

**New Religious and Spiritual Movements in the  
West: Reflexive Modernity, Alienation and  
Embodied Charisma**

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**By**

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# Abstract

This thesis investigates the causes and consequences behind the rise of new religious and spiritual movements [NRSMs] in the West, by tracing their historical, structural and in some cases individual origins and trajectories. The West in this study refers to the United States and Great Britain, with the two countries serving both as a reference point for critical examinations, as well as the basis for comparative analysis. The main argument developed in the study is that NRSMs are the natural by-product of a reflexive modernity and represent a morally inspired response to the largely materialistic values engendered by the capitalist ideologies of profit maximization, accumulation and consumption. Nonetheless, certain NRSMs ultimately end up practicing these very same materialistic goals. Fundamentally, new religious and spiritual discourses have emerged to counterbalance the logic heavy narrative of Enlightenment, which promoted science as a replacement for superstitious beliefs in God, and the concomitant pursuit of industrialization via the taming of nature as the correct parameters for human evolution. In an attempt to transcend the strictures of positivistic scientism and postmodern ambiguity, as applied to the sociology of new religious movements, my theoretical approach instead opens up a third space based on critical realism. Thus, the methodology incorporates a plurality of research techniques (quantitative and qualitative), such as secondary analysis of survey data, case studies, in-depth interviews and ethnography, with the thesis ultimately presenting a new theoretical framework with which to systematically analyse any NRSM.

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<sup>1</sup> See: [http://www.asanas.org.uk/2004\\_programme.htm](http://www.asanas.org.uk/2004_programme.htm).

**Scene Setting: Why this thesis?**

If we do not ask, and seek to answer as well as we can, questions like – how should we best characterize modernity? What were its origins? What are the major transformations currently influencing the trajectories of development of world history? – most of the intellectual challenge of sociology is lost.

(Giddens, 1993: 43-44)

New Religious and Spiritual Movements [henceforth NRSMs] represent one of the most thought provoking and yet at the same time *controversial* arenas of study in modern sociology (Balch, 1985; Beckford, 1985). The mass suicide in 1978 by supporters of the Peoples Temple in Jonestown, followed by the Order of the Solar Temple in 1994/5, and members of Heaven's Gate waiting for the Hale Bopp comet in 1997 (Moore, 1985; Palmer, 1996) – all serve as stark reminders of the command and hold of religious and spiritual beliefs over sections of the Western population (Barrett, 2001). The 1993 FBI raid on The Branch Davidian compound in Waco Texas (King and Breault, 1993), and Aum Shinrikyo's 1995 Sarin gas attack on a Tokyo subway, have both provided Western governments with ample food for thought regarding legal restrictions on new religious and spiritual groups (Bradney, 1999; Richardson, 1995). The activities of certain other new religious movements such as the Church of Scientology and the Unification Church have also attracted tremendous scrutiny from both academics and the media (Barker, 1984; Beckford, 1983). Keywords such as brainwashing, financial charlatans and sexual deviants have been used to describe the activities and leadership of various new religious movements (Kent, 2001; Melton, 1995a; Singer, 1995). The scholarly arena has become increasingly polarised into a clique of "cult bashers" on the one hand, and "cult apologists" on the other, which has 'added confusion rather than clarity to a class of phenomena already beset with more than its share of confusion and misunderstanding' (Zablocki and Robbins, 2001: 3).

For the above reasons and in the interests of transparency I feel it is imperative that I outline at the outset where my sympathies and predispositions lie. I come from a position of impartiality to religion. The analytical approach employed in the thesis was as even-handed as permissible; the study sought empathetic understanding of the beliefs and activities of the new religious and spiritual movements, the ideas they promote, the ways they conceptualise the social realm and the individual agent, and how these discourses interact and mesh with the debates and values prevalent in wider western society. Those 'who wish to find "cult critiques" will find no shortage of

sources', however 'the teachings of NRMs are considerably more sophisticated than their critics allow, and their detractors would do well to ascertain the true nature of their opposition' (Chryssides, 1999: 3). In respect to this observation the study attempted to avoid *a priori* dismissive explanations of the religious and spiritual beliefs of modern religionists, by assuming them to be based on "irrationality" or the result of "cultist brainwashing". This reductionist strand within sociology towards explaining away religious and spiritual sentiments as illusionary was inherited from the founding fathers, such as Comte, Durkheim and Marx, whose influence on the sociology of religion still looms large even in contemporary times (Aldridge, 2000; O'Toole, 1984, 2003). Furthermore, in contrast to what the modern secularisation theorists would have us believe (Bruce, 1995, 2003), the study of religion and in particular new forms of spirituality still warrant sophisticated sociological investigations in their own right (Andresen and Forman, 2000; Beckford, 2003; Norris and Inglehart, 2004).

There is no reason to expect that the twenty-first century will not see the rise of new modes of religiosity, which will demand new styles of analysis and new categories of thought. (Aldridge, 2000: 215)

The primary argument put forward in this thesis is that NRSMs are a manifestation of the reflexive nature of modernity, and represent a morally inspired response to the largely materialistic values promoted by the capitalist ideologies of accumulation and consumption. However, this is not to say that some NRSMs do not also end up practicing these very ideologies. Essentially new religious and spiritual discourses are appearing to balance the logic heavy narratives of the Enlightenment, which attempted to replace God, myth and divine revelations as the authoritative basis and criteria for knowledge claims, with science and the scientific method (Hanegraaff, 1996). A product, according to many New Age thinkers, has been a cold materialism based on the promotion of industrialisation and consumerism, modelled on Darwinian notions of the "survival of the fittest", as the preferred parameters for guiding human evolution and social development (Horn, 1994; see chapter 6). Further, the increasing interdependence among nations, the ease of international travel, the rise of internet communications, the permeability of national boundaries, and the globalisation of metaphysical ideas have all created new challenges for society and religion (Beckford, 1986; Bokser, 2002; Wuthnow, 1986). Therefore, according to Beyer, 'modernization

and globalization have had ambiguous, and not simply negative, results for religion', which is in blatant contrast to the inherent arguments found in secularisation theories as 'special communication with a posited transcendent has certainly not disappeared or become irrelevant' (Beyer, 1994: 97; see chapter 1).

In addition to being an intellectual objective, this thesis has also served as a vehicle for my own personal journey towards spiritual understanding. It has proved to be a fascinating odyssey; taking me across Britain, overseas to America, within the temples, churches and offices of many diverse movements, as well as into the homes of numerous modern seekers. I have met a vast number of remarkable people along the way, some truly unexpected such as shaking hands and exchanging words with Tom Cruise (actor) at the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary meeting of the International Association of Scientologists;<sup>1</sup> to interviewing and being inspired by the 92 year-old Falun Gong practitioner and human rights campaigner Lord Francis Edward Thurlow. I have found much to appreciate in the so-called "fringe" and have encountered some truly inspiring visions and hopes for human evolution and social betterment. However, I did not dismiss the possibility that the teachings, practices and actions of some NRSMs can ultimately be dangerous for the individual as well as detrimental to society (Harrison, 1990; Palmer, 1996). During the course of my research I encountered reluctance by some people from certain movements to help me with my research and was also denied the opportunity to observe activities (see chapter 9).

The personal truth of religious or spiritual beliefs as experienced by the members of different movements is equally respected. This respect holds true even in the instances when the broader discourses of the movements, which often try to rationalise, objectify and frame the beliefs into totalising cosmologies, have been subjected to the critical realist method of explanatory critique (Bhaskar and Collier, 1998; see also chapters 7 to 9). Religion and spirituality essentially provide one methodology (often intuitive and mystically orientated) geared towards explaining the place of the human species within the infinite cosmos. They attempt to develop organised and authoritative knowledge about humanity's creation, destiny and the mysteries behind the mechanisms of evolution. Einstein argued this emphasis on mysticism was an indication of true religion:

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<sup>1</sup> I am not a scientologist. I was invited to attend the IAS conference on 29/10/2004 in East Grinstead by Graeme Wilson (PR Manager, Church of Scientology).



The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle. It was the experience of mystery – even if mixed with fear – that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which are only accessible to our reason in their elementary forms – it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude... (Einstein, 1979: 5)

The discourse interpreting and investigating NRSMs that follows in the pages of this thesis serves a dual purpose. The primary aim has been to explain the reasons why new religious movements have been appearing in a cyclical fashion across Great Britain and the United States in the last century. In this context the thesis aspires to a rather ambitious universal frame of reference, by examining and classifying over 200 of the NRSMs operating in the West. In undertaking this epic task the epistemological assumption adopted was that it is far ‘better to build on the past, adapting the discipline to new developments in sociological theory and in the society it seeks to comprehend’ (Aldridge, 2000: 11). Through a critical engagement with the literature I demonstrate how sociologically inspired theories can best be applied to account for the rise and significance of NRSMs, with the underlying objective being to develop a theoretical model to aid in more detailed analytical case studies of specific groups.

A secondary objective of the thesis has been to satisfy a personal curiosity regarding the different conceptions of the meaning to life as presented by various groups. Therefore, I supplemented my broader socio-theoretical agenda with a deeper phenomenological approach. The purpose of this was to enter the life-world of certain individual seekers in order to comprehend, describe and analyse the ways these new believers construct and reconstruct the meaning of science, religion and spirituality in social and cultural forms. I particularly wanted to uncover the reasons why people convert to, and practise, the beliefs preached by these “new” religious ideologies, and in the process explain the specific ways the discursive formations of various NRSMs are socially legitimated. Particular focus was on identifying how NRSMs use distinctive discursive repertoires to critique the “popular” understanding of science, and in the process present alternative histories and evolutionary theories to construct novel totalising cosmologies (Lewis, 2003; Locke, 2004; see chapter 6).

## **Structure and Research Questions**

This thesis analyses several of the major new religious and spiritual organisations operating in the West, by tracing their historical, structural and in some cases individual origins and trajectories. The West in the context of the study means the United States and Great Britain, with the two countries serving both as a reference point for critical investigations, as well as the basis for comparative analysis. The main beliefs NRSMs adhere to, and promote, as well as the methods they employ in practice and recruitment are evaluated. I also highlight and appraise the various social consequences their activities have and could potentially engender. This latter concern is mindful of trends in the literature that have moved towards emphasising the process or social movement aspect of new religions and spiritualities (Zablocki and Looney, 2004). A key objective driving this thesis was to address the following question:

- **What sociological theories and research strategies can best help elucidate the causes and consequences of the rise of new religious and spiritual movements in the West?**

The above was a very challenging question and included within its remit a number of intersecting and overlapping concerns. In order to address the question effectively it was necessary to split it into manageable portions.

The opening two literature review chapters set the agenda and there is a visible continuity between them. In these chapters there is a critical dialogue with some of the current debates prevalent within the sociology of religion. In the first chapter some classical constructs in the sociology of religion are examined, which is a necessary prerequisite for developing an adequate theoretical understanding of the rise of NRSMs. Investigating NRSMs requires us to revisit and engage foundational issues in philosophy and social theory that have shaped modern knowledge about western societies. In Chapter One my key arguments are that the classic sociological theories of religion were based on linear philosophical foundations, which resulted in their incorrect future predictions of the vibrancy of religion against the rise of science and modernity. The Enlightenment promise of reason, logic and science as the future basis for knowledge completely replacing the superstitions and dogmas of religions has not come to complete fruition. The vibrant religious scene in the modern United States exemplifies this; in addition a far more complex religious process than one of

inevitable decline is also occurring across Great Britain, the first chapter's subsequent critique of contemporary secularisation theory helps to substantiate these arguments. Instead, a structuration-based approach is advocated as a more fruitful theoretical tool to use to explain contemporary religious transformations (Lee, 1992; Mellor, 1993). The divergent development paths of 'religions' in modernity calls for more complex use of social theories to identify the multi-casual processes driving religious change.

Chapter Two presents a consolidation and extension of arguments developed in the preceding chapter. Primarily, postmodernism's endless questioning, relativism and consequential ambiguity are discarded in favour of a more practical albeit still critical view of the characteristics of modernity. Here I present a Foucault/Giddens inspired theoretical approach to account for the rise of New Age movements in what can be termed Reflexive Modernity (Beck *et al.*, 1994). These movements in contrast to being the consequence of a supposed postmodern climate of fragmentation instead share similar underlying hopes for unity through discovering absolute truth and knowledge in a deeper reality. Such a universal theme signifies the conscious attempt made by social agents to remould and energise fractured identity through reinterpretation of traditional religious discourses. To substantiate these arguments the evolving role of the body in religious discourse is illustrated (McGuire, 1990). Initially, from being portrayed as inherently sinful and in need of control, as depicted in traditional religious discourses like Christianity and Islam (B. S. Turner, 1984, 1991), to the contemporary recasting of the body in New Age discourses, which are concerned with unleashing the potential of the sacred body through the notion of inner transcendence. This achievement New Agers argue, will lead to the attainment of an internal holistic wisdom and an eventual external mass enlightenment (Hove, 1996; McGuire, 1996).

Chapter Three takes the insights from the literature review chapters one stage further, presenting the methodological framework by reference to which the research question above was answered in the thesis. First, there was the conceptual matter of definition. In short, this amounts to answering the questions: What does religion mean in sociological terms? And what do we mean by NRSMs? Second, the theoretical framework guiding the study is outlined, which involves introducing the strengths of critical realism as a philosophy guiding social research. This philosophical approach to human sciences like sociology rejects the notion that truth can be uncovered by using the appropriate quantitative or qualitative methods (Bhaskar, 1998a; Collier,

1993; Harvey, 1990). Instead, knowledge is seen as transient requiring a self-critical and explanatory approach to research processes through which we can incrementally move towards a richer understanding of social phenomena and complexity (Bhaskar, 1989; Cruickshank, 2003; Groff, 2004). Knowledge is never completed because social interactions between structure and agency are dynamic, constantly evolving as well as transforming (Archer, 1988, Giddens, 1984, 1993). Thirdly, the research methods used to inform theory and to develop the arguments in the thesis are presented. In this regard a critical social science is not tied to any single research method, rather the fundamental aim is to get beyond the dominant values of society (based on capitalistic ideology across the West) to discover what is occurring beneath the surface. Finally, the theoretical and methodological means used to inform the study could engender criticism – some of these are anticipated and evaluated.

The primary objective of this thesis was more comprehensively achieved when supplemented with more specific research questions, such as:

- **Can we devise a sociological typology to classify the main types of new religious and spiritual movements operating across the West according to their origins (potential causes) and orientations (possible consequences)?**

Chapter Four is concerned with answering this question. To achieve this end a NRSMs database was created, which necessitated a social mapping of movements operating across London and California.<sup>2</sup> The application of a modified and enhanced Partridge (2004) typology assisted in selecting a representative sample of the NRSM population for inclusion in the database. This initial scheme classified NRSMs according to the religious traditions they were derived from and became the “origins” part of the new typology. It is acknowledged in the chapter that while such ideal type constructions are not without limitations (Albrow, 1990); they remain useful for analytical purposes and become ‘meaningful if it enables us to draw important distinctions between movements and their likely trajectory. People are justifiably interested in knowing which movements pose a threat either to their own members or to the wider society’ (Aldridge, 2000: 12). To supplement the “origins” scheme, Wallis’s (1984) typology of NRSMs that is based on classifying them according to their “orientations to the world” was also applied to the groups in the database. In this

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<sup>2</sup> The CDROM attached to the back flap of this thesis contains details about the 220 NRSMs classified.

manner a novel “origins-orientations” typology was developed for analytical purposes and generalisations. The subsequent statistical results derived from application of these classifications to the movements in the database are presented throughout the chapter, with the implications of the main striking trends that emerged being discussed in the text. The results from the new typology will help facilitate future research by assisting academics interested in conducting historically contextual research, to become cognizant of the dominant patterns of inspiration for new movements to have emerged in specific decades.

Chapter Five utilises the theoretical insights gleaned in chapters two and three and applies them as a broad framework to aid understanding of the reasons why people join new religious movements. This was another subsidiary research question:

- **What concepts and themes can be uncovered that explain “why” people join new religious and spiritual movements?**

The approach taken to answering the question “why” was based on exploring what the new religious or spiritual discourses may have to offer that mainstream secular or traditional religious discourses do not. The attractiveness of these new discourses it is suggested lies in their “novel” explanatory strategies, which can successfully compete with the traditional and more “outdated” secular/religious discourses. What essentially becomes evident is that religion – as a cognitive system for understanding the world – has not been totally undermined by science (Barbour, 1990; Capra, 1999; Casey, 2000; Clayton, 1997). Narrative extracts from the depth interviews conducted with members of new movements help to highlight the agency side of the arguments, while concepts such as alienation, family and moral decline derived from critical analysis of the sociological literature form the structural equation (Anderson, 1997; Beckford, 1986; Bellah, 1976; Glock, 1976; Robbins, 1988).

Zablocki and Looney suggest we should ‘attempt to account for the social and cultural mechanisms used by NRMs for attaining cohesion and control, and for mobilizing resources. To put it another way, “why” questions are making room for equally important “how” questions’ (2004: 314). The sixth chapter attempts to answer such a question, one that has received minimal attention in the sociological literature:

- **“How” does a selection of new religious and spiritual movements engage and critique the public understanding of science in order to legitimate their discursive formations regarding the social realm?**

An overview of the historical and often public debates between science and religion is a necessary precursor for focusing the arguments in Chapter Six. I show while it was Christianity which first lost intellectual credibility in the early exchanges, we now increasingly witness science and the validity of the scientific method subjected to stern questioning within the social sciences, popular science books, and based on these understandings by NRSM doctrines (Barbour, 1971, 1998; Capra, 1999; Horn, 1994). Using the Kuhnian notion of scientific paradigms framed against hermeneutics, I illustrate how various NRSMs draw on public notions of science, to suggest it like religion is primarily a method for acquiring knowledge about existence when confronted with a greater reality. I term the idea of a greater reality the metaphysical realm, which is akin to Durkheim’s depiction of religion as the deep grammar of society. Several NRSMs draw inspiration from this abstract level to re-enchant mundane reality. Using a graphical model as a heuristic device, I delineate the various discursive strategies a selection of NRSMs has used to legitimate their discourses.

Chapters seven through to nine include in-depth case analysis of a selection of specific movements by which their discursive formations are critically evaluated. This follows a trend in the recent sociological literature, which has moved towards focused case studies of various groups in endeavours to catalogue and build a reliable archive of knowledge about such “marginal” religious ideologies (Chryssides, 1999; Dawson, 1998b, Enroth, 2005; Lucas and Robbins, 2004; Zablocki and Looney, 2004). The case chapters examine a mix of prominent and previously un-investigated groups from the NRSMs database, in order to identify the inspirational basis of their doctrines, as well as discuss the possible consequences arising from their social agenda and activities. A genealogical and archaeological approach is applied to the discourses to ‘define them in their specificity; to show in what way the set of rules that they put into operation is irreducible to any other; to follow them the whole length of their exterior ridges, in order to underline them the better’ (Foucault, 2002b: 155). The reoccurring questions addressed in the case chapters were the following:

- **What do NRSMs seek to change in the structure of society as object and how does this relate to the ultimate aims of their totalising cosmologies?**
- **What techniques of the self and modes of action do they promote and how does this systematically construct and reinforce convert/agency identity?**

Chapter Seven begins with a discussion of the consequences of globalisation on patterns of religious belief, and agrees, albeit in a diluted manner, with Campbell's (1999) hypothesis that an Easternisation of religious faith has occurred in the West. Case studies on the rise of two new Eastern movements, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and Falun Gong serve as the analytical reference. ISKCON is a significant new movement in the West claiming roots in a religious tradition that goes back centuries in India. It attracted initial acceptance amongst the counter cultural sensibilities of the 1960s and has since become an established second and third generation religious community. ISKCON teaches the "Science of the Soul", a doctrine with the aim to free humanity from the cycle of reincarnation. However, the group's discursive formation is conservative and rigid, rather than fluid and adaptable. As a result, it has had to make significant compromises of its ideals to continue to prosper across the West in recent decades (e.g. Rochford, 2000; Zaidman, 1997). The Falun Gong emerged in the mid 1990s across the West and gained worldwide attention in July 1999 after being officially banned in China by the Communist state. The movement primarily emphasises a set of energy cultivation techniques, which aim to develop morality and understanding of universal laws within individuals. Nonetheless, deeper examination of the founder's charismatic social constructions uncovers controversial opinions, like the belief we are entering the "End of Days" or apocalypse. The discourse of the movement is a good example of how eastern and western religious ideas can be combined and reconstructed for commercial appeal.

The main bulk of my exploration in Chapter Eight is targeted at the discourse of Scientology. The case study of the movement focuses on how it constructs the notion of "otherness" to justify its knowledge claims. By subjecting the veracity of the discursive formation to broader sociological and historical frames of reference, the ruptures in some of the movement's claims become self-evident. The emancipatory ideals of the religion will serve to ultimately affirm the fragmentary nature of capitalist socio-economic development, instead of offering a genuine basis to, and

alternative from, exploitative materialism. Scientology essentially strives to dislodge psychiatry and to insert itself in its place as the new model for treating various societal ills. A range of techniques of the self are available to encourage the social agent to fulfil his or her potential, as well as treat a wide range of psychological deviances. In the short-term the benefits of adopting an oppositional and messianic ideology may empower some Scientology members, but the long-term objectives simply promote the more negative attributes associated with the hierarchical nature of capitalistic consumerism.

Chapter Nine illuminates the reasons behind the rise of two new UFO groups, Zeta Talk and the Cassiopaea Experiment. In these religious and spiritual discourses humanity is portrayed as the genetic creation of alien gods, who are also credited as the original inspiration for all the world's religions. I argue the movements are "sham traditions" because their discursive constructions demonstrate the reflexive nature of modernity (Giddens, 1990). The spiritual knowledge the founders present claims to derive normative authority from more advanced extraterrestrial beings. However, I show they are more likely to be the by-products of radical renewals, reformulations and amalgamations of terrestrially derived religious, spiritual and scientific traditions. The discourses essentially express the tribulations facing the self in a modern western culture where fears of an ending to everything are prevalent across many sectors of the population (Fenn, 2003b; Giddens, 1991). Their apocalyptic hopes for a New Age signify a reflexive project of the self in action, which in the face of saturated power relations desires transformation of institutions via their destruction. This indicates the cyclical nature of social evolution, in which if an unbiased interplay between structure and agency were to arise, as sought by these movements, a potentially liberating development trajectory is seen as possible (i.e. a utopia after destruction of Earth).

The conclusion presents the foundations to a new theoretical framework for understanding the rise of new religious and spiritual movements. This is achieved by drawing together all the insights and concepts developed from prior chapters into a succinct explanatory synthesis. The model presented will assist future social research on NRSMs, by serving as an analytical reference for guiding investigations.



**Introduction: The Enlightenment critique of Religion, the seed for Secularisation**

In its earliest formulations at the hands of such Enlightenment sages and heirs as... Marx [and] Comte... there is little question that secularization involved the prophetic end of religion itself. (Demerath, 2003: 212)

The roots of the notion of secularisation can be traced back to the grand narrative of the Enlightenment, also known as ‘the Age of Reason’ (Hamilton, 1992). Varga elaborates, ‘secularization at the level of ideas began within theology, and specifically in philosophies which were still close to, and influenced by theological ideas (e.g. Descartes and Leibniz)’ (1995: 238). Enlightenment thinking was largely based on French philosopher René Descartes’ concept of the autonomous and independently conceived cogito that has the capacity to build its worldview systematically from reason alone. Descartes’ detailed theories about the physical operation of the material world and a profound rejection of the scholastic tradition in which he had been educated led him to fear the condemnation of the church.<sup>1</sup> Descartes saw the pursuit of mathematical and scientific truth as the right model for progress in knowledge, which he formalised by four simple rules (Descartes, 2004). This quasi-mathematical procedure for the achievement of knowledge was evidence of the beginnings of a rationalistic approach to epistemology. Indeed, Descartes’ key contribution to the narrative of Enlightenment was this very notion of “scientific thinking” as we have come to understand it (Cottingham, 2001). The philosophy of Descartes won ready acceptance in the second half of the seventeenth century, especially in his native France and in Holland, influencing many subsequent classical theorists to be self-styled rationalists, not simply in the weaker sense that they held reason to take precedence over other means of acquiring understanding, but also in the stronger sense that for them reason was the only viable path to knowledge. This fundamentally entailed a denial that knowledge can come through divine revelations, such as was the case with the Christian religion. Malcolm claims that in ‘our Western academic philosophy, religious belief is commonly regarded as unreasonable and is viewed with condescension or even contempt... The objective, mature strong attitude is to hold beliefs solely on the basis of evidence’ (2000: 118).

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<sup>1</sup> Regardless of his rational scientific approach to the pursuit of knowledge, Descartes still remained a firm believer in the existence of God: “There is undoubtedly some truth in everything I have been taught by nature-for, when I use the term ‘nature’ in its general sense, I refer to God Himself or to the order that He has established in the created world, and when I apply the term specifically to my nature, I refer to the collection of everything that God has given me” (Descartes, 2004: 45).

Auguste Comte strongly advocated such a view arguing for the extension of the scientific or “positive” method to the study of society, which he saw as the last stronghold of theologians and metaphysical philosophers.<sup>2</sup> Comte set out a grand theory of the evolution of society and human understanding, in which he formulated the ‘Law of Three Stages’. In the *theological* stage, phenomena are explained as the actions of fictitious gods and spirits, supernatural beings who are similar to humans though far more powerful. In the following *metaphysical* stage, phenomena are explained in relation to the operation of abstract entities and forces such as Nature. The last of the three stages the *positive* heralded the triumph of reason over dogma and the withering away of religious thinking. Pickering explains:

In the positive stage of history, no discussion of first causes or origins was allowed because the existence of supernatural beings and essences could not be proved. Instead, intellectual discourse was characterized by scientific laws explaining how, not why, phenomena worked. (2003: 17)

Comte’s theory was endorsed by a great number of scientists and Enlightenment philosophers, who all shared the view that *the advance of rationality and the scientific spirit would inevitably undermine the religious heritage; religious myths would give way to scientific explanations* (Hamilton, 1992). Therefore, in its simplest sense the Enlightenment was the creation of a new framework of ideas about man, society and nature, which challenged the existing conceptions, rooted in a traditional world-view dominated by Christianity. The grand narrative of the Enlightenment also sought to promote the idea of science as the supreme form of knowledge, and endorsed the application of the scientific method to aid social understanding. The Enlightenment was one of the starting points for sociology. Its central themes formed the threshold of thinking about the realm of the social. The application of reasoned and empirically based knowledge meant that a new humanity was being created, one that understands, and by this understanding frees itself from the shackles of superstition and religious dogma. Unfortunately, in many ways the innate rationalist tendencies of the classic theorists of sociology, shaped by the legacy of the Enlightenment, led them to underestimate the complexity and pervasiveness of religion in human society: ‘concerning the problem of secularization and rationalization in modernity, there is a

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<sup>2</sup> This led to the birth of positivism, which Comte introduced to sociology with the intention of making it scientific like the natural sciences. Emphasis was placed on dealing only with propositions that were directly testable (see Caldwell, 1994 and J. H. Turner, 2003).

largely shared opinion that the classics of sociology of religion envisioned rather a *linear* development’ (Varga, 2000: 111, emphasis added). I trace the root of this linearity and demonstrate how it is linked to some theoretical limitations evident in the classics, flaws that remain in the modern guise of secularisation theory.

