Handbook of Hyper-real Religions

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Edited by

Adam Possamai

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PREFACE

Eileen Barker

In olden days (or at least in much of mid-twentieth century Western sociology of religion), enquiring whether people believed in God, or whether they attended a place of worship on a regular basis, was commonly considered an adequate method for determining whether or not they were religious. More recently the questions have become increasingly sophisticated, recognising not only that there are religions, such as branches of Buddhism, that do not acknowledge a God at all, but also that conceptions of god(s), deities, Supreme Beings and the like are far more diverse than had been suspected by many. One relatively recent interest has been in what is meant by those who call themselves 'spiritual but not religious,' provoking an interest in New Age and other versions of 'the new spirituality', and in how such concepts tally with modern or (perhaps more frequently) postmodern society. Another development has been the growing awareness of Eastern religions and the recognition of a distinction between what the Chinese scholar C. K. Yang identified as institutional and diffused religion: the former being "a system of religious life having (1) an independent theology or cosmic interpretation of the universe and human events, (2) an independent form of worship consisting of symbols (gods, spirits and their images) and rituals, and (3) an independent organisation of personnel to facilitate the interpretation of theological views and to pursue cultic worship." Diffused religion, on the other hand, "is conceived of as a religion having its theology, cultus, and personnel so intimately diffused into one or more secular social institutions that they become part of the concept, rituals, and structure of the latter, thus having no significant independent existence" (Yang 1991: 294–295).

Such a distinction threatens the widely accepted separation of Durkheim's *conscience collective* into the sacred and profane—a separation that is threatened in a somewhat similar, yet radically different way by the concept of a hyper-real religion, defined by Adam Possamai as "a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or a source of beliefs for everyday life." Simulacra are simulations that

make no distinction between an object and its representation but which can be seen as more real than the 'real' and are, thus, 'hyper-real.'

This book examines some of the issues that this concept of hyper-real religions raises for contemporary analyses of *homo religiosus*, exploring the boundaries of what might usefully (if sometimes controversially) count as religious or spiritual beliefs and practices. Drawing on the empirical examples offered in the rich array of chapters, questions are asked about the wide variety of ways in which contemporary cultures provide new resources, with which people can attempt to transcend what might be considered the profane by employing images available in popular media, and by both discovering and creating sacred space in cyberspace.

New syncretisms and new ways of 'being religious' would appear to have become available on a global scale hitherto well-nigh unimaginable. Indeed, several of the groups or movements that are discussed in the following pages might seem to be quite incredible. Yet the members of Heaven's Gate would appear to have believed in their 'theology' of extra-terrestrials with sufficient sincerity to take their own lives. But how seriously can we take the 390,000 Britons who declared themselves Jedi Knights for the 2001 national Census? Surely, most people would argue, this was nothing more than a disruptive joke? How seriously can we take Discordianism, the Church of the SubGenius or the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, alternatively known as Pastafarianism? However, while members of such 'parody religions' might be doing their best to shock or to celebrate the absurd, there is seriousness in the manner in which they recontextualise and/or 'remix' selected facets of contemporary culture to create their Monty Pythonesque *Weltanschauungen.* Furthermore, members of hyper-religions are not merely consumers, they can be active creators in an on-going construction both of their religions and (as part of a dialectical process) of popular culture.

For some, role-playing is serious play as a technique to summon the 'powers within' and align oneself with an imagined 'higher' or 'magical' Self. But sometimes it is not the consumers themselves but their critics who are the believers in the power and efficacy of the constructs of popular culture—as when certain Christians are convinced that the *Harry Potter* books and films are an evil influence on the young and/or that role-playing games are Satanic and can lead to suicide. Yet other Christians, recognising the attraction that role-playing games can hold for the young, have introduced special Christian competitors and, we learn, a hyper-real *ir*religion has evolved as a competitive alternative to the religious world-views that gain their inspiration from popular culture.

It would seem that there is no limit to the range of contemporary media (such as music, dance, comics, film, videos, psycho-active chemicals and plants and now, above all, the Internet) that can give rise to these new forms of religiosity. There is a virtual online community of those, the Otherkin, who believe themselves to be spiritually and/or physically other than human. Many of the resources that are drawn upon have lain lurking in the cultic milieu to which Colin Campbell drew our attention in the early 1970s; shades of Theosophy and Freemasonry, bits and pieces from Aleister Crowley and Gerald Gardner, vampire myths and science fiction have all contributed to one or other of the hyper-real religions described in this book.

To apply the term hyper-religion raises a number of theoretical and methodological issues, several of which are discussed by the contributors to the volume. First, one might question the usefulness of expanding the concept of religion and its study to include what might alternatively (or complementarily) be looked upon as little more than secular fiction. One might consider that to call a religion a hyper-religion is to introduce an evaluative element when social scientists should remain methodologically agnostic, not judging one religion as either more or less 'really' religious than another. And, perhaps most pertinently for social constructionists, one might question the whole concept of reality. All social reality has been described as symbolic interactionism. This does not deny that social facts exist, independent of the volition of any individual; but, it can also be argued, they do not exist independent of individuals (consciously or unconsciously) recognising them. Of course, what is real for some is not real for others and, as Scheifinger's analysis of Hinduism points out, phenomena can be experienced as possessing different levels or gradations of reality—and Hindu representations have always stood for the real and, thereby, become real. Perhaps the methodologically agnostic social constructionist might insist that *all* religions can be seen and/or should be analysed by the social scientist as hyper-religions.

The concept of hyper-real religions could be criticised as an ambiguous one and, indeed, in some ways it is—as is evidenced by the variety of ways that it is taken up by the contributors to this volume. But this very ambiguity is perhaps its strength rather than its weakness, for this is an exciting volume that takes the sociology of religion to places it does not usually visit. It not only points to novel developments in contemporary society that can be fruitfully analysed with the tools of the sociology of religion, encouraging us to sharpen those tools when they can been seen to be too blunt; it also stimulates us to recognise things, or at least ask

questions, about older religions that we may not previously have noticed or queried. It offers a genuinely innovative addition to the discipline.

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INTRODUCTION

RELIGION, POPULAR CULTURE AND BAUDRILLARD

YODA GOES TO GLASTONBURY: AN INTRODUCTION TO HYPER-REAL RELIGIONS

Adam Possamai

Introduction

Hyper-real religion refers to a simulacrum of a religion, created out of, or in symbiosis with, popular culture, which provides inspiration for believers/consumers. The most commonly known twenty-first century examples are Jediism (from the *Star Wars* films) and Matrixism (from the *Matrix* films). However, this phenomenon is not limited to full-blown cases and can also involve people being religiously inspired by popular culture while playing a game such as *World of Warcraft* or being influenced by conspiracy theories.

Western culture appears to be dominated by simulations (Baudrillard, 1988), which are objects and discourses that have no firm origin, no referent, no ground or foundation. The 'spectacle' and these simulations are part of consumer culture in which signs get their meanings from their relations with each other, rather than by reference to some independent reality or standard. Baudrillard's (1988) theory of commodity culture, which is the source behind the coining of the term hyper-real religion, removes any distinction between objects and representation. In their place, he pictures a social world constructed out of models or 'simulacra' which have no foundation in any reality except their own: for example, theme parks representing Hollywood films or Mickey Mouse cartoons rather than 'reality'; day-time television viewers speaking about soap opera characters rather than 'real' people; and popular news broadcast that are more about entertainment than information about 'real' social issues.

In this world, there is no fixed meta-code. (Post/Late)Modern society is saturated by images with the media generating a 'non-material', a dematerialised concept of reality. It seems we live in an economy of signs in which signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real.

If Marx's vision of society was a giant workhouse, Baudrillard's (1998) vision is that society is now structured by signs and symbols in which it becomes difficult to distinguish the real from the unreal: from this, hyper-reality—that is a situation in which reality has collapsed—takes over.

This vision portrays contemporary Western society in which people seem to seek spectacle more than meaning. In this hyper-real world, fictions offer a library of narratives to be borrowed and used by anyone ready to consume them.

Although hyper-real religions have existed since at least the 1960s, the Internet has been instrumental in the growth of this phenomenon. The Internet is now more than just a tool for work or research for academics and the military. It expands the realm of democracy beyond any possible dreams of a 1789 French revolutionary. As regards religion, the Internet is no longer simply a cyber-billboard where people simply post messages; through Web 2.0 the Internet is now a powerful social technology allowing people to interact at broadband speeds about issues ranging from personal to political and religious. A broad range of groups adopted this new technology and some of them established this symbiosis between religion and popular culture which is observable in cyberspace. Rather than standing up on a soap box and speaking about the faith derived from *Star Wars*, or spending hours photocopying a Jediist manifesto and mailing it to a list of people (and paying for stamps), one can simply create a website that anyone in the world can access. Further, 'preachers' do not have to reveal their identity. They can hide their identity behind a screen and even use pseudonyms and are thus protected from the threat of stigmatisation in the offline world.

Referring to Luther's reformation, Horsfield and Teusner (2007: 283) argue that "the development of printing did not instigate changes in Christianity but Christianity was affected by these changes taking place in the wider culture." The same could be argued with regard to the Internet and hyper-real religion. It is tempting to argue that just as Luther was able and ready to capitalise on the printing press to promote an alternative Christianity addressing the cultural and social issues of his time, these hyper-real religious promoters on the Internet are also addressing the social and cultural issues of our time. But this comparison is far from being extendable to a full-blown reformation, akin to the Protestant one, in our current religious landscape.

It is one thing to claim that, especially since the advent of the Internet, people are creating new religions out of popular culture, and another to analyse the different levels of creation and reaction associated with this phenomenon. Some people might get a thorough inspiration from popular culture, whereas others might get just a touch of inspiration. Others might be firmly located within a mainstream religion and also find inspiration in popular culture, or even counteract this hyper-real phenomenon

by claiming, for example, that it needs to be abolished. To distinguish between these shades of grey in the interrelations between popular culture and religion, this chapter aims first to describe three ideal-types (in the Weberian sense) of social actors involved in this phenomenon. Ideally, statistical data from these spiritual actors would have been helpful to refine these idea-type categories. Unfortunately, no research so far has been able to survey these practitioners. However, we do have data concerning people's perception of this phenomenon, the analysis of which will form the basis of the second section of this chapter.

Sub-Types of Hyper-Real Religions

Three ideal-types of hyper-real religious actors could be argued to exist. These are:

1. *Active consumers of popular culture leading to the practice of hyper-real religions*.
According to previous research, some individuals actively consume popular culture to create new types of spiritualities, e.g. Jediism (McCormick, this volume) and Matrixism (Morehead, this volume) or to enrich existing spiritualities (e.g. neo-paganism). For example, the Church of All Worlds is a neo-pagan group that was founded by Tim Zell in Missouri in 1962 and moved to Ukiah, California, in 1967. This group bases its teaching in part on Robert Heinlein's science-fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* which narrates the story of Valentine Michael Smith, a Martian-raised human with god-like powers, who taught humankind how to love. The group does not limit its reading to this novel and even extends its consumption to the *Star Trek* mythos. As one of its members states:

> [t]his whole period (late 1960s) fell under the shadow of the Damoclean Sword of impending nuclear holocaust, and a dominant Christian culture that fully embraced an apocalyptic mythos. For many of us, a powerful antidote to that mythos was found in science fiction, and particularly Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek*, with its Vulcan IDIC: 'Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations.' CAW [Church of All Worlds] and *Green Egg* avidly embraced this vision of, as Roddenberry said, 'a future everyone will want to be part of.'[1]

[1] Internet site, http://www.greenegg.org/issues/123/oberonedit123.html. Accessed 05/01/00.

As part of the consumption of science-fiction narratives by specific groups, one should not forget the Heaven's Gate group that committed mass suicide in San Diego in 1997 (Zeller, this volume). Its members believed that a UFO was travelling behind the Hale-Bopp comet and that by leaving their physical bodies behind, they would reach the extraterrestrial realm. They also watched *The X-Files* and *Star Trek* almost religiously and took fiction seriously. Indeed, as one member expressed a week before the infamous event:

> [w]e watch a lot of *Star Trek*, a lot of *Star Wars*, it's just, to us, it's just like going on a holodeck. We've been training on a holodeck . . . [and] now it's time to stop. The game's over. It's time to put into practice what we've learned. We take off the virtual reality helmet . . . go back out of the holodeck to reality to be with, you know, the other members on the craft in the heavens . . . (cited in Robinson 1997).[2]

Horror stories can also provide a reservoir of cultural content to be religiously consumed. In 1966, in San Francisco, Anton LaVey founded the Church of Satan as a medium for the study of the black arts. His assumption of the inherent selfishness and violence of human beings is at the base of its non-Christian teaching. According to LaVey, Satan is mistakenly believed to be a long time opponent of God, and is rather a hidden force in nature that can be tapped into. In *The Satanic Rituals*, which is used by some (see below) as a basis for metaphysical growth, LaVey (1972) refers to the metaphysics of H. P. Lovecraft, the author of weird fiction who wrote most of his tales during the 1920s and 1930s. H. P. Lovecraft developed a pantheon of gods called the Ancient Ones, for example Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth and Nyarlathotep, who are waiting in secrecy before coming back to earth to conquer the human race. In *The Nameless City* (1921), Lovecraft introduced the mad Abdul Alhazred, who had penned the ancient tome *The Necronomicon*. This book claimed to reveal all secrets of the world, especially those of the Ancient Ones. It became a standard prop in all later stories, and many readers believed it actually existed. Lovecraft always claimed that his stories were fictional and that he was a total agnostic. However, LaVey (1972), believing that "fantasy plays an important part in any religious curriculum", developed some rituals for his Church of Satan based on this fictional mythology. The following is a ceremony extract:

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[2] As Robinson (1997) comments, these members had envisioned death as the ultimate Trekkie trip to the final frontier.

> N'kgnath ki'q Az-Athoth r'jyarh wh'fagh zhasa phr-tga nyena phragn'glu.
>
> *Translation: Let us do honor to Azathoth, without whose laughter this world should not be.*

Hanegraaff (2007) lists groups who are more or less directly inspired by Lovecraft stories for their magical works, such as the Illuminates of Thanateros and the Autonomatrix. His analysis confirms the view among these religious actors that all systems of knowledge are socially constructed and culturally biased, and that in a Nietzschean sense, no one belief is more true than any other. Following this nihilist logic, their ideology is open to refusing the distinction between fiction and reality.

Coming back more specifically to neo-paganism, the literature labelled "fantasy" (Harvey 2000, 2006; Lurhmann 1994) and "medieval romances" (Rose 2006) seems to express and explore neo-pagan issues. J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mist of Avalon*, Brian Bates's *The Way of Wyrd*, Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* corpus, and even William Gibson's cyber-punk *Neuromancer* and Richard Wagner's operas are all parts of a cultural reservoir which contributes to neo-pagan thinking. While there is no 'biblical' text of reference in neo-paganism, the construction of the pagan self entails reading works of fiction. These fantasy books describe a pagan world and consequently contribute to the pagan experience of the reader (Harvey 2006).

In Ellwood (2004), we discover how some people involved in the 'craft' use popular culture as a method of practising magic. In this text, the author explains how he uses the character of Buffy the Vampire Slayer as a god-form of protection, equality, and magic. Instead of using magic and incantation in the name of one god, as often practised in religions comprising a large pantheon of gods, certain neo-pagans replace more traditional gods with icons of popular culture. The importance behind these magical practices/rituals is to focus one's energy on the characteristic of this god/pop icon. For example, as the author explains:

> [l]et me give you a quick example. You may want to go on a diet, but know under ordinary circumstances you'd have trouble keeping to it. You can use the magick of working with a pop culture entity to help you. Who do you use? Were I to go on a diet I'd use the pop culture entity Jared, who represents the Subway franchise. You'll see him a lot on US television and each time he's showing the benefits of a successful diet. So what you do is create a god-form out of Jared. Observe the commercials, take notes on attributes you'd want your Jared god-form to have and then on the first night of the diet and each night after invoke the Jared god-form to help you keep to the diet. Now on a humorous aside you may find yourself having an inexplicable

> craving for Subway subs, but so be it. As long as you are dieting and reaching your target weight it doesn't matter. What does matter is that you invest Jared with your belief that he will keep you dieting. Use chants, images, and whatever else as needed. (Ellwood 2004, p. 187)

According to this testimony, a pop icon should be used only as long as a person needs it. After this, the practitioner should move to another. If this is not done there is a danger that the person might start believing in the icon too deeply, instead of using it for a specific purpose.

Whereas twentieth century forms of hyper-real religions were using popular culture in a secondary fashion (for example, the Church of Satan being inspired by the stories of Lovecraft and neo-pagan groups by SF stories), the twenty first century hyper-real religions (e.g. Jediism and Matrixim) use works of popular culture as their central themes. These twentieth century hyper-real religions have their spirituality defined somewhat independently from popular culture. There are no Lovecraft or *Discworld* spiritualities; however, there is now a *Star Wars* spirituality. Indeed, in Jediism, for example, the *Star Wars* works of popular culture are used as a direct source of inspiration (Possamai 2010).

Parts I and II of this handbook explore these specific types of hyper-real religions. Part I deals with pre-Internet cases such as Discordianism, the Church of the SubGenius and the Temple of Psychick Youth (Kirby), and Heaven's Gate (Zeller) and the Raelian movement's (Machado) inspiration from science fiction. Part II moves to the Web 2.0 realm with groups and networks such as Matrixism (Morehead), the Otherkin (Kirby) and Vampires (Laycock), Star Wars (McCormick), and Tolkien's Middle Earth (Davidsen).

2. *Casual consumers of popular culture leading to a sharing of characteristics with hyper-real religions.*

Some consumers are already part of established mainstream religions and use popular culture to strengthen their belief system. As explained in Possamai (2005), a case in point is *ChristianGoth.Com*, which is a virtual environment for Christian Goths and other Christians. It does not aim at converting regular Goths to Christianity, but at proving to pastors and anyone else that not all Goths are Satanists or witches. This site even quotes Isaiah 9:2: 'the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.' As one Christian Goth claims:

> [o]nce I received the Christ, I never lost my culture. There were certain things that had to go, certain things that didn't glorify God. But I still loved

> Siouxsie and Bauhaus [popular Goth bands] along with my new found faith in the Lord Jesus. I found that contrary to popular 'Christian' opinion, I could still wear lace and velvet (and, God forbid—eyeliner?)[3]

Some heavy/black metal bands view themselves as Christians. The popular group, Demon Hunter, has appeared on the soundtrack of the movie *Resident Evil 2*. It lies between being a 'Christian band' and a group of Christians in a secular band, even though it is on a Christian recording contract.[4] Mortification is another band, based in Australia.[5] This Christian style of music is sometimes referred to as 'White Metal' or 'Unblack Metal.'

There are Christian role-playing support and advocacy groups such as the Christian Gamers Guild.[6] These groups promote Christian role playing groups without rejecting science fiction and/or fantasy narratives. One statement on this site sums up quite well this tendency among Christians to use the newest forms of popular culture for their faith:

> Christians have too long allowed non-Christians to dominate the imaginal world of role-playing, which was originally inspired by Christian men like J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, not to mention Dante, John Bunyan, and John Milton. I think it's time to be a creative force in role-playing and other forms of gaming for the true author of all creativity and imagination, Almighty God Himself.

Other casual consumers of popular culture leading to a religious work might not belong to a religious group, but might nevertheless believe in something beyond their everyday life. With the growth of spirituality in western societies, more and more people find their inspiration from popular culture. If the following analogy is permitted, hyper-real actors of the first type would be like Catholics attending church regularly, whereas actors of the second type would be like Catholics who believe without belonging. They might, for example, find inspiration in *The Da Vinci Code* and feel more spiritual thanks to this work of popular culture, but they do not necessarily actively engage in (hyper) religious practices. Taking into account this ideal-type, we can assume that the hyper-real religious phenomenon is more extended than initially thought.

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[3] Internet site, http://www.fehq.org/public/gothchrist.htm. Accessed 23/08/2004.

[4] Internet site, http://www.demonhunter/net. Accessed 23/08/2004.

[5] Internet site, http://hem.passagen.se/bransell/mortification.html. Accessed 23/08/2004.

[6] Internet site, http://www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/2964/. Accessed 23/08/2004.

For example, one Generation X respondent mentioned that he had a Catholic upbringing and watched the *Star Wars* series when he was young. Years later, when he became a young adult and re-watched the series, he realised how much these works of fiction influenced his current view on spirituality, even more than Catholicism. However this is far from making him a Jediist.

Whereas the first type of consumers deals with popular culture as a primary or secondary source of inspiration for their religious work, in this second ideal-type, we find actors who, in a way, tend to dabble with this phenomenon. They might get some sort of inspiration from popular culture rather than be part of a more organised set of beliefs. Part III of this handbook explores some of these more casual dealings in, for examples, the computer game of *World of Warcraft* (Aupers), role playing games (Wallis) and Tarot cards (Cowan). Conspiracy theories (Introvigne) are also shown to have some connection with the hyper-real religious phenomenon when the demarcations between culture, mythical history and religion are blurred. To finish Part III, we move to a popular Indian television series (Cusack) and Hinduism in cyberspace (Scheifinger) to realise that this hyper-real religious phenomenon might be new only in a Western context.

3. *Religious and secular actors opposed to the consumption of popular culture leading to the practice of, or to the sharing of characteristics with, hyper-real religions*.

In this category, members of a religious or secular group would be against the hyper-real religious phenomenon. This is seen, for example, in a Christian forum with texts such as: "[t]hough not as overtly and sympathetically occultic as the Harry Potter series, Tolkien's fantasies are *unscriptural* and present a very dangerous message."[7] On a promotional Internet site[8] for a video against Harry Potter, 'Harry Potter: Witchcraft Repackaged. Making Evil Look Innocent,' we are told that sorcery is being introduced in schools disguised as children's fantasy literature. The video/DVD is aimed at explaining to parents how to teach children that spell-casting is forbidden territory. The site then lists a few accounts from children, such as "I feel like I'm inside Harry's world. If I went to wizard school I'd study everything: spells, counterspells, and defence against the

[7] Internet site, http://forums.christianity.com/html/p681045. Acccssed 23/08/2004.
[8] Internet site, http:///www.chick.com/catalog/videos/0127.asp. Accessed 04/08/2004.

dark arts" (Carolyn age 10) or "It would be great to be a wizard because you could control situations and things like teacher" (Jeffrey age 11). It then concludes by stating: "Stop and Think: what will these children do when invited to visit an occult website, or even a local [neo-pagan] coven?"

Fundamentalist/literalist Christian groups are more than just a marketing niche for global popular culture. For example, Walt Disney's promotion of its adaptation of C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as a '*Passion of the Christ* for kids' is an attempt to secure worldwide Christian support for the film (Hastings and Laurence 2005). There are also pressure groups against certain forms of popular culture (for example, Imax cinemas' refusal to show movies such as James Cameron's *Volcanoes of the Deep Sea* that suggest that Earth's origins do not conform with biblical description [McKie 2005]) and against the use of non-Christian popular culture for religious practice. For example, while Dan Brown's film adaptation was shown at Australian cinemas, the Anglican Church in Sydney showed a trailer in two hundred and fifty cinemas telling cinemagoers about their website, which challenges the theories in *The Da Vinci Code* (described as '*Harry Potter* for adults'). The film was banned from a cinema on the Central Coast, N. S. W., because of the way it depicts the Catholic Church. As detailed above, these pressure groups demonise hyper-real religious actions on the Internet and at church, and one might wonder if they are working towards setting off the type of full-blown moral panic which turns minority groups into scapegoats for negatively perceived social changes (see Possamai and Lee 2011).

Part IV of this book explores these various reactions such as that from various Muslim communities trying to weaken the hyper-real religious component of Muslim hip hop music (Nasir), or of Christian groups trying to prevent their believers from accessing hyper-real types of content in computer games (Bernauer). Finally the cases of Polish Catholics' rejection of Harry Potter due to the fear of the manifestation of hyper-real religious elements based on that character (Olechnicki) and the push towards a hyper-real irreligious phenomenon by the new atheism (Nixon) are explored.

In the concluding chapter to this handbook, Roeland, Aupers and Houtman analyse this whole phenomenon in the light of the classical theories from Durkheim, Marx and Weber on alienation and anomie to argue that this whole phenomenon might propose salvation for a meaningless world devoid of magic and mystery and counter-act the spread of anomie.

Results From A Survey

I was commissioned by an academic unit of my university to design a survey of religious and spiritual practices by students and staff, the results of which form the basis of another article (Possamai and Brackenreg 2009). This university has six campuses spread through Sydney's western suburbs and is one of the largest in Australia, with more than 35,000 students and almost 2,600 staff. I took the opportunity to insert four extra research questions into this survey.

The survey was posted online in 2007–2008. A sample of 2,000 students and 500 academic and administrative staff was randomly selected via computer software. Two different emailing lists were then generated. Two emails were sent towards the end of the second semester in 2007 and one at the beginning of the first semester of 2008 inviting staff and students (in a separate email) to fill out the questionnaire.

In total, 217 people completed this survey which is an overall response rate of 8.7%. 94 students and 100 staff replied to the survey. 23 respondents remained silent about their status within the university. The minimum response rate for staff is strong at 20%, with that of students much weaker at 4.7%. This sample reflects a randomised selection across religious and atheist groups, gender, and generations of people working and/or studying in a university environment.

As detailed in Table 1, this sample represents a group of students and staff from a university which has a religious diversity almost in line with the regional and national one. The survey clearly under-represents the Christian average (by around 10%) and over-represents the Muslim one (almost two times the Sydney average). The percentage of Other Religion such as Baha'i and neo-paganism are also over-represented in the survey.

Table 1. Religious diversity of the sample

	Australia (%)	Sydney (%)	Survey (%)
Buddhist	2.09	3.69	2.8
Christian	63.23	63.32	53.5
Hindu	0.74	1.69	0.9
Judaism	0.44	0.83	0.5
Muslim	1.7	3.88	7.8
Other Religion	1.19	1.21	4.5
No Religion	18.48	13.98	18.5
Religious Affiliation Not Stated	11.09	10.26	11.5

Overall, it can be stated that this sample is a reflection of the increasing religious diversity in Australia (Bouma 2006) but is more post-Christian than the Australian average.

Specifically regarding the use of popular culture for religious/spiritual purpose, a previous survey by Hjarvard (2008) in Denmark found that people's interest in spirituality can grow from being exposed to the stories of *Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings* and *The Da Vinci Code.* The computer game, *World of Warcraft*, as explored by Aupers in this volume, can also facilitate an interest in spirituality. The survey designed for this chapter also confirms similar findings.

Table 2 indicates that the respondents in this university based sample regard popular culture as a source of inspiration. However, people who indicated in the survey that they were religious and/or spiritual are also inspired by genres of popular culture such as music (40.6%), movies (30.4%), television series (15.2%), and it is mainly nature (52.15%) and philosophy (45.6%) that provide the greatest source of spiritual/religious inspiration. It should be noted from the previous section that inspiration from popular culture can be understood at different levels, and that the survey question was not framed to explore these distinctions. The results of the survey that we are exploring for this section of the chapter are not about people's growing interest in these works of popular culture, but rather their opinion on the process of using popular culture for one's religion/spirituality. As there is a difference of level of inspiration from popular culture, it is expected that there would be a difference of level of opinion on the use of popular culture for religious/spiritual work.

Table 2. Sources of Inspiration

As part of your religion and/or spirituality, do you also find spiritual inspiration from other sources such as (tick as many boxes as you wish)	Frequency	Percentage
Computer Games	2	0.9
Graphic Novels	3	1.4
Films	66	30.4
Music	88	40.6
Nature	113	52.1
Novels	57	26.3
Philosophy	99	45.6
Television series	33	15.2
No, my only source of inspiration is from my religion and/or spirituality	32	14.7
Other	37	17.1

Table 3 focuses on people's opinions about the use of a recent piece of popular culture for spiritual/religious purposes: *The Da Vinci Code*. 29.3% of those who knew about this story thought that it could provide people with spiritual/religious inspiration, whereas 8% people were of the opinion that people using that type of inspiration should be opposed. The majority of the respondents (44.3%) thought that this is just a work of fiction and that it should only be considered as such.

The answers to the next question (see Table 4) are even more telling. 24.1% of those who replied do not see a problem with people creating a religion out of popular culture, 43.7% do not mind that these works of popular culture lead to some inspiration but think they should not lead to a religion per se. 14.1% of people feel that this hyper-real phenomenon is wrong and should be opposed.

These questions were not created to test the validity of the ideal-types illustrated in the previous section, as the intention was not to find out about people's practices, but rather about people's opinions on these practices. There are strong indications that there are two extreme minorities:

Table 3. *The Da Vinci Code*

The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown describes the story of a secret organisation aiming at protecting the direct line of descendants from Jesus. Which of these statements would better fit your position on this novel/movie (only tick one (1) box)

	Frequency	Percentage
This is a fiction story and should only be read as such	94	44.3
This is a fiction story that can provide inspiration for people who have a religion and/or spirituality	29	13.7
This is more than a fiction story and it provides some clues about religion and/or spirituality	33	15.6
This is just a work of fiction but because it can provide the wrong inspiration for people's religion and/or spirituality, something should be done about this.	17	8
I do not know what this story is about and cannot answer this question.	39	18.4

Table 4. *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*

Some people use works of popular culture such as the movies *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* for inspiration as part of their religion and/or spirituality. Which statement do you agree with (only tick one (1) box):

	Frequency	Percentage
It is reasonable for people to create new religions/spiritualities from works of popular culture.	48	24.1
It is reasonable for people to select works of popular culture and be inspired by them for their existing religions/spiritualities but it is not reasonable to create new religions and or spiritualities.	87	43.7
It is NOT reasonable for people to find inspiration from works of popular culture for their religion/spirituality but nothing needs to be done about this.	36	18.1
It is NOT reasonable for people to find inspiration from works of popular culture for their religion/spirituality and something should be done about this.	28	14.1

some people are at various levels supportive of this type of activity and others are of the opinion that it needs to be actively opposed. In between, the large majority of people surveyed are amenable that these narratives should serve only as a source of inspiration. To shed more light on the respondents' perspectives, some cross-tabulations have been constructed. As in previous research (Hughes et al. 2004; Marler and Hadaway 2002) respondents were asked to align themselves with one type of religious and/or spiritual identity, as presented in Table 5.

The larger group of the sample claim to be religious and spiritual (46.5%), and more people claimed to be neither religious nor spiritual (17.5%) than religious only (13.4%). This is in agreement with previous research conducted in Australia (Hughes et al. 2004) and in the United States (Marler and Hadaway 2002). Across age groups, the 'religious and spiritual' category is also stronger than the 'religious only' and the 'spiritual only' categories. These 'spiritual only' actors are not churchgoers and are more likely to be agnostics who experiment with alternative spiritualities and/or Eastern practices. From such research, it appears that there are

Table 5. Religion and Spirituality

Would you say that you are (only tick one (1) box):		
	Frequency	Percentage
Religious Only	29	13.4
Spiritual Only	46	21.2
Religious and Spiritual	101	46.5
Neither Religious nor spiritual	38	17.5
No Answer	3	1.4

two types of spiritual actors; one that claims that he or she is still religious (the majority according to the two tables above), and one that is not religious. The 17.5% claiming 'no religion' in the sample is close to the result of the latest Australian national census (18.48% in 2006).

When this variable is cross-tabulated with the question on *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* above, (see Table 6) some interesting findings emerge. It appears the people who are against this phenomenon and would want to actively oppose it will more likely be both religious and spiritual (68%) than neither religious nor spiritual (11%). Out of all those who claim that this phenomenon is reasonable, those who are religious only (6%) are the least likely to agree with this statement.

The results for people from the sample who are neither religious nor spiritual are more polarised. They either state that the phenomenon is reasonable (32%) or not reasonable (31%), but only 8% would wish to act against it. Those who are 'spiritual only' tend to be more positive with this phenomenon than all other types. 58% of them consider reasonable the use of fiction as only a source of inspiration, and 35% condone the further step of the creation of new spiritualities. Except for the 'neither religious nor spiritual' category, all categories ('religious', 44%; 'spiritual', 58%; 'religious and spiritua'l, 42%) consider it valid that these works of fiction be used as a source of inspiration.

From this cross-tabulation, it appears that being 'spiritual only' is an indicator of a more positive attitude towards this phenomenon, whereas being both 'religious and spiritual', rather than 'neither spiritual nor religious', or 'religious only', is a signpost for people ready to act against it.

Table 7 shows that of the people who oppose the use of *The Da Vinci Code* for inspiration and want to act on this, those who claim to be both religious and spiritual (94%) are still in the majority, but at a much higher

Table 6. Type of Religious Actor, *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*

Type of religious actors	It is reasonable for people to create new religions/ spiritualities from works of popular culture.	It is reasonable for people to select works of popular culture and be inspired by them for their existing religions/ spiritualities but it is not reasonable to create new religions and or spiritualities.	It is NOT reasonable for people to find inspiration from works of popular culture for their religion/ spirituality but nothing needs to be done about this.	It is NOT reasonable for people to find inspiration from works of popular culture for their religion/ spirituality and something should be done about this.	
Religious Only	6 / **11**	14 / **44**	19 / **26**	18 / **19**	**100**
Spiritual Only	31 / **35**	29 / **58**	6 / **5**	3 / **2**	**100**
Religious and Spiritual	40 / **20**	45 / **42**	44 / **17**	68 / **21**	**100**
Neither Religious nor Spiritual	23 / **32**	12 / **29**	31 / **31**	11 / **8**	**100**
	100	100	100	100	

level than above. No one who is 'spiritual only' or is 'neither religious nor spiritual' is ready to oppose this phenomenon. Of the people who seem to see more than a fiction in this story, it is those who are 'spiritual only' (45%) who are in the majority.

Of the people who are 'religious only' (64%), or 'neither religious nor spiritual' (66%), the great majority see in this story only a work of fiction. Of those who are 'spiritual only', 33% see more than a story and 18% see a source of inspiration.

These results should be considered in the light of findings from Possamai and Lee (2011) in which we find from the same sample and survey, that of the people who believe that 'Only one religion and/or spirituality is the expression of the truth and only this one is valid', 82% claim to be both spiritual and religious.

If we take as a working assumption that 'spiritual only' people tend to work in networks outside of a specific religion, that the 'religious only' category pertains to people who are not strongly active in their religion

Table 7. Type of Religious Actor and *The Da Vinci Code*

Type of religious actors	This is a fiction story and should only be read as such	This is a fiction story that can provide inspiration for people who have a religion and/or spirituality	This is more than a fiction story and it provides some clues about religion and/or spirituality	This is just a work of fiction but because it can provide the wrong inspiration for people's religion and/ or spirituality, something should be done about this	I do not know what this story is about and cannot answer this question	
Religious Only	19 / **64**	3 / **4**	6 / **4**	6 / **7**	15 / **21**	**100**
Spiritual Only	17 / **33**	28 / **18**	45 / **33**	0 / 0	18 / **16**	**100**
Religious and Spiritual	37 / **35**	59 / **17**	37 / **12**	94 / **16**	51 /**20**	**100**
Neither Religious nor Spiritual	27 / **66**	10 / **8**	12 / **11**	0	16 / **15**	**100**
	100	100	100	100	100	

(perhaps even claiming to be part of a religion without necessarily believing in it), and that people who are both religious and spiritual are reasonably active within their own religion, we would expect that it is these people, adhering to and active within one faith (rather than, for example, atheists), who are most likely to have the strongest reservations regarding this phenomenon. Those most likely to support it would tend to be part of what can be assumed to be the alternative spirituality scene. Research of the qualitative type would need to be conducted to shed more light on these findings.

The data from this survey on people's opinions on the hyper-real phenomenon indicate that those who are 'spiritual only' are the most likely to be supportive of it whereas those who are 'both religious and spiritual' are more likely to be actively opposed, and more strongly, than those who are 'neither spiritual nor religious', or who are 'religious only'.

How then to explain antagonism towards hyper-real religions? The implication here might be that these religions are simply not regarded as *bona fide* religions. This suggests a struggle when it comes to defining what is to be considered a religion and what is not, especially in a field where authority is fluid.

Authentic or Fake Religion in a Weak Authorative Field?

In a devolved and 'glocalised' consumer world of instant and continuous communication, who can speak authoritatively for these diverse hyper-real religious groups and reflexive religious individuals? In Max Weber's theory of authority, it is clear that the legitimacy of information cannot be understood as being under either traditional authority or charismatic authority. Jediism is not traditional, and Jediists make no claim to traditional legitimacy. The network is clearly not charismatic because it cannot be legitimised by a single person who can rise above the e-network to assert global authority, and no routinised charisma could significantly influence the ever-changing Web. The new forms of authority are not legal-rational, because there is no hierarchical organisation, and no linear chain of officers.

Authority on the Internet is devolved, dispersed and dissipated (Turner, 2007). As the educated and elite purveyors of religion are now challenged by a global spiritual marketplace, especially on the Internet, forms of religious authority are being redefined. Looking at Weber's typology of authority, Turner (2009) proposes that global commercialism has inverted the traditional relationship between the virtuosi (purveyors of official religions) and the masses (consumers of popular religions). In this sense we see religions created out of popular culture at the grassroots level rather than by certain forms of religious authority. But does a lack of authority undermine the validity of a religion and turn it into a fake religion?

Debray (2005) demonstrates how the word 'religion' emerged in Latin with the birth of Christianity. Indeed, the word, as we understand it, is not found in Sanskrit, Hebrew, Greek or Arabic. The author points out how the word 'religion' became a universal entity emerging from a Roman Christian locality. Christianity did not begin as a religion (the notion was unthinkable in the Jewish culture), and did not grow into one during the first two centuries of the Christian era, because Christian theologians formulated their thoughts within a Greek language which ignored this Latin category. It only became a religion—in the sense of the word as

we understand it—in the third century. Christians made a political move to have their faith viewed as a religion so that their belief system would become valid in the Roman world. Before Constantine, Christianity was seen in the Roman world as *superstitio* (pejorative) and was thus perceived negatively as a type of popular religion. Christianity had to become *religio* (laudatory) to be accepted into the mainstream and thus able to develop in the Roman world. In 341 the appropriation by Christianity of the Latin word *religio* (that is, official religion) became so successful that Christianity became accepted as *religio* and Roman paganism relegated to *superstitio* (i.e. popular religion). This reversal of perspectives, establishing Christianity as the official religion, clearly demonstrates the power of labelling politics. It is for such reasons that Beckford, using a social constructionist approach, thinks that

> religion is . . . a particularly interesting "site" where boundary disputes are endemic and where well-entrenched interest groups are prepared to defend their definition of religion against opponents. The history of anti-witchcraft movements in many parts of the world, particularly the Inquisition, is powerful evidence of the deadly length to which some interest groups go to enforce their definition of "true" religion. (2003: 13)

The defining of religion can thus be seen as a site of power in which groups try to impose their personal view and agenda, for example rejecting 'pagan' practices from medieval Christianity, or authenticating miracles and shrines. And this politics of definition could also be reflected in this discussion on religions in symbiosis with popular culture.

Fake religion or parody religion are terms that have been applied to groups like the Discordians and the Church of the SubGenius (see Kirby's chapter in this volume) that appear to profess a religion, even if their satirist approach to facts and beliefs seems to parody religion (Chidester, 2005; Alberts, 2008). Even if they are fake, however, they must follow the template of established religions in order to be able to mock them. Chidester (2005: 209) describes how a campaign by the Discordians using the search engine Yahoo changed people's perspective on this group. Discordianism was listed on the Internet as a 'parody religion' and one member raised this issue thus: "I ask that either you move us into the same category as the rest of the religions, or tell me what the criteria [are] to become a 'real' religion so that I might show how Discordianism meets [them]" (quoted by Chidester 2005: 209). For any social scientists following the cultural constructivist approach to religion, such a reply would imply that labelling this group as fake is problematic.

Recently, Cusack (2010) underlined that religion is not independent from its social and cultural context, and has not been left untouched by a shift to a post or late modern world. Part of these late modern novelties, in this context, are found in the invention of religions from popular culture. What she calls "invented religions" re-shape popular cultural discourses for religious (or quasi- or pseudo-religious) purposes. Popular culture is used here as a source of inspiration. Reality, revelation or historical continuation are not needed to justify the existence of these invented religions. Davidsen (this volume), thinking along the same lines, would rather make reference to fiction-based religion (i.e. a religion that uses fictional texts as its main authoritative, religious texts). Taking a sociological perspective, especially a Marxist one, one could easily argue that we did not have to wait for late modernity to find invented religions, as this label could be applied to all religions and could even be read as a tautology.

The terms "invented religion" and "fiction-based religion" are indeed appealing to those researching in this field. Although Cusack (2010) refers to this invention and localises this recent phenomenon in contemporary culture, the term hyper-real makes specific reference to Baudrillard's hyper-reality (see Geoffroy's contribution to this volume) which only exists in our televised and cyber world.

In 2005 I first used the term "hyper-real religion" to refer to a simulacrum of a religion created out of popular culture, which provides inspiration for believers/consumers at a metaphorical level. Some of the contributors to this book have since advanced some constructive comments. For example, Davidsen (this volume) argues that for some people Middle-earth is a real space, be it an ancient place in our world or a current one on another plane of reality or in another dimension. In the light of this case study, Davidsen is rightly critical of the claim that hyper-real religion exists only at a metaphorical level.

Aupers (this volume) questions the use of this term as it can have negative connotations in referring to some religions as superficial, meaningless, unreal or alienating. I believe that the same comment could be applied to the notion of invented or fiction religion as well. Whatever the appellation, many social commentators would argue that any religion in a state of fusion with popular culture would represent the above traits, and it is only as these religions gain more credibility (perhaps with the following generation) that this stigma might lose its strength. Applying this concept of hyper-real religion to Hindu gods, Scheifinger (this volume) makes the interesting argument that it is a Western construction. In his chapter, he

concludes that although the claim that the Internet and hyper-reality go hand in hand appears highly plausible, online replications of images of Hindu deities are no more hyper-real than their original counterparts in a pre-consuming society. This raises questions as to the universality of the concept of hyper-real religion and suggests that perhaps this concept only fits within a post-Christian environment where popular culture is fully commodified.

These comments and critiques help to refine my 2005 definition of hyper-real religion into one more appropriate for 2011. It becomes: "A hyper-real religion is a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or is a source of beliefs for everyday life."

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HYPER-REAL RELIGION PERFORMING IN BAUDRILLARD'S INTEGRAL REALITY[1]

Martin Geoffroy

Introduction

Hyper-real religion is an original conceptualisation brought forward by Australian sociologist Adam Possamai (2005). This concept is based on what he calls a 're-adaptation' of theories from the Frankfurt School and French sociologist Jean Baudrillard to an approach more inspired by Weber's classic theories involving the active role of the social actors in society. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse more closely Possamai's hyper-real religion theory by revisiting Baudrillard's hyper-reality theory and its articulation in what he refers to as 'integral reality.' This will allow us to bring forward a critical point of view on hyper-real religion as a concept by demonstrating that it is more a re-interpretation than a re-adaptation in Baudrillard's case. The fundamental question of this chapter being, is this re-interpretation of Baudrillard's hyper-reality theory a valid one?

The first part of this chapter will attempt to define Baudrillard's hyper-reality concept, and then compare it to Possamai's re-interpretation into hyper-real religions by discussing the *seduction of simulation* in hyper-real religions. The core of the chapter will bring forward a more critical point of view on the concept of hyper-real religion itself through Baudrillard's writings and explain what hyper-real religion is. The third part of the chapter will portray religious fundamentalism as a reaction to integral reality and link it as another type of resistance to hyper-real religion. A more critical point of view on Baudrillard and Possamai's theories about fundamentalism will be developed in the fourth section of this chapter. I will develop a new concept based on a re-interpretation of Baudrillard's work: *integral religion*. I will conclude this chapter by explaining why the hyper-real religion concept is relevant to a rigorous analysis of the many new spiritual movements flourishing in Western societies.

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[1] As a predominantly French-speaking bilingual author, I think that most translations of Jean Baudrillard's work do not adequately transmit his thought. I have therefore chosen for this chapter to freely translate Baudrillard's ideas from the original French versions of his books.

What are Hyper-reality and Hyper-real Religion?

For Baudrillard (1981), hyper-reality is what appears to be more real than reality itself. For instance, the physical violence delivered every day via all manner of broadcast is more real to us than actual violence, which we practically never see in our daily lives. Thus, hyper-real violence is much more common in Western culture than real violence. The simulation of violence has taken over real violence in terms of their representation in the culture. American professional wrestling companies like World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) are a good example of the violence simulation described by Baudrillard. The wrestlers simulate violence every week on television in an elaborate scenario based on a sacralised quest for power, prestige and supremacy. Many of them have crosses on their costumes, and some wrestlers simulate archetypal characters like 'Death,' as the 'Undertaker' has done with great success for the last twenty years. WWE is the perfect illustration of the implosion of medium with reality described by Baudrillard; there is a lot of information but it has no meaning in reality, only in what they call the 'WWE universe.'

Throughout his career and until his death in 2007, Baudrillard applied this hyper-reality conceptualisation to a variety of topics such as contemporary art, architecture and especially mass media, almost always from a very critically negative point of view. Strangely, he never applied it to religion or spirituality. Even if he was considered at the end of his career to be a post-modern thinker, Baudrillard began his career in the 1960s with a somewhat Marxist critique of consumption society. It is probably his historic materialism background that prompted the French sociologist to declare early in his life that "God is dead." In one of his last works Baudrillard (2004: 15) maintained that "the disappearance of God leads to the realisation of the world" and that this undertaking puts us on the road to what he calls 'integral reality.' This chapter will later explain the concept of integral reality; suffice for now to say that hyper-real religions would certainly be for Baudrillard a by-product of the integral realisation of happiness. But it is surely hard to believe that Baudrillard would agree with what Possamai calls a 're-adaption' of his hyper-reality concept as applied to religion in the contemporary world. It is clear that in the opinion of the French sociologist religion has been out of the hyper-reality picture for a long time. In fact, he said that "the disappearance of God has left us facing reality" (Baudrillard 2004: 14) and that hyper-reality has now replaced reality altogether. For him, religion would probably be an illusion of modernity and it would be impossible for it to exist in

hyper-reality, because our present value system excludes all forms of predestination of evil (Baudrillard 2004). Without the metaphysical presence of God and the Devil battling in the heavens for our souls, Baudrillard (2004) maintained that there is no more mythological presence of Evil in the world: that hyper-reality is pushed to its limits and falls into integral reality. So it is unclear how hyper-real religion can be a re-adaptation of Baudrillard's concept when he does not acknowledge the existence of religion itself in his work.

But what does Possamai consider to be a hyper-real religion? "By hyper-real religion I thus refer to a simulacrum of a religion partly created out of popular culture which provides inspiration for believers/consumers at a metaphorical level" (Possamai 2005: 79). For Baudrillard, popular culture is nothing more than a form of alienation and cannot be a source of inspiration at any metaphorical level. So, it would be much more accurate to characterise Possamai's conceptualisation as a re-interpretation than as a re-adaptation of Baudrillard's concept of hyper-reality. Indeed, it seems logical to qualify hyper-real religion as a simulacrum of religion that functions at a metaphorical level, but what happens when these metaphors are thought no longer to exist? Baudrillard argues that the virtual world does not have any consciousness of its own illusions, and since most of Possamai's examples of popular culture exist only in cyberspace (e.g., Jediism) it is difficult to believe the claim that the original concept of hyper-reality can be adapted to fit the purpose of studying religion and spirituality in the contemporary (cyber) world. It has to be re-interpreted in a broader theoretical frame that would be closer to Melucci's (1996) culture codes analysis, for example, than Baudrillard's very bleak view on the subject. We could consider then that hyper-real religions are guided by metaphorical culture codes concerning questions of ultimate meaning. It is clear to me that Possamai perceives hyper-real religions more as developing cultural resources than as mere illusions that have been disappearing for a long while. I think that English sociologist James A. Beckford's (2003) classic theories on religion as a cultural resource would be more helpful in describing hyper-real religions than Baudrillard's somewhat ambiguous position on the question. Hyper-real religions seem to be closer to what Forgues (2009) calls a 'symbolic activity' that manifests when a person embarks on an 'individualistic path.' For those who view religion as a symbolic activity, images of religion have become more real than religion itself. Symbolic activities preoccupied with imagining or re-imagining systems of ultimate meaning would be, in this sense, hyper-real religions. Thomas Luckmann's (1967) invisible religion theory could

also have been considered to describe hyper-real religions because of its concerns for ultimate meaning systems at the metaphorical level and its description of the displacement of religion from the public to the private sphere.

Then why should we use Baudrillard's theories in the composition of the definition of hyper-real religions? Maybe because the French sociologist's writings are easy to re-interpret since they open a lot of theoretical doors that rarely reveal fully fledged theories, especially on religion. If we accept the idea of hyper-real religion as a re-interpretation of Baudrillard's original vision, then it becomes possible to develop it beyond the impossible application presented by Possamai's re-adaptation position. If we follow Baudrillard's idea that modern society is now structured by sign and symbol and dominated by simulation, we could say that the masses are not attracted to hyper-real religions because of their inspirational values, but more for the *seduction of simulation* itself. The French sociologist once said that seducing is accepting to die as a reality and produce oneself as an illusion (Baudrillard 1979). He meant that in order to be seductive, any object or person would have to present not as it is/they are, but as a perfect model of itself/themselves. Hyper-reality is thus ruled by the "precession of simulacrum" (Baudrillard 1981: 10). The hyper-religious person would be more attracted by the seduction of the simulation of religion because, according to Baudrillard (2004), religious metaphors do not exist anymore. Hyper-religion could then be considered as some sort of role-playing game where the individual is seduced, thus accepting to die as a reality, in a totally simulated universe, or even a multiverse, as is now said in the gaming world. Philippe St-Germain (2009) has demonstrated that players of the classic video game *Mortal Kombat* have created and are creating a form of sacred ritual around murdering an opponent. They usually 'finish' their adversary by using a secret weapon only known to experts of the game, thus symbolically separating themselves from the lesser players and creating for themselves an elite status among other players. For St-Germain this ritualisation of status through power is mainly inspired by a form of hyper-real eastern esoterism. Thus, the expert player almost becomes a god in the virtual multiverse.

For Baudrillard (1981) simulation is now generated by models of reality without any origin or actual reality. This substitution for reality by the signs of reality is described by him as hyper-reality. Hyper-reality is operational, the product of the synthesis of combinatory models. Hyper-reality happens when the simulacrum of reality succeeds over reality itself. For Baudrillard (2004) a simulacrum does not hide the truth, but the absence

of truth. He cited the Christian icon as the first form of divinity simulacrum; the religious icon does not represent divinity, but a model of divinity. In that sense, the image of Jesus with a beard and long hair that we are familiar with in our Western civilisation is not real, but merely a simulacrum of divinity, a hyper-real divinity. In a more contemporary example, which perhaps bears some relation to hyper-real religion, Baudrillard (1981: 25–26) said that Disneyland is the "miniaturised religious enjoyment" of real Americana. We could extend this description to the many mega-churches and religious theme parks that exist today in the United States, like *Holy Land* in Orlando, Florida, where 'Jesus Christ' is crucified and resurrected six days a week. This 'living biblical museum' reproduces different moments from the Bible on a grand scale, with actors dressing up as characters from the Holy Book. Baudrillard describes this kind of process, where the simulacrum of history seems to be more real than history itself, as 'retro' history, a form of hyper-real history. Religious history can in this sense be considered essentially hyper-real, in that real history disappears in the shadow of its own simulacrum. From Baudrillard's point of view, hyper-real religions would be essentially individualistic because the imperative to submit to a model no longer exists: the individual has become the model. In fact, the individual is an integral part of the model. Baudrillard has illustrated this theory with two very relevant examples: hyper-museums and hyper-markets. The Contemporary Museum of Paris, also known as 'Beaubourg', is for Baudrillard the ultimate hyper-real construction because it seeks to destroy contemporary art by submitting it to consumption and manipulation by the masses. The *masse* circulates through the museum without any understanding for contemporary art. When the museum is too crowded, one can only circulate in its architectural network of plastic pipes, finding no meaning in the visit other than the pleasure of being part of a massive event. Baudrillard would certainly call it a 'non-event,' and the museum a "monument of cultural dissuasion" (1981: 100). The second example is hyper-markets such as Wal-Mart. Baudrillard thought that hyper-markets have become a space-time continuum of all the operationalisation of social life, a singular structure of habitat and traffic. The subdivisions of the modern suburb are built around the shopping mall and the hyper-markets like Carrefour or Wal-Mart. They are "negative satellites" of the city center that usually bring about the end of the downtown area. They are "poles of simulation" that attract the *masse* into their all consuming orbits (Baudrillard 1981). Mega-churches are very similar to the description Baudrillard gives of hyper-museums and hyper-markets because they simulate religion for the masses. Mega-churches'

architectures are directly inspired by shopping malls and are also usually situated in suburban areas. They are usually providers of hyper-real religions, with the few exceptions of some fundamentalist mega-churches.

This discussion leads to my first conclusion: the hyper-real religion concept is a derivative of Baudrillard's hyper-reality concept, since the French author never bothered to elaborate a full analysis of religion in his works. Many theories more appropriate to the analysis of hyper-real religion have been suggested here but it is clear that, even if Possamai's description of hyper-real religions does not fully correspond to Baudrillard's definition of hyper-reality, it seems to work as a re-interpretation of hyper-reality. In the next section, I am going to explain Baudrillard's integral reality theory and its application to religion.

Integral Reality: Religion and the Ultimate Accomplishment of the Self in the "One-dimensional Man"

For Baudrillard (2004), integral reality is brought about by an irreversible movement of world totalisation. The technical realisation of reality and its constant performance has created a complete failure of representation systems. It is this hyper-realisation of all possibilities and their maximum performance that creates integral reality. And the simulation hypothesis is perceived as diabolical by the reality integrists. Integral reality is the murder of reality and loss of any imagination of the real. Furthermore, the ideal of integral happiness necessitates the sacrifice of life to a functional existence where the individual is urged to be happy, and to give all the signs of happiness. Thus, integral reality has created a new religion, the religion of the accomplishment of the self, a religion where this accomplishment is the end itself. But, not unlike in older religions, accomplishment is fast becoming more of an obligation than a choice. This "excess of liberty," as Baudrillard would say, creates a contrary impulse in the masses that directly leads to the implosion of all sociality. Integral reality is the ultimate accomplishment of system circularity and the masses' refusal to participate in this system is characterised by inertia. Power tends to try to dominate with signs empty of meaning, but the masses resist with their indifference.

Hyper-real religions are mostly about accomplishment of the self through the consumption of popular culture (Possamai 2005). In my own research on the New Age Movement (Geoffroy 1999, 2000), I have found indeed that this new religion of the self—some would say, with irony, the

self-absorbed—is in many ways a simulation of a religion, especially of religious rituals. Baudrillard was surely critical of any spirituality based on the development of the self: he thought that when the quest for the development of a personal identity becomes so central, when existence is so individualised and atomised that any exchange is impossible, individuality becomes a simulacrum of alterity. Individuality is a simulacrum, there is no real free choice. Since reality was invented by occidental modern reason, we can only represent objective reality without ever being able to evaluate its own objectivity. For Baudrillard (2004), objective rationality has replaced religious values, but is only a disenchanted descendant of the same religious values. God may not be dead yet, he still lives on in cyberspace. Possamai (2005) maintains that, indeed, it seems that for these spiritual consumers the real and unreal have imploded and that this might have created an unclear sense of distinction between them. Baudrillard believed that virtual reality is a modern fetishism. In the case of many spiritual consumers, life on the Internet has indeed become more real than reality itself. Their attachment to virtual reality has created a quasi-religious form of spiritual fetishism where spirituality is sold as a commodity. Baudrillard believed that, in virtual reality, images are not coming from the order of representation, but are characterised by decoding and visual consumption.

We could say that hyper-real religion consumers are worshipping a model of religion instead of the original because no one can identify what is true religion anymore. This confusion is caused by the failure of representation systems due to the development of integral reality. Only hyper-real religions can truly survive in the spiritual market described by Possamai and many other authors. But for Baudrillard and Possamai, fundamentalism may well be the last stronghold of resistance against the empire of hyper-real religions and integral reality: a 'negative' force against what I have called before the 'new positive thinking' (Geoffroy 2000). As Possamai (2006) pointed out, some inspiration for the theorisation of hyper-real religions can be found in the works of some intellectuals from the Frankfurt School. From my perspective it can be found mostly in Herbert Marcuse's classic *One-dimensional Man*. For Marcuse (1968), 'negative thinking' is characterised by a systematic critique of society. As a radical critique of advanced industrial society, *One-dimensional Man* proposed to demonstrate the different social control mechanisms that influence the modern individual. Marcuse characterises 'positive thinking' as a way of thinking reduced to an operational scheme in the service of the domination of particular interests, which is similar to the positive

thinking we can find in practically all New Age discourses. The forced integration of any opposition forces to the dominant way of thinking imposed by capitalism in our modern society is so advanced, according to Marcuse, that even liberty can be used as a domination instrument. The German intellectual believed this liberty of choice is 'conditioned' by the market which is constantly inventing 'false needs'. These needs can be found in the many forms of leisure that boost the ego, thus giving the illusion of liberty of choice. What Possamai describes as hyper-real religions could very well correspond to what Marcuse defined as 'positive thinking' that uses technology to intrude more efficiently into the private sphere of the individual, thus creating the illusion that spiritual mass consumption is vital to life. In our Western societies, freedom of expression and liberty of choice in the religious market are valued as sacred. The mere act of describing religion as a product confirms that all forces opposed to production are now absorbed by the market. The 'negative attitude', as Marcuse called it, is thus perceived as an illness that must be cured. In the fifties, in an essay on Freud's psychoanalysis, Marcuse was criticising the neo-Freudian school for prescribing social adaptation through therapy (Marcuse 1955). In today's individualist and personal growth oriented culture, it seems obvious that a person is basically judged on his or her *emotional performance*. New Age therapies such as neo-*reiki* or channelling are often used in today's corporate businesses for controlling emotions. Expressing emotions is always permitted in the workplace, but only in the context of a personal growth objective, which goal is a subtle integration to consumer society. The emotional performance is the result of a 'new positive thought' that assumes it can cure the world of its wound by feeding it with a pseudo-cosmic conscience, what Marcuse called 'happy conscience'. For Marcuse, today's religious pluralism would be just an illusion hiding the fact that this pluralist administration is still seeking to control and impose conformity upon the masses. In advanced industrial societies, the individual is forced to conform to a happy conscience, which prevents her/him from questioning the social system and thus liquidates all oppositional cultural elements. For Marcuse, mass communications are reducing art to market product. Indeed, religion on the Internet is reduced to a commodity like any other; it would have no more nor less transcendental value from Marcuse's point of view.

Baudrillard goes much further because, unlike Marcuse, he thought masses are not alienated, but are in fact responding to oppression with their absence of response. Marcuse's critical thinking can only work on the presupposition that masses are naïve and stupid, but Baudrillard

simply gave them more credit than Marcuse; Baudrillard believed that the non-responsive masses are deliberately provoking the implosion of the social system by plunging it into an endless circularity of the same hyper-real models. In integral reality, there are no more images because they are exploited as products. To illustrate his integral reality concept, Baudrillard continued his ongoing negative critique of contemporary art by saying that art has just become a community of artists talking about themselves: only interface and performance counts in integral reality. And the same could apply to religion. *Integral religion* could be a religion where networks of individuals are talking about each other, mostly but not exclusively about questions related to ultimate meaning. The interface between different networks, Facebook for example, permits the exercise of this performance of religion. Integral religion is definitely a performance religion where the value of symbolic numbers is more important than a real moral impact. The measurement of the performance of the interface with reality is more important than the existence of reality itself.

In this section, I have explained that Baudrillard's integral reality concept is characterised by the technical realisation of reality in the virtual world. The world totalisation and domination of the computer binary model has taken over reality and provoked a major failure of all representation systems, including all systems concerning questions of ultimate meaning. For Baudrillard, integral reality has no inherent meaning; it is only an orbital circulation of models of reality. *Integral religion* would then be a religion without any meaning other than that given to it by the masses who manipulate and use its symbols. Jediism could be described as an integral religion because it is totally created and manipulated by the masses for their entertainment purposes. Jediism is also an integral religion because it works in a completely fantasized world that has no link with reality. Integral religion is an invention that surpasses all other religions in its ability to convey self-realisation. It is completely individualistic, but paradoxically needs an audience, albeit a virtual one, in order to function.

Fundamentalism as a Reaction to Integral Reality

In this multiverse where the individual can become an avatar of herself/himself in a system of general exchange, there is a growing contradictory impulse, a resistance to this totalisation of freedom equal in force to the deregulation it has brought upon the world. Baudrillard (2004)

explained that this negative force could only come from a passion for the rule, any kind of rule. Paradoxically, that is why religious fundamentalism endures in contemporary society, as a negative reaction to the empire of self-help forced upon us by integral reality. Indeed, many individuals still refuse to accept the unending quest for ultimate liberty and self-realisation set upon them by integral reality; fundamentalism is therefore their only refuge. For Baudrillard (2004), when there is no more possibility of dialectic resolution of conflict, a growing struggle is produced between extremes. These extremes, the ultimate realisation of the self and fundamentalism, are in fact two sides of same coin. They are religion at its extremes (Geoffroy 2004, 2009). Possamai (2005) argues that fundamentalist groups are hypo-consuming their way through integral reality by firmly restricting consumption inside the boundaries of religious dogma. This hypo-consumption tenders an acceptable selection of popular culture to members of fundamentalist churches. Good examples might be found in many Protestant fundamentalist and Catholic integrist groups[2] that restrict or forbid their members any use of modern communication devices like television or computers. For many of these groups, these devices are the instruments of the Devil. Quebec's St-Michael Pilgrims,[3] a Catholic fringe movement that defends the integrality of the Catholic doctrine, is an example of a group resisting all manner of modern communication devices like television, computers, cell phones and radios. Since they cannot control all media anymore, they selectively restrict all access to media except their own output. In their case, the only media they allow are their newspaper *Michael*, their auto-published books and their website. They are hypo-religious because of their non-participation in the dominant model of hyper-real religion. They must strictly obey the rules and regulations of their religious movement and renounce many liberties of modern life. They are not bound by their individual pleasure but by their duty to their group.

But Baudrillard's theory about all forms of fundamentalism being oppositional forces to the completion of integral reality is far from flawless. For example, in the case of Catholic integrist groups Baudrillard's theory can

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[2] For a distinction between fundamentalism and integrism, see Geoffroy (2010).

[3] The Pilgrims of St-Michael is a Canadian Catholic movement founded in Montreal in the 1930s by Gilberte Côté-Mercier. It is an integralist-traditionalist fringe group based in Rougemont, Québec and still functions inside the Roman Catholic Church rule. It fiercely advocates Major Douglas's social credit political doctrine. For more details see Geoffroy (1998; 2010).

be applied mostly to traditionalist-integralist groups, like the Pilgrims of St-Michael, because these groups usually stick fiercely to tradition. But it is more difficult to apply it to mystical-esoteric groups, like the Army of Mary,[4] for instance. This group relies enormously on a re-interpretation and a mix of classic Catholic myths with esoteric and mystical traditions. And since they are constantly manipulating metaphors to confirm the charisma and divinity of their leader, they could very well be a fundamentalist hyper-real religion. In this case, I think Possamai's hypo-religion concept is more adapted and applicable to most fundamentalist groups than are Baudrillard's theories, because practically all fundamentalist and integrist groups practice one form or another of selective and restrictive consumption, thus confirming Possamai's theory that they are hypo-religious because of their hypo-consumption. This is the case of the Army of Mary, who gives absolutely no credit to all media and opinion coming from the 'outside' world or even to the Catholic Church, especially since 2007 when they were excommunicated. But fundamentalism and integrism cannot be integral religions because they are based not on hedonist and individualistic values but on strict dogma and rule.

Explaining New Religious Movements as Hyper-real Religions: A Critical Point of View

The purpose of this chapter was to provoke the beginning of a discussion about Possamai's theorising of hyper-real religions, with a more critical point of view concerning how he has used Baudrillard's work, and also to examine the links between Baudrillard's theory and Marcuse's *One-dimensional Man.* I have demonstrated that the hyper-real religion concept is a derivative re-interpretation of Baudrillard's hyper-reality concept. I have also shown that Baudrillard's integral reality has brought forth the advent of integral religion.

It seems to me that all hyper-real religions are performance based, and that, as elaborated in this chapter, endless performance and total realisation are the trademarks of integral reality. But as I have also demonstrated

[4] The Army of Mary is a Canadian group founded in Quebec City in the sixties by Marie-Paule Giguère. It is a Catholic mystical-esoteric group based in Lac-Etchemin, Quebec, whose members submitted to the Roman Catholic Church rule until 2007, when they were formally excommunicated from the Church because of their fundamental belief that their leader Marie-Paule Giguère is "the terrestrial reincarnation of the Virgin Mary." For more details see Geoffroy (2001; 2010).

in this chapter, it is usually impossible to adapt Baudrillard's theory to fit a purpose such as explaining the existence of new religious movements in contemporary society, because of the heuristic complexities inherent in the French philosopher's work. However, the possibilities for diverse interpretations of Baudrillard's work are endless and his theories can certainly be useful when they are used as a descriptive tool relating to an empiric reality, as is the case with most of Possamai's work. In this sense, Possamai (2005) has certainly reached his objective: to develop what he calls a Weberian approach which views social actors as agents, but as still carried by socio-cultural forces. But Possamai's concept is certainly not an adaptation of Baudrillard's theory; it is a valid *interpretation* applied to a social topic, religion, which the French philosopher never took seriously throughout his career.

I remain critical of all market-based theories concerning religion, especially new forms of spiritualities. I am not convinced that all metaphors can be sold as commodities. Still, I agree with Possamai that these alternative networks have potential in creating a form of spiritual emancipation that could reside outside the market and in the human power of imagination. This theory remains to be clearly demonstrated and I'm quite sure Baudrillard would disagree with us, because he denies the very existence of imagination in his integral reality theory.

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PART ONE

20TH CENTURY CASE STUDIES OF HYPER-REAL RELIGIONS

OCCULTURAL *BRICOLAGE* AND POPULAR CULTURE: REMIX AND ART IN DISCORDIANISM, THE CHURCH OF THE SUBGENIUS, AND THE TEMPLE OF PSYCHICK YOUTH

Danielle Kirby

Introduction

Religious and spiritual *bricolage* is a common feature of contemporary religiosity, be it mainstream or alternative. The juxtaposition of otherwise disparate ideas and beliefs has, in recent years, moved beyond the traditional spheres of religion and now encompasses a raft of material previously thought of as unequivocally secular. This interweaving of the spiritual and the popular has given rise to new forms of religiosity, much of which defies traditional understandings of the sacred. While the recent popularisation of the Internet has meant that such practices are now most commonly viewed within a digital context, these alternative spiritual bricoleurs are by no means limited to, or necessarily created by, the burgeoning digital world. Three such spiritual or metaphysical groups that heavily engage with popular cultures and occultural *bricolage* that predate the mass adoption of the Internet are the Discordians, the Church of the SubGenius, and the Temple of Psychick Youth.

The proximity of the sacred to the popular has on occasion been approached somewhat dismissively within the late modern world, and is often supposed to suggest a lack of genuine religious sentiment on behalf of participants (Partridge 2004b: 122–123). Such a critical perspective is often reinforced by the conflation of contemporary spiritual participants as simply passive consumers of cultural products. The Discordians, the Church of the SubGenius and the Temple of Psychick Youth are particularly interesting within this context in that they all engage with popular culture content in ways that instead highlight active participation and engagement. Coming from broadly similar locations within the occultural world, these groups demonstrate a variety of methods of engaging with popular culture that range from the juxtaposition of numerous texts through to the creation of public art. As in many cases of alternative spirituality, the spiritual and popular content and context in these cases cannot be disentangled, and in fact are at least to a degree mutually constitutive. Further, it has been acknowledged that popular culture both functions as a forum for the exploration of spiritual ideas and provides the source material for

beliefs (Partridge 2004a: 54–56). So rather than focusing on the latter point, this chapter will explore the former through the particular instances of Discordianism, The Church of the SubGenius, and the Temple of Psychick Youth. This chapter primarily seeks to expand our notion of popular culture-based spirituality by illustrating some of the ways in which spiritual participants create, rather than consume, popular culture artefacts.

Popular Culture and Consumption

Possamai (2007: 1–2) has described hyper-real religions as "religions and spirituality that mix elements from religious traditions with popular culture . . . These hyper-real religions are a simulacrum of a religion partly created out of popular culture which provides inspiration for believers/consumers." This description clearly delineates the field of engagement of hyper-real religions: they are spiritualities with significant popular culture content. Generally speaking, beliefs such as Jediism, Matrixism, or various Paganisms tend to exemplify this type of spiritual behaviour, most notably in that they take popular cultural artefacts and integrate them into a spiritual framework. However, implicit in this model is the construction of the spiritual seeker as consumer and/or audience member, receiving the text in a kind of secularised parallel to more traditional religious revelation, albeit received in these cases from the creators of media content rather than a deity.

> [T]exts are consumed by the reader, construct who the reader is, and (re) define the reader's self in his or her involvement in this culture of desire. If malls are crowded with shoppers who construct their sense of self through buying commodities . . . spiritual consumers construct their sense of self through consuming popular culture. (Possamai 2005: 66)

With regards to popular cultural engagement in general, and postmodern religion specifically, this unidirectional model is becoming less and less satisfactory as a mechanism to describe actual behaviours, most particularly when viewed in relation to online engagement. The staggering increase in both the creation and acknowledgement of user generated content (Ritzer 2010), for instance, is a clear indication that such static frameworks do not parallel actual practice for many. In a recent work, Lessig (2008) notes the relationship between what he terms read-only and read/write cultures. The former, read only culture, denotes a unidirectional framework of cultural participation. In this model, professional artists create works that are disseminated through official channels to the audience. When

structured like this, cultural production effectively requires the recipient of the cultural artefact to be a passive receiver, a contented beneficiary of tailored artistic expression. This is not, of course, to suggest that the role of an audience member is passive in terms of meaning making, but rather simply that this model assumes that the text as a complete artefact is received as an endpoint by the audience. Variants then are produced in terms of interpretation, not through active alteration, extension, or recreation of the text itself. On the other hand, the read/write structure is one far more mutual in its forms of engagement and less strict in adherence to an either/or approach to cultural roles. In such a structure, there is no reason why an audience member cannot also be a creator, or re-creator, of cultural product. The twentieth century has largely been dominated by read only culture, but this habit has been reversed with the arrival of the Internet and other modern media. "This new vernacular culture encourages broad participation, grassroots creativity, and a bartering or gift economy. This is what happens when consumers take media into their own hands" (Jenkins 2006: 136).

The process of creation rather than consumption warrants attention within the milieu of popular culture-based religiosity, if only as a mechanism through which to balance a scholarly understanding of such processes. Further, it seems a reasonable proposal that framing analysis through the notion of consumption brings with it all the derogatory baggage this notion has accrued in recent years. Cultural consumption, of music, art, film, literature and so on, are central to the leisure pursuits of western society and there is no basis upon which to denigrate this process *per se*. Capitalism is currently the mechanism by which such things operate, and to critique on this basis renders the majority of the practices of the western world vulnerable to the same evaluation. Tacit in much analysis of this sort is a hidden elitism that harks back to the high and low culture divisions of earlier times. Such static hierarchies of quality are not only out of date, but they also deny the complexities of appreciation and engagement as they occur within the contemporary western world. Beyond this, however, locating the element of consumption as the central factor of popular culture related beliefs can place the emphasis on inappropriate aspects of these beliefs and further tends to occlude the personal meaning and creativity inherent within such stances.

It therefore seems a valid undertaking to explore some metaphysical positions that imbricate popular culture and spirituality and yet shift the emphasis away from the traditional conflation of the participant as consumer. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that the relationship

between spiritual engagement and popular culture, the realm of hyper-real religion, is not simply constituted through the consumption of texts but rather constitutes a more complex field of endeavour which includes active engagement and textual creation. By exploring some alternative aspects of the hyper-real, it is hoped that we may open the way for a repositioning of the role of consumption in hyper-real religions. The Discordians, the Church of the SubGenius, and the Temple of Psychick Youth, as with many other spiritualities, do not simply consume popular culture, they are also the creators and recontextualisers of it.

Narrowing the gaze somewhat, it is also important to note that there is a wide variety in the specific manner in which spiritual questers imbricate their spirituality and the particular elements of their popular culture. While this chapter looks particularly at self-publishing, remix and performance as especially creative and participatory techniques, there are many more methods that popular spiritualities rely on and utilise. Groups like the Otherkin (Kirby 2009) for instance, may sometimes transpose specific elements from popular culture narrative into alternative frameworks not necessarily indicated in the original context. Such transposition can be selective and may, for instance, mean a belief in dragons of a Tolkienesque nature without the concomitant belief in the existence of Middle-earth.[1] Alternatively, others may harvest their source material for an overriding ethic or philosophy without particularly asserting the actuality of the created world itself: Jediism (Possamai 2005) and the Church of All Worlds (Cusack 2010) are good examples of this type of approach. Both these groups demonstrate a sincere and abiding respect for the philosophies contained respectively within *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977) and *A Stranger in a Strange Land* (Heinlein 1961), but the relationship is sometimes less of a specific borrowing than an acknowledged source of inspiration.

These methods, the transposition of textual elements outside of original contexts and using the text as philosophical support, are but two of a plethora of approaches available to the spiritual *bricoleur* engaging with popular culture. Both of the above examples work in broadly similar ways, in that the text is received as a finished product, and then reappropriated at the discretion of participants. Examples such as remix and original artistic creation, as will be explored below, rather shift the emphasis more towards the authorial role. Discordianism, the Church of the SubGenius, and the Temple of Psychick Youth demonstrate, in a sense, the flipside

[1] Middle-earth is the world in which J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is set.

of the hyper-real, where they create, rather than consume, contemporary popular culture in the practice of their spirituality.

It should also be noted that the Church of the SubGenius and Discordianism have traditionally been dismissed as joke religions by the academy.[2] From a certain point of view this attitude is perfectly valid, in as much as humour and an ironic sense of the world is utterly central to these philosophies. Scholars of religion tend to look to the passionate seriousness of the participant as the measure of religious sincerity. This is understandable in light of the methodological issues that confront the scholar of religions, and, to a degree, is in line with phenomenological approaches that prioritise the experience of the participant and therefore necessarily rely upon the expressions of religiosity as portrayed. We assume, in the face of a multitude of different forms of religiosity, that it is only in so far as the participant is incapable of heretical self-depreciation or, to use the traditional word, blasphemy, that such an individual's beliefs are genuine and worthy of respect. Approaches such as this simply do not function in the westernised late modern world, and even less so in relation to the younger generations and their spiritual and/or religious attitudes (Beaudoin 1998). Irony culture is now essentially entrenched within everyday communication, particularly noticeable in an online context, and this affects all aspects of every day life. To assume that individuals, who generally treat their experience as ironic, would suddenly achieve some solemnity and sincerity in relation to their spiritual beliefs is simply ridiculous. As Droogers (2004: 138) has so insightfully pointed out, " 'playful' and 'serious' are not necessarily opposites."

Unfortunately though, the demarcation of these and other like beliefs as simply sophisticated jokes has meant that the underlying substance to the various philosophies has often been overlooked or simply ignored. In terms of classification, Discordians and the Church of the SubGenius, I would argue, are religions or spiritualities masquerading as a joke rather than the other way around. They are also spiritual/magical manifestations of a broader cultural shift towards irony and irreverence that is by no means limited to spiritual endeavours, but rather has become an integral element in contemporary western society. It has been pointed out that post-modern parody "both legitimises and subverts that which it parodies" (Hutcheon 2002: 101). Irony, then, often offers a sign of

[2] See Cusack (2010). This text provides a detailed exploration of Discordianism and the Church of the SubGenius, amongst others.

self-conscious legitimation of the views of participants, and this certainly appears to be the case here.

Irrespective of the technical classification of these groups, however, they are integral elements of contemporary occulture, both in their own right and as source material for other occultural practices. Occulture, in its simplest definition, refers to "often hidden, rejected and oppositional beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices" (Partridge 2004: 68). Discordianism and the Church of the SubGenius are clearly ideologically continuous with one another, whereas the Temple of Psychick Youth is philosophically quite distinct from the other two. All three, however, resonate strongly with the left hand path magical and occultist traditions. Indeed, their various public texts can all be considered to be magical texts *par excellence.* Further, at root they all share a belief in breaking down normative modes of thought and practice, which is evident across all their various endeavours. Finally, while these groups have all migrated online since the popularisation of the Internet, it should be noted that they previously existed comfortably offline as well. Their texts, though perhaps best understood in relation to the more recent broad cultural practices of digital media, nonetheless predate mass expansion of such practices. These groups can thus be seen as early articulations, if not seminal exemplars, not only of popular culture-based religiosity, but also of the tendencies of contemporary digital culture.

Discordianism

> We are a tribe of philosophers, theologians, magicians, scientists, artists, clowns, and similar maniacs who are intrigued with Eris Goddess of Confusion and with her Doings. (Jackson 1994: 1)

Discordianism has been a persistently present, if somewhat unusual, metaphysical movement since the 1950s (Cusack 2010; Doherty 2004). Originally developed by Kerry Thornley and Greg Hill, Discordianism combines various Buddhist and Pagan ideologies within a *bricolage* comprised of mythology, chaos, conspiracy theories, numerology, and anything else they deem appropriate. Discordianism is most clearly premised in a fundamentally absurdist approach to the world with a deep and abiding investment in ontological terrorism. Practice is utterly personal, as indeed is affiliation, but there is a clear emphasis upon transgression, most evident through their use of subversive humour in their literatures, public interventions, and practices.

> Discordianism is, at the core, a religion of liberation. Mal-2, Omar and Mord devised a creed where all restrictions were to be violated, all standards overturned, and all expectations disappointed. (Cusack 2010: 49)

In addition to Paganism and Buddhism, Discordian thought is heavily indebted to artistic movements such as Surrealism and Dada, and stands as a clear instance of ontological anarchy as lived experience. Articles of the (possibly non) faith include the sovereignty of the goddess Eris, the malevolence of the Illuminati, the law of fives, and the supremacy and general desirability of chaos. Discordians gleefully assert that everyone is a pope, and generally encourage both pranks and utter personal liberation.

> If you want in on the Discordian Society
> Then declare yourself what you wish
> Do what you like
> And tell us about it
> Or
> If you prefer
> Don't (Jackson 1994: 32)

In practice, Discordianism often imbricates with other religious, spiritual, and magical areas of engagement. The continuities are most clearly evident within the Neo-Pagan movement and the practice of magic, particularly chaos magic. It should be understood that one may be, for instance, a Pagan and a Discordian, or a magician of an Erisian bent. It is also worth noting that both the Church of the SubGenius and the Temple of Psychick Youth are similarly flexible. Like many elements of the occultural world, these ideas tend to support, rather than exclude, one another.

The Principia Discordia—'Zines and KopyLeft

There are two particular Discordian texts worth mentioning here: the *Principia Discordia* and *the Illuminatus! Trilogy* (Wilson 1975). The *Principia Discordia* is the original manifesto of the Discordians. The content ranges from the absurd to the sublime, and is simply a collection of Discordian thoughts, ramblings and so on. Originally written by Malcalypse the Younger and Lord Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst (the Discordian personas of Greg Hill and Kerry Thornley), the text exhibits a kind of profound countercultural zen, with textual assertions such as "a Discordian is Prohibited from Believing What he Reads" (Jackson 1994: 4) and quotations such as "King Kong died for your sins" (Ravenhurst 2006: 48) allowing for some insight into the metaphysic. The *Principia Discordia* was

originally a photocopied collection primarily written and collated by Greg Hill (Cusack 2010), which has, fifty years later, still maintained circulation and is indeed in print in a number of locations. It is also freely available online, as is associated Discordian material.

The other particularly important text of the Discordians is the *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*. This cult science fiction novel effectively popularised the Discordians when it was released in the mid 1970s (Magrathea 2003), and placed their philosophies in a slightly more accessible narrative form. The text is framed as an instance in the eternal struggle between the Erisian movement and the Illuminati, albeit in an extraordinarily complex and convoluted form. In the context of the *Illuminatus!* books, the Illuminati represent those for the forces of order, the technocracy and so on, whereas the Erisian movement is for chaos and discord. The *Illuminatus* trilogy takes the *Principia Discordia*, and incorporates the overall content as well as using it as a text which exists, and is quoted, within the book. It weaves Discordian content into an intricate web that includes Atlantis, police drama, the history and conspiracy theories around the Bavarian Illuminati,[3] dolphin intelligence, magic, the contemporary mythology of John Dillinger and a great many other things. Over thirty years since its publication, the trilogy is still extremely popular, and maintains a significant following, as does its Discordian and occultist author, the late Robert Anton Wilson.

Leaving aside the fact that both of these texts are very much popular culture documents in their own right, it is also worth looking at some of the particulars of the *Principia Discordia*. Since its inception, the *Principia Discordia* has been, and remains, a public domain document, with the original authors eschewing traditional copyright for their more idiosyncratic KopyLeft. In the contemporary digital world we are becoming increasingly familiar with these sorts of texts, from creative commons

[3] The Illuminati, apparently, did actually formally exist from 1776 to 1787, when, after receiving unwanted government attention, it was shut down (Barkun 2003: 48–49). The stated goal of the group was the destruction or removal of institutionalised political and religious authority, and they invested deeply in complex schemes to both avoid notice and develop a select core able to enact the group's goals. At its largest, the Bavarian Illuminati numbered approximately 2500 members. With other sporadic resurgences linked closely with anti-Semitism, the belief in the Illuminati conspiracy resurfaced most recently in the late 1950s, with the development of the John Birch Society (Barkun 2003: 50). It is worth mentioning the provenance of the conspiracy as it has developed into one of the most well-known and enduring conspiracies of the West, and has become a significant subcultural and occultural theme.

through to popularly known structures such as wikis, as well as with less generalist practices such as the publication of source code. Within the context of Discordianism, this has resulted in the existence of many different versions of the *Principia Discordia* in both digital form and hard copy. While they all share the same core texts of the original *Principia*, any given editor may choose to remove or add text as desired.

> Discordianism and the concept of KopyLeft go hand in hand. Although just a small part of the counter-culture gestalt, I believe that the Principia Discordia was probably one of the earliest expressions and strongest champions of this idea, which has since seen such concepts as the "Open Source Software" initiative, with endeavours such as the Linux Operating System. Remember: if it's not KopyLeft, it's not Discordian. This concept is at Discordia's very heart, ye and its spleen, gonads and pineal gland. Or something. I remember stumbling across the Discordian internet site some meatboy had constructed and copyrighted—I laughed and laughed and laughed at the sad-arsed bastard. No doubt Eris will accordingly soften him sorely. (Swabey 2002)

What is fascinating in this context is that such a process, at least to a degree, actively encourages participants to engage with the creation and extension of the text itself, not just necessarily supporting replication of the content. In thus engaging, Discordians have effectively created an ongoing, perpetually developing public text that has itself been the source of inspiration for other popular culture texts, not to mention a raft of idiosyncratic religious and spiritual practices. The most obvious and direct instance is the *Illuminatus!* trilogy discussed above, but this is but one of many examples of this process. The version of the *Principia Discordia* quoted here, for instance, was published at the whim of a games company who loved the text and wanted to make it available. In addition to the material from earlier versions, they have also included more recent Discordian content. That games company in turn has created specifically Discordian games that are available for purchase.

While the *Principia Discordia* has now been reproduced a number of times in both hard and electronic copy, it is also of interest that the original version was initially created as a 'zine. 'Zines are self-published, often photocopied or hand made works that are generally created and distributed outside of usual commercial channels (Poletti 2008). Already acknowledged as a significant, if underground, movement in the 1980s (Zweig 1998), 'zines have continued to hold their appeal and still constitute a present and active part of contemporary popular culture. Key notions generally present within the production of 'zines and the cultures

surrounding them include DIY approaches, strong positions against mass production, and the de-emphasis of marketability. There is also an established culture of exchange or gifting, and an intensely personal and idiosyncratic approach to content.

> Zines . . . have never tried to be a profitable commodity and this is, in part, what has kept them vital. They are usually traded or sold at cost through a vast underground network of other zine makers and zine readers. (Zweig 1998: 4)

The focus upon public domain texts as iterated through the *Principia Discordia* and the broader notion of KopyLeft, and the grassroots anti-commodification ethic of 'zine cultures both emphasise a participatory, rather than consumer, culture. While undeniably a part of contemporary popular culture, the underlying orientation of Discordians is away from consumption, and towards personal participation and individual creation.

There are three particular points that the *Principia Discordia* and the *Illuminatus!* trilogy demonstrate regarding the Discordian relationship to popular culture. Firstly, the texts themselves are manifestations of the practice of the Discordian philosophy. Certainly the content and structure, but in the particular case of the *Principia Discordia*, also the format and means of distribution are utterly instances of Discordian ideology and practice. Secondly, the *Principia Discordia* is a public domain text which, while maintaining a constant core, has been developed and reused many times by different participants in the approximately fifty years since it was originally composed. Thirdly, both the *Principia Discordia* and the *Illuminatus!* trilogy have become popular culture documents in their own right, with the documents used both as inspiration for other groups and as specific texts and concepts to remix.

The Church of the SubGenius

The Church of the Sub-Genius is the classic example of what is generally thought of as a joke or parody religion. Clearly a child of the Discordians, the Church of the SubGenius combines in it an eclectic mix of conspiracy theories, UFOlogy, social commentary, ontological terrorism, religious remixing and Western occultism. Presentations of their ideologies, such as the *Book of the SubGenius* (Stang 1983) or the *Bobliographon* (Stang 2006) conceptually and visually hark back to a collage style, with a barrage of material presented in no overtly apparent order. Central tenets

include the coming of the alien Xists in 1996, the awesome power of Bob Dobbs, the ultimate salesman, and the general unpleasantness of the elder gods. In terms of agenda, the Church of the SubGenius seems intent upon shocking people out of normative patterns of thinking in regards to all areas of human engagement, be they personal, political or spiritual. It is inherently postmodern insofar as while materials are presented with ironic and subversive humour, this is indeed part of the philosophy that is being propounded—as with the Discordians, they are their own best example. The Church of the SubGenius also has its own unique magical system, termed 'Slack', for which techniques and methods for its accrual and disbursal are offered. It should also be noted that in addition to its books, the Church of the SubGenius has also made films such as *Arise! The SubGenius Video* (Holland 1992) which provide further expression of their ideology whilst maintaining stylistic continuity. They also regularly stage public events, such as an annual party on 5 July celebrating the anniversary of the Xists *not* coming to earth to transport all SubGenius off in a spaceship, as well as regular 'devivals'.[4]

In terms of ideology the Church of the SubGenius and Discordianism are extremely well aligned. Even SubGenius texts are visually similar to Discordian texts, and they share the penchant for both *bricolage* and the absurd. The SubGenius publications, however, appear to reference a far broader selection of popular culture, as can be seen through their first publication, the *Book of the SubGenius*. Where the Discordian texts mentioned above tend towards original textual creation, albeit with the inclusion of extant popular culture content, the publications of the Church of the SubGenius are far more explicit in their remixing of popular culture.

The Book of the SubGenius—Remix and Bricolage

The *Book of the SubGenius* is a text both fascinating and entertaining (Stang 1983). The text not only draws upon popular fiction sources, but also traditional religions and occulture, as well as more mainstream themes. It borrows from a huge swath of culture, parodies everything in sight (including the Church of the SubGenius itself), and recontextualises it into a strident call to arms for the forces of absurdity. The list of broader cultural sources in the *Book of the SubGenius* is immense. The elder gods of Lovecraft's work

[4] Internet site, http://www.subgenius.com/newdevivals.html. Accessed 13 July 2011.

take up residence next to ancient astronauts and Jehovah (Stang 1983). Conspiracy theories, UFOs, and Buddha are discussed alongside a notion of our shared Yeti heritage and the SubGenius version of the Overman (Stang 1983). These, and many more, occultural themes are in turn juxtaposed with political and social commentary, critiquing constructions such as the nuclear family or the idea of working for a living.

The attitude taken toward the popular culture material in the Church of the SubGenius can be most easily interpreted through an understanding of remix. Remix is a technique that centres upon the juxtaposition and recontextualisation of extant cultural artefacts. At the simplest level, it may mean combining two separate elements of source material, such as placing a soundtrack over film for which it was not designed. On the other hand, remix might include multiple sources of content that are treated in such a way as to be virtually unrecognisable. Whether there are one or many sources of content for the remix, the underlying process itself is one of *bricolage*.

The kind of use of sources seen in the Church of the SubGenius goes far beyond simple referencing. Rather, it comprises an explicitly creative process in the degree to which disparate narratives and ideas are interwoven as well as radically juxtaposed. Like many recent popular culture texts, they constitute a veritable web of references that provide a kind of list of affiliation across texts. Beyond this web, however, there is a demonstrable capacity to strip references of their original meaning without necessarily losing their function as icons. To take an instance from the Book of the SubGenius, the role of Jehovah is reworked into an immensely powerful alien being, a far cry from the Judaeo-Christian god. By reframing the Judaeo-Christian god as an alien, the SubGeniuses co-opt both narratives without in any way representing either. Similarly, their consistent use of 1950s 'American dream' imagery in no way infers adherence to that morality or way of life, but rather simultaneously critiques and subverts it.

As well as the kind of conceptual juxtaposition already mentioned, the visual layout of these texts is equally based in *bricolage*. Any given page may include text, pictures, diagrams, slogans, and quotes: the layout as well as the content is overwhelming in every sense. Beyond this, though, remix is not only a method of expression and a technique of cultural adoption and subversion, but also an integral technique of spiritual behaviour in these contexts. In as far as radical juxtaposition forces the individual to reconsider normative methods of approaching the content, it is in fact guiding the reader into taking on the ideological stance of the group.

Remix and *bricolage* are prevalent techniques within the cultural endeavours of contemporary western digital culture, and have come to form a huge portion of both commodified and private textual creation. These developments have tended to blur the role between performers and audiences, between the creators of popular culture objects and those who enjoy them. Consumers are

> playing a more active role in shaping the flow of media throughout our culture, are drawn together by shared passions and investment in specific media properties or platforms, and often create new content by appropriating, remixing, or modifying existing media in clever and inventive ways. (Jenkins 2007: 357–358)

Remix culture does not engage only with juxtaposition, but more generally with recontextualisation. The underlying premise tends to be one of exchange and interrelation rather than the static, modernist view of the created object that sees a work as distinct, discrete and, most importantly, copyrightable. In a far more postmodernist vein, remix cultures generally see no problem with extending, recontextualising, or changing the text, with or without legal permission (Mason 2008). In a secular context, remix has been applied to every from of cultural production from music, visual art, text, film to game.

> Today's notion of creativity and originality are configured by velocity: it's a blur, a constellation of styles, a knowledge and a pleasure in the play of surfaces, a rejection of history as objective force in favour of subjective interpretations of its residue, a relish for copies and repetition. (Miller 2004)

Remix culture is not a phenomenon limited to only one form of art, or to only one subculture. It denotes a far broader shift in attitudes to content, to authenticity, and to context. *Bricolage* of this sort has been implicated as an integral element of the subversion of consumerism in subcultural contexts (Hebdige 1997) in as much as consumables are not utilised as intended, but are reworked by individuals. In this sense objects become 'owned' rather than just purchased. Remix implies a process that extends somewhat beyond *bricolage* in that it does not just juxtapose disparate content to shed light on otherwise obscured implications, but rather uses juxtaposition to create new artistic and popular products that are complete in and of themselves (Mason 2008).

The radical juxtaposition of content, the subversive humour and the overwhelming visual style of the *Book of the SubGenius* are all emblematic of the Church of the SubGenius. In this case, the point to emphasise is the process of remixing extant cultural artefacts and concepts into something

decidedly original. While the consumption of popular cultural artefacts is evident, it is simultaneously de-emphasised by the processes of remix, by what is done with, and to, these cultural artefacts.

The Temple of Psychick Youth

Moving somewhat laterally within the worlds of popular cultural religiosity, the final exemplary group to be viewed here is The Temple of Psychick Youth (TOPY). TOPY is perhaps more firmly entrenched within the explicitly occultural milieu, but nonetheless has definite impact on, and location within, popular culture. It began as an offshoot of Psychic TV, an experimental conceptual art group started in 1981 (Kinney 1994) which focused upon transgressive forms of ontological terrorism via music, film, and performance art. The Temple of Psychick Youth was the title given to the overtly occult endeavours of members and fans. TOPY was heavily influenced by Chaos and Sex magic from the Golden Dawn/Crowley school of thought, although the group out-rightly denied adherence to any one form of practice, rather stating that information gathering, of both experiential and literary types, and its dissemination were the group's major priority. *Thee Psychick Bible*, for instance, contains essays relating to the practice of sex magic, sleep related magic, psychick discipline, and many other themes relevant to the practice of magic (P-Orridge 2009). The original TOPY group formally disbanded in 1991 in the wake of police raids on various TOPY homes, inspired by fears of satanic ritual abuse (Keenan 2003). As is a fairly familiar story, these fears stemmed largely from media hype and misrepresentation, although perhaps some confusion can be understood on behalf of the authorities with regards to a group that did not maintain boundaries between art, ritual and magic. For all the claims of disbanding, various incarnations of the Temple of Psychick Youth are still present and active (The Temple of Psychick Youth 2001).

To give an idea of the mission statement of the Temple of Psychick Youth, here are some extracts from *Thee Psychick Bible*.

