



**Invented Religions**  
**Imagination, Fiction and Faith**

**Carole M. Cusack**

# INVENTED RELIGIONS

Utilizing contemporary scholarship on secularization, individualism, and consumer capitalism, this book explores religious movements founded in the West which are intentionally fictional: Discordianism, the Church of All Worlds, the Church of the SubGenius, and Jediism. Their continued appeal and success, principally in America but gaining wider audience through the 1980s and 1990s, is chiefly as a result of underground publishing and the internet.

This book deals with immensely popular subject matter: Jediism developed from George Lucas' *Star Wars* films; the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, founded by 26-year-old student Bobby Henderson in 2005 as a protest against the teaching of Intelligent Design in schools; Discordianism and the Church of the SubGenius which retain strong followings and participation rates among college students. The Church of All Worlds' focus on Gaia theology and environmental issues makes it a popular focus of attention. The continued success of these groups of Invented Religions provide a unique opportunity to explore the nature of late/post-modern religious forms, including the use of fiction as part of a bricolage for spirituality, identity-formation, and personal orientation.

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# Invented Religions

Imagination, Fiction and Faith

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*University of Sydney, Australia*

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# Introduction: Imagination, Fiction and Faith

The notion of ‘invented religions’ is deeply provocative, in that it contradicts the traditional understanding of religion as a phenomenon that traces its origins to divine revelation (as is the case with Judaism, Christianity and Islam), or with origins so far in the past that individual founders are unknown but venerability is assured (as is the case with Hinduism), and asserts that teachings that are not only new but are admitted to be the product of the human imagination deserve that most lofty of designations, ‘religion’. Since the start of the nineteenth century there has been a significant trend in the West and certain other regions (for example, Japan) toward large numbers of new religions being founded. Many of these are short-lived and have little or no impact on mainstream religion and culture. Others find eager converts, develop more formal institutional structures and eventually attain a modest place in the spiritual marketplace of contemporary society.<sup>1</sup>

In the West little scholarly attention has been paid to those religions that announce their invented status. That is understandable, as they are openly defying the web of conventions that surround the establishment of new religions, which include linking the new teaching to an existing religious tradition, arguing that the teaching is not really ‘new’ but rather a contemporary statement of a strand of ancient wisdom, and establishing new scriptures as authoritative through elaborate claims of external origin, including translation, channelling and the chronicling of visions.<sup>2</sup> Invented religions refuse such strategies of legitimization. Discordianism was founded in 1957 in a Californian bowling alley by Kerry Thornley (Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst) and Greg Hill (Malaclypse the Younger), and promotes the worship of Eris, the ancient Greek goddess of chaos and discord. Discordianism incorporates fiction into its canon (Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea’s *Illuminatus! Trilogy*), and is generally classified as a ‘parody religion’ by critics. However, Discordians

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<sup>1</sup> Denshinkyo, a post-War new religion worshipping the Electricity God, gained few converts and faded. However, PL Kyodan (Church of Perfect Liberty), founded by Miki Tokuchika in 1946 and derided as the *gorofu shukyo* (‘golf religion’), attracted followers and spread beyond Japan. H. Neill McFarland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods: A Study of New Religious Movements in Japan* (New York, 1967) p. 65 and p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Joseph Smith, prophet and founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, claimed to have translated the *Book of Mormon* from gold plates in ‘Reformed Egyptian’, using a device resembling spectacles. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York, 2002), pp. 11–15.

have found a home within modern Paganism, and have developed a complex theological position that belies the humorous and anarchic tone of its classic scripture, *Principia Discordia* (1965). Further, the inclusion of Discordianism on internet sites (including Yahoo) as a ‘parody religion’ in 2001 resulted in an e-mail protest by Discordians who wished to have their religion accorded the same status as those regarded as ‘real’. One writer demanded, ‘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]’.<sup>3</sup> This raises profound questions for the academic study of religion, which struggles to devise a definition of ‘religion’ that is generally accepted, and which has a history of moving from restrictive definitions (based on Christianity as the normative, indeed the only, ‘religion’) to ever-broader, more inclusive definitions (as the dominance of Christianity in Western culture wanes and awareness of ‘other’ religions grows). Given the history of the discipline, it is not only possible but probable, that simply treating Discordianism as a ‘real religion’ in scholarly terms will produce a substantially altered assessment of it.<sup>4</sup>

The Church of All Worlds has a more explicit relationship to fiction, in that it was founded by Tim Zell (now Oberon Zell-Ravenheart) and Richard Lance Christie as a real-world version of the fictional church of the same name in Robert A. Heinlein’s novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961). Yet, over 40 years since Tim Zell formally registered the Church of All Worlds as a religion in 1968, CAW has grown in influence and become part of the broader Pagan revival through its eco-spiritual focus on Gaia and its incorporation of ritual and witchcraft, so much so that its fictional origins are well nigh irrelevant.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, The Church of the SubGenius is traceable to 1979, when the *SubGenius Pamphlet #1* was published. However, the ‘founders’ Reverend Ivan Stang and Doctor Philo Drummond claim its founding date is 1953 (one year prior to the founding of the Church of Scientology by L. Ron Hubbard) and its prophet/deity J.R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs, a 1950s-style entrepreneurial salesman, echoes Hubbard’s business flair. Throughout its

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2005), p. 209.

<sup>4</sup> It would not be difficult to produce a better description than that found in Mark Mirabello, *Handbook for Rebels and Outlaws: Resisting Tyrants and Priests* (Oxford, 2009), which states that Discordianism is ‘a bogus religion ... In effect, Discordianism teaches that god is a crazy woman’, p. 86. Mirabello means this description to be a dismissal of Discordianism, but Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson used exactly the same line in *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (London, 1998) when Simon Moon tells Joe Malik, ‘Have you read the latest data on the ecological catastrophe? You have to face it, Joe. God is a crazy woman’, p. 220, and in the Discordian universe that is not a problem.

<sup>5</sup> Carole M. Cusack, ‘Science Fiction as Scripture: Robert A. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* and the Church of All Worlds’, in Christopher Hartney, Alex Norman and Carole M. Cusack (eds), *Creative Fantasy and the Religious Imagination*, special issue of *Literature and Aesthetics*, 19/2 (Sydney, 2009), pp.72-91.

three decades the Church has had a strong following on university and college campuses in the United States, with artists and writers, and among internet subcultures. Critical responses to the Church of the SubGenius, considered as a religion, have been entirely dismissive. The derogatory label ‘parody religion’ is in fact a gentle assessment. To some, J.R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs, ‘the stupid guru of SubGenius’ is ‘precisely worthless’, his followers ‘a sophomoric priesthood who pretend-believe that he is real’.<sup>6</sup> Yet the Church of the SubGenius voices a sophisticated critique of materialism and mainstream Western religion and society through the use of parody and anarchic humour, and advances an alternative vision of the fulfilled life, which includes the reclamation of freedom and creativity, and participation in ritual events (‘Devivals’, a hybrid of religious celebration, political demonstration and performance art).

An unbroken thread of protest, of rejection of the modern Western trajectory of wage-slavery, materialism and consumerism, links Discordianism, the Church of All Worlds and the Church of the SubGenius, though their analysis of and solutions to the problems differ. This book also considers three more recent ‘invented religions’, Jediism, Matrixism and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. The same thread of protest is still detectable, though what is being protested against has changed. All three are twenty-first-century movements; Jediism, based on the *Star Wars* films of George Lucas, gathered momentum via an e-mail campaign in Anglophone countries in the lead-up to the 2001 censuses in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom; Matrixism, based on the *Matrix* trilogy of films by Larry and Andy Wachowski, was founded in 2004; and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster was founded by Bobby Henderson in 2005. Jediism and Matrixism embrace the notion that the values depicted in cinematic science fiction are more ‘real’ and provide a more meaningful basis for life than existing ‘real life’ religions, and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster protests against the decision of the Kansas State Board of Education to allow the teaching of Intelligent Design (repackaged creationism) as an alternative to Darwinian evolutionary theory in high schools.<sup>7</sup> All three movements have prospered through internet facilitation.

This study argues that invented religions are neither trivial nor necessarily invalid. Rather, when their historical and social context is investigated and their teachings are examined, they can be seen to be functionally similar, if not identical, to traditional religions. As with all new religions, some invented religions are more successful than others, and certainly it is not possible to say whether there is a guaranteed long-term future for any of the religions analysed in this book. There have been substantial shifts in Western culture since the turn of the twentieth century that have resulted in large numbers of people passively

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Mann, ‘Stupid Undergrounds’, *Postmodern Culture*, 5/3 (May 1995) at <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pmc/toc/-pmc5.3.html>, accessed 13 August 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Bobby Henderson, *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* (New York, 2006), pp. 33–7.

ignoring or actively rejecting the teachings of Christianity, historically the religion of the West. Most of these individuals do not commit to, or even flirt with, a non-Christian religion, but are content to remain secular, living their lives according to the values of consumer capitalism.<sup>8</sup>

However, a small percentage of people deliberately commit to another religion, which provides them with an alternative source of meaning. These include Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, which are traditional in Asia but new in the West, and new religions that have developed in the Western context. Sociologists studying the adherents of new religions have noted that they tend to possess a high degree of agency, and to be innovative and experimental in their approach to life.<sup>9</sup> A consistent theme that runs through the history of invented religions is that it is possible (even likely?) to invent (or join) a movement knowing that it is not 'true' and to later discover, through experience, that it is true, for you. This phenomenon dispenses with the argument that the intentions of the founder matter, that a leader who preaches a falsehood can invalidate the faith of later converts. Religion is, to a large extent, about narrative and the success of the story. In the case of the Church of all Worlds, its founders thought Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* was a fiction so good it should actually be true. This, clearly, is the thinking that also underlies the founding of both Jediism and Matrixism.

In the twentieth century the stories that resonated most in Western culture were speculative, often containing elements that a literary critic would identify as science fiction. The 1950s was a decade in which 'the dreams of the SF magazines began to be translated into the physical realities of the mature consumer culture', and religion reflected this shift, with early UFO and alien-based theologies developing at the same time.<sup>10</sup> After all, how different are aliens and angels? Discordianism was founded in 1957, and reflects aspects of 1950s America, particularly the Cold War mentality, conspiracy theories, and interest in the negative effects of corporatism. The 1960s continued the trend away from institutional authority and received truths (scientific, religious, and political) and the trend towards speculation and experiment. Alternative religions such as revived Paganism and feminist spirituality gained ground, and these religions drew upon environmentalism and Eastern religion in articulating a holistic vision, in which humanity and all living beings were inter-connected. Although it is possible to argue that the 1960s represent a high point in youth culture revolt and the reification of alternative lifestyles, the development and enthusiastic take-up of communications technologies (chiefly the internet) has continued the spread of unorthodox ideas,

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Bellah, 'New Religious Consciousness and the Crisis of Modernity', in Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah (eds), *The New Religious Consciousness* (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 333–52.

<sup>9</sup> Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 405.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas M. Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (New York, 1998), p. 7, pp. 22–3.

albeit often in a commodified form. These ideas, which include ‘the occult and the magical ... spiritualism and psychic phenomena ... mysticism ... alien intelligence and lost civilizations’ form a ‘cultic milieu’ that constantly spawns new forms of religion and spirituality from the margins.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Church of the SubGenius is often regarded as a splinter group of Discordianism, and the determinedly parodic online Church of MOO (formerly Church ov MOO) cannibalizes both movements (and a myriad others).<sup>12</sup>

The study of new religions is often thought to occupy a disproportionate amount of scholarly energy, considering the small number of adherents involved in these movements. It is true that the number of Discordians, SubGenii and Matrixists is minimal compared to that of Christians or Buddhists. However, in the West new religions are the sites of major innovation in spiritual beliefs and practices, and furthermore they are imbricated with popular cultural forms, revealing much about the concerns of contemporary society. They pique curiosity, and send the imagination soaring. Most of all, they tell a good story; a compelling narrative about life and faith in this late modern (or postmodern) world. This story deserves more attention than it has hitherto received; this book, I hope, goes some way to rectifying that lack.

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<sup>11</sup> Colin Campbell, ‘The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization’, *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972), p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> Church of Moo, at [www.churchofmoo.com](http://www.churchofmoo.com), accessed 13 August 2009.

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# Chapter 1

## The Contemporary Context of Invented Religions

### Introduction

This chapter has three purposes. First, it considers the effects of secularization, individualism and consumer culture in Western society from the late nineteenth century to the present, and explains how these changes directly affected the varieties of religion that exist today. Second, it examines the development of new religions from the 1950s to the present in terms of the provision of niche religious products in the so-called ‘spiritual supermarket’. Third, it situates the category of invented religions in the context of definitions of religion, and theories of the meaning and function of religion, with an emphasis on those scholars who propose cognitive and evolutionary explanations of religion. It is argued that invented religions are exercises of the imagination that have developed in a creative (though sometimes oppositional) partnership with the influential popular cultural narratives of the contemporary West, particularly film and science fiction.

### Secularization, Individualism and Consumer Culture

In 1770 religious choice scarcely existed. It was impossible for a woman living in provincial France to become a Buddhist, because not only were there no Buddhists living in France, but at that time no Buddhist texts were translated into any European language, making it impossible for a potential convert to gain knowledge of Buddhism save through travel to a Buddhist country. Christianity was the dominant, almost the sole, religion in Europe and European-derived societies, because little was known of the ‘world religions’ and the indigenous traditions of colonized nations were not recognized as religions by the colonial powers.<sup>1</sup> Christian missionary endeavours and colonial expansion brought increased knowledge of other cultures, and as Europeans gradually learned languages such as Sanskrit and Chinese, translations were made of religious and historical texts

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<sup>1</sup> Australian indigenous religion was not recognized as a ‘religion’ until E.B. Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871) changed the accepted definition of religion from one that focused on a supreme being to one that focused only on spiritual beings (and which would therefore include the Ancestors). See Tony Swain and Garry Trompf, *Religions of Oceania* (London and New York, 1995), p. 11.



from countries including India, China and Iran; for example, the first translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, by Charles Wilkins, an employee of the East India Company, which appeared in 1785.<sup>2</sup> The academic study of religions other than Christianity began in European universities in the first half of the nineteenth century, but at that time it was assumed that the study of the *Gita*, the *Upanishads* or the *Analects* was a purely intellectual exercise. As Christianity was believed to be the ‘highest’ religion, the notion that Christians might wish to convert to Buddhism or Hinduism was not entertained. Towards the end of the nineteenth century this situation had changed; the founding of the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875 by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott marked an important transition; it was possible for modern individuals to turn away from the Judeo-Christian tradition and seek religious and spiritual satisfaction in Eastern religions.<sup>3</sup> The publication of the Sacred Books of the East series, edited by Max Müller, by Oxford University Press from 1879 to 1900 greatly increased knowledge of the world’s religions, as did popular books like Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* (1879), a biography of the Buddha that enjoyed high sales. Further, Arnold neutralized the unfamiliarity of the Buddha’s life for Western readers by casting him as Luther to Hindu ‘Catholicism’, a reformer who liberated humanity from priestly intermediaries and instigated an individualistic and scriptural faith. The 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago introduced the West to Swami Vivekananda, the charismatic Hindu teacher, and Anagarika Dharmapala, a Sri Lanka Buddhist monk who had worked with Colonel Olcott, and who preached Buddhism in Asia, North America and Europe.<sup>4</sup> Theosophy itself provided the inspiration and model for multiple new religious movements.

The historical trajectory of modernity has been inextricably tied to the concept of secularization, which was defined by Peter Berger as ‘the process whereby sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols’.<sup>5</sup> Early formulations of the secularization thesis argued that religion would decline and eventually disappear. The past, particularly the Catholic Middle Ages, was portrayed as an ‘age of faith’ in which high, almost universal, levels of religious commitment manifested, and the era since the Reformation in the sixteenth century was characterized as one of steady, inevitable loss of faith. It was speculated that Enlightenment rationalism, the dominance of science and the confidence generated by affluence would render the comforts

<sup>2</sup> Eric J. Sharpe, *The Universal Gita: Western Images of the Bhagavad Gita* (Lasalle, 1985), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd edition (London, 1986), p. 256.

<sup>4</sup> George D. Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation and Responses* (Delhi, 1995), pp. 53–61.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London, 1969 [1967]), p. 107.

of religion redundant.<sup>6</sup> However, by the late twentieth century it was clear that religion was not dying in Western culture, and indeed that the posited past ‘age of faith’ was a fiction; the secularization thesis, as a result, had to be reformulated.<sup>7</sup> Two important factors emerged as a result of this process. The first was that Berger’s definition was partially correct; throughout the twentieth century religious institutions had lost much of their influence and the majority of people now live their lives unaffected by any authoritative religious body. Birth, marriage and death, the crucial rites of passage, can all be marked in entirely secular ways. It is still the case that high numbers record religious affiliation in official contexts, such as census questions about religion, but this affiliation does not translate into attendance or active forms of participation. It has been argued that such people are ‘believing without belonging’; however, there is evidence that those who belong to, and even regularly attend, church may not believe.<sup>8</sup> In either case, it seems undeniable that religious institutions have lost power in the West.

The second factor to emerge from attempts to refashion the secularization thesis was the significance of the growth in new religious movements in the post-war period. When scholars began studying these movements in earnest in the 1960s they were generally regarded as deviant, ‘cults’, phenomena that were anachronistic, both in the light of modern secularism and in terms of their opposition to the normative religion, Christianity. However, the success of many of these new religions, and the constant replenishing of the alternative religious sector, so that those movements that failed were replaced by newer forms, demanded attention. Yves Lambert has argued that the interactions of modernity and religion created four possible future scenarios: ‘decline, adaptation or reinterpretation, conservation, and innovation’,<sup>9</sup> and he noted that those relevant to the growth of new religions, reinterpretation and innovation, tended to exhibit certain characteristics. These are this-worldliness, self-spirituality, immanent divinity, dehierarchization, parascientific or science fiction-based beliefs, loose organizational structure, and ‘pluralism, relativism, probabilism, and pragmatism’.<sup>10</sup> Logically, this meant that those who participated in new and alternative religions would do so in a rather different spirit than those who were in mainstream Christian denominations, or even reinterpretations of Christianity such as Pentecostalism. The criterion of truth is eclipsed in such religions; members are more likely to ask ‘does it work?’ than

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<sup>6</sup> N.J. Demerath III, ‘Secularization and Sacralization Deconstructed and Reconstructed’, in James A. Beckford and N.J. Demerath III (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, 2007), p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> Rodney Stark, ‘Secularization, R.I.P.’, *Sociology of Religion* 60/3 (1999), p. 269.

<sup>8</sup> Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: believing without belonging* (Oxford, 1994). See also Demerath, ‘Secularization and Sacralization Deconstructed and Reconstructed’, p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> Yves Lambert, ‘Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?’, *Sociology of Religion* 60/3 (Autumn 1999), p. 311.

<sup>10</sup> Lambert, ‘Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age’, p. 323.

‘is it true?’ Moreover, their definition of what works is flexible and pragmatic. As they are ‘seekers’, they will move on to another practice or teaching should their current group cease to ‘work’ for them.

It remains to note that secularization is now broadly understood to refer less to a process of religious decline and more to a process of religious change, which in the twentieth century resulted in the uncoupling of the sacred from institutional religion, so that ‘religion becomes only one possible – albeit one very important – source of ... the sacred’.<sup>11</sup> This helps render intelligible the range of practices, experiences, and texts that modern Westerners draw upon in new religious and spiritual forms, including science fiction, comic book superheroes, and rock stars like Elvis Presley.<sup>12</sup> It also draws attention to the fact that Berger’s definition was wrong as much as it was right. This is because he understood secularization to involve the sloughing off of religious symbols, and not only religious institutions. Yet what has actually happened is that a multitude of symbols from a variety of religions are being constantly added to as previously secular symbols become sacralized. These symbols have been detached from their historical, institutional context and are now ‘floating signs that seem to mix and merge without any overarching meaning’.<sup>13</sup> Thus, a group of friends in Dallas, Texas can begin an art project influenced by the Russian Theosophist and composer Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915), who planned that his final multi-media work *Mysterium*, to be performed in the foothills of the Himalayas, would usher in a universal transcendent state and bring about the end of the world. The Hot Tubbists created ‘installations [that] combined music, visual art, food, and sometimes mind-altering chemicals, along with symbols from Sufism, the Cabala, and other sources’, and one member, Yehoodi Ayd, states that ‘about 1991 or ’92, several of us got together as sort of an affinity group, and we started doing events and parties and installations and putting out zines and whatnot. And it kind of evolved into a mystery religion’.<sup>14</sup>

In the early twenty-first century, scholars are generally in agreement that the contemporary religious landscape is very different to that of one or two centuries ago. There are disputes as to how these changes came about, but it appears that the shift from understanding the self as part of a community to valuing the self as an individual is a major part of the process. Recent explanations of the secularization process have tended to concentrate on the relationship between the public and

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<sup>11</sup> N.J. Demerath III, ‘The Varieties of Sacred Experience: Finding the Sacred in a Secular Grove’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 39/1 (March 2000), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> B.J. Oropeza (ed.), *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture* (New York, 2005); Madeleine Rigby, ‘Graceland: A Sacred Place in a Secular World’, in Carole M. Cusack and Peter Oldmeadow (eds), *The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalisation* (Sydney 2001), pp. 155–65.

<sup>13</sup> David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 42.

<sup>14</sup> Jesse Walker, ‘Inside the Spiritual Jacuzzi: What JewBus, Unitarian Pagans, and the Hot Tub Mystery Religion tell us about traditional faiths’, *Reason* (May 2003), p. 40.

the private realms; while it is no longer possible to valorize the Middle Ages as an ‘age of faith’, it is still true to say that it was an historical era in which Christian authority filled the public or social sphere, whereas in the modern West it no longer does. Charles Taylor notes that this is still compatible with a majority of people believing or practising their faith in the private sphere. He proposes three interpretations of secularity: first, where it is understood that contemporary public spaces are secular; second, where it is understood that religion, if adhered to, must occupy only the private realm; and finally where it is understood that it is the conditions of belief that have changed: ‘the shift to secularity consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace’.<sup>15</sup>

This third sense is formulated on the understanding that belief is a personal choice, something that an individual may or may not choose to engage in. Taylor charts the change from a society where belief was dominant to one where it is optional through three narratives of alienation. He argues that in 1500 the natural world ‘testified to divine purpose and action’, that this same divine presence and purpose was ‘implicated in the very existence of society ... as polis, kingdom, church’, and that the world was ‘enchanted’, which meant that individual agency was not sharply distinguished from impersonal forces.<sup>16</sup> For Taylor, the modern world has become disenchanted, public spaces have been emptied of God, and humans have become increasingly distant from nature in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The modern self is ‘buffered’ where the self of earlier times was ‘porous’, interpenetrated with other people, the divine and nature. He argues that ‘for the modern, buffered self, the possibility exists of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind. My ultimate purposes are those which arise within me, the crucial meanings of things are those defined in my responses to them’.<sup>17</sup> This insight is vital to understanding the interrelationship of individualism and the rise of consumerism.

Modern Western people often define themselves as ‘choosers ... consumers or constructors of options’.<sup>18</sup> However, most of the options available for choice did not exist prior to 1950, when labour-saving devices started appearing in middle-class homes and the advertising industry became ever-present, tempting people with new products. Yet the history of consumerism, like the history of individualism, is longer than might be generally appreciated. Colin Campbell has traced consumerism to roots in the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He identified the oppositional trajectories of the

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> Harold Coward, ‘Self as Individual and Collective: Ethical Implications’, in Harold Coward and Daniel C. Maguire (eds), *Visions of a New Earth: Religious Perspectives on Population, Consumption and Ecology* (Albany, 2000), p. 44.

twentieth century (the dominance of science and increasing rationalization *contra* the continuing popularity of the occult sciences and alternative religion) as heirs to the opposing philosophical poles of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The eighteenth century also saw the emergence of the middle-class as a social and economic force, and the rise of the novel as the most popular type of recreational reading. Although his purpose is to develop a workable theory of consumerism, Campbell's findings dovetail neatly with those of Taylor, in that the buffered self is again a crucial factor. Consumerism works because of the fluid and continual nature of wanting among modern individuals; 'the gap between wanting and getting never actually closes'.<sup>19</sup> For moderns, the emotions are located within the self, rather than being in the world and acting on individuals. This transforms the status of experience (and is evidence for disenchantment), in that, for example, rather than understanding awe as a 'characteristic of God' as used to be the case, modern people understand awe to be a human 'reaction to his presence'.<sup>20</sup>

The final piece of the puzzle for Campbell is the human imagination, which pursues hedonistic fantasies and daydreams, fuelled by whatever stimuli are available. The extraordinarily rapid rise to popularity of the novel in the eighteenth century meant that through the exercise of reading people could imagine themselves as others, with other lives. Such imaginings tended to be emulative, in that readers (and contemporary viewers of films and television) were attracted to the lives of those who were more beautiful, more fortunate, and wealthier than themselves. The novel also circulated potentially dangerous notions, such as that it was noble to defy morality and convention in the pursuit of love, or programmes for political change disguised in narratives of imaginary voyages, which were perceived by discerning readers to comment unfavourably on contemporary society.<sup>21</sup> Prior to the dominance of the novel, the Bible and works of a religious nature (such as sermons and spiritual autobiographies) were the most popular form of recreational reading; thus, the rise of the novel also is evidence of the processes of secularization and disenchantment. Campbell concludes that modern life is characterized by 'a longing to experience in reality those pleasures created and enjoyed in imagination, a longing which results in the ceaseless consumption of novelty'.<sup>22</sup> This psychological pattern, enacted in behaviour, clearly underpins modern romantic relationships and fashion, but also can be extended to the consumption of other cultures (through tourism) and of religions and spiritualities as products (through seekership).

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<sup>19</sup> Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (York, 2005), p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, p. 72.

<sup>21</sup> Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel 1600–1740* (Baltimore and London, 2002), pp. 212–70.

<sup>22</sup> Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, p. 205.

## New Religions as Niche Products in the Spiritual Marketplace

At the end of the nineteenth century the outlines of an emergent spiritual marketplace were dimly apparent. Christianity was still the dominant religion and the principal source of secular law and values, but Spiritualism had flourished since the 1850s and had introduced mediumship into popular culture, and Theosophy also employed mediumistic techniques to bring the message of the Ascended Masters (which in Madame Blavatsky's revelations were Tibetan lamas) to humanity. Ceremonial magic and Kabbalistic Jewish mysticism were appropriated and taught by the Order of the Golden Dawn (founded 1888), and in America the New Thought was popular (including Christian Science and Religious Science).<sup>23</sup> New Christian sects were also being founded at a rapid rate, and some of the core elements of mass popular culture, chiefly moving pictures, which were invented by the Lumiere brothers in 1895, had made an impact.

World Wars I and II were instrumental in accelerating the drift away from mainstream Christian churches, for a number of reasons. Many lost faith in a God who could permit such violence and wanton destruction of life. However, the social upheaval that accompanied the wars, in which women moved from the home into men's jobs and sexual and social *mores* relaxed, also contributed to secularization, here understood as the decline in influence of institutional Christianity. The late 1940s saw interest in Buddhism manifest among members of the 'Beat Generation', a phrase coined by writer Jack Kerouac in 1948, with the meaning of 'beaten down' but later coming to comprise 'beatific' in the spiritual sense.<sup>24</sup> Through the 1950s the Beats (chiefly Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsburg, Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso and William Burroughs) carved out a path for rebellious youth, a path involving sexual adventure, literary experimentation, drugs, alternative religion and the wholesale rejection of the conservative, materialistic society of post-war America. Remaining on the margins was essential to them; hobos and outcasts were celebrated in Kerouac's novels as 'desolation angels', and two of Ginsburg's major poems ('Howl' and 'Kaddish') chronicle madness and death. Their spiritual orientation also rejected simple answers and embraced uncertainty. Stephen Prothero poetically observes that for the Beats:

as for pilgrims, transition was a semipermanent condition ... The Beats shared, in short, not an identifiable geographical goal but an undefined commitment to a spiritual search. They aimed not to arrive but to travel and, in the process, to transform into sacred space every back alley through which they ambled and every tenement in which they lived.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany 1998), *passim*.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Prothero, 'On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest', *Harvard Theological Review* 84/2 (April 1991), p. 206.

<sup>25</sup> Prothero, 'On the Holy Road', p. 211.

The Beat Generation has been criticized for its interpretation of Zen Buddhism, which erred on the side of the anarchic, absurdist, iconoclastic and anti-institutional. Yet they were early popularizers of ‘Buddhism as a way of personal transformation and ... presenting the teachings of Buddhism in the contemporary language of everyday Western life’.<sup>26</sup> In 1960s youth culture, the beatniks gave way to the hippies, and the Eastern spiritual orientation of the Beats became known to a broader sector of society, as roshis, gurus and monks from Japan, India, Tibet, and throughout Asia came to America to teach.

Zen Buddhism and the Beats were an influence on Discordianism, the earliest of the invented religions investigated in this study. From 1953, the popular Zen author Allan Watts had a Sunday night programme on KPFA, Berkeley, called ‘Philosophy East and West’.<sup>27</sup> In 1960, Robert Anton Wilson, a key figure in Discordianism, interviewed Alan Watts for *The Realist*, a freethought magazine. One particular question and answer exchange caught precisely the Beat view of Zen:

Robert Wilson: *What is Zen?*

Alan Watts: [Soft chuckling.]

Robert Wilson: Would you care to enlarge on that?

Alan Watts: [Loud laughing].<sup>28</sup>

The use of humour and an embodied response, and the absolute rejection of rational explanation inherent in Watts’ ‘answer’ to Wilson’s question are qualities that are employed to great effect in several invented religions. There is also a sense in which the Buddhist understanding of material reality as subjective and ultimately illusory, with the goal of Enlightenment being to ‘see’ this clearly and detach from worldly life, is compatible with the anti-materialist, anti-consumerist, nonconformist rejection of mainstream society that invented religions almost uniformly advocate.

The 1950s was an important incubator of religious trends that came to fullness in the 1960s. New religions were founded, and the themes of science fiction and popular culture came to the fore in their theologies. Robert Wise’s 1951 classic science fiction film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (scripted by Edmund H. North, with a score by composer Bernard Herrmann, famous for his collaborations with Alfred Hitchcock) portrayed an alien messiah, Klaatu, whose spaceship lands in Washington. Klaatu is accompanied by a robot bodyguard, Gort. His mission is to inform humanity that violence, and the threat of nuclear war in particular, is alarming the peaceful citizens of other planets. During his sojourn on Earth, Klaatu is given a tour of the city by Bobby, a small boy. Klaatu is grieved that those

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Oldmeadow, *Zen: An Ancient Path to Enlightenment for Modern Times* (Sydney, 2001), p. 64.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Tamony, ‘Beat Generation: Beat: Beatniks’, *Western Folklore* 28/4 (October 1969), p. 276.

<sup>28</sup> Alan Watts, *Zen and the Beat Way* (Boston, 1997), p. ix.

in the Arlington National Cemetery have perished in wars, and he warns Professor Barnhart that Earth must embrace peace. Rather than listen, humans choose to kill Klaatu (who like Jesus is resurrected). He leaves earth, having warned that ‘humanity must submit to live peacefully, being watched over by the robots (like Gort) or be destroyed’.<sup>29</sup> New religions focused on alien contacts were founded in the 1950s, including the Aetherius Society, which was founded by George King (1919–97) in England in 1955. This movement employs the perennial alternative spiritual technique of mediumship to contact extraterrestrials, chiefly Master Aetherius, who brought King information about an intergalactic parliament in which Earth was invited to participate.<sup>30</sup> The message that UFO contactees brought was remarkably similar to that of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*; Polish-American George Adamski (1891–1965) encountered Orthon, a Venusian who warned of the dangers of ‘atomic testing and the prospect of nuclear war’ in 1952.<sup>31</sup> Mark Prophet (1918–73), a member of the channelled post-Theosophical I AM tradition (led by Guy and Edna Ballard), founded the Summit Lighthouse in 1958. The Summit Lighthouse, and later the Church Universal and Triumphant, channelled the Ascended Masters, and taught that humans could achieve their Higher Self through harnessing the violet flame of love, a force that could negate the effects of *karma*.<sup>32</sup>

Science fiction was not the only popular cultural phenomenon that was mined by the founders of new religions in the 1950s. L. Ron Hubbard (1911–86) published *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* in 1950, and after it became a popular success launched the Church of Scientology in 1954. Hubbard was an author of science fiction, fantasy and adventure stories, who had served in the navy during World War II and who was deeply interested in psychology. Dianetics, from the Greek for ‘through’ and ‘mind’, argued that the mind was divided into two parts, the analytical and the reactive. The reactive mind stored ‘memory traces or what Hubbard calls engrams. Consisting primarily of moments of pain, unconsciousness or emotional loss, these engrams ... cause us a variety of problems in the present, ranging from neurosis to physical illness and insanity’.<sup>33</sup> Auditing, a process of working through these engrams with a counsellor, enables ‘clearing’, which will solve these problems. Psychologist Erich Fromm, an early reviewer of *Dianetics*, suggested that this was a message ‘appealing to readers

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<sup>29</sup> Matthew Etherden, ‘“The Day the Earth Stood Still”: 1950’s Sci-Fi, Religion and the Alien Messiah’, *Journal of Religion and Film* 9/2 (October 2005), section 6 at [www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9No2/EtherdenEarthStill.htm](http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9No2/EtherdenEarthStill.htm), accessed 13 August 2009.

<sup>30</sup> John A. Saliba, ‘Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena’, in James R. Lewis (ed.), *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds* (Albany, 1995), pp. 15–64.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas M. Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (New York, 1998) p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> See Bradley C. Whitsel, *The Church Universal and Triumphant: Elizabeth Clare Prophet’s Apocalyptic Movement* (Syracuse, 2003), pp. 7–9.

<sup>33</sup> Hugh B. Urban, ‘Fair Game: Secrecy, Security, and the Church of Scientology in Cold War America’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74/2 (June 2006), p. 365.



who look for prefabricated happiness and miracle cures'.<sup>34</sup> Further publications by Hubbard brought science fiction themes to the fore, when auditing was revealed to be able to bring to light not only *in utero* memories from this life, but past lives (some of which were lived on other planets).<sup>35</sup>

To join a new religion like Scientology (or a traditional religion that was new to America like Buddhism) in the 1950s was a remarkably independent and spiritually adventurous life choice. In the 1960s, the erosion of traditional values through the process of secularization was intensified. In the West class barriers were breaking down, with the 'new aristocracy' consisting of rock musicians, models and film stars, and the demand for novelty that Campbell had argued was fuelled by the imagination began to be satisfied through unprecedented prosperity and the production of a myriad affordable consumer goods.<sup>36</sup> The dominance of 'high culture' retreated and 'by the late 1960s what was identified as the "Woodstock Nation" saw its own variegated youth culture not so much as a "stage" to go through in growing up but as a viable alternative to established elite culture'.<sup>37</sup> Progressive elements in American society demonstrated against the Vietnam War and demanded equal rights for women, the Stonewall Riots resisted discrimination against homosexuals and affirmed gay rights, and the civil rights movement agitated for equal rights for African Americans. There was a strong sense that a new society, a transformed society that had shed the bigotry, restrictions, prudishness and hypocrisy of the past, was coming into being. Many of those who were engaged in bringing about social and political change were attracted to alternative and new religions. Popular culture reflected the social concern for equality; the television series *Star Trek* modelled an egalitarian, multi-racial future where men of all races, women and alien species were integrated into the Federation, a benign intergalactic body resembling Master Aetherius' interplanetary parliament.<sup>38</sup> Research into new religions became a thriving sub-specialization in the academic study of religion, and the profile of the 'typical convert' to non-traditional religion was carefully investigated.

Those who were attracted to new religions were found to be generally among the better-educated and affluent sectors of society, with a high degree of agency and a consciousness of their right to choose the religious path that was most fulfilling

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<sup>34</sup> Erich Fromm, 'Review of *Dianetics*', *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* (September 3 1950), p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> L. Ron Hubbard, *Have You Lived Before This Life?* (Copenhagen, 2006) at <http://web.archive.org/web/-20070701072407/http://www.newerapublications.com/trade/titles/hylbt1.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs: The Revolution in English Life in the Fifties and Sixties* (London, 1992), pp. 19–30.

<sup>37</sup> Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, 'Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore', *American Sociological Review* 61/5 (October 1996), p. 905.

<sup>38</sup> Jeff Greenwald, *Future Perfect: How Star Trek Conquered Planet Earth* (London and New York, 1998), p. 4.

to them. It was noted by many scholars that the ‘seeker’ orientation was very apparent, with many people demonstrating some interest in new religions but not actually making the commitment to join. Further, it was observed that ‘conversion’ to a new religion often involved the ‘learning of roles rather than changes in ... values, beliefs or attitudes’.<sup>39</sup> This is in keeping with the consumerist ethos of the 1960s and 1970s when fashions changed rapidly due to the availability of cheap, mass-produced clothes and personal identity began to be linked to brands, such as Levi’s and Coca Cola. There was a profoundly romantic streak running through the counterculture of the 1960s, which manifested in apparently contradictory phenomena such as the desire to retreat from industrialized, mechanized modern society and go back to the ‘land’, the embracing of new technologies and science fiction scenarios, passionate activism in the political sphere, and the embracing of mysticism as the highest form of personal religiosity.<sup>40</sup> This romanticism fuelled anti-rationalist sentiments generally, and when the longed-for revolution did not arrive many political activists retreated from a programme aimed at the transformation of society to one aimed at the transformation of the self through adherence to new religions and spiritualities.<sup>41</sup>

The New Age Movement of the 1980s consolidated these trends by promoting a free-floating spiritual matrix from which seekers could select beliefs and practices, often from different traditions, that were not only incompatible but in some cases were diametrically opposed. Where many of the new religions of the 1960s and 1970s had demanded exclusive allegiance, New Age spirituality was marked by eclecticism and its advocacy of the position that all religions were equally valid and that an individual was only required to find his or her ‘truth’. In the 1980s it became clear that self-transformation had become the fundamental religious process for many Westerners; religious and spiritual insights melded with Jungian psychology (which advocated ‘individuation’, or realizing one’s true self, as the primary aim of human development),<sup>42</sup> and consumerism became a major part of identity-formation. The locus of authority had shifted from the public sphere, where it had been embodied in institutions, to the private sphere, where it was to be found within the self. Experience as a touchstone of the real became important as faith in science and Enlightenment rationalism faded. Returning to the insights of Taylor and Campbell above, ‘it has become a truism that religious activity is, increasingly, subject to personal choice ... and that ... for many in the advanced societies, religious identities are assembled to create a *bricolage* of beliefs and

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<sup>39</sup> Robert W. Balch, ‘Looking Behind the Scenes in a Religious Cult: Implications for the Study of Conversion’, *Sociological Analysis* 41/2 (Summer 1980), pp. 138–40.

<sup>40</sup> Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society* (London, 1973).

<sup>41</sup> Stephen A. Kent, ‘Slogan Chanters to Mantra Chanters: A Mertonian Deviance Analysis of Conversion to Religiously Ideological Organizations in the Early 1970s’, *Sociological Analysis* 49/2 (1988), pp. 104–18.

<sup>42</sup> David Tacey, *Jung and the New Age* (Hove and Philadelphia, 2001), p. 188.

practices'.<sup>43</sup> Lyon argues that the contemporary understanding of self values personality more than character, so that rather than admiring people for being reliable or consistent in their self-conception or ethical commitments, constant change is appreciated as a sign of attention to the project of self-transformation.

The New Age and the Next Age (as some have termed it) that followed were also successful commercial enterprises. Seekership had become more prevalent since the 1960s, so that it was possible to direct one's own spiritual journey and even religious conversion through internet searches, reading books on topics of interest, and the purchasing of religious and spiritual products (including ritual tools, spell kits, meditation retreats, workshops, fairs and festivals), which became a hallmark of the alternative religious scene.<sup>44</sup> Academic approaches to new religions also became mainstream, in that rather than treating new religions as a problem that required an explanation, scholars accepted that 'the emergence of new religions seems to be one sign of a healthy and free society, and we can now see everywhere that the slowing of the process of the formation of new religions occurs only where the suppressive powers of the state are called to bear'.<sup>45</sup> The historical dominance of Christianity and its imbrication with governmental structures had, by the early twenty-first century, not only been undone through historical processes, but rendered illicit, a model of society that was illiberal and resulted in the quashing of individual freedoms and spiritual quests. The consumerist model dictated that no new religion would ever attain that level of dominance. Campbell hypothesized that what he called 'mystical religion' was more likely to prosper in a secular culture, because of its 'monism, relativism, tolerance, syncretism, and above all, its individualism'.<sup>46</sup> Individuals could now choose to not be religious at all, and if they did choose to be religious they were confronted with an extensive range of niche products from which they could select one that satisfied their personal needs.

### **Invented Religions, the Imagination and the Perennial Purpose of Religion**

Invented religions are an inevitable outcome of a society addicted to the consumption of novelties, in which the exercise of creativity and innovation in the development of products is rewarded by wealth and fame. Inventors and entrepreneurs became valued during the industrial revolution, when a stable agricultural society that had remained basically unchanged for centuries was transformed by new technologies that radically altered the life patterns of people. Manufacturing rose to prominence

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<sup>43</sup> Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, p. 76.

<sup>44</sup> Nurit Zaidman, 'Commercialization of Religious Objects: A Comparison between Traditional and New Age Religions', *Social Compass* 50/3 (2003) pp. 345–6.

<sup>45</sup> J. Gordon Melton, 'Perspective New New Religions: Revisiting a Concept', *Nova Religio* 10/4 (2007), p. 109.

<sup>46</sup> Colin Campbell, 'The Secret Religion of the Educated Classes', *Sociological Analysis* 39/2 (1978), pp. 152–3.

and consumers were needed to buy the new products. Significantly, Christianity reshaped itself to meet the new conditions, and religious innovators like John Wesley (1703–91) eschewed churches and preached in factories and fields, reasserting the relevance of religion to the emerging modern world. Wesley's reinterpretation of Christianity was affective and experiential, and thus could be said to be Romantic in inspiration.<sup>47</sup> As material prosperity advanced, this worldly fulfilment began to overtake the delayed rewards of heaven and the power of traditional religion waned, as discussed above. By 1960 the West was affluent, confident, future-oriented and committed to consumerism as a mode of 'information about the changing cultural scene'.<sup>48</sup>

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the desire for pleasure and a multitude of leisure activities had been served by an emergent mass popular culture. Cinema rapidly established itself as a favourite entertainment, and mass literacy and cheap publishing ensured the popularity of genres such as science fiction and fantasy, crime, romance and adventure. Fashion, rock music, sport, and eating and drinking all became prominent sites of leisure consumption. The status of popular culture is hotly contested, with some commentators seeing it as the heir to the folk culture of rural people in the past, and others warning that, unlike folk culture, it is not 'made' by the people, but is a commercial product, designed for passive consumption by the masses and as 'a profitable commodity'.<sup>49</sup> A more positive assessment is that popular culture can be differentiated from mass culture. Malory Nye explains that despite the

phenomenal growth of both choice and commercialization of culture at the popular level ... the 'people' have been selective in which cultural products they make their own: not only through choosing certain artists, but also which particular elements of a cultural product become invested with meaning and significance.<sup>50</sup>

This explanation has much in common with the choosing individual who selects which religious or spiritual 'product' to consume. Indeed, the same dynamics appear to underlie both the discourse of contemporary religion and that of culture; the scorn expressed by representatives of elite cultural forms toward popular and mass cultural forms closely resembles the disdain established religions express when confronted by new religions, New Age spiritualities, and invented religions in particular.

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<sup>47</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 312–15.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (London and New York, 1996), p. 67.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen Duncombe, *Notes From the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London and New York, 1997), p. 113.

<sup>50</sup> Malory Nye, *Religion: The Basics*, 2nd edition (London and New York, 2008), p. 35.

As the concept of ‘invented religion’ is generally anathematized, it is necessary to posit a definition of ‘religion’ that can harmonize with fiction and invention. Religion is notoriously difficult to define. Definitions of religion that emerged from theological study were essentialist; that is, they asserted that religion was *sui generis*, unique, and not reducible to anything else. When adopted by the non-confessional academic study of religion, essentialist definitions result in the impasse that ‘the unreachable goal towards which the study is directed, that is to understand what religion is, [being] required as precondition to the study’.<sup>51</sup> Functionalist definitions, which concentrate on what religion does rather than what it is, are often more useful in that they enable the analysis of practices rather than the more problematic ‘beliefs’. A third category of definitions, called ‘polythetic’ definitions, utilize a ‘family resemblance’ model, derived in part from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. For example, a group of characteristics commonly found among religions might include the belief in supernatural beings, notions of sacredness and profanity, ritual and prayer to communicate with the sacred realm, authoritative texts, buildings or spaces set aside for religious activities, a code of morals, the experience of awe towards the divine, a worldview that explains the particular community’s place in the ‘overall purpose or point of the world’, and the organization of human life according to this worldview.<sup>52</sup> If all of these characteristics are present, it is probable that what is being observed is a religion; if only six of the nine are present, some further evidence of the movement’s religious nature might be required.

Polythetic definitions draw attention to the fact that religion is often not easily separated from the broader category of culture. Realistically, it can be argued that religion is a subcategory of culture, just as art or ‘popular culture’ is. This position suggests that deep connections exist between religion and social contexts: that if the cultural context is ascetic and anti-materialist, the dominant religious form of that community will be, too; if the cultural context is consumerist, then the dominant religious form of that community will be, too. This does not obviate forms of religion and culture being in existence that are in opposition to the dominant form of the host culture; it merely confirms that religion is, above all, a human activity and must be investigated in conjunction with its companion cultural forms. In assessing invented religions, this study will reference polythetic definitions of religion, and situate particular invented religions in the context of the host culture. Finally, regarding definitions of religion, Benson Saler’s assertion that the ‘power of religion as an analytical category ... depends on its instrumental value in facilitating the formulation of interesting statements about human beings’ is clearly applicable to the success of invented religions.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Sam Gill, ‘The Academic Study of Religion’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62/4 (Winter 1994), p. 968.

<sup>52</sup> Russell McCutcheon, *Studying Religion* (London and Oakville, 2007), p. 62.

<sup>53</sup> Benson Saler, ‘*Religio* and the Definition of Religion’, *Cultural Anthropology* 2/3 (August 1987), p. 398.

