eastern Europe: Towards an Investigation of José Casanova's theory

András Máté-Tóth

University of Szeged

Abstract

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

Keywords:

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

Introduction: The Nonreligious Sphere of Society

To begin a discussion of the development of secularization theory as it emerged from the collaboration of José Casanova and Charles Taylor,¹ one must differentiate between three concepts that are often indistinguishably applied in describing the presence and significance of, or the diminishing of the presence of, religion in modern societies: the secular; secularization; and secularism. The *secular* is an epistemological category that helps us distinguishing between the secular and the religious. *Secularization* is a theory conceptualizing certain processes of our modern world, while *secularism* is merely an outlook, or an ideology.

¹ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); José Casanova and Anne Phillips, 'A Debate on the Public Role of Religion and Its Social and Gender Implications', *Gender and Development Programme Paper Number 5*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, September 2009.

These key concepts must be investigated in order to achieve a stable frame for our investigation of the East Central European region.

In Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007), the first, contemporary sense of the word *secular* (and of *secularity*) is the separation of state and church, or more broadly, not perceiving God and the divine revelation as the natural origin of life's meaning and the norm for human actions. In contemporary societies individuals and social institutions are independent from this fundamental religious provenance and influence.² In its second sense, secularity means the decline of religious practice: people are not going to churches as often, are not praying as often, and so on. In this second sense secularity denotes the social process by which people no longer regard faith in God and the practice of faith as self-evident. For Taylor, however, the most important sense of the secular is its third interpretation: in our modern world the religious interpretation is merely one of many possible interpretations, the religious dimension itself is present in society, in the individual's self-interpretation, and in public discourse as an *immanent frame*.

Taylor accounts for three main subtraction stories that are characteristic of secular relations.³ The first one is *the eradication of the religious outlook from the public sphere*. This is not merely the triumph of the 'scientific outlook'; it is the disenchantment of the cosmos, the disenchantment of the world previously full of enchantments. The worldview formerly held together by religious markers is now free and untethered. In enchanted world science, politics and religion were all part of the common religious system, and thus part of each other in an appropriate coherence. In the world of disenchantment all three spheres follow their own logic.⁴ The second characteristic is *the diminishing of personal religiosity and of religious commitment*. From here, one can trace the disintegration from the public world /common good. The individual has turned away from the public, external and eternal sources to the individual, internal, and is following their own choices and decisions. The third characteristic, and the most crucial one for Taylor, is the fragmentation of opinion regarding social order. Public opinion has turned away from the notion that the roots of its norms reside in religion. Religious beliefs are no longer the universal foundations for the norms of society but merely one of many possible foundations. We live in a society where there is no single axis around which the whole revolves.

According to the secularity narrative, humanity must abandon infantile naivety and its belief in God in order to recognize and fulfil the goals of self-realization. Namely, belief in God does not support the modern way of sexual fulfilment, and the predominant values of technological development, and consumerism. It is easy to see how the predominance of these goals had a diminishing effect on notions that relativized them. The narrative of personal and social maturity also contributes to secularism's belief in scientific and technological progress.

Thus, God has been exiled to the margins of life, presented as a distanced deity, an immobile mover without empathy, the clockmaker of the universe having no stake in present life and contemporary society. One can recognize deism, comprehended in this sense, from order and beauty ruling over the world, from the laws of nature, but by no means from revelation. Religious practice within this system means recognizing and knowing divine order and attempting to live in harmony with it. Hence, being Christian is being good, following civic

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

³ However, Taylor is far from seeing modernity as merely a story of loss, i.e., subtraction. In his words, "[t]he key difference we're looking at between our two marker dates is a shift in the understanding of what I called 'fullness', between a condition in which our highest spiritual and moral aspirations point us inescapably to God, one might say, make no sense without God, to one in which they can be related to a host of different sources, and frequently are referred to sources which deny God" (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26).

⁴ Although Taylor uses Max Weber's key term 'disenchantment' (*Entzauberung*), he does not adhere closely to Weber's concept. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 3rd edition, trans. Stephen Kalberg (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

norms, and being in harmony with an ordered society that more or less concedes to the moral requirements of the Decalogue. As a result, secular Christianity is experienced as a civil religion in the societies and adapted churches of present-day Europe, the United States and Canada. Taylor describes these state of affairs and terms it the immanent frame, as if every task humans have to face can be comprehended and solved with the logic and framework of immanence.⁵

Following Taylor's distinctions, I should mention that is not rare that we find in new, up-to-date specialized literature the term secularism denoting secularization in relation to state and church. This is primarily seen in socio-political texts, where *multiple secularisms* – following the pattern of Shmuel Eisenstadt's term of *multiple modernities* – seems to be the new buzzword.⁶ However, despite the occasional inconsistency, secularism signifies the ideology that promotes the separation of the religious and the civic sphere, while secularity customarily refers to the complex system of relations of society and religion. The concept of secularization is used more or less consistently to signify the institutionalization of the differentiation between the religious and the civic sphere (sacred and profane), and the diminishing of the individuals' participation in religious practices, and of individuals basing their worldviews on religious ideas. Consequently, as the concept of secularization is not merely multi-layered but overburdened, authors are forced to separate combined phenomena signified by secularization, distinguishing from it both the ideological aspirations of secularism and the secular dimension of society too.

The concept of the secular is a modern category that allows for the recognition, construction, codification and separation of that which is nonreligious. It is clear that the concepts of the secular and the religious are categories that are mutually constitutive. Viewed historically, the secular world, or more precisely the secular view of the world, has been established by the gradual unfastening of the entirety of social reality from its previous religious framework. In European history, the religious was considered the primary and universal dimension, while the secular was its opposite and, thus secondary, dimension. In contemporary sociology the secular dimension is the self-evident, exhaustive interpretative paradigm in which the sacral, religious dimension either maintains a certain position and significance, or loses it to differing degrees, depending on the continent, region, state, and historical age in question.

As the European mentality and identity was primarily formed on Christian religious outlook and Christian theology, its primary religious paradigm is Christian. Its basic notions are therefore informed by Christian theology, which speaks of God as the creator of the world and of humans as the stewards of its values and missions. Hence, the foundation and significance the world's dimensions are to be found in God, whose will is expressed in His revelation. However, increasingly since the Enlightenment, reason and later social discourse has become the new, exhaustive spring for answers to the majority of questions. This state was termed "postmetaphysical thinking" (*nachmetaphysisches Denken*) by Jürgen Habermas.⁷ It was to this state that Taylor applies the third sense of secularity.

Distinguishing between these different notions of the secular is critical within the debate on secularization theory, and subsequently for its application in sociology. Namely, in examining the development of the personal or the public presence of religion in different societies, one cannot lap back into the obsolete historical and philosophical framework in

⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539-93.

⁶ See Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt, 'Vielfältige Säkularitäten. Vorschlag Zu Einer Vergleichenden Analyse Religiös-Säkularer Grenzziehungen', *Denkströme: Journal Der Sächsischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften* 7 (2011): 53–71.

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1994).

which religious versus worldly dimensions formed the bipolar structure of thinking. Within current social relations, the issue at stake is not merely the process of the balance between these two equal and yet differently present spheres. Secularity is the universal framework of contemporary thinking; hence the religious dimension is present within this framework, particularly in the public space of society, influenced by its interpretation and functioning. Modernity has not repressed religion but provided new possibilities for religion to gain strength and manifest itself. Modernity has changed the meaning of society itself, partitioning the previously whole entity, differentiating it and fragmenting it. Religion has become one of the fragments, as has power, family, culture, industry, moral norms, and so on.

The concept of secularity, therefore, signifies two processes. In Europe, the concept of the secular was developed by Christian theology and meant the scope of the temporal realization of religious goals. Within the religious sphere one faces the turning away from the “temporal” towards the “eternal” goals, while on the other hand, there is the turning towards the temporal reality, towards the ‘world(ly)’. In this sense, Christian theology and judicial practice differentiated between the monastics (regular clergy) and the secular clergy, and later between the clergy and the ‘worldly’. Enabling simultaneously similar and dissimilar binary interpretations to the previous example is the model of the secular other, in which world is interpreted devoid of its religious content and purpose, and liberated from religious-church control. This notion and practice are based on the philosophy of *laïcité*, which defines its theory and practice in opposition to and liberated from religious sphere and church control. There is a significant difference between the two processes. In the first, secular is a religious category, in the second it is a nonreligious, a religion-less, category.⁸ Both trends are legacies of modern societies in which we focus on the religious changes, i.e., the shift in the significance of religion in society. However, if we choose to focus primarily on the analysis of the secular, we will see these societies as completely secular, despite their aforementioned dual legacy. Secularity is the basic interpretative framework and space in which human life takes place, defining our thinking about religion. From this perspective, the secular is not the divergence from the religious, but the religious is the divergence from the secular. A religion-less, disenchanted present forms the framework for human pursuit of happiness in modern societies, and this paradigm is likely to continue into the foreseeable future. The switch between religion and secularity seems to be complete. As religion was the self-evident position with no need of proof in Christendom, so is today nonreligious secularity the obvious stance in no need of particular justification. Even dedicated believers consider their religious conviction as one of the many possible options.

Modern secular society or culture denotes three modes that are not necessarily closely connected. In Casanova’s words:

One may distinguish three different ways of being secular: (a) that of mere secularity, that is, the phenomenological experience of living in a secular world and in a secular age, where being religious may be a normal viable option; (b) that of self-sufficient and exclusive secularity, that is, the phenomenological experience of living without religion as a normal, quasi-natural, taken-for-granted condition; and (c) that of secularist secularity, the is, the phenomenological experience not

⁸ As Casanova repeatedly notes, it was Talal Asad who directed our attention to the “remarkable ideological inversion” of the historical process of secularization: “For at one time ‘the secular’ was a part of a theological discourse (*saeculum*),” while later “the religious” is constituted by secular political and scientific discourse, so that “religion” itself as a historical category and as a universal globalized concept emerges as a construction of Western secular modernity. See José Casanova, “Public Religions Revisited.” In *Religion: Beyond the Concept*, edited by Hent de Vries, 101–119. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, 103).

only of being passively free but also actually of having been liberated from “religion” as a condition for human autonomy and human flourishing.⁹

Secularity is the analytical and evaluative category that traces, describes and interprets the direction of social change of religion, religious institutes and religiosity within the development of European society, with the understanding that a certain religious position transforms into a certain secular position. Secularization as an interpretative framework within sociology was first applied to studies of Europe, but has achieved a global application, in as much it interprets the historical direction of social change, development to be from, in a sense, primitive sacred towards the modern secular. The decline of religion and the privatization of religion became inherent parts of the secularization theory.

At first glance, the theory of secularization does support the self-evidence of the immanent frame in several European societies. Modernization in these societies went hand-in-hand with the decline of religious life and conviction, with its privatization and the substantial collapse of its social effectiveness. However, in other highly modernized societies, like the United States of America or South Korea, the level of religiosity is still high. For this very reason, the two subtheses of the secularization theory – the decline of religion and the privatization of religion – have been subjected to criticism and revision, as the proportional relation between modernization and the decline of religion is no longer held under scrutiny.¹⁰ Indeed, if the decline of religion could not be perceived in all of the highly modernized societies, the reasons for the change in religiosity within societies must be sought in different historical or other factors.¹¹ According to Casanova, who agrees with Taylor, the special factor responsible for the suppression of religion in European modernization is the so called *secularist stadal consciousness*.¹² In societies where one observes this stadal consciousness, one also observes a decline of religion in the process of modernization and, vice versa, where such consciousness plays no significant role the process of modernization is accomplished without religious decline.

According to Taylor, stadal consciousness is formulated throughout the nineteenth century, gradually becoming one of the most significant factors.¹³ Stadal consciousness provides a certain interpretative framework that facilitates differentiation between values, relations and significances, as well as their acceptance or rejection based on the stage they belong to. The era of modernity is also a product of this. Everything belonging to the era of modernity, whether value or relation, is considered obsolete and untenable from this point of view, as stadal consciousness describes stages in terms of advancement. Consequently, everything contemporary is acceptable, supportable, and in some sense is a norm that does not require particular justification or explanation. Starting from the Enlightenment and deepened by Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, stadal consciousness has released societies’ cognition and interpretative skills from tensions. This simple and effective model, damning anything from the past and imputing advance in a positive direction from past to future to be obsolete, has simplified and rendered plausible perceptions related to religion. The influence that religion, religious thought, and institutions once had on society and the individual were once and for all relegated to the discredited past. The contemporary era is a bearer of new

⁹ José Casanova, ‘The Secular, Secularizations, Secularism’, in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. by Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 60.

¹⁰ N. J. Demerath III, “Secularization and Sacralization Deconstructed and Reconstructed”, in *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, eds James A. Beckford and N. J. Demerath III (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore: SAGE Publications, 2007), 57-80.

¹¹ Casanova, ‘Public Religions Revisited’, 103-106.

¹² Casanova, ‘The Secular, Secularizations, Secularism’, 59.

¹³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 289.

interpretative and value system replacing the religious system and the role it played in a former era. In Taylor's words, "[t]his stadial consciousness is, so to speak, the ratchet at the end of the anthropocentric shift, which makes it (near) impossible to go back on it."¹⁴

Multilayered Secularization

Casanova deemed it necessary to rectify his previous thesis on public religions and address its criticism on three levels: "[First,] rethinking secularization beyond the West: toward a global comparative perspective; [second,] public religions beyond ecclesiastical disestablishment and civil society: the dual clause and the 'twin tolerations'; [third,] transnational religions, transnational imagined communities and globalization."¹⁵ In order to rethink secularization beyond the West (in this context signifying Western Europe), Casanova builds on Eisenstadt's thesis of "multiple modernities", according to which one cannot simply posit a continuation between the traditional and the modern, nor can one claim a radical break between the two.¹⁶ The relationship of tradition and modernity can rather be described with multiple modernities, particularly if we step outside the context of Western Europe. The initial interpretative theory of secularization was modelled on Western European societies and following Western Europe's colonization trajectory ascribed a global applicability to the theory. However, from a wider, multi-continent, or even from an East Central European perspective, Europe is the exemption rather than a model of a global occurrence.

The global perspective, when applied to Casanova's second level of rethinking public religion, relativizes the previously normative claim containing the deprivatization of religion "within the public sphere of civil society, within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, and within the constitutional premises of ecclesiastical disestablishment and juridical separation of church and state."¹⁷ Acknowledging his initial views to be informed by the Catholic *aggiornamento* of the 1960s, Casanova claims that the Catholic Church has shed its antimodernist sentiments at latest at the Second Vatican Council (wherein the *aggiornamento* reached its peak), recognizing the inalienable right of every individual to religious freedom.¹⁸ He accepted "the modern principle of disestablishment and the separation of church and state", embracing democracy and, consequently, changing "from a state-oriented to a civil-society oriented institution," all of which enabled its "crucial role in opposition to authoritarian regimes and in processes of democratization throughout the Catholic world."¹⁹ Changes like this are observable in twentieth-century histories of other world religions too. A pressing issue today is the not so theoretical question of Islam's compatibility with democracy. As Casanova notes, there are three separate, but interconnected, issues related to Islam reminiscent of the nineteenth-century anti-Catholic sentiments that were perceptible even in the twentieth century. Firstly, at a geopolitical level the question is whether we are witnessing a clash with Western civilization (reminiscent of earlier clash between 'Republicanism' and 'Romanism'); secondly, the presence of political Islam, particularly in Turkey, provokes reactions that can easily be related to reactions to Christian democracy; and, thirdly, there is the question of the articulation of the Muslim *ummah* outside the realm of *Dar el Islam*.²⁰

Although the last two centuries have facilitated changes in the relationship of churches and democracies, primarily in Europe, enabling church support of democratic relations, "the

¹⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 289.

¹⁵ Casanova, 'Public Religions Revisited', 103.

¹⁶ S. N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities", *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 1-29.

¹⁷ Casanova, 'Public Religions Revisited', 106.

¹⁸ Casanova, 'Public Religions Revisited', 106.

¹⁹ Casanova, 'Public Religions Revisited', 107.

²⁰ Casanova, 'Public Religions Revisited', 109.

pattern of caesaro-papist regulation and control of religion established by the early modern confessional absolutist state [...]” has been preserved to the present.²¹ The formal separation of state and church is characteristic of the majority of European countries, although in different ways. The so-called post-socialist countries have not followed the French model in which separation, among other things, means the complete lack of government support for churches. Nor are they following the Scandinavian model, or that of Great Britain, where one can talk about state churches. According to Casanova, in the post-socialist countries one discerns, besides the formal separation, also “an informal single or multichurch quasi-establishment” with “various corporatist-consociational arrangements and church-state entanglements” that necessitate a certain level and type of restriction of religious pluralism. Hence, the question especially pertinent to these countries is just how far the impenetrability of the “wall of separation” extends? As Casanova emphasizes, the existing, different European models of state and church separation are not tightly interconnected with levels of democratization. Consequently, separation of state and church in its classical liberal sense cannot be the measure of democracy.