> We have reached a crisis point. We are aware that whole areas of our experience are missing . . . we are faced with the debasement of man to a creature without feelings, without knowledge and pride of self . . . We have been conditioned, encouraged and blackmailed into self-restriction, into a narrower and narrower perception of ourselves, our importance and potential. All this constitutes a Psychick attack of the highest magnitude. Acceptance is defeat . . . Right Now you have these alternatives: to remain forever part of a sleeping world . . . To gradually abandon the hopes and dreams of child-

> hood . . . to be permanently addicted to the drug of the commonplace . . . Or, to fight alongside us in Thee Temple Ov Psychick Youth. Thee Temple of Psychick Youth has been convened in order to act as a catalyst and focus for the Individual development of all those who wish to reach inwards and strike out . . .
>
> Our function is to direct and support. Work that is needlessly repeated is simply wasteful. Accordingly, we will be making public books, manuscripts & other recordings of our progress, in various formats, video and audio. These do not contain meaningless dogma but are examples of our interests and beliefs in action. They are made not as entertainment, but as experience, not the mundane experience of day-to-day but of the Spirit and Will triumphant. (P-Orridge 2009: 33–34)

And, to present the current TOPY attitude, here is an extract from the current Temple of Psychick Youth website. It is not officially associated with the original members, but participants feel themselves to be continuing the overall goals of the original founders.

> Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth (TOPY) exists to promote a system ov functional, demystified magick, utilising both Pagan and modern techniques. It is a process ov individual and collective experimentation and research with no finite answers, dogmas or unchallengeable truths. It is for each to discover his or her own understanding ov thee questions that suggest themselves, and through that voyage ov discovery to find their personal and true identity, thee True Will.

In the case of the Temple of Psychick Youth and Psychic TV, the complexities of the relationship between popular culture and spiritual engagement are given full expression. In this group, the space between the audience and the creator, or the spiritual quester and public performer, is both minimised and made effectively irrelevant. Of course, TOPY is not alone within spiritual and religious contexts in making their own cultural products. Nonetheless, it is notable that they were/are equally engaged as both spiritual and artistic participants, rather than one interest being subservient to the other.

> The concepts of such things as ritual or the perception of a non-physical reality are misunderstood and now commonly seen as retrograde steps towards barbarianism and superstition. The Temple wishes to re-integrate such concepts into the human experience, and has therefore developed, quite consciously, a practical, logical, and presentable system to help this to be done. (Dwyer 2000: 36)

Their art was their magic and their magic their art, which also more or less was their lived experience. Because they were creating public art, their work and hence their ideologies and experiences were accessible

to a wider audience than might otherwise have been the case. This audience then, in part, assumed ever more active roles, effectively moving from observer to participant. See, for instance, The Family of Psychick Individuals (FOPI), a group that has developed from the original fan base of Psychic TV (Partridge 2004b) and shares its ideology. This inclusive attitude was encouraged in the original incarnation of the group, and remains a focus, as is highlighted on the current TOPY website in the 'TOPY is . . .' section. One of the primary issues of interest with TOPY is that the enactment of their music and performance art was not divorced from the enactment of their rituals—the popular culture and the religious, spiritual, and magical aspects were not distinguished. The two continually informed one another, and placed ideas such as active participation and internalisation in a quite new context.

Psychic TV—Outright Textual Creation

> PTV's cut-up of reality is aimed at short circuiting the training the brain has had—to twist up the map of that shared geography and make the viewer find his own way, rather than accepting what emanates from the TV screen without thought. (Dwyer 2000: 34)

The Temple of Psychick Youth and their associated endeavours are interesting in this context precisely in that they did not draw upon popular culture so much as make it, and yet are still inextricably bound up in that sphere of engagement. Moreover, their method of creation was to a degree both a magical and political act. The music and performances of related groups such as Throbbing Gristle, Coil and Psychic TV were, and still are, in many cases deliberate attempts to alter normative ways of thinking (Rushkoff 1994). These groups focused upon magical strategies such as popular performance as ritual, effectively involving their audiences as participants in magical as well as musical activities (Partridge 2004b).

Genesis P-Orridge, one of the founders of the Temple of Psychick Youth, articulates this point clearly in reference to particular compositional techniques.

> Sampling, looping and re-assembling both found materials and site specific sounds selected for precision of relevance to thee message implications of a piece of music or a transmedia exploration, is an alchemical, even a magical phenomenon. No matter how short, or apparently unrecognisable a 'sample' might be in linear time perception, I believe it must, inevitably, contain within it (and accessible through it), the sum total of absolutely

> everything its original context represented, communicated, or touched in any way. (P-Orridge 2003: 32)

This attitude renders the process of composition a magical, transformative act in itself. That such compositions are then made available as popular culture artefacts which may in turn be used in others' spiritual practice clearly illustrates the impossibility of making a strict demarcation between what is popular and what is spiritual.

While somewhat obvious, it should be noted that the use of aural and visual stimuli to facilitate alternative states of consciousness has long been a part of religious practice of many forms. Again, however, it seems relevant to draw the distinction between adopting an extant popular cultural artefact (i.e. a piece of music or film) for that purpose, and deliberately creating one with religious/spiritual/magical outcomes in mind. Like the Discordians and the Church of the SubGenius, the texts of TOPY and their related endeavours are both the manifestos of their respective metaphysics, and (to a degree and in their various ways) the actual practice of their respective magical/spiritual systems. TOPY, however, encourages spiritual experimentation through artistic creations, many of which are audio or visual artefacts that then become popular culture artefacts in their own right.

Conclusion

Popular culture religion is marked not only by consumption but also by creation and active participation. The examples of the Discordians, the Church of the SubGenius, and the Temple of Psychick Youth demonstrate that, firstly, the relationship between popular culture and modern alternative spiritualities can be quite complex. Not only do these metaphysics borrow from existing popular culture texts, but they also rework and remix them, as well as creating original texts of their own. Secondly, their various attitudes towards active participation and remix suggest that we cannot conflate the notion of popular culture religion, or hyper-real religion, with a consumer-only paradigm. The relationship between popular culture artefacts and idiosyncratic alternative religiosity is most emphatically not a unidirectional flow, but rather a field of engagement where audiences are also performers, viewers become authors, and the spiritual seeker may simultaneously be an artistic creator. Thirdly, in some cases the mechanism of engagement with popular culture can be in itself a spiritual act.

The argument made here is not that these, and other like groups, are not simply consumers, but rather that they are participants within popular culture, creators and consumers, audiences and performers. Inherent in such a position is the suggestion that an attempt to develop interpretative frameworks for popular culture spiritualities needs to also account for such behaviours. While the Discordians, the Church of the SubGenius, and the Temple of Psychick Youth are all fairly explicit in their ownership of popular culture, it should be noted that there are any number of alternative religions and spiritual movements that, while perhaps not so overt, nonetheless emphasise creation rather than consumption in their religious and spiritual practice. Given that so much of contemporary belief is becoming intertwined with the popular, it seems entirely possible that there will be many new creative techniques emerging through the imbrication of the spiritual and the popular.

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HEAVEN'S GATE, SCIENCE FICTION RELIGIONS, AND POPULAR AMERICAN CULTURE

Benjamin E. Zeller

Heaven's Gate: A Science Fiction Religion?

Few who remember the 1997 Heaven's Gate suicides forget the details: the purple shrouds covering the dead, the lethal mix of phenobarbital-laced applesauce and vodka, the rolls of quarters and Nike shoes. Indeed, the thirty-nine individuals who ended their terrestrial existences in Rancho Santa Fe, California between 22 March and 24 March, 1997 took great care in orchestrating their ritual suicides. Not surprisingly, the earliest media reports seized on these details. Coverage fixated on the material culture of the Heaven's Gate dead, as well as the medical histories of its members, several of whom had been surgically neutered. Each print, television, and radio account seemed to offer an even more bizarre account of the group, feeding an audience that had been primed for decades to expect religious cults—particularly those in California—to demonstrate odd behavior.

As more information on Heaven's Gate slowly trickled out, media outlets shifted from describing the physical surroundings of the Rancho Santa Fe dead to their worldview. A combination of Christian millennialism, New Age self-transformation, and ufology, scholars still debate the theological makeup and history of Heaven's Gate. Yet from the earliest days of the coverage of the 1997 suicides, the mass media has fixated on one element in the movement's worldview: its connection to science fiction. Heaven's Gate was, if one believes *TIME, Newsweek*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, a "science fiction cult," or at least one that formulated its religious ideology using a foundation of science fiction (hereafter SF).

Newsweek's near issue-length coverage of Heaven's Gate offers a representative sample of how the mass media framed Heaven's Gate with recourse to SF. In massive bold-faced font, *Newsweek* introduced its nearly thirty-page treatment of Heaven's Gate by labeling the group a "strange brew of twisted Christian theology, castration, science fiction, belief in UFOs and mastery of the Internet" (Thomas 1997: 27). The second article in the special section, which focused on religious quests and the search

for spirituality, began by labeling the movement a "farrago of early-Christian heresy and 1970s-era science fiction," though it did not elaborate on what aspects of SF appeared in the movement (Beals 1997: 37). Lest readers miss these references, the next article in *Newsweek*'s examination of Heaven's Gate—and the only *Newsweek* article that took care to unpack and attempt to understand the worldview of the religion—made the group's SF credentials part of the article's byline, trumpeting: "What did 'Do's' [group leader Marshall Herff Applewhite's] followers believe? A bit of everything, from the Gospels to science fiction to Eastern Mysticism. Inside their twisted theology" (Stone 1997: 40). The article that followed made occasional allusions to SF popular culture, commenting on the popularity of UFO films in the 1970s and the analogies between Heaven's Gate's 'sci-fi universe' and another new religion, that of Scientology (Stone 1997). Even the *Newsweek* articles unrelated to the movement's ideology, such as a consideration of the place of the Internet in Heaven's Gate's recruitment, invoked the mantle of science fiction. The magazine's special section on the group concluded with an editorial by renowned SF author Harlan Ellison—an original *Star Trek* series writer, among other genre accolades—that disparaged believers in SF religions as having fallen into a "simplistic, pulp-fiction view of the world" of conspiracies, science fiction conventions, UFO sightings, and other "nonsense" (1997: 49).

The *Los Angeles Times*, which because of its geographic proximity to Rancho Santa Fe became the newspaper of record for the coverage of Heaven's Gate, similarly framed Heaven's Gate as a product of science fiction. The 2 April edition of the *Times* referenced a popular SF television series in the subtitle of its front-page article on the group. " 'I Want to Believe' is the mantra not just for TV's 'X-Files' but also for many Americans who look to science or sci-fi—or what lies in between—to explain life's mysteries." The following article focused on how Heaven's Gate was part of "an increasingly popular culture in which the search for meaning has turned to a fuzzy fusion of science and science fiction" (Harmon 1997: 1). Another article in the *Times*, this one a guest editorial, even blamed the mass media, particularly book publishers and television producers, for feeding "the public a steady diet of science fiction fantasy, packaged and sold as real," that Heaven's Gate transformed into its 'pseudoscientific' religion (Kurtz 1997: 5).

Religious journalists were no less affected by the desire to portray Heaven's Gate as somehow a product of science fiction. *The Christian Century*, stalwart bastion of the American Protestant mainline, led off its news item on Heaven's Gate by calling the group "a quasi-religious

group that mixed elements of apocalyptic Christianity with sci-fi space travel" (*The Christian Century* 1997: 382). A Catholic contributor to the progressive Evangelical journal *Sojourners* similarly introduced his analysis of the group with a reference to the movement's consumption of SF, as the product of "gross misrepresentations of Christian beliefs, laced with doses of New Age, science fiction, and TV fantasy (the group loved *X Files* and *Star Trek*)" (Nangle 1997: 41). The obsession was not lost on media self-observers. *Harper's* columnist Christine Lehmann criticised her fellow journalists, who "dwelt obsessively on the exotic sci-fi trappings of the cult and its now-infamous Web site" (1997: 15).

Two clear facts emerge from these media representations of Heaven's Gate. First, in its coverage of this alternative religious movement the media acted as social gatekeeper, determining that Heaven's Gate represented a 'twisted' and 'bizarre' theology aberrant from American social and religious norms. Such a function of the media hardly surprises long time observers of new religious movements (NRMs). Sean McCloud has demonstrated that from 1955 onward, media outlets intentionally framed an 'American religious fringe' through exoticising and sometimes demonising NRMs. McCloud argues that this functions not only to exclude NRMs and other alternative religious groups, but to support the notion of a religious mainstream from which some groups deviate. This fringe, McCloud indicates, "functions as a 'negative reference group' in the process of identity construction" (2004: 6). In this way, Heaven's Gate came to represent precisely what journalists determined American society should not be. Yet the media's representation of Heaven's Gate linked this to a new element: the many references to science fiction. At times, SF religion itself came to serve as a "negative reference group," as Ellison's editorial suggests. Certainly other alternative and new religious groups possess SF elements. Scientology, the Raelian Church, and the Nation of Islam all believe in UFOs and extraterrestrials, not to mention the numerous flying saucer religions and channeled extraterrestrial groups in the New Age spectrum. Yet coverage of those religions seldom dwells on the SF elements. Media outlets generally cover Scientology through the lenses of celebrity and deception, the Raelians through those of technology and sexuality, and the Nation of Islam through the lens of race. Something was different about Heaven's Gate that made its science fiction elements more central. But what was that?

Though one can find much at fault in journalistic coverage of Heaven's Gate, the media's treatment of the group through the lens of science fiction was completely appropriate. In fact, Heaven's Gate functions as a

prototypical science fiction religion. Scholars have understood Heaven's Gate in many way; a Christian new religious movement, a religious offshoot of ufology, a New Age apocalyptic group. I have argued elsewhere that Heaven's Gate was fundamentally a Christian movement that adopted central elements of the New Age and ufology subcultures in forming its unique worldview (Zeller 2006). I do not repudiate that stance here, only add to it: as a Christian new religious movement, Heaven's Gate engaged in a variety of hermeneutical methods to read its central text, the Christian Bible. One such hermeneutic is what I called an extraterrestrial hermeneutic (Zeller 2009). Though not a hermeneutic *per se*, Heaven's Gate's absorption of central elements of the science fiction genre into its worldview make the group an example of a Christian NRM that is also a science fiction religion.

Science Fiction and Religion

As for the concepts of religion, art, or music, no single definition of science fiction exists. In many cases, consumers of science fiction (like those of religion, art, or music) disagree on the nature of the category and even whether particular examples merit inclusion. Still, scholars of the SF genre have offered a general guide to understanding what SF means and why it draws people. James Gunn, a professor of literature and one of the leading researchers of SF, has offered one of the most influential of such definitions, predicated on the notion of change:

> [s]cience fiction is the branch of literature that deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places. It often concerns itself with scientific or technological change, and it usually involves matters whose importance is greater than the individual or the community; often civilization or the race itself is in danger. (Gunn 2005: 6)

The notion of change is at the heart of Gunn's definition. Typical science fiction stories either dwell on the concept or assume it as the dramatic focus of the story. To take a representative example, Gene Roddenberry's original *Star Trek* series imagined a future of spaceships, unified humanity, and interstellar conflicts. All these represent major changes from the present circumstances of his 1960s viewers. As a science fiction production, *Star Trek* considered the ramifications of such changes, playing them out on national television. Yet the characters of *Star Trek* act as real people would, within the limits of storytelling that Rodenberry imposed,

and the abilities of the actors. They experience normal human psychology and biology, and have the range of feelings and motivations appropriate to present-day humanity. As *Star Trek*'s hero Captain Kirk (by that time promoted to Admiral Kirk) said in the fourth of the franchise's films, "I'm from Iowa, I only work in Outer Space" (Nimoy 1986). The series dwelt on real-world problems. Famously, it featured episodes that commented on race relations, war, the counterculture, and intergenerational conflict. Science fiction asks 'What If?' but its answers assume the conventions of everyday reality.

Yet SF stories are often weighty, as Gunn's definition notes. SF deals with threats to civilisation, humanity, and even the universe. This is in fact part of SF's attraction. Audience members tune in to watch Captain Kirk and Mr Spock save the universe every week, after all. One of the most beloved of science fiction's series, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* novels, involve the efforts of a single man, and then an organisation, to stave off the end of civilisation throughout the entire universe. George Lucas's *Star Wars* films similarly involve weighty matters: a band of rag-tag freedom fighters attempting to overthrow a cruel despotic empire. More recently, the hit series *Battlestar Galactica*, a reimagining of another 1970s television series by the same name, assumed as its premise that a single starship of post-nuclear holocaust survivors represented the only hope for the existence of not only civilisation but the human species itself. In all cases, such science fiction stories assume changed circumstances (e.g. interstellar travel, unified humanity, near-genocide of the species, and so on), project these onto characters who act in real-world ways, and comment on issues of major importance to today's readers and viewers.

Yet change is not the only way of understanding SF. Canadian-Croatian scholar Darko Suvin has offered the second major approach to understanding the genre, predicating his definition on the twin concepts of estrangement and cognition. He writes that science fiction is "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (Suvin 1979: 7–8). Somewhat more arcane than Gunn's definition, Suvin looks to science fiction as a creative exercise in the construction of alternative worlds. With its space ships, time machines, telepathic abilities, faster-than-light travel, and even world peace, SF is estranged from the real world and its present scientific and social development. Yet SF offers cognitive explanations for these departures, often in the form of technology or science. As Suvin (2005) argues, SF explains the mechanics

of the flying carpet, or at least assumes that there are mechanics, rather than relying on some sense of magic, supernaturalism, or mythic powers. Suvin calls these "cognitive" responses to estrangements, meaning that they work within the confines of rational, naturalistic, and scientific limits, rather than appealing to a sense of wonder, miracles, or supernatural powers. Carl Freedman (2000) explains this distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive disjunctions from reality as the heart of science fiction. SF explains disjunctions from the real world through cognitive means, whereas other genres (namely folktale, myth, and fantasy) use non-cognitive means to imagine their disjunctions. In following Suvin and Freedman, I use the concept of 'cognitive' similarly ro mean rational, empiricist, and naturalistic.

Suvin and Freedman's insistence on the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive reasoning, and with it their implication that any form of supernaturalism violates SF's cognitive assumptions, reminds us of certain antipathies between science fiction and religion. SF authors have a certain public reputation for disparaging religion and religious belief, some of which is earned. Isaac Asimov's aforementioned *Foundation* (1951) features an advanced technocratic society creating and employing a religion to control the masses, in a formulation that Karl Marx would find deeply familiar. Gene Rodenberry's original *Star Trek* series even features the crew of the Enterprise encountering—and then defeating—an extraterrestrial who had appeared on Earth using the alias of the Greek god Apollo. The implication was clear: extraterrestrials founded Earth's religions by passing themselves off as gods, and by the end of the episode, Kirk bluntly declared to Apollo, "we don't need you anymore" (Ralston, Coon and Daniels 1967). Best-selling SF author George Zebrowski's short story "Heathen God" (1971) went one step further, replicating the early Christian Gnostic heresy by portraying the Biblical deity as an insane childlike alien, responsible for creating a broken world and all of the troubles that followed.

Yet for all this, science fiction also features certain sympathies with religion, as a close examination of the two definitions reveals. Assuming Gunn's approach to SF, two commonalities stand out. First, both SF and religion fixate on notions of change. Religion looks forwards and backwards, trying to alleviate the human discomfort with change at the same time that is recognises the need for change. Mircea Eliade (1954), one of the founders of the academic study of religion, described religious ritual as seeking to restore the primordial time of the origins, replicating the first acts of cosmogony. Other scholars, following the leads of nineteenth

century anthropologists E. B. Tylor and J. G. Frazer, have argued that religion functions as an attempt to understand the greatest change of all: the transition from life to death to whatever happens afterwards.

Like SF, religion highlights "matters whose importance is greater than the individual or the community," as Gunn describes. Theologian Paul Tillich (1965) called the realm of religion that of "ultimate concern," and insisted that beliefs about the nature of the self, society, and the divine functioned as the heart of religion. Emile Durkheim (1915), another founder of the academic study of religion, wrote that religion is above all else the recognition of the power of society and its cohesive bonds, and translation of the notion of society as greater than the self onto the divine realm. That religions often focus on questions of purpose and salvation supports these contentions, as well as an obvious parallel to the genre of SF.

Certainly SF often ventures into the realm of religion. At times, these ventures represent the appropriation of religion for narrative purposes, most notably what some SF authors call 'Shaggy God' stories, defined by Gary K. Wolfe (2005: 21) as "tales that seek to achieve a sense of wonder by mechanically adapting biblical tales and providing science fiction 'explanations' of them." Yet far more often, SF considers religious themes rather than merely replicating religion. Walter M. Miller Jr's classic *A Canticle for Leibowitz* mused on the nature of faith and its continuation in a post-apocalyptic world. The television series *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* centered on a character torn between his own agnosticism and instance on free will, and an extraterrestrial-imposed religious mission and destiny. J. Michel Straczynski, creator of the *Babylon 5* television series, succinctly argued that science fiction must consider religion, explaining that "[i]f you look at the long history of human society, religion—whether you describe that as organised, disorganised, or the various degrees of accepted superstition—has always been present . . . To totally ignore that part of the human equation would be as false and wrong-headed as ignoring the fact that people get mad, or passionate, or strive for better lives" (1993, n.p.). In fact, Straczynski's epic television series featured religion as one of the core elements driving its plot and character development. Not surprisingly, numerous novels and short stories consider religious themes, and four different anthologies of SF and religion stories exist.

Yet these sympathies extend beyond the mere consideration of similar themes. No less a commentator than Isaac Asimov (1986: v) wrote that "it is impossible to write science fiction and *really* ignore religion." Religious questions, he argued, percolate throughout SF, for example those involving the universality of God, creation, and the meaning of existence. Alexei

and Cory Panshin (1989) have argued that science fiction functions as mode of modern mythmaking, crafting stories of meaning that appeal to a modern audience just as religious myths did for earlier societies. Taking a somewhat more positive view of religion, Patricia Warrick and Martin Harry Greenberg (1975: xii) introduced their anthology of SF short stories, *The New Awareness: Religion Though Science Fiction*, by arguing that science fiction brings religion and science together, and along with them, creates meaning: "[humanity] needs both science and religion, disciplines that can no longer ignore each other. Each serves a similar function: to help man [*sic*] shape his universe enough to make it comprehensible." Religion and SF share common interests: explaining and considering such topics as the nature of humanity, the future, the purpose of life, free will, the origin of life, and the eventual end of the species.

Given the sympathies between SF and religion, the concept of a science fiction religion is not surprising. As I use the term, a science fiction religion is a religion that features two characteristics. First, it has incorporated facets of the science fiction genre into its beliefs, practices, and worldview. These facets may include elements drawn from particular works of science fiction, or more general themes. But in some way, science fiction religions have borrowed from the literary genre of SF. Heaven's Gate used the language of *Star Trek* in its religious practice, for example. Second, the science fiction religion functions like science fiction literature, meaning that the religion postulates a significant change—one estranged from the world as most people know it—and responds to that change. Here I extend and combine the definitions of SF proffered by Gunn and Darko. At its heart a science fiction religion shares with the genre of science fiction the postulation of a radical new future dependent on hitherto unknown technology, science, or discoveries about the natural universe, such as the existence of extraterrestrial life, time travel, space ships, or ESP. Each of these represents a radical change from the current world. Darko would call these developments estrangements, since they radically alter the manner in which human beings now understand themselves and the world and require some sense of resolution. Yet science fiction religions, like SF more broadly, offer cognitive responses to these changes. In offering cognitive—rather than supernatural or miraculous—responses, a science fiction religion insists on the same restrictions that hold in the SF genre. Borrowing the concepts and terms of science and technology, a science fiction religion offers religious responses to imagined changes. Therefore, as I use the term, a science fiction religion is a religion that a) has adopted elements of the SF genre, in order to b) envision and

explain a perceived change, and c) using cognitive means, resolve the estrangement of that change.

Science Fiction Religion and Heaven's Gate

Despite its eventual nature as a SF religion, Heaven's Gate did not emerge from a science fiction background, but a far more conventional Christian one. Its founders Marshall Herff Applewhite (1932–1997) and Bonnie Lu Nettles (1928–1985) predicated their movement's theology on their readings of the New Testament's book of Revelation, and from the earliest days of the group, understood their religious work as part of a millennial scenario detailed in that text. As I have argued elsewhere, they even taught a variant of a form of Christian millennialism known as dispensationalism, popular in the Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestant American subcultures, emphasising this approach's belief in a rapture of the faithful, during which the saved ascend into the heavens to their greater glory (Zeller 2006; Zeller 2010).

Though fundamentally Christian, Heaven's Gate filtered its understanding of Christian theology through the lenses of ufology and the New Age. As Brenda Denzler has demonstrated, the adherents of ufology form a diverse subculture of individuals who not only believe in UFOs, but make the pursuit of them and beliefs about them central aspects of their lives. Though Denzler cautions against attempting to strictly define or delineate ufology, she indentifies the subculture as focused on "mak[ing] the existence of the UFOs not just something that might be believed or not, but a demonstrable, empirical fact of life" (2001: 32). This empiricism carried over into Heaven's Gate, but the movement also absorbed central theories, texts, and ideas from the ufology subculture. In essence, it absorbed the popular culture of ufology, and with it the beliefs in UFO crashes, government cover-ups and conspiracies, subterranean bases, alien-human hybrids, and most importantly, following in the wake of Erich von Däniken's best-selling *Chariots of the Gods?*, a view of the Bible as a record of extraterrestrial contact with humanity. Yet the group members filtered these beliefs through the lens of SF, specifically the sub-genre of SF concerned with alien visitation of Earth and government cover-ups of such visits. Avid television watchers, the adherents of Heaven's Gate cited both *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (*ST:TNG*) and *The X-Files* as favorites. Both series feature such visitations and cover-ups. In the case of *ST:TNG*, when the technologically advanced humans of the Starship

Enterprise visit more primitive extraterrestrial worlds, they attempt to do so undercover, and when discovered seek to hide evidence of their visits. Set in the modern world of 1990s America, *The X-Files* portrays alien visitations and cover-ups from the other perspective; that of humans visited by extraterrestrials.

Despite Heaven's Gate's origins as a Christian movement, media observers had a point when they considered it a 'science fiction cult'. Heaven's Gate did speak in the language of SF genre, mimicking the language of *Star Trek, The X Files*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Its members watched science fiction films and television series frequently, and in their final recorded video messages—effectively suicide notes—many identified with the genre of SF. One Heaven's Gate member even signed off her video message mimicking Captain Kirk's famous line from the *Star Trek* television and film series ("Beam me up, Scotty") with her own salutation, "Thirty-nine to beam up!" (Jwnody 1997a). Another, the Heaven's Gate member calling himself Ollody, concluded his exit video by declaring that the heavenly truths "could be accepted by humans more easily in the form of science fiction," and explaining that the group had hoped to create a SF television series to teach their beliefs (Ollody 1997). According to numerous interviews with former members of the group, adherents regularly watched both *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (*ST:TNG*) and *The X-Files* as part of their regular religious practice, and saw both as offering religious messages (Gleick 1997). As I argue in the remainder of this chapter, Heaven's Gate satisfied the definition of a science fiction religion. In short: Heaven's Gate adopted central elements of the SF genre in order to envision and explain a perceived change—in their case, the presence of extraterrestrials as semi-divine figures—and ultimately sought resolution to the estrangement created by that fact through recourse to the language and concepts of science fiction.

Heaven's Gate incorporated elements from science fiction directly into its worldview. The group's members believed in UFOs, interstellar wars, alien technologies, and human-alien hybrids, and referred to God as an extraterrestrial being. Despite these SF elements, the movement did not incorporate them willy-nilly. Rather, Heaven's Gate carefully introduced material drawn from SF in order to support and explain the basic contention that underlay the group, and which represents the substantial change which Heaven's Gate perceived. The movement declared that the Jewish and Christian Bible was a record of extraterrestrial contact with Earth, and that Earth functioned as a laboratory and classroom for extraterrestrials. Human beings existed because extraterrestrial beings—referred to

as god(s) by primitive human beings—planted us here, and would return at the end of the current civilisation in order to harvest the current crop. The planet would then undergo a 'spading under' process, resulting in the complete destruction of the current order. Only those humans who accepted the teachings of the extraterrestrials and chose to follow them would survive this process. Heaven's Gate members believed that the Bible revealed all these concepts through coded language and symbol.

Without doubt, this understanding of the world radically differs from the normative view of other religious and secular people. It represents a radical change, no less so than the changes envisioned by SF. Rather than naturally evolved or divinely created, human beings are the products of extraterrestrial manipulation, and rather than either divinely inspired or the product of history, the Bible represents a record of extraterrestrial contact. Such changes in the fundamental nature of humanity and the underlying text of the Western world clearly represent radically important changes. Further, both lead to estrangement, since they effectively deny the assumed nature of the world and its inhabitants. Like SF, Heaven's Gate proclaimed a reality estranged from that assumed by most people, and used the language of science fiction—UFOs, space aliens, telepathy—to do so. The estrangement that the leaders and adherents of Heaven's Gate proclaimed bears the hallmark of the SF genre. It mimics specific stories claiming the extraterrestrial origin of Earth's religions, namely the aforementioned *Star Trek* episode, "Who Mourns for Adonais," as well as the film *Stargate*, which features space aliens creating ancient Egyptian religions to manipulate humanity. One Heaven's Gate member calling himself Rkkody (all members took new names consisting of three disharmonious preliminary letters, and ending with the suffix 'ody'), even cited *Stargate* as both an accurate depiction of the origin of Earth's religions as well as a good teaching tool, indicating the reflexive awareness of the use of SF within the group (Rkkody 1997).

Like SF, Heaven's Gate offered solutions to the estrangement through cognitive means, specifically a worldview that incorporated those beliefs and allowed its adherents to live in light of them. Further, the movement offered an ultimate solution to the estrangement of life as a human being living on a minor planet surrounded by a cosmos filled with superior extraterrestrials: departure from the Earth and physical metamorphosis into a perfected extraterrestrial being. As a science fiction religion, Heaven's Gate's response to the estrangement was in keeping with the cognitive assumptions of the SF genre. Its response drew from both elements of the SF genre as well as the cognitive approach of science fiction, satisfying

the definition of a SF religion. In keeping with Gunn's assessment of SF, the change and solution envisioned by Heaven's Gate represent ultimate threats to the human species, and in this regard, Heaven's Gate followed in the line of the classics of the SF genre: extraterrestrial beings threatened to annihilate life on Earth. A staple of science fiction stories, this apocalyptic approach declares that human beings have sullied the Earth beyond repair, and a cosmic judgment threatens to destroy humanity for the sake of the universe. The hit 1951 science fiction film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* had an identical theme, in the words of its extraterrestrial hero Klaatu, who warned humans that the price of human violence was planetary holocaust: "this Earth of yours will be reduced to a burned-out cinder. Your choice is simple: join us and live in peace, or pursue your present course and face obliteration" (Wise 1951). Heaven's Gate declared that the extraterrestrials proclaimed the same basic message, namely that human beings had polluted its garden, and only worldly destruction would allow the cosmic gardeners to reseed the beds. As the Heaven's Gate member named Jwnody (1997b) wrote just before her suicide, "[t]he weeds have taken over the garden and truly disturbed its usefulness beyond repair—it is time for the civilisation to be recycled—'spaded under'." Like SF more broadly, the SF religion declared the change that it perceived threatened the very nature of human civilisation. Like Klaatu and other SF protagonists, the leaders of Heaven's Gate insisted that human beings faced a choice, either to remain in their sullied human condition and face destruction, or evolve into a higher social consciousness. As Gunn has described of SF, Heaven's Gate's worldview was both weighty and important: its members declared that humanity itself was threatened, and that only those who accepted their teachings would escape destruction.

Heaven's Gate offered two solutions to the estrangement during its history, one during the movement's first decade, and the second during the latter decade of its history. The first solution involved bodily transformation into a space alien and departure aboard a flying saucer, and the group promulgated it from its founding in the mid-1970s—Applewhite and Nettles attracted their first adherents in 1975, but laid the groundwork of the movement two years earlier—until approximately the mid-1980s. Recognising the fundamental estrangement brought on by their belief that human beings existed only as a crop planted by a superior race of extraterrestrials, Heaven's Gate offered a chance to transcend humanity—the 'human level', as they called it—and join the extraterrestrials in space—the 'next level'. Accomplished through a yoga-like process of overcoming human attachments, feelings, and desires, a successful

candidate for 'the process' would metamorphose into a new extraterrestrial creature. In keeping with the cognitive approach of the SF genre and science fiction religion—using Savin's language—Applewhite and Nettles emphasised the physical and material nature of this transformation. In the words of Heaven's Gate's founders to an early interviewer, "when one leaves his humanity and makes the graduation, he moves into an entirely different consciousness. His body changes just as the chrysalis changes caterpillar to butterfly. The body chemically, biologically, changes over" (Applewhite and Nettles 1976: 76). All of Applewhite and Nettles's early material repeats this cognitive approach. After they had transformed into space aliens, a UFO would descend into the Earth's atmosphere, pick up the new members of the heavenly kingdom, and return to outer space.

Late in the history of Heaven's Gate, the group's leaders modified its means of dealing with the estrangement that their SF worldview introduced. Rather than envision the transformation into extraterrestrial life as a purely biological one, they looked to a form of salvation involving the transfer of consciousness from the human body to a perfected alien one. Labeling this transfer an 'upload', and describing it as akin to copying software from one computer to another, the adherents of Heaven's Gate used explicitly cognitive (that is, physicalist and materialist) rather than non-cognitive (that is, supernatural or mythic) language to describe the process. Individuals who successfully completed the training program offered by the movement, which entailed severing attachments to the human body and human ways of being, and found the approval of the extraterrestrial beings supervising the final harvest of Earth's crop of sentient beings, could hope to experience this uploading process. In this way, the members of the movement provided a response to the estrangement brought on by their beliefs that extraterrestrials functioned as gods, looking at humans as gardeners relate to plants.

Here, Heaven's Gate invoked aspects of SF popular culture in its development of this cognitive solution to the estrangement of their theology. Consciousness transfer, especially understood in a quasi-computerised manner, had become a SF trope by the time that Heaven's Gate adopted this approach in the mid-1980s. One of the most famous examples of consciousness transfer in SF is Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, its novelisation, and its sequel *2010: Odyssey Two* (novel) and *2010* (film), in which the computerised Jupiter monolith uploads hero David Bowman's mind into the monolith itself, which later reappears to warn his fellow humans of several imminent dangers. The first of these movies, released in 1968, predates the emergence of Heaven's Gate, but

the studio released the second film in 1984, during precisely the era in which Heaven's Gate developed its consciousness transfer doctrine (Clarke 1982; Clarke and Kubrick 1968; Hyams 1984; Kubrick 1968). Heaven's Gate's beloved *Star Trek* television series also postulated such technology, particularly in the plots in *ST:TNG* involving the character Data, the self-aware android. "The Schizoid Man," an episode from *The Next Generation*'s second season, featured a human transferring his consciousness into Data as a means of seeking immortality (Landau 1989). While most readers and viewers looked to *2001, 2010*, and *ST:TNG* as entertainment or perhaps fictional musings on a highly technical metaphysical topic, the members of Heaven's Gate—as befitting adherents of a SF religion—might very well have seen these SF stories as sources. Without a doubt, Heaven's Gate used the cognitive approach of science fiction to explain this process, using technical and technical-sounding terms to explain and define consciousness transfer. Like SF, they sought to explain the mechanics behind what religious people might call the soul's ascent to heaven or reincarnation, paralleling the approach of SF.

A Science Fiction Religion in Practice

The religious overtones of Heaven's Gate's message are clear (self-transformation, transcendence, heavenly salvation). Yet Heaven's Gate clearly also appealed to the ufological subculture and the SF genre. Calling the heavenly beings 'extraterrestrials' and 'aliens' marked the movement in this manner, as did their reference to the extraterrestrial transport vessels as 'UFOs', 'spacecraft', and 'flying saucers'. This rhetoric signifies the movement as distinct from the many other religions that similarly offered views of heavenly salvation, but also shows how the group drew from the SF genre and popular ufology. In addition to proffering a worldview predicated on the SF genre, Heaven's Gate incorporated numerous SF elements into their religious ritual and practice. This is most evident in the language that the members of Heaven's Gate used to talk about their living situation, themselves, and their ideas about the divine. Such spoken practices served to help the members of Heaven's Gate understand and relate to the major change that their movement envisioned—the true nature of humanity and the means of its salvation—and seek to resolve the estrangement wrought by that change. Tellingly, the leaders and members of the movement sought to avoid explicitly supernaturalist language and practices, leaning instead on more technological language

and practices oriented towards the empirical physical reality. In this way, the group members followed the lead of SF, with its dependence on cognitive means in resolving the estrangement of change. As both Christopher Partridge and I have argued, Heaven's Gate was a remarkably non-supernaturalist religion (Partridge 2003; Zeller 2010). The movement's nature as a SF religion explains why.

One of the central ways that the leaders and members of Heaven's Gate put their SF religion into practice was their relationship with space, where space means the more banal three dimensions of existence rather than the regions beyond Earth's atmosphere. Yet it is through their engagement with livable Earthly space that the members of Heaven's Gate sought to transport themselves into Outer Space. As theorist Thomas A. Tweed (2006: 74) has written of the religious engagement with space, "[r]eligions . . . involve finding one's place and moving through space. One of the imperfections the religious confront is that they are always in danger of being disoriented. Religions, in turn, orient in time and place." The religion of Heaven's Gate allowed its members to orient themselves on Earth, but like many ancient sailors, they did so with recourse to the heavens. Unlike stellar navigators, Heaven's Gate not only mapped space using the stars, they created spaces meant to bring themselves to the stars, at least symbolically.

For most of its history Heaven's Gate was nomadic, with members moving relatively frequently between temporary dwellings. In the group's early history its members stayed in campgrounds, public land, and spaces borrowed from sympathetic spiritual seekers. Later, after the movement gained funds from several well heeled converts and another member's inheritance, they tended to rent houses. Throughout this time, the members of Heaven's Gate sought to transform these borrowed spaces into sacred space, but they did so using the specific vernacular of SF religion. Their temporary abodes became 'crafts', short for spacecrafts. Former Heaven's Gate member Rio DiAngelo (2007: 29) explains why in his memoir of his time in the movement: "it is our understanding that 'Next Level Beings' [extraterrestrials] do most of their tasks from a spacecraft. So, we were taught to do all of our tasks as if in a laboratory in board a spacecraft with crew minded accuracy." Robert W. Balch (1995), who studied the group during its early days, reported a similar phenomenon of calling their homes crafts during the group's formative period of 1975 and 1976. Renaming their houses as crafts, the members of Heaven's Gate created sacred spaces meant to duplicate those in the literal heavens, outer space. They did so using the language of SF. In addition to calling their homes

'crafts', DiAngelo (2007: 30) explains that the group's members called bedrooms 'rest chambers', kitchens 'nutri-labs', laundry rooms 'fiber-labs', and offices 'compu-labs.' Members recast their excursions out of the house to earn money through odd jobs or to engage outsiders, 'out of craft tasks.'

The practices described by DiAngelo and Balch illustrate what Tweed (2006: 103) has written of religious individuals, that they are constantly engaged in "constructing, adorning, and inhabiting domestic space. Religion, in this sense, is housework. It is homemaking." Heaven's Gate's members created homes through rhetorically reconstructing them as spaceships. This transformed rented or borrowed houses, campgrounds, or warehouses from merely ordinary space into sacred space, space that religious people—the adherents of Heaven's Gate—could live within. They did so using terms drawn from SF, remaking kitchens as nutri-labs and bedrooms as rest chambers. Most importantly, the members' excursions outside this intensely insular and sectarian community, certainly fraught with anxiety and danger, became more manageable 'out of craft tasks', akin to spacewalks. Rather than invoke the supernatural, as nearly all the religious people in Tweed's study of sacred space do, the members of Heaven's Gate looked to explicitly cognitive means to remake their space. Rather than rituals, they used rhetoric. Rather than altars, they altered their language. Yet renaming this space nevertheless functioned as important religious practice, orienting the members of Heaven's Gate within a space that was at once Earthly and not Earthly.

Another practice that members of Heaven's Gate employed involved transforming themselves into members of a SF spaceship crew, rather than individual spiritual seekers who had joined a new religious movement. The members of the group referred to each other as crewmembers, wore uniforms, shared similar diets, adopted identical grooming habits for both men and women, and generally sought to function as individual units within a whole. Balch reports that adherents followed extremely regimented lives, and redefined their activities in quasi-scientific (or quasi-SF) language, such as 'fuel preparation' rather than cooking, or 'brain exercises', rather than puzzles (1995: 157). The adherents of Heaven's Gate modeled these religious practices on the quasi-militaristic model of spacecraft operation presented by most SF serials, novels, short stories, television series, and films. Most notably, the group's beloved *Star Trek* employed this model, as several members of Heaven's Gate made explicit in their exit videos and statements. Such members sought to live within such a crew and to function as members of a highly developed and coherent group dedicated to peaceful maintenance of the universal order. Though

the angels of Western religious traditions seem an apt parallel, the members of Heaven's Gate looked to SF rather than religion as their guide in developing this 'crew-consciousness'. The group's *'88 Update* combines the movement's acceptance of consciousness transfer, this focus on crew, and its wider acceptance of the broader ufological claim of crashed UFOs and conspiracy theories when it declares of the group's members, "they were briefed as a crew aboard a spacecraft about how they would incarnate into human vehicles in order to do a task. They left their Kingdom 'world' and came into this 'world' beginning in the late 1940's. They feel that some left their Next Level bodies via so-called UFO 'crashes' " (Heaven's Gate 1988: 10). Like the movement's rhetorical transformation of Earthly into outer space, Heaven's Gate's adherents' self-understandings as crewmembers served a central role in the group's religious practice.

Not surprisingly, the rhetorical use of SF functioned as one of the main modes of God-talk in Heaven's Gate, and was the center of their religious practice. The movement sometimes copied language directly from specific SF products. Most frequently, they turned to *Star Trek*. The movement's one-third page advertisement in the national American newspaper *USA Today*, published May 27, 1993, best represents this approach. Transposing the story of the incarnation of Christ into that of *Star Trek*, the advertisement proclaimed: "Two thousand years ago, the true Kingdom of God appointed an Older Member to send His 'Son', along with some of their beginning students, to incarnate on this garden. While on Earth as an 'away team' with their 'Captain', they were to work on their overcoming of humanness and tell the civilisation they were visiting how the true Kingdom of God can be entered." Here Heaven's Gate referenced the 'away team', a concept from the fictional *Star Trek* universe of a small group of crewmembers descending from their spaceship so as to engage in some activity on a planet's surface. They also referred to Christ as a 'Captain', alluding to the main characters of the various *Star Trek* television series, namely Captain Kirk from the original series and Captain Picard from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Heaven's Gate 1993).

The advertisement continued, explaining the nature of the Heaven's Gate movement both with reference to Christ and his apostles as well as *Star Trek*. "That same 'away team' incarnated again in the 1970's [*sic*] in the mature (adult) bodies that had been picked and prepped for this current mission. This time the 'Admiral' (the Older Member, or Father, incarnate in a female vehicle) came with the Son—'Captain'—and his crew." Alluding to the rank system in *Star Trek*'s quasi-military Starfleet, the authors of the advertisement portrayed the movement's founders as

both divine figures and SF characters, Applewhite/Christ/Captain, Nettles/God the Father/Admiral (Heaven's Gate 1993). Readers of the advertisement who had seen *Star Trek* would surely have thought of the pairing of Admiral Kirk and Captain Spock from the various *Star Trek* motion pictures produced in the decades before the advertisement, especially *Star Trek IV*, released two years earlier, which featured the Enterprise crew visiting twentieth-century Earth in an attempt to "save the planet from its own short-sightedness," in the words of the film (Nimoy 1986).

Heaven's Gate's *USA Today* advertisement used other language drawn from *Star Trek* as well, most notably its reference to human morality as a "prime directive." In *Star Trek* the prime directive is a moral imperative of not interfering with another culture's natural development. For Heaven's Gate, here drawing on a New Age sense of individual self-transformation, the prime directive was the moral requirement to not interfere in another person's spiritual development. The advertisement ended with another *Star Trek* reference, and one that combined the group's Biblical, ufology, and SF language. The members of the movement would depart on "the *true* 'Enterprise' (spaceship or 'cloud of light')." This brief statement combines the multiple languages that Heaven's Gate spoke. Even casual consumers of SF would recognise the reference to the Enterprise, the spaceship that ferries the crew of the original *Star Trek* series and *ST:TNG* between its adventures, and over the course of the televisions series even develops a life of its own as something more akin to a character than an object. Heaven's Gate also utilises a more generic term, 'spaceship', a concept with which readers of the advertisement familiar with ufology would more closely identify. Finally, the movement referenced the Biblical tradition and the "bright cloud" (elsewhere, "cloud of light") said to be present at divine events, and what Heaven's Gate believed was a UFO (Heaven's Gate 1993).

Other Heaven's Gate sources repeated this phenomenon of utilising the language of *Star Trek*. The group's Internet posting of 16 January, 1994, "Last Chance Statement," repeated the same claims, as did the title of the movement's final Internet statement, "Heaven's Gate 'Away Team' Returns to Level Above Human in Distant Space," though the latter statement itself avoided any direct reference to *Star Trek* other than its title (Heaven's Gate 1994; Heaven's Gate 1997). The most extensive treatment is found in Jwnody's (1996) "'Away Team' from Deep Space Surfaces Before Departure," which not only directly references the two aforementioned *Star Trek* series, but in its title possibly also alluded to *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1994–1999), a series still airing new episodes

at the time of the suicides. Jwnody continued the trope of referring to herself as a crew-member on an away team mission in the company of her Captain and under the command of her Admiral. Jwnody (1996) uses *Star Trek* quite intentionally, calling it a metaphor and implying that people might understand Heaven's Gate better through the lens of SF. She writes, "[m]etaphorically speaking, in 20th century human vernacular, I am a member of the current 'Away Team' deployed from deep space. As a young and extremely fortunate student, I have been working closely with the 'Captain' and he in turn with the 'Admiral' (Chief Administrator of this civilisation since its inception) on this remarkably complex mission."

The group was certainly intentional about its use of SF. Jwnody, who in addition to writing the aforementioned statement also co-edited the movement's self-published anthology, made the use of SF a cornerstone in her attempt to engage the wider world. Her overview of the movement's history and theology served as the introduction to the group's anthology, and as one of its intellectual leaders, Jwnody was in the position to deploy SF as a means of reaching her target audience: educated, intelligent, questioning Americans. She explained in her overview, "[t]o help you understand who we are, we have taken the liberty to express a brief synopsis in the vernacular of a popular 'science fiction' entertainment series. Most readers in the late 20th Century will certainly recognise the intended parallels. It is really quite interesting to see how the context of fiction can often open the mind to advanced possibilities which are, in reality, quite close to fact" (Jwnody 1997b). Jwnody's use of quotes to set apart the concept of "science fiction" indicates her discomfort with the term. This discomfort arose not from disagreements with the validity of the genre or its claims, but the fact that SF was in fact, in her own words, "quite close to fact." Not fiction at all, science fiction represented a means of communicating the deep religious truths that Jwnody believed Heaven's Gate offered. Like her earlier material and the movement's *USA Today* advertisement, Jwnody's overview in the group's anthology made extensive use of *Star Trek*, and sought to portray the group as crewmembers on an Away Team mission to Earth, led at first by their intrepid Admiral (Nettles) and Captain (Applewhite), and later by the Captain alone.

Heaven's Gate as Hyper-real Religion

As a SF religion, Heaven's Gate engaged in what might seem a somewhat odd practice of drawing ultimate religious value from the patently unreal

stories of literature and entertainment. Despite Jwnody's claims to the contrary, science fiction is still fiction. Yet in finding absolute meaning in the unreal, Heaven's Gate was hardly alone. David Chidester has described a rich canopy of such activities throughout American culture, what he has called "authentic fakes": popular culture doing the work of religion. Chidester's *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* argues that more than merely being permeated by religion, American popular culture actually possesses the qualities and functions as religion through their shared mimetic process of play. Both religion and pop culture play with what it means to be real and authentic. Both engage in playful reconsideration of the categories of life: what it means to be human and to be part of a community, to possess a body, and to have desires. Both are "an arena of human activity marked by the concerns of the transcendent, the sacred, the ultimate—concerns that enable people to experiment with what it means to be human" (Chidester 2005: 1). Such playful engagement with the nature of what it means to be human represented the heart of Heaven's Gate's religious agenda, and like the authentic fakes that Chidester considers—the "fake religions" of Coca Cola, Disney, and invented internet faiths—the movement employed popular American culture to do so. Heaven's Gate ultimately challenged the very assumptions of the nature of humanity, but did so by drawing on the fictive. In this way, it implicitly challenged what Americans assume to be real vs. fake, reality vs. fiction. The notion of authentic fakes explains why religious groups such as Heaven's Gate find resonances within the SF genre. Like other popular culture, SF can do the work of religion. Yet by its very nature, SF possesses powerful sympathies with religion. It directly asks what it means to be human, and how change affects humanity. It postulates problems and offers solutions to them, just as religions do. Unsurprisingly, science fiction religions such as Heaven's Gate employ SF to do religious work.

One of the first peer-reviewed articles on Heaven's Gate, Hugh Urban's "The Devil at Heaven's Gate," asks a similar question of how and why this religious group made use of imaginary material in its approach to religion. Leaning on the theoretical approach of Jean Baudrillard, Urban (2000: 270) argues that "[Applewhite] and his followers in Heaven's Gate reflect the intense ambivalence and alienation shared by many individuals lost in late twentieth-century capitalist society. In a world in which the boundary between the real and the imaginary, the original and the simulation, or the human body and the computer screen, is growing increasingly blurred, the search for ultimate meaning, or even a coherent personal identity, often becomes more complex, even seemingly futile." In Urban's reading,

the members of Heaven's Gate responded to the ambiguity of modernity's permeability between imagined and real by creating a form of hybridity. They developed a religion composed of 'simulations' as Baudrillard would call them, images that appear more real than the originals from which they are copied. In their particular case, these images were taken from SF and technological tropes, and transformed into religious truths. This helped the members of the group respond to the technological, market-driven, postmodern world and its flattening of truths, facts, and fictions. Urban's approach has its flaws—Heaven's Gate was not an "online religion" (in Urban's words) or involved in computer technology until very late in its existence—but his overall argument is valid. The members of Heaven's Gate responded to the postmodern situation of rapid technological growth, the explosion of cyberspace, commoditisation, and the decline of the Enlightenment value of pure rationality, through the creative intermixing of fact and fiction.

Yet another related theoretical approach, Adam Possamai's concept of the hyper-real religion, provides even greater traction. Possamai draws on the concept of hyper-reality, as also developed by Baudrillard, which postulates a state wherein reality and fantasy combine, and the approximation (or simulacrum, or simulation to use the language of Baudrillard as read through Urban) of reality becomes more real that reality itself. Possamai extends this concept to that of religion, defining hyper-real religion as "religions and spirituality that mix elements from religious traditions with popular culture." He explains:

> [a]t a metaphorical level, these social actors are inspired by popular culture to express their spiritualities. At one end of the spectrum we can find groups such as Jediism from the Star Wars movies, Matrixism from the Matrix trilogy, and neo-pagan groups using stories from the Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter. At the other end of the spectrum, we see members from mainstream religions, such as Christians, being influenced or inspired by, for example, *The Da Vinci Code* . . . which illustrates the interest that some people from mainstream religions and spiritualities could have in the hyper-real religious phenomenon. (Possamai 2007: 1)

Heaven's Gate certainly follows the definition that Possamai has set out for hyper-real religion. Popular culture, in the form of SF, inspired the religious practices and beliefs of Heaven's Gate, and the movement clearly falls in the spectrum that Possamai develops. Extending the basic approach of Baudrillard, hyper-real religions do not distinguish between reality and fantasy, or popular culture and religion. Hence a member of Heaven's Gate could explain to an interviewer that the SF film *Stargate*

revealed the actual history of Earth without the slightest sense of irony (Rkkody 1997). Within Heaven's Gate, the distinction between the fiction of *Stargate* and other SF and the reality of the world around them disappeared.

The notion of hyper-real religions permits scholars to take the fictive elements of Heaven's Gate seriously, and understand why its members incorporated SF into their worldview and practices. As Possamai (2007: 2) explains, "[t]hese hyper-real religions are a simulacrum of a religion partly created out of popular culture which provides inspiration for believers/consumers. These contemporary expressions of religion are likely to be consumed and individualised, and thus have more relevance to the self than to a community and/or congregation." This radically individualised nature of the religion of Heaven's Gate appealed to its adherents and potential converts. Members of the movement railed against traditional religions as supernaturalistic, unscientific, ritualistic, and old-fashioned. Through the incorporation of SF elements into their worldview, the modern twentieth-century Americans who joined Heaven's Gate were able to claim what they followed a more satisfying alternative, a scientific, modern religion that offered naturalistic—cognitive—responses to their religious questions.

The adherents of Heaven's Gate used the language of science fiction for a simple reason: to communicate what they considered their most important messages. Heaven's Gate was a SF religion, as I have defined it. It drew from the genre of SF in its practices and theology. It envisioned a radical change that led to estrangement, and offered a cognitive solution to that estrangement. As a hyper-real religion, to use Possamai's language, the adherents of Heaven's Gate collapsed the distinction between popular culture and religion, fiction and reality, and used SF in their practices, theology, and attempts to explain their group to outsiders. The group's members believed in the existence of extraterrestrial life, and that extraterrestrials had shaped human evolution, history, and religion. They believed that aliens regularly interacted with human beings, and religions recorded these interactions using symbolic or mythological language. They also believed that what religions called salvation represented the chance for humans to evolve into extraterrestrial beings, either through physical metamorphosis (during the first decade of the group's existence) or through consciousness transfer methods (during the second decade). These beliefs marked the tenets of Heaven's Gate as estranged from most other religions, and indeed from the assumptions and worldview of most Americans. Yet the religious system of Heaven's Gate offered a solution

to that estrangement, namely a ritualised means of living like a space alien, reshaping one's human life and existence to cleave to the example of the extraterrestrial crew. Ultimately, Heaven's Gate offered its members the opportunity to transcend their human limitations and the estrangements of living as a limited species in a planet controlled by higher beings, through transforming themselves into those higher beings—'Next Level' extraterrestrials, in the words of the group. Group members labored to demonstrate that this was a purely rational, naturalistic, non-ritual response, i.e. a cognitive means of responding to the estrangement. In their attempt to communicate with outsiders, they naturally turned to the SF popular culture that had influenced them, intentionally deploying *Star Trek*, *The X-Files*, and *Stargate* not only as the basis of their religious beliefs and practices, but as a means of explaining their religion. In the end, the very-real members of Heaven's Gate shed their Earthly bodies as a crew, dressed in matching uniforms inspired by the television fiction *Star Trek*.

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BRAIN, BIOLOGICAL ROBOTS AND ANDROIDS: PROPHECIES IN THE REALM OF SCIENCE FICTION AND RELIGION

Carly Machado

Introduction

Today the brain occupies centre stage in all kinds of debates, inquiries, discussions and hopes concerning human beings, including the future development of the species and its potential for improvement. In the background, different social contexts and agents provide a variety of stages on which the brain plays a series of leading roles. In the popular science disseminated in the mass media, images of the brain are seen on numerous magazine covers and television shows on an enormous variety of topics. Talking about human behaviour and personality—normal or pathological—in the mass media today almost invariably means displaying coloured images of the brain as evidence of the human subject's functioning and responses to every kind of situation. Flourishing around the borders of this popular science is a self-help literature that promotes brain 'exercises' as means to personal development, disease prevention and the overall enhancement of a person's quality of life.

The popular science filling magazines, television shows and self-help books across the Western world draws from the scientific production of neuroscience and what Ehrenberg (2009) identifies as its 'strong program'. By this the author means that neuroscience—whose influence extends far beyond its more obvious objectives, such as making progress in the treatment of neurological diseases—presents the general public with a project for developing a "neurobiology of the personality" (Ehrenberg 2009: 189) in which the individual and spirit are fully explicable (albeit not yet explained) by biology. This enables a powerful fusion between the social, cerebral and mental. Ehrenberg argues that the 'strong program' functions from three perspectives: theoretical, conceptually postulating the brain as the basis of the spirit; practical, clinically proposing a fusion between neurology and psychiatry; and social, where the brain is posited as a means of describing and understanding social behaviour and, as a consequence, as a category of identification—that is, a means of recognising a social agent and his or her profile.

This convergence of neuroscience's 'strong program' with the mass media results in a super-potentialised brain with powers at the limit between the scientifically explained natural world and a supernatural world yet to be revealed, readily able to be embedded in a magical-religious dimension specific to modernity (Pels and Meyer 2003; Aupers and Houtman 2010). In the particular religious context of the Raelian Movement, the brain occupies this sacred central place, manifesting the transparent *revelation* of the essence of human behaviour projected in images of the organ, and a *prophecy* that contains an unbounded potential for the development and enhancement of human capacities. Hence, pursuing the idea of a magic specific to modernity as discussed by Pels and Meyer's (2003) and Aupers and Houtman's (2010) recent work on religions of modernity, we can identify the fashioning of diverse modern imaginaries around the construction of scientific evidence relating to the functioning of the brain and its potential—some of which are religious, confounding the secular expectation of a rigid opposition between modern science and the religious dimension.

However the magical-scientific message of the Raelian Movement, like that of other groups with techno-religious imaginaries (especially contemporary new religious movements), is not only directly informed by scientific publications properly speaking—indeed, on evidence, these play a minor role—but is primarily informed by the popular science disseminated in the mass media and by other cultural imaginaries fashioned by images of science in mainstream culture including, for example, science fiction. The sacredness conferred to the brain by Raelianism, focused here specifically, is built of elements taken from scientific publications on neuroscience (again, probably a comparatively minor source) and from the popular science found in magazines, on television and on the Internet (swamped by images and formulations of the brain) as well as images of the brain found in scientific fiction.

It is important here to make it clear that Raël, prophet and leader of the Raelian Movement, never related any aspect of his message to science fiction (sci-fi or SF), nor made any reference to his interest in this genre. On this topic, Susan Palmer, in her book on the Raelian movement, says: "I asked Raël in our December 1994 interview if he had read science fiction as a boy. He replied he had not but had been interested rather in poetry and philosophy" (2004: 33). However, analytically it is relevant to highlight that, born in France in 1946, Claude Vorilhon (birth name of Raël) was a boy during the 1950s and a teenager during the 1960s, two very important decades for sci-fi, especially on film. According to Bould

(in Slonczewski and Levy 2003), the 1950s witnessed an SF movie boom centred in the USA, although a significant number of SF movies were also made in Europe, Asia and Latin America.

In France, several of the filmmaker-critics associated with *Cahiers du cinema* and the *nouvelle vague* made SF movies, including *Un amour de poche* (*A Girl in his Pocket*, Kast 1957), *Les Yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*, Franju 1959), *La Jet'ee* (Marker 1962), *Alphaville* (Godard 1965), *Fahrenheit 451* (Truffaut 1966) and *Je t'aime, je t'aime* (Resnais 1967; Slonczewski and Levy 2003). The New Wave for sci-fi occurred during the 1960s, says Broderick: "The emergent movement, a reaction against genre exhaustion but never quite formalised and often repudiated by its major exemplars, came to be known as the New Wave, adapting French cinema's *nouvelle vague*. Auteurs such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut broke with narrative tradition at the start of the sixties, dazzling or puzzling viewers with tapestries of jump cuts, meanderings, all-but-plotless immersion in image" (in Slonczewski and Levy 2003: 49–50).

Even when it is officially avoiding any reference to UFO religions or sci-fi, the Raelian message is full of concepts and images related to the sci-fi imaginary: space travels, spaceships, extraterrestrial beings, high-tech realities and androids among many others. When I first started my research in 2005, the Raelian Movement avoided the use of images in books, magazines or websites, especially images of the Elohim. After some years, these images started to appear more frequently, bringing with them the inescapable and unmistakable (though not explicit) reference to sci-fi films; it may be that this connotation is the very reason for the dearth of images that I noticed previously. Raël's clothes, the Elohim's spaceship, the appearance of the Elohim themselves, and many other images from the Raelian Movement's official website and videos can be traced to sci-fi films.

The Raelian version of the Old Testament, a significant part of Raël's first book, is also full of sci-fi images. The Tower of Babel is presented as actually being a "rocket" (Raël 2001: 22). The trumpets of Jericho are depicted as a technological aid from the Elohim to the Jewish people who, through "highly amplified ultrasonic waves," were able to reach their goal (Raël 2001: 33). Samson's hair appears in Raël's version as "antennae" through which the Elohim[1] could communicate with him and reinforce his leadership and knowledge (Raël 2001: 35–36). These are some examples among

[1] In his books, Raël calls the extraterrestrials by the name of Elohim. More explanations about the Raelian message will be presented later in the chapter (see note 2).

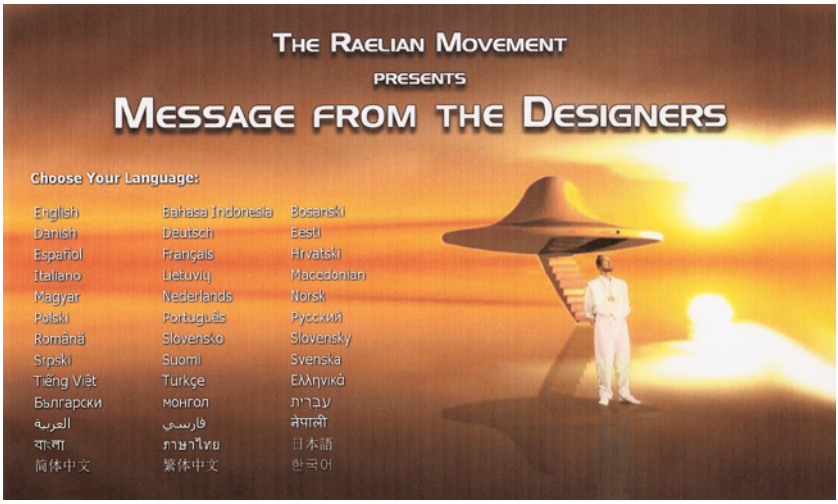

Fig. 1. Raelian Movement website homepage (rael.org)

Fig. 2. Video still: spaceship from "Message from the Designers"

Fig. 3. Video still: the spaceship and the Elohim from "Message from the Designers"

many others. Raël's attempt to present a scientific version of the Bible actually produced a biblical sci-fi plot in terms of its characters and scenario. His references are clearly not based in the scientific realm, but in sci-fi imaginaries. However, presenting himself as explicitly aligned to science fiction production, and thus answering 'yes' to Susan Palmer's question about his interest in sci-fi, was a risk Raël could not take. His message must not be read as fiction, but as actual reality and real prophecy.

The article "The Singularity of the Raelian Message," written by the Raelian Kathleen Watterson (2009) and published on one of the movement's official website, presents an emblematic argument representative of the official Raelian perspective on the difference between science fiction and the Raelian message. Watterson (2009) refutes Arthur C. Clarke's (1984) statement that "[a]ll attempts to predict the future in any detail appear ludicrous within a few years," arguing that all predictions Raël made were totally right. Says Watterson (2009), in reference to some examples of Raël's prophecies presented in her article: "[a]ll this Rael described way back in the mid 1970s, when such ideas seemed more like imaginative science fiction. Many people laughed back then. Even today, when all that Rael has written is proven daily on the science pages, some people are wallowing in confusion, bombarded by conflicting information." The distinction pointed out here, and relevant to any official Raelian argument, designates sci-fi as pure fiction unable to deliver any real prediction, and Raël's prophecy as a precise anticipation of future reality. But a critical

investigation of the Raelian movement and its beliefs cannot avoid the presence in it of sci-fi imaginary.

Far from making any attempt to approximate the Raelian message of fiction or reality, or to evaluate its truthfulness (or otherwise), this chapter aims to take seriously the intimate relation of the Raelian prophecy to sci-fi stories in order to amplify possibilities of understanding its outreach. Significantly, sci-fi is usually called upon as a way of devaluating UFO religions as fictional (as opposed to real) imagination; this explains Raël's unwillingness to express any interest in sci-fi. Analysing the relation between sci-fi and religion is an effort to understand the relevant interfaces between religion, science, fiction and imagination, which I hope will become clear further on this chapter. As we shall see, scientific ideas are even more radically extrapolated in fiction than in popular science, which, though media-based and aimed at the general public, still refers—albeit to a relative extent—to an ethic of scientific dissemination. However the free production of science fiction—in general only distantly connected to scientific knowledge per se and to its projections for the future—operates not only through the apparently predictable effects of a 'false' real, 'almost' real or 'not yet' real—a fictional real—but also as evidence of a 'more than' real—a hyper-real—imbued by a sacred potential through which the future is announced.

While academic discussion has generally focused on the direct relation between religion and science, I propose exploring the impact of popular science and science fiction on the construction of contemporary techno-religious messages. Arguing that science-related religious questions originate within institutionally framed religious contexts, and can only be addressed on the basis of these supposedly rigid boundaries between science and religion, means abandoning a much more complex approach to the phenomenon of techno-scientific religions. I propose that it is essential to examine the rich boundary zones in which science itself acquires religious and prophetic overtones: within the area of scientific production itself (Machado 2003; Zandbergen 2010), and also in contexts formed by the media, artistic production and entertainment—outside of both science and religion—where categories overlap even more intensely, free of the dogmas specific to each of the scientific and religious domains, generating fictions and truths that circulate in the social imaginary as realities and, in the process, *produce* realities.

Here I look to discuss religious constructs of the brain in the specific context of science fiction, connecting its fictional production of a

hyper-reality to the sacred dimension of the brain in the Raelian Movement and its message. This focus is based on various complementary perspectives that, combined, form my overall proposal. The presence of the brain in science fiction output is highly significant in terms of quantity and extremely relevant in terms of questions relating to 'the human,' its essence, its limits, its materiality, substantiality and immortality. As for the religious question, science fiction is an area rich in imagery of 'more-than-natural' phenomena in which the supernatural frequently acquires highly significant dimensions, especially in the case of techno-religious beliefs and their projections of the future. In the specific case of the Raelian Movement, the message formulated by its prophet is awash with elements drawn from science fiction, including life on other planets, intergalactic journeys, spaceships, androids and so on, thereby confirming the importance of this field of cultural production to the formulation of Raelian conceptions and beliefs.

In "Religion and Spirituality in Science Fiction Narratives," Possamai and Lee (2010) identify a number of possible connections between science and religion in sci-fi narratives. Emphasising the idea of multiple modernities, the authors distinguish a variety of different and sometimes unexpected connections between science and religion, atheism and religion, science and spirituality, and so on. "Contrary to the earliest modernist Project that saw the future as a more technologically advanced place in which religion would not have a place, and which was reflected in the large majority of the earlier science fiction narratives, today, some mainstream science fiction stories project a different view of modernity which still supports scientific inquiry and progress but, at the same time, embraces the celebration of religious, spiritual, and atheist diversity" (Possamai and Lee 2010: 216).

I therefore propose a careful examination of imagery of the brain in science fiction, specifically as an important element in any analysis of the Raelian Movement's ideas, but also, more generally, because the fictions produced about the brain offer us an insight into the magical and sacred dimension enveloping the brain in other religious contexts, as well as in areas that are not directly religious, such as the mass media and science itself. From this point of view, the future projects contained in the scientific research that, in turn, informs fictional works is reflexively affected by the supernatural and hyper-real effects of science fiction itself on objects of scientific studies and what these studies seek, investigate, research or even expect from these objects themselves.

Neuropsychology, Biochemistry and Prophecy in the Raelian Movement: On the Brain, Neurons and Hormones

To obtain a clearer idea of the way in which the brain is depicted in the Raelian Movement, a more detailed introduction to the cosmology of this group is needed. Created in 1973, the Raelian Movement is led by Raël, a prophet who conveys messages from the extraterrestrial creators of the Earth and humanity: the Elohim.[2] Referring to two encounters with the Elohim, one on Earth and another when he was taken to their planet, Raël's message propounds the belief in and support for scientific advances of every kind as a way of enabling the enhancement and evolution of humankind and the individual. The Elohim, their way of life and their planet are projected as an ideal to be attained by followers, hence the term 'Elohimisation' given to the process of personal development proposed by the movement.

The project for humanity and subjectivity propounded by the Raelian Movement invokes a maximum potency with minimal effort, an ideal to be obtained primarily through technological advances. The Raelian message points to a future where work no longer exists, life is eternal and people live solely for pleasure. All the 'ties' of human life will therefore need to be undone: family, marriage, work, moral and sexual restrictions, everything. The planet of the Elohim is the hi-tech prophetic scenario presented by Raël in his message. As a vision of the future available in the present—made possible through Raël's space journey to their planet—the way of life and moral standards projected by the Raelian message for the developed terrestrial individual are presented as the mainstream of Elohim society.[3]

To achieve the level of evolution already attained by the planet of the Elohim, the terrestrial human being therefore needs to prepare him or herself for this degree of freedom and for complete openness to pleasure.

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[2] The Raelian Movement is presented as an atheist religion in which the creators of human life are recognised as superior human beings living on another planet, whose mission was to people the Earth by developing their cloning projects here. Completely denying the existence of any type or form of God or gods, Raël claims in his message that the notion of God derives from a misunderstanding of the name 'Elohim,' meaning 'those who came from the sky,' referring to the extraterrestrial creator beings rather than a supernatural or divine God, as in the usual and mistaken (in the Raelian view) translation of the Bible. In one of his books (*The Message of the Extraterrestrials*) Raël retells the book of *Genesis*, presenting a scientific version of the events described with the aim of demystifying any theological or Christian interpretation of them.

[3] About UFO religion and the Raelian movement, see Battaglia (2005).

Raël dubs this preparation 'deprogramming', an inverse kind of brainwashing in which traditional values are rationally abandoned to be replaced by the values associated with all kinds of individual freedom. More conscious than ever, followers must free themselves from everything learnt as correct and immerse themselves in moral and sensual experiences in order to expand their subjectivity and 'Elohimisation'. The extraterrestrial model of subjectivity projected as a goal for Raelian development leads in practice to a terrestrial subject disconnected from culture and society in the name of a scientific, transnational, planetary and global worldview.

In the Raelian message, the techno-religious means of 'deprogramming' the subject and thereby promoting personal development involve actions on the brain and the body, the latter specifically through sensuality and sexuality. The brain is the concern of the movement's psychologist, Daniel Chabot, writer of a number of books, including *La Sagesse du Plaisir* and *Plaisir et Conscience*, both works which are intended to be scientific reinterpretations of Raël's ideas. The body is tackled by biochemist Brigitte Boisselier.[4]

"The brain is the original Matrix," Chabot claims. "There are molecules for all our behaviours and emotions." In Raelian neuropsychology, Chabot argues, the brain is the core component of the person, with interconnecting neurons forming the personality. Chabot expounds the truths of this neuropsychology by showing videos with sequences of images demonstrating brain functions, emotions, biochemistry, the hypothalamus and other components. His aim is to show how the brain works and the dynamic of emotions, using the images to reveal the truth of the science/Raelianism connection. Audio-visual input is a constant tool in Chabot's presentations, the images and simulations core elements in the pursuit of public visibility for Raël's ideas. The images displayed by Chabot—scientifically produced neuroimages or images simulating mental processes—allow us to perceive how leaders of the Movement try to produce through this appeal of

[4] The Raelian Movement's organisational profile is called the 'Structure' of the Movement. The Structure is formed by those responsible for spreading the message of the extra-terrestrial and all the Raelian projects. Composed of regional, national and planetary leaders, it's also divided into teams with specific tasks. The Raelian leaders are called guides and are organised in levels (from 0 to 6) according to their responsibilities assumed within the Structure, and also their status. Only Raël is a guide level 6, the so-called 'Guide of guides.' Daniel Chabot is a planetary guide level 5, responsible for the Raelian University, in charge of spreading the knowledge of the Raelian message all around the world. Brigitte Boisselier is also a guide level 5. In view of her planetary recognition and efforts related to the Raelian human cloning project and its corporative interface—Clonaid—Brigitte was chosen by Raël to replace him as the leader of the Raelian Movement in the case of his death (Machado 2009; Machado 2010).

colourful images a revelatory effect for those members enchanted (in the double sense of the word) by the clarity of the images and thus of the ideas presented.

Chabot's main objective in displaying the images is to show the damage that can be caused to the brain by wrong behaviour. Among these behaviours he highlights drug use and criminality. In the conception developed and advocated by Chabot, morality shapes the brain. Every attitude leaves a different mark, a variation capable of being identified in the images: the brain of a cocaine user differs from brain of a cannabis user (the latter less damaged than the former), just as a murderer's brain differs from a thief's. In general the simulations presented by Chabot are grossly deformed, even in the cases of less damaged brains, since achieving the desired impact of the image depends on the visual intensity of the cerebral deterioration. Chabot explicitly stresses the importance of the displayed images, saying that science 'now' enables us to see things that could once only be described. Alongside this imagery of cerebral damage, Chabot also formulates practical suggestions, with the claim that the brain can nonetheless recuperate and create new connections. He thus offers this piece of advice: "look after your brain."

Chabot sacralises a brain/person paradigm and elevates it to the status of a key category of the Raelian project of human enhancement and development. In specific terms of an analysis of the brain/person relation in the field of the neurosciences, Ortega (2009: 249) discusses the 'cerebral subject' as an important historical category in the exploration of processes of subjecification: "[c]erebral subjects form and are formed through technologies of the self sustained, in part, by the specialised knowledge and its divulgation by the media and by popular culture."

According to Ortega (2009), in the area of biosociability the cerebral subject gives way to the appearance of cerebral self-practices of neuroascesis, that is, discourses and practices of how to act on the brain to maximise its performance, leading to the formulation of what Ortega calls neurosociabilities and neuroidentities. These constitute forms of objective selves, or "objective self-fashioning," to use Joseph Dumit's expression (2004, cited in Ortega 2009: 249) to refer to the process of forming an objective self—a category of person developed through specialised knowledge.

Ortega (2009: 249–250) claims that the "notion of the objective self refers to a comprehension of subjectivity that sets out from technical, scientific and medical discourses on objectivity, that is, an objectified subjectivity, a form of self in which the phenomenological and subjective perspective of the first person is reduced to the third person perspective

expressed through medical technologies and the objectifying discourses and practices." Pursuing his argument further, Ortega claims that these 'objective facts'—which he himself places in quote marks—are gleaned by individuals from what is transmitted by the media. Capitalising on the transparency of images of the brain, the media thereby generates causal relations between mental states and cerebral structures, leading the public to interpret these images as the objective records—explicitly questioned by Ortega—of emotional and mental states. Ortega (2009) argues that neuroascesis is a neoliberal technology of self-governance in which each individual is effectively a business entrepreneur responsible for managing his or her own life. Cerebral self-help therefore contributes to the production of citizens capable of and responsible for governing themselves and others.

Ortega's critical perspective about the idea of a 'cerebral subject' (see also Ehrenberg 2009; Azize 2008) adds important questions to reflections on the Raelian religious (and utopian) neurobiology of personhood. While the Raelian prophecy highlights only positive aspects of a possible scientifically cerebral transparency as a way to human development, Ortega points to political projects of control, which go along with scientific and religious ones, and must be taken seriously.

Focusing exclusively on positive aspects of the brain/person paradigm, inside the Raelian movement not only intellectual concepts about the brain are taught and learned, but also practices are developed in order to religiously enhance the brain and the person. The connection between Raël's prophecy and Chabot's neuropsychology is made by the biochemist Boisselier[5] and her presentation of sensuality and sexuality. As well as having a high public profile gained as a result of media interest in cloning,[6] Boisselier is also one of the Raelian Movement's leading figures. The main theme of her presentations is sexuality, her talks taking elements from biochemistry and biology and combining them in ways that delineate her conception of humans and their development. In one of her talks at the

[5] The ideas formulated here are field notes made during Boisselier's talks at the 2005 Raelian European Seminar and also while watching her videos and interviews in different Raelian meetings and on Raelian official websites.

[6] Cloning of Eva, a human baby, was jointly announced by Raël and Boisselier, the latter presented as the scientist responsible for the project and for CLONAID, the human cloning company supposedly created by the Raelian Movement to conduct research and projects in the area.

2005 Raelian European Seminar, held in Barcelona, Boisselier presented on the topic: "we are biological robots."

Boisselier formulates her Raelian biochemistry through an unusual equation that combines DNA, consciousness, culture and past experiences. In the middle of this fourfold schema are *endocrine glands, pleasure and displeasure receptors, instinctive mechanisms* and *memory*. After presenting the *biological mechanisms* that lead to actions and behaviour, Boisselier turns to speak specifically about the relation between *hormones*, *sex* and *emotions*. By contrast to Chabot who focuses on the brain in his arguments, Boisselier places the body as the central issue for debate. While he focuses on 'neurones', she talks about 'hormones'. In the practices set out by Boisselier, sensual and sexual experiences configure the ways for deprogramming and reprogramming the brain, which is stimulated by provocative and thus liberating experiences. As practical exercises in sensuality and sexuality, the Movement promotes a variety of events that mobilise its followers to varying degrees of stimulation, from morning public talks to night shows and parties. The senses stimulated during shows are mainly sight and hearing, while during night parties, people's bodies as a whole are stimulated by the incorporation of roles (like a religious carnival) and by dancing strongly percussive rhythms from different parts of the world. Normally Raelian seminars start their activities with more passive experiences in which participants watch more than act, moving gradually to events increasingly more encompassing, mobilising bodies with a sensory bombardment assailing the eyes, ears, mouth and skin of the participants, intensifying the sensual and sexual experience.[7]

Boisselier formulates her argument for the human capacity for change in the keynote idea of one of her talks, namely that "we are biological robots" and that we can therefore use biology to reprogram ourselves in the desired direction. In the Raelian message, 'biological robots' were presented for the first time as non-human 'others'. In Raël's book on his journey to the planet of the Elohim, he indicates the existence of these beings with a human form and a human body but without subjectivity—

[7] The Raelian shows are dominated by musical presentations, dance, sensual performances and strip-teases. The parties are theme-based with the most frequent theme being the swapping of sexual roles—where men and women dress as the opposite sex—and the African festival in which African dance and rhythm set the tone for bodily experience. The sensual night is organised into different environments, each one providing a different sensory experience, such as walking blindfolded, tasting things without seeing them, giving and receiving massages, etc. For more information, see Machado (2009).

androids—created to perform every type of work: domestic, professional and sexual. However, conceiving humans as biological robots is Boisselier's own formulation and implies working with the logic of programming as a basic principle of human functioning. 'Robots' call into question the notion of autonomy and are defined as hetero programmable. Boisselier emphasises the different biological levels involved in the programming of the robot-person: *sensual experience*—where smells define attractions and repulsions between people; *sexuality*—regulated by instincts and hormones that anticipate consciousness; and *genetics* itself—DNA—which essentially anticipates everything else. The Raelian project represented by Boisselier focuses on nature's control of the body and biology's control of culture. In the bio-techno-religious categories of the Raelian Movement, therefore, biological robots play an important role as cyborgs intermediating the biology-culture relation.

Elsewhere I have analysed the relation between the Raelian message and science fiction from a broader perspective (Machado 2010). As I tried to argue, the elements that make up Raelian cosmology are derived from *real* scientific worlds on the one hand and science fiction on the other hand, blurring the distinctions between real and virtual. At this point my specific interest resides in linking the centrality of the brain in the Raelian message—its totalising role in terms of shaping the person, their current state and their transformative potential—to the imagery constructed around this category in science fiction. One of the most important points to discuss in this respect is the theme of the scientific-enchanted potential of the brain-person, as presented by Daniel Chabot, in relation to the ambiguous image of the 'biological robots' presented by Brigitte Boisellier, where the hyper-autonomy of the brain-person coexists with a sensual-sexual hetero-programming and a genetic-biological determination through which the Raelian person can be deprogrammed and reprogrammed.

While in Raelian prophecy this project of conceiving the person as a mixture of the autonomous and the automaton is tension-free, an analysis of these themes in science fiction can help us gain a better understanding of the project's ambiguity and its consequences. Science fiction is recognisably a rich field of creative output involving the exploration of important questions about human anxieties, moral issues and ethical dilemmas. Whether in its utopic or dystopic versions, science fiction always foregrounds a tension generated by the unpredictable consequences and latent risks of technical-scientific developments for society and the individual, whether a happy ending is reached or not. The absence of any tensions in

Raelian morality in terms of the consequences of a hi-tech future makes it more like fiction, while the unease and anxieties of science fiction take on the contours of reality and truth. The futurist scenario of the Raelian message apparently has close and complex affinities with science fiction.

Brains and Androids in Science Fiction

As discussed above, the notions of brain and 'biological robots' are central to the Raelian message concerning a person's development or 'Elohimisation'. However, we arrive at a tension between a hyper-autonomous conception of the person as one capable of morally programming the brain in any chosen direction of development, and a notion of the person as a 'biological robot,' hetero programmable through the pathways of sensuality and sexuality as external stimulations. These two images—the autonomous brain and programmable androids—are found in abundance in science fiction and we could even say that they appear in the social imaginary as intrinsically hybrid science fictions and projections. However, the various fictional characters and plots of sci-fi multiply the possibilities of success and failure for the futurist projects of brains and androids, generating a variety of useful angles for analysing the Raelian formulation of these categories. Science fiction is produced in various formats and languages: novels, magazines, comic strips, TV shows, films, and so on. In this chapter I concentrate not on the media language of these productions, but on the characters and plots of some science fiction stories in the belief that—for the specific purposes of this study of the brain and androids in sci-fi—characters and plots can help inform the core of the argument being developed.

To advance our discussion, we can take a closer look at some of these characters and the plots in which they are immersed. As a broad framework, the following main characters can be identified in science fiction: 1) hyper-developed human brains—expanded in size or potency—that create evolved human beings; 2) bodiless human brains; 3) brainless human bodies; 4) human brains in non-human bodies or environments, and 5) artificial intelligences that develop without the cerebral human substrate, generally through the use of machines. Surrounding these characters we can identify plots that raise the possibility of immortality through the potential for intelligent life outside the body, and those questioning the limits of humanity though the depiction of brainless bodies and humanity-less intelligences. Other plotlines focus on the possibilities

for creating the naturally human through artificial intelligence and, at the extreme limit of this project, the creation of a perfect artificial intelligence implying the creation of the more-than-human, the more-than-natural, inverting the relation between the divine creator of a human creature to arrive at the opposite: the human creator of a divine creature. These plots are pervaded by questions concerning the forms of domination and subordination found between the human, almost-human and more-than-human. The theme of agency acquires unexpected contours, sometimes inherent to the human brain, at other times dispensing with it and emerging from artificiality. Slonczewski and Levy (2003) point to an intimate relationship between science fiction and life sciences, especially biology, highlighting a trend away from so-called 'hard science fiction', which is interested mainly in the physics of space travel or intergalactic warfare, towards a 'softer hard science fiction' focused on biology, especially questions relating to the genome.

> The great adversary is no longer an alien superpower, but the enemies within—cancer, AIDS, and bio-weapons—as well as the accidental results of genetic manipulation, and our own lifestyle destroying our biosphere. The engineering challenge of the future is less a matter of machines replacing living organisms than of machines imitating life's complexity. (Slonczewski and Levy 2003: 174)

Among the main themes of this biological science fiction are questions relating to the fields of sexuality and reproduction, genetic engineering, mutation and evolution, the environment and biosphere, intelligence and the brain (Slonczewski and Levy 2003). In the specific context of this chapter, we can highlight these themes as core aspects of the Raelian message: the imagery populating this interface between science fiction and biology assumes a prominent role in the Raelian belief in a biotechnologically evolved future. In Raelian terms, sexuality is free, completely disconnected from reproductive ends, meaning that assisted reproduction and cloning have emerged as the human reproductive ideal. DNA represents the 'soul' as revealed by science, and human evolution lies at the heart of the process of terrestrial development. Mutation is the only theme not found in the Raelian message and this absence is significant: the icons of Raelian biology are presented as successful versions of biotechnological projects without failures or margins of risk. Mutation in general brings to light the dangers of 'in between' versions of life, and the tension intrinsic to a potential technological slip simply does not fit into the Raelian project of complete scientific success.

Turning to the theme of intelligence and the brain, innumerable science fiction stories are pervaded by questions relating to the increase, decrease or alteration of human intelligence or human cerebral functions and how these alterations fundamentally change the nature of humanity. Thus in this fictional scenario the nature of human intelligence is directly related to the brain's physiology, and also to the essence of humanity.[8] In these fictional works we can identify different kinds of evolutions or involutions of the human brain in its supposedly natural environment—that is, the human body and person. We can observe a rich set of imagery concerning the undeveloped potential of the human species, centring on the still unknown potential of the brain. This field of the scientifically or fictionally possible operates in delicate conjunction with the field of beliefs, since the formulation of what does not yet exist, but still could, takes place not in the context of evidence but in the context of *belief in the possible*, with scientific, fictional and religious dimensions.

With regard to the aims of this chapter, emblematic sci-fi characters and plots will be depicted as a way of offering concrete elements to the sequence of this argument. The chosen focus inside the wide field of sci-fi production is the work of Isaac Asimov, and this choice is based on three main aspects: 1) Asimov's transit through scientific and fictional fields, and also popular science; 2) his importance to sci-fi productions, such as his offering important frameworks in *Foundation* and *Robot Series* which were used by several other authors; and 3) the presence in his stories of emblematic brain related characters and specially relevant plots which raise discussions pertinent to this investigation.

Trained in biochemistry, Asimov produced a striking corpus of work in science fiction (especially the *Foundation* and *Robot Series*) but also wrote works of popular science and professional scientific publications (D'Ammassa, 2005). In this sense, Asimov provides an important example of the tenuous boundaries between the fictional and the scientific in terms of the creation of elements belonging to the field of beliefs in the possible. This is the case with *The Human Brain: its capacities and functions*, published in 1962 as a work of popular science, but which also figures as a scientific reference book in the area. In 1987, Asimov wrote *Fantastic Voyage II: Destination Brain.* This work of fiction further explores

[8] According to Slonczewski and Levy (2003), many early twentieth century authors dreamed of the enhancement or transcendence of human brain-power. Some examples of this argument are J. D. Beresford's *The Hampdenshire Wonder* (1911), Olaf Stapledon's *Odd John* (1935), A. E. Van Vogt's *Slan* (1940, 1946) and Poul Anderson's *BrainWave* (1954).

Asimov's scientific interest in the brain through a plot in which Soviet scientists hold hostage a polemical American scientist and shrink him and themselves down to microscopic size in order to enter the body—specifically, the brain—of a renowned and eccentric Soviet scientist in a coma, to retrieve his memories.

In Asimov's work we can find examples of practically all the versions of the brain and artificial intelligence present in science fiction. The works cited above highlight Asimov's interest in the brain as the human organ of intelligence. In his acclaimed *Robot Series*, however, Asimov creates a fundamental image for the idea of artificial intelligence: the positronic brain. This technological device was fundamental to the development of robots in Asimov's work since this artificial brain was the main structure responsible for robotic enhancement of almost all human cognitive and emotional skills.[9]

More interested in robot software—the programs controlling robots' actions—and less in physical infrastructure or hardware, Asimov formulated the Three Laws of Robotics as a set of programmed rules indispensable to the positronic brain. According to D'Ammassa (2005: 194), the Three Laws are:

> [f]irst, robots cannot injure a human being either through direct action or failure to act in their defense. Second, robots must obey the orders of human beings unless those orders conflict with the first law. And third, robots must protect their own existence except where that would conflict with either of the first two laws.

The positronic brain ushers in the possibility of creating an artificial intelligence and, developing this possibility, explores the limits between the robotic and the human when the former is endowed with intelligence. These ideas can be found, for example, in two influential works, *I, Robot* and *Bicentennial Man*. Initially a collection of short stories written by Asimov in 1950 (including the story in which Asimov first formulated the Three Laws of Robotics), *I, Robot* was released as a film in 2004. The robot at the centre of the film, Sonny, acts out the tension between his positronic brain and his capacity to evaluate when application of the Three Laws to his decisions is relevant. This leads him to take unexpected actions that are initially considered dangerous by humans, but later perceived as ethically sustainable. His main antagonist in the film is VIKI—an enormous

[9] In 1992, with Robert Silverberg, Isaac Asimov published a short story entitled *The Positronic Man*, based on *The Bicentennial Man* from 1976.

super-powerful positronic brain that, exploiting the limits of the Three Laws, uses her own interpretation of these rules to control a rebellion of robots against human beings, justified by the argument that humans at that moment are their own worst threat and therefore need to be dominated and controlled by robots for their own sake.

In examining *I, Robot* we can highlight not only the issue of the artificial creation of intelligence, but also its risks, which point above all to a complex ethical scenario of domination and subordination of humans by non-humans and vice-versa. The issues relating to the free will of the robots programmed on the basis of the Three Laws and the morality implied in the right (or lack of right) for humans to dominate robots, exposes another field of blurred boundaries—this time in the context of morality and ethics—between the fictional, scientific and religious. Just as in the earlier discussion of beliefs in the possible, the ethical dimension of scientific developments in artificial intelligence brings to light religious issues, such as free will, that are directly implied in the type of relation formulated between superior and inferior beings, divine and human. These questions concern the agency and autonomy of creators *vis-à-vis* their creators, as well as the ethics—could we say bioethics?—implied in the possibility of human beings in the future creating beings superior to themselves both physically and mentally, and the relation that can be predicted, projected or imagined between creators and creatures when the former are inferior to the latter.

Bicentennial Man, produced as a film in 1999, is based on the 1993 novel by Asimov and Silverberg, *The Positronic Man*, itself originally based on a short story published by Asimov in the 1970s with the same title as the film. Andrew, the story's protagonist, is a robot who, possessing human emotions and thoughts, embarks on a project to become recognisably human. He therefore alters his hardware, making for himself a human body with skin, body hair, organs and a nervous system. In love with Portia and anxious to marry her, Andrew asks the World Congress to recognise him as a human being. The final sticking point of the political opposition to his request is the impossibility of accepting the existence of an immortal human being. After this setback Andrew invests in the project of growing old and develops technology enabling him to become mortal by injecting blood into his body. In parallel to Andrew's initial immortality and later aging, Portia, his lover, is kept alive thanks to a biotechnological apparatus developed by Andrew, which is capable of practically immortalising Portia. At two hundred years old and on the verge of dying, Andrew is officially declared human by the World Congress and his marriage to

Portia is finally recognised. Hearing this announcement on the television, Andrew dies and next to him Portia switches off the equipment keeping her alive so she can die with her newly recognised husband.

Bicentennial Man foregrounds the theme of artificially produced humanity and the complex negotiations between nature and culture involved in this composition of the human somewhere between the natural and the artificial. In contrast to *I, Robot*, where Sonny desires recognition, respect and autonomy as a robot, in *Bicentennial Man* Andrew wants to be a human and undertakes the project of humanising himself in the most literal and fullest sense of the term. As well as through his brain and intelligence, Andrew also develops into a human through his acquisition of skin, body hair, organs and nervous system. Nothing about his appearance differentiates him from a human being. He uses his own artificial intelligence to develop an artificial humanity. This is the dilemma set up by the story, which simultaneously creates an artificial immortality for the humanity of Portia, and an artificial mortality for the 'positronicity' of Andrew. At the end of the story, Portia—whose humanity was never in question—is practically an immortal robot thanks to the equipment keeping her alive, cyborg-like, while Andrew is finally recognised as a human when he becomes mortal, despite this mortality being artificially produced.

Bicentennial Man highlights issues directly relevant to the religious field. Mortality and immortality—the human condition and its project for salvation, respectively—are conceived in technological and artificial versions, producing a techno-religious imagery of eternal life and, at the same time, highlighting the dilemmas inherent to immortality and the inevitability of death as a defining mark of the human condition. The immortal provokes questions concerning the humanity of any human capable of dispensing with death. The World Congress rules that it is not possible to recognise any human as immortal. Hence the immortal is not human. The scientific, fictional and inherently religious view of eternal life brings into question the possibility of extending the human condition beyond death. Immortality thus implies a life in another condition, whether scientifically and/or religiously projected—robotic, angelic, spiritual, informatic or virtual.

As well as the techno-religious dimension contained in the possibilities and impossibilities of immortality in *Bicentennial Man*, the work also allows us to identify important aspects of a model of the human being involving particular criteria of humanity and a planned process of humanisation. So, the question about what it means to be human and

how to achieve it in *Bicentennial Man* is not a one-answer interrogation. Different projects of humanity are presented in sci-fi works, as in religious beliefs. Between the natural and the artificially human, a specific project of humanisation takes concrete shape in Andrew, passing from the modelling of ways of thinking, feeling, acting and reacting to the shape and composition of his body itself, inside and out. This modelling of Andrew is above all a *self*-modelling in which humanising the self is above all a self-conducted process directed towards the desired model or project of humanity to be attained.

Despite my focus so far on Asimov's work, many other science fiction works feature brains and androids as important characters.[10] One of the relevant fields of possibilities explored in science fiction is the notion of humans evolving through brain enhancement.[11] A background presumption here is that biotechnological manipulation is a legitimate means of improving humankind—capable of much more than it currently achieves—and that this potential is present in the brain. However these evolved human individuals or groups are also associated with tensions and the risks of dissociation and crisis.