Contemporary academic studies of religion frequently attempt to go beyond merely defining it, and seek to explain why it exists, why human beings originally developed religious explanations for phenomena, and what purpose those explanations still might serve in the contemporary world. The cognitive theorist Pascal Boyer has persuasively argued that religion serves an evolutionary biological purpose, and that humans are hard-wired to find certain types of religious explanations convincing and worthy of trust. Chiefly, these explanations concern phenomena which are not observable, and the reason why the explanation appears to have gained acceptance is that it attributes outcomes in the visible world to agents, and people try to ‘imagine what they [the agents] perceive, what they know ... and so on, because there are inference systems in [their] minds that constantly produce such speculations about other people’.<sup>54</sup> Boyer emphasizes the importance of story in the successful transmission of these religious explanations. Humans are narrative beings and communities transmit culture through narrative. All religions have narrative dimensions, and these narratives are meaningful in the cultural context in which they developed, as religion helps humans ‘achieve personal wholeness and social coherence’.<sup>55</sup>

The relation of story and imagination deserves closer analysis. Writers within the Christian tradition often noted that creation was the preserve of God; but that human imaginative acts were a dim adumbration of this divine activity. Kim Selling notes that J.R.R. Tolkien (a devout Roman Catholic) ‘calls the art of creating a fictional world through narrative art, “sub-creation”, to distinguish it (in degree though not in kind) from the work of the ultimate Creator’,<sup>56</sup> and that Tolkien’s story ‘Leaf By Niggle’ is his clearest statement of a theory of human artistic creativity. In this tale, the painter Niggle’s ‘attempts at painting a marvellous Tree are eventually realised: his tree literally comes to life, is made real’.<sup>57</sup> For Tolkien, this is a sign of how human creativity participates in the creativity of the Christian God, and of God’s grace. In secular terms, it offers a powerful example of how the creations of human beings do not remain their possessions, but take on independent reality through shared participation in narrative. From a different methodological perspective, humans engage collectively in world-construction; Berger has argued that religion is a part of this larger enterprise, which humans achieve through externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Berger explains how these processes work as follows:

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<sup>54</sup> Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York, 2001), p. 326.

<sup>55</sup> Loyal Rue, *Religion is Not About God: How Spiritual Traditions Nurture our Biological Nature and What to Expect When They Fail* (New Brunswick, NJ and London, 2006), p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> Kim Selling, *Why Are Critics Afraid of Dragons? Understanding Genre Fantasy* (Saarbrücken, 2008), p. 66.

<sup>57</sup> Selling, *Why Are Critics Afraid of Dragons?* p. 66.

Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being [*sic*] into the world, both in the physical and the mental activity of men. Objectivation is the attainment of the products of this activity (again both physical and mental) of a reality that confronts its producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalization is the reappropriation by men of this same reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness. It is through externalization that society is a human product. It is through objectivation that society becomes a reality *sui generis*. It is through internalization that man is a product of society.<sup>58</sup>

This lengthy quotation is justified, because it dovetails exactly with the evolutionary advantage that Boyer finds in religious narratives. World construction, in Berger's terms, is an act of creation in which that which has been created becomes the real.<sup>59</sup>

Naturalistic theories of religion accord centrality to the story, whether an orally transmitted myth or a written account of an historical figure's encounter with the divine.<sup>60</sup> Accordingly, this analysis of invented religion will pay attention to the stories told by these movements, and affirm that in cognitive terms, there is no reason to prefer a factual to a fictional story in a religious context. Each of the invented religions I examine in this book has an intimate relationship with narrative; either it was inspired by a fictional narrative, which, in Tolkienian terms, it proceeded to imbue with reality, or it constructed a deliberately fictional narrative, which was communicated to sympathetic listeners and acquired reality through this shared conversation. Although the fact that new religions are frequently invented is acknowledged in the work of some scholars, such as Bainbridge and Stark, discussed below, it is generally true that even those scholars who do not themselves espouse a particular religion are influenced by the 'traditional' religious model, in which to draw attention to the invented status or fictional inspiration of a religion automatically invites its dismissal on the grounds of inauthenticity. One important exception to this is Lonnie Kliever, who in a 1981 article insisted that all religious lifeworlds 'are essentially fictive in character', and that 'religious symbols are *heuristic* fictions

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<sup>58</sup> Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> It is important to note that these theoretical perspectives are not intended as 'magic bullets' that explain complex phenomena with a single phenomenon. Boyer concludes ruefully that 'Instead of religious mind, what we have found is a whole frustration of invisible hands. One of these guides human attention towards some possible conceptual combinations; another enhances recall of some of these; yet another process makes concepts of agents far easier to acquire if they acquire strategic agency, connections to morality, etc. The invisible hand of multiple inferential systems in the mind produces all sorts of connections between these concepts and salient occurrences in people's lives. The invisible hand of cultural selection makes it the case that the religious concepts people acquire and transmit are in general the ones most likely to seem convincing to them, given their circumstances.' See Boyer, *Religion Explained*, p. 330.

<sup>60</sup> Rue, *Religion is Not About God*, pp. 125–31.

of human meaning'.<sup>61</sup> Kliever asserts that the fictional status of religion does not render it valueless or inconsequential. Rather, both 'play and religion tutor persons and groups in the skills and arts of life', and 'artful argument and artistic vision are noncoercive and nonviolent ways of fashioning consensual communities'.<sup>62</sup> This capacity for invented religion to utilize persuasive discourse and artistic creativity is evident from the beginnings of Discordianism to the recently instituted Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.<sup>63</sup>

It has already been established that science fiction and other popular cultural forms have had a fertile relationship with trends and developments in the 'real world'. Consequently, if the production of new religions is a regular occurrence in a free society, a society that consists of individuals whose imaginative capacity drives their desire for constant change and transformation, and that society rewards entrepreneurial vision, creative individuals, who innovate trends rather than merely follow them, are inevitably going to invent, create, and innovate new religious products and entire new religions. Bainbridge and Stark, in an influential article, argued that the formation of new religions (or in sociological terminology, 'cults') could be viewed through three compatible models. The first two, the psychopathology model and the entrepreneurial model, placed emphasis on the charismatic founder, whereas the third, the subculture evolution model, placed emphasis on groups within society that participate in the 'cultic milieu' and cause new religions to evolve without charismatic leadership. What is especially important about Bainbridge and Stark's argument is that they emphasize that new religious ideas are invented, and that while some innovative religious founders may be fraudulent, just as 'ordinary businessmen are convinced of the value of their products by the fact that customers want to buy them ... cult entrepreneurs may likewise accept their market as the ultimate standard of value'.<sup>64</sup> This is an important insight into invented religions; even those founders who deliberately employed fiction to create new religions may be gradually convinced of its value, reality or truth through their experience of its success, and in communication with like-minded people. Bainbridge and Stark's model is deeply influenced by economics, and argues that the modern individual chooses from the expanding marketplace of religious ideas the religion that most suits their needs and lifestyle. This 'economic' model is fundamentally compatible with the evolutionary biological explanation, and the social constructivist explanation (human world-building), of the persistence of religious narratives among apparently secular

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<sup>61</sup> Lonnie D. Kliever, 'Fictive Religion: Rhetoric and Play', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49/4 (December 1981), p. 658, p. 665.

<sup>62</sup> Kliever, 'Fictive Religion: Rhetoric and Play', p. 663, p. 665.

<sup>63</sup> The role of the imagination in the initial development of religion by *homo sapiens* is accorded great importance, see Maurice Bloch, 'Why religion is nothing special but is central', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 363 (2008), pp. 2055–61.

<sup>64</sup> William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, 'Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models', *Sociological Analysis* 40/4 (1979), p. 289.



and rational human beings. Moreover, Bainbridge and Stark indirectly contribute evidence for the thesis that religions will reflect (positively or negatively) the host culture in which they develop, which is an important pillar of the argument of this book regarding invented religions in the West since the 1950s.

The cognitive science approach has demonstrated that religion is a successful factor in evolutionary biology and that religious explanations (narratives attributing agency) are readily accepted as plausible. Late modern postindustrial society is exceedingly complex, with specialized knowledge needed to gain even a basic understanding of any scientific discipline. Pseudo-scientific theories are perennially popular, partly because authors like Erich von Däniken have an extensive readership that goes well beyond that of any academic archaeologist or scientist, but partly because there is a willingness to accept explanations such as ‘aliens created *homo sapiens*’ (rather than the Darwinian theory of evolution) or ‘all culture had its origins in ancient Egypt’ (rather than complicated theories about independent invention), because these explanations attribute cultural phenomena to specific agents, and are thus functionally equivalent to religious explanations.<sup>65</sup>

Discordianism, the Church of All Worlds and the Church of the SubGenius are all religions that both reflect the host culture in which they originated, and yet also stand in opposition to it. They are exercises of the creative imagination, that utilize science fiction, conspiracy theories, Beat-inspired versions of Zen, environmentalism, anti-corporatism and anti-consumerism, and anarchic, absurdist humour to voice critiques of the late modern Western cultural context and of traditional religion. Jediism, Matrixism and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster similarly feed on popular discourses and ‘lite’ versions of Eastern religions including Taoism and Buddhism, using humour, irony and memorable narratives to critique the culture of the new millennium. Arguably, they are less original than the three older invented religions, in that all three rely on a single ‘text’ (the *Star Wars* films, *The Matrix* trilogy, and the reshaping of creationism as Intelligent Design), and their creativity is best measured by the unexpected uses to which they put this foundational text. Jediism and Matrixism also engage less with the critique of Christianity, signalling the widespread postmodern acceptance that popular cultural forms are appropriate sources for values and self-spiritualities. *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* are both science fiction films, confirming the ongoing relevance of that genre to the imaginative longings of the contemporary West.<sup>66</sup> All six invented religions disseminate wonderful stories, filled with memorable agents, which would satisfy any seeker’s desire for an imaginative and satisfying explanation of the nature of reality and the purpose of human life, and would also fulfil any cognitive science criteria to be regarded as ‘religious’.

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<sup>65</sup> Carole M. Cusack, ‘New Religions and the Science of Archaeology: Mormons, the Goddess and Atlantis’, in James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer (eds.), *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science* (Leiden, 2010).

<sup>66</sup> Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyperreal Testament* (Brussels, 2005), pp. 57–69.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the social conditions in which religions come into existence and win converts from the mid-twentieth century were deregulated by the retreat of institutional Christianity and the creation of a religious marketplace that was facilitated by the secular nature of modern public spaces and discourses in the West. The related processes of consumerism and individualism predisposed individuals to experiment with new religions and to understand self-transformation as an ongoing process with no particular terminus. Identity and personality began to be constituted through the consumption of diverse products, and this was linked to the human imagination's capacity to create alternatives to everyday life. Popular cultural forms (particularly science fiction) contributed powerfully to the social understandings of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, and cross-pollinated with religion, resulting in new religions focused on extra-terrestrial beings and spaceships. Finally, some academic definitions of religion were reviewed, and it was argued that if religion is assessed naturalistically and cognitive science explanations of its function(s) are taken seriously, the fundamental building block of religion is narrative, in which unseen agents are asserted to have caused effects in the physical world. One consequence of these findings is that they render unfair and inadequate dismissals of invented religions that proudly declare their fictional status as 'fake religions', or as not religion at all. All the invented religions treated in this book promote interesting explanatory narratives that replicate the conditions of traditional religious forms (myths, sacred histories). The social process of world construction, as explained by Berger, involves the social creation of culture by humans, and this culture is then externalized and takes on an independent existence, and is then re-internalized by society. This process exactly matches the proposal of a fictional religious narrative by a particular person or group of people, which is circulated and acquires independent status, and is then accepted as 'true' by converts who internalize the narrative. This study will proceed by treating each of the six invented religions, in historical order of foundation, in terms of its narrative and the ways in which that narrative exists in a symbiotic relationship with popular cultural forms (chiefly, though not exclusively, science fiction) and in terms of its oppositional relationship to the mainstream culture of the late modern West.

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## Chapter 2

# Discordianism: Chaos is a Goddess

### Introduction

This chapter analyses Discordianism, a religion devoted to Eris, the Greek goddess of chaos (known as Discordia to the Romans). Discordianism was founded by Gregory Hill, aka Malaclypse the Younger and Kerry Wendell Thornley, aka Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst in 1957. Discordianism is now over 50 years old; it continues to attract new adherents, and has inspired other invented religions, chiefly the Church of the SubGenius, the subject of Chapter 4. Apart from Thornley and Hill, other significant Discordians include Bob Newport, Robert Anton Wilson, and Camden Benares. Discordianism spread through underground publishing and word of mouth in the 1960s, through the novels of Robert Anton Wilson (particularly the *Illuminatus! Trilogy*, co-authored by Robert Shea) in the 1970s, and through role-playing game clubs, science fiction fandom, and the internet from the 1980s to the present. This chapter details the history of the religion, supplies some biographical information on the founders, and offers an exposition of the teachings of Discordianism, including its debt to Greek mythology, its deep immersion in conspiracy theories (particularly the activities of the Bavarian Illuminati and the assassination of John F. Kennedy), and the extent to which it may be considered a form of modern Paganism, a substantially goddess-focused religion. Finally, an assessment of Discordianism as a ‘real’ religion is attempted; the role of humour, mockery and parody in religion is considered, along with Discordianism’s anti-authoritarian and libertarian tendencies. For Kerry Thornley, at least, it was ‘an American form of Zen Buddhism’.<sup>1</sup> The Zen understanding of enlightenment or *satori* as a moment of total awareness, and the Zen assertion that there is nothing to say, that intellectual efforts must give way to ‘non-symbolic actions and words’,<sup>2</sup> are here argued to be crucial to understanding the teachings of Discordianism and to place them appropriately within a religious context. Thus, the power of the Discordian narrative is acknowledged and related to established religious narratives, including Paganism and Buddhism.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Anton Wilson, ‘The Monster in the Labyrinth’, in Adam Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy: The Story of Kerry Thornley and How he Met Oswald and Inspired the Counterculture* (New York, 2003), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (Harmondsworth, 1980), p. 97.

## The Origin of Discordianism and the *Principia Discordia*

Kerry Wendell Thornley (1938–98) and Gregory Hill (1941–2000) met while they were students at California High School in East Whittier, California in 1956. They, and their friends Bob Newport and Bill Stephens, were freethinking ‘nerds’, devoted to *Mad* magazine, science fiction, poetry and philosophy. In 1957 Thornley and Greg Hill were in a bowling alley discussing some poems Thornley had written on the topic of order emerging from chaos. Hill demurred, arguing that there was no order, it was a projection of the human mind, that there was only chaos, for which the Greeks had a patron goddess, Eris. Although later scriptures present the revelation of Eris as a single, life-changing event, Bob Newport claims that Discordianism originated from many nights in several different 24-hour bowling alleys, and that the friends congregated in bowling alleys because they could drink alcohol there, despite being under age. The *Principia Discordia*, the scripture authored mainly by Greg Hill (with assistance from sundry other early Discordians) records their beverage of choice as coffee. The revelation of the goddess Eris is alleged to have been in the form of a vision of a chimpanzee, who showed Thornley and Hill a symbol (later revealed to be the Sacred Chao) that was similar to the *yin-yang*, with an apple inscribed *Kallisti* (‘to the prettiest one’) on one side of the divide and a pentagon on the other. A formal record of this origin myth was preserved when Hill published the first edition of the *Principia Discordia*, five photocopies of the original (allegedly made on the xerox machine of Jim Garrison, the New Orleans District Attorney best known for his investigation into the Kennedy assassination, which included the pursuit of Kerry Thornley), in 1965.<sup>3</sup>

By this stage Thornley and Hill had developed their various Discordian identities, with Thornley being known as Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst or Lord Omar, and Hill as Malaclypse the Younger or Mal-2 (Bob Newport was Dr Hypocrates Magoun). The tradition of taking a new ‘name’ when committing to a religion is traditional: the persecutor of Christians Saul became Paul, the apostle and evangelist, after his baptism into the Christian faith. This tradition is upheld among the invented religions, along with other traditions, such as the writing of scriptures and allocation of roles within the organization. *Principia Discordia* (called The Magnum Opiate of Malaclypse the Younger, and subtitled *How I Found Goddess and What I Did to Her When I Found Her*) was, at its inception, an anarchic ‘zine’, filled with hand-drawn illustrations, varied typefaces, reproductions of ‘found’ documents such as Western Union telegrams, scattered ‘official documents’ of the Discordian religion, raucous humour and a determinedly non-linear structure.

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<sup>3</sup> Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy*, pp. 57–62, p. 135. However, in the Gypsy Skripto interview with members of the Joshua Norton Cabal that is included in the fourth edition of *Principia Discordia*, Greg Hill disputes this, claiming it was a mimeograph machine, and the material copied was antecedent to *Principia Discordia*. See Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia: How I Found Goddess and What I Did to Her When I Found Her*, 5th edition (Austin TX, 1994), pp. 1–10 at p. 9.

'Zine publishing was a natural activity for freethinkers, innovators, rebels and outlaws; 'zines are handmade and independent, reject the 'brand' of professional publication, and 'form networks and forge communities around diverse identities and interests'.<sup>4</sup> Yet the contents of the *Principia* were largely philosophically consistent, despite the fact that the official Discordian belief is that it is impossible to hold a consistent philosophical position.

The teachings of Discordianism are complex and difficult to expound in an ordered fashion, in part because *Principia Discordia* is not a sustained narrative, but rather a series of random vignettes. According to *Principia Discordia*, the Goddess Eris appeared to Omar and Mal-2 five nights after the vision of the chimpanzee showed them the Sacred Chao. Her message was clear and unambiguous:

I have come to tell you that you are free. Many ages ago, My consciousness left man, that he might develop himself. I return to find this development approaching completion, but hindered by fear and by misunderstanding.

You have built for yourselves psychic suits of armor and clad in them, your vision is restricted, your movements are clumsy and painful, your skin is bruised, and your spirit is broiled in the sun.

I am chaos. I am the substance from which your artists and scientists build rhythms. I am the spirit with which your children and clowns laugh in happy anarchy. I am chaos. I am alive and I tell you that you are free.<sup>5</sup>

Omar and Mal-2 claimed to have laughed till they wept, then 'declared themselves to be a society of Discordia, what ever that may turn out to be'.<sup>6</sup> Eris herself is said to be the daughter of Void, and the twin sister of Aneris. Eris is fecund and brings things into being, whereas Aneris is sterile and makes Eris' progeny become non-existent. Eris created order, which caused her to observe disorder (which had until then escaped her notice as all was chaos); she then devised contests between the two. Void brought forth a brother for Eris and Aneris, Spirituality, and declared that rather than be made non-existent by Aneris, if Spirituality ceased to be he had to be reabsorbed into Void. This is distilled into a teaching about the ultimate fate of humans; 'so it shall be that non-existence shall take us back from existence and that nameless spirituality shall return to Void, like a tired child home from a very wild circus'.<sup>7</sup>

Two other significant myths are featured in *Principia Discordia*. The first is that of the 'Original Snub', which explains the function of Eris' golden apple of discord, with its 'to the prettiest one' inscription. This myth is part of a complex of stories that form the background to the Trojan War in Greek and Latin sources.

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Duncombe, *Notes From the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London and New York, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>6</sup> Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia*, p. 58.

Eris arrived at the wedding of the sea-nymph Thetis and the hero Peleus to protest the couple's failure to invite her. She then hurled the apple among the guests and rioting broke out, as the goddesses argued over who should be its recipient. The apple was eventually awarded to Aphrodite (Venus), the goddess of love and beauty, to the chagrin of her rivals Athena and Hera. The judge was the Trojan prince Paris.<sup>8</sup> Aphrodite promised Paris the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Sparta, as his reward if he gave it to her. The Trojan War resulted when Helen's husband Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon invaded Troy to reclaim Helen; ten years of bloodshed ensued, testimony to Eris' powers. The Discordian version of the tale has Eris 'joyously partake of a hot dog' after she leaves the wedding, and concludes 'and so we suffer because of the Original Snub. And so a Discordian is to partake of No Hot Dog Buns. Do you believe that?'<sup>9</sup>

The second myth is that of the 'Curse of Greyface', which deals with human history and is a theodicy, in that it explains the origin of humanity's current predicament. This myth tells of a 'malcontented hunchbrain' called Greyface, who in 1166 BCE preached that humour and play were in contravention of Serious Order, the true state of reality. Greyface and his followers 'were known even to destroy other living beings whose ways of life differed from their own', resulting in humanity 'suffering from a psychological and spiritual imbalance', which is called the Curse of Greyface.<sup>10</sup> The combined impact of these myths is that humanity is in need of liberation. Eris' actions in separating order and chaos, the violent legacy of the Trojan War, and the repressive negativity of Greyface constantly menace humanity's freedom. *Principia Discordia* suggests humorous ways to dispel these negative conditions; for example, the Turkey Curse creates eristic vibrations that disrupt the Curse of Greyface, which operates in an aneristic (anti-life, repressively ordered) environment. The Turkey Curse involves waving one's arms and chanting 'GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE, GOBBLE. The results will be instantly apparent'.<sup>11</sup> It appears undeniable that dancing around making turkey noises would have the effect of lightening the mood of a person oppressed by excessive seriousness and alienated from play.

As Mal-2 and Omar delved deeper into the nature of Eris, they realized that the Sacred Chao symbol (called the Hodge-Podge of the Erisians) encapsulated the opposition between the Aneristic and Eristic Principles. These are both essentially illusions; the Aneristic Principle is apparent order and the Eristic Principle is apparent disorder. For Discordians, neither actually exists, but both are mental constructs, enabling humans to cope with reality, which is pure chaos. The golden apple of Eris refers to the Greek myth discussed above; the pentagon has many

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<sup>8</sup> A.R. Littlewood, 'The Symbolism of the Apple in Greek and Roman Literature', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 72 (1968), pp. 149–51.

<sup>9</sup> Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>10</sup> Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia*, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> Malaclypse the Younger and Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst, *Discordia: Hail Eris, Goddess of Chaos and Confusion* (Berkeley, 2006), p. 175.

potential meanings as a symbol of apparent order (including the fact that The Pentagon is the military headquarters of the United States). A five-sided figure, it clearly is related to the Law of Fives, which is that ‘all things happen in fives, or are divisible by or are multiples of five ... [and] the Law of Fives is never wrong’.<sup>12</sup> This law is the reason 23 is a significant number for Discordians, as the sum of its two component numerals equals five. The Law of Fives may be intended to reflect aspects of certain religions; Islam has five ‘pillars’ that the faithful must observe, and in Chinese religion there are five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal and water) that recur in many contexts, including traditional medicine, cosmology and martial arts.<sup>13</sup> The Law of Fives results in 23 being a number of special significance for Discordians, as  $2 + 3 = 5$ .

The organizational structure of Discordianism as in the *Principia* is chaotic. Malaclypse the Younger occupied the position of Polyfather of the religion. In the early years of the movement membership was usually conferred by either Mal-2 or Omar. The broadest category of membership is of the ‘Discordian Society’, of which is noted, ‘the Discordian Society has no definition’.<sup>14</sup> There are two divisions within Discordianism; the Paratheo-Anametamystikhhood of Eris Esoteric (POEE), which has five degrees of initiation and was founded by Mal-2, and the Erisian Liberation Front (ELF), which was ‘Omar’s sect’. Paratheo-Anametamystikhhood can be translated as ‘equivalent deity, reversing beyond mystique’, and refers to the Discordian tenet that all religions are equally true.<sup>15</sup> This disunity was essential, as a popular motto is ‘We Discordians Shall Stick Apart’.<sup>16</sup> Members are encouraged to found their own sects, and anyone who does so becomes an *Episkopos* (Greek for ‘overseer’ and cognate with the English word ‘bishop’). Later, all members of Discordianism were affirmed to be popes, and to be a member one had only to declare oneself to be one. Further, as every human being on Earth is a member and a pope, Discordianism is ‘the fastest growing religion in all creation (Discordians grow at the exact same rate as the population)’.<sup>17</sup> Although POEE has been described as a ‘non-prophet irreligious disorganization’ and Discordianism as ‘an anarchist’s paradise’,<sup>18</sup> there are structures through which members can get together and practise the tenets of the religion. Discordian parishes are called

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<sup>12</sup> Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia*, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> D.M. Pachuta, ‘Chinese Medicine: The Law of Five Elements’, in A.A. Sheikh and K.S. Sheikh (eds), *Eastern and Western Approaches to Healing: Ancient Wisdom and Modern Knowledge* (New York, 1993), pp. 64–90.

<sup>14</sup> Malaclypse the Younger and Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst, *Discordia: Hail Eris Goddess of Chaos and Confusion*, p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> Malaclypse the Younger and Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst, *Discordia*, p. 69.

<sup>16</sup> Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, 2nd edition (Boston, 1986), p. 332.

<sup>17</sup> David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2005), p. 199.

<sup>18</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 332.



‘cabals’ (a term derived from *kabbalah*, the system of Jewish mysticism). It is not necessary to belong to a cabal, but in practice members often do. In the early twenty-first century the favoured meeting place of Discordians is on the internet, and online cabals are popular.<sup>19</sup>

In 1969 Mal-2 founded the Joshua Norton Cabal, named for a homeless San Francisco resident who declared himself Emperor of the United States and protector of Mexico. Joshua Abraham Norton (1819–80) was born in England and became a wealthy rice merchant in San Francisco. In the mid-1850s he went bankrupt, and emerged a few years later, clearly suffering from delusions, to proclaim his imperial status. He roamed the streets dressed in military uniform, and was much loved by the people of San Francisco. Restaurants gave Norton free meals and accepted the currency he issued; theatres reserved him seats for new productions; Mark Twain wrote an epitaph for his dog Lazarus in 1863; and 20,000 mourners attended his funeral. He was politically astute and recognized the threat of civil war between the Union and the Confederacy in 1860, and in 1869

he showed uncanny foresight when he ordered a bridge built across the San Francisco Bay. People laughed at his ridiculous proposal, but about sixty years later the Oakland-San Francisco Bay Bridge became a reality. Today a plaque honors the Emperor’s wisdom: ‘Pause traveler, and be grateful to Norton I ... whose prophetic wisdom conceived and decreed the bridging of San Francisco Bay ...’<sup>20</sup>

As this description makes clear, Joshua Norton was a natural fit with Discordianism, and he is honoured as a saint within the movement for his absolute disregard for external reality and received wisdom, and his commitment to living an authentic life according to his truth. This influential early cabal sparked the formation of other Discordian cabals that would bounce ideas around between each other, referring back constantly to Mal-2.

Several other Discordian doctrines deserve brief consideration. The received tale of the writing of *Principia Discordia* claims that earlier scriptures, most notably the *Honest Book of Truth* (HBT) are embedded in it. This book was revealed to Omar, in a tale that echoes elements of Joseph Smith’s discovery of the gold plates of the *Book of Mormon*, and is described as the Erisian Bible. Teachings that originate in the *Honest Book of Truth* are regarded as ‘dogma’, whereas those found generally in the *Principia* or other Discordian writings are

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<sup>19</sup> Laurel Narizny, ‘Ha Ha Only Serious: A Preliminary Study of Joke Religions’, unpublished Bachelor of Arts Honours thesis (University of Oregon, 2009), p. 31, at <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/-1794/9336/Thesis%20Laurel%20Narizny.pdf?sequence=1>, accessed 19 August 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Patricia E. Carr, ‘Emperor Norton I: The benevolent dictator beloved and honored by San Franciscans to this day’, *American History Illustrated* 10 (July 1975), pp. 14–20 at [www.molossia.org/norton.html](http://www.molossia.org/norton.html), accessed 17 August 2009.

known as ‘catma’. If Discordianism has a creed, it is the Pentabarf, which has five principles:

1. There is no Goddess but Goddess and She is Your Goddess. There is no Erisian Movement but The Erisian Movement and it is The Erisian Movement. And every Golden Apple Corps is the beloved home of a Golden Worm.
2. A Discordian Shall Always use the Official Discordian Document Numbering System.
3. A Discordian is required to, the first Friday after his illumination, Go Off Alone and Partake Joyously of a Hot Dog; this Devotive Ceremony to Remonstrate against the popular Paganisms of the Day: of Roman Catholic Christendom (no meat on Friday), of Judaism (no meat of Pork), of Hindic Peoples (no meat of Beef), of Buddhists (no meat of animal), and of Discordians (no Hot Dog Buns).
4. A Discordian shall Partake of No Hot Dog Buns, for Such was the Solace of Our Goddess when She was Confronted with The Original Snub.
5. A Discordian is Prohibited of Believing What he reads.<sup>21</sup>

The first of these recalls the *Shahada*, the profession of faith that is the first pillar of Islam. The third parodies the repressive dietary habits of a number of religions, including Discordianism itself (why refrain from eating the hot dog bun, when Discordianism requires nothing from members?) The fifth principle reinforces the scepticism of the Erisian attitude to truth; in *Principia Discordia* Mal-2 says everything is true. When he affirms that this includes false things, he is asked how that works. His response is ‘I don’t know, man. I didn’t do it’.<sup>22</sup> This is an absurd position to hold, but it is logical in view of Discordianism’s trenchant rejection of the dualism of order and disorder, and its assertion of the ultimate unity of all in chaos. The assertion that all religions are true (which is particularly apparent in some of the titles Omar applies to himself, such as Master Pastor of the Church Invisible of the Laughing Christ and Ho Chi Zen) is also the result of Discordianism’s non-dualist, ultimately monistic view of reality in which all is reducible to chaos. This view is harmonious with many Eastern religions that are pantheist and mystical in orientation, and Omar was deeply immersed in Buddhism for much of his life.

*Principia Discordia* gives details of the five pioneering Discordian Apostles. They are: Hung Mung (who first drew the Sacred Chao); Dr Van Van Mojo (a master of Hoodoo and Vexes); Sri Syadasti (whose full name means ‘all affirmations are true in some sense, false in some sense, meaningless in some sense, true and false in some sense, true and meaningless in some sense, false and

<sup>21</sup> Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia*, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Malaclypse the Younger and Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst, *Discordia: Hail Eris Goddess of Chaos and Confusion*, p. 34.

meaningless in some sense, and true and false and meaningless in some sense’);<sup>23</sup> Zarathud the Incurable (a hermit of medieval Europe); and Malaclypse the Elder (a wandering wise man who carried a sign that said ‘Dumb’ but was misunderstood as ‘Doom’, which earned him the status of prophet). These invented comic characters emphasize the role of accident and circumstance in the formation of a tradition. There is also a lengthy list of Discordian saints (for example, Saint Gulik, who is a cockroach) and religious feast days are assigned to each apostle and saint. Additionally, Discordians are often told to consult their pineal gland. The pineal gland is small gland located deep in the brain, which produces melatonin as part of the endocrine system. It has long been associated with esoteric religion and is often referred to as the ‘third eye’.<sup>24</sup>

Another significant element in the mythology of Discordianism is the Bavarian Illuminati, an eighteenth-century secret society founded by Adam Weishaupt, who was professor of Canon Law at the University of Ingolstadt, Bavaria. This was a Catholic region where there was strong resistance to the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Weishaupt intended the Illuminati to parallel Freemasonry, and the society was ‘launched on 1 May 1776, with five members’.<sup>25</sup> Weishaupt had ambitious plans; there were to be three levels of initiation (Novice, Minerval, and Illuminated Minerval) with more to be developed over time. His members were wealthy young men and the organization promised to deliver an intellectual revolution. However, it amounted to very little until Baron Adolf Franz Friedrich Knigge, who was a Mason, joined in 1780. Under his guidance higher levels were instituted, membership reached the thousands and the Illuminati became allied with Freemasonry. This ended in 1784 when the order was suppressed. Although Weishaupt and Knigge were not arrested, others were,

including one Xavier Zwack, a disgraced member whose trove of letters and documents included plans for creating a secret organization for women, essays defending atheism and suicide, claims that the Illuminati had the power of life and death over their members, and information on secret ink, counterfeiting, poison, and even abortion.<sup>26</sup>

These papers were the basis of the legend that the Illuminati were an all-powerful secret society, set on world domination. Over the centuries the Illuminati have been accused of causing the Revolution in France, and being involved with the Republicans during the lead-up to Thomas Jefferson’s inauguration as President in 1801, among other dark deeds. Pasley notes that after 1800 the Illuminati

<sup>23</sup> Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia*, pp. 39–40.

<sup>24</sup> C.E. Quin, ‘The Soul and the Pneuma in the Function of the Nervous System After Galen’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 87 (July 1994), p. 394.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey L. Pasley, ‘Illuminati’, in Peter Knight (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Denver, Oxford, 2003), p. 335.

<sup>26</sup> Pasley, ‘Illuminati’, p. 336.

conspiracy was never invoked in a mainstream context, but that many groups still ‘assign a major role to the Illuminati as progenitors or allies of whatever group each writer fears’. Further, the Illuminati have been embraced by the 1960s counterculture, sometimes as a positive force, ‘a secret network of enlightened individuals who might be able to spread hidden knowledge and bring about sweeping ... change’.<sup>27</sup> The Bavarian Illuminati, and other secret orders like the Assassins (Hashashim) are mentioned in the *Principia*, though the development of that strand of Discordian thought was greatly accelerated by the publication in 1975 of the *Illuminatus! Trilogy* by Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea. A key term, *fnord*, which represents disinformation spread by a worldwide conspiracy, also appears in the *Principia Discordia*, but is much amplified in meaning by Wilson and Shea, for whom ‘seeing the fnords’ is a quality of the enlightened characters in the novels.<sup>28</sup>

It remains to note that the main reason *Principia Discordia* has become a subcultural classic and is now published in several print versions and online (apart from the fact that Mal-2 and Omar did not copyright it, wishing it to be freely available to all under what they called ‘Kopyleft’) is that it is original, clever and very funny. It is true that some of the laughs are cheap, though the news headline ‘Dyslexic Christian sells soul to Santa’ can hardly fail to raise a smile. Reading Part Five, ‘The Golden Secret’, in which it is asserted that the mastery of nonsense is the key to salvation, ‘we propose that man develop his innate love for disorder, and play with the Goddess Eris. And we know that it is a joyful play, and that thereby CAN BE REVOKED THE CURSE OF GREYFACE’,<sup>29</sup> reveals another reason for the book’s popularity. Admittedly, Eris is an unreliable goddess, but she desires and facilitates freedom. This freedom is to be brought to people through exposing them to the unexpected, the absurd and the hilarious. Laughter is liberating, as is flouting social norms and career expectations in order to pursue dreams.

## The Prankster and the Conspiracy

Robert Anton (Bob) Wilson met Greg Hill and Kerry Thornley in 1967, a decade after they founded Discordianism. Both Mal-2 and Omar had changed radically during that time, in part due to the experience that Omar had of being a suspect in the Kennedy assassination (as Kerry Thornley, one-time member of the Marines and acquaintance of Lee Harvey Oswald). Thornley had joined the Marines in 1959 after dropping out of his journalism studies at University of Southern California. At that time he felt his politics were properly described as right-wing, but while at El Toro Marine Base near Santa Ana, California he met Lee Harvey Oswald, who

<sup>27</sup> Pasley, ‘Illuminati’, p. 339.

<sup>28</sup> Eric Wagner, *An Insider’s Guide to Robert Anton Wilson* (Tempe AZ, 2004), pp. 68–9.

<sup>29</sup> Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia*, p. 74.

was studying Russian and openly admired the USSR. The two became friendly, though Thornley later told the Warren Commission that '[y]ou might say I was [Oswald's] best buddy, but I don't think he had any close friends. I was a close acquaintance'.<sup>30</sup> Oswald introduced him to George Orwell's *1984*, which became a favourite novel, but the two men had fallen out by the time Thornley was sent to Atsugi in Japan, in June 1959. They were acquainted for just three months. While in Japan Thornley's politics shifted towards the left. He was reluctantly promoted to corporal and got a security clearance to work on new radar equipment. In October 1959 Thornley heard that Oswald had defected to Russia. This gave him a new plotline for *The Idle Warriors*, a novel he was working on at the time.

He became a self-styled Marxist, a phase which lasted only till August 1960, when on his way back to the United States he read Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, and was converted to Objectivism. He later wrote that he had become disillusioned with American foreign policy and that

what had driven me to Marxism was simply that, as a political philosophy, it was the only thing I could find without a blatantly mystical base ... So I was about to look up a friend in San Francisco who belonged to the Communist Party and ask him what I could do to speed up the revolution, when I picked up *Atlas Shrugged* ... I knew I'd happened on a genius. It took me about two years to work out and adjust to my new philosophy, but I knew it'd be worth it. It is.<sup>31</sup>

Margot Adler has commented on the appeal of Ayn Rand to intelligent, disaffected youth in the context of her influence on Tim Zell and Richard Lance Christie, the founders of the Church of All Worlds, the subject of Chapter 3. Rand's ideas were intensely romantic and her characters were larger than life, and in pursuit of heroic goals. For many students 'it was easy to be swept up by the intense struggles of Rand's artists and creators ... battling government and bureaucracy'.<sup>32</sup> Rand's libertarian, technological outlook was particularly appealing to those who were rebelling against authority, whether religious, familial or institutional. Back in Whittier after his discharge from the navy, Thornley grew a full beard, signalling his nonconformity, and he and Hill decided to move to New Orleans in early 1961, after local police threatened to arrest them for being on the streets in the early hours of the morning.

The most significant event in Kerry Thornley's life was the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dealey Plaza, Dallas Texas, on Friday 22 November 1963 at 12.30 pm. On the same day, Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested for the crime and for the murders of two policemen. He admitted killing the police but denied the Kennedy assassination. He died two days later, shot by Jack Ruby, the owner

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<sup>30</sup> Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy*, p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy*, pp. 42–3.

<sup>32</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 287.

of a local nightclub.<sup>33</sup> Kennedy's death is the subject of the most wide-ranging conspiracy theories in American history, and bitter disputes characterize the relationship of conspiracy theorists and those who accept the findings of the Warren Commission, who are usually referred to as 'loyalists'. Thornley was working as a waiter in New Orleans, and expressed personal pleasure at the assassination of the President. Two days later he was grieved to hear of Oswald's death, believing him to be innocent. At this time, Thornley had alienated many of his friends due to his free expression of radical politics, and he reconnected with Greg Hill to develop the ideas of Discordianism further. In the spring of 1964 Thornley testified concerning his knowledge of Oswald to the Warren Commission. In 1964 he returned to southern California with his girlfriend Cara Leach, to become editor of a pioneering libertarian newsletter, *The Innovator*. He had become disillusioned with Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism and became an anarchist. In 1965, he and Leach married, his book *Oswald* was published, and the first edition of *Principia Discordia* appeared.<sup>34</sup>

The metamorphosis of Discordianism into a form of modern Paganism was effected during the movement's second decade, between 1967 and 1977. In 1966 Thornley, who was in pursuit of 'sex, drugs and treason' joined Kerista, a polyamorous commune in southern California, founded in the early 1960s by John Presmont, who was known as 'Brother Jud'.<sup>35</sup> Margot Adler credits Thornley with the first use of the term 'Pagan' to describe ancient and modern nature religions. In a 1966 article he argued that:

Kerista is a religion and the mood of Kerista is one of holiness, Do not, however, look for a profusion of rituals, dogmas, doctrines and scriptures. Kerista is too sacred for that. It is more akin to the religions of the East and, also, the so-called pagan religions of the pre-Christian West. Its fount of being is the religious experience and ... Kerista, like those religions of olden times, is life affirming.<sup>36</sup>

Kerista's polyamorous sexual practice was influenced, as was that of the Church of All Worlds, by Robert A. Heinlein's (1907–88) science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) in which the Martian-raised human Valentine Michael Smith founded the Church of All Worlds, preached sexual freedom and the truth of all religions, and is martyred by narrow-minded people who are not ready for freedom.<sup>37</sup> In October 1966 Heinlein wrote to his publisher and friend Lurton Blassingame that he had been offered \$100 to address the Los Angeles branch

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<sup>33</sup> James D. Perry, 'Kennedy, John F., Assassination of', in Knight (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories in American History*, p. 383.

<sup>34</sup> Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy*, pp. 64–9.

<sup>35</sup> Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy*, pp. 70–72.

<sup>36</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 294.

<sup>37</sup> Robert A. Heinlein, *Stranger in A Strange Land* (London, 1987 [1961]).

of Kerista, which he called as a ‘far-out cult’, because it considered him ‘the “New Testament” – and compulsory reading’.<sup>38</sup> He turned down the invitation. It is interesting to speculate on these early Pagan connections between Kerista, the Church of All Worlds, and Discordianism, and to ask whether it was Kerry Thornley who extended that invitation to Heinlein, as he and his wife Cara were living in Watts, in South Los Angeles (a neighbourhood famed for the 1965 race riots which lasted for six days) at the time, and he was a lifelong science fiction fan.

The arrival of Bob Wilson (1932–2007) on the Discordian scene gave further impetus to the Paganization of the movement. He was raised a Catholic in New York and studied engineering and mathematics at New York University. Wilson was also a formidable autodidact, who was passionate about literature (particularly Ezra Pound, William Burroughs and James Joyce, on whom he wrote and lectured prolifically) and music. He was a libertarian, agnostic, scientist, futurist and essayist on a vast range of topics. He had married Arlen Riley (1925–99), a freelance writer, in 1958 and in 1965 he began working for *Playboy* as an editor. Wilson was interested in almost everything, and despite his agnosticism and commitment to science was particularly attracted to religious and mystical figures with fringe theories about the nature of reality, including psychologist Wilhelm Reich, architect and visionary Buckminster Fuller, occultist Aleister Crowley, researcher into anomalous phenomena Charles Fort, and psychedelics advocate, Timothy Leary (who was a personal friend of Wilson). Like Robert A. Heinlein, another writer of speculative fiction, he admired the theories of Alfred Korzybski (1879–1950), who wrote *Science and Sanity* (1933) and devised the method of linguistic analysis called General Semantics.<sup>39</sup> In 1966 Thornley sent an issue of *The Innovator* called ‘Postman Against the State’, which presented the case that privately-run postal systems over the centuries had been more efficient than government postal systems, to *Playboy*, where it came to Wilson’s attention. When he met Hill and Thornley in 1967 the Discordian worldview appealed profoundly to him. He was familiar with the Beat version of Zen, and had interviewed Alan Watts, the popularizer of Zen, for the freethought magazine *The Realist*. Watts had noted affinities between Zen and General Semantics and had argued that Zen was dangerous in the same way that freedom was dangerous.<sup>40</sup> In the 1970s, Wilson would immerse himself in the *mythos* of the Bavarian Illuminati, which would culminate in the publication of the *Illuminatus! Trilogy* in 1975. Kerry Thornley would immerse himself in Zen, after meeting Korean War veteran Camden Benares (born John Overton) at University of California, Berkeley in the mid-1960s. Thornley took the name Ho

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<sup>38</sup> Robert A. Heinlein, *Grumbles from the Grave*, Virginia Heinlein (ed.) (New York, 1989), p. 236.

<sup>39</sup> Wagner, *An Insider’s Guide to Robert Anton Wilson*, pp. 78–9.

<sup>40</sup> Alan Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen* (San Francisco, 1959), p. 3, p. 15.

Chi Zen, and developed the political philosophy Zenarchy (which, according to Thornley, is the social order than arises from meditation).<sup>41</sup>

While Wilson was researching the Illuminati another conspiracy theory was gaining ground. The Warren Commission had released its report in September 1964, and in the following years there was growing concern about the swiftness with which it had been completed, and its conclusion that ‘Oswald alone killed Kennedy, that his motives were frustration and personal failure, that he had no connection to the U.S. or foreign governments, and that he had no connection to Ruby’.<sup>42</sup> Many people witnessed things in Dealey Plaza that appeared to be incompatible with the event sequence outlined by the Warren Commission, and there were reasons to believe that the Kennedy autopsy was incompetently conducted. Critics also were sceptical that Oswald had no ties to the USSR or other Communist governments, or to United States federal agencies. After meeting with David Lifton, an outspoken critic of the Warren Commission, Kerry Thornley reneged on the position he had taken in *Oswald* (1965) and began openly to question the Commission’s findings. In 1967, the Summer of Love, Thornley became a vocal critic of the Vietnam War, and (in between his pursuit of the ultimate drug high), participated in various ‘happenings’ and decided to drop out by finding some cheap or free accommodation in which to live. This did not eventuate, but he and Cara moved to Tampa, Florida, late in that year.

Meanwhile Jim Garrison was fundraising to mount an investigation into the Kennedy assassination, with the assistance of Warren Commission critic David Lifton. What Garrison was attempting to prove was that there was a New Orleans-based conspiracy and that in September 1963 ‘Kerry Thornley was closely associated with Lee Oswald in New Orleans’.<sup>43</sup> Garrison suspected Thornley of being one of a number of Oswald ‘lookalikes’.<sup>44</sup> On 8 February 1968 Thornley made a deposition at the New Orleans District Attorney’s Office. He wrote to Hill on 17 February, ‘I’m up to my ass in a cheap spy novel. And right now that means I am over my head’.<sup>45</sup> During his investigation, Jim Garrison got exposure on the Johnny Carson show, and in *Playboy*. Adam Gorightly argues that during the Garrison investigation Thornley deliberately issued announcements claiming he was an agent of the Bavarian Illuminati, simply to ‘mindfuck’ Garrison.<sup>46</sup> Discordianism developed the idea of ‘Operation Mindfuck’ or OM, in 1968. It was

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<sup>41</sup> Kerry Thornley, *Zenarchy* (IllumiNet Press, 1991), at <http://www.mindcontrolforums.com/hambone/zenarchy.html>, accessed 19 August 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Perry, ‘Kennedy, John F., Assassination of’, p. 384.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy*, p. 91.

<sup>44</sup> Nick Gerlich notes that it is not surprising that ‘many people swore they saw Oswald in a variety of locations and in the company of a number of shady characters after they had seen Oswald in the news following the assassination’, ‘Tragedy on Elm Street: Facts and Fictions in the JFK Assassination’, *Skeptic* 6/4 (1998), p. 46.

<sup>45</sup> Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy*, p. 97.

<sup>46</sup> Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy*, p. 136.



a collaborative project between Thornley and Wilson, and was a ‘Marx Brothers version of Zen’, a technique to mess with people’s perceived realities (through civil disobedience, culture jamming, vandalism and performance art, among other techniques) in order to bring about guerrilla enlightenment.<sup>47</sup>

Many examples of such mindfucks exist in the archives of Discordianism. Members carried business cards stating ‘There is no Friend Anywhere’ and the opposite theme, ‘There is no Enemy Anywhere’, to distribute to the unaware.<sup>48</sup> Bob Wilson, using his Discordian name Mordecai the Foul (or simply Mord), started the John Dillinger Died For You Society. At the same time, the Yippies (from YIP, Youth International Party), a countercultural movement founded at a party on 31 December 1967 by Abbie Hoffman, Anita Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Nancy Kurshan and Paul Krassner, employed similar techniques, though with political rather than religio-spiritual motives. In 1968 the Yippies proposed a Festival of Life to counter the Democratic National Convention. Police repression shut down their more ambitious plans, but they ‘succeeded in nominating a pig, “Pigasus”, for president, providing a brief rock concert, causing an LSD scare by threatening to lace the Chicago water supply with the drug, and providing movement workshops on guerrilla theater and protest maneuvers’.<sup>49</sup> It can be argued that in the United States conspiracy theories are particularly well-received, possibly because of the high levels of religious faith found there, and the apocalyptic themes of these religions. For example, the Puritan Salem witch trials asserted a conspiracy between witches and Satan, mainstream American society accused Freemasons, Mormons and Catholics of conspiring against its country, abolitionists suspected advocates of slavery of a conspiracy, and in the twentieth century the McCarthy era pursued Communists, socialists and anyone with left-wing sympathies as un-American, while books about the impending apocalypse like Hal Lindsay and Carole C. Carlson’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) were bestsellers.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps most relevant to the argument of this book is the notion that a conspiracy (from the Latin *conspirare*, to breathe together) need not involve ‘deliberate agency ... that certain states of affairs ... are not merely the result of chance but are the perhaps unintended consequences of a series of attitudes and ways of behaving that together amount to something that may as well have been a conspiracy’.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy*, p. 137. I owe the term ‘guerrilla enlightenment’ to Alex Norman. He contends that the central message of Thornley’s version of Discordianism was that people must be liberated, brought to *satori*, whether they desired to be or not.