Following Alfred Stepan’s suggestion, Casanova sees the model of “twin tolerations” better suited for the interpretation of the relation between state and church, between society and religion within democracies. In Stepan’s words, the model of “twin tolerations” is described as “the minimal boundaries of freedom of action that must somehow be crafted for political institutions *vis-à-vis* religious authorities, and for religious individuals and groups *vis-à-vis* political institutions.”²² As Casanova summarizes:

Religious authorities must “tolerate” the autonomy of democratically elected governments without claiming constitutionally privileged prerogatives to mandate or to veto public policy. Democratic political institutions, in turn, must “tolerate” the autonomy of religious individuals and groups not only in complete freedom to worship privately, but also to advance publicly their values in civil society and to sponsor organizations and movements in political society, so long as they do not violate democratic rules and adhere to the rule of law.²³

Returning to the third level on which Casanova deemed it necessary to reformulate his thesis on public religions, one encounters the change in the global significance of Catholicism. For centuries the Catholic Church has directed, influenced, and controlled the political and cultural relations of Europe and its colonies. Following the French revolution,²⁴ this global significance of Catholicism has diminished considerably, attaining new significance only in the last few decades. However, Casanova does not restrict the opportunities that the process of globalization allots to religions with ambitions to attain transnational and global status to Catholicism only, as he exemplifies another, differing trajectory with Pentecostalism. While the first is a centralized, global institution of great tradition, the latter is decentralized, with low territorial and traditional roots allowing an easy naturalization in any of the contemporary societies. The global cultural conditions have allowed even religions defined within boundaries of civilizational territories, like Islam or Hinduism, to attain partly deliberately, partly inevitably global statuses; however, this comes at a price of deterritorialization. Global media presence and global migration have both rewritten the principle of *cuius region, eius religio*

²¹ Casanova, ‘Public Religions Revisited’, 110-1.

²² Casanova, ‘Public Religions Revisited’, 103.

²³ Casanova, ‘Public Religions Revisited’, 103.

²⁴ Casanova traces the diminishing of the transnational dimension of Catholicism to the emergences of the Westphalian system of territorial nation-states in the sixteenth century and illustrates it with the fluctuating fate of the Jesuit order. See Casanova, ‘Public Religions Revisited’, 114.

that, in a sense, provided denominational peace in the past, but seems to be inadequate when it comes to facilitating the accommodation of religious diversity generated by global migration in the present. There is a need for new models of interreligious peace.

Revisiting and reconsidering the initial thesis of public religions seems to be most pressing from the globalization perspective. The conditions of globalization necessitate, in Casanova's words, that all the religions draw not only upon their own traditions but also increasingly upon one another. Intercivilizational encounters, cultural imitations and borrowings, diasporic diffusions, hybridity, creolization, and transcultural hyphenations are as much part and parcel of the global present as Western hegemony, cosmopolitan homogenization, religious fundamentalism, or the clash of civilizations.²⁵

So far, I have given an overview of the new discourse on the secularization paradigm as it emerges from recent works of Casanova and Taylor, in the process distinguishing the notions and concepts of secular(ity), secularization, and secularism. This was necessary for two reasons. The first reasons might be termed historical, namely, related to the history of theory. It is important to note that ever since the 1970s some of the initial assumptions of secularization still echo as dogmas even in contemporary scholarly works by prominent authors. My revisiting of the subject, particularly of its further development, wishes to free the present discourse from the shackles of this decades-long problem. However, I do not propose to completely reject the significance the original notion might have in the present day, in light of diverse religious revivals; rather, I wish to emphasize its relativity and, at the same time, offer a possibility for its further development. The consistent applications and validation of this paradigm shift is what I consider the chief aim and result of my own research related to secularization. The second reason for distinguishing between the differing notions of secular, secularization and secularism is for the purpose of perspective, especially as I consider the approach from the secular framework to be the adequate approach in examining the religious stock of the East Central European societies. Namely, it assures the omission of perspectives informed by theology and/or church power from the sociological approach.

The First and Second Wave of Transition

In East Central European societies, the democratic transition might be deemed paradigmatic, as the political systems of what were arguably dictatorships were replaced by rather more than less democratic systems: multi-party free elections, constitutional courts, and separation of powers, to mention just a few of their features. Apart from the structural transition, these countries also face debates about the quality of public life within democratic relations. One can draw basic conclusions both on the structural elements and on the quality of the democracies in the examined societies. I will provide an overview of the criteria that allows for such an examination. However, it must be remembered that the nuanced analysis of public religions' relations is possible only by nuanced description of democratic relations.

Andrew Roberts, arguing for the validity of the procedural conception of democracy in assessing the quality of East European democracies, claims that democracy can be defined as based on two major principles and/or practices (he terms them "main institutions").²⁶ The first is that of free election: a procedure by which the adult population of a country chooses its "most powerful policy makers" at free elections organized at regular intervals. At the elections each adult is entitled both to vote and to be a candidate. The second is the existence of civil rights that ensure for each adult the possibility to provide or obtain sufficient information allowing

²⁵ Casanova, 'Public Religions Revisited', 119.

²⁶ See Andrew Roberts, *The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe: Public Preferences and Policy Reforms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

him or her to effectively participate in the election. Based merely on these two principles, the definition of democracy is minimalist, as it omits the presence of other criteria, such as legislation, law enforcement, and so on. However, the East Central European transition requires a definition that allows the classification of countries; hence, definitions with multiple variables would limit the effectiveness of the model. Further, we do not aim for exhaustive analysis, but merely for the examination of the roles religions play in some of these new democracies.²⁷

If we link the formal presence of democracy to the procedure of well-informed free election of the electors, the quality of the democracy can be assessed based on how the governing relations of a given country facilitate the operation of the structural elements of democracy. In other words, if we define democracy according to certain rights of the people, the quality of that democracy depends on how those rights are realized; that is, whether the electors can exercise control over their government or are, rather, controlled by it.²⁸ Democracy is of a higher level in countries where the population exercises higher control over their politicians, and of lesser level where the populace's influence and control is realized in a lesser degree.

According to Roberts, there are three distinct areas where one can assess the support democratic institutions provide (or lack to provide) in order to advance popular rule:

Elections and rights give citizens three different powers: (1) the power to sanction incumbents, (2) the power to select new officials, and (3) the power to petition the government in between elections. All three powers enable citizens to control policy makers. If democracy promotes citizen rule, these linkages should be strong [and, consequently, one might also perceive the quality of democracy as strong].²⁹

A common mode of discussing the East Central European transition in public discourse, and often in academic discourse as well, is to identify transition focusing on a shift from autocracy to democracy. However, the last two decades following the 1990s has shown that the transition in this region is a much longer and a more complicated process. There are marked differences between the first half of the 1990s and the period following it. In all three areas of public sphere – in organs of government, politics, and civil societies – one can perceive a distinct boundary separating the first phase of the transition from the second. This line is not pinned to the same date in all states, but it is present in all of them. Let us now observe this trajectory in one of Roberts' case studies, namely, that of the Czech Republic.

First of all, the first free election cannot be perceived as an institution of established democracy for various reasons. On one hand, the Communist (or crypto-Communists) parties running in the first election held incomparably large advantages over other parties. They had exercised uncontested power for almost forty years and had developed a network of connections in every settlement. Their incumbents were imbedded in existing institutions of socialism, and their connection capital was unsurpassed. On the other hand, while the new parties could ride the wave of novelty, catching in their sails the winds of change, their programs were unfamiliar and their representatives unknown to the public. Also, this was the first instance of free election in several generations; hence, the knowledge and practice of this political procedure was rudimentary not only in Czech Republic but in all of Eastern European countries.³⁰

²⁷ According to Freedom House's survey, *Nations in Transit 2012*, in only eight countries of East Central Europe can the democratic structure be perceived as complete, i.e., consolidated (Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Hungary).

²⁸ Roberts calls this quality *linkage* (Roberts, *The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe*, 25, 26).

²⁹ Roberts, *The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe*, 32-3.

³⁰ Roberts, *The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe*, 54-55.

Following the system change, the associations as institutions of civil societies have metamorphosed and, most significantly, new societies have emerged gradually taking over the role of defining the institutional system of civil society from the previous, slowly metamorphosing associations. In analyzing this civic sphere of society, one can observe three phases of change: first, the phase of liberalization, starting with the termination of the state, i.e. state party control and the (police) power influence; second, the phase of institutionalization, in which new associations develop and their institutions are built up on new legal regulations; and third, the phase of consolidation, marked by the social, maintaining and profiling clean-up activities of these civil societies.

In case of Czech Republic, the transition comprises both the rapid collapse of the Communist regime and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia into two separate states. The period between the two historical events (the collapse and the dissolution) simultaneously marks the phases of liberalization and institutionalization ending with the Constitution that took effect on 1 January 1993. The start of the consolidation phase might be dated from the time Constitution took effect. The number of civil societies in the two years of the system change has been still concise. The first drastic leap in numbers was produced in the period between 1989 and 1992, by the end of which there were almost 20,000 registered civil societies in the country (the majority of them forming from the break-up of previous large associations). By 2008 the number of registered civil societies has reached 100,000.³¹

The characteristic of the increase in the number of civil societies supports the existence of a clearly dividable, two phases in the period following the system change. One can discern a short transitional phase concluding in legislation, followed by another phase that is significantly different from the first particularly in terms of corporate and political roles of civil societies. A strong corporate and political role seems to be characteristic of civil societies in the first, short transitional phase only, while one observes a continuous political impartiality both before that phase (due to enforced party directives) and following it (due to disappointment in the existing democracy and to the lack of civil society traditions).

The most significant religious-political issue still under debate in the Czech is that of the “return of church property confiscated in 1949.”³² The support of and the opposition to restitution plays a large role in the self-definition of post-system change political parties and is also a tool for distinction between them. The issue of church financing tied with the issue of restitution played equally large roles in election campaigns and in subsequent parliamentary debates. If the confiscated properties were to be returned to the church, they would provide a source of finance independent of the state. However, if these were retained, necessitating the continuation of the state-paid salaries, the state could exert a strong control over the church. The ambiguous role of Catholicism in the history of the Czech nation only complicates the matter. On the one hand, the notion of an independent, self-maintained church evokes and activates Czech anti-Catholic sentiments because “[u]nder the Habsburgs, forced Catholicisation proceeded hand-in-hand with Germanisation, and there has thus always been a feeling in the Czech lands that Catholicism, despite its being the major religion, is also anti-national.”³³ On the other hand, the proponents of active independent church refer to the fact that “key Catholic dissidents played an active role in the opposition.”³⁴ All in all, the participationists support restitution as they claim that “proper recognition of groups and

³¹ Benjamin Zeitler, *Verbandliche Interessenvertretung Und Mitgestaltung in Den Mittel- Und Osteuropäischen Transformationsstaate* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011).

³² Joan O’Mahony, ‘The Catholic Church and Civil Society: Democratic Options in the Post-Communist Czech Republic’, in *Church and State in Contemporary Europe: The Chimera of Neutrality* (ed. by John T. S. Madeley and Zsolt Enyedi (London: Routledge, 2003), 174.

³³ O’Mahony, ‘The Catholic Church and Civil Society’, 176.

³⁴ O’Mahony, ‘The Catholic Church and Civil Society’, 176.

associations require the creation and preservation of the resources that allow groups to govern themselves”, while the elitists consider issues related to religious societies as tools of party-political identity struggles; in their opinion religious societies have no interest in public activities.³⁵

It is a curious paradox that in a country showing the lowest religious rates in Europe, the relationship between religious societies and politics is not merely an issue concerning – according to many – an isolated religious sphere, but one of the basic issues of the post-Communist democracy. In a state where the relationship between church and state is characterized by distance, the political debates about the church touch on the core of democracy.

Religion in Public

Secularization has two dimensions: that of individual conviction and of the shifting, changing relationship between church and public. In his initial assessment of religion’s presence in the public, Casanova distinguished the spheres of the state, of politics, and of civil society. Casanova’s division of public space into the aforementioned spheres has a particular merit in relation to religion’s East Central European presence.³⁶ Namely, one of the primary features of the region’s countries following 1990 was the dissolution of the monolithic public life of the one-party dictatorship, and the development of the public structures characteristic of Western European democracies. Churches and other religious societies played crucial roles in this process, so much so that the political processes can be adequately analyzed by examining the public presence of religion. Let us take a more detailed look at Casanova’s tripartite division.

The three spheres of a society’s public life are the state, politics, and civil society. Religion is present in all three of these throughout Europe’s history and in the present. The religious institutions on church level correspond to the publicity on state level. Apart from few exceptions (for instance the UK and Sweden), the separation of state and church has been accomplished in Western Europe and is considered evident both in political and in religious thinking. In the political sphere – comprised of the parties, legislation and big political organizations influencing legislation – religion is present on institutional level through Christian political parties supported by the church(es), through church organized political interventions that aim at influencing legislation, and through social organizations supported or operated by churches. In Western Europe the presence of religion in this sphere has gradually reduced and withdrawn from politics for reasons often not merely political, but theological too. There are not many existing Christian parties, unions, social movements supported by the church. The third sphere of civil society is where individual conviction is communally guarded, displayed, and revealed. Civil society expressly accepts and incorporates the separate operation of state and church, meaning that the state cannot demand its citizens to comply to certain church requirements (hence, the civil registration of birth records and marriages), nor can churches rely on state cooperation to provide for their exclusive rights. Civil society asserts the freedom of individual political convictions and of their collective, public manifestation. The activity of religious communities within the sphere of civil society can be also defined as the network activity of faith-based communities. In Western Europe these faith-based communities form the primary form of religion’s public presence in societies.

³⁵ O’Mahony, ‘The Catholic Church and Civil Society’, 172.

³⁶ José Casanova, ‘Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective’, *The Hedgehog Review* 8, no. 1-2 (2006): 21.

State

The primary political demand of the East Central European countries following the system change was that of (re)establishing state sovereignty. Although some of the countries have a longer or shorter history of state sovereignty – the continuation of which was broken by shorter historical periods – there are countries that have achieved independence only following the system change, all of them to a more or lesser degree experiencing a restricted state sovereignty before the system change. Consequently, one of the common features of the region's countries is the demand of independent state existence and its guarantee, and the constitutional and political actions aiming to secure it.

The leaders of religious communities with substantial memberships and, therefore, large influences whose histories have long been interwoven with the history of a given country, have supported the primary strategic goal of the state. In several countries, the foundation of the state and the Catholic Church gaining ground can be perceived as the result of the same state act. In other Orthodox countries, the existence of nation-state and nation-church has been inseparable.