Artificial intelligence in science fiction also suggests another possible direction for development of intelligence beyond the human potential. In 1972, David Gerrold wrote *When Harlie Was One*, a book in which the computer Harlie is the main character. H.A.R.L.I.E.—an acronym for Human Analog Replication, Lethetic Intelligence Engine—"was built using what Gerrold calls 'judgement circuits' which allows [sic] the computer to program itself (i.e. 'learn'), to seek out further information, and to formulate original ideas" (Enniga 2010). What is unique about Harlie is its (his) decision to "build a Graphic Omniscient Device (G.O.D.), an extension to Harlie's brain that will be able to answer any research question, compute any probability, and in general, will free mankind from making erroneous decisions about anything" (Enniga 2010). In Gerrold's Harlie we can identify another dimension to the science-fiction-religion relation: rather than making machines more like human beings (as in *Bicentennial Man*), the development of artificial intelligence—by turning to transcendence

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[10] *The Puppet Masters* (Jack Finney 1951), *The Brain Stealers* (Murray Leinster 1954), *The Girl Who Was Plugged In* (James Tiptree Jr. 1973), as presented by D'Ammassa (2005).

[11] *Beggars in Spain* (Nancy Kress1991), *Beggars and Choosers* (Nancy Kress 1994) and *Beggars Ride* (Nancy Kress 1996), *The Fourth 'R'* (George O. Smith 1959, also published as *The Brain Machine*), *Brain Child* (George Turner 1991), as presented by D'Ammassa (2005).

in the unexpected configuration of a perfect intelligence—moves beyond the human and towards the representation of God (Harlie's G.O.D). The image of the developed human brain feeds the image of a superior human being, while the depiction of a perfect artificial brain suggest the possibility of creating God. A curious imaginary connection between the human, the machinic and the divine emerges: the enhancement of the human brain enables the creation of extremely highly developed machines with 'almost' human consciousness and intelligence who turn their creators into those who create humans, in other words, gods. In their final creative act, these humans/gods create machines even more perfect than themselves and finally produce not artificial humans but artificial gods—or more than natural gods: supernatural, in other words.

This analysis of the roles played by the brain in science fiction has looked to bring to the fore a series of important questions for any analysis of techno-religious imaginaries where the category of the brain and other connected elements operate. Using these themes and questions as a basis, we can now turn to how they play an extremely important role in a variety of religious contexts, and focus specifically on the Raelian Movement and its alien prophetic message.

Final Considerations

Over the course of this chapter I have stressed the importance of analysing the imaginaries produced in the space between science and religion in order to comprehend techno-religious configurations, their beliefs and principles. Where the apparently watertight categories of science and religion interconnect and merge, we can identify elements that are produced not within the two domains but in the fields of meaningful production between them, including the area examined here, science fiction.

Seeking, then, to understand the reasons for the strong presence of the brain in the Raelian message we investigated images of the organ in science fiction, identifying in the sci-fi output elements that can help us to comprehend the techno-religious setting in which Raelian beliefs are produced, maintained and reinvented. Extrapolating from this survey of science fiction and its changes over time, we can suggest that the Raelian message also migrated from a 'hard' version to a 'softer' version of the hard one. Raël's first books focused on the alien and galactic dimension of the Elohim and their planet. Spaceships, space travel, technological equipment, other planets, fantastic objects: all of these elements provided

the setting in which the prophecy of the Elohim was transmitted to Raël. In his description of the first encounter, the prophet claims to have been led inside the Elohim spaceship, while in the second encounter he was taken to their planet. Gradually, though, the prophecy announced by Raël loses its emphasis on the alien technological infrastructure and even on any direct relation with the extraterrestrial creators, and transforms into a more biological version of the message. On one hand the prophecy turns to focus on the biotechnological potential of scientific development, centring on themes of cloning, stem cell technology and genetic engineering. In *Yes to Human Cloning* (2001), Raël's third book, spaceships and space journeys give way to DNA and the genome. On the other hand, the contact between Raël and the Elohim becomes embodied. He no longer meets the creators physically, either on Earth or by visiting their planet, but the Elohim start to speak directly through his mouth. The physical presence of extraterrestrial beings loses its sway over the Movement as Raël's humanity becomes the locus from which the alien presence must be projected.

But the changes continue. While in the 1990s until the turn of the 2000s, DNA biology and cloning operated as fundamental Raelian techno-sacred icons, during the first decade of the twenty first century DNA has given way to the brain, as we saw earlier in the discussion of Daniel Chabot's neuropsychology. Reflecting on the sciences that inform the production of fictional or religious imagery, it is worth noting that a concurrent shift of emphasis took place within the life sciences away from genetics towards neuroscience. The Raelian belief in the potential of the brain is based on the evidence produced by neuroscience and subsequently diffused and developed in the cultural imaginary, in the scientific environment itself and in popular science and science fiction, creating a plural context of possible futures that is shared by Raelians but certainly not limited to the Raelian Movement.

Hence in discussing the relation between science fiction and life sciences, I have tried to present some of the key aspects of the images and depictions of the brain and intelligence in this area of fictional production, looking to highlight dimensions of direct relevance to notions of the brain and person found in the Raelian Movement, including autonomy and automatism, domination and subordination, the relation between the natural, artificial and supernatural in the realm of artificial intelligence, and so on. Returning to the main theme of this article, it can be argued that the possible futures glimpsed today for human potential and human development tend to involve the brain as conceived as the centre

of the personality, religiously reaffirming neuroscience's 'strong program' (Ehrenberg 2009), and even more intensely potentialised by science fiction imagery. However, the assumption of this neurobiology of the personality as a sacred truth does not inform the Raelian Movement through its 'purely' scientific version—indeed a fiction—but through various versions focused on issues of autonomy and automatism, humanity and non-humanity, mortality and immortality, delicately and dangerously articulated in science fiction as consequences of the predictions and imagery fashioned from the brain, androids and artificial intelligence. Tracing some of the characters and plots found in science fiction, we saw that brain and person form a cohesive whole in the imagery of these works. Improving the brain means improving the person, preserving bodiless brains means preserving the person, placing brains in other bodies (human or non-human) implies the transference of the person, creating artificial intelligences on the basis of non-human substrates means creating persons. In science fiction, manipulating the brain therefore implies manipulating the self and subjectivity, whether towards success or towards failure.

In this chapter, sci-fi plots and characters helped us think about some of the religious, political, moral and ethical projects related to social impacts of neuroscientific developments, and their consequences in terms of social life. Science fiction and its imaginative contribution to the creation of possible worlds is a privileged locus where strong scientific programs live side-by-side with equally strong ethical questions that challenge these programs to prove their strength and power. In fiction, the success and failure of scientific projects sets in motion notions of truth and falsity, possibilities and impossibilities, of an extremely rich and pertinent kind for the analysis of techno-religious movements.

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PART TWO

21ST CENTURY CASE STUDIES OF HYPER-REAL RELIGIONS

"A WORLD WITHOUT RULES AND CONTROLS, WITHOUT BORDERS OR BOUNDARIES": MATRIXISM, NEW MYTHOLOGIES, AND SYMBOLIC PILGRIMAGES

John W. Morehead

Introduction

In 1999 a film appeared in theaters that would make an interesting contribution not only to science fiction cinema, but also in a number of areas beyond it, as its impact reverberated beyond the silver screen. The film was *The Matrix*. It told the story of Thomas Anderson, a young computer programmer by day, computer hacker by night under the alias 'Neo'. For Anderson things do not quite seem right in the world, and a part of his quest for resolving his unease is finding the mysterious figure of Morpheus, another computer hacker, considered a terrorist by government authorities. As the story unfolds it is Morpheus who finds Anderson. He offers him an opportunity to find out the answers to his questions and existential angst, and in particular, what the mysterious 'matrix' is. Although it is nearly impossible for Anderson to accept, he comes to learn that what he had assumed to be reality is a 'computer-generated dream world', a virtual simulation created by a race of machines. Instead of living their daily lives as they assume through their experiences of 'reality', human beings are grown in farms and plugged neurologically into the simulated reality of the matrix as a means of control so that they can provide an energy source from their bodies for the machines. Later, very reluctantly, Anderson comes to accept that he is indeed Neo, the chosen One, prophesied to come and set humanity free from its bondage. As the story reaches its climax, Neo learns to control, and eventually reshape the matrix according to his own will, and lead the battle against the machines in order to save the human race.

The Matrix was a success with viewers as its writers and directors, Andy and Larry Wachowski, brought together a number of influences, including cyberpunk, comic books (especially Japanese *manga*), mythology, martial arts and wire-work fighting from Asian cinema, to create a dynamic science fiction thriller. The success of *The Matrix* would spawn two other films that formed a trilogy, *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003). It also produced *The Animatrix* (2003), a collection of nine animated shorts in the style of Japanese *anime* that explored aspects

of the *Matrix* storyline and broader narrative. It also spawned three video games including *Enter the Matrix* (2003) and *The Matrix: Path of Neo* (2005) for console systems, and *The Matrix Online* (2005), a massively multiplayer online game for Internet play.

The Matrix also had a significant impact in other areas of popular culture beyond film and videogames. In philosophy it raised questions related to epistemology; how we know what we know and take for granted as real in daily life (e.g. Irwin 2002; Irwin 2005; Lawrence 2004; Grau 2005). In so doing it incorporated philosopher Jean Baudrillard's ideas related to symbols, signs, and simulations of reality or hyper-reality (Baudrillard 1994; Messler 2006; Henley 2010).[1] *The Matrix* also touched on religion. Given the complex and multilayered aspects of *The Matrix*, it is not surprising to find divergent readings of the religious aspects of its narrative. These include writers who see elements of the Christian story reflected in the film in the form of Neo as a Christ-figure prophesied to provide deliverance and who would later seemingly rise again from the dead (Seay and Garrett 2003), others who recognise these elements but who also see Buddhist ideas (Ford 2000), still others who see both Buddhism and Gnosticism in the film, (Flannery-Dailey and Wagner 2001), and some who engage in Muslim (Hamid 2005), Taoist (Lawrence 2004), and Hindu Vedantin (Lännström 2005) interpretations.

The incorporation of aspects from differing religious traditions in the *Matrix* trilogy, and cinema's provision of "sacred content that can be used by audience members for play and serious reflection", even as religious phenomena "which can compete with the Bible and other religious texts in the imaginative and practical lives" of individuals (Laderman 2009: 21), have come together to birth a new expression of spirituality. The film trilogy has become the metaphorical inspiration for the formation of a new religious movement based in part upon its mythic narrative, a hyper-real spirituality (Possamai 2007) called Matrixism. Before exploring a few facets of this interesting spirituality it is necessary to briefly sketch its history and doctrines.

Summary of Matrixism

The origins and description of the varying expressions of Matrixism must be pieced together from Internet sites and interactions with those who

[1] Apparently Baudrillard has stated that the Wachowskis have misunderstood his thesis, and this has become the focus of academic discussion.

helped create it.[2] Although Matrixism surfaced in its public manifestation in 2004, it claims a longer history going back to 1911 with a connection to the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í Faith is traced to its founder Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), who is considered the last of several Messengers from God (Smith 1999).[3] These include Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, Jesus Christ, and Muhammad. Matrixism points to Bahá'u'lláh's son, 'Abdu'l-Baha, who made references to 'the matrix' in various speeches which were later published in book form ('Abdu'l-Baha 2007). These references are said to include sayings such as, "In the beginning of his human life man was embryonic in the world of the matrix" (www.geocities.com/matrixism n.d.). Those who identify with Matrixism, calling themselves Matrixists, Pathists (newmatrixism.com n.d.), Futurists, or Redpills (matrixism.org n.d.), see such references as points of connection between the Bahá'í Faith, the religious significance of the *Matrix* films' narrative as metaphor, and the spirituality of Matrixism. In this way Bahá'í is understood by Matrixists as a predecessor of Matrixism, much like Christianity arose as a sect out of Judaism, and Islam arose in connection with reactions to Christianity and Judaism (Michael X 2009).

Moving from the history of Matrixism to its beliefs and practices, Matrixism involves holding to The Four Tenets, the first three understood as coming from *The Matrix*, and the final tenet coming from common religious experience and a connection to "a mystic text of the Bahá'í religion" (Michael X 2009). These include: "1. Belief in the prophecy of The One" (newmatrixism.com Home), a messianic figure like *The Matrix*'s Neo who was prophesied in works of fiction and the world's religions; "2. Acceptance of the use of psychedelics as sacrament" (newmatrixism.com n.d.); "3. Recognition of the semi-subjective multi-layered nature of reality," a reference not to the belief in a literal matrix computer simulation

[2] Sources for understanding Matrixism are threefold. They include "Michael X," one of the original and primary 'authors' of the religion, and the original website at http://geocities.com/matrixism, which is now defunct, although a portion of this original website is archived at http://www.newmatrixism.com/archives.php. Michael X created the "Matrixism: The Path of the One" website and served as its webmaster. However, as of February 2010 he is no longer affiliated with Matrixism. Michael X's website was followed by another expression of this spirituality, "Matrixism: Science and Philosophy of the Matrix," at http://www.matrixism.org. This site is maintained by an individual who goes by the name "henreman." Finally, there is "The New Matrixism: Following the Path of the One to Enlightenment," at http://www.newmatrixism.com. Matrixism also has a Facebook page, but the website URL provided there was not active at the time of the writing of this chapter.

[3] Internet site, http://www.bahai.org. Accessed 10/12/2010.

controlling human beings (the computer simulation of *The Matrix* is viewed as a "metaphor for the rules, norms and values of society," as well as to the hyper-reality of the media age) (original at http://geocities.com/matrixism/faq.html; website now unavailable), but rather a recognition that reality has more depth and complexity than is commonly understood; and "4. Adherence to the principles of one or more of the world's religions until such time as the One returns" (newmatrixism.com n.d.).

Ritual is found within Matrixism in two forms. As described in the second of The Four Tenets, the first ritual is in the use of psychedelics, which are understood as a means of accessing various aspects of the "multi-layered nature of reality," as well as enabling glimpses of and communion with the divine, which must be experienced directly (Michael X 2009). Computer hacking also functions as a ritual. Through hacking it is believed the individual experiences hyper-reality through active and creative participation (Michael X 2009).

Additional elements of Matrixism include its two holy days of 19 April as Bicycle Day which commemorates Albert Hoffman's experimental use of psychedelics, and November 22 as the Day of Remembrance and Reflection, the anniversary of the day of the deaths of Aldous Huxley, C. S. Lewis and John F. Kennedy (www.geocities.com/matrixism/faq.html, website no longer available). Matrixism also has a symbol associated with it, 赤, the Japanese *kanji* symbol meaning 'red', which first appeared in the *Enter the Matrix* video game. The meaning of this color symbolism refers to the scene in *The Matrix* where Morpheus presents Thomas Anderson with a red pill that, if swallowed, represents his desire to accept truth wherever it leads in his awakening to the hyper-reality of the matrix.

Matrixism is a spiritual pathway with an international following. The original website allowed Matrixists to register their email addresses as a means of declaring themselves followers of this spiritual pathway. From 2004 to 2008 over two thousand people declared themselves to be Matrixists. The registration form for the website was later closed and the original author of Matrixism considered the spirituality a decentralised movement with an unknown number of adherents. More recently several websites report 16,000 followers of Matrixism, but no information is presented as to how this figure is arrived at.

In 2008 another website surfaced claiming to represent Matrixism (matrixism.org n.d.), and still another expression surfaced called 'The New Matrixism' (newmatrixism.org n.d.) the same year. Both of these forms took most of the material and concepts from the original Matrixism website with minor modifications. In terms of the relationship between the original

form and the more recent expressions, the first new expression from 2008 claims "no relationship with the so called 'original' Matrixism" (henreman 2010). The website for The New Matrixism states that it is "merely a refinement of what was presented on the website [for the original expression of Matrixism] in 2004." Some of the refinements involve an attempt to address what was seen as 'unclear and confusing', including a move away from the original form of Matrixism's repudiation of pornography and professional sports (newmatrixism.com n.d.). Although those associated with the original expression of Matrixism consider it a decentralised religion, friction has existed between the various forms, not only with one expression alleging no connection to other expressions altogether, but also in those connected to the original form alleging plagiarism by those who created the Matrixism.org website (Michael X 2008).

With a basic portrait of this spirituality established, attention is now turned to a consideration of aspects that help provide a greater understanding of not only Matrixism, but also other hyper-real religions as significant aspects of the contemporary spiritual quest in the Western world. This brings together two research areas, new religious movements or minority religions, as well as science fiction as a form of the quest for the sacred. The discussion that follows draws upon the proposal of Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe regarding the significance of myth in understanding new religions, coupled with the work of other scholars who suggest that science fiction is an especially significant source of mythic inspiration for our time. Then I will consider how science fiction mythic narratives provide new religions like Matrixism with the imaginative tools necessary to engage in practices similar to more traditional religions. By drawing upon Jennifer Porter's exploration of fan participation at *Star Trek* conventions as a form of pilgrimage in fulfillment of an embodied ideal, combined with the thesis of Roger Aden on participation in imaginative narratives of alternative worlds that allow adherents to transcend and critique the habitus of daily life as well as grand narratives of culture, I suggest that the *symbolic* pilgrimage of Matrixism parallels pilgrimage as found in more traditional religions, yet also differs in that they take place primarily in the realm of the sacred imagination.

Myth, New Religions, and Science Fiction

Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe (1997) have suggested that myths are important to an understanding of new religious movements. Indeed, in

their view myths function as the "operating systems of new religions" (Hexham and Poewe 1997: 69) where myths are intimately connected to primal spiritual experiences. In addition, they claim that myths are significant to the "thought patterns and behavior in our postmodern, hi-tech world [which is] deeply symbolic" (Hexham and Poewe 1997: 73).

Scholars define myth variously, but Hexham and Poewe define it as "*a story with culturally formative power*. This definition emphasises that a myth is essentially a story—any story—that affects the way people live" Hexham and Poewe 1997: 69; emphasis in original). They go on to state that what is important in this understanding of myth "is not the story itself but the *function* it serves in the life of an individual, a group or a whole society" (Hexham and Poewe 1997: 69; emphasis in original). Two aspects of Hexham and Poewe's definition of myth stand out. First, as they state, a myth may or may not be historically or scientifically true, but rather than focusing on this understanding of myth in dismissive fashion as scholars tend to in the post-Enlightenment period, this is not the best way in which to define the topic. Regardless of whether it is 'true', the significance of myth is found in the powerful ways in which these mythic stories impact people's lives. Second, emphasis is placed on the function of myth for individuals as well as larger groups, and with this consideration in mind more traditional sources for myth in the form of cultures and religious traditions are complemented by popular culture serving as a potent reservoir for mythic ideas.

After defining myth for the purposes of their discussion of new religions Hexham and Poewe (1997) remind us that in our modern society there are no overarching myths that provide a common basis for shared belief. They acknowledge the continued significance of the Christian myth for the West, particularly America, but they recognise that "most Westerners no longer find in Christianity the basic imaginative and mythological framework by which they understand their place in the world" (Hexham and Poewe 1997: 83). This loss of mythic inspiration and narrative context through Christianity has left a variety of mythic fragments that exist in the West, which are then scooped up and combined into a more coherent whole resulting in the creation of new mythic narratives. This includes a process which Hexham and Poewe describe as "box-myth-making" the construction of a "myth within a myth" (Hexham and Poewe 1997: 68), which involves not only the incorporation of several mythic fragments woven together, but also the inclusion of a meaningful personal myth wrapped within a larger cosmic myth.

Hexham and Poewe continue their discussion by identifying differing types of "personal mythological fragments" as well as "fragmented cosmic myths" (Hexham and Poewe 1997: 84). In their typology two mythic fragments are applicable to a discussion of Matrixism, including the personal mythological fragment of "pseudoscientific myths" (Hexham and Poewe 1997: 84), and the fragmented cosmic myth of "decline and transformation" (Hexham and Poewe 1997: 89). Pseudoscientific myths are "science-fiction-type stories that reduce people's skepticism and their resistance to explain primal experiences in essentially occult terms" (Hexham and Poewe 1997: 84). As an example of a pseudoscientific myth Hexham and Poewe point to the *Star Trek* television programme of the 1960s. They argue that the futuristic scientific and evolutionary framework of the program allowed the producers of the program to portray 'strange happenings' in a way that was acceptable to viewers. This included things that in some contexts might be viewed as paranormal or supernatural, but which were interpreted in a more scientific sense due to the futuristic possibilities presented by science fiction.

Hexham and Poewe also state that science fiction "provided a bridge between personal and cosmic myths." Turning from the personal mythological fragment of pseudoscientific myths to the cosmic mythological fragment of decline and transformation, these are defined as "elements of popular mythology that provide a cosmic dimension to personal myths by expressing pessimism concerning modern society. They are generalised stories about the decline of civilisation and the end of the world" (Hexham and Poewe 1997: 89).

These two mythological fragments come together to provide an insight into understanding the power of the mythic narrative of the *Matrix* films for Matrixists. Beginning with an application of the personal myth fragment of pseudoscience, *The Matrix* and its sequels scoop up a number of myths from a variety of sources and weave them together in a credible fashion. As James McGrath has stated:

> [t]he Wachowski brothers retell older stories, or rather, use motifs distilled from older stories and myths, and this is clearly something that has been done before—one thinks of Jung's archetypes, George Lucas' use of Joseph Campbell's ideas of universals in world religions and mythology in *Star Wars*. But they also do something significantly different. Unlike Lucas and many authors in the fantasy genre, the Wachowskis find a way to weave ancient myths into a new story which does not involve the same suspension of disbelief that stories of miracles, myths, and monsters do. They envisage a scientifically plausible world in which the implausible elements of traditional religious and mythic stories can be retold believably. (McGrath n.d.)

Through a credible science fiction narrative the *Matrix* trilogy combines a number of mythic fragments for a high-tech age that increasingly interacts with computers, the Internet, and other expressions of cyber-reality. This then enables the viewer to engage the myths with a sense of real possibility and then to incorporate them into a personal narrative.

As part of the construction of box myths the personal myth of pseudoscience enables readers to engage the various mythic fragments within the trilogy and to extract those of interest, which are then reformulated and connected via a science fiction framework to the larger cosmic myth fragment of decline and transformation. "Myths of transformation bring together a profound mistrust of modern science with a deep respect for science myth and a belief in the immanent cosmic transformation of human beings" (Hexham and Poewe 1997: 90). Both of these elements are exhibited within the *Matrix* trilogy through the concern of human beings about technology that holds them captive, and the possibility that human beings might transform themselves, at least through the One, as a means a means of battling the machines.

Popular culture is filled with expressions of the decline of civilisation, whether from atomic war, contagion, zombie plague, or more recently, ecological disaster. The *Matrix* trilogy presents its own vision of the end of the world through warfare between humans and machines with humans 'scorching the sky' in attempt to deprive the machines of the sun as their power source. This depiction of the decline of civilisation in the *Matrix* trilogy may be understood as an expression of postmodern apocalyptic that brings together the differing strands of concern about the end of the world at the hands of human beings as well as machines (Rosen 2008).

The expression of the myth of pessimism and the decline of civilisation is clearly present within the *Matrix* trilogy, but what of transformation? The transformational aspect may be seen in two ways. First, as a result of the apocalyptic war with the machines human civilisation has not only declined, but has also been transformed, even if it exists in the form of a computer-generated simulation as a means of forcing human beings into slavery. Second, those human beings who have been extracted from the matrix and awakened to the true nature of reality have experienced their own personal transformation and fight a battle with the machines. These humans are headquartered in Zion as the human city of hope, working toward the defeat of the machines and a transformation for all of humanity. The *Matrix* trilogy may be understood then as incorporating the cosmic myth of decline and transformation.

At this point in the analysis we are in a position to consider the significance of an application of myth to new religious movements in general, as

well as to hyper-real religions such as Matrixism. In one sense the emergence of new religions in the modern era reflects, in part, an attempt to re-enchant the world with sacred stories and meanings (Partridge 2004). Those new religions that spring out of the major world religions take the central myths of those faiths as their point of departure, with subsequent modification. With other new religions, like the Church of Scientology (Chryssides 1999) and the Raëlian Movement International (Chryssides 2003) for example, the 'secular' stories or myths of science, technology, and human psychology are appropriated as a point of departure and are reworked with a mix of ancient and modern mythmaking. Scientology takes up elements of psychology and esotericism and allies this with mythic fragments from science fiction (Hexham and Poewe 1997) to generate a new trajectory on human origins so that we might experience our full human potential through the 'tech' of the various personal auditing sessions and courses that can be taken. The Raëlians take up the process of cloning and rework it to incorporate variations on the Judeo-Christian myth of origins from Genesis and then combine this with UFO and alien myths (Hexham and Poewe 1997) in order to arrive at an understanding of cloning as a vital step in human evolution in keeping with our origins and destiny with alien civilisations in the cosmos.

Just as myth sheds light on facets of new religions, it also helps us understand the new, hyper-real religion of Matrixism. The *Matrix* trilogy incorporates a number of mythic elements that function as sources for metaphorical inspiration. The various mythic strands are drawn upon in the creation of personal box myths. The personal myth fragment of pseudoscience depicted through science fiction presents a credible form for considering new ideas related to new ways of seeing need in order to recognise the 'multilayered nature of reality'. This personal myth is connected to the cosmic myth fragment of cultural decline and transformation expressed as pessimism regarding human being's slavery to the system and inability to recognise the multilayered and mediated reality around us. Personal transformation comes as the individual 'wakes up' to the truth of the real world and becomes empowered to control it.

Myth thus provides a significant aspect for consideration for those exploring new religions and hyper-religions, a largely neglected aspect with great research potential.[4] Scholars would do well to reconsider this research trajectory.

[4] Myth is helpful not only for understanding those new religions with close ties to popular culture, but also those such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints wherein

It is also worth noting that science fiction represents an important genre for mythic expression in late modernity. In his volume on the changing spirituality of the 1960s, Robert Ellwood (1994: 309) includes a number of helpful illustrations which he refers to as 'counterpoints'. One of these is titled "New Mythologies, Easy Rides in Space and Time." This small section looks at the religious or spiritual significance of science fiction and fantasy in the late 1960s and quotes Michel Butor to the effect that "science fiction is 'the normal form of mythology of our time'." Ellwood (1994) discusses "the creation of new mythologies from the fabrics of science fiction and fantasy," and he notes that the "time of shifting religious imagination" of the 1960s "may yet turn out to be among the most far-reaching developments of the decade." In a more recent volume, an introduction to myth in religion, Ellwood (2008) maintains the significance of myth not only for an understanding of religion in general, but also for science fiction and fantasy as modern expressions of myth. These sentiments have been echoed by other writers exploring modern mythology in connection with science fiction (Perlich and Whitt 2010; Voytilla 1999; Wagner and Lundeen 1998; Whitt and Perlich 2008), and scholars like Em McAvan have argued for the significance of this in what she terms the "fantastic postmodern sacred":

> [t]he postmodern sacred then consists of texts that are consumed in part for their spiritual content, for an experience of the transcendent ambivalently situated on the boundary of formal religious and spiritual traditions. The postmodern sacred is everywhere once one begins to look for it, for popular culture is rife with the detritus of millennia of religious tradition. Because of the suspension of the usual rules of the 'real world' in their textual universes, the postmodern sacred occurs most of all in the literary and visual genres of science fiction, horror and fantasy (what I have termed the "fantastic postmodern sacred"). (McAvan 2010)[5]

Given the increasing popularity and success of science fiction and fantasy at the cinema box office, in television, and literature it is likely that this will continue to function as a mythic reservoir for religious and spiritual exploration (Cowan 2010).

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the overarching myth of evolution is combined with mythic fragments from Protestantism resulting in a new mythic structure within which the Latter-day Saint situates their own personal narrative.

[5] McAvan develops this more fully in her unpublished 2007 PhD dissertation, "The Postmodern Sacred: Popular Culture Spirituality in the Genres of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Fantastic Horror," Murdoch University, Perth.

Science Fiction, Religion and Pilgrimage

In the preceding section I argued that a consideration of myth brings an important facet to our understanding of new religions, including hyperreal religions such as Matrixism, and that science fiction should be understood as a significant form of mythic expression with spiritual possibilities for our time. In this final segment I address science fiction narratives as a forum for spiritual exploration that can result in expressions of religion that resemble more traditional forms of religiosity. I will explore the process of religious pilgrimage by bringing two differing research trajectories together in application to Matrixism. First, I will consider Jennifer Porter's contention that fan participation at *Star Trek* conventions can be understood as an expression of pilgrimage for some attendees who are seeking participation in the science fiction franchise's sacred ideals. I will also explore Roger Aden's thesis regarding participation in fantastic narratives that enables fans to transcend the habitus of daily life and the failed grand narratives of culture as they seek sacred places of imagination. The result is a form of symbolic pilgrimage that is similar to pilgrimage in more traditional religions.

'Star Trek' Conventions and Pilgrimage

A chapter by Jennifer Porter in a volume on the anthropology of pilgrimage and tourism stands out in relation to the religious significance of science fiction with its exploration of fan culture at *Star Trek* conventions (Porter 2004). Although the television series was only on for three seasons in the late 1960s, and did not do well in the ratings at the time, it developed a devoted fan following, and in syndication the number and devotion of fans grew over time. One of the results of this was the development of conventions held throughout the United States, a phenomenon that has continued since the first gathering in 1972 (Jindra 1994). Today fans come together from around the world, often in costumes representing their favorite characters from the various installments of the *Star Trek* franchise, whether human or alien, who celebrate the vision set forth by the program's creator Gene Roddenberry. Probing for depth in this popculture experience, Porter begins her discussion of *Star Trek* convention attendance as pilgrimage by reminding readers that anthropologist Victor Turner told his students to take note of the significance of science fiction, because in this genre one finds the "futuristic frameworks [for] expressing

mythic and liminal states and concerns" (Porter 2004: 160). Porter finds both "mythic and liminal states" in her exploration of the academic literature on pilgrimage combined with fieldwork at *Star Trek* conventions with fans.

Although *Star Trek* conventions are usually considered a form of secular entertainment, Porter argues that participation in these events can be understood as something deeper, specifically as a form of pilgrimage or sacred journey. She supports this assertion by drawing attention to anthropologist E. Alan Morinis, who states that even a secular journey can be understood as pilgrimage if the "journey [is] undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal" (Porter 2004: 161). Morinis also states that these destinations "share being an intensified version of some ideal that the pilgrim values but cannot achieve at home" (Porter 2004). Further, these journeys can be understood as 'sacred', and "it is the pursuit of the ideal (whether deified or not) that defines the sacred journey" (Porter 2004: 161). The ideal that many *Star Trek* fans pursue is the "doctrine of IDIC—an acronym for Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination" (Porter 2004: 165).

The IDIC doctrine or ethic was first presented in the third season of the original series. It arose out of Gene Roddenberry's humanistic philosophy, and it refers to the idea of tolerance in the midst of diversity, exemplified in the racial and even planetary species makeup of the original crew of the *Starship Enterprise* that included characters made up of men and women, whites, an African American, an Asian, a Russian, and an alien Lieutenant Commander from the planet Vulcan. The tolerance in the midst of diversity symbolised within the Enterprise crew was then projected outward as an ideal of the United Federation of Planets, of which the *Enterprise*'s crew was a part, as they explored the universe and encountered various alien races and civilisations. This IDIC ethic is embraced by fans attending conventions and is so significant that Porter characterises it as the "root paradigm" of *Star Trek* fandom (Porter 2004: 165).

With the IDIC ethic in mind this then becomes the ideal which fans seek as a form of pilgrimage in keeping with Morinis' definition discussed above as "the pursuit of a place or state in which intensified ideals not attainable at home are embodied" (Porter 2004: 167). Yet even with the significance of the travel of a fan from home to the convention site as a part of the definition of pilgrimage Porter questions the "centrality of 'place', or 'space' " in the definition and suggests that scholars focus more on "nongeographically centered pilgrimage" or "decentered space" (Porter 2004: 167) as an important alternative concept in defining pilgrimage. In

this regard Porter concludes "it is not space or place but rather fandom that represents the true center of the convention pilgrimage process." (Porter 2004: 168). In her conclusion, Porter (2004: 173) discusses the need to reconsider the concept of travel and centered space in relation to pilgrimage studies:

> [i]f one relocates the object of scholarly attention from the space and the journey as integral frames to pilgrimage processes, however, and focuses instead on the participants as the "sacred center," the scope of pilgrimage studies suddenly becomes much more broadly defined.

Imaginative Journeys and Sacred Pilgrimage

This shift in emphasis from travel to geographical places to the internal dynamics in the fan as primary in defining sacred pilgrimage is significant, and becomes an even more important concept when considered in connection with Roger Aden's thesis regarding fan cultures and symbolic pilgrimages to alternative visions of promised lands (Aden 1999).

Aden lays down a theoretical foundation for his thesis with a discussion of the *habitus* and grand narratives. By habitus Aden (1999: 3) refers to Pierre Bourdieu's concept that he defines as "our collective, cultural sense of place that is forged through the reproduction of history." This habitus functions as a set of rules, "an unwritten set of norms, behaviors, expectations, that a culture deems commonsensical" (Aden 1999). These rules operate in conjunction with grand narratives that have served as a foundation for American life, and in which Americans situate their experiences. Aden (1999) identifies two primary narratives, including the idea of America as sacred garden, and also a secular paradise connected to technological progress. With the rise of modernity the garden image has given way to the narrative of technological utopia. Yet in spite of the hope put in this narrative, during this same period increasing doubt has arisen that has eroded confidence in grand narratives in general, and especially that of secular technological utopia. As Aden (1999: 35) writes, "[t]he promised land of technological paradise has not only failed to deliver on its vision of economic plenitude, it contributes to our growing sense of displacement as members of a social community."

This sense of dissatisfaction with the narrative of technological paradise, has led to various rhetorical responses, one of which involves the creation of "a collection of postmodern narratives in which we find a multiplicity of changing places through play" (Aden 1999: 45). These narratives

are popular stories of the imagination that function as "alternative visions of places that matter" (Aden 1999: 8). In the examples of these popular stories explored by Aden, one of them is *The X-Files* television program, an extremely popular and influential program defined variously as science fiction or horror, usually involving the paranormal and which regularly critiqued the government and accepted national narratives, and also suggested that reality is far broader and mystical than commonly understood. Aden (1999: 10) argues that when an individual explores and participates in various imaginative narratives from popular culture that this represents a "symbolic pilgrimage, those purposeful, playful, repeated journeys in which we imagine ourselves leaving the material world of habitus to enter the symbolic world of promised lands." Like Porter, Aden also interacts with Victor Turner's thinking, in this case considering pilgrimage in connection with the *communitas* that is experienced as a result of the journey to a sacred symbolic place in the company of others. Aden (1999: 8) says this participation in the "ritualistic journey of the mind to spiritually powerful places" results in symbolic community which can provide a sense of spiritual fulfillment not only through interactions with other fans, but also "through our construction of these symbolic communities in a transcendent plane that exists *above* the material moorings of our habitus" (Aden 1999: 95; emphasis in original).

Having considered *Star Trek* conventions in connection with the pursuit of the embodied ideal of the IDIC ethic as a form of pilgrimage, and participation in imaginative narratives and fan cultures as a form of symbolic pilgrimage, aspects of the insights from these ideas are combined and applied to an understanding of Matrixism.

Just as fans of *Star Trek* embrace a particular valued ideal imparted by science fiction, so do those who follow the pathway of Matrixism. In the latter case the ideal is one of critique and liberation. The critique comes in the form of the grand narrative of technological progress, and this results liberation in the form of new perceptions and a new understanding of the "multilayered nature of reality." As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, this new understanding incorporates a number of beliefs and practices as the outworking of the ideals of Matrixism. And since, as Porter argues, the individual making the quest represents the 'sacred center' rather than the journey to a geographical place in pursuit of an embodied ideal, Matrixists may be understood as engaging in some form of pilgrimage. This idea is strengthened when connected to the idea of symbolic pilgrimage through imaginative narratives.

Matrixists share in the general dissatisfaction with the grand narrative of technological utopia, even going so far as to consider whether the tools of our alleged freedom instead confer some level of illusion and imprisonment. As a result they look to the *Matrix* films as an imaginative story that critiques the habitus of daily life, those unwritten rules and assumptions of culture, as well as the narrative of technological utopia. But the *Matrix* films not only provide a means of critique, but also present an imaginative narrative through which an individual can transcend the habitus and dominant cultural narrative in order to enter into an alternative world of promise. Participation in this imaginative narrative results in symbolic pilgrimage enjoyed not only by the individual, but may also come in connection with others who connect via online fora.[6] To the extent that the individual develops a sense of connection to others pursing the same understanding of reality through Matrixism it may be that feelings of and a form of communitas results. Through a new perspective on reality and participation in the community of like-minded individuals, however small and mediated by cinema and cyberspace, Matrixism provides a vision of an alternative world in which an individual can find ultimate fulfillment.

Conclusion

What are we to make of new expressions of the sacred and spirituality like Matrixism? During the course of my research in sharing with a few individuals my findings and reflections on this topic, it was not uncommon to encounter expressions of incredulity. Most people find the idea of Matrixism absurd, and question whether those who identify with it really take it seriously. Such people argue that surely pop-culture and a science fiction trilogy cannot be legitimate sources for religious inspiration, and no religion founded upon such elements is to be taken seriously. This reaction on a popular level is often shared by academics, particularly theologians, as relayed by Gary Laderman in his discussion of new and alternative forms of religion in popular culture:

[6] Those following the pathway of Matrixism may connect with like-minded individuals online through sites like The New Matrixism Forum, http://www.newmatrixism.com/forum/general-chat, or the Matrixism Facebook page, http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2237867490.

> I can hear my New Testament and Systematic Theologian colleagues reading this with skepticism if not disgust—and indeed I've encountered these kinds of reactions in public forms. "Surely anyone identifying their religion as Jedi is just being silly," they say. Or "How do you know this is genuine religion and not just some passing fancy?" I imagine after the death of Christ members of the early Christian community faced the same kind of incredulity and disdain.
>
> My response: Welcome to the twenty-first century, when sacred matters are not limited to the monotheists or confined by conventional religious traditions. Bono and Warren Buffet, Master Yoda and Obi Wan Kenobi are legitimate and guiding religious lights whose words and actions stir the imagination and rally the faithful in ways those of us who study religion are only beginning to understand. (Laderman 2009)

Religious and spiritual expressions like Matrixism, particularly those inspired by narratives of the fantastic, including science fiction, fantasy, and even horror, represent new and vibrant forms of religiosity that will likely continue to have great appeal for individuals in the future. It is the responsibility of scholars, and I hope even theologians, to sympathetically understand them and how they make connections to the sacred.

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ALTERNATIVE WORLDS: METAPHYSICAL QUESTING AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITY AMONGST THE OTHERKIN

Danielle Kirby

Introduction[1]

The advent and subsequent popularisation of the Internet and the World Wide Web has given rise to significant transformations within the religious world, effecting communicative and sometimes structural changes that have been variously embraced by both mainstream and alternative forms of religiosity (Dawson: 387). The long term impact of this transition is currently unknown, but already new methods of religious participation have arisen that range from emailed prayer requests (Larsen 2004: 17), to the acceptance of virtual ritual participation (Larsen 2004: 19) as valid religious practice. The religious presence within the virtual world of the Internet is considerable (Larsen 2004: 17), as all major and many alternative religions have located themselves within the virtual landscape (Cowan 2004: 120). On the fringe of this religious expansion into the worlds of cyberspace, however, are groups that situate themselves well outside the frameworks of religiosity as are commonly accepted as valid (Helland 2004: 23). These groups are not only innovative in the content of their beliefs, but are also unique in that they have apparently developed as communities almost entirely on the Internet. Hyper-real religions (Possamai 2005; Possamai 2006; Possamai 2007) constitute a notable element of this religious relocation, most particularly remarkable in their overt proximity to popular culture source material and postmodern relation to notions of fiction and truth. This chapter looks at one such group, the Otherkin, with an aim to providing an introduction to the community, focusing upon the shared central philosophies of the constituent members, and the locales within which the community as a whole functions.

The Otherkin fall into the category of hyper-real religion in a fairly unproblematic fashion, taking as the definition that they are "religions

[1] This chapter was originally published in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on the Sacred*, ed. Frances Di Lauro (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2006). This current version has been updated to reflect developments within the Otherkin community.

and spirituality that mix elements from religious traditions with popular culture" (Possamai 2007: 1). In the case of the Otherkin, the relevant religious tradition is perhaps best understood as contemporary paganism and more broadly western occultism, but, as will be demonstrated, the explicit utilisation of popular culture source material for unequivocally spiritual and metaphysical means is clearly evident within the community.

The Otherkin[2]

The Otherkin are a loosely affiliated group of likeminded individuals who have formed a virtual online community. Their shared belief is that some people are, either partially or completely, non-human. To quote, "Otherkin is a collective noun for an assortment of people who have come to the somewhat unorthodox, and possibly quite bizarre, conclusion that they identify themselves as being something other than human" (Windtree n.d.). Further, they are "an alternative community that accepts everything from therianthropes to extraterrestrial fae" (Ten 2005). Therianthropes are a "deity or creature combining the form or attributes of a human with those of an animal" (Walens 1987), and fae are an alternative term for fairies (Newall 1987: 246). In practice, there are a variety of self-knowledges supported within the community, including constructions of the individual as, for instance, a human body with a non-human soul, multiple souls within the one body, a human who is a reincarnated non-human, and there are even occasionally those who claim physical status as non-human. The types of non-human entities referenced in this context include dragons, elves, vampires, lycanthropes, fairies, fae, and angels, as well as a plethora of specific creatures sourced from ancient myth through to popular culture media creations.

Beyond the premise of the group, there seems little in common across the community, with participants engaging in an eclectic personal mix of magic, philosophy, metaphysical questing and self-inquiry. As an interim classification, the Otherkin fit broadly within the ideas encapsulated by the Neopagan movement and religions of re-enchantment (Partridge 2004), although it needs to be stressed that such a classification is only

[2] The material pertaining to the Otherkin community has largely been drawn from otherkin.net and associated sites. All quotes are directly referenced, and general statements are the result of an ongoing synthesis of Otherkin material, and are subject to reworking as is necessary.

general. To construe this group as specifically Neopagan or technopagan obscures the focus of the participants. The Otherkin relationship to paganism should be seen as a shared body of knowledge rather than in terms of similar intentions or practices, although individual participants may or may not adhere to some form of pagan belief. There exists a shared body of knowledge common to paganism and western esotericism in so far as participants utilise concepts with facility that are broadly accepted within these areas: ideas such as astral travel, dream interpretation, alternative realities, magic, reincarnation and the like see, for instance (Hanegraaff 1998; Harvey 2000; York, 2000). There are further parallels between Otherkin and pagan beliefs in their willingness to consider fiction (that is acknowledged as such) as a valid evocative spiritual tool. There are also some structural similarities between paganism and the Otherkin, or perhaps rather an absence of structure that is common to both groups: most specifically in the weight and priority given to personal lived experience (Harvey 1996: 10), and the lack of unified creed or dogma (Hume 1997: 51; Ireland 1999: 99). As a community, the Otherkin function largely without formalised authority structures, and, with regards to their online presence, focus largely upon support and information sharing within the community (Zaleski 1997: 111–112).[3]

Otherkin.net

Otherkin.net is one of a number of focal points for the Otherkin community online. Between 2006 and 2011, its listed membership has ranged from between 798, to over 2500 in 2010, with present numbers at 348, reflecting a recent update of inactive profiles. As it is not necessary to sign up to access Otherkin information there are likely to be many more casual browsers, and there are, of course, any number of other sites that Otherkin may choose to engage with. This constituency is thinly spread across the world, with American, Asian, and European countries most heavily represented (Otherkin.Net 2003). Judging from the members names, there is no particularly obvious gender inequity, although it is impossible to be sure, given the overt identity construction that occurs online. The site contains a wealth of information, including essays, links to Otherkin websites, media reports on Otherkin, an Otherkin directory,

[3] Zaleski notes that the internet may well prove to be more intrinsically supportive of groups that do not hold to a hierarchical structure.

and events information. The entire site reflects a grass roots philosophy in so far as it does not present a monolithic message, but rather attempts to make accessible a variety of views about the nature of the Otherkin. For instance, the essay section reflects this tendency well. A new member or interested seeker is initially directed to introductory papers outlining the general substance of what constitutes the Otherkin. Beyond this recommended reading, there is a large selection of articles, sixty-seven on the website as of November 2011,[4] written by Otherkin about Otherkin. The content of these articles range from personal reflections upon the experience of being an Otherkin (Dandelion_Ae 2001), to expressions of discontent with certain trends evident within the community.[5] There are papers pertaining to specific aspects of their belief structure, such as soulbonding (O'dea 1999) and magic (Hedgie 2002), as well as papers that admonish participants for various forms of illogic (Seavixen 2004). This variety is reflective of the diversity of interest and focus within the group, and is indicative of their generally inclusive attitude.

There are a number of cosmological assumptions that underpin the community that diverge from more traditional constructions of a religious or spiritual milieu. Primary amongst these is the largely tacit postulation of multiple and/or parallel universes; alternative worlds separate to our own but not entirely unrelated. As a general rule, a spiritual or religious hierarchy is conceptualised as just that—a vertical axis with god/des/s at the top, humans somewhere in the middle, and the relevant negative aspect of the divine is located at the bottom. The Otherkin construction of the cosmos, on the other hand, is one far more densely populated with alternative spaces, and also one seemingly devoid of absolute value judgements that would infer any scale of relational importance that could be mapped into a linear system. Although not clearly stated, the strong impression is given that, to an Otherkin paradigm, multiple alternative worlds are at least potentially infinite in number. If a pagan philosophy asserts the animation or ensoulment of the non-human parts of this world (Hume 1997: 44; Harvey 1996), the Otherkin *en masse* extrapolate this animism not just into the regions of this world, but into many others also.

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[4] Internet site, http://otherkin.net/articles/bytitle.html. Accessed 2/11/2011.

[5] For instance, deploring the tendency to construct their position in binary opposition to the prevailing mainstream western culture Dandelion_Ae. *Us vs Them* [Online]. Website Us vs Them. At: http://www.otherkin.net/articles/usThem.html. Accessed 27/1/2005.

Otakukin

The origins and/or locations of these multiple worlds are not clearly stated within the community, nor does it appear to be an issue of any specific interest to participants. The creatures populating both this and other worlds, however, seem to lie closer to the heart of Otherkin self-inquiry. Take, for instance, the case of the otaku kin or ota'kin (Ten 2005). The term *otaku* comes from the Japanese, literally meaning house, but colloquially used somewhat similarly to 'geek' or 'nerd', albeit with more sociopathic overtones (Schodt 1996: 43–46). This particular branch of the Otherkin network specifically refers to those participants who experience their non-human aspect through anime and manga.[6] A slightly more broad term used in regards to this type of belief is mediakin, which pertains to characters sourced from media without the necessary Japanese association.

The Otakukin appear to be somewhat fringe even within the Otherkin community, presumably at least partially due to the overtly fictional and extremely recent sources for such characters and creatures. The primary issue appears to be one of authenticity: creatures from traditional mythology and the cannon of the fantasy genre are accepted as validly archetypal, if not outright actual, whereas more recent additions to that particular pantheon are considered somewhat more suspect. The otaku kin, as they premise their metaphysics in explicitly popular forums, have various understandings to explain the processes by which a fictional creation can be more than a figment of the author's imagination. To quote from the Temple of the Ota'kin,

> [t]he initial concept of a supposedly 'fictional' paradigm and/or cosmology having partial or complete basis in an alternative reality is not uncommon among Otherkin. Sections of the community accept as reasonable extrapolations of fact Tolkien-esque elves and fae, Pernian dragons, and other phenotypes resembling or derived from allegedly 'fictional' sources. (Ten 2005)

The article then goes on to offer two potential explanations of the methods by which reality can be ascribed to fictional sources.[7] The first refers to an author essentially acting as a channel or conduit, not necessarily intentionally, and relating as fiction what is actually an alternative reality.

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[6] Anime is an umbrella term used to refer to Japanese animation and cartoons, while manga refers to comics. These genres are often heavily laden with myths, legends, fantasy, and apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic themes (Napier 2000).

[7] For a more detailed discussion of the role of authorship and text in Otherkin terms, see Kirby (2009).

The second possible explanation effectively states that, by repeated attention and focus, individuals (as participants interacting with and within the specific texts) give weight, power, and specifically energy to the thought forms, thus allowing them a life beyond the confines of the text.

Soulbonding

Constructions such as this are important foundational assertions of an Otherkin paradigm, and are necessary in order to understand the type of conceptual frameworks within which the Otherkin function. While there are a number of various concepts that fall into this category, *soulbonding* is the example that will be referred to here, as it is quite a complex conglomerate of relatively simple ideas that also reaches beyond the bounds of the Otherkin community. To briefly summarise, soulbonding refers to the various relationships that may develop between a participant and another entity, physical or otherwise, and it is approached as it is named: as a bond between souls. A soulbond is "someone with whom you tend to reincarnate time after time . . . even to the extent of having agreed to permanently share soul development" (O'dea 1999). Alternatively, it is "the adoption into one's mind, into personal mental space, of characters from history, video games, films, books, TV, anime, daily life" (Ragland 2005), "a fictive or real person adopted into one's mindspace" (Astreasweb.Net 2007). As is to be expected, the idea is not a static one, but rather a cluster of experiential knowledge which is emphasised differently according to the agenda and philosophy of each individual participant.[8] To quote one participant,

> I have my own ideas about what Soulbonds are. Like most Soulbonders, I believe that my Soulbonds are truly alive and not just made-up things. I've heard a lot of people propose that story-worlds really exist, and story-makers "channel" them from wherever they really are. This is a great explanation for some people, but it doesn't quite work for me.
>
> My own belief is that a thing that has love, devotion, or even plain fascination poured into it gains a sort of spiritual life. In our era of mass communications, where fictional characters can reach millions of people, massive amounts of life are poured into these characters, and I believe that this gives

[8] It should be noted that the data on soulbonding is sourced from a variety of personal home pages and the like, and most particularly the soulbond database (http://illvision.net.sbdata/ n.d.), which is a now defunct site that was designed to collect and make available information on soulbonding for participants based upon personal experiences, and as of August 2005 contained 30 participant responses to an apparently participant-composed questionnaire.

> them life as spirit-entities. I see Soulbonders as people whose love and fascination for a character is so great that it gives spiritual life to their own vision of a character (reality, especially in fiction, is subjective. No two people have exactly the same take on a given character), creating a Soulbond, who is at once an aspect of that character's spirit, an aspect of the Soulbonder's personality, and a unique person with a will of their own. (Gilkey n.d.)

Soulbonding at the spiritual/metaphysical end of the Otherkin paradigm becomes a full blown interpersonal relationship, and occurs in all the variety that human to human relationships may, be that as a lover, a friend, or a mentor and so on. In these cases, the non-human entity is an entirely self-contained individual, albeit almost never physical, and interacts with the participants as such. Participants may experience their soulbonds as nominally outside themselves, and although some refer to having had their bodies taken over occasionally, this does not appear to be a regular occurrence. The spaces within which the soulbonds exist vary between participants, with some locating them within a 'soulscape', others within the physical realm, and others referencing the astral, and others again simply referring broadly to alternative realities or dimensions. A soulscape appears to be one's inner space, a personal landscape contained within the self that may or may not extend beyond the bounds of the psyche (Also 2011).

In a slightly different context, soulbonding is also used to refer to the nature of relationship that can occur between an author and their fictional creations (Fenrir). In this situation, the soulbonded character is not necessarily understood as animated beyond the bounds established by mainstream western perspectives of reality, and is still by and large treated as a product of one's own psyche. Alternatively, soulbonding is viewed by some as the end result of an entity finding pathways into this reality, the access point being the body of the participant (Jade 2002). Another accepted form of soulbonding, which rests much easier within the bounds of popular western culture, is simply one that occurs between two human people, generally lovers. There are, of course, many more variations upon this theme, but these brief examples suffice to indicate the spread of interpretations placed upon the same term.

Virtuality

The spaces within which these fictional characters and non-physical entities occur and exist, be it a personal soulscape, the astral, or an entirely distinct alternative reality, are (to some extent at least) related to and

reinforced by the new spaces afforded by the internet. It is entirely relevant that public discussions about soulbonding have apparently largely taken place on the Internet, as is the existence of the Otherkin network as an almost entirely online phenomenon. This is not to dismiss or diminish the validity of such beliefs, but rather to highlight the continuity between the content of such paradigms and the nature of online engagement. Both the structure of community interaction and the specific beliefs are benefited from online participation. Not only are some pragmatic issues facing the community immediately overcome, such as the geographic spread of participants (Willson 1997: 147), but the very virtual world they populate in itself reinforces the experiential reality of non-tangible worlds within which one may make perceptible, in both the physical and the virtual worlds, actions originating in a non-physical context. The idea that one may have meaningful communication with an unknown disembodied presence (Holmes 1997: 37) is no longer confined to the realms of fantasy or mysticism, but is rather a simple fact of everyday life. Email, online banking and shopping, web surfing and the overabundance of other types of online activities all tacitly reinforce the premise of genuine disembodied engagement and interaction. Further, in the western technologised world at least, the lived experience of the world incorporates in large portions communication media that simultaneously attenuates and facilitates interaction (Holmes 1997: 43), and this has been ever increasingly the case for a number of decades. Personal tangible interaction is no longer necessarily the mainstay of human engagement, and this development is playing itself out within the sphere of religious and spiritual activity as much as any other.

The Otherkin community are developing in relation to these new spaces. While there are occasional physical meetings, or gathers, the pragmatics of physical geography makes it nigh on impossible for any offline meeting to be representative of the community at large. Correspondingly, the few physical gatherings that there are appear to be aimed more towards specific sub-sections of the community rather than attempting to facilitate all. The Otherkin appear to function within smaller units, generally divided by the types of creatures associated. This means that there are, for instance, elvish, angelic, or draconic communities that nominally associate themselves with the term 'Otherkin', but create their own, more specific discourses and spaces in more personally meaningful and relevant contexts. There are also other communities that, to an outsider perspective, appear to share the same philosophy, yet clearly disclaim any association with the Otherkin. It has been noted, and certainly appears

to be the case here, that new religious movements in their initial stages often appear to be "expressions of marginal subcultures" (York 2000: 141). Indeed, the entirety of the Otherkin network can be seen as a large number of extremely specific and small subgroups that interlink and exchange at the whim of individual participants. Take, for instance, two elvish web rings: A Ring of Elves and Elven Realities.[9] Web rings provide an extremely interesting example of virtual geography insofar as they represent communities of interest in a participant-oriented and created environment. These two web rings both contain largely similar pages, all obviously oriented towards elflore, but they represent two discrete information pathways. They interrelate only through the Elven Realities website, as this site is linked to both web rings, and then more broadly to each other through the Otherkin network. The fact that these sites, to an outsider, appear to be largely similar is not reflected in participants chosen affiliations, and demonstrates the ease and facility with which subgroups are simultaneously discrete and inter-relational. On the other hand, any one particular linkage should not necessarily be assumed to hold deep significance due to the ease and simplicity with which these connections are made. Such arrangements also reiterate the need for extremely careful research techniques when dealing with these forms of interaction, as association can be easily and incorrectly assumed simply on the basis of subject matter.

Conclusion

Although admittedly brief, this chapter has gone some way towards providing a *précis* of the Otherkin community. While its area of concern may be situated well outside the bounds of what is generally considered to constitute a religion, there can be little question that the internal focus upon superempirical experience (Griel 1994: 3) locates it firmly within the sphere of personal metaphysical or spiritual inquiry. Simultaneously, the Otherkin highly proximate relationship to popular fictional narrative clearly locates such beliefs within the framework of hyper-real religiosity. This relationship becomes most apparent within the context of Otakukin and Mediakin, and related concepts such as soulbonding, but is nonetheless present within the broader community as well. With regards to the

[9] A web ring is a series of sites that the designers choose to link together, which can then be navigated between in various forms. See http://m.webring.com/hub?ring=elvenrealities http://n.webring.com/hub?ring=aringofelves n.d.

general paradigm asserted, the Otherkin appear to be closely related to Neopaganism and more generally to other forms of self-reflexive[10] western esotericism. Structurally, they clearly function as a segmented polycentric integrated network (York 2000: 142). As this type of organisational configuration was first noted in relation to a certain type of new religious movement, of which belief systems such as Neopaganism and Wicca stand as premier examples, it is unsurprising that this should be the case. However, the community's reliance upon the Internet as the primary source of interaction and communication calls into question the usefulness of this form of categorisation. The specific nature of the Internet, particularly the World Wide Web, is designed precisely to be negotiated in such a non-hierarchical manner, and it follows that groups situated within such a locale would be inclined towards these types of flexible interaction (Zaleski 1997: 111–112; Dawson 1999: 168). The Internet stands as a genuinely new space, with its own unique geography, language, and cultural norms. While it supports a vast array of religious discussion and participation, it is in cases such as the Otherkin community where the significance of the medium comes to the fore. Although beliefs of this nature undoubtedly existed before the introduction of the Internet, this new global space has allowed an unparalleled opportunity for the consolidation of such personalised spirituality into a larger community.

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[10] The term 'self-reflexive' is used here to denote belief systems that are constituted primarily as a result of personal experience and reflection, as opposed other currents within within the western esoteric tradition that lean more heavily upon structured knowledge.

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REAL VAMPIRES AS AN IDENTITY GROUP: ANALYSING CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF AN INTROSPECTIVE SURVEY BY THE VAMPIRE COMMUNITY

Joseph Laycock

Introduction

When I first began doing ethnography with the Atlanta Vampire Alliance (AVA) in 2007, the self-identified vampires I met expressed irritation that scholars had presented their community as a religious movement. For most self-identified vampires, vampirism is not a 'religion' in the substantive sense of having an institution, sacred texts, a catechism, or religious leaders. Although some vampire groups do conform to this model of religion, they represent an increasingly small percentage of the so-called 'real vampire community'. However, groups such as The Temple of the Vampire have received a disproportionate amount of attention from religion scholars, precisely because they are amenable to a substantive model of religion. For this reason, my article, "Real Vampires as an Identity Group,"* suggests that new models are needed to understand this community and its beliefs. Analysis focuses on an introspective survey of the vampire community carried out by the AVA through their LLC, Suscitatio Enterprises. The "Real Vampire and Energy Worker Research Survey" suggests a complex and multifaceted discourse about what being a 'real vampire' might mean. The survey also covers a broad range of discourses with questions about medical background, religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, and the consumption of popular culture. This attempt to define vampirism through a *consensus gentium* suggests that scholarly analysis of the real vampire community should focus less on institutions and more on 'cognitive praxis'—that is, the ideas and identities that this community makes possible. In trying to understand the religious dimension of this community, the notion of 'hyper-real religion' is more useful than a substantive model.

There is an undeniable relationship between the real vampire community and fictional depictions of vampires, particularly in role-playing games such as *Vampire: The Masquerade*. Real vampires do not claim to be the beings portrayed in novels and films, however, they often argue

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* An earlier version of this article appeared in *Nova Religio*, 14:1. It has been reproduced here with permission.

that popular culture provides useful vocabulary to describe metaphysical experiences that would otherwise be ineffable. Furthermore, in the 1990s, live action role-playing games served as an important venue where self-identified vampires could find one another. However, the real vampire community differs from other movements treated in this volume in that they have gone to great lengths to distinguish themselves from vampire role-playing games. This is due in large part to a double homicide committed in 1996 by Rod Ferrell, a sixteen-year-old self-identified vampire who also played *Vampire: The Masquerade*. The murders led to a moral panic and a fear that teenagers playing the role-playing game would lose track of reality and commit actual crimes. This narrative has now resurfaced with the success of the *Twilight* series. Several self-appointed 'occult crime experts' and evangelical leaders have suggested that teenagers who read *Twilight* will identify as actual vampires and commit murders.

Since 1996, both self-identified vampires and enthusiasts of vampire role-playing games have sought to dissociate from one another to avoid the narrative of 'the delusional role-player'. The AVA deliberately sought to avoid soliciting responses from individuals engaged in role-playing games. The survey also asked self-identified vampires what vampire fiction they consumed and contained questions to assess whether respondents could distinguish terminology derived from role-playing games from terminology created by the real vampire community.

However, the attempts of groups like the AVA to extricate themselves from popular culture have been undermined by a trend towards 'viral' marketing and games that deliberately confuse fiction and reality. In 2008, HBO created an *ersatz* blog, *Bloodcopy*, to promote their television series, *True Blood*. *Bloodcopy* presented news and advertisements as if the premise of *True Blood* was reality. Actual news stories were presented alongside fictitious ones concerning the civil rights of vampires. *Bloodcopy* even falsely reported that it had been acquired by an actual blog, *Gawker*. *BusinessInsider* reported on this acquisition and was later forced to retract it. In its effort to further blur the lines between fiction and reality, *Bloodcopy* contacted the real vampire community online and attempted to draw them into the web of viral confusion.

Earlier this year, Merticus, my chief contact with the AVA, discovered a vampire role-playing game being played using Twitter accounts and a Ning social networking site created for the game. Players were assuming the roles and online identities of actual members of the real vampire community. One player was posing as Merticus and, in the game, had been kidnapped by the Volturi––the antagonists of *Twilight*. Merticus'

discovery of his fictional doppelganger pushes Baudrillard's notion of the hyper-real to dizzying heights. The continued challenges faced by the real vampire community suggest that the relationship between contemporary belief systems and popular culture is quite complicated with numerous historical and discursive layers. The notion of 'hyper-real religions' as a theoretical tool opens up a sizable territory for further exploration. Finally, the moral panic surrounding the fear of teenagers, vampire media, and violence suggests a real need for scholarly analysis on the relationship between fiction and emerging belief systems.

Real Vampirism

'Real vampirism' is a self-descriptive term used by individuals who feel a need to consume blood or to feed on the 'subtle' energy of other people in order to sustain their physical, mental, and spiritual health. The modifier 'real' is used to distinguish these individuals from 'lifestyle vampires', those who participate in a vampire subculture and dress in manner reminiscent of the undead, but who do not require any sort of 'feeding' to maintain their health.

Several trade books were written about real vampires from the mid-1980s through the 1990s, including *Vampires Are* (Kaplan 1984), *American Vampires* (Dresser 1989), *Vampires Among Us* (Guiley 1991), *Blood Lust* (Page 1991), *Something in the Blood* (Guinn and Grieser 1996), and *Piercing the Darkness* (Ramsland 1998). A common problem for these authors, however, is that it is extremely difficult to locate vampires and solicit interviews. The vampire community was less cohesive and self-aware in the 1980s and early 1990s. There were no channels through which large numbers of vampires could be reached. Furthermore, many vampires are reluctant to speak with journalists or researchers. Thus, these books often give only the perspective of the most vocal and exhibitionist members of the community.

Stephen Kaplan created the Vampire Research Center in 1972, advertising it in numerous places, including *Playboy* magazine (Kaplan and Kane, 1984: 70). The majority of 'vampires' calling the center, though, were probably hoaxes. For instance, Kaplan dedicates an entire chapter to "Elizabeth" who repeatedly called the center claiming to be 439 years old. Other researchers relied heavily on vampire fan clubs such as The Count Dracula Fan Club, started by Jeanne Keyes Youngson. Although established to study the vampires of literature and folklore, the club received

numerous letters from self-identified vampires who wanted to tell their story. These letters, which Guiley describes as 'confessional' in tone, provided much of the material for trade books on vampires (Guiley 1991: 73). Guinn and Grieser were able to do a bit better. They contacted Michelle Belanger, a leader in the vampire community, and solicited interviews through her publication, *The Midnight Sun.* Finally, Ramsland gathered data by posing as a vampire both online and in New York night clubs, going so far as to create a vampiric persona, "Malefica," for the project.

Generally, these books take a journalistic approach to vampires and present the phenomenon as an alternate lifestyle. A number of scholarly articles have also been written about real vampires, understanding vampires either as a cultural phenomenon or as a cluster of 'vampire religions' (Keyworth 2002: 355–370; Perlmutter 2004: 2). These approaches tend to assume that real vampirism is an 'extreme' or 'religious' form of lifestyle vampirism. But this assumption ignores the real vampires' claims that they did not choose their condition, rather that it exists independent of socially constructed categories. Any model of vampirism as a new religious movement must acknowledge this emic perspective. Furthermore, looking at vampires as a distinct category of person opens up new areas of discursive analysis: How have real vampires sought validity as a distinct category? How did this concept arise and through what channels has it gained legitimacy in the vampire subculture?

In the winter of 2007, I began an ethnographic study of the Atlanta Vampire Alliance, a group established by and for real vampires. Based on these observations, I present a different strategy for understanding real vampires. Although there is undeniable interaction between real and lifestyle vampires, the two groups are fundamentally different in their orientations. A lifestyle vampire chooses to adopt a particular subculture—and is free to leave it. While real vampires may or may not engage in this subculture, they perceive their need to feed as inherent in their nature, more akin to a genetic quality or a sexual orientation than a cultural affiliation. In light of this, it is more useful to consider real vampirism first and foremost as an identity group centered around this perceived difference. Approaching real vampirism as an identity group incorporates the real vampires' own understanding of vampirism as an inherent quality independent of cultural affiliation, and in turn allows for a richer understanding of vampire discourse and a more accurate assessment of the religious dimensions of vampirism.

Real vampirism has emerged as an identity category through two decades of discourse. An ongoing dialogue has taken place through small groups

of real and lifestyle vampires (sometimes known as Houses or Orders), vampire newsletters and magazines, zines (simple, non-commercial publications often produced using only a photocopier), and since the 1990s on the Internet. From this dialogue, a nebulous entity known as 'the vampire community'[1] has emerged. My contacts in Atlanta tended to define the vampire community in the broadest and most inclusive sense possible. It is an acephalous entity understood to contain both lifestyle vampires and real vampires, as well as non-vampires who act as donors, and other allies. Despite the somewhat inchoate character of the community, and while the institutions, traditions, and cultural lexicons within the vampire community often conflict with one another, its existence has become a source of identity for many vampires.

Pursuing metaphysical and biological concepts of vampirism, the real vampire community defines itself as a subset of the total vampire community and there is now an accepted taxonomy of real vampires based on the manner in which they 'feed'. 'Sanguinarian' vampires literally consume small amounts of blood, typically human. 'Psychic' vampires have the ability to draw subtle energy out of other people, often without any physical medium for transference. Vampires who use both feeding techniques are known as 'hybrids'. This feeding taxonomy is only one example of how real vampirism has become an increasingly tangible identity through discourse.[2]

During my period of observation, Suscitatio Enterprises, a limited liability corporation created by AVA members, was engaged in "The Vampire and Energy Work Research Survey: An Introspective Examination of the Real Vampire Community." This was a global survey aimed at reaching as many vampires as possible. Subjects were asked to complete a basic survey featuring 379 questions, followed by an advanced survey featuring an additional 609 questions. These surveys addressed issues ranging from

[1] There is currently debate within the community as to whether the term 'vampire community' should be capitalised. The term 'VC' is frequently used in Internet discourse.

[2] Although there was once a disagreement over whether psychic vampires are real vampires, this debate has largely died down. There is now a theory that sanguinary vampires require blood because it contains subtle energy. According to this theory, all real vampires are, in a sense, psychic vampires. This idea is reflected in a t-shirt sold by the AVA, featuring a vampire pouring blood into a martini glass. A speech balloon asks, "How do you take your *prana*?" (*Prana*, a Sanskrit word for "breath," is commonly used by real vampires to describe subtle energy.) See internet site, http://www.cafepress.com/houseava. Accessed 14/04/2008. Virtually all members of the Atlanta Vampire Alliance engage in psychic feeding. Of these, about 60 percent also engage in sanguinary feeding and are therefore considered hybrids.

income and education level, to medical history, to spiritual beliefs and philosophical attitudes, to feeding habits, to psychic abilities and theories about vampirism. Despite the length of the survey, 650 responses were received before the project was concluded on 31 October 2007. The survey project has been a massive undertaking requiring substantial resources of time and money. It is currently the object of much anticipation and excitement within the community. Vampire groups from as far away as Ohio and California have invited the AVA to present their preliminary research.

According to AVA members, the project has both intercommunity and intracommunity goals. The first is to create a form of resistance to outside characterizations of the community. Vampirism is often confused with or represented as a mental illness, a 'cult', or a role-playing game. Suscitatio Enterprises lists one of the goals for the survey as "raising the standard of proof required to make successful arguments about the community."[3] The second goal is to collect a body of data that will allow the vampire community to analyse itself and the phenomenon of real vampirism.

The AVA is unusual in pursuing these objectives through the collection of survey data. One might expect an American religious group to respond to negative characterisations through advocacy groups such as CAIR (Committee on American Islamic Relations), or through litigation (e.g., Church of Scientology). On the other hand, intracommunity questions about what it means to be a member of a religious or cultural group are typically left to organisational or intellectual leaders—not a consensus by self-identified members. During my time with the vampires, I tried to understand why this particular form of discourse appealed to their needs.

The key to the discursive value of the survey lies in understanding the real vampire community as an acephalous identity group rather than a unified religious or cultural entity. Consider David Keyworth's definition of vampirism: "The contemporary vampire subculture can be defined as a multi-faceted, socio-religious movement with its own distinct collective community and network of participants who share a similar belief system and customary lifestyle that reflect their concept of the vampire" (Keyworth 2002: 256). Although this is more accurate than other religious and cultural definitions of vampirism, my contacts in the AVA still found

[3] Suscitatio Enterprises, PowerPoint presentation given by Merticus and Zero in Los Angeles, 30/10/2007. While an 'introspective survey' may be not be considered a high standard of proof, it should also be noted that claims about the vampire community are usually based on web sites and books produced by journalists for a popular audience rather than any active data collection.

it objectionable. Keyworth is correct in describing the community as multi-faceted, and it is true that there are such things as vampire belief systems and lifestyles, but these are not ubiquitous nor do they unify and define the community.[4]

What does both unify and define the real vampire community is identity *as* a vampire. For real vampires, this identity is seen as inherent and independent from cultural or religious ascription. A Christian or even a Wiccan can become an apostate, however, a real vampire sees her condition as an immutable state of existence. One vampire even told me he would prefer to be like everyone else if it were possible. Conversely, some believe that an individual with no concept of vampirism or subtle energy can still engage in vampiric feeding without realising it (Konstantinos 1998: 245–251).

The idea that the real vampire community is formed by an inherent quality rather than subcultural participation is reflected in the structure of the community, which is dialogical and acephalous. While some real vampire groups incorporate hierarchy and social titles, the majority of vampires value self-determination and are mistrustful of institutions (Leanan 2007: 120–121). Because there is no unifying leader or organisation, statements on behalf of the vampire community carry little authority. There is no accepted 'vampire catechism' to define vampirism, nor would the community likely accept one.

With this understanding, it becomes possible to see why a survey is best suited to the needs of the community. Through a *consensus gentium*, the survey paradoxically provides a source of authority to a community that is suspicious of authority. By offering a body of data, the survey creates a sort of normative center against which real vampires can understand their identity as vampires. In turn, this also provides a means of resistance to outside characterisations of the community. Said one vampire, "This is what it's going to take to show how we really *are*."[5]

Among the Vampires

My observation of the AVA lasted from February to December 2007. Negotiating entry with the group was understandably difficult. In our first

[4] One of my most important contacts within the AVA described his religious beliefs as non-denominational Protestant.

[5] Maloryn, personal communication with author, Decatur, Georgia, 19/02/2007.

meeting, AVA members jokingly described themselves as 'paranoid'. Most members were concerned with keeping their identities as vampires concealed from their coworkers. Several contacts described growing up in the Bible Belt and feeling oppressed for not conforming to a Protestant norm (Eclecta 2007). A conservative religious climate has been cited in shaping Southern vampire culture, which is more discreet than vampire cultures in New York City and Los Angeles.[6] Most of my contacts were unwilling to have interviews tape-recorded, saying simply that it made them feel uncomfortable.

Like many vampires, AVA members refer to one another by 'community names'. Some of my contacts, for example, included Eclecta, Merticus, Maloryn, and Zero, and throughout my research I have not used the legal names of these individuals. Also used in Internet dialogue and in print, community names seem to have a number of social functions, only one of which is to protect the vampire's identity.

Another difficulty was that ethnographers do not enjoy a good track record with this community and many outside representations of vampirism have been sensationalistic. Members complained to me that vampires are only interviewed for TV specials that air around Halloween, and expressed annoyance that any lucid explanation of vampirism was always accompanied by ominous music. The AVA members had also read the academic literature about their community and found it upsetting, particularly Dawn Perlmutter's claim that, "Vampirism, the most recent manifestation of the occult, has led to many crimes, ranging from vandalism to murder" (Perlmutter 2004: 7).

When a rapport was reached with the group, there was still a methodological problem regarding my mode of rational interpretation as an ethnographer. While many real vampires interpret subtle energy as a metaphysical phenomenon that transcends the laws of nature, others believe that vampirism is a natural phenomenon not currently understood by Western science. The concept of psychic vampirism has formed in dialogue with models of complementary medicine, which often holds the same interstitial state between science and metaphysics. Because of the diversity of opinion, it is more accurate to describe real vampirism as a form of "subjugated knowledge"[7] (Foucault 2007: 7)—that is, whether real

[6] Merticus, personal communication with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 22/11/2007.
[7] The term "subjugated knowledge" was coined by Michel Foucault.

vampires regard themselves as supernatural entities or simply possessed of an unrecognised health condition, their claims are generally disqualified by more dominant forms of discourse. As a form of subjugated knowledge, there is a concern within the community about whether outsiders can ever understand the vampire's reality. One AVA member advises fellow vampires, "While it is nice to share a part of yourself with others, many of those with whom we share do not have the capacity to understand who we are because they do not even know themselves . . . Putting trust in another being about your true self leaves you in a vulnerable position" (Eclecta 2007: 111).

My contacts became aware that I taught at a secondary school and eventually I was asked, "You're a teacher, what would you do if a student told you they could see other people's energy? And that the energy was leaving other people and flowing into them?"[8] This was a tough question that cut through many of my defenses as an ethnographer. Because the question invoked my duties as a public educator, I could not claim that I would interpret the student's claims in a relativistic or phenomenological way. Instead, I neglected to answer the question, and in so doing revealed the range of difference between my world and theirs.

During my observation I was able to attend several business meetings of the AVA at which the survey project was discussed. These meetings were held in fashionable restaurants around Atlanta, and I found that AVA members were not uncomfortable discussing vampirism in public. It was not uncommon for them to make reservations using a community name or even "Atlanta Vampire Alliance." The individuals who attended these meetings were primarily Caucasian and in their late twenties to early thirties. Although there was a preponderance of black clothing, the group did not seem concerned with fashion or appearance. (No one seemed to notice when someone arrived in an oversized fluorescent yellow t-shirt.) In addition to observation, I conducted formal interviews with several members and became active with the group's mailing list and online forum.

Social and organisational gatherings occur regularly in the American vampire community, the largest being The Endless Night Festival held every year in New Orleans.[9] In October 2007, the first Twilight conference

[8] Eclecta, personal communication with the author, Dunwoody, Georgia, 20/03/2007.

[9] The Endless Night Festival is the brain-child of vampire and former club promoter Father Sebastiaan. It began in 1997 and has become one of the largest vampire gatherings in the world, with attendees from several continents. It is primarily a social function featuring a 'vampyre ball' and a 'dark bazaar'. Internet site, http://www.endlessnight.com n.d.

was held in Los Angeles. Twilight is modeled on an academic conference and features lectures and discussion groups. In June 2007, I traveled with AVA members to Medina, Ohio, where they presented their preliminary research findings at a vampire 'open house.' The open house took place in a hotel and was hosted by House Kheperu,[10] an organisation founded by Michelle Belanger, an important writer and public intellectual for the vampire community. The open house was more scholarly than social and anticipated the first *Twilight* conference held the following fall. Spending a weekend at this event allowed me to observe real vampires from other parts of the country and to see how the AVA's research was being received by the community at large in the United States.

The open house also gave me the opportunity to participate in an energy workshop. As a non energy-worker, I struggled to find a method of understanding the significance of subtle energy for vampires. From my ethic perspective, I was trying to achieve a type of understanding described by Robert Orsi (2004: 162) where "difference is not otherness." Attendees were divided by skill level into beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. Making no pretense about my inexperience with energy work, I attended the beginner's workshop.

I tried to approach this experience using the phenomenological concept of "embodied rationality" (Stoller 1998: 251–252). Without struggling to accept or interpret any claims about subtle energy, I participated in simple energy exercises with a variety of partners (both real vampires and otherwise). During these exercises I did indeed feel tactile sensations in my palms and fingertips. While I did not attempt to rationalise or assign meaning to these sensations, by allowing myself to feel them I was able to achieve a more sympathetic understanding of the vampire life-world.

In fact, the vampires themselves seem to approach the matter of subtle energy in a way that is phenomenological rather than dogmatic. It is understood that different energy workers have different facilities for detecting and manipulating energy. Relatively few vampires I spoke with claimed they could actually *see* energy. The majority described detecting it as a tactile sensation, a temperature change, or even as a flavor. Michelle Belanger described vampires who have claimed they can feed simply by holding their hand over an electrical outlet. She showed little skepticism towards this claim, but simply noted that this feeding technique would not work for her.

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[10] Internet site, http://www.kheperu.org. Accessed 14/04/2008.

The heterogeneous experience of subtle energy was one of the factors that inspired the Vampire and Energy Work Research Study. In addition to gathering sociological data about vampires, the survey was also designed to accumulate a body of phenomenological data from the reported anomalous experiences of vampires.

Survey Methodology

It is difficult to convey how ambitious a project the survey is compared to the size and resources of the AVA's Limited Liability Company, Suscitatio Enterprises. Paper copies of the survey had to be mailed to real vampires who did not have Internet access or did not wish to submit their responses in digital form. Surveys were translated into French, Spanish, German, and Russian. Promotion, distribution, and analysis cost more than $5,800, with a total estimated post-analysis cost of $8,500.[11]

Vampires working on the survey had a variety of educational backgrounds as well as different research interests. A registered nurse and a medical technologist were especially interested in medical and genetic aspects of vampirism and worked to design relevant sections of the survey. Another member has a background in cultural anthropology and was an important contributor to the survey's design and interpretation.

AVA members stated that they anticipated their methodology would be attacked and endeavored to make their study as sound as possible. They taught themselves research methods using several texts on survey methodology. The design of the survey used a double-blind submission process and was based largely on the work of Floyd J. Fowler of the Center for Survey Research at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. 650 responses were received. Finally, quantitative and qualitative data were analysed using a concurrent triangularisation strategy based on the work of J. W. Creswell of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln.

To determine the effects of the survey on vampire identity, the important methodological questions are what operational definition of a 'vampire' was used and how responses were solicited. While Suscitatio Enterprises has stated that it is not attempting to create an exclusive

[11] Suscitatio Enterprises, *Research & Project Budget Outline*. Internet site, http://www.suscitatio.com/financial/budgetexpenditures.html. Accessed 15/06/2008.

definition of vampirism, the survey methodology clearly challenged some concepts of vampirism while attempting to screen out others completely. Although no self-identified vampires were rejected from the data sample, these methodological choices ultimately affect the role of the survey in validating and shaping a new category of identity.

The survey's title states that it is an introspective examination of the 'real vampire community'. Although the modifier 'real' is not always used in the survey's literature, the instrument itself was designed to discourage responses from lifestyle vampires. Survey promotion was also designed to screen out individuals engaged in vampire role-playing games. The relationship between the vampire community and role-playing games is quite complicated and each group has borrowed from the other in the past. The relationship became strained in 1998 when 17-year-old Rod Ferrell, a role-player, murdered two people in Florida. At his trial, he stated that he was Vesago, a 500-year-old vampire. The trial focused on Ferrell's mental problems, drug addiction, and history of sexual abuse rather than his interest in role-playing games. Nevertheless, the case became sensationalised and brought negative attention to role-players and vampires alike.[12] Currently, both groups avoid each other partly for fear of being confused with role-players like Ferrell who lack the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy. An AVA member commented, "We tend to avoid role-players so we don't risk contributing further to the blurring of lines between our distinct and related groups."[13]

In promoting the survey, web sites and online groups frequented by lifestyle vampires or role-players were avoided as much as possible. These elements were typically referred to as 'flakes'. One member related that, "Those people are flakier than a croissant factory."[14] Additionally, Suscitatio Enterprises offers their operational definition of a vampire on their web site:

> [a] vampire is essentially a blood drinker or an energy feeder that may display various levels of psychic ability. The vampires that are the focus of this study are individuals who cannot adequately sustain their own physical, mental, or spiritual well-being without the taking of blood or vital life force energy from other sources; often human. Without feeding (whether by a regular or infrequent schedule) the vampire will become lethargic, sickly, and often go through physical suffering or discomfort. Vampires often display signs of

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[12] Both Perlmutter (2000: 13) and Keyworth (2002: 363) saw the Ferrell case as relevant to their analysis of the vampire community. A summary of the case can be found at internet site, http://www.courttv.com/archive/verdicts/vampire.html. Accessed 4/01/2008.

[13] Merticus, personal communication with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 22/11/2007.

[14] Maloryn, personal communication with author, Decatur, Georgia, 19/02/2007.

> empathy, sense emotions, perceive auras of other humans, and are generally psychically aware of the world around them.[15]

While this definition is widely accepted, it is not without its critics, especially from occult groups such as the Temple of the Vampire and the Order of the Vampyre (a branch of the Temple of Set). These groups share a common discourse about feeding on the energy of others and 'vampiric magic.' However, they have begun to dissent from the dominant discourse that understands vampirism as an inherent condition with unique health needs.[16] Instead, occult groups have begun to reframe their projects as a sort of ritual apotheosis that is available to everyone.[17] While both models of vampirism are considered to be part of the vampire community, a discursive struggle exists over the concept of 'real vampirism'.

In addition to strategies for soliciting the surveys, and presenting an operational definition to respondents, the survey built in a mechanism to determine how conversant with vampire discourse respondents are and how their ideas about vampirism are shaped. A section labeled "Knowledge" is essentially a multiple-choice quiz to see if the respondent can distinguish different paradigms of vampirism. For example, question 207 presents the terms: KINDRED / MASQUERADE / EMBRACE / CAIN / BOOK OF NOD. The respondent must then select what group this lexicon is associated with: life-style vampires, role-playing games, occultism, and so forth. All of the terms in question 207 are taken from a vampire role-playing game and are not used in the vampire community. Thus, if a respondent incorrectly matched the terms and lexicon on question 207, this would suggest that they have confused role-playing games with real vampirism or that they are not conversant with relevant discourses in the vampire community. Additionally, the knowledge section also asks respondents to indicate on a checklist which books they have read regarding vampire fiction, folklore, and real vampirism.

I asked an AVA member if they simply exclude responses from vampires who answered incorrectly on the knowledge section or made fantastical claims about their experiences with vampirism. He responded, "No. We *can't*".[18] Instead, the data is tracked and correlated to look for differences

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[15] Suscitatio Enterprises, *Definitions and Precedent*. Internet site, http://www.suscitatio.com/research/definitions.html. Accessed 8/01/2008.

[16] Michelle Belanger, personal communication with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 3/09/2007.

[17] The Temple of Vampire's website provocatively asks visitors, "Do you want to live forever?" Internet site, http://www.vampiretemple.com. Accessed 14/04/2008.

[18] Merticus, personal communication with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 22/11/2007.

between vampires with more accurate or accepted knowledge and those with less exposure to the vampire community. In time, analysis of the knowledge section may produce, for example, different trends among vampires who have read Anne Rice versus those who have not.

From an Institutional Model to an Identity Model

In order to understand real vampirism, analysis must shift from an institutional model to an identity model. This is especially true of the religious dimensions of vampirism. Dawn Perlmutter (2000: 11) writes, "Vampires pride themselves on practicing the antithesis of Christian ethics and this is apparent in the ritualised sexual and violent activities that permeate their interactions." This description, however, is completely inconsistent with my experience with the AVA.[19] While some vampires spoke critically of Christian institutions, many of them affirmed Christian ethics. On a survey question about religious identity, Christianity was the fifth most common response.[20] The characterisation of vampires as a religious alternative to Christianity has come about in large part because scholars have overemphasised institutions that are peripheral to the vampire community. Vampire institutions such as the Temple of the Vampire and the Ordo Strigoi Vii, for example, are modeled after traditional religious institutions, complete with hierarchies and documents such as the 'The Vampire Bible'.[21] Qualifying as new religious movements, they promote specific metaphysical doctrines and often feature charismatic leaders, mystagogues, in Weberian terms.[22]

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[19] One vampire sent me a text-message to wish me a Merry Christmas.

[20] Survey Question 155 asks, "Which faith, discipline, paradigm (spiritual/fraternal), or religion do you identify with? (Check all that apply)." Fifty-one options follow featuring a combination of world religions as well as Pagan and esoteric groups. The top seven groups with the highest number of responses were: 1) Magick, 2) Wicca, 3) Neo-Paganism, 4) Occultism, 5) Christianity, 6) Shamanism, 7) Agnostic/Atheist/Humanist/Irreligious. Both Vampirism and Vampyrism were not among the fifty-one options but were common write-in responses. (Suscitatio Enterprises, internet site, http://www.suscitatio.com. Accessed 14/06/2008.)

[21] Strigoi Vii's website may be viewed at internet site, http://www.strigoivii.org. Accessed 14/04/2008. *The Vampire Bible* is only available for purchase directly from the Temple of the Vampire. Internet site, http://www.vampiretemple.com/bible.html. Accessed 14/04/2008.

[22] For Weber (1964: 55), the mystagogue combines elements of the magician and prophet. However, where the prophet's soteriology is based on a religious ethic or a moral example, the mystagogue offers salvation through arcane initiation.

However, according to the results of the survey, 74 percent of vampires have no affiliation with any sort of group or institution, even on the local level.[23] Furthermore, many of those vampires who did join these institutions did so only as a means to learn more about their self-discovered identity as a vampire. (Belanger 2004: 18)[24] This suggests that the real vampire community cannot be accurately characterised by studying these institutions.

Instead, it is more profitable to focus analysis on the broader category of identity groups. Amy Gutman (2003: 9) defines identity groups thus:

> [i]dentity groups are politically significant associations of people who are identified by or identify with one or more shared social markers. Gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability, and sexual orientation are among the most obvious examples of shared social markers around which informal and formal identity groups form.

According to Gutman, identity groups will always exist as long as individuals are free to associate. Some are formal groups to which membership is optional (e.g., the NAACP or the League of Women Voters), while others are nominal groups based on sociobiological markers (e.g., African-Americans or women). In the latter case, placement in this group is not a matter of choice.

Because real vampires believe that they are of a different ontological nature than other people, they see vampirism primarily as a nominal social marker. Some vampires may additionally see their identity as vampires as a cultural or religious identity. This may result in what Christopher Partridge (2005: 2335) has called "ad-hoc vampire religionists." One vampire, for example, argues that vampire identity is distinct from the vampire lifestyle, just as ethnic Judaism is separate from the Jewish religion (Sanguinarius 2007: 125–127). As Jews share an ethnic identity, vampires share an ontological identity.

Identity and Discourse

How has 'real vampire' become a category of person and what is the role of discourse in this process? Outsiders assume vampirism to be a

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[23] Suscitatio Enterprises, internet site, http://www.suscitatio.com. Accessed 14/06/2008.

[24] Catherine Albanese (2007: 7) suggests that American metaphysical organisations have always been "joined somewhat warily" due to a suspicion of authoritarian voices.

culturally constructed phenomenon.[25] Vampires themselves understand vampirism as an empirically measurable condition around which a culture has formed. At AVA meetings, vampires discussed vampirism as a subject for physicists and genetic biologists, not social scientists and religion scholars. Should vampires be approached as a social category like 'Yankees fans' or as an objective category like 'people with red hair?' In theorising the origin of vampires as a category of person, the emic perspective of the vampire community should be acknowledged.

Critical theorists have observed that seemingly 'objective' categories may in fact be constructed through discourse. Following Foucault's notion of the 'constitution of subjects,' various theorists have suggested that statistical analysis in the nineteenth century actually manufactured new categories of people—especially categories of mental illness and conceptions of sexual orientations (Hacking 1986: 226). Similarly, social scientists have observed how the category of 'young people,' which seems to have an objective reality, was given new meaning due to social changes in the 1960s (Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 20).

Ian Hacking, however, suggests a theoretical compromise between social and empirical categories, that helps to balance emic and etic perspectives of vampirism. In his essay, "Making Up People," Hacking argues that people spontaneously come to fit their categories through a process he calls "dynamic nominalism." Drawing on the medieval dichotomy between realism and nominalism, Hacking refutes both realism—in which categories have an objective reality—as well as nominalist claims that categories have only a linguistic reality. Instead, he suggests a sort of dialectic process where a kind of person comes into being at the same time that the kind itself is being invented. For Hacking, created categories of people are very real. They are neither the products of nature, nor socially constructed but rather seem to have characteristics of both. Furthermore, each new category that arises affects every person. Hacking (1986: 232) writes, "the outer reaches of your space as an individual are essentially different from what they would have been had these possibilities not come into being."

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[25] Current scholarship on this community assumes that real vampirism evolved from vampire movies and novels. Both Keyworth (2002: 355–370) and Perlmutter (2003: 279–283) consider the novels of Anne Rice and other vampire fiction as a primary source of the vampire community. While Anne Rice's novels have had an undeniable influence on the culture and aesthetics of the vampire community, vampire fiction alone does not account for the ontological claims of vampires or the metaphysical models created to explain vampirism.

Dynamic nominalism makes it possible to explore the discursive influences on the category of the real vampire without dismissing claims that vampirism has an empirical reality.

The concept of a vampire as a living person first appeared in the nineteenth century, approximately the same time in which statisticians were gathering data on mental conditions. An early description of an individual as a vampire who drains not blood but energy appeared in 1892, in an essay of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn:

> A few years ago, I noticed that invariably after a prolonged interview with a certain person, I felt exhausted. At first, I thought it only the natural result of a long conversation with a prosy, fidgety, old gentleman; but later it dawned upon me, that being a man of exhausted nervous vitality, he was really preying upon me. I don't suppose that he was at all externally conscious that he possessed a vampire organisation, for he was a benevolent kind-hearted man, who would have shrunk in horror from such a suggestion. Nevertheless, he was, in his inner personality an intentional vampire, for he acknowledged that he was about to marry a young wife in order, if possible, to recuperate his exhausted system. The next time, therefore, that he was announced, I closed myself to him, before he was admitted. I imagined that I had formed myself a complete investiture of odic fluid, surrounding me on all sides, but not touching me, and impenetrable to any hostile currents. This magical process was immediately and permanently successful—I never had to repeat it (Frater Resurgam 1892).[26]

Throughout the twentieth century, books have emerged for Pagans and occultists describing how to protect oneself from psychic vampires (Konstantinos 1998: 176–83; Fortune 1997: 71; Orloff 2002).[27] As in the case above, the vampires described in these texts are often unaware that they are vampires. Vampires such as Michelle Belanger have described reading these texts and realising these descriptions of occult threats seem to apply to their own experiences. Most likely, Belanger's experiences existed before she read about vampires, but the category served to interpret her

[26] Several theories were promoted before 1892 explaining vampires in terms of occult science. The earliest of these appears to be that of Eliphas Levi, who describes a sort of vitality draining vampire in *Dogma et Rituel*, written in 1856 (Levi 2001: 126–127). "Thoughts on the Imagination" is significant both because it accuses a specific person of vampirism rather than describing an abstract concept and because it has been widely promoted by Michelle Belanger through *The Psychic Vampire Codex*.

[27] In 2002, *O: The Oprah Magazine* featured an article describing how to protect oneself form "energy vampires," prescribing visualising a barrier of white light as a defense (Orloff 2002).

experience. Applying the theory of dynamic nominalism, I speculate that if the psychic vampire did not exist as a category, individuals with this sort of experience would not be vampires. Instead, they would be something else. Indeed, Belanger (2004: 36) has emphasised that vampire legends are necessary to explain her experience because Western culture lacks terms to describe subtle energy or its transfer.

'Otherkin' are another group that has formed an ontological identity in dialogue with occult defense manuals (Windtree n.d.). Like the vampire community, the Otherkin are an acephalous identity group. An Otherkin may identify as an incarnated angel or demon or as a mythological beast such as a faery, elf, or dragon. Some otherkin relate their own experience to entities described in 1930 by occultist Dion Fortune (1997: 79):

> [t]here are many of us who have met people who might well be described as non-human, soulless, in that the ordinary human motives are not operative with them, nor do the ordinary human feelings prompt or inhibit them. We cannot but love them, for they have great charm, but we cannot but dread them as well, for they spread an infinitude of suffering around them.

Probably Fortune could not have imagined a community of self-identified 'non-humans', and yet her book helped bring this community into being. Like vampires, Otherkin find themselves identifying with the description of a dangerous occult other.

After these categories came into being, individuals who resonated with them formed informal identity groups such as the vampire community, and vampirism became a social movement as well as a category. The vampire community has created its own discourse, redefining and 'de-otherising' the concept as put forth in the occult defense manuals. Most importantly, the vampire community has actively promoted the vampire as a category of person. During a late night discussion at a vampire gathering, one AVA member commented, "I got to the point where we were like, 'Everyone shut up and just make some progress'."[28] The term "progress" was used quite often when vampires discussed their community's goals.

'Progress', however, did not seem to entail any sort of public recognition. There seemed to be little interest in defining vampirism as a legal

[28] Merticus, personal communication with author, Atlanta, Georgia, 22/11/2007.

religion or even as an acknowledged medical condition.[29] Indeed, some believe that vampires should remain 'in the shadows' or even that public knowledge of vampirism will lead to action by the government or religious institutions either to oppress vampires or control them. What sort of progress, then, should the vampire community be making?

In Ohio, I discussed documents created by the community such as "The Black Veil v2.0" (an ethical code for vampires created by Michelle Belanger and Father Sebastiaan, another vampire leader) and the "Donor's Bill of Rights."[30] The vampires informed me that these documents were created, not because there was actually a problem with vampires acting unethically or donors being mistreated, but rather because the existence of these documents signified that the community was making 'progress.'[31] Progress refers to strengthening the concept of the vampire as a valid identity and gaining agency in defining that identity.