<sup>48</sup> Wagner, *An Insider’s Guide to Robert Anton Wilson*, p. 14.

<sup>49</sup> Nicholas Turse, ‘Yippies’, in Knight (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories in American History*, p. 752. All these activities are referenced in the *Illuminatus! Trilogy*.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Alan Goldberg, ‘Conspiracy Theories in America’, in Knight (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories in American History*, pp. 1–13.

<sup>51</sup> Peter Knight, ‘Making Sense of Conspiracy Theories’, in Knight (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories in American History*, pp. 15–16.

This is clearly the case with Discordianism; and this situation generates paranoia, when, as Wilson and Shea wrote, ‘no Discordian apostle knows for sure who is or who is not involved in any phase of Operation Mindfuck’.<sup>52</sup>

Garrison’s pursuit of Kerry Thornley continued into the 1970s. Thornley was then immersed in Zenarchy and had separated from his wife Cara in 1971. While he and Camden Benares became involved in the Sexual Freedom League, Greg Hill and Bob Newport started a film theatre in Monte Rio, California. These activities both fell apart in 1973. Hill’s marriage broke up and Thornley found himself oppressed by a ‘torrent of memories’ concerning Gary Kirstein (aka Brother-in-Law), a companion of his during the period he lived in New Orleans. Thornley, who by 1975 was unravelling psychologically, became certain that Kirstein was involved in Kennedy’s assassination.

The first edition of Margot Adler’s pioneering study of American pagans, *Drawing Down the Moon*, was published in 1979, and when she interviewed Greg Hill he was frank about the progress of the religion. He had been an atheist in the 1950s and Discordianism began as a joke. But in the mid-1970s, the situation had changed and he was happy to affirm that:

Eris is an authentic goddess ... In the beginning I saw myself as a cosmic clown. I characterized myself as Malaclypse the Younger. But if you do this type of thing well enough, it starts to work. In due time the polarities between atheism and theism become absurd. The engagement was transcendent. And when you transcend one, you transcend the other. I started out with the idea that all gods are an illusion. By the end I had learned that it’s *up to you* to decide whether gods exist, and if you take a goddess of confusion seriously, it will send you through as profound and valid a metaphysical trip as taking a god like Yahweh seriously. The trip will be different, but they will both be transcendental.<sup>53</sup>

This is the profession of faith of a man who has accepted that his spiritual journey has taken him from doubt to belief, of some sort. Although Hill was to die a recluse, separated from his fellow Discordians by grief and alcoholism, in his late thirties he was serene in his Paganism. By contrast, Kerry Thornley was suffering from the activities of the goddess of chaos; Hill told Adler that he had recently said, ‘You know, if I had realized that all of this was going to come *true*, I would have chosen Venus’.<sup>54</sup> This statement makes it clear that he underwent the same journey from doubt to faith, but that he was troubled by the nature of the deity he had committed to. A man of prodigious sexual appetites, it occurred to him that the voluptuous Venus might have been a more benevolent choice.

In 1975 Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea (1933–94) ushered in the next era of Discordian missionizing with the publication of their 800-page *Illuminatus!*

<sup>52</sup> Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy*, pp. 139–40.

<sup>53</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 335.

<sup>54</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 336.

*Trilogy*. It was initially published as three separate novels; *The Eye in the Pyramid*, *The Golden Apple* and *Leviathan*. In 1988 this trilogy was the highest selling paperback science fiction novel in the United States. It ‘won the 1986 Prometheus Hall of Fame Award and was adapted into a ten-hour rock opera at London’s National Theatre’.<sup>55</sup> The novel has a complex non-chronological structure and its writing style(s) parody sundry modernist authors. The narrative concerns the plot by the Illuminati to destroy the world. New York cop Saul Goodman is investigating the disappearance of Joseph Malik, a magazine editor who was on the track of the Illuminati. Malik:

turns out to be working with John Dillinger ... for the justified Ancients of Mummu (JAMs), a Discordian group fighting the Illuminati. Joining the JAMs ... Goodman – as part of his enlightenment – learns to perceive fnords, words people are brainwashed not to see, which are inserted in texts to manipulate negative responses.<sup>56</sup>

The Kennedy assassination is another important storyline, with journalist George Dorn investigating and being rescued by the Legion of Dynamic Discord, which is led by Hagbard Celine (who turns out to be a double agent, in a very OM way, in that he is also one of the five leaders of the Illuminati, and brings about the deaths of Wolfgang, Winifred, Werner and Wilhelm Saure, the rock band known as the American Medical Association, who are the other four). The novel is filled with esoteric and popular cultural motifs; Atlantis, the Knights Templar, Marilyn Monroe, psychic powers, supercomputers, Satanism, Carl Jung, and the defeat of the Illuminati by the incarnate Eris at a rock concert, Woodstock Europa, at Ingolstadt in 1976. Marcus LiBrizzi argues that while it begins as a detective story, it ‘becomes science fiction, and finally a love story between a supercomputer and a sea monster’, the *Leviathan*.<sup>57</sup> Quotations from *Principia Discordia* appear throughout the novel, and Discordian symbols including the Sacred Chao play a significant role. The Law of Fives is constantly referred to (quite apart from not having died, John Dillinger is one of five brothers, there are five leaders of the Illuminati and so on), and the book’s status as a metafiction is acknowledged in *Leviathan* when Joe Malik announces to Hagbard ‘I’ve got it! We’re in a book’.<sup>58</sup> Despite its labyrinthine non-linear plot, the *Illuminatus! Trilogy* is immensely readable, well-written and enjoyable, punctuated by surreal sex scenes, high adventure, and political, artistic, historical and other cultural references that

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<sup>55</sup> Marcus LiBrizzi, ‘The *Illuminatus! Trilogy*’, in Knight (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories in American History*, p. 339.

<sup>56</sup> LiBrizzi, ‘The *Illuminatus! Trilogy*’, p. 340.

<sup>57</sup> LiBrizzi, ‘The *Illuminatus! Trilogy*’, p. 341.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (London, 1998), p. 722.

constantly challenge the reader.<sup>59</sup> Ayn Rand is mercilessly satirized in the figure of Atlanta Hope (of the God's Lightning movement), author of *Telemachus Sneezed*, an epic novel which is a parody of *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), in which the heroine Taffy Rhinestone (Rand's Dagny Taggart),

sees the new King on television, and it's her old rapist friend with the gaunt cheeks and he says 'My name is John Guilt' – man, that's *writing*. His hundred-and-three-page speech afterwards, explaining the importance of guilt and showing why all the anti-Heracleiteans and Freudians and relativists are destroying guilt certainly is persuasive – especially to somebody like me with three-going-on-four personalities, each of which was betraying the others. I still quote his last line, 'Without guilt there can be no civilization'. Her nonfiction book, *Militarism: The Unknown Ideal for the New Heracleitean* is, I think, a distinct letdown, but the God's Lightning bumper stickers asking 'What is John Guilt?' sure give people the creeps until they learn the answer.<sup>60</sup>

There is also an intersection between *Illuminatus!* and other invented religions, in that the Cthulhu Mythos (invented by H.P. Lovecraft and enhanced, through the creation of the Lloigor, by Colin Wilson) which features such dark gods as Yog-Sothoth, Azathoth and Nyarlathotep, features quite prominently.<sup>61</sup>

There are interesting synergies between *Illuminatus!* and Wilson, and the novels and life of celebrated American writer Thomas Pynchon (b. 1937, New York). Despite their highbrow status, Pynchon's novels are full of popular cultural references and feature themes that are 'Discordian' in nature. *V* (1963) concerns Herbert Stencil's quest for V, a woman who is the goddess through multiple incarnations;<sup>62</sup> and *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) is at least partly about a secret postal service, the Trystero, that is an all-encompassing conspiracy. The heroine, Oedipa Maas, 'encounters a broad range of southern Californian subcultures including LSD-experimenting doctors, right-wing nuts, a rock band called the Paranoids, and a gang of engineers at Yoyodyne Aerospace'.<sup>63</sup> *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) has a plot concerning two interconnected conspiracy theories, and at the end of the novel it is

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<sup>59</sup> Shea and Wilson, *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (London, 1998). The three novels name-check Pynchon (particularly *Gravity's Rainbow*, another novel of liberty and paranoia), James Joyce, Emperor Joshua Norton, Greg Hill and Kerry Thornley, and a vast number of esoteric and religious figures including Madame Blavatsky, Buckminster Fuller, Anton LaVey, the Order of Thelema, and Billy Graham, among others.

<sup>60</sup> Shea and Wilson, *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*, p. 547.

<sup>61</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'Fiction in the Desert of the Real: Lovecraft's Cthulhu', *Aries*, 7/1 (2007), pp. 85–109.

<sup>62</sup> David Seed, 'The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon', *Critical Quarterly* 18/4 (December 1975), p. 73.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Cohen, 'Pynchon, Thomas', in Knight (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories in American History*, p. 602.

revealed that ‘we, Pynchon’s readers, have been watching this movie [of the novel] in the Orpheus Theatre in Los Angeles’.<sup>64</sup> Pynchon was a friend of the musician and writer Richard Fariña (1937–66) and they briefly led a ‘micro-cult’ based on an occult fiction, Oakley Hall’s novel *Warlock* (1958) in 1959.<sup>65</sup> This group failed to gain traction, but is further evidence for the existence of fiction-inspired religions in the 1950s and 1960s. Pynchon’s later novels, particularly *Vineland* (1990) and *Inherent Vice* (2009) reflect on the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s with mixed emotions. It is sufficient to note that for Pynchon as for Discordianism, the broader frame of American culture in the late 1950s and 1960s provided the context and the source material for both literary and religious innovation.

The *Illuminatus! Trilogy* brought many thousands of readers to Discordianism; and the release of the *Illuminatus* card game by Steve Jackson Games (which also published *Principia Discordia*) in 1982, and the extensive use of references to the novel in the lyrics of the projects of anarchic British musicians Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty (the Justified Ancients of Mu Mu, the JAMS, and the KLF or Kopyright Liberation Front, from 1987 to 1992) spread the message to new audiences. Bill Drummond’s interest in Discordianism dated to as early as 1976, when he ‘was enlisted by British theatre iconoclast Ken Campbell to design and build the set for a 12-hour theatrical adaptation of the *Illuminatus! Trilogy*’.<sup>66</sup> Wilson and Shea attended a performance in which Wilson, naked, participated onstage in the Black Mass while being watched by Queen Elizabeth II.<sup>67</sup> The internet, which coincidentally dates to the 1960s and was originally developed by the United States military, began to expand after the invention of the World Wide Web in 1989. There was significant overlap between the gaming subculture, anarchist musicians and artists, computer programmers and underground religions, and by the mid 1990s Discordianism had a formidable internet presence. Smith measured the ‘hits’ and sites for Discordianism and other invented religions (most significantly the Church of the SubGenius) on two search engines, HotBot and MetaCrawler, then compared them to mainstream religions. Hotbot returned 1,237 hits for Discordianism, compared to 91,052 for the Catholic Church. MetaCrawler, more reliable as HotBot ‘cites every web site that remotely mentions the term asked for’, listed 61 sites for Discordianism and 94 for Catholicism.<sup>68</sup> These figures are now very much out of date, but they indicate that in the first decade of

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<sup>64</sup> Lawrence C. Wolfley, ‘Repression’s Rainbow: The Presence of Norman O. Brown in Pynchon’s Big Novel’, *PMLA* 92/5 (October 1977), p. 873.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Pynchon, ‘Richard Fariña’, at [www.pynchon.pomona.edu/uncollected/farina.html](http://www.pynchon.pomona.edu/uncollected/farina.html).

<sup>66</sup> Bill Drummond, *45* (London, 2000), p. 49.

<sup>67</sup> Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy*, p. 224.

<sup>68</sup> Richard Lloyd Smith III, ‘Neophilic Irreligions: Audience Cults and the World Wide Web’, unpublished Master of Arts thesis (University of Virginia, 1996), p. 32, at [www.poe.co.uk/toa/pdf/neophile.pdf](http://www.poe.co.uk/toa/pdf/neophile.pdf), accessed 19 August 2009.

the internet's expansion, the tech-savvy invented religions were moving abreast of far bigger traditional religions.

By the late 1970s Kerry Thornley's paranoid delusions had further intensified. He became convinced that he had controlling devices planted in his body by the CIA and had been programmed as a 'Manchurian candidate', an unknowing assassin.<sup>69</sup> His old friend Bob Newport, a psychiatrist, attempted to help him, as did Hill and Wilson. By the mid-1980s he ceased communicating with Wilson, as he believed that Wilson had been killed and replaced by a 'lookalike'. Wilson and his wife Arlen moved to Ireland from 1982 to 1988, in protest over the election of Ronald Reagan as President.<sup>70</sup> Throughout the 1980s Thornley continued to publish 'zines including *Kultcha* and *The Decadent Worker*, and from 1992 until his death in 1998 he participated in a series of interviews with true crime writer Sondra London about how he thought the Kennedy assassination had happened and who was involved. These interviews are available online (with clips of Thornley on YouTube) and the complete text, edited by London, was released as *The Dreadlock Recollections* in 2000.<sup>71</sup> In his last years, Gorightly portrays him as 'living the life of an illuminated hobo', earning a living selling his newsletters and from what he called 'Zen and the art of dishwashing', having perhaps become one of the enlightened 'desolation angels' that the Beats immortalized nearly 50 years earlier.<sup>72</sup> Sondra London's moving obituary for Thornley describes his Buddhist funeral,

which included meditations allowing the fetters which had bound Kerry to his suffering to be breathed in, and then released with the breath, along with prayers that his spirit be freed from confusion and pain and allowed to achieve its own true Illumination. Then a paper inscribed simply 'Kerry Thornley' was burned while his spirit was chanted free.<sup>73</sup>

Thornley is survived by his ex-wife Cara Leach Thornley, who had cared for him in the last year of his life, and his and Cara's son, the musician, artist and filmmaker Kreg Thornley.

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<sup>69</sup> Brian Doherty, 'Historia Discordia: Meet Kerry Thornley, the Second Oswald', *Reason* (August–September 2004), at [www.reason.com/news/printer/29229.html](http://www.reason.com/news/printer/29229.html), accessed 19 August 2009.

<sup>70</sup> Wagner, *An Insider's Guide to Robert Anton Wilson*, p. 35.

<sup>71</sup> Kerry Wendell Thornley, *The Dreadlock Recollections* (Portland, 2007) at [www.ibiblio.org/ovo127/-media/OVO017.pdf](http://www.ibiblio.org/ovo127/-media/OVO017.pdf), accessed 19 August 2009.

<sup>72</sup> Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy*, pp. 233–4.

<sup>73</sup> Sondra London, 'Kerry Thornley R.I.P.', at [www.sondralondon.com/attract/kerry/23.htm](http://www.sondralondon.com/attract/kerry/23.htm), accessed 21 September 2009.

## American Zen: Humour, Mockery and Enlightenment

It has been demonstrated that for certain individuals, including Thornley and Hill, the joke that was Discordianism at its inception became a reality. Scholars of religion have noted that placing great emphasis on belief is a distinctively Protestant Christian strategy, which is inappropriate to most religions.<sup>74</sup> Contemporary Paganism and alternative religions de-emphasize belief, and ask whether the religion ‘works’ in preference to whether it is ‘true’. It is important to realize how Christianity, as the normative Western religion, casts a shadow of all other religious forms, causing many to decide that religions that do not resemble Christianity cannot be ‘real’ religions. This attitude is observed in the Indian religious tradition, which was homogenized for convenience by European colonialists, but which actually bears no resemblance to Christianity, the tradition to which it was being compared. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western observers often dismissed the religion of India as ‘idolatry’ and ‘superstition’. Hinnells and Sharpe comment that ‘Hinduism’

is not a ‘founded’ religion. It has no creeds – except in some unusual cases, and these are as a rule accepted only within the group that has produced them. Its holy scriptures are of immense size and staggering diversity. It has nothing even remotely approaching a central organization (or ecclesiastical authority), and would not know what to do with it if it had one. In short, whatever it is, and whatever its unity, that unity is neither doctrinal nor organizational.<sup>75</sup>

What binds members of this religious tradition together are a few basic concepts and practices; the more or less universal application of the caste system, and acceptance of the *dharma* (often translated ‘religion’, but ‘law’ is more accurate, also encompassing the sense of the order of the world). It is instructive to attempt Michael Pye’s exercise of the imagination, and visualize what the study of religion would look like if the dominant religions ‘were Mithraism, Jainism, Aztec state religion and Catharism’.<sup>76</sup>

In Chapter 1 it was argued that religions and their host cultures are constantly engaged in a dialogue, and as the host culture changes, the forms of religion it generates and nurtures also change. In 1957 Kerry Thornley was 19 and Greg Hill 16. They were rebellious freethinkers, but in a youthful way. Having rejected Christianity and embraced atheism, it was amusing to them to develop a religion as a joke. Discordianism’s chaotic picture of the world and deep suspicion of authority, government, mainstream *mores* and the accepted model of a successful life hardened during the 1960s, as Thornley embraced (or as Adam Gorightly and others would have it, inspired or even invented) the counterculture. Through his

<sup>74</sup> Nye, *Religion*, pp. 106–8.

<sup>75</sup> John R. Hinnells and Eric J. Sharpe, *Hinduism* (Newcastle, 1972), p. 1.

<sup>76</sup> Michael Pye, ‘Religion: Shape and Shadow’, *Numen* 41/1 (January 1994), p. 72.

own experiences of unfettered sexuality, drug experimentation, dropping out, independent writing and publishing, Paganism, and the conspiracy surrounding the Kennedy assassination, Thornley came to apprehend that Eris was real and powerful, and eventually chaos overwhelmed him. Greg Hill has received less attention from Discordian chroniclers and subcultural authors, but as the first author of the *Principia Discordia* he brought the teaching to an audience that resonated with the Discordian vision. Bob Wilson, as a successful popular novelist, cannibalized Discordian theology and popular cultural forms including science fiction and conspiracy theories, with boundless energy, and took the Erisian religion to the masses. For all its humour, satire, wild anarchy and determined hilarity, there is a profound sadness in the religion of Eris for these three founders. Thornley died of Wegner's granulomatosis in abject poverty aged 60. Hill died alcoholic and broken-hearted in 2000, having abandoned freedom and creativity after the breakup of his marriage in the early 1970s, and begun working for a bank. He 'ended up a top manager for Bank of America. As Discordian synchronicity would have it ... [he] worked 23 years for B of A'.<sup>77</sup> Bob and Arlen Wilson, happily married for 40 years, were nevertheless devastated by the random murder of their 15-year-old daughter, Luna, in 1976.<sup>78</sup> Eris touched them all, and chaos brought tragedy.

In considering Discordianism as a 'real' religion, it is arguable that the personal spiritual journeys of a small inner circle are not translatable to the wider context, and that the teachings and practice of the religion must work in the context of converts who did not know Thornley, Hill or Wilson. Discordianism as a religious teaching looked outlandish in the 1950s, and has gradually mainstreamed as alternative and esoteric religions and spiritualities (Wicca, Asatru and all the modern Pagan religions, Raelianism, Scientology, Gurdjieffianism, Subud, Sukyo Mahikari and a myriad others) have emerged from the shadow cast by Christianity since the 1960s. Hugh Urban notes that Discordianism's refusal of any authoritative view of truth or reality is compatible with postmodern philosophy, and its advocacy of chaos has scientific support as chaos theory became popular among scientists.<sup>79</sup> Eris is a goddess, thus it is relatively easy to place Discordianism within the family of modern Pagan religions, where the Goddess is the focus of worship for a majority of adherents. However, the Discordian path is so individualist, it is possible for Discordians to combine their religion with countless other spiritual practices, and with atheism or agnosticism. This is standard practice for contemporary Western religion, which advocates eclecticism as a form of consumerism. The main reasons scholars and critics consistently discount Discordianism as a 'real' religion are threefold: it is a self-confessed fiction (whether its founders decided later that it was true or not); its use of humour, pranks and jokes is illicit, as religion is a

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<sup>77</sup> Gorightly, *The Prankster and the Conspiracy*, p. 261.

<sup>78</sup> Wagner, *An Insider's Guide to Robert Anton Wilson*, p. 35.

<sup>79</sup> Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2006), pp. 234–5.



serious business; and its members mainly congregate on the internet and do not have traditional interactions for ritual or worship.

Two unpublished university theses, by Richard Lloyd Smith III (1996) and Laurel Narizny (2009), attempt to place Discordianism and other 'joke' religions that operate principally online, into a framework from the academic study of religion. Considering the dearth of academic treatments, both these attempts are praiseworthy. Smith's thesis uses Stark and Bainbridge's characterization of 'audience cults' as a starting point.<sup>80</sup> These were defined as loose and rarely constituting congregations, rather being focused on going to seminars or events where many different small groups were in attendance. Smith rejected this negative classification, and the focus of his study is the way that online groups are actively involved in building viable communities in cyberspace. He asked provocative questions on Discordian bulletin boards, Chthulhu discussion groups and SubGenius lists about what a religion should provide its members with, and took seriously the responses that were offered. He concluded that online groups differed from passive 'audience cults' in four ways: they were more organized and encouraged participation; they provided 'unique ultimate meanings ... resting on metaphysical, deity-oriented mythology';<sup>81</sup> the groups also offered a range of compensators, not just the 'diffuse hope' suggested by Stark and Bainbridge; and finally, these groups have 'antagonistic ties with ... conventional, or normalized, social and religious groups'.<sup>82</sup> However, Smith's classification of Discordianism, the Church of the SubGenius and Chthulhu remains within Stark and Bainbridge's sociological system; they are not 'audience cults' but 'real' cults, but that does not make them religions.

Laurel Narizny's work was completed in 2009 and reflects the development of the internet since the mid-1990s.<sup>83</sup> She is concerned to investigate 'joke' religions, a category in which she places Discordianism, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and The Center for Duck Studies. She proposes a distinction between parody religions (which are insincere) and satirical religions (which are sincere). The intention behind this distinction is good; the Invisible Pink Unicorn is not a religion and should not be allowed to slip through the net to be classified as one. But the reason is not because those invoking the Invisible Pink Unicorn are insincere. It is because the Invisible Pink Unicorn is an illustrative device to prove the illogicality of theism, and therefore has more in common with Bertrand

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<sup>80</sup> Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* (Berkeley 1985), pp. 27–8.

<sup>81</sup> Smith, 'Neophilic Irreligions', p. 20.

<sup>82</sup> Smith, 'Neophilic Irreligions', p. 21.

<sup>83</sup> Narizny, 'Ha Ha Only Serious', cites 55,000 hits from a 'Discordianism' Google search, p. 32. I searched on 20 August 2009 and received 113,000 hits, which appears anomalous.

Russell's teapot.<sup>84</sup> The criterion of sincerity, like faith, is an internal condition that is not susceptible to tests, and is ultimately predicated on the normativity of Christianity. In neither of these studies is Discordianism enabled to emerge from the shadow of the dominant religious model.

Although the fit between humour and religion may not seem that close, in fact there is a long history of interaction between the two; laughter and religion are both socially constructed human phenomena. Ingvild Gilhus lists the three main theories invoked to explain why humans laugh. The first is the superiority theory, where laughter is used aggressively to mock a victim; the second is the incongruity theory, where laughter is 'caused by two opposite meanings being held together at the same time';<sup>85</sup> and the third is the relief theory, which claims that people feel relief when they laugh at forbidden things. She then discusses many types of laughter: regenerative, derisive, comic, tragic, mocking and critical. She notes that the laughter found in the ecstatic cult of Dionysus had a 'chaotic dimension'; unpredictable and a threat to order, it 'points to a dimension beyond normal human thought and experience'.<sup>86</sup> Laughter's location in the body and its status as often spontaneous and uncontrolled is important as a corrective to those who would connect laughter primarily with the intellect and with wit. Gilhus' study is mainly concerned with the Judeo-Christian tradition, though she briefly considers Eastern religions. Her most interesting insight is the notion that the 'primary aim of modern religious laughter is liberation, its *modus vivendi* is therapeutic, but its results are not necessarily either therapeutic or liberating'.<sup>87</sup> This observation, which points to the liminal nature of laughter, is made in the context of charismatic Christianity but is exactly applicable to Discordianism.

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. The result of this subversive stance was ideally liberation, enlightenment, the moment of *satori* in which one could, as the Zen master Dogen (1200–1253) stated, 'simply understand that birth and death is itself *nirvana*, there is nothing to reject as birth and death, nothing to seek as *nirvana*'.<sup>88</sup> Rational thought is a tool that can easily become a straightjacket; laughter, like faith, is irrational. Kerry Thornley and Camden Benares explicitly framed Discordianism as 'an American form of Zen Buddhism',<sup>89</sup> building on the legacy of the Beats, which offered Earth-based spirituality along with Eastern

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<sup>84</sup> Bertrand Russell, 'Is There a God?' at [http://www.godslasteraar.org/assets/ebooks/Russell\\_Bertrand\\_Is\\_There\\_a\\_God.pdf](http://www.godslasteraar.org/assets/ebooks/Russell_Bertrand_Is_There_a_God.pdf), accessed 19 August 2009.

<sup>85</sup> Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London and New York, 1997), p. 5.

<sup>86</sup> Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*, p. 41.

<sup>87</sup> Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*, p. 138.

<sup>88</sup> Christopher Lamb, 'Rites of Passage', in Peter Harvey (ed.), *Buddhism* (London and New York, 2001), p. 177.

<sup>89</sup> Wilson, 'The Monster in the Labyrinth', p. 11.

wisdom. Other inheritances from the Beats were: their determined refusal to adhere exclusively to any one religion (Allen Ginsburg was a Buddhist Jew, and Jack Kerouac ‘was born and died a Catholic but nonetheless identified himself as a Buddhist for a significant period in his life and once even fasted during Ramadan’);<sup>90</sup> their commitment to Bohemianism and evading the demands of the system; and above all their passionate commitment to art. They, too, were ‘beaten down’ by alcoholism, poverty, mental illness and suicide, but like the Discordian founders they never wavered in the spread of their gospel of liberation.<sup>91</sup>

It may be that this form of American Zen is not particularly close to Chinese Ch’an Buddhism or Zen as it is practised in Japan. Nevertheless, there are connections that justify the Beat/Discordian version. If schools of Buddhism are classified as focusing on either ‘self power’ or ‘other power’, Zen is a ‘self power’ teaching, impatient with intellectual training and advocating spontaneous enlightenment.<sup>92</sup> Dogen, the great Zen master, also taught that it was not necessary for Buddhist practitioners to become Buddhas, as they were already. What Zen practice enabled them to do was ‘simply to manifest one’s intrinsic Buddha nature’.<sup>93</sup> The secular is sacred, the sacred is secular, human life is divinely inspired and Greg Hill’s determined assertion to Margo Adler that ‘in due time the polarities between atheism and theism become absurd. The engagement was transcendent. And when you transcend one, you transcend the other’ is a valid modern Western assertion of non-duality.<sup>94</sup> In the Rinzaï school of Zen, the education system for monks is based on *koans*, puzzles or riddles that must be broken through to experience *satori*. They are often obscure or humorous; one famous *koan* of Hakuin asks ‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’<sup>95</sup> This is referenced in *Principia Discordia*, where a sketch of a hand is captioned ‘The uproar of one hand clapping’.<sup>96</sup> Discordian activities, including all manifestations of ‘Operation Mindfuck’, are directed toward guerrilla enlightenment; dispelling the illusions of the unaware, whether they desire this liberation or not.

In terms of the Discordian narrative proposed by Malaclypse the Younger, Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst and Mordecai the Foul, in the manner of Peter Berger’s theory of world-building, it was developed as a fiction by Mal-2 and Omar, and released into the wider culture. The fictional output of Mord meant that it reached a greater audience than was likely for the teachings of a new religion. Literary

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<sup>90</sup> Carole Tonkinson (ed.), *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation* (New York, 1995), p. 14.

<sup>91</sup> Stephen D. Edington, *The Beat Face of God: The Beat Generation Writers as Spirit Guides* (Bloomington, 2005), p. 11.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Harvey, ‘Introduction’, in Harvey (ed.), *Buddhism*, p. 23, p. 26.

<sup>93</sup> Peter Harvey, ‘Buddhist visions of the human predicament and its resolution’, in Harvey (ed.), *Buddhism*, p. 82.

<sup>94</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 335.

<sup>95</sup> Watts, *The Way of Zen*, p. 185.

<sup>96</sup> Malaclypse the Younger, *Principia Discordia*, p. vii.

critic Scott MacFarlane has argued that Heinlein could not control the reception of his narrative; ‘it belongs to the world’.<sup>97</sup> The readers of the *Illuminatus! Trilogy* and other Discordian-influenced books and websites internalized the mythos, and externalized it as a legitimate narrative of meaning and religious inspiration. The founders of Discordianism are all dead, but the story lives on.

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overdue extended scholarly assessment of the origins of Discordianism. It has sought to weld together the cultural context of late 1950s and 1960s America, the biographies of the founders, the political events that shook the age (specifically the Kennedy assassination, the Cold War and the 1960s counterculture), and the spiritual sources on which Kerry Thornley and Greg Hill drew upon to create the Discordian mythos (Beat Zen, Greek mythology, Ayn Rand’s libertarian politics, and conspiracy theories, particularly the Bavarian Illuminati). Discordianism may have begun as a joke, but by the mid-1970s Eris, Goddess of Chaos, was a real presence in the lives of the leaders. Studies of online Discordian groups in the 1990s and after testify to the vitality of the mythology and the central place of Eris in Discordian thought. Modern Pagans are often ambivalent about the status of the gods and goddesses: some believe they exist in the same way that Christians believe the Christian god exists; others believe they are psychological realities; others incline more to the idea that they are archetypes, in the Jungian sense. Whichever of these interpretations is employed, Discordians venerate Eris and She exists for them.

Changes in social organizations due to the growth of online communities have contributed to the mainstreaming of Discordianism and other invented religions. It is no longer vitally important to interact in person with co-religionists. The realization that cyberspace facilitates communal life necessitates the abandonment of ‘restrictive congregational model of religious organization’.<sup>98</sup> The absurdist aspects of the religion also no longer seem problematic; Thomas Disch has sternly castigated America for being a nation of liars because of its willingness to entertain fictions, and criticized Robert Anton Wilson for (despite his personal scepticism) spreading conspiracy theories and esoterica gleefully among the unwary, but even he admits that in late modern culture ‘one has to be sent to school to begin to sort out what’s real and what’s Hollywood’.<sup>99</sup> In Chapter 1 it

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<sup>97</sup> Scott MacFarlane, *The Hippie Narrative: A Literary Perspective on the Counterculture* (Jefferson, NC, 2007), p. 97.

<sup>98</sup> Lorne L. Dawson, ‘Religion and the Quest for the Virtual Community’, in Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York and London, 2004), p. 76.

<sup>99</sup> Thomas M. Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (New York, 1998), p. 1.

was argued that religion succeeds because humans have an evolutionary biological bias towards proposing, developing and validating a certain kind of explanatory narrative. Conspiracy theories and according responsibility to the Goddess Eris satisfy the demands of that kind of story; events happen in the physical world because an agent, often unseen or otherwise mysterious, caused them to happen. The story developed by Kerry Thornley and Greg Hill, and amplified by Robert Anton Wilson, is a powerful explanatory narrative for the contemporary era. Further, it is relativist, tolerant, syncretic and individualist, fitting Campbell's prediction concerning the type of religion that was likely to flourish in secular, late modern culture. It emerged in dialogue with popular cultural forms and has clearly gained traction through subcultural publishing and the internet; new readers are constantly discovering the *Principia Discordia* and popular cultural figures continue to reference it. The first generation of Discordians has passed, yet they are replenished by new believers. As Discordians would say, 'Hail Eris'.

# Chapter 3

## The Church of All Worlds: Science Fiction, Environmentalism and a Holistic Pagan Vision

### Introduction

This chapter analyses the Church of All Worlds (CAW), founded in 1962 by Tim Zell (b. 1942) and Richard Lance Christie (b. 1944). CAW is an invented religion that was initially based on Robert A. Heinlein's science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961). Of all the invented religions detailed in this book, the Church of All Worlds, now nearly 50 years old, is closest to the religious mainstream, having married its early fictional inspiration with Wiccan-inspired modern Paganism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The modern Pagan tradition, traceable to British civil servant Gerald Gardner, who founded Wicca in the 1940s, is itself a broadly 'invented' religion. However, unlike the religions treated in this book Paganism did not resist, but rather embraced, strategies of legitimization such as positing a historical continuum from pre-Christian indigenous religions, through persecution as witchcraft during the period of dominance of the Christian Church, to re-emergence in secularized modernity as institutional Christianity retreated.<sup>1</sup> Though the Church of All Worlds is now a Pagan religion, *Stranger in a Strange Land* provided CAW with four of its five core spiritual practices (sharing water, organization of members or Waterkin in 'nests' with a nine-circle structure, sexual freedom, multiple relationships and a commitment to non-traditional family patterns, and the affirmation between members that 'Thou art God/ess' and the use of other quotations from Heinlein's novel) and it has never denied its fictional origins.

Yet the breadth of activities that the Church of All Worlds has engaged in ranges far beyond Heinlein's text. Tim Zell (later Otter G'Zell and now Oberon Zell-Ravenheart) and Lance Christie became passionate environmentalists and their vision of the divine became Gaia (or Terrebria, Zell's original term), the Earth as a living being. Paganism, with its strong focus on the divine feminine, which redresses the gender bias of the Judeo-Christian tradition, has a long history of environmental activism. This chapter argues that the Church of All Worlds is a sophisticated and self-reflexive invented religion, chiefly due to the visionary leadership of Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, Lance Christie, and Morning Glory

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<sup>1</sup> Michael York, 'Invented Culture/Invented Religion: The Fictional Origins of Contemporary Paganism', *Nova Religio* 3/1(1999), pp. 135–6, p. 141.

Zell-Ravenheart (b. Diana Moore, 1948), among others. CAW is constantly in dialogue with the discourses of late modern culture. These include science fiction, the realization of human potential, and libertarian politics; the pagan revival, environmentalism, and subcultural publishing; and polyamory, non-traditional family structures, education, and the place of children and the younger generation in Paganism.<sup>2</sup> It will be demonstrated that all these aspects of CAW are interrelated, and that the overall holistic vision first articulated by Zell and Christie was both remarkably prescient and flexible enough to accommodate far-reaching social, political and religio-spiritual change.

### **Robert A. Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land* and the Founding of the Church of All Worlds**

Robert Anson Heinlein (1907–88) was in the United States Navy and worked as an ‘aeronautical engineer for the Navy Aircrafts Materials Center in Philadelphia’,<sup>3</sup> before he became a novelist in the late 1930s. When the Second World War ended he quit his job to write full-time and achieved stunning success, being hailed as one of the ‘Big Three’ with Arthur C. Clarke (1917–2008) and Isaac Asimov (1920–92). The science fiction community awarded him four Hugos and he also received the first Grand Master Award from the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA), for lifetime achievement.<sup>4</sup> His novels reflect contradictions in his personal life and politics; his second wife Leslyn MacDonald was a radical leftist and he supported liberal causes during their 15-year marriage. Disch notes that in 1938 Heinlein ran for ‘the Democratic nomination for the state assembly ... in California’;<sup>5</sup> the Second World War was, however, a transformative experience, and after 1945 he expressed right-wing and anti-democratic views, which were shared by his third wife Virginia (Ginny) Gerstenfeld, whom he married in 1948. He was personally committed to sexual freedom and was an avid naturist, and he respected and liked his near-contemporary Ayn Rand’s pro-technology and pro-capitalist philosophy and novels. He was friendly with L. Ron Hubbard, another

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<sup>2</sup> Some of this material appears in Carole M. Cusack, ‘Science Fiction as Scripture: Robert A. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* and the Church of All Worlds’, in Christopher Hartney, Alex Norman and Carole M. Cusack (eds), *Creative Fantasy and the Religious Imagination*, special issue of *Literature and Aesthetics* 19/2 (Sydney, 2009), pp. 72–91

<sup>3</sup> William H. Patterson Jr. and Andrew Thornton, *The Martian Named Smith: Critical Perspectives on Robert A. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land** (Sacramento, 2001), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> J.D. Gifford, *Robert A. Heinlein: A Reader’s Companion* (Sacramento, 2001), p. xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas M. Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (New York, 1998), p. 164.

naval man and science fiction author with an interest in invented religion.<sup>6</sup> When *Stranger in a Strange Land* was published in 1961 it had been 13 years in the writing; critics have speculated that it was not published earlier because its sexual content was too controversial for the 1950s.

*Stranger in a Strange Land* is set in the near future and is the story of Valentine Michael Smith, the son of two astronauts on a mission to Mars. The mission perished and he is brought up by the Martian ‘Old Ones’, who are very different to humans (all are both male and female at times thus erotic attraction does not exist, and they are cannibals). In Part 1, ‘His Maculate Origin’, Mike is taken prisoner by Federation agents and, as he is unable to cope with Earth’s heavier gravity, he is confined to Bethesda Medical Centre, Maryland. There he meets nurse Gillian Boardman, the first female he has ever seen; she becomes his first ‘water-brother’ (the act of sharing water has great significance on hot, dry Mars). Jill assists Mike to escape from the hospital with her lover, the journalist Ben Caxton. In Part 2, ‘His Preposterous Heritage’, the Reverend Doctor Daniel Digby, the Supreme Bishop of the Church of the New Revelation, also known as the Fosterite Church, is introduced. Here Heinlein satirizes the hypocrisy and bullying tactics of Christian fundamentalist churches, and anticipates the political clout they wield in twenty-first-century America; the press report on Fosterite activities uncritically, ‘the Fosterites having wrecked newspaper offices in the past’.<sup>7</sup>

Mike is taken by Jill and Ben to the Poconos Mountains, to Jubal Harshaw’s mansion. Jubal is a Wise Old Man, a ‘Heinlein-voice’ character; a millionaire who dictates novels to his three beautiful secretaries, Dorcas, Miriam and Anne. Jubal educates Mike, who has paranormal powers and noteworthy intelligence. Jubal’s home is a prefiguring of the Church of All Worlds, founded by Mike later in the novel. Nudism and free love are common, and a large swimming pool emphasizes both sensual pleasure and the importance of water. Jill gradually adjusts to the household, and Jubal tells her ‘[t]his is Freedom Hall, my dear. Everybody does as he pleases’.<sup>8</sup> The agnostic Jubal tries to aid Mike in understanding religion. Mike ‘groks’ (a Martian word meaning to understand so completely as to eradicate the subject-object dichotomy) that ‘Thou Art God’ (the whole of creation is divine,

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<sup>6</sup> It has frequently been claimed that the Church of Scientology was the result of a bet between Robert A. Heinlein and L. Ron Hubbard, and that Heinlein’s effort in the competition to start a new religion was *Stranger in a Strange Land*. It is now agreed, even by hostile critics of Hubbard, that this wager never took place and that the two writers remained warm friends. See Donald C. Lindsay, ‘Non-Scientologist FAQ on “Start a Religion”’, at [www.xenu-directory.net/opinions/lindsay-19990117.html](http://www.xenu-directory.net/opinions/lindsay-19990117.html), accessed 21 August 2009. Lindsay concludes that Hubbard certainly stated in front of witnesses that there was more money in starting a religion than in writing science fiction. Heinlein, however, had nothing to do with it.

<sup>7</sup> Robert A. Heinlein, *Stranger in A Strange Land* (London, 1987 [1961]), p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, p. 79.



pantheism).<sup>9</sup> Mike experiments with sex and meets members of the Fosterite Church, and Jubal Harshaw's great wealth and shrewdness ensures Mike's freedom when Federation agents come to the house to re-apprehend him.

In Part 3, 'His Eccentric Education', Mike attends a Fosterite Church service where he meets stripper Dawn Ardent and Digby, Supreme Bishop of the Church. Mike realizes the service is different to his water-sharing ceremony, and yet is still a way to achieve closeness. He and Jill begin working for a while in a carnival (Mike is Dr Apollo, a magician, which is important as the book constantly contrasts the Apollonian and Dionysian modes), where they meet the tattooed snake-lady Patricia Paiwonski, a Fosterite 'priestess'. The carnival educates Mike in showmanship and aids Jill to accept sexual liberation in public (as for her it was previously private, in Jubal's home). These two things are significant bridges to the Church of All Worlds, as is their learning of the existence of the 'inner church' of Fosterism (members are called the 'reborn'); 'the secret church was that Dionysian cult that America had lacked and for which there was an enormous potential market'.<sup>10</sup> Mike decides that founding a religion might be good for people, and that all religions are true. In Part 4, 'His Scandalous Career'. Mike studies at Union Theological College, and joins the army for a while, seeking experience. Jubal is horrified when he hears that Mike is a theology graduate and has founded a new religion, the Church of All Worlds. Ben Caxton goes to the 'Nest' (as Mike calls it, a Martian usage) to report to Jubal: he says that learning Martian is a high priority; that followers are studying telekinesis and other psychic powers with Mike; that the Church is organized in nine circles; there are obvious similarities to Fosterism; and that nudism and polyamory are customary. Patricia Paiwonski and Dawn Ardent have abandoned the Fosterite Church to join the Church of All Worlds. Ben decides to join the Nest himself, and Jubal remains the last skeptical outsider.

In Part 5 'His Happy Destiny'. Mike is freed from his mission of spying for the Martian Old Ones, so he can serve the 'Terran angels'. Jubal is concerned by the radical activities of the CAW. Mike's Temple is incinerated and Jubal joins him at a Florida hotel, where his followers are temporarily housed. The aged Jubal's long celibacy ends, and he has sex with Dawn. The fact that CAW is in agreement with all religions is emphasized; Muslims, Jews, Christians, atheists and agnostics have all joined the Nest. There are discussions on sexual freedom and mythology, and Mike, who realizes that his time on Earth is nearly at an end, prepares to 'disincorporate'. This happens when he is violently attacked by a crowd. They menace him with bricks and a shotgun, and accuse him of blasphemy, and finally kill him.<sup>11</sup> Jubal is in despair, and attempts suicide, but is revived by members of the Nest. They plan to move the CAW to his house permanently. The water-brothers

<sup>9</sup> Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, p. 134.

<sup>10</sup> Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, p. 268.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Lee Cansler, 'Stranger in a Strange Land: Science Fiction as Literature of Creative Imagination, Social Criticism, and Entertainment', *Journal of Popular Culture* 5/4 (1972), pp. 944–54.

drink a decoction of Mike's remains in observance of Martian cannibalism. Several of Mike's lovers are pregnant or have recently given birth. The final scene shows Mike being appointed archangel and the supervisor of Digby and Foster, while the Martian planned invasion of Earth is aborted. Jubal is last witnessed dictating a novel called *A Martian Named Smith*.<sup>12</sup>

*Stranger in a Strange Land* was an instant smash hit and remains extremely popular, although Heinlein was puzzled as to why, as readers who used the novel as a 'how to' guide were usually of a very different political and religious orientation to him. Yet there are obvious reasons for it being enthusiastically embraced in 1961. Heinlein, like Robert Anton Wilson, was a lifelong agnostic, believing that to affirm that there is no God was as silly and unsupported as to affirm that there was a God.<sup>13</sup> His attitude to sex was based on the conviction that the Judeo-Christian obsession with virginity, celibacy, sex within marriage alone, and legitimate offspring is completely incorrect; it results in sexual jealousy, ungenerousness, hostility towards the illegitimate, and punitive treatment of women who attempt to escape this repressive situation. Female critics often praise Heinlein for his advocacy of women's sexual liberation, although some feminists have decried his portrayal of sexually available beauties. Elizabeth Anne Hull credits Heinlein for asking (not answering) important questions, which concern 'political power – our responsibilities to one another – and in the realm of personal freedom, particularly sexual freedom'.<sup>14</sup> In the mid 1990s Diane Parkin Speer acclaimed Heinlein as 'almost a feminist', and concluded that feminist objections could be dismissed, as 'women are empowered by the utopian group marriage'.<sup>15</sup> The 1960s counterculture that embraced *Stranger*, which included Tim Zell and Lance Christie, shared this acceptance of Heinlein's idealization of sexual freedom, embodied in Jubal Harshaw's statement to Ben Caxton in *Stranger*, '[L]ove is that condition in which another person's happiness is essential to your own ... Jealousy is a disease, love is a healthy condition. The immature mind often mistakes one for the other, or assumes that the greater the love, the greater the jealousy – in

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<sup>12</sup> This summary of *Stranger in a Strange Land* also is used in Carole M. Cusack, 'The Church of All Worlds and Pagan Environmentalism: Uncertain Boundaries and Unlimited Possibilities', keynote lecture at the British Association for the Study of Religion Conference, Bangor University, 7–9 September 2009, to be published in *Diskus* 10 (2009), at <http://www.basr.ac.uk/diskus/>.

<sup>13</sup> Jubal Harshaw admitted 'with bleak honesty ... that the Fosterites might own the Truth, the exact Truth, nothing but the Truth. The Universe was a silly place at best ... Jubal admitted that a long life had left him not understanding the basic problems of the Universe. The Fosterites might be right', Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, p. 129.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Anne Hull, 'Justifying the Ways of God to Man: The Novels of Robert A. Heinlein', *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy* 20 (1979), p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Diane Parkin-Speer, 'Almost A Feminist', *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy* 36/2 (Summer 1995), pp. 113–25.

fact, they're almost incompatible; one emotion hardly leaves room for the other'.<sup>16</sup> This attitude challenged the 1950s Christian patriarchal nuclear family and the repression of sexuality that 'Christian virtue' demanded and offered a way forward based on honesty, freedom, and openness to experience.

The portrayal of religion in *Stranger in a Strange Land* is also problematic, as personally Heinlein rejected all religions and was critical of those who adhered to them. He was also dismissive of secular creeds including atheism and scientific humanism. He regarded these non-religious worldviews as intellectually bankrupt; and his assessment of all religions is equally negative.