As we move further from the years of the system change (1989-1991), all of the region's countries have achieved, and constitutionally established, their sovereignty, so the next issue for the now independent states became establishing their network of international contacts. Negotiations were initiated, new alliances were made. These diplomatic actions, on the one hand, posed challenges to the interpretation of state sovereignty and, on the other hand, forced the states to freely renounce certain elements of their total and inviolable sovereignty. The establishment of state sovereignty is the primary state activity of the period following the system change, while participating in international networks and facing the tensions it provokes must be seen as a subsequent period. In some countries these two actions are almost simultaneous; in others there are years between them. The two most important international organizations influencing this period are NATO and the European Union. The question of joining NATO has historically generated fewer debates than the question of joining the EU. Controversies around joining the EU were significant in all of the region's countries. While all of them shared the unambiguous goal of joining the EU, not all of them were able to meet its requirements by the last two periods of EU expansion.³⁷

In this second period, the churches strove to cooperate closely with the state, or rather to accommodate to the new statehood in two areas: cultural and economic. Culturally, they strove to transcendently establish the new state, revoking the state-creating role of Christianity in history and emphasizing the central elements of Christian state conception. Economically, the most important task of this second period, after establishing the constitutional guaranty of state and church cooperation, was the legal assurance of church financing from government budget. Internal to the topic of church financing is the complex problem of restitution of church estates/properties – a problem that simultaneously showcases the similarities and differences between the countries of the region. Finally, there is a third component of the financial issue; namely, the role churches play in public functions,

³⁷ Bettina Wagner, 'Unterstützung Der Europäischen Union in Mittel- Und Osteuropa: Die Rolle Nationalstaatlicher Einstellungen Als Heuristiken', in *Information – Wahrnehmung – Emotion: Politische Psychologie in Der Wahl- Und Einstellungsforschung*, ed. by Thorsten Faas, Kai Arzheimer, and Sigrid Roßteutscher (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010); Dorothee Bohle and Béla Greskovits, *Capitalist Diversity on Europe's Periphery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). Although I am not analyzing economic processes, I still feel it is important to reference Bohle and Greskovits's *Capitalist Diversity on Europe's Periphery* (2012) for the authors definitely distinguish two periods in their comparative economic examination of the region: one immediately following the system change, and one subsequent to that (ff. 81).

particularly in education and healthcare. In the second period following the system change, these area in-between state and church required primarily legal regulation and achieved judicial form in laws related to churches and in statutes clarifying various state-specific issues. Although the legal regulations of the region's countries show marked differences pertaining to the relations between state and church, one clearly perceives a couple of basic tendencies. All of the states acknowledge the historical and moral significance of the churches, particularly of the Catholic and the Orthodox Church, and they desire and rely on their cooperation. The legal entity of the churches is recognized in all countries of the region, along with the legal entity of church institutions referring to the canonical law of the churches. The state law guarantees the freedom of churches to inner structure and function. Hence, there is no need for churches to form additional civil legal organizations in order to function in civil society: they can function so as churches. This kind of legal regulation seems reasonable as a response to the needs of a cultural vacuum that emerged in the wake of Communism's dissolution and in compliance to the criteria defined by European states in Vienna in 1989. According to the latter, freedom of religion comprises not merely the individual's right to practice their religion individually or in their community, but also the right of denominations, churches as organizations to hold the rights of legal entity and freely practice their articles of faith and religious practices.³⁸

East Central European countries with constitutionally provisions related to religious rights

Croatia	1990	Slovakia	1992
Bulgaria	1991	Russian Federation	1993
Latvia	1991	Belarus	1994
Macedonia	1991	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1995
Romania	1991	Armenia	1995
Slovenia	1991	Poland	1997
Estonia	1992	Hungary	1997
Lithuania	1992	Czech Republic	-

Source: Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Programme, *UNESCO*, at <https://en.unesco.org/themes/social-transformations/most>.

Politics

In the present context I limit the concept of politics to that of party politics, based on the region's societies' experience in developing and functioning multi-party systems following a transition from a one-party regime, which can be seen as the most defining dimension of the region beside its economic transition. The political life following the system change primarily meant the structural regulation of the multi-party polity as it emerged from the one (legitimate) party, reviving parties that were either incorporated into Communist autocracy or terminated, and establishing new parties. This structural process also means a closer attention to elaborating and representing the public identity of the parties as the former more or less monolithic political-ideological space suddenly changed in front of the public, due to cessation of media censure, into a plural ideological space.

The religious communities took different strategies in this period. The majority of churches were informally, rather than formally, supporting national parties or parties

³⁸ Peter Erdő, 'A Katolikus Egyház Jogrendje: A Kánonjog Helye És Sajátossága a Jog Világában', *Jura* 8, no. 1 (2002); Baláz Schanda, 'Staatskirchenrecht in Den Neuen Mitgliedstaaten Der Europäischen Union', in *Recht in Kirche Und Staat: Joseph Listl Zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. by Wilhelm Rees (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2004); Baláz Schanda, 'Church and State in the New Member Countries of the European Union', *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 8, no. 37 (2005).

representing Christian ideologies. Based partly on historical experience and partly on ideological reasons, the minority or newly established religious communities preferably supported new parties, often becoming their support base. Within the study of the relationship of churches towards political parties the examination of their intimate relations with Christian democratic parties, that is, parties with pronounced national-Christian rhetoric, warrants a separate task to be examined from both the side of the parties and that of the churches.

Immediately after the system change one observes among the party members, and even more so among their representatives, the attitude of personal dedication. As political responsibility was possible only within one party in the previous system, those who did not agree with the ideology of that party could only practice their profession for the benefit of society. The multi-party system opened the space of public life for many who could not play a role in it before. Due to the conditions of its emergence, I call this new stratum of party politics the lay-existential layer: lay, for lacking experience in participating in the public life, and existential, as it is a public activity motivated by personal dedication and conviction, inspired and defined by a certain idea.

Such a lay-existential public activity can be seen as religious in character from a number of viewpoints irrespective of the fact whether such a politician is linked to a religious community and professing a faith or not. Functionally it can be seen as a religious attitude as it is motivated by an idea which the politician undertakes with their whole persona along with possible risks. The politician is, so to speak, under a mission for social change defined by the motivating idea. Their personality gets interwoven with the idea, and their self-esteem is primarily the mixture of the idea and of their role and identity. In the period following immediately the system change the public activity of persons motivated in such a way often run parallel both in party political and in religious areas.

This period is quite distinct from the period following it and characterized by the strengthening of professional party politics³⁹ After a number of free parliamentary and municipal elections the political layers have been sifted and the social approach to party politics has changed. The majority of the lay-existential politicizing generation has forsaken direct party-political public roles, and has partly or completely withdrawn from party political life. Those who stayed became familiar with the democratic framework of politicizing and became professional politicians themselves. A new stratum of politicians was added to this layer, namely, those who stepped into the party-political arena with a professional area to begin with.

Party-political professionalization also means differentiation in regard of relations towards certain parties and of opinions about parliamentary democracy in general. Characteristic of the societies belonging to this region is the disenchantment from the naïve expectations related to economic upheaval and political freedom, and the disappointment related to the unfounded, though understandable hopes they attached to the notions of economic and political prosperity. The differentiation and disappointment felt within churches and other religious communities is also a sign of a professional relation to the party-political sphere. During their common learning process, religious communities have learnt that the area of politics has its own goals, laws and norms to which one should related in suitable manner. The parties should not be perceived as the political representatives and executives of religious ideologies and institutional requirements. Religious communities had experienced that parties instrumentalize them in order to promote and realize their own political goals, and that their

³⁹ Béla Pokol drew attention to the figure of the professional politician as early as 1993, and provides Hungarian examples. See Béla Pokol, 'A Hivatásos Politikus,' *Politikatudományi Szemle* 2, no. 2 (1993a), 61-78; and Béla Pokol, 'Professzionizálódás, Értelmiség És Politika,' *Politikatudományi Szemle* 2, no. 2 (1993b), 135-140. With reference to other East Central European politicians, particularly relying on East German experiences, are the works of Klaus von Beyme. See Klaus von Beyme, *Transition to Democracy in Eastern Europe* (Basingstoke UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996).

Christian rhetoric does not necessarily align with what churches mean by 'Christianity'. The sheer diversity of their members' political sympathy is yet another incentive for religious communities to differentiate in their relations to party politics.

There is another consideration one must account for from the party-political dimension, namely, the difference between the antagonistic and agonistic view of politics and their realizations. According to Chantal Mouffe, antagonism – the us/them difference seen as one “between friend and enemy” – is an always present constitutive possibility of democratic politics, therefore, one must distinguish between *antagonism* proper, “the struggle between enemies”, and *agonism*, “the struggle between adversaries.”⁴⁰ In other words, antagonism wishes to deprive its adversary from all possibilities of public corporate representation and clout, while agonism perceives the simultaneous and continuous presence of political adversaries in the discursive realm as important, in a sense the ‘dogma’ of politics. Hence, a mature democracy is characterized by agonistic political culture, while immature democracy demonstrates antagonistic politicizing in which the adversary is virtually or, in extreme cases, really destroyed and at best discredited. Religion has a bearing on this political dimension, as one of its primary functions is to draw a line between ‘us’ and ‘them’. It is therefore of no little importance to what extent the region’s churches, particularly those wielding greater political influence, identify with or are critical of the party-political demarcation. This is especially relevant in case of the Catholic Church, as it is international in nature and, nevertheless, closely related to a given state and social community through its local church organizations.

The shifts in how different governments are constituted as a result of party politics and election struggles can be observed in a number of the region’s countries. A number of the parties that emerged in the wake of the 1990’s change can no longer reach election thresholds ensuring their presence in the parliament, while newly established parties are much more successful in achieving representation.⁴¹ Concerning the relationship between large churches and political parties, it is especially interesting to consider the success of Christian parties in the last twenty-five years.⁴² Expressly Christian democratic parties that used to wield great influence in the 1990 have, in the cases of Hungary, Poland and Romania, alike lost their bearing and public role. At the same time, parallel to this occurrence, one observes a migration of Christian political ideology and rhetoric to right-wing parties, which have attained influence and parliamentary seats after 2000 and have joined the coalition government.

Civil Society

The third public sphere of society is that of civil society. The presence of these in the new democracies of the region is a novelty surpassing that of the multi-party system. Even in Western Europe, civil society emerges and gains significant foothold after World War II, irrespective of their different European versus American nature and structure, particularly when comparing the relationship between religious communities and civil societies. This continental difference aside, the development of a civil society in East Central Europe in the era of total dictatorship was completely impossible, because one of the goals of the region’s

⁴⁰ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2004), 13, 102-3.

⁴¹ Tönis Saarts, ‘Comparative Party System Analysis in Central and Eastern Europe: The Case of the Baltic States’, *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 3 (2011); Paul G. Lewis, *Political Parties in Post-Communist Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge 2000).

⁴² Ann Grzymala-Busse, ‘Why There Is (almost) No Christian Democracy in Post-Communist Europe’, *Party Politics* 19, no. 2 (2013); Gábor Dániel Nagy and Tamás Szilágyi, ‘Szavazhat-e a Hívó Katolikus a FIDESZ-KDNP-Re 2012-Ben? Gondolatok Tomka Miklós Cikkéről Kortárs Kontextusban’, in *Vallás a Keresztény Társadalom Után (Tanulmányok Tomka Miklós Emlékére)*, ed. by Mónika Földvári and Gábor Dániel Nagy (Szeged: Belvedere Meridionale, 2012).

dictatorships was annihilation of all party independent social institutions, or their absolute assimilation.⁴³

Despite the stifling climate, some form of civil society did emerge in the region termed “the second public sphere” (*Zweite Öffentlichkeit*) by social historians. They emerge with the slacking of the total dictatorship, for from the 1970s and 1980s onward it no longer launched its expressed police rigor against independent initiatives as before, at least in case of Hungary and Poland. A significant part of this alternative, ‘second public sphere’ was comprised of religious circles, present in form of national and international pastoral movements, and groups linked to congregations and parishes.⁴⁴

Immediately after the system change, the societies of the region could be characterized by the lack of civil society. In particular, the number of non-state organizations was very low, there were no bylaws regulating the organization and activity of civil societies, and the later had to face the pressing issue of non-existing budget, not having yet the means – either cultural or technological – to support themselves.

Despite these factors, groups and activities characteristic of civil societies did precede the formation of new parties, often becoming the base for the latter. Several members from the religious communities of the second public sphere before the system change have later stepped into party politics. The movements and groups were partially dissolved into more liberally organized church congregations and parishes and have, thus, lost the framework partially securing their identity: the ethos of resistance. The legal regulation of the civil society sphere, and the provision of competition possibilities from both national and international resources ensuring financial support, have largely contributed to the growth and spread of this layer of public life. At the same time, one can observe besides the rapid growth of leisure associations and foundations also a proliferation of civil societies focusing on a specialized project, moreover, of organizations maintained by political parties that are legally listed under civil societies while their function and activity is subjected to party political goals and programs.

In this period of proliferation of civil societies, one also observes an unambiguous growth in number of religiously based civil societies, and the exploitation of competition resources particularly in relation to social and mental health activities. At the same time, these societies or, rather the communities behind them, lack civil courage of a political nature; moreover, they tend to separate themselves from non-religious civil spheres of similar status. Within this religiously based civil society there too are organizations established for the realization of the pastoral and other interests of church institutions, organizations that explicitly or even exclusively serve the spiritual growth of individuals, and organizations that that function as national branches of larger international movements.

Compared to the self-interpretation of the East Central European civil society, Alexis de Tocqueville’s classical observations about civil societies are in a sense atypical, and yet offering a productive perspective. In his seminal two-volume work, *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840), Tocqueville did not define the significance of civil societies primarily in their role of filling the void between the individual and the power structure, nor in their function to limit the totalitarian endeavors of the government, but in emphasizing their function in curbing the excess selfishness of the individual. He calls this notion “the doctrine of self-interest well understood.”⁴⁵ According to Tocqueville, the individual citizen in and of himself is incapable, nor willing to limit their self-interest, and cannot withstand the principles and practices of

⁴³ Elemér Hankiss, *Diagnózisok 2* (Budapest: Magvető, 1986).

⁴⁴ The role of religions in the second civil sphere in case of Hungary is well researched. See István Kamaras’s *Bűvópatakok* (Underground Streams) (Budapest: Márton Áron, 1992) and *Kis magyar relgiográfia* (Small Hungarian Religiography) (Budapest: Pro Pannonia, 2003).

⁴⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. by Harvey C. Manfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

economic market controlling society. Hence, the need for (grassroots) civil societies, associations, and connections. In order to break centralism and atomism, and the forced circle of individualism and despotism, the subsidiary organization of civil society needs to be reanimated to mediate between the state and the individual. Tocqueville attempts to illustrate his conviction with the example of the Puritans and the Huguenots. These examples furthermore demonstrate the connection and link between civil society and religion, as both examples are of religious communities. The role of religion in creating and revitalizing civil society is in setting up immaterial ideals, and in representing the goal of human perfection. According to Tocqueville, religion and civil society are based on the same belief, or at least cannot be maintained without a common belief. However, this common belief is not merely a faith in God, but a belief in responsibilities towards one's fellow man. Self-interested considerations were not sufficient foundations for a society to escape the rocks of excessive individuality (selfishness) and the shoals of governments' excessive power-hunger. Religion guarantees that the creation and union of society will not equate with the abandonment of democracy, as religion cannot stand behind/in for power, nor can religion hold it. The freedom characteristic of America can stand because the obligation to moral good is based on religious faith.

Tocqueville's observations and conclusions—fitting well with those of his Hungarian contemporary, József Eötvös—make it clear that in societies under democratic political structure, the function of the civil society dimension is not primarily the opening and maintaining of free public life in face of dictatorship, but forming a solidarity community that facilitates reaching beyond self-interest. In a culture void of democracy, religions, and churches, the emergence and support of civil societies could signify the opposition to dictatorship; in democracies their function is to oppose selfishness, and egotism. In autocracies they fight for democracy, while in democracy they strive for solidarity.

Conclusion: The Mutual Acknowledgement of Public Life

In summary I am compelled to primarily state the importance of acknowledging the public sphere as social public space. This imperative applies to public figures. The secular nature of society's non-religious area does not merely signify independence and/or opposition to the religious in its traditional forms, but exemption from all other religious, and even non-religious ideologies. While the struggles of political interest seem to play out naturally within the given framework of a democracy, public figures should realize that the standard of their argumentation is not political success, but the factual solution of the tasks society faces. However, the acknowledging of secular, disenchanting society—particularly considering the temptation of secularism's ideology—is not merely the obligation of civil public figures, but also of religious public figures. Given their creed, religions and religious institutions will inevitably look upon the reality of a secular world as a missionary territory. However, they also need to accept and be familiar with the logic of how a secular society works if they want a balanced cooperation with other agents/factors shaping that society. All of this does not mean disregarding the historical traditions of a country, or ignoring the religious, denominational division of a society's members. One merely has to acknowledge that in a constitutional democracy—due to separation of state and church—religious public actions are possible within the legal framework of a secular society. Secularity in itself does not mean exemption of values or opposition to values, as democracy itself is sustainable only if built on certain basic values, primarily the respect of human rights and the principles facilitating undisturbed democratic discourse. It is in this discourse that the representatives of religious communities take part while advocating the interests of their religious institutions and offer their stance in questions related to the society at large.

The Communist regime assigned a common lot to the societies of the East Central European region; however, its dissolution has opened up new possibilities for them to structurally develop and culturally realize democratic relations. In this region's countries, the foundations of democracy were laid and completed, more or less successfully, within the first few years following the system change. The directing of societies within these new democratic frameworks, however, is burdened with hardships to this day. Public representatives and analysts of social change, both must acknowledge the second wave of transition in present democracies. The most important challenges of present-day societies in the region are not resistance to autocracy, nor the paving of democracy, but politicizing for the benefit of the public within democratic relations. The acknowledgement of this second wave requires professional analyses that must be preceded by revisions of theoretical stand points. Hence the need for differentiating between structural and qualitative democracy, and for analyses considering the basic elements of both. As there are differences between the theories attempting to interpret the logic of dictatorship(s) and the theories addressing the changes brought forth in the first wave of transition, so is there change between these latter theories and the ones analyzing the second wave of transition.