This insight serves to interpret the motivation for and the discursive effect of "The Vampire and Energy Work Research Survey." Oliver Krueger (2005: 7) argues that while the Internet promotes dialogical rather than hierarchical forms of organisation, it also facilitates new structures of authority and discursive agency. The normative authority of the survey data is an example of Internet-enabled agency.

Suscitatio Enterprises has stated that they are not attempting to create a universal definition of vampirism. However, the data provided by their survey can hardly help but have a normative effect on the concept of the vampire. The effect of the knowledge section, which allows Suscitatio Enterprises to correlate responses with how much respondents know about the community, will likely enhance this normative effect dramatically. In fact, some real vampire groups have begun giving the survey to potential members as a sort of application test. In other words, the normative effect of the survey is quite powerful. Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1991: 5) have argued that knowledge production in itself is a form

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[29] Robert Paul Rice, a Utah prison inmate and self-identified 'Druidic Vampire,' requested access to blood as part of his religious diet. My contacts in the AVA had no sympathy for Rice, who also demanded conjugal visits on religious grounds. They did not consider Rice's claims to be representative of real vampirism and viewed his case as negative publicity on par with the Ferrell case. Internet site, http://www.thecovenorganization.com/prisoner-demands-vampire-diet. Accessed 12/01/2008.

[30] The Black Veil v2.0 can be viewed at internet site, http://www.sanguinarius.org/articles/black_veil_2.shtml. Accessed 14/04/2008. The Donor's Bill of Rights can be viewed at internet site, http://www.sanguinarius.org/articles/dbor.shtml. Accessed 14/04/2008.

[31] Zero, personal communication with author, Medina, Ohio, 23/06/2007.

of social action that creates a 'cognitive space' where new ideas and issues emerge. The actors who make this cognitive praxis visible are known as "movement intellectuals (Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 98)." The survey creates a cognitive space by defining the vampire as a category of person: it is progress. By organising the survey and disseminating its findings, the AVA have become movement intellectuals.

It should be noted that defining a category is not the same as assigning someone to that category. AVA members have repeatedly been approached by people who offer a list of symptoms and want to know whether or not they are a vampire. Their position has consistently been, "We do not diagnose. It is not our role to confirm or deny whether one is a vampire—that is something only the individual can come to know through serious introspection and experience"[32] However, Hacking suggests that as new categories of people are created, individuals will spontaneously fill these categories through dynamic nominalism. Thus, we can predict that as people encounter the survey data, some will discover that they are, *and have been*, vampires. Furthermore, as 'vampire' becomes more entrenched as a category of person, the rest of us will become 'non-vampires', where before we were not.

Conclusion

These wider implications of knowledge production and identity are lost if the real vampire community is reduced to a cluster of institutions. Eyerman and Jamison (1991: 59) argue for "a cognitive approach" to social movements, seeing them as producers of knowledge that create an intellectual space and then dissipate into mainstream culture. The greatest obstacle to this "cognitive approach," they argue, is the tendency to identify movements with organisations, parties, and sects rather than ideas or "cognitive praxis."

By looking at the types of categories and identities emerging from the vampire community, one can also find implications for related identity groups and modes of religiosity. Oliver Krueger shows that the majority of Wiccans are "eclectic practitioners" with no affiliation to a coven or group. This is attributed to "self-initiation" rituals readily available on the Internet. Like vampires, Wiccans do not need an outside entity to validate

[32] Merticus, electronic communication with author, 22/11/2007.

them as part of a group. Krueger (2005: 4–5) argues that Pagan initiation now refers to a "state of spiritual identity" rather than affiliation with a group or coven.

It may come as no surprise that there is significant interaction between the vampire community and Pagan communities. Many real vampires practice forms of Paganism and during my research I received an invitation to a vampires versus witches softball game. What Pagans and vampires share is participation in an identity that is dependent on subjugated knowledge. Paganism is a religion, and vampirism is sometimes a religion—however, both groups find themselves outside of the religious and scientific *episteme*.

In addition to vampires, a growing number of ontological identity groups are forming communities facilitated through Internet dialogue. Along with the Otherkin, 'Therians' also believe they have a mental, emotional, spiritual, or shamanistic connection to or shared kinship with a particular animal. Several other categories of people are just beginning to gain momentum through the Internet: 'walk-ins', 'indigo and crystal children', 'otakukin', and 'multiple systems' are all ontological categories of beings with which individuals have begun to identify (Lupa 2007).[33]

Together, these groups are creating the type of cognitive praxis that Eyerman and Jamison attribute to a full-blown social movement. Collectively, these groups are sometimes referred to as "awakened" (Belanger 2004: 270). This term represents the production of a collective identity (Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 117). The terms 'mundanes' or even 'muggles' are sometimes used to refer to those outside of these groups.[34] This is the identification of the oppositional other, which is also crucial to the cognitive praxis of a social movement (Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 119). Finally, the survey demonstrates the existence of an effective communication network between various groups and organisations, which is a necessity for a social movement to endure (Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 107).

The motto of the vampire House Kheperu is "seek your own truth."[35] I predict that Internet facilitated surveys and other forms of knowledge

[33] For more on these concepts see Lupa 2007. Lupa herself is a therian and describes the nature of her connection to wolves.

[34] The term 'muggle' was coined by author J. K. Rowling in her *Harry Potter* fiction series and refers to individuals with no magical abilities. In 2003, 'muggle' was added to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Internet site, http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/uk/newsid_2882000/2882895.stm. Accessed 14/04/2008.

[35] See internet site, http://www.kheperu.org. Accessed 14/04/2008.

production through a *consensus gentium* will become the discursive mode of choice for these groups. The otherkin community has already expressed a desire for their own survey and I anticipate that similar projects will become prolific among 'awakened' groups such as therians and otherkin as well as identity-based religious movements seeking to reify their sense of identity. Without prescribing or defining, these databases may come to function as a sort of ontological lighthouse for those who continue to 'seek their own truth.'

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THE SANCTIFICATION OF *STAR WARS*: FROM FANS TO FOLLOWERS

Debbie McCormick

In the Beginning

Communication technologies are a vital conduit for religious groups to provide information to, and develop relationships with, their followers. Religious organisations and individual clergy are increasingly utilising digital technology to enhance, diversify and simplify the practices of their faith; today Jews from around the world can fax their prayers to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem; fortune tellers in China can provide computer-generated astrological charts; and television has globalised evangelism (Kurtz 1995). The Vatican was one of the first major religious organisations to go online when they launched their website in 1995. In his address for *World Communications Day* in 1990 Pope John Paul II expressed his view on the potential for technology to facilitate religious communications:

> [w]ith the advent of computer telecommunications and what are known as computer participation systems, the Church is offered further means for fulfilling her mission. Methods of facilitating communication and dialogue among her own members can strengthen the bonds of unity between them. Immediate access to information makes it possible for her to deepen her dialogue with the contemporary world. In the new "computer culture" the Church can more readily inform the world of her beliefs and explain the reasons for her stance on any given issue or event. She can hear more clearly the voice of public opinion, and enter into a continuous discussion with the world around her, thus involving herself more immediately in the common search for solutions to humanity's many pressing problems. (Wotjyla 1990)

While Catholicism and other traditional religions have benefited in many ways from their use of communication technologies, the broad appeal and easy access these technologies provide has also paved the way for the emergence of sects and new religious movements (NRMs). Advances in communications technology have afforded potential members of NRMs the means to connect and cultivate their ideas.

All religious traditions have at sometime in their history been subject to human mediation, and it is not uncommon for old ideas to be modified or blended, repackaged, and marketed as new products. In the modern era the "old wine in new bottles" is marketed and sold through the overt

and explicit religious themes that are presented in works of popular culture. At a time when more people go to the cinema than attend church (Kohn 2005), the messages transmitted by popular culture have the potential to both inform and influence. While audiences may not be intentionally seeking information about religion, Schofield Clark (in Kohn 2005) explains that in relation to young people:

> [i]t's not that they're looking for religion, or even that they're interested in religion. They think religion may not be very important in their lives, but they still pick up understandings about religion from popular culture, in places like fantasy film.

In this chapter I describe how, over a period of more than three decades, fans of the *Star Wars* series of films harnessed emerging communications technologies to form a religious community and how technology, conversely, almost led to the demise of the nascent religion.

A Long Time Ago in a Galaxy Far, Far Away . . .

In the beginning there was the film. Six *Star Wars* films have been released and re-released over a period of four decades beginning in 1977 with *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* and ending in 2005 with *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith.* In each of the decades they were released, the films ranked at, or near the top of the list of *Top 10 Films by Decade and Year* (Dirks). Spin-offs from the film series include books, comics, collectables and a wide array of merchandise from costumes to Lego™. The LucasArts gaming division was founded in 1982 and since then the *Star Wars* games, which are based on characters from the films, have been translated into eight languages, distributed worldwide, and appear regularly in the top rankings for computer game sales (LucasFilm Entertainment Company 2010).

The constant flow of films, merchandise and games over the past thirty-four years has entrenched the lore, characters and philosophy of *Star Wars* into the vernacular of the West; "May the Force Be with You" (*Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* 1977), a quotation from the first *Star Wars* film that was released in 1977, was judged eighth in the most recognisable film quotations of the past one hundred years by the American Film Institute (American Film Institute, 2011). So recognisable was the quotation that in 1999, a buyer offered 6.7 million US dollars on the online auction site eBay for the Internet domain name (Fierman 1999).

George Lucas, director of the series, describes what he believes to be the attraction of *Star Wars*:

> I'm telling an old myth in a new way. Each society takes that myth and retells it in a different way, which relates to the particular environment they live in. The motif is the same. It's just that it gets localised. As it turns out, I'm localising it for the planet. I guess I'm localising it for the end of the millennium more than I am for any particular place. (Moyers and Lucas 1999)

The myth Lucas refers to is the 'Monomyth', also known as the 'Hero's Journey' (Larsen and Larsen 1991) which was posited by Joseph Campbell (1975) who became Lucas' close friend. Although the *Monomyth* has been intellectually criticised in many different quarters (Brin 1999; Manganaro 1992; Pearson and Pope 1981) Lucas believed it had a timeless global appeal (Larsen and Larsen 1991). Lucas' plan for localisation was also furthered by using the deliberately ambiguous spatial and temporal context of "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away" (Anon. 1999); the considerable use of religious and moral imagery in the narrative likewise found universal resonance.

Lucas explains that despite the use of religious and moral imagery and religious themes in *Star Wars* it was not his intention to instigate a new religious movement:

> [w]hen I wrote the first *Star Wars*, I had to come up with a whole cosmology: What do people believe in? I had to do something that was relevant, something that imitated a belief system that has been around for thousands of years, and that most people on the planet, one way or another, have some kind of connection to. I didn't want to invent a religion. I wanted to try to explain in a different way the religions that have already existed. I wanted to express it all. (Moyers and Lucas 1999)

While Lucas denies he planned to invent a new religion, he concedes that he wanted to

> try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people—more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system. I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery . . . I think it's important to have a belief system and to have faith. (Moyers and Lucas 1999)

While it may not have been Lucas' intention to create a new religion, fans recognised, interpreted and augmented the base philosophies that were expressed in the films and christened the derivative 'Jediism'; a follower explains:

> Jediism is both an old and new religion; we did the same thing that religions have done for thousands of years . . . we assimilated spiritual teachings from other and ancient faiths. Taoism, Zen Buddhism, Mysticism, as well as the

> honourable martial arts philosophies; this spiritual mixture is potent. We call this fusion 'Jediism.' (Temple of the Jedi Force n.d.)

Conversely, the religious metaphors found in the *Star Wars* films have been appropriated by "almost every single religion [who] took *Star Wars* and used it as an example of their religion; they were able to relate it to stories in the *Bible*, in the *Qur'an* and the *Torah*" (Moyers and Lucas 1999). Although proponents of Jediism cite ancient religious traditions as the basis of its tenets and popular culture as its vehicle, Jediism also shares an obligate relationship with communications technology that is revealed in an historical juxtaposition.

1970s—Fanning the Flames

When the first episode of the *Star Wars* series of films (originally known simply as *Star Wars* but later renamed *Episode IV: A New Hope*), burst onto cinema screens around the world in 1977, the first off-the-shelf personal computers also made their debut in retail stores, and the first major demonstration of an internet (then called ARPANET, Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) was conducted with transmissions between the United States and the United Kingdom (Computer History Museum 2006). These three events would have a profound impact on global culture and share a common, albeit unlikely, connection with the inception of a new religious movement.

The religious themes in *Star Wars* immediately generated discussion and debate in the general, academic and religious media (Collins 1977; Curtis 1980; Ingersoll 1980). During the late 1970s and early 1980s personal and group discussions about the film were bounded by the publically available communication channels of telephone, personal mail, and 'letterzines' (fan published newsletter style publications). The challenges of connecting and communicating with other fans during this period are described by Langley (2005):

> . . . finding fandom used to be pretty much a had-to-stumble-across-it affair. A local fan club or zine publisher might post a flyer announcing an upcoming meeting/zine on a bulletin board in a local library, school, grocery store, etc. A pro con [convention] might come to town (SF cons, or ST cons when they began), or a local club might put on a small fan con. Reading a zine on the local mode of public transportation might prompt excited questions from a total stranger next to you, who would turn out to be a fan-in-waiting. [. . .] Once in fandom, 'penpal' correspondence was common, as fans found other fans through directories, letter columns, and letterzines. Fans found

> more zines through flyers inserted in other zines, ads in letterzines (later, adzines became common), by picking up flyers at a con, or through private correspondence. Some zine editors established mailing lists and sent zine flyers out by direct mail.

While discussions about the characters and the plot were abundant and profound, in an historical recollection of the major letterzines of the period Nowakowska (2001) reports that during this time

> questions about the nature of the Force and the philosophical wanderings that flow from such inquiry [had] not yet made it into general conversation. The American legal tradition of treating religion and philosophy as purely individual interests keeps many fans from making comments about their interpretations of the Force and the SW [*Star Wars*] 'world view.' Interest in such discussion was not helped by an early story wherein Luke is likened to Christ and brings Han back to life, mostly because the writers were loudly dogmatic in their insistence on a Christian interpretation of the Saga. Also, there had been enough public dismissals of the Force as irrational (i.e., anti-scientific) to inhibit many fans. Some stories and fannish SW universes have dealt with the subject at this time, but ROTJ [*Return of the Jedi*] must be released before philosophy becomes an unavoidable topic.

In the time leading up the release of *Return of the Jedi* in 1983, technology was being developed which would facilitate and accelerate online discussions between existing fans and, at the same time, enable new fans from around the globe to join the conversation.

1980s—In the beginning . . .

In 1979 Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis, two Duke university graduate students, developed a programme which enabled users of the emerging online communication network to trade information, news and research results between several universities in the United States (Kehoe 1992). Chains of messages on single topics formed discussions, also known as threads, and the topic groups were referred to as 'newsgroups.' These newsgroups were hosted on a network of computers that became known as Usenet (Kehoe 1992).

The popularity and use of Usenet as a system of communication and discussion grew quickly; "what began as two or three sites on a single network in 1979, expanded to 15 in 1980, to 150 in 1981, to 400 in 1982" (Usenet Learning Centre n.d.) and by 1986 the number of messages being posted annually had grown from 4,000 in 1981 to more than 100,000 (Google Groups Team 2011).

The exponential increase in messages during the 1980s stimulated a free flow of information about a broad range of *Star Wars* related topics, and

among the many discussions about characterisation, plot and the genius of George Lucas are burgeoning conversations between fans seeking a deeper understanding of the religious themes in the three films that had been released during that decade. The reference points for these discussions included existing religions (Hsing 1983, Spafford 1982) and religious themes from other popular culture contemporaries of *Star Wars IV* such as *Kung Fu*, a television series based on the wanderings of a Shaolin monk (Faust 1984).

The discussions during this period reflect nascent, external, theoretical musings and there is little or no evidence of internalisation and/or any form of organised personal or public practices of any of the philosophical tenets; a situation that would change toward the end of the decade with the introduction of online computer role-play games.

During the 1980s the continuing preoccupation by fans with all things *Star Wars*, was driven by the release of *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* in 1980 and *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* in 1983. Interest in the films resulted in the development of 'spin-off' products, which included merchandise, books and computer games. Video games that could be played on television screens or computers had been available since the 1970s but the proliferation of personal computer ownership during this decade fuelled the growth of the commercial, mass-produced games market.

In 1978 a group of undergraduate students at the University of Essex, in the United Kingdom, recognised the potential for emerging online technology to be utilised for playing 'pen-and-paper' based role-playing games (RPGs) which were a favourite pastime of many university students at the time. In 1978–1979, Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle developed what is generally acknowledged to be the first multi-player online role-playing game, which they dubbed a MUD (Multi-User Dungeon) (Cuciz 2001; Koster 2000; Mena 2005). The game was a text-based, player-developed, character-driven fantasy adventure based on *Dungeons and Dragons*, the paper-based role-playing game developed in 1974. The genre created by *Dungeons and Dragons* was described as "a brand-new type of game without boards or set goals in which all the action took place in the players' minds" (Gamespy 2004). The profound immersion experienced while participating in online role-play games (RPGs) created a fertile environment for discussions that would contribute to the establishment of a doctrine and the genesis of Jediism.

The use of MUDs as a means of exploring religious identity through fantasy in a virtual world was integral in the development of Jediism; a devotee explains:

> [t]here came a point in which people desired to play Jedi and Sith roles, not just other fictional characters. These people began to flock together and create their own role-playing groups, playing online games and conversing in chat rooms. The first Jedi, as you know them here and at other Jedi websites, originated from these places. It was when a few of them began to see more to a Jedi then [*sic*] just a RPG character, where some fans began to relate most of their life with the fictious [*sic*] Jedi, no matter how fake or childlike they seemed. There was more about the Jedi then [*sic*] fighting with lightsabers or levitating tables and chairs, they perceived [*sic*].
>
> With such realisation, some began to believe in a new concept, applying the wisdom which the fictional Jedi carried within the Star Wars Universe and applying it to their own, realistic lives. These so-called 'Jedi' were rejected by many, becoming as outsiders. As they left their small RPG groups in search of a new paradigm, they began soughting [*sic*] to find others like their own. It didn't take long until some did as a few began to create their own websites. Shortly afterwards, a community was born. (TheJedi.org, jedi.ws 2006b)

1990s—Reaching Out to the Masses

In the early 1990s the Internet exploded into the public realm. Universities and governments in more than 100 countries became connected, and in 1995 commercial and public users were granted access. The launch of browser technology later that year facilitated document and page searching, further increasing the potential for global communication and paving the way for the exponential growth of the Internet. Public access to the Internet had a rapid and profound effect on the ways people communicated, and increased the scope for global discussion and collaboration between businesses, education and community groups, and individuals with common interests.

Although there had been no new additions to the *Star Wars* series of films since 1983 the devotion of the fans continued to grow, and when the Internet became publically available as a method of communication, conversations between *Star Wars* fans leapt off the pages of fanzines and onto Usenet discussion forums. In the first half of the decade there were 2,300 Usenet threads relating to the religious themes in the *Star Wars* films; in the second half of the decade from January 1995, when the Internet was opened up to the public, to December 1999, there were more than 26,000 message threads for the same themes[1] (Google Groups 2006).

[1] These data were the result of using the search criteria 'star+wars+and+religion' in a search of Usenet messages which have been archived at Google Groups since 2000 <http://groups.google.com/advanced_search?q=&>. Accessed 2/03/2012.

By the end of the decade a transition from fans to followers was firmly established. The ideas discussed in forums and RPGs began to crystallise, and through the continuing exploitation of emerging technologies, communities based around, what had been dubbed Jediism, began to emerge.

The New Millennium—The Crash and Growth

When the Internet became publically accessible in 1995 the major focus was the development of commercial applications and websites, however unexpected events would once again facilitate conditions that would be conducive to the continued organisation and growth of Jediism and the Jedi community.

When the NASDAQ—the technology arm of the United States stock market—crashed in 2000 many commercial Internet enterprises became victims, and the business world was cautious about investing in new technology companies. During this time, technology companies began to rethink the philosophy behind online communication and turned their attention toward "socialisation, interaction and communication . . . focussing on people, not sales" (Boyd in Oliver 2006). The focal point of web development began to shift to what was becoming commonly known as social software (Allen 2004) or social networking applications. These new applications, which included blogs, wikis and user-developed websites, required little or no technical expertise and enabled users from around the globe to publish their thoughts and viewpoints, interact, connect and form communities. Most Jediism sites that launched during this period embraced the emerging online tools and used them multifariously.

Many Jediism sites that launched during this period began with lofty intentions that failed to materialise, however some achieved their objectives and played, and in some cases continue to play, a significant role in the consolidation of beliefs and the development of community. The Jediism sites that began (and in many cases, ended) in the first decade of the new millennium can be loosely categorised according to their explicit and implicit purposes: learning and teaching the applied practice of Jediism; developing and maintaining community; expounding the theology; and portal sites which were a combination of these elements.

Learning, Teaching and Applied Practice

Advances in communications technology and social networking applications since the start of the new millennium have enabled sites that focus on

learning and teaching theoretical and applied *Jediism* to develop extensive, well organised educational frameworks. In keeping with canonical terminology, most Jedi education sites are called academies or 'praxeum'—a term coined in the *Jedi Academy Trilogy* (Anderson 1994) books—which means "the distillation of learning through action" (Anderson 1994). The challenges associated with delivering an organised program of instruction to a diverse global community have impelled teachers of Jediism to become early adopters of communications technologies.

The assignments and set readings are presented as web pages or text files, and student essays are submitted using blogs or mail forums. Some academies encourage their Padawans (students) to blog their reflections and activities during training. Some more formal, structured sites include exams and accreditation. The levels of attainment range from three or four tiers, up to intricate, multi-level systems (Volkum n.d.), however all sites audited for this research include the levels of Padawan and Knight, which have their origins in the *Star Wars* canon.

The range and scope of subjects delivered through these academies varies, however most focus on a combination of moral and philosophical development through assigned readings which comprise teachers reflections, classic philosophical texts, and spiritual readings from other, complementary faiths; physical fitness through the practice of martial arts; and mental exercises designed to harness power of *The Force* (Jedi Teal'c Nyal n.d.).

There is no 'standard' curriculum among these academies; however the influence of Eastern spiritual traditions is a constant. The *Force College* offering is representative of many education sites:

> [t]he training we offer comes form [*sic*] various traditions, such as: Daoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Kabbalah, Kung-Fu, Samurai . . .
> The basic training covers: feeling the force, manipulating it, give [sic] it a taint (of consciousness), force meditation, force combat, introduction to telekinesis . . .
> All training material has to be downloaded (PDF eBook, Windows Media videos). An appropriate training requires about 30 minutes per day.
> Previous experience in qi-gong or martial arts will help you advance faster in the Force combat training. Yet, it is not a requirement. (Lepine n.d.)

Although most courses of instruction are self-paced and instructor facilitated, some have prescribed semesters. The *Jedi Organization* (Volkum n.d.) offers an explanation of their interpretation of the range of alternative modes of study:

- *The Academy Method*—This is when a qualified instructor teaches students within a classroom setting. In other words, the Academy method

is allowed courses taught in a style you may find at a college or university. It's a more modern format.

- *The Traditional Method*—You are probably more familiar with this format relating to Jedi training. Basically, a mentor teaches a student in a private, one-on-one setting. This is the most original format. Keep in mind this method may vary. For example, a mentor might teach two students instead of one.
- *The Solo Method*—Sometimes, a student wishes to learn on one's own. They work better by themselves. We can understand this. What this method is about is allowing a student teach themself [*sic*] within a controlled setting. It's a very loose format. This doesn't mean the person can just learn anything they want; we set a basic criteria [*sic*] they have to generally follow in order for us to recognise their effort.
- *The Praxeum Method*—What this method allows is a unique format which students learn from another Jedi website/school other than JEDI. In other words, it is an external setting. Praxeums can be looked at as finishing schools, a school teaching specific educational skills while focusing on the basics. For example, a Jedi school which presents a Taoist aspect to their teachings. Before you decide to train at another area, find out if it is approved by the faculty first (TheJedi.org, jedi.ws 2006a).

Although Jediism education sites have embraced cyberspace as a location for teaching, some groups, such as The Jedi Knights of Canada (http://www.angelfire.com/ca4/jediknightsofcanada/ n.d.) also attempt to create the impression of a physical presence by including images of large, college like structures on their websites. While these images of physical structures may be used to create the illusion of a physical presence, some groups make purposeful efforts to establish communities that meet face-to-face and social networking applications facilitate these endeavours.

Developing and Maintaining Community

Community is the lifeblood of Jediism and most sites provide some opportunity for social networking—usually a mail forum with a discussion topic dedicated to 'Community'. A smaller group of sites have the development and maintenance of community as their central focus; these groups extend the opportunity for community development by providing Jediists with the means to make themselves known to other members, organising

on- and offline gatherings and social events, and compiling and distributing member information and statistics.

The *Order of the Jedi* site explains. "We are in an ero [*sic*] of science and technology. We use various web tools to meet online, such as email, skype, and a video conference system. Members recieve [*sic*] email invitations to public web events" (2010). The *Jedi Resource Center and Jedi Gatherings Group* which commenced in 2006 describes their purpose as

> bringing Jedi together in real life. We utilise the online medium in order to organise offline meetings and activities between Jedi around the world. Our goal is to provide the resources and means of communication necessary to aid in creating, organising, conducting, and promoting these real life functions. (2011)

Their site houses a range of tools for developing and maintaining community including a mapping application that enables members to visually indicate their location and to connect with other Jediists (Figure 1).

The site invites members to "[h]elp connect with others in your area by adding your location to the Jedi Map. You may be surprised how many Jedi might be nearby. Signing onto the Jedi Map will also assist us in informing you of possible upcoming Jedi events in your area" (The Jedi Resource Centre & Gatherings Group n.d.).

Fig. 1. Member map of Jedi Resource Centre/Jedi Gatherings Group (http://jediresourcecenter.org/vb/vbgooglemapme.php?do=showmain)

Other tools provided by the group to facilitate on- and offline community include:

> Jedi Gathering Roster—This is your chance to find out more about the history of past Gatherings, where they occurred, who attended, what activities were involved, post Gathering thoughts, etc.
>
> Chapter Roster—This feature provides contact details and a little bit of background information for various Jedi Chapters and other offline Jedi-related groups. Check it out to see if you can find a local group in your area to join.
>
> JRC Photo Album—Take a look at pictures from past Gatherings and get a better idea of what goes on at these events.
>
> Community Calendar—Use the Calendar to post or receive reminders about upcoming Jedi Gatherings, Chapter meetings, Community Service events, and any other Jedi-related activities.
>
> Member Blogs—Each member can also create their own Jedi Blog to chronicle their offline training and progress along the Jedi path. Comments can be posted directly to individual entries and members also have the option of subscribing to other member blogs. (The Jedi Resource Centre & Gatherings Group n.d.)

The Jedi Resource Centre group has more than three hundred members; almost a third have posted a message to the mail forum since they joined. Although the majority of members hail from Western nations (United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) there are representatives from all corners of the globe.

Although Jediism is practiced globally the geographic diversity of its followers limits the formation of offline congregations. Despite these limitations some followers have become ordained celebrants and offer Jediist ceremonies to celebrate or commemorate life's milestones including:

> Welcoming
> A ceremony which honours a new life into the world. As per the parents choosing, a prayer of the protection of the light of the force is placed.
> Definition explanation: gladly received
>
> Unification
> A ceremony otherwise known as Marriage.
> Definition explanation: A bringing together into a whole.
>
> Journey Complete
> A ceremony for those who have completed their journey on earth, and have once again become one with the force.
> Definition explanation: Ones passing from human form back into the force. (Order of the Jedi n.d.)

Establishment of Doctrine and Theology

The philosophy that is at the heart of Jediist education and community has evolved democratically through more than three decades of mostly online conversation and negotiation, resulting in various assertions of doctrine. The doctrine of the *Temple of the Jedi Order* (Temple of the Jedi Order) includes a 'Definition of Religion', a 'Statement of Beliefs', 'The Jedi Oath', 'The 16 Teachings of the Jedi', and 'The Jedi Creed'. Social networking applications have once again been vital to the process; the *Jedi Church* has utilised an online voting system to pose questions related to health (is it good for Jedi to donate blood? is it ok for Jedi to accept blood transfusions?), morality (is it ok for Jedi to be gay? is it ok for Jedi to have abortions?), and religious validity (are there elements of fiction in all religions?).

One of the most vigorously debated topics in the establishment of Jediism's tenets has been the primacy of its canon. While most sites agree that the philosophy underpinning Jediism is predominantly based on Eastern traditions including Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism views on the source and extent of its canon are divided. The official LucasFilms position is that

> "Gospel," or canon as we refer to it, includes the screenplays, the films, the radio dramas and the novelisations. These works spin out of George Lucas' original stories, the rest are written by other writers. However, between us, we've read everything, and much of it is taken into account in the overall continuity. The entire catalog of published works comprises a vast history—with many off-shoots, variations and tangents—like any other well-developed mythology. (Rostoni and Kausch 1994)

Canon 'purists' however, insist the films are the primary source; a stance supported by George Lucas who said "the movies are Gospel, and everything else is Gossip" (Hays 1980: 45).

Despite the disputes about the primacy of source(s) there is a universally acknowledged and cited *Jedi Code*:

> There is no emotion; there is peace.
> There is no ignorance; there is knowledge.
> There is no passion; there is serenity.
> There is no death; there is the Force.
> (Star Wars Databank n.d.)

The Force, which is the cornerstone of Jediism, has been described as "the mystical energy field that permeates the universe surrounding

everything and flowing through all life" (Emfinger n.d.). In keeping with his desire to instil "more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system" (Moyers and Lucas 1999), Lucas created the concept of *The Force* as an enigmatic abstraction that has become central to Jediist philosophy.

Some Jediism sites have attempted to link the origins of *The Force* to more established faiths in what is perhaps an effort to establish credibility and distance themselves from those they refer to as 'fictional' Jedi. The *Order of the Jedi* (Order of the Jedi n.d.) advances an historic view that locates the origins of the term 'The Force' in Eastern philosophy:

> Jediism is a philosophy and religion based on the personal cultivation of our relationship with The Force. The term "Force" was used up to 3000 years ago by the Daoist immortals, and was made first popular in a Chinese text written in the 6th century BC. The text is entitled "Tao te King," and can be translated in various manners, such as "The way of the Force."
>
> The term "Force" was used in Hinduism as a quality and power of the divinity Indra, lord of minor gods, various aspects of the unique unnamed God. The Force was call [sic] in Sanskrit "Vajra," and described in the same was [sic] that we describe the Force in Jediism. The Force was also called "Ka," as a property of Vishnu, the One God united with the creator Bramha and the transformer Shiva.
>
> The ways of Jediism are mostly inspired by Buddhism and Taoism. Although modern movies are useful for inspiration, we do not base our ways on science fiction, but on the true inner culture of the Force.

The *Jedi Creed* group also distances itself from its Hollywood origins, explaining what the site authors see as the differences between fans and followers:

> [w]hat made this belief creditable [*sic*] was having a solid separation between fantasy and realism: Jedi do not require powers depicted in Star Wars. They do not have lightsabers or wear robes. They do not need to be very young to be trained. They do not affiliate themselves with a government, or travel to a temple. They don't even have to know of Star Wars, Yoda, or George Lucas. (Volkum n.d.)

The quest for mainstream legitimacy has resulted in some groups seeking legal recognition as a religion or other non-profit group. The first organisation to achieve this status was the *Temple of the Jedi Order* which became the "first international church of Jediism, incorporated December 25, 2005 by the Secretary of State of Texas as a non profit church, religious, educational and charitable corporation" (Temple of the Jedi Order n.d.); this was followed in 2009 by a Canadian group, *The Order of the Jedi* (Order of the Jedi n.d.).

The desire for authenticity extends to a pragmatic approach to the practice of Jediism in which followers claim they integrate the outlook and values of the faith into their own lives (Temple of the Jedi Order n.d.). The integration of Jediism into the lives of its followers is not sought with the intention of excluding other religions. The innocuous requirements of practicing Jediism makes it a guilt free addendum to traditional religions and provides many followers with an outlet for the articulation of aspects of spirituality they may not be getting from their traditional religions. A Jedi Padawan explains her choice:

> [t]he Jedi teachings are the yellow brick road to modern day Christian living. The teachings of the Bible are no less important, I dont [*sic*] mean to imply that. The Bible is timeless and to me, represents my Truth in this world. Where the Bible uses parables, the Jedi teachings use a direct approach. They coorelate [*sic*] with each other, going hand in hand, neither contradicting the other.
>
> Being a Christian means I love the Lord and follow his Word, being a Jedi means I constantly seek knowledge and enlightenment. Jediism is the lit path to my ultimate goal: knowing my Saviour. (Rachattainingblog 2006)

Adherents are assured that, from a Jediist perspective, they should feel no philosophical conflict in practising their beliefs in parallel with traditional religions because Jediists believe that "all religions have truth, and [Jediists] are not bound to our Doctrine only. Jedi are encouraged to learn as much as they can about others in order to increase their knowledge" (Order of the Jedi n.d.). The *Temple of the Jedi Order* group have extended this sentiment and combined tenets of Jediism with traditional faiths to form five hybrid 'rites'; the *Five Rites* (*Traditions*) are *Pure Land*, *Abrahamic*, *Pagan*, *Buddhist*, and *Humanist* (Temple of the Jedi Order n.d.).

The Challenge of Darkness

It is ironic that at the beginning of this decade the technology that had been intrinsic to the inception and growth of Jediism would be instrumental in events that caused a devastating setback in its advancement.

Most countries conduct a census of their population at various intervals to obtain a "snapshot" of social indicators that can be useful for planning purposes (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Many include questions about religious affiliation, which provide an indicator of the changes to stated religious affiliations of populations who complete the survey.

The power of individuals to affect these classifications was tested in 2001 when a series of events surrounding the National Census that was to be

held in a number of countries that year commanded the attention of the media and governments in Australia and internationally. In a global email campaign that began as a prank, Australian, British and New Zealand citizens were encouraged to designate 'Jedi Knight' (Natchers 2001) as their religious affiliation in the National Censuses that were being conducted that year.

The incident captured the interest of both the public and the media to the degree that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) was compelled to release a statement responding to reports that it might fine people who, in reply to the email campaign, stated their religion as Jedi Knight in the National Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001). The campaign drew similar responses from the Office for National Statistics in Britain and Statistics New Zealand (Emery 2001; New Zealand Press Association 2001; Newport UK 2003).

The possibility of legal consequences did not deter 390,000 (0.70%) Britons (Newport UK 2003), 71,000 (0.37%) Australians (Anon 2002), and 53,000 (0.13%) New Zealanders (Perrott 2002) who heeded the 'call to action' and indicated a religious affiliation with Jediism. Despite the number of responders, the three governments refused to recognise Jediism as a religion. The reason cited by the ABS was that Jediism did not fit within the High Court of Australia's legal definition of a religion.

The credibility being sought by the followers was eroded by association with the prank, and in-fighting among Jediism members caused a number of sites to close down during that time which has been referred to as "The Challenge of Darkness" (TheJedi.org, jedi.ws 2006b). It would be two years of decline before the community began to revitalise and re-establish its credibility with the development of several new websites.

Conclusion: Future Challenges

As a religious movement that exists almost entirely on the web, the vitality of the Jediism community depends on continued communication and interaction among its geographically diverse followers. The links that have been formed as a result of common beliefs are tenuous and would be unlikely to continue without social networking applications.

The attenuated nature of Jediism and the fickle participation of its followers is redolent of the general state of religious participation in a postmodern society where religious institutions and traditions compete for adherents, and worshippers shop for a religion in much the same way that

consumers assess their options for goods and services in the marketplace (Warner 1993). Sherkat and Wilson's (1995: 997–998) description of a religious marketplace is an apt metaphor to describe a religious landscape where "[d]ecisions are made on the basis of not only what is desired but what is known about alternatives." The emergence and use of social software has provided the opportunity for individuals to 'try on' new, old and mixtures of religious ideas.

While the development and growth of the use of social software has proved a boon for new religious movements such as Jediism, it comes with risks which were evidenced in the fallout from the Census incidents in Australia, Britain and New Zealand. The incidents demonstrate the 'double-edged' nature of the democratic global transmission of information and are examples of how tools of construction may also become instruments of destruction.

At the time of Jediism's inception and early development the control and flow of information was held by those who had technical ability and access to the Internet. The availablility and ease of use of communication technologies has resulted in an environment where public producer-consumers, or "prosumers" (Toffler 1981) contribute to debate and discussion with religious and other authorities. The tools that allow for the development and dissemination of user-created content have provided activists with vehicles to spread information and disinformation supporting their particular agendas (Alam 1996; Yoon 2010). Some governments have responded to these expressions of ideas by attempting to censor content and restrict access to applications including Google (Mufson and Whoriskey 2010), Facebook and Twitter (Kirkpatrick 2010).

The legitimacy of the Jedi as a religion may be questionable and the Jedi census controversy may have been a one-off event, however the continuing dilution of the authority of mainstream religions and the proliferation of new ways of articulating religious beliefs have created an environment that is conducive to the development of other online religious movements that will demand attention and interpretation by communities, religious organisations and governments.

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THE SPIRITUAL MILIEU BASED ON J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S LITERARY MYTHOLOGY

Markus Altena Davidsen

Introduction

The present volume attests to a growing scholarly interest in new religions that incorporate popular fiction into their beliefs and practices. Such religions are variously referred to as 'hyper-real' (Possamai 2005), 'invented' (Cusack 2010a), or 'fiction-based' (Davidsen 2010) religions. Studies in the field have examined, for instance, Lovecraft-inspired Chaos Magick (Hanegraaff 2007), the Otherkin (Kirby 2009a; Kirby 2009b), Matrixism (e.g. Morehead this volume), the Church of All Worlds (Cusack 2010a: 53–82; Cusack 2010b), and Jediism (Possamai 2005: 71–83; Davidsen 2010).[1] Scholars see these organised groups as extreme examples of an increasing interconnection between popular fiction and alternative spirituality, contributing to a re-enchantment of the world (Possamai 2005: 103–104; Partridge 2004).

So far nothing has been published on spirituality based on *The Lord of the Rings* and J. R. R. Tolkien's other writings, though two traditions of scholarship have touched upon 'Tolkien and religion'. Theologians and Tolkien scholars with a theological agenda have emphasised the fact that Tolkien was a convinced Roman Catholic and sought to show that his fiction is deeply Christian (e.g. Pearce 1998; Birzer 2003). Some have suggested using *The Lord of the Rings* in religious education and Bible study groups (Arthur 2003). The theological approaches focus on Tolkien's writings and his person, but pay little attention to the reception of his works. Scholars of contemporary Paganism, on the other hand, have emphasised that Tolkien was and is widely read in Pagan circles, and that his works

[1] Chaos Magickians incorporate elements of H. P. Lovecraft's horror cycle, the 'Cthulhu Mythos'. They invoke the monster gods from those tales and become possessed by them. The Otherkin is a movement whose members believe themselves to be 'other-than-human', for instance, elves, dragons or vampires. Matrixism is based on the *Matrix* film trilogy by Larry and Andy Wachowski. The Church of All Worlds is inspired by Robert A. Heinlein's science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), but its practice also includes Pagan elements. The church has played a major role in the organisation of American Paganism. Jediism is based on George Lucas' *Star Wars* films. Its members believe in the Force and identify with the Jedi Knights.

inspired contemporary Paganism on a spiritual level. However, most scholars of Paganism, especially those who are themselves Pagans, are fast to rebuff Tolkien's influence as merely general and metaphorical in character (Harvey 2000; Harvey 2007: 176–177; York 2009: 306).

It is indisputable that Tolkien provided significant inspiration for contemporary Paganism on a general and metaphorical level. What this chapter aims to show is that Tolkien's work also has been used by religious groups for whom Tolkien's writings are absolutely *central* and who believe that important parts of his mythology refer to *real* supernatural beings, events and otherworlds in a straightforward and non-metaphorical way. In what follows, I will sketch the history of this Tolkien spirituality from the 1970s till today with an emphasis on the twenty-first century.[2]

Tolkien's fantasy writings about the Middle-earth universe function as the main authoritative, religious texts in Tolkien spirituality. These writings, which are collectively referred to as 'the Legendarium', include *The Hobbit* (first published in 1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (first published in 1954), and *The Silmarillion* (first published in 1977), which provides the mythological background. Some serious Tolkien religionists study in detail the twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth* series (first published 1983–1996), which is a collection of drafts of *The Silmarillion* and related material.[3]

Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* was released in 2001–2003 and caused an immediate increase in Tolkien spirituality. A substantial portion of those engaged in Tolkien spirituality today, were first introduced to Middle-earth through the films. Though most of them went on to read the books, the films remain the most important source of inspiration for many. Needless to say, just as in the Tolkien fan community, individual Tolkien religionists using the books and films respectively as authoritative texts regard each other with suspicion. But they all look forward to 2012 where they hope that the film adaptation of *The Hobbit* will generate a renewed interest in Tolkien spirituality.

Tolkien spirituality obviously has much in common with the fascination of Tolkien's narrative world found among Tolkien fans. Nevertheless,

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[2] I use 'Tolkien spirituality' as a convenient shorthand for 'spirituality based on Tolkien's literary mythology'. Since the shorthand might suggest otherwise, I want to stress that Tolkien spirituality focuses on Tolkien's works rather than on his person.

[3] *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth* were edited and published by Tolkien's son Christopher Tolkien after his father's death in 1973.

Tolkien religionists use Tolkien's works in an inherently religious manner that clearly differentiates Tolkien spirituality from Tolkien fandom. For instance, most Tolkien religionists believe that Middle-earth is a *real* place. Some of these believe that Tolkien tells the ancient history of our world, while others believe that Middle-earth exists on another plane or in another dimension. Even more central in Tolkien spirituality is the ritual interaction with various superhuman beings from Tolkien's Legendarium. Some Tolkien religionists additionally claim to be (partly) Elves, descendants of the Elves (Quendi) of Tolkien's narrative. In contrast, Tolkien fans regard Middle-earth as a fictional place and do not engage in rituals directed at Middle-earth's supernatural beings.

There is no central or umbrella organisation for Tolkien spirituality, and the initiatives are so scattered that we cannot even speak of a movement. Inspired by Colin Campbell's (1972) notion of the 'cultic milieu', I will therefore use the term 'milieu' to denote the loose social organisation of Tolkien spirituality and henceforth speak about the 'spiritual Tolkien milieu'. At least in the Internet era, individuals and groups engaged in Tolkien spirituality have been sufficiently interconnected to form a 'milieu', where the different groups to some extent share and exchange ideas, practices and members. Furthermore, the spiritual Tolkien milieu can be seen as a sub-milieu within the general cultic (or esoteric) milieu.[4] This is the case because most individuals engaged in Tolkien spirituality are also engaged in other alternative religious practices and subscribe to a variety of those alternative religious and scientific views that characterise the esoteric milieu, for instance astrology, healing, tarot, yoga, UFOs, grail lore and lay lines. It is the spiritual Tolkien milieu that is the analytical object of this chapter, rather than any specific group.

In what follows, I will describe what individuals engaged in Tolkien spirituality believe and practice, discuss the ontological status they attribute to Tolkien's narrative world, and analyse the ways in which they combine Tolkien material with other religious elements. Taking a historical approach will enable me to compare the two waves of Tolkien spirituality *before* and *after* the film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* and the rise of the Internet. Later, I will relate my findings to Adam Possamai's concept of hyper-real religion. My first task is to sketch some of the features of

[4] To avoid the pejorative term 'cult' I prefer to use the term 'esoteric milieu' rather than 'cultic milieu'.

Tolkien's writings that provide what we can call 'religious affordances' and so make his texts usable as authoritative, religious texts.

Religious Affordances in Tolkien's Legendarium

Tolkien's writings are not used as religious texts without reason. On the contrary, they share a number of features with conventional religious texts that promote their transformation from fiction to religion. These features, which I call religious affordances, include (a) an elaborate cosmology and theology (in *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth*), (b) a frame narrative connecting the narrative world to our own (in *The Lord of the Rings*), and (c) Tolkien's personal experience of being inspired during the writing process (in his letters). In this section I will briefly outline each of these in turn.

The cosmology and theology according to the lore of the Elves, including an account of the creation of the world, is recounted in detail in *The Silmarillion*. In the beginning, before the creation of the world, only the supreme creator god existed, who is called Eru (the One) or Ilúvatar (Allfather). Eru first created an order of spiritual beings, the Ainur (Holy Ones), and the Ainur assisted Eru in the creation of the world by singing it into existence. Some of the Ainur subsequently went into the created world as incarnated beings to further shape it and rule it in Eru's name. The fourteen most important of these incarnate Ainur are called the Valar (Powers); the lesser Ainur are called Maiar. One evil Vala, Melkor, wanted to rule the created world for himself and rebelled against the rest of the Valar, becoming Morgoth (The Black Enemy), taking a number of Maiar with him in his Fall. After a mighty war, Morgoth was bound by Ilúvatar in the Void outside of Creation, but his servants continue to plague the world. Sauron, the main evil power in *The Lord of the Rings*, is a fallen Maia and a former servant of Melkor. Following a human revolt against the Valar provoked by Sauron, the Valar have withdrawn from the inhabited world at the time of *The Lord of the Rings*, but are occasionally referred to. This is true especially for one of them, Elbereth (Star-queen), to whom the Elves sing hymns. The wizards Gandalf and Saruman who play an active role in *The Lord of the Rings* are both Maiar.

Several kinds of lesser carnate beings were also created, including humans, Elves, Hobbits and Dwarves. For Tolkien spirituality, the majestic, artistic, and almost immortal Elves are of the greatest significance and function as spiritual role models. This is feasible, partly because Tolkien's

Elves (Quendi) are portrayed as very human, even to the extent that some unions between Elves and humans take place.[5] As a result, Elven blood flows in the veins of some of the human kings in Tolkien's world. Further, through a union between the Elf Thingol and the Maia Melian, Maian ancestry and thus a divine spark originating from before the creation of the world, is blended into this bloodline.

The entire created universe is referred to as Eä (It Is), but the narrative takes place exclusively on one particular planet, Arda (Earth). Originally, Arda was comprised of two main landmasses: Middle-earth, the home of Men and Elves, and Aman (the Blessed Realm) in the West, the abode of Valar and Maiar. At the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, however, the Elves have also left for Aman, which has been separated from the physical world. With the 'straight way' gone, humans can only visit the Blessed Realm in dreams, and humans believe that their souls go there when they die, before leaving Eä to be with Ilúvatar.

The second religious affordance in Tolkien's writings is the frame narrative which links the fictional mythology to the world of the reader. In the foreword, prologue and appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien constructs a tradition of commentary and editing, claiming (in jest) that he is not the author, but merely the publisher (and translator) of material originally written by others. The Hobbit Bilbo is presented as the author of *The Hobbit*, his nephew Frodo as the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* is presented as a collection of Elvish lore. Tolkien has said that his stories take place in *our* world, but that the *time* is imaginary (2006b: 239). Therefore his works are not real history, but "feigned history," a term Tolkien uses in the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 2007: xxiv).[6] It is this fictional imitation of history that enables Tolkien religionists to treat Tolkien's narrative as real history. They are not alone in doing so. According to William Ratliff and Charles Flinn (1968: 143), British lending libraries generally catalogued *The Lord of the Rings* as non-fiction in the 1950s, which surprised and upset Tolkien. Also, revisionist grail historians such as Laurence Gardner (2003: 1, 6 and 315) assume that Tolkien had obtained esoteric, historical knowledge. which he hinted at in his books.

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[5] In her PhD thesis on the Otherkin movement, Danielle Kirby (2009a: 112–113) makes the point that the spiritual identification with non-human beings has been facilitated by an increasingly humanised depiction of non-humans in fantasy literature and films.

[6] It falls outside the scope of this chapter to show in detail how Tolkien constructs this feigned historicity. See Flieger (2005: 67–73) for a detailed discussion.

The third important religious affordance is found in Tolkien's letters and in the interviews he gave in the last years of his life about *The Lord of the Rings*. On many occasions he claimed some kind of inspiration or revelation and saw himself as a recorder rather than an author. He writes in a letter about his stories that "they arose in my mind as given things" (Tolkien 2006b: 130). Tolkien seems to have interpreted this as the working of God's grace. But he writes in terms sufficiently vague for others to interpret his inspiration as Gnostic insights or channeling. In any case, Tolkien's statements on inspiration are used by individuals engaged in Tolkien spirituality to legitimate their views concerning the scriptural status of his writings.

The First Wave of Tolkien Spirituality

The Lord of the Rings was first published in 1954–1955, but it was not until the paperback edition in 1965 that Tolkien rose to massive fame and became a "campus cult figure" according to one observer (Ellwood 1994: 134). The hippies of the late 1960s found their own ideals expressed in the hedonistic Shire culture of pipeweed and mushrooms, identified themselves as Hobbits, wore 'Frodo Lives' and 'Gandalf for President' badges, and took Tolkien-inspired names for themselves and their communes (Hinckle 1967: 25; Ratliff and Flinn 1968; Walmsley 1984). They also used *The Lord of the Rings* as a psychedelic manual (Clifton 1987; Ratliff and Flinn 1968: 144). The Pagans of the 1970s and 1980s shared Tolkien's love for nature and expressed this by naming their sanctuaries after Elven localities such as Rivendell and Lothlórien. But even though Tolkien was an important source of inspiration most Pagans did not use Tolkien material in ritual.[7]

The earliest known religious group that was clearly based on *The Lord of the Rings* was active in the Mojave Desert in the United States in the early 1970s. Robert Ellwood, Professor Emeritus of World Religions at the University of Southern California, tells this anecdote:

> [a]bout this time [in 1973], back in southern California, we [Ellwood and his wife who were themselves active in the Los Angeles Mythopoeic Society] heard about a group centered around a mystical woman living in the Mojave

[7] Graham Harvey mentions that some Heathens have developed Tolkien-inspired liturgy (2007: 68) and that practitioners of Chaos Magick have integrated Tolkien material (2007: 97), but he does not refer to any particular groups nor say how common it is.

> Desert who was convinced that *The Lord of the Rings* saga was actual history, and Tolkien knew it, though for reasons the author deemed compelling he veiled the chronicle in fictional form. She had regular conversations with Elves, Dwarves, and Hobbits, and moreover was convinced that the actual site of Gondor was what is now the Mojave Desert. She believed that Aragorn's castle was buried out there, and by psychic means had determined the location of the ruins. She was continually announcing archeological excavations to be conducted by her group, then postponing the date for one reason or another (Ellwood 2002: 133).

Another 1970s group that would prove much more influential was the Elf Queen's Daughters who claim that an Ouija board spirit had instructed them to take this name in 1975 (Love 2005: 36). The group was interested in many different kinds of esoteric practices, but was also clearly influenced by Tolkien. According to one member, they sang the Elven hymns from *The Lord of the Rings* to Elbereth, and when the core group tired of being Elves after a few years, they named themselves Tooks after a prominent Hobbit family (Love 2005: 36). Even though the Elf Queen's Daughters was a short-lived group, it is important because it marks the beginning of the Elven movement—which in turn sparked the Otherkin movement in the 1990s—and attests to the initial Tolkien influence on both movements. Some of the original members of the Elf Queen's Daughters came to call themselves the Silvan Elves (after the wood Elves in Tolkien's books) and continue to occupy a prominent place in the Elven movement, now referring to themselves as the Silver Elves.[8]

Perhaps the largest and most successful organisation integrating Tolkien material in its spirituality is the Tribunal of the Sidhe.[9] The group was founded in 1985, and initially Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* and Tolkien were the most important sources of inspiration. The Tribunal of the Sidhe does not read Tolkien and Graves as accurate history, but do take Graves' account of the Tuatha Dé Danaan and other magical people from European legend and Tolkien's stories about Valar, Maiar and Elves to be mythical references to the real phenomenon of 'changelings'. Changelings are spiritual beings whose real home is in another world, but who sometimes become incarnated, by choice or chance, in this

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[8] Internet site, http://silverelves.angelfire.com. Accessed 12/07/2011. Zardoa Love is a former member of the Elf Queen's Daughters and now one of the Silver Elves. His master's thesis in depth psychology (Love 2005) provides information on the early history of the Elven movement.

[9] The description of this group is based on interview and email correspondence with circle leader and founding member Lady Danu.

world. The members of the Tribunal believe that they are 'changelings' themselves, and they visit their 'home' by means of astral projection. The Valar are regarded as the most powerful type of 'kin folk' from the home world, and for instance the fertility Valië (female Vala) Yavanna has been invoked in ritual. They say that they found out, with 'magickal research', that Tolkien was a changeling himself, a bard of the kin folk, who chose to be incarnated to tell the true story of the kin folk in mythical form. Even though Tolkien clearly plays an important role, most of the beliefs and rituals of the Tribunal of the Sidhe are not Tolkien-based, and Tolkien material is combined with Wicca, Norse and Celtic mythology, shamanism and ceremonial magic. Everything centres on the notion of 'changelings' which is foreign to the Legendarium. The Tribunal of the Sidhe still exists today with more than twenty circles worldwide, most in the United States, including a circle formed by second-generation members.[10]

Another American group, the Order of the Red Grail, which blends Christianity and ceremonial magic, made a quite elaborate Valar ritual in 1993 that circulated among Pagans in the United States and New Zealand and was later published online.[11] A member of the group has told me, however, that neither this nor other Tolkien-inspired rituals form a part of their regular practice. They view the Valar ritual as a more playful, experimental and less serious one than their usual rituals, and only consider the Valar to be fictional or at best mytho-poetic representations of real metaphysical powers or archetypes. Nevertheless, the group has continued to perform the 'High Elven Valar Working' occasionally at Pagan festivals.

The groups that I have sketched above all belong to the *first wave* of Tolkien spirituality. In the first wave, Tolkien's writings were used as a source of spiritual inspiration, but (with the exception of the Mojave Desert group) Tolkien's texts were not the *main* source of authority (and certainly not the only one). Rather, Tolkien lore was integrated into and subordinated to other material. This is obviously the case in groups that view the Valar as only archetypal images (like the Order of the Red Grail). But it is also the case in groups that believe in the Valar as discrete beings (like the Tribunal of the Sidhe). In other words, religious ideas and practices based on Tolkien's literary mythology were, in the twentieth century, one ingredient among many others in the esoteric milieu that individuals

[10] Only a few of these circles reach out to the public. One that does is Lady Danu's Circle of the Coyote. Internet site, http://thechangeling.ning.com. Accessed 13/07/2011.

[11] Internet site, http://fifthwaymysteryschool.org/valar.html. Accessed 13/07/2011.

and groups could add to their menu, but one could not yet speak of an independent spiritual Tolkien milieu. Having been founded in the 1970s through to the 1980s, the first wave groups naturally based themselves on Tolkien's books and began their existence offline. Even though all the groups that are still active today have some kind of online presence, they remain essentially offline groups.

The Second Wave of Tolkien Spirituality

The second wave of Tolkien spirituality has taken form in the twenty-first century. The most important cause of the renewed spiritual interest in Tolkien was Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* which was released in 2001–2003. For many of those engaged in Tolkien spirituality today, these films constitute a more important source of authority than the books. Additionally, the second wave of Tolkien spirituality is primarily organised online. In the years just after the movies came out, at least nine online groups were formed devoted to Tolkien spirituality. One called itself Middle-earth Pagans, and others crafted names in Elvish meaning things like The Elven Path (Tië Eldaliéva), and The Silvership of the Valar (Ilsaluntë Valion).[12] In these groups, people from around the world (but mostly from the United States and other English-speaking countries), meet and exchange knowledge, experiences and ideas about how to form a Tolkien-based spiritual path. While the move online has made specialisation and global co-operation easier, it has in most cases come at the cost of relatively unstable and incoherent organisation.[13]

Most of these groups are collectives of networked solitaries who do their rituals alone and offline. As far as I know, none of the second wave online groups has managed to organise offline meet-ups, but at least two groups experimented with group rituals using phone or Skype. I participated in one such Skype ritual in September 2009 with members of Tië Eldaliéva to celebrate Enderi, the Middle-Days, a three-day festival at

[12] For the discussion board of Middle-earth Pagans see http://mepagans.proboards.com/index.cgi. Accessed 13/07/2011. The home page of Tië Eldaliéva can be found at http://www.lassiquendi.com/TheHiddenRealm. Accessed 13/07/2011. Ilsaluntë Valion is located at http://westofwest.org. Accessed 13/07/2011.

[13] Cowan (2005) draws a similar conclusion in his study of online Paganism. Cowan's study is especially relevant for Tolkien spirituality since he primarily studies Pagan and Wiccan discussion groups on Yahoo! and similar sites where most spiritual Tolkien groups are still anchored.

the middle of the Elven year. The frame of the ritual was strongly Wicca-inspired: a ritual circle was cast, energy raised and sealed and the directions acknowledged. At the end of the ritual the circle was re-opened. The lack of physical co-presence (the three participants were located in the Netherlands, the United States and Canada) was not seen as a problem. This had to do with the fact that the core of the ritual involved the imagination rather than anything physical. Calantirniel, the leader of the ritual, read a visualisation sequence aloud which was meant to transport those listening to the Blessed Realm. We were left with Oromë, the hunter Vala, and there was a twenty minute meditation break, after which the participants reported those of their experiences and conversations with Oromë that were not considered too private. Ilsaluntë Valion, which is a splinter group from Tië Eldaliéva, also used Skype earlier, but members say that they had troubles getting into the proper ritual state of mind using Skype, and the group has stopped doing online rituals.

Apart from the move online, the most striking change from the first to the second wave of Tolkien spirituality, is that Tolkien's Legendarium is now credited with increased authority in two ways: Tolkien's texts now play a more *central* role, even when they are combined with elements from other traditions, and Tolkien's mythology is attributed a higher degree of *reality*. In what follows, I will discuss these two trends which together reflect the formation of a spiritual Tolkien milieu of relative independence from the broader esoteric milieu. I will also reflect on how the Internet facilitated its formation.

Centrality: Tolkien's Legendarium as Narrative Frame or Reconstructed Tradition

With the exception of the Mojave Desert group, all groups in the first wave Tolkien spirituality integrated Tolkien's fiction into and subordinated it to other material. In contrast, all second wave groups use Tolkien's writings as the most central texts, and other material is here subordinated to the Tolkien framework. It varies, however, exactly which other material is combined with Tolkien and how this is done. Broadly speaking, three groups of Tolkien religionists, Middle-earth Pagans, Middle-earth Christians and Legendarium Reconstructionists, combine Tolkien material with other alternative religious beliefs and practices, each in a different way.

Tolkien religionists with some sort of Pagan background make up the largest group and tend to self-identify as 'Middle-earth Pagans'. Many of

them cross-pollinate an eclectic form of Wicca with Tolkien spirituality and identify various supernatural characters from Tolkien's world with the God and the Goddess. Laurasia, the founder of the group Middle-earth Pagans, told me that she has used Gandalf as an image of the God and the Elven queen Galadriel as an image of the Goddess. This use of Gandalf as an archetypal image did not, however, prevent her from viewing Gandalf as an independent being with whom she had a personal relation. In fact, Gandalf was also her spirit guide. Among Middle-earth Pagans it is common to do rituals focused on Gandalf and the Elven Lords and Ladies Elrond, Celeborn, Arwen and Galadriel (rather than on the Valar), to celebrate the days of Frodo's recovery and Aragorn's coronation, and to believe that Middle-earth really exists. Some claim that the lore revealed to Tolkien was essentially Pagan, but that Tolkien Christianised it to fit his own beliefs; a suggestion that would probably have the deeply devout Roman Catholic Tolkien turn in his grave.

It is a good question, however, whether Tolkien would have preferred the second group of Tolkien religionists who bring their Christian background into play with their Tolkien-based beliefs. These Middle-earth Christians *do* share some notions with Tolkien himself, though: they equate Eru with the Christian God, they see him as the source of inspiration for Tolkien's stories, and they speak of the Valar as a kind of angels (rather than as deities) just as Tolkien did. But like the Middle-earth Pagans, they believe in the reality of Middle-earth in a way that Tolkien himself did not, and their Christianity is open to all kinds of esoteric beliefs and practices.[14] In fact, the Tolkien-inspired Pagans and Christians have much more in common than they have differences between them. Both groups have an inherently eclectic approach to spirituality and engage in many of those practices and beliefs that make up the esoteric milieu in general. Next to discussions about Valar and Elves on their online forums, one will find threads about astrology, clairvoyance, crystals, psychic vampires, grail legends, Atlantis, UFOs, energy healing, reincarnation, past lives, ancestral memory and more.

Middle-earth Pagans and Christians share what I call a *narrative frame* approach to Tolkien's mythology. They use the Legendarium as a hermeneutic key or religious perception filter through which they interpret other religious traditions. This allows them to integrate beliefs and practices from various sources into a relatively coherent whole. For instance, the Atlantis

[14] The Indigo Elves is an example of a group led by a Middle-earth Christian. Internet site, http://indigocrystals.proboards.com/index.cgi?. Accessed 13/07/2011.

myth and the Noah Flood myth are generally taken to be mythological references to the same 'real' historical event, namely Eru's destruction of the continent Númenor which is recounted in *The Silmarillion*. Legends, myths and fairy-tales about elves, dwarves, fairies, trolls and so on are viewed as echoes of real beings who populated the world in the time that Tolkien writes about, and archaeological findings of early humanoids are interpreted as evidence for this view. It is similarly attempted to show how the coastline of Middle-earth matches that of pre-historical Europe.[15] Like many other alternative religionists, those engaged in Tolkien spirituality have spirit guides, but theirs prove to be Maiar, and past life regression shows that they lived past lives as Elves before the War of the Ring. The grail or dragon bloodline featuring in esoteric grail lore and revisionist history is identified with the Elven/Maiar bloodline from *The Silmarillion*. Since the Elves are astrologers and practitioners of magic and alternative healing, such practices can be included in the mix, and belief in aliens is sometimes creatively added by allowing for the existence of Star Elves. The Skype ritual mentioned above not only showed a Wiccan influence, but also included references to *chakras* and the Christ Consciousness and used Hindu *mudras* and flower essence. While Tolkien's mythology is used throughout as a narrative frame, these combinations of Tolkien elements with other alternative beliefs and practices make clear that the spiritual Tolkien milieu is a sub-milieu of the esoteric milieu in general.

The third type of Tolkien religionists has a different approach, which can be termed *reconstructionist*. The Reconstructionists are *purists* who want to create a tradition based *only* on Tolkien's mythology. In their own words they are strictly 'Legendarium-based'. They use the Elven ritual calendar given in an appendix to *The Lord of the Rings* and value the twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth* higher than Tolkien's other writings (not to mention the movies). This is because they prefer to use Tolkien's earliest and unedited story drafts which are believed to be closest to his original experience of inspiration. Where Tolkien's lore lacks something, as in the case of rituals, the Reconstructionists prefer to develop their own rituals rather than to borrow from existing traditions like Wicca or Christianity. In the group Ilsaluntë Valion, which is the clearest example of this approach, many ritual elements are even believed to have been

[15] The use of archaeological evidence as a source of legitimisation in Tolkien spirituality mirrors strategies found in other new religions (cf. Cusack 2011).

revealed to members by Elves and Valar. An Elven spirit guide of one of the members writes part of the group's meditation sequences, a Valar has taught another member a ritual blessing which the group uses, and a third member has done 'Gnostic research' into the names of the Valar in their own divine tongue, Valarin. These names are used by the group to establish contact with the Valar, prior to the meditative journeys to the Blessed Realm, which form the group's main ritual practice.

The practice of using a specific mythological tradition as exclusive textual basis (*in casu* Tolkien's Legendarium) and to combine scholarly studies and ritual divinatory techniques as strategies to reconstruct the culture and religion 'behind the text' is inspired by Heathenry and Celtic Reconstructionism. This practice has indeed been brought to Tolkien Reconstructionism by members with Pagan Reconstructionist backgrounds. Other Tolkien Reconstructionists have been active in Elven language groups and similar forms of intellectual Tolkien fandom prior to their involvement in Tolkien spirituality. It is interesting to note that the Elvish language community—led by David Salo who later wrote all the Elven dialogue for *The Lord of the Rings* films—in the mid 1990s also took a reconstructionist turn. Language reconstructionists began to 'reconstruct' the grammar and vocabulary of Tolkien's two Elvish languages 'behind' the actualisations of them in Tolkien's writings using standard philological methods. They also began to use the languages creatively, for instance for the composition of poetry. Reconstructionist Tolkien spirituality combines the reconstructionist tendencies within Paganism and philological Tolkien fandom.

Tolkien Reconstructionists do not depend as exclusively on Tolkien as they claim. In practice many of those who consider themselves strictly Legendarium-based and consciously purge flower essences, *chakras*, crystals and Wiccan circles which they consider 'New Age' and low style, are still happy to integrate more intellectual elements from the esoteric milieu into their Tolkien tradition. Such intellectual elements include Neo-Gnostic readings of Jung, Henry Corbin's idea of the 'imaginal realm', advanced astrology and alternative archaeology. On the one hand therefore, the Tolkien Reconstructionists are situated as firmly within the broader esoteric milieu as the Middle-earth Pagans and Christians. But on the other hand, *within* the spiritual Tolkien milieu, the Reconstructionists represent the pole of relative disembeddedness and independence from the esoteric milieu, while the Middle-earth Pagans and Christians represent the pole of relative embeddedness and dependence.

Reality: Mytho-historical and Mytho-cosmological Beliefs

The strong trend towards increased *centrality* of Tolkien's mythology from the first to the second wave of Tolkien spirituality is accompanied by a trend towards a higher degree of *reality* attribution or ontologisation of the narrative world. In the first wave, the degree of reality attribution varied widely between the groups: both the Elven groups and the Order of the Red Grail saw the Valar as merely metaphors or, at best, archetypal images. The Tribunal of the Sidhe viewed the Valar, Maiar and Elves as independent, spiritual entities, but cosmologically re-positioned them as three examples of 'kin folk' and potential 'changelings'. Only the Mojave Desert group believed in the historicity of Tolkien's writings.

In second wave Tolkien spirituality, the picture is much clearer in favour of high reality attribution. The most common stance here, shared by most Middle-earth Christians and Reconstructionists and many Middle-earth Pagans, is that Tolkien's works are about the real world and contain a historical core. Individuals holding this view sometimes term it 'mytho-historical'. They believe that the earth was once populated by Elves and Hobbits, and that the Blessed Realm, which was once intertwined with our world, now exists as a transcendent otherworld. The mytho-historical Tolkien religionists maintain that the narrated events of the Legendarium have taken place in the real world prior to their fixation in the narrative text, but do allow for mistakes and inaccuracies in Tolkien's mythologised account.

Almost equally common is the view that can be called *mytho-cosmological*. Those who hold this view believe in the reality of (at least some parts of) Tolkien's *cosmology*, but do not believe that he tells the *history* of our world. There are two variations of this view. Some believe that the Valar and the Blessed Realm exist in a transcendent world that one can travel to in meditation. Individuals holding this view do not identify Middle-earth with the physical world, but have no problem doing otherworld-directed rituals together with mytho-historical Tolkien religionists. The second version of the mytho-cosmological view is that also (or primarily) Middle-earth, rather than the Blessed Realm, exists in another dimension. This last view is particularly common among Middle-earth Pagans for whom the movies serve as the authoritative texts. Because the movies lack the 'feigned history' frame narrative identifying Middle-earth with the real world, Middle-earth itself can be seen as an otherworld.

The Internet and Second Wave Tolkien Spirituality

While impulses towards Tolkien spirituality before the Internet only managed to survive within a more general Pagan framework (as in the Tribunal of the Sidhe), the second, *online*, wave of Tolkien spirituality attributes a high degree of centrality and reality to Tolkien's works. I do not think that is accidental. On the contrary, I will argue that the Internet strongly facilitated the formation of groups dedicated to Tolkien spirituality.

Already before the advent of the Internet, a small group of people existed who shared three characteristics: they were long-time Tolkien fans, they were active participants in the esoteric milieu at large, and they wanted to synthesise those two engagements. These individuals experienced ridicule and were treated as outsiders both in the Tolkien fan community and among fellow religionists in the esoteric milieu. Some of them actively searched for like-minded individuals, but it was only with the coming of the Internet that they were able to find each other on a scale sufficient for group formation. The Internet made it easy to set up a group devoted to a very specialist interest on Yahoo! or another social site, and it became equally easy for interested individuals to search for such groups and join. The Internet thus allowed a 'long tail' of small, specialist groups to form and gain critical mass for further development, and groups dedicated to Tolkien spirituality were among these. Not all new spiritual Tolkien groups were created by long-time fans, though. Most Middle-earth Pagan groups were founded and joined by people who were fans of the film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* rather than of the books, and who were already active in other Pagan Internet groups.

Many of those who joined one of the new Internet-based spiritual Tolkien groups did so mostly out of curiosity and soon left or became passive. Others did not find the group inspiring and preferred to practise on their own. Another group lost interest after a while and moved on to new forms of spirituality based on popular fiction, many as vampires. For those who found group membership rewarding and stayed active, two processes could be observed after the initial group formation. Firstly, the beliefs and practices of those individuals developed and consolidated. Members generally arrived with a vague belief that Tolkien's writings contained more than metaphorical, and possibly historical, truth. Through study and conversation with each other, members expanded their knowledge of the Legendarium over time and mutually reinforced their belief in its historicity (or cosmology). Together they practised interpreting other religious traditions in the light of the Tolkien's mythology, and ritual experiences

of interaction with the Valar, Maiar and Elves consolidated the members' belief in those entities. The second process was that different views of what to believe, how to practise and how to organise the groups led to schisms, with the splinter group typically stressing the centrality and reality of Tolkien even more than the mother group.

To sum up, the Internet promoted the formation of a self-conscious spiritual Tolkien milieu, firstly by helping people get together who already had an ambition to construct a Tolkien-based spiritual tradition, and secondly by offering a platform for recruitment and outreach. This brought together a critical mass of Tolkien religionists which started the self-propelling processes of belief consolidation (through conversation and ritual) and group competition and specialisation, thus further developing the already present tendency to ontologise Tolkien's mythology.

Tolkien Spirituality as Hyper-real or Fiction-based Religion

In this last section I will briefly discuss my main findings, the two trends towards increased centrality and reality attribution from the first to the second wave of Tolkien spirituality, in relation to Adam Possamai's ideas about hyper-real religions. The centrality trend corroborates similar findings in Possamai's material, but the tendency among Tolkien religionists to believe in the reality of Tolkien's narrative world conflicts with Possamai's notion that hyper-real religions provide inspiration on a 'metaphorical level' only.

Possamai (2003: 37, 2005: 79, 2009: 85) uses the term 'hyper-real religion' to refer to any "simulacrum of a religion created out of popular culture that provides inspiration for believers/consumers at a metaphorical level." According to Possamai, hyper-real religions have existed since the 1950s in the form of, for instance, Scientology, the Church of Satan, the Church of All Worlds and the Neo-Pagan movement. In this first generation of hyper-real religions, the inspiration provided by popular fiction had a significant, but merely supportive and *secondary* character (Possamai 2009: 89). The Internet and the rise of so-called 'participatory culture',[16] however, has been the catalyst for a new generation of hyper-real religions that

[16] Participatory culture is a term used by cultural studies scholars to denote the trend among contemporary individuals to actively participate in popular culture rather than just passively consume it. Participatory culture refers to, for instance, blogging, fandom and gaming (see Jenkins 2006).

are largely Internet-based and use popular fiction as a *primary* source of inspiration, appropriating it as "the spiritual work itself" (Possamai 2009: 90). The *Star Wars* based religion, Jediism, is Possamai's prime example of second-generation hyper-real religion which he also calls *hyper-real religions.com* (Possamai 2009: 87–90).

In other words, Possamai observes a trend for hyper-real religions *in general* towards the use of specific popular cultural texts as increasingly central and framing spiritual resources. The increased centrality that Tolkien's mythology enjoys in the second wave of Tolkien spirituality compared to the first wave, and the new importance of the Internet as a meeting place, communication tool (and occasionally ritual space) fit precisely into this picture. The two waves of Tolkien spirituality can be seen as instantiations of the two generations of hyper-real religions identified by Possamai.

The increased attribution of reality to Tolkien's mythology in second wave Tolkien spirituality eludes Possamai's framework, however, since he understands a hyper-real religion (of any generation) as providing "inspiration for believers/consumers at a *metaphorical level*" (my emphasis). I have shown that a large portion of Tolkien religionists, especially of the second wave, actually believe that Tolkien's works contain a historical core, a belief that is very clearly not metaphorical.

The straightforward conclusion would be that Tolkien spirituality does not belong to the category of hyper-real religions. It is not the only solution, however. As I read Possamai, he is more concerned to show that new religions based on popular fiction have appeared since the 1950s, than to argue strongly for the necessarily metaphorical belief in such religions. It should therefore be possible to re-describe the category of religions based on popular fiction without tying it to metaphorical inspiration.

Carole Cusack (2010a: 125) has pointed out a further potential for misunderstanding inherent in the very term 'hyper-real' religion, that should be taken into account as part of such a reformulation: the adjective 'hyper-real' in 'hyper-real religions' is borrowed from the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, but Possamai uses it in a way that differs from Baudrillard's. In Baudrillard's work the term carries the dystopian connotation of the inability to distinguish at all between fantasy and reality. It does not do so for Possamai, who simply uses the term hyper-real religion to refer to the fact that such religions are inspired by popular fiction. Surely hyper-real religions succeed in creating an imagined worldview that to some extent usurps empirical reality as the social reality of its adherents. But in doing so, they simply achieve what all religions do.

For these reasons I suggest the use of the more neutral term *fiction-based religion* for the category to which Tolkien spirituality belongs—possibly together with other of the religions discussed in this volume. In my understanding, a fiction-based religion is *a religion that uses fictional texts as its main authoritative, religious texts*. That a text is authoritative for a religion means here that its members use terminology, beliefs, practices, roles and/or social organisation from the authoritative text as a model for their own real-world religion. The term *fiction* refers to a narrative where the narrated events are presented without the ambition on behalf of the author of referring to events that took place in the real world prior to their entextualisation.[17]

Tolkien spirituality as discussed in this article, especially of the second wave, fits my definition of fiction-based religion. Tolkien spirituality is *fiction-based*, because its main authoritative texts, Tolkien's Legendarium and Jackson's film adaptations, are not meant by their authors to represent events that took place in the real world before being entextualised. And it is *religion* because it brackets the intended fictionality of the author and ontologises (parts of) the narrative world by postulating the existence of a trans-empirical reality populated by Elves and Valar and engaging with them in ritual.

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[17] This understanding of fiction as depending on the author's intention of non-reference follows Dorrit Cohn (1999: 12). This does not mean, however, that the author can control the reader. An author can try to guide or trick his/her reader (Tolkien does both), but the final choice of fictionalising or historising/ontologising a narrative belongs to the reader in the act of reading as Marie-Laure Ryan has stressed (2008). Fiction-based religions are prime examples of the possibility of reading a text against its author's intentions.

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PART THREE

THE INTERNET, COMPUTER GAMES AND CASUAL DEALINGS WITH THE HYPER-REAL RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON

THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH D20s: EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY AND ROLE-PLAYING GAMING[1]

John Walliss

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a growing academic debate around the intersection of religion and popular culture. The majority of this work, however, has been textual/analytical in nature, and to date there has been little examination of either the ways in which audiences make use of, negotiate, or resist the variety of religious themes found within popular culture, or the potential ways in which popular culture may act as a resource for individuals' spiritual exploration. Over the last half-decade, however, this pattern has begun to shift with a number of commentators calling for a more 'audience centered' approach to the study of religion and popular culture. David Morgan (2007), for example, in a wide-ranging discussion of the field has called for scholars to consider the ways in which popular culture texts are received, rather than just how they are produced and distributed. Similarly, looking towards developments in communication studies over the latter half of the twentieth century, Jolyon Mitchell (2007: 42) has argued for a move beyond seeing the media as "myth-makers" or "instruments of communication" towards "how and where audiences construct their own myths, rituals, and meanings out of what they see" (see also Schofield Clark 2003; Lynch 2007).[2] In addition, several monographs have also been published that take as their starting point the intersection of popular culture, religion and everyday life. Amy Frykholm's (2004) study of readers of the *Left Behind* series, for example, deconstructs the notion that there is a single reading or readership of the series, and explores the ways in which a variety of readers, ranging from evangelicals through to non-believers, respond to and negotiate the texts. Similarly, both Lynn

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[1] Versions of this chapter were presented at the Mid-West and North East PCA conferences in Detroit and New York, October 2009. For non-gamers, a D20 is a 20–sided die.

[2] This approach is, of course, not wholly new. A number of older studies focused on the ways in which different religious audiences responded to the mass media. See, for example, the chapters in Kintz and Lesage (1998) and Stout and Buddenbaum (1996; 2001).

Schofield Clark's (2003) *From Angels to Aliens* and Stewart Hoover's (2006) *Religion in the Media Age* examine the ways in which individuals both use popular culture as a framework for understanding and exploring their religious identities and filter what they see in media through their respective beliefs.

This chapter contributes to this debate by examining the phenomenon of evangelical Christian role-playing gamers, focusing on the ways in which their beliefs and hobby intersect.[3] Evangelical gamers, I will show, are in an ambiguous position in that for over three decades their hobby has been the subject of a range of criticisms by their fellow evangelicals, who have claimed that the role-playing games (hereafter RPGs) are Satanic and 'a doorway to the occult'. They therefore have to negotiate these criticisms and carve out a social space for themselves among their fellow-believers as *Christians who play RPGs*. In doing so, however, they also have to potentially negotiate uncertainty—and possibly even hostility—from fellow gamers who may associate them with the evangelical critics of RPGs. They also, therefore, need to carve out a space for themselves among their fellow gamers as *RPG players who are also Christians*. Last, but by no means least, they also have to carve out a space for themselves as 'Christians' and 'gamers' or 'geeks' within a broader culture that often looks on both with disdain. None of these spaces, however, is secure, and in my analysis I will explore both the strategies used to maintain them and the potential dissonances and ambivalences that they engender.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first, I will present a brief overview of the evangelical critique of RPGs that emerged in the late 1970s/early 1980s. Secondly, following on from this, I will draw on a range of primary materials and interviews with gamers themselves to examine the ways in which evangelical Christian gamers attempt to both respond to these critiques and create a specifically Christian space within the role-playing community.

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[3] The analysis presented in this chapter is based primarily on interviews conducted with twenty evangelical Christian gamers based in the United Kingdom and the United States. An initial call for interviewees was posted on online Christian gaming forums and interviews took place over the telephone and via email and Skype. The first draft of this chapter was passed to them and any comments or suggestions integrated into the final draft. All those who took part are where appropriate referred to in the chapter via pseudonyms. Online postings are cited to screen names.

Dark Dungeons

The roots of the evangelical critique of RPGs may be traced back to the deaths of two teenage boys in the late 1970s/1980s: Dallas Egbert III and Irving 'Bink' Pulling II. Egbert, a sixteen-year-old child prodigy, with a history of mental illness and drug use, disappeared from Michigan State University in August 1979, leaving behind a suicide note and what was believed to be a map of the steam tunnels under the university made out of drawing pins on a notice board. William Dear, a private detective hired by Egbert's family to investigate the disappearance interpreted the evidence to suggest that Egbert, an avid Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) player, had become lost while playing a form of 'live action' role-playing in the tunnels, a theory that was quickly picked up by both the local and national media. In reality, however, role-playing had no involvement at all in Egbert's disappearance. Far from being trapped below the University, believing himself to be a character in a role-playing game gone awry, Egbert had instead gone into the tunnels on the night of his disappearance with the intention of taking his own life with sleeping pills. When he awoke the next evening, he went to a friend's house, staying there a week while he recovered. Egbert then travelled to New Orleans, where he again attempted suicide, before finally moving to Morgan City, Louisiana, from where, a month after he had left the Michigan State campus, he telephoned Dear and revealed his location to him. In the popular imagination, however, D&D stayed intimately linked with the Egbert case, not least as a consequence of both Egbert's suicide in 1980 and the publication of a fictionalised account of the case, *Mazes and Monsters* by Rona Jaffe in 1981. In addition Dear, out of respect for the Egbert family, only set the public record straight in 1984 in his book *The Dungeon Master* (Dear 1985), two years after a made-for-TV movie of Jaffe's book was aired on the CBS network (Cardwell 1994; Waldron 2005).

By this time, however, the alleged link between D&D and self-destructive behaviour had been further cemented into the popular imagination with the suicide of another gifted, but troubled young man, Irving 'Bink' Pulling II. Pulling, like Egbert had a history of mental illness and violent and unusual behaviour. Nevertheless, when he committed suicide in June 1982, his mother, Pat Pulling, blamed his actions on a 'death curse' that she claimed had been placed on him on the day he died, during a D&D game that he played as part of a school program for gifted children. According to Pulling (1990: 9), her son had killed himself rather than become "a follower of evil, a Killer of man" as stipulated in the curse. After failing to sue both

her son's school and TSR Inc., the manufacturers of D&D, in 1984 Pulling's mother founded BADD (Bothered about Dungeons and Dragons) with Dr Thomas Radecki, the director of the National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV). The following year, they filed a petition with the Federal Trade Commission demanding that labels be placed on RPGs, warning that they were hazardous and could lead players to commit suicide. The Consumer Products Safety Commission, however, concluded that there was no evidence to support BADD's accusations and that, therefore, there was no justification for any warning material. Consequently, BADD turned its attention to lobbying members of Congress and other organisations (such as the media, schools and churches), claiming that RPGs could not only cause suicidal behaviour but were linked with Satanism and ritual killings (see Martin and Fine 1991). Both Pulling and Radecki also offered 'expert' testimony in various court cases in which a defendant claimed that their actions had been inspired by playing RPGs.

The tactics employed by BADD and other evangelical critics of RPGs developed over the course of the 1980s, with a variety of claims being made about the negative consequences for the individual—and, indeed, the moral order—of playing RPGs. Primarily, it was claimed, following Pulling's accusations over her son's death, that players were learning genuine occult rituals and spells from playing RPGs and using this knowledge to put curses on others. Thus, for example, in the Jack Chick tract *Dark Dungeons* (1984), a young female player, Debbie, is invited to join a Witches' coven after 'the intense occult training' she has undergone through playing D&D. In the next panel, she is shown telling the Dungeon Master, who is also the High Priestess of the coven, how she had cast her first real spell the previous evening; a 'mind bondage spell' against her father who 'was trying to stop [her] playing D&D'. The result, she exclaims, "was great": rather than stopping her playing, her father had instead "bought [her] $200.00 worth of new D&D figures and manuals [*sic*]."

Linked with this, it was also claimed that playing RPGs led individuals to commit suicide or other violent acts. Another character in *Dark Dungeons*, Marcie, for example is shown committing suicide because her character, "Black Leaf," has died in a game of D&D. "It's my fault Black Leaf died," she claims in her suicide note, "I can't face life alone!" When Debbie goes to tell the Dungeon Master/High Priestess this, she is told that "[her] spiritual growth through the game is more important that some loser's life" and that "[i]t would have happened sooner or later. [Marcie's] character was too weak." As part of their campaign against RPGs, BADD and other evangelical critics published lists and publicised the cases of individuals who, they claimed, had committed violent acts as a consequence

of their involvement with RPGs. Thus, for example, the BADD leaflet *Dungeons & Dragons: Witchcraft, Suicide and Violence* listed the names of suicide victims, adding how each shared "one common denominator: ALL WERE HEAVILY INVOLVED IN DUNGEONS & DRAGONS" (quoted in Martin and Fine 1991: 114; capitals in original). Similarly, in *The Devil's Web*, Pulling (1990: 85, 88) claimed that "fantasy role-playing games have been significant factors in at least 125 deaths," ranging from a store clerk murdered by a sixteen year old boy "obsessed with guns, violent movies, paramilitary magazines and the game of Dungeons and Dragons" through to the sixteen people murdered by Michael Ryan in Hungerford in the United Kingdom in August 1987.

Finally, underpinning both these claims, RPGs' evangelical critics alleged that the games were, to quote William Schnoebelen's *Straight Talk on Dungeons and Dragons* (1984), "essentially a feeding program for occultism and witchcraft." Central to these allegations was the idea that not only did the games contain genuine magic rituals and spells, but that players, whether willingly or not, allowed evil spirits to gain possession of them through the games. Once they were possessed they would, it was claimed, at the very least become involved in Satanism, and possibly also commit violent or anti-social acts. Indeed, Rick Jones (1988: 99), the author of *Stairway to Hell*, went so far as to claim that this was the "ultimate (but well hidden) purpose of the 'game' ":

> [l]iterally millions of young people are unknowingly participating in genuine occult practices and opening the doors for demons to enter their bodies through this seemingly innocent game. By the time they find out they were hood-winked, it's too late. They have taken that last step down the stairway to hell and are greeted by the engulfing flames.

Similarly, Leithart and Grant (1987: 10; emphasis in original) in their *Christian Response to Dungeons and Dragons*, alleged that "D&D has become a modern-day catechism . . . [containing] a summary of the principles and an introduction to the fundamentals of the occult." As such, they argue, D&D and other RPGs "should simply be off limits to Christians" (Leithart and Grant 1987: 10).

As David Waldron (2005) notes in his discussion of the evangelical 'moral panic' against RPGs, the impact of these allegations on gamers in the late 1980s and early 1990s was profound.[4] Drawing on a variety of

[4] For an excellent collection of contemporary news articles concerning an early 1980s D&D "moral panic" in the Canadian city of Nanaimo, see http://forum.rpg.net/showthread.php?t=459104. Accessed 8/07/2009.

contemporary materials from within the gaming community, he argues that gamers described a variety of responses from authority figures, ranging

> from minor harassment by teachers, police and clergy to that of more substantial issues of seizing property, bashings, loss of privacy, expulsion from school for continuing to play after a ban had been put in place and harassment/arrest for supposed satanic desecration of graves and churches etc. (Waldron 2005: 28)

Consequently, gamers developed a variety of responses to the accusations, ranging from apologetics and attempts at self-censorship (such as TSR removing references to supernatural monsters from the second edition of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*), through the use of humour to satirise the claims,[5] to systematic attempts to repudiate them and highlight the perceived irrationality, superstition and bigotry of their evangelical critics. In 1990, for example, the Game Manufacturers Association (GAMA) commissioned the fantasy author Michael Stackpole to produce a refutation of the claims promulgated by Pulling and BADD. 'The Pulling Report' certainly pulled no punches, accusing Pulling of numerous inaccuracies, exaggerations and of being highly questionable in both her investigation techniques and use of evidence. To quote the Report's conclusion:

> [Pulling] has, willfully or negligently, manufactured reports concerning suicides and murders related to games and Satanism. She has promoted individuals who are, at the very least, in need of serious psychiatric help to deal with their emotional and psychological problems. She has repeatedly represented herself as an 'expert witness' concerning games of which she knows little or nothing. She has perpetrated a deception concerning the circumstances surrounding the senseless death of her son . . . Clearly Pat Pulling is

[5] There are, for example, a number of satires of *Dark Dungeons* available on the web (see http://www.humpin.org/mst3kdd/, http://www.unhelpful.org/chyx/, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeV5xjjVFfk, http://www.gamegroup.org/comics/dd.php, http://www.enterthejabberwock.com/?p=133. All accessed 6/04/2009). There is also a spoof RPG *Darkest Dungeons* (http://scruffyco.com/darkestdungeons/) apparently in development in which, according to its developers, "players take on the roles of Gamers in a group of young people playing the wildly popular . . . and horrifically dangerous game, 'Advanced Darkest Dungeons' and the Characters those Gamers play. The Gamers compete to get their Characters to 'The 9th Level' without turning to occultism, killing themselves, failing out of school, or loosing their grip on reality. They must constantly appease their game master (called the Evil DM, or EDM) to gain favor. Their friends and family (and even the other Gamers) constantly attempt to pull them away from the game . . . or pull them deeper in. They become embroiled in a battle between Corruption and Sanctity. Traveling too far towards either one, however, will ultimately prevent them from reaching the fabled 9th Level of the Dungeon.

> a 'cult crime expert' only in her own eyes and those of her cronies, allies and disciples. (Stackpole 1990)

Being a Christian and a Gamer

Pulling's and other evangelicals' attacks on RPGs, however, had their greatest impact on Christian gamers who, according to Waldron (2005: 37), "described the highest level of harassment from parents, teachers, friends and clergy." Even today, a quarter of a century after *Dark Dungeons* and Schnoebelen's *Straight Talk on Dungeons and Dragons* were first published and over a decade since BADD ceased to exist following Pulling's death, a recurring theme in both my interviews and postings on Christian gaming forums is the unease, and sometime hostility, that Christian gamers often encounter from their fellow Christians because of their hobby. One of my interviewees, Marlene,[6] described the problems that she encountered in 2001 when she encouraged her children to play a RPG at home:

> *I had no idea of the can of worms I was opening*. I got letters. One lady in our home study group wrote me this letter saying '*I can't believe that you have gone over to the devil*. You're doing *Satanic* things'. She'd read through the Monsters Manual [a rule-book supplement containing information on monsters and other creatures that can be encountered in a D&D game] and talked about 'the horrendous things you now believe in', and 'how can [you] talk about being a Christian and be part of a game like this?'. There was almost a Church disciplinary sort of thing where we were asked about what we thought we were doing . . . It was surreal . . . It left a really bad taste. There was even someone in the Church Elder's Council who said, 'I don't know much about D&D. All I know is that it's Satanic'. I thought: y'know, this is *not worth* it . . . (emphases in original)[7]

Such experiences are echoed by Michael J. Young, the author of the *Multiverser* RPG and chaplain of the Christian Gamers Guild, who writes:

> I get letters from well-meaning pointy-headed narrowminded people of faith who are convinced that I must be deceived by the devil, that I could not possibly be a good Christian if I believe that these games are safe and not instruments of evil. (Young 2007: 3)

Similarly, the fansforchrist.org forum features a thread entitled "Reaction you received when you 'came out of the Dungeon'," in which posters

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[6] Unless they requested otherwise, all interviewees will be identified by pseudonyms.
[7] Marlene [pseud.], interview by author, e-mail, Liverpool, May 2009.

relate their experiences of 'coming out' to their fellow Christians as a RPG player.[8] For some, such as 'Silverton' (posted on September 16, 2008.), there has never been a need to hide his hobby. However, others, such as 'Tonyngc' (posted on September 14, 2008.), describe a situation similar to that of Marlene and Young in which he has "had friends look at me with horror, as if I had just sprouted horns and was carrying a pitchfork." Yet others such as 'Tink' (posted on September 15, 2008.) are still firmly 'in the dungeon': "*peeks out of the closet* still there. :-) I tried, but ended up getting condemned and I explained it away and have not brought it up since."[9]

In response to this, Christian gamers, like their secular peers, have developed a series of rebuttals and counter-arguments to defend their hobby; these often being couched in theological and/or Biblical terms. Primarily, Christian gamers argue that RPGs are not Satanic and do not teach players, whether consciously or unconsciously, 'genuine' magical rituals. In particular, a distinction is drawn between, on the one hand, the 'fantasy magic' of the gaming world and, on the other, the 'real world magic' of occultism. To quote Stephen Weese (2003), the webmaster of fansforchrist.org and author of *God Loves the Freaks* (Weese 2006):

> [t]he magic that we are forbidden to practice in the Bible comes from one source—Satan. God and Satan are here in the real world with us. Fantasy stories take place in other worlds, in other realities that never have happened and never will . . . When a character in the fantasy world accesses magic, they are simply tapping into a power source that is built into their world, not calling on evil spirits, demons, or the devil.

Thus, while not denying evangelical concerns regarding magic/occultism, Christian gamers argue that there is no link whatsoever between this and the 'magic' that they may use in their games. Indeed, for some Christian gamers imagining and playing within a world dominated by magic is in many ways a lesser evil than doing so in a world in which all forms of magic and supernaturalism are banished by the forces of secularism. In several of his writings, for example, Michael Young (2002b: 9) has urged Christian gamers to be more afraid of "atheism and agnostic naturalism and materialism," rather than "imaginary magic," "for these lies will

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[8] Internet site, http://www.fansforchrist.org/new/viewtopic.php?t=5744. Accessed 19/05/2009.

[9] See also the "Gaming is of the Devil" thread on the Christian Gamers Guild Forum: http://games.groups.yahoo.com/group/Christian_Gamers_Guild/message/23963. Accessed 21/05/2009.

destroy far more souls in our age than will ever fall prey to witchcraft or Paganism." For Young, then, it is better for a game to promote a belief in a supernatural power, however distant that may be from Christianity, rather than for it to discourage belief in the supernatural *per se* (see, for example, Young (2001b).

Of course, critics could still argue that RPGs feature evil—even, in some cases, demonic—elements and that Christians should, if they take the Biblical injunction to "abstain from all appearance of evil" (I Thessalonians 5:22 KJV) seriously, therefore still not play them. RPGs look evil, it could be argued, therefore they should be avoided. However, as Lynette Cowper and others within the Christian Gamers Guild who authored an online FAQ about Christians and RPGs note, this argument misinterprets the Biblical quotation. Rather than warning against "things which look evil," they argue, the quotation should be read as a warning against evil in all its appearances. Going further, they, and other Christian gamers argue that in many ways the presence of evil elements within the game is not only desirable, but essential both in terms of storytelling terms and for giving the players something to battle against (Cowper, Young and Cardwell n.d.).