All the other religions, elsewhere and in the past, are just as silly, and the very notion of 'worship' is intellectually on all fours with a jungle savage's appeasing of Mumbo Jumbo. (In passing I note that Christianity is a polytheism, not a monotheism as claimed – the rabbis are right on that point –and that its most holy ceremony is ritualistic cannibalism, right out of the smoky caves of our dim past. They ought to lynch me.)<sup>17</sup>

Yet religion pervades *Stranger*; even the novel's title references Exodus chapter 2, verse 22 in which Moses calls his son 'Gershom: for he said, I have been a stranger in a strange land'.<sup>18</sup> Further, *Stranger* affirms the equality and validity of all religions, which are compatible with Mike's Church of All Worlds, which is scientific and future-oriented. The novel's original title was *A Martian Named Smith*. Valentine Michael Smith is named for both the patron saint of romance and the archangel (and 'Michael' means 'who is like God'), and he dies as a sacrifice, like Jesus Christ. *Stranger* contrasts two churches, Digby's Fosterite Church of the New Revelation and Mike's Church of All Worlds. Although the Fosterites are intended to be Dionysian and CAW Apollonian, critics are often disturbed that the two churches are almost indistinguishable. At a Fosterite service Mike 'grokked correctly that this was a growing-closer as real as a water-ceremony, and in numbers and intensity that he had never met before outside his own nest'.<sup>19</sup> Critics are also uncertain as to whether Heinlein's positive portrayal of Mike and the CAW is parodic; another possibility is that the novel's elusive genre (variously described as novel, satire,

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<sup>16</sup> Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, p. 333. Oberon Zell-Ravenheart in an e-mail communication states that 'That line is what transformed our sexual mores in the '60s!' Significantly this passage was omitted from the Ace Books 'uncut' edition of *Stranger in a Strange Land* edited by Virginia Heinlein (New York, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Robert A. Heinlein, *Grumbles from the Grave*, Virginia Heinlein (ed.) (New York, 1989), p. 229.

<sup>18</sup> Exodus 2, verse 22, *King James Version*, at <http://bible.cc/exodus/2-22.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, p. 309.

anatomy, myth, and parable) means that the meaning of the CAW has to be decided by readers, depending on their assessment of the genre of *Stranger*.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1960s many individuals and groups were attracted to *Stranger in a Strange Land*. In this decade, America was divided by intergenerational conflict. The family values of the conservative 1950s were challenged and protesters demanded equal rights for gays, blacks and women, and called for an end to the Vietnam War. The 'Beat Generation' of the 1950s, including writers Jack Kerouac (*On The Road*, 1951) and Allen Ginsburg ('Howl', 1956) had powerfully articulated alternative values, including sexual liberation, rejection of wage-slavery, anarchist politics, Buddhism, experimentation with drugs and altered states of consciousness. In the 1960s these ideas moved from the fringes of youth culture to the mainstream.<sup>21</sup> 'Hippies' espoused countercultural values; lack of competition, absence of sexual jealousy, anti-discrimination, peace, anti-racism, concern for community, and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, a communal group immortalized in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, identified themselves as Heinlein's 'stranger', partook of water-sharing, named their commune 'the nest', and used 'grok' for 'understand'.<sup>22</sup>

American college students told their teachers that reading *Stranger in a Strange Land* was a life-changing experience. H. Bruce Franklin recounts testimonies, which he calls 'narratives of religious conversion'. These include: '[t]he book showed me that I was not alone'; 'We didn't know what we were supposed to do and we needed somebody to show us. So I identify with Michael'; and the fact that the novel advocated 'community without losing individuality'.<sup>23</sup> This was not what Heinlein intended; but Scott MacFarlane has argued that Heinlein could not control the reception of his narrative; 'it belongs to the world'.<sup>24</sup> The last group to use *Stranger* as a foundational text is the Manson Family, those who coalesced around the charismatic criminal Charles Manson. He had lived with up to 18 women at one time, and is said to have named his first illegitimate son Valentine Michael Smith and christened a parole officer 'Jubal'. During the Manson trial in 1970 *Time* featured an article that claimed *Stranger* was a key text inspiring Manson's murderous plans. This is not true, although he had read and

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<sup>20</sup> Patterson and Thornton, *The Martian Named Smith*, pp. 26–7 (on *Stranger* as satire), pp. 49–53 (on *Stranger* as myth).

<sup>21</sup> See A. Robert Lee, *The Beat Generation Writers* (London and Chicago, 1996), *passim*.

<sup>22</sup> Robert G. Pielke, 'Grokking the Stranger', in N.D. Smith and F.D. Miller Jr (eds), *Philosophers Look at Science Fiction* (Chicago, 1982), p. 163.

<sup>23</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, *Robert A. Heinlein: America as Science Fiction* (New York, 1980), p. 128.

<sup>24</sup> Scott MacFarlane, *The Hippie Narrative: A Literary Perspective on the Counterculture* (Jefferson NC, 2007), p. 97.

admired Heinlein's novel.<sup>25</sup> Manson failed to appreciate its message; true, Mike could disincorporate his enemies (which may have inspired Manson to murder), but he also died sacrificially at the hands of a mob, rather than use his powers to live.

Tim Zell and Lance Christie were both fascinated by *Stranger in a Strange Land* and the Church of All Worlds for many reasons. Like Heinlein, they admired Ayn Rand and supported her call for the reduction of government intervention in peoples' lives, and they found her artists and creative geniuses, struggling against bureaucracy and the blandness of modern life, compelling.<sup>26</sup> The CAW encapsulated sexual and spiritual freedom to Zell and Christie; complete liberation from constraints. At Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, Tim Zell's particular academic mentor was Dr Gale Fuller, head of the Psychology department. Fuller was an admirer of Abraham Maslow, Karen Horney and Erich Fromm, and was a social rebel, refusing to wear a necktie because it was 'a symbolic yoke of submission; a hangman's noose'.<sup>27</sup> Zell and Christie, who met during Pledge Week of their first year and instantly recognized each other as peers, were enthused by Abraham Maslow's idea that certain people were 'self-actualizers', aware and more experimental than most. Zell and Christie shared water on 7 April 1962 and founded the Church of All Worlds and a Maslovian water-brotherhood called Atl. Their girlfriends (and later wives) Martha and Penny returned to college after the spring break, and they too shared water on 25 May.<sup>28</sup> Tim Zell set about creating a liturgy for the weekly CAW services, which he noted was derived from his Christian childhood churchgoing, the Boy Scouts, and 'ideas from the fantasy, science fiction and mythology I was reading at the time',<sup>29</sup> including Heinlein and Robert Rimmer (1917–2001), particularly the later novel *The Rebellion of Yale Marratt* (1964). Rimmer is little read now, but he was an advocate of sexual liberation, and his novels chronicle the failures of monogamy. Even at this early

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<sup>25</sup> Leon Stover, *Robert A. Heinlein* (Boston, 1987), p. 57. See also Erik Davis, 'The Remains of the Deities: Reading the Return of Paganism', *Voice Literary Supplement* (November 1993), at [www.techgnosis.com/neopaganism.html](http://www.techgnosis.com/neopaganism.html), accessed 13 July 2009.

<sup>26</sup> J. Neil Schulman, *The Robert A. Heinlein Interview and Other Heinleiniana* (Mill Valley CA, 1999), p. 114.

<sup>27</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, 'Chapter 3 – Sharing Water', unpublished draft autobiography, 2009. I am grateful to Oberon Zell-Ravenheart for generously sharing personal documents, particularly his correspondence with Robert A. Heinlein and the draft chapters of his and Morning Glory's joint autobiography, to be published in 2010. As these drafts contain reminiscences of many important figures in the CAW story (including Lance Christie, Gale Fuller, Martha Zell, Anodea Judith, and others) they have been invaluable.

<sup>28</sup> The Church of All Worlds' *Membership Handbook* attributes the foundation of CAW to 'Tim (now Oberon) and Martha Zell, and Lance and Penny Christie', at [www.caw.org.au/about.htm](http://www.caw.org.au/about.htm), accessed 21 September. I have not identified particular contributions by Martha Zell and Penny Christie, though the importance of female members in CAW has been consistently emphasized by Oberon Zell-Ravenheart.

<sup>29</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, 'Preface: A Brief Personal History of HOME', in Oberon Zell-Ravenheart and Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart (eds), *Creating Circles and Ceremonies: Rituals for All Seasons and Reasons* (Franklin Lakes NJ, 2006), p. viii.

stage the Church of All Worlds was definitely religious in orientation, even though it was based on a fictional institution. The fact that Zell, Christie and their friends were holding services and developing practices is testimony to their commitment; perhaps not that ‘it was true’, but certainly ‘that it works’ (and possibly that even if it was not true, it was a narrative of such power that it ought to be true).

Tim Zell and Lance Christie recruited members for Atl partly through the Edwards Personal Profile Survey (EPPS), which had been administered to all students of the Psychology Department. Zell and Christie worked on a research project for Gale Fuller, scoring the results of the EPPS. They noted that they shared an unusual result, both having scored an ‘M’ in the middle five criteria (affiliation, intraception, succorance, dominance and abasement) in contrast to the more common ‘W’. They approached all the other students with the same ‘M’ score, distributed copies of *Stranger* and those who were interested joined Atl. Tim Zell’s explanation of Atl’s purpose involved the fact that most members felt that the religion they had been born into was not satisfying:

We wanted to create an affiliation that was based on cherishing diversity, and a deeper level of bonds between the people, one that we really felt a natural affinity to. None of us felt like we quite belonged to the families we were born into, but we wanted family! We wanted a tribe. The only way we could get it was to come up with different criteria. The old saying was that ‘blood is thicker than water’. We created a family in which water is thicker than blood. And the sharing of water became a stronger bond to us than the blood relationships that formed the basis of all families prior to us. And in our new tribal family, we all took secret names – usually from Greek mythology. I was Prometheus, the fire-bringer who defied the authority of almighty Zeus to bring enlightenment to humanity; and Lance was Chiron, the wise centaur and teacher of heroes, such as Heracles and Jason. And right about in there I formulated my lifelong Mission Statement, which has remained unchanged ever after: ‘To be a catalyst for the coalescence of consciousness.’<sup>30</sup>

A newsletter called the *Atlan Torch* was launched, and Christie (who had not been pledged to a fraternity and roomed with other ‘outcasts’) launched a satirical fraternity called Mu Omicron Alpha (MOA), also the name of an extinct flightless bird, to provide community for the unpledged (including disabled students and foreign exchange students) and to tilt at the windmills of the established fraternities. College was an extraordinarily full time for both Zell and Christie; they both got married, Tim and Martha’s son Bryan was born in 1963, they established a number of groups (Atl, MOA, the Church of All Worlds), and they were both deeply engaged with their studies and started graduate school in 1965, Zell at Washington University in St Louis and Christie at University of Oklahoma in Norman.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, ‘Chapter 3 – Sharing Water’.

<sup>31</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, ‘Chapter 3 – Sharing Water’.

Until 1967 the Church of All Worlds was a largely private interest, and Atl was the more prominent group. Margot Adler gives an etymology for ‘Atl’; it was Aztec for ‘water that also had the esoteric meaning of “home of our ancestors”’. The closeness of Atl to words like Atlas, Atlantic, and Atlantis was also noted. Water was ... [a] symbol of life, since the first organisms came into existence in water and water is essential to life’.<sup>32</sup> Atl, which was always a small, intimate group of like-minded spirits, was loosely structured and politically radical, but not in any identifiable left-wing or right-wing way. Atl was dedicated to realizing human potential. Lance Christie wrote that Atl worked toward ‘a world where the children of Man walk in the hills like Gods’.<sup>33</sup> Atheists and agnostics were welcomed by Atl and in 1967 when the prospect of the Church of All Worlds becoming a formally registered religion loomed, Adler suggests that many Atlans were unhappy with this proposed course of action. However, Lance Christie is adamant that there was never a falling-out between them. He says that, although they took different paths, ‘[b]oth Oberon and I, when we have compared notes in recent times, have mutually agreed that our fundamental take on everything – religious philosophy, human social affairs, etc – has not changed one whit’.<sup>34</sup>

### **Paganism, the Environment and the Interconnectedness of All Things**

In the late 1960s Tim Zell was living in St Louis, Missouri, and working as a recruiter for ‘Head Start’, a programme run by the Human Development Corporation (HDC). He completed one year at Washington University, but was disillusioned by the ‘rats and stats’ approach to psychology and decided not to continue his studies. He was to work with HDC, doing social work (‘family counseling, job training and placement, arranging educational programs and scholarships, working with abused women and kids, halfway houses, rent control, emergency food, clothes and shelter’),<sup>35</sup> until 1975. Zell was also experimenting with aspects of the counterculture. Like Kerry Thornley, he became involved with one of the earliest Pagan organizations in the United States; in Zell’s case Feraferia, which was founded by Frederick McLaren Adams (1928–2008). In 1967, the year Feraferia was formed out of Adams’ earlier group, the Fellowship of the Hesperides, Zell first used ‘Pagan’ as a descriptor for the Church of All Worlds (one year after Thornley had used the same term for Kerista, another sexually experimental intentional community). Feraferia founder Fred Adams had studied Greek mythology, anthropology and fine arts, and in 1956 had a powerful

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<sup>32</sup> Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1986), p. 291.

<sup>33</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 292.

<sup>34</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, ‘Chapter 4 – The Church of All Worlds’, unpublished draft autobiography, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, ‘Chapter 4 – The Church of All Worlds’.

experience of the divine feminine. From that time he devoted himself to the Goddess. From 1957 to 1959 he lived in a polyamorous commune in the Sierra Madre, where they established a temple to the Maiden Goddess.

The group practiced nudism ... The major festivals were the solstices and equinoxes. The ideal of the horticultural society ... symbolized by the orchard of the Hesperides, was ... a central ... psychedelic drugs (then legal) were used ... In 1960–61 Adams withdrew to work on a manuscript, *Towards an Ethnology of Hesperides*. He traveled in Europe to visit the sites of pre-Christian culti, and performed private celebrations at them, also making contact with British neopagan groups. In 1967 the name Feraferia ('nature celebration') came to him in a flash, as though something remembered, as did the group's symbol, the 'stang', a trident with sun and crescent moon super-imposed. At the vernal equinox of 1967, the new group's banner was unfurled for the first time at a great 'love-in' in Los Angeles's Elysian Park. The basic concept of Feraferia was now virtually complete.<sup>36</sup>

Zell was deeply impressed by Adams' highly developed Pagan vision, devotion to the Goddess, and ecological sensibility; he has readily admitted that he borrowed Adams' rituals and artwork used them in his own practice.<sup>37</sup> This meant that in terms of ritual, the Church of All Worlds adopted the Wiccan Wheel of the Year, with its eight Sabbats or major festivals (a combination of the 'quarter days' or Summer and Winter solstices and Spring and Autumn Equinoxes – Litha, Yule, Ostara and Mabon – and the cross-quarter days of the Celtic Pagan calendar, Beltane or 1 May, Lughnasad or 1 August, Samhain or 1 November, and Imbolc or 1 February), and in terms of ethical conduct, the Wiccan Rede, 'an it harm none, do what you will'. This has resulted in a specifically CAW ethic, embodied in five precepts ('Be Excellent to Each Other!', 'Be Excellent to Yourself!', Honor Diversity!', 'Take Personal Responsibility!', and 'Walk Your Talk!').<sup>38</sup>

In 1968 Zell established the Church of All Worlds formally as a religion, and launched the seminal Pagan newsletter *Green Egg*. This was originally to be the newsletter for the outer Ring of CAW, the first three circles of the nine-circle membership, and it was printed in green ink. The newsletter for circles four to six, *The Scarlet Flame*, only ran to about six issues and was printed in red. Zell-Ravenheart

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<sup>36</sup> Robert S. Ellwood, 'Notes on a neopagan religious group in America', *History of Religions* 11/1 (August 1971), p. 133.

<sup>37</sup> Zell-Ravenheart and Zell-Ravenheart, *Creating Circles and Ceremonies*, p. viii.

<sup>38</sup> Reverend Luke MoonOak, *The Church of All Worlds: An Ethnography of a Pagan Religion in the United States*, unpublished PhD dissertation, California Institute of Integral Studies, 2009, pp. 131–5 on the Wheel of the Year and the Wiccan Rede, and pp. 163–73 on the CAW ethic. I am grateful to Luke MoonOak, who was introduced to me via e-mail by Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, and who generously sent me his doctoral thesis, which has been extremely helpful for my research.



notes that the third newsletter, '*Violet Void*, was designed for the Priesthood, but only one issue was ever produced'.<sup>39</sup> Needless to say, it was printed in purple ink. *Green Egg* (the title referencing Dr Seuss' *Green Eggs and Ham*, published in 1960) became the Church of All Worlds newsletter, and a source of wisdom and inspiration for the whole Pagan community. Lance Christie, though he wrote for *Green Egg* and participated in CAW, continued to run Atl and pursue study and a career as an environmental activist. In addition to the established practices derived from *Stranger in a Strange Land* (the water-sharing ritual, calling groups 'nests', a nine-circle structure, sexual freedom, the truth of all religions, and the use of words and phrases such as 'grok', 'Thou art God', and 'never thirst'), Zell added the Pagan worship of the Goddess, probably due to his interaction with Feraferia. By 1969 CAW employed both the Feraferia ritual calendar and its ceremonial greeting 'Evoe Kore' (Hail Divine Maiden). Adler argues that the real significance of CAW was not that it was the first Pagan movement (because it had antecedents), but that it created a common cause between Pagan groups and developed a communication system for people who until then had met 'with others only at rare events like the Renaissance fairs in California or science fiction conventions'.<sup>40</sup> This comment is testimony to the significance of popular cultural discourses and events for the nascent Pagan revival. With no official bodies in existence at the time, science fiction conventions and alternative gatherings facilitated the exchange of ideas. To address this lack Tim Zell founded the Council of Themis with members of Feraferia. This was the first pan-Pagan organization; it had folded by 1972, when the Council of Earth Religions was established. From around 1970 the Church of All Worlds began to take on aspects of ceremonial magic and witchcraft (circle casting, hallowing the quarters, evocation of deities, and the Celtic institution of bardship), influenced by Wiccans and other Craft adherents who participated in these umbrella organizations.

The 1960s was also the decade in which the discourse of environmentalism took root amongst both scientists and the public. Rachel Carson's (1907–64) influential *Silent Spring* (1962) brought the environmental damage done by pesticides to a popular audience, and in 1967, the peculiarly eventful and creative time known as the Summer of Love, medieval historian Lynn White, Jr (1907–87) published an article arguing that environmental devastation was a direct consequence of Judeo-Christian theology, which drew a sharp distinction between Creator and creation, with the latter viewed as soulless matter.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, White praised the Pagans of the ancient world in order to hammer home his criticisms of Christianity. He wrote:

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<sup>39</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, 'Green Egg: The 40-Year-Old Hippie', in Oberon Zell-Ravenheart (ed.), *Green Egg Omelette: An Anthology of Art and Articles from the Legendary Pagan Journal* (Franklin Lakes NJ, 2009), pp. xi–xiii.

<sup>40</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 295.

<sup>41</sup> Lynn White, Jr, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 155 (1967), pp. 1203–7 at <http://aeoe.org/resources/spiritual/rootsofcrisis.pdf>, accessed 21 August 2009.

In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids showed their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying Pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.<sup>42</sup>

On 6 September 1970 Tim Zell, Primate of the Church of All Worlds, had a profound religious experience that changed the direction of CAW's theology in significant ways. This revelation was preached to CAW members and published in *Green Egg* in 1971. What he apprehended was that the Earth was alive, that the Goddess of Paganism was the Earth, and 'the entire Biosphere of the Earth comprises a single living Organism'.<sup>43</sup> Zell coined the term Terrebios (later Terrabia) from the Latin for 'earth' and 'life' to describe this deity. In 1972, the English scientist James Lovelock (b. 1919) published a version of the same thesis in the journal *Atmospheric Environment*, using 'Gaia' as the name for the living Earth. This name was suggested to Lovelock by his friend, the novelist, William Golding.<sup>44</sup> Tim Zell then adopted Lovelock's nomenclature, though he generally spelled it 'Gaea'.

In 1971 Zell began to correspond with Robert A. Heinlein, and Heinlein became a subscriber to *Green Egg*. He never became a member or an advocate of the Church of All Worlds, which is not surprising given his attitude to religion. Yet he developed sympathy for what Zell was trying to do, and even had some input into CAW's evolving religious vision. One thing he shared with Zell and Christie was a commitment to the advance of science. When Christie wrote an essay on Neo-Paganism for *Green Egg* in 1972 he placed the emergent Earth Goddess theology in an evolutionary biological framework, rather than a traditionally religious one. He argued that CAW believed that the evolutionary process over billions of years brought to maturity 'a single vast living entity ... We perceive the human race to be ... [what] Teilhard de Chardin termed the Noosphere. And further, we equate the identity of our great living Biosphere (... 'Terrebia') with ... the Great Goddess: Mother Earth; Mother Nature'.<sup>45</sup> There is a general trend in Western modernity to collapse the supernatural, previously seen as radically separate from the natural, into the natural order. This means that religions and spiritualities that combine

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<sup>42</sup> White, Jr, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', p. 6 (of pdf).

<sup>43</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, 'TheaGenesis: The Birth of the Goddess', in Zell-Ravenheart, *Green Egg Omelette*, p. 95.

<sup>44</sup> Lovelock's early musings on Gaia were eventually published as *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford, 1979). This book has been enormously popular and influential and is now in its third edition.

<sup>45</sup> Lance Christie, 'Neo-Paganism: An Alternative Reality'. in Zell-Ravenheart, *Green Egg Omelette*, pp. 120–21.

‘rationality and science with the pursuit of transcendent meaning’ (where what is transcended is often the individual human or humanity in general) are now popular.<sup>46</sup> TheaGenesis, the coming to consciousness of Terrebia or Gaia, as preached by the Church of All Worlds, is a perfect example of that trend. Luke MoonOak has noted that the issue of the divine in Paganism has had to be reframed in the light of scientific discoveries, particularly concerning environmental degradation, and that the ‘emerging framework is a planet-spirit worldview and ethos that encourages speculation concerning the possible consciousness of Earth, the place of humans within Earth’s living matrix, and the relationship of embodied divinity as planetary consciousness and humanity’.<sup>47</sup>

In the 1970s CAW and Atl moved further apart, with Tim Zell and his second wife Morning Glory (b. Diana Moore, 1948), whom he met at the Gnostic Aquarian Convention in 1973 and married in 1974, taking a very public approach to the spread of their new religion. Morning Glory, of mixed Irish and Choctaw descent, was a free-spirited woman who had spent the 1960s exploring the wilder shores of love and life. She had discovered Paganism through reading Sybil Leek’s *Diary of a Witch* (1969), and realized her true identity after undergoing a spiritual experience at Big Sur, which involved taking LSD after a period of fasting and diving into a waterfall. She comments that the ‘person who dove off that waterfall was a girl named Diana, and the person who climbed out of that pool was a woman named Morning Glory ... And that was my initiation’.<sup>48</sup> At the time of her meeting with Tim Zell Morning Glory was in an open marriage with her first husband Gary, and was the mother of a small daughter, Rainbow (later known as Gail). When she and Tim met it was a decisive moment; they were instantly aware of their connection as soul mates. As Morning Glory was to become CAW’s pre-eminent theorist of polyamorous relationships, her first significant exchange with Tim Zell is worth noting:

‘You know this is amazing and wonderful and I love you so much I can’t even think straight. But I must think straight enough to be honest with you. I need you to understand that as much as I love you, I can never be in a monogamous relationship. It’s just not in my nature and I don’t want to deceive you. I want to be free to have other lovers and you’re free to do that as well. I’ll give you my whole heart and soul, but I cannot give you monogamy. There are other people in my life and there always will be other people. Yet what we have together is special and unique beyond any measure; nothing will ever take away from

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Jindra, ‘Natural/supernatural conceptions in Western cultural contexts’, *Anthropological Forum* 13/2 (2003), p. 164.

<sup>47</sup> MoonOak, *The Church of All Worlds: An Ethnography of a Pagan Religion in the United States*, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> V. Vale and John Sulak, *Modern Pagans: An Investigation of Contemporary Pagan Practices* (San Francisco, 2001), p. 131.

that.’ And he looked back into my eyes and smiled like he had just found the Holy Grail.<sup>49</sup>

For the next two years she divided her time between Eugene, Oregon and St Louis, working out the difficult logistics of long-distance relationships and training as a priestess in the Church of All Worlds. She and Zell were married on 14 April in Minneapolis, at Gnosticon (in a ceremony performed by Isaac Bonewits of the Reformed Druids of North America).<sup>50</sup>

From circa 1970 Zell had been studying the Craft with a number of practitioners in St Louis, including Deborah Letter (Wicca and Ceremonial Magick) and CAW High Priestess Carolyn Clark (Ozark Druidic Witchcraft). According to Adler, Atlans had always been inclined towards atheism and were suspicious of CAW’s increasing use of ceremonial magic and ritual, which they regarded as superstition or even ‘occultism’ in a negative sense. The interaction of Paganism with the science fiction world flourished, with Zell competing in and winning prizes at the Costume Ball of the World Science Fiction Convention in Los Angeles (1972) and at Discon (with Morning Glory) in Washington in 1974, where they were distinguished by the wearing of their pet pythons.<sup>51</sup>

By the mid-1970s the St Louis Nest had become two Nests, as membership of the Church of All Worlds increased. Don Wildgrube ran Don’s Overland Nest, the entry-level group, and Tom Williams hosted the Dog Star Nest, for long-time CAW members. Tensions within the Church and Morning Glory’s increasing discomfort at living in the city led Zell to quit his job with the HDC and in June 1976 Tim and Morning Glory Zell left Missouri for Oregon, *en route* to California.<sup>52</sup> They settled on a property near Ukiah called Coeden Brith (Welsh for speckled forest) that belonged to Alison Harlow, who with Thomas de Long had founded Nemeton.<sup>53</sup> The two Pagan organizations merged in 1978. Without their hands-on leadership, CAW activities dwindled and *Green Egg* went into abeyance. By that stage Zell had completed a doctorate in Divinity at Life Science College,

a small Christian seminary in Rolling Meadows, Illinois ... I got a Teacher’s Certificate from Harris Teachers’ College in St. Louis. I worked for many years

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<sup>49</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, ‘Chapter 8 – Cosmic Convergence’, unpublished draft autobiography, 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, ‘Chapter 8 – Cosmic Convergence’.

<sup>51</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 298.

<sup>52</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, ‘Chapter 9 – The St Louis Nests’, unpublished draft autobiography, 2009.

<sup>53</sup> Anon, ‘Church of All Worlds’, in James R. Lewis (ed.), *Odd Gods: New Religions and the Cult Controversy* (New York, 2001), pp. 317–18.

as a counselor, social psychologist, and programs supervisor for the Human Development Corp. in the ‘War on Poverty’, and also taught public school.<sup>54</sup>

In 1979 Tim Zell co-ordinated a large Pagan eclipse gathering at the replica of Stonehenge at Maryhill, Washington, which was built between 1918 and 1930 by Sam Hill as a memorial to the war dead.<sup>55</sup> More than 3,000 came for a ritual during the solar eclipse on 26 February 1979. While conducting the ritual, Zell experienced a vision quest and he changed his name to Otter G’Zell as a result of it. During their time at Coedin Brith the Zells, who had long been fascinated by the magical creatures of myth, bred unicorn goats, which they exhibited in Ringling Brothers Circus, after reading lore on unicorns which led them to believe that they were not a separate species but rather a one-horned variant with special significance:

OZ: People had always treated unicorns as if they were supposedly a separate species, like horses or cows. But actually, unicorn-ism was something more akin to albinism. Albinos are found in many species such as rabbits, deer, and humans. Albinos are a multi-species phenomenon, and so are unicorns.

MG: It was not like the unicorn was a separate species of animal. And that was where everybody got their wires crossed. If that is what you’re looking for, and none of the facts fit your theory, then you’re going to come up with information that is not correct. So instead of having a theory about it, we just started doing more detailed research. And we concluded that many different kinds of animals were labeled as being ‘unicorns’.<sup>56</sup>

They also taught Pagan seminars; and started the Ecosophical Research Association (ERA). With fellow Pagan and bard Gwydion Pendderwen they founded the Holy Order of Mother Earth (HOME) and conducted rituals on Pendderwen’s neighbouring property, Annwfn (Welsh for the otherworld).<sup>57</sup> The Zells had always been polyamorous and in 1984 Diane Darling and her son Zack joined Otter and his son Bryan and Morning Glory and her daughter Rainbow. The three underwent a triple Pagan marriage in 1989.

The Church of All Worlds has maintained its commitment to unconventional sexual paths and non-traditional family structures, despite the fact that mainstream Western society retreated from sexual experimentation after the 1960s. Morning

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<sup>54</sup> Rick West, ‘The Great and Powerful OZ Unicorn. An Unusual Tale: Oberon Zell-Ravnheart [sic] Interview’, *SideShowWorld*, at [www.sideshowworld.com/interview-OZ.html](http://www.sideshowworld.com/interview-OZ.html), accessed 21 September 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Kathy Weiser, ‘An American Stonehenge at Maryhill’, *Legends of America*, at [www.legendsofamerica.com/WA-Stonehenge.html](http://www.legendsofamerica.com/WA-Stonehenge.html), accessed 21 August 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, ‘Chapter 10 – Eugene, Oregon’, unpublished autobiography, 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Zell-Ravenheart, ‘Preface: A Brief Personal History of HOME’, p. ix.

Glory Zell-Ravenheart was a pioneering Pagan theorist of multiple relationships. Her 1990 essay, 'A Bouquet of Lovers', set out clear and sensible rules that should be in place before open relationships can be viable. She distinguishes between primary and secondary partnerships, advocates full honesty and safe sex practices such as the use of condoms, and acknowledges the possibility of jealousy and secondary partnerships that may threaten the primary partnership (her advice is to terminate any threatening secondary partnership).<sup>58</sup> This essay is also important as in it Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart coined the term 'polyamory' for this type of relationship. With Diane Darling the Zells (G'Zell was a short-lived surname) revived *Green Egg* in 1988. CAW also began to engage with academic discourse about Gaia consciousness, taking part in a conference at the California Institute of Integral Studies early in 1988.<sup>59</sup> In 1994 Otter changed his name to Oberon, the partnership with Diane Darling ended, and Oberon and Morning Glory established new relationships: he with Liza Gabriel; she with Wolf Dean Stiles. In 1996 Wynter Rose joined their multiple family structure, as did John. At this time all members took the surname 'Ravenheart'.<sup>60</sup> They became known as the 'first family of polyamory'. The CAW polyamorous philosophy is explained by Oberon Zell-Ravenheart in a lecture broadcast.<sup>61</sup> When called upon to provide the opening ceremony for PolyCon in 1991, the Church of All Worlds members enacted a poem from Donald Kingsbury's science fiction novel *Courtship Rite* (1982). In this novel three men and two women in a group marriage are seeking a sixth partner to complete the relationship:

One man alone is like a cripple bound to his pillow, ennobled/humbled by the daily discipline of conquering trivial detail, even the lacing of boots a major challenge. When does the One achieve more?

Two may live serenely, with occasional storms of high happiness, if the weather and the times are with them, and chance smiles on them, and Death does not halve them. The man of such a union must take vows of poverty; his one woman will never be as rich as his dreams. The woman of such a union must learn to cherish weaknesses and lacks; her one man will have to work too hard to be the best of lovers. When expectations are small, and life benevolent, a Two works well enough.

Three restlessly seeks another mate like water seeks the sea, but a triumvirate is the freest of all marriages from conflict. A chair with three legs does not wobble.

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<sup>58</sup> Morning Glory Zell, 'A Bouquet of Lovers', in Zell-Ravenheart, *Green Egg Omelette*, pp. 228–31.

<sup>59</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, 'Chapter 21 – Green Egg – Next Generation', unpublished draft autobiography, 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Vale and Sulak, *Modern Pagans: An Investigation of Contemporary Pagan Practices*, pp. 130–53.

<sup>61</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, 'Poly History 201', *Polyamory Weekly*, Episode 203, 2 May 2009 at [www.mefedia.com/tags/heinlein/rss2.xml](http://www.mefedia.com/tags/heinlein/rss2.xml), accessed 21 September 2009.

Four is the threshold of emotional wisdom. Only masters of the four phases of love and the four nodes of loyalty can juggle a marriage of Four without losing a ball. The Four is a game for the players of the game of love who have won.

Five, like Three, is sensually unstable but transmutes more opulently in the harmonies of its shiftings. The Five is an energy amplifier of great power based on loyalty, love, experience, communication, and flexibility. Mates of a Five are adepts at conflict resolution. It is said that a clan is in safe hands whose leader has achieved a Five.

Six is the marriage of completion. The children of the Sixes shall inherit the stars, for the symbol of Six is the star.<sup>62</sup>

One by one, led by Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, the group came on stage, recited a section of the poem and joined hands. When the six was completed (Oberon, Morning Glory, Diane, Richard, Anodea, and Andy) they held out their hands to the whole audience, who surged forward to join with them. Monogamy is a denial of the interconnectedness of all things; polyamory, as CAW have developed it, mirrors the cosmic interconnectedness of all in Gaia in human relations. This powerful unity and mutual support underpins CAW's commitment to polyamory, sacred sexuality and group Pagan marriage, as does the one 'commandment' CAW prescribes for all, 'Be excellent to each other'.<sup>63</sup>

Oberon Zell-Ravenheart revived *Green Egg* in 1988 and it became a major Pagan journal with Diane Darling as editor. Largely as a consequence of the success of *Green Egg*, the Church of All Worlds 're-emerged as a major force' in modern Paganism.<sup>64</sup> In the 1990s the Church of All Worlds began to reorganize under the leadership of Anodea Judith (a psychologist and Pagan teacher who was ordained in 1985) and Tom Williams (the editor of *Green Egg* from 1975–76), and since 2000 it has undergone an impressive renaissance. International expansion has followed; a branch of CAW was founded in Australia in 1992 by Anthorr and Fiona Nomchong, and 'it became the first recognized Goddess and Earth worshipping religion within [that] country'.<sup>65</sup> Since the advent of the New Age, often dated from the publication of Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980), Paganism

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<sup>62</sup> Donald Kingsbury, *Courtship Rite* (New York, 1983 [1982]), p. 171.

<sup>63</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, 'Chapter 22 – Missions to Mundania', unpublished autobiography, 2009 explains how CAW's simple emphasis on ethical excellence in polyamorous relationships indirectly led to the demise of Kerista, a polyfidelitous commune run by Jud Judson, mentioned in Chapter 2. Kerista was organized according to rigid rules; the Keristans in the audience were the only people who did not respond to CAW's invitation. In November 1991 Kerista disbanded after about 35 years and some members joined CAW.

<sup>64</sup> James R. Lewis, 'The Church of All Worlds', in Christopher Partridge (ed.), *New Religions: A Guide* (New York, 2004), p. 298.

<sup>65</sup> Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament* (Brussels, 2005), p. 58.

has moved from the fringe of Western religion closer to the mainstream. There has been an explosion of Pagan publishing that forms a large part of the alternative religion book market.<sup>66</sup> Everything from crystal healing, through Kabbalah, chakra therapy, ceremonial magick, Wicca, channelled messages, spirit guides, indigenous mythology and traditional Chinese medicine fall under this rubric. In the late 1960s and early 1970s it was often necessary to learn Pagan and esoteric traditions directly from an initiated teacher, as getting access to books on these topics was difficult. In the early twenty-first century seekers frequently engage in a process of ‘auto-conversion’, as they search the internet for subjects that intrigue them, follow this up by buying and reading books and attending seminars, and often at the point of commitment will self-initiate, rather than be initiated in a church, coven or other religious organization. This change is partly due to changed social factors: the growth of communication technologies has made such seeking vastly simpler; the late modern (or postmodern) emphasis on the project of self-cultivation and self-transformation has placed greater importance on continually seeking out new experiences, products and spiritualities to construct identity through ‘trying on’ new selves; and the overarching consumer society means that new products in all markets, material, spiritual, alternative, and esoteric are constantly being made available at a bewildering rate of production.<sup>67</sup> It is also validated by the perception that religious conversion does not occur in Paganism; rather, Pagans recognize their true self, they ‘come home’.<sup>68</sup>

The Church of All Worlds is somewhat implicated in this consumer cycle, though it must be noted that CAW, like all the invented religions considered in this book, has both a positive and negative relationship with its host culture. Its advocacy of the truth of all religions (since truth is subjective) and its eclectic approach to spiritual and religious techniques makes it harmonious with the postmodern, relativist trend of the late twentieth-century West. However, there is a sense in which CAW takes a stand on truth; since its registration as a church in 1968 the main message it has preached has been one of environmental awareness. The Goddess Gaia is the Earth, ecological damage is real, and climate change sceptics are given short shrift. The conservation movement is anti-consumerist and pro-sustainability. Since the mid-1980s Lance Christie, now resident in Utah, has been a tireless conservationist, publishing and campaigning on the effects of pesticides, global warming, and sustainability. He founded the Association for the Tree of Life (ATL in its current incarnation) and was a member of the Natural

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<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Puttick, ‘The Rise of Mind-Body-Spirit Publishing: Reflecting or Creating Spiritual Trends?’ *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies* 1 (February 2005), pp. 129–49.

<sup>67</sup> David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, 2000), Chapter 5 ‘Shopping for a Self’.

<sup>68</sup> Eugene V. Gallagher, ‘A Religion Without Converts? Becoming a Neo-Pagan’. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62/3 (Autumn 1994), pp. 851–67.



Resources Defence Council.<sup>69</sup> Oberon and Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart lived for many years in rural districts, seeking a lifestyle with a low carbon footprint as much as the freedom to practice polyamory and Paganism away from mainstream society. Oberon Zell-Ravenheart has stated that:

Since we are concerned with the emergent evolution of a total new culture and lifestyle, and since we perceive no distinction between the sacred and the secular, we consider every activity to be essentially a religious activity. For us, recycling is as much a religious duty as prayer and meditation ... We recognize that the essence of a religion is in the living of it.<sup>70</sup>

Their order, HOME (the Holy Order of Mother Earth) celebrates the cycle of seasons and rural life, with its patterns of birth and death in the plant and animal worlds. In all CAW publications the divinity of the Earth is attested in ritual and in teachings. It could be said to be the only dogma the Church insists upon. There are rituals to become attuned to the Earth ('imagine an interchange between you and the Earth, and as you make contact with each step, you bless one another'),<sup>71</sup> rituals for tree-planting, and chants to use in water-sharing rituals ('I open up my body, to receive the Living Waters, that spring from the heart of life, that spring from the heart of life, the Earth is guiding me clear and true, to the living source of Love, to the living source of Love').<sup>72</sup> Yet the Church of All Worlds remains attached to science and to science fiction, and the fact that Zell-Ravenheart and Christie both studied science at university means that their vision is future-oriented, rather than looking nostalgically back to a pre-modern Golden Age (for example, Zell-Ravenheart has expressed CAW's commitment to 'space exploration and colonization').<sup>73</sup>

### Magickal Education and Pagan Elder Statesmanship

Oberon and Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart are now elders of the modern Pagan community. Oberon returned to the post of Primate of the Church of All Worlds in 2005 after a period of turmoil within CAW (when the second phase Church of All Worlds had been disbanded in 2004), and in the twenty-first century has shown

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<sup>69</sup> See 'Lance Christie', *Earth Forum: Discourse, Diverse, Dynamic*, at [www.earthportal.org/forum/?author=782](http://www.earthportal.org/forum/?author=782), accessed 21 August 2009.

<sup>70</sup> David V. Barrett, *The New Believers: Sects, 'Cults', and Alternative Religions* (London, 2001), p. 404.

<sup>71</sup> Farida Ka'iwalani Fox, 'Attunement with the Earth', in Zell-Ravenheart and Zell-Ravenheart, *Creating Circles and Ceremonies*, p. 139.

<sup>72</sup> Liza Gabriel, 'Water Sharing Chant', in Zell-Ravenheart and Zell-Ravenheart, *Creating Circles and Ceremonies*, p. 143.

<sup>73</sup> Barrett, *The New Believers*, p. 402.

concern to make the CAW legacy more readily available, through both an internet and paper publishing programme.<sup>74</sup> The format of books like *Green Egg Omelette* (2009) is interesting to compare with that of *Principia Discordia*. *Green Egg* the newsletter incorporated elements of 'zine publishing; sketched illustrations, large blocks of text broken up by poems and rituals, cartoons and photographs, although it was never as anarchic as the *Principia* in layout or content. All the publications issued by Oberon Zell-Ravenheart in the new millennium preserve this 'amateurish' quality, which grants them folksy charm and belies the fact that they are sophisticated products. They are also a wonderful resource for the scholar and the seeker interested in Paganism, as they are filled with well-written short opinion pieces, rituals and songs, by figures of great significance in the history of the modern Pagan revival.

The mainstreaming of Pagan and New Age publishing resulted in the production of many textbooks and 'how to' manuals that explained to interested seekers how to become a Pagan, learn ceremonial magic, or gain other esoteric spiritual skills.<sup>75</sup> All of these textbooks were, however, aimed at adults (or highly capable late adolescents). As the Pagan movement has grown older, the issue of how to raise the next generation has become increasingly important, with education at the forefront of the debate. Pagans have a choice of religious schools, secular schools or home-schooling. The religious schools that exist are (in Western countries) overwhelmingly Christian, and any kind of private education is generally very expensive. In 1989 Oberon and Morning Glory, with Diane Darling (all three of them informed and engaged parents), supplemented the publication of the revived *Green Egg* with a newsletter for children, *HAM* ('How About Magic?') which was edited by Diane's son Zack. However a comprehensive Pagan education system for children was yet to be devised.

This book argues that invented religions (and, indeed, all religions) exist in dialogue with their host cultures. The difference is often that invented religions deliberately cannibalize elements of popular culture, engaging in a creative (and often cheeky) dialogue with certain phenomena. In 2004 Oberon Zell-Ravenheart announced the founding of the Grey School of Wizardry, a complete alternative education system, which drew on the enormous success of J.K. (Joanne Kathleen)

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<sup>74</sup> See [www.caw.org](http://www.caw.org), accessed 21 August 2009.

<sup>75</sup> Works of this nature include Donald Michael Kraig, *Modern Magick: Eleven Lessons in the High Magickal Arts* (St Paul MI, 1992), which offers a course in Kabbalah, complete with a test or 'review' at the end of each lesson. Scott Cunningham's extremely influential *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner*, revised edition (Woodbury MN, 2005) opened a floodgate on self-initiating solitaries who decided that coven-based training was not for them. Yet another kind of 'textbook' is Kristin Madden et al., *Exploring the Pagan Path: Wisdom From the Elders* (Franklin Lakes NJ, 2005), which features chapters by a range of Pagan academics and practitioners, covering a variety of traditions (rather than one particular tradition).

Rowling's series about the boy wizard Harry Potter.<sup>76</sup> This series of seven children's novels became a runaway publishing phenomenon, and featured an alternate England where the majority of people were 'Muggles', born without magical powers. Wizard families sent their children to be educated at the wizarding school Hogwart's, where they studied Spells, Potions, and Defence Against the Dark Arts, among other subjects.<sup>77</sup> Zell-Ravenheart when interviewed in 2006 by 'Hypocritical Ross', alluded frequently to the significance of the Potter phenomenon. When asked whether he thought his and Morning Glory's creation of unicorns in the 1980s had been effective in causing change in the world, he responded:

Well, there has certainly been a significant rise in all things magickal, and an enormous popular interest in Myth, Magick and Mysterie! Dropping real live Unicorns into the pool of the mundane world has definitely started ripples that have become waves – and hopefully will continue to grow into an enormous tsunami! Think of the Harry Potter phenomenon, the revival of interest in (and movies of) *Lord of the Rings* and Narnia – to say nothing of fantasy literature and films in general. I believe strongly that our returning Unicorns to the world was a harbinger of all this renaissance of classical fantasy. What we heard time after time when people encountered our Unicorns was: 'If a real live Unicorn can exist, then anything is possible!' And I believe that this widespread acceptance and popularity of fantasy literature and film has now laid a solid foundation for the return of real magick and true Wizardry, which is where I continue to direct my primary energies, via my books and the Grey School of Wizardry.<sup>78</sup>

What is most interesting about this response is that Zell-Ravenheart takes a position on fiction that is almost the precise opposite of that of Plato. Where Plato suspected art because it was not 'real' but might be mistaken for reality by ignorant people, and therefore banished artists from his Republic, Oberon Zell-Ravenheart views the unreal (for example, novels, unicorns and other magical creatures from mythology, and films) as prefigurings of the real. If there is a fiction that is so good that it ought to exist, humans have a duty to make that fiction a reality. This is exactly the thinking that led Zell and Christie to found the Church of All Worlds nearly five decades ago. Heinlein's novel was so powerful, so liberating, that it was true despite its obviously fictional elements (Martians, Fair Witnesses, global government and so on).

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<sup>76</sup> The series began with J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London, 1997 and concluded with *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (London, 2007).

<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth D. Schafer, *Exploring Harry Potter* (London, 2000), Chapter 4, 'Setting', pp. 72–89.

<sup>78</sup> Hypocritical Ross, 'An Interview With an Actual, Real-Life Wizard (Who Made Ten Unicorns)', *Hypocritical Mass* (October 30, 2006) at [www.hypocriticalmass.org/blog/an-interview-with-an-actual-real-life-wizard-who-made-ten-unicorns.html/](http://www.hypocriticalmass.org/blog/an-interview-with-an-actual-real-life-wizard-who-made-ten-unicorns.html/), accessed 21 August 2009.

After inaugurating the Grey School in 2004, a steady stream of textbooks aimed at making wizardry and magic attractive and interesting to children have appeared. That this may be a difficult task is attested to by Kristin Madden in her article ‘Involving Children’ (one of only a small number of sensible, thoughtful works on ways to incorporate children into Pagan practice and to teach children Pagan values). She notes that small children learn from their parents modelling behaviours and attitudes, and thus have fewer problems, but that older children can struggle if their parents become Pagans, because they may have already absorbed society’s negative stereotypes of ‘witches’, ‘druids’ and ‘Pagans’.<sup>79</sup> Madden was raised by Pagan parents in the Shamanic tradition, and is the author of books on Pagan parenting and Pagan home-schooling, and her experience with placing children in the wider Pagan community shines through in her writing. She advocates a concentration on nature, which is a great way to teach Earth-based spirituality, through fun and festival, and by concentrating on what interests one’s children have developed and divining the spiritual in them. However, Madden’s approach, though worthy, is quite different to what Zell-Ravenheart hopes to achieve through the Grey School of Wizardry.