### **A Linear Legacy: The Classic Theories in the Sociology of Religion<sup>3</sup>**

The influence of the classics on the contemporary sociology of religion is not rhetoric but reality, a fact which even the most cursory examination of textbooks, journals, and professional publications can confirm. The founding fathers... loom large in all areas of this enterprise, either as the focus of investigation and interpretation or the inspiration for theoretical, methodological, and empirical explorations. (O’Toole, 2003: 145)

#### ***Émile Durkheim: Religion as Social Integration or Cult of Man?***

The first classic theoretical approach to the study of religion follows Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, in which he insisted religion is never found apart from the collective (Durkheim, 1965). Durkheim suggested all explanation of things human must commence ‘by going back to its most primitive and simple form’, because ‘the first ring has a predominating place in the chain of scientific truths’ (1965: 15; 16). This approach, Durkheim argued, allowed one to break down an institution into component parts, enabling the motives that originally caused those actions to become revealed. Such assumptions reflected Durkheim’s close affinity to the philosophical principles of Comte’s positivist scientific approach to sociological inquiry. Durkheim also believed in the decline of religion, as Pickering supports:

Running through all Durkheim’s writings, even from the earliest, there is an unbroken strand which states simply and categorically that religion, both in the early days of man and now, has suffered a persistent *decline* due to one fact and one fact alone, the *continual advance and acceptance of scientific thought and practice*. (1984: 457, emphasis added)

There is much in Durkheim’s treatment of religion that is reminiscent of Comtean thought, but in his hands science was seen both as a tool for destroying religion, as

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<sup>3</sup> Durkheim, Marx and Weber’s theories of religion, reviewed below, are by no means the only classical ones. Turner (1996) reviews other theories in the early sociology of religion, while Guthrie (1993) critically reviews the theories of Naturism and Animism. The American psychologist James (1985) also articulated a classic theory of religion, in which he took religious phenomena as authoritative in their own right. He was particularly concerned with the reasons for religious conversion; both Durkheim (Stedman-Jones, 2003) and particularly Weber (Hennis, 1998) were influenced by his ideas.

well as an instrument for the conservation of religion. In some ways Durkheim was searching for a middle ground, as he states ‘in so far as religion is action, and in so far as it is a means of making men live, science could not take its place, for even if it expresses life, it does not create it; it may well seek to explain faith, but by that very act it presupposes it’ (1915/1965: 478). Therefore, Durkheim believed that the religion of the future would celebrate individualism. This would not be individualism as self-indulgence liberated from social restraint, but individualism based on moral responsibility. Durkheim did recognise that if this were the case his own definition of religion would be in need of revision (e.g. rise of new religious movements undermines Durkheim’s position).<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, Durkheim also states: ‘That which science refuses to grant religion is not its right to exist, but its right to dogmatize upon the nature of things and the special competence which it claims for itself for knowing man and the world’ (Ibid). Thus, some confusion in Durkheim’s arguments is evident if taken to the logical conclusion: *if science deprives religion of its intellectual dimension it becomes emasculated and such an irrational form must quickly give way to the complete demise of religion itself.* However,

It is a mark of the classical stature of Durkheim’s work that, even when wrong, its questions compel us to take stock of our own answers, in light of what we believe about human nature, morality, and the social context of human existence. (Wallwork, 1985: 201)

Looking at the religion-society relationship, the former was interpreted by Durkheim as the deep grammar of the social fabric, partly because religion is the generative source of social norms, and because social norms duplicate the quality of the religious obligation. For Durkheim then religion symbolises some aspects of reality. In this way *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* remains a thought provoking and important work, one that has rightly stimulated the interest of several generations of researchers (Smith and Alexander, 1996). Tucker (2002) in a study of the New Age Movement follows Durkheim by arguing that religious representations are collective representations reflecting collective realities. So his research implies that this general relationship holds true not only for the older, communal religions studied by Durkheim, but also for the New Age spiritual practices examined in his paper. He writes given ‘the right circumstances, then, religious representations may be

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<sup>4</sup> Hanegraaff (1999) discusses some issues the new age movement poses for Durkheim’s theory.

individual representations that reflect individual realities. This is increasingly the fate of religion in modern America' (Tucker, 2002: 51).

Hanegraaff expands Durkheim's fragmentary ideas on the possible future of religion being based on the cult of man and argues as a consequence that the New Age is 'the new type of religion referred to by Durkheim' (1999: 146). Durkheim had suggested that the religion of the final stage of development, modernity, is the cult of the individual, which consists of shared beliefs, without supporting rituals, regarding the sacredness of the human person. This occurs only gradually, as the primitive collective conscience decreases in volume, strength, and precision. Hence the human person becomes the principal object of religious esteem and respect, Durkheim wrote:

This cult of man is something... very different from egoistic individualism... Far from detaching individuals from society and from every aim beyond themselves, it unites them in one thought, makes them servants of one work... So we have, not to concentrate each separate person upon himself and his own interests, but to subordinate him to the general interests of humankind.

(Durkheim, 1897, cited in Wallwork, 1985: 211)

Based on the above cult of man and on other fragmentary remarks Stedman-Jones suggests that contrary to popular belief Durkheim's theories did incorporate voluntarism, because he viewed as important the 'idea that thought is tied to action and through this creates reality' (2003: 113). However, she undermines her argument in respect to Durkheim by concluding in her paper 'are not both James and Durkheim necessary for a comprehensive study of religion?' (2003: 118). If both James (a psychologist concerned with volition) and Durkheim are needed to study religion then does this not clearly imply that Durkheim's theory lacks an adequate conception of the subject? I believe so and will argue why (see also Giddens, 1993: 12).

A central aspect dominant in all of Durkheim's writings (beyond any theory of the subject) was the coverage given to the ways society exercises force or pressure over men and women.<sup>5</sup> The roots of this theoretical approach can be traced back to Durkheim's personal values, first the view of sociology as a science with observable laws (i.e. his positivism), and second the critique of Kant's ethical philosophy (Gane, 2003). So while almost all of the enlightenment theorising of the 18th and 19th centuries had moved in the direction of radicalising the subject – Kant's ethical

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<sup>5</sup> In Durkheim's (1965) view this pressure can inspire acts of heroism, but in reality it can also inspire acts of atrocity (B. S. Turner, 2003). Collective pressures do not always foster integration either for societies or individuals. Religion has been a divisive force as often as it has been an integrating one.

subject or Hegel's self-actualising subject of history – Durkheim went in the opposite direction to the very extremity of Western reason by radicalising the object. Durkheim did this by setting his structural theory in opposition to the empirical conception of the real, by treating objects in the social world as if they were structures and mechanisms instead of events, so that in contrast to idealism he saw the outer world as having autonomous conditions and arrangements, rather than as spontaneous products of the mind (Morrison, 1995: 201-3). In expressing this view Durkheim believed he was going beyond Kant, in taking the position that our mental operations are rather a product of a historically developing ensemble of social relations. In the Kantian account of the categories human beings start out with fundamental reason, apprehend the world, and spontaneously delineate it including such things as nature:

Categories are concepts which prescribe laws *a priori* to appearances, consequently to nature as the complex of all appearances... these categories are not derived from nature, and do not regulate themselves according to it as their model... *Laws do not exist except by relation to the subject* in which the appearances inhere, in so far as it possesses understanding, just as appearances have no existence except by relation to the same existing subject in so far as it has senses. (Kant, 2002: 116)

According to Durkheim's view this principle is reversed, first come the categories (i.e. Durkheim's concern with social facts), following them the delineations into classes of things in which human beings are also grouped along with nature (thus like biology, sociology can be a science), once grouped humans simply see the world in terms of the fundamental divisions of these groupings (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963). Durkheim was clearly stating that rather than being innate to reasons engagement with the outer world our differentiations such as class and category, in contrast, were part of the fundamental structures and discoverable laws of society, as Hamilton observes: 'Religion, then, for Durkheim, is nothing other than the collective force of society over the individual' (2001: 113). This results in Durkheim largely ignoring the role of religious leaders and as a consequence the individual in societal relations, culminating in a glossing over of how religion can and does function in social conflict and asymmetrical relations of power (Beckford, 2000: 484). To Bhaskar (1998a) this

would be evidence of the Durkheimian stereotype of ‘reification’, the assumption that societies possess a life of their own, external to and coercing the individual.<sup>6</sup>

Durkheim did recognise the potential structural benefits of religion as the *deep grammar* of society functioning to provide a common basis for morality (in contrast to Marx, see below, who only recognised the negative). However, Durkheim’s *cult of man* does not adequately explain modern religious phenomena as Tucker (2002) and to a lesser degree Hanegraaff (1999) optimistically presume. Durkheim was suggesting a form of humanism in the future and even then somewhat vaguely – not the birth of new religions. Rosati concurs by observing that new religious movements are revitalising the romantic legacy in ways ‘not always consistent with the modern cult of the individual’ (2003: 191). Durkheim was unclear on whether religion would decline or remain significant with the rise of modernity and science. I would suggest this confusion stems from Durkheim’s theoretical and methodological assumptions, which treated ‘the behaviour of social facts as a domain of phenomena that is completely autonomous of the psychological level’ (Porpora, 1998: 342).

### ***Karl Marx: Economic Materialism, Ideology, Alienation and Religion as Illusion?***

Marx also built a theory of religion within the broader narrative of the Enlightenment, although in a different direction to Durkheim by claiming that religion was not a form of social cement but instead a product of man’s self-alienation.<sup>7</sup> Marx endeavoured to

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<sup>6</sup> Other methodological difficulties with Durkheim’s (1965) structural theory are linked to the limited range of data his study was based on. The choice of the single case of central Australia restricted to a few aboriginal tribes undermines his stated aim to find *the essential nature of religion*. Jones (1986) elaborates by arguing that even if we limit ourselves to Australian tribes, we find that the central tribes are atypical; that the major cohesive force among aborigines is the tribe rather than the clan; that there are clans without totems (and totems without clans); that most totems are not represented by the carvings and inscriptions on which Durkheim placed so much weight; and that the ‘high gods’ of Australia are not born of a synthesis of totems. Stark and Bainbridge also state, ‘Durkheim’s analysis of anthropological reports about the Australian aboriginals, on which the entire book is based, is marked by the omission of very significant contrary facts’ (1996: 54).

<sup>7</sup> Feuerbach had initially claimed that religion was the projection of man’s highest aspirations onto the cosmos. In this way he attempted to abandon Hegelian idealism, because it began with the spirit and relegated nature to a secondary manifestation of spirit. Thus the task of Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel’s conception of religion was to show that the antithesis of the divine and human is altogether illusory and that the object and contents of the Christian religion were entirely human. Feuerbach argued the real truth of religion would prove to be atheism, or simply the positive affirmation of humanity (Kamenka, 1970). Marx (1957) believed Feuerbach had shown the true nature of the religious illusion. While rejecting the spirit or mind as a first principle Marx did nevertheless recognise a great advantage in Hegel’s philosophy, which was his second principle that the contradiction in things is the basis upon which *dialectical negation* unfolds. This resulted in Marx’s formulation of a novel social theory, by synthesising the active relational aspect of Hegel’s dialectic, with the critical materialistic dimension of Feuerbach’s philosophy.

develop a theory of social change focusing on the problem of how to transcend the given capitalist social conditions, which foster labour alienations, through conscious human praxis (i.e. creative activity through which human beings make and change their social and material world). However, Kim suggests the concept of human praxis was ‘of secondary importance in understanding the movement of human history’ (1995: 87). Instead, Marx reasoned that the dialectical opposition of material or productive forces primarily propelled history, namely the economic conditions of human existence in society (the base or infra-structure). Hence ‘as the paradigm of concrete material practice is deployed to enunciate social life as an articulated whole, then ideas, and consciousness, must be made derivative’ (López, 2001: 77). The history of ideas became a mere overlay of the real forces at work in history and within society (the super-structure). In this manner the role of religion and religious ideas became subsumed under the general concept of ideology.<sup>8</sup> So to Marx superstructural elements like religion were seen as simply ‘reflections’ of the economic base; a mere by-product of the oppressive nature of economic relations between classes in society, and one illusory means by which domination was maintained (Marx and Engels, 1972). These oppressive conditions could only be remedied through the overthrow of the capitalist class by the working class. Then religions will also wither away: ‘religion, Marx says, must be abolished as the illusory happiness of the people before they can achieve real happiness... Religion is not an inherent tendency of human nature but the product of specific social circumstances’ (Hamilton, 2001: 94-5). There is ample historical evidence to support the Marxist view that *religious ideology* is an important method of social control. Several relevant examples spring to mind:

- (1) The caste system of traditional India was justified by Hindu religious beliefs. The castes (and sub-castes), numbering many thousands, fit into the divinely originated varna framework. These divisions date from the time of the early Aryan settlement in North India and according to the Rg Veda the gods from the body of Purusa (the first man) created them (Hutton, 1963). The word varna means ‘colour’, hence the hypothesis that the system reflects an observed difference in appearance between the fair skinned Aryan invaders from the north and the darker skinned indigenous inhabitants. An individual’s

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<sup>8</sup> Marxists often use the concept of ideology to explain the continued persistence of capitalism, the dominant class maintains power through ideological control and manipulations – this has often been inspired by the notion of *hegemony* as developed by Gramsci (1971).



varna, and within it, his/her caste, gives his/her ascribed status in society; he/she is born into it and remains in it throughout life. As Bramley observes, ‘Force and economic pressures were the initial tools used by the Aryan invaders to preserve the caste system. By the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., distorted religious beliefs emerged as a third significant tool’ (1993: 99).

- (2) In Medieval Europe, kings and queens ruled by divine right, which was a view of the monarchy resting on biblical texts that associate kings closely with God through their anointing. Because of this sacramental association, the early view held that the character of the king was irrelevant: the virtue lay in the office, not in the person. Thus even under a bad ruler, only passive obedience, not active rebellion, is appropriate (Tomlinson, 1995).
- (3) Slave owners in the southern states of America often approved of the conversion of slaves to Christianity, believing it to be a controlling and pacifying influence. In addition, the adoption of Christian beliefs by the white slave owners helped justify their position both to themselves, as well as to others (Hugh, 1997). Jefferson Davis (a former American president) stated in his inaugural speech that: “[Slavery] was established by decree of Almighty God... it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation... it has existed in all ages, has been found among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts.”<sup>9</sup>

Althusser (1971) developed Marx’s theory of ideology further, moving away from the idea that ideology and hence religion is merely an illusion. He invented the concept of *ideological state apparatuses*: institutions such as religion, the media and education (they are called ideological because they function primarily through ideology), incorporate all classes in society within a dominant ideology. Through a process that Althusser called ‘interpellation’, people are made into agents, or carriers of social structure. This secures the hegemony of the dominant classes by making it possible for the relations of production to continue. Although this is a fuller formulation of Marx’s theory of the roles of religious ideology in society, it has still been criticised along with Marxism in general for being overly economically deterministic. Religion cannot simply be seen as essentially ideological and manipulative, this view does not adequately explain all religious phenomena:

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<sup>9</sup> Quote from: [http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr\\_slav.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_slav.htm) accessed 14/11/2004.

Marxist reasoning has not been at its most penetrating when applied to religion. Its headlong chase of collective progress has often left it heedless of the sensations of individual men and women, and its materialism has neglected the fact that death too is a material fact. (Kiernan, 1991: 104)

Abercrombie *et al.*, (1990) also argue that throughout history subordinate groups have developed their own interpretations of beliefs and symbols that frequently opposed those of dominant classes. In other words, religious ideologies will not always be used to legitimate power. They can sometimes be an impetus for change and indeed revolution. For instance, Tiryakian studies the unexpected and surprising implosion of the Soviet empire in 1989-90, combining aspects from both Durkheim's and Weber's sociology of religion to show how 'social actors in coercive secular states, confronted by a seeming monopoly of the use of physical force, are able, in certain exceptional circumstances, to mobilise and disarm the state' (1995: 269). In this regard, Marxist theory would more accurately capture societal complexity if we assumed that the super-structure (religion/ideology) could also feed back on the base (infra-structure), and thus shape or transform economic relations. Kersevan complains, Marx 'treated religion as a phenomenon of the social superstructure; however, in the majority of cases, the complex relationship was reduced to a global study of the changes in the content of religious conceptions brought about by changes in socio-economic conditions' (1975: 329, emphasis added).

A profound criticism of Marx's thought can also be made regarding his view of human nature, which goes to the very root of his philosophical foundations. In his inversion of Hegel's dialectic, as not the historical process of human thought towards universal consciousness, but instead as 'a theory of historical development based on human economic needs' (Morrison, 1995: 112). Marx makes the *a priori* assumption that human beings are purely biological organisms, having no spiritual essence or soul and therefore lacking in spiritual needs. While Marx was justifiably sceptical of certain manifestations of religious phenomena, he was also nonetheless himself guilty of promoting a purely materialistic type of dogma:

Marxism is strongly apocalyptic. It teaches a "Final Battle" creed involving forces of "good" and "evil" followed by a utopia on Earth. The primary difference is that Marx moulded those beliefs into a nonreligious framework and tried to make them sound like a social science rather than a religion. (Bramley, 1993: 325)

Furthermore, Marx underestimated the role of the middle classes in his conception of capitalism (Kim, 1995: 88), while also overestimating the liberating potential of the working classes (Kiernan, 1991: 115), and ironically the fall of communism in Russia has resulted in a growth in religious beliefs.<sup>10</sup> According to Inglehart and Baker, ‘In 1990, when a tottering but still dominant Communist party ruled Russia, 56 percent of Russians described themselves as religious. By 1995, when the Soviet political, economic and social systems had collapsed, 64 percent of Russians described themselves as religious’ (2000: 46). In essence as ‘to the future of religion, Marx was wrong’ (Kiernan, 1991: 118).

In a broad critique of both Marxist and Durkheimian thought, Baudrillard’s (1983) thesis on the end of the social makes a prophetic announcement of how the death of the social, entails the end of classical sociological theory. For Baudrillard the word ‘social’ is ambiguous and has never been given adequate theoretical formulation in either its abstract or more concrete sociological categorisations (1983: 65). This is clear in its use as a convenient gloss for a wide range of cognitive terms in the social scientific lexicon: social structure, social relation, social class, social institution, social exchange and social theory etc. Baudrillard suggests these problems of definition are further compounded by the collapsing of social relationships into an undifferentiated and homogenous mass, which is without ‘attribute, predicate, quality, or reference’ (1983: 5). Baudrillard sees contemporary Western populations as incapable of acting socially because with the advent of media and information technology the social ‘regresses to the same degree that its institutions develop’ (1983: 66). Baudrillard mounts a tacit attack on Durkheim and Marx’s understanding of the social as an objective realm, which requires and indeed can entail rational investigation. He suggests that sociology ‘survives on the positive and definitive hypothesis of the social. The reabsorption, the implosion of the social escapes it. The hypothesis of the death of the social is also that of its own death’ (1983: 4). Thus, according to Baudrillard it is only when classical sociology has been abandoned that we can begin to properly understand the fragmentation of mass culture through personalised consumption, leisure, and those other surface-level comforts that exist today.

I agree with Baudrillard these particular classics do overemphasise the social to the detriment of the subject. However, I disagree with his bold assertion that the

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<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of NRMs in Russia see Shterin (2004).

social has completely and mysteriously vanished during the course of modernity. The social still exists and in many ways the advent of media and information technology helps reinforce social networks (see Fish, 2003). Baudrillard is expressing a typically nihilistic postmodern view, and his ‘playful rambling should not be accorded too much veracity’ (Antonio, 2003: 172). Giddens (1993) is more even handed when stating that ‘theoretical frameworks can be assessed in terms of their fruitfulness and accuracy’, and there is still a need to ‘acknowledge the significance of institutional constraints and parameters forming both the condition and outcome of individual action’ (1993: 31; 32). The existence of competing ideologies and the potential alienation of groups and individuals as a consequence, are still structural realities of contemporary western society. Kalekin-Fishman argues that instead ‘of thinking of alienation as a state which can be wiped away, we can now grasp it as a means for exploring the wealth of diversity in human existence’ (2000: 406). An informative study of modern religious phenomena would therefore benefit from utilising such socially derived concepts.

### ***Max Weber: Failing Charisma and the Disenchantment of the World?***

Weber did not share in the celebration of liberating reason supposedly ushered in by the Enlightenment and evident in Comte’s positivism. For Weber modernity meant the spread of rationalisation, which brought with it, ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart, this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilisation never before achieved’ (1930: 182). What this foretold for religion was decline, a demise driven by what Weber referred to as the “disenchantment” of the world. The ideals that had motivated the early Protestant reformers had lost their religious content, yet lived on as an “iron cage” of rational self-repression, which compelled modern people to work hard at their occupations without the hope of transcendent reward. Weber also saw rationalisation as the spread of legal-rational systems of domination at the expense of charismatic ones. The commands charismatic leaders give often violate the requirements of tradition and the dictates of law. Thus to Weber charismatic systems and leadership were an important source of cultural innovation, which would inevitably decline and disappear under pressure from legal-rational domination. Weber set out what were essentially sociological approaches to religion, but ones also recognising the intellectual and emotional (i.e. psychological)

bases of it. Weber comments on the, ‘metaphysical needs of the human mind as it is driven to reflect on ethical and religious questions, driven not by material need but by an inner compulsion to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos and to take up a position toward it’ (1965: 117).

Rejecting the determinism of both Durkheimian functionalism and Marxian materialism, Weber saw religion as a potential independent variable in a multivariate formula: a proactive as well as reactive element in social life.<sup>11</sup> Morrison observes, ‘It was Weber who explicitly argued sociology must be a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action’ (1995: 307). So while Durkheim concentrated on the forces that held society together, Weber was more interested in the forces that carried society forward and modified the conditions of culture. Crucially Weber (1930) argued that the origin of the modern, hard working, capitalist world at the end of the Middle Ages (with its rapid spread and unequalled success) had something to do with Protestant worldly asceticism.<sup>12</sup> Weber further tried to demonstrate that a particular form of Protestantism, ascetic Calvinist Protestantism, preceded the development of capitalism. He was not claiming that Protestantism directly caused capitalism but instead postulated an ‘elective affinity’ between the ethic of Protestantism and the spirit of modern capitalism. In addition social class and class conflict to Weber became ideal types. They were never, as they were for Marx, concepts representing the existing social realities. Instead they were ideal types applicable more or less to a given society. So to Weber there could be times when the same religion serves the dominant classes as ideology and the oppressed classes as otherworldly consolation, by which the Marxist analysis is seen to hold true. However, when studying the same phenomena over a longer period of time, the relation of religion and class turns out to be very varied. It does not lend itself to easy generalisations. According to Weber in history religion had been both legitimating and innovative. Weber (1965) built on this reactive dimension of religion by creating categories for the understanding of religion, abstracting from the social process sets of two principal alternatives of social structure (e.g. magic/religion, religion/prophecy, etc.), where one reinforces the traditional order of society, while the other creates a

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<sup>11</sup> But here, as with the previous theories, Weber emphasises the rational analysis of religion and indeed considers religious change itself as part of a process of increasing rationality.

<sup>12</sup> The ascetic ethic Weber described was one encouraging the denial of sensuous pleasures for the enhancement of the spiritual self. It produced individuals who worked hard in their careers or callings, in a single-minded manner.

breakthrough and becomes a source of evolutionary change. Weber was fascinated with the idea of change and non-conformity. He made “charisma”, a word derived from the Pauline epistles, the starting point for his study of religion as well as the key concept for his theory of social action:

The holder of charisma seizes the task that is adequate for him and demands obedience and a following by virtue of his mission. His success determines whether he finds them. His charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent. (Weber, 1968: 20)

Charisma is a mysterious power attached to a person, which attracts people to him/her and makes them obedient to the will and the commands of that person. The charismatic person is experienced as a human with superior powers, out of the ordinary and not subject to the laws of daily reality. In some instances, the charismatic person is regarded as having divine powers. Weber thought this was the true origin of religion. The charismatic leader creates a community and begins a movement of people who accept his word and submit to his authority. To make this charisma available to people living at a distance from the leader or to hand it on to subsequent generations, the original charisma is institutionalised in rites, symbols or sacred writings and ritually communicated to a group of chosen disciples and their successors. This institutionalisation of charisma always implies a certain weakening or cooling of the original charisma. The fervour of the beginning is lost in the second generation. In Weber’s terminology, the charismatic power of the founder is eventually transformed into traditional authority invested in the religious institutions. What happens again and again, according to Weber, is the outburst of new charismas, new leaders emerge who attract people and exercise power over them. However, Weber did not expect any more charismas in the modern, industrialised, bureaucratic world. Weber felt that every breakthrough would be levelled down by the application of empirical reason. He thought, moreover, that the bureaucratisation of life, taking place at all levels of society, would inevitably create technically governed, rigid and inhuman structures that the increasing rationalisation would only make tighter until no room whatever could be left for freedom and flexibility (i.e. the dreaded “iron cage”).

Weber’s approach to the sociology of religion was both rich and complex. At its root was a psychological basis that emphasised the pursuit of meaning. For Weber the individual innovative prophet played a crucial role in the process of religion and of social action, it was a role based upon personal charisma from and through which

the structure of religion/society stemmed. Bhaskar (1998a) calls this the Weberian stereotype of “voluntarism”: the view that social objects are the outcomes of intentional or meaningful human action. Many have argued in relation to this that the central theoretical weakness of Weber’s approach to the sociology of religion was his ‘methodological individualism’: a willingness to treat all social forces and pressures as if they could be explained, (or reduced) to the actions and purposes of seemingly isolated individuals (Lee and Newby, 1983). The structural approaches of Marx and Durkheim examined earlier would strongly oppose such a view. As Kalberg writes, ‘organic holists have attacked Weber’s elevation of ideal types and subjective meaning to the center of his methodology and lamented the absence of their major explanatory concepts’ (2003: 183). Furthermore, Tiryakian (1995) feels compelled to combine both the Durkheimian notion of collective effervescence, with the Weberian concept of charisma, in order to successfully understand the dynamics of the “velvet revolutions” of 1989. Although Durkheim’s structuralism contrasts with Weber’s methodological individualism, Tiryakian still feels there is sufficient overlap to establish an important theoretical convergence. This confirms some of the limitations of applying Weber’s theory in isolation in endeavours to understand ‘the dynamics of social change and collective action in the contemporary world’ (1995: 278).

Wilson (2002) argues the absence of a theory of change in Weber, and the emphasis on the progress of formal rationality entailing the routinisation of charisma and institutions, lends an air of determinism to his understanding of these large-scale processes. In other words, the relationship between religiosity, science and level of industrialisation is far more complex than Weber’s theory supposes. Mullins (1992) suggests the classic Weberian perspective on the process of industrialisation, which emphasises the role of rationalisation in the elimination of magic, or what Weber called the “disenchantment of the world”, is in fact giving birth to non-rational phenomena. Mullin notes that revivals of mysticism and magic become the inevitable reactions to the rationality and predictability of contemporary society. For example, the charismatic movements and various new religious movements emphasising meditation perform the revitalisation function in North America. Aldridge (2000) also argues that the rise of consumer society does not necessarily spell the end of religion. On the contrary, religion benefits from a free market, where religious “firms” are sensitive to their customers’ needs. Thus, ‘consumer-friendly’ movements such as Soka Gakkai stress their compatibility with science. An affinity with the scientific

world-view is one key facet of Soka Gakkai's congruence with contemporary consumerism. Add to this its successful mobilization of resources for proselytizing, and its rapid growth is unsurprising' (Aldridge, 2000: 194-5).