Christian gamers are also critical of the so-called 'weaker brother' argument. Stemming from St Paul's vow in 1 Corinthians 8:13 that "if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend," this argument suggests that Christians should abstain from activities (such, as for example, playing RPGs) in case their doing so leads other, weaker brothers (and sisters) astray. While accepting, as will be discussed below, that some games do have problematic aspects to them, Christian gamers respond to the 'weaker brother' argument on both Biblical and practical levels, arguing that it not only misrepresents, theologically and historically, the meaning of the passage, but that who exactly the 'weaker brother' is never made explicit. As Young (2001a) ironically puts it:

> [t]here's a funny thing about this weaker brother argument as it applies to role playing games: I've never heard it made by a weaker brother. That is, most of those who object to role playing games on the basis that they might cause someone to fall into sin aren't the least bit tempted either to play such games or to fall into the particular sins they believe the games promote. They aren't going to become witches or sorcerers; Pagan worship or ritual does not appeal to them. There is probably less chance that they will suddenly go on a violent rampage than that nuclear war will break out by three o'clock tomorrow. They aren't in the least bit concerned that these games are going to lead them to sin. Rather, they imagine that there might

> be someone else—some hypothetical other brother somewhere in the universe—for whom the ideas within these games might present a temptation. They don't know any such person, but the possibility that he or she might exist gives them a basis on which to condemn the game.

Indeed, turning the accusation on the accuser, Cowper, Young and Cardwell (n.d.) argue that the "true weaker brother" is the one who believes that their faith gives them the right and authority to tell others (whom they perceive to be 'weaker') what they should or should not do.

In addition to deploying theological/Biblically-based arguments, Christian gamers also draw upon many of the criticisms of Pulling, Chick and the other critics of RPGs used by non-Christian gamers. The FAQ by Cowper et al., for example, refutes a number of the allegations promulgated by evangelical critics in the 1980s, arguing that several of the critics themselves are completely unreliable and may in fact be fantasists. All those that I interviewed were also critical of the allegations made by some of their fellow Christians, although often this was mixed with a sense of frustration. 'Tim', for example, said that he reacted with "a combination of sadness and humour" to critics such as Jack Chick, adding that "by spouting hateful ignorance, [such critics] turn a rather large section of modern culture away from Christ."[10] Such sentiments were echoed by 'Strider' on the fansforchrist.org forum who blamed Chick in particular as "a prime example of why some gamers arent [*sic*] friendly to Christianity" and bemoaned the fact that "whenever someone starts ranting nonsense then some folks are going to believe they speak for the rest of us and get the wrong idea. It burns bridges and loses us friends" (posted on March 10, 2009). Another poster, 'jedi-knight2005', put it more bluntly "Chick tracts should be BURNED!!!" (posted on February 13, 2009).[11]

This frustration is felt particularly strongly as a number of Christian gamers believe that not only is fantasy a Christian medium, but that RPGs themselves may also be tools to witness to the "unsaved" (Schofield Clark 2003). Another recurring theme in both my interviews and in the online Christian gaming material is that the world of D&D in particular has its basis in the literary work of two notable Christian apologists, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, and that the creators of the game, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, were themselves Christians. (For a discus-

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[10] Tim [pseud.], interview by author, e-mail, Liverpool, May 2009.

[11] Internet site, http://www.fansforchrist.org/new/viewtopic.php?t=5744. Accessed 19/05/2009.

sion of the Christian themes found within Tolkien in particular, see, for example, Wood 2003).[12] Similarly, it is claimed, both the magic and clear dualism between good and evil found within the fantasy genre is more akin to a Christian vision of the world than RPGs' evangelical critics would accept. Rather than the presence of magic in gaming worlds being a bad thing, it can instead be what Young (2002a) terms an "apologetics to the heart", "a way of undermining disbelief, of subtly suggesting that there is a greater reality undreamt by most." Far from being a "doorway to the occult," RPGs may thus be "a mission field that is white unto harvest" (John 4:35) to quote Cowper, Young and Cardwell (n.d.): a way of presenting a Christian message to the "unsaved" (or, at the very least, a way of demonstrating to them that, to quote one Christian gamer, "Christians aren't all freaky hate-mongers who say 'you must do this, you must not do that' " (Mattingly 2009).

This outline is by no means exhaustive. It does, however, give a taste of some of the key counter-arguments presented by Christian gamers in their attempts to both respond to the criticisms of RPGs made by other Christians and, by extension, to carve out a social space for themselves among their fellow believers. This space is, however, fluid and characterised by some degree of ambivalence. While, on the one hand, Christian gamers defend their hobby against accusations that it is satanic or dangerous and argue for fantasy as both a Christian medium and a tool for evangelisation, there is still, on the other, an acknowledgement among some that RPGs do still nevertheless have theologically problematic aspects to them. While generally accepting of RPGs, 'Bob', for example, noted the presence of many "dark games on the market; games—such as *D&D, The Call of Cthulhu, or Vampire: The Masquerade*—that he believed can easily be used to introduce players to the occult and New Age beliefs."[13] Similarly, notwithstanding his dismissal of the "Doorway to the Occult" claims as "patently false," Steve Weese (2003) still expresses a degree of discomfort with the presence of demons in D&D:

> [p]ersonally, as a Christian, I will say I don't like the idea that there are 'demons' in D&D. I would rather there not be, and in any games that I run myself I exclude them. I know that demons are real and would rather not play around with the concept. Since D&D is so versatile, it should be no

[12] See for example the video recording of Gygax speaking at a panel on Christianity and Gaming at Gencon 2007 on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tBx4ITJLpE. Accessed 13/07/2011.

[13] Bob [pseud.], interview by author, e-mail, Liverpool, May 2009.

> problem to fully enjoy D&D without including any demons . . . as a Christian, I would recommend for a good D&D experience just to cut out the demons altogether.

A more broad concern with the presence of magic in many RPGs was also expressed by 'Eric'.

> Magic is a big question for me. If we assume it to be what we in the real world would call magic, then it's a problem because everything I understand about that is that it is satanic. That said, it's relatively easy to fix that by making it into a science of sorts that uses natural forces much as one uses the laws of physics.[14]

This strategy of removing or redefining potentially problematic content recommended by 'Eric' and Weese is one of several employed by some Christian gamers who feel uncomfortable with either entire gaming systems or aspects of them. One thread on the fansforchrist.org forum, for example, was started by a member who had bought a RPG source book which had the statistics for Lucifer and other demons, and who was asking whether he should "trade the book off, ignore this or do like my gut wants and use a sharpie [a permanent marker pen] to remove the offending entry" (julian_grimm posted August 19, 2008). Responses ranged from one member who recalled having burned a similar book (Ajmucha August 19, 2008), through another who recommended that the poster "get rid of it, deface it, whatever you do to need to feel comfortable" (Voltronfan posted August 20, 2008), to yet another who suggested that he should "pray over the book directly, that God give you direction in regards to dealing with it, and, if there is demonic influence involved, that God drive it out" (Comsquare Ashes Parsec posted August 20, 2008).[15] In a similar vein, 'Bergj89' (posted January 26, 2009), writing on the Christian Gamers Guild forum, sought advice for his wife who was uncomfortable playing a druid character, not least because the Dungeon Master not only wanted her to have "a defined deity preference," but also "want[ed] the religious aspect played up in the course of the game." This situation, 'Bergj89' claimed was making his wife feel increasingly uncomfortable as she "really isn't comfortable with pretending to be a worshipper of anybody besides Jesus." One solution to this put forward by several respondents was that 'Bergj89's' wife might try and attempt to modify her character to reduce the dissonance between

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[14] Eric [pseud.], interview by author, e-mail, Liverpool, May 2009.

[15] Internet site, http://www.fansforchrist.org/new/viewtopic.php?t=5651. Accessed 27/05/2009.

her own personal beliefs and those of her character. 'Sizzaxe' (posted on January 27, 2009), for example, suggested that 'Bergj89's' wife might " 'pioneer' a new order of druids that focus on the innate energies within nature and its attunement to the creation" or even model her character "off of a Celtic type Christianity," while 'agapeesel' (posted January 29, 2009) suggested that she offer to play a slightly different character (a ranger with druidic powers), "who couldn't accept worshipping the 'god' in the game and so went solo." A number of other posters told 'Bergj89' that they were praying "for peace in [his] game."[16]

A second strategy, then, employed by some Christian gamers uncomfortable with some RPG material is to 'Christianise' it, either by grafting Christian elements onto the material or reinterpreting it through a Christian lens. The Christian Gamers' Guild e-zine, *The Way, The Truth, & the Dice*, for example, has featured several articles in which their authors described the ways in which they either added Christian elements to game settings or reinterpreted and modified an existing game that dealt with demonological themes so that it accorded with Biblical accounts (Aubuchon 1999; Barnes 1999; Meier 2000). James Aubuchon (1999: 3) discussed the ways in which Spiritual Warfare could be added to the generic role-playing game system, FUDGE, to simulate "the battle that goes on in the souls of men against sin and the forces of darkness." In Aubuchon's system, when characters find themselves in the presence of certain demons or 'defilements' they will be tempted to commit sins.[17] If they give in to the temptation they are said to have suffered a "spiritual wound" and will, at best, become "Distracted" and unable to pray or, at worst, will become "Overcome" and engage in the sin "and immediately lose a level of holiness" (1999: 3). Once a character's holiness level becomes "pathetic," Aubuchon recommends, they should "be removed from the game. They have become unfit for duty" (Aubuchon: 5). Players, however, can resist defilements by either praying or quoting at a defilement a passage of scripture that refers directly to it.

A third strategy employed by those who feel dissatisfied with either adapting or retrofitting their faith onto existing games is to play one of the small number of exclusively Christian games available, such as *The Way, DragonRaid*, or *Holy Lands*. In each game, players encounter none of the problematic material (allegedly) found in the RPG systems nor do

[16] Internet site, http://games.groups.yahoo.com/group/Christian_Gamers_Guild/message/24092?threaded=1. Accessed 27/05/2009.

[17] These include such things as 'sexual immorality', 'witchcraft', 'murder', 'homosexuality' and 'vain philosophy'.

they have to play characters that do not share their faith. Rather, in each game, a Christian worldview is central and the emphasis is often as much on the development of faith or Biblical/theological knowledge as it is on enjoyment. In *DragonRaid*, for example, players, known as 'Twice Born' LightRaiders, serve 'the OverLord of Many Names' (i.e. Jesus) by battling dragons and other dark creatures (that represent demonic forces and other evils) and attempting to 'rescue' 'Once Born' creatures by telling them about 'the Great Rescue' (which is the salvation purchased for them by the 'OverLord of Many Names').[18] Similarly, in the historical RPG *Holy Lands*—billed by its creators as 'THE Christian RPG'—players pit themselves "against various demons, devils, and sorcerers who want to destroy the medieval church." Far from being an adherent of some polytheistic magical system, a character in the game (like the players themselves) thus "believes in, proclaims, and fights for God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the 'real' message of eternal salvation;" a salvation that is achieved, in classic Protestant style, through characters' "profession of faith, not by their service to the religious."[19]

Such attempts to either 'retrofit' Christianity onto games or make characters conform to players' beliefs is, however, by no means universally accepted among Christian gamers, nor are Christian RPGs like *DragonRaid* or *Holy Lands* widely played by Christian gamers. Some gamers, for example, recognise that RPGs are just a game and that they are neither playing themselves nor committing a sin by either having their character exist in a polytheistic setting or cast spells. As one gamer cogently put it, "I very much doubt whether God cares if I play a Pagan, or cast Magic Missile in a make believe world LOL. I know some folks have a problem with that but they should probably take some time making sure they're OK with themselves first." Others, such as 'Kim', are keen to keep separate their beliefs from their hobby:

> I take my beliefs very seriously and therefore don't discuss a serious topic like theology/Christianity unless there is a serious mood, which is usually not the case for people meeting for a *game*. I also don't usually incorporate my beliefs into a game for a similar reason; by incorporating God into a game, you make Him merely a story element to entertain.[20]

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[18] Internet site, http://www.dragonraid.net/info. Accessed 27/05/2009.
[19] Internet site, http://www.holylands.net/. Accessed 27/05/2009.
[20] Kim [pseud.], interview by author, e-mail, Liverpool, May 2009.

Yet others question whether bringing God into gaming actually creates more problems than it solves. While doing so, they suggest, removes the problems of playing polytheistic characters, it could, as Cowper, Young and Cardwell (n.d.) argue, reduce God and theological questions to mere entertainment:

> [p]eople often complain about the polytheism in the game. But then, what would they prefer? Would they want Game Masters around the world deciding the will of the True and Living God? Would they really want these games to more directly portray the battle between God and Satan, and the outcomes to be subject to some high school student with no more understanding of the Bible than of the Koran (or possibly more of the Koran) to decide these things for God?

Conclusion

Christian gamers, then, are not cut from the same cloth, but, rather, may be better understood as being on a continuum in terms of how their beliefs and hobby intersect. On the one end would be those gamers who wish to (sub)merge their gaming into their beliefs so that there is no incongruity between either what they believe in and their characters' beliefs or between the 'real world' and the 'gaming world'. Such gamers would, as in several cases cited above, feel uncomfortable playing non-Christian or 'evil' characters, using magic, or having evil/Satanic/demonic forces in their games, even as villains. They would also actively seek to remove offending content or reinterpret it through their beliefs and may even, in an attempt to fully merge their beliefs and hobby, play explicitly 'Christian' RPGs, such as *Holy Lands*. On the other end would be gamers who prefer to keep their beliefs and hobby as separate as possible. Whether because they feel uncomfortable reducing God and their beliefs to "mere entertainment" or simply see RPGs as "just a game," such individuals do not feel any need to make their hobby overlap with their beliefs. While they may feel uncomfortable with playing an evil or immoral character, they would, for example, defend the use of magic or playing non-Christian characters in a game by making a clear distinction between, on the one hand, what *they* believe and what they see the nature of reality to be and, on the other, what *their characters* believe and the nature of the gaming world. Thus, while they would consider themselves to be a Christian gamer—in the sense of being a Christian who happens to have a particular hobby—they wouldn't typically feel a need or desire to emphasise that particular identity, in the same way as they wouldn't see themselves (or expect to be

seen) as, for example, "a Christian who watches TV" or "a Christian who plays football." If they were a member of a forum discussing RPGs at all, it would consequently be more likely to be a generic forum (such as, for example, the official D&D forum), than a specifically Christian one.

These categories are, however, not fixed, and it is possible that gamers may move along the continuum either as their beliefs change or in response to changing external realities. It is possible, for example, that a member of the latter category may, if they found their hobby under resurgent criticism from their Church, families and/or evangelical peers, become more aware of their identity as a 'Christian gamer', and use that identity as a way of negotiating the criticisms. However, it is arguably more likely the case that as evangelical concerns steadily move further away from RPGs towards other areas of popular culture, that Christian gamers will find themselves less and less having to utilise the various forms of apologetics highlighted above. Instead, if they are called upon to justify their hobby at all, it is more likely to be against accusations that it is 'sad', 'geeky' or 'nerdy' than a "doorway to the occult."

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"AN INFINITY OF EXPERIENCES." HYPER-REAL PAGANISM AND REAL ENCHANTMENT IN *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

Stef Aupers

Introduction

> It's from the death of God that religions emerge…
> (Baudrillard 1994: 26)

In *The God Delusion* well-known atheist and out-spoken critic of religion Richard Dawkins (2006) triumphantly states that the Bible is fiction. Scientists, biblical scholars and historians, he argues, have undermined the factuality, and hence the literal interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, and this makes the existence of a God incredible. As such, he continues, there is no distinction between the Bible, legends as 'factually dubious' as the stories of King Arthur and popular fantasy fiction: "The only difference between *The Da Vinci Code* and the gospels is that the gospels are ancient fiction while the *The Da Vinci Code* is modern fiction" (Dawkins 2006: 123).

Dawkins' argument is deeply problematic. Not so much because he degrades the Bible to the realm of fiction but because of his typically positivistic assumption that sacred texts—once deconstructed, falsified and bereft of their ultimate truth claims—can never be at the basis of religiosity and spirituality. But is it true? Leaving aside the revival of fundamentalist groups involved in Biblical literalism in the United States, we can nowadays also detect a shift from a literal interpretation of the Bible to a more symbolic reading, an approach that has mainly developed since the 1960s in 'new theology' (Campbell 2007: 250–273). Obviously, factuality and literalism are not absolute conditions for religion to remain vital. Most important for this chapter, however, is the fact that the erosion of Christianity is accompanied by the rise of a new type of spirituality (Aupers and Houtman 2010; Campbell 2007; Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas et al. 2005; Houtman and Aupers 2007) that is often informed by or based on popular fiction (e.g. Partridge 2004; Possamai 2005; Schofield Clark 2003). Media products, like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *Star Trek*, *The X Files*, *Charmed*, *The Matrix*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and, indeed, *The Da Vinci Code*, are nowadays infused with religious, spiritual and metaphysical

worldviews and are, in turn, often treated as "sacred texts" (Partridge 2004) that are used to actively construct "subjective myths" (Possamai 2005) or private "systems of ultimate significance" (Luckmann 1967). Moreover, media texts and popular fiction are at the basis of new social forms of religion—of cult formation in real life and on the Internet—and motivate veritable "media pilgrimage" (Reijnders 2010).

In his pioneering work on this fiction-based type of spirituality Adam Possamai (2005) dubbed this "hyper-real religion," employing a concept from the work of Jean Baudrillard. In this chapter I will use a case study of so-called Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), most notably *World of Warcraft*, to provide an in-depth study of 'hyper-real religion'. I will analyze the way these 'enchanting' worlds on the Internet are constructed (or rather, designed) and if, how and why gamers derive spiritual meaning from play in these environments. The analysis is based on multiple sources, but mainly on a content analysis of four popular online computer games (*Ultima Online*, *Everquest*, *Dark Age of Camelot* and *World of Warcraft*) and about twenty qualitative in-depth interviews with Dutch players of *World of Warcraft*.

The qualitative nature and hence particular focus on (spiritual) *meaning* in this study is relevant for at least two reasons. First of all, most academic studies of fiction-based religions are still mainly explorative and sensitizing; they point out *that* fiction and spirituality are combined in the contemporary spiritual milieu without analyzing, in more empirical detail, *how* and *why* particular 'texts' are productive in the formation of contemporary spirituality. On a more theoretical note, however, it seems that *real* spiritual meaning based on popular fiction is not only under studied in the social sciences, it is often *a priori* denied. Obviously, this is the position taken by advocates of secularization, like Bruce (2002) or Dawkins (2006), mentioned in the introduction. But even Possamai's fruitful conceptualization of fiction-based spirituality as 'hyper-real religion' and the argument that it is part and parcel of the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' has strong connotations of it being essentially 'superficial', 'meaningless', 'unreal' or 'alienating' since it is based on the critical, neo-Marxist theories of Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson. 'Hyper-real religion', from this perspective at least, is an oxymoron since 'real religious meaning' and the 'hyper-real' are by definition incompatible. On the basis of this study of *World of Warcraft*, particularly through an analysis of the meanings players attribute to the game, I hope to demonstrate that this dichotomous and implicitly moral picture is deeply problematic.

Designing a Hyper-real Religion

"Hyperreality", Jean Baudrillard (1994: 1) argued, is a model "of a real without origin or reality" and as such it abolishes the typically modern claim of a referent in the real world. Hyper-reality, in other words, no longer reflects reality but has become a reality in and of itself; it masks, obscures or even abolishes the real since, Baudrillard famously claimed, the 'map' has become the 'territory' (1994). Throughout his work he discusses the rise and prominence of hyper-reality in fields of politics, science, media and culture and emphasizes the difficulty in countering—let alone dismantling—its logic through subversive practices and 'anti-discourse,' since it relentlessly neutralizes resistance by transforming it into yet another consumer item, "sign," or "hyper-reality" (Baudrillard 1998: 78). A paradigmatic example of a hyper-real environment is the realm of digital simulation (Baudrillard 1998: 61) and particularly, a computer game. As Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2003: 69–70) rightly comment about the latter: "[f]inding examples of Baudrillard's hyper-reality in the world of video and computer games is like shooting fish in a barrel".

The online computer game *World of Warcraft* that is—at the moment of writing—played by about fifteen million people is an outstanding example of a hyper-reality. After all, Azeroth, the universe of *World of Warcraft*, is a 'model of the real without origin or reality': notwithstanding its imaginary, fiction-based content it is an utterly realistic, three-dimensional environment that is both shared (people from different countries inhabit the world) and persistent (the environment is twenty four hours a day online and continues to exist even when players are not interacting with it). Moreover, these online computer games generate a unique culture, social structure, economy and ecology that change over time. As such they are considered as 'more than games' and are generally described as "virtual worlds" (Bartle 2004) or "synthetic worlds" (Castranova 2005). Not surprising from this perspective is the fact that a "significant number of people think of Norrath [the world of the game Everquest] as their main place of residence . . . they treat the game world as their life world" (Castranova 2005: 59).

World of Warcraft, *Everquest* and other games in the genre, however, are not only 'models of the real without origin or reality', they are distinctly other-worldly in content. This, then, makes them hyper-real *religions*. More than ninety five percent of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games are based on the 'fantasy' genre and are brimming with myth, magic, and enchantment (Woodcock 2009). In this first section

I will demonstrate that these online worlds are particularly influenced by neopagan spirituality and the fantasy fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien, influences undergirding that these are indeed realities consciously based on intertextual references rather than on a postulated truth in the real world. In the second section I will analyze whether, and if so, how and why gamers derive spiritual meaning from play in these 'hyper-real' environments.

From Middle Earth to World of Warcraft

Neopaganism consists of many sub-branches and communities and this diversity in the milieu can by and large be understood as the result of the imperative to 'reinvent' your own pagan tradition (Adler 1986; Berger 1999; Hanegraaff 1996; Luhrmann 1991; York 1995). There are, however, core doctrines and practices. Motivated by a fundamental critique on the alienating and 'disenchanting' consequences of modern science, technology and Christianity, neopagans are "romanticizing the premodern" (Partridge 2004: 77). Our ancient forefathers, it is argued, still lived in harmony with nature, the rhythm of the cosmos and the sacred that permeates everything, a meaningful way of life that is lost in the modern world. From this perspective, neopagans freely delve into all kinds of premodern traditions and cultures since "the only dogma . . . is that there is no dogma" (Luhrmann 1991: 7): some firmly ground their ideas in the Western esoterical, hermetical or Gnostic tradition, whereas others seek alignment with ancient Greek mythology and Eleusinian cults, Celtic legends, the Norse tradition, Jewish Cabbalistic mysticism, the 'wisdom' of Native Americans or ancient Egyptian cultures. Whereas neopaganism encourages individual 'cutting and pasting' of premodern religiosity—resulting in a diverse and fragmented milieu—it can essentially be characterized as an animistic and polytheistic 'nature religion' (Adler 1986; Berger 1999; Hanegraaff 1996; Luhrmann 1991; York 1995). Nature is seen as a vital and sentient environment. In addition, neopagans worship various gods and goddesses, like the goddess of fertility and her male counterpart, the horned God, in Wicca. Magical practices, rituals and spells are probably most important in the neopagan milieu, since, as one of Adler's (1986: 170) respondents says: "It's a religion of ritual rather than theology. The ritual is first, the myth is second."

It can be argued that neopaganism is itself a hyper-real religion (Possamai 2005). After all, from its emergence in the 1950s until the present, neopaganism has been fed by the media and the media has been

informed by paganism. Neopaganism is, first of all, a 'literary culture' and "potential magicians enter magic through browsing in its bookstores" (Luhrmann 1991: 238). Participants ground their worldview in books that claim objectivity and authenticity, like historical or anthropological works, but also use fictional works to design and legitimate their own traditions (Possamai 2005). Even the primary work of the founder of Wicca—Gerald Gardner, a British colonial administrator and lay anthropologist who published on his alleged involvement in various secret pagan communities and covens—is known to be a fictional ethnography. In general, contemporary pagans are quite aware of the socially constructed nature of their own traditions. They self-consciously create their own 'mytho-poeic history' in what they consider to be "a myth-impoverished world" (Luhrmann 1991: 238, 241). Since the 1960s, the neopagan imagination has been particularly mediated by 'science fiction' and 'fantasy fiction'—it is substantially shaped by the works of Robert A. Heinlein, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, contemporary television series like *Charmed* or—especially among young people—supernatural 'pulp' horror like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Partridge 2004). The most important influence from fantasy fiction is the work of J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings* is mainly based on Norse mythology and its imagined world Middle-earth—inhabited by mythical creatures like hobbits, elves and wizards—was immediately embraced by the spiritual counterculture when it was published as a paperback in 1965. Moreover, it is fed by and feeds into the neopagan imagination since it conveys "a polytheistic-cum-animist cosmology of 'natural magic' " that, Tolkien felt, is important since "the 'war' against mystery and magic by modernity urgently requires a re-enchantment of the world, which a sense of Earth-mysteries is much better placed to offer than a single transcendent deity" (Curry 1998: 28–29). Like neopagans then, Tolkien was deeply hostile to the disenchanted modern world—the sovereignty of capitalism, science, technology and the disrespect *vis-à-vis* the natural world that accompanies it. *The Lord of the Rings* has been described as an "implicit diagnosis of modernity" informed by 'radical nostalgia' that promotes a "neo-pagan reverence for nature" (Curry 1998: 25, 29; Schick 2003; Kraus 2003).

The fantasy fiction of Tolkien has deeply informed the neopagan movement but spilled over to other media forms as well: it set the standard for the booming business of pagan series on television, like *Charmed* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and fantasy movie blockbusters, like the *LOTR* trilogy directed by Peter Jackson: *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002) and *The Return of the King* (2003). In addition, and most important for this chapter, it influenced the prominence of pagan fantasy

in contemporary online computer games. Richard Bartle—probably the most influential designer in the field of online games—confirms: "[t]he single most important influence on virtual worlds from fiction is Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy" (2004: 61–62). Already in the 1970s and 1980s technicians, hackers and programmers were often great fans of the work of Tolkien. The rooms at the AI lab at Stanford were named after Middle-earth locations, and computer scientists built three elven fonts for the Stanford printers (Levy 2001). Turkle argues: "[t]he personal computer movement of the 1970s and early 1980s was deeply immersed in Tolkien and translated his fantasy worlds into hugely popular (and enduring) role-playing games" (2002: 18). Middle-earth, so it seems, appealed to their feelings of disenchantment in modern society, but also to their habitus as modern technicians (e.g. Aupers 2007). As to the latter, Tolkien himself maintained that 'mythopoesis', 'myth-making' or the creation of a true 'secondary world' is not a frivolous matter. Although the content of the world should break with reality (and therefore be appealing), its form, structure and detail should be "derived from reality" and reflect "the inner consistency of reality" (Tolkien 1939: 16). In an interview with GameSpy (2003), game designer Richard Bartle recently stated that this was indeed why he used Tolkien's work as a blueprint for online games: "[h]e [Tolkien] showed it could be done. He showed you could create a consistent, believable, enthralling world that didn't—couldn't possibly—exist. Middle Earth is a world of and for the imagination." In the words of Davis: "*The Lord of the Rings* didn't just make you want to escape in another world; it made you want to build your own" (1999: 208).

And so they did: Tolkien died in 1973, but around that same time his pagan world was reproduced in cyberspace. Middle-earth became an interactive place in the digital realm. In 1976 a Stanford hacker, Donald Woods, and a programmer, Will Crowther, developed *Adventure*, the first text-based role-playing game on the computer. *Adventure* "turned out to be one of the most influential computer games in the medium's early history" (King and Borland 2003: 31). An important shift came in 1980s when Trubshaw and Bartle developed the 'Multi-User Dungeon' (MUD) that made it possible to explore this textual world with other people across the country. Between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1990s, text-based role-playing games and MUDs were booming. Some examples that are directly derived from the work of Tolkien are *The Shire* (1979), *Ringen* (1979), *The Lord of the Rings* (1981), *LORD* (1981), *Ring of Doom* (1983), *Ringmaster* (1984), *The Mines of Moria* (1985), *Bilbo* (1989), *The Balrogian trilogy* (1989) and *Elendor* (1991). In 1997, finally, Richard

Garriott launched *Ultima Online* on the Internet, one of the first three-dimensional Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. *Ultima Online* became a big success and a stimulus for other companies to develop MMORPGs for the market. In 1999 *Sony* launched *Everquest,* (played by 730,000 people—*Everquest II* included) while *Microsoft* followed that year with *Asherons Call* (played by 'only' 120,000 people). Other popular games are *Dark Age of Camelot* (250,000 players) and, launched in 2004, W*orld of Warcraft*—an online world that has had three extensions since then: *The Burning Crusade* (2007), *Wrath of the Lich King* (2008) and *Cataclysm* (2010). World of Warcraft is currently inhabited by more than ten million people (Castranova 2005; Woodcock 2009).

"A World Awaits . . ."

No less than ninety five percent of the contemporary MMORPGs are based on the 'fantasy genre' (Woodcock 2009). Let's look at four popular ones: *Ultima Online*, *Everquest*, *Dark Age of Camelot* and *World of Warcraft*.[1] These virtual worlds are designed as real places: players are immersed in a three-dimensional environment where laws of physics reign, where apples fall when you drop them, where nature flowers, where millions of artifacts and objects are located and where people interact with each other and the environment. Most manuals of the games therefore contain a detailed map of the online world that is, in all cases, divided into various imagined countries, provinces, cities, villages, pools, ponds, oceans and islands. Players of *EQ* step into a world called Norrath; players of *UO* are inhabitants of Britannia; *WoW* consists of the provinces Kalimdor, Lordaeron, Khaz Modan and Azeroth while *DAoC* is divided into the regions Albion, Hilbernia and Midgard. The main narratives of these games differ, of course, in many respects but all hark back to an imaginary medieval society that is as yet untouched by the juggernaut of modernity (Aupers 2007). Not unlike neopagans in the spiritual milieu then, the producers of online worlds construct, or literally design a 'mythopoeic history' by 'cutting and pasting' premodern religions, myths and sagas and by offering it for further

[1] The game manuals of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) and *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment 2004) used for the analysis are small books provided with the gaming software. The manuals of *Ultima Online* (Electronic Arts Inc.) and *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment) are retrieved from the Internet, at http://guide.uo.com, accessed 01/2005 and http://daoc.goa.com, accessed 03/2005, respectively. Unless indicated otherwise all quotations in the following section are derived from these four manuals.

consumption. The narratives are often derived from well-known Western legends, but also from popular fiction varying from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, to James G. Frazer's *Golden Bough* and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Bartle 2004). By using such inter-textual references to other popular (fantasy) texts, Krzywinska argued, designers constitute an appealing "combination of otherness and familiarity for players" thereby enhancing feelings of immersion and "being in a world" (2008: 138).

In line with the approach set out by Tolkien, in short, MMORPGs are both extremely realistic and distinctly otherworldly (Castranova 2005: 80). This otherworldliness, instigated by premodern, mythical and magical content, is actively used in marketing and advertisement to seduce potential consumers. In the manual of *WoW* and *UO* one can read:

> [a]world awaits . . . Descend into the World of Warcraft and join thousands of mighty heroes in an online world of myth, magic and limitless adventure . . . An infinity of experiences await. So what are you waiting for?
>
> If you've ever felt like you wanted to step out of yourself, your life, into one that was full of fantasy and adventure—virtual worlds offer you this opportunity . . . You choose your own virtual life and immerse yourself into the mystical, medieval world of Britannia . . . *Ultima Online* is the place where you can be whatever you want to be.

These are, the manuals demonstrate, not just profane worlds, but 'other,' more exciting worlds brimming with pagan legends, mysteries and magic. There are, however, profound differences between the four game worlds. The culture of *UO*, for instance, is rooted in specific Anglo-Saxon legends and was originally guided by 'Lord British' (Richard Garriot) who resided in his castle just outside of the capital of Brittania. *DAoC* is a good example of a game that is exclusively based on Northern European myth and legend. At the beginning of the game, players can choose to be part of one of three territories that each have their own culture, religion and customs and are at war with each other: they can chose to inhabit Albion (portrayed as Medieval England and informed by 'King Arthur legends'), Midgard (portrayed as ancient Scandinavia and informed by 'Viking mythology') and Hilbernia (portrayed as ancient Ireland and informed by 'Celtic lore'). In the manual of *DAoC*, these three territories try to convince players to join them in their battle against the 'Dark forces of evil' by claiming that they are the purest and most spiritual land of all. As Albion argues: "[w]e are the protectors of the land of Arthur, the greatest of Kings. Ours is the fair land of Albion, and none fairer doth grace this Earth." Midgard states: "[c]ome to the land of the ancient gods and wield your sword and hammer with us." Hibernia, finally, strikes back by stating:

> [o]thers may tempt you with mighty deeds and fine words, but in Hilbernia we keep closest to the oldest of the spirits of the Earth. Ours is the most mystical, imbued with the spirit of ancient days and long forgotten powers. If you desire to fight with us against the encroachment of evil and darkness, come to the most magical land of all, Hilbernia.

Being 'the most magical land of all,' so it seems, is an important asset in rivalry in the game, as well as in the competition between online game worlds competing on today's market. In recent applications of the game DAoC, new territories are opened up, like the "highly advanced civilization" Atlantis (which is, according to legend, the pinnacle of spirituality), Stygia ("a searing desert where adventurers will encounter creatures from Egyptian mythology") and Volcanus ("Here you will encounter . . . the warlike Minotaurs"). The examples make clear that the main goal of the game producers is to create a setting for their players that is enchanting—exactly because it transcends modern society. Unencumbered by historical accuracy, they cut, paste and sample various popular legends and myths and combine them into new idiosyncratic worlds. In these games, for instance, it is possible to encounter a Minotaur (derived from Greek mythology) in ancient Europe. Time and place are subordinated to the imperative of pagan enchantment. While the designers of *DAoC* and *UO* still base their designs loosely on familiar places in Northern Europe, and their premodern legends and myths, the location may also be another planet. This is the case with Norrath, the world of *EQ*. *WoW* is even completely abstracted from this-worldly time and space. Although it seems to be mainly influenced by Norse mythology (and some of the regions even refer to Mayan and African culture), it has almost no referent in the 'real world.'

In sum, the environments of these games are infused with premodern legends, myths and sagas. As well, the Christian tradition is downplayed in favor of primarily polytheistic and animistic forms of religion. As to the former, various gods and deities (both good and bad) are prominent in all the games. As to the latter, players are encouraged—or even obliged if they want to proceed in the game—to perform various 'quests' to collect spiritual objects, like 'totems' or weapons imbued with 'mana'. Most relevant for the players, however, is the 'art of magic'. Before the game starts, players construct an 'avatar' or character and choose between various races, classes and professions. Abstracted from the differences, it can be concluded that in every game there is the choice to become an explorer, a fighter or a magician. Magicians, in general, have supernatural powers and are skilled to perform rituals and cast spells to heal their

allies and attack their enemies. As in most aspects of the games, however, the possibilities to develop one's character as a magician are enormous. Magicians are divided into sub-classes. Without being exhaustive: in *EQ* one can for instance become a sorcerer, warlock, wizard, enchanter, illusionist, coercer, summoner, necromancer, conjurer, druid, warden, fury, shaman, defiler or mystic. In *DAoC* one can, for instance, become a cabalist, rune master, bone dancer, spirit master, healer, bard, mentalist or animist. Again, this is just a small sample of the options available. Each sub-class has specific abilities and skills. In the manual of WoW, for instance, the mage, druid and shaman respectively are characterized as follows:

> [t]he mage is a master of powerful mystic energies, able to use magic in the most spectacular and destructive of ways. Mages are a fragile class, with little health and poor fighting abilities. However, they make up for this physical weakness with their awesome spell casting . . . Mage spells fall into three schools: arcane, frost and fire.
>
> The druid is a formidable class with good healing ability, potent offensive spells, excellent buffs, and the unique ability to shape change into different animal types. In its animal form, the druid can adopt new roles, such as that of a warrior or rogue . . . Druid players have spells that cover three categories: healings, buffs, and offensive spells.
>
> The shaman is an effective spell caster, but can also fight extremely well with mace and staff. The shaman's line-of spirit spells enables it to perform a variety of useful non-combat actions. It can resurrect allies, turn into a ghost wolf for increased movements, or instantly teleport to town. The shaman's unique power is totems. Totems are spiritual objects that a shaman must earn through questing.

Resurrecting the dead, healing, draining souls, summoning spirits, telekinesis, teleporting, paralyzing, creating energy bolts, becoming invisible, shape shifting, causing earthquakes; the spells and the possibilities of performing magic in the games are various. In addition, players can develop their magical skills when they are progressing in the game. In fact, they can have a magical career. As *DAoC* states: "[f]or those who wish to dabble in the arts of magic and mysticism, there are several paths that lead to a mastery of the arcane." In *DAoC* they can do so by joining magical schools and guilds. They can become part of the Academy ("the school founded by the famous wizard Merlin"), the Guild of Shadows or the Church of Albion. In *UO*, there are eight levels of magic containing sixty-four magical spells and rituals. The novice starts at the first level (low-magic) and can advance until the eighth level (high-magic). In this last phase, one can attain great—almost omnipotent—magical powers.

Playing with Pagan Magic: "I want to believe . . ."

The assessment that popular online worlds are suffused with the pagan worldview and magic does not necessarily mean that they are experienced as spiritual. The motivations of several game designers, however, provide a first indication that the implementation of pagan fantasies in game worlds is not just esthetically informed. In an interview with Richard Bartle I asked, "Why do so many virtual worlds feature magic?" and he turned it into a topic of discussion among game designers on the blog *Terranova*.[2] The answers ranged from explanations that magic is a functional trope to enhance the boundaries between the real and the game world (that is, to construct a self-enclosed 'magic circle' of play (Huizinga 1950) with its distinct rules, time and space) to speculations about the intrinsic value of magic, myth and mystery and its importance in the modern world. As one typical designer noted about the latter:

> [m]agic is growing in popularity . . . It's a very compelling way to view the world and can provide more meaning and agency than a viewpoint that is strictly materialist . . . In a nutshell, we want the magic that was stripped by rational materialism to return back into our lives. Immersive 3D worlds provide a nice playground to this end.

Game designer Brian Mortiarty claimed at the Internet Game Developers Conference in San Jose, California in 1996:

> [i]f we could design reality for our minds, what powers would we grant ourselves . . . Why should we settle for avatars when we can become angels? . . . Spiritual experiences are, in fact, our business. Ours will be an economy of spirits.[3]

The question remains, whether, and if so how, players identify with these fantasy worlds and whether they themselves experience them as 'really' or 'truly' enchanting. The 'disenchantment of the world,' Max Weber famously argued, generates a nonreligious *and* disillusioned worldview. Under the influence of science and technology, he commented, an otherworldly orientation will be gradually replaced by a worldview that is more realistic and objective but at the same time undermines the meaning of life. Modern astronomy, biology, physics or chemistry can describe the world

[2] Internet site, http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2005/09/magic.html. Accessed 13/07/2011.

[3] Brian Moriarty, "The Point Is" (1996), at http://ludix.com/moriarty/point.html. Accessed 13/07/2011.

as it is, but cannot (and should not) teach anything about the ultimate meaning of the world. In a totally 'disenchanted world,' Weber argued, "the worlds [*sic*] processes simply are . . . and happen but no longer signify anything" (1948: 506).

Interestingly enough, the majority of players of *World of Warcraft* interviewed subscribe to this existential situation: first of all, they pride themselves on being atheists incapable of believing in 'supernatural' or 'transcendent' realms and especially traditional forms of religion. One typical gamer argued that "[r]eligions like Christianity and Islam are from the past and no longer relevant for me. They are based on a society from two thousand years ago . . ." Others state that "there's nothing holy about the Bible," that religions are just 'fairytales' and that "only fools believe in God." They essentially perceive themselves as too rational and sober (*nuchter* in Dutch) to believe and often actually claim that, essentially, scientific knowledge can solve and de-mystify all mysteries. As self-proclaimed 'true atheists' they accept many secularizing scientific propositions derived from evolution theory, physics and computer sciences. One of the gamers provides the most explicit and radical example of this thoroughly rationalized and disenchanted perspective. He comments:

> I am completely irreligious. I think a human being is nothing more than an animal—a mechanical organism and you can best compare a human with a computer. The body is like a closet—in this closet you'll find the hardware, everything we learned is written on this hardware, our brains, and our personality is therefore nothing more than software interacting with the world.

Many of the gamers are not only nonreligious but have 'lost faith' in a more general sense too. They overtly complain about the meaninglessness of contemporary modern society: the 'emptiness' of politics, the problem of unchecked modern capitalism, relentless consumption and the unforeseen consequences of science and technology. One gamer argues: "[s]ociety is all about power and status. You need a job, you need money . . . And all those technologies . . . We lose sight of what is really important. People forget: what are you actually living for?" Another comments: "[m]otivated by the aim for more profits we develop technologies we do not understand. We can not see the consequences for humanity but they will be dramatic, I think." And more bluntly: "[w]hy should I invest in such a world that is so fucked up?"

On the flipside of this critical analysis of modern, disenchanted society as meaningless is a quite romantic picture of more traditional, premodern society. One gamer notes:

> [t]here's this nostalgic longing for the past when all these things where not there yet. In the old days everything was better. The countryside, sunny summers when everybody was happy. If you walk through the world of World of Warcraft this is all there. And you are not constantly confronted with high-tech.

The affinity with the rural, pre-industrial environment of *WoW* can thus, first of all, be understood as motivated by the disillusions of living in a disenchanted modern society. Like neopagans, the majority of WoW players romanticize the premodern past: they praise the simplicity, primitivity and 'authenticity' of 'their' virtual world and, most ironically, emphasize the lack of technology. From their perspective Azeroth—the universe of *World of Warcraft*—is an isle of meaning and enchantment in a thoroughly disenchanted modern world. But how do they relate, more specifically, to pagan religion, polytheism and magic that suffuse the online world? As noted, gamers proudly present themselves as too 'rational' to believe. But there's another side to this story—a feeling of loss and disillusion: gamers can not believe in the supernatural but, argue, very much like FBI agent Fox Mulder in the popular television series the *X-Files* that they '*want to believe*'. As one gamer stated: "I would really like that there was more than we can see in life. Telepathic connections between people, or special super powers that people are born with—forces that are prominent in everyday life."

Paradoxically, their disenchanted stance motivates these youngsters to enjoy 'superpowers', magic and pagan spirituality online. In this virtual environment, after all, they can freely *play* with pagan spirituality without believing or without being swallowed up by a belief system. "Within these worlds you accept everything as it is," one gamer typically comments. "It is as it is because it is made that way." Is this engagement with mediatized paganism 'just' play then—merely entertainment in a game world? Things are more complicated than that: play may be understood as an alibi to seriously engage oneself with the meaning of magic, myth and spirituality. More than that: while playing, gamers often *experience* the environment, including its supernatural entities and propositions, as real. Such ontological transformations occur, as we will see, especially through the activity of role-playing.

Role-playing: Summoning the Powers Within

> Magic is about turning a let's pretend fantasy of being a witch or a wizard into a serious assertion about the world. (Luhrmann 1991: 327)

Magical rituals are most important in the contemporary neopagan movement since magic is the method by which one crosses the border from the mundane to the realm of the sacred. Although the sacred, the divine or the 'spiritual world' is located in the natural environment as a whole, neopagan magic has a strong focus on unleashing the 'god within'. Thus it is part of the contemporary spiritual milieu where a Christian transcendent god is replaced by 'self-spirituality' (Heelas 1996; Aupers and Houtman 2006; Houtman and Aupers 2007). Through the influence of 'bricolage' and 'perennialism', the 'god within' has many labels, derived from various traditions: participants refer to the 'higher self' (derived from Theosophy), the 'divine spark' (from the Gnostic tradition), the 'Buddha self' (from Buddhism), the 'soul' (from Christianity) or the 'inner child' (from humanistic psychology). Writing about the neopagan movement, Helen Berger refers to this alleged spiritual core as the 'magical self'—a second identity that lies hidden in the deeper layers of consciousness and is invoked in many contemporary neopagan rituals. Berger (1999: 33) emphasizes the primacy of this 'magical' or 'divine' Self in ritual performances, procedures and formulations: "[l]ook within yourself; everything for which you are searching is there. Know thou art goddess/thou art god." Once the 'divine' or 'magical self' is awake, neopagans assume, one crosses the border from the profane world to the sacred world where everything is possible and interconnected.

It has been assessed in many studies on paganism that 'play' and 'role-playing' are at the heart of such neopagan rituals to summon the powers within (Adler 1986; Berger 1999; Luhrmann 1991). Most convincingly, Luhrmann argues on the basis of her extensive fieldwork that the model of 'play'—or a context of 'let's pretend', 'as-if' or 'make-believe'—forms an integral part of the magical act. Magic involves role-playing: in rituals, the participants are called by another 'magical' name; they often wear exotic, arcane clothes (especially in the tradition of 'the Western Mysteries'); they speak in hermetic vocabularies; they formulate archaic sentences and utter strange words. In doing so, modern magicians play, and often mimic, magical behavior derived from fiction in the media:

> [m]agic involves and encourages the imaginative identification in which the practitioner 'plays at' being a ritual magician or a witch; the theatrical setting and dramatic invocations are directed at evoking precisely that sort of complete identification with what one imagines the magician to be. Here the role models are taken from fiction: the magician fantasizes about being Gandalf, not about being his coven's high priest. (Luhrmann 1991: 333)

Neopagan magic is, however, not 'just play,' but 'serious play' since role-playing is constitutive for genuine, out-of-the-ordinary experiences and motivates ontological transformations: in the process of role-playing, fiction becomes real, make-belief instigates belief and play is gradually experienced as serious magic. As Johan Huizinga noted in *Homo Ludens* (1950: 13): "[t]he disguised or masked individual 'plays' another part, another being. He is another being." In the context of neopaganism, a housewife becomes the Greek goddess of the hunt, Artemis, a teacher becomes Osiris and yet another participant a powerful priest of an ancient Mayan cult, a Celtic druid or Siberian shaman.

Role-playing, in short, is a technique to summon the 'powers within' and align oneself with an imagined 'higher' or 'magical' Self. This applies to the activity of online gaming as well. Before the game starts, players choose an archetypical 'character' or 'avatar' which functions as a digital representation of the player. According to Kolo and Baur (2004), the role of the magician is most popular among 'all players' (at least in *UO*). By incarnating a role as, for instance, a sorcerer, warlock, wizard, enchanter, illusionist, coercer, summoner, necromancer, conjurer, druid, warden, fury, shaman, defiler or mystic—players become active subjects in the enchanting online world. Like neopagans, gamers are 'naming' their characters and in doing so they are often inspired by popular legends, myth and historical knowledge. As one gamer notes: "I gave it a beautiful name derived from history—my character lived during the Roman Empire. That's what I really like. And that's the way I experience it in the game." The enhancement of a feeling of agency is furthermore built into the design of the online games: players have seemingly endless choices to make about the gender, race, class, work and physical appearance of their characters and everyone can thus, in theory, be a truly 'authentic' individual in the game world. As displayed on the website of the the game *Asheron's Call*: "[e]nter the vast and magical world of Dereth, where a new and heroic identity awaits you!... After selecting your attire and facial features from millions of possible combinations, customize your skill set to make your character truly unique."[4] Once they are in the game, individual role-players shape and are shaped by the broader narrative of the game world—its imagined history, tales about violent wars between good and evil alliances and, of course, its pagan culture brimming with enchantment and magic.

[4] Internet site, http://ac.turbine.com/. Accessed 09/2010.

The affinity between neopaganism and online gaming is evident. In both cases the concrete practice of role-playing blurs the distinction between playing and being, between a virtual identity and real identity. And more than that, through role-playing, people paradoxically gain access to dimensions of the self and experiences that do not surface in real life. Game designer Richard Bartle (2004: 155–156) refers to this process as the "role-playing paradox":

> [y]ou're not role-playing as a being, you *are* that being; you're not assuming an identity, you are that identity; you're not projecting a self, you are that self. If you're killed in a fight, you don't feel that your character has died, you feel that you have died. There's no level of indirection, no filtering, no question: you are there . . . When player and character merge to become a personae [*sic*], that's immersion; that's what people get from virtual worlds that they can't get from anywhere else; that's when they stop playing the world and start living it.

My own research validates this point to a large extent. Most interviewed players of *World of Warcraft* emphasize that they increasingly identify with their avatars, especially since they invested a lot of time, energy and work in them. One typical gamer argues that, "it has become a part of me" whereas another states: "[the character] clearly possesses a fragment of my soul . . ." Once players experience the in-game character as real, they project personal desires and idealized identities on the avatar. Like neopagans then, they unleash and play out their 'better selves,' 'magical selves' or 'higher potentials' that cannot be expressed in everyday life. "A hero that follows his own path and does his own thing—that's the way I have designed him. And I like playing with the idea that I am him." "He is a part of me, something that I would like to be," one player contends. "You can be someone else. I think it is a beautiful world full of fantasy—a world that you encounter only in books. Unlike in real life, you can become a real hero," says another. While finally, respondent number three states: "[i]t says something about your dreams: you play the person that you cannot be in real life but would like to be."

In the online realm of *World of Warcraft*, in short, gamers freely immerse themselves in pagan worldviews and unleash, what Berger calls, the 'magical self' through the activity of role-playing. More important: role-playing proves to transgress the boundaries between the real and the virtual and players admit that they often experience their magical self and its magical actions as real. While immersed in play they often 'forget' that *World of Warcraft* is in fact a computer game, mediated by technological hardware, software, keyboard and a screen. Typical are statements like: "I don't have

the feeling that I am sitting behind my laptop—that I am using a mouse or that I have to push a button . . ." As a result, one gamer comments: "[y]ou are there—living the fantasy . . . You are the wizard and can do extraordinary things. And you can actually do that together with other people." Another adds: "[e]specially when you are a wizard, someone who knows how to cast spells, you really feel you have power. Like Gandalf in the movie . . . The evil ones are just scared. It has impact." A third gamer notes: "[t]he impossible becomes possible. In *City of Heroes* you are a superhero with supernatural powers; you can do there what you can not do in real life. I can't lift things with my thoughts, but I can do this in *City of Heroes*. Just like *Spiderman* and the *X-Men*. And that is really cool!"

Is this real magic? Like neopagans our gamers are aware of the constructed, man-made nature of 'their' metaphysical world and magical actions. Yet they are not very interested in such ontological considerations. Experience is key; over and over again they conclude: "I experience it as real." Magic, Sigmund Freud (1999) argued a century ago, is all about the 'omnipotence of thought'; magicians take seriously their subjective, and, according to Freud, infantile and narcissistic desires to control the natural world with thoughts and feeling. Online environments provide the opportunity to, literally, play out such magical desires and fantasies.

Conclusion

The erosion of traditional Christian religion has given rise to all kinds of spirituality including fiction-based or 'hyper-real religion.' Compared with traditional forms of religion, such forms of spirituality no longer refer to a 'real truth' out there: it is mediatized, self-referential and by and large builds upon inter-textual references, i.e. references to other fictitious narratives in novels, movies and popular consumer culture. The online computer game *World of Warcraft* provides a good example. It is clearly a reality in and of itself—a 'magical' otherworldly world that draws on narratives from an imagined pagan past, the fantasy of Tolkien and other forms of popular fiction.

Given its hyper-real character, postmodernists like Jean Baudrillard or Fredric Jameson would *a priori* deny the spiritual significance of a game like *World of Warcraft*. More than that, the existence and popularity of such games would probably be considered symptomatic for a postmodern culture that is governed by 'simulations and simulacra', a society that encourages 'surface' over 'depth' (Jameson 1991) yet at the same time

mourns the death of reality. "When the real is no longer what it was," Baudrillard (1994: 6) argued, "nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and signs of reality—a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity." *World of Warcraft* can, from this perspective, be understood as a 'myth of origin'—a simulation of an innocent premodern spiritual culture that is fed by nostalgia for the real but, tragically, only further contributes to its loss. The question remains: should the proliferation of 'hyper-real' religions like *World of Warcraft* simply be understood as a sign that 'real' religion is dead—is it indeed 'a hyper-real *testament*', as Adam Possamai (2005; emphasis added) suggests in the subtitle of his book?

This can be doubted. Ironically, it seems that such typically postmodern positions are often informed by a modern ontology that holds a clear-cut distinction between 'reality' and 'fiction'; the 'real' and the 'virtual'; the 'authentic' and the 'fake'. Such distinctions are not just descriptive, but are above all hierarchical and normative: religions based on fiction, located in the virtual world are considered of less value than 'real' (traditional) religions. This 'ontological fundamentalism' is no longer feasible: 'what is real' and 'what is fake' can and should not *a priori* be established in the social sciences but should be empirically informed.

From this perspective, this study analyzed the meanings young Dutch gamers attribute to the hyper-real religious environment of *World of Warcraft*. It is demonstrated that the distinctions between the 'real' and the 'fake' are not so clear-cut and stable as many academics would have them. Motivated by a stance that can be described as 'ontological relativism' or 'ontological pragmatism' (Aupers 2004; 2007) players of *World of Warcraft* willingly negotiate and transgress such boundaries. They are, as Rushkoff (1994) accurately phrased it, 'reality hackers'. Unburdened by essentialist and moral considerations about 'what is real' and 'what is fake,' they freely *choose realities* that are above all *experienced* as real, meaningful or spiritual. This particular focus on experience as the ultimate key to determine what is good, just and real is especially salient in the spiritual milieu (Hanegraaff 1996; Hammer 2001; Possamai 2005). In the field of spirituality Partridge (2004: 75) rightly notes: "[o]nly personal experience . . . can provide immediate and uncontaminated access to truth." Clients of reincarnation therapy, for instance, don't necessarily believe in the 'objective truth' of reincarnation, yet they experience their past-life experiences as subjectively real and veritably spiritual (Aupers 1998; 2011). Neopagans acknowledge the socially constructed nature of their historical claims, yet they experience such claims as genuinely real and truly spiritual.

In a similar vein then, players of *World of Warcraft* obviously do not believe in the 'reality' of the mysterious online world of Azeroth or the magic they perform online. Through the transgressive act of role-playing, however, they increasingly *experience* their 'magical avatars' and the virtual world as real, meaningful and spiritual. From an emic perspective (that is leading here in the inductive formation of theory) such experiences can not easily be falsified. My respondents would probably fully agree with Pine and Gillmore (1999: 36) that: "[t]here is no such thing as an artificial experience. Every experience created within the individual is real, whether the stimuli be natural or simulated." And they would surely relate to what Markham (1998: 120) stated about experiences in an online environment: "[w]hen experiences are experienced, they cannot be 'not real'. In a broader sense, terms such as real, hyperreal, not real, or virtual are no longer valid or meaningful as definitions of our experiences because our experiences are not easily separated in these binary oppositions."

Instead of indicating the end of religion then, the experience as real of enchanting online games like *World of Warcraft* may be exemplary for a transformation of religion. Focal in this may not be just the rapid proliferation of hyper-real environments producing all kinds of enchanting narratives, magical practices and the like, but primarily the epistemological transformation from (religious) belief to (spiritual) experience. It is from the focus on experience as the royal road to sacred truth that almost everything—including a commodified, 'hyper-real' computer game like *World of Warcraft*—can become part of the religious domain.

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DEALING A NEW RELIGION: MATERIAL CULTURE, DIVINATION, AND HYPER-RELIGIOUS INNOVATION

Douglas E. Cowan

Dealing a New Religion: Material Culture, Divination, and Hyper-religious Innovation

"What witch doesn't love a good divination system?" asks Linda Bellaluna (2002: 19), priestess-initiate in the Sisterhood of the Silver Branch, an online Goddess spirituality group (www.thesilverbranch.org), and columnist on 'witchcrafting' for *newWitch* (now *Witches & Pagans*), a modern Pagan magazine initially marketed to adolescents and young adults. Each month, Bellaluna teaches her readers how to create different magical objects for use in ritual, devotion, and, in this case, divination. To make a "personal amulet oracle," for example, she suggests that readers glue small pictures to the backs of "vase gems" (flat-sided glass pastilles) and draw them at random when seeking insight, wisdom, and guidance. The pictures should be carefully chosen and the oracle created in the context of a ritual environment, with strict attention paid to the selection of images and the intent behind the oracle's design. "The hard part," she writes, "is figuring out what kind of information you want to be able to receive from your oracle, and what kind of symbolism to incorporate so you'll get answers that are actually useful" (Bellaluna 2002: 19). In addition to the creation of the oracle as a magical act in and of itself, Bellaluna stresses both the haptic relationship with and the fashion statement made by the objects themselves.

> Like any divination system, the more you play with your amulets the better your readings will be, so keep them nearby and consult them often. Carry a couple with you as touchstones on tense days, or choose one to slip beneath your pillow for dream guidance. Oh, and show them off, because your one-of-a-kind oracle is going to be too cool to keep to yourself! (Bellaluna 2002: 20)

Although in her column Bellaluna does consider some aspects of the epistemology underpinning divination practice, at least as many modern Pagans understand it, note that what she describes in her column is not an intellectual exercise requiring belief in complex, abstract notions of god and goddess, or the ontological vagaries of the "unseen order" (James

1999: 61). Rather, this is an interactional devotional practice that both depends on and is facilitated by materiality and the sense of touch as "an instrument of knowledge" (Chidester 2005: 71). The more the practitioner handles, touches, caresses, and 'plays with' the amulets she has created, the more they will reveal the information to which Bellaluna believes their very creation has granted them access. "Keep them nearby," she advises, counsel that speaks directly to their material nature. Carry them as "touchstones on tense days," guidance that could not more clearly indicate the material character of the practice. That is, they have no power sitting in a shoebox tucked in the back of one's bedroom closet. Efficacy is a function of proximity and tactility. Their ability to guide, to calm, to do whatever the practitioner believes they can do is precisely related to the physical contact between the creator and the creation. It is in this bond that their contribution to religious belief and practice is realised—or in our case, hyper-realised.

Two aspects of this relationship particularly interest us here: material culture as a constituent of religious identity, and divination culture as an exemplar of hyper-religious innovation through material culture. With a few notable exceptions—Phillip Lucas' work on the use of megalithic sites by contemporary nature worshippers (2007), Sabine Magliocco's discussion of modern Pagan artwork and altarcraft (2001), or Nikki Bado-Fralick and Rebecca Sachs Norris's research into religious toys and games (2010)—material culture has been all but completely ignored in the study of new religions. If material objects are mentioned at all, they are discussed either as epiphenomena to new religious belief, practices, and the discourses within which they are embedded, or as an ephemeral entrée to what are regarded as more important analytic concerns—conversion processes, institutional routinisation of charisma, new religious violence, or failed prophecy. They are not treated as aspects of new religious culture worthy of study in their own right or capable of disclosing aspects of new religious understanding unavailable through other means of analysis (cf. McDannell 1995; Schlereth 1985; Upton 1985).

Unfortunately, it seems the importance of material culture, the things we use to establish and practice our different and diverse faiths, is all too easily lost in the heady shuffle of ritual participation, doctrinal belief, and the ethical and moral dicta that are often defined by the latter and enacted in the former. Arguing, for example, over whether a Wiccan altar must be placed in the northern quadrant of the sacred circle (or east or west, depending on whom one reads; cf. Buckland 1987; Farrar and Farrar 1984; Starhawk 1979), or whether a statue of the Virgin Mary is an appro-

priate addition to a Goddess altar (Cowan 2005), misses a number of important aspects of the discussion: the material fact of the altar itself; the physical presence of this statue or that as an instantiation of one's religious devotion; the complex mythistory—both Christian and Pagan in this instance—that informs the discourse; the unspoken language of object and arrangement that demarcates the sacred space these objects signify; and, finally, the implicit and explicit relationships of power that are embodied in the objects and embedded in disputes about them.

Put bluntly, scholars of religion—especially scholars of new religions—need to take things more seriously, to embrace, as it were, a Hegelianism of the left in their search for new religious understanding. That is, we need to pay closer attention to *things* and to the meanings those things have for new religious groups and adherents. "Without artefacts, material goods," argues archeologist Colin Renfrew (1998: 1), "many forms of thought simply could not have developed." Further, material culture is "not only reflective of social relations and of cognitive categories, it is to a large extent constitutive of these as well" (Renfrew 1998: 3). Once recognised, this insight could not be more clearly displayed than in the "social relations" and "cognitive categories" populating the vast and varied landscapes of human religious history and behaviour. Art historians David Morgan and Sally Promey (2001: 16) concur, asking, even more pointedly, "in what manner are material things constitutive of religion? How do material objects participate in the practices that make up religious lives? How do such practices rely on material objects? . . . How do objects help generate and maintain the narratives, institutions, and rituals that make sense of a lifeworld?" Or, in our case, how do material objects contribute to the creation and reification of new and emergent religious lifeworlds, especially hyper-real lifeworlds drawn from popular culture? Too easily we forget that things only have the meanings we give them, but that the meanings we give them often characterise and control our use of those things, consequently shaping the traditions in which objects are used and reused. Among these traditions are the myriad divination cultures that have for millennia marked human interpretation of and interaction with the unseen order.

Although many researchers have investigated divination and oracular practice as social phenomena, much of this work has been restricted either to antiquity (Berchman 1998; Gordon 1997; Lambert 1997) or to non-Western cultures (Jordan 1982; Pugh 1988; Sharma 1970). Classic works by anthropologists William Bascom (1969) and Victor Turner (1975), for example, discuss the various means of Ifa and Ndembu divination respectively,

research on African oracular practices that has been revisited and augmented many times since (Abimbola 1989; Mendonsa 1979; Reynolds Whyte 1990). Wai-Ming Ng (2000) has considered the importance of the *I Ching* in Tokugawa Japan, while Suzuki (1995) and Benjamin Dorman (2006) examine oracular and divination practices in late modern Japan.

In North America, however, divination practices and processes have not yet attracted the scholarly attention they deserve, particularly as these impact new religious innovation and development. To be sure, there have been a number of studies related to astrology—horoscopes, after all, remain the most common form of popular divination, with approximately twenty five percent of North Americans believing that the position of the stars affects their lives in some way (Lyons 2005; Feher 1992; Munk 2007; Wuthnow 1976)—and a number of volumes have appeared in recent years on the origins of the occult Tarot (Auger 2004; Decker, DePaulis and Dummett 1996; Decker and Dummett 2002; Farley 2009). However, we know considerably less about the ways in which these practices construct, contribute to, or reinforce both personal and social lifeworlds. One notable exception is the dissertation work of sociologist Danny Jorgenson (1992), who learned the skills of a professional Tarot reader in order to carry out participant observation at New Age fairs and psychic festivals. Given the popularity of divination in late modern society and the dramatic increase in new tools for accessing the unseen order—whether this is conceptualised as a supernatural realm populated by a variety of non-empirical entities or as the natural world of the unconscious (collective or otherwise)—the paucity of research in this area remains obvious. Mediums and channels notwithstanding—though here a case could be made for the body as the material locus for communication with the unseen order—material culture is endemic to divination. After all, even Johnny Carson had his faux swami turban and famous sealed envelope on *The Tonight Show*. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine divination apart from the material culture through which it is instantiated. Theriomancy, for example, seeks insight into the divine mind through the behaviours of various animals, including birds (avimancy), fish (icthyomancy), horses (hippomancy), and ants (myrmomancy). Among the Azande, termites are used to divine the solution to problems or questions, the answer depending on which of two different branches the insects find tastier. Divination in many parts of the Cameroon often involves a large spider and a 'deck' of cards made from the dried leaves of a plum tree (Zeitlyn 1993). Many people in rural Europe and North America are familiar with dowsing, or 'water-witching', which depends on an adept's used of a split stick or twisted coat-hanger.

Thrown bones, shells, and stones have offered insight to cultures around the world. Scapulomancers burned the shoulder bones (*scapulae*) of different animals, then read the pattern of cracks that appeared. Whether consulted through the counting of yarrow stalks or the throwing of coins, the venerable *I Ching* has figured in divination for more than two thousand years and has contributed to everything from political decisions to marriage advice, and from the quest for personal growth in the New Age to the search for a Russian whaling fleet in the early years of Greenpeace (Hunter and Weyler 1978: 61). The runic alphabet that was once the basic Anglo-Saxon orthography (Elliott 1989) has been mythologised and transformed into a popular divination system supposedly given to humans by Odin himself (Pennick 1992). Similarly, the Irish *ogham* alphabet, interpreted through the poetic imagination of Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* (1975), has been popularised in the modern Pagan Celtic revival as a divination tool (cf. Thorsson 1992). Artfully carved in bone or wood, painted on carefully selected stones, or sometimes offered as divination card decks, both runes and ogham are available from numerous modern Pagan outlets, both online and off. Consider, though, what any of these would be without their material component.

First, materiality lends substance to imagination, concretising and realising the abstractions that so often constitute religious belief and practice. While in the context of a Tarot reading, for example, the querent (possibly) and the reader (certainly) will be aware of the meanings encoded in the major and minor arcana, neither is required to rely on imagination alone as they seek the guidance of the cards. Since both are looking at the same image—say, the Five of Swords, which is often interpreted to indicate despair, loss, or failure—the material reality of the card imparts a finality, a sense of closure to the interpretation. In our imagination, we can run away; when our cards are on the table, as it were, we are forced to face them. In this way, the material nature of the cards serves as an external locus of validation and standardisation, necessary functions of the power relationship that exists between the querent and the reader. Faced with cards that indicate significant problems for the querent, the material objects—their 'objective' nature—allows the reader both to maintain control of the reading and to distance herself from the reading's content. "It's not me telling you this," we can hear her say, "just look at the cards."

Second, material culture functions as a kind of prosthetic memory, an external hard drive for complex concepts and extended interpretations. As Linda Bellaluna advises, young Pagans who make their own divination system are encouraged to carry the stones around with them, to remind

them of the attributes with which they believe the individual images are imbued. Though they may not remember the entirety of the system they have created, individual physical objects act as meaning cues in the context of interpretation and divination. Divination artifacts such as runes or Tarot cards also participate in what anthropologists are beginning to identify as 'culturfacts', material objects that are not only purposive within a particular social context (a divinatory reading), but are more generally symbolic of the culture embedded within that context (the modern Pagan or New Age milieu). They encode information that both allows for the performance of particular religious or spiritual identity and makes possible the transfer of meaning between or among participants.

Third, this possibility for shared meaning through material culture immanentises the potential for an exchange relationship, for an ongoing commodification and commercialisation of divinatory practice. It's not hard to imagine that a Tarot reader who simply describes the images she sees would soon find herself short of customers. Laying the cards out, on the other hand, especially in the context of a ritually prepared physical environment, inviting the querent to look and see for himself, offering something visible (the cards) for something tangible (the fee) all *realise* the reading in ways simple description can never approach. "These days," writes Isaac Bonewits (1989: 17), founder of the neo-Druid movement, Ár nDraíocht Féin, "occultism is spelled o¢¢ulti$m," and nowhere is this more the case than with the expanding market of divinatory technologies.

Finally, use is as often as not a history of reuse, and, as Eric Hobsbawm (1983) has pointed out—symbolic reuse of a thing often becomes possible only when its practical use has expired. In *The Wiccan Web: Surfing the Magic on the Internet*, popular Pagan authors Patricia Telesco and Sirona Knight describe how obsolete computer equipment can be put to magical reuse. Individual keys pried from an old keyboard and kept in a special cloth bag become a divination tool similar to runes or bones. Pulling the 'Caps Lock' key, for example, suggests that one should "stop shouting or projecting your energy so much"; the 'Num Lock' key, on the other hand, indicates "you're too caught up in logical thinking" (Telesco and Knight 2001: 97, 98). A screwdriver can become a magic pendulum, while a blank computer monitor acts as a crystal ball, a scrying tool (cf. Cowan 2005: 16–18). Judging by the explosion of popular interest in Tarot, however, the 'wicked pack of cards' remains one of the most fashionable means of divination and one that reveals most clearly hyper-religious innovation.

The Wicked Pack of Cards: Subcultural Intertextuality and Tarotic Variety

According to Aeclectic Tarot (www.aeclectictarot.net), a website run by an Australian Tarot enthusiast, more than a thousand different Tarot and oracle decks are currently available either commercially or privately, with many more in various stages of design and production. Indeed, Tarot seems more popular than ever, with choices ranging from assorted interpretations of the venerable Rider-Waite deck, one of the first to be offered widely and the one many Tarot readers still regard as the benchmark of their craft, to those reflecting an astonishing array of religious and spiritual traditions, from decks that attempt to remain faithful to the European tarotic tradition to others that freely synthesise and syncretise images and interpretation from a wide variety of cultures, both religious and popular. Many are marketed by major publishers such as U.S. Games Systems or Llewellyn in the United States and Lo Scarabeo in Italy, while others are self-published.

Practitioners of ceremonial magick, for example, can choose between Aleister Crowley's *Thoth Tarot*, the *Enochian Tarot*, and the *Golden Dawn Tarot*, while those who resonate with Native American spirituality have the *Santa Fe Tarot*, the illustrations of which are more ideographic than representational and whose suits, rather than the traditional cups, pentacles, swords, and wands, are water, buffalo, lightning, and rainbows. Similarly, in its minor arcana Julie Cuccia-Watts' *Ancestral Path Tarot* oversimplifies four different traditional cultures to illustrate the information allegedly encoded in the suit cards: Pagan Britain (cups), Native America (circles or pentacles), mediæval Japan (swords), and ancient Egypt (staves or wands). Not surprisingly, Wiccans and witches have an embarrassment of riches when it comes to the Tarot, including, but hardly limited to, the eponymous *Pagan Tarot*, *Robin Wood Tarot*, *Tarot of the Old Path*, *Sacred Circle Tarot*, and the *Witchy Tarot*, which Aeclectic Tarot describes as "full of cutely drawn long-legged Witchy stereotypes." For those interested in the mythology of the British Isles, there are, among others, the *Arthurian Tarot*, the *Avalon Tarot*, the *Celtic Tarot*, and the *Merlin Tarot* (which Aeclectic Tarot rates as "disappointingly repetitive and difficult to interpret intuitively"). In *The Grail Tarot*, John Matthews, a well-known figure in the revival and reinvention of Celtic spirituality, offers "A Templar Vision." In this deck's major arcana, for example, the Fool (usually the first trump card in the series) becomes "The Grail Seeker," while the Magician is "The Gnostic Christ," and the High Priestess, "The Magdalene." Most often depicted as a man and a woman, the Lovers card is rendered as

"The Two Knights of the Temple," an image that, according to the deck's guidebook, "emphasises the loving relationship between the brothers of the [Templar] Order" (Matthews 2007: 26). Although Matthews describes the image—two men riding tandem on a horse—as part of foundational legend of the Knights Templar, it is hard to avoid the arcanum's rather unsubtle homoeroticism, a charge that figured prominently in the persecution of the Templars in the early fourteenth century.

Still other decks exhibit no particular religious or historical affiliation. Patrick Valenza's surrealist-inspired *Deviant Moon Tarot*, for example, which uses a Punch-and-Judy styled imagery, was voted the most popular new deck in 2008 (according to Aeclectic Tarot), while five different decks use vampires to depict the tarotic journey and nine feature angels of one sort or another. Drawing on the immense popularity of such New Age classics as Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975) and Gary Zukav's *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (1979), the *Quantum Tarot* uses images from NASA's Hubble telescope to illustrate cards that ostensibly combine the intuitive divinatory capabilities of the cards with theories of quantum physics.

Lest we think, though, that the choice of tarotic imagery is relegated solely to the intellect—the region above the neck—in recent years a number of 'adults-only' decks have appeared that draw on different erotic traditions to generate new tarotic pathways and invoke the sexual imagination as a means of divinatory insight. Luca Raimondo's *Tarot of Casanova* evokes the famous Venetian womaniser and memoirist, painting into the cards the erotic intrigues of eighteenth-century Venice that Casanova described in *Story of My Life* (1794). Considerably less aristocratic in its imagery is the *Decameron Tarot* of Giarcinto Guadenzi and Luciano Spadanuda, whose cards demystify the various aspects of sexual behaviour in the same bawdy manner as Boccaccio's classic collection of erotic stories. On the other hand, with its almost Sadean imagery and explicit reference to bestiality, rape, and child sexual abuse, Amerigo Folchi's *Tarocco Erotico dei Giardini di Priapo* ('The Tarot of the Erotic Garden of Priapus') is considered by Aeclectic Tarot far too sexually explicit for many enthusiasts. Considerably more romantic in its imagery, the *Tarot of Sexual Magic* encourages practitioners to explore their own sexuality through the rather gentle eroticism of its images. And, for modern Pagans who are interested in the more embodied side of the Craft, there is the *Sensual Wicca Tarot*. Drawing on the imagery associated with such well-known Indian erotic classics as the *Ananga Ranga*, the *Gita Govindam*, the *Koka Shastra*, and, of course, the *Kama Sutra*, the *Kama Sutra Tarot* "seeks to connect its users with a rich tradition of sexual intercourse as a path to bliss and enlightenment" (Madan 2007: 5).

Italian artist Milo Manara's *Erotic Tarot* recalls artwork for which he is well known to a generation of *Heavy Metal* readers (e.g. 1995; 2004), and crosses all boundaries, both literary and imaginal, with no principal allegiance to any. In the major arcana, for example, the Fool is Pinocchio lying in the lap of the Blue Fairy, while the Magician is a scantily clad young woman pointing a screwdriver (her magic wand) at the erect, mechanical member of a robot dinosaur she has assembled in her workshop. As playful as these are, much of Manara's imagery is more explicitly transgressive. The second trump card, the Priestess, invokes decades of "nunsploitation" cinema (see Cowan 2008: 239–248), centuries of anti-Catholic propaganda, and the history of 'marriage night' mystical experience in Roman Catholicism. A beautiful young nun in full habit stands before a table and picture frame, her face raised in rapture, her skirt raised to expose her *mons veneris*. Is the frame, though, a mirror and she delighting in her own sexuality, or does it contain a holy picture or icon while she displays her sex for the glory of God, her husband in the conventual sense? We are left to decide on our own. The Priest card, on the other hand, is considerably less ambiguous and depicts a Cardinal in full regalia who appears to be surprised by a young woman urinating on the stone steps of a cathedral. However much the Church may try to censor our biological needs and desires, it seems they always surface somehow. There is inevitably a 'return of the repressed'. Indeed, the Tower card, which always follows the Devil in the major arcana and which in many interpretations symbolises imminent, institutional destruction or collapse, is the famous gothic cathedral at Chartres. Slashed with rain and lowering clouds, its massive presence is threatened by the irresistible pressure of the human urge to eros.

As should be obvious by this point, Tarot decks are designed to access particular stocks of subcultural knowledge—the Arthurian legends, modern Paganism, New Age spirituality, the current popularity of vampire lore, or the erotic imagination—and are, therefore, relentlessly intertextual, combining and recombining an astonishing array of images and ideas into what becomes for practitioners a meaningful, material whole. That is, the images, the tactility of the cards, and the various divinatory arrangements function interdependently as a meaning-making system. Lose any one aspect and the system itself is weakened. The conceptual plasticity of the cards presents an open-ended field on which any particular subcultural interest may be mapped, any religious tradition or practice realised. Consider, then, as an extended example of this, the realisation and commodification of H. P. Lovecraft's dread *Necronomicon*, one component in the hyper-realising of a Lovecraftian magical religion.

The Necronomicon Tarot: Hyper-realising Lovecraft

The Cthulhu Mythos, tales of elder gods known as the Old Ones, and of the myriad madmen, demi-humans, and simple victims born from the fertile imagination of Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890–1937), could not be more a part of popular culture. Brought to light first in the classic horror pulps of the 1920s and 1930s—most prominently, *Weird Tales*—elements of his dark fiction have evolved into a Lovecraftian subgenre and include pop culture products ranging from video games (*Call of Cthulhu*, 2005), graphic novels (e.g. Mike Mignola's *Hellboy*, which was brilliantly realised onscreen by director Guillermo del Toro), an ever-expanding bibliography of shared world fiction, and extreme metal rock groups such as England's Cradle of Filth, to a variety of mid- and low-budget films either culled from Lovecraft's oeuvre (e.g. *Dagon, Reanimator, The Dunwich Horror*) or inspired by it (e.g. John Carpenter's *In the Mouth of Madness*; cf. Cowan 2008; Migliore and Strysik 2006).

Despite the fact that there is neither systematic organisation nor conceptual consistency to the Cthulhu Mythos, within two decades of Lovecraft's death, fans and devotees began to use elements of his short stories and novellas to fashion a kind of 'Lovecraftian magick'—among the first of these, occultist Kenneth Grant, one-time secretary and *protegé* of Aleister Crowley. Central to many of these new hyper-religious innovations is speculation about *The Necronomicon* (*The Book of Dead Names*), allegedly an ancient compendium of Cthulhian magic that was said to cause insanity in those who read even a few of its dread pages and is used in a number of Lovecraft's stories as the mechanism through which the Old Ones are called back into our world. Although it was nothing more than a literary device Lovecraft invented to lend both an eldritch atmosphere and an aura of authenticity to his work, books alleged to be translations of the real *Necronomicon* began to appear in the 1970s. The most well-known of these is the so-called Simon *Necronomicon* (1977) and its companion volume nearly thirty years later, *The Gates of the Necronomicon* (2006), written, perhaps, by a disciple of Aleister Crowley, to whom the first volume is dedicated.

Since then, debates have raged within the Lovecraftian pop subculture about the origins and ontology of the book itself. In their exhaustive study, *The Necronomicon Files*, Daniel Harms and John Gonce (2003) demonstrate clearly that the book is a Lovecraftian creation—a pulp fiction, as it were—despite the cottage industry it has generated since the days of pulp. Some enthusiasts, however, continue to argue that *The*

Necronomicon is real, that Lovecraft perhaps read a copy in a university library, and that this caused the nightmares that plagued him throughout his life and on which he drew for much of his fiction. Others maintain that Lovecraft himself was a black magician who sought the secrets of the dead through the book and only barely disguised his efforts in short story form. Still others want *The Necronomicon* and the dark magics it is said to contain to be real(ised).

"The public wants the Necronomicon to exist," writes Canadian ritual magician Donald Tyson (2000: xi) in his preface to *The Necronomicon Files*, "indeed, it demands that it exist." Further, he concludes, while "it seems almost a crime to debunk the living and growing myth of the *Necronomicon* . . . it is arguably a still greater crime to sell books claiming that they are the genuine *Necronomicon* when no such text ever existed" (2000: xiii).

"When no such text ever existed": remember that phrase, because in recent years, Tyson has done more than anyone to realise and reify a system of Lovecraftian magic based explicitly on the *Necronomicon*. In less than five years, he has published not only his own version of the text itself (2004), but a massive 'autobiography' of its putative author, the 'mad Arab' Abdul Alhazred (2005), the *Grimoire of the Necronomicon* (2008), a handbook of ritual magic and the framework for a magical order devoted to invocation of the Cthulhian pantheon, and a nicely illustrated *Necronomicon Tarot* (2007a), which includes an almost *de rigueur* companion volume, the *Secrets of the Necronomicon* (2007b). In 2010, he published *The 13 Gates of the Necronomicon* (2010a), which is subtitled "A Workbook of Magic," and a biography of Lovecraft himself (2010b). Challenging Lovecraft's well-documented skepticism of all things mystical—despite the literary genre in which he made his reputation—Tyson posits that the author's active and disturbing nightmare life contributed far more to the Cthulhu mythos than other biographers allow and reveals far more about the reality of the shadow world his stories describe.

Attractively boxed, the *Necronomicon Tarot* follows an emerging trend in the commodification of Tarot: shelf presentation and retail security, value-added marketing, and the impression of conceptual gravitas—all of which speak to the popularity of the genre. By avoiding single-deck packaging in favour of a large, illustrated box, the *Necronomicon Tarot* can be placed alongside other books in the Divination section of one's local box bookstore, or face-fronted on the shelf to encourage browsers. From a security point of view, it is clearly more difficult to slip a box the size of a dictionary into one's pocket, backpack, or messenger bag, than

it would be a single deck of cards. Moreover, placing the Tarot beside other components in Tyson's *Necronomicon* series is meant, obviously, to persuade customers to purchase not only the divination deck, but the accompanying material as well. Inside the box, purchasers find the *Secrets of the Necronomicon*, which describes the particular meanings assigned to the cards as well as instructions on their use. Playing to the popularity of Lovecraft and Cthulhian imagery among the Goth subculture, the cards themselves come in a black organdy bag, the dark, gauzy feel of which both reveals and occludes the images within—not unlike Lovecraft's fiction. All this colludes to present the material with a conceptual gravitas to which it might not otherwise pretend. These are, after all, pulp fiction horror stories brought to life. That said, as Morgan and Promey (2001: 16) point out, "it is important to bear in mind that material culture scholars read *texts* as objects. Books are things that clergy proudly display in their studies or families display on parlor tables"—or, we might add, writers, artists, and marketers display on bookstore shelves.

But, What of the Cards Themselves?

Although inflected with Lovecraftian imagery, the minor arcana follow traditional understandings of the suit cards, a trait common among many Tarot decks since it is considerably more difficult to create seventy-six images entirely particular to a deck than it is to set the deck apart through the images of the major arcana. In the *Necronomicon Tarot*, the Cthulhu Mythos emerges in the twenty-two cards that symbolise the Fool's journey to enlightenment and self-understanding.

The Fool, for example, is the naked, corpulent Azathoth, "the blind idiot god" whom the narrator in Lovecraft's "The Haunter of the Dark" describes as "Lord of All Things, encircled by his flopping horde of mindless and amorphous dancers, and lulled by the thin monotonous piping of a daemonic flute held in nameless paws" (1999b: 354). The Magician, on the other hand, is Nyarlathotep, the "crawling chaos," an amorphous entity who appears throughout the mythos and whom Lovecraft portrays in his novella "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath" as the "soul and messenger" for "the blind, voiceless, tenebrous, mindless Other Gods," at the centre of whom sits Azathoth (2004: 157). The Empress, who in most tarotic interpretation represents all the positive aspects of female fertility and the maternal instinct, is the demonic generatrix, Shub-Niggurath, whom the narrator of "The Mound" describes as "a kind of sophisticated

Astarte" whose worship was "supremely obnoxious," perhaps for its overtly sexual nature (Lovecraft 2001: 375). She is the many-breasted goat-goddess, who holds death on high (a skull in one clawed hand, a hangman's noose in the other) while hordes of her squalling, impish progeny crawl around at her hooves. Many of Lovecraft's stories turn on human/non-human miscegenation, the fictional result, perhaps, of his own very real racism (cf. de Camp 1975; Joshi 1996), and this trait is most obvious in the Lovers arcanum. Ordinarily depicting a happy couple in a romantic union, the *Necronomicon Tarot* presents a not-quite-human priest presiding over the wedding of the "Deep One and Bride," an amphibious being and his human bride. Drawn largely from the novella, "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (1999c), the imagery depicts the deliberate interbreeding between species, something that Lovecraft always described in the direst possible terms. Finally, there is the Devil, the arcanum traditionally associated with subordination, entrapment, and enslavement. Here is Cthulhu himself, high priest of the Old Ones, rendered by artist Anne Stokes almost directly from Lovecraft's description in "The Call of Cthulhu." "If I say," writes the narrator, "that my somewhat extravagent imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings" (Lovecraft 1999a: 141).

As Jean Baudrillard (2005) points out, objects are the excerpted reflections of a larger, more totalising conceptual order. In this sense, every object function as a metonym for the system of object-ideas within which it is located and to which it contributes. Thus, we ought not consider the *Necronomicon Tarot* in abstraction, but as one component in the larger hyper-real project Tyson presents.

Fitting precisely into the entrepreneurial model of new religious development identified by sociologists William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark three decades ago (1979) and meant to be used in conjuction with the *Tarot*, the *Necronomicon*, and his 'autobiography' of dread text's author, Tyson (2008: xiii) intends the *Grimoire* as "a workable system of magic based on the lords of the Old Ones," as well as "the external framework for an esoteric society devoted to group practice of this system of magic." That said, one might question just how 'esoteric' it could be when all the books and the boxed Tarot set are prominently displayed in such bookstores such as Barnes and Noble, Borders, and Chapters, and Tyson himself depends on royalties from them to make a living. "Drawn forth from the astral plane," reads the *Grimoire*'s back cover blurb, "set down in cold print, behold the

one true book of ritual magic of the Cthulhu Mythos" (2008). And, on the first page, we read how "fans of Lovecraft now have the opportunity to reliably and safely get in touch with the Old Ones and draw upon their power for spiritual and material advancement" (2008: ii).

How, then, does Tyson hyper-realise his new religious system? In addition to systematising, materialising, and commercialising both doctrine and practice through the material culture of books and divinatory tools, and framing a dichotomous choice for the user that pits "a purely materialistic viewpoint" and "the scorn of academia" against "the quiet assertion of practicing magicians" (Tyson 2007b: 9), he reimagines Lovecraft and his biography, and from this conjectures both the reality of *The Necronomicon* and the ontology of the Old Ones. That is, through a constructed history and a construed antagonism (which is little more than a fallacy of limited alternatives), he establishes the framework for a primary group devoted to his interpretation of the ontology of the Old Ones.

It is clear that Lovecraft suffered from terrifying dreams and nightmares for most of his life and that this dream-life inspired many of his stories. That he actually believed he was in contact with anything supernatural, however, is denied by both his definitive biographers (cf. de Camp 1975; Joshi 1996) and by his own correspondence with friends and colleagues. For example, in a 1925 letter to fellow horror writer Clark Ashton Smith, Lovecraft wrote that "I am, indeed, an absolute materialist so far as actual belief goes; with not a shred of credence in any form of supernaturalism" (Harms and Gonce 2003: 12).

Tyson, however, simply ignores this and reimagines Lovecraft as sleeping prophet à la Edgar Cayce. "I have come to believe," he writes in the *Grimoire*, "that [Lovecraft] was a sleeping seer who drew forth from his dreams archetypal realities that lie on the edge of human consciousness, and which have found expression in various veiled forms in our religious myths" (Tyson 2008: xxii). In one deft move, Tyson shifts Lovecraft's own biography from the Hegelian left to the right, obviating the thoroughgoing materialism that the writer himself professed, substituting a more supernaturally inclined one of Tyson's own imagining. This is an important first step in hyper-realising a Lovecraftian religion, because an obvious question for someone like Tyson—indeed anyone who seeks to hyper-realise religious belief, practice, and products from popular culture—is: how do you reconcile your attempt to establish an entire ritual and religious system with the reality that all the components are fragmentary, fictitious, and disavowed as anything more than that by their original author? For Tyson, as for true believers in many religious traditions, the answer is to reinvent the founder and so to invent a tradition (cf. Lewis 2007).

Next, Tyson (2008) moves from a reimagined biography of Lovecraft to a non-falsifiable argument that since no one can prove that the Old Ones do not exist they very well may, and then to an historical speculation (also non-falsifiable) that the English occultist John Dee both possessed and translated *The Necronomicon*. Indeed, because he is appealing primarily to those who are already predisposed to believe in the reality of supernatural entities, Tyson creates an entirely self-referential rationality within which the Old Ones not only exist, but are essentially benevolent toward humanity, or at least benignly uninterested us. This is very different, for example, from Tim Zell's use of Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) as the foundational myth for modern Pagan Church of All Worlds. Neither Zell nor his coreligionists have tried to convince anyone that Valentine Michael Smith is anything other than a fictional character or that there is a civilisation on Mars like that Heinlein describes in his novel. They simply took elements of the story as the organising framework for their religious and spiritual practice. Tyson's effort is very different. However much stock he actually puts in the reality of the Old Ones—and there is no evidence to support an *a priori* dismissal of his sincerity—his writings present them as real.

This is most clearly demonstrated in the introductory material to the *Tarot* and the *Grimoire*. In both volumes, Tyson's presentation of the Old Ones is reminiscent in a twisted way of the ontological argument for the existence of God proffered by Anselm of Canterbury to the Benedictine monk, Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, in the eleventh century. If the existence of something in reality is superior to its existence in the mind, and we imagine a certain thing to be supremely great, then somewhere—perhaps outside of space and time as we understand them—that thing must exist. "The main purpose of this grimoire," he writes, and to which we must add the other volumes and the *Tarot*, "is to provide a practical system of ritual magic based on the mythology of the alien gods known as the Old Ones, who are described in the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, and appear prominently in Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*" (Tyson 2008: ix).

In conclusion, it is important to parse this opening sentence a bit, since it reveals important aspects of the hyper-religious innovation Tyson constructs. First, he wants "to provide a practical system of ritual magic," a move that takes the Old Ones out of the realm of fiction, places them in the context of real behaviour and consequence, and treats them as real entities—not unlike Colonel Kurtz escaping the *Heart of Darkness* to wreak havoc in downtown Toronto in Timothy Findley's novel, *Headhunter* (1999). Following on this, Tyson indicates in several places throughout his *Necronomicon* corpus that these elder gods, the Old Ones,

were merely 'described' by Lovecraft in his fiction, not invented by him as a pantheonic framework for that fiction. This difference is significant when we consider the lengths to which Tyson goes to rationalise the existence of the Old Ones.

In *Secrets of the Necronomicon*, Tyson (2007b: 8) echoes Lovecraft and characterises the Old Ones as "a race of godlike beings from beyond the stars who ruled the Earth in its distant prehistory, and who wait with reptilian patience for the stars to once more come right in their courses, so they can resume their despotism and enslave humanity." On the other hand, in the *Grimoire*, he contends that "it is not the intention of the Old Ones to exterminate humanity in order to cause human suffering, but rather it is a necessity of their great work of many ages that humanity either be transformed into a spiritual condition that will not hinder the elevation of the Earth, or be removed from this planet" (Tyson 2008: xx). Not unlike Lovecraft himself, who never systematised the Cthulhu Mythos or the pantheon of the Old Ones—and like many religious leaders throughout history—Tyson's theological imaginings are not entirely consistent.

They are, however, hyper-real in two different ways. First, following Adam Possamai, they illustrate the process of religious innovation and formation from popular culture. More than that, though, Tyson claims that his creation is *hyper*-real. "It was left to others," he writes, "myself among them," though perhaps including in this the work of Kenneth Grant and the Simon texts, "to seek to draw the *Necronomicon* forth from the astral plane, where Lovecraft glimpsed it in his dreams and set it down in cold print. All re-creations of the *Necronomicon* are only echoes of different portions of the one true book of the customs of the dead, which exists in its entirety only in the akashic records, but not in this world" (Tyson 2008: x). That is, the true *Necronomicon* resides in a vast, supernatural repository of universal knowledge—the Akashic Records popular among theosophists and anthroposophists—and extant only on the astral plane or in a dimension different from ours. Hyper-real, it takes us out of normal, accepted, conventional reality in the same way science fiction's 'hyperdrive' takes us out of normal, accepted, conventional space/time. Pop culture becomes religious culture.

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WHO IS IRMA PLAVATSKY? THEOSOPHY, ROSICRUCIANISM, AND THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF POPULAR CULTURE FROM THE DIME NOVEL TO *THE DA VINCI CODE*

Massimo Introvigne

Introduction

Why did *The Da Vinci Code* become such an extraordinary bestseller? Not only its critics who, on average, rated the novel as good but not exceptional, but also its author Dan Brown, were surprised. In the London copyright case in 2006 wherein he was accused of plagiarism, Brown (Introvigne 2006) told judge Paul Smith that "many people have told me they actually prefer [his previous and originally unsuccessful novel] *Angels & Demons* to *The Da Vinci Code*," and he seemed to share this opinion. However, Brown testified that

> a great deal of the success of *The Da Vinci Code* is down to the excellent promotion the book received. *The Da Vinci Code* got a huge launch. My first three books were barely promoted. There were more Advance Reader Copies given away for free of *The Da Vinci Code* than the whole print run for *Angels & Demons*. I am convinced that *The Da Vinci Code* would have failed if it had been published by my previous publishers—equally, I think *Angels & Demons* would have been a big success if published by Random House with as much fanfare as they brought to *The Da Vinci Code.* (Introvigne 2006).

But was its popular success really all due to the money spent on advertising? Theologians, social scientists, and literary critics often disagree. For many theologians, the success of *The Da Vinci Code* is both good and bad news: it attests to a substantial contemporary interest in Jesus Christ, and an equally substantial eagerness to explore alternative versions of his story from the one usually told by mainline churches. Some Christian groups have been keen to prevent a different reading of the gospels (Moore 2009) that could lead to a hyper-real religious construction by the lay population. In this sense, the threat was not so much the fear of people creating a full-blown hyper-real religion out of this novel (as is the case for Jediism and Matrixism, based on films, for example), but more of people constructing a new type of gospel, in which the demarcations between the official history and popular culture are blurred. In this sense, as Neo-Pagan

groups find inspiration for their religion from popular culture, the same process had to be prevented in Christian groups influenced by *The Da Vinci Code*. In this hyper-real phenomenon, readers of Brown's conspiracy theory might simply question the official Christian story, or might even fully embrace the new version carried by popular culture. For many social scientists, the fact that *Angels & Demons* failed in 2000 (of course, it was rescued from oblivion and made into a bestseller in 2004 and a film in 2009, but only after the triumph of the *Code*) may have to do with something that occurred between 2000 and 2003: the events of September 11, 2001. Before 9/11, conspiracy theories were becoming *passé* and unfashionable. 9/11 proved that conspiracies (however one prefers to interpret this notion) do exist and often succeed in history, making literature on conspiracy theories popular again. Conspiracy theories succeed because they present history as both scary and strangely reassuring. The extreme complexity of history, so difficult to grasp for the layperson, is reduced to a few conspiracies: of the Jesuits, the Illuminati, the Priory of Sion, Opus Dei, the Vatican, perhaps the CIA, Mossad or Al Qaeda. Conspiracies surrounding the Antichrist have a long history and regularly resurface during periods of crisis (McGinn 1994). Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), who founded the Theosophical Society, interpreted human history as the perennial struggle between a benevolent Great White Lodge led by more-than-human Ascended Masters, and a malignant Black Lodge.