Concerning public religion, a new generation is growing up whose basic knowledge not only of dictatorship but also of system change is acquired indirectly. Personal experiences do not enrich, nor bias the new generation in their attempt to solve current social issues, analyzing them and setting up interpretative frameworks. From their current discourse perspective, this generation looks upon the region based on economic indicators, and not on the memory of their common lot. Especially in regard of public religion, the interpretation of the religious institutions' repression and of the opposition to religion no longer feature as interpretative tasks for this generation. In their perspective the legitimate scope of comparison is Europe as a whole and the rest of the world's continents. For this generation East Central Europe is no longer a given condition but a question and, perhaps, a research result.

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‘You people don’t know what the truth is... Truth is obsolete’: New Religious Movements and Possible Future Scenarios

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Abstract

Transmetropolitan, a long form graphic novel series (1997-2002), is the story of Gonzo journalist Spider Jerusalem, seeking to expose the truth amongst a futuristic world of lies. The first six issues, collected in a trade edition entitled *Back on the Street*, introduce readers both to the state of the world in an uncertain future, but also to new religious movements (NRMs) of the future. In issue six, Spider and his assistant Channon attend a NRM convention, which is held due to a new religion emerging every six minutes within the city. These religions are created in a time and place in which technological marvels allow its denizens to be constantly connected or constantly distracted. Houses and apartments have mechanical ‘makers’ to reconstitute matter, creating new from old. The city’s citizens can do and be what they wish, allowing seekers to join or start an NRM; that these religions are still created and are popular in a society that seemingly has it all, permits the exploration the role of NRMs in society. This article investigates *Transmetropolitan*’s author Warren Ellis’ statement that “Science fiction is social fiction” to anchor the future NRMs in the series to ideas he found in his own world. This article attempts to understand how twenty-first century NRMs emerged in answer to societal ills or injustices that required solutions. *Transmetropolitan* is set in an unknown future, but the society it portrays can be utilized to explore twenty-first century first world culture. NRMs were seen as a problem in the 1960s when first studied by sociologists, but are now regarded as a normal part of human social interaction, and have been facilitated by advances in Internet and communications technologies. Using *Transmetropolitan* as a guide for how we could view NRMs in the future also allows for exploration into the way that NRMs are designed to solve the ills of modernity (what was modern for Jim Jones in 1979, for example, reflects the fears and anxieties of specific times and places), which in turn reflects thoughts, attitudes and beliefs that become inherent in new religious movements. These movements are then explored through the concepts of seekers: if given a world in which anything is permissible, why do people continue to search and seek out new forms of belief and belonging?

Keywords

Warren Ellis, New Religious Movements, Futurism, Modernity, future of religions, Jim Jones, Peoples Temple, Shoko Asahara, Aum Shinrikyo.

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This article focuses on the prevalence of New Religious Movements (NRMs), and the ways that they are created within contemporary society. These NRMs shall be framed within *Transmetropolitan*, a long form comic series written by Warren Ellis and illustrated by Darick Robertson. With over sixty issues published between 1997 to 2002, *Transmetropolitan* told the story of gonzo journalist Spider Jerusalem as he seeks to spread the truth in a world of lies.¹ *Transmetropolitan* opens with Spider returning to an east coast American megacity, resuming his career as a journalist, and becoming embroiled in a political plot by a presidential candidate. This article focuses on the first six issues, collected in a trade edition titled *Back on the Street*, which highlights the ideas of the future city and of NRMs both present and future.² *Transmetropolitan* is set in an unknown year, in an unnamed city full of technological marvels, allowing its denizens to be constantly connected or to be constantly distracted. Machines in houses and apartments, called “makers”, have the ability to reconstitute matter, creating new from old. The city’s citizens can do as they wish and be what they wish. This permits seekers to join or start one of the burgeoning new religions, as according to one character within the title, “one new religion is invested every hour in the city”.³ This article aims to understand how NRMs originate, based on the societal issues and problems that society pins to their ills. While *Transmetropolitan* may be set in an unknown future, the society it portrays can be utilized to explore twenty-first century first world culture. NRMs were seen as a problem in the 1960s when they were first studied by sociologists, but are now regarded as a normal part of human social interaction, and have been facilitated by advances in Internet and communications technologies.⁴ This article uses *Transmetropolitan* as a guide to what the future might say about the present, with a focus on NRMs.

I will first sketch a methodological lens through which these new NRMs can be viewed as existing and operating within society. Secondly, it will provide a discussion about Warren Ellis and his work, explore the dialectical lens through which he operates. This will be followed by a consideration of magic and technology as an avenue to how society views and participates with technology. A discussion on Ellis’ use of magic and folklore, rather than religious themes, will also be explored here. Following this, this article will reflect upon NRMs past, present and future, and the seekers that join such groups. This section will then explore NRMs within a society that has everything provided in a technologically advanced world, and within our own world. Ultimately these groups will be explored within the societal fears and pressures of the era that they were created within. These future NRMs will be considered and compared with the real-world examples of Jim Jones’ Peoples Temple (United States and Guyana) and Shoko Asahara’s Aum Shinrikyo (Japan). By utilizing *Transmetropolitan* as a lens for exploring NRMs, the role of religion will be explored within a world that is ultimately distracted by technology and entertainment that allows for new priorities.

Methodology

¹ Steen Christiansen, ‘The Truth of the Word, the Falsity of the Image: *Transmetropolitan*’s Critique of the Society of the Spectacle’, *Word & Image Interactions* 6, no. 1 (2009):147.

² Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson, *Transmetropolitan: Back on the Street* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2012).

³ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 126.

⁴ J. Gordon Melton, ‘Perspective: New New Religions: Revisiting a Concept’, *Nova Religio* 10, no. 4 (2007): 104.

William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark's work on cult formation will be used to investigate the necessary conditions (both in the present and the fictional future) for NRMs to emerge and to flourish.⁵ Bainbridge and Stark argue that three models of cult formation can be identified: the psychopathological; the entrepreneurial; and the subculture-evolution model.⁶ Ellis may be considered a science fiction author or a futurist, but he states that "science fiction is always about the time it's written in... science fiction is social fiction".⁷ When viewed through Bainbridge and Stark's models, *Transmetropolitan* highlights ways in which contemporary individuals can choose from a staggering multitude of options that are created when support for organized religions fade, illustrating the psychopathological and entrepreneurial models.⁸ Historical and socio-economic factors, entwined with personal choice and consumerism, permit near-limitless exploration by seekers, illustrating the subcultural evolution model.⁹

Warren Ellis: Super Powers, Mythology and Religion

Warren Ellis (b. 1968) first found his ground within the graphic novel world through the British institution of *2000AD*, the long running serial that brought to the world characters such as Judge Dredd. In the mid 1990s, Ellis began working for Marvel, contributing to titles such as *Doom 2099*, a series set in a dystopic cyberpunk future focusing on futuristic variations of established Marvel properties. Ellis, however, has long been vocal in his dislike for the superhero comics, once stating in a blog post entitled "the Old Bastard Manifesto",¹⁰ "Fuck superheroes, frankly. The notion that these things dominate an entire genre is absurd."¹¹ While Ellis may feel annoyance at the prevalence of superhero comics, and ultimately their place within the wider landscape of comic books, he maintains a sense of humor when it comes to the absurdity of the world of superheroes. One notable example is *Nextwave* (2006-2007). Not only did Ellis introduce the world to a character who once went by the name "Captain **** [indicating an unknown expletive]", who Captain America beat seven shades of it out of and then put in the rubbish with a bar of soap in his mouth, Ellis and illustrator Stuart Immonen also take a thinly veiled swipe at the comic book publisher's insistence on variant covers and their reliance on obsessive collectors.¹² The duo created six individual double spreads that would require someone to buy six different copies just for the full joke; this is highlighted by the final panel stating "Nextwave: Blatantly wasting your money since 2006".¹³

⁵ William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, 'Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models', *Sociological Analysis* 40, no. 4 (1979): 283-295.

⁶ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 283.

⁷ Warren Ellis, *Cunning Plans: Talks by Warren Ellis* (SUMMON Books, 2015), 124.

⁸ Roger Finke and Laurence R. Iannaccone, 'Supply-Side Explanations for Religious Change', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527, no. 1 (1993): 39.

⁹ William James Allred, 'Sublime Beauty & Horrible Fucking Things - The Finer Worlds of Warren Ellis' (Doctor of Philosophy, University of Arkansas, 2011), 89.

¹⁰ Ellis was 32 when he wrote this essay.

¹¹ Warren Ellis, 'Issue #18 | The Old Bastard's Manifesto', *Comic Book Resources*, published 31 March 2000, <https://www.cbr.com/issue-18-10/>.

¹² Warren Ellis and Stuart Immonen, *Nextwave: Agents of H.A.T.E.* (New York: Marvel, 2010).

¹³ Ellis and Immonen: *Nextwave*.

Ellis, while occasionally touching on religious ideas, can be considered more of a folklorist, or a purveyor of English mythology. Whereas contemporaries such as Irish writer Garth Ennis write explicitly anti-religious themes in his work in titles such as *Preacher* (1994-2000), *Chronicles of Wormwood* (2006-2007), and *Hellblazer* (periodically between 1991 and 1998), Ellis surveys more about the nature of humanity than he does about religion. This exploration of humanity can be seen within the much talked about issue number 141 of *Hellblazer*, entitled “Shoot”. This issue explores on the theme of school shootings, specifically how and why they occur. This issue is of particular note in part due to it being responsible for Ellis quitting the series rather than fulfil his multi-year contract, but mostly due to the dark and topical nature of the subject. “Shoot” was due to be published mere weeks after the Columbine shootings, which forced the editors of Vertigo comics (the publishers of *Hellblazer*) to mandate that that Ellis was to edit it, or they would do it for him. Ellis subsequently asked them not to publish it and quit rather than have such a story sanitized.¹⁴ Ellis touched briefly on the occult during his run on *Hellblazer*, with issues 134-139 contained and collected in an edition entitled ‘Haunted’.¹⁵ This arc sees John Constantine endeavoring to solve the murder of an ex-girlfriend, murdered by a magician who was attempting to emulate Aleister Crowley and create his own version of Crowley’s Scarlet Woman.

Ellis once stated “magic clings to the digital world, as if the digital world were actually the other world”, which sees Ellis attempting a form of digital alchemy, combining technology with magic in much of his work.¹⁶ Ellis’s newest long form work *Injection* (2015-) is based on elements that exist within English folklore, such as character Dr. Robin Morel, whose family is connected to a long line of cunning folk, English wise-people, and folk healers, of which he is the last one. Hallvard Haug posits that this surname is an allusion to Cunning Murrell, considered to be the last of the cunning folk.¹⁷ *Injection* is based around the concept of merging technology and magic together, ultimately creating an Artificial Intelligence that is a combination of the past and the future. As Haug states, this “questions the boundary between magic and technology by equating our technological fears with stories from mythology and folklore”.¹⁸ Ellis once stated that the iPod was essentially a magic mirror, and that using it was akin to being a wizard, pointing at something with your finger, as if a wand, and thus causing something to happen; this blend of technology and folklore is prevalent within his works.¹⁹ Even Ellis’s most explicitly “religious” title, 2011’s *Supergod*, is a blend of technology and mythology, with humanity creating gods in the form of superhuman weapons in an arms race that ultimately destroys all of humanity. Ellis once described the cunning folk as “hackers in league with the fantastic:” a combination of technology and magic allowing for the world to be seen, viewed, and explored within a myriad of avenues for a number of differing seekers.²⁰

¹⁴ Adam X. Smith, ‘Vertigo Resurrected #1: Shoot - A Retrospective on Hard Truths’, *Bleeding Cool News and Rumors*, published 31 July 2014, <https://www.bleedingcool.com/2014/07/31/vertigo-resurrected-1-shoot-a-retrospective-on-hard-truths/>.

¹⁵ Warren Ellis, *Hellblazer: Haunted* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2003).

¹⁶ Ellis, *Cunning Plans*.

¹⁷ Hallvard Haug, ‘The Alchemical Singularity: Magic and Technology in Warren Ellis’s *Injection*’, *Foundation* 48, no. 132 (2019): 23.

¹⁸ Haug, ‘The Alchemical Singularity’, 22.

¹⁹ Ellis, *Cunning Plans*, 32.

²⁰ Ellis, *Cunning Plans*.

This attachment to humanity and exploration of their ideals makes Ellis' work the perfect example to explore the attraction of NRMs. Rather than focusing on the spectacular exploits of a superpowered few, Ellis focuses on what makes humanity function. He explores what it is that drives people, what leads them to not only form an attachment, but to also continue that attachment even to the detriment of their own existence and the existence of others. Ellis seeks a world in which attachments to things and places can still be considered magical, as he states, "it's one of those popular tropes of fantastic fiction ... The magic goes away, crushed out by the grim mechanical march of Reason and Science".²¹ By exploring the concept of NRMs within a futuristic setting, Ellis dissects the anxieties of our times by positing them within a future scenario. He tries to keep magic alive by reminding the reader that even in a future where everything is possible and accessible, society still seeks that attachment not only with each other, but with something greater.

Ellis and Robertson's world of *Transmetropolitan* is one in which anything is permissible. Over the first collected edition, Spider destroys a bar with a rocket launcher and causes the President of the United States to defecate in his pants, yet is only punished when he covers a series of riots organized by the current administration. As a writer, Spider believes images can lie, but words cannot.²² Drugs and media are utilized to distract the populace in a digital bliss; however, these distractions do not stop society from endeavoring to find a place to belong. Through exploring the concept of religion through a fictitious lens, Ellis permits the exploration of the important social themes such as politics and religion to become part of the commentary surrounding it.²³ This article will now turn to exploring NRMs within society both present, and the future.

New Religious Movements, and Society

The term "New Religious Movement" is not commonly used outside of the academy and can be misinterpreted. It has been developed as a term largely to avoid use of the word "cult" due to its negative connotations in the media and society.²⁴ Richardson also argues that usage of "cult" should "be severely limited in scholarly and other writings... to do otherwise promotes the agenda of those deliberately using the term as a social weapon against new and exotic religious groups".²⁵ That being said, the groups examined in this article would be categorized as "cults" in popular discourse. Bainbridge and Stark's first model of cult formation is the psychopathological, formed around a charismatic leader, who often creates new compensators due to mental illness.²⁶ Second is the entrepreneurial, in which the leader devises new

²¹ Ellis, *Cunning Plans*.

²² Christiansen, 'The Truth of the Word, the Falsity of the Image', 151.

²³ Mark Knight, *An Introduction to Religion and Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009); S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

²⁴ James T. Richardson, 'Definitions of Cult: From Sociological-Technical to Popular-Negative', *Review of Religious Research* 34, no. 4 (1993): 352; James R. Lewis, 'Seekers and Subcultures', in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements: Volume II*. (ed. by James R. Lewis and Inga B. Tøllefsen, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016), 64.

²⁵ Richard, 'Definitions of Cult', 355.

²⁶ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 285; Bainbridge and Stark utilized the existing academic language at the time of writing.

compensators that are then sold to believers in order to fill a gap in a market.²⁷ The subculture-evolution model differs from the other two models, as there is no singular creator or leader; instead, the NRM emerges from group action and small steps that lead to something much bigger.²⁸

Bainbridge and Stark insist that it is important to identify how individuals discover new religious ideas.²⁹ They posit that at a fundamental level, humans seek rewards and as rewards are often scarce, compensators are put in place of rewards.³⁰ These compensators, for both traditional religions and NRMs, are treated by believers as a form of supernatural IOU, in that believing something now will garner a reward in the future. For example, the idea of heaven is a compensator for a lifetime of piety, chastity, and belief in Christian doctrine.³¹ Bainbridge and Stark also define that the difference between religion and NRMs is that while both are social enterprises, religion seeks to *maintain* and exchange compensators based on supernatural origins, while NRMs seek to *produce* and exchange novel and exotic compensators.³² NRMs tend to be loosely organized, have small numbers, and may have a history that is able to be traced back to established religions and sites that help to solidify their existence.³³

In Spider's future, as previously mentioned, there are a multitude of distractions available to the populace of the city to keep them distracted from the world around them. As Spider traverses the city, he narrates sights that are out of frame, and Robertson's imagery provides a richer visual context for how the city operates. The compensators posited by Bainbridge and Stark are identifiable in two characters who interact with Spider: leader of the Transient movement "Alien Love Messiah" Fred Christ, and transhumanist Ziang. Fred leads the Transients, who so disaffected that they willingly undergo genetic changes in order to become an entirely new species; in this case, they are attempting to transform themselves into 'extraterrestrials', despite negative side-effects, such as radical changes in diet. For the Transients, their compensator comes about as being recognized as legitimate, rather than as just as genetically modified humans. They follow Fred as he promises that they will be able to be who they are, rather than downtrodden, scared, second-class citizens.³⁴

Jiang belongs to an NRM called "Gaian-Bias Buddhism", a group that teaches that "all is one," and one that Spider describes as "A west-side sect tailored for people who want to feel environmentally sound about filling their bodies with non-biodegradable machinery".³⁵ Spider also considers Jiang deranged for opting to voluntarily have "ten pounds of wiring in your back."³⁶ In later issues Ziang take this "all is one" philosophy further, joining yet another NRM community known as "Foglets", a community whose price of joining is the total destruction of your physical body, through which a swarm of millions of nanoparticles are created which are

²⁷ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 287.