Weber's (1930) thesis has engendered a great deal of debate with regard to his observation that religious ideas can conceivably lead to economic change. Weber argued that Protestant asceticism was one main factor (among others) that helped to produce modern capitalism. Nonetheless, this is rather contradictory. Protestant asceticism for Weber was associated with the notion of denying sensuous pleasures for the enhancement of the spiritual self; capitalism requires the consumption of commodities as well as saving for future investment. So Protestant asceticism aids the latter, but the former may require hedonism (Marshall, 1982). Further Beyer (1995) demonstrates that there are viable alternatives to Weber's account of the relationship between religious and economic behaviour. To Beyer intellectual and cultural agency expressed in the ethical and theological reflection of religious traditions in 'economic cultures' possesses a contemporary importance greater than Weber conceded.<sup>13</sup>

With its limitations acknowledged, Weber's concept of charisma (with modifications) does still remain a useful conceptual tool in explaining the formation of new religious movements (Riesebrodt, 1999). Turner suggests that: 'Weber never imagined that what the future held was a new age of charisma' (S. Turner, 2003: 23). He argues that in contemporary society charisma is commonplace and that *charismatic change agents* are sought to modify culture by modelling a desired culture, such as Madonna's influence on female fashion wear. Charisma is particularly important in modern society because fear and perceptions of risk have become more prevalent with the marginalisation of highly structured worldviews such as Christian ethics (Giddens, 1991). Melton also argues one important future direction of research for scholars of new religious and spiritual movements will be to analyse the 'importance of charismatic leadership in the life of new religions' (1995a: 274).

### **Secularisation: The European View**

The declining salience of most religious organizations in public life, the growth of privatized religion, the differentiation between religious institutions

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<sup>13</sup> Since the three classic theories, several contemporary sociologists have tried to re-examine religion. For excellent summaries see Beckford (1989, 1990), Fenn (2003a), Hamilton (2001), and on the links between religion and capitalism see Roberts (1995).



and other aspects of culture, and the erosion of many religious monopolies may all appear to indicate that the social significance of religion is also in decline. (Beckford, 1990: 57)

It has been argued that one major legacy of classical theorising to the contemporary sociology of religion has been the theme of inevitable religious decline. This has been manifested in modern debate within sociology of religion as the secularisation thesis.

### ***The Supporters: Wilson and Bruce***

In contemporary sociology, it was Bryan Wilson who first defined secularisation as ‘the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance’ (1966: 14). By 1982 little had changed as he states, ‘secularisation relates to the diminution of the social significance of religion, and secularisation means that process by which religious institutions, actions, and consciousness, lose their social significance’ (1982a: 149). Wilson’s approach to religion is very much influenced by Weber. In this respect, for Wilson, the key to secularisation is the process of rationalisation, which is part of modernisation. Wilson explains secularisation by the decline of community and the concomitant changes in social control from moral or religious to technical and bureaucratic control. ‘As our society has become less dependent on moral regulations, and as our relations to each other have become more role regulated and less personally involved, so the functions of religion have declined’ (1976: 20). This is very much a linear process for Wilson and he argues there are no reasons to believe that any counter-trend could reverse it. In 2003 his position had not altered, ‘the secularization of religion has been largely attributable to the rationalization of work techniques, that same current of rational process has also been responsible for the de-moralization of society’ (2003a: 48). In sum, according to Wilson religion becomes more and more marginal in society.

Several problems stem from Wilson’s discourse on secularisation. First, if Wilson is asserting that a modern linear decline in the institutional significance of religion has transpired in the West, then statistical support such as church attendance rates only hold in Europe, but not America (Fischer and Hout, 2002). Second, there is a problematic distinction between the concept of the institutional decline of religion and a personal decline in religious belief. For example, Robbins (1988: 56) asserts that Wilson is ‘decidedly not maintaining that people no longer believe or need to be religious’. However, Wilson’s (1982a) definition of secularisation makes reference to

‘consciousness’, but no elaboration on what this means is offered: individual/social or both? (See Beyer, 1994: 70) Third, and related to the previous point what is Wilson actually suggesting? If religion is in decline only institutionally, but perhaps not personally, then how is he using the term secularisation? Wilson’s definition of religion as ‘the invocation of the supernatural’ (1982a: 159), and his theory of secularisation as the decline of such a religion, is rather contradictory (Baum, 1975: chapter 7). Dobbelaere correctly observes that the ‘term “secularization” is widely acknowledged to be a source of confusion’ (1984: 200). Finally, Wilson’s theory of secularisation focuses on modernity, science and technology, industrialisation and urbanisation as external secularising forces acting upon religion. This is evidence of a macro approach, in which Wilson’s arguments become linear by linking the growth of one phenomena and the decline of the other as parts of the same process. Thus, ‘Wilson’s account of secularisation leaves mainstream religion in a strait-jacket from which it cannot escape’ (Aldridge, 2000: 74).

Another contemporary advocate of secularisation is Steve Bruce (1995), who presents a range of statistics based on church attendance to support his assertion that religion is experiencing irreversible decline in modern Britain. For example, in support of this view church membership in Britain has declined from 30% of the adult population in 1900 to 12% in 1990 (see table 1 below). Again in a similar vein to Wilson, Bruce (1995) sees secularisation as the product of the rationalisation of the modern world. This leads to increasing social differentiation, a key facet of which is that the church has progressively less opportunity to involve itself in non-religious spheres. To Bruce modernisation leads to social life becoming more and more dominated by the logic of capitalist production, with its emphasis on calculability, efficiency and profit. Hence, religious faith and morality become less significant in the culture and institutions of modern societies. Both these trends are further amplified by societalization (a term first used by Wilson), which refers to the process whereby social life becomes fragmented and ceases to be communally based. These fundamental changes and features of modern societies lead to institutional religion losing its social base and many of its social roles. Bruce summarises his position:

The secularization thesis argues that the *decline of religion* in the modern *West* is not an accident but is an unintended *consequence* of a variety of complex social changes that for brevity we call *modernization*... unless we can imagine

a reversal of the increasing cultural autonomy of the individual, *secularization must be seen as irreversible.* (2003: 262, emphasis added)

**Table 1 – Christian Church membership in Britain (1900 to 1990)**

<i>Year</i>	<i>All Protestant total (m)</i>	<i>Roman Catholic total (m)</i>	<i>Total (m)</i>	<i>% of adult population</i>
<i>1900</i>	5.4	2	7.4	30
<i>1930</i>	7.1	2.8	9.9	29
<i>1950</i>	6.1	3.5	9.6	25
<i>1970</i>	5.2	2.7	7.9	19
<i>1990</i>	3.4	2.2	5.6	12

Source: Adapted from Hunt (2003: 9).

Note: *m* = millions

Bruce’s theory of secularisation has many shortcomings, several of which are related to his over reliance on statistics to support his embedded set of assumptions. Jenkins (1996) elaborates by arguing they leave unexamined points of interest that do not fit the underlying argument of secularisation (such points are simply set aside in favour of the master narrative). Distinct and often very different histories (local, regional, for example) are handled in such a way that they tell the same, rather than different, more nuanced and at times contradictory stories. So following Jenkins, Bruce’s theory is incomplete because ‘this approach cannot readily measure change; rather, it generates its own chronologies’ in which ‘history is effaced, and the past homogenized’ (1996: 335). Further, how certain can we be that church membership or attendance are valid and truly reflective measures of the importance of religiousness within society? Stark (1999) asks the same question and provides an answer, ‘we are directed to note a steep decline in church attendance in much of Europe and to infer from this an erosion of individual faith as well, on the grounds that participation is low because of a lack of the beliefs needed to motivate attendance. These views are wrong in all respects’ (1999: 254). We examine why in the following section.

***The Complexity Acknowledged: Dialectics and Believing without Belonging***

Secularization cannot be interpreted as a process in which the social importance of religion, or even religion as such, declines or vanishes altogether. But secularization can be very well understood as a thorough transformation of religion under the impact of historical and social processes  
(Hanegraaff, 1999: 151)

The most scathing blow to the premises of the secularisation thesis has come from one of its most notable original supporters, namely Peter Berger. Peter Berger and his collaborator Thomas Luckmann together developed one of the more famous theories of religion. Berger and Luckmann (1963) were primarily concerned with the falling monopoly power of organised religion (i.e. Christianity), as a major legitimating force of a socially constituted universe. They envisioned a “privatization” of belief or the expectation that religion would eventually shift to the private sphere within an increasingly secularized society, a result of which was to introduce a competitive element to the domain of legitimating socially constituted universes. Berger and Luckmann reasoned the reigning theoretical models in social science (functionalism and structuralism) did not take account of the “total social facts” of religion, so ‘a more comprehensive theoretical frame of reference’ is needed (Berger and Luckmann, 1963: 426). This was the beginning of their argument for a *dialectical perspective* in the social sciences. They went further and the essentials of a theoretical framework were laid down in their *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967), which explored the linkages between convictions, commitment and social reality. This view avoided both the idea of a structure determining individuals (Marx, Durkheim) and that individuals could independently create their world (Weber). Instead emphasis was placed on a dialectical process in which the meanings given by individuals to the world become institutionalised or turned into social structures. These structures then become part of the meaning systems employed by individuals constraining their actions. Or put more simply, society forms the individuals who create society, so society produces the individuals who produce society, in a continuous dialectic.

Berger applied and developed the implications of this dialectic to the religious realm in *The Social Reality of Religion* (1969), within which he shows how religion brings society into relation with the sacred cosmos, how it locates human society in a wider cosmic picture and in the process legitimates the social order.<sup>14</sup> All this Berger

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<sup>14</sup> For more details and a good evaluation of Berger’s work on religion see Woodhead *et al* (2001).

argued was achieved through socialisation. This is the process in which individuals are taught and learn the cultural essentials of a society, as well as brought to identify with these meanings. The self that internalises the meanings of a society does not merely possess these meanings, but also represents and expresses them (dialectic at work). However, religion does not simply legitimate and make sense of the social order (as in the Marxist or Durkheimian theories); it also makes sense of experiences, which might otherwise be disruptive and disordering. Put another way, it legitimates marginal situations and experiences, those that are at the limits of everyday ordinary experience such as sleep, dreams, death, war and evil etc. Berger called the religious explanations of such things theodicies.<sup>15</sup> It is the major role of religious theodicies to combat anomie (disordered experiences become *anomic*). Religion ‘is powerful over men precisely because it shelters them from the terrors of anomy’ (Berger, 1969: 90). The purpose of religion is to offer a protective canopy of transcendent legitimacy, meaning, and order to the precarious constructions society calls ‘reality’.

Based on his dialectical reasoning Berger viewed religion as both a dependent and independent variable. Thus, to Berger the historical origins of secularisation lie in religion itself, ‘Christianity has been its own gravedigger’. (1969: 127). The religious tradition of Western culture is seen as a historical force or a casual factor in the formation of the modern secularised world. Berger also recognised other factors to that of religious tradition in forming the modern world, such as social and economic processes. But these latter processes also take on a rationalising dimension leading to a segregation of spheres. To Berger a familiar set of root causes drive rationalisation: industrialisation, urbanisation and the rise of science. This led Berger to define secularisation as ‘the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols’ (1969: 107).

The approach of Berger and Luckmann is a clever synthesis of Durkheimian, Weberian and Marxist insights (Hamilton, 2001). Although Berger and Luckmann’s theoretical approach is more ‘dynamic’ than the classics, by attempting to incorporate a dialectical component, the relationship between structure and agency remains under-

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<sup>15</sup> A theodicy in religion justifies divine justice, despite the existence of evil. The concept was first used by Weber to explore how religious beliefs may legitimate social privilege or compensate the suffering of the disprivileged: ‘A theodicy of disprivilege, in some form, is a component of every salvation religion which draws its adherents primarily from the disprivileged classes’ (Weber, 1965: 113).

developed.<sup>16</sup> For example, Bhaskar regards the Berger and Luckmann models as seriously misleading because ‘it encourages, on the one hand, a voluntaristic idealism with respect to our understanding of social structure and, on the other, a mechanistic determinism with respect to our understanding of people’ (1998b: 214). This results in a diminishing role given to religion in the dialectical process, by assuming that the convergence of a number of modernising processes will ultimately erode religion’s ability to act back upon its creators. Bhaskar suggests society should be regarded as an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions that individuals reproduce or transform, but which would not exist unless they did so. So society does not exist independently of human activity (the error of reification), nor is it the product of it (the error of voluntarism). Society is only present in human action, but human action always expresses and utilises some or other social form. Neither, can be identified with, reduced to, explained in terms of, or reconstructed from the other (the error of the dialectical conception). To Bhaskar there is an: ‘ontological hiatus’ between society and people, as well as a mode of connection that the Weberian, Marxist and Durkheimian models ignore and the Berger and Luckmann model fails to fully articulate. Hence, ‘People and society are not... related dialectically. They do not constitute two moments of the same process. Rather they refer to radically different kinds of things’ (Bhaskar, 1998b: 214).

The presentation of a secularisation theory by Berger and Luckmann is similar to Wilson. A key point of divergence is the clearer distinction the role religion is now seen to play. The segregation of spheres caused by the rationalisation of social and economic institutions relocates religion to the ‘private sphere’, from its initial position within the ‘public sphere’. Thus, religion is no longer imposed and consequently must be marketed. For Berger the fact that the modern world brings together many people with contrasting views (i.e. pluralism), combined with religion’s relocation to the private sphere, leads him to argue a decline in religious belief will inevitably result:

As there is a secularization of society and culture, so there is a secularisation of consciousness. Put simply, this means that the modern West has produced

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<sup>16</sup> Marx also incorporated a form of dialectics throughout his work. However, this was more concerned with explaining motion and change in broad historical processes and as a result the role of the individual in change was underdeveloped. Kaspersen argues ‘the works of the mature Marx... focus on structural conditions and especially on the role of the economic structures. The latter are given so much weight, however, that the human agent and human consciousness appear to be determined by the economy’ (2000: 25).

an increasing number of individuals who look upon the world and their own lives without the benefit of religious interpretations. (Berger, 1969: 107-108)

The secularisation theory developed by Berger is the most convincing, complex and comprehensive. Nevertheless, it is still open to criticism on one major front, which is, ‘while rates of religious participation are far lower in Europe than in the United States, differences are small when comparisons are based on subjective measures of faith’ (Stark, 1999: 263). Grace Davie (1990, 2000) has developed this notion in the context of Britain as the “believing without belonging” thesis. This essentially means that while church membership and attendance may be low in Britain, and indeed declining, the same cannot be said about religious belief. For example, data from the International Social Survey Programs (Religion and Religion II) shows that in Great Britain belief in a higher power of some kind had increased from 12.5 percent in 1991 to 14.3 percent in 1998. Further those saying they did not believe in God had declined from 9.9 percent in 1991 to 9.6 percent in 1998. Gill *et al.*, (1998) chart the trends in belief in occultist practices in Britain since 1970 to 1990, and discover many have remained stable over time. Superstitious beliefs in things like lucky charms and in paranormal phenomena such as Ghosts have evidently not declined (see table 2).

**Table 2 – Belief in occultist practices in Britain (1970-1990)**

<i>Belief in</i>	<i>% of British population</i>		
	1970s	1980s	1990s
<i>Reincarnation</i>	24	26	26
<i>Horoscopes</i>	23	26	23
<i>Fortune Telling</i>	48	54	23
<i>Lucky Charms</i>	17	19	18
<i>Black Magic</i>	11	13	10
<i>Spiritualism</i>	11	14	14
<i>Ghosts</i>	19	28	31

Source: Gill *et al.*, (1998: 513)

What all these observations imply is that there is a far more complex religious process occurring in modern Britain than irreversible decline. Dobbelaere attempts to capture

the complexity by arguing for secularisation to be studied via three levels; macro, meso, micro, and as a ‘dialectical and discordant process’ (1999: 244). Dobbelaere argues that secularisation occurs primarily at the societal (i.e. macro) level, which does not imply a concomitant disappearance of religion or decline in personal religiosity, though these processes may very well accompany the removal of religion from the centre of society. So secularisation is *one* explanatory factor for ‘declining involvement in the churches’ (Dobbelaere, 1999: 241).

Hervieu-Léger echoes a similar theme, ‘secularization itself is: not the loss of religion in a globally rationalized society, but a general reorganization of the forms of religiosity, itself part of a more general redistribution of beliefs’ (1998: 31). Inglehart and Baker (2000) have collated compelling evidence that contradicts the traditional view promoted about the relationship between modernisation and religion. Using data from three waves of the World Value Surveys, which include 65 societies, they find evidence that the rise of postindustrial society does not necessarily diminish interest in religion: ‘Indeed, the evidence suggests that it leads to growing interest in spiritual concerns’ (2000: 48). They argue modernisation is probabilistic, not deterministic. Economic development tends to transform a given society in a predictable direction, but the progress and path are not inevitable. Or in simple terms ‘modernization does not follow a linear path’ and ‘the secularization thesis is oversimplified’ (2000: 49).

The arguments, criticisms and mounting evidence undermining the simplistic concept of secularisation, led Berger to withdraw his support for the theory, ‘The big mistake, which I shared with everyone who worked in this area in the 1950s and ’60s, was to believe that modernity necessarily leads to a decline in religion’ (1998: 782). Even Bruce’s (2001) appeal for him to recant resulted in the following response:

I must stand by my ‘recantation’ of secularization theory, for all the reasons that Bruce enumerates and which, I think, he does not successfully repudiate... Those who, in the face of all this, maintain the old secularization theory – Bryan Wilson and Steve Bruce are notable among them – can be admired for their dissent... For all that, they are wrong. (Berger, 2001: 194)

Nonetheless, other sociologists (notably in the US) have rejected the secularisation thesis from the beginning, on the grounds that it grossly underestimates the diversity of patterns of religious change in the modern world. We now examine their views.



### **Who Said Secularisation? The North American Perspective**

While the secularisation story got much of its ammunition from Europe's steep religious decline (in terms of church attendance), the United States has long been a religious nation. Rates of religious participation are far higher than those in Europe and particularly Great Britain and on the surface do not provide support for theories of secularisation (Hadaway, 1993). As a consequence the view held in the US from the start has been that secularisation theory was devised in Europe and applies only to Europe (Martin, 1991). Dissenting from the sociological orthodoxy as they see it, American scholars have declared the secularisation thesis ethnocentric, empirically unsafe and intellectually bankrupt. Drawing on a variety of approaches including economic analysis and rational choice theory, they have produced a new paradigm in the sociological study of contemporary religion.

#### ***Rational Choice and a Market Theory of Religion***

The foundations of American sociological thought can be traced back to the Chicago School under the auspices of Park and Burgess in the 1920s and to Harvard under Talcott Parsons in the 1930s and 1940s (Morrison, 2001). Of these it is Parsons who is particularly notable for the broad scope and analytic depth of his theories. The main concern of Parsons was to develop a coherent conceptual scheme for sociology that would be applicable in all times and places, would address all aspects of human social organisation, and would be open to progressive refinement as the advancing discipline gained in ability to relate theory to empirical knowledge. A key interest for Parsons was to refine the concept of function in social systems, which resulted in his four-function paradigm. In order to meet the functional requirements of the social system, groups of action or sub-systems of action develop.<sup>17</sup> Parsons held that systems of social action tend to equilibrium even if they never actually attain it and that social change is simply movement from one state of equilibrium to another (Parsons, 1991). Again in a similar vein to Durkheim, Parsons argued that religion functioned to maintain social stability by helping to form value consensus (i.e. integration) through the cultural system (of which religion is a part). He rejected the grim Weberian vision

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<sup>17</sup> This emphasis on functions in social systems has led to his classification following Durkheim as a functionalist. Lemert suggests Parsons invented modern social theory by reinterpreting the classics and most famously taught that religion was irreplaceably at the core of society itself and was therefore 'needless to say, rigorously Durkheimian in this respect' (1999: 236).

of a disenchanted world where religion loses significance. Instead he observed that ‘death cannot be treated with indifference’ (1991: 163), so religion was still seen as playing a crucial function in pattern maintenance through its motivational properties.

The market or rational choice theory of religion advocated by Stark and Bainbridge (1987) shares some features of the Parsonian approach. It also departs in two important ways. First, more importance is placed on the micro-sociological analysis of action. So in contrast to the Parsonian concept of human agency, with its emphasis on the societal integration of norms and values, a more dynamic rational choice account of human action is proposed.<sup>18</sup> Put very simply rational choice theory asserts that humans seek what they perceive to be rewards and try to avoid what they regard to be costs. Thus, there is an emphasis on optimization, individuals optimize by maximising benefits while minimising costs when making choices from sets of alternatives for action. In short, people do what they believe will be most beneficial for them.<sup>19</sup> Second, the Parsonian thesis of overarching value consensus is replaced by a greater attention to social conflict. As a result, Parsons’s (1967) account of the triumph of Christian values in the west gives way to a more sceptical analysis of social conflict within and between religious groups.

The Stark-Bainbridge theory of religion is built on two fundamental concepts, which they see driving rational human behaviour, compensators and rewards. The central idea is that individuals try to rationally maximise their gains in their everyday actions, including religious ones. This leads to individuals seeking religion to ensure otherworldly rewards; hence religious rewards are compensators for the trials of their current life. This implies an inherent or universal human need for answers to our most fundamental questions, such as: Why are we here? The consequence of this reasoning is that there will always be a ready demand for explanations outside the natural world of our senses, based on supernatural conceptions. Therefore, it follows, since religion answers universal questions and it offers compensators that meet universal human needs, religion can neither disappear nor seriously decline. Stark argues:

The “market” theory of religiousness developed in my earlier publications is compatible with religious *variation*: with increases as well as decreases in religiousness, indeed its usual prediction is for relatively stable levels of religious commitment in societies. (Stark, 1999: 259)

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<sup>18</sup> The theory of rational choice has origins in microeconomics (Gravelle and Rees, 1992: 6-8) and has become an important branch within sociological theory (Abell, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> The term “rational” as used here has clearly nothing to do with the notion of “rationalisation”.

Results from the International Social Survey Programs (Religion and Religion II) indicate that in the US belief in life after death had increased from 78 percent in 1991 to 81 percent in 1998. Furthermore, those saying they definitely believed in heaven had also increased from 63 percent in 1991 to 67 percent in 1998. Meanwhile, in Great Britain over the same period belief in life after death declined by 2% and in heaven by 1%, while in contrast those believing in hell increased from 29 percent in 1991 to 32 percent in 1998. This implies that belief based on supernatural conceptions or the demand for religious compensators (e.g. belief in heaven) is not decreasing in a linear fashion over-time with modernisation. As the data shows, religious belief in the US and GB is not easy to classify. People will always seek answers to the purpose of life or hope for immortality; therefore some will inevitably choose to believe in transcendent meaning systems. In this way the market theory of religion presents a key challenge to the secularisation thesis, namely that decline in religious belief is *not* an irreversible or inevitable outcome of modernity. Demerath acknowledges the complexity and dynamics of religious behaviour in modern society:

Religion has declined in many sectors and levels of society, but not all. If it has lost currency in the public sphere, this has often been accompanied by a shifting location into the private world. And the decline of religion at one point in time is often a precondition for its later revival, albeit in sometimes altered form and function. (Demerath, 1995: 110)

The key theme evident in the North American narrative is that religious behaviour is increasingly a matter of choice (rationally motivated), as opposed to socialisation, modernisation or ingrained rationalisation. Religious behaviours are less and less a product of cross-generational traditions and more and more a matter of individual decision-making. Therefore, ‘Stark and like-minded sociologists use methodological individualism to challenge the basic tenets of the secularisation thesis. They do not see religious culture as anything more than the sum of the religiosity of individuals’ (Aldridge, 2000: 100). Methodological individualism assumes that there are stable religious preferences or demand. Leading to the rejection of secularisation on the grounds it mainly concentrates on measuring changing religious supply (i.e. church attendance), while neglecting the more crucial case of demand (i.e. individual belief).

Rational choice theorists such as Stark have even challenged the assumption of some “golden age” of religion ever having really existed in Europe. For example, Stark (1999: 254) argues ‘religious participation was very low in northern and western

Europe many centuries before the onset of modernization'. Furthermore, Stark notices that "eastern revivals", "upward trends in Islam" and "the rise in fundamentalism" all result in establishing the need for a more complex body of theory to explain religious variation, because 'secularization theory is as useless as a hotel elevator that only goes down' (1999: 269). A primary occurrence Finke and Stark (1992) attempt to address with rational choice theory is an account of the rise of NRMs in the US, which is often used as evidence to refute the determinism of secularisation. They conclude that religious pluralism leads to competition in the religious market, which serves to draw more people into religion, and hence results in religious innovation such as new cults and sects. This contrasts to Berger's (1969) view of pluralism as leading to religious decline, as well as Wilson (1976) who argues new cults and sects are marginal and insignificant items in the religious marketplace. Melton in opposition to this latter view shows that new sects and movements have been founded at an accelerating rate throughout the United States and, while a few do disappear, most of them continue to survive and flourish (Melton, 1992: 28).

Rational choice theory strives to overcome the determinism of secularisation.<sup>20</sup> However, this does not mean that it has been immune from criticism (Hamilton, 2001: chapter 16). For example, in a recent study of the dynamics of religious choices in America, Fischer and Hout (2002) argue that demographic changes and politics are key determinants of religious behaviour. While secularisation is rejected, Fisher and Hout do identify numerous macro influences on micro religious choices, and show that the rational choice model of human behaviour is highly problematic by assuming people act largely according to utilitarian principles. Rosati asserts that 'mainstream sociology has always, from its very beginning, been an anti-utilitarian discipline' (2003: 176). It is inadequate to reduce something as emotionally rooted as religious belief/faith to simple cost benefit calculations. This assumes that people across time and space have the same immutable needs, which neglects the fact that needs could be, and are, often socially constructed. Again this is a re-emergence of the limitations to a theory based on methodological individualism (Lee and Newby, 1983; Bhaskar, 1998b). Hamilton remarks on Stark and Bainbridge's approach, 'Markets are always embedded in social relations and religious markets particularly so. They are not comprised of freely choosing independent actors or competitive firms' (2001: 222).

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<sup>20</sup> Miller (1995) presents a modified rational choice view and applies it to religious behaviour in Japan.