As Headmaster of the Grey School, Zell-Ravenheart has authorized a seven-year programme (the same as that of Hogwarts, although six or seven years of high school is not uncommon in many education systems). Paralleling the four Hogwarts Houses of Slytherin, Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw are four Houses named for the Elementals associated with the Four Quarters, Sylphs, Salamanders, Undines and Gnomes (respectively air, fire, water and earth). The first textbook was *Grimoire for the Apprentice Wizard* (2004), and it contains material on magickal arts, conducting rituals, cosmology, wizards of history (including Eliphas Levi, Charles Godfrey Leland, Aleister Crowley and Gerald Gardner), and a multitude of other subjects, assembled into seven blocks of study (several of which are attached to particular colours).<sup>80</sup> Despite Zell-Ravenheart’s sense of fun and fondness for theatrical flourishes being undiminished over the years, the Grey School of Wizardry is an entirely serious project. Western Christianity has lost ground, and now there are Islamic and Jewish schools, Buddhist and Steiner schools, and parents have a choice of niche products to ensure that their children are educated in ways they regard as appropriate. The time was right for a magickal curriculum, and Zell Ravenheart, an innovator from his teenage years, made it happen. The membership list of the Grey Council in the *Grimoire* is very impressive; names to conjure with include Raymond Buckland, Raven Grimassi, Donald Michael Kraig and Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart. In 2009 Isaac and Phaedra Bonewits closed their Real Magick

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<sup>79</sup> Kristin Madden, ‘Involving Children’, in Madden et al., *Exploring the Pagan Path: Wisdom from the Elders* (Franklin Lakes NJ, 2005), p. 168.

<sup>80</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, *Grimoire for the Apprentice Wizard* (Franklin Lakes NJ, 2004), p. vii, p. 338.

School, which had been struggling, and joined the Grey School.<sup>81</sup> It is probable that the school's name is derived from the colours assigned to wizards in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, in which the wizard protagonist Gandalf is called 'the Grey' (although he later acquires the title formerly held by Saruman, 'the White'. Radagast 'the Brown' is the only other named 'colour wizard'). However, as will be seen, Zell-Ravenheart is reluctant to allow the Grey School be perceived as a 'Pagan' institution.

Robert Ellwood, one of the earliest academic commentators on modern Paganism in America, noted the attraction of the 'wizard or seer' figure as early as 1974. He noted that the models for this new spiritual figure were all found in fictions:

Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, Ged in Ursula LeGuin's brilliant *Wizard of Earthsea* novels, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Castaneda's Don Juan ... He is essentially pagan; his world has the hardness, the inevitability, and the cool glory of old myth. His cosmos is polytheistic; the wizard has many spirit allies and friends, but they are finite and he finally walks beyond the stations of each ... None know from where he ultimately came or whither he goes after the last parting. But he helps whom he can. He has gone through a heavy initiation somewhere, and he knows the esoteric structure of things, so that nothing really surprises him or is past his power. Yet finally an air of solemn sadness tinges even the joy he also radiates.<sup>82</sup>

He concluded that this type of figure was heroic and countercultural, even in the 1970s when the fire of the 1960s was slowly being extinguished. People were attracted to these fictional wizards because they were alienated from modern Western life. The fictional wizards lived an authentic existence, in which Western *mores* meant nothing. This lent *gravitas* and power to the figure of the wizard, whose existence was authentic because it was entirely separate from conventional expectations. Ellwood further speculated that the reason for the appeal of the wizard was that people yearned to live like that, and he asked if that was not a kind of polytheism, where everyone was a deity and viewed their fellow humans as such? The CAW greeting 'Thou art God/ess' would appear to confirm his suspicions.

The Grey School of Wizardry website has a number of very Potteresque features, including the 'Magick Alley' site from which textbooks and school equipment may be purchased. Although this is a virtual site, it is conceptually similar to Diagon Alley ('diagonally') in Harry Potter's parallel London, where wands and robes, spell ingredients and companion animals (usually owls and cats, but sometimes rats and toads) can be purchased.<sup>83</sup> In the wake of the Potter novels the Grey School is

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<sup>81</sup> Isaac and Phaedra Bonewits, 'Real Magick School', [www.realmagicschool.com/](http://www.realmagicschool.com/), accessed 4 December 2009.

<sup>82</sup> Robert S. Ellwood, 'Polytheism: Establishment or Liberation Religion?' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42/2 (June 1974), p. 349.

<sup>83</sup> Grey School of Wizardry, at [www.greyschool.com](http://www.greyschool.com), accessed 21 August 2009.

not the only group that are attempting to attract the young to a magickal education. George Beahm and Stan Goldin's *The Whimsic Alley Book of Spells* (2007), classified as 'juvenile nonfiction' by its publisher, hits some of the same notes. The essay 'A History of Whimsic Alley' ('whimsically'), posits one Sir Geoffrey Wilsey, who in 1354 told his companions he had visited the magical Whimsic Alley. They ridiculed him.<sup>84</sup> Readers will be thrilled to know that in 2004 Whimsic Alley relocated to Santa Monica, California. Nor is this the only example; to borrow a phrase, their name is legion. Llewellyn Publishing classified Cornelius Rumstuckle's *The Book of Wizardry* (2003) as 'juvenile/fiction/wizardry' but such distinctions are hard to maintain. The author self-identifies as a fourth-generation wizard and the book contains 22 lessons (the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, though no Kabbalistic orientation is evident), but the tone is conversational and the effect is rather more like a 'choose your own adventure' novel.<sup>85</sup>

These sample Pagan and magical textbooks for children and adolescents demonstrate the sophistication of the Grey School of Wizardry's programme and the high quality of the content. Several textbooks are of the dictionary or compendium type; these include volumes detailing gargoyles, dragon lore, and a bestiary that is particularly redolent of the Potter novels, where studying 'Care of Magical Creatures' with the half-giant Hagrid is one of the dullest subjects at Hogwarts (exceeded consistently only by History of Magic, which is taught by a ghost, the ancient, shrivelled Professor Cuthbert Binns, who simply has not noticed that he is dead).<sup>86</sup>

One final textbook, Zell-Ravenheart's *Companion for the Apprentice Wizard*, is examined briefly to identify ways in which it would appeal to, and be accessible, to children and adolescents. The 'Preface' is an excellent sample of Zell-Ravenheart's attunement to his audience, and his willingness to tell young people how 'things are' without patronizing them. He notes the absence of wizarding and magickal websites aimed at young people, provides a succinct summary of the plot of *Stranger in a Strange Land* and tells the students how he and Lance Christie shared water and formed a bond 'deeper than blood or marriage'.<sup>87</sup> He reflects on his years as a teacher, social worker and school counsellor (even Pagan leaders need jobs), and admits that he wants to appeal to those potential students

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<sup>84</sup> Stan Goldin, 'A History of Whimsic Alley', in George Beahm and Stan Goldin, *The Whimsic Alley Book of Spells: Mythical Incantations for Wizards of All Ages* (Charlottesville VA, 2007), p. xi.

<sup>85</sup> Cornelius Rumstuckle, *The Book of Wizardry: The Apprentice's Guide to the Secrets of the Wizard's Guild* (St Paul MN, 2003).

<sup>86</sup> See Susan 'Moonwriter' Pesznecker, *Gargoyles* (Franklin Lakes NJ, 2007); Ash 'LeopardDancer' DeKirk, *Dragonlore* (Franklin Lakes, NJ, 2006); and Oberon Zell-Ravenheart and Ash 'LeopardDancer' DeKirk, *A Wizard's Bestiary* (Franklin Lakes NJ, 2007).

<sup>87</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, 'Preface: Once Upon a Time', in Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, *Companion for the Apprentice Wizard* (Franklin Lakes NJ, 2006), p. ix.

who loved Harry Potter. Finally, he draws an interesting distinction; he argues that ‘Paganism and Wicca are *religious* orientations, whereas Magick and Wizardry are *studies* and *practices* that are independent of any particular religion. And I felt this was an important distinction that I wanted to keep’.<sup>88</sup> The School admits students from 11 years of age (like Hogwarts), though many of its approximately 1,000 students are much older. Delivery is online, and to meet Zell-Ravenheart’s egalitarian intentions, it is not an expensive education. He has ambitious plans for the expansion of the Grey School:

the role of Wizards has ... been about fostering the next generation ... Wizards are the teachers and mentors of the young heroes, whose job it will be to go out into the world and make a difference. This is what Merlin was trying to do with Arthur ... Gandalf with Frodo, and Obi-Wan Kenobi with Luke Skywalker. So, much of our Vision is to send forth ... graduates of this School who really will have the kind of tools – wisdom as well as knowledge – that they need to help people. But we’re not limiting it, of course, just to the kids ... You can still pick it up here at the Grey School ... If you never got to take that class in classical Latin, speculative physics or herbal chemistry ... Future plans ... are to expand ... into three sub-schools. [They] would be ... the Arcane Academy, offering a full seven-level Apprenticeship program covering middle school through high school levels, culminating in a Journeyman Certificate ... the Invisible College, offering a four-year Journeyman program at college level, and culminating in a Master’s Degree ... [and] the Unseen University, offering a Master-level program culminating in a Degree of Adept (equivalent to a Ph.D.).<sup>89</sup>

This is a radical programme that offers a comprehensive alternative education, and is evidence of Oberon Zell-Ravenheart’s commitment to the transmission of an ecological, magical Pagan vision as the basis for widespread social transformation.

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the Church of All Worlds was inspired by a novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, demonstrating the power of science fiction in providing an alternative theology in the early 1960s (in the sense that it provided compelling narratives attributing effects in the real world to unseen or little known agents). Both Aidan Kelly and Isaac Bonewits, key figures in the Pagan revival, attribute their personal wholeness to the reading of science fiction. They view it as a moral literature and argue that ‘the only authors who are coping with the

<sup>88</sup> Zell-Ravenheart, ‘Preface: Once Upon a Time’, p. ix.

<sup>89</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, ‘Chapter 30 – The Grimoire and the Grey School’, unpublished autobiography, 2009.

complexity of modern reality are those who are changing the way people perceive reality, and these are authors who are tied in with science fiction'.<sup>90</sup> But science fiction alone was not the whole story. Tim Zell and Lance Christie encountered the environmentalist discourse in the 1960s and advocated the worship of the goddess Gaia. Their progress can be measured by the distance between their developed eco-theological position, asserting the primacy of the living Earth as Goddess, and the position of their early inspiration, Ayn Rand, who 'praised pollution as a sign of human progress. Her heroines have wept with joy at billboards and saluted smokestacks, regarding them as a sign of the human struggle against nature'.<sup>91</sup> Zell and Christie absolutely rejected this position and embraced an all-encompassing environmentalism, while Zell married their invented religion to the larger Pagan revival. However, despite the fact that much of modern Paganism accepted the legitimating strategies of pseudo-history and an historical connection to pre-Christian European pagan religions, Zell-Ravenheart continues to affirm the importance of *Stranger in a Strange Land* to the religion:

Four of the five practices... ['Thou are God/ess', sharing water, nests and sexual freedom] derive directly from *Stranger in a Strange Land*, the 1961 science fiction by Robert Heinlein in which the name 'Church of All Worlds' first appears. Some members of the CAW Tradition glow with pride over this fact, while others are embarrassed and do not wish to be identified with the book. There is no question that many aspects of the book are increasingly outdated. What will never be outdated, however, is the Church of All World's embrace of the mythology of the future and of science and technology as sources of wisdom as valid as the sacred traditions of old. The CAW Tradition honours the ancient past and looks, with equal reverence, to the future.<sup>92</sup>

Zell-Ravenheart is now in his late sixties, and in 2008 underwent successful surgery for cancer. Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart has also been treated for cancer, and the couple now live with Julie Epona as their closest partner. Lance Christie too had cancer treatment in 2008–2009 and his partner LaRue died in 2008 after a struggle with Alzheimer's disease. But collectively their vitality and commitment is unaffected and the renaissance of CAW (including the 2007 revival of *Green Egg* as an online publication and the Grey School of Wizardry) seems likely to continue.

The Church of All Worlds has vigorously resisted dogmas and never ceased to advocate life-paths that are substantially in opposition to the trajectories of the mainstream modern West. However, the leaders of this invented religion have thriven on that diet of adversity. In a strange contrast with Kerry Thornley and Greg

<sup>90</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 285.

<sup>91</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 288.

<sup>92</sup> Liza Gabriel, Morning Glory and Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, "Appendix A: The Church of All Worlds Tradition", in Zell-Ravenheart and Zell-Ravenheart, *Creating Circles and Ceremonies*, p. 268.



Hill, the founders of Discordianism, Tim Zell and Lance Christie pursued their alternative vision with passion and emerged happy and fulfilled people, perhaps even successes (if that can be realistically defined). CAW too eschews universal truth (for example, welcoming members of all religions)<sup>93</sup> and engages with the multiplicitous discourses of the contemporary world, and it could be argued that the Earth as a Goddess is as much of a handful as Eris, requiring constant environmental vigilance and a significant curtailing of the modern consumerist appetite. Yet Gaia has proved benign to Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart and Lance Christie. The largest and most ambitious magickal workings in the CAW are ‘larger group workings to save the planet – protecting endangered forests, people and species, etc’.<sup>94</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, in particular, is a contemporary Pagan icon. In 2005, Peter Andrew Wright and Lynn Santer published a novel, *Professor Midnight*, for which he contributed an endorsement. Its magus-hero, whose birth was prophesied centuries earlier by Gaia-worshipping Pagans, and who becomes ‘one of the most revered “Magicians” (wizards) of all time’ sounds uncannily like Oberon Zell-Ravenheart himself.<sup>95</sup> Aleister Crowley was the subject of several fictions, most notably Somerset Maugham’s *The Magician* (1908). It is not yet certain whether Zell-Ravenheart’s posthumous fame will prove as lasting, but famous and influential he certainly is. It is worth noting that his fame is qualitatively different to that of Crowley, in that he is revered as a powerful light-bearing and benevolent wizard, whereas Crowley’s reputation was as a powerful dark and malevolent wizard.

It is now irrefutable that the Church of All Worlds is a vibrant and influential Pagan religion, despite the fact that it has always been modest in size, and that revived Paganism is an authentic spiritual path in the modern West.<sup>96</sup> Its membership remains small and limited to the United States, Australia, and parts of Europe including Germany, Switzerland and Austria.<sup>97</sup> Yet the Church of All Worlds’ mastery of communications technologies, and its leaders’ sophisticated intellectual engagement with all aspects of modern Paganism enable CAW to punch above its weight, and it has been extraordinarily influential. Many academics remain sceptical about the value of new religions (for example, the Church of Scientology, founded in 1954), and are even more dismissive of those

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<sup>93</sup> MoonOak, *The Church of All Worlds: An Ethnography of a NeoPagan Religion in the United States*, notes that CAW Florida’s ‘membership includes mystic Catholics, Pentecostals, Santeros, Wiccans, secular humanists, and a Mormon’ and that services may include ‘a Zazen meditation, a reading from Daoist, Sufi, or Kabbalistic texts to guide the discussion, a Lakota dance, or a Christian hymn’, p. 160.

<sup>94</sup> Barrett, *The New Believers*, p. 404.

<sup>95</sup> ‘Professor Midnight Preview’, Zeus Publications at [www.zeus-publications.com/midnight.htm](http://www.zeus-publications.com/midnight.htm), accessed 21 August 2009.

<sup>96</sup> MoonOak, *The Church of All Worlds: An Ethnography of a NeoPagan Religion in the United States*, calls it ‘a tiny church’, p. 201.

<sup>97</sup> Barrett, *The New Believers*, p. 403.

religions that admit to being based on fictions.<sup>98</sup> Compared to traditions with a long history, such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity, which are all at least 2,000 years old, new religions are often perceived as thin and insubstantial. Yet such comparisons are basically unfair. Oberon Zell-Ravenheart's vision of a transformed future is ambitious: he and the members of CAW live out a revolutionary sexual culture based on polyamory; he has developed a Magickal education system based on J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels; he has proposed a new understanding of history as 'Religious Epochs' (now is the Gaian Epoch, with Zell-Ravenheart and scientist James Lovelock as prophets); constantly asserted the need for an equal relationship between humans and all of nature; and he has devoted his life to a vital Pagan culture which asserts the unity of religions, whether Native American, Celtic, African, Taoist or even Christian.<sup>99</sup> Whether this vision is completely realized is unimportant. What matters is that CAW has a radically new vision of the world, one that is compatible with the Discordian worldview (and the modern Pagan movement in general), in that there is no real distinction between the sacred and profane. As Tim Zell told Margot Adler in the mid-1970s,

Worship is a form of communication, of communion. And communication can only be between equals. It can't be abasement, a bowing down before something greater. When I make love with a woman, when I sleep under the trees, when I compost my garbage, all these things can be acts of worship.<sup>100</sup>

The Church of All Worlds as a registered religious organization is only just over 40 years old, and 40 years after the death of Jesus, Buddha, Zoroaster or Lao Tzu it would have been impossible to predict the degree of global penetration that each religion would see, or even to read a scripture written by most of the groups. Robert Ellwood, a sympathetic early observer, employed a liberal definition of religion borrowed from Frederick Streng, a 'means of ultimate transformation', and remarked that the new Pagan groups of the 1960s and 1970s were striving 'to reach out to construct [their] own universe, replete with gods and demons and alternative laws, in which the man of anagogic imagination can find a wide home'.<sup>101</sup>

This chapter has already referenced Scott MacFarlane's notion that 'it doesn't matter that the author could not foresee the cultural influence of his novel. Once an author creates a text, except for royalties, it belongs to the world'. Heinlein wrote *Stranger in a Strange Land* between 1948 and 1961 and the book is saturated with

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<sup>98</sup> See David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2005), *passim*.

<sup>99</sup> It is interesting to note that the polyfaith trickster Robert Anton Wilson, Discordian pope and SubGenius wrote 'The Origins of Magick' for *Green Egg* 7/63 (1974). See Zell-Ravenheart, *Green Egg Omelette*, pp. 169–72. For a lifelong agnostic he had a finger in almost every Pagan pie.

<sup>100</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 305.

<sup>101</sup> Ellwood, 'Notes on a neopagan group in America,' p. 125, p. 131.

ideas that he subscribed to (self-reliance, sexual freedom, an Elect who are destined to lead the masses, intense discussions of art and politics, and more). Heinlein never anticipated the reception that *Stranger* received, and when groups as varied as the Merry Pranksters, the Manson Family and the Church of All Worlds made use of the text, it ceased to be 'his' and became theirs. The 1960s, in which secularization, individualism and a move away from traditional values (including Christianity) accelerated, was fertile ground for Heinlein's novel. In an article analysing the novels of Heinlein, Frank Herbert and Roger Zelazny, Julia List argues that Heinlein adapts the messiah-figure of Christianity to secular modernity:

'salvation' is translated into success in the temporal world, in which hard work and an emphasis on family and friendship (rather than guidance from God) become the keys to combating flaws in human nature. This fundamentally alters the soteriological function of the messianic protagonist, which ... [is] restricted to a Promethean provision of knowledge and skills rather than revealing a path to salvation through faith ... Even at their most agnostic, these influential texts reflect the ecumenical mood of the 1960s, basing their pluralism on a respect for the benefits that religious practice can provide, despite their skepticism about its theological basis.<sup>102</sup>

Modern Paganism shares this scepticism toward the theological underpinnings of religious faith and advocates the benefits of practice. The process of secularization, which throughout the twentieth century was assumed to be the dominant trend for Western religion, was supposed to result in the end of religion, or at least its eclipse as a major source of authority. More recently, this view has been replaced by the 'sacralization' thesis, which argues that the retreat of Christianity has resulted in a multiplicity of new religious movements.<sup>103</sup> From this point of view, the social processes that resulted in the founding of CAW may not ultimately have displeased Heinlein. He wrote that in *Stranger in a Strange Land* 'I don't offer a solution because there isn't one... That pantheistic, mystical "Thou art God!" chorus that runs through the book is not offered as a creed but as an existentialist assumption of personal responsibility, devoid of all godding'.<sup>104</sup> In the 1960s Heinlein's creative vision fired the religious imagination of Tim Zell and Lance Christie. CAW is a testimony to the power of narrative; Heinlein's novel struck a chord with a generation that had lost faith in the Christian narrative and were looking for a new story. That the story was fictional was ultimately unimportant.

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<sup>102</sup> Julia List, "'Call Me a Protestant": Liberal Christianity, Individualism and the Messiah in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Dune* and *Lord of Light*', *Science Fiction Studies* 36/1 (2009), p. 44.

<sup>103</sup> Yves Lambert, 'Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?' *Sociology of Religion* 60/3 (Fall 1999), pp. 303–33.

<sup>104</sup> Heinlein, *Grumbles From the Grave*, p. 229.

## Chapter 4

# The Church of the SubGenius: Science Fiction Mythos, Culture Jamming and the Sacredness of Slack

### Introduction

The Church of the SubGenius originated in Dallas, Texas in 1979, when the *Sub Genius Pamphlet #1* (also known as *The World Ends Tomorrow And You May Die!*) appeared. This was distributed by the Reverend Ivan Stang (b. Douglass St Clair Smith, 1953) and Doctor Philo Drummond, two original members of the SubGenius Foundation. However, the origin myth of the Church of the SubGenius (COSG) states that it was founded in 1953 by J.R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs, the prophet/deity figure of the religion. This date is one year before L. Ron Hubbard (1911–86) founded the Church of Scientology, and elements of the SubGenius teachings parody the doctrines of Scientology. In 1999 Ivan Stang relocated the COSG from Dallas to Cleveland, Ohio. Of all the invented religions considered in this book, the Church of the SubGenius is the most often derided as a ‘parody religion’ and asserted to have no conceivable spiritual merit. The SubGenius Foundation has published the mythology of the Church and ‘Bob’, with additional works written by Ivan Stang. These include the *Book of the SubGenius* (1983), *Revelation X: The ‘Bob’ Apocryphon* (1994), and *The SubGenius Psychlopaedia of Slack: The Bibliographon* (2006). The SubGenius mythos is extremely complicated, involving: aliens and space ships; the genetic engineering of the SubGenii (a mutant race that are part human and part Yeti) which brought about the fall of Atlantis; ‘Bob’s’ ability to die and be resurrected innumerable times; the alien god Jehovah-1, the ‘Elder Gods’ and their agents the Watchers; and the power of ‘Slack’ (which is what makes SubGenii independent and creative, and which is constantly being stolen by the Conspiracy and their dupes, who are known as ‘Pinks’ or ‘Normals’). COSG is both active and well organized: with members part of local groups called ‘clenches’; frequent meetings and events (called Devivals) at which there is a mixture of preaching, performance art, comedy and music; a sophisticated internet presence including the newsletter *The Stark Fist of Removal* (online since 2000); and Ivan Stang’s programme, ‘The Hour of Slack’, which is broadcast on many American college radio stations. This chapter argues that the mythology of the COSG has developed in a complex dialogue with the popular culture of late modern America and features tropes from science fiction, conspiracy theories, and the countercultural parody of materialism and consumerism.

The Church of the SubGenius also relentlessly parodies existing religions, particularly megachurch Christianity and Scientology. However, the message of COSG is arguably a legitimate path to liberation in a world dominated by work and money; the performance-art qualities of Devivals and the COSG leaders' 'rants' draws attention to the way that they are constructed as counter-spectacle or culture jamming. Even the tastelessness and near-obscenity of many SubGenius activities is a technique to procure 'guerrilla enlightenment'. The COSG is often characterized as a splinter group of Discordianism; the two religions share an anarchic sense of humour, the conspiracy, the need to become awakened or enlightened, the use of common key terms like 'fnord', and a deliberate co-opting of fictions and popular cultural modes to spread the word. Finally, the COSG has many writers, musicians and other artists as members, many of whom use their art forms to protest against the soulless wage slavery and empty materialism that prevails in contemporary Western society. After 30 years, the Church of the SubGenius shows no sign of loss of popularity or influence, and must be accorded the status of a functional equivalent of religion, at the very least, if not 'authentic' religion.

### Science Fiction, 'Bob' and the SubGenius Mythos, Part 1

The face of J.R. 'Bob' Dobbs (see Figure 1) is the Church of the SubGenius' icon, its most recognizable symbol. Bob is a smiling, lantern-jawed, pipe-smoking cartoon depiction of a 1950s salesman, described as the High Epopt of the COSG and the perfect embodiment of Slack. The COSG does not have mandatory beliefs or creeds, but a useful summary statement of some of its doctrines is:

THE SOURCE: JEHOVAH-1 (a.k.a. WOTAN, YAHWEH, RA, etc.)

THE TEACHER: J.R. 'BOB' DOBBS

THE GOAL: SLACK

THE OBSTACLE: THE CONSPIRACY AND ITS DUPES, THE NORMALS

THE WAY: THE CASTING OUT OF FALSE PROPHETS

THE WEAPON: TIME CONTROL.<sup>1</sup>

The SubGenius universe is one where a powerful Conspiracy is in operation, and potential SubGenii are in peril of being 'taken' by its architects, who have most people in a state of mind control, such that they believe that it is normal to work to earn a living.<sup>2</sup> The functional god-figure in this universe, Jehovah-1 (or the countless other deity names by which he is also known as) needs people, as he can achieve his aims more swiftly with their assistance. Dobbs, through trance

<sup>1</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius* (New York, 1987), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Stang, *The SubGenius Psychopaedia of Slack: The Bobliographon* (New York, 2006), p. 6.



Figure 1 The portrait of J.R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs is a trademark of SubGenius Foundation and is used with permission.

utterance, ‘tells us SubGeniuses are those tools, and Jehovah-1 needs our help’.<sup>3</sup> The goal of the religion is the permanent acquisition of Slack, the quality of doing nothing, rejecting work and yet still having sufficient wealth to live well. Slack is an entitlement, but the Conspiracy deprives people of it. The message of ‘Bob’s’ teachings is liberation from false consciousness, and the achievement of limitless Slack. He promotes deliberate Abnormality; the footsoldiers of the Conspiracy are known as ‘Normals’ or ‘Pinks’.

‘Bob’s’ religious journey began in the early 1940s, when he had a seizure while building a television. He was ‘Removed’ and, while in the presence of Jehovah-1, received ‘communions’.<sup>4</sup> After this experience he was enhanced in every way; stronger, braver, more attractive to women, and able to control Time, which gave access to the non-material realm, ‘a vast power grid bearing the energy pattern of all that has ever happened and ever will happen – The Skor’.<sup>5</sup> This meant that he had information regarding past events like the destruction of Atlantis, and also of what would happen in the future. ‘Bob’ and his primary wife Connie are presented as the essence of maleness and the essence of femaleness, with the ability to have cosmic sex, in the manner of Shiva and Parvati. In fact, references to Hinduism are threaded through the SubGenius publications, and

<sup>3</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> SubGenius theology and mythology is filled with neologisms and eccentric uses of words, which may refer to the vast lexicon of neologisms developed by L. Ron Hubbard for the Church of Scientology. See L. Ron Hubbard, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (Los Angeles, 2007) among other publications.

<sup>5</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 23.

‘Bob’ is described as a World Avatar. His ability to die and be reborn many times fits with this paradigm (although it is also compatible with Christianity, as is the speculation that his mother Jane McBride Dobbs was parthenogenetic, because he does not resemble his Mayan father. An alternative suggestion is that a Jewish milkman was the ‘true Dobbsdad’).<sup>6</sup> Like L. Ron Hubbard, ‘Bob’ is presented as having founded sundry bodies and engaged in precocious activities as a child, and as an adolescent and an adult to have learned various wisdom traditions (including Sufism, Rosicrucianism and Gurdjieff’s Fourth Way). Later, after achieving success as a salesman (chiefly of fluoride to government bodies), he went to Tibet and had his Third Nostril opened and became aware of the continued existence of Yetis. SubGenii are apparently human, but have Yeti genetic code, and ‘Yeti’ and ‘Yetinsynny’ are common greetings between members of COSG.

The life story of ‘Bob’ (the ‘Smiling One’) includes the building of his secret headquarters Dobbstown in Sarawak, the institution of polyamory as a Church of the SubGenius practice, the amassing of a vast fortune, the infiltration of the upper echelons of the Conspiracy, and his 1972 telepathic communication with Doctor Philo Drummond, whom he allegedly then met in 1973. Drummond then ‘recruited his friend Ivan Stang, a failed science fiction writer, to help generate the first Church brochures and propaganda booklets’.<sup>7</sup> The COSG argues that while modern society claims to be individualist it actually does not want individuals. It is easier to manage drones and clones, so the Conspiracy manipulates people into becoming its Underlings. Through ‘Bob’ SubGenii people can ‘see’ and become Overmen. The Yeti inheritance of SubGenii gives them a Nental Ife, which is like a soul; Pinks or Underlings do not have a Nental Ife. This also renders them devoid of imagination. UFOs are important, because according to COSG most of them are not from outer space, but are used by the leaders of the Conspiracy for surveillance. ‘Bob’ was intended by Jehovah-1 to be the head of the Conspiracy; but he refused this offer, began a counter-conspiracy and works to re-establish contact with the Xists (residents of Planet X, who were predicted to arrive on Earth on 5 July .1998, ‘X-Day’, called the ‘Rupture’, a pun on the Christian concept of the Rapture).<sup>8</sup>

Jehovah-1’s evil plan (he may functionally be God, but he is a wrathful deity, ‘his Stark Fist of Removal is ever poised overhead and will crash down randomly for indiscernible reasons’)<sup>9</sup> is the same as that of the Conspiracy; to deprive people of Slack. In the *Book of the SubGenius*, Slack is described mystically in terms resembling the Tao, ‘The Slack that can be described is not the true Slack ... Slack is neither created nor destroyed ... Abstract unto incomprehensibility, it is

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<sup>6</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Ivan Stang, *The SubGenius Psychopaedia of Slack: The Bibliographon* (New York, 2006), pp. 22–3.

<sup>9</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 33.

the definitionless'.<sup>10</sup> When the world was created it was suffused with Slack, but gradually it has drawn itself to an Ultimate Centre Point, and only a thin penetration that is almost not-Slack exists at the outer rim of the universe. When a SubGenius has Slack s/he is described as 'enSlackened', which echoes the Buddhist notion of becoming enlightened. This resemblance is enhanced through knowledge that SubGenii are both supposed to seek Slack but not to become fixated on it because the effort involved can itself take one farther from Slack (like *nirvana*). But Slack is necessary to be an Overman; otherwise the SubGenius slides into Mediocretrinitism. 'Bob' himself uses shock tactics, or 'the Zen of Terror' to 'wake up' his followers completely; the accidents and emergencies that the SubGenius goes through are called 'UltraKoans'.<sup>11</sup> When enSlackened, the souls of SubGenii are like 'the smoke from "Bob's" pipe'.<sup>12</sup> This pipe is also of great symbolic importance; Bob smokes a Tibetan vegetable called *habafropzipulops* that COSG claims is beneficial for all. It is known as 'frop'.

The Church of the SubGenius is explicitly likened to Scientology in a number of ways. The term 'Clear' is used, but where Scientologists use it to refer to the removal of engrams from the reactive mind through the process of auditing, clearing the planet refers to 'Bob's' 'new method for exterminating nine tenths of the Earth's population at once'.<sup>13</sup> 'Bob's' purpose in instituting the Church of the SubGenius is to make millions of dollars, which echoes L. Ron Hubbard's comments to the effect that starting a religion would create more wealth than writing science fiction.<sup>14</sup> 'Bob' is reputed to have said to Hubbard, 'They may be Pink but their money is green'.<sup>15</sup> Both the Church of Scientology (COS) and COSG have a mythology involving aliens and space travel. While Scientology claims that auditing will cure mental illness, the Church of the SubGenius alleges that its members are mentally ill Schizophreniatrics who have learned to counterfeit the appearance of sanity to avoid detection by the Normals. COSG's alien God Jehovah-1 bears some resemblance to Xenu, the ruler of the 'Galactic Confederacy' in Hubbard's writings.<sup>16</sup> Scientology notoriously posits the evolution of humans from clams, and COSG attributes the qualities of SubGenii to their Yeti genes.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *Revelation X: The 'Bob' Apocryphon* (New York, 2007), p. xiii.

<sup>14</sup> Donald C. Lindsay, 'Non-Scientologist FAQ on "Start a Religion"', at [www.xenu-directory.net/opinions/lindsay-19990117.html](http://www.xenu-directory.net/opinions/lindsay-19990117.html), accessed 21 August 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Cordt Holland and Douglass Smith, *Arise! The SubGenius Video* (SubGenius Foundation, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Hugh B. Urban, 'Fair Game: Secrecy, Security, and the Church of Scientology in Cold War America', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74/2 (June 2006), p. 371.

<sup>17</sup> L. Ron Hubbard, *A History of Man* (Los Angeles, 1988), pp. 32–5. SubGenius Foundation, *Revelation X: The Bobliographon*, pp. 62–3.



The Church of the SubGenius' gleeful references to the conspiracy call to mind the Cold War context of the Church of Scientology's doctrine of 'fair game', by which Scientology 'was allowed to use any means at its disposal to counterattack and defeat its enemies'.<sup>18</sup> Finally, both religions share a cheesy aura of American 1950s culture of the 'Leave it to Beaver' variety. SubGenius texts contain many references to pulp 1950s science fiction films and television series. 'Bob' actually promises at one point that one can 'see another dimension' through television, and his first encounter with Jehovah-1 involved a television set.

Like Discordianism, of which it is often considered an offshoot (the ubiquitous Robert Anton Wilson, who has already been acknowledged as a Discordian and a contributor to the Church of All Worlds' newsletter *Green Egg*, is Pope Bob of the COSG, Saint Kerry Thornley is included as well, and Eris appears as the former wife of Jehovah-1 and one of the Rebel Gods, enemies of the Elder Gods and friends to Earth), the Church of the SubGenius explicitly embraces the position that there is no one truth, that one's perspective dominates, and that all teachings are mutable and often contradictory. J.R. 'Bob' Dobbs himself is paradoxical, because despite his great powers he is completely stupid, 'lucky not smart'; the scriptures intimate that his wife Connie is actually more powerful than he is:

the person closest to 'Bob' in his Luck Plane sinkhole of Slack is his Primary Wife, Constance Marsh Dobbs. She is the sole entity who is immune to 'Bob's' will, yet she is so close to her Primary Husband in the Luck Vortex turbulence that almost nothing can interfere with her plans. Consequently, Connie is at least as dangerous as 'Bob' – for, being smarter, she uses the power willfully.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, 'Bob's' message may alter at any time, as he is wont to change his mind (and because of his mastery of Time Travel he is able to alter the preconditions of any particular situation). SubGenii can always deny that they said certain things; and 'Bob' counsels against making plans (he *has* a plan, but that is different). The Sacred Doctrine of Erasability means that any utterance may be cancelled and is then as if it never existed. A crucial term for SubGenii is 'Bulldada', which is described as propaganda as an 'art form'. The COSG thinks that most things in the world are Bulldada of some sort, whether inadvertent or advertent. Inadvertent Bulldada includes 'most other religions', television programmes and other mainstream phenomena, but far more important is 'Advertent Bulldada', which includes the Church of the SubGenius itself; 'it is *real* but it knows it will amuse the gods with its secret humor of the Illiterati and its dignified bathroom morbidity, which is as true and entirely horrible as the world itself, except for the good parts'.<sup>20</sup> This neologism, combining the first element of 'bullshit' and the

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<sup>18</sup> Urban, 'Fair Game: Secrecy, Security and the Church of Scientology in Cold War America', p. 358.

<sup>19</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *Revelation X: The Bobliographon*, p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 72.

name of the anarchic, humorous art movement, Dada, connects the COSG to those mischievous and anti-bourgeois artists including Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp and Hans Arp, whose prankish ‘art works’ (most notorious of which was Duchamp’s urinal signed ‘R. Mutt’) so offended the art establishment.<sup>21</sup>

If you wish to be a SubGenius, there are hints in the texts as to what that might involve in terms of practical life decisions (although theologically you cannot *become* a SubGenius if you are a human and ‘Pink’, as you must have Yeti genes). Five suggestions are made. First and most important is to break the habit of work, drop out, and if you are absolutely anxious about money, to register for the dole. After all, it is the Conspiracy’s fault that you have to push drugs or prostitute yourself to keep body and soul together. Despite those hardships, dropping out is always a positive. *The SubGenius Pamphlet #1* exhorted potential SubGenii to ‘REPENT! QUIT YOUR JOB! SLACK OFF!’<sup>22</sup> The second recommendation is to ‘buy SubGenius’. Combined, these two propositions constitute the SubGenius critique of materialism, which is reflexive and ironic. On the one hand members are advised to give up all material ambition, and yet you must still buy SubGenius products because although ‘Bob’ ‘will always be okay ... if his *outreach* shrivels up and blows away, YOU WON’T be’.<sup>23</sup> This made perfect sense in the feral capitalist 1980s when people were being treated to Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko opining that ‘greed, for want of a better word, is good’, and engaging in rapacious buying and asset-stripping of companies.<sup>24</sup> The third command is that the individual must confuse all data and contribute to the breakdown of law and order (specifically recommended by Robert Anton Wilson). This position advocates vandalism, both intellectual and physical. SubGenii are advised to deface the lenses of security cameras and to hack into information systems. The fourth action point is that the human race are not worth saving; with no Yeti genes and as the maladapted creation of the Atlantis Yetis, who perished directly because of them, they deserve to be eradicated. The Church of the SubGenius recommends using two weapons, drugs and abortion (permissible up to the age of 50) to rid the world of pointless, negative people. This is both offensive to the pro-life lobby and very funny. The fifth and final point is that the Conspiracy is very afraid of the members of the COSG, and this fact should be exploited by SubGenii.

Before discussing the activities of members of the Church of the SubGenius in the ‘real world’, and how best to categorize those activities, it remains to describe the place of ‘X-Day’ in the mythos of the COSG. This is an eschatological event of major significance. From the publication of the *SubGenius Pamphlet #1* in 1979, the importance of 5 July 1998 was emphasized. What was supposed to happen was

<sup>21</sup> T.E. De Vries and A Buffinga, ‘The Twentieth Century’ in Valentin Denis and T.E. De Vries (eds), *The World’s Art*, Vol. 2 (London, 1962), p. 199, p. 203, p. 206.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Duncombe, *Notes From the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London and New York, 1997), p. 86.

<sup>23</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *Revelation X: The Bibliographon*, p. 152.

<sup>24</sup> Oliver Stone (director), *Wall Street* (20th Century Fox, 1987).

that the aliens from planet X (the 'Xists') were to arrive in spaceships and end the world as presently known. The COSG prepared for the event with considerable care. Most of the critics who have discussed 'X Day' are hostile, in the sense that they are certain that the Church of the SubGenius is a childish prank and nothing more. Beard and Gunn described X-Day as follows:

in an outrageous parody of the apocalyptic cults featured in our tabloid newspapers for the last decade, several hundred camping pranksters converged on Sherman, New York to celebrate 'X-Day', July 5, 1998. 'Reverend' Ivan Stang, the parodist responsible for the 'Church of the Sub-Genius', which sponsored the event, claimed that the end of the world was set to begin at seven o'clock in the morning. Only card-carrying, dues-paying Sub-Genii would be spared from the cataclysm. According to an imaginary church messiah, the occulted 'Bob Dobbs', the saved would be beamed up and into space vessels controlled by alien 'sex-goddesses' for a cosmic Saturnalia in the stars. Those remaining on earth were to be destroyed.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, the predicted end did not come and instead there was a classic SubGenius Devival, with high jinx, music and 'sex'. Stang later speculated that he had looked at the napkin containing the date of X Day upside down; perhaps the date might be 5 July 8661? It is events like X Day that lead some scholars to place the Church of the SubGenius in the category 'performance art'. This has some legitimacy, as the origin point of both secular art and religious ritual appears to have been performances at religious events in the ancient world, often incongruous and obscene performances at that (such as ancient Greek satyr plays).<sup>26</sup> The purpose of such performances in modernity appears to be bringing the body back into focus within art and to create spectacle (or counter-spectacle) to raise consciousness. The 1960s was a vital decade for the incubation of such events, with Happenings being the most important manifestation.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, the Church of the SubGenius had to offer an explanation of why the Xists did not turn up, even if the event was a shameless publicity stunt designed to make money. In 1998 there were 10,000 paid up SubGenius ministers (the fee is a one-off \$30) according to Ivan Stang. His suggestion that the napkin had been read upside down has already been alluded to. Several other suggestions have surfaced: that X Day commenced in 1998 but has not yet come to fullness, that the Rupture began but is not complete is the most prevalent. Another view is that SubGenii have all

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<sup>25</sup> Joshua Gunn and David E. Beard, 'On the Apocalyptic Sublime', *The Southern Communications Journal* 65/4 (2000), p. 269.

<sup>26</sup> Carole M. Cusack, 'Arachne's Weaving: Disentangling the Ambiguities of Irreligious Representations of the Divine', in M. Griffith and J. Tulip (eds), *Religion Literature and the Arts III* (Sydney, 1996), pp. 289–95.

<sup>27</sup> Linda Frye Burnham, 'High Performance, Performance Art, and Me', *The Drama Review* 30/1 (1986), p. 20.

taken a ‘what if X-Day never happened’ pill, which was given to them after paying their \$30. Yet another explanation posits that X-Day was a joke, fundamentally not serious.<sup>28</sup> These are all strategies which are employed by or foisted onto traditional and fringe religions alike, when announcements of the end are promiscuously made and fail to eventuate.<sup>29</sup> In the *SubGenius Psychlopaedia of Slack* a rant by Rev. Onan Canobite argues that as the last cadence of the massed SubGenii chanting ‘Fuck ’em if they can’t take a joke’ (one of ‘Bob’ Dobbs’ signature lines, along with ‘The SubGenius must have Slack’ and ‘Eternal Salvation or TRIPLE Your Money Back’) the spaceships appeared. However, rather than taking the massed SubGenii ‘home’ (rather in the manner of Heaven’s Gate, which on 26 March 1997 suicided on the command of Marshall Herff Applewhite, in order to catch the mother-ship in the wake of the Hale-Bopp comet),<sup>30</sup> Canobite records seeing ‘Bob’ and an olive green alien in conversation. The alien gave ‘Bob’ a briefcase, which the High Epopt promptly left behind when he drove away in his golf cart. According to Onan Canobite, the Rupture did happen; ‘the Men from Planet X had taken away not our persons but our pains’.<sup>31</sup> More terrifyingly, the Xists had stripped illusions from the SubGenii, who were now painfully aware of the strangeness of humans (the insect armour that they wear was alien, and the ‘robot monkey demons’ that were on their backs were distressing). Canobite concludes that on X-Day ‘Bob’ fucked up; from the beginning ‘Bob’ preached that ‘the world ends tomorrow – and you may die’. X-Day promised Sub-Genii that they would have their cake and eat it too. As people were not rescued from Earth, they must work harder to ensure their departure as soon as possible. It is up to people to refuel spaceship Earth with methane from their excrement (Excremeditation, a SubGenius religious activity), and attempt to save themselves.<sup>32</sup> Ivan Stang has pronounced 5 July as a SubGenius holiday; X-Day is now celebrated each year.

### Culture Jamming, Devivals, Rants and the Counter-Spectacle

Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* was first published in French in 1967. Debord was a Marxist and a member of Situationist International, a group of artists and political activists whose most noted role was as prime movers in the 1968 Paris riots. Debord’s book argued that the culture of the later twentieth century

<sup>28</sup> Ivan Stang, *The SubGenius Psychlopaedia of Slack: The Bobliographon*, pp. 145–8.

<sup>29</sup> The classic study is Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (New York, Evanston and London, 1956).

<sup>30</sup> James R. Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, 2003), p. 128.

<sup>31</sup> Rev. Onan Canobite, ‘What Really Happened at Brushwood on July 5 1998’, in Stang, *The SubGenius Psychlopaedia of Slack: The Bobliographon*, p. 151.

<sup>32</sup> Canobite, ‘What Really Happened at Brushwood on July 5 1998’, pp. 154–5.

was now entirely economic. The economy ruled, and citizens were required only to consume. This shift was dehumanizing and fundamentally damaging to personhood, and also fed into a mode of society that he described as ‘spectaculist’, where social relations were mediated by images. Thesis 17 stated:

the first phase of the domination of the economy over social life brought into definition of all human realization the obvious degradation of *being* into *having*. The present phase of total occupation of social life by the accumulated results of the economy leads to a generalized sliding of *having* into *appearing*, from which all actual ‘having’ must draw its immediate prestige and ultimate function. At the same time all individual reality has become social reality directly dependent on social power and shaped by it. It is allowed to appear only to the extent that it is *not*.<sup>33</sup>

Debord goes on to argue that the spectacle is the capitalist replacement for theology and what he terms the ‘religious illusion’. This now functions in the material world rather than in posited supernatural realms like heaven. Profane, everyday life has ceased to be comprehensible, and has become mysterious. People feel compelled to acquire goods and despite the growth in leisure time and activities, they are enslaved to the system, because although leisure appears to be freedom from work, this is an illusion. This is because the only purpose of ‘leisure’ is to consume products that are generated by the labour of the workers, who are paid only so that they can consume. Debord argues that the end result of this type of society is total alienation. Thesis 30 concludes that; ‘[t]he externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere’.<sup>34</sup>

The Situationist International developed a sophisticated critique of contemporary culture in both its capitalist and communist instantiations in the period of its formal existence, from 1957 to 1972. It rejected copyright and encouraged the reproduction of all Situationist pamphlets and materials, much as the early Discordian authors did, and was deeply aware of the fact that protest movements were often subsumed by the host society against which they protested. As Edward Ball comments, the situationist programme and aesthetic has been co-opted into discursive production, including art, film and marketing. Yet, he asserts, the Situationists never became marketable themselves; ‘they taught an ensuing generation how to recycle the detritus of official learning, how to reinscribe texts, figures, and artifacts so as to

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<sup>33</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Fredy Perlman (trans.) (Detroit, 1983), Thesis 17, no page numbers.

<sup>34</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 30, no page numbers.

empower them with new meanings, and, despite their precautions, how to make new products out of the leftovers of the commodity economy'.<sup>35</sup>

This analysis fits very well with the worldview articulated in the Church of the SubGenius publications. The Conspiracy wants people to be 'Pinks', Normals who do not suspect its activities nor ask questions about the extent of its influence. The world for Pinks may be perfectly pleasant. However, it is a dangerous illusion. The peculiar quality of SubGenii is that they can 'see', they are aware of the activities of the Conspiracy, the existence of Jehovah-1 and the Elder Gods, and through 'Bob' they know that the present state of existence is temporary; that the Xists may come in spaceships very soon. When the extent to which the modern self is imbricated in the process of consumption and the passive absorption of spectacle (advertising, films, television sitcoms, 'news' that is doctored or manipulated to produce certain effects, presidential inaugurations, and any number of other images) this confirms the slide from being to having to appear described by Debord). In this context, the SubGenius cry: 'REPENT! QUIT YOUR JOB! SLACK OFF!' is truly revolutionary.