Freemasonry. Esoteric Brotherhoods and Conspiracy Theories

There is now considerable scholarly study of conspiracy theories (see Ciuffoletti 1993; Barkun 2003) and it is one of the arguments of this chapter that when conspiracy theories are used in a religious fashion, they are part of the hyper-real religious phenomenon. Indeed, people can be inspired at various levels by a mix of historical facts and popular history/culture (or mythical history, see below) for their religious work, where the difference between reality and fiction becomes blurred. While we can regard grand metaphysical theories such as Blavatsky's as *meta-conspiracies*, historians deal daily with *micro-conspiracies* (such as Al Qaeda's 9/11 co-ordinated terrorist attacks) which obviously do exist, and at least occasionally succeed. Somewhere in the middle are *macro-conspiracies*. Unlike meta-conspiracies they do not rely primarily on supernatural explanations, although these may occasionally be involved. But unlike micro-conspiracies, the aim of a macro-conspiracy is not con-

fined to a single event or set of events, no matter how historically important the event may be. Allegedly, macro-conspiracies aim at explaining/influencing the whole of human history, or at least a good deal of it.

Jesuits, Freemasons and Jews have typically been accused of trying to control history as a whole. The idea that Freemasonry organised the French Revolution, although historically false, was seriously suggested by widely read authors who were both Catholic, such as the former Jesuit Father Augustin Barruel (1741–1820), and Protestant, such as the Scottish scientist and philosopher John Robison (1739–1805). Interestingly, both Barruel (1799) and Robison (1795) argued (falsely, as latter scholarship amply demonstrates, see Le Forestier 1914) that Freemasonry organised the French Revolution through a German secret society, the Illuminati. The Illuminati were established in Ingolstadt, Bavaria on 1 May 1776 by law professor Adam Weishaupt (1748–1830), and did have a political aim, to overthrow the Catholic and conservative Bavarian monarchy. Had they not been dismantled by the Bavarian authorities in 1787, they may have organised a kind of French Revolution in Germany two years before the one that took place in France. On the other hand, persistent mythology notwithstanding, they had nothing to do with the French Revolution proper—nor with the revolution in America (see Stauffer 1918).

Both Barruel and Robison also contributed to spreading legends about both the Illuminati and Freemasonry by failing to distinguish in modern esoteric societies between what Masonic scholarship defines respectively as 'authentic history' and 'mythical history'. Freemasonry, for instance, according to its 'authentic history' (i.e. a history based on documents verifiable by professional historians) is a late development of the trade guilds of stonemasons, who lost their commercial importance and ended up having more members who joined because of the Freemasons' beautiful legends than because they were professional builders or architects. When this situation became obvious Freemasonry was re-organised in 1717, and a professional writer of legendary histories for newly founded organisations, Presbyterian pastor James Anderson (1684–1739), was promptly hired in order to produce a 'mythical history' of the order, involving Noah, Solomon and his personal architect Hiram, Saint John and other characters of both sacred and profane history. For the Freemasons who had hired Anderson, his mythical history was not a fraud but a *legenda* or legend, a word which in Latin means 'what should be read.' While the 'authentic' history was widely known as true but was somewhat uninspiring, Anderson's *legenda* was read aloud in Masonic lodges and inspired much meditation and philosophical debate. Most Freemasons of the nineteenth century were well aware

that the 'mythical history' was not literally true; the same applies to those Illuminati who knew that their order did not exist before 1776, although its founder, Weishaupt, had produced a mythical history dating back to pre-Islamic Persia and the Italian Renaissance. A similar condition surrounds the modern Rosicrucians and also the Priory of Sion, which did not exist before Pierre Plantard (1920–2000) legally established it in 1956. Plantard later produced a mythical history dating it back to Merovingians, the Knight Templars, and the Crusades (see Introvigne 2005a; Introvigne 2005b).

The distinction between 'authentic' and 'mythical' histories is crucial for the whole social scientific study of esoteric societies. By no means should 'mythical' history be considered fraudulent or unimportant: it is often due to meditating on the myth that members have meaningful spiritual experiences and regard their membership in such societies as rewarding. On the other hand, only the most naïve members regard the 'mythical' history as literally true, and only the most controversial leaders present the 'mythical' version as supported by historical evidence (Plantard did this with the Priory of Sion. He sold titles under the auspices of the newly founded organisation pretending that it was a century-old order, and ended up in jail for fraud). Readers of Dan Brown, and occasionally Brown himself, confuse 'mythical' and 'authentic' history with respect to the Priory of Sion, the Illuminati, and Freemasonry itself, thus adding to this hyper-real phenomenon.

Of course the creation of a mythical history has been the practice, not only of religious or esoteric groups, but of their enemies as well. Barruel and Robison took advantage of the mythical history created by the Freemasons and the Illuminati, but added a number of elements in order to make them appear more sinister. Before confessing that all his writings were part of a huge hoax, the French impostor Léo Taxil (pseudonym of Gabriel Jogand (1854–1907) went much further. He claimed that Freemasonry was controlled by a still more secret society, Palladism, which in turn was led by Satan, who occasionally appeared in Masonic meetings in the form of a crocodile. Although obviously ridiculous by twenty-first century standards, Taxil's books were not only widely read, but taken seriously for several years by a number of European governments and also by the Vatican itself. Only in the late 1890s the latter concluded correctly that they were part of an elaborate hoax, compelling Taxil in 1897 to publicly confess his fraud (see Introvigne 1994).

While Taxil was pro-Jewish and denied that Jews were behind Masonic conspiracies, other Catholic and non-Catholic authors claimed just the opposite. The idea that Jews used Freemasonry to control the world gained

currency throughout the nineteenth century and was consecrated by the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a false document created by anti-Semitic right-wing Russian extremists between 1902 and 1903 and passed to the Russian secret police who made the text known throughout the world. By 1910 it had been proved that the authors had fabricated the document by combining two different texts. The first was a book written by an anti-Bonapartist lawyer Maurice Joly (1829–1879) during his exile in Belgium, about a conspiracy by the heirs of Napoleon I (1769–1821) to control the world. The *Protocols* simply substituted the Jews for Joly's (1864) heirs of Bonaparte. The second was a discourse pronounced by a fictional rabbi in the popular German novel *Biarritz*. The novel was signed by John Retcliffe (1868), a pseudonym disguising the identity of anti-Semitic journalist Hermann Goedsche (1815–1878). Although this information has been widely available for almost a century, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are still widely used in anti-Semitic propaganda, are officially reprinted by governments of Arab countries, and even quoted in the by-laws of the Palestinian party Hamas.

Conspiracy theories are not only, nor even mainly, disseminated by allegedly scholarly or investigative works. They prosper because they are the stuff of popular literature (for a novel poking fun at this whole process see Eco 2010). Though definitions of popular culture are the subjects of considerable debate (see Walz 2000), most refer to the concept of the 'serial': popular literature is easy to read because it keeps offering the same characters through a long series of issues and stories (Bleton 1995). Although enjoyed by all classes, it is certainly true that popular literature first persuaded the newly alphabetised masses of the nineteenth century to read regularly. The genre started with the *feuilleton*, a name created by French journalist Louis-François Bertin (1766–1841) for a detachable supplement enclosed with a daily newspaper, including news about theatrical productions. It was used in the 1840s for serialised novels whose parts appeared daily in a newspaper. The chapters should perforce leave their heroes in a 'cliffhanger' situation in order to persuade the reader to buy next day's edition.

Freemasonry and Popular Culture

Although famous novelists such as Alexandre Dumas (1802–1870) and Charles Dickens (1812–1870) did participate in the *feuilleton* game (where authors were better paid than in the writing of volumes), Eugène Sue

(1804–1857) emerged as the king of the *feuilleton* precisely because he realised that the conspiracy theme was perfectly fitted to the genre. In his 1856 *feuilleton* on *Le Juif errant* (The Wandering Jew), Sue portrayed two well-known subjects of conspiracies fighting against each other: the Jews and the Jesuits. Although, for the anticlerical Sue, the Jews were victims and the Jesuits villains, his material was later occasionally used for anti-Semitic purposes. Other authors elected to stay on safer ground by portraying fictitious secret societies—one such was the prolific Paul Féval (1817–1887), who devoted a number of *feuilletons* to an organisation known as *Les Habits Noirs* (The Black Coats). An Italian reader would have recognised, however, obvious references to the Mafia in The Black Coats, and the same is true for the most successful Italian *feuilleton*, *I Beati Paoli* by William Galt (1921), offered to the readers of the Palermo daily *Giornale di Sicilia* in 239 instalments between 1909 and 1910, and published as a book in 1921. The *Beati Paoli* are presented as noble avengers of the innocent in nineteenth-century Sicily. They do use illegal means, and may correspond at least partially to an historical organisation. There has been an endless debate in Italy on whether the novel, the most widely read in Sicily for one century, may be a covered apology for the Mafia. Although the author Luigi Natoli (1857–1941), who wrote under the pseudonym of William Galt and was in fact a Freemason, was certainly not friendly toward organised crime, modern Mafia leaders have proudly proclaimed the *Beati Paoli* as their noble forerunners (Montemagno 2002: 51).

From the *feuilleton* originated the dime novel, sold separately from the daily newspaper. The first dime novels were simply novels written as a whole and then cut into chapters (usually ending in a cliffhanger in the tradition of the *feuilleton*) and sold as weekly instalments. Later, the dime novel adopted the slogan "each instalment a complete story" and, although the main characters were the same, each sixteen to thirty two page booklet, with its richly illustrated cover, included a story which could be read without knowledge of the previous issues. Such knowledge was useful however, particularly when cycles featuring the same villains were offered. The modern dime novel emerged from the previous British 'penny dreadfuls' (often devoted to what we call today 'true crime' stories, although some were only alleged to be true), through a number of leading publishers in the United States, including Beadle and Adams and Street and Smith. The latter, established in New York in 1855, went on to create a worldwide dime novel market by entering into a joint venture with the German company Eichler, which in turn had branches in several European countries, including France, the Netherlands, Italy, and Sweden. Street

and Smith and Eichler endowed two characters above all with worldwide fame: Buffalo Bill and the detective Nick Carter. When World War I started in 1914, the latter's stories may have had a worldwide weekly readership of seventy five million (Cristofori and Menarini 1987), more than any subsequent comic book, and more even than *The Da Vinci Code*.

After World War I, the dime novel was slowly replaced in the U.S. by pulps (which included not only one, but different stories of the same genre, while keeping alive Nick Carter and creating new Western heroes such as Zorro). In Europe Eichler went bankrupt, because its owner was officially ostracised in Germany as a Jew and elsewhere as a German (he ended up committing suicide). But other companies bought licenses from Street & Smith and promoted Nick Carter *et al.* until the 1940s, not to mention many local imitations. Dead in the U.S., the dime novel was alive and well in Europe throughout the early 1950s and continued in the Netherlands and Germany until the 1970s. In the meantime, American pulps had been largely replaced by comics, which were experiencing decreasing sales because television was the new kingdom where the serial hero now reigned.

The most successful dime novels prospered by proposing, once again, secret societies and conspiracy theories. Some of them returned to criminal secret societies, like the various series devoted to Giuseppe Petrosino (1860–1909), a real-life NYPD detective who fought the Mafia and was killed by them in 1909 in Palermo. German authors of the Petrosino dime novels quickly ran out of realistic Mafia incidents, and started recycling old Sherlock Holmes stories as 'true crime' Petrosino adventures. Many conspiracies were 'romantic,' insofar as a damsel in distress, usually a princess destined to reign in some minor Central European kingdom, was abducted and replaced by a look-alike adventuress (Nathan 1990). Eichler and other German companies excelled in producing such material, which was then translated into several languages. Other conspiracies involved spies who were often connected to miscellaneous secret societies and organised crime. Contrary to what many have argued, it was not World War I but the war between France and Germany in 1870 that generated the first dime novels devoted to spies. The first series is probably the French *Jeanne l'Alsacienne*, started by Georges Le Faure (1856–1953) in 1887, which ran for two hundred and eleven issues and was continued by other Le Faure series involving increasingly sinister German-led conspiracies.

Other authors introduced esoterica into the dime novel. Some differences are worth noting between the cases in France and United States, the two countries where in the early twentieth century dime novels had

the largest audience. Well before the establishment of AMORC (Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis) in the United States in 1915 by Harvey Spencer Lewis (1883–1939), Rosicrucianism was well known in France. Two organisations, the anticlerical Kabbalistic Order of the Rosy Cross and the pro-Catholic (if unorthodox) Catholic Order of the Rosy Cross, of the Temple and the Grails, had been established in Paris in the 1880s and the fight that sprang up between the two groups in the 1890s was followed with amusement by the popular media and nicknamed "the War of the Two Roses." Crucial to the amusement were the antics of Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918), the leader of the pro-Catholic group (and the son of a very pious and well-known French Catholic author), who signed himself 'Sâr Péladan' and was often seen in Paris dressed in the most eccentric Oriental garbs.

The real-life Sâr Péladan was the model for a dime novel character, the Sâr Dubnotal, a Rosicrucian who solved a number of mysteries (including the Jack the Ripper case) through meditation and hypnotism. It is unclear whether the author was really, as some have claimed, Norbert Sevestre (1879–1945), a respected author of novels for young adults. The series was published by Eichler both in Germany and in France in 1909 and ran for twenty issues only. Ironically, critics have argued that it was too well written for the average reader of dime novels (Lofficier and Lofficier 2003). A direct derivation of Sâr Dubnotal (both were schooled by Indian yogis) was a later dime novel hero of the 1920s, Fascinax, a French creation probably attributable to well-known novelist Gustave Le Rouge (1867–1938). This series, which ran for twenty-two issues in Paris in 1921 and had two successful Italian translations in 1924 and 1949, starts in the Philippines with the mortal struggle between two powerful yogis, the benevolent Nadir Kritchna and the villain Numa Pergyll. Both know the secrets of the Rosicrucians, but Pergyll prevails and has Kritchna sentenced to death on false accusations. Kritchna is, however, saved by a British M.D., Dr George Leicester, who is then schooled by the yogi in Rosicrucian magic and becomes the esoteric superhero Fascinax, ultimately able to defeat Pergyll and other miscellaneous villains. The interesting idea in the Fascinax series is that not all Rosicrucians or all yogis are good; some are evil, and may try to use their magic to become masters of the whole world (or, at least, the whole international criminal underworld). This denotes a return to the conspiracy theme.

The different American and French approaches to esoteric conspiracies emerge from the differences between the original American stories and the European Eichler translations—prepared in France by popular author of romance novels Jean Petithuguenin (1878–1939)—of the Nick

Carter dime novels involving Dazaar, one of the most famous villains ever to cross swords with the American arch-detective. The original Dazaar cycle was created in 1904 for Street and Smith's *New Nick Carter Weekly* by Frederic Van Rensselaer Dey (1861–1922). Dey did not create Nick Carter: the first stories were written, following outlines from the publishing house, by John R. Coryell, 1848–1924. But Dey was its most prolific and celebrated author before committing suicide in 1922. In the first episode, published by Dey (1904a) as the *New Nick Carter Weekly* no. 372, a mysterious and strikingly beautiful woman knocks at Nick Carter's door. Her name is Irma Plavatsky, and she very much resembles Olga, the leader of the Russian Nihilists, who had previously fought Nick Carter but had ended up saving his life by sacrificing her own (we will later learn that Irma is Olga's cousin). Irma tells Nick that she has a double personality: kind and benevolent when she is her normal self, she is possessed for long periods by the evil Tibetan magician Dazaar and, when possessed, performs the most evil deeds, which she only vaguely remembers after each episode of possession ends.

Nick originally does not believe the story, but later becomes persuaded that it is literally true, and that Dazaar is able to possess not one person only, but seven prominent New York socialites. Nick's Japanese assistant, Ten-Ichi, the son of the Mikado, reveals to the detective that he has previously met Dazaar in Japan. Dazaar is a century-old Tibetan Ascended Master, who has been expelled by the Great White Lodge and has created a powerful organisation, controlling *inter alia* all of the world's Satanist lodges, and aimed at dominating the whole world. It takes several weeks, and horrible tortures by Dazaar's Tibetan acolytes and possessed socialites, before Nick discovers that only six of the seven New Yorkers are innocent citizens unwittingly possessed by Dazaar. The seventh, Irma Plavatsky herself, has lied to the detective and is Dazaar in his most permanent incarnation. Irma/Dazaar is captured, brought to trial, and sentenced to death. She dies in jail before being executed, vowing that her posthumous vendetta will kill Nick's wife, Ethel. The latter is in fact killed several weeks later, apparently by a hit man connected to organised crime. Nick however discovers that the killer has been paid by Dazaar, who has only faked her death and is alive, well and living in a luxurious Manhattan hotel.

As the story further unfolds, we learn that members of the Great White Lodge, when old, magically exchange their souls with those of young men, thus in fact implanting their old soul, completed with powers and memories, in a new body, while the poor young men acquire the bodies of the decrepit magicians and quickly die (the possibility of this 'Avataric magic', or exchange of bodies and souls, was seriously discussed

in Rosicrucian circles at that time). White Lodge members had, however, always used male bodies. Dazaar is the first Master who has decided to try a female body, thus violating White Lodge rules and being sentenced with expulsion. His experiment has created in the otherwise omnipotent Master a crucial weakness, the potential for human love. In fact, Dazaar as Irma Plavatsky is in love with Nick Carter and, when s/he discovers that the recently widowed detective is dating his attractive neighbour Cora Tempest, not only does s/he abduct Cora, but s/he vows to win Nick's love or to die. In order to save Cora, Nick consents to marry Irma in her new headquarters, the Palace of the Vampires. Nick, however, is a master of disguise and Irma in fact marries Chick Carter, Nick's adopted son, disguised as the detective. In the last battle, a furious but exhausted Irma shoots herself out of love for Nick. In her last breath s/he wishes—as reported by Dey (1904b) in the *New Nick Carter Weekly* (number 396)—to deliver him forever from the only enemy he could never have defeated through merely human means.

The name of Irma Plavatsky obviously reminds the reader of Madame Blavatsky, and was recognisable as such in New York, where the *New Nick Carter Weekly* was published by Street and Smith. In fact, in the previous decades the tabloid press had often published lurid exposés of the Theosophical Society and of Blavatsky herself, accusing her of being a fraudulent Spiritualist medium and even a Satanist (Santucci 1999). It is also important to note that, while Tibetan Buddhism is today widely respected, in the early twentieth century many Orientalists regarded it as an inferior form of Buddhism or an entirely different religion, 'Lamaism', dominated by magic or perhaps black magic (Lopez 1998). Millions of readers were thus exposed through the Dazaar saga to the idea that Theosophy and Tibetan Buddhism were indeed potentially dangerous religions.

The Eichler group had Dey's Dazaar cycle not only translated, but somewhat rewritten, by Jean Petithuguenin. The French version reflects the strong reaction by the French religious and esoteric milieu against Oriental religions and the Theosophical Society, called by some 'la haine vers l'Orient' ('the hate of the East'). The Rosicrucian competition had denounced Blavatsky as fraudulent and evil, and exalted the superiority of the Christian esotericism of the Rosy Cross over the barbaric and demonic Oriental religions. Works by Catholic missionaries also frequently claimed that Tibetan Buddhism was demonic in essence. It is thus not surprising that Petithuguenin (whose version of the Dazaar stories was used by Eichler throughout Europe) depicted an even bleaker picture of the Tibetans, even in a racist and inaccurate manner calling them 'Tibetan negroes'.

Irma Plavatsky is also a different character in the version by Petithuguenin. Here, there is a real Irma Plavatsky who has died but was once a beloved fiancée of Nick Carter in Paris. Dazaar has borrowed her body from the grave; hence the romantic relation with Nick and the detective's ambivalent attitude toward her. Nick's wife Ethel is downplayed, and the attractive neighbour Cora Tempest eliminated entirely from the European version. The woman Irma kidnaps and Nick seeks to rescue is not Cora but Ida Jones (Nick's cousin in the European translations but only an able assistant—not a relative—in the original American stories). And in the finale, Irma Plavatsky in the version by Petithuguenin does not shoot herself, but is magically 'called back', or dissolved, by the Great White Lodge she has betrayed. Her last words in the version by Petithuguenin (1908: 16) are also different: "[a]ll is lost . . . All has been in vain . . . I failed to solve the ultimate enigma." In Péladan's Rosy Cross the 'ultimate enigma' was a code word used in order to indicate the 'eternal woman' and the mystery of love. It was precisely this enigma that Eastern religions and cultures were regarded as unable to solve, because (at least as presented by missionaries and Orientalists) they were considered as lacking an adequate anthropology and as debasing women for lack of a Christian or even secular, Victorian moral code. As a male, a Tibetan 'Lamaist' or a Theosophist such as Dazaar may have been a match for the highly moral Victorian hero Nick Carter. By incarnating into a female body, neither Theosophy nor Tibetan Buddhism may seriously compete with Christianity and Victorian ethos, and Irma Plavatsky is fatally doomed. And all this notwithstanding the fact that, while Helena Blavatsky was definitely *not* good-looking, and even somewhat masculine (she explained this by claiming to be the reincarnation of a male magus, Paracelsus [1493–1541]), Irma Plavatsky was one of the most beautiful women ever depicted in the dime novel world.

Conclusion

From this exploration beginning with the dime novel, it becomes clear that the success of *The Da Vinci Code* did not spawn a totally new literary genre. It is, rather, a story in the long tradition of conspiracy theories that incorporate religious themes and blur the difference between 'authentic' and 'mythical' histories for the viewer/reader, contributing to the hyperreal religious phenomenon. It can be argued that the success of *The Da Vinci Code* taps into the increased interest in religious conspiracy theories the post 9/11 period of social anxieties.

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THE GODS ON TELEVISION: RAMANAND SAGAR'S *RAMAYAN*, POLITICS AND POPULAR PIETY IN LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY INDIA

Carole M. Cusack

Introduction

On Sunday mornings from January 25, 1987 to July 31, 1988 between eighty and one hundred million Indians watched *Ramayan*, a seventy-eight episode television series directed by Ramanand Sagar (Kumar 2006). This was a realisation of the *Ramayana*, one of India's most loved stories, an epic regarded as *smrti* ("that which is recollected") scripture, and was shown on Doordarshan (the national broadcaster, founded in 1959). Though derided by critics for its gaudy costumes, extremely slow narrative pace, and low quality special effects (Lutgendorf 1990) *Ramayan* evoked spontaneous outbursts of popular piety and became an important focus of devotion, with viewers performing purification rituals before the programme began and adorning television sets with flowers and incense, consecrating them as altars (Mitchell 2005).[1]

Further, *Ramayan* coincided with a sharp upsurge in Hindu nationalism and religious fundamentalism, which was partially fuelled by the series' presentation of a Hindu world menaced by demons (the "Other") (Wu 2008). The presence of a mosque, the Babri Masjid, on the site of the alleged birthplace of Rama (who is an *avatar* or human manifestation of the god Vishnu) in Ayodhya was a particularly inflammatory issue (Rajagopal 2001). This mosque was demolished by Hindu nationalists on December 6, 1992 (Karner 2005). In the wake of the demolition, "riots across the country . . . left 2,026 dead and 6,957 wounded" (Rajagopal 2001: 17). Although the destruction of the Babri Masjid took place four years after *Ramayan* ceased being screened, there is evidence that the serial's presentation of Rama and Sita as Hindu exemplars of morality and

[1] I am grateful to my research assistant Dominique Wilson for her skill and patience in locating materials, photocopying and taking preliminary notes. My thanks are also due to Don Barrett for his sympathetic interest in my researches and his assistance in clarifying my thoughts during the researching and writing of this chapter.

honour, and of Ayodhya as a perfectly governed kingdom, fuelled anti-Muslim (and anti-non-Hindu generally) feelings and actions.

The stars of *Ramayan* attempted to carry their popularity from television into politics, with Deepika Chikhalia (who played Sita) being elected in the 1988 by-elections to a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu nationalist party, seat. Other members, including Arun Govil (Ram) and Dara Singh (Hanuman) also flirted with politics. The Hindu tradition has always allowed for the presence of gods on earth, through the concept of the *avatar*, and television simply allowed a larger number of people to focus that belief on the cast of a religious programme. Enormous crowds gathered wherever the stars (particularly the actors who played Ram, Sita and Lakshman) appeared, in order to receive *darśan*, the "auspicious" seeing of the deities (Eck 1985: 3), and riots and even terrorist bombings were among the more unfortunate side effects of the *Ramayan* phenomenon.

This chapter argues that *Ramayan* concretised a religious and aesthetic vision that was deeply imbricated with Hindu nationalism, and that its enthusiastic viewers received it religiously in their daily lives. Watching television became for many a religious act, and personal devotion to the actors playing the gods emerged as a form of popular piety. Ritual and practice marked out *Ramayan*-watching as an act of worship. This devotional attitude was also in evidence among viewers of the ninety-four episode serial of the *Ramayana's* sister-epic the *Mahabharata*, which was directed by B. R. Chopra and screened from 1988 to 1990 (Gillespie 1995). Further, many were moved to political action, including violence, as seeing the gods on television drew attention to the perceived enemies of *Hindutva* (Hindu-ness) that existed within India itself. This response was possibly, and even probably, deliberately engineered, as television is "an obvious means of projecting a glorified vision of national identity" through a national broadcaster which is "an arm of the nation-state" (Rajagopal 1993: 92).

Previous studies of Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* have been scattered and fragmentary, concentrating on specific aspects of the phenomenon, such as the aesthetics of the video release (Lutgendorff 1990), gender issues in the responses of female viewers of the serial (Mankekar 1999), and the ways in which televised religious epics interact with popular politics (Rajagopal 1993, 2001). To date there are no published studies of *Ramayan* from a religious studies perspective, or that focus on the serial as the begetter of a distinctive form of popular piety. This volume analyses case studies of contemporary religions that are deeply imbricated with popular cultural forms. Adam Possamai calls these phenomena "hyper-

real religions," drawing on Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyper-real, in which "a new reality logic based upon simulation rather than representation constitutes the dominant organizing principle" (Luke 1991: 349). For Baudrillard, autonomous cultural representations, detached from any ultimate reality, actually *displace* the real. He argues that this happens when technologies such as film, television and the Internet claim to be more than representations; for example, "by claiming that it captures the real, the television effectively obliterates the real" (King 1998: 50). Baudrillard's theory of hyper-reality abandons Marx's focus on production to focus on consumption, and the resultant commodification of culture and proliferation of simulacra. Thus the Marxist vision of production (which generates commodities, things or representations) being inextricably linked to the condition of alienation is for Baudrillard replaced by consumption of simulacra and "the ecstasy of communication" (cited in Mendoza 2010: 57).

Academic studies of hyper-real new religious forms, and of contemporary religious beliefs and practices incubated within popular culture, tend to treat the Internet and other information and communication technologies as the primary sites for the development of such phenomena, despite Baudrillard's personal fascination with television. Such studies also tend to focus exclusively on Western religions founded on Western popular cultural phenomena. An additional complication is that within this emergent field of religious studies, there is as yet little recognition that such popular cultural manifestations may supplement traditional religious beliefs and practice, without undermining the religion in question (as, for example, Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* could be understood to undermine orthodox Christianity). A study that exhibits all these tendencies is Hugh B. Urban's (2000) article about Heaven's Gate, a UFO-based religion founded in the mid-1970s by Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles (better known as Bo and Peep, Ti and Do, or "The Two"), which is chiefly notorious due to the suicide of thirty-nine members in California in March 1997. The theology of the movement was a *bricolage* of Christian doctrines and New Age concepts, and the fact that several members were web designers led Urban (2000: 289) to describe Heaven's Gate as "an ideal religion for the age of simulation and technology in postmodern America." This chapter stands in sharp contrast to these trends; it a historical and cross-cultural contribution to the emergent field of hyper-real religion, in that it analyses a phenomenon that is more than twenty years old, mediated by a technology, television, that is almost a century old (Williams 1990). Further, it deals with India, which

is one of the emergent economic powers of the early twentieth-century world, but which in the late 1980s was a far from prosperous society, in which shared viewing of televisions was still a luxury activity. Finally, the religion interacting with the televisual 'hyper-real simulacrum', Hinduism, is an ancient tradition, the beliefs and devotions of which were supplemented rather than supplanted by Sagar's *Ramayan*.

In this chapter, it is argued that the cinematic and televisual media were peculiarly appropriate vehicles for the experience of the divine within the Indian religious context. This is partly because Hinduism lacks explicit distinctions between this world and the otherworld, and between the gods and human beings. First, the development of the genre of mythological films in India is sketched and the Sagar *Ramayan* is contextualised within this genre. Then the ways in which *Ramayan* represents a source of popular-culture mediated religion are examined, and these new devotional forms are linked back to traditional Hindu understandings of *darśan* (seeing the divine) and *bhakti* (loving devotion). Finally, the imbrication of this televisual piety with Hindu nationalist politics is reviewed. The chapter concludes that the hyper-reality of this religious form was only imperfectly realised, in that the popular cultural rituals supplemented rather than disestablished traditional ritual.

Ramanand Sagar, the Ramayana, and the Indian Cinematic Tradition

The first moving picture, *Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory*, was made by Louis and Auguste Lumiere, and was first shown in Paris in March 1895 (Barnouw 1993). The new medium rapidly became popular, and among Western film-makers religious subject matter was explored from almost the beginning of non-documentary film production. In India, the Maharashtrian Brahman Dhundiraj Govind (known as "Dadasaheb") Phalke established the "mythological" genre of films after seeing a film about the life of Jesus. In 1913 he made *Raja Harischandra* ("King Harischandra"), based on an incident from the religious epic the *Mahabharata*, and in 1917 he made *Lanka Dahan* ("The Burning of Lanka"), based on an incident in the companion epic, the *Ramayana* (Lutgendorf 1990). The great potential for film-related (and even film-created) religious devotion was recognised early; in 1918 the management of the Wellington Cinema in Madras premiered Phalke's *Sri Krishna Janma* ("The Birth of Krishna") in conjunction with "a major south Indian Hindu festival season" (Hughes 2005: 217) to fuel popular devotion among the local people.

The mythological genre became a staple of the "Bollywood" film-makers of Bombay, despite criticism including that of C. R Reddy, the future Vice-Chancellor of Andhra University, who, as early as 1919, urged realism and modern life as the preferred style and subject matter of the emergent film industry (Hughes 2005). However, Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) gave his seal of approval to mythologicals when he confirmed that the only film he had ever seen was Vijay Bhatt's *Ram Rajya* (1943), a retelling of the *Ramayana* (Lutgendorf 1990). A later very successful adaptation of this tale was Homi Wadia's *Sampoorna Ramayana* (1961). The epic *Ramayana* tells of the hero Rama, an avatar of the god Vishnu, and his marriage to the beautiful and virtuous Sita. Rama (the son of Queen Kaushalya) has three brothers: Bharata (the son of Kaikeyi); and the twins Lakshmana and Shatrughna (sons of Sumitra), who all marry kinswomen of Sita. Through the treachery of his father Dasharatha's youngest wife Kaikeyi, Rama, Sita and Rama's most loyal brother Lakshmana are exiled to the forest for fourteen years. During this exile, Sita is abducted by Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka. Rama and Lakshmana, in alliance with the monkey-god Hanuman and his monkey army, besiege and burn Lanka, defeat Ravana and rescue Sita. Finally, Rama returns to Ayodhya, where his brother Bharata has governed the kingdom for him, and is crowned king (Valmiki 1927, *passim*). In Ayodhya Rama "banishes the pregnant Sita because of rumours that she was unchaste while a captive of Ravana. Sita finds shelter with a sage in the forest and gives birth to twins. When the twins become teenagers, they vindicate her honor and the family is reunited. But Sita refuses to return to Ayodhya with Rama: the earth splits and she is swallowed by it" (Mankekar 1999: 169–170).

The earliest version of this tale is in Sanskrit, attributed to the poet Valmiki, and was probably written in the fourth century B.C. (Zaehner 1966). Multiple retellings exist in a range of subcontinental languages. Stephen Cross says of the sixteenth-century *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsidas, this "beautiful retelling . . . in the Hindi language . . . is today perhaps the most loved and popular book in North India" (Cross 1994: 95). The film director Ramanand Sagar was born Chandramauli Chopra in Lahore in 1917, and died in 2005. With his five sons he ran Natraj Studios and had made a number of popular films. Sagar was a deeply religious man, with a life-long devotion to the Tulsidas *Ramcharitmanas*, and was "involved for some twenty-five years in a group that met regularly to recite and discuss the Hindi epic" (Lutgendorf 1995: 325). His initial proposal to Mandi House, Doordarshan's headquarters, was for a fifty-two episode series based on the *Ramcharitmanas*. This was initially rejected, at least partly on the

grounds that the series could foment social discord. Sagar's religious and nationalist intentions were signalled in the proposal, which asserted that "*Ramayan* is not only a great epic of Himalayan dimensions, it is also a repository of our social and moral values. The real challenge . . . lies in seeing this immortal epic with the eyes of a modern man and relating its message to the spiritual and emotional needs of our age" (Rajagopal 2001: 80). The project was approved in 1986 and the final version had seventy-eight episodes and was shown weekly from January 1987 to July 1988.[2]

Ramanand Sagar employed approximately three hundred actors in the series, and the action takes place in a number of defined environments, including the luxurious palace of Ayodhya, the wilderness where Ram, Sita and Lakshman are exiled, the various ashrams of holy men and gurus, and the island of Lanka. The purpose of the series was not merely entertainment but also the inculcation of piety and religious values through pedagogical direction. Actors participating in the project had to give up alcohol and cigarettes and eat only a vegetarian diet (Lutgendorf 1995). Ram, Sita and other characters were presented as role models, the embodiments of virtue and appropriate action, and of submission to *dharma* (law). Sagar's project to educate the public in piety and social norms by means of his *Ramayan* meant that he took certain liberties with the story. Written versions say little of Rama's childhood or teenage years; Sagar portrayed an idyllic infancy in the palace with the three doting queens, Kaushalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi, and then the stern discipline of Guru Vashisht's ashram where the four brothers (Ram, Bharat and twins Lakshman and Shatrughn) are educated. Lutgendorf (1990: 148) observes that the content of Guru Vashisht's teachings "are revealing: a blend of yoga and Vedanta (illustrated with *cakra* graphics and out-of-the-body special effects), Gandhian nationalism, and an idealized Vedic socialism." Sagar's depiction of Vedic sages as teachers of ancient Indian wisdom is unproblematic, but his claim that this "anticipated Western science . . . it was scientific knowledge, it was spiritual . . . the product of mysticism and experimentation" gave, as Rajagopal (2001: 106) argues, "the otherwise somewhat nebulous Vedic goings-on a startling sense of contemporaneity."

The series began with discussion among the great gods, Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the destroyer). Thus viewers' attention was drawn to the religious nature of the tale from the beginning.

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[2] In Hindi the final "a" of the Sanskrit names is dropped; thus *Ramayana* becomes *Ramayan*, and Rama, Bharata, and Lakshmana become Ram, Bharat and Lakshman.

In the opening scene, Shiva and Brahma persuade Vishnu that he must descend to earth as an avatar to save the world from destruction. Elizabeth Burch comments on the use of the split screen (with the lower half showing the ocean and the upper half the sun) which is utilised to transmit this theological message. She argues that this technique means that the characters "float suspended, electronically . . . against a dense background that is 'painted' to be shimmering . . . The technical aspects . . . relate to the religious narrative and audiences must know the story . . . to know that. Vishnu is . . . the ocean (*Nara*), which was spread everywhere before the creation of the universe . . . In *Ramayan*, Vishnu is represented in human form in the upper portion of the screen with the other gods" (Burch 2005: 509). Sagar self-consciously connected himself to the tradition of *Ramlila*, retellings of the *Ramayana*, downplaying any originality in the series, and placing it in a conservative religious tradition. Yet he was also conscious of the contemporary power of his retelling, and inserted himself in the narrative, introducing events at the start of each videocassette of episodes and appearing in the narrative "to join assembled deities in singing the praises of the newly-crowned Ram" (Lutgendorf 1990: 143).

The aesthetics and style of Sagar's *Ramayan* owe much to the *Natyaśastra*, a text attributed to the sage Bharata, a historically unattested figure, and composed around 200 C.E. It is an instruction manual for actors, and contains detailed material on the physical representation of mental and emotional states, through a range of gestures and postures; for example, quick movements may express anger, but also possibly assertiveness, threats or intolerance, whereas slow movements may evoke sadness, unwillingness, or grief. Of especial importance in capturing certain states are facial expressions, in particular the eyes (Bharata 1967). In Sagar's *Ramayan*, this tradition of elaborate gesture and exaggerated emotion is clearly apparent. It is exaggerated because of the extremely slow pace of the series, in which, for example, a whole episode may be devoted to King Dashrath's funeral, and the expressions of grief among the royal family and their retainers. This traditional Indian theatrical sensibility (which also included classical and folk music, and imitation of the style of religious iconography) was married to Bollywood devices such as complex sequences of dance and singing, saturated colour and elaborate costumes (Burch 2002).

Ramanand Sagar deliberately cast unknown actors, stating that he "didn't want the star to cast his image on Ram. I wanted Ram to cast his image on whosoever is playing him" (Lutgendorf 1990: 144). He was spectacularly successful with this strategy, and Arun Govil (Ram) and Deepika Chikhalia

(Sita) became overnight sensations. Purnima Mankekar's interview-based research has revealed that many modern Hindus believe that they can learn, in a spiritual sense, from watching television. For example, Aparna said that if one had the right attitude television was powerful; "When you read the *Gita*, you should read it with a certain *bhaav* [feeling] in your heart. It's the same . . . when you watch something on television" (Mankekar 1999: 24). Other interviewees confirmed that "Ram, Sita, and Lakshman looked exactly as they had imagined them," an impression that Mankekar attributed to the presence of religious calendars and iconography in their homes and Sagar's deliberate realisation of that style in the serial (Mankekar 1999). Sagar's version also engaged the television audience in certain specific ways. For example, when Ram, Sita and Lakshman are exiled, the written texts focus on their experiences in the forest. Sagar alternated between the palace and events there, and the exiles. Further, he strengthened the roles of the female characters (particularly Lakshman's lonely young wife Urmila), which appealed to modern audiences, and he depicted the demon king Ravan as an impressive and honourable character (in contrast to some earlier portrayals) (Elgood 1999). Audiences were provided with a variety of role models of moral excellence. Even those characters who had committed evil acts (such as Kaikeyi, whose jealousy resulted in Ram's exile), were redeemed through ascetic suffering and penitence (Lutgendorf 1995).

Ramayan was also shown in countries with large Indian *diaspora* communities, such as Mauritius, Britain, the West Indies and Canada. It was enormously popular, with about one-eighth of the population watching. Mishra (2002: 220) comments that even though there were criticisms of the serial—"Kamleshwar, a journalist, spoke of . . . 'definitely inciting Hindu fundamentalism', and the South Indian politician M. Karunanidhi read it as . . . 'a vehicle for the imposition of Hindi' "—it was still undeniable that those espousing mainstream Indian values embraced Sagar's retelling and regarded it as culturally appropriate, educational, and religiously profound.

Ramayan Viewing: Darshan in Daily Life

Viewing *Ramayan* constituted a religious experience for many Indians. In order to watch that week's episode, people often gathered outside shops selling televisions or in tented areas where one television could be seen. Lutgendorf (1990) comments on reports from Indian newspapers;

for example, an article in *Dainik jagaran* described a busy Benares intersection, where each week a crowd of several hundred gathered to watch a television set up "on a makeshift altar sanctified with cow dung and Ganges water, worshipped with flowers and incense . . . [and] 125 kilos of sanctified sweets (*prasad*) which had been placed before the screen during the broadcast" (Lutgendorf 1990: 137). This devotional behaviour might also include religious discourses or singing hymns before the episode started, and one of Mankekar's informants said that "her mother and grandmother would bathe and purify themselves before the serial came on, and would sit in front of the television set with their heads covered and hands folded, just as they would when participating in a Hindu ritual or while getting the *darśan* of a deity" (Mankekar 1999: 201). Two central concepts unique to India are in operation here: *darśan* and *bhakti*.

Bhakti is a form of religiosity that involves deep personal and emotional devotion to a deity by a worshipper. The devotee surrenders herself absolutely to the deity, and the relationship is one of mutual love. The key text for the introduction of this emotional piety to the Indian religious tradition is the *Bhagavadgita* ("Song of the Lord"), an extract from the *Mahabharata*, in which Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu, persuades the Pandava hero Arjuna to fight despite his despair at killing his Kaurava relatives who are massing for war against the Pandava. Krishna reveals that doing one's caste duty with love and devotion is a path to *moksha* (liberation) equal to that of renunciation and withdrawal from society as an ascetic (Mascaro 2003). This form of Hindu piety rapidly became popular (the *Gita* dates from approximately 100 B.C. to 100 C.E.) and the *Gita* remains the most loved Hindu scripture. The Vaishnava (focused on Vishnu) tradition is the most fertile site of *bhakti*, and Krishna and Rama the most prominent deities receiving such devotion. Indeed, religious and cultural activities such as *Ramlila* performances and pilgrimages to holy sites like Ayodhya are driven by devotional piety; in fact, *Ramlila* confirms the link to *darśan*, as "throngs of spectator devotees . . . wait for hours to glimpse the human icons of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana enact in brief vignettes the drama of their exile" (Eck 1991: 50).

The key term here is "spectator devotees," as images (both mental and physical) have always been important in the Indian tradition (Patton 2005: 16). Diana Eck (1985: 3) explains that Hindus rarely say they are going to the temple to worship; rather they go to "stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity." In the pre-modern era, the *darśan* would have been of famous images of the deities, and of holy people such as *sadhus* and *gurus*.

Unlike the Western Christian tradition which separated the transcendent God from the material creation and permitted only Jesus Christ to be the divine in flesh, India has a long tradition of recognition of the divine in natural sites (such as the Ganges) and in human beings. Eck (1985) notes that tens of thousands of people took *darśan* of Mahatma Gandhi on his travels throughout India. Western observers often criticised Hindus as "idol worshippers"; it is more useful to consider the Indian religious tradition as one which is radically polytheist and in which almost everything may offer a glimpse of divinity. The "seeing" of *darśan* operates in two ways: the deity sees the devotee, gives *darśan*, while the devotee takes *darśan*. Seeing also is used in the sense of profound knowledge, rather than mere looking at (Eck 1985).

With this in mind it is easy to understand that the mediation of images of the gods through television in no way compromises or diminishes their power. Mankekar (1999: 199) notes that for her informants "the fact that their *bhakti* was electronically-mediated seemed to make little difference to the to them. Indeed . . . the televisual medium seemed to encourage a particular form of *bhakti* through the visual process of seeing or *darśan.*" Many episodes of *Ramayan* consciously drew attention to the way the televisual medium increased the possibility of *darśan*. For example, when Ram is in Mithila courting Sita, a scene of him walking through the streets of the city, the song accompanying the footage tells "how the people of Mithila are mesmerized by Ram's beauty and grace," and in episode seven a "*bhajan*, or devotional hymn . . . describes how 'the form of the Lord' is the embodiment of grace" (Mankekar 1999: 200). It is important to note that this interpretation entirely contradicts Baudrillard's understanding of hyper-reality; rather than reality being superseded by the simulacra on the television screen (Luke 1998), the televisual spectacle that is *Ramayan* gains its authority from representing the world of the divine, the gods of the Indian religious tradition.

The theory of *rasa* (juice, quintessence) found in the *Natyaśastra* is relevant here. The *Natyaśastra* argues that "aesthetic forms ought to activate an emotion already present in the . . . audience who must cultivate their own aesthetic sensibility" (Lynch 1990b: 17–18). The text identifies eight primary emotions. These are "love, humour, courage, distrust, anger, astonishment, terror, and pity" (Lynch 1990b: 18). When an artistic form evokes an emotional response in a spectator, this response has the capacity to be an experience of *rasa*, quintessence, which is the "divine bliss inherent in all humans" (Lynch 1990b: 18). It is important to note that *bhakti*, *darśan*, and *rasa* all operate as reciprocal phenomena. In *bhakti*

the devotee loves the deity who loves the devotee, in *darśan* the devotee sees the deity who sees the devotee, and in *rasa* the aesthetic form makes possible the experience of both one's true self and divinity; "what is portrayed is essentially in oneself and is the essential self" (Lynch 1990b: 18). Thus, watching *Ramayan* on television can never be a passive exercise; the viewer is totally engaged with the religious drama, and this engagement is intelligible in the light of traditional theological and aesthetic theories. This perception also offers a challenge to those scholars of religious studies who understand consumption to be an essentially passive process.

Within *Ramayan* elements that may be puzzling to Western viewers are clarified by reference to these conventions, the *Natyaśastra*, in representing *darśan* and *bhakti*. For example, there are many shots of feet that precede the identification of the character by seeing their face. This sometimes is linked to humility and spiritual advancement, for example in "the scene where the king [Dashrath] makes a barefoot pilgrimage to his priest to conduct a sacrifice that will bring fertility to his wives" (Burch 2005: 513). However, techniques such as having characters gaze in a particular direction (which draws the viewers' eyes in the same direction) may lead subtly to class and caste realisations among the audience. Burch (2005: 513) comments that in "*Ramayan*, many shots show actors looking down or away from the expected directions during conversations . . . [this] makes sense since it would be viewed as disrespectful for peasants to look directly at kings or gods. It is a subtle aspect of the culture that viewers could know that relates to religious caste and class differences as well." This is particularly true in the Indian context, but Charles Harvey (2004) has argued that viewing visual entertainment is a transformational experience, whether the content of our viewing is based on scripture or science fiction, because when we view a film or a television programme, "we enter its world on its own terms" (Harvey 2004: 263).

It has been demonstrated that Ramanand Sagar's intentions in making *Ramayan* were religious, and that the serial itself is undeniably religious in that it was a televisual adaptation of the *Ramayana*, a treasured religious classic of the Hindu tradition. Due to the specific cultural conditions of India, the viewing of television was accorded sacred status quite easily, as an extension of the attitude that sees cinemas as "the temples of modern India" (Mishra 2002: 1). In fact, it has been argued that being on television intensified the religious aspects of *Ramayan*, in that it brought the deities closer and into intimate and repeated contact with the audience. Pious people who watched the serial had their religious certainties confirmed, where others were moved to new piety. Poonam, one of

Purnima Mankekar's interviewees, "said that the *Ramayan* had reminded her of the power of faith and that she was now a fervent devotee of Lord Ram. She sometimes dreamed of him, and in her dreams he looked just like he did in the serial. She said that the Lord Ram spoke to her in her dreams and reassured her that she would pass her exams" (Mankekar 1999: 203).

Hindutva Politics and Ramayan-Generated Piety

One aspect of the *Ramayan* phenomenon that seems novel and fresh is the way in which a highly self-conscious, contemporary television rendition of an ancient epic was harnessed to the Hindu nationalist political cause. Although there is no verifiable historical evidence of the site of Rama's birthplace, the traditional site has been in Ayodhya, where since 1528 a mosque, the Babri Masjid, has been standing. This mosque was erected by the Mughal Emperor Babur, who is believed by Hindus to have been the demolisher of the sacred Rama temple. Hindu nationalist politics embraces many causes, but broadly seeks to diminish the significance of any non-Hindu cultures and peoples in the Indian subcontinent. Thus, the theory of Indo-European migration into the subcontinent "as had been advocated by European linguists and historians since the latter part of the nineteenth century" is rejected. Rather, the position favoured is that advocated by Golwalker in *We, or the Nationhood Redefined* (1939) that "Hindus have always been the indigenous 'children of the soil' " (Witzel 2006: 204). Similarly, although scholars cannot point to any evidence that Rama was worshipped in the first millennium C.E., many assert that sites now bearing his name were places of pilgrimage and devotion as early as the fifth century C.E. (Bakker 1991).

In the later part of the twentieth century, the Congress Party, which had ruled India since partition in 1947, lost ground as the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, or BJP), a Hindu nationalist party, gained in popularity. A movement, the Ram Janmabhumi (birthplace of Rama) campaign, caught the popular imagination. It called for the rebuilding of the Rama temple in Ayodhya, and the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Even their political opponents were reluctant to oppose the BJP's campaign, arguing only that the temple should be re-erected without damage to the mosque. In the 1989 General Election the BJP increased "its Parliamentary seat total from two to eighty-eight" largely due to the Ram Janmabhumi campaign (Rajagopal 2001: 14).

Ramayan had been serialised on Doordarshan from January 1987 to July 1988, and directly fed into national sentiment concerning the perceived Muslim occupation of the site of Rama's birthplace. This means that the serial fed into the most important phase of the Ram Janmabhumi campaign, when it was transformed from a relatively obscure religious fixation to the issue that captured the nation's imagination. Arvind Rajagopal (2001: 30) described a procession from Delhi to Ayodhya: "in . . . one procession . . . volunteers dressed to look like the television versions of Ram and his brother Lakshman, with their bows strung, [and] posed for photographs in front of a pile of bricks intended for the proposed Ram temple, dubbed Ram *shilas*, using the Sanskrit *shila* for brick to underline that this was religious, not political work." Scenes in the serial fuelled these sorts of religio-political activities, such as that which showed Ram praying to a parcel of earth from Ayodhya during his exile.

Just as the serial presented the ancient realm of Ayodhya as a polity superior to that of the late twentieth century, and the wisdom of Vedic sages as anticipating Western science, the campaign to destroy the Babri Masjid was constructed as the latest phase in a historic struggle. Rajagopal (2001: 65) notes that pamphlets handed out to "pilgrims" to Ayodhya described the battles that "have been fought over the birthplace of Ram . . . thousands of Hindus . . . had died in the cause . . . at the hands of Muslim rulers . . . Devotees of Ram . . . would strike at night, attempting to rebuild the temple that the forces of the . . . emperor Babar would tear down by day." While it was true that violence in the modern era over that particular piece of ground first "occurred in 1855 in the context of an ongoing struggle for control of Faizalabad by Muslim administrators, Hindu landholders, and British officials" (Stoler Miller 1991: 788), that too derived from a specifically modern colonial context. Like Sagar's *Ramayan*, the Ram Janmabhumi movement denied that it was new, a product of the twentieth century, and took refuge in the mantle of time-honoured religious tradition. In addition to its focus on the site of Ayodhya, the movement promoted the mythology of Rama because it "is more powerful than history itself. In medieval times the '*rakshasization*' (demonization) of the Muslim other was crucial to the recovery of this myth" (Mishra 2002: 209). *Rakshas* (demons) in Sagar's *Ramayan* bore the signs of being non-Hindus, being the 'Other' (generally non-Hindu, but specifically Muslim).

Many critics have argued that Sagar presented Ravan, the demon king of Lanka, in a positive light. Rajagopal (2001: 106) noted that "Ravan, the demon king, is portrayed as a devout worshipper of Shiva and a connoisseur of the arts: our introduction to the court of Lanka is with a lengthy

performance of classical *bharatanatyam* dance." Certainly, Arvind Trivedi, the actor who portrayed Ravan, was in receipt of rapturous attention from fans, despite being the villain of the piece. However, interview research by Mankekar indicated that devout Hindu viewers tended to see Ram and Ravan as diametrically opposed, good versus evil. She notes that "the Otherness of the *rakshasas* is [seen in their] 'culture', lifestyle, and, most important, their moral inferiority. They are usually depicted as antagonistic to *brahmins* and as sexual predators . . . The conflict between the two kinds of 'morality' is laid out in one of the opening scenes when Vishnu descends to the earth to rid it of all the *rakshasas*" (Mankekar 1999, p. 176). In conversation with female Hindu viewers, Mankekar heard repeatedly that the Indian government was too lenient towards Muslims, particularly through the recognition of polygamy (coded as moral inferiority), and Muslim women told her that they refused to watch the serial, expressing hostility toward its Hindu nationalist agenda. One Hindu informant, Renuka, insisted that "[t]he *Ramayan* has taught us a lot about Hinduism," and claimed that until it was screened many people she knew were reticent about signalling their Hindu identity. After the serial's great impact, they now felt that it was "alright to be traditional . . . *Ramayan* has taught us to be proud of our heritage" (Mankekar 1999: 181). Mankekar's research is supported by the findings of Marie Gillespie's research into "devotional viewing" among the Hindu *diaspora* in London. Her interviewees showed religious respect toward the viewing of mythological films and television serials; incense was lit at the start of such programmes, and *puja* may be performed. "Furthermore, once a sacred film or serial is switched on it must be viewed until the end out of respect—a devotee would not stand up and leave his or her guru in mid-sentence. Food should not be eaten while viewing, except *prasad* or holy food that has been blessed. If, for instance, Krishna appears on screen, the mother will encourage the children to sit upright and make a salutation, as in an act of worship in a temple" (Gillespie 1995: 362; see also Gillespie 1993).

The overwhelming identification with *Ramayan* and its sister serial *Mahabharat* by Hindu viewers, and evidence that Muslim and Marthoma Christian families boycotted the serials, would suggest that in India television reinforces existing religious identities and does not create opportunities for dialogue between members of different faiths. Those who built religious activities around their viewing of the serials were Hindu, and the rituals they performed were Hindu and made sense in the religious context of *darśan*, *bhakti* and *rasa*, as demonstrated above. The sternly anti-iconographic stance of Islam and the mediated stance of Christianity

are very far from the radical plurality of images found in the Hindu tradition. It has been argued that "Doordarshan, by telecasting Hindu religious serials day after day may provide an opportunity for the not-so organised Hindus to amplify their religious identity" (Thomas and Mitchell 2005: 42). Some of the fruits of this amplified Hindu identity are new, popular culture mediated religious practices; others, sadly, include anti-Muslim violence (of which the destruction of the Babri Masjid stands as the nadir) and the marginalisation of all minority religions in India. From the point of view of Western theorists of information technologies, this is logical. Harvey has drawn attention to the ways in which "[w]e become what we behold, and then in a dialectical turn-about, we make the world in terms of what we have become" (Harvey 2004: 266).

Conclusion

It has been argued that Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* was conceived by the director with overtly religious and probable Hindu nationalist motivations, and was presented to television audiences as an 'authentic' realisation of the ancient Rama mythology. In fact it was a distinctively late twentieth-century cultural artefact, and not just because it employed the televisual medium. It was intimately imbricated with contemporary Hindu political discourses of nationalism, and the Ram Janmabhumi movement in particular, and the involvement of a number of the actors with the Bharatiya Janata Party would seem to deepen this connection. The rapturous reception that the serial received was evidenced by the fact that bazaars were deserted, weddings and funerals delayed, and buses and trains stopped during the broadcast of *Ramayan* on Sunday mornings (Lutgendorf 1995).

It is undeniable that *Ramayan* fuelled expressions of Hindu nationalism. The two discourses were linked by certain general features: the demonisation of the religious and cultural "Other," and the "construction of an ancient past in which Hindus existed as a clearly defined, unified community . . . and the rulers [were] just and honest" (Mankekar 2002: 144). The BJP quickly realised that the serial offered political opportunities and Deepika Chikhalia (who played Sita) was elected in the June 1988 by-elections as a BJP candidate. In the same election other stars campaigned in character: Arun Govil appeared as Ram in Uttar Pradesh representing the Congress Party, and Dara Singh (Hanuman) campaigned as well (Lutgendorf 1990). However, as Lutgendorf noted, people were not overly persuaded by these

politicised actions, and non-aligned public appearances by the stars were attended by far larger and more appreciative crowds. Yet *Ramayan* did contribute to the assertion of Hindutva, "the 'Hindu-Hindi' religio-linguistic hegemony of the northern Indian states over the rest of India" (Sinclair and Harrison 2004: 45), at least partly because, as Rajagopal (2001) wryly observed, the desires stimulated by electronic media are not always obedient to mainstream social and political processes.

This book is an investigation into new forms of religion and spirituality that are produced through the medium of popular culture. Adam Possamai has termed such forms "hyper-real religions" (Possamai 2005). This concept reflects Baudrillard's notion that the hyper-real is a simulacrum, "in which entertainment, information, and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life, as well as the codes and models that structure everyday life" (Kellner 2007). The situation of *Ramayan* partially fits this model, but has some important differences. The devotional activities that accompanied broadcasting of *Ramayan* replaced more traditional religious behaviours for some viewers, and the screening of the final episode saw spontaneous festivities across the country. One reporter characterised this as "an 'early Divali' (similarly, the slaying of Ravan several weeks before had been observed in some areas as an out of season Dashara festival)" (Lutgendorf 1995: 328). This suggests that the hyper-real (or the popular cultural) festival has replaced the canonical religious celebration. Yet the reality was more of an augmentation of devotional life; the canonical festivals continued to be celebrated by devout *Ramayan* viewers. If *Ramayan* cannot be understood in terms of the hyper-real, it may be that the technological, religious and social context of India in the 1980s did not manifest such a cultural shift (although twenty-five years later, with India emerging as an economic superpower, with a significant information technology sector, the situation may have changed sufficiently for a Baudrillardian analysis to be sustained).

In conclusion, the television-mediated devotion that *Ramayan* generated was a culture-specific phenomenon in India and among Indian diasporic communities. The experiences of viewers were shaped by traditional religious and artistic concepts and reflected mainstream Hindu religious tastes. There was general agreement that the televisual medium was a site of *darśan*: Rajagopal observed people watching a black and white television in a shop window, and when he enquired as to their motivation, he was told by Ashok Kumar Gupta, a mechanic, "[m]any people watched it out of devotion. They felt that God was giving them *darśan*" (Rajagopal

2001: 93). Yet caution should be exercised in categorising *Ramayan*-generated forms of piety as hyper-real or even decisively new, as they were definitely connected to traditional Hindu modes of piety. Rather than conforming to the consumer culture model, in which "signs get their meaning from their relations with each other, rather than by reference to some independent reality or standard" (Possamai 2002: 49), *Ramayan* testified to the relative stability of the Hindu understanding of Valmiki's ancient epic *Ramayana*, and the range of styles and meanings that were socially acceptable in representing this sacred story. A further tension is evidenced by the fact that Daniel Lerner, in *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958), championed electronic media because he believed they promoted modernisation in developing countries. He argued that "individuals can thus identify with those in hitherto distant or unfamiliar roles, and form bonds of association based on new sets of symbols, he argued, thereby leading the way out of traditional society" (cited in Rajagopal 2001: 11). The televised *Ramayan* was mediated by a contemporary electronic technology, but the irony is that the 'unfamiliar roles' and 'new sets of symbols' that its viewers began experimenting with were actually modern re-imaginings of the ancient Hindu past.

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HINDUISM AND HYPER-REALITY

Heinz Scheifinger

Introduction

According to Jean Baudrillard, "culture is now dominated by simulations" (Poster 1988: 1). By a simulation, Baudrillard means that there is no distinction between an object and its representation. He calls these simulations 'simulacra,' and asserts that the world is made up of these simulacra which "have no referent or ground in any 'reality' except their own" (Poster 1988: 5). Consequently, these simulacra become more real than the real—hyper-real. Drawing inspiration from this, Adam Possamai (2007a) gives the name 'hyper-real religions' to those religions in which "elements from religions and popular culture are so much exchanged between each other that it becomes hard to find the 'reality' of the religions behind [them]." Thus, a hyper-real religion is, in fact, "a simulacrum of a religion" (Possamai 2007b).

In making this assertion, Possamai deviates somewhat from Baudrillard. Because Baudrillardian theory posits that even mainstream religions are hyper-real, it follows that there can be no 'reality' hidden within Possamai's hyper-real religions. Despite this, Possamai's classification still makes sense. For example, even if Baudrillard's overarching argument that the world is made up of simulacra is rejected, the idea that in many cases there is no distinction between an object and its representation can still be retained. This is the approach that is implicit in Possamai's understanding of the new hyper-real religions. From this viewpoint it becomes logical to speak of a new religion which mixes popular culture and religion as being hyper-real because its religious underpinnings are indeed difficult to discern. Alternatively, if it is accepted that mainstream religions are already hyper-real, we can still appreciate that there is a fundamental difference between them and those religions that Possamai terms hyper-real. This is because, from this perspective, the blurring of religion and popular culture in the latter constitutes an exacerbation of hyper-reality.

Although Baudrillard's idea that simulacra are ubiquitous is undeniably interesting and important, as it does make us think about the nature of that which we perceive, simply accepting that simulacra are everywhere

ultimately fails to allow us to recognise and to understand the distinctive characteristics of the hyper-real religions considered in this volume. It is also the case that merely accepting that the world is made up of simulacra does not allow us to constructively consider incidences of hyper-reality in mainstream religions. Because in this chapter I will consider Hinduism in the light of the notion of hyper-reality, in my explanation of why this is the case (and in my proposal of a modification of the approach which does allow us to consider instances of hyper-reality), I will use examples from that multi-faceted religious tradition.

David Smith directly draws upon the ideas of Baudrillard to demonstrate that the characteristics of Hinduism are hyper-real. He argues that the Hindu temple is a simulacrum because it is a simulated environment—"the palace of the God" (Smith 1993: 160): "[t]he whole temple is simulation, the forms of the deities, their being fed and dressed, their retiring for the night" (Smith 1993: 162). Smith (1993: 163) also mentions the temple-car which is used to transport deities during festivals and points out that it is a "simulacrum of the sky-flying vehicles of the gods." Smith provides these examples in order to demonstrate the central thesis of his (1993) article, that there are parallels between the premodern and the postmodern (he uses Hinduism "to exemplify the premodern" (Smith 1993: 158)). Although he successfully achieves this, outside of this context this does not tell us very much. There is little doubt that these aspects of Hinduism which allow humans to gain access to the divine are hyper-real simulacra—even devout Hindus would assert that few are likely to be able to directly experience the divine and that therefore these simulations become, to all intents and purposes, real.

However, the adoption of an approach which accepts either that religions (or aspects of religions) can become hyper-real or that hyper-reality can be exacerbated, overcomes this limitation. It is prudent to adopt the latter approach. Crucially, it does not negate Baudrillard's central idea upon which any discussion of hyper-reality ultimately rests. Besides, as the examples provided by Smith demonstrate, at least in the case of Hinduism, the notion of simulacra is difficult to deny. Furthermore, countless modifications occur in successive presentations of aspects of mainstream religions and this has gone on since the inception of these respective religions. Therefore, the real has been lost and representations have always stood in for the real and become the real.

For example, there are several textual versions of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana* and these versions have evolved over the years (Smith 1993). Because the origins of the gods that feature in the story are obscured,

the images of the gods as portrayed in these successive multiple versions are already hyper-real. However, although the fact that there are multiple texts means that it is not possible to consider the differences between one authoritative text and a modern presentation of the *Ramayana* such as the televised serial shown in 1987–1988, a general comparison can still be made. This is possible because this new mode of presentation constitutes a significant break with textual sources which, although they may be varied, share the same mode of presentation. We can then conclude that the televised serial gives rise to an increase in hyper-reality because for some Hindus their perception of, for example, the god Rama comes from the image portrayed in the television series and not from more traditional sources. Indeed, the hyper-real nature of the series is apparent in a number of ways—something that will be considered in due course.

Certainly it may be difficult or impossible to identify possibly subtle changes that have occurred in the past in aspects of religions and the consequent increase in hyper-reality that these changes give rise to. However, clear differences in aspects of religion between contrasting modes of presentation can be exemplified through the utilisation of an approach which accepts that simulacra are ubiquitous but that it is possible that aspects of mainstream religions can undergo an exacerbation of hyper-reality. This approach adds a new dimension to Baudrillard's theory and can ultimately throw light upon changes that are occurring within mainstream religions.

In his (1993) article, Smith inadvertently adds further weight to my claim that such an approach is valuable. In addition to the simulacra mentioned above, he also identifies another aspect of Hinduism which is a simulacrum—one that is fundamentally different from his other examples. Smith reveals that in the diaspora some Hindu temples have a recently reprinted volume containing Vedic hymns displayed in a glass case. He argues that it is likely that this is "in imitation of the role and status of the [Sikh holy book] the *Adigranth* and the *Koran*." Because this text is generally not read in the temples "it is in fact the simulation of scripture" (Smith 1993: 164). In this case, something concrete (written-down Vedic hymns) has undergone a significant change. Instead of being utilised in order to aid recital, this contemporary presentation of Vedic hymns now serves a new, symbolic function. Consequently, for those who attend temples which house such a volume, the nature of Vedic hymns in this new form becomes the real even though this presentation has a role that is vastly different to previous ones. This is in contrast to the other simulations mentioned by Smith which are simulacra of non-concrete

spiritual realms that do not tell us anything significant about changes that are taking place within Hinduism. The fact that Smith separately mentions the new manifestation of the Vedic hymns in a footnote—in contrast to the afore-mentioned simulacra which are treated prominently in the main text—suggests that he implicitly recognises the differences between these types of simulations. However, instead of considering in detail the nature of relatively recent altered presentations of aspects of Hinduism, he chooses to concentrate upon providing evidence to back up the central claim of his article.

Of course, 'Hinduism' is a term which encompasses an extraordinarily diverse array of religious traditions originating in the Indian sub-continent which may have markedly different philosophical approaches and ritual practices. It is not necessary here to enter into debates as to the validity of the term or the nature of Hinduism. Instead, key features of Hinduism will be exemplified in my demonstration that some of Baudrillard's assertions are problematic when applied to Hinduism as a result of its distinctive characteristics. Following my critique of Baudrillard, in the context of Hinduism I will consider the claim that religious replications become more hyper-real than their original counterparts. This leads to a consideration of manifestations of Hinduism online—a worthwhile undertaking because the introduction of the Internet has led to an upsurge in interest in Baudrillard's ideas regarding simulacra, with the claim being that the Internet has a special role to play in the creation of hyper-reality. If this is indeed the case, then the Internet has a double-pronged effect when it comes to religion and hyper-reality. Possamai (2007b) has identified the Internet as being a key factor in the transformation and growth of hyper-real religions as it facilitates "a shift from using popular culture as a source of inspiration . . . to having popular culture appropriated as the spiritual work in itself" on account of the participatory culture that it engenders. But it could also be the case that key aspects of established religions that are presented on the Web undergo a marked exacerbation of hyper-reality.

Baudrillard and Religious Images

Baudrillard not only considers the nature of images in general; in his *Simulacra and Simulations* (1988a) he specifically applies his idea of the simulacrum to religious images, which leads him to interesting conclusions which invite theoretical analysis in the light of Hinduism. This is

because of the supreme importance of religious images within Hinduism which, to a large extent, unifies many of the diverse Hindu religious traditions. Although images are, of course, important in many other religious traditions, images within Hinduism are crucial because of the fact that they are necessary in order for devotees to receive *darshan*. *Darshan* involves "seeing the divine in an image" (Eck 1985: 3). It "means 'sight', and it implies both beholding the deity and being seen by the deity. An exchange takes place through the eyes, and devotees may feel that they have been granted a vision of the deity or have experienced the divine, favoured glance" (Beckerlegge 2001a: 62). *Darshan* can form part of a *puja* ceremony in which a deity or deities are propitiated, but it is also a religious practice in its own right. It is a central component of *Bhakti* (or devotional) Hinduism which is the most widespread contemporary manifestation of Hinduism.

It is important to emphasise though, that images are not only relevant to the *Bhakti* traditions. According to the influential philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta*, which does not advocate the belief in a personal god with attributes, the worship of images of deities can never be an end in itself. This is because, alone, the practice cannot lead to *moksha* or enlightenment. However, as Gwilym Beckerlegge (2001a) points out, philosophically minded Hindus usually still regard the image as being of some use and an acceptable focus of devotion for those Hindus who are not philosophically inclined. Indeed, the former may regard use of the image as being necessary for those Hindus who do not commonly engage in philosophical reflection, because it can (over successive life-times) eventually lead to a path which can foster an appreciation of the formless Truth. For this reason, even the founder of *Advaita Vedanta* Shankara did not reject image worship and actually composed a number of devotional hymns (Beckerlegge 2001a). I shall have more to say regarding *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy and its intersection with the *Bhakti* traditions in my critique of Baudrillard's ideas concerning religious images when they are considered in the light of Hinduism.

In Baudrillard's opinion the simulacrum does not represent the real—it becomes the real. He therefore concludes that this is why iconoclasts wanted to destroy images of God. He asserts that iconoclasts sensed the 'omnipotence of simulacra' as they have the facility of "erasing God from the consciousnesses of people." This suggests that "ultimately there has never been any God; that only simulacra exist; indeed that God himself has only been his own simulacrum" (Baudrillard 1988a: 169). As for the

iconolaters, Baudrillard (ibid.) claims that they were "content to venerate God at one remove." He also adds, however, that perhaps they were aware of the nature of simulacra but did not want to unmask images as this would reveal the fact that there was nothing behind them (Baudrillard 1988a).

This view is very problematic indeed when applied to Hinduism. Firstly, Baudrillard only makes a distinction between iconolaters and iconoclasts. He does not appreciate the diverse range of meanings that are placed upon the image in Hinduism by devotees. Even amongst those that afford primacy to images and engage in ritual worship, different meanings are attributed to the image. For example, although an image of a deity is known as a *murti*—a term which implies that the deity is literally embodied within the (usually three-dimensional) image—it may be regarded by a devotee as being the embodied deity, the location of the deity's power, or representative of the deity. Such views are in addition to the afore-mentioned one that Hindu religious images can be a spiritual aid for those who need it, a view which is often held by those who personally eschew image worship (see Beckerlegge 2001a). Regardless of an individual's approach towards images of Hindu deities, use of the image should certainly not indicate iconolatry in the sense that it is the actual image that is being worshipped. A striking example of this is that images of deities that have previously been the focus of devotion during festivals are discarded at the end of the festivities (Eck 1985).

In another crucial way it appears that Baudrillard's view of religion is ethnocentric, which again calls into question the general applicability of his theory of simulacra to Hinduism. Baudrillard is of the opinion that those who used images were content to venerate God 'at one remove.' However, a consideration of the afore-mentioned philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta* challenges this idea. *Advaita Vedanta* holds that an individual must realise that everything that is impermanent is unreal and that the only thing that is changeless and hence real is their pure consciousness (known as the *atman*). This type of realisation differs from ordinary realisation and refers to perfect understanding on an experiential level. Before such realisation this consciousness is known as the *jiva* and is present in successive physical incarnations. However, realisation results in the merging of the *atman* with the *formless Brahman* (the use of the word 'merging' should not give the impression that there is actually a duality at any stage between the *atman* and *Brahman*). By its very nature, *Brahman* cannot be sufficiently defined but it can be tentatively referred to as being "undifferentiated existence, consciousness and bliss" (Krishnananda 1994: 102). Although deities may be propitiated in order to secure boons, not all of

those who engage in the worship of deities are unaware of, or uninterested in, the concept of *Brahman*. From many perspectives within Hinduism, the image can certainly be used as an aid in the quest to gain appreciation of the formless *Brahman*, which, "though it is everywhere, it *cannot be seen*" (Krishnananda 1994: 102, my emphasis).

In the case of Hinduism then, it appears that Baudrillard's view that those who use images are afraid to unmask them because this would reveal the fact that there was nothing behind them, is inappropriate. It is more apt to suggest that it would be a desirable goal for many Hindus to be able to unmask the image because behind the image is the 'opposite' of 'nothing.' It is thus fair to say that it is necessary to be careful when considering Baudrillard's idea of simulacra in the light of Hindu religious images. Baudrillard does not entertain the notion that, owing to the unique way in which individuals may perceive Hindu religious images as distinct from other simulacra, it is possible that other variables might come into play. In fact, Baudrillard's theory of hyper-reality can even be read as a superficial version of *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy. For Baudrillard, that which we perceive on a daily basis is unreal and that which stands behind it is the real. In *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy, even that is an illusion which, ultimately, must be realised.

Baudrillard also makes a further claim that calls into question the applicability of his ideas to Hinduism. In *Fatal Strategies* (Baudrillard 1988b: 200) he asserts that "gods can only live and hide in the inhuman . . . and not in the human realm . . . [and that] . . . a human-god is an absurdity." In contrast to this claim, Hinduism has a long history of belief in *avatars* or manifestations of God on earth in physical form and this belief is still very popular today. A good example of a contemporary *avatar* is Sathya Sai Baba who enjoys a huge worldwide following, but there are also countless others who enjoy lower levels of popularity. For example, David Pocock (1973: 98–99) writes that it is common that men are elevated to the "status of godhead." Furthermore, in addition to *avatars*, gurus in Hinduism are also seen as being God (see Hutchinson 1996: 110; Juergensmeyer 1996) (there is thus an overlap between an *avatar* and a guru). It is also important to note that during the Hindu wedding ritual the bride and groom '*assume a divine form*' and are worshipped by their family and friends "in much the same way as deities are worshipped before their images in temples" (Fuller 1992: 30–31, my emphasis). In addition to these examples that show that a 'human-god' is certainly not an absurdity in Hinduism, there is the example of priests in some Hindu temples who, on one level at least, actually become the god *Shiva* during worship (Fuller 1992).

The way that some Hindus perceived and reacted to the afore-mentioned 1987–1988 televised serialisation of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana* provides yet further evidence to suggest that gods and humans in Hinduism are not mutually incompatible. This Hindu epic tells the story of Rama's exile from his kingdom, his quest to rescue his wife Sita from the clutches of Ravana in Lanka, and his reinstatement as a righteous king. The televised transmission was incredibly popular and even had the effect of causing the principal actors and the gods that they were representing to become intertwined in the minds of some viewers—something that Baudrillard's claim cannot accommodate. Because of this,

> many of those who watched the series conducted themselves as if receiving *darshan* in front of a *murti*. Some bathed, put on clean clothes and removed their shoes before the transmission began. In some areas, a television set was set up as the focal point of a shrine. It was draped in garlands, anointed with the substances used in conventional *puja* rituals, and incense was burned in front of the screen. After the transmission, *prasad* [sanctified offerings] was distributed . . . (Beckerlegge 2001a: 92)

Therefore, ironically, although Baudrillard (1988b: 200) says that "a human-god is an absurdity," the blurring which occurred between actors and deities meant that for some Hindus, the on-screen images projected by the actors stood in for the real. This not only resulted in some Hindus worshipping in a novel manner—it was also influential in other ways. As Carole Cusack (this volume) shows, themes from the series were appropriated by Hindu nationalist groups, its deified actors entered politics, and it led to an upsurge in Hindu nationalism. Therefore, this popular rendering of the *Ramayana* is a clear example of an exacerbation of hyper-reality within Hinduism. The distinction between the actors and the gods that they played became blurred and the televised series (unlike more traditional presentations of the *Ramayana*) contributed to a rise in anti-Muslim sentiments. This shows that Baudrillard's general notion of simulacra is certainly worth holding on to. This is despite the fact that it is necessary to discern different levels of hyper-reality in order to identify the significance of new presentations of aspects of religion, and that a consideration of certain of his ideas in the light of Hinduism suggests that these ideas are not universal.

Religious Replications

In addition to the fact that some aspects of Baudrillard's ideas are problematic when certain features of Hinduism are considered, the claim that

replications in religions necessarily give rise to hyper-reality is also highly questionable when Hinduism is taken into account. That replications of aspects of religions become hyper-real has been proposed by the cultural anthropologist Paolo Apolito (2005). In his consideration of Catholic religious sites in Europe he concludes that, as a result of modernity, there has been "a general delocalization of the sacred." In the case of Lourdes this began in the 1870s with 'imitation grottoes' (Apolito 2005: 152). According to Apolito, such reproductions play a key role in the delocalisation of 'sacred statuses' (Apolito 2005: 153) and he further argues that this delocalisation reaches its culmination with the Internet. Crucially, although Apolito admits that some elements of localisation remain, because of the changes wrought by the Internet this aspect is of limited importance. In short, Apolito claims that replications of aspects of Catholicism—especially those on the Internet—are hyper-real because they become more relevant to religious consumers than their original counterparts.

A consideration of replications of various aspects of Hinduism is more complex and does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that they become more hyper-real. Replication has long been a feature of Hinduism. Although conditions of modernity have indeed facilitated copies, the status of a replication is often attributed to a natural feature such as a river and so the role of modernity in giving rise to replications is irrelevant in such cases. Even though in Hinduism a natural feature may be accorded the status of a replication and, theoretically, be deemed sufficient in fulfilling a religious role, in most cases these replications are unlikely to challenge the importance of the original. For example, the River Soar in Leicestershire, England "has been officially approved as the 'Ganges' [Ganga] where British Hindus . . . can scatter the ashes of their dead, instead of flying to India to perform the last rites" (Sonwalkar 2004). Dan Martin (2006) further reports that performing the last rites at the Soar is very popular and even attracts Hindus from abroad. However, if given the choice, most devout Hindus are highly likely to prefer that, when they die, their last rites be performed at the Ganga and not in Leicestershire. The Soar is thus better understood as being a convenient acceptable substitute to the River Ganga as opposed to a hyper-real simulacrum.

In addition to natural features that are accorded the status of a replication, human-made copies are also ubiquitous in Hinduism: deities, temples and towns can all be replicated. For example, the Kedarnath temple in the important pilgrimage city of Varanasi is replicated in the Himalayas. The original temple and its replication are intertwined to the extent that a pilgrim can perform a pilgrimage to the Kedarnath temple

in the Himalayas without leaving Varanasi (Eck 1993). Another example is Varanasi's Vishwanath temple (which is widely accepted as being the prime temple to Shiva (see Fuller 1992) and, consequently, is one of the most important Hindu temples). It is replicated in the town of Uttarkashi in the Himalayas, which is, in itself, a replication of Varanasi. Varanasi is also replicated a further two times in the south of India where these towns contain many temples which replicate Varanasi's Vishwanath temple and which, it is claimed, offer the same benefits as performing worship in Varanasi (Eck 1993). However, these replications do not become hyper-real, because the original still retains its prime importance. For example, the fact that the Kedarnath temple in the Himalayas is still inextricably related to the one in Varanasi means that the original temple does not decline in importance in the same way that Apolito argues that Lourdes did following the introduction of imitation grottoes. Although these grottoes are replications and are therefore related to Lourdes, crucially they are not mythologically related to Lourdes as in the case of the replications in Hinduism outlined above. It is for this reason that the Catholic replications can be understood as being more hyper-real than their original counterparts, while these replications in Hinduism cannot.

It needs to be acknowledged, though, that in Hinduism replications also do not necessarily need to have a myth justifying their sacred status (see Narayanan 1996). This initially suggests that such copies can be more hyper-real than their original versions. Examples of such replications are the so-called 'New' Vishwanath temple on the campus of the Benares Hindu University (BHU)—not to be confused with another 'New' Vishwanath temple situated in the Mir Ghat area of the city—and the *lingam* (the non-anthropomorphic representation of Shiva) which it houses. This temple has no mythological association with the 'original' Vishwanath temple[1] that it replicates and even stands outside the sacred geography of *Kashi* (the religious name for Varanasi). Despite this, the New Vishwanath temple is very popular and the official line there is that worshipping this temple's *lingam* is of the same value as worshipping the *lingam* at the Vishwanath temple, even though the latter is considered to be a *jyotilingam* (a 'self-manifest' *lingam* believed to be especially sacred).

[1] The temple has actually been rebuilt a number of times in the vicinity of the current temple following repeated destruction.

Because there is no recognised mythological link, such replications could theoretically constitute an exacerbation of hyper-reality in the same way as do the imitation grottoes in Catholicism referred to by Apolito. For example, if the claim made at the New Vishwanath temple regarding the *lingam* there is accepted, it means that it is not necessary for devotees of Vishwanath to visit the original temple. Furthermore, there is even the added advantage that the New Vishwanath temple is inclusive in a way that the original is not. Non-ethnic Indians are welcome to enter the temple and to perform worship, which is not the case at the original temple. Therefore, there are aspects of the New Vishwanath temple which for some devotees actually make it more desirable than the original. However, the extent to which the New Vishwanath temple can be regarded as a true replication is questionable. For example, the temple's entrance policy is a direct response to the one in place at the original temple. The temple is also architecturally different to the original and the grounds are spacious, which is in direct contrast with those at the Vishwanath temple, where the congested environment is seen in negative terms by the Honorary Manager of the New Vishwanath temple. For these reasons, the New Vishwanath temple at BHU is perhaps best regarded as being another temple to Vishwanath rather than a replication. Furthermore, the claim that the worship of the *lingam* at the New Vishwanath temple is equal to that of the original is not universally accepted—and this further suggests that the temple and the *lingam* are not more hyper-real than their original counterparts.

Apolito's assertion, though, that it is especially replications facilitated by the Internet which give rise to delocalisation and a consequent increase in hyper-reality, deserves consideration. As pointed out in this chapter's introduction, the commercial introduction of the Internet has caused Baudrillard's ideas regarding images to attract renewed interest. The reason for this increase, it seems reasonable to suggest, is that with each successive communications technology the notion of the simulacrum becomes stronger, as images drift further away from their original reference points. In the following investigation as to whether this is indeed the case in the context of Hinduism, it is replications of images of Hindu deities on the Web that I will consider. This is because of the central role of images of deities within Hinduism, which I have already emphasised. Before considering the status of the online images, it is necessary to take into account views as to the nature of cyberspace.

Cyberspace and Hyper-reality

Manuel Castells (2000) directly draws upon the ideas of Baudrillard and explicitly asserts that the Internet has a special role to play in the formation of hyper-real phenomena. The central feature of Castells' theory regarding the Internet and simulacra is his claim that the Internet gives rise to a hyper-real environment—a view also held by Margaret Wertheim (1999) who has written specifically on the nature of cyberspace. Whereas the Internet and the Web can be easily defined, the emergent feature of cyberspace is more elusive. The Internet is "the worldwide network of networks" that "connects millions of computers . . . around the globe" (Whittaker 2002: 196), which consists of the various interlinked computers and other hardware and the software protocols that "govern the exchange of data between machines" (Whittaker 2002: 4). Amongst other services, the Internet hosts the Web, which refers to the huge number of various interconnected websites. A concise definition of cyberspace is a space "within the electronic network of computers" (Vasseleu 1997: 46). However, there are a multitude of opinions as to the nature of this space. According to Wertheim (1999: 39), cyberspace

> . . . exists beyond physical space . . . cyberspace *itself* is not located within the physicalist world picture. It is a fundamentally new space that is not encompassed by any physics equations . . . cyberspace is an *emergent* phenomenon whose properties transcend the sum of its component parts . . . [It] is a 'place' outside physical place . . . Despite its immaterial nature, this realm is real.

In effect, Wertheim is asserting that cyberspace is a hyper-real place—it is not physical yet it exists and can be inhabited by various phenomena. The philosopher John Caputo also holds such a view, believing that cyberspace constitutes a space which he explicitly refers to as being 'hyper-real' (Caputo 2000: 67) because it undermines materialism and "deprive[s] the material world of its rigid fixity and dense and heavy substantiality" (Caputo 2000: 76).

Castells outlines a Baudrillardian theory of simulacra and then considers this environment in greater detail. He asserts that "there is no separation between 'reality' and symbolic representation" (Castells 2000: 403) but wishes to make it clear that although communications technologies and simulacra do go hand in hand, this has always been the case and has not just arisen as a result of electronic communication. Castells claims that "all realities are communicated through symbols [and] in human, interactive communication, regardless of the medium, all symbols are

somewhat displaced in relation to their assigned semantic meaning." Therefore, according to this view: "In a sense, all reality is virtually perceived" (Castells 2000: 404). Castells further argues though that the role of the Internet is especially significant in engendering hyper-reality because it not only induces virtual reality but actually constructs real virtuality (Castells 2000: 403). The reason for this is that:

> [*i*]*t is a system in which reality itself* (*that is, people's material/symbolic existence*) *is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience.* All messages of all kinds become enclosed in the medium because the medium has become so comprehensive, so diversified, so malleable that it absorbs in the same multimedia text the whole of human experience, past, present, and future. (Castells 2000: 404, emphasis in original)

If such claims concerning cyberspace and hyper-reality are accepted then this would suggest that the defining characteristic of images that are present on the Web (and therefore, according to this view, located within cyberspace) is hyper-reality. It is important to note though that these claims are somewhat hyperbolic—a charge that has also been levelled against the work of Baudrillard (see for example Poster 1988). Indeed, the view that cyberspace is a place has met with opposition. Some are reluctant to even acknowledge its existence, seeing the Internet as merely being a tool which enables, for example, the dissemination of knowledge or ease of communication (see for example Dawson 2001; Brasher 2004: 114). However, although the more extreme claims regarding cyberspace may often be rejected, the idea that cyberspace is a hyper-real non-physical space does have support. For example, research into the mapping of cyberspace has led the geographer Martin Dodge to conclude that "the space-time laws of physics have little meaning online" (Dodge 2005: 118) and this echoes the claims made by Wertheim—while Michele Willson (2000) and Pramod Nayar (2004) are also of the view that cyberspace constitutes an environment.

Such an approach does appear to make sense because people meet 'there', they perform various activities 'there' (see Arthur 2002: 305), and they talk of 'entering' cyberspace and 'visiting' websites (Beckerlegge 2001b: 222, 257). However, in his criticism of hyperbole surrounding the Internet Douglas Cowan (2005) dismisses these metaphors as being misleading, while according to Massimo Introvigne (2000) the fact that people talk about cyberspace without being able to fully articulate just what this environment is, demonstrates that it is a classic example of

a social construction. On the other hand, it is difficult to disagree with Christine Hine's (2005) conclusion that the fact that ethnographers successfully claim cyberspace as a field site indicates that it is a form of social space. In short, the claim that cyberspace is a hyper-real environment is contested. But even if the notion that online images inhabit a hyper-real environment and are thus automatically especially hyper-real is rejected, it might still be the case that images of Hindu deities on the Internet are more hyper-real than their original counterparts.

Online Images of Hindu Deities

Images of Hindu Deities are widely available on the Internet. They can be found on, for example, websites dealing with Hinduism in general (from an objective/academic perspective or from a Hindu perspective), websites representing specific traditions within Hinduism, or the websites of Hindu temples or institutions. The images are often generic depictions of universal deities which are not associated with a specific location. However, there are also many images online (projected, for example, via a webcam) of particular *murtis* at physical places. It is the latter that I shall consider here because a direct comparison can be made between the perceived status of these online replications and their original counterparts which can clearly illuminate possible significant differences. This is not the case regarding generic images of universal deities which do not a have a single corresponding image in the physical world.

Although an original image in a Hindu temple is already a simulacrum, it is possible that whereas this image is secure within a referential context, the image replicated on the Web is far removed from this context and becomes even more hyper-real. This is something that can be investigated despite the points that I have made which call into question the applicability of certain Baudrillardian ideas when Hinduism is taken into account. For example, I have demonstrated that Baudrillard's theory of simulacra cannot recognise that Hindus hold different views as to the nature of images of deities. But, if the different views held by individuals are taken into account it is then possible to gauge whether or not, to the holders of these views, online images of Hindu deities are more hyper-real than their offline counterparts.

Because *darshan* is a central feature of Hinduism, when considering the nature of images of Hindu deities online it is crucial to assess the extent to which these images can allow for *darshan* to be experienced by

devotees. This is something that is directly dependent upon the different views held by devotees as to the nature of original images. *Darshan* can be had from online images of Hindu deities (Scheifinger 2008) but the perceived efficacy of this *darshan* may be less than that from an original image (Scheifinger 2009). For those to whom a *murti* is considered to be an embodied deity, an online replication cannot have an equal status and, consequently, the *darshan* that it can provide is not as powerful as that from the original image. Therefore, for such devotees, it is still necessary to gaze upon a physical *murti* in order to receive full *darshan*. Because of this, the online image does not become more real than, or even as real as, the original image.

Whilst images of Hindu deities do not have a fixed status that can be objectively assigned to them, and instead the nature of images is subjective, in some cases there may be a commonly held view as to the nature of a particular *murti*. This therefore allows us to make general statements regarding the status of such a *murti*'s online replication—provided that it is recognised that there will always be some Hindus who hold a different view as to the nature of that *murti*, which will result in a different conclusion. For example, the prevalent belief regarding the *murti* of the god Jagannath (a form of Vishnu) which is housed in the famous Jagannath temple in the pilgrimage city of Puri in the eastern Indian state of Orissa is that it contains an essence which is actually *Brahman* (see Scheifinger 2009). Mahimohan Tripathy (2003: 11) informs us that:

> Lord *Jagannath* is also called *Darubrahma*. It means the prime soul enshrined in wood. He is shrouded in mystery like *Brahma* in *Vedanta* philosophy. In the sacred body of *Jagannath*, something unknown has been kept in a cavity. This 'something' is called *Brahma* [Tripathy uses the term '*Brahma*' for '*Brahman*'].

Because the *Jagannath murti* is made of wood, it needs to be replaced periodically (along with the *murtis* of his brother and sister) on certain auspicious days in a ceremony known as the *Navakalebara* (new body) ceremony. During this ceremony, after the new *murtis* are made, "the life substances (brahma) from the old images are transferred secretly into the new images" (Tripathy 2003: 43). Because the old *murtis* are replaced and the essence is actually transferred to a cavity inside the new *murtis*, it is clear that it is this essence that is the focus of devotion. Because *Brahman* is believed to be literally enshrined inside the *Jagannath murti* which resides in the Jagannath temple, other *murtis* of Jagannath do not hold the same power (Jagannath is replicated in many temples in India and elsewhere in

the world). Therefore, whilst an image of Jagannath on a computer screen may be an image of the actual *Jagannath murti* containing the essence which is *Brahman*, it is not identical with it because the essence cannot be present in an image which is a replication. Consequently, as a result of the important difference between the physical *murti* and its replication on the Web, online *darshan* of Jagannath is not of the same value as *darshan* received from the original image—a view that was stated explicitly by the Jagannath temple's spokesperson.

In contrast, for those Hindus who do not hold that *Brahman* or gods or goddesses are literally present within physical images and who instead regard these images as being primarily a symbolic aid to the contemplation of the divine, images replicated online can have the same status as their corresponding images in the physical world. Those holding such a view do not necessarily deny the sacredness of original images that reside in temples or elsewhere or the worth of the practice of receiving *darshan*. Officials at the important temple to the goddess Kali at Kalighat, Kolkata, at the temple in Varanasi dedicated to the Mother Goddess as Annapurna (which, according to Diana Eck (1993), is the second most important temple in that city) and at the afore-mentioned New Vishwanath temple (BHU) all share this view. These officials were unanimous in asserting that online replications of images of the deities housed in their respective temples can provide a *darshan* experience equal to that from the original *murtis* (although it is worth pointing out that visiting a sacred site can still be desirable for a number of other reasons). This view which arises from the belief that a *murti* is not literally an embodied form of a deity is, of course, congruent with the philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta*. Unsurprisingly then, the officials that I spoke with at the latter two temples made it clear that they align themselves with this philosophical approach.

It is worthwhile mentioning here a point made by Joanne Waghorne regarding the articulation of aspects of *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy by educated Hindu interviewees. Waghorne (2001) points out that, largely as a result of intellectual theory since the nineteenth century, the belief in embodied gods in Hinduism has often been seen as 'an embarrassment' (Waghorne 2001: 286) to both scholars and educated Hindus and is often simply "characterized as an expression of 'popular worship' " (Waghorne 2001: 281). Waghorne (2004: 205) alludes to the fact that this has led to her having to listen to what she terms the 'all-is-one cliché' on numerous occasions in interviews with educated Hindus. It is conceivable that this is the reason that the officials at the *Annapurna* temple and the New Vishwanath temple express a viewpoint which emphasises that *murtis*

are symbolic, as opposed to being embodied gods. Nevertheless, such a viewpoint can still accommodate the view that *darshan* is important. Its articulation thus does not necessarily obscure, in the presence of an interviewer, a respondent's possible alternative belief that gods can be embodied in a literal sense.

For those Hindus who hold that gods and goddesses are not literally present within physical images, but who still recognise the value of particular deities, online images of *murtis* appear to undergo an increase in hyper-reality because they seem to have become freed from their original referential context—yet they can still provide a necessary function for devotees. However, just because these images on the Web appear to be separated from those which they replicate, yet are still able to offer *darshan* at the same level, it does not mean that the original physical *murti* is rendered unimportant. It is the particular deity that has been replicated online which gives it meaning. For example, those who seek to receive *darshan* from an image of Kalighat Kali on the Web, wherever they are in the world, are entering into a relationship with the Kali of Kalighat—not a generic Kali with no link to an actual place.

The inherent relationship between the original image and the online image is exemplified when the widely held belief that a deity's power is affected by actions performed to its *murti* is taken into account. Charles Brooks (1989) explains that the power of deities is directly related to the level of devotional service that their *murtis* receive from *pujaris* (Hindu 'priests'), emphasising that the services of the *pujaris* are crucial. According to this commonly held view within Hinduism, an image of a deity on the Web can only give an efficacious *darshan* if the physical *murti* is given adequate service. It is clear then that online replications still retain a crucial link to their respective original images. Because of this, even in cases in which an individual's belief as to the nature of a *murti* means that an online image is able to provide a level of *darshan* identical to that from the original image, these replications are not more hyper-real.

It might initially appear that only those Hindus who believe that images of deities are purely symbolic would regard corresponding online images as being more hyper-real. These individuals reject the significance of particular physical *murtis* and the idea that rituals to them must be performed. As a result, there is no discernable link between an original image and its online replication and this does allow the latter to stand in for the former. However, for those who adhere to this more strict interpretation of *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy, the very fact that images of deities are always purely symbolic means that an increase in hyper-reality is

irrelevant. And, as Smith (1993: 161) points out, it is even possible for such Hindus to "remember that it is all . . . *maya*, without substance."

Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion I accepted Baudrillard's claim that the world is made up of simulacra but asserted that if we want to identify possible changes in the nature of religious phenomena it is necessary to distinguish between different levels of hyper-reality. I demonstrated that Baudrillard's ideas regarding simulacra have difficulty accommodating the ways in which images of Hindu deities are perceived, and that replications in Hinduism in the 'offline world' are not necessarily more hyper-real than their original counterparts. Despite the incompatibility between Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and Hinduism, in looking at the claim that the Internet engenders hyper-reality I was able to show that if individuals' views as to the nature of *murtis* are taken into account then it is still possible to discern whether or not replications of images of Hindu deities on the WWW become more hyper-real. Although the proposition that the Internet gives rise to an increase in hyper-reality through allowing online images to break away from their original referential contexts seems convincing, I argued that online replications of *murtis* do not become more hyper-real. This is even the case when *murtis* are not regarded as being the embodied form of gods and goddesses, which means that the efficacy of online *darshan* can be the same as that received from an original image.

In my discussion of Hinduism and hyper-reality I have only been able to consider some aspects of Hinduism. I concentrated largely upon images of Hindu deities because they play a crucial role within Hinduism. I do not claim that various aspects of Hinduism are immune to increases in hyper-reality. On the contrary—I have highlighted Smith's (1993) example of how a new presentation of Vedic hymns becomes more hyper-real than previous manifestations, and I also mentioned the hyper-real nature of the televised serialisation of the *Ramayana*. The exacerbation of hyper-reality in the latter was largely as a result of the blurring that occurred between humans and gods—something which happened despite Baudrillard's (1988b) claim that any fusion between humans and gods is absurd. Although I have only considered some aspects of one (multi-faceted) religious tradition, my discussion of Hinduism and hyper-reality has shown that some influential claims concerning hyper-reality—including per-

suasive ones regarding the Internet—are not universal. Thus, although Possamai (2007b) demonstrates that the Internet is instrumental in the growth and development of hyper-real religions, we should not simply accept that the Internet and hyper-reality always go hand in hand.

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PART FOUR

REACTING TO THE HYPER-REAL RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON

POETIC *JIHADIS*: MUSLIM YOUTH, HIP-HOP AND THE HOMOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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Introduction

Hip-hop is a genre that crosses analytical boundaries such as culture, ethnicity, class, political orientation and identity with seeming effortlessness, and manages to create moral, cultural, commercial and political debates to varying degrees. In recognition of these boundary crossings, there is a growing sociological literature on the influence of hip-hop and rap music on urban minorities and on global culture, and even on its contribution to a global economy (Rose 1994; Perkins 1996). Many Western universities today offer courses on the sociology of hip-hop. Todd Boyd, professor at the University of Southern California, claims that "[h]ip-hop is the best way to grasp our present and future. Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech is less important today than *DMX's* 'It's Dark and Hell Is Hot' " (Boyd 2004: 12). Boyd claims that through hip-hop, the rest of America will assimilate with black culture. According to a rapper from *Public Enemy*, "[r]ap music is Black folks' CNN" (Gilyard 2008: 98). This reference to rap music as an alternative source of information can also be understood as a critique of mainstream media's misrepresentations of groups which exist at the margins of society.

This chapter examines the global rise of a social group whom I call the 'poetic *jihadis*' that fuses hip-hop with Islamic symbolisms. I posit that this leads to an interpretive confusion with regard to the message of these hip-hoppers, given the different brands of Islam espoused by the hip-hop *ummah* and the discursive limits of the hip-hop lexicon. The confusion arises partly due to a replicating of the structurations of the habitus as expressed in hip-hop music of a particular locality. Although Bourdieu calls for a contextualisation of the social actor within his habitus, the consumption of hip-hop music also promotes a worldview that is homologous with a distant Other. Hence, there is a tension as to whether the youth is actually ingesting Islam or a hyper-real version of the religion as manifested through popular hip-hop culture. Whilst these contemporary Muslim hip-hoppers may or may not be members of a hyper-real religious

group, by their (conscious or unconscious) references in their songs to the lexicon and iconographies of hyper-real religions, they enter into a hyper-real religious mode. This is further compounded by attempts by moral entrepreneurs to manage the youth through music. While this chapter will consider the developments in the hip-hop *ummah* as a whole, I will bring forth specific examples from observations made of Muslim youth in specific localities. I will demonstrate how hip-hop has been appropriated by the poetic *jihadis* to galvanise the concerns of urban minority Muslim youth living as part of the September 11 generation.

Hip-hop's Tenuous Relationship with Islam

Despite the popularity of hip-hop amongst Muslim youth around the world, the choice to be a Muslim hip-hopper is still marked by tough practical questions, the most fundamental of which is: is music *halal* (permissible)? The religious *fatwa* with regard to the status of music in Islam is diverse, ranging from a total prohibition of music, to allowing music as long as the song complies with Islamic precepts such as the ruling against uttering profanities.[1] It is understandable then that one of the discussions within the Muslim hip-hop *ummah* centers on the contestation between the notions of 'Muslim hip-hop' and 'Islamic hip-hop'. Generally, Muslim youth involvement in hip-hop still comes as a challenge to Muslim religious 'authorities' who do not see the elements present in hip-hop as being in sync with Islamic values. Hip-hop is still largely seen as a sign of Western moral decadence and liberal norms. A number of social critics have also slated the heavy emphasis on 'bling bling' (materialism) and 'bagging honeys' (sexual relations with beautiful women) in hip-hop music and culture, as hip-hop's concern with other topics, such as social justice, fades to the background. These factors make the fusion of Islam into hip-hop all the more controversial.

One area of contention pertains to the management of the body. The fact that the Muslim body is constructed as a site of moral judgement leads to the demonising of the performative aspects of hip-hop music, such as the sexualised or violent body associated with particular dances and the unruly crowds during public performances. In this regard, hip-hop can be seen as a response to the disciplining of the body within the context

[1] Internet site, http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Books/Q_LP/ch4s3pre.htm#Singing. Accessed 13/07/2011.

of traditional Islamic music. Having said this, there are also significant attempts by Muslim hip-hoppers to 'Islamise' hip-hop performance.

> Our *deen* is not meant to be rocked!... I see these so-called Muslim sistas wearing a *hijab* and then a boostier [*sic*], or a *hijab* with their belly-button sticking out. You don't put on a *hijab* and try to rock it! Or these brothers wearing Allah tattoos, or big medallions with Allah's name—Allah is not to be bling-blinged! Banjoko. (Aidi 2004: 122)

The notion of Islamic hip-hop therefore emerges as an attempt by Muslim hip-hoppers to reconcile themselves with Islamic religious requirements in music. It is adopted amongst Muslim youth who believe that hip-hop can be compatible with one's Islamic convictions. The term 'poetic *jihadis*' is not arbitrary. Notwithstanding the apparent tension between hip-hop and Islam, many Muslim hip-hoppers tend to couch their craft within the rubric of the Islamic tradition (Alim 2006a; Mandaville 2009). Suad (2007) stresses that poetry has an exalted place in pre-Islamic Arabia that confers on its practitioners social status and symbolic power. A continuity of this longstanding tradition is found in the *Qur'an* which is viewed by Muslims of all ages as a text of superior linguistic pedigree. In fact, Prophet Muhammad was reputed for his use of poetry as a missionising tool. Seeking to emulate the Prophet, who is regarded as endowed with the tools that are deemed most appropriate in engaging his audiences, hip-hoppers utilise the rhymes and idioms of Islamic symbolism to engage the youth of today. As one prominent former hip-hopper, Napoleon, handsomely puts it, "Moses was sent with magic, Jesus with medicine, and Muhammad with poetry" (Suad 2007: 130). In this light, Muslim hip-hoppers thus see themselves as progeny of the 'Muhammadan mission'.

The Creation of a Hyper-real Religion and Rise of the Hip-Hop Ummah

It is essential that this study trace the nascence and evolution of the poetic *jihadis* in light of the influential black civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. I posit that the emergence of the poetic *jihadis* as a social group is intertwined with the birth of versions of Islam that arise from a particular facet of protest culture. This section argues that it is important to contextualise the surfacing of strands in Islamic thought and practice, as seen in the form of the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Five Percenters. Their emergence has to be examined against the backdrop of the black civil rights movement that sought to address the 'innermost concerns' of

the blacks and to provide them with 'a survival kit' (see below) against economic marginality and political discrimination.

> In the case of black culture, protest [is] inspir[ed by] the people's innermost concerns. Needless to say a protest culture such as we have in the major urban black centres is also in important psychological respects a survival kit. It also suffers from too shamelessly [*sic*] a preoccupation with certainty and the need for the elimination of ambiguity. It would be a serious cultural tragedy if this protest culture should lose touch with traditional African cultural forms. It should continue to enrich itself from this source in its specific idiom. On the other hand, some strands of the current urban black culture are absorbed from the black experience, notably in the United States and post-colonial Africa (Manganyi 1982).

As Cornell West (2001: 142) evinces in his treatise *Race Matters*, "the basic aim of black Muslim theology—with its distinct black supremacist account of the origins of white people—was to counter white supremacy." Muslim hip-hop culture was therefore born in the age of segregation and institutionalised racism, serving the function of a social critique against the unemployment and lack of attention experienced by a particular ethnic group.

This chapter will lay bare the presence of a hyper-real religion by pursuing West's proposition. This will be done by tracing the evolution of Islamic rhetorical devices, metaphors and imageries within a popular culture of Black Nationalism and black protest which had in turn spawned new ideologies. As black music entertainers incorporate aspects of the protest movement into their music, the conceptions of their protest take on more overtly religious features. For example, the song "Bring The Noise" by Public Enemy lauds the NOI leader, Louis Farrakhan, as "a prophet and I think you oughta listen to what he can say to you." Another Five Percenter, Nas, also dedicates a song to Farrakhan in his *Untitled* album (Miyakawa 2005). Hence, hip-hop culture becomes the hyper-real medium through which the promotion of black awareness, identity construction, as well as defiance against explicit discrimination and marginalisation are expressed.

> You don't wanna come here sit 'n' listen to Farrakhan for two hours, that's a little bit too much. But turn on the box and the [Public Enemy] are getting to you with the Word, and whities sayin' 'Oh, my God, we gotta stop this'! But it's too late now, baby! When you got it—it's over, when the youth got it—it's over . . . the white world is coming to an end (Farrakhan 1989, cited in Gardell 1996: 68).

The practice of hip-hop, as manifest in the lexicon of Muslim black hip-hoppers in the United States, illuminates the fluidity and variegated nature of Islamic representations in urban America. The hip-hop culture is seen most poignantly in the friction between Sunni Muslims, the NOI and the Five Percenters. To be sure, the majority of allusions to Islam in American hip-hop spawn from adherents of the Five Percenters (known more often amongst its members as The Nation of Gods and Earths) which was formed in 1964 by Clarence 13X as a breakaway group of the NOI. Members of this group include influential figures in the American hip-hop scene such as the Wu Tang Clan, Busta Rhymes and Rakim. The Five Percenters reject the NOI's notion of Farad Muhammad as Allah. On the contrary, they believe that the black man himself is God and that ALLAH is actually an abbreviation of Arm Leg Leg Arm Head (Aidi 2004: 111). The group refers to women as Earth and believes that, as three quarters of the Earth is covered with water, so must the female body be. Therefore, it will be no surprise to see the females covering their hair and wearing clothes that do not accentuate the figure of their body. The name Five Percenters is derived from the teaching that eighty five percent of people on Earth are oblivious to, and will not arrive at, the truth, whilst ten percent of those who do know the truth will use their knowledge to reap benefits by exploiting the ignorance of those who are unaware. Hence, only the remaining five percent are conscious of the true nature of the black man as God or Allah (Nuruddin 1994; Nuruddin 2006). Sunni Muslims view Five Percenters' theology as blasphemous while the latter views the former as belonging among the ten percent category. In the main, the Five Percenters' referring to each other as 'Gods' is in direct contradiction to the mainstream Muslim belief in the One-ness of God.

The Science Fiction Foundations of the NOI and Five Percenters

The hyper-real nature of the heterodox African American Muslim groups can also be observed through their assimilation of ideas from science fiction. Nuruddin (2006) asserts that there is a strong presence of "science fiction motifs" in the ideology of the NOI and the Five Percenters which is disseminated widely through hip-hop culture. The science fiction of the NOI and its offshoot, the Five Percenters, is concerned with the question of origins. The myth revolved around the work of a certain menacing and 'crazy' black scientist called Yakub who existed six thousand years ago in a time when the Original People, who were the blacks, lived singularly on

planet Earth "like gods in a technologically advanced utopia" (Nuruddin 2006: 147). Nuruddin presents as evidence a work called *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* in which it is stated that

> Yakub had a super intellect and thirst for knowledge. He began school at age four and displayed a penchant for scientific inquiry. Known as the 'big-headed scientist' on account of his unusually large cranium which symbolised his vanity as well as his mental powers, he earned degrees from all of the colleges and universities in the land by the age of eighteen. Though one of the preeminent scholars of the Nation of Islam, his greatest achievement took place outside of school when he was just six years old. While toying with two pieces of steel, he learned the secret of magnetism, that opposites attract. The larger lesson for Yakub was that if he could create a race of people completely different from the Original People, that race could attract and dominate the Black Nation through tricknology—tricks, lies and deception. The essence of the black man, which consisted of a black and brown germ, was the key to creating such a race. If he could simply graft or separate these germs until none of the original black genetic code was left, he would be able to create a species of man, called 'mankind', who would rule the earth forever (Clegg 1997: 49).

Yakub and his sixty thousand followers were banished to an island called Pelan due to the havoc they wreaked in the capital, Mecca. In Pelan, Yakub constructed genetic engineering laboratories and engaged in an elaborate eugenics project where he created a master race that was "physically weak, spiritually and morally depraved, yet intellectually cunning" that he could control in order to be the undisputed leader on earth (Nuruddin 2006: 148). Nation of Islam's theology mentions that the history of the Original Man happened in twenty five thousand year sequences, with that of Yakub being the latest cycle. In fact, in an earlier cycle, a scientist, in his failed attempt to detonate planet Earth, had flung a large chunk of earth into space, and this became the moon (Nuruddin 2006). The theology of the NOI also makes reference to the Mother Plane, known to the world as the Unidentified Flying Object (UFO). Louis Farrakhan describes the Mother Plane in great detail in the following speech:

> The Honorable Elijah Muhammad told us of a giant Mother Plane that is made like the universe, spheres within spheres. White people call them unidentified flying objects (UFOs). Ezekiel, in the Old Testament, saw a wheel that looked like a cloud by day, but a pillar of fire by night. The Hon. Elijah Muhammad said that that wheel was built on the island of Nippon, which is now called Japan, by some of the original scientists. It took 15 billion dollars in gold at that time to build it. It is made of the toughest steel. America does not yet know the composition of the steel used to make an instrument like it. It is a circular plane, and the Bible says that it never makes turns.

> Because of its circular nature it can stop and travel in all directions at speeds of thousands of miles per hour. He said there are 1,500 small wheels in this Mother Wheel, which is a half mile by-a-half-mile. This Mother Wheel is like a small human built planet. Each one of these small planes carry three bombs . . . That Mother Wheel is a dreadful looking thing. White folks are making movies now to make these planes look like fiction, but it is based on something real. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad said that the Mother Plane is so powerful, that with sound reverberating in the atmosphere, just with a sound, she can crumble buildings (Farrakhan 1996).

The NOI and Five Percenters' hyper-real theologies and jargons are conflated with many terminologies from the Muslim tradition. For the Five Percenters, Harlem is 'Mekkah', Brooklyn is 'Medina', Queens is 'the Desert', the Bronx is 'Pelan', and New Jersey is 'New Jerusalem'. As mentioned, the beliefs of the Five Percenter hip-hoppers are often codified in their lyrics. For example, the phrase 'whassup G' refers to another black male adherent as 'God', not 'Gangsta' as is often believed. In addition, popular hip-hop slang such as 'represent' and 'break it down' can also be traced to the influence of the Five Percenter hip-hoppers. So too can the popular hip-hop expressions 'word' and 'peace'; the expression 'peace' originates from the Moorish Science Temple, an Islamic precursor to the group (Fauset 2001: 42). 'Word' is an exclamation of the Five Percenters' affirmation of truth identified in the statement of another God (Nuruddin 1994). As will be shown in the following sections, these Five Percenter terminologies and the combative style of ex-NOI Minister, Malcolm X's "jihad of words," are reproduced throughout the hip-hop *ummah* beyond the context of the Five Percenters and NOI.

Provincialising Hip-Hop from its African American Roots: Hyper-realising the Hyper-real Religion

> Hip-hop's changed, ain't a black thing anymore G
> Young kids in Baghdad showing 2 on 3
> Holla West Coast?! Naah, West Bank for life
> Upside Down, holla for my Moros aight
> Spit rhymes in Arabic on the same level like Jada
> You wouldn't know if you should head bang or belly dance playa
> I'm that type of sand nigga type of Johnny Conchran yaw dig
> World wide like H. C. Andersen, I won't quit
> Don't depend on the rap game, I depend on my brain
> Ya stereotype me; I knock you out like Prince Naseem.
> *Outlandish*, 'El Moro' (Bukdahl 2004: 80–81)

The song above, by a Danish Muslim hip-hop group, demonstrates how the complexion of the genre has mutated and how it is appropriated beyond its African American origins. It also illustrates the inversion of the term 'G' by a non-Five Percenter hip-hop group. Its usage here is closer to the 'Gangsta' insinuations, which is an innovation upon the original reference to the Five Percenters' 'God'. Whilst maintaining the symbol as popular hip-hop jargon, the term has thus been done violence to, removed from its theological origins and even decentered from its African American roots. In this instance, it ceases to refer to the struggle of the blacks in the streets, and has instead mutated into a term of reference and a rallying cry among young Muslims who feel under siege the world over.

There is a decentering of the understanding of the hip-hop generation as defined as "those young African Americans born between 1965 and 1984 who came of age in the eighties and nineties and . . . share a specific set of values and attitudes" (Kitwana 2002: 4). However, as Kitwana has perceptively observed, six major driving forces have been indispensible in fuelling the hip-hop generation—"the visibility of black youth in popular culture, globalisation, the persistent nature of segregation, public policy surrounding the criminal justice system, media representations of black youth, and the general quality of life within the hip-hop community" (McMurray 2007: 76).

Hip-hop music in the contemporary scene is hence used by diverse social groups who find themselves at the margins of society. In the context of this study, hip-hop's social commentary and confrontational style lend a voice to Muslim youth who utilise 'hip-hop activism' as a vehicle to assimilate into mainstream society on one hand or, on the other hand, to create an alternative identity of the Other. In the post September 11 era of increased 'Islamophobia', hip-hop has also been used to battle public misconceptions of Islam as well as to articulate everyday injustice faced by Muslims locally or globally.

> It's about speaking out against oppression wherever you can. If that's gonna be in Bosnia or Kosovo or Chechnya or places where Muslims are being persecuted; or if it's gonna be in Sierra Leone or Colombia—you know, if people's basic human rights are being abused and violated, then Islam has an interest in speaking out against it, because we're charged to be the leaders of humanity.
>
> Mos Def (Aidi 2004: 110)

Inspired also by African American hip-hoppers from a Sunni Muslim background, such as Mos Def, Islamic hip-hop in the US today is increas-

ingly characterised by young Muslims from various ethnic backgrounds pronouncing their identity whilst espousing local and global messages of justice and equality, in solidarity with their Muslim brethren. Aidi (2004: 112–113) cites the Pakistani American group Aman, who sings about "being Muslim Robin Hoods fighting for justice in a foreign land" in their song entitled 'Arabian Nights', and Palestinian American duo Hammer Bros., who rap about being "originally from the Holy Land living in the belly of the Beast, trying to rise on feet of Yeast" in their pro-intifada song 'Free Palestine'.

Beyond the United States, hip-hop activism also serves as a strategic platform for anti-Islamophobic mobilisation among Muslim youth in France and Britain. Writing about England's Fun-Da-Mental and France's IAM, Ted Swedenburg (2001: 58) states that "[i]n both countries Muslims are attempting to construct cultural, social and political spaces for themselves as ethnic groups (of sorts), and are massively involved in anti-racist mobilisations against white supremacy . . . Fun-Da-Mental's expressions of pride in Islam appealed to Muslim youth who had been raised on British popular culture yet also felt wounded by British Islamophobia." Bennett (2000) postulates that hip-hop culture is popular among non-Anglo migrant youth living in cities globally owing to their feeling of alienation and the affinities they draw from the oppositional image embodied in the genre.

An example of such hip-hop activism is Australia's Muslim hip-hop group, The Brothahood. The Brothahood has members from Lebanese, Egyptian, Turkish and Burmese backgrounds. To a certain extent, the direction of their music parallels that of Australian hip-hop in general, insofar as it calls for a rethinking of Australian national identity and embarks on a "project of attempting to build a multicultural national identity in place of a racist monocultural model that is now gaining strength in Australian national politics" (Iveson 1997: 47).

> I was born and raised here in Australia . . . I don't listen to Arabic songs and I don't speak the language that much. I grew up as a Muslim listening to hip-hop . . . The problem I had was that I couldn't relate to a lot of the hip-hop out today with all this rapping of violence, girls and drugs. So I started writing about who I was and what I feel as a Muslim and Australian . . . We basically try to break down stereotypes and barriers that we face as Muslims in Australia. There is a huge gap between Muslims and everyone else. Muslims stick to each other and non-Muslims are scared of us because of what they see and read in the media. We hope that our music bridges the gap so that non-Muslims aren't so scared of us and can see us as regular people . . . We noticed our music was attracting a lot of Muslim youth so we decided to use it as a tool for the sake of Allah to remind people, especially youth, but more

> importantly ourselves about this beautiful deen and way of life. We hope we are able to perfect it so that it eventually becomes an alternative to the negative, material based hip-hop on the airwaves today.
>
> The Brothahood (Saeed 2008)

Management of the tensions between hip-hop and Islam through the incorporation of the *nasheed* element has enabled some Muslim youth, who had considered music as *haram* and un-Islamic, to take a more sympathetic view of hip-hop groups like The Brothahood. In addition to expressing their everyday religiosity, tracks from The Brothahood talk about their piety in Australia post September 11, reminiscent of a growing trend in global Muslim hip-hop groups (also seen in Britain's Mecca2Medina and America's Native Deen). The group articulates a diverse array of issues related to migration, xenophobia, media prejudice, Islamophobia and the exclusionary treatment exacted upon Muslims in the name of national security, whilst also exerting their rights to citisenship in Australia. These result in the production of socially conscious tracks like 'The Silent Truth'.

> From beer I refrain, prayers I maintain
> Can't get on a plane without copping all the blame
> People can't you see that we are all the same
> Children of Adam but playing the blame game
> It's a shame, and that's the damn well truth
> If I hear another word I'm going to cut your ass loose
> News got you scared that I'm going to knock out your tooth
> So gullible, you believe in mother goose
> How cute, but that doesn't make it right
> Australia is mine too so I'm going to put up a fight
> You want to send me back? Yo send me back where?
> Australia is the place where I let down my hair
> you don't care, but that's in your nature
> they find an excuse they can to rate and then hate you
>
> The Brothahood, 'Silent Truth' (http://www.musicsonglyrics.com/the-silent-truth-lyrics-the-brothahood.html)

In essence, hip-hop as appropriated by the poetic *jihadis* is an attempt to reconcile two seemingly colliding cultures. It is a rebellion against both the exaltation of misogynous and Afrocentric themes in hip-hop, and the conservativeness of Islamic music such as the *nasheed*. As hip-hop culture undergoes an 'Islamisation' process when appropriated by this segment of Muslim youth, the lyrics remain devotional although they incorporate a heavy dose of social reality. It is interesting however, that despite the

global dispersion of Muslim hip-hop, groups of diverse ethnic origins make references to the African American civil rights struggles in their lyrics. Fun-Da-mental's 'Wrath of the Black Man', a song conceived around a Malcolm X speech, is perhaps one of the most explicit.

Explaining the Double Hyper-realisation: Homological Imagination

Hip-hop activism amongst globalised Muslim youth can be conceptualised as what Baudrillard has called a "reality by proxy." I contend that the essence of global Muslim hip-hop lies in its simulation of a transient "simulacrum of reality" rather than any interaction with any 'real' reality (Baurillard 1988: 4–5). Through a revisionist approach to the understanding of Islamic orthodoxy that goes beyond the first and second level simulations of counterfeiting and production respectively, the Five Percenter theology has already appropriated Islamic iconography at the hyper-real level. A 'double hyper-realisation' then occurs as mainstream Muslim hip-hoppers seek to reclaim the orthodoxy of their religion whilst maintaining the Five Percenter hip-hop parlance. In fact, in the context of the mass consumption of hip-hop culture among Muslim youth globally, the Islamic hip-hop lexicon of the poetic *jihadis* has shed the meanings originally embedded in the Five Percenter and NOI messages. Therefore, hip-hop jargons and black iconographies have been 'violated' to take on a 'realer than real' feel. Hence, the global Muslim youth hip-hop culture demonstrates a "generation by models of a real without origin or reality" and "is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double . . ." (Baudrillard 1994: 1–2).

This double hyper-realisation is achieved via two key processes which can be discerned by examining the disciplining of the body, and the disciplining of language. The first process of a double hyper-realisation is evident in the Islamising of the performativity of the Five Percenter and NOI hip-hop culture among contemporary young Muslims. The notion of bodily discipline is a strong feature of Islamic hip-hop in contemporary society. Its practitioners strive to conform to a body regimen that is in line with the tenets of Islamic principles. All-male groups such as The Brothahood, Mecca2Medina and Native Deen are modestly dressed, perform with less aggressive gyrations and are less likely to be *bling-blinged*, display tattoos, or take off their shirts during a gig. As mentioned above by

Banjoko, among the female hip-hop fans the place of Islamic dress codes in such a musical genre has been increasingly debated.

> I don't believe in conforming to what TV says hip-hop is about . . . Hip-hop is a "very misunderstood art form," often highlighted in the media as "a form of threat or negativity." But vice can be found everywhere, it doesn't take hip-hop to promote violence, sex or drugs . . . Hip-hop culture is merely an art form to be appreciated, especially for those with talent and passion. I'm a practising Muslim and hip-hop has not done anything to change that.
>
> Shakirah (cited in Anon 2003)

Shakirah, the co-founder of www.sghiphop.com, performs in gigs in Singapore and Malaysia organising hip-hop events and running a hip-hop store called The Cube. However, her fascination with hip-hop does not extend to the fashion associated with it. She avoids body-hugging tops, opting instead for long-sleeved shirts, slacks and the *hijab* (Anon. 2003).

The second process aims at mainstreaming the hip-hop jargon to give it more conventional and 'authentic' connotations. These interpretations are made to satisfy Sunni Muslim requirements, or at other times they are decentered to refer to a plurality of religions, as in the case made above on the appropriation and transposing of various hip-hop idioms to unravel a global and inclusive interpretation. Muslim or 'Islamic' hip-hop, from its NOI and Five Percenter beginnings, has been co-opted from a movement that is subversive within the domain of Islamic theology to a more consumerist and palatable medium through which to voice Muslim youth discontent. Turning theological symbols on their heads, Muslim hip-hop culture can be seen as a social movement aiming not only to promote multicultural living but also to project a 'real' Islam into hip-hop through the infusion of elements of *nasheed* and Islamic devotional music. Hence, having begun as a challenge to the supremacy of the white over the black man, hip-hop is repositioned as a global movement for Muslim youth of the September 11 generation.

The consumption of hip-hop culture among Muslim youth exhibits a significant degree of homological imagination. This is most evident if we examine the evolution of hip-hop idioms. Language structures an individual's perspectives of the world and functions as the vehicle whereby these worldviews are communicated. The contribution of hip-hop and the African American experience is to impart to urban minority youth "a cultural vocabulary and historical experience with which to bond and from which to draw elements for local repertoires of resistance" (Aidi 2004: 119). In this instance, the popularity of hip-hop culture

seems to prove the extent to which Americanisation pervades even Islam. This has led certain quarters to advocate an essentialist and reductionist Americanisation thesis in explaining the lived experiences of Muslim youth.

I understand *homology* in the Bourdieusian sense, as referring to "the source of the functioning of the consecration of the social order" which conceals the power relationships just as it serves to manifest itself under the pretence of neutrality (Bourdieu 1988: 204). Following Bourdieu, I maintain that in imagining a singular habitus, young transnational Muslim hip-hoppers "are united in a relationship of homology, that is, of diversity within homogeneity characteristic of their social conditions of production" whereby "each individual system of dispositions is a structural variant of the others, expressing the singularity of its position within the class and trajectory" (Bourdieu 1989: 60). As Bourdieu perceptively observes, each position comes with a set of "presuppositions, a doxa, and the homology between the producers' position and their clients' is the precondition for this complicity, which is all the more required when fundamental values are involved" (Bourdieu 1984: 240). Therefore, an individual at any stage of every society deals with a set of social positions which is tied to a relation of homology to a set of activities or commodities which are themselves characterised relationally (Bourdieu 1998).

Various factors can be said to have contributed to this homological imagination. Amongst the key factors would be the notion of solidarity. Groups like The Brothahood are not just verbal *mujahidins* (Alim 2006a), but also engage in operationalising Islam. They performed in 'Free Gaza' benefit concerts held in March and July 2009 to lend their support to the Palestinians. Proceeds of these concerts were donated to the Palestinian cause. The Brothahood also performed for the first time at the Free Gaza Concert, their latest pro-Palestinian track, called 'Act On It'. The group's global message and outlook is also manifest in their dressing. In a Sydney concert, one of the singers came on stage wearing a "Free Burma" t-shirt, jeans, *zikr* beads and a skullcap.

The second factor would be the perceived sense of persecution. The notion of justice for the minorities is central to this homological imagination. Words like 'outlaws' and 'outsiders' are used by the Muslim youth to describe their status vis-à-vis the larger society. This identification is a double-edged sword in the sense that it might be precisely the similar social conditions they face that makes African American hip-hop music appealing to these Muslim youth, and/or it might be the discursive constraints within the hip-hop vocabulary that necessitate Muslim youth to

subscribe to an 'us versus them' mentality in the process of immersing themselves in the music.

The attempts by Muslim youth to synchronise disparate cultural symbols, social structures and value systems through a homological imagination manifests in a hyper-real appropriation of the hyper-real religion of the NOI and the Five Percenters. Even at the level of analysing Muslim hip-hop coming from America, hip-hop's messages do not essentially convey images or symbols depicting the social reality of everyday life in a post-industrial community. The esoteric messages and insider language codified within the hip-hop jargons of the Five Percenters and the NOI more often than not transcend comprehensibility for many consumers of hip-hop music. Since "linguistic relations are always relations of symbolic power," any attempts at rationalising from a merely linguistic perspective without taking into consideration the totality of the matrices of power relations makes the analysis unintelligible (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 142–143). At one level it seems that the hip-hop language borrowed from these groups has become normalised and is reproduced among the global hip-hop *ummah* to represent symbols that are detached from their originally intended meanings.

The idea that Muslim youth are simply mimicking black American culture, devoid of any direct mentorship by its 'original' practitioners, has been generally attributed to the amount of exposure given by the media to 'black' music and the glamourising of the lifestyle in the music genre. However, to take on an such a reductionist approach in understanding Muslim youth consumption of hip-hop is to lose sight of the homological imagination that emerge in the global conversations within the hip-hop *ummah*. A more nuanced reading of the phenomenon reveals that, as hip-hop originally symbolised the struggle of the black man and his attempts to speak truth to power, its music as well as the accompaniments of its culture confers a symbolic status to its practitioners. This is evident if one examines the influence of Malcolm X on global Muslim hip-hop. Malcolm X, an eminent African American civil rights leader and an Islamic activist who started off with NOI but later switched to the more orthodox Sunni tradition, has since become a central figure in Muslim hip-hop, with many hip-hop songs invoking his name and speeches (Alim 2006a). In fact, the influence of African American icons such as Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali has also been cited by a significant number of converts to Islam the world over. The rhetorical style of Malcolm X's "jihad of words" (Floyd-Thomas 2003) which he had deployed successfully as a "potent political and religious strategy" (Turner 2003) has been much reproduced in the

global hip-hop scene. However, owing to the complexity of his personal background, replicating Malcolm X in global Muslim hip-hop usually comes at the expense of ignoring the structural conditions that make up his habitus. The symbolic status of figures such as Malcolm X can also be viewed as a product of secular consumerism; he is romanticised as a symbol of the rebellion, as a Che Guevera of the Muslim world.

The adoption of such symbols has, to a degree, led to an unproblematic internalisation of black street culture amongst a section of Muslim youth. 'Gangsta' hip-hop, a popular subgenre of hip-hop culture, is a source of moral panic among many media observers and members of the community. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, in his article "Gangsta, in French," talks about a struggle between "Osama bin Laden and Tupac Shakur" among poor young Muslim men. In the aftermath of the Paris riots, he pointed to the rioters' immersion in hip-hop and rap culture, and their replication of black American ghetto gang culture as a form of global hegemonic resistance (Brooks 2005). These youth primarily envision their everyday lives as resembling the struggles of the African American street culture.

Due to the sheer magnitude and rate at which Muslim youth are globally immersing themselves in and reproducing hip-hop culture, it is inevitable that hip-hop culture also takes on a somewhat 'glocalised' form. To be sure, from the examples that I have cited of Muslim hip-hop groups, the nodes of cultural influence in Muslim hip-hop are increasingly dispersed. Furthermore, diasporic young Muslims are not only subjected to the social policies of their host countries that influence attitudes towards migrant status, but also policies that influence the socioeconomic status which is intimately linked to the locality where they reside. As a case in point, Western Sydney, an area of Australia where a significant number of Muslim migrants live, has long been stigmatised as 'unrefined' and is distinguished by its high level of social problems. Vocal accents originating from the particular locality, which is labelled as 'woggie' or 'westie' accumulate less cultural capital. Hence, young Muslims utilise an amalgamated form of black street language and Arabic to challenge the power relationships that are embedded in a predominantly White Christian nation. "Lebspeak" (Cameron 2003) emerges amongst the second-generation Lebanese youth in Western Sydney, countering conventional decorum by ingesting hip-hop jargons into their everyday speech. This results in the creation of new jargon like " 'fully sick bro', awesome, *Habib* (a form of 'mate'), Yallah (let's go), as well as the more colourful swearing (mo-fo, for example)" (Butcher 2008: 374).

What Kitwana (2002) has correctly identified as the main forces driving the hip-hop generation are also the primary factors fuelling the homological imagination in the hip-hop *ummah*. The advent of globalisation and the continued visibility and representation of black youth in popular culture and the media resonate with the sense of alienation felt by young Muslims, and is further reinforced by what is perceived as a prejudiced criminal justice system and the concerns of living in an age of Islamophobia. Hence, as this chapter has demonstrated, there is a fusion between the hyper-real religious nature in which Muslim hip-hop originates and the mental structures of its contemporary global Muslim youth practitioners which has resulted in a double state of hyper-reality.

Conclusion

The consumption and production of hip-hop amongst Muslim youth brings with it various presuppositions that should not be taken for granted. This chapter has demonstrated the nuanced way that hip-hop is consumed within Muslim youth. Youth participation in hip-hop culture is structured to varying degrees by both national and transnational factors. In the case of the consumption of hip-hop culture, it can be argued that there is an attempt to replicate the structurations of the habitus as expressed in the struggles of, not only the African American experience specifically, but the hip-hop *ummah* as a whole (Alim 2006a; 2006b).

Hip-hop culture amongst urban minority youth exists in dialectical relationships with government institutions, political parties, media, religious groups and among the youth themselves, who attempt not only to claim and assume moral guardianship but to redraw existing moral boundaries. Following Bourdieu (1989), these practices do not exist as dualisms (such as a conflict between structure and agency), but rather accentuate the consequences of the youth's living within a structure. Youth attain their dispositions, consciously or unconsciously, from a structural framework. The challenge remains for the youth to reconcile themselves with seemingly colliding social norms. This can be conceptualised via the mode of the homological imagination.

One would be remiss to see hip-hop activism and the struggle for justice by the poetic *jihadis* as merely aimed at a confrontation between Muslims and non-Muslims. The vibrancy within the hip-hop *ummah*, itself characterised by a re-reading of the religion, cannot be taken for granted. In essence, the poetic *jihadis* amongst the Muslim hip-hop

ummah have bridged the gap between the seemingly colliding genres of *nasheed* and hip-hop with the notion of jihad as central to their endeavours. Inadvertently, a *double hyper-realisation* occurs as the producers of mainstream Muslim hip-hop seek to maintain the Five Percenter lexicon whilst also subverting elements of it. Hence, lyrics within hip-hop music not only document struggles with the non-Muslim Other, but are also part of sartorial strategies of resistance within the religion itself. What is indeed ironic is that the quest for religious authenticity and justice further adds to the hyper-real nature of the endeavour. For the everyday consumers of popular Muslim hip-hop, the entry of the Muslim hip-hop jargon into the hip-hop landscape can thus be seen as what Baudrillard has termed "a carnival of signs" (Sweetman 2000; Fisher 2002).

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PLAYING FOR CHRIST: CHRISTIANS AND COMPUTER GAMES

Lauren Bernauer

Introduction

In recent times there have been outcries against the media content and imagery that society (and especially its children) is exposed to. As a result of these concerns over violence, sexual explicitness, and narratives that promote an interest in the occult through a hyper-real religious process, as well as of a desire for media that praises their God, devout Christ-centred Christians have been creating and producing their own version of popular mainstream culture. Most notable is their music scene, which finds Christian versions of Heavy Metal, Rock, Pop, Rap, Country and many more genres being performed, recorded, and sold to a Christian audience. While their music has been particularly prolific, there are other popular culture media being similarly converted for Christian consumers. This phenomenon has also been recognised in the satirical comedy of *The Simpsons*, with the episode "Thank God it's Doomsday" parodying the famous *Left Behind* books and films (Payne 2005), and "Alone Again, Natura-Diddily" in which both Christian music and Christian computer games make appearances (Maxtone-Graham 2000). Research on this phenomenon of Christianity's engagement with popular culture has mostly been concerned with some of its more prominent manifestations, such as the music scene (Romanowski 2005) and *Left Behind* (Frykholm 2005). Also, John Walliss (this volume) has written a chapter on the Christian response to role-playing games, which is often viewed as quite negative.

Like Walliss' contribution, this chapter examines the Christian response to another 'geek' hobby which, rather than remaining *niche*, has become mainstream: computer gaming. Instead of viewing computer games in a wholly negative light, and wishing to ban them altogether, Christ-centred Christians are creating and publishing their own video games. The founder of the Christian Game Developers Foundation and creator of *Catechumen*, Reverend Ralph Bagley, has stated:

> [s]imply forbidding our children from playing video games is not the answer . . . We have to give them quality alternatives that match the excitement of secular games while promoting Christian values—without the violent or sexually explicit content. (Davis 2005)

In light of the growth of the gaming industry and continuing concern over the impact of computer games, especially those that could lead to a non-Christian hyper-real religious phenomenon, this chapter will examine the way Christian groups have appropriated mainstream games and converted them into entertainment that they consider doctinally and morally acceptable. In addition, this chapter considers websites that have been created to review mainstream games in light of their potential appropriateness for Christian consumers, and also groups of Christians that play online games and the sets of rules they impose upon themselves and their guilds while engaging in this activity.

Violence and Other Moral Objections

Computer games have been a leisure pastime within Western society since the 1970s, when arcade games began to make an impact on the hobbies of children and teenagers. Even at this early stage there were concerns about game content, with Exidy's *DeathRace2000* being deemed by the general public to be unsuitable for consumption, and suggestions that violence in arcade games caused the rise of violence in everyday life (DeMaria and Wilson 2002: 27–28). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, video games entered households through gaming consoles such as the Atari 2600, Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) and Commodore 64. As technology progressed, video games became playable on the personal computer, which, over the years, has created a divide between video game consoles and computer gaming (Bray 2008). As an overall genre of entertainment the gaming industry is extremely successful, with its annual revenue exceeding that of Hollywood films in 2004 (Lynch 2005: 52).

Fueled from the beginning by parental concern, the controversy over video and computer games has grown in recent years, with questions raised as to whether violence in popular games is desensitising the players (often presumed to be children), or even creating killers (Grossman 2009: 316–320).[1] After the Columbine High School massacre, the fact was publicised that both Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold played *Doom*, a first-person

[1] Computer games are by no means the only media to be criticised for corrupting and desensitising the younger generations. Concerns were raised over violent movies after the under-age murderers of James Bulger claimed they were inspired by *Child's Play 3*. There is also the issue of violent music, most notably rap, and the response to Ice-T's *Cop Killer* and concern that it would lead to listeners to be violent towards the police (Ferrell 1998).

shooter (FPS) game, and this was followed by the unfounded rumour that they had created a map of their school in the game and rehearsed their horrific plan (Gilbert n.d.). In Britain there was also the accusation that Warren Leblanc, who brutally murdered Stefan Pakeerah, owned the violent game *Manhunt* and was obsessed with it, and that this obsession led to the gruesome killing (BBC News 2004). Investigators later reported that they did not find a copy of the game in Leblanc's possessions, but rather that his victim, Pakeerah, owned a copy (Fahey 2004). Some activists against violent games, such as disbarred United States attorney Jack Thompson, go to great lengths to tie violent crimes to the circumstance of a criminal having played video games, especially first-person shooters:

> [o]n those rare occasions when a student opens fire on a school campus, Thompson is frequently the first and the loudest to declare games responsible. In recent years he's blamed games such as 'Counter-Strike', 'Doom' and 'Grand Theft Auto III' for school shootings in Littleton, Colo., Red Lake, Minn. and Paducah, Ky (Benedetti 2007).

In the aftermath of the Virginia Tech massacre, Thompson proclaimed that Seung-Hui Cho had trained in the game *Counter Strike* even before Seung-Hui Cho's identity had been linked to the crime (Benedetti 2007). Thompson also intended to bring a lawsuit against the makers of *Manhunt* on behalf of Stefan Pakeerah's family (Fahey 2004).

While there are concerns over game addiction, chiefly brought to the fore in connection with the Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) game *World of Warcraft*, violence is the predominant moral issue raised concerning games. Countries such as Germany and Venezuela have banned violent games, and Australia has not introduced a R18+ rating for games, resulting in popular titles such as the zombie apocalypse first-person shooter *Left 4 Dead 2* being banned, or in game producers having to modify and reduce the impact of certain aspects of their games (Colwill 2009). Other concerns such as drug use or sexual themes are often aired, but violence remains the main concern for critics of computer and video games. Christian game developers therefore emphasise this issue when promoting their games as a moral and safe alternative to mainstream games (Davis 2005).

The concept of hyper-reality is also quite important, as the absorption of players into the game world is controversial, as it has been important in other areas of popular culture:

> [t]here is much debate in our time about the effects of entertainment upon consciousness, personality and behavior. Our analyses can cast light on this

> debate. Virtually every parent in the contemporary western world knows of the "glazed eye" phenomenon when calling his or her children after they have been absorbed in some of their favorite TV. At these moments the world has become less real than the work; the pure phenomenon of the entertainment event has ontologically outweighed the everyday world (Harvey 2005: 265).

The world of computer games is much more captivating than that of television as, rather than being an observer to a story, the player is participating in the world of the game and his/her actions may lead to 'world' changing consequences. Indeed part of the controversy about violence in computer games concerns the fact that rather than merely simulating the violence, the player is engaging in violent acts, hence the supposed blurring between the virtual reality of the game and real life. With that concept in mind, it could be seen that because of the hyper-reality of computer games, Christian deeds done in computer games could be considered as of equal importance to those performed in the physical world.

Christian Computer Games

Christian computer games are not a new phenomenon; they originated in the mid to late 1980s when game company Color Dreams was causing minor waves, producing the gaming system on which their games were played. As a consequence of designing games for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) without a license from Nintendo, Color Dreams was slowly impelled to change the type of consumers it attracted. Nintendo did not pursue Color Dreams legally, but rather told retailers that if they stocked and sold the unlicensed games, Nintendo would no longer allow them to sell Nintendo products (Nielsen n.d.). Rather than seek a license to produce the games, Color Dreams instead began to create and sell Christian video games for the NES under the new name of Wisdom Tree. These were marketed through Christian bookstores—places in which regular computer games were not sold.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Wisdom Tree produced games that focused on Christian morals and beliefs, while drawing inspiration from popular game titles such as *The Legend of Zelda* and *Mario Brothers*, and reusing old Color Dreams games to create new ones. These new games often had similar game play to the popular titles, but their stories would be about Christianity, and their activities might involve using Bible knowledge to defeat an enemy, or playing through levels based on Bible stories. As co-owner of the company, Brenda Huff, has stated,

> [b]asically, what we were doing was taking the garbage out and putting Bible content in. That's the whole reason for the company to begin with. We marketed almost 100 percent into the Christian bookstore market, not through secular channels. It took a while to get in. We got picked up by Focus on the Family, which gave us pretty much of an industry okay (Kent 2001: 399).

While most of their games just borrowed elements from the popular titles, Wisdom Tree also produced a clone of a game from the Castle Wolfenstein series, *Wolfenstein 3D*. Changing the models in the game, Wisdom Tree converted the original scene from a castle full of Nazis that the player must shoot and kill while hunting for Hitler, to Noah's Ark, where the player must slingshot food at animals to pacify them. *Super 3D Noah's Ark* was the only unlicensed game for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, successor to the NES (Kent 2001: 400). Wisdom Tree was the main Christian video game developer during these early years, but with game technology moving toward computers, the creation and production of Christian games declined.

Due to the trend to personal computers, the Christian games industry stalled for a while, as it no longer had the aid of a set-up company. Wisdom Tree had flourished because it already possessed the game designers and experience to build upon when the company took a different direction with its game content. However, by the early 1990s the company had essentially gone out of business; even now they only reproduce their old NES games for computers. A few years later, however, there were Christian games being developed for the home computer, with one of the notable ones being N'Lightning Software's *Catechumen*, essentially a game like *Doom*, but one in which there is no gore, and the player wields a sword rather than a gun. The aim of the game is to fight and destroy minions of Satan who are in the tunnels under second-century Rome, and to purge the evil from Roman soldiers, leaving them penitent and praying to God. While the game does have its own story, it follows in the footsteps of Wisdom Tree by drawing upon mainstream game titles. This trend has continued throughout Christian game design, with Virtue Games' *Nacah* and *Isles of Derek* drawing upon the popular *Myst* and its sequel *Riven*, as mystery and puzzle solving adventure games (Namma 2005).[2] More recently there has

[2] The creators of the *Myst* series were devout Christians, and there are Christian religious themes in the game, though they are quite subtle (Pearce and Artemesia 2009: 73). It can be assumed that the subtle nature of the message in the games was not enough for

been a Christian game produced by Rebel Planet, *The Axys Adventures*, that is graphically quite similar to the recent *Legend of Zelda* games. These games essentially create a story that suits the mainstream title they are copying, and use the similarity as one of their main selling points. In *Isles of Derek*, a community is without faith because a demon stole their only Bible generations ago, so the player must discover its location and bring the people back into the fold (Virtue Games 2006). *Axys Adventures* sees a faithful community being attacked by an evil outside force, and the player controls their champion, Axys, who goes out and fights against the corruption this evil force is causing in the land (Rebel Planet 2007).

One Christian game available on consoles is based on the Christian cartoon *Veggie Tales*, although it was not produced by a Christian company but by mainstream developers who have produced numerous other console games. Those games that are based on other Christian media, like *Veggie Tales, Adventures in Odyssey* and *Left Behind*,[3] do not seem to draw on mainstream games as much as those that are trying to create their own story. The only games that copy mainstream titles competently are *Guitar Praise* and *Dance Praise* (which are Christian versions of *Guitar Hero* and *Dance Dance Revolution*), simply because the format is quite straightforward and is not forcing a Christian story or game play into the model of a mainstream game. These games are for the computer, rather than the consoles the original games are played on, and use USB ports for the guitar and dance pad peripheral devices. The games also have multiplayer capabilities, which the majority of Christian computer games do not, and thus allow the players to involve their friends in the game. There are some Christian games that still incorporate elements from well-known titles even if they do not directly mimic these titles. Examples are the non-denominational *Bible Champions* and its Catholic counterpart *Gospel Champions*, where stories from the Bible are played out and the player interacts with them; however the game also has coin collection similar to that seen in *Super Mario Bros* games.

Despite their appropriation of mainstream games themes, Christian computer games also seek to teach the players lessons. The *Adventures in Odyssey* games state that they teach children the lessons of truthfulness, praise, forgiveness and trust (Digital Praise n.d.). Many of the games also use knowledge of the Bible to aid in puzzle-solving, and this has been

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the Christ-centered designers, who instead created their own version of the game with an explicit Christian message.

[3] It should be noted that Jack Thompson spoke out against *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* due to the violence in the game (Zach 2006).

a key element of Christian games since Wisdom Tree was producing them. *Bible Champions* and *Gospel Champions* also market themselves to churches and Christian schools, thus gaining the benefit of easy access to all the families in the schools' communities. *Gospel Champions* also follows the schools' Mass readings schedule:

> [t]he Gospel Champions video game reinforces Gospel readings by recreating the same Gospel stories that children hear in Mass into fun action/adventure video games. Each month your kids play a Gospel story game that sequences with the Lectionary. As children play the games on their home PCs, they learn by seeing and hearing the story; and then by doing activities related to the story. This incredibly affordable series lets ALL your children play games on their home PC that reinforce the Gospel Readings and Catholic Faith. (Third Day Games n.d.)

Those designers who create an original story and setting for their games tend to embed in them as much Christian and Biblical knowledge as possible. There are even Bible quiz games, which have been some of the more popular Christian games (Michael and Chen 2006: 217). This heavy focus on Christianity is, as with contemporary evangelical music, possibly the main deterrent to the games finding a place in the greater gaming community.

Why, it might be asked, is the Christian version of the *Legend of Zelda*-inspired game on the computer, when *Zelda* games have only appeared as console games? While Christian computer games began as console games, since the move to the personal computer the Christian developers have not been able to break back into the console market. There have been a couple of games developed for the Playstation and Xbox, but for the most part Christian game developers do not have enough funds to produce console games. Developing and producing console games entails purchasing a specific game engine, and this can cost between three hundred and fifty thousand and five hundred thousand United States dollars (boyoftomorrow 2006). Also, the console companies have a say in what is produced for their console, just as Nintendo did in the days of Color Dreams. While these major companies would possibly not dispute the production of Christian games, Christian game developers do not have to worry about them when producing personal computer games.

While the main dissemination issue faced by Christian game developers is their inability to produce console games, there are other potential problems. Financial issues mean that of the number of companies developing Christian games, most only seem to be able to create a small number of games before they disappear. Virtue Games' website has not been updated since 2006 despite, supposedly, being close to another release

(Virtue Games 2006). This lack of funding and compromised longevity of the companies is important in relation to the console market; if a game company were able to buy the console game engine to create console games, would that benefit the entire community of Christian game developers, or only the company that bought the engine? What would happen to the engine if the company that purchased the equipment were to go out of business? These issues, though warranting consideration, are not discussed by the Christian Game Developers Foundation in their infomercial (boyoftomorrow 2006), requesting donations and support. Other issues also stem from the short life of Christian computer game businesses and their wish to break into the console market, such as aspirations to move into the mainstream market and rivalry with mainstream games for market share. While Christian games are clearly for Christians, there is the potential that they might also be viewed as a means of converting those who need to be 'saved':

> [i]n addition, evangelicals sometimes argue that games can teach tribal values and beliefs, even "enlighten believers and nonbelievers concerning God's truths by providing entertainment that is rich with Christian content. These products must be highly entertaining and engaging in order to create 'teachable moments'." (Schut 2008)

Unlike the Christian music industry, the Christian game industry has a long way to go before it might see mainstream interest. It has taken many years for evangelical music to go mainstream and appear on MTV, and this eventual success has essentially been a result of lessening the religious overtones of the music (Romanowski 2005; Halpern 2005). The progress is slow, despite the hopes of the evangelical community that their music would engage non-believing youth and bring them to the community and God (Gormly 2003).

An infomercial, produced by the Christian Game Developers Foundation for viewing on the Internet, appears on Youtube (boyoftomorrow 2006). Uploaded by a (presumably) non-Christian who has labelled the video "propaganda," the infomercial displays a woman talking to children aged between ten and twelve. She asks what games they play, and the children list games that are clearly inappropriate for their age group: games rated for those aged fifteen and above (boyoftomorrow 2006).[4] The video's

[4] The issue of video game violence could be viewed as more likely linked to children playing games that are not age-appropriate, rather than to the apparent violence in any particular game.

main objective is to encourage people to donate to the Christian Games Development Foundation, so that they might be able to produce more wholesome Christ-centred games and potentially break into the console market, but the people likely to view this advert and give money to the foundation are unlikely to be those parents who would allow their children to play age-inappropriate games. This leads to the issue of the Christians' target audience with regard to age. While the majority of children play some computer or video games (Pew Research Center n.d.), several studies list the average age of gamers as around thirty-five (BBC 2009; Hill 2008). Christian games are clearly predominantly aimed at children, who already have a vast number of games catering to their age range, created by mainstream developers; though Christ-focused Christians may have other issues with those games, such as their promotion of evolution, or the occult themes in the popular *Pokémon* franchise (Possamai 2005: 142–149). Christian music artists had to work with mainstream record companies before seeing sales outside of church and Christian stores, and Christian computer game companies have yet to take similar steps, so it will be some time before they see sales outside of the devout Christian community.

Christians Playing Mainstream Games

It is obvious that there are Christ-focused Christians who are interested in the larger culture of games and gaming, given the ways that Christian games have been deeply influenced by mainstream games, either by incorporating elements from them or by being explicitly Christian versions of popular games. This appropriation of content indicates that Christian game developers also play mainstream computer and video games, and many Christ-focused Christian consumers still consume and play mainstream, secular, often violent video and computer games.

By playing popular games, these Christians are not necessarily forgoing their faith. Rather, a number of them review the games they play and detail the appropriateness of the game regarding Christian morals and values, as well as commenting on the common issue of the level of violence evident during game play, since secular classifications do not necessarily address their concerns. It is interesting to observe how two different websites go about this review process. At the Christ Centered Gamer website, games are given two scores out of one hundred; the first is based on five different areas of appropriateness, such as violence, nudity and the occult. The

other score is an overall game score, which rates five aspects, such as the game play, graphics and general stability of the game. These scores are placed at the end of a long review of the game, but because appropriateness is broken down into five different categories, a game that scores badly in only one area can potentially receive a reasonably good score out of one hundred. The following review of *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* is an example.

> Do me a favor and don't buy this for your kids. And some of you may want to think twice about buying it for yourself too. With that out of the way, let's get into why. Blood is heavily used during battle, which gushes and splashes and the screen also gets a nice dose on it during messy kills. Gory dismemberment and decapitation is used a lot, the numerous finishers can and will look downright savage, arms and legs are broken, and heads are blown off using the enemies own weapons . . . There is some crude language and profanity here and there (s--- and a-- mainly), but it isn't used that much. Some tight clothing is shown on female characters as well. Mystique and some mutant female enemies don't wear clothing, but look like they have a skin-tight suit which, intentional or not, has at least some sex appeal, so it's worth watching out for (Keero 2009).

Despite the author saying that this game might not be worth purchasing due to inappropriate content, the game receives a score of seventy-six in the appropriateness category. For, while it gets zero out of ten for violence and four out of ten for language, the game was given ten out of ten in the areas of 'Occult/Supernatural' and 'Cultural/Moral/Ethical' ('Nudity and Sexual Reference' received eight). Thus arrived at, the score of seventy-six out of one hundred is quite misleading, as according to the reviewer, the game is not at all appropriate for the audience reading this review. While there is a brief outline of the game at the beginning of the review, it is not visually prominent, and does not give a rating of the game or warning about its content. Not all of the reviews have even this initial outline.

Another website, Guide 2 Games, begins its review with the level of appropriateness, and rates games as either 'Squeaky Clean', 'Some Issues' or 'Strong Caution'. *Unreal Tournament 3*, a similar game to *Wolverine* with regard to violent content, receives, due to its violence, a 'Strong Caution' rating with a small explanation as to why:

> [t]he heart of this game is violence, so be advised as to what you are getting into. Also, there is a lot of swearing that stops short of f***. There is female cleavage present in a few characters during the game (Summers 2009).

Under this rating system, it is easily identifiable that the game is considered inappropriate, and why. Though the 'Strong Caution' section of the

review might be small for this game, others receive long, detailed explanations. Like Christ Centered Gamers, Guide 2 Games provides a substantial review of a game overall, but they display clearly their rating of a game regarding its levels of violence, sexual reference, the occult and other worrying content. While not all its reviews have this clear rating, the older ones include a numerical score for different categories at the beginning of the review—one category being 'Christian Rating'. On Guide 2 Games, the game *Okami*, which is about the Japanese goddess Amaterasu, receives "2 of 5 (poor)" for its Christian content (Josh 2008).[5]

These two websites review games and publish their results in different formats, but they both show that there are Christ-focused Christians playing violent, 'morally dubious', mainstream games. *Left4Dead*, an online zombie apocalypse first-person shooter, receives 'Strong Caution' on Guide 2 Games. The concluding remarks of the review state:

> *Left4Dead* is an extremely satisfying and fun game, especially if you get together and play with friends. However, the violence is extreme, and you very well could hear a lot of profanity if you play online. If you can handle the above mentioned content, then you are in for the ride of your . . . un-life. (Link 2009)

It is clear from this review that these Christians enjoy playing these types of games and later discussion will show that they do not see the practice as interfering with their faith and relationship with Christ. The Christ Centered Gamer website, while including reviews of numerous games, also serves as a place for devout Christians[6] to find people with whom to play these cooperative multiplayer games. ChristianGameServers.com hosts servers for these games to be played on, and they advertise hosting both *Team Fortress 2* and *Unreal Tournament 3*. Both of these are purely Player versus Player FPS games, meaning that when you shoot an opponent you are shooting a character being played and controlled by another human being, the main objective of these games being to shoot and kill the opposition. While *Team Fortress 2* is an entirely team-based game, and

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[5] While *Okami* received an M classification rating by the Office of Film and Literature Classification, the only listed concerns are "Moderate Fantasy Violence and Moderate Sexual References." This listing clearly does not address Christian issues with the Shinto and non-Christian spirituality evident in the game.

[6] While the Internet is a place of anonymity and anyone might choose to play within the community this website fosters regardless of their religion or level of devotion, the website does pitch itself at devout Christians and bears the self-created label of "the ultimate Christian gaming site."

the *Unreal Tournament 3* server that the Christian Game Servers website runs is a team based map (and thus the team play and cooperation concepts in both these games may be advanced as positives), the main objective is still to kill the 'enemy'.

The use of the occult category also raises an interesting question as to why engaging in those actions that are 'un-Christian' is so problematic. If the game is purely fantasy and has no impact on the real world then there should be no need for concern. But given the nature of hyper-reality within the gaming genre, playing games that have strong occultic overtones is considered dangerous because it is not truly a fantasy, non-real, world in which the player's actions are taking place. The players are engaging with 'evil' supernatural forces and in some games, actually performing sorcery or devotion to Pagan deities. Doing this in a game is as real as actively participating in rituals at a non-Christian religious festival—there is no true distinction between the actions performed in the game and those occurring in the physical world, this lack of distinction creating an hyper-real religious phenomenon. The reason Christian-developed computer games are perceived to be necessary, is that rather than having the players absorbed into a new world and there performing occultic, satanic acts (as in the *Harry Potter* franchise games), or engaging in violence and overtly sexual behaviours (as in the *Grand Theft Auto* series), they can instead be active in a hyper-real world where they perform Christian deeds, do God's work and save people's souls—the concept being that performing these these actions in the game is just as important as doing them in 'real life'.

Aside from these purely Player versus Player games, Christ-focused Christians also play other online games, like *World of Warcraft* and other Massively Multiplayer Online role-playing games. Groups or 'guilds', formed around their religious devotion, share ideals about players' conduct. One such group is the Tribe of Judah who play numerous games, and maintain *World of Warcraft* and *Warhammer: Age of Reckoning* guilds for their members. As many of these online games have opposing factions, Tribe of Judah hosts guilds on both sides. These guilds have guidelines that all members need to respect and obey, such as not using profanity, playing with a family member who is over eighteen (and also in the guild) if underage, and playing well with those in other guilds. They also have a propensity to proselytise:

> Section 5: Witnessing & Encouragement
> encourage v.t. to give courage or confident [*sic*] to; to raise the hopes of; to help on by sympathetic advice and interest; to advise and make it easy for

> (someone to do something); to promote, stimulate; to strengthen (a belief or idea)
>
> All members are encouraged to witness to non-Christians, whether through open conversation or by the example of their conduct. All members should also encourage and uplift their fellow members (ewoksrule 2009).

The guilds run Bible study, lead prayers and provide spaces where Christ-focused Christians can be open about their beliefs without fear of recrimination from other players. The guilds have also received some publicity: one of Tribe of Judah's *World of Warcraft* guild leaders was interviewed by James John Bell for an article about the game. He speaks of his time in the game and the activities his guild participates in, and his reactions to the content of the game:

> [w]hile Heath doesn't kill non-believers, he along with both factions vanquishes a great number of demon NPCs like those found in Desolace. It was during a quest through this dead zone that Heath realised that even in the hi-rez land of Azeroth the Lord can speak through the virtual dead: "As I was riding through the Kodo Graveyard in Desolace, the bones brought to mind Ezekiel 37, which later resulted in a message I preached at a location and used this reference to the valley of dry bones. I eventually used it as a Bible Study one Friday night in the guild as well" (Bell 2006).

Tribe of Judah is just one group of Christ-focused Christians that play MMOs. Schut (2008) talks of how numerous Christian guilds actively seek converts and have statements regarding salvation plans. He also discusses how these gaming guilds can act as religious communities for the players. This idea of witnessing and out-reach programs is used by Christians to give a more spiritual role to their game playing, transcending the act of socialising online through game play with other like-minded Christians. There has been some concern over Christians limiting themselves to Christian guilds. As one commenter on a blog post states, limiting oneself to Christian guilds does not allow a huge potential for out-reach and guiding people to Jesus:

> [i]t seems to me that it's more effective to witness by joining a guild that contains unsaved members and build[ing] relationships with them there. We don't need to create more seperate [*sic*] sub-groups of Christians—we need to infiltrate the unsaved communities.
>
> Being a youth pastor and sharing about my 'career' with other guildmates has offered many great witnessing opportunities. I've earned their respect over the past 10 months and now have opportunities where members just want to sit in Teamspeak [voice chat] and talk privately about what they're going through in life. It appears to me that many people play games like this as an escape from real-life struggles, so I agree that it is an exceptionally needy

> mission field. Just please don't create your own little groups of Christians in these games—reach out! (Andy 2005, comment by Tim).

Other comments on this particular blog post also talk of using gaming as a means of witnessing to non-Christians or lapsed Christians, and this seems to be the main positive aspect that these devout Christians find in playing large scale mainstream games. This aspect does not apply to the games they can only play in small groups (such as *Team Fortress 2* and *Left4Dead*), but in the MMOs, conversion, witnessing and mission are raised as regular topics, because while Christ-focused Christians play they come into contact with those who either do not share their faith, or do not believe in it as passionately as they do.

In spite of the gamers' claims of using this contemporary medium to proselytise, there are those from within their faith who are critical of their involvement with computer and video gaming. With the recent media discussions about addiction to games (specifically *World of Warcraft*) and Internet and game addiction recovery programs (Associated Press 2009), there are concerns in the Evangelical and Christ-centered communities that involvement with gaming can interfere with a person's faith and devotion to Jesus and God (Jindra 2008: 207). There is apprehension that the games are becoming an idol, and that Christian gamers are using the idea of gaming being a mission and opportunity for witnessing to dismiss that criticism.

> We pour our money into new computers, new games, monthly subscriptions, and hours and hours of time to feed our fleshly desires.
>
> While I will admit that some may reach a lost soul here or there by playing video games with them, I'd be FAR more worried that it's just an excuse we're making so we can play our games for thousands of hours and not feel guilty because we're not out meeting real needs for real people in the real world. Why do I say this? Because this is a beast inside me that I have to beat down all the time. I know the excuse, I know the temptation, and it scares me to death.
>
> Seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness! All these other things will be given to you. Don't be caught up in a world which isn't even a world. (Andy 2005, comment by jwise).

This comment represents those Christ-focused Christians who have embraced gaming but realise that there can be harmful side-effects not only in the content of the games (which Christian critics mostly focus on), but in spending too much time engaging with them, something numerous critics of gaming discuss. While there are religious and spiritual overtones to the above comment, it could also be viewed as representing people

who are not devoutly Christian or religious, but can relate their own experiences of spending too much time playing computer games rather than living life. While there are those who can see the detrimental effects of spending too much time with computer and video games, there are many in the gaming community who do not. While Christian gamers face the same involvement issues as non-religious gamers, they must also address a spiritual side to their potential 'addiction'. Instead of evaluating just the real world physical and social aspects of their lives being impacted by their gaming—as would be the primary concern of non-religious gamers—the Christian gamers also need to evaluate the impact their time gaming is having on their own spiritual welfare, not just on that of those they are trying to reach.

Jwise's comment also connects with hyper-reality, even though he obviously rejects the notion of these virtual worlds having potentially great importance to certain people and their faith. Heath, in his adventures in *World of Warcraft*, demonstrates how the seemingly non-real world can impact faith. Heath's experience and sermon within the game world shows that it has a real importance to him and his faith. By witnessing to other gamers in the virtual reality of their chosen game, they are doing their work as Christians, and getting the Word out to non-believers. That missionising is as real to them as if it were occurring in the physical world.

Conclusion

Video and computer games have been part of Western society for many years now, and their popularity is growing. Yet there remain numerous concerns about the content of the games. Primarily these focus on the violence, sexually explicit clothing, and the un-Christian behaviour of some of the characters in the games. Realising that they cannot simply ban children from playing computer and video games, Christian groups have been creating Christ-centered games, encountering, however, numerous problems.

The primary issue is that these Christians view games as something for children (despite numerous studies suggesting the average age of gamers is well into adulthood), and this essentially limits the kind of games Christian companies produce. Christian computer games are aimed at children in an attempt to encourage children to play these games rather than mainstream ones. Yet they cannot really compete with the numerous children's games available in the mainstream market, as Christian companies

do not have the same level of financial backing as the mainstream game companies have and the Christian games are bound by their religious and moral messages. Christian game developers state that there needs to be a non-violent moral alternative to mainstream games, but they do not take into account that age recommendations and classifications are not being adhered to when children are given games to play (boyoftomorrow 2006). While Christ-centered Christians may also have concerns about non-violent aspects of mainstream children's games (such as the Darwinian evolutionary nature of the creatures in *Pokémon*) this is not spoken about in public messages (such as the video from the Christian Game Developers Foundation). Rather it is mainstream games' violent and sometimes sexually explicit nature that is discussed, in order to recruit non-Christians to play Christian-developed computer games.

Christian games also fail to include co-operative play, a core component of numerous popular mainstream titles. Computer and video gaming is becoming a group activity both through consoles and online play, but Christian computer games are yet to incorporate this aspect. Christian music gives Evangelical teenagers the means to listen to contemporary styles of music and thereby engage, in a sanctioned way, with normal teenage behaviour and customs (Schofield Clark 2003: 44). Christian computer games do not. They are aimed at children, and (aside from *Guitar Praise* and *Dance Praise*) have no co-operative or versus play, so children are not able to involve their friends. Since the Christian market does not supply their demand, some devout Christians turn to mainstream video and computer games.

The numerous issues that Christian computer game companies face are inherently financial. They do not have the money to produce many games, and as these games are aimed at a young audience they do not see sales across the entire age range of gamers. Also, the games cater to a specific group of people. Lack of funds stops companies from branching into the console market, thus limiting the growth of Christ-focused games, and also affects their multiplayer ability. Console games are potentially able to support two to four players at once, while multiplayer computer games require multiple computers or connection to an online server—a venture which requires adequate financial support. The overt Christian sentiment in the games produced by these Christian companies makes non-Christ-focused Christians and the non-religious less inclined to play them and thus makes mainstream success more difficult.

When playing mainstream games, Christ-centered Christians still incorporate their faith: informing others of what games are like with regard to

Christian ideas of appropriateness; playing with a group of like-minded people according to a code of conduct; and/or using their involvement with gaming to spread the Word. While these Christian gamers may have good intentions, there is criticism of their actions from the Evangelical and Christ-focused communities. Given that 'game addiction' has been a recent concern in the media, there are those who feel that playing mainstream games inherently leads the players away from Christ and the core beliefs of the Christian faith.

In spite of the detractors, it is quite clear that Christ-focused Christians are engaging with the medium of computer and video games. While some engage in an attempt to provide a Christian alternative to mainstream games, others use the social interaction that computer and video games can provide to find a new religious community. However there are still steps that need to be taken by both players and developers. Christian game developers need to learn from their Evangelical music counterparts that unless they are willing to tone down their religious message and content, their audience is always going to be devout Christians. They also need to move away from single-player children's games and adapt to the mature age of the average gamer and produce the engaging games that teenagers wish to play. As for any other gamer, for the Christ-centered Christians playing mainstream games there is the potential to become too involved with their hobby, and they need to realise that (even though they might play inside a religious community, or use gaming as a potential vehicle for witnessing to and for the conversion of non-believers) it can become an overwhelming part of their lives. Devout Christians engaging in large scale games like MMOs face the same issues as do non-religious gamers regarding time spent playing and time taken away from real world interaction and living life in general. Because of this there will always be critics of their hobby, and Christ-focused computer gamers, no matter what their religious and witnessing intentions might be, will need to negotiate how their beliefs and hobby interact, and reflect on which of the two is receiving more attention.

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SOME ANGEL SOME DEVIL: HARRY POTTER VS. THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN POLAND

Krzysztof Olechnicki

Introduction

> Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real? (Rowling 2007: 579).

Pottermania in Poland is not different from Pottermania in many other countries, but because of the relatively high level of religious homogeneity in Polish society and the very special position of the Roman Catholic Church, J. K. Rowling's books have triggered a far-reaching discussion within the Catholic community.[1] The variety of the reactions is somehow paradoxical: all debaters are deeply concerned about their belief system (i.e. Roman Catholicism) and also claim that they have analysed the *Harry Potter* series from the Catholic (or just Christian) point of view. But some of them warn against the diabolical and occultist roots of the series of books, while others recognise the Christ-like traits in the young wizard from Hogwarts. It seems that either the books are complex and unclear or, a more reasonable argument, that Roman Catholic belief is very diverse concerning what is good or bad for the faithful. Why do some Catholics, even priests, defend and promote *Harry Potter*, while others think that even reading these books is a sin? I suggest that this may be because the concern is not about *Harry Potter* being good or bad, but about the fact that *Harry Potter* is part of consumer culture and the hyper-real religious spectacle. The debate is clearly fuelled by the enormous popularity of these books and the assumption that *Harry Potter* is seen by the Church as becoming a real religious/spiritual competitor in the case of some people. While there are groups (and individuals) who are directly inspired by *Harry Potter* in their quest for religiosity/spirituality (Cusack 2010), they have not led to any type of group formalization such as Jediism. There is

[1] This is not the only discourse on *Harry Potter* in Poland. There are also more conventional literary and readers' discourses which have produced quite a fierce discussion on whether *Harry Potter* is good or bad literature (or is literature at all) but as these discourses have no special Polish characteristic I will not consider them in my chapter.

no church of Potter but there are nevertheless people who are inspired by these stories spiritually and religiously, such as some neo-pagan groups and networks. However, this is not the focus of this Chapter. The stronger social impact of the hyper-real religiosity of *Harry Potter* might instead be based on the vigorous resistance of conservative and evangelical Christians who perceive *Harry Potter* in religious terms, and recognise that people can be attracted by a 'false' belief. As such, this Chapter does not deal with the religious consumption of popular culture but rather on the counter-consuming processes by a mainstream religious institution. In Poland, this opposition is represented in the first place by the Roman Catholic Church. Because the Church has defined the situation in such a way (akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy), *Harry Potter* has actually become a serious religious challenge due to its negative hyper-real attraction to spiritual consumers.

It is noticeable that the arguments of the *Harry Potter* opponents seem to have very little (if any) impact on consumers of popular culture. Regardless of severe criticism and warnings issued by some Catholic authorities, *Harry Potter* books and films sell extremely well among the mostly Catholic Polish population. I argue that mixing elements of religious traditions with a popular culture (as is the case in *Harry Potter*) makes this blend very resistant to any institutional pressure. The negative reactions to the stories of *Harry Potter* especially concern young people going astray with their belief system. However, as this Chapter will explore, the hyper-reality of Rowling's kingdom, on one hand, and the polarisation of opinions within the Church itself, on the other, make the institution's voice, a voice (crying) in the wilderness. I also think that while the situation in Poland is very specific, it is possible to generalise the findings about this phenomenon's dynamics to other countries, because the logic behind the consumers' choices is likely to be the same everywhere.

Fundamental to understanding the phenomenon of *Harry Potter* is the concept of the sacred, or, more precisely, the return of the sacred. In my chapter I would like to present some reflections on hyper-real religions in the context of reactions to *Harry Potter* in Poland, and in connection with two concepts which are fifty years apart, but are nevertheless connected. The first is Max Weber's concept of the disenchantment of the modern world, which was created within the context of the sociology of religion. The other is Leszek Kołakowski's concept of the revenge of the sacred on secular culture (and on petrified institutionalised religion), which was created within the framework of the philosophy of religion.

My study is based on extensive empirical research, including analysis of various Catholic publications from Poland between 2000 and 2009. (The first volume of *Harry Potter* was published in Poland in 2000.) These are articles from several Catholic press titles (*Rodzina Radia Maryja*, *Przegląd Powszechny*, *Nasz Dziennik*, *Rycerz Niepokalanej*, *Przewodnik Katolicki*, *Posłaniec Serca Jezusowego*, *OAZA*, *Miłujcie Się!*, *List do Pani*, *Któż Jak Bóg*, *Źródło*, *Gość Niedzielny*, *Wzrastanie*, *Wieczernik*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*), popular Catholic books and Catholic web pages. Between 2000 and 2009 I have also surveyed the content of the most popular Catholic-oriented sites (including some anti-cult sites). While reviewing the most popular and widespread titles and sites, I was looking for the most representative voices in the discourse on Harry Potter. In my analysis I do not mention any one-time, single comment or statement, but concentrate on those with the highest frequency of repetition. Undoubtedly, this is a kind of reduction, but it allows the most important actors and threads in the discussion to be distinguished.

Let me start with some historical background. For more than twenty years Poland has been the scene of strenuous efforts towards political and economic transformation. Undoubtedly, this is the most crucial process in the country; the process which determines others. However, we should not disregard additional processes that started in Eastern and Central Europe in 1989, particularly, changes connected with religious secularisation and religious pluralisation resulting in open access to Western ideas. In comparison with Western countries these processes were slow to start, but they are nevertheless vigorous.

In Poland the influence of the new religious ideas has become widespread since 1989, when the fall of Communist rule caused the collapse of the 'iron curtain'. Depending on the political situation, the 'iron curtain' had, to a varying extent, isolated Poles from ideas competing with Marxism. The fall of the Communist system produced a kind of ideological vacuum, which was filled by the ideology of consumption and, for those wanting 'something more' than luxury goods, the colorful array of the religious/spiritual proposals, whose full range we are now experiencing. Among them are various sorts of religious groups: Oriental religious movements (such as International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga, Karma Kagyu, Bahai), quasi-religious movements (Transcendental Meditation, Rebirthing, Theosophy) and quasi-scientific movements (New Science, radionics, electro-crystal therapy, and so on). Bookshop shelves in Poland are full of books devoted to religions, the occult, astrology, black magic, the UFO, macrobiotics, prophecies, occultism, chiromancy, and so

on. Now, we can observe a slow but constant shift from identification with an organised religion to privatised religiosity, a more individual approach which is sometimes mixed with popular culture and its themes. Many of these ideas—which deal with New Age religion, religiosity and spirituality—have already gained significant support and popularity in Poland (Hall 2007; Olechnicki 2008; Załęcki 2001b). However, their success has put these new proposals into conflict with the Roman Catholic Church, which has almost a monopoly on religious activity in Poland and is afraid of weakening its position.

The majority of Poles declare their affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church. Some research puts the majority as high as 90–94%—in the period 1989–2010 the numbers did not fall below 90% in any poll—but this does not mean Poles are active Church participants. The most widespread group among Polish Catholics are so-called passive churchgoers (about 75%), whose participation is limited to traditional rituals. There is also a group of 'marginal members' (13%). Only about 11% of Polish Catholics belong to a group of hard-core believers and supporters—the concept of 'Pole-Catholic' is not obvious (Marody 1994). Much research has been carried out since 1989 on the institution of the Church and on changes in religiosity within Polish society. All researchers agree that religiosity is undergoing a change but they also agree that trends are unclear and obscured. One constant is that the Church is no longer a monolithic institution: both the priesthood and the faithful are divided into many categories. Władysław Piwowarski (1996) thinks that the most general distinction that can be made is with the categories of 'the Church of the People' versus 'the Church of Choice'.

Polish religiosity is full of paradoxes. The results of the RAMP (Religious and Moral Pluralism) research project show that the general affiliation with Catholicism and the keeping of rituals is interlaced with ideological pluralism and criticism of the Church (Borowik and Doktór 2001). Polish sociologists of religion point out that Polish religiosity was and is very selective, incoherent and contradictory when it comes to teachings and the doctrine of the Church (Piwowarski 1984). Poles in general and also part of the church's hierarchy do not accept the church's interference in political affairs; many interpret it as compromising the state's nonreligious character. According to this view, Catholic priests spend too much time debating ideological issues, such as abortion, contraception, religious education and the presence of Christian values in the media.

> However, the most distinctive characteristic of Polish religiosity is the ritualisation of religious practices—Poles are very active churchgoers, but this is not connected with deeper or richer faith. It is a unique combination if we compare it with other European countries. Irena Borowik has coined a very accurate name for Polish religiosity. Borowik refers to Grace Davie's phrase which Davie used to describe the situation in Great Britain, where believing in God is far more popular than affiliating with religious institutions. Davie has called it 'believing without belonging.' On the contrary, the situation in Poland can be called 'belonging without believing' (Borowik and Doktór 2001: 151).

It is worth mentioning that during the Communist regime, between 1945 and 1989, the Church in Poland suffered many wrongdoings from the Communists, who wanted to limit its power and disseminate atheism among the faithful. For example, the Church was accused of being influenced by the Vatican and Western governments, and having a hostile policy toward the legal government. Nevertheless, the state-inspired actions against the Church were unsuccessful and actually made it even stronger. The Church reinforced rather than weakened its structures and it had a significant role in overcoming Communism (Borowik 2002). Besides, during that period it always acted in somehow convenient circumstances, i.e. the lack of serious ideological competition (except for the self-compromising Communism). Moreover, it opposed unpopular governments, and as a political asylum, the Church had many adherents even among unbelievers. After 1989, because of democratic changes, this role has ended. Now, in Poland there is a rich market of ideas, and the Church has to take care of its believers—for many people (especially the young) tradition is no longer the sole and sufficient reason to be a Roman Catholic. How does the Catholic Church, which is the largest religious organisation in Poland and which has been closely connected to the state and culture for more than a thousand years, cope with this challenge? The existence of numerous religious ideas differing from Catholicism and Christianity has changed the religious landscape in Poland. The Church has lost its religious domination. The new social and cultural environment forces the Church to adapt and actively strive for new believers and, what is more important, watch over the faithful so that they are not seduced by other 'shepherds'.

Also important is the fact that during the Communist period the Church was sheltered from real (by which I mean cultural and spontaneous) secularisation. Only since 1989 has real secularisation begun and it has so far been more successful than forty-five years of Communism. All these processes make the Church's position very difficult: the Church has prevailed

over Communism so it should be triumphant but, on the other hand, it feels insecure and under attack by 'anti-Christian' Western culture (see Załęcki 2001a).

According to Peter L. Berger (1969: 150–153), in such a situation religious institutions have two options; either they can adjust to the new conditions, admit the equality of rights of other institutions, and take part in the game of free religious enterprises, or they can reject the possibility of adjustment, announce 'a state of siege', and fight to retain the old structures. In Poland we see both types of reaction but, in my opinion, the latter is decidedly more widespread and stronger. The reaction to *Harry Potter* reflects this alternative, which is even more pronounced in the reality of consumer culture, where the right to choice—including the consumption of ideas—is fundamental.

Since the first book of the series was published in Polish, *Harry Potter* has become one of the most popular subjects of discussion in Poland, and usually this discussion contains references to the New Age, new religiosity and, consequently, hyper-real religions. *Harry Potter* has divided its Christian readers into two camps. Opponents accuse the author, J. K. Rowling, of, among other things, promoting dangerous New Age ideas. But strangely enough, both her supporters and defenders share anti-New Age sentiments, and their arguments try to prove that *Harry Potter* has nothing in common with the New Age Movement. Let me analyse some emblematic and representative examples of these arguments.

Sister Joanna AVD[2] considers yoga, astrology, martial arts or predictions to be transmitters of the New Age, but in her opinion mass media are of the most crucial importance. Most stories shown in the cinema or on television tend to model a new mentality in which God means cosmic power or energy, and humans are able to possess unnatural powers. The most prominent examples are cartoons such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, He-Man, Batman, Pokémon* and, certainly, the *Harry Potter* movies. Robert Tekieli (2005, 2006), a Catholic journalist, argues that such techniques as Tai Chi or the Silva Mind Control share some characteristics with *Harry Potter*: they are not at all innocent and they pretend to be something other than what they really are. Their second common attribute is promoting toxic spirituality and occultism.

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[2] Sister Joanna AVD, "New Age modnym złudzeniem." At http://www.effatha.org.pl/zagrozenia/newage2.htm. Accessed 5/05/2006.

Aleksander Posacki (popular Polish demonologist and Catholic priest), in his book *Harry Potter i okultyzm* (*Harry Potter and Occultism*), concentrates on the deep analysis of magic and occultism omnipresent in culture and, particularly, in literature (Posacki 2006). The main part of the book is devoted to *Harry Potter* and J. K. Rowling, but he also deals with other examples of the relationship—both manifested and hidden—between fantasy and occultism or Satanism. Posacki argues that *Harry Potter* is not an example of innocent imagination and entertainment because it contains elements typical of occultism, esoteric knowledge and even Satanic cults. According to Posacki, the *Harry Potter* books and films put under children's noses artifacts and signs associated not only with a magical kingdom of imagination but also with the realistic realm of practical magic. These two worlds are confused and the border between them is, in fact, very unclear. The problem is that the realistic realm of magic is connected with the occultist reality of evil, sin and Satan, which tends to enslave human beings. For example, such magical artifacts as the wands of Harry Potter and his friends are known to be used for conjuring ghosts and evil spirits.[3] Posacki thinks there is no difference between good/white magic and evil/black magic, because they both evoke evil spirits, and actually Harry Potter sometimes uses black magic while defending himself. Within this view, the industry produces gadgets marked with occult symbols, accustoming people to the realistic world of magic.

Posacki believes that there are numerous hidden ideological and worldview oriented assumptions in *Harry Potter*, both philosophical and theological. If one wants to discuss them one needs to be able to recognise in this book, signs and symbols connected with Western occult and Satanist tradition, which is not an easy task. Posacki writes that, for example, while writing the book and assisting a film production, Rowling showed deep knowledge of occultism by choosing proper colors for the kingdom of magic. Children do not understand the ideology coded in their minds, but codes, signs and details hidden within it will, sooner or later, be apparent through their attitude and behavior. The border between imagination and ideology is very cloudy. For example,

> Harry Potter discovers his magical ability to communicate with animals in the zoo where he speaks to a snake which—besides references to Satan (who according to Bible seduced the man with the illusion of magical divinity)—

[3] It must be noted that a well known photograph of the famous twentieth century magician, Aleister Crowley with a wand in his right hand, exists.

> as a symbol is of a special importance to occultism (e.g. R. Steiner's anthroposophy) that treats it as a symbol of wisdom or vitality . . . The criteria of Christian spirituality (valid for ages) are inverted in *Harry Potter*: everything which was universally rejected from now on becomes accepted, which suggests that this is a kind of anti-Christian initiative (Posacki 2002).

Posacki argues that the problem is that Harry Potter is treated as an idol by more and more young people who can start to follow him, also in experimenting with black magic (Posacki 2002).

Stanisław Krajski[4] refers to Posacki's opinion and asks why some Catholics, even priests, defend and promote *Harry Potter* in spite of the proven harmfulness of this story? Is it stupidity, thoughtlessness, lack of responsibility or maybe Paganism? Does it mean that the way of thinking introduced by the New Age Movement is becoming more and more popular among some Catholics and prevails over less attractive Catholic proposals? Krajski also refers to Gabriel Amorth, an Italian exorcist of the Diocese of Rome and the initiator of the International Association of Exorcists, who thinks that behind Pottermania we should notice the signature of the dark lord or devil. Amorth warns parents against *Harry Potter* books because they are full of positive remarks on magic and falsely distinguish between white and black magic while, in fact, magic is always a trick of Satan, and even white magic may result in a diabolical possession.

Gabriele Kuby (2006), a popular German author who is very frequently quoted in Poland, argues that the *Harry Potter* series of books is a long-term and worldwide project aimed at the basic human ability to distinguish between good and evil. Rowling shows misrepresented evil which leads individuals and the whole of society to the acceptance of magic and other occultist practices. Kuby's book is often advertised by quoting Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's (now Pope Benedict XVI) letter to the author, in which he thanks her: "[i]t is good that you enlighten people about *Harry Potter*, because these are subtle seductions, which act unnoticed and thereby deeply distort Christianity in the soul, before it can grow properly."[5] Gabriele Kuby is the author of the quite famous *Ten Arguments*

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[4] Apologetika Katolik. "Stanisław Krajski, Opinie ks. Gabriela Amortha i o. Alesandra Posackiego SJ o Harrym Potterze." At http://apologetyka.katolik.net.pl/content/view/393/89/. Accessed 10/04/2007.

[5] Lifesite. "Pope Opposes *Harry Potter* Novels—Signed Letters from Cardinal Ratzinger Now Online." At http://www.lifesite.net/ldn/2005/jul/05071301.html. Posted 13 July, 2005, accessed 25/05/2009.

Against Harry Potter,[6] which is a good summary of the anti-*Harry Potter* agenda.

1) Harry Potter is a long-term project to change our culture. Young people's inhibitions against involvement in magic are destroyed. As a result, these forces reoccupy the culture which Christianity had overcome.
2) Hogwarts, the school for magic and witchcraft, is a closed off world of violence and cruelty, of curses and spells, of racial ideology and blood sacrifice, of disgust and possession. A sense of constant threat hangs over the heads of the book's young readers.
3) Harry Potter doesn't fight against evil. From one novel to the next his affinity with Voldemort, who is totally evil, becomes clearer and clearer. In the fifth volume, he is possessed by Voldemort, which leads to the total destruction of his personality.
4) The world of humanity is debased; the world of witches and magicians is glorified.
5) There is no positive transcendental dimension. Everything which is supernatural is demonic. Divine symbols are perverted.
6) Harry Potter is no modern fairy tale. In fairy tales, magicians and witches are clearly figures of evil, from whose evil influence the hero is delivered by acts of virtue. In Harry Potter, no one wants to do good.
7) The ability of the reader to distinguish between good and evil is deliberately lamed through emotional manipulation and intellectual confusion.
8) It is no favor to the younger generation to seduce them playfully with magic and to fill their heads with images of a world in which evil rules, a world that is not only inescapable but desirable as well.
9) Everyone who is interested in diversity of opinion should be on guard against the mass blinding and thought control that is imposed on them by the gigantic multi-media concerns.
10) Since the Harry Potter books engage in the systematic destruction of belief in a loving God, the use of Harry Potter books in schools is intolerable and contradicts the spirit of our constitution. Refusal to take part in Potter-related activities in school should be guaranteed on grounds of both religion and conscience. (Kuby 2006)

[6] Internet site, Current concerns. "Harry Potter: A Global, Long-term Project?" At http://www.currentconcerns.ch/archive/2004/05/20040513.php. Accessed 24/06/2009.

In the statements of *Harry Potter's* antagonists, an emphasis is put on alleged immoral and anti-Christian characteristics of the main character. The readers are warned that any contact with the ideas expressed in the series of books or movies is dangerous. Sometimes, in some conspiracy theories, it is even suggested that these books were created as a secret tool aimed against Christians. The authors often use overgeneralisation, hyperbolic metaphors ('war', 'fight') and such labels as 'plot', 'conspiracy', 'occultism', 'Satanism', 'black magic', 'evil force', and so on. These words appeal to emotions, and facilitate fear of otherness and of alleged secret connections between *Harry Potter* and anti-Christian conspiracy. They are a call to arms, to close Christian ranks and defend real faith against ideological enemies. This discourse rejects any possibility of dialogue and mutual understanding with advocates of *Harry Potter*. In this prevailing discourse even titles of articles and books are judgmental and definitive. Some examples are Wronka's *Od magii do opętania* (*From Magic to Possession*) (2003), Posacki's *Egzorcyzmy, opętanie, demony* (*Exorcisms, Possession, Demons*) (2005) and *Harry Potter i okultyzm* (*Harry Potter and Occultism*) (2006). Other noteworthy titles in this context are *Magia, New Age i Harry Potter* (*Magic, New Age and Harry Potter*) (Jarzębińska-Szczebiot and Szczebiot 2005), *Zmagania z duchem nieczystym* (*Fighting the Unclean Spirit*) (Szaniawski 2006) and *Szatan istnieje—widziałem go* (*Satan Exists—I Have Seen Him*).[7]

There are as many Catholic defenders of *Harry Potter* as there are enemies, although their voices are less audible and less publicised. Sister Edyta Pielas CSC expresses the most frequently used arguments. She rejects the demonising of *Harry Potter*, and is scared by the call to forbid reading Rowling. She thinks that such words as 'occultism' or 'Satanism' do not fit these books, just as they do not fit Andersen's or the Brothers Grimm's fairytales. Pielas notices that children who read *Harry Potter* do not treat magic as something real and do not even concentrate on magic in the way adult readers sometimes do. For them it is just an adventure story about friendship, about the struggle against evil, in which readers identify themselves with the forces of good. Pielas also criticises the selective citations which are characteristic of *Harry Potter*'s foes, and accuses them of manipulation.[8]

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[7] MP. "Szatan istnieje widziałem go." At http://www.egzorcyzmy.katolik.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=503&Itemid=0. Accessed 4/09/2009.

[8] E. Pielas SM CSC. "Prawa Harry'ego." At http://apologetyka.katolik.net.pl/content/view/809/89/. Accessed 1/05/2006.

Harry Potter's supporters give a considerable amount of thought to the Christian dimension of this book. For example, Aleksandra Kowal[9] writes: "[i]n the kingdom of magicians friendship, loyalty, honesty and courage count the most. The death of Harry's mother, Lily, who saves her little baby's life but, in return, sacrifices her own, is rightly recognised by many readers as a Christ-like type of sacrifice." In Kowal's opinion, *Harry Potter* has nothing in common with occultism, magic and black sorcery in the form of the New Age.

Jacek Dunin-Borkowski, a Catholic priest, supports the Christian interpretation of Harry Potter, placing him in line with Tolkien's Frodo and, consequently, with Jesus Christ. He agrees that Rowling's books may affect some people in a negative way, but also writes that no good book is protected from stupid readers; some criminal sects are based on the Bible, but it does not mean that the Bible is a dangerous book. Dunin-Borkowski also denies any connection between *Harry Potter* and the New Age, which he judges as spiritual rubbish.[10] Dunin-Borkowski criticises popular and mass culture as mainly anti-Christian and contrary to the teachings of the Church. For this reason Christians should look for and promote products that are not harmful and are close to the Gospel, such as *Harry Potter*. Is it really anti-Christian, dangerous, close to the New Age, even satanic? According to Dunin-Borkowski[11] it is just the opposite:

> [i]n *Harry Potter* stories, just as in saga novels by Tolkien and Lewis, a man has to fight to the death with evil. Evil is not a convention which depends on a value system one chooses—it is real and, what is even worse, it is personal. The man has to fight with sin and with the evil one, who exploits sin and weakness. The description of evil is the very best part of *Harry Potter*'s plot which is, on the whole, quite trivial. Voldemort, though mortal, is close to the Christian meaning of the devil—a creature who fully chooses evil and is an enemy of all that is good and beautiful. He is also, as Satan, consistent in choosing evil. Evil cannot be tamed, enlisted or turned into goodness. This is the other side of a dream which can be found in many fairytales. Evil and the evil one should be defeated in order to get to Arcadia. A road to paradise always goes through a fight with Satan.

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[9] A. Kowal. "Harry Potter—dzieło szatana?" At http://apologetyka.katolik.net.pl/content/view/805/89. Accessed 15/04/2008.

[10] "Odczarować Pottera." At http://apologetyka.katolik.net.pl/content/view/806/89/. Accessed 15/05/2007.

[11] "Harry, Frodo i Jezus Chrystus." Trans. K. Olechnicki. At http://apologetyka.katolik.net.pl/content/view/808/89/. Accessed 15/05/2007.

Let us now come back to the sacred, because I would like to suggest that hyper-real religions are one of numerous attempts to re-enchant the world, alongside such phenomena as the New Age, new religious movements and new religiosity or new spirituality. However, this process takes the shape of the revenge of the sacred on the secular culture.

According to Max Weber, the disenchantment of the world (*Entzauberung der Welt*) is a historical process which took Western civilisation from the period of absolutism to capitalism. During this process, the old culture is untied (becomes disenchanted) from the prevailing impact and rule of irrational, supernatural and unexplainable phenomena, and enters the era of reason, which spreads to all dimensions of social reality—economy, politics, science, everyday life and religion. The consequence is the desacralisation and demytholisation of culture, and all the sacred, mystery and magic disappear. Weber thought that modernity was the highest form of human thinking, but that the return to previous phases is possible. This re-enchantment of the world, the revival of an irrational religion, is possible, but the price is loss of individual autonomy and independent judgment (see Krasnodębski 1999). The re-enchantment of the world is the key success factor for hyper-real religions, and for all new religious movements. The people who are joining these groups are those disappointed with the effects of scientific (technological) progress, discouraged by the petrified structures of organised religion and established churches, and looking for their own path leading to the sacred.