The assumptions and data used by Finke and Stark (1992) regarding religious innovation leading to a rise in new religions can also be questioned. Lechner (1991) argued that the crucial statistic is the ratio of recruits to the new movements, compared with the losses of membership of the older mainstream denominations and sects. This loss according to Lechner is far greater than the increase in numbers involved in the new movements, at least as far as Europe is concerned. Therefore, Finke and Stark's (1992) analysis even if it applies to the United States is somewhat country-specific. Crockett *et al.*, (2002) give a statistical based critique of both the secularisation and rational choice theories of religion, they point out that using data on religious participation as a valid indicator of the prevalence of belief is questionable. The premise of Crockett *et al.*, 's argument is that both theories assume that religious pluralism has a direct affect on rates of religious belief. Berger's (1969) secularisation theory implies rising religious pluralism exposes people to a diversity of opinions so the plausibility structure of religion is undermined, which leads to religious decline. In contrast, Finke and Stark (1992) argued such a theory fails to describe the United States, which has both the highest levels of religious pluralism and one of the greatest rates of church attendance. Based on their market conception of religion they suggest that pluralism fosters competition, which causes churches to work harder to maintain demand, thereby drawing more people into religious markets. Nonetheless, Crockett *et al.*, suggest: 'Proponents of secularization and religious economies theories could both be wrong: Pluralism may have no effect at all on religious participation' (2002: 227). Thus, a more complex model of religious transformation is still required:

In my view, rational choice theory is the theoretical formulation of a market modelled perception of human actions, and its application to sociology of religion cannot contain the rich variety of religious experience, the socio-cultural and even individual-psychological components of past and present religiosity, religious movements and especially not their mutual relationship to society. (Varga, 2000: 114)

### **Towards a Structuration Model of Religious Change**

Giddens (1976, 1979) does not specifically say anything about the relevance of structuration theory to religious change *per se*. However, as a theory of social reproduction there is no reason why it cannot be used to explain the making/remaking of religion in society. The central ambition of structuration theory is to provide an

account of the constitution of social life and of the nature of actions and systems. Giddens argues the traditional dualisms between agency and structure, individual and society, voluntarism and determinism, and subject and object cannot be transcended simply by bringing these rival types of approach together, conjoining one to the other (e.g. Berger and Luckmann). Instead, a fundamental reconceptualisation of the debate in terms of duality is required. Thus, structuration theory supersedes the deficiencies of the Durkheimian, Marxist and Weberian conceptions of society by showing how ‘structures are constituted through action, and reciprocally how action is constituted structurally’ (1976: 161). This is by no means a repetition of Berger and Luckmann’s dialectical process. Giddens goes one stage further by proposing a “duality of structure”. He argues that ‘structure’ is both the medium and the outcome of the actions, which are recursively organised by structures. The use of similar arguments by Giddens to those of Bhaskar’s critical realism is not entirely coincidental. Realism is a philosophy of science that Giddens himself explicitly refers to as a point of departure for social theory. He suggests the concepts formulated are ‘compatible with a realist epistemology’ (1979: 63). This is clearly evident when Giddens argues that ‘structures’ can be understood as a matrix governing the laws of transformation, but that they ‘do not exist in time-space, except in the moments of the constitution of social systems’ (1979: 65). Manicas (1998) has also noted the very close affinities between Bhaskar’s transformational model and the ontology of praxis developed by Giddens.<sup>21</sup> He argues critical realism downgrades epistemological and methodological questions in favour of ontological ones, and by doing so has many points of intersection with structuration theory.

Giddens (1984) sees social change as a cyclical process of social reproduction. Social life is contingent, so social change must therefore always be seen in a specific context – a conjuncture:

If all social life is contingent, all social change is conjunctural. That is to say, it depends upon the conjunctions of circumstances and events that may differ in nature according to variations of context, where context (as always) involves the reflexive monitoring by the agents involved of the conditions in which they “make history.” (1984: 245)

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<sup>21</sup> However, a major difference is Bhaskar’s argument for two accounts of duality, the first dealing with the “duality of structure” and the second dealing with the “duality of praxis”. This need for separate accounts of structure and praxis firmly separates the TMSA from structuration (see Archer, 1998).

Giddens criticises sociology for conceptualising societies as isolated, distinct entities in which processes of social change caused by interaction with other systems are largely ignored. Hence, for Giddens, social change becomes the result of an infinite number of social processes. This implies that explanations of social transformation must always be historically specific, while also incorporating multiple causes. Thus, explanations that attempt to reduce complicated social processes to single explanatory models (e.g. the theory of secularisation) must be rejected. According to him,

In the modern world the expansion in the time-space distancing of social systems, the intertwining of different modes of regionalization involved in processes of uneven development, the prominence of contradictions as structural features of societies, the prevalence of historicity as a mobilizing force of social organization and transmutation – all these factors and more supply a backdrop to assessing the particular origins of an episode. (Ibid)

The metamorphosis of the religious landscape in confrontations with modernity is a complicated episode. Although we can trace the origins behind such an episode, predicting the trajectory is far less feasible. Unintended consequences will materialize after the force of religion and individuals collide, producing novel institutional forms.

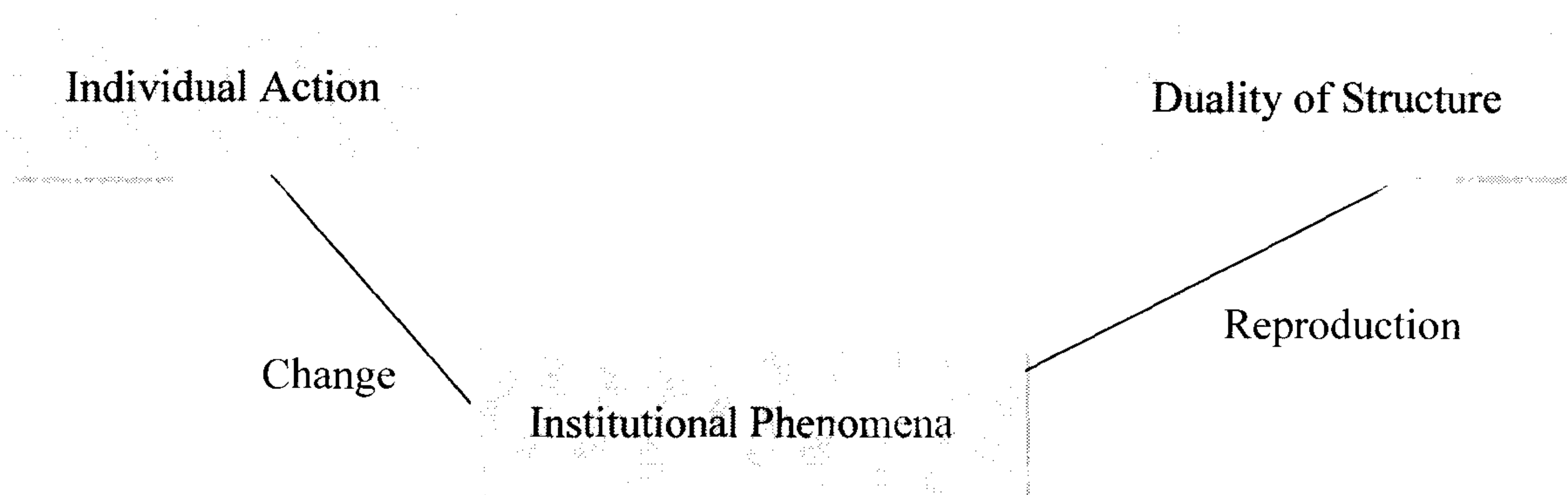
Lee uses the principles of structuration theory to focus ‘on the problem of secularisation as a motor of change in religious systems’ (1992: 318). The thrust of his argument is that secularisation needs to be recast in non-linear terms for which structuration theory has a lot to give, not only in demonstrating cycles of reproduction in social change, but by also extending the discussion of this process beyond the Christian realm. He provides an example by using structuration theory to demonstrate the unique ways the structural bases of contemporary Islam and Hinduism have been reproduced, which he argues derives from varying charismatic sources. In this respect, Lee operationalises the Weberian concept of charisma to identify two distinct types:

- (1) Structural charisma – embedded in a divine message transmitted by prophets – i.e. Islam and Mohammed. This type of charisma is associated less with particular individuals than the power of the word, which becomes enshrined in scriptural form to be interpreted and reinterpreted according to changing circumstances.
- (2) Systemic charisma – involves interaction between a guru and his followers and is therefore not foundational, meaning the message does not take

precedence over the individual – i.e. Hinduism. This type of charisma involves individual action and hence bypasses institutional phenomena to connect directly with the reproduction chain.

Lee argues that the concept of secularisation implies two levels of change that connect with the duality of structure. This is illustrated by the diagram below (figure 1 is from Lee, 1992: 386), which highlights the links between structuration and secularisation:

**Figure 1 – Structuration and Secularisation**



Lee suggests that the left side of the diagram above represents individual action and figures prominently in the emergence of secular consciousness. However, it is at the institutional level when directed change is systematically expressed that reproduction occurs (right side of the diagram). In his words:

[T]he new institutional orders arising from secularization are not independently derived from concrete praxis between human agents, but must be conceptualized as empirical representations of structural properties central to the reproduction chain. (Lee, 1992: 386)

Lee proceeds to argue that the systemic charisma of Hinduism renewed through personal, and not institutional networks, allows the possibility of re-enchantment as an alternative to modern disenchanted institutions (e.g. the Hare Krishna movement). In broader terms, in the realm of Hindu philosophy disenchantment is not necessarily the antithesis of enchantment, but merely a distraction or minor detour from the realisation of Spirit. Thus, disenchantment may increase materialistic concerns in the world, but does not totally remove the spiritual element in humanity. In contrast the



structural charisma of Islam is antithetical to modernity because its divine foundationalism is challenged by the competitive pluralism of modern institutions. For example, the Islamic revolutionaries in Iran came to power with ideological baggage that implied an economic as well as a political transformation of society. They wished to show that Islam, like capitalism and Marxism, had its own economic philosophy and its own answers to contemporary economic problems. Their work was an exercise in the rejection of “alien” ideologies and in the assertion of a distinct Islamic identity. As Bakhash comments, ‘they attempted to use Islam as an instrument for social and economic reform, and to suggest to a younger generation attracted to socialism or Marxism that Islam also could serve as a vehicle for social transformation’ (1985: 167).

In terms of the linkages between his two conceptions of charisma and the structuration model shown in figure 1, Lee argues the following:

[W]e may depict systemic charisma as the establishment of horizontal relations between individual action and the duality of structure, whereas structural charisma involves competition with modern institutions, thus invoking vertical relations between individual action and institutional phenomena. (1992: 389)

Lee’s model implies that the modernising tendency of society will be confronted in different ways by various religions, and will not necessarily result in a linear decline. So to Lee, the ‘problem of secularization is not concerned so much with the decline of religion but with the unique forms of religious reproduction occasioned by reactions to modernity’ (Lee, 1992: 398). The merits of Lee’s theory of religious change lie largely in his use of structuration theory, which enables the conceptualisation of social reality as consisting of human social practice, or ‘human being and human doing, social reproduction and social transformation’ (Giddens, 1984: xx). Here in Lee’s approach we see the beginnings to a model that conveys and reflects the complexities of religious transformations and experiences in modern western societies. Based on structuration principles we have an account of the interactions between individual action and institutional phenomena and the intricate ways these can combine and intersect to reproduce society. This theoretical approach to studying the multifaceted nature of contemporary religion is the most promising of those reviewed thus far.

## Conclusion

Perhaps one might conclude that there is more to the sociology of religion than the secularization debate, and leave it at that. (Aldridge, 2000: 139)

I have reconsidered the classics and the secularisation thesis in this chapter, arguing that such theories linking a decline in religion to a rise in modernisation prove to be far too deterministic (Beckford, 2003: 30-72).<sup>22</sup> For example, Davie's 'believing without belonging' phenomenon undermines the simplistic notion of secularisation expressed in Britain.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, sociologists in the United States have from the start opposed the notion of secularisation. Church membership and attendance in that country has not recorded the levels of decline in the European countries. So while the European approach concentrates on making macro-generalisations regarding the inevitable decline of religion's importance within the social realm, the American rational choice perspective, instead, focuses on the microanalysis of agency actions that determine religious innovation (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985), but neither theory adequately combines structure and agency to explain religious change (Walsh, 1998).

Issues of theoretical lopsidedness aside, several key insights about the nature of religion derived from the classical theorists remain invaluable. Durkheim's notion of religion as the deep grammar of society functioning to maintain social integration through formation of a moral consensus is highly relevant. In modern society sources promoting collective values are still essential given the fallibility of legal systems and the historical difficulties of applying ethical frameworks to monitor scientific progress (Barbour, 1971, 1990). Feynman states that 'one of the powerful aspects of religion is its inspirational aspects. Religion gives inspiration to act well' (2003: 213). Although not true of all religions all of the time, this tendency can still be engendered through religious belief in certain instances or under specific circumstances (Durkheim, 1965).

The main structural insights worth salvaging from Marx are the ways ideology and religion can coalesce to serve as powerful controlling mechanisms over exploited groups within society. This occurs most visibly when religion acts as a diversionary outlet for alienated consciousness, suppressing the real causes, which is economic oppression from the elites within a given society. However, explaining religious belief

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<sup>22</sup> Spatial restrictions have not allowed me to review all the major theories of secularisation, notably Fenn (1978), see also Fenn (2003a: Part II) for a summary of other approaches.

<sup>23</sup> Lambert (1999) develops a theory of secularisation in which modernity has four main religious effects: (1) decline (pro-secularisation); (2) adaptation/reinterpretation (either pro/anti secularisation); (3) conservative reaction (again either pro/anti secularisation), and (4) innovation (anti-secularisation).

away as mere illusion or a symptom of economic alienation is far too reductionist. Religious beliefs also provide a strong source of meaning and can function as reactionary protests, by opposing dominant ideologies leading to potentially liberating outcomes for marginalised groups (Akom, 2003). Religious belief can also serve as a positive source of alienation on the road towards eventual realisation of human unity with spirit (Hegel, 1987). In other words, the intersections between religion, ideology and alienation are far more complex than Marx envisaged.

Weber's concept of charisma and the roles it can play in the formation of new religious movements is still of considerable analytical value. The significant influence of the modern mass media and the resultant obsession with celebrity marks a fresh era of charisma, one in turn leading to the emergence of new religious movements:<sup>24</sup>

...employing this reading of Weber, one could actually mobilize his theoretical and methodological potential against his own usage of it... [By] redirect[ing] the study of religion away from a perspective focused on Western uniqueness, rationalization and disenchantment and towards an analysis of the processes of globalization and pluralization of religion as well as the re-enchantment of the world. (Riesebrodt, 1999: 12)

Another strength latent in Weber's writing was his concern with the subjective side to religious beliefs. In this context, Berger and Luckmann's dialectical phenomenology emphasises just how subjectivity fits in. They maintain that individuals display a strong desire for subjective order and require legitimating frameworks with which to explain anomic events. While this could hold true in certain instances such assertions did not rest on conclusive deductive evidence. For this reason their further arguments that reality should be compartmentalised into spheres (public and private), and greater competition among alternative legitimating schemes, like various religions, will erode their credibility (an inherent secularisation argument), can be shown to be analytically problematic in the light of modern trends (Hamilton, 2001). In essence Berger and Luckmann's theoretical approach fails to fully escape the predictive linearity of the classics it tries to transcend, they would benefit 'from a more systematic discussion of the different empirical relationships between the contents of socialization and different social structural configurations – the structural bases of personality' (Wuthnow *et al.*, 1984: 71).

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<sup>24</sup> Mega celebrities such as Tom Cruise (Scientologist) and Madonna (Kabbalist) are open about their religious beliefs and bring immense publicity to the NRMs they are involved in. They may not have directly created these movements, but their fame and charisma are used as resources to raise awareness.

In part answer to one of our key research questions: What sociological theories could best help elucidate the causes behind the rise of new religious and spiritual movements in the West? This chapter has demonstrated that the conceptualisation of the complex responses religion has made to the rise of science and modernity have not been adequately theorised by the classics in the sociology of religion or secularisation theory. The most promising approach reviewed was Lee's application of structuration theory to accounting for religious transformations in modernity. A key occurrence in modern sociology of religion that requires theoretical explanation is the emergence of NRMs, which serves to question the idea of a straightforward secularisation sweeping across the West. This phenomenon has not been neglected in the sociology of religion and it is a critical review of this literature we turn to in the next chapter.

### **Introduction: The Study of New Religious Movements in the West**

The classic theories of religion did not envisage the rise of new religions in the West. Nor do contemporary secularisation theories, which are derived from the classics. In this regard, Bryan Turner observed that the sociology of religion in North America and Europe was characterised by a ‘narrow empirical focus on western forms of religion’, and was in practice largely ‘the sociology of Christianity’ (1991: 5). This tradition has been increasingly supplemented by studies of new religions in America and Britain, to the point that ‘the sociology of cults has now gone so far that mainstream Christianity has to some extent been neglected’ (1991: 5). For example, Beckford and Richardson (1983) list over 350 sources in a bibliography specifically concerned with cataloguing studies of New Religious Movements [NRMs] in the United States and Europe. According to Barker, ‘INFORM has on its computer some minimal information about over 2,000 movements’ of which around 600 are new religions in the UK, but there are ‘bound to be a considerable number of movements unknown to INFORM’ (1998: 17).<sup>1</sup> Melton who uses a similar definition of NRMs estimates that there are in the United States ‘between 700 and 1,000 New Religions... with more than 50% of the groups operating in Europe also operating in North America’ (Melton, 1999).<sup>2</sup> The interest in the study and rise in the number of new religious and New Age movements in the West is not really in question (Melton, 1995a; Nelson, 1987; Sherkat, 1999). However, some sociological research on NRMs remains plagued by pre-analysis bias (see Balch, 1985; Wilson, 2003b), rather than being informed by post-analytical critique (Chryssides, 1999).

#### ***The Limitations of Anti-Cult or Countercult Views***

Very early in my study of new religions I came to feel we were asking the wrong question. We were asking an elitist question from the twin perspective of established Church leaders and/or sceptical religious intellectuals. We wanted to know why people dissented from the norm or “normal” consensus religion. Since new religions obviously were “false”, we assumed that non-ideological (social, psychological, pathological) factors must have operated on people to cause them to devote their lives to such crazy notions.

(Melton, 1995a: 267)

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<sup>1</sup> INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements) is a charity based at the London School of Economics and Political Science that Professor Eileen Barker founded in 1986. The centre provides up-to-date information about new religions to interested researchers in an impartial manner. See: [www.lse.ac.uk/collections/INFORM/](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/INFORM/).

<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.cesnur.org/testi/bryn/br\\_melton.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/testi/bryn/br_melton.htm) accessed 24/01/2004.

The above quote concisely captures the extreme trends of bias evident in attitudes towards NRMs.<sup>3</sup> Likewise research aimed at explaining the causes/consequences of conversion to new religions, often made an *a priori* assumption that such movements were wholly negative (i.e. Singer, 1995). For instance, organisations such as FAIR (Family Action and Information and Rescue) and the Deo Gloria Trust in Britain, along with similar American counterparts (e.g. FREECOG) actively sought, and continue to seek, campaigns against NRMs.<sup>4</sup> Today (and historically) the primary controversies these organisations are concerned with are documenting and uncovering alleged instances of *brainwashing* of young members by cult leaders. So the associated psychological and sociological views were that joining a new religious or spiritual movement was due to mental instability (Singer, 1979; 2003), or a symptom of deviant behaviour by a ‘disaffected youth’ (Barker, 1983: 48; Glock, 1976). As a consequence, NRM members needed to be rescued and deprogrammed. On deprogramming activities in the United States, Richardson notes the ‘usual discussions legitimating such actions featured accusations of brainwashing and mind control, along with discussions of alleged sexual and financial offenses committed by the groups and their leaders’ (Richardson, 1983: 99). This view was influenced by, and also fuelled, negative media exposure raising suspicion as to the aims of certain so-called religious cults, according to Beckford: ‘Discussion of NRMs in the British press gives no indication of an agreed-upon etiology for them. Rather, the “problem” is implicitly located, in the opinion of most British critics, in the allegedly dishonest and unscrupulous practices of the cults’ (Beckford, 1983: 53).

Negative views of NRMs were largely justified with reference to the strange recruitment activities of specific groups, such as the Unification Church (UC) whose members became known as the ‘Moonies’. The UC was one of the first movements to have the charge of brainwashing sociologically and impartially investigated (Barker, 1984). Barker (1984) studied those who failed to be converted as well as those who were. If brainwashing were involved, high rates of conversion would be expected. In contrast, Barker found that nine out of ten people who attended Moonie two-day workshops did not join. Khalsa also even-handedly examines the financial activities, ideological foundations and goals of three NRMs active in the United States (3HO Foundation, Divine Light Mission, and Vajradhatu). He concludes, ‘worldly success

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<sup>3</sup> See Beckford (1983) for the cult debates in Britain, and Richardson (1983) for the United States.

<sup>4</sup> See Melton (2003b) for a discussion of the historical evolution of the countercult movement.

has become a religiously significant venture for at least two [of the three] new religious movements' (Khalsa, 1986: 233). In other words, the groups have adapted to and embraced some of the wider values of American culture. Followers work hard for material success alongside pursuing spiritual growth. This contradicts the traditional depiction of NRMs with countercultural origins as malevolent drug cults opposed to and on the margins of mainstream society (Clark, 1979; Singer and Lalich, 1995).

In a study of the New Age movement, Bruce suggests that the lives of a number of New Agers are a 'mess' and that talk of loving everyone appears to mask the commonplace reality that New Age personal and sexual relationships are 'as, or more, messy than the entanglements of those who are not in tune with our divine selves or the cosmic consciousness' (Bruce, 1998: 28). Heelas in a similar study of the New Age responds saying: 'Bruce, it is safe to say, is neither simply right nor wrong. Participants might sometimes be as he describes; but they certainly do not always think of themselves as messed up' (1998: 258). Further, he concludes that 'it seems to me – as it has to many others – that the sociologist... cannot pass ultimate judgement on the (claimed) ontological standing of spiritual experiences' (Heelas, 1998: 261). Faber regards the New Age along with all religious emotions as a continuation of the "child project". The child projects during the separation stage the internalised absence of the care-giver into external surrounding objects (e.g. blankets, stuffed animals, toys), so too, does the adult relocate the internalised object, but now through such cultural and symbolic substitutions as gods, angels, spirit guides and space visitors (Faber, 1996: 93). Nelson takes a completely different direction in his study of NRMs making 'the assumption that psychic, mystical and religious experiences are real and not illusory, and that such experiences provide the base upon which new religious movements grow' (Nelson, 1987: 38). In a more pragmatic vein, Mellor suggests that we should 'attempt to explore whether new religious movements indicate a positive interaction with certain aspects of modernity, rather than dismissing them as merely emotional responses to social forces outside their control' (Mellor, 1993: 125).

Sociologists who are interested in giving accurate unbiased descriptions of social phenomena, in a theoretical framework that reveals the social world in its true nature, have to guard against letting personal values impinge on facts (Stedman-Jones, 1998). In contrast to being objective, anti-cult groups look for, and cite facts, which support their values that NRMs are intrinsically malign and destructive. On this issue Melton makes the cautionary remark that we should remember 'much of the

controversy which surrounded the new religions bore no relation to anything they had done' (1995a: 275). Melton suggests religious growth is not due to evil brainwashing by cults (e.g. Singer, 1976), but is rather the 'product of the normal cultural activity of people in a free society' (1995a: 269). However, laws do still need to be in place for the safeguard of all for when dangerous cults do emerge (e.g. Aum Shinrikyô's – sarin gas attacks). These controls and laws should be constructed in a manner with issues of religious liberty acknowledged and accounted for (Robbins, 2001).<sup>5</sup> INFORM and the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) outline such guidelines for research:

CESNUR is a network of independent but related organizations of scholars in various countries, devoted to promote scholarly research in the field of new religious consciousness, to spread reliable and responsible information, and to expose the very real problems associated with some movements, while at the same time defending everywhere the principles of religious liberty.<sup>6</sup>

The value-based simplification of contemporary socio-religious complexity by theorists like Kent (2001) results in partial explanation and inaccurate generalisations of religious behaviour (i.e. the multifarious factors behind conversions). Hence, Kent in his study of *The Family/Children of God and Scientology* describes how:

Social degradation and maltreatment were part of a brainwashing program's efforts to pressure selected individuals into renouncing fundamental aspects of their lives. Humiliation, social isolation, submission, public degradations, and confessions characterized such efforts. (Kent, 2001: 350)

Utilising primary documents, publications and policy statements from the Family and Scientology combined with legal narratives, media accounts, and personal interviews with former members. Kent tries to expose the systematic and generic 'brainwashing' programs these NRMs administer to gain recruits. Nonetheless, Dawson (2001: 380) rightly notes that Kent's theories 'suffer from methodological flaws so grievous as to call into question the validity and reliability' of his conclusions. Long and Hadden (1983: 2) made a valuable point after evaluating the brainwashing and drift models of religious conversion arguing neither in isolation is 'capable of comprehending the apparent duality of cult life, for each is built on a fundamental denial of the reality perceived by the other', so we need to 'develop a more general model of conversion'. To achieve this we have to recast the question of why people join NRMs (chapter 5).

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<sup>5</sup> Richardson (1995) discusses the law related to NRMs in the US, which he sees as becoming more restrictive in line with the European model. See Bradney (1999) for the law related to NRMs in Britain.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.cesnur.org/about.htm> accessed 24/01/2004.



***Socio-Structural Explanations of the Rise of New Religious Movements***

Beckford and Levasseur (1986) argue the speed and scope of macro-social changes in Western Europe since the Second World War have generated observable dislocations, which increasingly stimulate young adults to join various NRMs. In particular they suggest that demographic factors like the “baby boom” between 1950 and 1965, gave rise to the historically unique number of young adults in the 1970s and early 1980s. According to them members of NRMs are largely drawn from such a segment (18-24 year olds) of the population,

changes in the educational patterns and in the structure of European economies have tended to make the dominant cohorts of young adults more responsive to new ideas than were earlier generations. It is almost a sociological commonplace that adolescents and young adults are among the people most deeply affected by rapid social change.

(Beckford and Levasseur, 1986: 33)

Wuthnow (1986: 23) lists very similar factors that have contributed to the growth of new religions throughout North America since the 1950s:

As the educational institution grew, both from the input of the ‘baby boom’ generation and from conscious efforts to upgrade the technical skills of the work-force, movements occurred within established religious organizations to bring them into line with newer, more liberal theological interpretations, with values which downplayed particularistic ethnic and doctrinal distinctions, and with attitudes of egalitarianism, tolerance and social concern on secular issues.

Beckford (1985) and Nelson (1987) suggest that the real explosion of the new religions came during the 1960s and 1970s, with the impetus being provided by events such as the Vietnam War and the rescinding in the United States of the Oriental Exclusion Act, which enabled many Eastern religious teachers and leaders to enter the country (see chapter 7). This period has been identified as the time of the “counterculture”, or the ‘flamboyant political and aesthetic protest among educated American youth’ (Robbins, 1988: 1). Glock (1976) and Bellah (1976) have both offered sociological interpretations for the rise of the new religions as related to the consequences of this period in American history. Bellah believes the new groups are successor movements to the 1960s counter-cultural rebellion against utilitarian individualism and technical rationality, as the dominant forces in American culture. Glock points to a crisis of confidence in all institutions in American society during this period and sees the new religions as just one symptom of the malaise affecting the

society. He warns: ‘Should the sciences fail to incorporate into their world view a way to make life meaningful... There will again be disenchantment with the way things are, and a lack of consensus about what would be a viable alternative’ (1976: 366). Others such as Robbins (1988) place the emphasis for the rise of new religions during this period on an alleged normative and moral ambiguity of contemporary American culture, associated with its increasing pluralism and rising degree of differentiation, which both serve to undermine traditional moral absolutism.