²⁸ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 291.

²⁹ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 283.

³⁰ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 284.

³¹ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 284.

³² Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 284.

³³ David G. Bromley, 'Categorizing Religious Organizations: In Search of a Theoretically Meaningful Strategy', in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements: Volume II* (ed by James R. Lewis and Inga B. Tøllefsen, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016), 20-21.

³⁴ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 289.

³⁵ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 129.

³⁶ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 102.

now representative of the seeker.³⁷ The Foglet community and the Transient movement are groups that, despite a world full of wonder, possibilities, and endless distractions, seek to uncover higher meaning. These NRMs offer a view of the subculture-evolution model as posited by Bainbridge and Stark, in that the Transients, the Gaian-Bias, and the Foglet groups are focused on multiple unusual processes and ideas that make up the entirety of their individual NRM movements.³⁸

Spider's search for the truth, and (despite his bravado and apparent lack of punishment for wrongdoing) his need to stand up and protect the vulnerable, are an entry point for the exploration of contemporary NRMs. *Transmetropolitan* also reveals the ways that consumer culture, secularism, and freedom of choice permit the formation of NRMs. Some are harmless, and others are barely visible in the world, but still there are NRMs that use their position and power to hurt, mislead, and even destroy the lives of those who choose to follow these beliefs. In issue six, Spider and Channon decide to attend the New Religious Movement convention, with Spider (dressed as Jesus in a stolen hotel bedsheet) mentioning to Channon that his costume is deliberate and chosen to "Bring out the criminal religious element I seek. Messianic fuckheads are a superstitious lot, and I must strike fear into their hearts".³⁹ Like some contemporary NRMs, Spider is ever cognizant of the harm that can befall people who are simply seeking a place to belong. The New Religious Movements Convention is well-attended, with an overhead announcement telling patrons that "the conception of Hercules is being re-enacted by the one true church of Zeus," and that free shotgun pendants are being given away by "the Church of Cobain".⁴⁰ This bewildering variety of eccentric religions, drawing upon both traditional religion and popular culture, is present in the contemporary world, to which our attention now shifts.

Within both the contemporary world and that set out within the pages of *Transmetropolitan*, humanity focuses on self-determination for multitudes of individuals. Our own world has changed quickly and dramatically over the last century, with institutional religion no longer having the hold it once held over the lives of so many. Notably, churches as spaces of communal gatherings and hubs of socializing have been replaced with secular sites that achieve the same desired outcome; sports fields, shopping malls, cinemas, and so on. While our own society may not be as technologically advanced as Spider's, it still maintains the ability to choose a beneficial path that they themselves wish to take, at least in terms of affluent nations. Modernity allows for humanity to exist in a world in which institutional religion can either play a formative part, or absolutely no part whatsoever, thus allowing individual seekers to craft something that fits within the schema of what they wish to believe in.⁴¹ Seekers such as these have a void within them that they seek to be filled with something, be it answers, a newfound connection with a goddess, or the physical closeness of a charismatic prophet; thus we as scholars cannot only question as to why adherents join NRMS, but also how NRMs differ from established religious ideologies.

³⁷ Allred, 'Sublime Beauty & Horrible Fucking Things', 89.

³⁸ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 291.

³⁹ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 127.

⁴⁰ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 135.

⁴¹ Lewis, 'Seekers and Subcultures', 64.

In this futuristic world, traditional religions have been usurped and surpassed by new religions that utilize updated terminologies of present-day religions. One such NRM in Spider's world is "the Official Serbian Church of Tesla", in which members of this new church go door to door to proselytize in the name of Nikola Tesla. These members state that only Tesla "can save your polyphase intrinsic electric field, known to non-engineers as the soul".⁴² In this group Tesla is equated with Jesus, in that only he can save someone through accepting them. In a fictitious world, this church is evidence that organized religions have been surpassed, and that NRMs based on technology (and thus social issues) are legitimated amongst a populace. This example calls to mind the short-lived Japanese NRM dedicated to Tesla's rival Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931), Denshinkyo ("Religion of the Electricity God").⁴³ However, Denshinkyo as a minor (and short-lived) NRM is overshadowed by the dramatic narratives of Jim Jones' Peoples Temple and Shoko Asahara's Aum Shinrikyo.

Both of these groups started as an answer to the social anxieties of their times, but the message of both the Peoples Temple and Aum shifted, changed, and ultimately became malevolent towards to the end of their existences. Jim Jones (1931-1978) started the Peoples Temple in 1950s North America, mixing a blend of Methodist teachings with his own Communist and anti-racist worldview, before a shift in his views lead to him preaching messianic evangelism.⁴⁴ What started as an inclusive and socially progressive church quickly turned into apocalyptic chaos as Jones started preaching about the end of the world, and his fears over nuclear annihilation as his grip on his followers tightened.⁴⁵ Devastatingly things reached a dramatic conclusion in 1974. After relocating to a rural property in Guyana, over nine hundred followers died on the orders of Jones. This became one of the largest mass suicides (and in some cases, murders) in modern history, under the direction of a charismatic leader who had ostensibly begun with the goal to form a community.⁴⁶

Nearly twenty years later in Japan, a charismatic and prophetic figure Shoko Asahara (1955-2018) introduced members of Japanese society to his new religion, which he based on traditional Buddhist scriptures while also incorporating Hindu and Christian ideology into what eventually became a messianic "doomsday cult".⁴⁷ Emerging in the 1980s, Aum as a group was first associated with Asahara during his teachings of meditation. Unlike the Peoples Temple's inclusivity and allowance of anyone to join, Aum was highly exclusive, and quickly became synonymous with the elite. As Aum grew, Asahara began reporting messianic and apocalyptic dreams, coming to (at least claiming to) believe he was the reincarnation of both

⁴² Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 122.

⁴³ H. Neill McFarland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods: A Study of New Religious Movements in Japan* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 65.

⁴⁴ John R. Hall, Philip Daniel Schuyler and Sylvaine Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements, and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan* (London: Routledge, 2000), 17-18.

⁴⁵ Rebecca Moore, 'Narratives of Persecution, Suffering, and Martyrdom: Violence in Peoples Temple and Jonestown', in *Violence and New Religious Movements*, ed. by James R. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 17-18; Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 293.

⁴⁶ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World Is More Religious than Ever* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2015), 98.

⁴⁷ Ian Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyō* (London: Curzon, 2000), 53; Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 18.

Jesus Christ and Buddha, and that it was his destiny to lead the survivors of a nuclear holocaust.⁴⁸ Asahara and his followers felt that doomsday was not approaching fast enough, and participated in acts of aggression that were designed to help bring about the apocalypse on the unaware, ultimately culminating on the twentieth of March, 1995 when Aum members set off Sarin gas bombs on the Tokyo subway system, killing thirteen members of the public and injuring hundreds more.⁴⁹

Both Aum and Peoples Temple are practical examples of Bainbridge and Stark's psychopathological model of NRMs: groups that are organized through the visions and ideas of charismatic leaders, ultimately not selling anything other than a cure of the ills of society itself.⁵⁰ Both NRMs seemingly formed with good intentions of helping society; Jones through his inclusive and welcoming socialist church, and Asahara through his meditation. Yet both groups ultimately damaged and destroyed more lives and families than they helped and are therefore the examples held up within the media and academia as NRMs that have done inordinate amounts of harm.⁵¹ In Spider's world, groups that seek to do harm to possible adherents continue, with "The Church of Release" being one of the many NRMs within the convention. The Church of Release practice sacred trepanation, and Spider stops a new adherent from receiving the release (which is performed through an ice pick to the skull), with the adherent acknowledging that he is simply seeking something to believe in. Spider considers this abhorrent, stating that the man he saved must need medical help if he cannot go through life without some invisible force to believe in. This ultimately ends with Spider and the priest exchanging blows.⁵² Ultimately the issue ends with Spider aghast at the lies, trickery, and subterfuge that is levelled at people who simply want a place to belong and whose "only crimes were to be frightened and tired".⁵³ In Spider's world, digital distractions, drugs, and the ability to do anything you set your mind to has distracted the populace from these NRMs with Spider stating that they are able to get away with such things as they are "getting away with it in a place so noisy that no one could hear the truth if it were ever told".⁵⁴ The young man that Spider saves from The Church of Release states that he is tempted to join because he feels that he is seeking "... something. I just can't get through my life without some help".⁵⁵

The term "seekers" refers to those people who are participate in an ongoing, highly personal search for answers to the questions they have in regard to their existence. Some will often be seeking and searching for their entire lives, never fully able to gather the answers they seek. Seekers move within groups, taking parts that they feel are useful from each group they pass through in order to help fill in the answers, adapting these parts in order to fit within the schema of their own lives.⁵⁶ Spider Jerusalem is unattached to the ills of the city and to the society in which he exists, yet he seeks the answers to the world around him. Spider, within the

⁴⁸ Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan*, 55.

⁴⁹ Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan*, 215; Haruki Murakami, Alfred Birnbaum and J. Philip Gabriel, *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (New York: Vintage, 2003).

⁵⁰ Bainbridge and Stark, 'Cult Formation', 286.

⁵¹ Hall, Schuyler and Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed*, 15.

⁵² Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 140-141.

⁵³ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 142.

⁵⁴ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 143.

⁵⁵ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 139.

⁵⁶ Lewis, 'Seekers and Subcultures', 63-64.

religious framing, could be considered that of a “messiah”, as he literally comes down from on high (his mountain home) bringing with him truth and revelation.⁵⁷ Through his actions and use of the truth, Spider manages to mobilize large swathes of the community to help shut down riots and police brutality against the Transient community. Spider successfully transforms his truth into mass news when he decides to spend a day calling into television shows as his knowledge about the world and the power of his voice creates disruptions within local talk shows shutting many of them down.⁵⁸ Of course, Spider, with his aggression and need to find the truth, would be a terrible messiah, constantly searching for that truth somewhere in the world, because nobody else is looking for it. Spider proclaims “You people don’t know what the truth is! It’s there just under their bullshit, but you never look!... Lies are news and truth is obsolete”.⁵⁹

Spider himself falls within the category of seeker, as he seeks the truth to the world around him. His strong moral code and his views on the needy being just as important and equal with those in power make him a dangerous subversive character, lashing out at the status quo and rising the masses against the powers that be. The truth is all-encompassing for Spider, and this informs how he interacts with the NRM convention. The convention is full of people seeking to mislead and lie to those in attendance to boost their own following, and yet the attendees are simply people who wish to have something to believe in; anything that distracts them from the perpetual self-indulgence that is ready made for them outside of the convention. The seekers attending the convention are yearning for something that can solidify their existence, facilitate a connection with other people, qualities that are lacking in a society in which technology has subsumed the need to venture outside your front door. In the twenty-first century, we have a greater choice of options for how we live our lives than any other generation that paved the way for us to reach this point. We build on these bones of the past in order to create and adapt to our societal needs. Perhaps when Ellis states “science fiction is social fiction”, he is looking at the state of technology today, how it fulfils societal needs yet ultimately distracts society from each other.

Conclusion

Transmetropolitan is a work of speculative fiction that considers the future of religion, belief, and NRMs. As stated by Ellis, when writing about the future, we are simply discussing our present. NRMs in our contemporary world are flourishing, with their appeal laying largely in their facilitation of the ability to travel, learn, and adapt existing ideas and structures to the creation of new thoughts. When Ellis envisions the future, he simply writes he sees today, adding only more technology and distractions. NRMs that exist in Spider Jerusalem’s beloved unnamed city exist for the same reason they exist in our society: because they are needed. They fill voids that seekers yearn to fill, and they allow people to find communities and connections that they might not find in a secular society. In the city we have actors like Ziang and the

⁵⁷ Christiansen, ‘The Truth of the Word, the Falsity of the Image’, 147.

⁵⁸ This also leads to a tormented television host having to be talked down from the roof after Spider criticizes her recipes.

⁵⁹ Ellis and Robertson, *Transmetropolitan*, 113.

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Transients, who physically change themselves to have that connection with others. It is a cold and lonely society, but can we say that ours is any different?

NRMs including Peoples Temple and Aum Shinrikyo existed because adherents believe in the message being communicated to the world from the spiritual heart of the group, but also because they seek belonging to something greater. If some of the NRMs that seekers find end in violence and tragedy, that is not the fault of the seekers. Characters like Ziang, or the man interested in sacred trepanning, are looking for ideas to fulfill them or ideologies that will double as the answers that they are seeking. Seekers have been and will continue to be a constant fixture in the religious world, and, through their searching, so too will NRMs. All it takes is one person to be like Spider and search for truth, and through that truth help those seekers that are hurting or attracted to a movement that might do them harm. Using a futuristic text such as *Transmetropolitan* does not so much give us exact knowledge of the future, but it most definitely allows society to take stock of what exists around them, and just possibly effect change for the future.

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords:

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Keith Raniere: Biography and Background to NXIVM

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

⁷ Berman, *Don’t Call It A Cult*, 216-217.

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

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

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

¹¹ Berman, *Don’t Call It A Cult*, 23.

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

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

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

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

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

¹² Natalie, *The Program*, 11.

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

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

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

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

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

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

NXIVM: Executive Success and the Years of Growth

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

¹⁷ Natalie, *The Program*, 85-87.

¹⁸ Natalie, *The Program*, 87.

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

²⁰ Natalie, *The Program*, 121.

²¹ Berman, *Don’t Call It A Cult*, 172, 175.

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

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

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

Edmondson climbed "the Stripe Path" (the hierarchy within ESP, white for students, yellow for coaches, orange for proctors, green for senior proctors, blue for counsellors, and purple for senior counsellors, "Prefect" Salzman in possession of the only gold sash, and Vanguard ostentatiously wearing a white sash to signify his commitment to being eternally a student, open and willing to learn),²⁵ completing NXIVM courses and enrolling scores of members. She was a proud "Espie" (graduate of ESP). Lauren Salzman became her closest friend in NXIVM, and she was the celebrant at Edmondson's wedding to fellow actor and Anthony "Nippy" Ames in 2013.²⁶ In her memoir Edmondson calls 2009 to 2012 the "Golden Years"; she was making friends, seeing successes in her career, and enjoying social life with other members, especially Vanguard Week, the annual ten-day celebration of Ranieri's birthday on Lake George in the Adirondack Mountains, at the Silver Bay YMCA Resort (which cost \$2,000 to attend).²⁷ The sense of community was strong.

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

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

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

²⁶ Edmondson, *Scarred*, 139-141.

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

²⁸ Natalie, *The Program*, 202.

²⁹ Berman, *Don't Call It A Cult*, 91-92.

³⁰ Berman, *Don't Call It A Cult*, 161-163.

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

Vanguard: Keith Raniere and the NXIVM Worldview

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

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

³² Edmondson, *Scarred*, 132.

³³ Edmondson, *Scarred*, 158.

³⁴ Edmondson, *Scarred*, 160.

³⁵ Natalie, *The Program*, 239-240.

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

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

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

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

³⁷ Berman, *Don’t Call It A Cult*, 216.

³⁸ Berman, *Don’t Call It A Cult*, 217.

³⁹ Palmer, ‘Media Review: NXIVM and #MeToo’, 106.

⁴⁰ Shea, ‘Ladies Who Cult’.

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

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

⁴³ Edmondson, *Scarred*, 41-45

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

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

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

⁴⁴ Edmonds, *Scarred*, 50-52.

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

⁴⁶ Kent, 'Comparative Reflections on Scientology and NXIVM', 6-7.

⁴⁷ Cusack, "'Squirrels' and Unauthorized Uses of Scientology', 490-503.

⁴⁸ Kent, 'Comparative Reflections on Scientology and NXIVM', *passim*.

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

⁵⁰ Raine, 'Narcissistic Sexual Predation', 47.