The process of re-enchanting the world, including the onset of the hyper-real religions, has many causes, but I think that the most important one is the decreasing impact of the process of secularisation, by which society and culture are set free from the domination of religious institutions and symbols, thus making human life de-sacred. It is connected with ideological pluralism, rationalisation, industrialisation and urbanisation. Lothar Roos (1990) writes that in the heyday of secularisation, around the 1970s, it was widely accepted among people that society can work smoothly without religious ideas. However, nowadays the opposite opinion is gaining more and more credibility. It seems that society without religion is an illusion, and that religiosity is an immanent characteristic of the human condition. The success of hyper-real religions and other forms of alternative and innovative religiosity proves that after a relatively short period without religion or after replacing it with secular myths and religions like scientism or Marxism, people are again looking for a religious, meaningful life (Roos 1990). A similar thesis on the return of the sacred was formulated, for example, by Daniel Bell (1980) and also by Thomas Luckmann (1967) in his concept of invis-

ible religion, in which religion is defined as a symbolic universe of meaning founding the whole of human life upon the sense of transcendental aim.

Even if we agree that hyper-real religions respond to the need for religious values and ideas, which is probably in humanity's 'nature', we still should ask why young Americans or Europeans recognise these ideals in *Harry Potter*'s adventures but not in the teaching of Jesus Christ. (In this case the Polish youth are no different from other young people around the world). I think it is because the liturgy and teachings of the Christian churches lack the elements of mysticism, mystery and transcendence, which have been rationalised. Besides restrained secularisation, this is the second most important reason for the success of hyper-real religions. The churches are on one hand not conservative enough, in that they give in to the temptation to adjust to modernity, but on the other hand are too conservative in their clericalism and authoritarianism. Rowling's kingdom appears to be more real than reality itself in the sense that people would prefer to live in this imagined world rather than in their own world. I think that a common feature of all hyper-real religions is that they are very successful in fantasy-like world-building. In this sense, the boundaries around the world of imagination from popular culture become blurred with reality, and this process provides an avenue for a re-enchantment process. Even if this hyper-real phenomenon does not lead to a hyper-real religion per se, or even if it does not necessarily tempt young minds to look into the 'dark side' of occultism, it does provide a sense of re-enchantment to readers and/or viewers who are ready to be inspired by a sense of mystery; without necessarily becoming more or less spiritual and/or religious. The hyper-real religious phenomenon can thus reach various types of people with various levels of religious commitments, but also non-religious people ready to look into the sacred in popular culture.

Leszek Kołakowski (1990), one of the most original philosophers of religion, considers that the transition from the pan-religion era—in which religious terms conferred additional significance to almost every form of culture—to the era of secularised culture, remains uncompleted because of the immanent religious 'drive' in humankind. In societies which are industrially the most advanced we can observe a religious renaissance: Oriental cults, the occult, hermetic arts, magic.

Secularisation means not only the negation of the sacred but, most of all, the universalisation of the sacred, which results in overreaching the border between the sacred and the profane. "Note, first of all, that there is yet another sense—a third—in which the term *secularisation* is used. In this sense, secularisation does not imply the decline of organised

religion, and it may be seen in churches as well as in religious doctrines. It takes the form of a blurring of the differences between the sacred and the secular and a denial of their separation" (Kołakowski 1990: 68). Such a corruption of the sacred means the corruption of the whole culture, shattering the forms, annihilating the borders, conceptual chaos, lack of sense, anomy. This is the most important effect of the revenge of the sacred on the secular culture, but there is one more result—the sacred itself deteriorates, and consequently the place of ideal spirituality is occupied by instrumental spirituality (Kołakowski 1990).

The most dangerous forms of this revenge are distortions generated by the commercialisation of the sacred. Religious ideas are very often absorbed by commercial capitalist enterprises, which homogenise them and convert them into mass-products, completely contrary to their nature. The introduction to pop-culture of new religious ideas made them widely known, but at the same time it generated a kind of 'pop-religion' (called 'karma cola' by Gita Mehta)[12] which has not much in common with 'real' religion. Good examples of this universalisation (or actually, 'washing out') of the sacred are the various guides in spiritual life (easy to find in supermarkets), and correspondence courses in spirituality, in which, for instance, rich teachings of Hinduism are reduced to instructions in healthy life (*hatha yoga*) and successful work (Transcendental Meditation). The revenge of the sacred on the secular culture means vulgarisation of the sacred. The sacred is back but it has dwindled. The culture becomes re-enchanted but superficially and trivially. Using Ritzer's famous phrase we can say this is an example of a pure McReligion.

The re-enchantment of the world cannot represent the literal return to the Age of Myth because the Age of Reason cannot be dissolved. The re-enchantment may take place only within the limits of new conditions that are defined by the logic of consumer culture, which inescapably leads towards the revenge of the sacred. This vicious circle cannot be broken but it can be said that hyper-real religions, which are usually based on a wide range of cultural traditions, give Westerners the chance to embrace other cultures. Maybe the stronghold of ethnocentrism and the myth of the moral and cultural superiority of the West—called '20th century provincialism' by Mircea Eliade—will, thanks to the New Age and hyper-real religions, be somehow undermined.

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[12] Internet site http://www.amazon.com/Karma-Cola-Marketing-Mystic-East/dp/ 0679754334. Accessed 18/07/2011.

Finally, what are the chances for hyper-real religions, or, at least, hyper-real religious inspirations? Will they be successful or will they remain a colorful but marginal phenomenon? Western civilisation has passed the 'magical' year of 2000, but people are no more rational or indifferent to supernatural phenomena. Even if one thousand years ago, in medieval Europe, people expected the Day of God's Anger and the end of the world, people still expect today the end of the world as we know it. Now, that the Millennium Year has passed, many other people, in contrast, still await the advent of the New Age, the Golden Age of humanity.

While discussing Harry Potter in the context of hyper-real religions one cannot escape Jean Baudrillard and his notion of hyper-reality. It would be easy to point out that hyper-real religions co-constitute the hyper-reality, a reality without reference, in which signs of consumer culture ('simulacra') are so 'real' that people have problems distinguishing between hyper-reality and reality. However, I think that what we observe is more complicated. Let me recall what Dumbledore says to Harry in one of the final chapters of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*: "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?" (Rowling 2007: 579). Precisely. Why on earth should one treat hyper-real religions as less authentic, inferior, worse? Is it because most people believe in the historical reality of certain religions? Is there a rational reason to take Jediists with a pinch of salt? If so, we should treat Catholics, Mormons or Buddhists in the very same way and acknowledge that all religions are hyper-real.

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CONTEMPORARY ATHEISM AS HYPER-REAL IRRELIGION: THE ENCHANTMENT OF SCIENCE AND ATHEISM IN *THIS* COSMOS

Alan Nixon

Introduction

> A religion old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge (Sagan 1994: 52).

Beginning in 2004 a spate of books appeared containing polemical discussion of the pathological acts of 'Religion' and an admiration for an Atheistic/scientific worldview. These books achieved large sales and indicate a receptive public concerned about the perceived public resurgence of religion and the erosion of scientific authority. In this chapter Possamai's (2007) hyper-real religions concept will be employed to gain an understanding of contemporary Atheism and its emergence in late modernity. Viewed through the lens of hyper-reality, Atheist materials and culture will be argued to support the individual ontological security of contemporary Atheists via an enchanted public image of scientific understanding and progress. These enchanted versions of science will be viewed as hyper-real in nature and as providing inspiration for the creation of meanings and identity, supported by a naturalistic scientific cosmology.

Atheism: A Historical Sketch

In the Greco-Roman world 'Atheist' could refer to monotheists, notably Christians and Jews, and so would merely signify disbelief in the particular polytheist deities of the Romans (Bremmer 2007). Extending this usage, 'Atheist' has often been used as a judgmental term denoting those who do not believe in the same God as the user. As a term of self-definition it is not really found until the mid-eighteenth century where it appears among French intellectuals (Hyman 2007). Its use as a term of self-definition was slow to spread and the pejorative use continued into the nineteenth century, with Atheist identity remaining within the domain of the intellectual elites. Michael J. Buckley (1968, cited in Hyman

2007) has described the period preceding contemporary Atheism, which broadly comprises the last forty years of the twentieth century, as the "high noon" of Atheism. He suggests that in this period the extent and cultural establishment of Atheism was unique compared to previous eras. It is worth noting that this is the period in which three of the four main new atheist writers (Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett) came of age and received their education. From the perspective of a self-identified Atheist in this period s/he is simply a person that does not believe in any gods, and to whom 'God' is just a concept (Eller 2010). Hyman (2007) argues that Atheism is tied to modernity with its narratives of universal knowledge and human progress. He goes on to suggest that if we have indeed entered postmodernity, as many theorists argue, then Atheism cannot remain undisturbed. At this point we are largely unaware of who contemporary Atheists are, what they believe, and what affect these beliefs are having on their lives and society. In illustration of this lack of knowledge, it is interesting to note that since Colin Campbell's (1971) seminal *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, less than sixteen studies were undertaken on irreligious people up until 2002 (Zuckerman 2010). In 2010, thirty-eight years later, Pasquale still suggests that the entire phenomenon of irreligion has been largely ignored by social scientists. The subject of non-religion/Atheism is beginning to be addressed however, with two edited volumes (Amarasingam 2010; Zuckerman 2010) and a number of articles produced in the last few years. With the addition of these much needed articles we have begun to explore the sociological issues surrounding 'Contemporary Atheism'.

Atheism and the Culture of Late Modernity/Postmodernity: The Secular 'Blind Spot'

Sundry authors have noted that Atheism often reacts to the particular theism of its time, and that this will shape its form within an era (Martin 2007). In the case of the late modern/postmodern West, it has been argued that there is an emergent culture in which science's authority to legislate truth has evaporated and in which the Christian churches have lost much of their former credibility. This kind of world cannot leave forms of meaning creation unchanged (Cusack 2010; Possamai 2005). Possamai describes the contemporary West as a world largely influenced by consumption, popular culture and new forms of media. In these cultures there has been a communal move away from strict rationalisation

to spaces that re-enchant public and personal issues via popular culture (Possamai 2005). Contemporary Atheism can be understood as one of the results of this move. As it will be argued, works of contemporary Atheism have enchanted science and secularisation through popular culture.

Religion has not so much disappeared in late modernity, but has been transformed, continuing to evolve into a number of forms in the West after the 1960s. On one end of a spectrum, there is a proliferation of spiritual actors that create subjectively authored *bricolages* of various religions that may include elements of popular culture. On the other end of the spectrum, there is an increasing public presence of monotheistic fundamentalisms that resist these cultural changes or harness them to promote their own agendas (Possamai 2005). Thus Possamai (2005) argues that the secularisation thesis, or the assumption that religion would simply die out as modernity progressed, had become a 'blind spot' for secular sociology and secular culture in general.

The rise of fundamentalisms (connected to right-wing politics) in the 1980s and 1990s, and the events of 11 September 2001, arguably made religion more salient to these religion-blind secular actors. Despite being the most commonly cited influence for the books comprising the New Atheism, to claim that 9/11 is the sole cause is a simplification. Figures such as Richard Dawkins held these views well before this time. Furthermore, the events of 9/11 do not explain the continued propagation of the New Atheist movement (Geertz and Markússon 2010). The large sales of books concerned with Atheism and 'religion as the root of all evil' clearly indicate a Western vein of public discontent with religious fundamentalisms (Dawkins and Clements 2006; Hay 2007).

Atheistic thinkers have a stake in the shape of the religious landscape, as this landscape restricts or enables the possibility of openly holding Atheist or non-religious views, and is composed of religious systems impacting on an Atheists' right to be religion free. From this perspective, the recent uprising of popular, science based Atheism could also be seen as a defence against the perception that religion is encroaching on secular society and the 'domain of science'; the very factors that had previously been discounted by the popularity of the secularisation thesis (Borer 2010; Locke 2011).

A Media Savvy Competitor

Religion in the late modern era is also providing a much higher level of enchantment due to marketing, theological and methodological shifts,

something it has been suggested late modern individuals are craving. Possamai (2007) discusses the re-appropriation of popular culture by Christians to achieve their evangelical goals. While acknowledging that other forms of culture have been utilised, his examples include Christianised comics and games. Pradip Thomas takes this further suggesting that:

> . . . Christian fundamentalists rank among the most creative, effective users of network technologies—telecommunications, computing, mobile telephony and the internet. These groups have invested in substantive economic, symbolic and social capital leading to the creation of environments in which Christian fundamentalists in the USA have the option to live lives ensconced in life-worlds framed and affirmed within an exclusive Christian milieu (Thomas 2009: 59).

One example is the commercial success of the *Left Behind* series which consists of "12 books (50 million unit sales), a 22-volume series for children (10 million unit sales), audio books on CDs, graphic novels, videos, music, apparel, collectibles and a video game" (Thomas 2009: 71). Drawing on these various media the series markets a narrative based on the 'rapture' or 'end times', featuring "battles between the true believers who are raptured into heaven at the Second Coming and those who follow the Anti-Christ" (Thomas 2009: 71). This is an example of the current scope and power of the Christian marketing industry. The 'opposition' Atheists now face is media-savvy and competing at a much louder level (Dawkins 2006; Harris 2004; Laats 2010; Stenger 2009).

Contemporary Atheism

Although Alister McGrath hinted at the emergence of a new Atheism in 2004 (McGrath 2005: 174), the 'New Atheism' is generally recognised as starting with (or being) a collection of popular texts that were published from 2004 to 2007 (Amarasingam 2010; Geertz and Markússon 2010; Hay 2007; Zuckerman 2010). These books contain material that focuses heavily on the destructive and violent tendencies of religion, while extolling the benefits of Atheism. The books most commonly cited are Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* (2004), Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006), Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2006), and Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great* (2007). It has become an established convention to refer to these authors as 'The Four Horsemen', indicating their importance to the movement (Cotter 2011). Offering a public voice for Atheism and secularity

they have become the figureheads of a popular movement that has often been termed the 'New Atheism'.

It is significant that these books promoting Atheism and arguing against religion have made bestseller lists, and their popularity should pique the curiosity of researchers in the history and social dynamics of science and religion (Amarasingam 2010; Geertz and Markússon 2010; Zuckerman 2010). From a sociological point of view the importance lies not in the ideas but the reception and social effect of those ideas. The large sales of the New Atheist literature indicates a receptive section of the public, who are cynical about organised religion and institutions in general, and happy to be entertained and informed by their decline (Bullivant 2010). Love it or loathe it, public Atheism is a newly visible player in the marketplace of popular worldviews (Eller 2010; Pasquale 2010).

The term 'New Atheism' was initially a media phenomenon used to describe the works of the Four Horsemen. It was first used in a *Wired* magazine article entitled "The Church of the Non-believers" (Wolf 2006). Since then, New Atheism has become an umbrella term to describe the more vocal forms of Atheism and has increasingly been used as a form of Atheist self-identification. However, this term raises definitional problems as authors refer to a 'New Atheism movement' (Wolf 2006) and enumerate characteristics of the 'New Atheist' worldview (Stenger 2009), yet it is unclear that any 'New Atheist' organisations exist (Cotter 2011). Until the term receives wider acceptance it would be inappropriate to use it uncritically (Cotter 2011). Many Atheists dispute the 'new' part of the label, suggesting that there is in fact nothing new within the movement (Eller 2010). Due to this, some Atheists use the humorous term 'Gnu Atheism' to suggest this redundancy. There are also those who disagree with the more aggressive tactics employed by this movement and therefore refuse to be a part of it or to label themselves this way (Koch 2008). My own experience of using the term 'New Atheism' on an Australian Atheist forum reinforces this impression. I was quickly asked "What is this 'New Atheism'?", with many people giving their own (often comical) definitions of the 'New Atheism' in relation to the 'old' version. Due to these issues, the term 'New Atheism' will not be used as an umbrella term in this chapter, but will only refer to the literary works of the Four Horsemen. For the purposes of distinguishing the vocal and public movement from previous eras of Atheism I will follow Christopher R. Cotter (2011) in using the term 'Contemporary Atheism'.

Atheist Individualism: Like Herding Cats

Possamai (2005: 83) argues that hyper-real religion, with its affinity to postmodernism, "wants to stay away from any structure and is a form of escapism and contestation, but also an affirmation of life in this risk society." In light of these three criteria we can begin to evaluate the connections between the contemporary Atheism and hyper-real religions.

Employing the works of a range late modern/postmodern social theorists, Possamai (2005) argues that the changes occurring in Western society since the 1960s have opened up a range of religious/spiritual options for post-World War II generations. Consumerism, information access and social mobility have all added to this increase in freedom. One consequence of this is a proliferation of personal spiritualities where the individual is the authority, creating their own subjective myths and meanings about life. Through this individualisation of worldview, hyper-real religion can be seen as a form of escapism that allows consumers to move away from the perceived violence of 'real' institutionalised religions (Possamai 2005: 82).

Many have noted the Atheist urge to stay away from institutions, organisations, and structure (Manning 2010). As Dawkins (2006) himself famously stated in *The God Delusion,* organising Atheists is "like herding cats" due to their independent nature. Agreeing, Bullivant (2008: 364) argues that Atheists do not "tend . . . to join specifically Atheistic organisations." He creatively spins Grace Davie's "believing without belonging" thesis, to introduce a norm of "disbelieving without belonging" within the Atheist 'community' (Bullivant 2008: 365). Representing this view, Dawkins derides the need for an outside authority to give one's life meaning.

> There is something infantile in the presumption that somebody else (parents in the case of children, God in the case of adults) has a responsibility to give your life meaning and point (Dawkins 2006: 360).

This preference for distributed and networked structures of information and authority is reminiscent of Possamai's (2007) description of the structure of New Age networks. Cotter (2011) also notes this connection to the New Age movement through Contemporary Atheism's focus on the individual, and the diffuse societal popularity of the ideas within both movements. These similarities include a democratic attitude towards knowledge, a focus on the individual and a holistic concern with the environment (Cotter 2011: 96). He argues that this may be the reason that the movement has failed to articulate plans for group action; the focus has so

far been on herding the cats so that they might have sufficient numbers to "make a lot of noise" (Dawkins 2006: 5). Cotter (2011) also goes on to suggest that the different focus audiences for the various New Atheist books would make the articulation of a single agenda difficult. Whether such a unified agenda will be articulated remains to be seen.

Thus the impulse to escape institutionalised religion is clear in the Contemporary Atheist movement, where a narrative of violent and indeed evil institutionalised religion is well established (Borer 2010; Stahl 2010; Cotter 2011), and a narrative of the individual/group shy atheist is often rehearsed (Bullivant 2008; Cotter 2011).

A Form of Protest

Hyper-real religion may be a form of protest against mainstream cultural ideas, "allowing expression by the marginalised, the demonised and the dominated" (Possamai 2005: 82). A case can be made showing that this protest facet of hyper-real religions is applicable to Contemporary Atheism. For example, Aronson (2007) argues that in the United States context, a discourse is promoted in which the majority of American citizens believe in God, and Atheists are an insignificant minority. From this perspective the desire of New Atheists such as American Daniel Dennett to introduce a new term ('Bright') that does not hold the same negative associations as 'Atheist' is understandable. It would also suggest at least one reason that some would reject the term 'Atheist' in favour of the less socially stigmatising 'Agnostic' or 'Humanist' (Eller 2010). Projects such as the 'out' campaign can be seen as attempts to reclaim the term 'Atheist' in a model similar to that used by the Gay Rights movement (Pasquale 2010). The New Atheist literature suggests that like this movement Atheists should be 'loud and proud' in asserting their identity and equal rights (Pasquale 2010).

However as Borer (2010) notes, these claims of minority underprivileged status are paradoxically presented alongside claims of a secular and scientific triumphalism. Eller (2010) gives one solution to this paradox, suggesting that these definitional issues arise for Atheists because the 'debate' in Western societies has historically been conducted from a position of 'default' theism. Atheism has been viewed as 'unnatural' and has often been restricted to apologetics. What is clear is that Atheists are feeling under threat and that there is a need to speak up and protest their current position in society, challenge myths and reclaim identity terms.

Atheistic and free thought organisations have become active in promoting non-religion to achieve these goals. Organisations like the Council for Secular Humanism (2011), the Sceptics Society (2011), American Atheists (2011), and the Brights' Net (2011), have emerged primarily in response to conservative Christian organisations. One example is the United States based Freedom From Religion Foundation (2011). The co-presidents are founder Annie Laurie Gaylor and her husband Dan Barker, a former Pentecostal Christian minister (Barker was also a major speaker at the "Rise of Atheism" conference in March 2010; Gaylor and Barker are scheduled for the 2012 event). They have twelve thousand members, and have instigated court cases against State and Federal use of religious symbols in the name of separation of church and state. They produce a newspaper, *Freethought Today,* and podcasts such as the *Freethought Radio Show*. Adding to this support network, the new *Atheist Alliance International* was launched on 8 June, 2011. This organisation was set up to facilitate cooperation between these various Atheist and free thought organisations around the world (Atheist Alliance International 2011). The emergence of such organisations in response to the public resurgence of religion can be seen as a major indicator of the threat perceived by non-religious/secular individuals. Despite the general individual nature of Atheists, groups are being organised to aid Atheists in collective protest actions.

Ontological Security

With the shift towards postmodernity, "human knowledge and beliefs are . . . lacking foundations and might create uncertainty and a desire for stability, certainty and predictability" (Possamai 2005: 80). Giddens (1991) describes this uncertainty as resulting from feelings of ontological security/insecurity. He defines ontological insecurity as the "obsessive exaggeration of risks to personal existence, extreme introspection and moral vacuity" while its opposite, ontological security, is a sense of reliability of (trust in) persons and things, aided and abetted by the predictability of the (apparent) minor routines of day-to-day life (Giddens 1991).

Possamai (2005: 82) suggests that "hyper-real religion and its subjective myths could provide a sense of ontological security to its consumer" in a world that is lacking foundations. This idea is supported by some particularly poignant psychological research by Tracy, Hart and Martens (2011) who found that when confronted with existential anxiety (particularly that around death) people respond by searching for a sense of meaning

and purpose in life. In this study, after being asked to contemplate either their death or dental pain (control), subjects were asked to evaluate two similar passages from an Intelligent Design advocate (Michael Behe) and an advocate of evolution by natural selection (Richard Dawkins). Those who had contemplated their death were inclined to evaluate Intelligent Design in a more positive light compared to controls.

The choice of a disenchanted interpretation of science via Dawkins (excerpted from his 1976 scientific text *The Selfish Gene*, not his New Atheist or other popular science texts) was shown to be important later in the study when a third text was introduced to subjects. The third text consisted of excerpts from Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* (1980) (cited in Tracy, Hart and Martens 2011), a text argued by Locke (2011) to be a form of enchanted science. When this text was introduced as an option, subjects were more inclined to support science and not Intelligent Design, even when faced with their own mortality. In a later study it was found that biology students were also inclined to support evolutionary and naturalistic worldviews when faced with mortality. The authors argue that this is because biology students are already trained in naturalistic meaning-making (Tracy, Hart and Martens 2011). Thus the authors suggest that people can learn to find meaning through naturalistic interpretations of the cosmos and that these meanings can help ease feelings of ontological insecurity.

In resonance with this insight, Stahl (2010) compares fundamentalism and the New Atheism and argues that they "are attempts to recreate authority in the face of a crisis of meaning in late modernity" (Stahl 2010: 98). Both groups are searching for certainty. He goes on to say that the failure of this quest generates a crisis in authority, which involves both social and political arenas; "for both the fate of western civilisation is at stake" (Stahl 2010: 106). For Stahl, Atheism and fundamentalism are attempts to impose belief as an external authority. Thus both groups are an "expression of a larger crisis of meaning in late modernity and a protest against it" (Stahl 2010: 107). They can be viewed as an attempt to recreate meaning in a world perceived as having lost its way (Stahl 2010). As will be discussed later, charismatic figures such as the Four Horsemen can tap into enchanted images of science to support scientific authority in the face of this late modern crisis.

In example, marketing activities supporting Contemporary Atheist ideas and worldview have become increasingly common in recent years. These campaigns are intended to let the non-religious individual know that they are not alone in their ideas and thus support the ontological

security of the audience they are aimed at. For example, in 2008–2009 the British Humanist Association supported the Atheist Bus Campaign, which utilised advertisements on the sides of hundreds of London buses (Jon 2009), which stated, "There's probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." In a recent turn of events the advertising company responsible for the buses has rejected the slogan, "If you're not religious, for God's sake say so," intended for the 2011 census campaign (Hasteley 2011). It was apparently the inclusion of the phrase "for God's sake" which was deemed offensive. The bus campaign has been recreated worldwide in Germany, the United States, the Netherlands, Finland, Canada, Italy, Spain and Australia with phrases such as "Don't Believe in God? Join the Club" and "Are you good without God? Millions are" (Jon 2009). A similar campaign began in New York on 26 October 2009, utilising the subway system and its five-million-people-a-day potential audience (Buxbaum 2009).

These campaigns were augmented by the Global Atheist Convention held in Melbourne, from 12 to 14 March 2010 (Nicholls 2009a). The theme of the conference was "The Rise of Atheism" and the conference organisers claim that it was the largest gathering of Atheists in Australia's history. The timing of this conference was significant in that it was approximately three months after the Parliament of the World's Religions (2009) in Melbourne from 3 to 9 December 2009. This view is supported by the Atheists' call to receive the same funding from the government as was being received by the Parliament of the World's Religions (Nicholls 2009b). Another convention, the World Atheist Convention (2011), was held in Dublin, Ireland in June 2011 and the next Global Atheist Convention has just been announced for Melbourne, Australia in 2012, with the 'Four Horsemen' as the main speakers. This time the convention has been granted state funding, due to its possible economic and tourism value for Melbourne (Global Atheist Convention 2011).

Other supporting organisations and individuals include: a growing number of blogs (i.e. *Pharyngula* [P.Z. Meyers]),[1] *Friendly Atheist*,[2] *Unreasonable Faith*,[3] *Common Sense Atheism*,[4] *Debunking Christianity*,[5] and *Atheist Revolution*.[6]), university and college campus groups of secular

[1] Internet site. At http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula. Accessed 20/10/2010.
[2] Internet site. At http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/. Accessed 20/10/2010.
[3] Internet site. At http://unreasonablefaith.com/. Accessed 20/10/2010.
[4] Internet site. At http://commonsenseatheism.com/. Accessed 20/10/2010.
[5] Internet site. At http://debunkingchristianity.blogspot.com/. Accessed 20/10/2010.
[6] Internet site. At http://www.atheistrev.com/. Accessed 20/10/2010.

Humanists/Atheists (Abbamonte 2009); Darwin Day celebrations (since 1995; International Darwin Day Foundation n.d.); *A Week on Facebook* (Anon 2010; Anon 2011); student essay contests (Freedom from Religion Foundation 2010); summer camps for children, such as Camp Quest (2011); and scholarships for Atheists and freethinkers (College Scholarships 2010). There are also symbols being employed such as the Invisible Pink Unicorn (n.d.), the Flying Spaghetti Monster (Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster 2010), and Russell's Teapot (Russell 1952; Dawkins 2006). These symbols, along with other ideas and phrases, are being used on T-shirts, stickers, posters, in films (both feature length and short), and in music, further augmenting the popular cultural disposition of Contemporary Atheists. All of these activities support the Atheistic worldview and help the consumer to realise this identity. In this way Atheists are attempting to provide community support structures, outreach, and to be a true and popular alternative/competitor to religious views. As has been shown, many organisations and structures are emerging to support the worldview and thus ontological security of Contemporary Atheists. By making this part of their identity public, Atheists have begun to realise their Atheistic identity through individual and structural changes (Smith 2010). As will be suggested in the next section, an enchanted view of science could be present in Contemporary Atheism and help to facilitate this process for consumers. This enchanted view is employed to police disputes at the hegemonic boundaries of science and to facilitate meaning-making.

Controlling Public Meanings of Science

Contemporary Atheist presentations of science also lend credibility to the idea that this movement can be described as a hyper-real irreligion. In order to further grasp this idea, it is necessary to examine the ways in which science can be presented to provide meaning. Simon Locke's (2011) ideas are instructive in this regard. In his view, enchanted images of science are used for purposes of the control and popularisation of public understandings and meanings of science. This is because the general public both understands science and does not understand it at the same time (Locke 2011). He suggests that because of this, scientists often refer to knowledge that many people may never attain but which is presented to them as foundational. They create a meaningful and stable veneer over the diverse chaos of competing and complex scientific views.

In this regard it seems of no small relevance that Richard Dawkins was the Charles Simonyi Professor in the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University during the beginnings of the Contemporary Atheist movement (retired September 2008) (Amarasingam 2010).

As Possamai (in this volume) points out, the 'definition of religion' is a site of power negotiations and with more insights from Locke (2011) the same can be argued of science Locke (2011) discusses the idea that higher levels of exposure to scientists' rhetoric have provided space for articulating forms of critique employing the terms of science itself. By employing similar rhetorical techniques and using scientific discourse, groups can combat science at the borderlines of hegemonic theory. This can be viewed as self-reinforcing, as the more critique of science in its own language appears, the more exposure people have to the 'rules of the game' and the more the presence of internal expert disagreement among scientists becomes apparent. Teaching people science also means teaching them, if only implicitly, the rhetoric of science (Locke 2011).

For elite groups, maintaining control over their specialised discourse is a constant battle, especially given its wider social function. It has to be made publicly available to enable the elites' preferred definition of reality to prevail and the legitimacy of their authority to be maintained (Locke 2011). In addition, there is the need to recruit new adherents from the social world and for this the specialised discourse has to be translated into the vernacular, but this means it may come to be considered a public resource available to all. There is a continuous need for boundary-work, including various forms of 'debunking', for which science has its formal rhetorical techniques derived from reason and instrumental empiricism (Locke 2011). Locke (2004) discusses Scientology in this regard as a religion that uses scientific language in its propagation and legitimation. However, for the purposes of this chapter the 'Intelligent Design' (ID) movement provides a convenient and relevant case to illustrate the point in relation to Contemporary Atheism.

According to the Intelligent Design Network website (2008), the theory of ID holds that certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause (i.e. God) rather than an 'undirected' process such as natural selection. ID is a relatively recent formulation of Creationism that deliberately avoids naming the creator (Hasker 2009). Based on the teleological arguments (argument from design) presented by theologians such as William Paley (1743–1805), ID proponents claim that the world is too complex to be explained without the presence of an intelligent designer. Since science cannot disprove the existence of an

intelligent designer, it must be accepted that the intercession of such a designer throughout history is a valid alternative to unguided Darwinian evolution. In this way ID claims a scientific disagreement with one of the core claims of evolutionary theory: that the design of living systems is an illusion (Cusack 2010; Hasker 2009).

ID activists propose that it be taught in science classrooms alongside Darwinian evolution. The campaigns being run by ID proponents include "teach the controversy," court cases, the Discovery Institute, Creationist museums, and attempts to install the Ten Commandments in government spaces (Laats 2010). These tactics are still being used in 2011 with the favoured strategy currently appearing to be "teach the controversy" (Diep 2011). This campaign attempts to expose alleged disagreements among scientists (with regard to evolution, climate science and the origins of life).

In response to this campaign in a presentation at University of California Berkeley in 2008, Richard Dawkins stated "well, why not teach the controversy?" as he displayed a picture of a stork carrying a baby on the screen for his now giggling audience with the words "'Stork theory' to be taught alongside pregnancy theory in Kansas schools." He went on to say,

> [t]here are real controversies in science, they're interesting and we should certainly teach them, it is a very important part of science education to understand that science isn't a done deal, that scientists are constantly changing their minds as new evidence comes in, that's important, so let's by all means teach controversies that are proper scientific controversies, but the controversy over so-called Intelligent design vs. evolution is just not a real controversy at all (Dawkins 2008).

By suggesting that the 'controversy' that the Intelligent Design advocates are supporting is not genuine, Dawkins excludes it from the realm of valid scientific argument. In another article with professor of biology Jerry Coyne, entitled "One side can be wrong," the two list recognised controversies within the biological sciences. Their next sentence is clear and to the point, "Intelligent Design is not an argument of the same character as these controversies. It is not a scientific argument at all, but a religious one" (Dawkins and Coyne 2005).

Dawkins rejects the "teach the controversy" campaign by pointing to what has become known as the 'God of the gaps' argument, which suggests that if science doesn't know the answer then God (or another supernatural explanation) must be responsible for the unknown process.

> In all cases there is a hidden (actually they scarcely even bother to hide it) 'default' assumption that if Theory A has some difficulty in explaining Phenomenon X, we must automatically prefer Theory B without even asking

> whether Theory B (creationism in this case) is any better at explaining it. Note how unbalanced this is, and how it gives the lie to the apparent reasonableness of "let's teach both sides." One side is required to produce evidence, every step of the way. The other side is never required to produce one iota of evidence, but is deemed to have won automatically, the moment the first side encounters a difficulty—the sort of difficulty that all sciences encounter every day, and go to work to solve, with relish (Dawkins and Coyne 2005).

Dawkins employs the ontology and language of ID against its own arguments, pointing out the fallacy in the tactic being used. The curiosity to continue looking past the "difficulties" encountered by science every day is put forward as a noble pursuit that a scientist would "relish." Dawkins uses language that bolsters the authority of the scientist. He contrasts the scientist to the ID proponent who is not involved in the scientific vocation, has never produced "one iota of evidence," but has come to a definite conclusion against the bulk of those who are.

These types of arguments come down to the permeability of the hegemonic borders of public understandings and meanings of science. ID uses the language of science in order to legitimate itself and due to this appropriation scientists must compete at the level of popular culture in order to maintain public meanings/understandings of science that more closely adhere to the current consensus of 'Science'.

Creating Public Meanings of Science: The Priestly Voice, and Charismatic Enchantment of 'Science'

> The word 'mundane' has come to mean boring and dull, and it really shouldn't. It should mean the opposite because it comes from the Latin '*mundus*', meaning the world, and the world is anything but dull; the world is wonderful. There's *real* poetry in the *real* world. Science is the poetry of reality (Dawkins 2007).

Locke (2011) suggests that this public veneer of 'Science' is presented discursively through the 'priestly voice'. Lessl (1989, cited in Locke 2011) states that the priestly voice expresses the charismatic within science by articulating it as a total cosmological vision that enchants science. This presentation is at once both near and remote and offers a sense of identity "with respect to the wholly other, the gods or the cosmos at large" (Locke 2011: 62). It defines the cosmological order and situates humanity within it. Thus Locke suggests, in the popularisation of science, scientists often use partial representations of the universe to forge cosmic connections between the human and the universal order. To Locke this enables

both a discourse of instrumentalised disenchantment, the traditional view of rationalism (Possamai 2005), and a discourse of enchantment, the injection of cosmological meaning into science via charisma (Whitehead 1987; cited in Locke 2011). The standard view of rationalisation considers it as disenchanting; the world becomes a series of 'mundane' processes. However, for Locke (2011) Science is also enchanting and he suggests that this is overlooked in the standard view.

This notion is illustrated in the early 1980s television series, *Cosmos*, where Carl Sagan used the image of 'star stuff':

> [t]he surface of the earth is the shore of the cosmic ocean. From it we have learned most of what we know. Recently, we have waded a little way out, maybe ankle deep, and the water seems inviting. *Some part of our being knows this is where we came from.* We long to return, and we can, because the cosmos is also within us. We are made of star stuff. We are a way for the cosmos to know itself (Sagan 1980; cited in Locke 2011: 64)

Locke suggests that 'star stuff' creates identification with everyday discourse, humanising science with the priestly voice even as it scientises humanity. He goes on to suggest that the stars in ordinary discourse can signify 'magic', a dimension of enchanted experience. It is the magical nature of the stars that imbues the possible journey with a sense of awe and cosmic wonderment. For Locke the 'extraordinary' is not necessarily removed by disenchantment but translated into the remote distance. Rather than being seen as necessarily disenchanting, science can be seen, like religions, to be informed by the charismatic. Describing us as 'star stuff' allows Sagan, as the charismatic user of the priestly voice, to harness this enchanted vision, imparting meaning through scientific cosmology.

In support of Locke's ideas, Tracy, Hart and Martens (2011), in recent research discussed earlier in this chapter, suggest that individuals can come to see evolution as a meaningful solution to existential concerns, but may need to be explicitly taught how to take this naturalistic approach to meaning making. Coincidently, the enchanted scientific text that was used by Tracy, Hart and Martens (2011) was Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*. This charismatic articulation of the 'extraordinary' is also present in writings and presentations by Contemporary Atheists. In the following case from *Unweaving the Rainbow* Dawkins muses on the very improbability of each of us being alive and how this should inspire us to live our lives fully.

> We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia. Certainly those unborn

> ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here . . . After sleeping through a hundred million centuries we have finally opened our eyes on a sumptuous planet, sparkling with colour, bountiful with life. Within decades we must close our eyes again. Isn't it a noble, an enlightened way of spending our brief time in the sun, to work at understanding the universe and how we have come to wake up in it? This is how I answer when I am asked—as I am surprisingly often—why I bother to get up in the mornings. To put it the other way round, isn't it sad to go to your grave without ever wondering why you were born? Who, with such a thought, would not spring from bed, eager to resume discovering the world and rejoicing to be a part of it? (Dawkins 1998: 1).

Dawkins draws on poetic imagery to express our connection to the universe and the 'magic' (expressed via probabilities) of simply having the chance to be alive and 'a part of it'. He scientises by suggesting that scientific understanding is a 'noble' and 'enlightened' use of life, it would be 'sad' to miss such an opportunity. He humanises via the use of poetic and descriptive language that makes our connection to the universe feel "sumptuous . . . sparkling with colour, bountiful with life." This is the meaning of existence, this is the reason "to get up in the mornings." We have the power to investigate the universe and it is a noble cause that will endow humanity with a better future. As Dawkins himself says in an interview with *Beliefnet*:

> [m]y book, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, is an attempt to elevate science to the level of poetry and to show how one can be—in a funny sort of way—rather spiritual about science. (Dawkins 2005)

Grand Meta-narratives: Science and the Future of Humanity

As mentioned earlier, Hyman (2007) argues that Atheism is tied to modernity with its narratives of universal knowledge and human progress. Locke (2011) argues that the manifestations of enchanted science are equivalent to the same 'grand meta-narratives': practical empowerment (at least partly through technology), and universal knowledge. These narratives also entail hope for what we may become, in the sense of a projected future for humanity as a whole. By highlighting those aspects of the human mind that are already in resonance with the scientific character, such as rationality, inquisitiveness and scepticism, these aspects are made

to be the defining features of all humans and the best path towards our collective future (Locke 2011).

The optimism about Atheism/science is found in all Contemporary Atheist books, which contain a lot of constructive, life-affirming material (Bullivant 2010). They tell readers that one can "be an Atheist who is happy, balanced, moral and intellectually fulfilled" (Dawkins 2006: 1) and that science, rationality, open intellectual enquiry and an inquisitive respect for nature (see Cotter 2011 for a discussion of Romantic Naturalism and Contemporary Atheism) are the paths to achieve this. Thus providing the consumer of Contemporary Atheism with a positive subjective myth on which to hang their views.

Possamai (2005: 104) argues that "Super Hero comics may also contribute to re-enchantment narratives by posing the superhero as an archetypal expression of greater human potential." Combining this with the insights from Locke (2011), for Contemporary Atheists, science as an idea could act as the superhero/archetypal expression of greater human potential, an idea colourfully expressed by Borer (2010: 137) as "Science *is* the New Atheists' new God, and Charles Darwin is their Patron saint."

The Majesty of Nature and the Naturalistic Enchantment of This World

In contrast to Borer's (2010) statement, science and evolution are not the only things that give meaning to the lives of Atheists, even if a big part. Many Atheists have their own (non-religious) ideas on what makes life worth living, often interpreted via the worldviews of science, arts, and popular culture (Manning 2010). Pasquale (2010) found that the values of atheist group affiliates were similar to those of religious 'moderates' and that they found meaning through friends, family, experiences, productive work and positive contributions. Pasquale's (2010) research gathered data on secular group affiliates to identify the shared and distinctive characteristics of people involved in such groups. There is evidence of increasing diversity in secular existential and metaphysical worldviews (Pasquale 2010). The majority of the secular individuals interviewed rejected the ideas of a transcendent God and spirituality, though a significant minority (38%) were willing to see spirituality in a psychological and 'this worldly' way. This spirituality can be described as a naturalistic enchantment of *this* world. Many Western Atheists take issue with the term 'spirituality' due to the supernatural loading that it often entails (Comte-Sponville 2008; Hay 2007). It is avoided by some altogether, but others show signs of a softening in this regard (Comte-Sponville 2008; Dawkins 2006; Harris

2004; Hay 2007) with some, such as Harris (2004), even suggesting that forms of Eastern religious ideas are compatible with Atheism.

The idea that the natural world should be enough for any human is repeated throughout the writings of the New Atheists (Cotter 2011). This is reflected in the type of spirituality that Atheists are interested in; if any. It appears to be a spirituality devoid of supernatural forces and in some ways ironically deserving of the term 'hyper-reality'. The above points are illustrated in the following interview with actor, comedian and open Atheist Ricky Gervais (2011):

> Interviewer: What do you think will happen to you when you die?
>
> Gervais: People that liked me will remember me . . . Some people say you can't believe in love if you're an Atheist. Of course I believe in love; of course I believe in the beauty of nature, I just believe that the Earth was made over four and a half billion years and not by design in six days. I'm not being disrespectful but I believe I have the right to say I'm not a believer in God just like everybody has the right to believe in God, and spirituality is very different to religion let's not forget that . . .
>
> Interviewer: Are you a spiritual person would you say?
>
> Gervais: Well not in that sense, but I get a funny feeling when I see a friend or a mountain or an animal, it fills me with joy. My first love is science and nature. (Gervais 2011)

In this interview Gervais represents the feelings of many Atheists. They do not feel that their world is disenchanted by science (Pasquale 2010); in fact many, such as Gervais (2011) and Dawkins (2011), express a profound feeling of awe and joy at the beauty of the world that they believe science makes visible to them. However, many people insist that this awe and joy should not and does not need to be expressed in supernatural terms. As Gervais (2011) continues in this interview, "I don't believe there is a spirit. I think the spirit is an upshot of all your inputs, your beliefs."

Cotter (2011) suggests that this quality of the Contemporary Atheism is related to the Romantic reaction to Enlightenment ideals that appeared in the nineteenth century which was characteristically expressed as an 'idealisation of nature'. This form of 'naturalistic' spirituality has been spoken about in a number of blogs. The following is a representative example.

> Practically, we might see a spiritual Atheist as highly empathic, aware of his or her connection to others, concerned with equality and social justice, regularly awed by the beauty of nature, etc. Such descriptors apply in varying degrees to all persons, theist and Atheist alike (Atheist Revolution 2008).

These 'spiritual' activities are generally expressed in *this-worldly* experiential terms such as 'beauty' and 'love', or even in scientific terms such as brain chemistry or evolutionary history. As Boeree (2001) puts it:

> I see Atheism as a sort of minimalist spiritual perspective, one that has stripped away so much of what we usually *think* of as spiritual—the supernatural—that the *essence* of spirituality can be seen more clearly.

This type of knowledge search is discussed on a number of the blogs as being a part of Atheist spirituality and the spiritual quest in general. The notion of humility and awe in the pondering and experiencing of a complex and practically infinite universe is evident in many accounts. In this sense, many people state that their Atheism makes them feel liberated to see the world as it is, and to live and investigate the real world, in an example from *Common Sense Atheism* (Muehlhauser 2009):

> I do think lack of belief in a deity has made me more intellectually curious to learn about this place and given me more drive to understand just what exactly all this is. On Atheism, one can approach the universe with [a] much more open mind than is possible on theism, and that does feel good.

Therefore the idea that science is absolutely disenchanting can be convincingly critiqued. This cosmos is given meaningful significance via the priestly voice as a place worth investigating, a mysterious and awe inspiring universe. Science and nature inspire an enchanted cosmological vision via a naturalistic cosmology. This cosmology gives inspiration for Atheists at a metaphorical level, giving them a positive subjective myth on which to hang their Atheism.

Although never explicitly voiced in Possamai's work, there appears to be an inherited view of rationalism from Weber that sees science as involved only in disenchantment processes. Even the Human Potential Movement Possamai discusses as partly responsible for the re-enchantment in new religious movements is closely linked to supernatural interpretations of reality. Due to this lack of supernatural orientation and the explicit anti-religious stance of much Contemporary Atheism, this group cannot be rightfully described as a religion. Via Locke, it has been shown that the inspirational qualities of the movement, which have largely been driven by marketing and methodological changes, are used to provide ontological security in a foundationless postmodern world. In this way it can be argued that Contemporary Atheism contains a hyper-real version of Atheistic science, that may be used as a cultural reservoir by those involved in identity formation, meaning making and contestations.

Conclusion: A Hyper-Real Irreligion?

As Baudrillard states, hyper-reality "is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard 1994: 2). In this way Contemporary Atheism presents a hyper-real version of 'Science.' Public re-presentations of science are hyper-real in nature in that they are enchanted partial images of complex cultural phenomena, more easily grasped and understood and yet lacking in detail. Charismatic figures such as Sagan and Dawkins are able to engage such images of science through the priestly voice, allowing consumption which imparts cosmological meaning. Thus it has been suggested that the subjective myths of Contemporary Atheists are drawn from these hyper-real representations and provide ontological security via contestation and protest for those who invest meaning in science.

In light of the separate criticisms of Davidsen, Aupers and Scheifinger, Possamai (in this volume) refines his 2005 definition of hyper-real religions to "a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or a source of beliefs for everyday life." Contemporary Atheism, through its placement in late modernity and connections to popular culture and religion, has come to compete with other popular spiritual/religious discourses. Drawing on Possamai's (2005) definition of hyper-real religions, Contemporary Atheism is a popular cultural phenomenon that has become one of the reservoirs from which some individuals draw their ideas and meanings (subjective myths) about the world. It can be described as a form of hyper-real irreligion.

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CONCLUSION

ANOMIE, ALIENATION AND THE FUTURE OF HYPER-REAL RELIGIONS

FANTASY, CONSPIRACY AND THE ROMANTIC LEGACY: MAX WEBER AND THE SPIRIT OF CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

Johan Roeland, Stef Aupers & Dick Houtman

Introduction

> God damn it, an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables; slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War's a spiritual war . . . our Great Depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars. But we don't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off (*Fight Club*, Fincher 1999).

These are the words of Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), the hero in the movie *Fight Club*. These words summarise his discontents with modern society: the alienation experienced by people in factories and offices, the never-ending consumption of superfluous goods, and the unrealisable desire, nourished by advertising and media, for fame, status and success. The movie thus discusses typical modern problems of meaning: the characters in this story have lost any sense of the meaning and purpose of life. They do not know why they live and who they are. Driven by his dissatisfaction with modern life, Tyler Burden started *Fight Club*, a weekly gathering of men who beat each other up, so as to feel something that is 'real': something beyond the rationalised and routinised modern order.

Fight Club's critical message resonates in many other cultural products of our times, among which are a number of well-known films that were released in the very same year, 1999—*American Beauty* (Sam Mendes), *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski) and *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson)—all films that explicitly discuss problems of meaning related to modern, (sub)urban life. These films thus deal with a notion that has been central to the sociological tradition from its very beginnings: that modernisation brings with it cultural problems of meaning. Modern individuals, it is often held, experience their lives less and less as solidly rooted in 'natural' or 'firmly grounded' social worlds and meaning is therefore no longer 'self-evident' or a 'given'. This is what Jean Baudrillard writes about

when he describes and laments the insidiously spreading simulations that increasingly mask and replace 'real' and 'authentic' reality (Baudrillard 2000); this is the experience of inhabiting worlds in which 'depth' has given way to 'surface' (Jameson 1991); this is an emergent culture in which science's authority to legislate truth has evaporated (Bauman 1987; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; Inglehart 1997; Rorty 2009) and in which Christianity has lost much of its former credibility (Brown 2001; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Norris and Inglehart 2004). Tradition and science have lost much of their authority and capacity to provide late-modern selves with convincing explanations of what the world's processes 'really' mean and what the meaning of life actually is. As a consequence, Berger, Berger and Kellner (1973: 82) commented as early as forty years ago, "[m]odern man has suffered from a deepening condition of 'homelessness' . . . a metaphysical loss of 'home' " (see also Gehlen 1980; Zijderveld 1970).

These problems of meaning, discussed and lamented in today's social sciences, were already at the heart of Max Weber's classical analysis of modernity, according to which modern science with its uncompromising anti-metaphysical ethos and relentless quest for truth inevitably erodes belief in a transcendent 'other world' that gives meaning to 'this world'. These developments, Weber famously claimed, constitute a progressive "disenchantment of the world," a process in which traditional religious systems of meaning become less plausible and lose much of their former capacity to provide modern selves with the aforesaid convincing explanations. Science itself, by its very nature, can adequately describe the world as it is but remains silent about its inherent goal or meaning. Simultaneously, Weber underscored, processes of rationalisation and bureaucratisation result in stifling 'iron cages' that are imposed on individual lives, thus threatening personal freedom, creativity and meaning. Weber's tragic "disenchantment of the world" therefore increasingly leads to a world deprived of meaning—a world in which "the world's processes . . . simply 'are' and 'happen' but no longer signify anything" (Weber 1978: 506). Moreover, this process evokes some existential uncertainties with respect to selfhood.

Two other classical sociologists, Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx, discussed these problems of meaning more specifically under the headings of 'anomie' and 'alienation', respectively, and sociologists have ever since considered these two problems as "the twin maladies of modernity" (Zijderveld 2000: 198–201). While the concepts of anomie and alienation have often been used interchangeably, they do in fact refer to quite

different phenomena. On the one hand, anomie, exemplified by Durkheim's analysis of the social decomposition and cultural disintegration of modern societies (Durkheim 1997, 2006), refers to "the absence of a meaningful, institutional *nomos*" (Zijderveld 2000: 198; italics in original). On the other hand, alienation, exemplified by Marx's analysis of the reduction of workers to commodities and cogs in the machinery of capitalism (Marx 1988), refers to "the presence of an overbearing institutional system" (Zijderveld 2000: 198). To put it simply, one may say that "anomie is caused by too little institutional control (and) alienation is caused by too much institutional control" (Zijderveld 2000: 198–199). Yet under modern conditions, the two are likely to occur simultaneously, because of modernity's tendency to erode the meaningful *nomos* of the past (anomie) and replace it with overbearing and therefore alienating institutional systems.

In this chapter, we argue that such analyses of modern life are no longer confined to the works of sociologists. Ever since the romantic counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, these analyses have been adopted by the cultural industry and expanded to commercially successful, widespread cultural narratives about life in contemporary Western societies. We argue that these narratives are especially present in today's popular culture, in particular in the genres of fantasy and conspiracy theories. We conclude with a discussion on the theoretical implications of this observation, in particular for Max Weber's classical analysis of the discontents of modern culture. Moreover, we explore the possibility that fantasy culture and conspiracy culture may serve as repertoires by means of which hyperreal spiritualities are constructed that offer solace for modern problems of meaning.

Cultural Discontents and the Romantic Counterculture

Cultural resistance against the modern rationalised order is as old as modernity itself, yet a prominent manifestation of this resistance was the eighteenth and nineteenth century artistic and intellectual movement of Romanticism. The Romanticists of that time turned against industrialisation, against the smoking and noisy factories that destroyed the beauty of the natural landscape (William Blake's "dark satanic mills"), against the mass production that threatened handcraft and humanity, and against science that was believed to threaten the human faculties of feeling, intuition and personal experience.

The counterculture of the 1960s and the 1970s was in many respects akin to Romanticism, since it shared its critical stance against the disruptive aspects of modernisation, as well as its nostalgic longing for an idealised past and its utopian dreams of a better future (Campbell 2007; Doorman 2004). There were, however, many differences as well. The counterculture, in the first place, was not the product of a relatively small elite of artists, intellectuals and philosophers, as was the case with Romanticism, but a cultural movement that had broad public support among educated middle-class young people. The counterculture was, in other words, a mass manifestation of Romanticism, as Daniel Bell rightly observed (1996). Secondly, the counterculture of the 1960s and the 1970s contained, much more evidently than eighteenth and nineteenth century Romanticism, an explicit, theoretical-sociological articulated criticism with respect to modern society. This criticism, which echoed Weber's, Marx' and Durkheim's classical analyses of modern cultural discontents, was loudly propagated by the social sciences of that time, in particular by the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm, Marcuse and Benjamin).

Theodor Roszak's *The Making of a Counterculture* (1995), as much a countercultural pamphlet as a social scientific analysis, is one of the most influential examples of this "double hermeneutics" (Giddens 1984). Roszak argued that the old Enlightenment dream of progress, rationality and freedom was degenerated into a society that he characterised as 'technocratic'; a society that is defined by scientific-technological ideals such as efficiency, productivity, control and progress, which are reached by technological and scientific means and systematically deployed by the powerful agents of this system: the science-trained experts (see Roszak 1995). As Roszak argued, the technocratic society is supported and legitimated by a tremendous trust in science and technology and the efforts to implement the knowledge and products of both in all domains of society—even the most personal, subjective and intimate domains. The consequence of this, according to Roszak, was the disruption of 'real' community, 'natural' social bonds and 'spontaneous' solidarity.

Roszak gave voice to a deeply-felt dissatisfaction with modernity that was shared by those who identified with the counterculture. Participants of the counterculture believed that something had been lost in the mechanistic and instrumental worldview of rationalism. From this stance, they expressed the anomic complaint that technocratic society undermines man's union with nature, real forms of sociality and authentic identities. There was, all in all, a widely shared conviction that modern, rationalised

society no longer provided a genuine 'home' for the individual—a cultural analysis that in turn inspired a collective search for the authentic, a search for a "salvaging of enchantment from the very dross of daily life" (Roszak 1995: 130). As against the centrality of reason and technocratic mentality, the counterculture called for imagination, feeling and fantasy as the royal road to the real.

The search for 're-enchantment' and a genuine 'home' led those who identified with the counterculture to a varied palette of practices, rites and beliefs. Many observers have paid attention to the countercultural penchant for Eastern religions, magic, shamanism, theosophy and the occult (Campbell 2007; Roszak 1995), all forms of religiosity with which the counterculture aimed to find spiritual meaning and break with the prime vehicle of modern enlightenment; secularism. Besides these spiritual strategies, more secular ones were embraced, among which were the romanticisation of nature and attention to the inner life of passions and emotions (e.g. Bell 1996; Taylor 1989). Furthermore, there was a nostalgic longing for pre-industrial communities and a search for tribalised communities, in order to overcome the mechanical and associational relationships that were ascribed to modern social life. Guided by the famous adage of LSD guru Timothy Leary, "turn on, tune in, drop out," such alternative, tribal communities were sometimes actually built. Examples are Arcosanti in the United States (founded in 1970) and Findhorn in Scotland (founded in 1972), but one can also think of Woodstock (1969) and other temporary social gatherings clustered around alternative music, ideologies and lifestyles. The call for genuine communities also boosted an interest in 'imagined communities' in the most literal sense of the word. Romantic fiction, fairy tales and fantasy novels thematising better civilisations in imaginary pre-modern pasts, were collectively embraced by countercultural hippies. The immense popularity of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is illustrative of this. *The Lord of the Rings* is mainly based on Scandinavian mythology and its world, Middle-earth—inhabited by hobbits, elves and wizards—was immediately embraced by the counterculture when the book was published as a paperback in 1965. It was, as Hinckle (quoted in Ellwood 1994: 201) states, "absolutely the favorite book of every hippie" since they "[felt] immediately familiar, upon first reading, with an apparently imaginary place and/or time" (Curry 2004: 118). A genuine home, beyond the anomie created by the 'technocratic society', was thus sought in real life and in the imaginary realm of fantasy fiction.

Not only the lack of guidance, morality and community was criticised, but also the oppressive and dehumanising efficacies of 'the system'—one

of the most characteristic concepts of the counterculture. This notion of 'the system' expressed the deeply felt alienation of many youngsters in these days, the experience that technocracy functions as an imperialistic system that reduces individual people to insignificant cogs in a soulless machine. In such discourses, the contours of conspiracy culture emerged in that the hippies ascribed agency and intentionality to this "imperialistic system," this "gigantic technological mechanism" (Roszak 1995: 54). The countercultural revolt was, so to say, quite 'paranoid'. Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture* is again illustrative of this, since it breathes a jargon full of conspiracy-like terms. To quote some passages of this book: the technocratic society is seen as "the regime of experts" (Roszak 1995: 7)—those trained people "on the official payroll of the state and/or corporate structure" (Roszak 1995: 11)—who are involved in a "social engineering" project (Roszak 1995: 6) that has an almost totalitarian hold on individuals. In such a society, all products of human action become "the subjects of purely technical scrutiny and of purely technical manipulation" (Roszak 1995: 6). The technocratic society uses techniques of "coercion" (Roszak 1995: 9) and domination, which work on the level of social organisation as well as on the "subliminal" level, since the regime "prefers to charm conformity from us by exploiting our deep-seated commitment" (Roszak 1995: 9) to technocratic ideals and the ideal technocratic society.

Roszak's portrayal of 'the system' as a brutal, dehumanising agent did not stand alone. There is a strong hostility to modern society in many of the works of sociology, philosophy and art of his time that in turn strongly influenced the ethics of the counterculture. The neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School, for instance, formulated well-known critiques, of which the work of Marcuse is worth mentioning here in particular. His *One-dimensional Man* (2002) breathes a similar spirit as Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture*, especially in those passages in which Marcuse calls for "the great refusal" of those societal forces that act upon the individual to create "false needs," in order to integrate individuals into the capitalist system (Marcuse 2002; cf. Campbell 2007: 288ff). A similar critical tone is heard in Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1991), in which he discusses the manipulative forces of the media, depicted by Packard as working upon the inner drives and desires of individuals in order to create the demand for the products of industry (Packard 1991). Existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre railed against the alienation that stems from the *Verdinglichung* (*chosification*) of human beings by technology and science: the efforts to make human beings objects of research, policy, labor, etc., which, according to Sartre, is a threat to human freedom. And, as a

final example, poets (such as Alan Watts and Allen Ginsberg) and musicians alike composed litanies of complaints about the estrangements of modern life.

In all these cases, modern society and its overly rationalised institutions were depicted as powerful, alienating agencies, held to repress people and to integrate them in the broader project of modernity. Moreover, the countercultural discourse highlighted concepts like 'false consciousness', 'brainwashing' and 'subliminal seduction', concepts that indicate a paranoid conspiracy culture imagining the social system as a powerful and malicious agent that threatens the free individual.

The 1960s counterculture has had a lasting impact on Western culture (Aupers, Houtman and Roeland 2010; Houtman 2008; Houtman, Aupers and Hüzeir 2010), even though the revolutionary vigor and the fierceness of the countercultural criticism have subsided in the course of time. As Marwick (1998: 13–15) points out, the counterculture was not so much an "attempt at political revolution that eventually failed" and that is meanwhile "over and done with," but rather an acceleration in an ongoing process of cultural transformation. The criticism of the counterculture has transformed many societal domains, such as religion (Aupers and Houtman 2010; Campbell 2007), the social sciences (Gouldner 1970; Lemert 2004; Seidman 2008), and politics (Inglehart 1977; Weakliem 1991). Several studies point out that, ironically, even modern domains that in the 1960s and 1970s were criticised as being exponents of the 'technocratic system', such as corporate life, have appropriated the countercultural discourse (Houtman 2008). Thomas Frank (1998: 32), for instance, argues that since the 1960s, companies and advertisers have created a consumer culture that "promises to deliver the consumer from the dreary nightmare of square consumerism." Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter (2004: 98) even claim that "the critique of mass society has been one of the most powerful forces driving consumerism for the past forty years."

As we will explain in more detail below, a similar conclusion can be drawn with respect to the cultural industry, which has adopted the cultural discontents that were loudly articulated by the counterculture half a century ago. At that time, the counterculture was extremely suspicious of the cultural industry, which was seen as the ultimate source of alienation and false consciousness. As Horkheimer and Adorno (2002: 115) argue, "the culture industry . . . can do as it chooses with the needs of consumers—producing, controlling, disciplining them." The same cultural industry, however, has made the cultural discontents that were vented by the counterculture into a commercially successful source of entertainment

and amusement. Nowadays, media products articulate a cultural dissatisfaction with media, technology and the state—often accompanied by romantic strategies to cope with or escape these feelings of estrangement. We discuss these developments with respect to two cultural genres which have become prominent in today's cultural industry: fantasy culture and conspiracy culture.

Anomie and Fantasy Culture

Whereas fantasy culture was already embraced by participants of the counterculture, it has entered the mainstream since the 1990s through a whole gamut of cultural products (e.g. Partridge 2005a, 2005b). The fantasy genre manifests itself nowadays in countless novels, movies, games, music styles, and festivals. Its underlying worldview has influenced the tastes and lifestyles of many individuals and groups (De Kloet and Kuipers 2007; Partridge 2005a, 2005b; Schofield Clark 2003). The screen versions of *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* series are among the most visited films of all time. Millions of people watched the television series *Charmed* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Science fiction films and series featuring all sorts of fantastic elements, among which is George Lucas' well-known *Star Wars*, may count on millions of devoted fans all over the world. Colin Campbell (2007: 329) even argues that "fantasy literature has now become a dominant force in modern fiction . . . but also in film, television, and computer games, such that a virtual tidal wave of stories embodying myths or set in mythic worlds has swept through the modern culture of the West. One can conclude from this that we now live in a mythopoeic culture, one in which stories about supernatural beings and events are continually being created . . . and eagerly consumed."

One of the most characteristic elements of fantasy culture is its creation of a mirror image of the modern, rationalised world. Despite the immense variety, a common feature of many products of fantasy culture is, after all, that it offers another world that reflects an imaginary past which, unlike modern society, boasts a coherent social structure, harmonious communities and a clear-cut morality—phenomena that, according to the sociological tradition, would erode under the influence of processes of modernisation. In addition, fantasy culture offers an enchanted, magical world populated by other-than-human beings and all sorts of mythical creatures (wizards, witches, demons, elves, angels, spirits, gods) which, if their historical equivalents had ever constituted the pantheons of older religions, have vanished from planet Earth in the course of modernisation.

The core example is undoubtedly Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Not only has it attracted a vast population of fans since its appropriation by the participants of the counterculture; it can easily be understood as the archetype and blueprint of the entire genre. In this work, Tolkien created a detailed, medieval-like 'secondary world' called Middle-earth, populated by hobbits, orcs, elves and wizards. This world is worked out in great detail and by a lively imagination. Tolkien elaborated extensively on the landscapes and geographical characteristics of this world, the aesthetic qualities of the products made by the populations inhabiting this world (clothing, architecture, things, etc.), the languages spoken by those populations, their typical customs and behaviors, and so on and so forth. The main story line of the book deals with a young hobbit named Frodo who, together with a couple of friends (the "Fellowship of the Ring," which includes hobbits, men, elves and the white wizard Gandalf), goes on a long and hard journey from the safe, warm community of the Shire to the dangerous barren lands where the dark lord Sauron reigns, in order to destroy an extremely powerful magical ring in the fire of the mount Doom. During this journey, Frodo is confronted with powers that are far beyond his own capacities, yet a strong drive to succeed and the help and bravery of Gandalf and the great warriors of his fellowship help him fulfill his mission.

Striking about Tolkien's world is the combination of realism and the display of moral values and worldviews that break with the modern anomic world. Clear-cut moral dichotomies embodied by a juxtaposition of good characters (e.g. Frodo, Gandalf) versus bad characters (e.g. Sauron); good places (the Shire) versus bad places (Mordor) and good virtues versus bad morals, are contextualised in a pre-modern world brimming with meaning, mystery and enchantment. The display of such values, allegedly eroded in the modern anomic world, is arguably part of the attraction of Tolkien's world. His own hermeneutic key to reading his work confirms this. In an essay entitled *On Fairy Stories* (1939), he admitted that his own work is driven by a "desire to escape" from "self-made misery"—a misery he relates to the modernisation he saw reflected in worlds produced by industrialisation: the factories and the products developed in factories. More generally, he argued that good fantasy functions like religion since it offers existential answers, hope and consolation in times of suffering. Describing *The Lord of the Rings* as an "implicit diagnosis of modernity" that compensates experiences of "homesickness," Patrick Curry (2004: 15) furthermore argues that it bestows on the reader "empowering nostalgia." Visiting Middle-earth, from these perspectives, is like visiting a genuine 'home'.

A similar point can be made about another popular, yet fundamentally different exponent of fantasy culture: Rowling's best selling *Harry Potter* series. In this series Rowling created an antiquated, gloomy-Dickensian world full of magic, in which features the young wizard Harry Potter, a student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He and his friends are confronted with a couple of scary and threatening developments and happenings, which all have to do with the attempts by the evil wizard Lord Voldemort to gain supremacy over the wizarding and the non-wizarding world. Together with his best friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger and with the help of the masters of the Hogwarts School, Harry Potter foils Voldemort's efforts to become the most powerful wizard in the world. In a final battle between Voldemort and Harry Potter, Harry, a skillful wizard by that time, defeats Voldemort. *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* differ, of course, in many respects: *The Lord of the Rings* is located in an imagined pre-modern or medieval society whereas the setting of the *Harry Potter* novels resembles traditional England of the nineteenth century. Both examples, however, testify to a nostalgia for times where community, morality and identity were still quite stable and firmly inscribed in the social structures, and meaning was a 'given'.

If we look at the impressive sales successes of fantasy books such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, we see that the once exclusive and underground fantasy literature has become mainstream. Moreover, fantasy fiction spills over to other media, such as film and television series. And although such media still assume a quite passive audience consuming fantasy worlds, fantasy culture becomes aligned with interactive media assuming a more 'participatory audience' as well (Jenkins 2006). Fantasy board games, card games and role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Magic: The Gathering*, for instance, have a loyal host of players and provide the opportunity to interactively engage oneself with the fantasy world through role-playing. Furthermore, there are people identifying themselves with elves, wizards, witches, druids, trolls and hobbits in our contemporary world, meeting each other in real life, at fantasy fairs, fantasy festivals, pagan ritual meetings, Internet communities and fantasy hot spots such as the film locations of *The Lord of the Rings* in New Zealand. By playing Live Action Role-playing Games, these fantasy fans can act out their fantasy roles in real life settings with other people, thereby turning the fantasy of meaningful other worlds into 'real' happenings. An extremely popular example of such interactive immersions in fantasy environments is the booming genre of online computer games. No less than ninety five per cent of a particular

popular genre in this field—the so-called "Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game" (MMORPG)—is based on the Tolkienesque fantasy genre (Woodcock 2008). Examples are *Everquest*, *Dark Age of Camelot*, *Ultima Online* and, currently the most popular one, *World of Warcraft*. What distinguishes these and other online games from the older console games is that they offer shared worlds (the game worlds are 'inhabited' by many players at the same time), they are persistent (the three-dimensional environment is online twenty four hours a day and continues to exist even when players are not interacting with it) and they generate a unique culture, social structure, economy and ecology that changes over time. These environments are therefore no longer simple games but emergent 'virtual worlds' (Bartle 2004). Characteristic of these worlds is the enchanting experiences that are offered. The cover of *World of Warcraft*, for instance, attracts the consumer to enter the exciting world of the game by saying that "[a] world awaits . . . Descend into the World of Warcraft and join thousands of mighty heroes in an online world of myth, magic and limitless adventure . . . An infinity of experiences await."

Of course, the question remains how audiences participate in these fantasy worlds, and which meanings they attach to them. The small but growing body of studies on online gamers, however, indicates that for them, gaming is a serious practice that transcends the mere 'just for fun'. As Norberg and Lundblad (2001: 3) argue, "[gamers look for] a parallel mode of existence, an illusion of meaning, that becomes increasingly real, an enchantment within or beside a disenchanted world" (see also Aupers, 2011a, 2011b; Harambam, Aupers and Houtman 2011). In addition, these online fantasy worlds provide a sense of 'home' and feeling of belonging because they provide the opportunity to build small tribal communities. In *World of Warcraft*, players form vital groups, tribes and guilds with friends and strangers, online and offline, virtual and real (e.g. Williams et al. 2006). Online fantasy games feel, as one of the respondents in Aupers' research on gaming summarises, "like a second home." No wonder, from this perspective, that the average playing time of such games is twenty-three hours a week (Yee 2006) and that one fifth of the players of *Everquest* "treat the game world as their life world" (Castronova 2005: 59).

Middle-earth, Norrath, Derreth, Kalimdor, Lordaeron, Khaz Modan, Azeroth, Albion, Hilbernia and Midgard—these are all imaginary places constructed in fantasy culture, that seem to derive their attractiveness from the way in which they contrast with the modern rationalised world. As such, the contemporary cultural industry has incorporated the countercultural uneasiness about modern society and capitalises on the

experiences of anomie and 'homelessness' (Berger, Berger and Kellner 1974), that—according to the sociological tradition—characterise the modern consciousness.

Alienation and Conspiracy Culture

Conspiracy culture is another dominant genre in contemporary popular culture. While paranoid thinking has long been characterised as irrational, pathological or weird, the counterculture turned this habitus into a constructive way of looking at the 'system'—a higher form of rationality even, since "no matter how paranoid you are, you can never be paranoid enough." Be that as it may, nowadays conspiracy culture has entered the mainstream of popular culture. Many of its products—books, films and television series—describe hidden complots and secret conspiracies that make the modern world a somewhat precarious and opaque place, in which individual agency is besieged. Paranoid fears about 'the system', once considered something for deluded crackpots and stoned hippies, are now institutionalised in the narratives of contemporary bestsellers and blockbusters. Popular books and television series like *24*, *Profiler* and *The X-Files* freely play with the paranoid assumption that social reality as we experience it is an illusion, a hall of mirrors and smokescreens constructed to conceal the secret powers that *de facto* determine history (Kellner 2002). While this cultural analysis may be frightening, conspiracy culture offers hope and solace at the same time through the formulation of alternative narratives and explanations: the 'real truth', as *The X-Files* typically propose, is 'out there'.

In short, the paranoid logic has evolved in the last decades from a deviant, exotic phenomenon to a commercialised and institutionalised mainstream narrative that spreads through popular culture (Arnold 2008; Birchall 2002; Goldberg 2001). As Timothy Melley (2000, 2002) argues, the appeal of conspiracy culture is related to the feelings of alienation that people may experience in today's complex society, in particular the feeling that is associated with the institutional pressure on individual lives. It is this pressure that results in—in the words of Melley—'agency panic' and a discourse of paranoid suspicions about modern society, its institutions and the social control they exert on the individual.

If we look at such a discourse in popular culture, we can distinguish many varieties. Technology, to begin with, plays an important role and is often portrayed as an alienating, overpowering force used to control the

bodies, minds and spirits of individuals. A particularly good example of this is the famous Wachowksi brothers' trilogy *The Matrix* (1999–2003) that features technology getting out of control and transforming into a powerful, malicious agent. *The Matrix* tells the story of the computer hacker Neo, who finds out that the world he is living in is not what it seems. The ordinary world he is familiar with turns out to be a simulated reality, a virtual realm and a dream world made by intelligent machines. Somewhere in the course of history, these man-made machines overpowered their creators and locked them up in big, grimy fields. Their only function was to provide the intelligent machines the energy to stay alive. Humans were, in other words, reduced to batteries. To keep them under control and undermine resistance, the machines plugged humans into a computer system that projected the illusion of a real world in the minds of people.

The Matrix exemplifies conspiracy culture. It is first and foremost a movie about a powerful hidden agent, a social system that acts upon the individual to the extent that he or she is completely deprived of agency. The suspect in this particular trilogy is technology. Technology not only imprisons people, but even 'infiltrate' the minds of people, so that they are unaware of the fact that they are captured or brainwashed by the system. The following quote, where Morpheus explains the Matrix to Neo illustrates this.

> Morpheus: Do you want to know what the Matrix is? The Matrix is everywhere, it's all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out your window or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.
>
> Neo: What truth?
>
> Morpheus: That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste or touch. A prison for mind.

In its imaginary future scenario of technological development, *The Matrix* obviously builds on an anxiety that has been central to the modern consciousness, and to the countercultural consciousness in particular—the anxiety about technology and technological progress. It takes this anxiety a step further by representing the ultimate realisation of technological domination: a world in which human beings have literally become replaceable cogs in a soulless machine, a world in which people are successfully alienated from their true essence: freedom.

The Matrix can not only be simply read as "technoparanoia" (Jameson 1991), since it may as well be understood as a broad metaphor for other powerful modern institutions that exert social control. As in *The Matrix*, technology has frequently been featured as a symbol mirroring a wider suspicion of technological progress and the use of high-tech by the State, malicious governments and corporate businesses. In Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) for instance, the supercomputer named HAL (often assumed to be referring to IBM, since alphabetically, each character of this name is neighboring the characters of IBM's name) has been designed as a powerful and intelligent machine that at a given moment no longer serves the human crew of the spacecraft, but becomes a powerful agent controlling and eventually turning against the members of the crew (cf. Arnold 2008). In Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002), to give another example, it is the inventive security technology that, once it turns against human beings, is hard to beat. Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), finally, tells the dramatic story of a man who suddenly finds out that he has lived in a giant studio since the day that he was born—that his life, including his work, wife and children, is a set-up, staged and broadcasted as a 'real life soap' for millions of viewers worldwide. As in *The Matrix,* it is the media and technology that fully controls the life of the individual.

Such paranoid discourses about media and technology often touch upon a wide complex of institutional forces that allegedly conspire against individual freedom. But many conspiracy theories about media, science, technology, bureaucracy and other modern institutions point their arrows, in the end, to the power of the State. This is, for instance, the case in *The X-Files*, an incredibly popular American television series that aired from 1993 to 2002. The series follows two FBI agents, Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson), who are investigating a bunch of mysterious 'unsolved' cases. They came to investigate these files after Fox Mulder began to question the mysterious disappearance, years earlier, of his younger sister. Digging into this case, the two agents slowly get lost in a widening, never closing network of conspiring parties. Every link leads to another link and every clue to another clue and, as conspiracy logic demands, in the end 'everything is connected'. Mulder's sister was abducted by aliens; these invaders had made a treaty with a syndicate, a group of powerful 'men in black', which turns out to be part and parcel of the United States government, which has its own hidden agenda: to prevent the human race from total alien domination. In order to achieve this, the syndicate uses any means at hand. It thus functions

as an unscrupulous group able to murder and sacrifice human beings, to infiltrate and mould governments and other institutions, and to use all available means to keep mankind in ignorance of its vulnerable fate.

Central to the narrative of *The X-Files* is a firm distrust in the State and governmental institutions, which are portrayed as powerful agencies with bad intentions and secret agendas. This is a staple feature in conspiracy movies. In Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), for instance, the government is involved in a dirty business around water resources. In Tony Scott's *Enemy of the State* (1998), a lawyer becomes the target of a group of NSA (National Security Agency) agents, after he unwittingly comes into possession of a disc containing crucial evidence in a political murder case. Peter Hyams' *Capricorn One* (1977) tells the story of a huge conspiracy, set up by a small elite within NASA, to stage a landing on Mars that in fact never took place but was broadcast on the screens of the NASA control room (in order to mislead the NASA personnel) and on television (in order to mislead the bigger audience). Examples like these indicate that there is a relentless feedback between real political events, non-fictional conspiracy theories and conspiracy in fiction. The Watergate scandal, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the moon landing hoax, and the alleged role of the United States government in the 9/11 attacks—all are events and theories that have in turn inspired movies such as *All the President's Men* (1976, directed by Alan J. Pakula) which features the Watergate scandal, and *Executive Action* (1973, directed by David Miller), *JFK* (1991, directed by Oliver Stone) and *Interview with the Assassasin* (2002, directed by Neil Burger), all of which feature the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Even in the seemingly conventional *Rambo* movies "the idea that the government . . . had schemed to suppress and victimise brave members of the American military" is at the heart of the narrative (Arnold 2008: 199). In addition to the state, industries and companies may also serve as suspects, as in Mike Nichols' *Silkwood* (1983), in which a woman got on the wrong side of the nuclear power company and eventually died in a strange car accident, after she had publicly denounced the miserable safety procedures in a nuclear power company. In some cases, a complex of agencies are involved in huge conspiracies, as for example in *Syriana* (2005). This movie, directed by Stephen Gahan, shows a hornet's nest of a worldwide operating oil industry, governments and the CIA, which are all connected and completely corrupt.

These examples suggest that conspiracy thinking about state, media and technology, once countercultural and deviant, now reigns in popular

culture. Conspiracy thinking bestows meanings upon things, social structures, organisations and agents, that may not contain or warrant these meanings. It constructs causality were randomness prevails; intention where coincidences thrive; meaning where meaninglessness comes to the surface. Moreover, it makes metaphysical claims about mysterious, unseen powers that are operative beyond the surface of everyday life. As such, conspiracy culture offers, as Melley (2000: 8) argues, comfort for feelings of alienation:

> [t]he idea of conspiracy offers an odd sort of comfort in an uncertain age: it makes sense of the inexplicable, accounting for complex events in a clear, if frightening way. To put it another way, by offering a highly adaptable vision of causality, conspiracy theory acts as a 'master narrative', a grand scheme capable of explaining numerous complex events.

Whether or not the embracing of conspiracy theories by the cultural industry and the wider public indeed contains more than just an expression of modern feelings of discontent—namely a way to cope with these feelings—remains an open question that cannot be answered on the basis of our analysis. Perhaps conspiracy culture may not only depict the individual as besieged by external agencies, but also offer notions of human redemption and empowerment, whether by offering 'true' insight into how things 'really' are, or by keeping up the hope for true freedom and agency by featuring heroes and redeemers who dismantle the corrupt elements in the government (as in *Enemy of the State*) or bring people to freedom (as in *The Matrix*). Narratives about conspiracies may, in other words, paradoxically feed faith in human agency. *The Matrix* is again an outstanding example. Neo, the protagonist of the story, can choose between taking a blue pill and a red pill and chooses the latter in order to escape virtual alienation and learn to know the 'truth'. The reason he gives is: "[b]ecause I don't like the idea that I am not in control of my life." Conspiracy culture thus not only expresses the precarious condition of modern life, but also, for those who feel alienated, it keeps alive the modern humanist dream of personal agency.

Conclusion: Max Weber and the Spirit of Contemporary Popular Culture

The relation between modernity and the cultural discontents of anomie and alienation is a central element in the works of Weber, Durkheim, Marx and their successors. In addition, cultural discontents have often inspired an upsurge of romantic stories about a better, meaningful world:

in eighteenth and nineteenth century Romanticism, in the counterculture of the 1960s and the 1970s, and in the many products that the cultural industry has released in the last decades.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Max Weber was well aware of the upsurge of such stories, as well as the many initiatives in his own intellectual circles in the German city of Heidelberg to find meaning in—according to Weber—a "disenchanted" and essentially meaningless world. Many a philosopher, psychologist, and artist took refuge in utopian experiments, alternative experiential religions, and esoteric movements like the new theosophy of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (who founded the Theosophical Society in 1875), Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, spiritism, pantheistic perspectives on nature derived from Romanticism, and the philosophy of life of Henri Bergson. During the 1913 and 1914, Weber himself paid visits to Monte Verita in Ascona in the Alps, where his contemporaries indulged in spirituality and free sexuality (Radkau 2009).

While acutely aware of these attempts by many of his fellow-intellectuals to re-enchant a progressively disenchanted world, Weber himself emphasised the need to 'heroically' face the essential meaninglessness of a disenchanted world without taking refuge in 'surrogate' experiential religions. "The ubiquitous chase for 'experience' stems from . . . weakness: for it is this weakness not to be able to countenance the stern seriousness of our fateful times" (Weber 1948: 149). And more bluntly: "this is plain humbug or self-deception" and one should "bear the fate of the times like a man" (Weber 1948: 154–155). Although Weber's rationalist aversion to what he saw in his own days and in his own intellectual circles may perhaps be understandable, it is quite unfortunate that he neither embarked on a more systematic study of these attempts at re-enchanting the modern world, nor developed a more sociological perspective on the significance of cultural discontents for the development of romantic cultural initiatives. This is especially so, because the Romantic resistance against the modern society, a relatively marginal and elitist phenomenon until the sixties, has become a mass phenomenon in the post-sixties era and, as we have shown, part of the cultural mainstream of today's popular culture.

The fact that Weber did not study and theorise such developments is remarkable, because his cultural sociology constitutes a most promising point of departure for such an analysis. In fact, Weber understood cultural change as the outcome of problems of meaning that inevitably emerge when belief systems become implausible. Cultural discontents do not simply lead to the abandonment of traditions, cultural ideals and systems of belief, Weber's cultural sociology maintains, but rather stimulate processes

of cultural reconstruction ('cultural rationalisation') so as to make them less vulnerable to loss of plausibility. Campbell (2007) has recently applied this Weberian notion to processes of cultural change in the West from the 1960s onwards, ranging from the shift from Christian religion to New Age spirituality, the emergence of a new ecological consciousness and the rise of quantum physics. What underlies these various cultural changes, he points out, is a marked shift away from the religious and scientific renditions of the Western dualistic worldview, towards an Eastern monistic or holistic one. This "Easternisation of the West" Campbell (2007: 41) maintains, entails "a fundamental revolution in Western civilisation, one that can be compared in significance to the Renaissance, the Reformation, or the Enlightenment."

The remarkable thing about Campbell's wide-ranging theory of cultural change is that it logically results from a systematic application of some of Max Weber's own most fundamental theoretical notions: the assumption of a universal human need to give meaning to an essentially meaningless world, the conception of culture as "the endowment of a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of events in the world with meaning and significance from the standpoint of human beings" (Schroeder cited in Campbell 2007: 11), and the notion that problems of meaning spark processes of cultural rationalisation that lead to a reconstruction and eventual replacement of worldviews that have lost their plausibility. According to Campbell, the problems of meaning that sparked these processes of cultural reconstruction were precisely those that were voiced by the counterculture in the heydays of the 1960s and 1970s, that is, the same problems of anomie and alienation that are massively culturally articulated in contemporary popular culture, as we have seen.

Now that doctrinal and theistic Christianity has fallen victim to the disenchantment of the world, and is therefore increasingly understood as implausible, unconvincing and unsatisfactory, and while science by its very nature can only further the disenchantment of the world and hence only increase problems of meaning, the cultural hunt for new cultural articulations of meaning is clearly on. This is a hunt for articulations of meaning that no longer necessitate 'belief' or 'doctrinal conformity', yet nonetheless endow reality with meaning, and may thus offer relief and comfort from modernity's maladies. Although in this chapter we have not studied whether and if so, how, audiences of fantasy and conspiracy culture use these cultural articulations to reflect on, appease, and even

cope with anomie and alienation as the principal maladies of modernity (see Aupers, this volume), we suggest that their immense contemporary popularity may stem precisely from their role in offering consolation from these modern experiences.

It is quite clear that fictional narratives, informed by fantasy and conspiracy culture, are much more 'disenchantment-proof' than doctrinal and theistic Christianity, which after all requires 'belief' (in the sense of 'placement beyond doubt and scrutiny') and hence conformity to religious doctrines and authorities. Precisely because of their explicitly fictional status, the popular fictions of fantasy culture and conspiracy culture do not demand belief and conformity to doctrine. Fantasy culture and conspiracy culture are in this respect similar to contemporary spiritualities of life ('New Age'), that also go beyond the need to 'believe' or 'have faith', in the latter case by emphasising personal experience rather than conformity to doctrines and propositional truths. Unlike traditional theistic types of religion, these spiritualities of life construct personal experiences as spiritual lessons about the self and the sacred that may further guide one on one's 'personal path'. Although this of course precludes the solid and taken-for-granted answers to problems of meaning that characterise traditional types of Christian religion, it is quite doubtful whether this means that these spiritualities—and, by implication, fantasy culture and conspiracy culture, too—can play no role at all in providing solace from modernity's cultural maladies. Fantasy culture and conspiracy culture may well provide the repertoires people draw from in practicing 'hyperreal spirituality': a spirituality based on fictional worlds which, despite their fictional nature, may inspire a spiritual search for meaning against the background of cultural discontents.

A promising avenue for further research, then, is the systematic uncovering of the role of fantasy culture and conspiracy culture in dealing with modern problems of meaning, alienation and anomie in particular. The guiding hypothesis in such research, the foregoing suggests, should be that popular culture neither feeds an unfathomable nihilism and meaninglessness of the type that Weber holds to be the logical outcome of the disenchantment of the world, nor the deep-rooted and unassailable existential certainty that traditional Christian religiosity aimed to provide. In an increasingly disenchanted world, it is likely instead that meaning will assume dramatically new shapes and that popular culture will play a vital role in its articulation, so as to enable its appropriation by its audiences.

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CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF HYPER-REAL RELIGIONS?

Adam Possamai

Introduction

In 2004, Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, a key leader of the Church of All Worlds, founded the Grey School of Wizardry, in which the education system draws from the *Harry Potter* fictions (Cusack 2010). This school is virtual and welcomes students from eleven to eighteen years old, and adults who want to go back to 'high school' for a different type of education. It is a site created to help adult Neo-Pagans, and children of Neo-Pagans, to access a more Pagan-focused teaching. The school's website claims:

> [b]esides its academic focus, the Grey School students and faculty provide a thriving interactive magickal community. Youth students (ages 11–17) are sorted into Elemental 'Houses' (Salamanders, Gnomes, Undines, and Sylphs) based on their astrological Sun sign, while adult students (age 18 and older) are likewise directed into Elemental 'Lodges' (Flames, Stones, Waters, and Winds). These compete via academic credits and merit points for the 'House Hat' and the 'Lodge Cup', which are awarded semi-annually at the Equinoxes.
>
> Each House and Lodge has a faculty Head to moderate discussions, introduce activities, etc. Each House and Lodge also has a student Prefect, a position awarded to students who exemplify academics, attitude, and enthusiasm. The student body is further led by House and Lodge Captains; selected from the pool of experienced Prefects, the Captains are an esteemed combination of student body president and 'Head Boy/Girl'. The Administrative Dean of Students oversees all student activities.
>
> The Grey School works via a series of interactive school pages and forums. Clubs are available to students who wish to delve deeper into specific focus areas. A library-in-progress includes reading lists, archived materials, and links to on-line articles and encyclopedias. Special forums provide everything from an online Bardic Circle, to All-School Challenges, to the latest edition of the student-produced school newspaper, *Whispering Grey Matters*.[1]

Another inscription of the *Harry Potter* fiction in reality is found in the non-profit Harry Potter Alliance. Started in 2005 by Slack, a self-declared

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[1] Internet site, "Grey School of Wizardry." At http://registered.greyschool.com/index.php?module=About&func=view&name=school. Accessed 25/01/2011.

'Harry Potter rabbi', this is an organisation devoted to social activism. By drawing parallels with the *Harry Potter* books, and especially with the dialogue of Harry's mentor, Albus Dumbledore, as a source of moral inspiration, the alliance attempts to educate and mobilise fans of the Harry Potter character around issues such as workers' rights and combating genocide. For example, it managed to raise funds for the Genocide Intervention Network's civilian protection program for displaced Darfuris and Burmese (Netburn 2009).

In connection with the *Star Wars* narrative, we find further interesting anecdotes illustrating how this hyper-real phenomenon is moving into everyday life. In 2008 a drunken man, wearing a plastic garbage bag for a cape and attempting to parody Darth Vader, attacked a Jedi church founder (Master Jonba Hehol) and his cousin (Master Mromi Hehol) with a metal crutch (Associated Press 2008). In 2009, the founder of the International Church of Jediism was asked to remove his hood in a supermarket in northern Wales. The Jedi, Morda Hehol, made a claim against the company for religious discrimination (Carter 2009; Cusack 2010). McCormick (this volume) also makes reference to some of these groups seeking legal recognition as religions or, at least, as non-profit groups. On 25 December 2005, The Temple of the Jedi Order became incorporated by the Secretary of State of Texas as a non-profit church, religious, educational and charitable corporation, and in 2009, the Canadian The Order of the Jedi also became thus incorporated.

Although many cases explored in this volume are centered on activities on the Internet, the above anecdotes show some intrusions from the online into the offline world. These cases are sparsely distributed and at the moment very limited. However, as any social scientist who has dabbled with the theories of moral panic would attest, if a specific social-cultural context is in place, incidents, if sparking the interest of a large number of people, can have impacts disproportional to their actual size or weight and lead to various calls for social awareness, or even to sanctions.

While promoting the research results from my book (Possamai 2005), a few of the journalists who interviewed me for their newspaper or radio programme asked me about accurate data on the extent of this phenomenon, and whether this new style of mixing popular culture with religion was a dangerous practice. I was asked to comment on whether adherents of hyper-real religions were unable to separate fantasy from reality. As a Weberian studying late modernity, and thus focusing on the meanings that social actors give to their actions, I had never really considered any possible danger. I was aware of the mass suicide of the Heaven's Gate

group in March 1997, and that believers from this new religious movement had envisioned death as the ultimate Trekkie (from the *Star Trek* franchise) trip to the final frontier, and also religiously watched *The X-Files* and *Star Wars* (Robinson 1997; Zeller, this volume). Also around this time period, two Goths who were deeply interested in horror fictions and Gothic spirituality committed suicide after meeting via the Internet (Lamont 2005). However, these events on the fringe of the phenomenon are far from representative of all hyper-real religions.

Newspaper articles mentioning my work attracted the attention of some Christians who commented on this phenomenon (hyper-real religiosity) in their cyber-sermon and expressed concerns. Following a discussion of my work on a Christian forum,[2] a cyber-user wrote about the "enemy trying to win his converts through these movies and music," and another claimed that

> [p]eople are hungry for spirituality, period. Problem is they are seeking in paths of deception and untruths. This is a time where us Christians need to make a great mark on society. Show God's light to the world. We want the lost to go to the light of life, rather than the light of Luke Skywalker's sword.

The opposite reaction has also occurred; some secular fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* found it incomprehensible that their television programme could be used for a spiritual purpose.[3] Although this volume has argued that hyper-real religions have been in existence in the Western world since at least the 1950s and 1960s, the Internet has given the phenomenon a cultural boost. Via cyberspace, more people can find out about these marginal groups, be inspired by and even join them, for however long it suits them. If our world is fluid (Bauman 2000), these groups epitomise a state of flux, as members play with their identities in forums/chat rooms and are able to express themselves more openly than in the offline world. This consumerist approach of mixing and matching religion and popular culture is a clear example of cultural fluidity; consumers (in this case, spiritual consumers) set their own goals and design their own lives guided principally by values of the self. Contemporary consumers eschew available macro-identities. They are mobile and their taste fluctuates. They are

[2] Internet site, http://scotwise.blogspot.com/2005/05/emergent-church.html. Accessed 14/11/2005.

[3] Internet site, http://forums.bducommunity.com/archive/index.php/t-2063.html. Accessed 14/11/2005.

part of a world in which the individual is autonomous, seeks his or her potential, constructs whom he or she is, and is part of the great adventure of the self. An example of this fluctuation of taste can be seen in relation to the Jediists: according to insiders, the cinematic release (after the 2001 Australian census) of *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* appears to have created a *processus* of exit from Jediism. This film introduced concepts, previously non-existent in the *Star Wars* franchise, that took some believers by surprise, such as renouncement of social attachment, maintenance of chastity and pursuit of neo-Franciscan poverty. These ideas conflicted with the lifestyle of most would-be adherents, and created a drop-out in the participation of *Star Wars* Internet rituals (Anon 2002).

People in the pre-Internet age would have been more reluctant or perhaps afraid to deal with such a religion as Jediism. They can now find various Internet sites with rites for self-initiation and chat rooms in which to discuss their passions for spirituality and popular culture. In these forums and chat rooms, people do not have to show their face and can use a pseudonym. They can even pretend they are of another gender and age. Some might have more than one cyber-name. Hyper-real religions have been able to develop due to the fact that people can play with their identities and not suffer from the stigma attached to following a 'nerdy' or 'wacky' religion. People can participate in these groups without fear of offline discrimination or harassment and do not even have to be in the same geographical place as other adherents.

As this phenomenon is likely to grow, thanks to the world of possibilities offered by the Internet, we will probably also see a growth of concerns from non-adherent citizens. There are groups actively attempting to prevent this phenomenon, especially those who believe that the minds of young people might be perturbed by surfing the 'wrong' Internet sites and be influenced to join the 'dark forces' in a religious sense. There are also social commentators who, for various reasons, will question this progressive alliance between religion and popular culture in our consumerist world.

Evidence suggests that fear, anger and concern about these practices exist, often among the religious establishment. Furthering our empirical knowledge of these practices, as this book has aimed to do, could alleviate some of these fears and provide knowledge upon which to base future discussion and research. Understanding the nature of people's fears and concerns may enable us to understand more about the anxieties of late-modern life.

This handbook of hyper-real religions has been conceptualised as providing an academic account of the phenomenon. As we move toward a more de-secularised world, this phenomenon is likely to grow even stronger within the wider process of de-secularisation. In this hypothetical scenario, we would see an increase not only in hyper-real religionists, but also in mainstream religious moderates and fundamentalists *and* atheists, who will make progressively intensified stands against these changes. Among all these post-secular changes in the religious landscape of our societies (Habermas 2006), this book provides testimony to a specific sub-group of a religious population on the move, that is not afraid to include popular culture in an active way (rather than an illustrative one) in its religious approach to life.

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