Dawson observes that in general there tend to be two varieties of social structural explanation for the rise of NRMs in the West. The first, ‘links the rise of NRMs to a search by young adults for “surrogate families” in the face of the demise of “mediating structures” in society’ (1998a: 582). While the second, ‘links the rise of NRMs to a more diffuse spectre of cognitive and affective disorientation stemming from the “de-institutionalization” of many aspects of modern “private” life, hand in hand with a more alienating pattern of mass institutionalization of modern public life’ (Ibid). Such explanations have been labelled the relative deprivation theory, because they start with the assumption that rapid structural changes, economic distress, lower status, loneliness, and alienation are the root causes engendering new religious movements (Saliba, 1995a). Nonetheless, Arweck and Clarke (1997) question theories connecting the rise of NRMs in the modern West to wider social changes:

Traditional societies have their sects and cults often borne of the failure to change. Furthermore, rapid social change explanation tends to reduce religion to the status of an epiphenomenon, a response to bewilderment mechanism which is not always borne out by the evidence. (1997: xviii)

The above critical observations have value, but we could use the arguments made by Giddens (1984) regarding the cyclical and reflexive nature of societal development to further enrich them. Stark and Bainbridge (1985) develop a relevant approach by considering new religions as genuine spiritual revivals. They suggest these have occurred throughout the history of the West in repeated cycles reflecting great awakenings. The awakenings take place whenever traditional religions appear to have lost some of their original vitality (rather like a recycling of Weberian charisma). This implies secularisation and the formation of NRMs are processes that go hand in hand. Most novel religions that currently survive will, in time, be swept away by the secularisation process, recreating the social conditions that give rise to new ones. In support of this view we can observe that ‘a number of ostensibly similar movements

developed at roughly the same time, were exported from the same country and attracted followers from the same narrow social stratum' (Beckford and Levasseur, 1986: 48). Although Arweck and Clarke question social change as a major causal factor explaining religious innovations and conversions, they offer no feasible theoretical alternative apart from suggesting better 'attention to such apparently unrelated events as greater affluence, more opportunity for travel, and changes in the immigration laws of a country... may shed as much light on the rise of new religions as the dislocating effects that follow from either globalisation or rapid social change' (1997: xix). But factors such as greater opportunities for international travel are surely related to the consequences of social change in the first place, are they not? Thus, the strengths of structural sociological theories of NRMs rest in the ways:

They focus on the problems of Western society in a period of rapid social change. They emphasize that it is precisely these problems that explain the reasons why new religions succeed and that, consequently, must be addressed. They make people reflect not only on the inevitability of the new religions, but also on their manifold functions. (Saliba, 1995a: 127)

However, the recent trend within sociology towards a 'post-everything' has engendered a shift in social scientific thinking about religion, often relegating it to the status of cultural phenomenon that may be a strong marker of identity and myth, but lacking in any institutional force or autonomy (Beckford, 2000).

### **Evaluating Postmodernism: Re-theorising Religion and Spirituality**

The rapid spread of the term *postmodern* in recent years witnesses to a growing dissatisfaction with modernity and to an increasing sense that the modern age not only had a beginning but can have an end as well. (Griffin, 1988a: ix)

In recent times there have undoubtedly been fundamental societal shifts resulting from transformations implicit in the conditions of capitalism, which have altered the relations of people to one another, as well as to their environments (Hall and Gieben, 1992; Hall *et al.*, 2001; Smart, 1992). It is inevitable that these broad societal changes should present a challenge and opportunity to the sociology of religion, in the respect that the nature and role of religion needs to be reappraised (Heelas *et al.*, 1998). Nonetheless, it is misleading to apply to these metamorphoses the term 'postmodern', 'postmodernity', or 'postmodernism'. This makes an unfounded assumption that there

has been a total break from modernity, as Thomas and Walsh suggest, ‘No matter how blurred sociology has become round the edges in recent years, it is nevertheless a product of modernity, part of the Enlightenment legacy, postmodernism’s reviled other’ (1998: 389). Therefore, in postmodernism while there is an awareness of a movement away from the institutional forms of modernity to a new type of social order, we are not actually shown whether and in what form such an order exists. In Mellor’s words, ‘postmodernism expresses the psychological, emotional and spiritual responses of many persons to contemporary social change, but does not offer an adequate theoretical analysis of the nature of these changes’ (1993: 113). At best postmodernism can currently be regarded as a set of broad assumptions, rather than a coherent theory of social transformation (Dawson, 1998b). Following the arguments made by Giddens (1990: 45-6), it would be shrewder to understand postmodernism as a form of aesthetic reflection upon the nature of modernity and the Enlightenment. Thus, I propose we discard the term ‘post’ and suggest we talk instead of Reflexive Modernity (Beck *et al.*, 1994). The advantages when applied to theorising about NRMs will become self-evident through the course of the following arguments.

### ***Postmodernism: The End of Grand Narratives and the Birth of Relativism***

The narrative around postmodernism can be seen to have intellectual roots in Nietzsche’s critique of modernism and his related idea of *dispersion*, which has since evolved through Heidegger to Lyotard and Derrida (Bauman, 1988). It was Nietzsche who initially declared, “God is dead”. This indicated the collapse of moral values and with it the implication that the future fate of the human spirit rested on the “Superman”, and his recognition of life as “the will to power”. Postmodernists called this state of affairs ‘polyvocality, the many voices within culture waiting to be heard, all with an equivalence and a right, ranging from the oppressed to simply the previously unspoken’ (Filmer *et al.*, 1998: 35-6). In a critical development of the Nietzschean legacy, Heidegger proceeded to revive our understanding of truth arguing mortality is our defining moment, and that we are thrown into limited worlds of sense shaped by our being-towards-death, so finite meaning is all the reality we glimpse. Like Nietzsche, Heidegger advocated dispersion away from unified ideals such as absolute truth or any definite criteria for ethical standards and morality. His main contribution to postmodern thinking was an erection of the foundation to a form of

deconstruction. This represented his unique application of the Hegelian dialectic in which two opposing notions are collapsed in order to form a new and distinct notion. The originality of Heidegger's application was demonstrated in his claim that the third and emerging concept lay outside the conceptual system of the two collapsed concepts. In sum, what emerges is a concept belonging to a new paradigm. Thus, the former two concepts are systematically deconstructed, and with them a (partial) deconstruction of the erroneous metaphysical system to which they belonged. This is done in the hope of attaining a new unfettered approach to the world and the conceptual frameworks it spawns (Rée, 2001).

In his series of books on postmodernism, the French postmodernist Lyotard criticised what he called "grand narratives" like Marxism and Hegelianism, arguing that such meta-theories prize unity and sameness over plurality and difference. In a similar vein to Nietzsche and Heidegger, Lyotard insists that there are no final criteria or fundamentals on which a judgement can be made regarding absolute truth. This results in Lyotard's wholesale denial of all conventional beliefs and institutions, with the nihilistic statement that the 'ideas of western civilization issuing from the ancient, Christian and modern traditions are bankrupt' (Lyotard, 1997: 235). So Lyotard's postmodernism implies that there are no sure foundations for our opinions on such matters as universal human rights or notions of liberation. He asks, 'Who could make such declarations? Who can tell whether the wars of liberation conducted in the name of the universal are wars of liberation or wars of conquest?' (Lyotard, 1993: 52).<sup>7</sup>

Derrida's "deconstruction" and "différance" is also a critical continuation of Nietzsche's negative reaction to modernity, as well as Heidegger's deconstruction of philosophy and metaphysics.<sup>8</sup> The twofold task of Derridean deconstruction is to expose the problem of centred discourses and displace the boundaries of metaphysics. Through deconstruction Derrida seeks to expand the conceptual limits of the meaning of the text imposed by metaphysics, preferring to explore meaning in the margins of a text through unrestricted semantic play and based on limitless interpretation. In this way, according to Derrida, every text calls for re-writing and this goes on indefinitely, always with *différance* (Derrida, 2001a). Deconstruction is evidently not only an

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<sup>7</sup> In this respect, the recent war of "liberation" in Iraq springs to mind. To many onlookers the war was fought more for the economic interests of oil, than of freedom or democracy. The history of arms dealing by the West to so called rogue states such as Iraq also shows that there is never any "black" and "white", or "good" and "evil" in global politics, more like shades of "grey" (see Mofid, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that Derrida is also sometimes associated with post-structuralism.

intellectual excavation but also a passionate quest. Derrida speaks of his search for the “wholly other” (not necessarily God) and of a mysterious Khora, an idea which he gets from Plato’s *Timaeus*. It is a region formless and incomprehensible where created things receive their forms. It could be a totally impersonal process, not God in any usual sense of that word. Caputo asks: ‘So then has not deconstruction been driven all along by a passion for God?’ (Caputo, 1997: 332). That is one potential interpretation, but I doubt whether Caputo or Derrida would deny other potentialities.<sup>9</sup>

In its simplest sense postmodernism is a critique of modern theory, primarily regarding what it views as modernity’s questionable assumptions; firstly, its search for a secure foundation of knowledge, secondly for the universalising and totalising claims and, finally its fallacious rationalism. More specifically postmodernist thought presents a challenging new assumption: that theory does not mirror reality, taking instead perspectivist and relativist positions. This implies that at best theories provide partial perspectives on their objects, and that all cognitive representations of the world are historically and linguistically mediated (Best and Kellner, 1991). Potter and López (2001: 5) summarise the legacy of postmodernism for sociology in the following way:

One of the central planks of postmodern theory in its myriad variants was the alleged discovery of the irreducible complexity of the natural and social world, of language and meaning... The alleged loss of hegemonic meanings in the social world were not so much explained but reproduced in texts through all type of narrative and rhetorical strategies. This led to a type of writing, and argumentation, which was rich and seductive, dense almost mystical. A type of writing that celebrated ambiguity, and enthroned irony. A type of writing that, at its worst, demanded little in terms of evidence, and argumentative coherence and consistency; the playfulness of language took precedence.

### ***Postmodern Approaches to Religion and Spirituality: Individualistic Ambiguities***

My assessment of the new spiritualities... is the same... their very holism locates them much more firmly in the traditions of modernity than of post-modernity. The stress on the inter-connectedness of all living things, the heightened awareness of ‘the global circumstance’... the strong sense of evolutionary equilibrium and change, the belief in the possibility of personal and social transformation, and the affirmation of noninstrumental rationalities are all redolent of a revised ‘Enlightenment project’ with the emphasis more firmly placed on the human scale and spiritual implications of science, politics, and state administration. (Beckford, 1992: 21)

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<sup>9</sup> Derrida specifically explores religion in his book, *Acts of Religion (2001b)*, which contains eight essays that span religious reflections on negative theology to the limits of reason and to hospitality.

It was Luckmann (1967) who insightfully observed that religious themes in the future would be shaped by a quest for self-expression and self-realisation. To Luckmann religion is rooted in a basic anthropological fact, the transcendence of biological nature by human organisms. So Luckmann foresaw religion in the future as not necessarily declining, but rather shifting from a “public” church oriented religiosity to a “private” individual religiosity. He argued ‘that the structure of the modern sacred cosmos and its thematic content represent the emergence of a new social form of religion’, one in turn ‘determined by a radical transformation in the relation of the individual to the social order’ (1967: 114). Many recent explanations of contemporary religiosity, frame this radical transformation of the individual to the social order, as simply representative of manifestations of the general features of postmodernism. For instance, Roof (1993: 245) observes that there is a pastiche-type of spirituality in modern society and that this is a typical feature of postmodernism. The emphasis is on religious individualization or the effort to craft a spiritually meaningful life as part of the widespread postmodern condition of individuality. The growing autonomy of people means individual religion no longer mirrors an institutionally defined package of beliefs and practices. Rather, individuals construct their faiths out of many disparate elements, not limited to one tradition. Therefore, NRMs in the West are mere by-products of postmodernity, not solely because of the pastiche character of spirituality, but also because they express the cultural mix within society.

Berry and Wernick (1992) discuss the new intellectual possibilities arising from religious themes, which have become apparent in some postmodernist thinking. They specifically explore the new religious and spiritual potentialities opened up by postmodernism in order to fill the ethical void left by the demise of Marxism and other modernist projects. Sutcliffe and Bowman (2000) argue postmodern openness to spirituality may seem like a step away from modernist naturalism, but the reality is that postmodern spirituality is inherently anti-Christian. The Christian message (like all worldviews) is true only for those who accept it, so in place of objective truth or what postmodernists like Lyotard call grand narratives (comprehensive world views), we find local narratives, stories about reality that work for particular communities, but that have no validity beyond that community. According to Bauman, morality also becomes privatised or individualised in postmodernity. The breakdown of modernist ‘life-projects’, things people wished to achieve, like the perfecting of society through the reason of Enlightenment, shift to less ambitious and more ambiguous hopes of

‘self-constitution’ in postmodernity. Rather than attaining mass utopia, people simply want to be recognised in the superficial postmodern culture of consumerism. Making life meaningful is achieved through the lifestyle choices adopted; ethics becomes a matter of personal preference, not a universal set of prescriptions. However, the moral beliefs adopted are still seen as superior to those of others. Thus, Bauman comments,

Fundamentalism is a thoroughly contemporary, postmodern phenomenon, embracing fully the rationalizing reforms and technological developments of modernity, and attempting not so much to roll back modern departures as to have the cake while eating it. (1998: 72)

Beckford (1992, 2000) criticises such postmodern views by arguing ‘their religious ignorance or illiteracy prevents them from observing the massive continuities or distinctly un-post-modern “grand narratives” and “mythic schemes” among the beliefs and practices of the majority of religionists’ (2000: 488).

During the 1980s and through to the present the catchall term *New Age* has been used in the sociological literature to refer to a wave of novel religious and spiritual enthusiasm most of which often has its roots in far older occult and spiritual practices (Hanegraaff, 1996, 2002). Bruce suggests that with the ‘New Age of the 1980s, we have seen a flowering of alternative religions’ (2000: 226). According to Bruce, in postmodernity views of experts and traditional authorities are regarded with greater scepticism, so the New Age movement ‘illustrates the zenith of individualism. Individualism used to mean the right to act as one wished provided it did not harm others and the right to hold views radically at odds with the consensus’ (Bruce, 1995: 122). The New Age is a symptom of the extreme relativism of knowledge, reflected by the fact that what New Agers believe depends simply on their subjective point of view. This entails denying the definite and objective truth claims made by scientists or experts. However, Bruce underestimates the sophisticated attempts many New Age groups have made at developing a holistic worldview based on integrating the traditions of science with religion (see chapter 6). Heelas (1996) presents a more complex sociological reading of the New Age Movement, arguing that the refusal to sit on the conveyor belt of modernity links the New Age idea to that other paradigm of refusal the postmodern notion of fragmentation. Nonetheless, Heelas also insists on separating the New Age from the shackles of postmodernism – seeing it as fully compatible with and a product of modernity’s central values (Heelas, 1996: 169). For Heelas, the postulated postmodern condition is de-differentiated, consumer culture,



relativism, utilitarian selfhood, expressivist and a compartmentalised view of history. While the New Age is concerned with collapsing cultural meta-narratives, it is also focused on amplifying an experiential meta-narrative. Heelas concludes New Agers are both epistemological individualists as well as ontological universalists.

That is to say, New Agers of this persuasion hold that they, and they alone, access truth – by way of their own experience (their epistemological individualism) – but the truth which they access is of a universal, shared, ‘the same’, order. At this ontological level of things, individualism – with its potential for relativism – is transcended. Now, there is only the experience of *the unitary, the interwoven, the values, the truth*. (1998: 261, emphasis added)

Griffin writes, ‘Modern spirituality began as a dualistic, supernaturalistic spirituality, and ended as a pseudo- or antispirtuality; postmodernity involves a return to a genuine spirituality’ (1988b: 2). This implies that people suddenly stopped being religiously or spiritually inclined during the course of modernity and then rapidly started again in postmodernity, which is inaccurate as shown in the previous chapter. People may still believe, but may not necessarily choose to belong to a visible church or religious organisation (where head counts can be conducted). In addition,

post-modernist perspectives tend to frame religion selectively as an exotic, playful, or curious feature of the present-day cultural kaleidoscope but without taking proper account of the power of religious organizations or the politico-legal force of religion in some places. (Beckford, 2000: 488)

The reduction of the cyclical flow of social transformation into segregated and disjointed stages (i.e. pre-modern – modern – post-modern) encourages static and linear explanations of change within the social realm, which dilutes the complex multi-causal and interrelated nature of reality.

### ***A Defence of Social Theory: Postmodernism R.I.P***

Rather than seeking to distinguish the “modern era” from the “premodern” or “postmodern,” I think it would be more useful to try to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of “countermodernity.” (Foucault, 1991: 39)

Foucault has on occasion erroneously been designated a postmodernist (e.g. Margolis, 1989), largely due to his critical view of modernity, nevertheless with reference to the above quote he clearly distances himself from such a label. More accurately (if labels

can ever be regarded as such), Foucault generally ascribed to poststructuralism, my primary justification for labelling him as such is that he was not concerned with deconstruction, but rather launched more holistic attempts to rethink history and dominating ideas with the help of alternative ways of understanding (Foucault, 2002a; 2002b). To Foucault discourse is so complex a reality that we should approach it from different levels with multiple methods. Archaeology and genealogy are such methods as well as new modes of historical writing. Both attempt to re-examine the social field from a micrological standpoint that enables one to identify discursive discontinuity and dispersion instead of continuity, and thereby grasp historical events in their real complexity. Cooper (2001) notes that one particular strand eminent in many of Foucault's studies is a critical view of the roles that certain kinds of knowledge have played in modern western societies. For instance, Foucault's studies of madness and reason, discipline and punishment, and sexuality and subjectivity offer critical analyses, which explore the complex power and discursive formations of modern society. Therefore, in contrast to the more nihilistic sentiments of the postmodern thinkers, Foucault does offer a 'broad schemata for the analysis of modern societies', even if he is 'often accused of documenting only the dark side of modernity' (M. Dean, 2003: 336). My specific proposition here is that a critical view of modernity does not necessarily entail the concomitant rejection of social theory building.

In further defence of the enduring value of social and structural theories we can direct some critical questions of our own to the postmodernists, such as Lyotard and Derrida. We can question Lyotard as to whether he does justice to the grand narratives he so readily dismisses. In the words of Browning, he 'tends to read their theories as closed, absolutist schemes, but in doing so he does not allow for the variety of ways in which their theories have been interpreted' (2000: 38). We may ask another question that troubled Lyotard himself; did he accomplish the end of grand narratives by a grand narrative to end all grand narratives? As Giddens argues we cannot assume all is chaos and that 'an infinite number of purely idiosyncratic "histories" can be written... Modernity is universalising not only in terms of its global impact, but in terms of the reflexive knowledge fundamental to its dynamic character' (1990: 6; 175).

We could ask Derrida, is language really so complex that understanding the meaning of text precisely is practically impossible? Is he not simply demonstrating

the art of abstract over-complication and ambiguity when writing, interpreting and appreciating texts?<sup>10</sup> The following excerpt from his stylised writing is a case in point:

What is to come is not a future present, yesterday is not a past present. The beyond of the closure of the book is neither to be awaited nor to be refound. It is there, but out there, beyond, within repetition, but eluding us there. It is there like the shadow of the book, the third party between the hands holding the book, the deferral within the now of writing, the distance between the book and the book, that other hand. (Derrida, 2001a: 378)

If there is an argument in the above passage it is very elusive, and indeed if there is a point it could certainly be made more succinctly here in the current present. In this regard Manning has also noted ‘Derrida’s opaque, pun-ridden, playful, aphoristic style’ (2003: 244). Further, as Foucault has argued, although the number of possible enunciations within a discursive formation may be great, they nonetheless remain limited. This is due to the fact that discourses and the meanings that they make possible are fixed not at the level of the general structure of language, but in institutionalised ‘fields of discursive events’ (Foucault, 2002b: 30). Giddens also argues that meaning is not solely constructed by the play of words or text, but also by ‘the production of signifiers... focused and organized via the acting agent’, so the priority ‘which Derrida gives to writing over speech has to be questioned’ (Giddens, 1993: 91).<sup>11</sup> MacQuarrie (2001: 21) poses yet more questions to Derrida:

Do not his critical methods apply equally to his own arguments? Is he not often quite arbitrary in preferring one point of view to another? Is not his critique of language as universally fissured, ambiguous and liable to slippage, highly self defeating, for one who has written so many books and articles?

I am not trying to completely dismiss the questions Lyotard and Derrida pose, as Alvesson states the ‘stronger formulations of postmodernism can perhaps best be seen as a provocation, and as such a potentially valuable one... This is not bad, and a strong reason for taking it seriously. But not too seriously’ (2002: 176). However, I do still suggest rather than just posing questions we should also be attempting to provide some answers (Groff, 2004; Habermas, 1985). Gellner (1992) rightly argues that postmodernism is really a contemporary form of philosophical relativism caused by

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<sup>10</sup> More *constructively* Rieff (1985) insisted that we confront and interrogate the written page without recourse to familiar safe interpretations. The eventual reward of such interrogation being that the teacher/writer of the text finally gives up its truth.

<sup>11</sup> For deeper and more systematic critiques of Derrida, see Giddens (1979: 35-8) and Potter (2001).

the difficulty of making sense of such a complex social world, which ‘unfortunately transforms the act of theory into a struggle for hegemony at the level of the text, just as it transforms French philosophy into politics rendered at the level of theory’ (Morrison, 2001: 118). Kopel (2002) has gone as far as calling postmodernism the intellectual axis of evil. I would not be as harsh as Kopel, but there is the danger of sliding into a subjective idealism with some of the stronger forms of postmodernism.

To say that language has no external reference renders much of human experience nonsensical. Natural phenomena are not simply a blank slate for human metaphoric projection. Nature and our *embodied natures present themselves as structured, limited, and frequently causatively determinative of human experience*. If you don’t think nature is real, try going without water for a few days and see how well you think.

(Grassie, 1997: 88-9, emphasis added)

In conclusion, ‘Social theory cannot abandon the attempts to determine what kind of world we now inhabit and to trace its relations of continuity and discontinuity with the worlds of the past’ (Crook, 2003: 320); further ‘theory is not the pursuit of a grand system of knowledge, perfected and closed to new influences... It offers “epistemic gain”, not absolute truth. It offers it in an open-ended fashion, in the recognition that all existing theories will need to be revised... in the light of new historical experience’ (Calhoun and Karaganis, 2003: 196).

### ***Making a Case for Reflexive Modernity***

Postmodernism expresses contemporary disorientations about the nature of reality, identity and meaning, but cannot offer a satisfactory explanation for how these disorientations arose. These can be understood as the outcomes of the breadth and the depth of reflexivity in contemporary societies.

(Mellor and Shilling, 1994: 29)

Following Giddens (1990), I suggest that what has been mistaken for postmodernity in the contemporary Western societies (Britain and America), is in reality a series of circumstances and experiences which are the product of certain features of modernity. Giddens argues that the postmodern visions of pluralistic, competing or contradictory claims to knowledge, which are supposed to be signals of the collapse of modernity’s grand narratives, are actually very much in line with the ‘discontinuist’ impulse of modernity. That is the desire to subject tradition to sceptical questioning and having destabilized it, to be freed from it. So rather than entering a period of postmodernity,

we are moving into an era in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more ‘radicalised’ and ‘universalised’ (Giddens, 1990: 3). In ‘high’ modernity, or what at other times Giddens refers to as ‘late’ modernity, the discontinuist impulse is expressed through the pervasiveness of ‘reflexivity’. Reflexivity refers to the continual and organised use of knowledge about social life in order to re-order and transform it, and is the constant monitoring and revision of beliefs and practices in the light of changing circumstances: ‘Reflexivity in this sense belongs to the reflexive historicity of modernity, as distinct from the more generic reflexive monitoring of action’ (Giddens, 1991: 76). Every tradition is open to questioning undermining any certainty of knowledge, even in the natural sciences (Bhaskar, 1986; Talbot, 1996). Therefore, a key characteristic feature of high/late modernity is ‘radical doubt’, which Giddens (1991: 207) specifically connects to the rise of new religious movements:

Not only has religion failed to disappear. We see all around us the creation of new forms of religious sensibility and spiritual endeavour. The reasons for this concern quite fundamental features of late modernity. What was due to become a social and physical universe subject to increasingly certain knowledge and control instead creates a system in which areas of relative security interlace with radical doubt and with disquieting scenarios of risk.

The consequences of modernity are not only experienced as personally disturbing by the individuals who have to live in a cultural environment structured by them, but they are by their very nature systematically disturbing. However, it should also be noted that despite the difficulties engendered by modernity its reflexivity could also be radically enabling to modern people. If we fail to appreciate this then we fail to ‘see that all human agents stand in a position of appropriation to the social world, which they constitute and reconstitute in their actions’, in sum we fail ‘to grasp the nature of human empowerment’ (Giddens, 1991: 175).<sup>12</sup>

The case has been made here for reflexive modernity as a useful conceptual tool in endeavouring to understand features of modern western societies (see also Beck *et al.*, 1994). This is primarily because, ‘reflexive appropriation of knowledge... becomes integral to system reproduction, rolling social life away from the fixities of tradition’ (Giddens, 1990: 53). Modernity is particularly distinguishable by the scope

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<sup>12</sup> McLennan states ‘Giddens’s thinking on post-modernity – whether for good or ill – does not pack much of a punch’ (2001: 347). I disagree, the whole point of sociology is to develop knowledge – postmodern relativism renders this a thankless and futile endeavour. McLennan undermines his own argument, and reinforces mine, when acknowledging that ‘without some aspiration to better humanity through improving knowledge, I see no purpose whatever in doing social science at all’ (2001: 353).

and pace of changes caused by its discontinuities, this calls for the development of an institutional and theoretical analysis of its double-edged character, which could elucidate the reasons leading to the rise of NRMs. The use of reflexivity in knowledge assimilation also involves what Giddens has called the rationalization of action (Giddens, 1984: 5-7). Beckford questions the compatibility of the rational thought dimension to reflexivity of action, with a revival of religion. To Beckford, Giddens can only explain the contradiction between rational thought to monitor action, and the rise of NRMs, with reversion to untestable claims about the needs of individuals. Beckford suggests that this argument has a functionalist tone, since religion is reduced to a need for moral certainty and answers to existential questions.

This 'volcanic' or emergent vision of moral agency is inadequate insofar as it runs the risk of implying that the real moral agent is pre- or even non-social. It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the 'return of the repressed' is a rabbit pulled out of a theoretical hat when all other tricks have failed to make sense of the persistence of religion at a time when, according to the theory of high modernity, religion's chances of survival are extremely slim. (1996: 36-7)

In defence of Giddens, there has been a great deal of psychological research linking religion to inherent human physiology (Argyle, 2000; Fontana, 2003). Besides we do not even need to resort to such untestable claims to justify the existence of religion in a reflexive rationally motivated modernity. As long as human beings hold incomplete or contested intelligence on the purpose of the universe, the factors driving evolution, and about numerous other existential and ontological issues, there will always be an informational void for religious re-interpretations to fill (see chapter 6).

The argument goes full circle and we return to where we began; to the factors driving socio-structural change, and their causes and consequences for conversion to NRMs. Mellor and Shilling concur, 'the study of contemporary religion should be shaped *not by postmodernism* but by an awareness of both the reality-threatening impulses of *reflexive modernity* and the continuing anthropological reality of the religious body' (1994: 23, emphasis added). The main themes an exploration of the reflexive religious body could encompass are explored in the following two sections.

***Mind/Body Dualisms, Traditional Religious and New Religious Discourses***

What the rediscovery of the body entails is a positioning of it as the central site of discourses and social control which objectify and subjectify it, which, in these terms, played a major part in creating and sustaining the social order of the modern world. (Thomas and Walsh, 1998: 385)

The body did not occupy a central place in the classic theories of religion, leading Shilling to note that in sociology the body has historically been an absent presence.<sup>13</sup> ‘Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and other classical sociologists... rarely focused on the body in its entirety as a subject of investigation’ (Shilling, 2003: 21). Thus, the body is present in the shadows in their writings, with focus relegated to ‘certain aspects of human embodiment’ (Shilling, 2003: 9). This is because sociology of the body has been ‘influenced profoundly by Cartesian thought’, following a long-standing tradition in philosophy by ‘accepting a mind/body dichotomy... focusing on the mind as that which defines humans as social beings’ (Ibid: 8). The origins of this mind/body dichotomy can be traced back to Plato and his discussion of the cycle of opposites, which argues that every quality comes into being from its own opposite. By analogy death must come from life, and life from death. This suggests a perpetual recycling of human souls from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead, and back. Plato assumed that the soul existed before the birth of the body and provided evidence in his concept of the forms. These were abstract things, such as genuine truth, goodness, beauty and equality that existed independently of the sensible world in supra-sensible realities. To Plato we partially perceive and try to imitate these things in an imperfect copy in the sensible world. Plato argued that since we could not have obtained such knowledge through any bodily experience, this knowledge of the forms are a degenerated recollection of the supra-sensible realm, and hence our souls must have been acquainted with the forms prior to our births (Williams, 2001).