In this revolution, the COSG have had important predecessors from whom techniques have been learned and influences absorbed. The role of Discordianism has been noted; because of their belief in Operation Mindfuck, Discordians engage in short-circuiting people and 'reality hacking'. These practices, which are designed to produce liberating laughter, seem to have three contexts or targets; the body (often that of the joker him/herself), the subversion of accepted meanings of phenomena or objects, and mocking and deriding all forms of authority. Laurel Narizny summarizes some examples from the Discordian website '23 Apples of Eris':

having a number of people with the alarms on their watches all set to go off at the same time enter a department store without appearing to recognize one another, then filing neatly out of the store when their watches go off, leaving the clerks befuddled; asking passers-by, while dressed as a homeless person, if they would like a spare quarter; a sign that says 'WARNING! It is against federal statute to read this sign. Reading this sign is cause for persecution'.<sup>36</sup>

The Church of the SubGenius puts on regular Devivals, performances that are in the style of an evangelical or Pentecostal Christian revival meeting. These events are very different to the Discordian examples just cited. Discordians aim to bring guerrilla enlightenment to people in their everyday existence; thus their efforts

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Ball, 'The Great Sideshow of the Situationist International', *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987), p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> Laurel Narizny, 'Ha Ha Only Serious: A Preliminary Study of Joke Religions', pp. 38–9, unpublished Bachelor of Arts Honors thesis (University of Oregon, 2009), at <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/-1794/9336/Thesis%20Laurel%20Narizny.pdf?sequence=1>, accessed 21 August 2009. See '23 Apples of Eris' at [www.23ae.com](http://www.23ae.com), accessed 24 August 2009.

at reality hacking take place in the wider world. Devivals are specific SubGenius festivals; people who attend are a self-selecting audience (and paid-up members), not a random collection of people on the street (or in the department store). The personnel of the Church of the SubGenius, all of whom take comic names ‘in religion’ (Pastor Buck Naked, St Janor Hypercleats, Rev. Susie the Floozie, and Puzzling Evidence, for example) whip up the audience with fire and brimstone preaching (called ‘ranting’, many SubGenii leaders deliver celebrated ‘rants’), much of which is hilarious, interspersed with comedy skits and performances by SubGenius musicians, including Dr Onan’s Wotan Band, the Swingin’ Love Corpses, and Rev. Mark Mothersbaugh (from the well-known band, Devo).

Devo are an interesting example of the penetration of COSG into mainstream culture. In the 1970s they were an immensely successful act, despite the fact that their recordings were always eccentric and their live performances bordering on offensive. Devo were formed in 1973, but their underlying ideology, de-evolution, had been pioneered by band members Gerald Casale and Bob Lewis when they were students at Kent State, Ohio in the late 1960s. De-evolution argued that instead of progressing, humanity was actually going backward, and that this could be seen in American society, where conformity and blind obedience reigned over innovation and intelligence. Kent State campus was the site of the ‘Ohio State National Guard shootings that killed four students’<sup>37</sup> on 4 May 1970, an event that deeply affected Casale and Lewis. Devo’s vision resulted in three very successful early albums; *Q. Are We Not Men? A. We are Devo* (1978), *Duty Now for the Future* (1979), and *Freedom of Choice* (1980). In their stage shows Devo utilized themes from religion and science fiction (their song ‘Jocko Homo’ was influenced by a Christian anti-evolution pamphlet, and they frequently made use of the 1969 film ‘The Beginning was the End’ by Oscar Kiss Maerth), surrealist humour, social commentary and bad taste. Members of the band made controversial films and pioneered the music video, and several joined the Church of the SubGenius. In response to COSG’s term ‘Pinks’ for all non-SubGenii, Devo used the term ‘spuds’ to identify the other. Yet they turned that on its head, claiming that they were ‘spud boys’ and that ‘We’re all Devo’.<sup>38</sup> In true COSG style they often opened their own shows as the anagrammatic Dove (The Band of Love), a spoof Christian band. When Devo’s success waned Mark Mothersbaugh wrote film soundtracks for other SubGenii including comedian PeeWee Herman (b. Paul Rubens). It is not difficult to conclude that there is a relationship between Devo’s de-evolutionary philosophy and the term ‘Devival’. Mothersbaugh has said that ‘Bob’ is a ‘slippery godhead’ and that after Devo had given ‘Bob’ everything, that he ‘lit a match, and blew a big flame and melted all of our red hats, melted all of our equipment, melted

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<sup>37</sup> James Weissinger, ‘New Traditionalists: Baudrillard, Devo, and the Postmodern De-evolution of the Simulation’, *The Haverford Journal* 3/1 (April 2007), p. 57.

<sup>38</sup> Weissinger, ‘New Traditionalists: Baudrillard, Devo, and the Postmodern De-evolution of the Simulation’, p. 59.

all of our homes, melted our cars, our wives, our girlfriends, our children ...'<sup>39</sup> In the complicated, conspiratorial world of the COSG, 'Bob' exists in both good and bad avatars, and one significant teaching is that one should not trust 'Bob' at all.

What Ivan Stang and his close collaborators are engaged in with the Church of the SubGenius is culture jamming. This term, theorized by Mark Dery, refers to a number of related phenomena that are the historical descendants of the Paris riots and the Situationist critique of television-dominated, spectaculist Western culture, and the Yippee subversion of American politics. Dery argues that mass consumption of television results 'aliteracy' where people 'know how to read but choose not to', and asserts the 'hegemony of image over language, of emotion over intellect'.<sup>40</sup> Culture jamming is a term first used by the experimental sound collage group Negativland, founded in California in 1979. Negativland have connections to the Church of the SubGenius (Ivan Stang 'appeared on the group's 1987 masterpiece *Escape from Noise*'),<sup>41</sup> and are committed to anarchist politics and forms of media sabotage. Culture jamming includes billboard defacement, subvertising (the production of 'anti-ads'), sampling and copyright infringement, deliberate hoaxes (particularly 'news' stories), cyber hacking, and what Dery calls 'audio agitprop'.<sup>42</sup> The development of the World Wide Web from the late 1980s onward created many more opportunities for this type of activity; projects that would have resulted in a printed product can now exist in electronic form. An example of this from the Church of the SubGenius is Ivan Stang's *High Weirdness by Mail* (1988),<sup>43</sup> a very strange book that is a collection of non-mainstream information available by mail order. Stang provides an address for each group and a brief description of their cause. The Church of the SubGenius is, of course, included. Rob Wittig, musing on the forms that a 'universe of cultural activism' might take, hails *High Weirdness by Mail* as a

monument to ... universal curiosity. Its spirit is summed up in a line the SubGenius's Rev. Ivan Stang A.O. shouted lustily at one of the church's 'devivals', castigating the narrow-minded and the prudish (September 1992): 'When a SubGenius sees something that offends and annoys and disturbs him he

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<sup>39</sup> Stang, *The SubGenius Psychlopaedia of Slack: The Bobliographon*, p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Dery, 'Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs', *Open Magazine Pamphlet Series 25* (1993), no page numbers, at [www.markdery.com/culture\\_jamming.html](http://www.markdery.com/culture_jamming.html), accessed 21 August 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Kembrew McLeod, 'Crashing the Spectacle: A Forgotten History of Digital Sampling, Infringement, Copyright Liberation and the End of Recorded Music', *Culture Machine* 10 (2009), p. 117.

<sup>42</sup> Dery, 'Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs', no page numbers, at [www.markdery.com/culture\\_jamming.html](http://www.markdery.com/culture_jamming.html), accessed 21 August 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Ivan Stang, *High Weirdness by Mail. A Directory of the Fringe: Mad Prophets, Crackpots, Kooks & True Visionaries* (New York, 1988).



says to himself, "Damn, that offends and annoys and disturbs me. I MUST FIND OUT MORE ABOUT IT!"<sup>44</sup>

Stang's criteria for inclusion in this book were that the information or product had to be weird, it had to be free or at least inexpensive, and it had to be available through the post. Twenty years later, the Church of the SubGenius continues the High Weirdness project, but online as a Wiki.<sup>45</sup>

Culture jamming tends to exist at the crossroads of performance art and political protest, although related types of thought and practice are found in educational theory, information technology, and international relations. The expansion of communications technology has created special problems for dedicated culture-jammers; late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Western society is increasingly hostile to autonomy and freedom. Surveillance technology is everywhere, and the number and type of proofs of identity that are required to perform even the simplest functions are becoming more complex. The relationship between the subjects of surveillance and the surveillance technology is a fraught one, because the surveilled interact with the surveillers, often mimicking or subverting them.<sup>46</sup> Similar tensions exist with any type of resistance to the net of late capitalism. 'Zine writers are dismayed when their independent, edgy style is incorporated into glossy publications and loses its original status as a 'reaction against professional design'.<sup>47</sup> Yet the consumer society feeds off innovation; British graffiti artist Banksy has included closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras in his paintings, often looming menacingly over children. Recently he managed to avoid the eye of CCTV sufficiently to paint a three-story mural of a red-hooded child on a ladder painting the slogan 'One Nation Under CCTV'. This was especially audacious because he had to avoid cameras that were positioned in the area to do it.<sup>48</sup> Banksy's works are now sought-after by art collectors and critics, and his popularity at least partially compromises his stance of resistance, his thumbing of his nose at those in power.

Within Anarchism itself there are multiple divisions. One very important way to understand the collective actions of the Church of the SubGenius, Devivals, is

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<sup>44</sup> Rob Wittig, *Invisible Rendezvous: Connection and Collaboration in the New Landscape of Electronic Writing* (Hanover and London, 1994), p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.modemac.com/cgi-bin/wiki.pl>, accessed 24 August 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Aaron K. Martin, Rosamunde E. van Brakel and Daniel J. Bernhard, 'Understanding resistance to digital surveillance: Towards a multi-disciplinary, multi-actor framework', *Surveillance & Society* 6/3, p. 216.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, p. 99.

<sup>48</sup> Anon, 'Graffiti artist Banksy pulls off most audacious stunt to date – despite being watched by CCTV,' *Mail Online* (2008). At <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-559547/Graffiti-artist-Banksy-pulls-audacious-stunt-date--despite-watched-CCTV.html>, accessed 24 August 2009.

as a form of counter-spectacle. The discussion of X-Day makes that clear; while it was an event for members of the COSG it was also staged for the benefit of the press and the wider society, to shake things up, and provide a glimpse of enlightenment. Hakim Bey (b. Stephen Lamborn Wilson, 1945) is an important figure in this analysis, because unlike mainstream Anarchists, he has always been attracted to mystical religion, which he has melded with his politics, which are broadly Situationist. Over the year, Bey has combined spiritual concepts and practices from Guenonian Traditionalism with Sufism and Celtic Paganism, and married these to politics, creating what he terms ‘Ontological Anarchy’.<sup>49</sup> Of this he states, *apropos* of Anarchism’s own desire for order (in very Discordian and COSG terms):

Ontological Anarchy however replies that no ‘state’ can exist in ‘chaos’, that all ontological claims are spurious except the claim of chaos (which however is undetermined), and therefore that governance of any sort is impossible/ ‘Chaos never died’. Any form of ‘order’ which we have not imagined and produced directly and spontaneously in sheer ‘existential freedom for our own celebratory purposes’ – is an illusion.<sup>50</sup>

This fits well with the general orientation of invented religions, in which there is a questioning of accepted reality and, in the case of Discordianism and the Church of the SubGenius, the assertion of the divinity of Chaos (Eris, who is primary for Discordians but also definitely acknowledged within COSG). It is certainly possible, in the case of the Church of All Worlds, to read the submission of humanity to the evolutionary processes of Gaia in similarly, through the application of chaos theory to the ways of Gaia (who resist the attempts of humanity to force order upon them).

Bey’s most important concept for culture-jammers is that of Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ), which have also been described as a ‘pirate utopias, centrifuges in which social gravity is artificially suspended’.<sup>51</sup> Devivals are precisely those sorts of spaces, gaps in the overwhelming blandness of everyday life, colour in the greyness imposed by the Conspiracy and their Dupes, the Normals. These spaces have been claimed to exist at raves and music festivals, science fiction conventions and historical re-enactment societies, on the internet among IT ‘nerds’, hackers and Hacktivists, and in the successful defiance of or mocking of the law when it is perceived to be unjust. Hakim Bey’s works are all not copyrighted; free to be used by all and sundry. In 1991 Negativland produced a record entitled ‘U2’, which parodied the song ‘I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For’, and sampled an anti-U2 rant from celebrity disc jockey Casey Kasem. Island Records, which distributes U2’s music, sued Negativland, almost causing the band to fold. Their principal spokesman, Mark Hosler, has observed, ‘We’ve

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<sup>49</sup> Hakim Bey, *Immediatism* (Edinburgh and San Francisco, 1994), p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Bey, *Immediatism*, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Dery, ‘Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs’, no page numbers, at [www.markdery.com/culture\\_jamming.html](http://www.markdery.com/culture_jamming.html), accessed 21 August 2009.

never had a hit record, but we have had a hit lawsuit!’<sup>52</sup> In 1971 Abbie Hoffman, a leader of the Yippies, published *Steal the Book*, a ‘how to’ book for thieves; ‘its cover blurb, “Everything You Always Wanted For FREE”, mocked the slogans and material dreams of the mass society, and the author’s photograph depicted him stealing from a bookstore’.<sup>53</sup> The Church of the SubGenius stands in this tradition of Anarchism. That Devivals function as temporary autonomous zones can be deduced from personal accounts such as ‘Clint’s Blog’, which contains extensive textual and photographic documentation of the eleventh X-Day celebration at Brushwood in 2008, amply testifying to its carnivalesque atmosphere.<sup>54</sup>

Before returning to the SubGenius mythos to explore ways in which it connects to the notions of counter-spectacle, culture-jamming and temporary autonomous zones, it remains to consider what members of COSG say when asked about religious practices. It has been noted that the local organization in the Church of the SubGenius is the ‘clench’ (which refers to the ‘fist’ imagery common in the Church, such as the ‘Stark Fist of Removal’, feared by ‘Pinks’ but no threat to SubGenii). It is not necessary to belong to a clench, though clenches are often the rallying points for local Devivals. Ivan Stang encourages clenches to secede and form their own religion, in like fashion to the constantly splintering Discordian cabals. One particularly interesting splinter group is the Church of Don, which ‘consists entirely of burned out members of the hierarchy of the Church of the SubGenius’ which ‘conceptualize[s] a transcendental yoga of HATE!’<sup>55</sup> The ranting style and range of cultural referents mark the Church of Don as part of the SubGenius family.

Those hostile to invented religions are often deeply frustrated (if not angered) by the willingness of members of the Church of the SubGenius to claim that it is a ‘real’ religion. After all, clenches are required to have at least one member who is a disbeliever and a ‘core belief of the movement is to believe nothing and everything, preferably at the same time’.<sup>56</sup> Richard Lloyd Smith III’s thesis has been referred to in Chapter 2. He conducted research about religious commitment and practice online amongst Discordians, member of COSG and Cthulhu aficionados. He sent

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<sup>52</sup> McLeod, ‘Crashing the Spectacle: A Forgotten History of Digital Sampling, Infringement, Copyright Liberation and the End of Recorded Music’, p. 115.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counter Culture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago and London, 1997), p. 229.

<sup>54</sup> Clint, ‘My Parody Religion Is Better Than Your Parody Religion ... or: How I Survived X-Day XI [2008],’ *Clint’s Blog*, at <http://clintjcl.wordpress.com/2008/08/14/journal-x-day-prologue-day-1/>, accessed 23 August 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Church of Don, at [http://neogenius.worldwarfive.net/don\\_pamphlet.html](http://neogenius.worldwarfive.net/don_pamphlet.html), accessed 24 August 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Solomon Davidoff, ‘Church of the SubGenius’, in Peter Knight (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Denver, Oxford, 2003), p. 170.

messages to the Usenet groups alt.discordia and alt.slack, asking members for answers:

All right, I've posted with alt.discordia and gotten a reply. But I need to ask the same questions of alt.slack: I don't get it. If you guys call yourself a religion, how can you foster commitment among members if you encourage them 'not to join'. I've read the 'Book of the SubGenius' (it was handed to me by someone who bought it, read it, but still doesn't get it) and it says nothing about gathering together, how to form solidarity among members etc. A faith needs to provide stability and security among its members, not spread discord, strife, and confusion.

How will you get anything done as a group if you never gather together ... join together? It seems to me Bob has a message but everyone on this newsgroup is afraid to ask what it is because 'if you have to ask, you'll never know'. I don't know, maybe I'm 'pink'. But it seems that this group won't last long if it doesn't plan regular meetings and establish bonds among members.<sup>57</sup>

This posting was definitely intended to provoke respondents and Smith received answers broadly advocating two positions. The first was that members of the Church of the SubGenius did come together regularly at Devivals (whether in the real world or online), and that he was definitely wrong in his suggestion that the group would not last long without 'regular meetings'. Tarla claimed that they 'bond and then break and then bond again. What keeps us here is mutual insanity and inertia'.<sup>58</sup> The second response was that Smith was correct that SubGenii did not encourage regular meetings, because that was not the point; it was a religion of individuals and personal spiritual beliefs and experiences were entirely legitimate. George also noted that all religions did not have to look alike and follow exactly the same pattern, as Smith seemed to be implying. He concluded 'you're looking at this like it's a normal religion and finding it doesn't operate that way. That's good. That's part of the deprogramming lesson: to look at things in new ways. Now apply that to everything else and you've got it'.<sup>59</sup> In fact, Smith is wrong; *The Book of the SubGenius* does acknowledge the existence of devotional activities and communities in which these can be pursued. Chapter 17 concerns clenches and services, offering information on how the individual SubGenius can found his/her own church (and clenches of any size are permitted, and may vary considerably in orientation, as 'Bob' looks with special favor on those with the most independence,

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<sup>57</sup> Richard Lloyd Smith III, 'Neophilic Irreligions: Audience Cults and the World Wide Web', unpublished Master of Arts thesis (University of Virginia, 1996), p. 30, at [www.poe.ee.co.uk/toa/pdf/neophile.pdf](http://www.poe.ee.co.uk/toa/pdf/neophile.pdf), accessed 24 August 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, 'Neophilic Irreligions: Audience Cults and the World Wide Web', p. 40, at [www.poe.ee.co.uk/toa/pdf/-neophile.pdf](http://www.poe.ee.co.uk/toa/pdf/-neophile.pdf), accessed 24 August 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Smith, 'Neophilic Irreligions: Audience Cults and the World Wide Web', pp. 42–3, at [www.poe.ee.co.uk/toa/-pdf/neophile.pdf](http://www.poe.ee.co.uk/toa/-pdf/neophile.pdf), accessed 24 August 2009.

insolence and chaos’).<sup>60</sup> Activities that are part of religious services include music, donating money, and marriages. These all sound harmless and appropriate within a church context; however, snake handling, ritual burnings (of ‘money ... authority figures, celebrities, Smurfs, etc’), séances, astral projection, levitation, and sermons where the preacher becomes ‘a vessel, a medium, a conduit for “Bob’s” Word ... Many who hear The Call are guided by Wotan’ remind the reader of the anarchic, culture-jamming anti-spectacle that is the Church of the SubGenius.<sup>61</sup>

Richard Lloyd Smith III did not conclude that the Cthulhu group, Discordianism or the COSG were authentic religions (he preferred the term ‘cults’, in Stark and Bainbridge’s usage), but his research definitely established that there were members in all three groups who were deeply engaged in the life of the movement and actively working to construct a viable online (and in some cases, real world) community. Thirteen years later this still appears to be the case; perhaps more so as the facilitation of online groups has been greatly assisted by advances in technology.

## Popular Culture, ‘Parody Religion’ and the SubGenius Mythos, Part 2

The Church of the SubGenius draws attention to its fictional quality in several ways. The visual style of SubGenius publications is derived from small-scale ‘zines with a liberal admixture of lurid 1950s-style advertisements and stills from obscure 1950s films. This style is reproduced in *Arise! The SubGenius Video*, which contains scenes from ‘Robot Monster’ and other low-budget horror films of that era. The anarchic design of the SubGenius scriptures reinforces the sense that they are a particular type of joke, or insider discourse, which one either ‘gets’ or fails to ‘get’. Further, the aesthetic of these publications bears a direct relation to COSG notions about work. It has been noted that ‘zinesters produce limited edition publications out of love and as an act of nonalienated labour, as a protest against the fact that ‘most work in our society is done for, is directed by, and benefits someone else’.<sup>62</sup> Writing a ‘zine, like participation in the Church of the SubGenius, is an act of authenticity and the reclamation of nonalienated labour, a temporary autonomous zone in which freedom (and thus slack) prevails.

The fiction with which the COSG began has periodically been supplemented by new fictions. Ivan Stang has published *Three-Fisted Tales of ‘Bob’*, a collection of stories by SubGenius authors that ‘fill in’ the mythos of ‘Bob’ and the Church of the SubGenius. These stories are of wildly varying literary quality, length and theological significance. Yet they contribute considerably to the understanding of the SubGenius universe. Because ‘believe nothing and everything simultaneously’ is an informal commandment of the Church, the mythos is vastly more complicated

<sup>60</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 157.

<sup>61</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 158.

<sup>62</sup> Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, p. 79.

than the sketch at the start of this chapter would suggest. In addition to Jehovah-1 there are the Elder Gods, who are evil and feed off human pain; the most important are Iaog-Satath (Fire Elemental of the South), H'aaztre (Air Elemental of the East), S'Ub Nhhwraath (Earth Elemental of the North) and Zthood'aLu (Water Elemental of the West). These deities are supported by their minions, the Watchers, who are extraterrestrials who contact humans (including 'All Voices in Heads' which spread Utopian/racist bullshit as "The Great White Brotherhood" ... etc').<sup>63</sup> They are opposed by the Rebel Gods (who include Eris, who is described as 'relatively evil' and her ex-husband Jehovah-1, who is described as 'relatively good', among others). There are also dark rebel gods, most important of whom is NHHG, the god of mischief, who 'raped his own mother, NUNU, to create himself, then raped his sister/aunt NARNINI to create YACATISMA ... called "Seraphim" in the Bible'.) These creatures seduced female Yetis in Eden, which possibly resulted in the creation of human beings. Just to be confusing, there is also Yacatizma, which is the 'supreme force of beauty in the cosmos'.<sup>64</sup> Also, at an unspecified time long ago, the planets of Mars and Earth were reversed in the SubGenius universe, and they remain that way.

The Elder God Iaog-Satath is Yog Sothoth, from the Cthulhu mythos by horror novelist H.P. Lovecraft (1890–1937). Lovecraft's fictions are, in a sense, a model for the Church of the SubGenius' approach to scripture. His stories contained dark references to the *Necronomicon*, a fictional text allegedly written by Abdul Alhazred, a Yemeni poet, around 700 CE. Lovecraft himself wrote a history of the book, claiming that:

Of the Latin texts now existing one (15th cent.) is known to be in the British Museum under lock and key, while another (17th cent.) is in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris. A seventeenth-century edition is in the Widener Library at Harvard, and in the library of Miskatonic University at Arkham. Also in the library of the University of Buenos Ayres. Numerous other copies probably exist in secret, and a fifteenth-century one is persistently rumoured to form part of the collection of a celebrated American millionaire.<sup>65</sup>

Many believed that the *Necronomicon* was a real book, although Lovecraft made it clear that he had invented it. Sundry false *Necronomicons* have since been published, horror films have been made concerning it, and the Cthulhu mythos has crossed the boundary from fiction into modern Paganism and eclectic ceremonial magick, particularly Chaos Magick. Lovecraft himself thought all religions were 'self-evident delusions', but (like Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange*

<sup>63</sup> SubGenius Collective, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 104.

<sup>64</sup> SubGenius Collective, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 105.

<sup>65</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, 'History of the Necronomicon', at [www.crewscut.com/images/6b/H.\\_P.\\_Lovecraft\\_-\\_History\\_of\\_the\\_Necronomicon.pdf](http://www.crewscut.com/images/6b/H._P._Lovecraft_-_History_of_the_Necronomicon.pdf), accessed 24 August 2009.

*Land*) once his Cthulhu mythos was published, he lost control of it, and it was appropriated by occultists who made it their own.<sup>66</sup>

It has already been noted that ‘Bob’ has both good and evil manifestations and that he resembles L. Ron Hubbard in certain ways. Other new religious movement leaders are referenced also. Dobbstown, his headquarters in Sarawak, is clearly modelled on Jonestown, Guyana where over 900 members of the People’s Temple, followers of Reverend Jim Jones, committed mass suicide in 1978. Members of the COSG are said to go to Dobbstown to be initiated, which involves opening their Third Nostril. Dobbstown is important, because ‘Bob’ is rarely seen by members of the Church of the SubGenius, and as he is often there his followers can be in the presence of ‘Bodhisattva Dobbs’ and hear his *Dhobma*, ‘Absolute Self-Deification, the Retaining and Depurification of the Ego, and the Achievement of All Selfish Desires’.<sup>67</sup> These devotees are called Doktors (there is a SubGenius rock band called Doktors for ‘Bob’, which has played at many Devivals in several different incarnations).<sup>68</sup>

Stories in *Three-Fisted Tales of ‘Bob’* reveal other aspects of ‘Bob’s’ character: his prodigious sexual power and ability to endow his male followers with sexual attractiveness (which probably has much to do with wish-fulfilment as it is admitted that membership of the COSG is overwhelmingly male); his profound knowledge of the way things are; and his connection with the Bavarian Illuminati (this last revelation is contained in a story by Robert Anton Wilson, which features Adam Weishaupt, the Maltese Falcon, Freemasonry, the ‘first all female conspiracy ... The High Priestesses of the Paratheo-Anametamystikhood of Eris Esoteric, or POEE’),<sup>69</sup> and Abdul Alhazred, author of the *Necronomicon*, who summons Cthulhu, the Master of this Death Universe. The stories in *Three-Fisted Tales of ‘Bob’* function for the Church of the SubGenius somewhat in the way that *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* does for Discordianism, amplifying mythic themes and providing more information on issues such as ‘Bob’s’ first encounter with God, in which he is asked questions, including: what is freedom, what is science, what is religion, what is insanity and what is neurosis? (The answers are ‘slavery of choice’, ‘everyone’s personal religion’, ‘somebody else’s science: speculation’, ‘the state of being insufficiently neurotic’, and ‘personality’).<sup>70</sup> In this story it is also revealed that there are three human beings who have been consistently right

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<sup>66</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ‘Fiction in the Desert of the Real: Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos’, *Aries* 7 (2007), p. 90. See pp. 100–106 for discussion of Lovecraftian Chaos Magick.

<sup>67</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 53.

<sup>68</sup> See St. Janor Hypercleats, ‘Bleeding Headeclessians 9:9 – Drs. 4 “Bob” Statement of Purpose (1983 edition)’, in Ivan Stang (ed.), *Three-Fisted Tales of ‘Bob’* (New York, 1990).

<sup>69</sup> Robert Anton Wilson, ‘The Horror on Howth Hill’, in Stang (ed.), *Three-Fisted Tales of ‘Bob’*, p. 180.

<sup>70</sup> Ivan Stang, ‘The Real Story’, in Stang (ed.), *Three-Fisted Tales of ‘Bob’*, p. 140.

about the nature of the universe; Princeton University physicist Edward Witten, the ‘Cabalist sage Isaac ben Solomon Luria’, and Salvador Dali.<sup>71</sup> In a cheeky review of his own book, Ivan Stang (writing as Douglass St Clair Smith) offers some very perceptive insights into what the COSG is about:

SubGenius is not just a genre, but an active lifestyle or at least thoughtstyle **propped up** by the books, radio shows, tapes, fanzines, T-shirts. It’s related to, yet opposite from, cyberpunk in that it’s relentlessly critical yet often eagerly low-tech. It represents the people who could choose, but chose to remain primitive. SubGenius is less like new appliance weaponry and more like dirt, old broken up dead leaves and the bugs crawling around in the mulch. Something that won’t go away, something you can fight but never defeat. It’s more down-home, more good-ol’-boy, more Southern, and possibly wiser in its informality than most other forms of literature or media philosophy. For all that, it’s still also mysterious and archetypal. It is a celebration of inexplicability, a rejoicing in what we **still don’t know**. It’s also a celebration of imperfection. It clings in a very ornery way to the conviction that human beings are hilariously imperfect, that the very idea of striving for perfection (as taught in so many New Age schools) is pure foolishness. ‘Bob’ Dobbs isn’t smart, or even **good**; he’s just lucky. Slack IS luck, and it’s usually low-tech, though certainly not to the exclusion of playing with electronic toys. SubGenius is a sort of bedmate to cyberpunk – the two genres share both audiences and creators – but it tends to look back, way back, rather than forward. SubGenius is, in fact, incredibly retro at heart. Its unspoken philosophy places the primitive aborigine who sits in the mud arhythmically hooting away on some weird flute way above the hyper, wired rebel battling it out in cyberspace. It’s a stone age religion, with far more in common with Neanderthal fertility cults than with science fiction ... a round peg forcibly wedged into the square holes of the modern world. It doesn’t deny technology; it simply doesn’t **require** it. It’s also non-political, or, rather, above politics. It’s cultural, mythic. No way is ‘Bob’ going to save the world; his function is rather to make it **worth** saving. He’d rather let others do the hard work.<sup>72</sup>

The review also notes that major figures in the Church of the SubGenius appear in the stories alongside ‘Bob’ and are often portrayed in an unflattering light, including Stang himself. ‘Bob’, too, is shown to be libidinous and drunk, crude and often stupid. For COSG, this is a type of culture jamming that deliberately takes on traditional religion’s portrayal of its gods and saints as virtuous, flawless, wise and lofty, not mired in the mess of life.

The Church’s calendar of saints and feast days similarly attacks conventional expectations, as it features fictional and improbable figures as saints (as does

<sup>71</sup> Stang, ‘The Real Story’, in Stang (ed.), *Three-Fisted Tales of ‘Bob’*, p. 141.

<sup>72</sup> Douglass St Clair Smith, ‘Three-Fisted Review’, at [www.subgenius.com/bigfist/classic/classictales/3-FistedReview.html](http://www.subgenius.com/bigfist/classic/classictales/3-FistedReview.html), accessed 10 December 2009.



Discordianism). 24 January features as the Feast of St Klaatu, the alien messiah from ‘The Day the Earth Stood Still’;<sup>73</sup> 23 February is the Feast of St Monty Python, referencing the seminal English comedy programme ‘Monty Python’s Flying Circus’;<sup>74</sup> 1 April (April Fool’s Day, associated with pranks and practical jokes) is the Feast of St Eris; 15 April is the Feast of St Dracula, referencing the horror films that COSG hold in high esteem and Bram Stoker’s classic novel;<sup>75</sup> and 10 November is the Feast of St Cthulhu. Other holy days make puns on the names of other religious feasts: 16 February is Cremation Wednesday; 28 March is Palmistry Sunday; and 1 September is the beginning of the holy month of Ramalamadingdong.

The claim that COSG is a Stone Age religion is reinforced by the Yeti mythology that is developed in *Revelation X. The Illuminatus! Trilogy* accorded considerable prominence to the lost ancient civilization of Atlantis; COSG posits a primordial civilization, Mutantis, in which the Yetis lived blissfully, spending most of their time having sex.<sup>76</sup> It has been argued by Garry Trompf that the ‘fundamental religion’ of humanity is ‘the reliance on spirit-powers or non-human agencies to bring material blessing and avert plain loss or harm’.<sup>77</sup> If this is so, the materialistic orientation of much post-1950s Western religion is both logical and religiously and culturally appropriate, and the Church of the SubGenius’ comical emphasis on riches, luck and sexual attractiveness is a witty ‘culture jam’ on those religions that emphasize material success; Scientology and Pentecostal Christian megachurches.<sup>78</sup> The ‘retro’ elements of SubGenius alluded to by Smith are evident in the 1950s cultural references that permeate COSG books, *Arise! The SubGenius Video*, and the Church’s website. The fact that ‘Bob’ is a salesman, and the aggressively commercial aspects of the Church of the SubGenius belong to this 1950s worldview, too, when the belief that life could be transformed by the acquisition of products manifested in a more innocent form.

The popular culture elements of the Church of the SubGenius are complex and reach into multiple cultural discourses. Cult cartoonist Robert Crumb, known for his extreme black humour and weird sexual obsessions (a recurring trope is men having sex with buxom headless women) promoted COSG in his magazine-style

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<sup>73</sup> Matthew Etherden, ‘“The Day the Earth Stood Still”: 1950’s Sci-Fi, Religion and the Alien Messiah’, *Journal of Religion and Film* 9/2 (October 2005), at [www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9No2/EtherdenEarthStill.htm](http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9No2/EtherdenEarthStill.htm).

<sup>74</sup> Graham Chapman, *Monty Python’s Flying Circus: Just the Words* (London, 1999).

<sup>75</sup> Judith Halberstam, ‘Technologies of Horror: Bram Stoker’s “Dracula”’, *Victorian Studies* 36/3 (Spring 1993), pp. 333–52.

<sup>76</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *Revelation X*, pp. 66–9.

<sup>77</sup> Garry W. Trompf, ‘Salvation and Primal Religion’, *Prudentia* Supplementary Number (1988), p. 206.

<sup>78</sup> Mark Chaves, ‘All Creatures Great and Small: Megachurches in Context’, *Review of Religious Research* 47/4 (June 2006), pp. 329–46.

comic anthology, *Weirdo*, published between 1981 and 1993.<sup>79</sup> Another viral visual meme promoting the Church of the SubGenius is the frequent use of the icon of J.R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs by graffiti artists, which is both a ‘cult’ reference for the artists and a means of promoting the religion.<sup>80</sup> Science fiction and fantasy are crucial, and the posited links between J.R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs and L. Ron Hubbard are similarly important. The COSG mythos may appear ridiculous to non-members and those hearing it for the first time; the same point is often made by scholars attempting to assess the teachings of Scientology. It is often not that the ‘revelations’ of disgruntled ex-Scientologists that are posted on the internet are particularly outlandish. Thomas Disch has stated:

[i]f Americans do believe they have a right to lie, as I maintained in Chapter 1, then its philosophical basis must be the radical solipsism that SF has always allowed as a fundamental premise: I am the Alpha and Omega; I’ve been abducted by aliens; the speed of light can be exceeded; I hunt for dinosaurs in my time machine every other Thursday; I may be fat but I’m a telepath, so beware. Anything goes, if it’s a satisfying daydream.<sup>81</sup>

At the risk of irreverence, it is arguable that any theology or religious discourse that posits the existence of supernatural beings, post-mortem paradises, and a whole range of supra-empirical themes, merits the same criticism that Disch makes of science fiction. One caution might be that solipsism implies an isolated individual, whereas many religious beliefs are quite widespread among people, despite the scientific and secular orientation of Western culture. Yet Michael Pye has sensibly asked why scholars take Catholic theology seriously when they do not extend the same courtesy to that of the Japanese new religion, Tenrikyo? His point is that no true philosopher would be ‘impressed by the mere number of people who believe something!’<sup>82</sup>

The core members of the Church of the SubGenius have invested heavily in it, spending time developing its narrative and exteriorizing that narrative through the media. Ivan Stang is a professional filmmaker and has used the medium of film to further the COSG message. The Church’s radio programmes, ‘The Hour of Slack’, ‘“Bob’s” Slack Time Fun House’, and ‘The Puzzling Evidence Show’ (which

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<sup>79</sup> See also Terry Zwiggoff, *Crumb: Weird Sex Obsession Comic Books and All That Jazz* (Optimum Home Entertainment, 2004) a documentary introduced by filmmaker David Lynch.

<sup>80</sup> Western Cell Division, ‘Graphics and Ethnographics: An Incomprehensive Survey of Stencil Activism in Baltimore and Beyond’, *On the Street – Off the Street* (Maryland Art Place, 1996), at [www.stencilpirates.org/history/-graphicsandethnographics.pdf](http://www.stencilpirates.org/history/-graphicsandethnographics.pdf), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (New York, 1998), p. 221.

<sup>82</sup> Michael Pye, ‘Religion: Shape and Shadow’, *Numen* 41/1 (January 1994), p. 71.

feature Rev. Susie the Floozie, Dr Philo Drummond, Puzzling Evidence, Rev. Ivan Stang, his wife Princess Wei R. Doe, and Dr Hal, among other SubGenius Foundation members) reach large audiences.<sup>83</sup> The COSG has collaborated with the Association for Consciousness Exploration (ACE) on a number of events, such as the Starwood Festival, the WinterStar Symposium,<sup>84</sup> and Rant'n'Rave, much in the way that the Church of All Worlds has cooperated with the Society for Creative Anachronism, Renaissance fairs and science fiction conventions. The Association for Consciousness Exploration's Starwood Center in Cleveland has hosted events by prominent Pagans and alternative religionists including Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart and Isaac Bonewits. Devivals are often large, well-attended affairs and the SubGenius leaders are inspired and charismatic preachers: Ivan Stang was named Best Crack-Pot Preacher by *Cleveland Scene* in 2000, and the cult publication carries frequent articles on the Church of the SubGenius.<sup>85</sup> Ivan Stang is also a lecturer for the Maybe Logic Academy (which was founded by Robert Anton Wilson and offers courses 'grounded in the philosophy and perspective of maybe logic, an approach which emphasizes the fallibility and relativity of perception and tends to approach information and observations with questions, probabilities and multiple perspectives rather than absolute truths'),<sup>86</sup> where he has taught courses on the history of the Church of the SubGenius which will be published at some time in the future.

Devivals are an example of temporary autonomous zones, and their temporary nature is reinforced by the fact that they generally take place in night clubs and bars, which are co-opted by the COSG for 'sacred' business (which may include healing and entertainment).<sup>87</sup> The violent and blasphemous nature of the preaching, which may at first appear inimical to 'real' religion, evokes the Ranters of seventeenth-century England, antinomian Christians who shocked the establishment with their rejection of all authority; church, scripture, and political. They believed in radical pantheism, and their most notorious thinker, Laurence Claxton (1615–67), the 'Captain of the Rant', claimed that 'that a believer is free

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<sup>83</sup> In an e-mail communication of 5 December 2009 Rev. Ivan Stang indicated to me that there were 40,000 members of the Church of the SubGenius. Other estimates are more modest. However, the radio programmes, books, cult bands and films, and the COSG website reach a much larger audience of non-members as well.

<sup>84</sup> 'Starwood 2010' at [www.rosencomet.com](http://www.rosencomet.com), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>85</sup> Jeff Niesel, 'Slack is Back: Quit your job! Make waste! The Church of the SubGenius has come to town', *Cleveland Scene*, 6 April (2000), at [www.clevescene.com/cleveland/slack-is-back/Content?oid=1473968](http://www.clevescene.com/cleveland/slack-is-back/Content?oid=1473968), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>86</sup> Maybe Logic Academy, at [www.maybelogic.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=227&Itemid=1](http://www.maybelogic.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=227&Itemid=1), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>87</sup> One prominent Church of the SubGenius charismatic preacher is Rev Dr (Mr M.D.) David N. Meyer, III, D.D., B.B.T., who is known as the Pope and 'holds his revivals ONLY in the evillest, most lucrative New York night clubs. Performs healings by sheer vocal intensity alone', SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 15.

from all traditional restraints, that sin is a product only of the imagination, and that private ownership of property is wrong'. Heretical messages such as this were 'ranted' in public, the group used nudity and sexual acts as social protests, and they were regarded as a threat to the social order.<sup>88</sup> It would seem that the Church of the SubGenius, in advocating slack, has a legitimate pedigree in the history of Western religion, one that stresses anarchic protest, sensual indulgence and innate divinity rather than the more traditional Christian virtues of obedience, chastity and the acknowledgement of humanity's sinful nature. In this context the custody battle of Rachel Bevilacqua, the wife of Steve Bevilacqua (a long-time associate of Ivan Stang, who retired from a prominent role in COSG affairs to support her), better-known as Reverend Magdalen in the Church of the SubGenius, takes on new significance. In 2006 Rachel Bevilacqua lost custody of her ten-year-old son Kohl largely because of photographs that her ex-partner, Jeff Jary, presented to the court. Michael Gill explains:

Jary and his lawyer filed for sole custody in Orleans County Court. In support of the request, they showed the judge a picture of Rachel as Mary Magdalen, in the nude and getting a tattoo. They showed a picture of Steve – known among the SubGenius as Lord Jesus Christ – wearing a clown suit in a mock passion play with a crucifix festooned with pool-noodle dollar signs, while a crowd of partially clothed people, including a woman holding a dildo, look on. There's a picture of Rachel in a costume parade called the Deity Ball, in which she's wearing a black mesh bondage suit with a papier-mâché goat's head mask perched atop her trim shoulders.<sup>89</sup>

In the hearing transcripts, Judge Punch described Rachel Bevilacqua as immoral and a pervert, and expressed disgust at her religion. Ivan Stang, himself the father of adult children, weighed into the controversy, appalled that the Bevilacquas were being persecuted by upholders of the type of repressive religion that the Church of the SubGenius explicitly challenges and lampoons. He argues that COSG is legitimately both 'satire and a real stupid religion ... The fact that it admits that it's a joke proves that it's the only honest religion'.<sup>90</sup> Since the publicity surrounding the custody case, the Church of the SubGenius has been inundated by supporters willing to pay the membership fee to become a COSG minister, in support of Rachel Bevilacqua's appeal. Stang explained to Michael Gill that Judge Punch's question 'Why a goat?' has become a viral meme on the COSG's online newsgroup

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<sup>88</sup> Nigel Smith (ed.), *A Collection of Ranter Writings* (London, 1983).

<sup>89</sup> Michael Gill, 'Perversion of Judgement: J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, Mary Magdalen, A Judge Named Punch, and a Custody Battle that Has Many Asking Why A Goat?' *Free Times* 14/6 (31 May, 2006), at [www.freetimes.com/-stories/14/6/perversion-of-judgement](http://www.freetimes.com/-stories/14/6/perversion-of-judgement), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>90</sup> Gill, 'Perversion of Judgement', at [www.freetimes.com/stories/14/6/perversion-of-judgement](http://www.freetimes.com/stories/14/6/perversion-of-judgement), accessed 10 December 2009.

alt.slack. The law case was important for the Church of the SubGenius, which had taken the unusual step of being registered as a business rather than seeking the usual taxation exemptions available to a church. Rachel Bevilacqua's case brought COSG to the public attention, and Judge Punch appeared to believe that it was a dangerous cult rather than a joke or parody. Stang views this as being clearly unconstitutional. His challenge is: 'Who cares what religion she is? They have no right to ask you that.' Rachel Bevilacqua appears more concerned with the issue of parenting ability. In the appeal, she wants to be judged 'on the fruits of my mothering instead of the nekkidity of my buttocks'.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusion

Almost all academic commentators on the Church of the SubGenius are entirely dismissive of its claims to be a 'real' religion. Thomas Alberts states that it is 'widely accepted that Discordianism, the Church of the SubGenius, and the various denominations of the Invisible Pink Unicorn are not authentic religions in the way that, say, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam and Catholicism ... are religions. They are fake religions',<sup>92</sup> and Paul Mann, employing Situationist terminology, has foamed at the mouth over J.R. 'Bob' Dobbs, the 'stupid guru' of COSG and has argued that there is neither wit nor power in the implied critique:

[t]he stupid guru of SubGenius is the image, the juncture of criticism as dumb embrace, a delirious, mocking, hysterical, literal, fantastic embrace that in effect squeezes the life out of the Other (Dobbs has been assassinated at least twice) without ever admitting that it does so (he never quite dies); the cult of Dobbs crystallizes a rabid overparticipation in the stupid spectacle of the real that goes far beyond any 'blank parody' or 'postmodern pastiche'.<sup>93</sup>

A slightly more generous assessment is offered by David Chidester in his pioneering academic study of invented religions, alternative spiritualities and secular phenomena that have acquired religious overtones, such as Coca Cola, rock'n'roll and baseball. He acknowledges the dilemma that the Discordian challenge presents to the scholar of religion; if Discordianism is not a 'real religion', what type of criteria might be employed to validate a reputable definition of 'real religion'? He identifies the Church of the SubGenius with other Discordian offshoots (including the Illuminated Knights of Otis and the 'Holy Church of Unified Borkism, devoted

<sup>91</sup> Gill, 'Perversion of Judgement', at [www.freetimes.com/stories/14/6/perversion-of-judgement](http://www.freetimes.com/stories/14/6/perversion-of-judgement), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas Alberts, 'Virtually real: Fake religions and problems of authenticity in religion', *Culture and Religion* 9/2 (July 2008), p. 126.

<sup>93</sup> Paul Mann, 'Stupid Undergrounds', *Postmodern Culture* 5/3 (May 1995) at <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pmc/-toc/pmc5.3.html>, accessed 10 December 2009.

to the Swedish “Muppet chef extraordinaire”, the Borkian lord and saviour’),<sup>94</sup> and Lorne Dawson and Jenna Hennebry refer to COSG (and Discordianism) as ‘quite sophisticated joke religions’.<sup>95</sup> In 2000 *Time* magazine voted Dobbs as the ‘Phony or Fraud of the Century’. He gained 20.46 per cent of the readers’ votes, winning from television host Geraldo Rivera with 15.88 per cent and O. J. Simpson with 11.06 per cent.<sup>96</sup>

Theories of humour and religion were discussed in Chapter 2. There is a long history of cooperation, as well as opposition, between humour and religion: in Mesopotamian mythology a god laughs at the mortal Adapa, exemplifying the laughter of derision; in Ancient Greece the gods laugh mockingly when the smith Hephaistos is cuckolded by Ares; in Ancient Rome authors like Lucian of Samosata employed critical laughter to express:

uneasiness with traditions and popular religions as well as with new and popular cults. It was a laughter of outsiders, a rhetorical device in which reason opposed emotions. This controlled laughter ... parodied the superficial and spectacular features of religions.<sup>97</sup>

This description entirely fits the satirical, mocking humour of the Church of the SubGenius, a religion in which rationality critiques irrationality and an invented religion mimics the beliefs and behaviours of so-called legitimate or ‘real’ religions. Scholars of religion are uncertain what approaches to take to groups such as the COSG. Should they accept the party line that these are joke or parody religions and ignore them? The challenge to scholars posed by Discordians, that they define what a real religion is, is genuinely unsettling. Discordians indicated that Native Americans would be unhappy if their religion were not accorded the status of a ‘real religion’; in fact that was what happened for centuries, until Westerners finally recognized indigenous religion very late in the colonial era. Further, Chidester (citing Rodney Needham) notes that to be a success, ‘a fake religion must look exactly like a real religion. Basic forms of religion, such as myth, doctrine, ethics, ritual, personal experience, and social formation, represent not only the template for inventing new religions, but also for asserting their authenticity’.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2005), p. 198.