⁵¹ Natalie, *The Program*, 25.

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

Branded Slaves: Scandal, Defections, and Criminal Charges

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

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

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

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

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

⁵³ Raine, ‘Narcissistic Sexual Predation’, 49.

⁵⁴ Edmondson, *Scarred*, 163-165.

⁵⁵ Palmer, ‘Media Review: NXIVM and #MeToo’, 110.

⁵⁶ Edmondson, *Scarred*, 184-185.

⁵⁷ Natalie, *The Program*, 247.

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

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

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

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

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

⁵⁸ Raine, 'Narcissistic Sexual Predation', 53.

⁵⁹ Natalie, *The Program*, 149-150.

⁶⁰ Natalie, *The Program*, 151.

⁶¹ Berman, *Don't Call It A Cult*, 154-156.

⁶² Natalie, *The Program*, 217-218.

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁷⁵ Maijastina Kahlos, *Religious Dissent in Late Antiquity 350-450* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

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

⁷⁷ Lauren Kranc, ‘How NXIVM Seduced Hollywood Stars and America’s Most Powerful Elite Into a Barbaric “Sex Cult”,’ *Esquire*, 18 October (2022), <https://flipboard.com/@esquire/binge-watch-1ak2l03az/how-nxivm-seduced-hollywood-stars-and-america-s-most-powerful-elite-into-a-barbaric-a-uy5aG70rT0iieSTsx5BqGQ%3Aa%3A3195373-c74e48ec7c%2Fesquire.com>.

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

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Disaster is the Thing with Feathers: Tragedy, Voids, and the Mothman as Animist

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Abstract

Since his first sighting in 1966, the Mothman has captured the attention of both residents of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, and cryptozoologists across the world. This article discusses the phenomenon of the Mothman and the role he occupies in the imagination of Point Pleasant and its subsequent cryptozoological pilgrims. Utilizing the language of neo-Paganism to frame the discussion, I will demonstrate how the Mothman emerged from a void in the urbanized landscape, and how he has since come to play a key role for the Point Pleasant community. I will specifically utilize the language of animism to explain his relationships with both humans and the non-human aspects of the community. I will consider the role played by the Mothman both during his emergence between 1966 and 1967, and following the collapse of the Silver Bridge in December 1967, which marked the end of his original appearance.

Keywords:

Mothman, cryptids, cryptozoology, animism, Paganism, voids

Introduction

In November 1966, residents of the town of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, began to report sightings of a humanoid figure with large wings and glowing red eyes. This creature, dubbed “the Mothman” by local press, would continue to terrorize the small town for thirteen months until the collapse of the Silver Bridge on 15 December 1967. These events inadvertently put Point Pleasant on the map as a significant site of paranormal activity. To this day, what would otherwise be just another town in America is known for the strange events, and in recent years

the community appears to have embraced its reputation. In the five decades since his¹ first appearance, the Mothman has been subject to a great deal of speculation, much of which surrounds what exactly he is and what his appearance signified all those years ago. However, just as much attention has been paid to *why* Mothman is remembered with such interest, even so long after his last “official” sighting.

This article discusses the phenomenon of the Mothman and the role he occupies in the imagination of Point Pleasant, West Virginia. Utilizing the language of neo-Paganism to frame the discussion, I will demonstrate how the Mothman emerged from a void in the urbanized landscape, and how he has since come play a key role in the Point Pleasant community, using animism to explain his relationships with both humans and the non-human aspects of the community. I must clarify that the purpose of this argument is not to claim that the residents of Point Pleasant themselves engage in Paganism, nor do I believe that the original sightings were influenced by such practices. Rather, the *language* of Paganism is used here to describe the sort of role that Mothman plays in the town. Another necessary point of clarification is that when I discuss the Mothman, I make no statement regarding his ontology. The question of whether or not the Mothman has ever actually existed is not a matter up for discussion. This article will treat the Mothman as real in as far as the phenomenon of the Mothman was real, being experienced by residents, and continues to be “real” to residents and cryptid pilgrims to this day.

To begin, this article will outline the role played by animism in Pagan worldviews, especially as it pertains to relationships between humans and the landscapes they inhabit. Particularly, this discussion will consider spatial voids, especially as they appear adjacent to human habitation. Next, we will recount the appearance of the Mothman in Point Pleasant between 1966 and 1967, culminating in the collapse of the Silver Bridge. This will be used to construct an understanding of the Mothman as he existed at that time, grappling with his relationship with the residents of Point Pleasant and what he came to signify. Finally, this article will consider the transformation undergone by the Mothman between 1967 and the present, taking into account his adoption as something of a totem by the town, and his ongoing role in culture and in cryptozoology. Additionally, I will discuss the emergence of cryptozoological pilgrims and their interest in Point Pleasant as a destination. Throughout, we will discuss how Mothman can be approached using the language of animism, and ultimately build a greater understanding of his role and relationship with the residents of Point Pleasant.

Paganism, Animism, and Voids

Before discussing Paganism, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the word. It has been used throughout history to refer to non-Abrahamic religious practices that existed peripheral to normative Christian societies.² In the last century, however, the term has come to refer more

¹ While no accounts specifically mention the Mothman’s sexual anatomy, he has historically been referred to using he/him pronouns from the very first media reports on sightings, likely due to the “-man” suffix in his moniker. As such, I will be using these pronouns (and male-gendered language in general) to refer to the Mothman throughout this article.

² Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis, ‘Introduction’, in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 1.

specifically to eclectic modern spiritual practices, including Wicca, Druidry, shamanism, and goddess worship, among others; this is generally referred to as neo-Paganism.³ The root of this renaissance can be traced to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, one of the most influential occult groups in recent history, which emerged in the late nineteenth century. The Hermetic Order specifically pioneered the appropriation of existing non-Christian mysticism to create an esoteric foundation for magical practice.⁴ The emergence of modern Paganism has been the subject of considerable academic inquiry, with a number of competing definitions offered. For the purposes of this article, Michael York's definition is most relevant. He describes contemporary Paganism as emphasizing sacred relationships and experiences that reach beyond monotheism and exists outside of conventional institutionalized religious practices, and specifically notes a common reverence for tangible living things and the unseen participating spirits that inhabit them.⁵ There are, of course, an endless number of various practices that are included in this definition, and (neo-) Paganism is most appropriately used as an umbrella term. Many of these worldviews place a great deal of emphasis on the role of the environment, especially in the ongoing face of climate disaster. This interest is closely linked to animism, which has itself undergone a transformation in the neo-Pagan emergence.

In its older context, animism was defined as belief in a soul or other metaphysical essence that differentiates living things from inanimate objects.⁶ New animism is not dissimilar from this but is distinct in its emphasis on communal nature of living things, generally believing that other-than-human persons should be treated with the same respect as human persons.⁷ As Kathryn Rountree explains, when contemporary Pagans engage with a landscape, their interactions can be described as a kind of family reunion; "a recognition, celebration, and embodied performance of kin relationships with the earth's seen and unseen inhabitants and constituents, present and past."⁸ This is not to say that flora and fauna are treated in precisely the same way as other humans. Rather, the relationships between them, and between humans and non-humans, are considered kinship of the same importance as human kin connections, and they are each handled in their own distinct way which may or may not resemble the relationships shared by humans. This subsequently informs aspects of society such as allocation of rights to group membership, economic resources, residential locality, occupation, transference of social status, inheritance of property, and intergenerational relations.⁹ As Graham Harvey summarizes, new animism holds that "the world is a community of persons, only some of which are human, but all of whom deserve respect."¹⁰ Engaging with nature is

³ Kathryn Rountree, 'Performing the Divine: Neo-Pagan Pilgrimages and Embodiment at Sacred Sites', *Body & Society* 12, no. 4 (2006): 96.

⁴ Nevill Drury, 'The Modern Magical Revival', in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, eds. Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 13.

⁵ Pizza and Lewis, 'Introduction', 1.

⁶ Graham Harvey, 'Animist Paganism', in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. Murphy Pizza and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 394.

⁷ Harvey, 'Animist Paganism', 395.

⁸ Kathryn Rountree, 'Neo-Paganism, Animism, and Kinship with Nature', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27, no. 2 (2012): 305.

⁹ Rountree, 'Neo-Paganism, Animism, and Kinship with Nature', 308.

¹⁰ Graham Harvey, 'Paganism and Animism', in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, eds Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim (London: Routledge, 2016), 213.

not a matter of asking whether something is alive, but of asking how it should be treated.¹¹

New animism reflects the emphasis placed on the environment by many neo-Pagans. It is unavoidable that a great deal of the theory surrounding animism refers to natural landscapes. In reality, as of 2020, 56% of the world's human population lives in urban centers, with this number increasing every year.¹² As such, new animism must consider relationships not only in forests and oceans, but also in cities and suburban areas. Here, humans are poised to consider balanced relationships with green strips and animals such as the humble pigeon, but it also brings a consideration of exactly what is included within animism. Indeed, while it is not uncommon to hear urban centers described as impersonal or dead spaces due to their remoteness from the natural environment, the emerging New Materialist movement calls into question the assumption that there is nothing substantially "alive" to be found in urban and suburban locations. Specifically, it considers the relationship between humans and the matter around them, reframing interactions as dynamic and mutual.¹³ In this way, while not directly referring to Animism, many works on New Materialism follow identical lines of thought regarding the relationship between human and non-human beings. While inanimate matter is not treated with the same precise kinship as living non-human things, it nonetheless instills the urban and suburban with a sense of life and even agency that is not present in traditional, cynical views of the landscape. In this way, the city and the town can be contextualized as sacred landscapes with their own complex society formed by the beings and matter who inhabit them. Neo-Paganism is thus able to consider both natural and human-made places within an Animist worldview. However, not everything in the landscape fits neatly into this categorization.

The void is itself a somewhat esoteric concept. Historically, it is usually associated with a nihilistic worldview, which emphasizes the absence of substantial meaning in life and the looming presence of eternal darkness that characterizes non-existence. Recently though, the void has undergone something of a reconsideration in academia, being snatched from the jaws of nihilism and instead utilized as a sociological concept. Simply put, it is invoked when nothingness itself is a key aspect of an interaction; when a relationship is attempted but fails due to an absence of another party. This draws heavily on Jacques Lacan's idea of The Thing: an unknowable object that resists signification and as such recontextualizes all concepts around it.¹⁴ Specifically, it causes an observer to question why those concepts cannot aid in identifying The Thing, allowing for greater insight into what is signified in those concepts that are identifiable.¹⁵ Within animism and the urban landscape, the void plays a role in highlighting the signifiers that exist around it. One common instance in which this can be identified is industrial ruins. As Tim Edensor describes, ruined urban spaces are understood as "somewhere in which nothing happens and there is nothing".¹⁶ If animism emphasizes the relationship

¹¹ Harvey, 'Paganism and Animism', 213.

¹² 'Urban Development', Understanding Poverty, *The World Bank*, updated 20 April 2020. At <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/overview#:~:text=Today%2C%20some%2056%25%20of%20the,world%20will%20live%20in%20cities>.

¹³ Melinda H. Benson, 'New Materialism', *Natural Resources Journal* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 257.

¹⁴ Oliver Keane and Paul Kingsbury, 'Raising Sasquatch to the Place of the Cryptozoological Thing', in *A Place More Void*, eds. Paul Kingsbury and Anna J. Secor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2021), 218.

¹⁵ Keane and Kingsbury, 'Raising Sasquatch to the Place of the Cryptozoological Thing', 218.

¹⁶ Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 8.

between human and non-human individuals, including aspects of the landscape, then the abandoned urban place can be likened to a person's relationship with a corpse: they cannot properly engage with it as it is, only with the memory of what it once was and what it once signified. It casts further light the ontology of everything around it. This constitutes a void by virtue of its instability. Industrial ruins signify concepts adjacent to themselves; they are "the hole from which all signification issues".¹⁷ Thus, we can identify the position of abandoned urban places within urban animism. They are, as Paul Kingsbury and Anna J. Secor describe, "the specters and memorialized departed, the afterimages of bygone episodes, the ghost towns and the industrial ruins where the past is tangibly present."¹⁸ Having lost their significance, they become voids, and as such trouble the relationships between humans and the world around them. Humans project onto their environments, but the void resists this and thus cannot respond. With this understanding of animist relationships with the non-human world, including the voids that exist within it, we can thus progress to considering how this approach can be used to describe the phenomenon of the Mothman.

The History of the Mothman

The first reported sighting of the Mothman occurred on the night of 15 November 1966. Two teenage couples – Roger and Linda Scarberry, and Mary and Steve Mallette – were driving on the outskirts of Point Pleasant, West Virginia.¹⁹ A small town with a population between 5000 and 6000 at the time, Point Pleasant is surrounded by the McClintic Wildlife Management Area, a naturalized zone home to a number of native species, especially birds.²⁰ This area also notably houses an abandoned wartime industrial site, known colloquially as the "TNT area" due the undetonated explosives that still sit in the abandoned factories.²¹ As the teenagers passed through the TNT area, they saw a pair of enormous, glowing red eyes peering out from the darkness of the buildings. As the car drew closer they could see the humanoid figure of a winged biped, standing over seven feet tall. The driver, Roger Scarberry, immediately began to drive away, but the creature suddenly flew up into the air and gave chase.²² Even when the car's speed reached over 100mph, the creature kept pace; it was only once they made it to the city limits that their pursuer abandoned its chase. The spooked teenagers immediately went to the Mason County Courthouse to report the incident. The police investigated the location of the alleged sighting but found no evidence of the strange creature. Despite this, the story soon spread around the small town, being featured in the newspaper and igniting interest in the TNT area. At some point during this period the press began to refer to the reported creature as "the Mothman", referencing the villain Killer Moth of the 1950s *Batman and Robin* comic series.²³

¹⁷ Paul Kingsbury and Anna J. Secor, 'Introduction', in *A Place More Void*, eds. Paul Kingsbury and Anna J. Secor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2021), 6.

¹⁸ Kingsbury and Secor, 'Introduction', 15.

¹⁹ Joe Laycock, 'Mothman: Monster, Disaster and Community', *Fieldwork in Religion* 3, no. 1 (2008): 74.

²⁰ 'Population of Point Pleasant, WV', *Population.us*, accessed 9 August 2022. At: <https://population.us/wv/point-pleasant/>.

²¹ Deborah Dixon, 'A Benevolent and Sceptical Inquiry: Exploring 'Fortean Geographies' with the Mothman', *Cultural Geographies* 14, no. 2 (2007): 196.

²² Dixon, 'A Benevolent and Sceptical Inquiry', 196.

²³ Laycock, 'Mothman', 75.

Over the next thirteen months, there were over one hundred reports of a large humanoid in the TNT area with wings and glowing red eyes. Many of these included pursuits by the creature identical to that described by the original four observers; other included feelings of dread leading up to the encounter, a strange sensation of being compelled towards the creature, and a scream that was so loud it caused a television set to explode.²⁴ These were from not only Point Pleasant residents, but also from tourists who were drawn to the town by reports of the paranormal. One such pilgrim was journalist John A. Keel, who was at the time investigating UFO sightings and would soon develop his theory of ultra-terrestrials, positing that aliens did not in fact come from outer space, but from other dimensions. Keel was attracted largely by the spike in UFO sightings that occurred in Point Pleasant at the same time as sightings of the Mothman; his attention was soon drawn to the creature when he experienced an encounter of his own. He would later record the events in his 1975 book *The Mothman Prophecies*.²⁵ He describes entering a building in the TNT area, accompanied by a handful of others, when suddenly one of the women in his group screamed and dissolved into hysterics, claiming to have seen “two big red eyes” staring at her.²⁶ Others reported a tall figure fleeing the scene, which police originally assumed was Keel himself. Another woman suddenly found that her ear was bleeding, and that the atmosphere was “oppressive... heavy.”²⁷ While Keel did not bear witness to the creature himself, he does recall “one curious experience”.

As I passed a certain point on one of the isolated roads I was suddenly engulfed in fear. I stepped on the gas and after I went a few yards my fear vanished as quickly as it came. I continued to drive, eventually returning again to the same spot. And again a wave of unspeakable fear swept over me. I drove quickly away from the place and then stopped, puzzled. Why would this one stretch of road produce this hair-raising effect? ... Once again, when I reached that particular point the hair tingled on the back of my neck and I became genuinely afraid. When I emerged from the other side of this invisible zone I stopped and got out of my car. The air was perfectly still... not even a bird call.²⁸

When Keel returned to the spot the next day, the “invisible zone” had disappeared. This high-profile encounter only fueled rumors of the Mothman’s potential origin, with some claiming it was a supernatural creature, while others believed that it was the remains of a human who had been mutated by chemicals dumped in the TNT area.²⁹ A small number of people who sighted the Mothman subsequently reported visits from Men in Black who were gathering information on the creature for the government; these alleged encounters are discussed at length in *The*

²⁴ Jeffrey J. Kripal, ‘On the Mothman, God, and Other Monsters: The Demonology of John A. Keel’, in *Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Western Gnostic, Esoteric, and Mystical Traditions*, eds. April D. DeConick and Grant Adamson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 249.