Descartes, a key originator of Enlightenment thinking, took this idea further. In his detailed theories about the physical operation of the material world, Descartes concluded: humans have minds that interface directly with the soul, which are

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<sup>13</sup> Durkheim’s (1965) study of the religion of totemic societies recounted the ways in which the identity of the collective was inscribed on the bodies of its members (through painting and tattooing), but the primary concern was with the broader question of social facts and the essential functions of religion. Similarly, Marx was mainly interested in the general material existence of humans, labour and the development of consciousness. The body was just a social and biological entity that was in a constant process of becoming towards liberation within a communist state. Weber based on his social action approach to religious formations, was more directly concerned with the body in his writings on the protestant ethic, rationalisation, the ‘iron cage’ of bureaucracy and charisma (Weber, 1930, 1965).

contained within bodies that are simply complex biological machines. He reasoned ‘mind differs importantly from body in that body is by its nature divisible while mind is indivisible... this single fact would be enough to teach me that my mind and body are distinct’ (Descartes, 2004: 48). This radical separation of mind and body, which became known as Cartesian dualism, offered a clear advantage. It established the independence of the material realm from the spiritual, securing the freedom of scientists to rely exclusively on observation for the development of mechanistic explanations of physical phenomena, while leaving religion to provide explanations about spiritual matters. This dualism clarifies the contemporary polemics between religion and science; both are trying to explain human predicament from different, but not totally unrelated perspectives (McGuire, 1990; Peterson and Vanarragon, 2004).

Foucault in the *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1980b) argues that our sexual definitions, conventions, beliefs, identities and behaviours have not simply evolved, but have been shaped within defined power relationships. In other words, sexuality or subsequent gender roles, have been, and are, socially and historically constructed.<sup>14</sup> He would have profusely disagreed with the following statement from the Koran:

Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them.

(The Koran – Women, translated by Dawood, 2000: 83)

Essentially, Foucault did not view bodies as naturally different entities whose biological constitution determines and limits permanently the capabilities of human subjects. Instead, bodies are highly malleable phenomena, which can be invested with various and changing forms of power. In this manner, Foucault introduced the concept of “bio-power”, or power over life, which he argued was an increasing political and administrative concern with ensuring the body’s docility, as well as integration into the machinery of production. This involved increasing regulation of the species body or population through interventions in propagation, births and mortality. Restrictive

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<sup>14</sup> Here I disagree with Foucault, both biological nature and ecological factors also help determine the development of differences between genders (i.e. male and female roles). It is not solely a matter of nurture or social construction (Grassie, 1997; McGuire, 1990). Men are in general naturally stronger and more aggressive than women due to chemical and biological factors. Foucault’s error stems from totally perceiving the self as decentred – in contrast a mild form of essentialism also seems to play a part in identity formation. Hartsock’s feminist based complaint against Foucault serves to illustrate continued interest in the debates over real differences: ‘Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?’ (1990: 163). Hartsock wishes to dismiss what she sees as Foucault’s all too radical view of social difference.



institutional configurations operationalised by various discourses serve this purpose. To Foucault one obvious controlling discourse is religion, which involves the shaping of individual subjects and can thus be seen as a power-knowledge matrix that forms a technology of self, one restraining force among others shaping life. Hence predictably Foucault identified Christianity (and in consequence most religion), as a fundamental mechanism of power, a part of the institutional structures that manipulate and control by both producing and silencing (Carrette, 2000).

Turner suggests traditional religions like Christianity have tended to see the body as dangerous and in need of control, particularly its secretions such as ‘semen and menstrual blood’, which ‘have to be enclosed by ritual and taboo to protect the social order’ (Turner, 1984: 83). Giddens (1991) observes that traditional religious authorities often cultivated the feeling that individuals were surrounded by threats and danger in the form of bodily temptations, and that adhering to religious authority would help successfully control these. The following quotes from the Bible and Koran serve to illustrate and validate these observations:<sup>15</sup>

... do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.

(The Bible – Romans 6: 11-13)<sup>16</sup>

Blessed are the believers, who are humble in their prayers; who avoid profane talk, and give alms to the destitute; who restrain their carnal desires... who are true to their trusts and promises, and diligent in their prayers. These are the heirs of Paradise; they shall abide in it forever.

(The Koran – The Believers, translated by Dawood, 2000: 341)

Baker states that through the ages, ‘Christians have almost automatically been mind-body dualists... Christians have naturally thought of themselves as composite beings, made of two substances – a material body and a nonmaterial soul’ (2004: 327). Muslims can also be regarded as mind/body dualists, as the following statement from the Koran demonstrates: ‘And to you We have revealed the Book with the truth. It

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<sup>15</sup> Doniger discovers an equally sinful depiction of the body and flesh in traditional Hindu religious discourse, which tells humans to ‘abandon this foul smelling, tormented, impermanent dwelling place of living beings, filled with urine and excrement, pervaded by old age and sorrow, infested by illness, and polluted by passion’ (Doniger, 1997: 169).

<sup>16</sup> From the New International Version, <http://www.bible.gospelcom.net/> accessed 27/01/2004.

confirms the Scriptures which came before it and stands as a guardian over them' (The Koran – The Table, Dawood, 2000: 115).<sup>17</sup>

Condemnation of sexual desires and resultant fears gave traditional religious discourse the power to control individual bodies, through appeals to the supposedly higher and separate mind or soul to abide by scriptural regulations. Foucault (1980a, b) highlights how power shifts through such institutional discourses in order to assign socially constructed and desirable labels of “normal” and “abnormal” behaviour upon individuals. This labelling promotes conformity across bodies by transforming them into docile objects, with threats of punishment in instances of non-compliance serving as the enticement to obey the rules. While an ‘economy of power relations’ comes to the fore in such analysis, the body is still perceived as largely a socially constructed phenomenon that lacks innate volition. As Shilling complains,

rather than overcoming fully the deficiencies of classical sociology, much of their [Foucault] work can be seen as reproducing in a different form the dual approach sociology has tended to adopt to the body. (Shilling, 2003: 9)

The mind (or the soul) by maintaining purity of the sinful body was promised entry to paradise. A classic example of how the mind/body dualism can be operationalised by power brokers in certain religious contexts to impose social controls (Brown, 1988). Simpson (1993) notes social theory has recently moved towards a direction that encourages the embodiment of human actors. Religion, in particular, is implicated in and central to this shift in focus.<sup>18</sup> Simpson also provides a commentary on the historical interplays between science, work and religion in early capitalism to control bodily desire. The main objective of this interchange was to produce a docile worker concerned with efficient production, without ‘the forceful taming and repression of bodily urges, civilisation would not exist’ (1993: 152). However, in late capitalism the hero is no longer ‘the diligent worker, but the unsatiated, willing consumer, seething with desire for new things and experiences’ (1993: 156). Ironically bodies are now the servants of consumption, buying goods produced by the previous servant bodies of production. This is the grim history and future fate of the body in capitalist society.

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<sup>17</sup> ‘You’ in the statement refers to the Prophet Mohammed; the ‘scriptures’ are the Torah and Bible.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Mellor and Shilling provide a theoretical analysis of successive reformations of the body, and their relationships with various forms of religious life, ‘in order to cast a fresh light upon the emergence, development and transformation of the modern Western world’ (1997: 1).

Several sociologists have tried to free the body from the various traditional religious, scientific and work related discourses that promote mind-body dualism. One attempt to liberate the body in sociology has been a theoretical movement towards human embodiments: ‘Our bodies are manifestations of our selves in our everyday worlds. At the same time, embodiment is our way of knowing those worlds and interacting with them’ (McGuire, 1990: 285). McGuire’s (1996) paper on religious healing argues that most sociological research focused on ideas about the body still promotes a tendency to disembodiment the very object of study. Therefore, the theme of religion as mere body regulation in Turner and Foucault is too narrow. She asks:

When we frame the linkage of religion and the body in terms of regulation, we must confront the themes of power, coercion and (often) violence. Who controls whom? ...

Under what circumstances does religion legitimate oppressive social control of bodies/minds; when does it promote liberation? (McGuire, 1996: 105-6)

Answers to such questions lie in calling for an abandonment of the limitations implicit in the oppositions of mind/body, nature/culture, and individual/society, by focusing instead on the many intersections through which body, mind, self and society interpenetrate. Thus, religious discourse – McGuire argues – is both a potential source of body regulation and constraint, as well as an avenue for resistance to such control.

The Raelian movement asserts, for instance, that the Elohim (advanced extraterrestrials) dictated the religious revelations given to humanity by the ancient prophets (Buddha, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed), and that this advanced alien species is the actual genetic creator of humanity. They adamantly state humans are not spiritual beings with a soul, after death of the body there is nothing (i.e. no paradise). A key characteristic of Raelian teaching involves sexual exploration as an important source of pleasure. They question Jewish and Christian inhibitions and guilt towards sex suggesting the best way to develop the mind is by exploring the body (see Palmer, 1995). As Barrett observes, the ‘movement has a completely free attitude towards sexual relationships; it depends entirely on individual choice’ (2001: 394). Likewise, Tucker notes that most New Age spiritualities refrain from passing moral judgment on sexual behaviour, essentially because unlike the Gods of the traditional religions their ‘gods and spirits, like New Agers themselves, are resolutely nonjudgmental’ (2002: 49). Scientologists regard homosexuality as a residue from previous lives spent as the opposite sex, to the one currently being experienced by a Thetan (soul). In principle

they do not condemn such sexual orientation as “sinful”, which is in contrast to what traditional religions historically opted to do.<sup>19</sup> More broadly, Casey charts work and non-work patterns in modernity and sees the growing encroachment of spirituality in the work place as a major countervailing tendency against technocratic and economic rationalities. She describes the rise of in-house and off-site employee participation in mind-body retreats like yoga and meditation, as well as observing diverse counter-rational practices such as ‘reading the aura of job interviewees’ and ‘scientists using tarot cards to discern direction and aid decision-making’ (Casey, 2000: 578). Thus, the self is revitalised through bringing the soul back into work and by listening to the body, hence the ‘restoration and consecration of self as creative, effervescent being discourage sacrifice of self in the service of mechanical abstracted doing’ (2000: 585).

### ***New Age Spirituality: The Self, Transcendence, Transformation & Reenchantment***

The first reason for man’s inner slavery is his ignorance, and above all, his ignorance of himself. Without self-knowledge, without understanding the working and functions of his machine, man cannot be free, he cannot govern himself and he will always remain a slave, and the plaything of the forces acting upon him. (Gurdjieff cited in Ouspensky, 1987: 104)

Giddens (1990), as previously outlined, emphasises that neither individuals nor groups are passive agents in the face of changing social forces; instead he argues that the reflexivity of modernity offers new liberating opportunities. The ‘reflexivity of the self is continuous’ and at each moment ‘the individual is asked to conduct a self-interrogation in terms of what is happening’ (1991: 76). Religion also becomes an object of the reflexive monitoring of alternatives and options, so it follows if one adopts and practices a religion it is within the general framework of reflexivity. In qualifying this, Giddens talks of ‘justified’ traditions. A religious tradition can only be accepted and sustained if it has been ‘justified’ by reflexive questioning and argument. Giddens goes on to suggest that ‘justified’ traditions are therefore ‘sham’ traditions because they receive their identity ‘only from the reflexivity of the modern’ (1990: 38). There is a great deal of merit in such analysis (see chapter 9). However,

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<sup>19</sup> Dillon (1999) argues that the view of religion as a body of dogma closed to rational critical discourse leading to emancipatory potential is simplistic (e.g. Foucault). For instance, the doctrinally reflexive reasoning that contemporary Catholics use in negotiating what might appear as “contradictory” identities (e.g. being gay or lesbian and Catholic) show the limitations of negation of the possibility of a self-critical religious discourse. In other words, religious traditions operate like public discourses by being open to critical debate, and possible change from within, as well as without.

‘we must acknowledge that many religious traditions have been much more reflexive in the past than Giddens seems to acknowledge. He has a rather undynamic view of tradition’ (Mellor, 1993: 118). Thus, Giddens also falls into the trap of viewing social transformation as rather linear by assuming a relatively static premodern civilisation and then depicting a more dynamic one during modernity, or late modernity. Archer associates this limitation with the problem of central conflation, which entails having ‘to resort to rather vague universal processes whose presence or absence is broadly associated with stability or change rather than being able to come to grips with the conditions and mechanisms involved’ (Archer, 1988: 96).

Modern features of society such as advanced telecommunication systems do make information readily available and hence reflexivity more fluid. For example, we can search the Internet for a wide variety of alternatives when deciding on a plethora of things, from buying a car, to joining a religion. Nonetheless, few new religions can be seen as just a ‘sham’, but are instead often reinterpreted and reformulations of older religious traditions (e.g. Hinduism and Buddhism), or novel spiritual derivatives based on recasting the occult, which is a tradition as old as Western thought (Gibbons, 2001). In general traditions often provide a normative focus for radical renewals, reformulations and reconstructions of religion, or what could be called a reframing of the metaphysical realm (see chapter 6). Further, with reference to the perception of reflexivity as both individually and structurally enabling transformation, Giddens fails to fully account for the pervasive influences of power.<sup>20</sup> So his assertion that in late modernity we as individuals ‘contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications’ is somewhat optimistic (1991: 2). Shilling concurs: ‘As the human body has evolved through the centuries, through the interweaving of biological and social factors, it has provided people with differing opportunities for action’ (2003: 175). Many New Agers striving and waiting for the elusive New Age are beginning to realise this harsh fact (see Melton, 1998: 141-48).

Limitations aside, the notion of reflexivity-of-self in modernity helps to explain why we are in fact witnessing attempts at re-enchantment, in contrast to Weber’s linear argument of increasing rationalisation leading to a disenchantment of the world. Weber clearly made the analytical mistake of envisioning in the long run a

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<sup>20</sup> Archer (1988) shows that Giddens’s analysis does not seem to be able to account for why it is that some actions are radically transformative, while others serve to maintain the *status quo* (see also King, 2000). We could also add some actions lead to the control of others, if we were to cite from Foucault.

separation of religion from society and from individual-reaction. He achieved this by seeing religion as a ‘transcendent point of reference over and above the world of purely human activity’ (Beckford, 1989: 31). More accurately, as Mellor (1993: 124) states, ‘religion and society are subject to the same patterns of transformation’. Hence Weber’s theory of the loss of religion’s significance is a self-fulfilling prophecy based on a theoretical flaw, rather than empirical reality. Individual charismatic attempts at transcendence and re-enchantment have resulted in the social formation of countless NRMs (Nelson, 1987; Riesebrodt, 1999; Robbins, 1988). In particular, New Age discourses are replete with statements regarding transcendence and transformation of self and society, but this view of transcendence differs from the meaning found in traditional religious discourses – e.g. Islam and Christianity. It does not solely refer to a reality outside the body:

The “Higher” reality is that which transcends and forms the foundation of everything else, without it being necessarily “above” the world. It is “higher” in importance, not in space. (Hove, 1996: 190)

Heelas (1996) in his survey of the New Age movement also talks of a focus on moving beyond the socialised self, known as the ‘ego’, ‘lower self’, ‘intellect’, or ‘mind’. Emphasis in the New Age discourses, he argues, is placed on self-mastery and self-perfection, leading to contact with the creator god or higher self within. Reaching this point the limitations of physical life can be voluntarily transcended. At such a stage the individual is in the world, but not of it and able to create his/her own reality:

Higher Self is somehow linked to the Universal Intelligence of the Cosmic Energy, but not in a hierarchical way, in contrast with the Christian notion of the soul, that is transcended by God. The Higher Self is part of the Universal Intelligence. It may be best described as an off-print of it. For the individual it is the gate-way to a more profound understanding of life. (Hove, 1996: 191)

Tucker suggests because the higher self ‘is defined with Godlike powers’; it is not surprising ‘to hear many New Agers claim extraordinary abilities to literally change the world’ (Tucker, 2002: 48). We are witnessing many attempts at a transformation and re-enchantment of the world. Melton (1992: 19) writes:

[If] personal transformation on a large scale is possible, argues the New Age, then social and cultural transformation is also possible. The world can be changed from the crisis-ridden, polluted, warlike, and resource-limited world in which we live into a New Age of love, joy, peace, abundance, and harmony.

Becoming conscious of a utopian reality is for some New Agers a religious quest, for others a profane project, like learning to swim or making better use of one's talents. According to Rupert (1992), *Creativity in business* is a clear example of how the American commerce community is becoming receptive to New Age practices by using them to increase productivity and efficiency. *Creativity in Business* is a book written by Michael Ray – a professor at Stanford Business School – which teaches students how to use New Age metaphysical teachings to increase their creativity in a competitive marketplace: 'The most popular vehicle for implementing these beliefs... has been different training seminars, easily available to any interested company' (Rupert, 1992: 128). Therefore, developing human creativity by discovering the "inner divine" is an important theme in the New Age discourses. In this manner, the adoption of New Age discourses is a particularly good example of *reflexivity in action*. They promise transcendence and reenchancement without the full-commitment required by the more traditional religions. This flexibility is also reflected in their organisational qualities, there is no central authority figure with activities being organised in a network fashion (Barker, 1989; York, 1995). New Age ideology contains several common themes that have slowly become mainstream; (1) holism, (2) the idea of spiritual evolution, (3) the coming of the Age of Aquarius, (4) the importance of ecology, (5) a return to the feminine aspects of the divine, and (6) criticism of Enlightenment science (Hanegraaff, 1996). Diverse meaning systems and a range of practical techniques, such as Yoga, are all utilised and mixed with the aim to ultimately discover the "true" self. For example, when I participated in an Eckankar spiritual seminar in Los Angeles, focused on learning the inner truth of dreams, the other participants were not concerned with my involvement as a sociologist. Writing my doctoral thesis was considered by many of them to be part of my "path of life", and simply a necessary step on my personal journey to find my real self.

Foucault viewed the ultimate goal and effect of discipline as leading to a dreaded normalisation. The process of normalisation involved the elimination of all social and psychological irregularities and the production of useful/docile subjects through a refashioning of minds and bodies. Foucault suggested religious discourses such as Christianity were involved in the shaping of individual subjects and could be seen as an important power-knowledge matrix that forms a technology of self. To Foucault, on the one hand the subject was obviously socially constructed: 'I now have no difficulty in accepting that man's languages, his unconscious, and his imagination

are governed by laws of structure' (2002b: 221). While on the other hand, Foucault also saw individuals as having the potential power to define their own identity, to master their body and desires, thereby forging a practice of freedom through techniques of the self (an aspect of his work not fully explored). He (Ibid: 230) writes:

The positivities that I have tried to establish must not be understood as a set of determinations imposed from the outside on the thought of individuals, or inhibiting it from the inside, in advance as it were; they constitute rather the set of conditions in accordance with which that practice gives rise to partially or totally new statements, and in accordance with which it can be modified.

We could argue, using Foucault's insights (he never did explicitly himself), that many New Age discourses constitute such a set of conditions, giving rise to partially or totally new statements in religious discourse. In other words, they are examples of techniques of the self in practice: 'When, for example, life is considered to be the abstract, mystical power that pervades everything, the body can be seen as sacred, because it carries the force of life' (Hove, 1996: 191). This liberates the body from its former conception as merely a site for sin, the flesh becomes sacred and desire is just part and parcel of the joys of embodiment. The promise of transcendence is no longer based on how religiously one follows the dictates of scripture, but instead becomes a personal task involving how deeply one is willing to go in the exploration of inner spirituality and meanings. These are the main new statements added by the New Age to traditional western religious discourses. Thus, despite the great variety of New Age inspired movements in the West there is still a remarkably consistent set of underlying themes, typically the freeing of the body through a mastery of the self, leading to a transcendence and transformation of the world.

The techniques of personal growth are extremely varied, but the cultivation of reflexivity and self-awareness is usually central. Thus, attention is deliberately focused on mental and bodily states in a continuous process of self monitoring... The self, other and totality are thereby methodically interrelated in terms of belief in an original, essential and/or emergent harmony among all components of the cosmos. (Beckford, 1984: 263, 265)

## **Conclusion**

NRMs provide a more holistic sense of self; a sense of self that transcends the constellation of limited instrumental roles recognized by modern mass society and anchored in a greater sense of moral community and purpose. (Dawson, 1998a: 582)



The main insight gained from investigating the sociological literature concerned with accounting for the rise of NRMs, was the importance given to rapid social change as a key variable explaining their formation (Beckford, 1986; Saliba, 1995a). However, rapid social change refers to generic cyclical processes, which continuously reorder societal relations and institutions, across space and through time (Bhaskar, 1998a; Giddens, 1984, 1990, 1991). A socio-cultural matrix of structural transformations such as the perception of a gradual erosion of values in a rational, scientific and materialistic capitalism can be isolated as one of the core dislocating effects wrought by rapid social change (Bellah, 1976; Glock 1976). This has fostered some hospitable conditions for the birth of, and conversions to, morally focused NRMs (Jones, 1978, Nelson, 1987). New religions are the adjustment responses to social change, cultural flux and identity crises (Kinnvall, 2004; Melton, 1995a; Stark and Bainbridge, 1987), so conversion is an outcome of conscious choices made by reflexive identity seekers (Warburg, 2001; see chapter 5), rather than the result of coercive pressures (i.e. Kent, 2001). The inadequacy of ‘brainwashing’ as an explanation for conversion resides in its largely value-driven assumptions, which inspire inductive formulations instead of deductive criticisms:

The brainwashing concept has been an ideological weapon rather than a falsifiable scientific theory in all the contexts in which it has been advocated as an explanation for worldview resocialization. (Anthony, 2001: 289)

One outgrowth of traditional hostilities between NRMs and the countercult movement has been the birth of organisations such as INFORM, which aims to promote mature and impartial academic research into the new religions of the West. This seeks to balance the traditional sensationalist media coverage of cults that tends to group all NRMs together as an insidious threat to mainstream social values (Barker, 1989; Richardson, 1983). This is not to deny that some movements can and do act dangerously, achieving warranted notoriety for real incidences of deviance, abuse, violence and self-destruction. Cases like the People’s Temple, the Branch Davidians, the Solar Temple and Heaven’s Gate spring rapidly to mind (Hall, 2000), but pre-judging all groups based on such extreme examples normally depicts the cultural fault lines and dilemmas of late-modern social life instead of general reality (Fenn, 2003b). Furthermore, in the face of countercult criticism a number of NRMs have improved and adapted their practices, with the last two decades witnessing less emphasis placed

on totalitarian-style community living, and more effort on combining spirituality with conventional western lifestyles (Chryssides, 1999; Khalsa, 1986; Rochford, 2000).

To fully understand the rise of NRMs and the processes leading to conversion requires us to engage more deeply with sociological theories (Beckford, 2003; Mellor, 1993). One significant recent development has been the greater frequency in accounts of contemporary religiosity framed against the philosophical and theoretical contours of postmodernism (Berry and Wernick, 1992; Bauman, 1998; Bhatt, 1997; Brasher, 2001a; Lyon, 2000, Roof, 1993; Sutcliffe and Bowman, 2000). While these accounts have numerous merits, I remain unconvinced of the principles behind postmodernism (Potter and López, 2001). In particular, the New Age objective of discovering a meta-narrative or key to open the absolute truth of reality undermines postmodern inspired accounts of the movement which tend to over-emphasise consumerism, relativism, ambiguity and individualism in their visions about the nature of modern spirituality.

At first glance, then, the New Age movement may appear to have the post-modern characteristics of playfulness, pastiche, hybridity, bricolage and, in some respects, an air of magical fantasy... On the other hand, there are good grounds for arguing that the New Age has features that appear to be thoroughly modern, non-ironic and rational, in an instrumental sense.

(Beckford, 2003: 189-90)

The New Age movement is a reflection of what Giddens calls reflexivity in action, or Foucault's notion of a practice of freedom through techniques of the self. New Agers strive to construct novel meta-narratives of knowledge and the basis to utopias, using a plurality of techniques and informational sources. Thus, the body becomes free to forge its own identity and destiny and is no longer the passive victim and site of sin as depicted within most traditional religious doctrines.

In the following chapter a refinement and extension of the arguments made in the first two literature reviews chapters is undertaken, to present the theoretical and methodological strategy specifically utilised in this study of NRMs. In this manner the question: what sociological theories and research strategies can best help elucidate the causes and consequences of the rise of NRSMs in the West? – is answered.

## Conceptual Issues

The previous two chapters reviewed the literature in the sociology of religion and new religious movements, but before proceeding to the presentation of the theoretical and methodological framework applied in this thesis based on that critical evaluation, it is necessary to clarify some main conceptual issues. First, the classic and contemporary attempts at defining religion are discussed and put into the broader cultural-historical context. Second, for the specific purposes of outlining the remit and scope of this study, the definition of new religious movements used is presented.

### *Problems with defining Religion: The cultural-historical context*

It is not surprising that there are few major conclusions in the sociology of religion. The subject is like history, continually rewritten as time brings new perspectives, and like philosophy and the clothing industry subject to fashions.  
(Jackson, 1974: 204)

As the above quote implies any conception of religion given at a particular moment in history is inevitably prone to change through the process of time. This is evident when discussing some contending historical attempts at defining religion, which has been a traditional subject of interest for sociologists and psychologists, with numerous definitions having been produced.<sup>1</sup> Contributions range on the one hand from the purely individualistic offered by William James (1902/1985) that religion is ‘the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine’ (James, 1985: 31), to the later more social definition of Emile Durkheim (1915/1965) who saw religion as ‘a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a church, all those who adhere to them’ (Durkheim, 1965: 62). In contrast to both these, Karl Marx argued that most religious movements originate in oppressed classes. He famously described religion as ‘the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people’ (Marx and Engels, 1957: 37). On the other hand, Max Weber declined in the opening sentence of his major general treatise

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<sup>1</sup> There are usually two broad definitional dimensions: (1) substantive: define what religion is by establishing categories of religious content that qualify as religion as well as those that do not; (2) Functional: emphasise what religion does for the individual and social group (see McGuire, 2002).

on the subject to give a definition of religion. This could only be done, he argued, at the conclusion of our study (Weber, 1965: 1). Although Weber steadfastly refused to formulate an explicit definition, his implicit conception of religion was grounded in an assessment of its universal social and psychological functions. To Weber, religion represented humanity's continuous efforts to impose intellectual and moral order on the chaos of existence and, in the process, to discover the ultimate *meaning* of the cosmos for both individuals and collective communities (O'Toole, 1984). Similarly, the theologian Paul Tillich, defined religion as any set of coherent answers to human existential dilemmas that make the world meaningful. In other words, religion is the response to those things, which ultimately concern humans. The debatable implication of such a definition is that all human beings are religious, since we are all faced by the existential problems of disease, aging and death (Adams, Pauck, and Shinn, 1985).