<sup>95</sup> Lorne L. Dawson and Jenna Hennebry, ‘New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14/1 (1999), p. 36.

<sup>96</sup> Melissa August, Harriet Barovick, Val Castronovo, Ellin Martens, Desa Philadelphia, Julie Rawe, Chris Taylor and Josh Tyrangiel, ‘Readers Speak: Down With Geraldo’, *Time* (Saturday 1 January 2000) at [www.time.com/time/-magazine/article/0,9171,995817,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/-magazine/article/0,9171,995817,00.html).

<sup>97</sup> Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins* (London and New York, 1997), p. 58.

<sup>98</sup> Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, p. 210.

Those scholars like Chidester and Gordon Lynch, who have attempted to assess very new religious phenomena, often speculate on whether the current era is ‘an age that is wholly different to any other in history’,<sup>99</sup> chiefly because of the influence of the internet and new media. But the influence of the internet and new media (including film, television and advertising) is pernicious as well as beneficial. To return to the Situationist philosophical position of Guy Debord, when material comfort became more common in the West, there was a delight experienced from the *use* of consumer goods, but in late capitalism commodities have become *sui generis*. Debord claims that:

the consumer is filled with ... waves of enthusiasm for a given product, supported and spread by all the media of communication ... propagated with lightning speed.<sup>100</sup>

This chapter has argued that the Church of the SubGenius has skilfully avoided becoming a commodity through constant culture jamming and the performance of counter-spectacle, resisting the banalization and conformity against which Debord so eloquently warned. Their aim appears to be, similar to that of Discordianism, the forcing of guerrilla enlightenment upon the unaware. The commitment of individual members of the COSG to its mission cannot be doubted; Rachel Bevilacqua’s custody battle indicates the personal cost that this may entail (and Ivan Stang has spoken of the painful break-up of his first marriage, which was largely due to his former wife’s lack of comprehension of his deep engagement with the SubGenius enterprise).<sup>101</sup> Considering that the internal states of individuals are not susceptible to empirical investigation, it seems reasonable to accept the members of the Church of the SubGenius’ testimony as to their religious commitment at face value.

This study has placed great significance on the narrative that invented religions tell. The COSG pulls no punches in its self-estimation:

it is a **certified religion** of scorn and vengeance directed at *THEM*, the *enemies* of us **Outsiders**. It is “self help” through *scoffing* and *blaspheming*, *frenzied fornication* and the *Mockery* of Graven Images. The Church provides **sure answers** and miracles in the service of SURREAVOLUTION.<sup>102</sup>

The penetration of the Church of the SubGenius into broader culture has been largely due to receptive radio audiences among student populations, its presence on the internet, and alternative celebrity adherents (Pee Wee Herman, Devo, Robert

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<sup>99</sup> Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford, 2008 [2005]), p. 44.

<sup>100</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, no page numbers.

<sup>101</sup> Niesel, ‘Slack is Back: Quit your job! Make waste!’, at [www.clevescene.com/cleveland/slack-is-back/-Content?oid=1473968](http://www.clevescene.com/cleveland/slack-is-back/-Content?oid=1473968), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>102</sup> SubGenius Foundation, *The Book of the SubGenius*, p. 12.

Crumb, Robert Anton Wilson, and sympathizers who never joined like the late Frank Zappa). Although its numbers remain small, the contribution of the Church of the SubGenius is influential; the aggressive culture jamming of the COSG is a strikingly original innovation in contemporary religion, and the penetration of its teachings concerning J.R. 'Bob' Dobbs, the Conspiracy, Mutantis and the ancestral role of the Yeti (and more) into underground publishing and guerrilla media (both online and offline) has been remarkably stimulating and fruitful.



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## Chapter 5

# Third-Millennium Invented Religions: Jediism, Matrixism and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster

### Introduction

At the start of the third millennium CE a flurry of invented religions appeared in Western culture, the three most important of which were Jediism (based on George Lucas' *Star Wars* film trilogies and dating to the 2001 census in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Canada),<sup>1</sup> Matrixism (based on Larry and Andy Wachowski's film trilogy and dating to 2004), and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (based on the reinterpretation of fundamentalist Christian Creationism known as Intelligent Design and founded by Bobby Henderson in 2005). To date, there has been very limited academic study of these three movements. However, they fit within the methodological paradigm developed in this book, of invented religions which re-shape popular cultural discourses for religious (or quasi- or pseudo-religious) purposes. This chapter will argue that the power of film as an inspiration for religio-spiritual innovations gave birth to Jediism and Matrixism, the teachings and organization of which remained sufficiently general as to be found to be compatible with religions as varied as Christianity and Paganism (for Jediism) and Buddhism and Paganism (for Matrixism). These religious movements were largely internet-based (with online Jedi Temples, for example) and the role of the charismatic leader is diminished in comparison with earlier invented religions.

The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is somewhat different, in that it began as a protest against the Kansas School Board's decision allowing creationism to be taught in school science classes alongside Darwin's theory of evolution. Bobby Henderson, a 24-year-old physics graduate, wrote an open letter demanding that his personal deity, the Flying Spaghetti Monster, be recognized as the Intelligent Designer of the Christian world. Intelligent Design, a recent formulation of creationism, does not mention God and thus leaves open the possibility that any deity may be proposed as the 'designer'.<sup>2</sup> This letter went unacknowledged,

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<sup>1</sup> James R. Lewis, 'New Religion Adherents: An Overview of Anglophone Census and Survey Data', *Marburg Journal of Religion* 9/1 (September 2004), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Bobby Henderson, 'Open Letter to Kansas School Board', at [www.venganza.org/about/open-letter/](http://www.venganza.org/about/open-letter/), accessed 10 December 2009.

and to vent his frustration and continue the fight against Christian fundamentalist undermining of science, Henderson founded the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM) in 2005. The Church has a sophisticated website, a range of humorous merchandise for sale, and a sacred book, *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*.<sup>3</sup> The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is included in this book, because although Henderson did not intend it to be a 'real' religion but a critique of Christian Intelligent Design (and thus closer to the Invisible Pink Unicorn or Bertrand Russell's teapot), through its activities it has come to resemble a 'real' religion more. As David Chidester has observed, even obvious parody and fake religions must follow the master-template of established religion; if they do not they are exercises in failed cultural criticism, as their critiques of established religion will not be recognized.<sup>4</sup> Henderson himself is well on the way to acquiring a following based on his personal charisma and deep involvement in the Church of the FSM.

In Chapter 1 it was argued that religions are deeply imbricated with the culture of the host society, and that after World War II the cultural and religious imaginings of the West became involved in making real the future visions of what had been to that date 'science fiction'. The paranoid politics of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear weapons were combined with the growth in consumption of labour-saving devices and the increased presence of technology in everyday life. New religions featured extra-terrestrial visitors to Earth and other popular cultural tropes. This chapter develops this argument with reference to comic-book superheroes and the new mythologies of science fiction presented in television and film, which pique the human desire for self-transformation and are broadly compatible with alternative spiritualities springing from the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s. The second section considers Jediism and Matrixism as instantiations of these science fiction scenarios, and also as examples of online memes, popular cultural motifs that are widely adopted because of internet dissemination.<sup>5</sup> In the final section, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is examined in the light of online memes and cultural criticism. In all three religions the prevalence of late capitalist consumerism, the willingness to work openly with fictions to construct working spiritual paths, and eclecticism in the construction of identity are clearly apparent. However, all appear less creative than the three earlier invented religions here examined, in that they are based on a single 'text', and as all three third millennium invented religions are yet very new, it is difficult to predict if in 20 or 30 years they will still wield influence in the manner of Discordianism, the Church of All Worlds, and the Church of the SubGenius.

<sup>3</sup> Bobby Henderson, *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* (New York, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2005), p. 210.

<sup>5</sup> Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, 'Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production', in Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (eds), *A New Literacies Sampler* (New York, 2007), pp. 199–228.

## The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: Science Fiction and Human Transformation

The superheroes of comic books enjoyed unparalleled dominance of American popular culture from the late 1930s to the mid-1950s. Like the science fiction short stories and novels of the same era, they gained devoted fans and enjoyed great popularity and wide circulation. The receptive readership for the two genres was largely the same, teenage boys and young men, and it is thus unsurprising that the genres overlapped, mainly in terms of futuristic science and technology. Comics, like science fiction, reflected the cultural context of World War II and the Cold War (in fact servicemen were one of the most eager audiences, particularly in the case of those superheroes who were engaged in fighting the same enemy, for example Nazis or Communists).<sup>6</sup> Superheroes were committed to fighting evil and upholding good, and they almost all had superhuman powers (the notable exceptions to this are Batman, Rorschach and The Punisher).<sup>7</sup> In a striking parallel to religious initiation, almost all superheroes derived their supernatural powers from traumatic experiences in which they were exposed to the terrifying powers of little-understood and dangerous science (for example, Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, the X-Men, and the Incredible Hulk).

Yet superheroes were also testimony to the transformative power of science; they were reborn with new identities and abilities, to continue their fight against evil armed as never before. Scott Rosen notes that:

[t]he origin of the Fantastic Four suggests this profound fear of science, yet their transformation also points to its promise. Their story is first told in the pages of *Fantastic Four #1* (Nov. 1961). With a determination to beat ‘the Commies’ to the stars, the four agree to fly a ship into space despite the danger of exposure to cosmic rays ... Reed Richards, the leader and brains behind the flight, gains the ability to stretch his body to any size and shape his mind can imagine. Truly he is Mister Fantastic. Sue Storm, Reed’s fiancée, can become invisible at will; she is able to project mental force fields also. She becomes the Invisible Girl ... Johnny Storm ... becomes the Human Torch – with the ability to spontaneously ignite yet not be consumed by the fire that surrounds his body. Finally, pilot Ben Grimm, gains virtually boundless meta-strength, yet his body is permanently disfigured, assuming a monstrous rocky texture. Known simply as the Thing, Grimm’s incredible strength makes him the most formidable member of the group. The Fantastic Four are both blessed and cursed by their transformation. They become powerful, godlike beings, with the ability to harness the ancient

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<sup>6</sup> Robert G. Weiner, “‘Okay, Axis, Here We Come!’ Captain America and the Superhero Teams from World War II and the Cold War”, in B.J. Oropeza (ed.), *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture* (New York, 2005), p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> B.J. Oropeza, ‘Introduction’, in Oropeza (ed.), *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, p. 5.

elemental powers. Indeed they appear to embody the ancient elements themselves. Mister Fantastic's infinite fluidity parallels water. The Human Torch obviously possesses the element of fire. The Invisible Woman resembles wind – with its invisible yet undeniable power and presence, and the Thing resembles Earth itself. Yet they are at the same time changed forever, bearing the effects of their attempt to reach the heavens. Like Icarus in the ancient Greek myth, they flew too high, too close to the sun, and paid the price for their hubris.<sup>8</sup>

The cartoonists who created superheroes were tapping into the perennial fascination with myth, the conflict between good and evil, and apocalyptic threats to humanity's survival. They referenced religion constantly: motifs of transformed identity (the superheroes' names parallel those adopted upon religious conversion, for example, Steve Rogers becomes Captain America after drinking a special draught designed to produce 'super soldiers'); raising from the dead (Captain America is frozen for many years then revived); miraculous births or unconventional family structures (the majority have either no parents or absent parents); heavenly origins (Superman is from planet Krypton), and distinctive garb which identifies the superheroes as defenders of justice, to be trusted by the people.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1950s new religions were proposing that all humans might achieve super powers through psychological exercises and encounters with alien life forms. L. Ron Hubbard (1912–86) founded the Church of Scientology in 1954, after his Dianetics movement attained popularity. Dianetics (derived from the Greek meaning 'through the mind') was launched in 1950 with the publication of Hubbard's *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*, and was marketed as a 'science of the mind'.<sup>10</sup> The book had an enthusiastic reaction among the public, who found its explanation of the powers of the mind intriguing. According to Hubbard the mind was separated into the analytical mind, which is 'accurate, rational, and logical', and the reactive mind, which 'is the repository of a variety of memory traces, or what Hubbard calls engrams', the most powerful of which negative memories that are damaging to the human. Auditing, in which a trained auditor takes the patient (the 'preclear') back to the painful event, is aimed at erasing engrams. Hubbard claimed that those who achieved the state of Clear experienced 'a variety of intellectual and physical benefits' enabling the Clear to enjoy life 'in a radically new way'.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the early prophets of UFO and alien-based religion, including George King (founder of the Aetherius Society in 1955) and

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<sup>8</sup> Scott Rosen, 'Gods and Fantastic Mortals: The Superheroes of Jack Kirby', in Oropeza (ed.), *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, p. 115.

<sup>9</sup> Oropeza, 'Introduction', in Oropeza (ed.), *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, pp. 5–9.

<sup>10</sup> L. Ron Hubbard, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (Los Angeles, 1986 [1950]), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Hugh B. Urban, 'Fair Game: Secrecy, Security, and the Church of Scientology in Cold War America', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74/2 (2006), p. 365.

Mark Prophet (founder of the Summit Lighthouse in 1958), spoke of encounters with superior extra-terrestrial beings, whose powers ranged from technological mastery that enabled interplanetary travel in space ships, to mental capacities that manifested paranormal powers (telekinesis, mind-reading, channelled messages and the like).<sup>12</sup>

In the 1960s these ideas coalesced into a broad range of psychological and religious trends with the umbrella title of the Human Potential Movement. The transformation of religion and the world from God-centred to human-centred, combined with the introduction of Eastern spiritualities to the West, was accompanied by an upsurge in 'seekership' in which people experimented with religions and spiritualities, new psychological techniques, drugs and sexual experimentation, all directed toward the goal of self-actualization.<sup>13</sup> Superheroes were congruent with the ideal of realizing one's higher self, as they were 'archetypal expression[s] of greater human potential'.<sup>14</sup> It is reasonable to argue that superheroes (along with celebrities and some other prominent contemporary humans) have taken the place of the saints in medieval Christianity; they are images of the perfected life, images of what may be achieved, and role-models to be emulated.<sup>15</sup> The imaginative desire to emulate, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, is inextricably linked to modes of self-transformation (spiritual and other) based on consumerism.<sup>16</sup>

The contribution of popular science fiction discourses was not always directed to the promotion of religion, at least not as it was traditionally understood. Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), discussed in Chapter 3, promoted a fictional Church of All Worlds, but it advocated sexual freedom and located God in all and everything. The Gene Roddenberry (1921–91) television series *Star Trek* offered a more skeptical vehicle for the investigation of religion, as *Star Trek* was committed to liberal modernity and progressive politics. The first episode aired in 1964, and in 1968 the kiss between Captain James T. Kirk (William Shatner) and Lieutenant Uhura (Nichelle Nichols) was only the second inter-racial kiss on American television, and the first in a dramatic fictional context. Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, co-founder of the Church of All Worlds, has

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<sup>12</sup> John A. Saliba, 'Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena', in James R. Lewis (ed.), *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds* (Albany, 1995), pp. 15–64.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Stone, 'The Human Potential Movement', *Society* 15/4 (May 1978), pp. 66–8.

<sup>14</sup> Adam Possamai, 'Superheroes and the Development of Latent Abilities: A Hyper-real Re-enchantment?' in Lynne Hume and Kathleen McPhillips (eds), *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment* (Farnham, 2006), p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> Carole M. Cusack, 'Celebrity, the Popular Media, and Scientology: Making Familiar the Unfamiliar,' in James R. Lewis (ed.), *Scientology* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 389–409.

<sup>16</sup> Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (York, 2005), p. 205.

confirmed the inspiration that *Star Trek* provided, due to its positive view of human capacities and the future:

[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 and *Green Egg* avidly embraced this vision of, as Roddenberry said, 'a future everyone will want to be part of'.<sup>17</sup>

The episode titled 'The Apple' involves the *Enterprise* landing on Gamma Trianguli VI, where Kirk and the crew discover an Edenic society in which the people are devoted to a power source called Vaal, which they accept as God. Only Spock is willing to accept that the people are happy and should be left alone; Captain Kirk and 'Bones' McCoy believe that Vaal must be destroyed, which the people are unhappy about. But Kirk is certain of the rightness of his views; at the episode's conclusion he 'assures the smiling people of Vaal that they will love freedom, sexual love, children, responsibility and independence'.<sup>18</sup> The *Star Trek* rational universe integrates notions normally deemed religious in the films, however; after Spock dies in *The Wrath of Khan*, Kirk clings to belief in the *katra*, a Vulcan immortal soul, which Spock had transferred to McCoy before his body failed. Kirk manages to transfer the soul back when Spock's body is reconstituted on the planet Genesis. As Schwartz comments, '[t]his is death and resurrection in its most fundamental form'.<sup>19</sup>

The power of the television medium led to *Star Trek* becoming a cult series, which later spawned sequels (including *The Next Generation*, *Voyager* and *Deep Space Nine*) that extended viewer knowledge of the multi-species Federation that benevolently administers the universe, and which articulate a post-Cold War vision of space exploration.<sup>20</sup> More than 700 episodes of the television series have been made. Novelizations and games have also proved popular. The film franchise is strong, with the eleventh title being released in 2009.<sup>21</sup> Further, Michael Jindra has argued that *Star Trek* is one of the 'sites' which the contemporary West finds sacred, and the activities of its millions of fans are clearly devotional. The first

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Adam Possamai, 'Cultural Consumption of History and Popular Culture in Alternative Spiritualities', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2/2 (2002), p. 205.

<sup>18</sup> Ross S. Kraemer, 'Is There God in the Universe?' in Ross S. Kraemer, William Cassidy and Susan L. Schwartz, *Religions of Star Trek* (Boulder, 2001), p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Susan L. Schwartz, 'Shamans, Prophets, Priests, and Mystics: *Star Trek's* Religious Specialists', in Kraemer et al., *Religions of Star Trek*, p. 107.

<sup>20</sup> Jeff Greenwald, *Future Perfect: How Star Trek Conquered Planet Earth* (Harmondsworth, 1998), pp. 17–19.

<sup>21</sup> J.J. Abrams, *Star Trek* (Paramount Pictures, 2009).

*Star Trek* convention took place in New York in 1972, and Jindra's research, now over ten years old, lists the show's popularity as follows:

over \$500 million in merchandise sold over the last 25 years (Paikert 1991), over 4 million novels sold every year (often bestsellers), dictionaries of ST alien languages, institutes that study them, 'fanzines' numbering in the thousands, hundreds of fan clubs, conventions, on-line computer discussion groups, and tourist sites, plus of course the endless reruns, broadcast in over 100 countries. Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, the two main characters on the original series (TOS), are household names not only in the United States but in other English-speaking countries, as is the spaceship on which they travel, the Enterprise. Other popular culture fads have come and gone over the years, but ST recently celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary and shows no sign of letting up.<sup>22</sup>

Production of the original *Star Trek* ceased after three seasons and during the 1970s reruns were shown, and two seasons of an animated series were aired in 1973–74. *The Next Generation* did not appear until 1987. The first film, *Star Trek: The Movie* was released in 1979, by which time the public's appetite for myth-saturated space opera had been whetted by the debut of a major cultural phenomenon, George Lucas' (b. 1944) *Star Wars*, which had been released in 1977.

*Star Wars* begins 'A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away', making explicit the connection between imagined science fiction futures and idealized and emended mythic pasts. George Lucas conceived of the project as an epic sequence of three trilogies, and made the second trilogy (films four, five and six) first. After *Star Wars* came *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *The Return of the Jedi* (1983). The prequel trilogy was released more than 20 years later. It comprised *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), and *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005). The story of the first trilogy is a version of what Lincoln Geraghty terms 'the American monomyth', in which a lone hero (Lucas' Luke Skywalker, who trains as a Jedi Knight) undergoes a rite of passage (initiation), learns wisdom, goes on a quest and achieves great deeds. The first trilogy chronicles Luke's adventures, in which he is reunited with his twin sister Princess Leia, acquires a loyal band of fellow-rebels (including Han Solo, his copilot the Wookiee Chewbacca, Lando Calrissian and the two androids R2-D2 and C-3PO), learns that the villainous Darth Vader is his father, and watches Vader die after he has killed the Emperor and liberated the galaxy. The monomyth of the hero's quest was popularized through the scholarship of Joseph Campbell, whose *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* was an inspiration to Lucas during the making of the films.<sup>23</sup> This monomyth is pervasive in American popular culture, which employs the motifs of ancient mythology in 'classic Hollywood westerns such as

<sup>22</sup> Michael Jindra, 'Star Trek Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon', *Sociology of Religion* 55/1 (Spring 1994), p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Novato CA, 2008 [1949]).



*Shane* (1953), *The Searchers* (1956), and *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), or the more modern comic-superhero movies such as *Superman* (1978), *Batman* (1989), and *Spider-Man* (2002).<sup>24</sup> Unlike the comic superheroes discussed above, Luke Skywalker is not miraculously endowed with superhuman powers, but has to train to become a Jedi (under Obi-Wan Kenobi and later Yoda), to master the Force, which is defined as an ‘energy field created by all living things’.<sup>25</sup> However, in the prequel trilogy, Lucas posits the existence of ‘midi-chlorians’ in the blood of those who have Jedi genes, which disappointed many fans who felt that becoming a Jedi was now elitist and inherited, rather than a matter of personal effort and self-cultivation.<sup>26</sup>

### Film, the Internet and the Census: Jediism

The *Star Wars* films were hugely successful at the box office and, like *Star Trek*, the franchise was enhanced and made more lucrative through accompanying merchandise, including novelizations, collectable figurines, Lego, customized board games, animated series to attract younger viewers (for example, *Star Wars: Droids* and *Star Wars: Ewoks*, both released in 1985), and a myriad other products, both featured in the six films or part of the ‘expanded universe’ (which comprises fan films, novelizations, online fan fiction on various topics, such as the romance of Padme Amidala and Anakin Skywalker, and so on). The growth of the World Wide Web from 1989 made it possible for fans to interact with *Star Wars* in a much more creative fashion than was previously achievable, resulting in the ‘expanded universe’ in which fans can ‘fill in’ aspects of the story that Lucas has not specified.<sup>27</sup> The language of the films passed into politics, with United States President Ronald Reagan’s strategic defence initiative being nicknamed ‘Star Wars’ and Reagan’s use of ‘the Evil Empire’ as a soubriquet for the Soviet Union. The mythic and moral dimensions of the narrative attracted comment from scholars and in popular media, particularly after the release of the prequel trilogy, which had as a narrative

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<sup>24</sup> Lincoln Geraghty, ‘Creating and Comparing Myth in Twentieth-Century Science Fiction: *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*’, *Literature/Film Quarterly* 33/3 (2005), p. 193.

<sup>25</sup> Stanley Rothman, ‘Is God Really Dead in Beverly Hills? Religion and the Movies’, *The American Scholar* 65/2 (Spring 1996), p. 274.

<sup>26</sup> Carol Emslie, ‘The “gene” for Jedi Knights? The “new genetics” and social stratification’, *Radical Statistics* 72 (Autumn 1999) at [www.radstats.org.uk/no072/article5.htm](http://www.radstats.org.uk/no072/article5.htm), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Adam Possamai notes that fans make amateur *Star Wars* films and post them online, making them widely available and bridging the gap between fan and filmmaker, consumer and producer, endorser and critic of popular cultural forms. See Adam Possamai, ‘Yoda Goes to the Vatican: Youth Spirituality and Popular Culture’, *Charles Strong Lecture* (Charles Strong Trust, 2007), at [http://users.esc.net.au/~nlabel/lectures/Yoda\\_Goes\\_to\\_the\\_Vatican.pdf](http://users.esc.net.au/~nlabel/lectures/Yoda_Goes_to_the_Vatican.pdf).

arc the transformation of the young Jedi Anakin Skywalker, father of Luke and Leia, into the evil Darth Vader, architect of the demise of the Republic and the rise of the mechanistic, soulless and tyrannical Empire. The demands of the path of the Jedi underlie both the story of Anakin and of his son Luke. The Jedi are a warrior class of dedicated knights, and their training involves the transcendence of emotions such as fear and anger, and the mastery of the Light Side of the Force. The Jedi Knights are opposed by the Dark Lords of the Sith, who use the Dark Side of the Force. Jerold J. Abrams, employing Heideggerian terms, argues that the Jedi emphasize ‘the importance of a passive and quiet, contemplative mind’ whereas the Sith:

are trained in aggression and technical thinking, control and domination. In a word, they’re trained in the mode of the *present-at-hand*, rather than the illumined *ready-to-hand*. Instead of feeling the Force, the Sith are trained visually to control nature as a set of external objects. All of reality, on this view, is ready to be subordinated and controlled, and all for the sole purpose of increasing their power over nature. Filled with anger, filled with fear, the Dark Side of the Force – taken to its logical limit – is precisely what gives rise to the darkest phenomenon of reality: enframing.<sup>28</sup>

This theme of the mechanical versus the natural, control versus creative participation, pervades the *Star Wars* films, and is important for the Jedi religion. Yoda, when he instructs Luke, insists on the Force’s presence in all of nature and the fact that Life creates the force. Jedi powers are not technological, like those of the Sith; nor are they purely cognitive. Rather, ‘a Jedi must learn to feel the Force’, and a Jedi master can, through the Force, ‘move physical objects without touching them’ and ‘influence other minds’, suggesting that the Force is spiritual and affective in nature.<sup>29</sup>

Scholarly investigation of the Force and the underlying religious concepts of the *Star Wars* films have identified an affinity with Eastern religions in the training of the Jedi. The psychological strategies taught to Luke by Yoda resemble those of Chinese and Japanese martial arts. The Force flows through a Jedi in a similar fashion to *ch’i*, and the Jedi ethic is compatible with that of martial arts orders, such as the samurai of Japan and the monks of the Shaolin Temple in Henan Province, China. Walter Robinson has argued that when Yoda rebukes Luke Skywalker for saying he will try to complete a task, saying ‘No! Try not. Do or not do. There is no try’, he is seeking to bring Luke into a state of undivided

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<sup>28</sup> Jerold J. Abrams, ‘A Technological Galaxy: Heidegger and the Philosophy of Technology in Star Wars’, in Kevin S. Decker and Jason T. Eberl (eds), *Star Wars and Philosophy* (Chicago and La Salle, 2005), pp. 114–15.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth F. Cooke, “‘Be Mindful of the Living Force’”: Environmental Ethics in Star Wars’ in Decker and Eberl (eds), *Star Wars and Philosophy*, p. 87.

unity, like the experience of momentary Zen enlightenment, or *satori*.<sup>30</sup> Taoism, with its reverence for nature and concern for keeping all perfectly balanced, has also been identified as an influence. Yet Western models can also be identified, although more from philosophy than from explicitly religious sources. Greek philosophers including Plato and the Stoics have been invoked as sources for Jedi ethics. William Stephens argues that Yoda perfectly embodies the three good emotional states of the Stoics; ‘benevolence (wishing someone good things for his own sake), joy (in virtuous deeds), and caution (reasonable wariness)’.<sup>31</sup> Also, Yoda is costumed rather like a monk, and lives in great simplicity at the Jedi Temple on Coruscant and in his hut on Dagobah, in stark contrast with the material luxury and technological sophistication of the Empire.

Anakin’s temptation away from the path of the Jedi and toward the Dark Side of the Force is interpreted in various ways. Raised as a slave with his mother Shmi, who is killed by the Sand People, George Lucas has suggested that Anakin’s fall is partly predicated by good motivations. He yearns for revenge for his mother, and his illicit love for Padme Amidala involves his desire to save her when he fears that she will die in childbirth. But Lucas perceptively notes that Anakin ‘has a hard time letting go of things. As he sought more and more power to try to change people’s fate so that they’re the way he wants them, that greed goes from trying to save the one you love to realizing you can control the universe’.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, at the end of his training Anakin’s son Luke Skywalker understands that being a Jedi demands a particular type of loyalty; he is still committed to his friends but has accepted that ‘the Jedi should be loyal to one another, to their ideals, and to the Republic’.<sup>33</sup> Compassion for all (in a rather Buddhist sense) does not preclude compassion for particular individuals; but Luke understands that he must place his personal loves in the wider context, which enables him to remain bound, voluntarily, by Jedi ideals.

This book has argued that invented religions in the contemporary West tell powerful stories which people respond to when they are engaged in the process of making meaning in their lives. The immense popularity of the *Star Wars* films was essentially the cultural continuation of the twentieth-century’s fascination with science fiction, in literary and comic-book forms. Just as the superhero comics did, Lucas’ films focused sharply on the constant struggle between good and evil, and on the making of ethical choices in a complex and morally ambiguous universe.

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<sup>30</sup> Walter (Ritoku) Robinson, ‘The Far East of Star Wars’, in Decker and Eberl (eds), *Star Wars and Philosophy*, p. 37.

<sup>31</sup> William O. Stephens, ‘Stoicism in the Stars: Yoda, the Emperor, and the Force’, in Decker and Eberl (eds), *Star Wars and Philosophy*, p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> Jason T. Eberl, ‘“You Cannot Escape Your Destiny” (Or Can You?): Freedom and Predestination in the Skywalker Family’, in Decker and Eberl (eds), *Star Wars and Philosophy*, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Judith Barad, ‘The Aspiring Jedi’s Handbook of Virtue’, in Decker and Eberl (eds), *Star Wars and Philosophy*, p. 65.

In Chapter 3 mention was made of Aidan Kelly's and Isaac Bonewits' insistence that science fiction is a moral literature, deeply engaged with the making of meaning, chiefly through 'changing the way people perceive reality', something they view as essential in a rapidly changing world.<sup>34</sup> Many scholars and social commentators have argued that older authoritative narratives in the West 'have lost their coherence and moral force. Everything is up for grabs now'.<sup>35</sup> When *Star Wars* was released in 1977 the American economy was less than buoyant, the Vietnam War and the impeachment of President Richard Nixon had contributed to loss of morale, and the utopian dreams of the 1960s had ebbed away. Lucas' epic took root in the hearts and minds of film audiences and passed into popular discourse. When he launched the prequel trilogy in 1999 the alternative religion scene in the late capitalist West was greatly changed from that of the late 1970s. The mid-1990s saw the mainstreaming of much occult phenomena (as women's magazines began to feature astrology and *feng shui* columns, psychic counselling, spells for love, prosperity and happiness, 'angelic wisdom' and clairvoyants) and the New Age movement of the 1980s had generated a marketplace for alternative spiritualities and new religions.<sup>36</sup>

The transformation of religion by the internet was a parallel process; although film and television had impacted on religion, the internet differed in crucial ways:

(1) the Internet is an interactive and not simply a broadcast medium; (2) the Internet is truly multimedial; (3) the Internet employs hypertextuality; (4) anyone can launch themselves onto the World Wide Web with relative ease and little expense; (5) the Internet is global in its reach. With a comparatively small investment in time, money, and knowledge, Internet users can make their religious views known, at least potentially, to millions of others throughout the world.<sup>37</sup>

The internet makes it possible to distribute information on a new religious concept or product with extraordinary rapidity, and to establish links between people in cyberspace, rather than building from a base of small-scale underground publishing and real-life interactions. Stephen O'Leary has also drawn attention to the internet's facilitation of alternative spiritualities and new religions, as

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<sup>34</sup> Margot Adler, *Drawing Down The Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, 2nd edition (Boston, 1986), p. 285.

<sup>35</sup> David Rieff, 'Designer Gods', *Transition* 59 (1993), p. 29.

<sup>36</sup> Frances Chan, 'When Witches Came Out of the Broom Closet,' paper presented to 'Social Change in the 21st Century' at Queensland University of Technology, 2003 at <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/117/1/ChanFrancis.pdf>, accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, 'Introduction', in Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York and London, 2004), p. 10.

practitioners of nontraditional religions can run a considerable risk by publicly declaring their allegiances in communities hostile to non-Christians; the network afforded an opportunity to meet with like-minded others and engage in religious activity without ever leaving one's home or alerting one's neighbours to one's nonconformity.<sup>38</sup>

Technological savvy and internet usage were congruent with the educated, middle-class profile of new religion initiators and adherents developed by Stark and Bainbridge.<sup>39</sup> The *Star Wars* narrative was a likely source of religious and spiritual inspiration, and even before the e-mail campaign that effectively launched Jediism as a religion, the cult single by the all-female Icelandic band Bellatrix 'Jediwannabe' (originally released in 1999 and re-released in 2000) wittily mocked those in whom 'the Force is strong' who wanted to 'live in a fantasy', the Jediwannabes.<sup>40</sup>

The proximate cause of Jediism being established as a religion was the 2001 census that took place in Australia (7 August), New Zealand (6 March), Canada (15 May) and the United Kingdom (29 April). Prior to the collection of the Census data an e-mail campaign urged people to put 'Jedi' on the Census forms, in answer to the religion question. This e-mail campaign was largely dismissed in the press as mischief making, and (at least in Australia and the United Kingdom) the information contained in the e-mail, for example '[i]f there are enough people in the country, about 10,000, who put down the same religion, it becomes fully recognised and legal',<sup>41</sup> was misleading and in some cases simply incorrect. Chris Brennan, the director of the Australian *Star Wars* Appreciation Society, outlined the Jedi path to journalists, but stopped short of endorsing the call, saying 'I have reminded everyone of the consequences of giving false information to the Government so if they go ahead and do it, it's on their own head'.<sup>42</sup> The Jedi Census phenomenon attracted the attention of sociologist of religion Adam Possamai, who to date is the only sociologist of religion (indeed the only scholar) to examine it in any detail prior to this study.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen D. O'Leary, 'Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks', in Dawson and Cowan (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, p. 46.

<sup>39</sup> Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), Chapter 18 'Who Joins Cult Movements?', pp. 394–424.

<sup>40</sup> Bellatrix, *Jediwannabe* (London, 2000).

<sup>41</sup> Eamonn Duff, 'Star Wars Religion Makes Perfect Census', *The Sun-Herald*, 15 April (2001), p. 19.

<sup>42</sup> Duff, 'Star Wars Religion Makes Perfect Census', p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> Possamai, 'Cultural Consumption of History and Popular Culture in Alternative Spiritualities', mentions Eamonn Duff's newspaper contribution on p. 205, which is a

The data from the 2001 Census was not available until the next year, and Possamai's first study placed Jediism in the context of a specific methodological classification ('hyper-real religions') and attempted to demonstrate that hostility existed towards new religions in Australia. Possamai's use of 'hyper-real' derives from 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. The realm of the hyperreal (e.g., media simulations of reality, Disneyland and amusement parks, malls and consumer fantasylands, TV sports, and other excursions into ideal worlds) is more real than real, whereby the models, images, and codes of the hyperreal come to control thought and behavior.<sup>44</sup>

However, Baudrillard's use of the term is both more powerful and dystopic. At least in the case of Jediism, Possamai seems concerned only to demonstrate that it is a hyperreal religion only because it is derived from popular culture, rather than arguing that it (and other related religions) are 'more real than real', have effectively displaced the real for adherents. The figure giving their religion as Jedi or Jedi Knight in the 2001 Australian Census was 70,509 people, and Possamai cites the Australian *Star Wars* Appreciation Society's estimate that 'about 5,000 people would be true hard-core people that would believe the Jedi religion ... 50,000 fans would have put down Jedi Religion just for fun, and 15,000 people "did it just to give the government a bit of curry"'.<sup>45</sup> Although this is not a scientifically verifiable estimate of devout Jedis, it is a not unreasonable breakdown of the total.

In New Zealand the figure giving their religion as 'Jedi' was 53,000 or 1.5 per cent of the population, the highest percentage recorded anywhere.<sup>46</sup> In the United Kingdom, combining the totals from Scotland with those of England and Wales yielded 405,179 respondents who gave their religion as Jedi. In England and Wales the figure was 390,000, approximately seven people in every thousand. In Canada, the figure was a much lower 20,000. Scholars of religion were interested to know how those who self-identified as Jedi constructed their beliefs and practised the religion. The model proposed in this book, that narratives fire the imagination of certain people who get together and instantiate the religion in the

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very early acknowledgement of the Jedi phenomenon, in that the article must have been submitted to the *Journal of Consumer Culture* very close to the date of Duff's piece.

<sup>44</sup> Douglas Kellner, 'Jean Baudrillard', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2007) at <http://plato.stanford.edu/-entries/ baudrillard/>, accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Adam Possamai, 'Alternative Spiritualities, New Religious Movements and Jediism in Australia', *Australian Religion Studies Review* 16/2 (Spring 2003), p. 74.

<sup>46</sup> Alan Perrott, 'Jedi order lures 53,000 disciples', *New Zealand Herald*, August 31 (2002), at [www.nzherald.co.nz/-nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=2352142](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/-nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=2352142), accessed 10 December 2009.

‘real world’, taking a pragmatic stance and asking ‘does it work’ rather than ‘is it true?’ applies in the case of Jediism. The importance of the films as foundational texts, and of the ability to contribute actively to the developing religion, is noted in this post from a Jedi website:

We’ve all seen the movies. We bought the DVDs and the toys. We imagined what it would be like to be a Jedi. We went online and met others who thought like we did. We met online, we grew online, and we began organizing online. We encouraged each other to take the life we talked about online, offline; at work, as neighbours, as friends. We were no longer ‘role-playing’, but Jedi Realists, making the Jedi Way how we lived our lives. We were of all ages, sizes, shapes, belief systems – all united in our desire to live life as a Jedi.<sup>47</sup>

The Jedi groups tend to emphasize the religion’s compatibility with other faiths and Danielle Kirby has suggested, in her very brief consideration of the appeal of Jediism, that it lies primarily in ‘adherence to the ideals espoused’ rather than in a literal belief in the events or characters of the *Star Wars* films.<sup>48</sup> Possamai quotes websites and online discussion groups where Jediism is asserted to be in harmony with Buddhism, Taoism, and Catholicism (among others religions), and to be a tradition involving ‘a healing art and a meditative journey’. Further, it is argued that though George Lucas’ *Star Wars* films are ‘fictional’, the ‘Jedi discussed within this website refer to factual people within this world that live or lived their lives according to Jediism’.<sup>49</sup> This means that the fiction created by Lucas is true, or at the very least a manifestation of a perennial philosophy, as it has had human followers for thousands of years.<sup>50</sup>

The question of whether Jediism is a ‘real religion’ has been approached in a variety of ways, by both self-identified Jedis and scholars of religion. In Australia the legal requirements to be recognized as a religion are quite liberal. Justice Lionel Murphy, in the 1983 High Court case *The Church of the New Faith vs. Commissioner of Pay-Roll Tax*, sternly insisted that the truth of a religion’s

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<sup>47</sup> Anon, ‘Welcome’, Jedi Resource Center/Gatherings Group at [www.jediresourcecenter.org/vb/](http://www.jediresourcecenter.org/vb/), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Danielle Kirby, ‘From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text: A Study of the Role of the Text in the Otherkin Community’, in Christopher Deacy and Elisabeth Arweck (eds), *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age* (Farnham, 2009), p. 144.

<sup>49</sup> Possamai, ‘Alternative Spiritualities, New Religious Movements and Jediism in Australia’, p. 75.

<sup>50</sup> Markus Davidsen’s doctoral research (University of Aarhus/University of Leiden) on Jediism and IIsaluntë Valion (a religious group based on Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*) proposes that there are three ‘ideal types’ of Jediism along a continuum from secular to religious, which he terms Naturalist Jediism, Spiritual Jediism, and Religious Jediism. See Markus Davidsen, ‘Fiction-Based Religion’, poster presentation, Alternative Spiritualities in Ireland Conference, National University of Ireland (Maynooth), 30–31 October 2009, p. 4.

teachings or the status of its founder (sensitive topics in a case involving the Church of Scientology) were irrelevant to the law, before which all religions were equal. He proposed that:

1. Any body (i.e., organization) which claims to be religious, whose beliefs or practices are a revival of, or resemble earlier cults, is religious.
2. Any belief in a supernatural Being or Beings, whether physical and visible, such as the sun or the stars, or a physical invisible God or spirit, or an abstract God or entity, is religious belief.
3. Any body which claims to be religious and offers a way to find meaning and purpose in life is religious.<sup>51</sup>

However, these generous criteria for recognition as a religion do not necessarily result in many new religions applying for tax-exempt status. Different criteria apply in other countries and in the United States the Temple of the Jedi Order in Texas is registered as a non-profit organization and has promulgated a code, 'The 16 Teachings of the Jedi'. Brother John, the Temple's leader, has also provided information on how to become a Jedi, including a Creed and an Oath.<sup>52</sup> In terms of the Australian criteria, Jediism meets all three requirements quite easily, and Debra McCormick has noted that the Australian Bureau of Statistics' decision not to recognize Jediism as a religion within the Census categories must be based on other criteria. She suggests that it is not recognized chiefly because it is a product of popular culture, and more or less came from nowhere, registering 70,000 Jedi in the 2001 Census (rather than manifesting slow growth like most religions).<sup>53</sup> Further, the number of 'Jedis' listed in the 2006 Census declined sharply in Australia and New Zealand, suggesting it was a transitory 'fad' rather than a viable new religion.

In the United Kingdom Jediism has received high-profile media attention as a test case, as the definition of a 'religion' in Britain is more restrictive than in the United States, Australia or New Zealand (for example, Scientology is not recognized as a religion in Britain). The Labour member for Copeland (Cumbria), Jamie Reed, gave his maiden speech in June 2005, in which he claimed that he was the first elected Jedi parliamentarian. This was not in fact true, but was a provocative claim, motivated by Reed's position on the Incitement to Religious Hatred Bill, which was being debated at the time. The Conservative Shadow Justice Secretary, Dominic Grieve, was on record as arguing for the exclusion of

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<sup>51</sup> Lynne Hume, 'Witchcraft and the Law in Australia,' *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 1995, p. 140.

<sup>52</sup> Temple of the Jedi Order, at <http://templeofthejediorder.org/>, accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>53</sup> Debra McCormick, 'From Jesus Christ to Jedi Knight: validity and viability of new religious movements in late modernity,' Social Change in the 21st Century Conference, 27 October 2006, Queensland University of Technology, at <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/6636/1/6636.pdf>, accessed 10 December 2009.



Jedi Knights from the bill's protection.<sup>54</sup> This is topical, because 23-year-old Daniel Jones (who uses the Jedi name Morda Hehol), has claimed religious discrimination when he was ordered to remove his hood or leave the premises of the Tesco supermarket in Bangor, North Wales.<sup>55</sup> Jones founded the International Church of Jediism with his brother Barney in 2008. Daniel Jones claimed that his expulsion definitely was religious discrimination, stating that 'I walked past a Muslim lady in a veil. Surely the same rules should apply to everyone.' In the International Church of Jediism's handbook, it is stated that 'Jedis must wear a hood up in any public place'.<sup>56</sup> In an interview Jones claimed that the United Kingdom now recognizes Jediism as a religion:

[o]ur training is serious so we have to be taken seriously. With the 2001 Census, now everyone recognizes Jedi as a religion. If the government says to us 'You can't do that because you're not a true religion', we can say 'Yes we are' because there's more Jedi than Scientologists in Britain.<sup>57</sup>

It must, however, be acknowledged that these cases of Jedis being in the public eye due to issues of religious discrimination are very rare.

### **Matrixism: Awaiting the One in the Desert of the Real**

Adam Possamai's most sustained discussion of religions based on popular culture, the 2005 monograph *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyperreal Testament*, briefly considers the Church of All Worlds, the Cthulhu mythos, Scientology, Jediism, LaVeyan Satanism and a range of other new religious manifestations as 'subjective myths', accepting Theodore Roszak's definition of science fiction, fantasy and other fictional forms as 'an array of romances enjoying an almost reverential respect as doors of extraordinary perception'.<sup>58</sup> The shaping of these narratives into subjective myths is, for Possamai, part of the process of individualistic cultural

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<sup>54</sup> *House of Commons Hansard Debates for 21 June 2005*, at [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo050621/debtext/50621-24.htm#50621-24](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo050621/debtext/50621-24.htm#50621-24), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Helen Carter, 'Jedi religion founder accuses Tesco of discrimination over rules on hoods', *The Guardian*, 18 September (2009) at [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/sep/18/jedi-religion-tesco-hood-jones](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/sep/18/jedi-religion-tesco-hood-jones), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Ben Ashford, 'Store wars as Tesco bans Jedi Knight', *The Sun*, 18 September (2009) at [www.thesun.co.uk/sol/-homepage/news/2642956/Tesco-supermarket-bans-Jedi-Knight-for-wearing-hood.html](http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/-homepage/news/2642956/Tesco-supermarket-bans-Jedi-Knight-for-wearing-hood.html), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>57</sup> D.J. Siegelbaum, "'Star Wars' is my Co-Pilot", *Time* May 22 (2008), at [www.time.com/time/arts/article/-0,8599,1808595,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/-0,8599,1808595,00.html), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Theodore Roszak, *Unfinished Animal: The Aquarian Frontier and the Evolution of Consciousness* (London, 1976), pp. 23–4.

consumption. Unlike traditional myths provide communal meaning, subjective myths usually relate to the individual self, although ‘some of these consumers can belong to a group such as the Church of All Worlds [or] the Church of Satan’.<sup>59</sup> He argues that spiritual seekers are usually motivated by one of three teleologies: illuminational development in which ‘spirituality is an end in itself’; instrumental development (where spirituality is ‘a means to external ends’); and entertainment, where spirituality is directed to pleasurable ends.<sup>60</sup> This typology of spiritual seekers is closely connected to the contemporary trend toward what Possamai calls ‘religion *a la carte*’, where individual combinations of religious elements are preferred to the ‘set menus’ offered by traditional religious institutions.<sup>61</sup>

*Religion and Popular Culture* also contains Adam Possamai’s pioneering brief assessment of Matrixism, an internet religion based on the trilogy of films by Larry (b. 1965) and Andy Wachowski (b. 1967), which was founded in the United States in 2004.<sup>62</sup> In *The Matrix* (1999) Neo (Keanu Reeves), a bored computer hacker, meets Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), a mysterious character who has the key to ‘the Matrix’. Morpheus offers Neo a choice of two pills, a red that will reveal the Matrix and the true nature of reality, and a blue that will permit him to return to his life unchanged. He takes the red pill and discovers that his ‘life’ was an illusion; that actually his body exists in a dystopic future where:

machines have taken control of the whole planet and have enslaved the vast majority of human beings. The planet’s resources have been depleted and a dense layer of smoke prevents these machines from using solar power. For this reason, human beings are kept alive so their human body can be used as a source of energy. Through a complex process, all human beings are born, live and die in a type of capsule that keeps them constantly dreaming about the twentieth century ... These dreams – i.e. the Matrix, this desert of the real – are generated and controlled by these artificial intelligences.<sup>63</sup>

*The Matrix* is a science fiction film about a philosophical question, the nature of reality, but it is steeped in religious references. Neo is the One, a messianic figure who is resurrected from the dead (a Christian motif, as is the name of the rebels’ chief female member Trinity, with the betrayer Cypher resembling Judas Iscariot), and the stripping of illusion to reveal reality connects with Buddhist and Gnostic notions of the illusory nature (*maya*) of everyday life and the physical

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<sup>59</sup> Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyperreal Testament* (Brussels, 2005), p. 67.