²⁵ John A. Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies* (London: New English Library, 1975).

²⁶ Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies*, 100.

²⁷ Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies*, 101.

²⁸ Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies*, 102.

²⁹ Laycock, ‘Mothman’, 75.

Mothman Prophecies.³⁰ Overall, the atmosphere of Point Pleasant over those thirteen months was somewhat hysterical, with law enforcement baffled by the prospect of managing a seemingly supernatural force threatening the town.

The anxiety that characterized Point Pleasant during this period ultimately came to a head on 15 December 1967, exactly one year and one month after the initial sighting by the Scarberries and Mallettes. During the evening rush hour, the Silver Bridge, which connected Point Pleasant to Gallipolis, Ohio, collapsed under the weight of the traffic, killing forty-six people and injuring dozens of others.³¹ The failure was the result of a faulty eyebar in a suspension chain; at the time it was the worst highway accident in American history.³² When the town was rocked by this disaster, sightings of the Mothman abruptly came to a halt, with the last reports taking place just hours before the accident. The proximity of the Silver Bridge disaster to the Mothman sightings quickly led the two events to become inextricably linked in the minds of Point Pleasant residents and Mothman enthusiasts alike. Some claimed that it was the Mothman himself that caused the collapse, while others posited that he was a herald seeking to warn the town of the danger in advance. In the ensuing years, Mothman has been interpreted in myriad ways, including as an alien, a spirit, an angel, and a demon.³³

Here, it is vital to address how the Mothman is framed within culture; specifically, his classification within cryptozoology. “Cryptids” are a type of pseudoscientific animal, found only in anecdote and lacking any concrete scientific evidence of their existence. Classic examples include species such as the Sasquatch, Chupacabra, and Jersey Devil. Since its appearance in the last 1960s, the Mothman has come to be classified as a cryptid and has seen great popularity in cryptozoology circles. However, the Mothman lacks many of the features commonly associated with cryptids. For instance, he is generally not considered to be one of a species, but a singular entity, a feature that notably clashes with the “zoology” aspect of cryptozoology. Additionally, the Mothman emerged much more suddenly than other cryptids, most of which have a traceable history in records such as First Nations traditions. For instance, the North American Sasquatch can be linked back to narratives of the Hupa, Karok, Tolowa, and Yurok Indigenous groups.³⁴ There are some claims that the Mothman is a spirit invoked by the Shawnee chief Cornstalk, who was killed by colonists in 1777 in what was then Fort Randolph and was said to have cursed the land with his dying breath.³⁵ I am hesitant to treat this with the same legitimacy as an Indigenous narrative, however, given that it is an account

³⁰ Laycock, ‘Mothman’, 75. Men in Black are a common topic among groups occupied with conspiracy theories and the paranormal. The Men in Black are allegedly a government body who visit people who have had apparent paranormal (often UFO) encounters. The Men in Black reportedly interrogate these individuals on their experiences, often intimidating them into keeping their story a secret and not alerting the press. These agents have also been described as displaying paranormal abilities of their own, to the extent of appearing inhuman. Accounts of these men include their pale skin and bright red lips, as well as their unnatural movements, sometimes compared to a creature still learning to be human. These reports are unsubstantiated, but their ubiquity in UFO circles is of interest.

³¹ Simon J. Sherwood, ‘A Visit to Point Pleasant: Home of the Mothman’, *Paranthropology* 4, no. 1 (2013): 31.

³² Sherwood, ‘A Visit to Point Pleasant’, 31.

³³ Laycock, ‘Mothman’, 76.

³⁴ Thomas Buckley, ‘Monsters and the Quest for Balance in Native Northwest California’, in *Manlike Monsters on Trial* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 152.

³⁵ Clarke, ‘The Mothman of West Virginia’, 272.

by Europeans of an apparently magical Indigenous person, a genre of narrative that is highly racialized and colonial.

As such, it can be safely said that the Mothman appeared out of nowhere in 1966. Finally, the Mothman is distinct from his cryptid brethren by virtue of his paranormal abilities. While creatures such as the Yeti and the Loch Ness Monster are certainly legendary, they are notably understood to not possess any actually supernatural traits aside from their resistance to identification. This is in stark contrast to contemporary descriptions of the Mothman's paranormal abilities such as compulsion, the ability to move at 100 miles per hour, and, of course, his unnaturally glowing red eyes. What the Mothman *does* share with other cryptids is a certain aesthetic of mystery and the undiscovered wilderness, as well as its nature as a purely anecdotal creature. It can be concluded that while Mothman can be discussed as a cryptid, the categorization is not concrete. As such, I will subsequently discuss Mothman's status as a singular mythical entity, rather than a cryptozoological animal. While there is certainly a great deal of insight to be gleaned from researching Mothman as a cryptid, this is not the aim of this article.

A Body Made of Void

There are myriad angles from which one may approach the Mothman; it is appropriate to begin by considering the intensely local nature of his body. Mothman is inextricable from Point Pleasant and the landscape around it. Compared to other "cryptids", the Mothman occupies a fairly limited space, with the TNT area constituting just 5.71 square miles of land. In comparison, Loch Ness is 21.77 square miles in size, and its alleged monster is crucially limited in its movements by its aquatic nature. The Mothman has no such physical limitations, and yet apparently remains in the small area by Point Pleasant. It should be noted there have been other alleged sightings of the creature at the sights of other great disasters, such as Chernobyl and 9/11, but these reports are generally made after the incidents have occurred, often years after the fact. This is inconsistent with the 1966-1967 sightings, which took place before the collapse of the Silver Bridge. As such, I believe it is justifiable to count these as outliers and maintain that the Mothman's home remains the TNT area.

The TNT area is an industrial ruin, specifically a post-war relic. During World War II, it was a manufacturing facility for ammunition, employing several thousand people at the height of the war. The buildings that stored that explosives are of particular note, as they were built into the landscape rather than on top of it, camouflaged beneath the hills.³⁶ Following the conclusion of the war in 1945, the facility was closed and subsequently abandoned; this included several bunkers that still housed explosive materials.³⁷ In the ensuing years, the area was converted into the McClintic Wildlife Management Area. Yet even as decades have passed, the location has never fully transformed into a natural area, as the old buildings remain even as flora and fauna have thrived around them. As such, those who enter the space cannot engage with it as a natural environment; they must always ruminate on the history marked by

³⁶ Claire O'Neill, 'Welcome to the 'TNT Area,' Home Of The Mothman', Daily Picture Show, *NPR*, published 23 January 2012. Available at <https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2012/01/23/145334460/welcome-to-the-tnt-area-home-of-the-mothman>.

³⁷ O'Neill, 'Welcome to the 'TNT Area'.

the ghostly edifices. Kingsbury and Secor refers to spectral geographies as “[tangling] up the string of temporal lineality” and engaging experiences of the uncanny, traits that be clearly identified in the TNT area’s muddling of urban and natural. In both categories, the TNT area lacks something. In the sense of the urban, it lacks human presence and production; in the sense of the natural, it lacks the peace of the fully non-human environment. As such, the TNT area is a void, contextualising the elements around it but troubling attempts to identify its own signification; it is Lacan’s Thing as a location. As described above, it follows that the dynamic between the TNT area and the human residents of Point Pleasant is multifaceted, built on a foundation of absence and muddling. It is therefore highly significant that the Mothman finds his home there. Indeed, the voidness of the space casts a great deal of light on the construction of the Mothman as a body imbued with meaning, yet simultaneously resisting signification.

In many ways, the Mothman’s body is an extension of the void of the TNT area. He is a non-human, apparently paranormal entity whose origin appears to be the post-war ruins. In this sense, he could not have been created by just any type of location on earth, as he embodies the uncanniness of an area reclaimed by nature yet still posing danger due to what was previously produced there. He *is* the intersection of human abandonment and natural growth, being both a non-human but distinctly *humanoid* being. Here, it is crucial to frame the Mothman’s body as a monstrous one. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen identifies in his chapter “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”, the monster’s body is *always* a cultural object constructed from humans’ relationships with the environment around them.³⁸ The Mothman is the result of the material landscape of Point Pleasant, and due to the location’s function as a void, the body constructed from that landscape will inevitably be monstrous and personify the conspicuous absence. The exact details of the Mothman’s appearance are also a reflection of this. His wings reflect the area’s status as a bird sanctuary, while the rest of his figure is human. Further, reports of his glowing red eyes demonstrate an ability for the Mothman to be ignored. The sense of dread associated with sightings is also in its own way ineffable: no one knew what the Mothman might do if he caught them, but they know they must avoid it at all costs. Overall, it is highly significant that the Mothman himself *made no sense at the time*. Unlike other “cryptids”, he is not based on a pre-existing concept from local First Nations narratives, nor is he a manifestation of a known urban legend. There was no context for his emergence, and in grappling with this, the residents of Point Pleasant were forced to reconsider how they engaged with the environment he suddenly inhabited.

This association of monsters with disaster is nothing new. Perhaps the most famous instance of this kind of rationalization is Godzilla (*Gojira*), who was originally constructed in the aftermath of the end of World War II, specifically the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Indeed, Godzilla’s status as a monster embodying disaster has only evolved since his first appearance in 1954. Significantly, the franchise’s reboot in 2016 was greatly informed by the triple disasters of 2011, when Japan saw an earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown within twelve months.³⁹ In both of these iterations, Godzilla embodies the disasters, and in some way makes sense of them. Crînguța Irina Pelea explains,

³⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’, in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 38.

³⁹ John Schneiderwind, ‘Godzilla as the Bridge: The Destruction of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Fukushima’, *Arcadia* 24, no. 1 (Summer 2020).

[Godzilla] becomes a coherent cinematic expression for the trauma of the atomic war, or otherwise said, the ultimate signifier of the nuclear holocaust, mass-destruction, and the dramatic economic and social development of a country in agony, thus it invites to a broader reflection on the nuclear theme. Similarly, the visual aggressiveness of the scenes where Godzilla attacks cities replicates almost identically the horrors witnessed by Japan when Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed.⁴⁰

Crucially, Godzilla represents the impact of man-made disasters on the natural environment; he is nature retaliating against the atrocities committed by humans. In this way he provides some sense of meaning to the events, embodying the impact of war and ultimately advocating for peace. This is similar to the role of Mothman in Point Pleasant. There are obvious similarities between Godzilla and the Mothman in their initial associations with the violence of World War II – in Godzilla’s case, the atomic bomb, and in the Mothman’s, the town’s role in producing arms. These similar origins led both to embody the lingering regret and tragedy of the loss of life in the war. Further, their later interpretations – Godzilla representing the triple disasters of 2011 and Mothman as a herald of the Silver Bridge Collapse – demonstrate an ongoing search for meaning in the face of loss of life. By attributing these disasters to monsters, a lesson can be drawn. In both cases, there is a sense of retribution; of nature taking revenge on humans who forget it can take back power at any moment. Godzilla’s association with the ocean made it the perfect candidate for catharsis following the Pacific Ocean earthquake and subsequent tsunami, while Mothman’s role as terrorizing force has since interpreted as a reminder of how a single events (be it an encounter with a paranormal agent or the collapse of a bridge) can impact a community.

Returning to animism, we can now place the Mothman’s role as an embodiment of the relationship between the people of Point Pleasant and the non-human entities that formed the landscape. All of the discomfort and separation that they felt towards the TNT area and its beings has been collected into one phenomenon. Due to the nature of this relationship, it was inevitable that the reaction to Mothman would be fear; indeed, the sense of dread commonly reported to accompany sightings is a direct manifestation of unease that comes with Animist engagement between humans and a fractured landscape. This is not to claim that the residents of Point Pleasant thought of their encounter with Mothman using (neo-) Pagan language. Rather, the language of Animism is a useful tool to describe how the residents interacted with the environment surrounding the town, and subsequently how they thought of the Mothman sightings. Ultimately, between November 1966 and December 1967, the Mothman served as an Animist medium for the uncomfortable position of the TNT area and the complex co-existence between the natural landscape and starkly man-made ruins of war. The discomfort of this role further points to the complicated nature of his appearance, a complexity which warrants further consideration.

⁴⁰ Crînguța Irina Pelea, ‘Exploring the Iconicity of Godzilla Popular Culture. A Comparative Intercultural Perspective: Japan-America’, *Postmodernism Problems*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2020): 20.

The Void of Mothman Present

For forty years following Mothman's appearance, he became something of a totem of Point Pleasant. In 2001, the town held its first annual Mothman festival, consisting of vendor stalls, live music, and public lectures, all themed around the legend.⁴¹ This coincided with – or perhaps began – a renewed interest in the Mothman, with Keels' book *The Mothman Prophecies* being adapted as a film adaptation the following year. Starring Richard Gere, his version fictionalized Keel's account and added a mystery element in order to create a more contained narrative, though it retained the major aspects of the book, including the intense atmosphere of simultaneous dread and compulsion surrounding the creature.⁴² During the 2003 Mothman festival, a 12-foot statue of the creature was unveiled in the center of town. The effigy was sculpted by Bob Roach and commissioned by Charles Humphries, the Executive Director of the Mason County Development Authority.⁴³ Since then, the festival has continued to take place every year in the third week of September, although the 2020 and 2021 events were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic; it returned in 2022. As it has grown, the festival has seen the inclusion of a 5km charity run, cosplay competitions, and private tours through Mothman-relevant locations in the area surrounding the town.

These festivities demonstrate a marked shift in Point Pleasant's perception of the Mothman; far from a terrifying herald of doom, he is now almost a mascot of the town. Joseph Laycock in particular notes the commonalities between Mothman's role in Point Pleasant and the properties of a clan totem as defined by Emile Durkheim, especially in the coherence and a sense of identity that the creature brings to the community.⁴⁴ Laycock identifies the Silver Bridge collapse as the key point at which the Mothman went from terror to totem. The fact that the bridge collapsed purely by chance, and that the forty-six deaths could have been easily prevented, characterized the tragedy as one devoid of meaning or ideology; in such circumstances, it is common for communities to scramble to find a way to contextualize the loss of life. The timing and proximity of the Mothman sightings led to the two events being associated with one another, with the Mothman being interpreted as a herald. In this way, he became deified in the narrative of the Silver Bridge collapse.⁴⁵ Laycock explains that "By connecting the disaster and the Mothman, the bridge collapse becomes part of the sacred and possibly unknowable mystery."⁴⁶ In the fifty years since the events, the Mothman has become an icon, both commemorating the loss of life and giving it meaning.

The status of Mothman as a mysterious and iconic cryptozoological figure cannot be understated. Indeed, visiting Point Pleasant, and in particular the Mothman statue, has become something of a pilgrimage for budding cryptozoologists. This is especially true during the Mothman festival, during which the town's population more than doubles. Several

⁴¹ Johan Smits, 'Mothman Festival 2022, West Virginia, USA', Travel Begins at 40, published 2019. At <https://www.travelbeginsat40.com/event/mothman-festival-west-virginia-usa/>.

⁴² Kripal, 'On Mothman, God, and Other Monsters', 250.

⁴³ Robert J. Kruse II, 'Point Pleasant, West Virginia: Making a Tourism Landscape in an Appalachian Town', *Southeaster Geographer* 55, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 324.

⁴⁴ Laycock, 'Mothman', 82.

⁴⁵ Laycock, 'Mothman', 79.

⁴⁶ Laycock, 'Mothman', 81.

businesses in the town offer tours of the TNT area both during the festival and throughout the year, and these services are highly popular with Mothman pilgrims. In visiting where the Mothman was once sighted, travelers can experience the same anticipation, and perhaps dread, felt by those who encountered the creature during the 1960s. The experience is one of aesthetics: mystery, suspense, and a strange mix of hope and dread. In this way, despite having no officially acknowledged appearances since December 1967, the Mothman endures as an animist force in Point Pleasant. Paradoxically, it is this strong association with mystery that makes Mothman quantifiable in a way that he was not during the height of sightings. He carries connotations of the paranormal, the unexplained, and as such has become a symbol for those things. We do not know what the Mothman *is*, but we are certain of what he *represents*. By disappearing, the Mothman became more understandable.