A more recent sociological definition is given in the work of Hervieu-Léger who focuses on the mode of believing. Religious belief works *ad intra*, as a way of social identification (by incorporating individuals into a community), and *ad extra*, as a way of excluding those who have no part in the genealogy. So a religion is 'the ideological, symbolic and social device by which the individual and collective awareness of belonging to a particular lineage of believers is created, maintained, developed and controlled' (1998: 36). Chryssides adds another definitional dimension by emphasising the goals of religion: 'The salvation of the world, the enlightenment of all living beings, or the ultimate triumph of good over evil are all goals... Allied to this, there is a second characteristic of religion: religions hold that the world's problems are not solved by human effort alone, but require supernatural aid' (1999: 15, 16). Hamilton (2001) argues that when dealing with religion we are in essence dealing with many different things – philosophical systems, cosmologies, systems of morality, even forms of drama, literature and other symbolic representations. Thus, no definition of religion on its own can tell us precisely what religion is: some definitions emphasise the personal, others the social; some the structures, others the functions; some the private, others the public; some the mundane, others the transcendent; some the truth, others the illusion. In other words, a more complete conception of religion will inevitably need to be articulated as part of the broader account of the features of a particular culture at a given point in time (see Clarke and Byrne, 1993: 205-6).

Foucault's writings could be regarded as such an approach to conceptualising religion. He included religion in his development of what he termed the *archaeology*

*of knowledge*: ‘Archaeology tries to define not the thoughts, representations, images, themes, preoccupations that are concealed or revealed; but those discourses themselves, those discourses as practices obeying certain rules’ (Foucault, 2002a: 155). Archaeology provided no account of transitions from one system of discourse (discursive formations) to another, so Foucault introduced a genealogical approach, which explains systems of discourse by connecting them to changes in the non-discursive practices of social power structures (see McNay, 1994). To Foucault the religious input to these systems and power structures has always been considerable. Discourses and discursive practices concerning the self, the body, sexuality, death, illness, health and spiritual well-being, as well as discourses of human rights, justice and peace. Beckford (1989) states that one of the effects of Foucault’s approach was to demonstrate that the very distinction between private and public spheres is itself a cultural product; similarly, the meaning attributed to the individual and to the individual’s rights and beliefs derive from particular cultural-historical contexts. Therefore, a complete conception of religion (as Foucault touches on) needs to encompass various dimensions or aspects, which may vary independently of one another, as well as over time. In this context, Beyer (2003: 429) makes the following pertinent observations regarding conceptualising religion:

- (1) A theory and definition of religion cannot be based on the assumption of a single function (e.g. Durkheim – solidarity; Weber – meaning) or even on a single social form (e.g. Marx – control).
- (2) Religion like culture is a constructed category that varies according to how its users conceive it. Therefore, both functional and substantive conceptions of religion apply because social actors use the word religion in either sense.
- (3) Modern society cannot be theorised as inherently secular just because certain forms of religion disappear or weaken, or because what counts as religion no longer responds to specific functions (e.g. theories of secularisation).

Beyer argues that further statements could be added to those above: ‘Yet it is only on the basis of these sorts of assumption that we can derive a social theory that does not *a priori* impose a certain historically and culturally determined (whether Western or not) manifestation of religion on the important differences that existed historically and that exist in today’s global society’ (2003: 430). The epistemological claims being

made here are that definitions of religion will usually be *partial* (do not fully capture the truth of reality), *situated* (specific to particular situations and periods rather than universally applicable) and *relative* (related to the researcher's world view and value system). In the words of Guthrie, religion has been 'difficult to define because definitions imply theories, and no good general theory of religion exists' (1993: 8).

### ***Towards a definition of New Religious and Spiritual Movements in the West***

Traditionally in sociology three main types of religious organisation have been identified: church, sect and cult.<sup>2</sup> According to Stark and Bainbridge (1987), the church is a conventional religious organisation; a sect is a deviant religious organisation with traditional beliefs and practices, while a cult is a deviant religious organisation with novel belief and practice. Note in the latter two definitions the word 'deviant', which is used because new movements are seen to stand in a relationship of tension with the surrounding sociocultural environment. The concept of deviance is defined as 'departure from the norms of a culture in such a way as to incur the imposition of extraordinary costs from those who maintain the culture' (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987: 122). Here we see the concept of a sect and a cult as negative by definition, the result of deviance. However, 'it is clear that the word "cult", as used by modern sociologists, cannot properly characterize groups such as the Unification Church, ISKCON [International Society for Krishna Consciousness] and the Church of Scientology' (Chryssides, 1999: 9). Furthermore, Wilson argues that the 'concept of the sect... does not meet the diverse demands that are made upon it. To have any rigour, the concept requires specification, but such specification is all too likely to carry the imprint of a particular culture and particular theological tradition' (1982b: 17). In order to minimise terminological confusion and prevent the promotion of negative connotations, this thesis rejects and discards as inadequate the labels 'cult' and 'sect', instead the phrase 'new religious and spiritual movement' [NRSM] is used.

The term 'movement' implies any organised attempt to introduce change. For instance, we could speak of social, ecological, feminist and political movements, as

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<sup>2</sup> There is a vast literature in this area going back to Ernst Troeltsch who following Weber pioneered the sociological study of sectarianism. Milton Yinger and Bryan Wilson further extended typologies of religious organisations, with the latter offering an analysis of the dynamics of sect emergence and development. Stark and Bainbridge (1987) attempted to integrate many of the findings of this earlier body of work on sects and cults in their theoretical framework.

well as religious movements (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003). A movement of any sort is a current or element within society that is concerned with introducing broad shifts in people's sensibilities and ideas. In this way 'movements provide glimpses of possible futures and are in some part vehicles for their realisation' (Giddens, 1990: 161). A typical response to such desire for a shift is friction, strain, and conflict from factions opposed to change, in the case of new religious movements the countercult movement is illustrative of resistance (Melton, 2003b). The very notion of a movement implies progress and reminds us such phenomena are not static or monolithic. A movement generally encompasses and includes both organisations and groups, which normally have clearly defined visible structures (e.g. hierarchical or networked) and leadership, making it clear those who are in, from those who are not. Scientology is too large to be called a group and is instead a highly structured organisation (Wallis, 1977), while the New Age is often seen as a circuit or loose network of individual believers with no formal administration (York, 1995). However, Scientology and the New Age can both be placed under the remit of new religious and spiritual movements: 'They are small currents in society that may be pointing to greater upheavals and changes in religious life [and] may be indicative of social and psychological turmoil' (Saliba, 1995a: 10).

The current emergence of NRSMs is certainly not unprecedented in the history of the West. The multifarious world religions (with their many branches) have provided rich soil for the constant flowering of new religious groups in different historical epochs and across various cultures (Beckford, 1986; Meldgaard and Aagaard, 1997; Nelson, 1987). For these reasons Chryssides (1999: 11-13) observes that it is problematic to account for the precise timing of the rise of new religious movements, partly because some claim they are not as 'new' as has been supposed:

- (1) Rissho Kosei-kai (the Society for the Establishment of Righteous and Friendly Intercourse) adheres to the doctrines and wisdom of Nichiren (1222-82), a controversial thirteenth-century Buddhist teacher.
- (2) ISKCON traces its practices back to Krishna, whom devotees regard as a genuine historical figure who lived some five thousand years ago.
- (3) The teachings of Ramtha's School of Enlightenment claim inspiration from a 35,000 year-old warrior who once conquered the island of Atlantis.

- (4) The Raëlians believe that their leader Claude Vorilhon known to devotees as Raël received his knowledge from the Elohim, these Elohim are advanced extraterrestrials that have interacted with humanity since before biblical times.

Regardless of the proclamations of such groups what has been crucial in allocating a movement to the category ‘new’ in the literature, is whether the organisation arose in recent times as a formal institution. Sociological definitions and benchmarks therefore vary with some designating ‘new’ as religions appearing in the West post World War Two (e.g. Arweck, 2002; Barker, 1998), while others define ‘new’ as those appearing after the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Beckford, 1985; Robbins, 1988). I slacken both these time frames in my definition of new for one main reason; if this refers to the original inception of the organisations relatively few of the larger groups (particularly those with Japanese origins) came into existence after World War Two. The Unification Church (founded in South Korea 1954, arriving in the United States 1959) and Church of Scientology (founded in 1954) would both be included at such a cut-off point, but the Arcane School/Lucis Trust (founded in 1923), The Self-Realization Fellowship (1925), Soka Gakkai International (1930), Nation of Islam (1931), and the Worldwide Church of God (1933) would all have to be excluded. For this reason a more liberal benchmark designating ‘new’ to those movements formed after the 1920s, and with a still visible presence and following among indigenous residents in either/both the United States and Great Britain, was preferred in this thesis (this still excludes the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Latter-day Saints, Theosophical Society and Christian Science).

Defining the term ‘new’ using such strict chronological criteria raises several objections (Saliba, 1995a), as Arweck and Clarke argue, ‘there will be dispute, for it will rule movements out that existed prior to that date and have a claim to newness... and it will rule other movements in that believe they are old religions’ (1997: xxvii). Inevitably any distinction between new and old made about religions is going to seem arbitrary and will struggle to capture the fluid nature of societal development. In this respect, Chryssides comments that ‘new religions will age, and perhaps in some cases become the older more established religions of the future’ (1999: 14), while these conceptual constraints warrant acknowledgement, for the purpose of framing the specific contents of the thesis the 1920s had to suffice as the imagined border of ‘new’. A further clarification needs to be made at this juncture. Although religions such as mainstream Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism may be relatively new



to the West (particularly the United States) – being based on recent migrations from other countries – this study was nonetheless not specifically concerned with them. Thus, I follow Melton who excludes ‘those Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist groups limited to a single immigrant ethnic group’ (1995a: 270). Only offshoots of these traditional world religions were counted as new to the West if packaged in a specific way by a guru or other leader for the purpose of attracting western followers, and ‘whose teachings and practices were markedly different from that of the society in which they were [originally] located’ (Melton, 1995a: 270). Good examples are certain manifestations of Sufism, as well as Eastern guru movements such as the Brahma Kumaris and the 3HO Foundation (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization).

The previous section argued that the definition of religion remains contested amongst academics. Therefore, there is no endeavour here to resolve the question of the ‘correct’ definition of religion, as Clarke and Byrne argue:

[A definition] is not a fixing of religion’s essence but a provisional, useful way of demarcating a subject of study. We shall expect cumulative knowledge to refine that means of demarcation. (1993: 205)

Nonetheless, there still do remain certain minimal expectations of an organisation, movement, ideology or worldview for it to be appropriately judged as religious. For example, a religion will normally offer some (or all) of the following to its members:

- (1) *Transcendence and a sense of the Sacred*: belief in an agency or agencies that transcend normal sense perception and which may even include details of a different order of existence. The related belief that such a supernatural force is concerned with and has intervened in human affairs.
- (2) *A Totalising Cosmology*: answers to life’s ultimate questions, such as: ‘Why am I here?’ ‘What happens after death?’ ‘What is the purpose of the Universe?’ ‘Am I more than my Body?’ ‘Is there a God?’
- (3) *Rituals*: rites of passage for marking key events in one’s life, in the context of the above answers.
- (4) *A Mythology*: re-enactments or commemoration of episodes in the life of deities who have lived in this world, as well as prophets or great teachers of the faith (e.g. ISKCON philosophy is based on the historically recorded longing of Chaitanya as Radha for Krishna, the beloved, setting the pattern and highest goal for the devotee’s achievement of Krishna Consciousness).

- (5) *Modes of Action*: techniques and strategies for coping with life. This must mean life as a whole, and not simply parts of life, such as personal efficiency, or ability to succeed in one's work. Particularly the belief that human fortune in this life and in the afterlife (lives) depends on the relationships established with transcendental agencies.
- (6) *Codes of Conduct*: some kind of guide to life in the form of a code of ethics, which prescribes the "correct" actions and conducts to be practised by individuals and collectives, in order to placate the supernatural agencies (might be formally set out as in Creation Spirituality principles, or it could be more implicit).
- (7) *Forms of Fellowship*: ceremonies to express devotions, gratitude, and obedience to supernatural agencies by devotees (e.g. ISKCON festivals).
- (8) *A Structured Framework*: a formal organisational hierarchy with a clear leadership\leader and a ranking of members according to status achieved within the organisation (i.e. the various levels to auditing in Scientology).
- (9) *Ultimate Aims*: a formal mission statement often including some either clearly stated, or thinly disguised, aspirations for social transformation (such as Creation Spirituality's Gifts of Liberation, or the anticipation of an imminent Aquarian Age among New Age followers).

These defining elements helped to distinguish what could be counted as a religion and what could not for the quantitative concerns of this study (see chapter 4).<sup>3</sup> Based on the above Transcendental Meditation is simply – as practitioners' state – a technique. Although it enables one to cope with life, it offers no specific goal beyond human existence (such as *moksha*), nor does it offer rites of passage or a clear ethic (see Chryssides, 1999). In contrast, Scientology has a cosmology, offers detailed explanations about life before and after our present one, advocates an ethic and includes novel rites and ceremonies (Church of Scientology International, 1993). So while the Church of Scientology, Soka Gakkai, Nation of Islam, and the Unification Church are clearly 'new' religions according to the above parameters, a plethora of groups and organisations still existed that could not be regarded as religions in their own right (see Robbins, 2000: 517-18). The New Age Movement and some UFO

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<sup>3</sup> Some organisations might claim to be religious, but fail to satisfy the criteria imposed here. It could also be possible that a movement satisfies the criteria so we would call it religious even if it rejects this.

movements (e.g. Zeta Talk) are relevant examples. These movements have very little formal administration or membership and followers often explicitly reject organised religion such as Christianity. Instead, they generally claim to be seekers; people interested in spiritual matters. In this context, Wuthnow makes a useful distinction between religion and spirituality while clearly defining the latter:

The distinction between spirituality and religion frequently casts the former in a more favourable light than the latter... Many people say their interest in spirituality is increasing, but they may or may not pursue this interest through organized religion. Spirituality is somehow more authentic, more personally compelling, an expression of their search for the sacred, while religion connotes a social arrangement that seems arbitrary, limiting, or at best convenient... For present purposes, spirituality can be defined as a state of being related to a divine, supernatural, or transcendent order of reality or, alternatively, as a sense or awareness of a suprareality that goes beyond life as ordinarily experienced. (Wuthnow, 2003: 306; 307)

Using Wuthnow's definition above certain groups were included in the study as new spiritual movements. These movements may not be seen as strict religions, however, they still provide a general meaning system of ideas and values that attempt to explain life with reference to a reality that is beyond everyday existence (Hove, 1996). Here I am referring to movements like the followers of Seth's teachings; these messages were channelled through Jane Roberts and instruct that we all "create our own reality" in a process of spiritual evolution through countless existences on this planet, as well as in an infinite number of other dimensions (see Roberts, 1970). Such groups tend to be placed under the broad term New Age movement in the literature:

The term 'New Age' can usually be deployed to characterise all those, belonging to the realm of the 'alternative', who hold that contact with inner spirituality – the spirituality which can be experienced from within the person and, for many, the natural order as a whole – serves as the basis for a new, transformed way of being. There are, of course, variations on this theme, variations to do with language, rituals, values, even ontologies. Some primarily drawn on eastern spirituality; others on western therapeutic practices; others on primal traditions; and yet others on teachings to do with the interplay of spirituality and capitalistic prosperity. (Heelas, 1998: 257)

Therefore, the various groups included and analysed in this study would have had to satisfy the following two broad characteristic dimensions:

- (1) *Movements designated as New Religions*: they were incepted after the 1920s and exhibit a degree of organisation and development that is characteristic of a formal religious group. Examples being the Church of Scientology, Unification Church, Soka Gakkai, Nation of Islam, ISKCON and the Jesus Army.
- (2) *Groups classed as New Spiritual Movements*: they also fall after the 1920s as the date of initial inception, but lack the formal organisation that is characteristic of organised religion. Followers are more inclined to talk about spirituality than religion and even claim to reject organised religion. Examples being the New Age Movement, including ‘goddess spirituality’ such as The Fellowship of Isis, and Wicca/paganism groups. There are a range of additional interests that are also associated with spirituality, such as healing, visualisation, channelling of spirits or extraterrestrials and other practices often labelled occult, such as tarot, astrology or kabbalah. Examples include the Society of the Inner Light, ZetaTalk and the Cassiopaea Experiment. Finally there are groups that offer specific spiritual or spirit based techniques or services, many of which are placed under the umbrella term Human Potential Movement. Examples being the London Tao Centre, and certain types of Shamanism (Puttick, 2000).

The above two categories were not rigid classifications. There were movements that overlapped dimensions, which reflects the complexity, fluidity and multi-faceted nature of new forms of religion and spirituality.

### **Theorising through the Lens of Critical Realism**

Comprehensively investigating and explaining the rise of NRSMs requires analysing the phenomena via several levels (micro, meso and macro), while taking insights from various social science disciplines (sociology, economics and psychology). This is why critical realism served as the underlying philosophical and epistemological reference for the study (Archer *et al.*, 1998; Bhaskar, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1993; Collier, 1993). Critical realism has already been innovatively and successfully applied to the diverse concerns of economics (Brown *et al.*, 2002; Faulkner, 2002; Lawson, 1997; Nielsen, 2002); ethnography (Carspecken, 1996; Porter, 1993); environmental issues (Benton,

1993; Dickens, 1996; Forsyth, 2001); philosophy (Collier, 1999; Groff, 2000, 2004); research methods (Sayer, 1994); religion and spirituality (Archer *et al.*, 2004; Collier, 2004a, b, c), as well as sociology (Archer, 1995; Cruickshank, 2003). The critical realist view is extremely useful as a fundamental feature is the recognition that social structure is dependent on human activity or praxis (Archer, 1998; Bhaskar, 1998a, b). Exploiting this feature allows a detailed conception of the interaction between agents and society as well as with the global system and religion. This abstract epistemology in conjunction with Giddens's (1976; 1979) structuration tools enables us to present a dynamic multi-causal theory of the rise of NRSMs, and in the process transcend the theoretical limitations inherited from the classics in the sociology of religion. The tools of structuration theory invite us to find the ways through which key tensions are reframed and how new paths of development are created, avoiding the deterministic doctrine of uniform covering laws found in theories of secularisation (see chapter 1).

Critical realism fully acknowledges the epistemologically relativist view of science as a social and historical process – a position associated with Kuhn (1996) – and therefore accepts fallibilism: 'All beliefs are socially produced, so that knowledge is transient' (Bhaskar, 1998a: 73). This enables us to safely steer between the constricting definitions of scientific positivism as well as the solipsistic relativism of postmodernism (Archer, 2004; Potter and López, 2001). In the words of Steinmetz:

[A]rguing for the powerful causal effects of discourse on social practice is not equivalent to the claim that society is a text for which all interpretations are equally valid. And scaling back the predictive claims of sociology does not entail relinquishing explanation. (Steinmetz, 1998: 184)

Giddens (1990, 1991) rejects the notion of a postmodern society and instead sketches the contours of high modernity in the West, with reference to both broader globalising influences as well as to transformational tendencies within societies. In his depiction of late modernity risk and fear are ever-present undercurrents, reflecting the possibilities of nuclear war; ecological calamity; unchecked population explosion; the collapse of global economic exchange and other potential global catastrophes. These potential risks 'provide an unnerving horizon of dangers for everyone' (Giddens, 1990: 125). The added ingredient of fear effectively combines with broad processes of transformation to result in acute feelings of personal meaninglessness that engender existential anxiety. This anxiety causes a set of tribulations which afflict the troubled self in modernity. Here Giddens's concept of the knowledgeable agent is deployed to

explain how a set of adaptive reactions – that serve to minimise the effect of such high-consequence risks – lead to a drive for ontological security. In this drive – the reflexive project of the self – programmes of actualisation and mastery come to the fore, where ‘an individual must find her or his identity amid the strategies and options provided by abstract systems’ (1990: 124). This very act of reflexive self-regulation, in which the conditions of reproduction are also consciously monitored, produces ‘modes of radical engagement’ like social movements that ‘provide significant guidelines to potential future transformations’ (1990: 158). Thus, utopian discourses like those of NRSMs represent one such guideline for a future transformation since ‘they directly address issues of the *moral meaning of existence* which modern institutions so thoroughly tend to dissolve’ (Giddens, 1991: 207, emphasis added).

Bhaskar’s (1989; 1991; 1993; 1998e) recent development of a post-Hegelian dialectics and his dissolution of the fact-value distinction in favour of a moral realism encourage us to go even further. It holds that there is more to “what is” than “what is known,” more to powers than their use and more to society than the individuals composing it. According to Bhaskar and Collier (1998: 389):

This opens up the possibility of extending realism into the realm of values and morality, finding an “intransitive dimension” underlying moral thought and moral change... *a moral realism, too, which is naturalistic in the sense that it does not look for real values in a Platonic world of ideas or a Kantian world of noumena, but in the real world which we all inhabit.* (Emphasis added)

A key underlying aim of this moral realism is human emancipation, but emancipation ‘depends upon the untruth of reductionist materialism and spiritualistic idealism alike’ (Bhaskar, 1989: 114). For emancipation to be possible ‘knowable emergent laws must operate’, which will be consistent with physical laws and be set in the ‘context of explanatory theories elucidating the structures of cognitive and non-cognitive oppression and the possibility of their transformation by women and men’ (Ibid). Lawson (1998) eloquently captures the promise of such a critical realist philosophical approach when directly applied to social science:

...policies, plans, and strategies can be formulated not with the objective merely to fix events and states of affairs in order to control the fixture, but with the aim, instead, of replacing structures that are, for example, unwanted and restrictive by those that are needed and empowering, to facilitate, in short, *a greater or more desirable or equitably distributed range of human opportunities.* Moreover, there opens up the possibility, unique to social (as

opposed to natural) science, of *facilitating social emancipation through explanatory critique*. (1998: 130, emphasis added)

A critical approach is employed in this study in which explanation and ‘transcendental critique’ are intertwined – based on the premise that to explain can be to criticise (Collier, 1993). Nonetheless, a critical view necessarily requires it to be ‘internal to (and conditioned by) its objects; or it will lack both epistemic grounding and casual power’ (Bhaskar, 1989: 114). Applying self-reflexive auto-critique as Bhaskar calls it, highlights some unresolved tensions in the Giddens description of continuities and contingencies in modernity and his depiction of knowledgeable and capable agents in a runaway world. Principally, the Giddens account of the opportunities presented by radicalised modernity is highly generalised failing to fully identify political groupings and issues of power on the individual’s potential to act and transform society (Bryant and Jary, 2003). Archer (1995) rightly argues people cannot just change or reproduce society as they wish. Some structural features of society are beyond control and constrain behaviour. For example, a flood or volcanic eruption, or shortage of land, is not the product of human will, but it exercises a real, material constraint on options, regardless of human actions: ‘In short, the *intransitive objects of knowledge* are in general invariant to our knowledge of them: they are the real things and structures, mechanisms and processes, events and possibilities of the world; and for the most part they are quite independent of us’ (Bhaskar, 1998f: 17, emphasis added). Furthermore, while Giddens understands both the possibility of action and social change, and the constraints and reproduction of social institutions, he does not adequately identify the specific actors that have dominated these interactions in particular historical contexts.

Foucault’s analyses of what he termed ‘techniques of domination’ employed in institutions like the asylum, clinic, and by religion to govern people in society, provides a useful analytical tool to supplement those of Giddens. Foucault’s (2002a, 2002b) conceptualisation of power as a complex strategic situation or relation, which contributes to producing social realities, practices, and forms of subjectivity is particularly informative. His genealogical researches implicitly focus on the complex articulations between forms of knowledge and relations of power, which operate through discursive formations. Such discursive formations are not exclusively linguistically derived, but rather ‘thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble[s] consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions’

(Foucault, 1980a: 194). To Foucault a genealogy of discursive formations reveals the dispersions, deviations, and discontinuities that are displaced in the traditional historical analytic pursuit of order, continuity, and secure foundations. Genealogical historical inquiry, what Foucault sometimes terms “effective” history, dispenses with constants and treats everything as having a history. The elevation of genealogy places the analytical emphasis on the question of the social production of discourses, or the articulation of discourse and power influences, so while Giddens is a helpful basis for outlining and describing, Foucault is essential for understanding and criticising.

A variety of discourses construct the self, so to Foucault the self was perceived as decentred. This concept of the self or of identity as decentred involves a rejection of essentialism: ‘Anti-essentialism consists of the claim that there are no human universals (such as “instincts”, “needs” or “drives”) that determine identity’ (Filmer *et al.*, 1998: 34). Foucault was also interested in “techniques of the self,” that is to say the means by which individuals may exercise ‘operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves’ (Foucault and Sennett, 1982: 10). In my view, the notion of techniques of the self sits uncomfortably with a decentred self because recognising the human subject as decentred necessarily moves the agent from being responsible for social transformation to a mere product of social relations (see Filmer *et al.*, 2004: 43).<sup>4</sup> Smart notes: ‘While the formation of the self through social interaction is briefly acknowledged in Foucault’s work... no attempt is made to elaborate on or to explore the complex relationships with others that are at the very heart of social life’ (2003: 218-219). It is here that Giddens’s conception of the reflexive knowledgeable agent can be utilised to compensate in combination with Foucault’s investigative tools like discourse analysis. Both enable immense rigour in attempts to critically understand the history of the present time and to uncover some of the causes of the rise of NRSMs. They help by explaining why the social agent in modernity still panders after religious understanding and also assist in tracing the genealogy of NRSM discourses.

Creative amalgamation of the theoretical apparatuses of Giddens and Foucault remains in line with the critical realist philosophical framework (see also Kaul, 2002), which takes as a starting position the assumption: ‘no universally applicable, logically

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<sup>4</sup> I would defend a mild form of biological essentialism; there is evidence which demonstrates that the physiological characteristics of different bodies do have influences on social behaviour (Irvine, 1990).



compelling method of theory appraisal exists' (Caldwell, 1994: 245).<sup>5</sup> Critical realists insist that theory is developed not by deduction, but retroduction 'exploiting analogies with already known phenomena, to possible explanations' of empirical law-like behaviour (Bhaskar, 1986: 68). This is an argument against purely theoretical or relativistic social science and emphasises the value of social theories in identifying the real underlying structures and mechanisms that combine to produce actual social events (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1986, 1998a). In the words of Steinmetz,

[T]he determination of complex objects [like new religious and spiritual movements] in open systems [like society] necessarily involves an "eclectic" mix of theories relating to the relevant causal mechanisms. (1998: 182)

Therefore, in tandem with employing an eclectic mix of theories, I also adhered to a plural methodological approach. Based on using quantitative and qualitative methods of data generation, which allowed the thesis research questions to be addressed and investigated from a number of different angles and perspectives (Spicer, 2004).