<sup>60</sup> Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyperreal Testament*, pp. 75–6.

<sup>61</sup> Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyperreal Testament*, p. 65.

<sup>62</sup> Sam Jordison, *The Joy of Sects: An A–Z of Cults, Cranks and Religious Eccentrics* (London, 2005), p. 127 gives the foundation date as 2003.

<sup>63</sup> Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyperreal Testament*, pp. 105–6.

world.<sup>64</sup> There are also Gnostic allusions, which fit the model of esotericism, secret knowledge available to only the initiated few. Neo consults the Oracle and meets children with paranormal powers, including the Spoon Boy, who tells him ‘There is no spoon ... Then you’ll see, that it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself’;<sup>65</sup> a riddling utterance like the *koans* of Zen Buddhism. Rather like Luke Skywalker, Neo learns martial arts to combat the enemy agents. James L. Ford’s assessment of the film makes use of Peter Berger’s notion of humans as world-building creatures, and argues that *The Matrix* is an example of self-conscious modern myth-making. He quotes Larry Wachowski on the filmmakers’ interests:

mythology, theology and, to a certain extent, higher-level mathematics. All are ways human beings try to answer bigger questions, as well as The Big Question. If you’re going to do epic stories, you should concern yourself with those issues. People might not understand all the allusions in the movie, but they understand the important ideas. We wanted to make people think, engage their minds a bit.<sup>66</sup>

Amusingly (in retrospect), in 2000 Ford did not think that *The Matrix* would become ‘the foundation myth for a new religion’, but simply that it might ‘perhaps inform the worldviews, if only subtly and temporarily, of thousands of young adults’.<sup>67</sup>

Film critic Gregory J. Grieve argues that the film conforms to the cultural logic of late capitalism and expresses a religious logic that he labels ‘postperennialism’. He argues that postperennialism has three fundamental axioms, all of which are clearly present in *The Matrix*. These are the belief ‘(1) that the universe is integrated and monistic; (2) that the purpose of life is personal spiritual growth; and (3) that because authentic spiritual growth is not limited to any one tradition: one’s personal religious practice should be assembled from all of the planet’s faiths’.<sup>68</sup> Grieve concludes that *The Matrix* refers to the consumerist, spectaclist

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<sup>64</sup> Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner, ‘Wake Up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in *The Matrix*’, *Journal of Religion and Film* 5/2 (October 2001) at [www.unomaha.edu/jrf/gnostic.htm](http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/gnostic.htm), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Gregory J. Grieve, ‘There is No Spoon? Teaching The Matrix, Postperennialism, and the Spiritual Logic of Late Capitalism’, in Gregory J. Watkins (ed.), *Teaching Religion and Film* (Oxford, 2008), p. 190.

<sup>66</sup> James L. Ford, ‘Buddhism, Christianity and *The Matrix*: The Dialectic of Myth-Making in Contemporary Cinema’, *Journal of Religion and Film* 4/2 (October 2000), section 22 at [www.unomaha.edu/jrf/thematrix.htm](http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/thematrix.htm), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Ford, ‘Buddhism, Christianity and *The Matrix*: The Dialectic of Myth-Making in Contemporary Cinema’, section 4, at [www.unomaha.edu/jrf/thematrix.htm](http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/thematrix.htm), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>68</sup> Grieve, ‘There is No Spoon? Teaching The Matrix, Postperennialism, and the Spiritual Logic of Late Capitalism’, p. 191.

culture in which contemporary Westerners live (which is simultaneously the ‘desert of the real’ and the illusory dreams of the Matrix) because, as Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard both argue, reality has been displaced by signs and images that are controlled by the media. The system of global economic capitalism is the undifferentiated unity, spiritual growth is pursued through consumption, and the vast body of the world’s religions are consumed and repackaged ‘into bite-sized nuggets of personal mythology’.<sup>69</sup> This mass mediation, particularly through advertising, converts ‘the most authentic of human emotions into manipulations, making real communication and connection virtually impossible’.<sup>70</sup> The liberation promised by *The Matrix*, in this reading, is no liberation at all. This makes the founding of a religion based on the film appear puzzling. However, Matrixism’s reading of the film trilogy is less literary-critical and multi-layered and rather more straightforward. Sam Jordison summarizes the four core beliefs of the movement as: ‘belief in the prophecy of The One ... acceptance of the use of psychedelics as a sacrament; acceptance of the semi-subjective multilayered nature of reality; and adherence to the principles of one or more of the world’s religions until such time as The One returns’.<sup>71</sup> The original Matrixism site from which these doctrines are derived has been taken down, but the information is available on a number of more recent websites, and the religion is rumoured to have between 500 and 15,000 members, principally in the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>72</sup> Like Jediism, it is explicitly stated that Matrixism is compatible with all other religions.

Both Matrixism and Jediism are evidence of the undiminished narrative power of (filmic) science fiction to inspire religion in the twenty-first century. George Lucas’ and the Wachowski brothers’ films function as subjective myths for some individuals and (principally) online communities, with core values distilled and promulgated via the World Wide Web. The more successful of the two, Jediism, has a mythos that has been available to the public for over 30 years, and a very high level of fan participation in the ‘expanded universe’. Adherents of both Jediism and Matrixism claim that their religions are compatible with all other religions (in the manner of the Church of All Worlds), and although they voice a critique of the individualistic, consumerist culture of the contemporary West

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<sup>69</sup> Grieve, ‘There is No Spoon? Teaching The Matrix, Postperennialism, and the Spiritual Logic of Late Capitalism’, p. 202.

<sup>70</sup> Margaret E. Farrar and Jamie L. Warner, ‘Spectacular Resistance: The Billionaires for Bush and the Art of Political Culture-Jamming’, *Polity* 40/3 (2008), p. 275.

<sup>71</sup> Jordison, *The Joy of Sects: An A–Z of Cults, Cranks and Religious Eccentrics*, p. 128.

<sup>72</sup> The original site was [www.geocities.com/matrixism2069](http://www.geocities.com/matrixism2069). Material from that site is now available from (among other sites) *The New Matrixism: Following the Path of the One to Enlightenment*, at [www.newmatrixism.com/-tenants.php](http://www.newmatrixism.com/-tenants.php), accessed 10 December 2009, and *The Chronicles of Illuminati Grand Master Leo Lyon Zagami*, at <http://illuminatichronicles.wordpress.com/2009/03/10/brother-leo-announces-matrixism-to-be-the-religion-for-2012/>, accessed 10 December 2009.

they both participate in that culture, and are thus somewhat disempowered by it. The chief difference that these two invented religions exhibit from Discordianism, the Church of All Worlds and the Church of the SubGenius is that no effective charismatic leaders have emerged. Jediism and Matrixism are, in Bainbridge and Stark's terms, new religious movements generated by subculture evolution.<sup>73</sup> They have spread via the internet and have no effective real-world presence, which limits their ability to be recognized fully as 'real' religions. However, it may be that the diffuse and spiritually eclectic culture of the twenty-first century West is moving away from traditional models of religion, and that as Lorne Dawson argues, 'a restrictive congregational model of religious organization' must be abandoned, and the fact that the 'weaker and more flexible ties' are still significant sources of community must be acknowledged.<sup>74</sup> Finally, these movements both fit Yves Lambert's checklist of characteristics of the new spiritual and religious forms that have emerged in the wake of secularization, discussed in Chapter 1; this-worldliness, self-spirituality, immanent divinity, dehierarchization, parascientific or science fiction-based beliefs, loose organizational structure, and 'pluralism, relativism, probabilism, and pragmatism'.<sup>75</sup>

### **Humour and Protest: The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster**

The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster began in a determined sense of protest and parody when Bobby Henderson, a 24-year-old physics graduate, sent an open letter to the Kansas Education Board, which had permitted the teaching of Intelligent Design alongside Darwinian evolution in science classrooms. Intelligent Design is the latest re-packaging of Creationism, the belief that the complexity of the universe requires a Designer (reference to God is scrupulously avoided). This is, in effect, a version of the teleological argument, also known as the 'Argument from Design', the most famous formulation of which was by the eighteenth-century English theologian William Paley (1743–1805). In summary, the argument claims that if a watch is found on a beach, the finder would:

deduce that blind natural processes could not possibly have produced an item of such purpose and specific complexity ... just as the existence of the watch

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<sup>73</sup> William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, 'Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models', *Sociological Analysis* 40/4 (Winter 1979), pp. 291–3.

<sup>74</sup> Lorne L. Dawson, 'Religion and the Quest for the Virtual Community', Dawson and Cowan (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, p. 76 and p. 83.

<sup>75</sup> Yves Lambert, 'Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?' *Sociology of Religion* 60/3 (Autumn 1999), p. 323.

demands the existence of a watchmaker, a careful examination of nature and man demands the existence of a grand designer: God.<sup>76</sup>

This philosophical argument has a long history, and the connection with the example of a timepiece dates at least to Cicero (c. 106–c. 43 BCE). However, there are multiple objections to it, including that complexity does not imply design (which is also often connected with the argument that particular animals or systems are poorly designed), that design does not imply a single designer (David Hume suggested that several gods could do as well), and that the argument is susceptible to an infinite regress, as who designed the designer?<sup>77</sup> Intelligent Design as currently framed by contemporary Christians such as William Dembski and Michael Behe<sup>78</sup> is further criticized because it is not able to be falsified, which is a key requirement of science, and is theological rather than scientific, and for mixing natural and supernatural causes. Larry Arnhart explains that much of Dembski's argument in *The Design Inference*<sup>79</sup> 'about how we detect design by human intelligent agents ... involves no recourse to the supernatural'.<sup>80</sup> The problem is, as Arnhart succinctly states, '[o]ur experience with the natural intelligence of human beings cannot by itself confirm any conclusions about the supernatural intelligence of divinity'.<sup>81</sup>

Bobby Henderson's letter to the Kansas School Board argued that the nameless designer of Intelligent Design was his personal deity the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM), who in the beginning created a mountain, trees and a midget. Henderson cleverly parodied the phraseology of Christian fundamentalists, claiming that believers in the FSM know that 'global warming, earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters are a direct effect of the shrinking numbers of Pirates since the 1800s' and that 'it is disrespectful to teach our beliefs without wearing His chosen outfit, which of course is full pirate regalia'.<sup>82</sup> The letter was not acknowledged and Henderson founded the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster online. The Church of the FSM rapidly gained popularity, due to three factors: the general cultural appeal of pirates, the humorous quality of the doctrines articulated by Henderson (the parodic image of a mass of spaghetti with meatballs for eyes,

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<sup>76</sup> John Bice, *A 21st Century Rationalist in Medieval America: Essays on Religion Science, Morality and the Bush Administration* (Laingsburg MI, 2007), p. 107.

<sup>77</sup> Bice, *A 21st Century Rationalist in Medieval America*, pp. 108–17.

<sup>78</sup> William A. Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology* (Downer's Grove IL, 1999) and Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York, 1996).

<sup>79</sup> William A. Dembski, *The Design Inference: Eliminating Chance Through Small Probabilities* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>80</sup> Larry Arnhart, 'Evolution and the New Creationism: A Proposal for Compromise', *Skeptic* 8/4 (2001), p. 49.

<sup>81</sup> Arnhart, 'Evolution and the New Creationism: A Proposal for Compromise', p. 50.

<sup>82</sup> Bobby Henderson, 'Open Letter to Kansas School Board', at [www.venganza.org/about/open-letter/](http://www.venganza.org/about/open-letter/), accessed 10 December 2009.

replacing the Biblical God in Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam', His 'noodly appendage' extended to touch the hand of Adam, is both memorable and hilarious), and the desire to further rational scientific explanation and oppose Creationism. It is undeniable, however, as Douglas Cowan has argued, that

but for the World Wide Web as a relatively low-cost venue for the mass dissemination of information few outside the founder's immediate circle of family and friends would ever have known the 'Pastafarian' faith existed, much less have found themselves touched by its chief deity's 'noodly appendage'.<sup>83</sup>

Investigating the role of the internet in facilitating religious discourse, and in particular its capacity to transform religion, is now a fashionable and ever-growing sub-discipline in the academic study of religion.

It has been demonstrated in this book that new and in particular invented religions have made headway in disseminating their teachings and expanding their membership through sophisticated websites, and indeed are frequently nearly entirely virtual in their meetings, rituals, and other significant activities. Online literacy scholars Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear have studied successful internet 'memes', a term first used by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (b. 1941) in 1976, but which in the context of the internet has the meaning of "'catchy" and widely propagated ideas or phenomena'.<sup>84</sup> Dawkins argued that the success of memes depended on their fidelity, fecundity and longevity.<sup>85</sup> Knobel and Lankshear were interested in internet memes because of their implications for literacy, but one meme they investigated (out of 19) was the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and their analysis is directly relevant to the mushrooming growth of third-millennium-invented religions. They concluded that successful internet memes have three characteristics. These are: first, 'Some element of humor, ranging from the quirky and offbeat, to potty humor, to the bizarrely funny, to parodies, through to the acerbically ironic'; second, 'a rich kind of intertextuality, such as wry cross-references to different everyday and popular culture events, icons or phenomena'; and third, 'anomalous juxtapositions, usually of images'.<sup>86</sup>

The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is a perfect fit with all three characteristics. Bobby Henderson's sense of humour is immediately apparent upon opening *The Gospel According to the Flying Spaghetti Monster* (2006). Each chapter takes on particular issues, with spoof anti-evolutionary arguments at the forefront. For example, gravity, rather than being a force of attraction, is

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<sup>83</sup> Douglas E. Cowan, 'Religion on the Internet', in James A. Beckford and N.J. Demerath III, *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, 2007), pp. 360–61.

<sup>84</sup> Knobel and Lankshear, 'Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production', p. 201.

<sup>85</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, 1989 [1976]), Chapter 11 'Memes: The New Replicators', pp. 189–201.

<sup>86</sup> Knobel and Lankshear, 'Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production', p. 209.

actually caused by the Flying Spaghetti Monster pushing humans down. Further, this explains why humans have been getting taller over the centuries: as the population increased ‘there are fewer Noodly Appendages to go around, so we each receive less touching – pushing down toward the earth – and thus, with less force downward, we’re taller’.<sup>87</sup> String theory points toward the pasta-constituted deity and the tendency of students to consume beer and eat noodles indicates that the FSM ‘is at work in our institutions of higher learning’.<sup>88</sup> Heaven, it is concluded, contains a beer volcano, and the religious sign-off for Pastafarians is ‘Ramen’ (a type of noodle).

A complex mythology involving the conflict between good and evil, in the form of Pirates (the Flying Spaghetti Monster’s chosen people) versus Hare Krishnas, ‘who are descended from Ninjas’, is developed. The Hare Krishnas recruit allies from the world’s religions. A holy war results, due to other religionists’ envy of the Pirates’ ‘happy lifestyle’. The result of this was the near-extinction of Pirates and an attendant rise in natural disasters, such as global warming. Many more examples could be supplied. Humour, it is clear, is amply present in the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. With reference to Knobel and Lankshear’s second characteristic, rich intertextuality involving popular culture, the enduring popularity of pirates in the popular culture of the West is easily established. Always a staple of Hollywood films, recent years have seen the box-office success of the Disney *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003) and its sequels *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* (2006), and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End* (2007), starring Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow.<sup>89</sup> Further, for the past decade or more, Talk Like a Pirate Day has been celebrated by increasing numbers on September 19. This was instituted by Mark ‘Cap’n Slappy’ Summers and John ‘Ol’ Chumbucket’ Baur, whose website now chronicles previous Talk Like a Pirate Day events, supplies vocabulary for those beginning their pirate life, and sells books and memorabilia of a piratical nature.<sup>90</sup>

Oberon Zell-Ravenheart and Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart’s unpublished autobiography contains evidence of the popularity of pirates within the Church of All Worlds: Morning Glory recalls that in 1992 after a Walpurgisnacht ritual, a friend named Dragon Singing stated that he was tired of witches and wanted to be a pirate. Morning Glory and some others were strongly attracted to pirate history and imagery, particularly through the stories of female pirates including Ann Bonny, Mary Reid and Grace O’Malley. She comments that:

<sup>87</sup> Henderson, *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*, p. 4.

<sup>88</sup> Henderson, *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*, p. 45.

<sup>89</sup> Gore Verbinski, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl* (Disney, 2003); Gore Verbinski, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* (Disney, 2006); and Gore Verbinski, *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End* (Disney, 2007).

<sup>90</sup> Mark Summers and John Baur, ‘The Original Talk Like a Pirate Day Site’ at [www.talklikeapirate.com/~piratehome.html](http://www.talklikeapirate.com/~piratehome.html), accessed 10 December 2009.



it seemed that their culture had been an early expression of free living outside the bounds of society ... So a whole bunch of us really started getting into being Pirates along about the same time as we got turned onto George McDonald Frazer's hilarious sendup of the whole swashbuckling genre: *The Pyrates* (1984). Someday, I hope someone will make a movie of that book. From its title, we took to referring to our fencing group as 'The Iron Pyrates'.<sup>91</sup>

Bobby Henderson's inspired marrying of this indelible image of pirates with other popular discourses, including the conflict between Darwinian evolutionary theory and Creationism, and the conflict between man-made global warming and climate change denial, was a stroke of genius. It rendered the Flying Spaghetti Monster instantly memorable and relevant. Knobel and Lankshear's final characteristic, anomalous juxtapositions, usually in pictorial form, has already been touched on in the mention of the image of the FSM creating Adam, a homage to Michelangelo. *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* is liberally illustrated with doctored photographs showing the FSM's role in human history (hovering above the astronauts as the moon landing took place, assisting Benjamin Franklin to discover electricity and so on), as well as inspired representations of the deity as assemblages of pasta and meatballs of varying shapes and sizes, humorous pen sketches including the Pirate Fish and the FSM symbol that riffs on both the Christian fish and the Darwinian fish with feet, and a variety of graphs and charts, the most amusing of which correlates the rise of global warming with the decline in the number of pirates on the high seas.

It is clear that Bobby Henderson did not intend the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster to be taken seriously as a religion. However, as Cowan notes, it 'has religious discourse at its heart ... and illustrates a number of issues facing scholars interested in religion on the Internet'.<sup>92</sup> Further, it draws attention to the fact that people are very much inclined to believe something, as has been argued by cognitive theorists of religion.<sup>93</sup> To date scholarly publication on the FSM has been minimal. Laurel Narizny's Bachelor of Arts thesis has been discussed in Chapter 2, as one of very few academic efforts to assess Discordianism. Her division of so-called joke religions into parody religions (which are insincere) and satirical religions (which are sincere) was questioned because of its dependence on the dominant model of Christianity in determining what was 'real' religion and what was not, it remains here to note that she gave brief consideration to the Church of the FSM, which she defined as a parody religion, the adherents of which 'are

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<sup>91</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart and Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart, 'Chapter 23 – Tempest in a Tea Dance', unpublished autobiography, 2009.

<sup>92</sup> Cowan, 'Religion on the Internet', p. 361.

<sup>93</sup> Harald Walach, 'Editorial: Spaghetti Monster and Quality Control – New Religions Taking Over', *Spirituality and Health International* 9 (2008), p. 2.

overwhelmingly likely to be playful atheists'.<sup>94</sup> Narizny noted that a one-act comic play written by Jeremy Gable, *The Flying Spaghetti Monster Holiday Pageant*, was approved by Henderson and was staged at the Hunger Artists Theatre in Fullerton, California in 2006. Also in 2009, Jessie Dammes, a Bachelor's student at the University of Leiden, completed a more lengthy study of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, which aimed to answer three research questions:

- 1) What is Flying Spaghetti Monster's place in the religious sphere? 2) What are the satirical aspects of Flying Spaghetti Monster concerning religion?
- 3) How is the Flying Spaghetti Monster used in the 'clash' between science and religion?<sup>95</sup>

Dammes' investigation concentrated on questions such as why atheism was so reviled in the United States, whether it was possible to tell if participants in FSM discussion forums were seriously committed to the religion, and the ways in which the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster parodied Christianity (for example, Holy Communion being a bowl of pasta rather than a single wafer, the Eight 'I'd Really Rather You Didn't's' as opposed to the Ten Commandments, Christians believing that God made humanity in his own image, whereas the FSM made humans in his ideal image, as Pirates, rather than in his actual image) and other religions (the Pastafarian holidays Pastover and Ramendan, for example).<sup>96</sup> She did, however, conclude that parody religions could be 'real' religions for their adherents, employing the criterion of self-identification as the most important method of determining an individual's religion.

While Bobby Henderson has not personally been active in turning the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster into a 'real' religion (he is on record as saying 'I don't have any problem with religion, but it is not science'),<sup>97</sup> he has been very tolerant of splinter groups (both humorous and religious), which include the Mystical Order of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, the Piratens, the Moonist

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<sup>94</sup> Laurel Narizny, 'Ha Ha Only Serious: A Preliminary Study of Joke Religions', unpublished Bachelor of Arts Honors thesis (University of Oregon, 2009), p. 3 at <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/-1794/9336/Thesis%20Laurel%20Narizny.pdf?sequence=1>, accessed 19 August 2009.

<sup>95</sup> Jessie Dammes, 'The Anthropology of the Flying Spaghetti Monster', unpublished Bachelor of Arts thesis (Leiden University, 2009), p. 5 at <http://website.leidenuniv.nl/~s0443050/blog/files/TheAnthropologyoftheFlyingSpaghetti-Monster.pdf>, accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>96</sup> Dammes, 'The Anthropology of the Flying Spaghetti Monster', pp. 18–23 at <http://website.leidenuniv.nl/~s0443050/blog/files/TheAnthropologyoftheFlyingSpaghettiMonster.pdf>, accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>97</sup> Dan Vergano, 'Spaghetti Monster is Noodling Around With Faith', *USA Today*, at [www.usatoday.com/~tech/science/2006-03-26-spaghetti-monster\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/~tech/science/2006-03-26-spaghetti-monster_x.htm), accessed 10 December 2009.

Church of His Spaghettness, and the First United Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.<sup>98</sup> Jon Smith has founded the Reformed Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and he introduced an element of communication between Pastafarians and the deity. He became fascinated with anagrams after reading Michael Curl's *The Anagram Dictionary* and decided to create 'Spaghettagrams' as a means of revelation.<sup>99</sup> The most important are 'angelic omniscience spaghettagrams' which use only the letters contained in the term 'Flying Spaghetti Monster'. There are also wisdom Spaghettagrams, which add a topic (for example 'and sexuality') and may ask questions of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Finally, Illuminary Spaghettagrams add 'at least one key word or phrase from the FSM lexicon' and anagrammatize from the given pool of letters.<sup>100</sup> The anagrammed messages usually take the form of poetic quatrains. Smith is an author in the popular humour genre, and it seems unlikely that he intended the quatrains to be used in worship or ritual, but in a religious landscape where Pagans do magical workings based on Tolkien's Elves from *Lord of the Rings* and Chaos magicians invoke the Teletubbies, the intention of the author is hardly relevant as the adherents will put the text to whatever use they desire.

In a striking parallel to the case of Jedi Daniel Jones discussed above, Bryan Killian, a 16-year-old student at North Buncombe High School in North Carolina was suspended from school for wearing Pirate regalia (including an eye-patch) which he claimed was a religious requirement of his membership of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. The school's Principal, Sarah Cooley, claimed that Killian's Pirate regalia was 'distracting' and suspended him. Killian has stated that 'I feel like my First Amendment was violated. Freedom of religion and freedom of expression. That's what I tried to do, and I got shot down'.<sup>101</sup> With reference to Dawkins' three characteristics of successful memes, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster scores highly on fidelity; even the splinter groups bear the unmistakable imprint of Henderson's vision. Similarly, it scores well on fecundity, having become amazingly prevalent on the internet in a short time. With regard to longevity, it does appear that the Church of the FSM may have sufficient staying

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<sup>98</sup> John Foyston, 'Bobby Henderson's Flying Spaghetti Monster Becomes an Internet Hit', *The Oregonian* September 20 (2005), cited in Jon Smith, 'History and Mission of the Reformed Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster', at [www.lulu.com/items/volume\\_13/244000/244728/9/preview/History\\_of\\_the\\_Reformed\\_Church\\_of\\_the\\_Flying\\_Spaghetti\\_MonsterPag.pdf](http://www.lulu.com/items/volume_13/244000/244728/9/preview/History_of_the_Reformed_Church_of_the_Flying_Spaghetti_MonsterPag.pdf), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>99</sup> Michael Curl, *The Anagram Dictionary* (Bellevue WA, 1996), cited in Jon Smith, *God Speaks! The Flying Spaghetti Monster in His Own Words* ([www.lulu.com/stress](http://www.lulu.com/stress), 2006), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>100</sup> Smith, *God Speaks! The Flying Spaghetti Monster in His Own Words* ([www.lulu.com/stress](http://www.lulu.com/stress), 2006), p. 16, accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>101</sup> Jordan Schrader, 'School: Pirates are not welcome', *Citizen-Times.com* March 29 (2007) at [www.citizen-times.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=200770328123&template=pr\\_intart](http://www.citizen-times.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=200770328123&template=pr_intart), accessed 10 December 2009.

power to be a force in religious debate for some time into the future. It has already been the subject of a session at the American Academy of Religion Conference in San Diego in 2007, where academics David Chidester and Sarah Taylor received 'hateful' e-mail and voicemail messages from offended Christians.<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion

The three third-millennium invented religions considered in this chapter have had little time to establish themselves and face an uncertain future. Jediism is nine years old, Matrixism six years old, and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is only five years old. All three have emerged from the popular culture of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century West, and have prospered due to the changed conditions of contemporary religion through internet mediation. All three testify to the principal argument of this book, that humans are meaning-making creatures who find certain types of narrative powerful, chiefly narratives in which unseen agents effect causality in the world. Scholars have stressed that the religious landscape of the West has been radically altered by secularization, individualism and the rise of consumption as the dominant mode of existence, indeed of self-determination. Religion is now more likely, as Possamai notes, to be personalized and *a la carte*, with increasing numbers choosing to select elements from a variety of religions when crafting a personal spirituality.

The place of science fiction as a dominant narrative mode from the early twentieth century has been emphasized, particularly as an exercise through which readers and viewers could experiment with ideas of self-transformation through imaginative emulation.<sup>103</sup> Jediism and Matrixism conform to this programme of science fiction combined with elective religio-spiritual affinity. The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is the outlier here, as it riffs on science rather than science fiction, is explicitly parodic where Jediism and Matrixism are serious, and it has a charismatic founder and prophet (albeit inadvertently), Bobby Henderson, where the leaders of Jediism and Matrixism are less important overall. Also, Jediism and Matrixism are deemed to be compatible with other religions, where the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is overtly hostile to fundamentalist Christianity and gives little quarter to other faiths. Yet Bobby Henderson's alternative history peopled with Pirates, Hare Krishnas and fantastical events is structurally similar to the mythos of the Church of the SubGenius and the primary mode of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is a muted version of the aggressive culture-jamming found in both Discordianism and the COSG. Although their rebellion against the materialist, spectaculist culture of the late modern West is muted,

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<sup>102</sup> Randy Dotinga, 'Flying Spaghetti Monster Inspires Wonky Religious Debate', *Wired* 20 November (2007) at [www.wired.com/culture/education/news/2007/11/flying\\_spaghetti\\_monster](http://www.wired.com/culture/education/news/2007/11/flying_spaghetti_monster), accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>103</sup> Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, p. 205.

Jediism, Matrixism, and the Church of the FSM are all, to some extent, religions of resistance. Jediism espouses the values of the monastic, honour-bound and ethical Jedi Order, Matrixists tackle spectaculism and the illusory nature of late capitalist Western culture more directly, and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster upholds Enlightenment rationality and scientific objectivity on the one hand, while making possible the instantiation of the FSM as the deity of a 'real' religion on the other. Yet again, Scott MacFarlane's observation that 'it doesn't matter that the author could not foresee the cultural influence of his novel. Once an author creates a text, except for royalties, it belongs to the world'<sup>104</sup> is strangely appropriate. Humans yearn for narratives infused with meaning, and when they appear they are seized upon greedily, become part of the popular *zeitgeist*, and innovative people craft new religions and spiritualities from them, which are designed to meet the needs of the host culture of the contemporary West.

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<sup>104</sup> Scott MacFarlane, *The Hippie Narrative: A Literary Perspective on the Counterculture* (Jefferson NC, 2007), p. 97.

# Conclusion

## Imagination, Fiction and Faith Revisited

### Introduction

This book has argued that invented religions, rather than being exceptional and best classified as ‘fake’ religions, are properly understood as the inevitable outcome of a society that values novelty, and in which individuals constitute their identity through the consumption of products, experiences, cultures and spiritualities. In the context of Western cultural trends, the history of invented religions can be traced in sundry possible ways; it could be argued that Helena Petrovna Blavatsky ‘invented’ the revelations from her Tibetan Ascended Masters that constituted a major part of the teachings of the Theosophical Society. Lonnie Kliever has gone so far as to argue that all religions are inventions. The academic study of religion, eschewing theological concerns, understands religion to be a human cultural product, part of the business of world construction that Peter Berger posits that humans achieve through the related processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization.<sup>1</sup> For Kliever the business of inventing religion is bound up with play; both engage the imaginative capacities of human beings. He concludes that ‘play and rhetoric are our most ancient and most cherished human defences against the void’.<sup>2</sup>

However, this study concentrated on explicitly invented, fictional religions, which refused the strategies of legitimation that were customarily employed by new religions. The earliest of these invented religions, Discordianism, is the product of the late 1950s. This decade was particularly important because many countercultural trends which became influential in the 1960s were incubated in the 1950s, with the Beat poets and religious innovators such as L. Ron Hubbard and George King moving away from mainstream Christian culture and drawing on Eastern religions, science fiction, and other contemporary cultural discourses for spiritual inspiration. Greg Hill and Kerry Thornley created a unique and original phenomenon when they founded Discordianism; it has inspired many imitations and attracted conspicuously talented adherents. This model of creating a new modern mythology, employing elements of popular culture, applies also to the Church of the SubGenius, and its founders Ivan Stang and Philo Drummond. The Church of All Worlds offers a different model of invented religion, one that

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<sup>1</sup> Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London, 1969 [1967]), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Lonnie D. Kliever, ‘Fictive Religion: Rhetoric and Play’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49/4 (December 1981), p. 666.

arguably has been more successful. Tim Zell and Lance Christie took a pre-existing text, Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and created a real Church of All Worlds from the fictional model. This strategy remains popular; it is effectively how Jediism and Matrixism were both created, from the texts of pre-existing films. Yet Zell and Christie were as creative and innovative as Hill and Thornley, for they extended the reach of the Church of All Worlds and absorbed multiple discourses (fictions, revived Paganism, environmentalism, sexual liberation, feminism) into the religion. Their most remarkable achievement was the holistic coherence manifested by the teachings and practices of CAW, testimony to the strong guiding vision of the leaders.

This conclusion first reviews the context of invented religions, concentrating on the role of the human imagination in creating meaning and the subjective turn that results in people actively constructing their identity, spirituality and reality through the consumption of products, cultures, and ideas.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, it considers the attraction of fictional narratives in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Finally, it analyses the conditions of faith in the late capitalist (sometimes termed 'postmodern') West, and argues that the issue of whether invented religions are 'real' religions should be irrelevant. Those commentators who have insisted that invented religions are 'fake', 'stupid' and 'jokes' have failed to recognize that they are working from a model of religion that excludes far more than it includes, a model drawn from Christianity. In the contemporary West that model is of ever-diminishing relevance, and newer models have emerged which suggest that very different modes of religion and spirituality are legitimate.<sup>4</sup>

### The Creative Imagination and Contemporary Identity

Western society in the twenty-first century is dominated by secularization, individualism and consumerism, three phenomena that gradually came to prominence over the period from the eighteenth century to the present. Although the nature and extent of secularization is disputed there is no doubt that the religious landscape of the West has changed profoundly since the mid-nineteenth century and that this change is most clearly seen in the retreat of traditional religious institutions, the Christian churches, from the public sphere. The public spaces of the West are almost entirely secular, which, as Charles Taylor notes, may be 'compatible with the vast majority of people still believing in God, and practising

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<sup>3</sup> David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), pp. 73–96.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Colin Campbell, *The Easternization of the West: A Thematic Account of Cultural Change in the Modern Era* (Boulder and London, 2007) offers one model of how the West effectively dismantled its core values and defining characteristics and replaced them with imported Eastern values and characteristics in the twentieth century.

their religion vigorously' in private.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the growth of private religion signals the effective loss of control over the content of this religion by the Christian churches, due to the role the human imagination plays in selecting those aspects of religion that are attractive. In the past, deviation from prescribed doctrine was heresy and was punished severely; now virtually everyone is a heretic (which is derived from the Greek *haeresis*, meaning 'opinion'), selecting religion *a la carte* rather than accepting the 'set menu' offered by a particular church.<sup>6</sup>

This shift in religious orientation is facilitated through the interaction of secularization with individualism and consumerism. The modern individual usually makes decisions based on self-needs rather than the needs of family or community, and has effectively become detached from the traditional sources of identity (for example, rigid class structures which made social advancement difficult, Christian allegiance which counselled patience in bearing the privations of this life in order to achieve salvation in the afterlife, and moral restrictions that discouraged people from sexual experimentation, divorce and other liberal life choices). Taylor insists on the profound nature of this change:

our first self-understanding was deeply embedded in society. Our essential identity was father, son, etc. and member of this tribe. Only later did we come to conceive ourselves as free individuals first. This was not just a revolution in our neutral view of ourselves, but involved a profound change in our moral world, as is always the case with identity shifts.<sup>7</sup>

Colin Campell has demonstrated that the eighteenth century accommodated the Enlightenment (which gave birth to modern scientific rationalism, and the social acceptability of widespread irreligion) and Romanticism (which gave birth to subjective individualism, and the imaginative yearning for self-transformation through consumption, alternative spiritualities and other sources of pleasure and fulfillment).<sup>8</sup> This quest for self-transformation and pleasurable fulfilment is condemned in traditional Christianity as immoral and selfish; for the contemporary Western 'seeker' it is almost a moral duty, as consumption is not driven by need but by the desire for self-expression. Lyon comments that 'being authentic, expressing oneself, is raised to a high status ... The voice within assumes a new authority at just the time when other, traditional authorities are being more and more radically questioned'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyperreal Testament* (Brussels: 2005), p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 157.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (York, 2005), *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, p. 3.



The consequence of these shifts for religion is that religion is understood in the West as a matter of personal choice rather than an inherited state, and religion has become relativized. Christianity traditionally claimed access to unique and universal truth, the rejection of which would result in eternal damnation. The religious equivalent of window-shopping is seekership, where interest is expressed in a variety of religions and spiritualities (simultaneously or sequentially), and where there is a willingness to experiment but not necessarily to commit to any one path. Religious leaders in the post-1960s West often belonged to more than one tradition. For example, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi was ‘not merely a Hassidic rabbi but an initiated Sufi sheik; he has explored traditions ranging from Buddhism to voodoo, from Native American peyote rituals to the Baptist church’.<sup>10</sup> To an extent, this pluralism and eclecticism was a reaction against the strictly imposed unity and purity of monotheism; where in the past there had been one truth, in the post-1950s West there were many, and the individual was charged with the task of finding ‘their’ truth, through the exercise of their creative imagination.

### Fictional Narratives and the Spiritual Quest

The growth in popularity of the novel from the eighteenth century to become the West’s preferred literary form is understood by Campbell to be a key factor in the rise of consumerism as a mode of self-construction. The novel and the consumer society are linked by the imagination, as the novel allowed readers to experience alternative lives and selves and generated the acceptance of emulative day-dreaming.<sup>11</sup> The consumption of fiction intensified as literacy increased, the price of book production dropped, and new media including the cinema were developed at the end of the nineteenth century. Leisure pastimes generated new types of popular culture that were qualitatively different to the ‘folk culture’ of agricultural societies, in that they were not ‘made’ by the people, but were designed for passive consumption by the masses and as ‘a profitable commodity’.<sup>12</sup> In the twentieth century science fiction became an especially important type of fictional discourse, in which the dreams and visions of an increasingly technological culture were expressed. Historians and critics of the genre have commented on the close relationship that science fiction enjoyed with religious innovation in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> Founders of new religions were themselves writers of science fiction (L. Ron Hubbard and Scientology), or they employed the tropes

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<sup>10</sup> Jesse Walker, ‘Inside the Spiritual Jacuzzi: What JewBus, Unitarians Pagans, and the Hot Tub Mystery Religion tell us about traditional faiths’, *Reason*, May 2003, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Duncombe, *Notes From the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London and New York, 1997), p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas M. Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (New York, 1998), pp. 138–9.

of science fiction (George King, the founder of the Aetherius Society), or they took science fiction narratives as foundational texts for new religions (Tim Zell and Lance Christie's use of *Stranger in a Strange Land* as the model for the Church of All Worlds).

This is not surprising, in that the academic study of religion has consistently accorded great significance to narrative. The study of the sacred texts of different religions, the biographies of founders and holy figures, the analysis of mythology, and the history of religious institutions are all to some extent story-driven. In the last decade or so this emphasis on narrative has taken on new significance with the rise of cognitive approaches to religion which have stressed the ways in which having religion conferred an evolutionary advantage on human beings. Pascal Boyer argues that humans are hard-wired to find certain types of religious explanations (chiefly those that attribute outcomes in the visible world to invisible agents) convincing and worthy of trust.<sup>14</sup> The major religious narratives of the West (those contained in the Bible, the Judeo-Christian scriptures) have been losing credibility among people since the Enlightenment. Interestingly, many of the events in the Bible that were rejected as unscientific were later co-opted by science-fiction-oriented new religions and given a different interpretation. For example, angels were re-cast as extra-terrestrials who visited select humans with a view to communicating technological secrets or even to aid human development through interbreeding. Similarly, the chariot in which the prophet Elijah was taken up to heaven was reinterpreted as a spacecraft.<sup>15</sup>

The adoption of explicitly fictional narratives as the foundation for religion, the replacement of traditional religious texts with novels and films, is connected with the subjective turn discussed above. The criterion of truth is no longer particularly important (perhaps because scientific advances, such as the Darwinian theory of evolution and Lyell's geological dating of the earth's crust, rendered questionable much that was contained in the Bible), and religion has shifted to supplying meaning for individuals. Hence, when a person considers his or her 'ultimate concerns', fictions may contain all the necessary elements for life choices, morals and ethics. With regard to science fiction, Thomas Disch has castigated fans for their uncritical attitudes, the chief of which is:

that SF is the true and only literature. 'Mundane' fiction, which professes to mirror the real world, is a deceitful heresy; SF is visionary, a map of the future by means of which fans have a private view of the millennium – which fans shall inherit ... SF's mission is nothing less than to present a vision of the 'future selves imminent within us', when men shall transcend their mortal coils and

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<sup>14</sup> Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York, 2001), p. 326.

<sup>15</sup> See Bryan Appleyard, *Aliens: Why They Are Here* (London, 2005), *passim* for an overview of the UFO and alien popular cultural discourse in the West.

become as gods. Outside of science fiction there is no salvation – not simply in a literary sense but with respect to the Fate of All Mankind.<sup>16</sup>

This statement demonstrates clearly that science fiction is a genre that has married scientific speculation with theological themes. Further, this technological view of humanity's future is compatible with the desire for self-transformation and this-worldly salvation exhibited in contemporary Western spiritualities. In an interesting parallel to Campbell's tracing of consumerist habits to the day-dreaming induced by novel-reading, Disch argues that the *mise-en-scène* of William Gibson's pioneering cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1984), published before the World Wide Web existed and before text interface had been replaced by graphics in computing, effectively created the aesthetic of computer games such as *Tomb Raider* and environments like *Second Life*, that the designers of these products instantiated Gibson's aesthetic.<sup>17</sup> The power and popularity of science fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries makes it the most likely narrative form to generate creative, new invented religions.

### Faith in Invented Religions

The invented religions discussed in this book were all influenced by science fiction, some more so than others. The twentieth century was a time of great religious change and fertility in the West. As Christianity retreated a vast array of new religions were introduced; some of these were religions that had a history elsewhere and were new only to the West (for example, Hinduism and Buddhism). However, many were genuinely new religions that found a place in the spiritual landscape of the West. What distinguished the invented religions from the merely new was their defiant rejection of the legitimating strategies employed by other new religions (arguing that the religion was not new, but rather a restatement of an ancient tradition, claiming that the scriptures had been dictated by a traditional religious figure such as Jesus, or translated from ancient documents, and so on), their confrontational use of humour and irreverence, and the 'underground' manner of their publications, evangelism and organizations. Determinedly subcultural, with ideals that are in direct opposition to mainstream Western materialist society, Discordianism and the Church of All Worlds flourished in the 1960s when rebellion became a prominent rite of passage for many young people. This identification of invented religions with the young is crucial for all the movements analysed in this book, because, as Stephen Duncombe observes, '[f]or many individuals, being able to define what is real for them is critical, as they feel that their reality is

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<sup>16</sup> Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World*, pp. 140–41.

<sup>17</sup> William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York, 1984), discussed in Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World*, pp. 219–20.

ignored by the rest of society'.<sup>18</sup> This perception may be relevant to all ages, but is particularly urgent and prevalent among young people.

The Church of the SubGenius has a particularly strong following on college campuses, and the founders of most of the invented religions in this book were young men, either students or just out of university. It has been noted that the only academic studies of any length of Discordianism, the Church of the SubGenius, and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster are by students who have posted their degree dissertations online as the technology became available. The humorous and irreverent nature of the teachings of many invented religions (the Church of All Worlds, Jediism and Matrixism are the exceptions) is closely linked to rebelliousness and to the sensibilities of youth culture, although they may appeal to all ages. As has been argued, humour and religion have long been associated and Ingvild Gilhus has noted that the 'primary aim of modern religious laughter is liberation, its *modus vivendi* is therapeutic'.<sup>19</sup> It seems premature that scholars have been willing to dismiss invented religions, particularly Discordianism and the Church of the SubGenius, because they employ parody, humour and jokes.

This study has argued that these scholars' model of religion, acknowledged or unacknowledged, is Christianity. The Christian religion has a story of sacrifice and salvation at its heart, teaches a world-denying and sexually restrictive ethic, advocates strict discipline for the faithful, and is strongly opposed to blasphemy, irreverence and unconventional behaviour. Further, it is a universal religion that dismisses all other religions as untrue. Invented religions violate all of these criteria and thus run the risk of not appearing to be religions at all; they cannot escape from the shadow cast by Christianity.<sup>20</sup> Such scholarly dismissals are also often concerned with whether or not the members of Discordianism or the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster really believe what the religion teaches. This criterion of belief is also unusually prominent in Christianity and is far less important in many other religions (for example, Ancient Roman Paganism or Hinduism). It is also worth remembering that the Christian West, through colonial expansion, came into contact with a vast array of indigenous religions, which it steadfastly refused to recognize as religions until the second half of the nineteenth century, when academic anthropologists had a sufficiently secular space in which to posit different definitions of religion, which 'allowed' indigenous religions to qualify. The desire to exclude religions from the list of 'real religions' is not new and it is useful to consider scholarly assessments of invented religion as being cases analogous to that of indigenous traditions. Modern Paganism explicitly draws on its affinities with indigenous cultures, in their pluralism, polytheism and earth-

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<sup>18</sup> Duncombe, *Notes From the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins* (London and New York, 1997), p. 138.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Pye, 'Religion: Shape and Shadow', *Numen* 41/1 (January 1994), p. 72.

honouring nature is in direct opposition to the exclusive, monotheistic and spiritual Christian religion.

Finally, the fact that all of the invented religions in this book are internet mediated, even if they were not at the time of founding, is another reason why they are often dismissed as less than legitimate. However, the existence of the internet and the World Wide Web (invented in 1989) changed conditions of existence in the West, not merely the ways in which religions operate. Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan noted that there were more than five hundred million internet users in 2002, up from 16 million in 1995.<sup>21</sup> In the past eight years that number has continued to rise dramatically. Traditional religions have elaborate websites, which enable the faithful to go on virtual pilgrimages, participate in cyber-worship, and to access information about their religion quickly and inexpensively. New and invented religions have exhibited particular internet savvy and have achieved penetration and influence well beyond their actual size due to Web presence.

It is reasonable to argue that invented religions look like religions, function like religion, have doctrinal and ritual content that appear religious, and therefore ought to be considered legitimately religious. The fact that their content may appear unusual or their rites inappropriate ought not to invalidate them. James Combs has argued that:

if people are disenchanted with the world, if their commitment to institutions and authorities is more fluid, and if they are searching for alternatives that do give their lives more meaning ... people will be looking for new objects of veneration. They may wish to venerate old and tried things, or new and novel things, but in either case they are seeking something that demands reverence or awe. And if this thesis is correct, there will emerge in such a fragmented culture a wide variety of popular things that will command the attention, respect, and even worship of groupings of people in search of re-enchanted experience. In other words we should expect a plurality of celebrations, popular groupings around different things.<sup>22</sup>

For some time academics in religion have been arguing that the secularization thesis, which initially posited the death of religion in the West, must definitely be modified to argue that secularization merely means the opening up of the spiritual marketplace and the development of new religious forms. The invented religions that appear in this book are examples of these new religious forms, and the science fiction narratives that they draw upon are one of the new 'sites' of the sacred in the contemporary West.

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<sup>21</sup> Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, 'Introduction', in Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> James Combs, 'Celebrations: Rituals of Popular Veneration', *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 22, Issue 4, p. 71.

## Conclusion

This study is hopefully the beginning of a much more detailed conversation about invented religions, a conversation that will result in a broader and deeper knowledge of how invented religions come into being, how they develop and become established, and the types of fictions that inspire them. The academic study of new religions has mainstreamed in the past 20 years, in that rather than treating new religions as a problem that required an explanation, scholars have accepted that ‘the emergence of new religions seems to be one sign of a healthy and free society, and we can now see everywhere that the slowing of the process of the formation of new religions occurs only where the suppressive powers of the state are called to bear’.<sup>23</sup> The time has come to extend that acceptance to invented religions, those religions that are unashamedly based on fictions and employ humour and irreverence. The creative imagination of founders like Kerry Thornley, Oberon Zell-Ravenheart and Ivan Stang have given rise to vital new religious narratives, which have been disseminated via the internet and have gained acceptance in popular culture, and are meaningful to their members. They are invented religions, and they are real religions.

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<sup>23</sup> J. Gordon Melton, ‘*Perspective New New Religions: Revisiting a Concept*’, *Nova Religio* 10/4 (2007), p. 109.

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