It is this provided meaning that problematizes the previous status of the Mothman as a void. Originally, he was utterly unknowable, his emergence being entirely devoid of context and subsequently transforming residents' view of the area he inhabited as they attempted to make sense of the strange circumstances. Following the Silver Bridge collapse, however, the Mothman was suddenly thought of very differently. As the two events became inextricable in the mind of Point Pleasant, Mothman quickly became contextualized by his proximity to disaster. This shift saw the Mothman transform from *The Thing* to merely *a Thing*; rather than resisting signification, his role as signifier was now his most important trait. Mothman transforms from the void to a known quantity; a herald of disaster, and most significantly a part of the town, rather than a distorted reflection of it.

Returning to Animism once again, we can map the modern standing of Mothman in Point Pleasant. Where he once acted as a manifestation of the relationship between the human residents and the TNT area, he now serves as an embodiment of the relationship between the people and the event of the Silver Bridge collapse. In the wake of such a tragedy, the question emerges of the cosmic reason for such loss of life, and inevitably edges into New Materialism when searching for justification for the failure of an inanimate object. Regardless of whether he is interpreted as messenger or perpetrator, the conflation of the Mothman with the event sanctifies and in some way justifies the tragedy. The reason for its occurrence is still unknown, but it appears that there *is* a reason. Even if the mystery is never solved, it is preferable to the idea that it was a meaningless accident.

Conclusion

The legacy of the Mothman continues to enthrall paranormal enthusiasts across the world. Originally a strange, terrifying monster who embodies the void between the natural the man-made, he has since become symbolic of the unknown and the unexplained. It is this prescribed meaning that makes him such a key part of Point Pleasant's history. His role is one of catharsis, providing a point of reference for the town to begin healing from the disaster that rocked their community. That the Silver Bridge Collapse seemingly had no meaning was solved by the Mothman's presence, as he serves as a reminder that some things will forever remain mysterious. In the wake of tragedy, this is a far easier framework for healing than the idea that the accident was entirely absurd and without philosophical consequence. Even if the meaning can never be determined, the Mothman is evidence that it exists.

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The Mothman's role in Point Pleasant has transformed greatly since the teenagers' first encounter in 1966. He has gone from a mysterious body at the crossroads of nature and humanity to a symbol for all things mysterious and unexplained. By using the language of animism, further contextualized by reference to New Materialism, we can build a more holistic understanding of how Mothman has been understood and engaged with across time. Within an animistic framework, we can identify the Mothman as real, not in the sense of physicality, but in his position as an embodiment of the town and its surroundings. Indeed, the suitability of the language of animism in describing the Mothman indicates potential for this framework to be applied to other instances of so-called "cryptids" in the future. Entities such as the Sasquatch and the Jersey Devil occupy similar spaces in their landscapes as embodiments of the strange and unexplained, and a great deal of insight could be gained in considering them as animist encounters.

BOOK REVIEWS

Donald L. Westbrook, *L. Ron Hubbard and Scientology Studies* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Elements, 2022); 75 pp.; ISBN: 9781009032001; RRP eBook ?

Keywords: Scientology; Bridge to Total Freedom; L. Ron Hubbard; Scientology Studies

The Cambridge Element series, like Oxford University Press Very Short Introductions, are brief, inexpensive, and often highly informative. Donald L. Westbrook has already published an important study of Scientology in the twenty-first century, *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis* (Oxford University Press, 2019), and he is one of the new scholars of the Church of Scientology (CoS) who are changing the whole approach to this most controversial new religion. Founded by L. Ron Hubbard (1911-1986) in 1954, CoS gained a reputation for both weirdness and dangerousness. Science fiction was often attributed a major role in the formation of its doctrines, its founder was decried as a “madman,” and the means to which the Church resorted to protect its reputation involved extreme harassment of journalists and critics, and violent control of members (especially of the elite Sea Org group) who wished to leave. Westbrook, in this work, acknowledges that not everything will be covered, but gives major attention to the study of Scientology, a reflective historiographical focus which is a major strength. The section “Scientology Studies: Theory and Practice” reviews all the monographs to date on CoS, and some scholarship in journals and edited volumes. Westbrook shares his relationship with CoS, which led to his PhD research and participant observation in Scientology practices like auditing, the Purification Rundown, and Training Routines.

The central place of Hubbard in the lives of Scientologists is made clear throughout. Westbrook covers Hubbard’s career as a writer, a naval serviceman, an explorer, and the deviser of the “Bridge to Total Freedom,” which he describes as “a distinct spiritual path to the states of Clear and OT” (pp. 16-17). Westbrook’s perspective is grounded in the beliefs and practices of everyday Scientologists, and he warns against Hubbard being viewed as a deity, and rejects faith-language, emphasising Scientology’s sacred scientific language of knowledge, technology, and workability. The discussion of “L. Ron Hubbard Landmark Site” (p. 19) is fascinating, as little attention has been paid to the devotional practices of CoS members. These include homes in which he lived, teaching spaces, sites linked to Dianetics (the precursor of Scientology), the various state headquarters of the developing Church, and buildings in England (such as Saint Hill Manor in East Grinstead). Westbrook discusses the Bridge to Total Freedom as a “pilgrimage guide” (p. 29), and makes the point that Scientologists walking the Bridge feel themselves to be in Hubbard’s footsteps.

The “Archival Research” section is particularly interesting; Westbrook presents the collections of documents and data that researchers can access when they study the CoS. Some are public and thus unproblematic; others are private (Clearwater, for example, where the Flag Service Organization is based). A range of Californian universities have collections (San Diego State University, UC Santa Barbara, UC Los Angeles, and the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley), and there are other collections connected to scholars, including Hugh B. Urban, Stephen A. Kent, and Westbrook himself. The links between Scientology and other religions are expounded using the work of scholars including Bernadette Rogal-Cellard, Bernard

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Doherty, Marco Frenschkowski, and Massimo Introvigne (among others). There is an extensive glossary of terms associated with the study of CoS (pp. 42-46), a timeline of major events in the history of CoS (Appendix A, pp. 47-55), and a fairly extensive bibliography. This short book is principally directed to those who wish to study Scientology, rather than those who want to know *about* the religion. This is both a strength and a weakness; as a scholar who writes about Scientology I am invested, but there will be no general audience for what is an interesting and valuable short study. It deserves a place in the library of everyone who is interested in Scientology, or in New Religious Movements (NRMs) generally.

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Matthew Francis and Kim Knott (eds), *Minority Religions and Uncertainty*. London: Routledge, 2020; xii, 224 pp.; £36.99. ISBN: 9781032336251.

Keywords: Uncertainty, Minority religion, Response, Ideology, Unpredictability.

The opening chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the concept of uncertainty. Key distinctions are drawn when using the concept of uncertainty, such as, internal, external, open and closed responses (Knott and Francis, 2020, 15). Kim Knott and Matthew Francis continue to discuss the varied scope of what is meant by uncertainty. The opening chapter considers both individual response and group reactions drawing on the scholarship of M. A. Hogg, J. R. Adelman, and R. D. Blagg's 'Religion in the Face of Uncertainty: An Uncertainty-Identity Theory Account of Religiousness' (2010), the late Roy Wallis' *Apocalyptic Trajectories: Millenarianism and Violence in the Contemporary World* (2004) and Catherine Wessinger's *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (2000). In doing so, the reader is introduced to a number of case studies such as Aum Shinrikyo, Shugden, and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. This chapter provides an introduction to the complexity of uncertainty, particularly in the context of minority religious movements. As the reader continues to subsequent chapters, they are presented with individual case studies all situated within the context of uncertainty. The reader is continuously reminded of the complexity of the concept of uncertainty not only in the ways in which groups respond to structural uncertainty but also the complexity of choice which members are presented with. For instance, David Barrett (2020) builds on Rodney Starke and Roger Finke's *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (2000), which expounds rational choice theory, arguing that members of the Worldwide Church are faced with innumerable choices when faced with internal conflict which leads to schisms within the organization. When taking into consideration individual uncertainty the concept is problematized.

The majority of the case studies referred to in the book are religious or spiritual; however, there are examples of non-religious groups. Notably, Francis Stewart's (2020) work on the punk movement and Graham Macklin's (2020) analysis of British fascism after World War II. The analysis of these non-religious groups provides a juxtaposed viewpoint for comparison. Themes of uncertainty can be seen in both categorizations, as they are both considered to be on the periphery of the norm and so their responses are often opposed to the majority. This external opposition faced by minority groups often ebb and flow as norms, values and restrictions change, and adapt to contemporary time periods. These may be governmental opposition as is the case for Scientology. Martin Weightmans's contribution is particularly interesting due to the insider perspective he is able to offer. Weightman notes the extended period of time which Scientology has had to oppose governmental repression explaining that it took over 30 years to achieve full religious status. Lucia Ardovini offers a similar account referring to The Muslim Brotherhood's response to persecution. At the time a 'mostly religious movement' turned 'into a violent resistance entity' which as Ardovini (p. 47) suggests is 'a reaction that is common to many groups in times of persecution and repression' for many minority groups. It is not just external pressures which minority groups experiences. Internal struggles may also be a source of uncertainty. The issue of succession of significant figures within these groups is a shared problem. Whether this presents ideological, theological,

or doctrinal transformations, minority religious groups must respond which in some cases creates schisms and breakaway groups. A key takeaway from the array of case studies is the cyclical nature of response to uncertainty.

Each group's history demonstrates periods of stability followed by disequilibrium and renewal. This problem is exhibited most significantly in Angela Burt's examination of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in which she argues that the group had to undergo a 'course of reform, renewal and sustainability' (p. 86) in the time after Bhaktivedanta Swami's death. A similar problem faced The Muslim Brotherhood when Anwar Sadat was assassinated, as his successor Hosni Mubarak represented a shift in both leadership and political governance. Although there are commonalities between all minority groups (religious or not) each of the case studies must also be situated within their own contextual landscape. The volume coherently explores how external pressures effect the experience of the religious and non-religious movements. For example, Erica Baffelli's work on new religious movements in Japan analyses the impact of the media on the sustainability of groups such as Tensho Ko tai Jingu Kyo and Jiu. Comparatively, Antony Fiscella's chapter on colonial dissonance demonstrates how different organizational responses to uncertainty have unanticipated consequences.

The book is comprehensive in the case studies used but the timely nature of publication is also worth note. In a globalized society characterized by flux and insecurity the volume provides an opportune analysis on the effect of uncertainty of minority religions. The analysis given by the various authors is not necessarily restricted to minority religions and therefore presents opportunities for application to well established religious and non-religious ideologues. The volume encompasses range of interconnected disciplines. A key strength of the book is the breadth of knowledge that is culminated which considers psychological and sociological and responses to uncertainty. For example, from a social psychological standpoint Hogg et al. assert that 'people turn to religion when times are uncertain or when they feel uncertain about themselves' and their worldviews whereas by adopting a sociological viewpoint, uncertainty arises from time of social change.

The book uses examples from mainly group responses the uncertainty. Of course, this encompasses individual differences but there are few examples of analysis at an individual level. A possible avenue for further enquiry may focus on the individual experiences of those undergoing uncertainty. Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, in 'Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality' (2013) have called for scholarly focus on the social construction of new age spirituality. This call can be applied to minority religion and by adopting a different theoretical standpoint, for example an ethnographic or social constructivist approach, future research may be able to further unpick how uncertainty expresses itself in behavior.

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Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, Siv Ellen Kraft and James R. Lewis (eds), *New Age in Norway*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2017, ix- 306, ISBN: 9781781794166.

Keywords: New Age, Spirituality, Consumerism, Norway, Mediatization.

New Age in Norway begins with a comprehensive count for the history of New Age spirituality in Norway which Gilhus, Kraft and Lewis suggest is reflective of the spiritual landscape in Scandinavia. This volume brings together a collection of case studies which contribute to a growing scholarship which Steven Sutcliffe and Ingvild Gilhus defined as third wave research in their book *New Age Spirituality Rethinking Religion* (2013). In the article “Category Formation and the History of ‘New Age’” Steven Sutcliffe (2003, p. 7) asserts that future enquiry should “take seriously the theoretical potential of New Age for general studies of religion.” Gilhus, Kraft and Lewis have taken up this challenge. The goal of the collection is twofold, to extend the reach of Norwegian scholarship to an international audience, and to contribute to the development of third wave studies. The volume is successful in achieving both of these aims. The reader is well-informed about a variety of case studies which provide different conceptual offerings on New Age spirituality. The volume offers a comprehensive collection of case studies which when brought together provide a vivid description of New Age offerings in Norway. For example, Bengt-Ove Andreassen’s analysis of the incorporation of New Age ideas in the RE curriculum reflects the continuing influence of New Age ideas in Norwegian society. Comparatively, Ingvild Saelid Gilhus’s chapter discusses the relationship between New Age spirituality, secularization, and re-enchantment. Gilhus conceptualises the relationship by using angels as a metaphor. Drawing on Gregor Ahn’s term ‘Religiöse Grenzgänger’ in *Engel* (1999), Gilhus argues that ‘contemporary angels cross the borders between Lutheran Christianity, popular religion and New Age’ which reflect a changing engagement with traditional monotheism (p. 154). She concludes that the contestation of the concept of angels ‘implies that a monotheistic religious approach is giving way to a more polytheistic approach’ and a growing spiritual milieu (p. 154).

The current landscape of New Age spirituality in Norway is characterized by choice, with the consumer having a multitude of options on offer. This is demonstrated particularly in Anne Kalvig’s chapter “Contemporary Spiritualism in Norway: Faith Assemblies and Market Products”. She describes the abundance of groups that offer alternative services. A distinction between spiritualism and spiritism is made, and Kalvig situates the concepts in the Norwegian context which is a key strength of the chapter. She discusses the flourishing panorama of concepts ranging from ‘psychic telephone lines’ to ‘spiritualist real life meetings’ counterparted by a thriving community of ‘online healing and mediumship’ (p. 200). As with many aspects of society, choice and competition has increased, which has been accelerated by the process of globalization leading to a consumer-driven market. Gilhus and Kraft comment on this, making reference to this in the annual alternative spirituality fairs on offer in Norway. This is not a new phenomenon, but started in the early 1970’s and gained traction from the 1980’s onwards. For example, Asbjørn Dyrendal’s chapter “New Age and Norwegian ‘Conspirituality’” explores ideas of conspiracism and spirituality melding in Norway. He explores how conspiracy theories arise as cultural populist discourses in response to a variety

of reasons. David G. Robertson's "Conspiracy Narratives as Response to Uncertainty in Minority Religions" (2020) builds on this further.

A commonality throughout all case studies is the idea that New Age spirituality is growing and therefore requires a varied, systematic engagement. The book provides a sense that new age spirituality is 'everywhere' in that it occupies the spaces between national and domestic domains. As previously stated, the scholarship is expanding and continues to develop as researchers scratch the surface of how, why, and where New Age permeates society. In Jonathan Z. Smith's chapter "Here, there and anywhere" (2003) he adopts a spatial model of religion which speaks to the pervasive nature of New Age spirituality. In turn, Christian discourse on angels, and more widely on the increasing spiritual milieu, has had to realign itself to meet the needs of contemporary believers. The lines between Christianity, secularization, and re-enchantment have become blurred in a religious and non-religious landscape of choice.

A key takeaway from the volume is that New Age spirituality has become increasingly mediatized. Within a contemporary context, New Age spirituality has diversified and adopted alternative forms to meet the demands of an increasingly demanding consumer. New Age spirituality not only reflects a changing attitude to religious and spiritual engagement but is also indicative of a changing attitude from counterculture to consumption. In James R. Lewis and Oscar-Torjus Utaaker's chapter "Bumper Car Ride Through a Maze of Spiritual Trips" the authors tackle what they define as a "dismissive economic reductionism" which is now associated with New Age spiritualities inkling towards consumption (p. 247). Instead, they suggest that researchers should adopt a position that takes into account that the choices individuals make are laden with value and meaning. The choices are made in interconnected web of other possibilities which are molded by a plethora of factors. A strength of this collection lies in its highlighting of connectivity. Rather than viewing New Age spirituality as reductionist, the volume interprets the growth of New Age spirituality as a reflection of how individuals can join, consume, and replace their spiritual identity as they deem fit. Finally, Gilhus, Kraft and Lewis are effective in signposting readers and researchers to the previous pitfalls in previous literature and in turn influencing future enquiry. In doing so, this book further strengthens efforts to achieve a comprehensive third wave New Age study. What is clear is that New Age spirituality is a growing field in Norway; this volume provides a broad introduction to scholarship on the topic and in turn is a strong foundation for future research.

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Wuhan Journal of Cultic Studies

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