## **Methodology**

It is time as a field of scholarship to remove the barriers that have constrained our vision. A range of approaches illuminate reality, which itself reflects interactive and reflexive causes, requiring a range of methodological glasses. It is time to look through all of them, and to see religion and human life in the richly complex hues that they are. (Andresen and Forman, 2000: 14)

A critical methodological approach to social science embraces the assumption that there is no failsafe method to accumulate knowledge (Harvey, 1990). Therefore, I employed a multi-strategic approach to investigating NRSMs in the United States and Great Britain. The essential features of a critical social science methodology involve the development of abstract concepts (e.g. alienation, charisma) and the examination of how such concepts relate to wider social relationships (such as NRSMs). The aim is to get beneath the surface of social reality by overcoming the dominant ideology or ideologies driving social progress and transformation (e.g. scientific rationalism and capitalist materialism). Each abstract concept and particular factor driving belief (in this case religious and spiritual) cannot be examined in isolation, but necessarily

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<sup>5</sup> I am not claiming Foucault is a critical realist, rather that his insights are compatible or containable within such a philosophical framework. Pearce and Woodiwiss (2001) combine some neglected aspects of Foucault's work to show how a Foucauldian metatheory can be produced which 'is compatible with a non-humanist variant of what we call ordinary realism' (2001: 51).

relates to a totality (i.e. discourse or paradigm). Totalities, structures and history are interrelated and conspire to constrain or limit what people can do in given moments in time. Structures are obviously not static, therefore they need to be related to particular historical contexts (see chapter 4). Critical social research also entails a form of praxis encapsulated by a reflexive approach to theoretical development and data collection. Carspecken (1996) outlines the five stages to a critical social science methodology, which were followed in this thesis:

- (1) *Compiling the Primary Record*: immersion in the critical evaluation of the literature of the social group or phenomena being studied, i.e. review of social theory, sociology of religion, secularisation and NRSMs literature.
- (2) *Preliminary Reconstructive Analysis*: analysis and reanalysis of the first stage particularly looking for interaction patterns, tendencies, themes, concepts, their meanings, power relationships, roles and interactive sequences and so forth.
- (3) *Dialogical Data Generation*: talks and interaction with those being studied discussing issues, preliminary findings, and refining concepts in order to decide how convincing the initial ideas were. The interviews with members of various NRSMs were very important at this stage.
- (4) *Discovering System Relations*: once stage 3 is well under way the study can be broadened to link findings to other parts of social life. By placing NRSMs within broader contexts in Western society, such as debates about scientific knowledge and discovery, human evolution, social emancipation and globalisation. The case studies of specific NRSMs served this purpose.
- (5) *Using System Relations to Explain Findings*: this final stage involves producing casual explanations of findings making links to social structures and totalities, such as in chapter 5 which explains why people join NRSMs and the theoretical model presented in the final conclusion.

The above methodological procedure guided the application of a range of research techniques that were used to inform the thesis, including trend analyses of survey statistics, depth interviews, discourse analysis, ethnography and case studies.

Two quantitative data sources were utilised for generalisations and inferences about religious trends across the West. This entailed secondary analysis of descriptive

statistics derived from the World Values and the Religion Surveys (see Arber, 2001), both of which were obtained from the University of Essex (UK Data Archive).<sup>6</sup> The World Value Surveys investigate broad socio-cultural and political change.<sup>7</sup> They are representative national surveys of the basic values and beliefs of the publics in more than 65 societies on all six inhabited continents, containing almost 80 percent of the world's population. They build on the European Values Surveys, first carried out in 1981. A second wave of surveys, designed for global use, was completed in 1990-1991, a third wave was carried out in 1995-1996 and a fourth wave took place in 1999-2001. This systematic investigation of global values has produced evidence of gradual, but pervasive changes in what people want out of life (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). More specifically Religion (1991) and Religion II (1998) serve as supplements to regular national surveys in the International Social Survey Programs, and include specific data on religious attitudes (about God, heaven, hell, life after death etc) across several countries. The data from all these surveys was used as a broad benchmark and comparative indicator for describing trends in values and religious sensibilities, specifically in the United States and Great Britain and is cited in various chapters.

A database of NRSMs operating across the United States and Great Britain, classified into ideal types was also created for quantitative analyses (please see attached CDRom). The movements included in the database were required to satisfy the definitional parameters outlined in the section above: *Towards a definition of New Religious and Spiritual Movements in the West*. There were an estimated 300 or so groups in Great Britain that fitted these criteria (INFORM database), and 800 or more in the United States (Melton, 2003a), so the population of NRSMs satisfying my definitional criteria was 1,100. But it was impractical to enter them all into the database, what was included was a sample of 220 groups (i.e. 20 percent). To ensure the external validity of the sample selected for inclusion the population was first stratified (Seale, 2004a), and then a representative sample from each stratum was put into the database (chapter 4 gives more details). The quantitative nature of classifying NRSMs into distinct types within the database also served the function of identifying groups or settings for selecting comparative cases for in-depth study using qualitative methods (Spicer, 2004). In addition, INFORM; the Adherents website;<sup>8</sup> the religious

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<sup>6</sup> See: <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/>.

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.worldvaluesurvey.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> See: [www.adherents.com](http://www.adherents.com).

movements' project website,<sup>9</sup> and the Metareligion website<sup>10</sup> all provided useful membership statistics about some of the NRSMs in the database (see CDROM).

A key qualitative method used to add rigour and depth to the arguments and criticisms in the thesis was through detailed case studies of specific NRSMs (chapters 6 to 9). Case study is a research strategy that involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence (see Miles and Huberman, 1994). The case studies of major and minor NRSMs selected from the database drew on secondary sociological research and were supplemented by original data gathered from analysing various documents published by the movements. Some arguments in the case studies were also reinforced by the thematic analysis of relevant depth interviews, as well as ethnographic insights. The analytical strategy guiding the case studies was to describe and evaluate how certain NRSMs construct discourses about social reality incorporating individual, group, institutional and societal layers, as well as how these may be open to critique.

Twenty-six depth interviews were specifically conducted with members of NRSMs. The aims of these interviews were to develop a deeper understanding of the philosophy behind organisations, the reasons why people convert and what strategies are used to legitimate the discourses, see chapter 5 and 6. Five depth interviews were also carried out with people who were not members of any religious or spiritual movement. These served as a comparison group. I was interested in contrasting the comparison group narratives regarding spirituality and religion with those provided by the first group (see appendix 1). I utilised the depth interview due to its advantages when 'the subject matter is sensitive or complicated' and because no 'survey questionnaire or standardised interview could provide the information in sufficient depth or attune it to the varying levels of comprehension likely to be present in the population' (Fielding and Thomas, 2001: 126). Topic guides also ensured that the same basic lines of inquiry were pursued with each person interviewed, which 'helps make interviewing a number of people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored' (Patton, 2002: 343). My primary aim was to interview members of NRSMs ensuring I selected groups from each of the two characteristic dimensions outlined above in the section: *Towards a definition of New Religious and Spiritual Movements in the West*. A combination of random and

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<sup>9</sup> See: <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu>.

<sup>10</sup> See: [www.meta-religion.com](http://www.meta-religion.com).

snowball sampling (based on referrals from previously interviewed members) resulted in depth interviews with people drawn from five movements (see table 3 below).

**Table 3 – New Religious and Spiritual Movements interviewees were drawn from**

<b>Movement</b>	<b>Numbers Interviewed</b>
International Society for Krishna Consciousness	7
Church of Scientology	7
New Age and Spiritualism	5
Falun Gong	5
Nation of Islam	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>26</b>

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Pilot interviews helped me to improve my interviewing technique as well as to develop the topic guides. I set my parameters for the potential interviewees to people who had been active in their particular organisation for at least two years. A reflexive approach to the interviews was taken from the start, this entailed critically examining my methods of inquiry and being conscious of the ways personal subjectivity could influence the processes of data collection and theoretical formulation (Seale, 2004a). The commitment to a continual re-examination of the data generated in light of developing arguments is a principle feature of what is known as grounded theorising. The main aim of such theorising is to generate a theory to explain what is central in the data. It also ‘demands a rigorous spirit of self-awareness and self-criticism, as well as an openness to new ideas that is often a hallmark of research studies of good quality’ (Seale, 2004b: 247). Using theoretical sampling in tandem with grounded theorising ensured the validity and reliability of the interview data. I re-interviewed all NRSM members at least once, after having had time to digest and theorise about the preliminary data. This also enabled greater exploration of any new avenues, which had emerged from the initial interviews. The ability to generalise reliably from the interview data was verified by theoretical saturation, or reaching the point when no new patterns or concepts emerged from the transcripts. Obviously financial, logistical

and time pressures were all important factors constraining the rigorousness of this part of the research process (i.e. it was not realistic for me to analyse/reanalyse more than 31 interview transcripts in a three year period as well as write the thesis).

Most of the interviews were taped; those that were not taped were not done so at the specific request of interviewees, and instead in those cases the responses were recorded by writing down notes. Interviewees who are mentioned by their real names in this thesis gave either written or verbal consent, in the cases where anonymity was requested interviewees are simply referred to using a pseudonym (Miller and Bell, 2002).<sup>11</sup> All interview data collected was transcribed and then systematically analysed in NVIVO using interpretive content analysis, which involved identifying the main themes, motivations and concepts best explaining the reasons why those interviewed joined the religious or spiritual movement in question (Seale, 2004d). Themes and concepts that were identified and coded in one interview were compared and contrasted with (any) similar material from other interviews (constant comparison). The underlying tactic used in the analysis was to focus on the interpretive detail and internal structure of given transcripts, which included looking for variation in the text, as well as paying attention to any silences or pauses (Tonkiss, 2004: 377-81). My overall approach to the interviews was based on the realist epistemological assumption that the social world has an existence that is independent of the language used to describe it (Byrne, 2004). Table 4 below lists the key themes/concepts that emerged *explaining conversion* after content analysis of the first part of the interview transcripts (see chapter 5 for further details).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For example, one Falun Gong interviewee was worried about repercussions for his family back in China if his real name was used, so I refer to him as Dr X in the thesis.

<sup>12</sup> I did not use a computer assisted coding scheme to analyse the remainder of the interview transcripts (i.e. answers to questions covered in topics 2 to 5 – see appendix 1). Instead these sections of the transcripts were used as a resource. In other words, they were analysed organically by being ‘read’ as unique experiences, and served to enrich the case studies about specific NRSMs in chapters 6 to 8.

**Table 4 – Eight key concepts explaining religious conversion**

Code	Key concept
A	<i>Alienation</i>
B	<i>Search for Mediating Structure</i>
C	<i>Search for Meaning or Truth</i>
D	<i>Charisma</i>
E	<i>Boredom and the wish for Re-enchantment</i>
F	<i>Seeking Self-improvement</i>
G	<i>Desire to Help or Serve Others</i>
H	<i>Bodily Transcendence</i>

Another qualitative method that informed this study is ethnography, which is a technique that encompasses *informal conversational interviewing, intensive fieldwork, and observational research* towards studies of small groups. Ethnography belongs to a distinct interpretive tradition and was originally developed as a research tool used by anthropologists. Ethnographic inquiry takes as its central and guiding assumption the position that any group of people interacting together for a period of time will evolve a culture (Van Maanen, 1988). Culture is that collection of behaviour patterns and beliefs that ‘covers all the folk-ways of a society, such as language, customs, and dress, as well as the symbols and artefacts that people develop’ (Lawson and Garrod, 2001: 56). Followers of NRSMs are often described as forming part of the “counter culture” (Bellah, 1976; Glock, 1976; Robbins, 1988). A counter culture is the term used ‘for any subcultural form of ideas, beliefs, or practices that is distinct from and often hostile to the dominant culture in society’ (Lawson and Garrod, 2001: 51). Thus, the importance of understanding culture, especially sub or counter cultures of all types is the cornerstone of “applied ethnography” as it has emerged in modern society (Chambers, 2000: 856-7). Using ethnography as a research tool to study the distinct subcultures of NRSMs empowered me to identify the rules that govern relationships in settings where the symbolic world and the meanings people apply to their own experiences are paramount, but which are generally inaccessible to other methods of social research (Tedlock, 2000: 470).

The specific brand of ethnography subscribed to in this study follows Becker's (1958) hypothetic-deductive approach to participant observation and is framed by the view of society as a social construction (see Berger and Luckmann, 1967).<sup>13</sup> The latter view argues society is socially constructed on the basis of how members make sense of, and order, their undifferentiated experiences. Over time such constructions also take on a hard-objectified character reflected by social institutions that act back on both social and individual consciousness. The main claim here is that although such ethnographic approaches 'share a view that the subject matter of social and cultural research is different from that of the natural sciences, they are nevertheless characteristically committed to a *realist and scientific* view of the world' (Walsh, 2004: 227, emphasis added). I did not subscribe to the postmodern tradition that all is simply text, which implies we should give up any notions of truthfulness by substituting the hope for consensus with relativistic fragmentation (Caputo, 1987). Instead, I agree with Walsh (2004: 228) that this position takes the idea of reflexivity too far while shunning the empirical too much. As Wuthnow *et al.*, argue postmodern ethnography concerned with 'thick description largely rules out the use of codified data collection techniques, the examination of questions concerned with macroscopic social institutions, and progress toward empirical generalizations' (1984: 243).

Qualitative research based on postmodern philosophy maintains that there is no external reality independent of human consciousness; there are only different sets of meanings and classifications, which people attach to the world (Feyerabend, 1978). This is a valid criticism of traditional positivistic approaches to science, but many would agree with Trigg (1989) that the notion that there is no reality separate from the conceptual systems employed by people accords quite ludicrous powers to human thought. Nonetheless, the assumption that knowledge could be socially engineered according to the values and political agendas of power brokers within a given culture is not something I would wish to dispute (Seale, 2004c: 108). A realist approach to ethnography overcomes this limitation by consciously admitting that values impinge on facts, but argues this does not necessarily mean we should embrace the postmodern dismissal of secure foundations and live as undetermined currents caught in the flux of social change (Porter, 1993).

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<sup>13</sup> I reject Berger and Luckmann's associated assumption that all human beings universally share an innate biological essence that requires them to fend off chaos by socially constructing sacred frames of meaning. Engaging in the verification of such an assumption lies beyond the scope of this thesis.



The relativistic tendencies of postmodern thought present a great challenge at a time in human history that also requires committed moral action in the face of intellectual and existential uncertainty... The trick will be, not to deny our hermeneutical finitude through some fundamentalist dogmatism or callous rhetorical will-to-power, but to honor the hermeneutical process and open the solipsistic circle into an evolving spiral. (Grassie, 1997: 91; 92)

Wuthnow *et al.*, argue in general, ‘theories which take subjective perceptions into account are better than theories which do not’ (1984: 244). Based on this premise I not only interviewed members of NRSMS, but also observed and participated in various spiritual practices. During the last three years I have been a regular visitor to the ISKCON temple in Watford (Bhaktivedanta Manor), a dedicated practitioner of the Falun Gong exercises, as well as a frequent guest at the main Scientology Centre in East Grinstead. My aim in these personal engagements was to try to understand the spiritual experiences of followers by encountering it first hand. There was no agenda on my part to judge the personal veracity of these experiences, or the emotions associated with such practices. Rather my observations were directed at identifying the ‘ways in which human beings express what they regard as religious ideas and sentiments in social and cultural forms’ (Beckford, 2003: 29). I focused on the “this-worldly” consequences the discourses of various NRSMS engender (both for the individual agent as well as for the social realm), and this proved a fruitful analytical avenue to pursue. During the observations of the activities of various groups I recorded my field notes by hand, or by talking into a Dictaphone. The analysis of the data involved a lot of thinking and reflection upon what had been observed. Coding the ethnographic insights involved looking for patterns of thought, action and behaviour emerging in the notes, and identifying key events (Porter, 1993).

In respect to the comparative concerns and agenda of the study, two months of field research was undertaken across California (United States) from June 2004 to August 2004. I visited the Eckankar Centre during my two weeks in Los Angeles, observing and participating in several spiritual exercises to gain first hand insights about the light and sound of God. I spent the following six weeks at the University of California in Berkeley and gained access to the Berkeley branch of ISKCON in the process. During this period I also carried out archival research at the Graduate Theological Union Library, which houses extensive periodicals published by NRSMS unavailable in Great Britain (Gidley, 2004). This enabled me to trace the genealogy of ideas of NRSMS like the Church of Scientology (chapter 8) and ZetaTalk (chapter 9),

by consulting their source documents without recourse to secondary interpretations. Some of the movements I analysed (e.g. ZetaTalk and the Cassiopaea Experiment) have here-to-fore received scant attention in the sociological literature.

### **Entering the Field: Some notes on the research process**

A little reflection on the fact that things go wrong even for seasoned researchers would go some way to dispelling the sense of overbearing methodological mystique. (Michael, 2004: 432)

The actual research process was far from as smooth as outlined in this chapter. At times my progress was disjointed and chaotic instead of logical and systematic. Making contacts with the research participants was occasionally based more on luck, rather than on the realisation of any well laid strategic plans on my part. For example, I became acquainted with Graeme Wilson (PR Manager, Church of Scientology) at an INFORM sponsored conference, which led to further surprising Scientology contacts and invitations. I initially met a female New Age follower – whom I later interviewed – at a mind body exhibition, while we were both waiting to have our aura pictures taken! My invitation to the ISKCON temple in Berkeley was the result of a chance encounter with a Hare Krishna devotee at LAX airport.<sup>14</sup>

There were some individuals who were reluctant to participate and others who made promises of cooperation that never materialised. For instance, I did not receive a reply to any of my questions from the Raelian movement. It also proved very difficult to secure interviews with the Nation of Islam, so I had to be satisfied with just two.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, when my thesis proposal had been first written for the ESRC, I outlined my intention to spend time in Los Angeles conducting fieldwork, primarily to observe people involved with the Cassiopaea Experiment and ZetaTalk. A contact I made on an Internet user-group for wanderers (people claiming to be extraterrestrial souls stuck in human bodies), promised to introduce me to the founder of ZetaTalk, but this never happened. She has since moved to an undisclosed site somewhere in North America to prepare for the cataclysms expected to follow the passage of the 12th

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<sup>14</sup> I was approached at the departures screen, while checking the information for my flight from Los Angeles to Oakland. The devotee got my initial attention by asking me if I was a movie star or model. We ended up having a discussion about my PhD. He was very keen to help me and gave me his contact details for a telephone interview, seeing I would not be back in Los Angeles. I ended up donating \$20 to the group, in return for which I received two books on ISKCON philosophy and the contact details for a friend of his based at the Berkeley temple.

<sup>15</sup> A draft case study written on the Nation of Islam was removed due to space restrictions.

planet. I had email communication with the Cassiopaea Experiment up until late 2003, but lost contact after the group relocated to France (see chapter 9).

The research methods employed such as the depth interviews and ethnography had to be learnt and refined as I went along. Before this thesis I had minimal practical experience of using either research technique. Carrying out the research, collating the results and analysing the findings have been very rewarding, as well as extremely demanding. My social life for the large part of the last three years has suffered, but the knowledge and skills I have acquired have made the sacrifices more than worthwhile.

### ***A Critical Reflection on Theory and Methods***

[T]here will always be a need for new, ever-deepening and more practically efficacious critical philosophy of and for the human sciences.

(Bhaskar, 1998a: 179)

Judging from the books written by academics representing diverse fields in the recent Routledge Studies in Critical Realism, it seems the theoretical perspective is gradually growing in recognition and justifiably so. For instance, López and Potter (2001) call their collection of insightful edited articles, '*After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*', but all these triumphal claims advertising the merits of the critical realist school of thought have not gone completely unquestioned (Baehr, 1990; Dow, 2002; Groff, 2000; Hartwig, 2001; Kaul, 2002; Sayer, 1997; Viskovatoff, 2002). In the spirit of auto-critique, some of the more worthy doubts cast over critical realism will now be discussed and systematically addressed.

The strongest grievance to have been directed at critical realism is its emphasis on social emancipation via explanatory critique. Baehr (1990) correctly points out that social heterogeneity and incompatible desires will guarantee that what is freedom for one person could be hell to another. He also doubts the ability of a rational scientific epistemology – as promoted by critical realism – to be a viable basis for freedom in an irrational and sometimes demonic world: 'critical realism's rationalist impulse ignores those energies and ultimate commitments which themselves can neither be ever rationally comprehended nor completely restrained' (Baehr, 1990: 774). In response to Baehr, critical realism assumes the fallibility of knowledge and strives for a more equitable distribution of human opportunities, not a utopia.

An emancipatory critique is entailed by critical naturalism because it suggests that the values we hold about society are always bound up with structures operating (sometimes) beyond how we directly perceived them... there is a strong impulse within critical realism to understand how our everyday ideas might be false. (Roberts, 2001: 668)

Thus, the purposes of my explanatory critiques have been to demonstrate how some of the NRSMs studied promote false histories, ideas and hopes (see chapters 6 to 9).<sup>16</sup>

Most of the papers, which have emerged that question critical realism, propose enhancements to the framework rather than out and out rebuttals (Brown *et al.*, 2002; Faulkner, 2002; Nielsen, 2002). In this context, Dow (2002) presents a good case for advancements in critical realist epistemology by suggesting it draws on insights from David Hume's sceptical philosophy. Kaul (2002) offers expansionary advice to critical realist methodologists, by suggesting that due to the context specificness of values and the intangible nature of power relations, emancipatory agendas would greatly benefit from the theoretical and research tools of feminism, postcolonial theory, deconstruction and poststructuralism. On the other hand, Sayer (1997) outlines some commonsense cautionary advice to critical realists. He argues intervention in social policy can cause more problems than it solves and that the complexity of multi-cultural society requires carefully evaluating evidence before making any normative statements. Meanwhile, Viskovatoff (2002) argues Kantian transcendental arguments have far more to offer than critical realism grants, although I fear he ultimately does not grasp the fact that idealism is the antithesis of realism.

[F]or there to be experience, there must be thought; once there is experience, however, thought has no 'impact' upon nature, which reveals itself to us in experience. Since the nature contemplated by transcendental realists is exactly the nature that transcendental idealists take to be given to us in experience, there is no relevant difference between transcendental realism and transcendental idealism. (Viskovatoff, 2002: 702)

The above argument misses the point; idealism presumes mind orders all sense data, while realism argues there is an actual rule following world that exists independent of mind. For example, if human beings become extinct the earth will continue to survive

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<sup>16</sup> In this regard, I disagree with Bhaskar's idealistic turn in his *From East to West: Odyssey of a Soul* (Bhaskar, 2000). He undermines the fallibility assumption of critical realism in this text by presenting a closed system, which aspires 'to produce for everyone now a total philosophy for the whole of their (i.e. everyone's) being' (2000: 74). His discussion of past lives, reincarnation and the nature of ultimate reality borrow heavily from Hindu and Western Esoteric cosmology, in an attempt to convince us (and perhaps himself) of the truth to a religious worldview. This switch should not tar the more humble agenda of critical realism (see Hartwig, 2001).

and orbit the sun. ‘If Kant had concluded, not that appearance is not of things in themselves, but that it is only of part of things in themselves, his argument would have been far less questionable’ (Collier, 1999: 80). As a consequence, there has been the inevitable reduction of Kantian idealism to social constructiveness and relativism for use in the postmodern critiques of foundationalism (Archer, 2001; Hicks, 2004). Critical realism does not reject the idealist assumption that the social world is intersubjective, one of cultures, consciousness and purposive human actions. Rather it seeks to order events and find regularities, totalizing discourses in the social sciences may very well block the expression of rival discourses, while also claiming privileged access to the truth (like many religions do). But critical realism is not susceptible to these criticisms, in part because it prioritises the search for necessity before order and conceptualises necessity as pluralistic rather than singular. There is also an emphasis on optimism in critical realism, instead of postmodern defeatism (Tissaw, 2003).

A critical realist social science was applied in tandem with a research design consistent with the principles of grounded theory. This type of approach to research seeks to generate a theory that relates to the particular situation forming the focus of the study. Theory is ‘grounded’ in the data obtained during the study, particularly in the actions, interactions and processes of the people involved (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). The prime criticisms of this type of research strategy are that it is not possible to start a study without some pre-existing theoretical ideas and assumptions, and it is difficult in practice to decide when categories have been ‘saturated’. Thus, it is hard to know when a theory is sufficiently developed (Robson, 2002). However, the strengths far out weigh the weaknesses. First, it presents a strategy for doing research that, while flexible, is systematic and co-ordinated. For example, by providing explicit procedures for the analysis of ethnographic data. Second, it is very useful in applied and novel areas of research, where the research approaches selected are multi-strategic and include quantitative and qualitative methods (Strauss and Corbin, 1997).

The specific research methods utilised in this thesis bring with them individual advantages and disadvantages (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; Gilbert, 2001; McClave, 2001; Seale, 2004). The analysis of large survey datasets has clear cost advantages (Arber, 2001), but often the variables seen as important by the original researchers may be of little value to current theoretical purposes. For instance, the data from the Religion and World Values Surveys was used very selectively in this study. Seale (2004e: 361) outlines six helpful procedures to follow when doing secondary analysis,

which informed my empirical endeavours. The key criticism directed at quantitative methods is the assumption of objectivity; epistemological relativists would argue values always impinge on facts (Stedman-Jones, 1998). The use of multiple methods and a reflexive approach to research helps to counter such limitations (Seale, 2004b).

The qualitative techniques used in this thesis such as depth interviews and ethnography rely on interpretive strategies to make sense of, and contextualise, data. Theorists like Greene remain adamant that interpretivist logic rejects the primacy of scientific realism because in interpretivism social reality is viewed as predominantly the product of social constructions. Thus, ‘Interpretivist inquiry is unabashedly and unapologetically subjectivist’ (Greene, 1998: 384). Furthermore, Snow and Machalek (1984) have suggested accepting converts’ statements as valid and reliable records of past events can be empirically problematic. They argue convert accounts are not objective data because of their socially constructed nature, their temporal variability (i.e. they are reconstructed or elaborated over time), and their consciously retrospective character. They also claim that a number of studies have shown converts’ accounts tend to be constructed with group-specific guidelines for interpreting certain experiences as religious conversions. Hence personal conversion narratives are not idiosyncratic and private constructions; instead, they could be individual expressions of basic themes in the general ideology of a particular NRSM:

[M]embers were frequently instructed to watch and listen to core converts recounting their respective experiences in order to learn how to construct an appropriate testimony. Consequently, most of the conversion experiences that Snow heard and recorded were structured in accordance with specified guidelines. (Snow and Machalek, 1984: 176)

In defence of the conventional practice of interviewing to acquire explanatory data about the social world, if we cannot ask converts about their experiences and reasons for converting whom should we ask? As Cruickshank (2003) rightly surmises sociologists cannot “develop a theory from nowhere”. Snow and Machalek make valid observations, but even they admit, ‘conversion is probably comprised of casual processes amenable to generalization’ (1984: 184) Critical realism does not deny the complexities of investigating the subjective natures of social actors, so when qualitative research is undertaken it is focused on intensive study of single settings (i.e. case studies), or a small number of people. This intensity helps to guarantee the reliability of theories based on interviewee accounts (Sayer, 1994; Seale, 2004a)

## **Conclusion**

As with most sociological research high level abstraction of concepts like religion are inevitable. But diligently shifting through the conceptual quagmire we arrived at a distinct set of characteristics that capture the essence of what is meant by religion. I then proceeded to confidently present my own definition of what the term NRSMs referred to in the context of this thesis. The study of NRSMs warrants sophisticated examinations and greater links with social theory (Andresen and Forman, 2000; Beckford, 2003). For this reason my approach draws on a critical realist epistemology and utilises a plurality of research techniques, including empirical and interpretive methods. The structure of this thesis mirrors my systematic multi-strategic research approach; I began with a critical review of the sociology of religion literature (chapters 1 and 2), and now proceed to re-analyse NRSMs in the West with the aid of theoretically derived generalisations (chapters 4 and 5). This leads on to more focused and in-depth explanatory critiques of specific movements (chapters 6 to 9), some of which have never been sociologically investigated (e.g., the Cassiopaea Experiment and ZetaTalk). In the following chapter we explore in detail the varieties of NRSMs active in the United States and Great Britain, with reference to the results of statistical trend analyses carried out on a sample of multifarious groups. The underlying logic propelling the forthcoming chapter is that there are definite episodes of historical transition within which the distinct types of NRSMs can be placed, and about which generalisations could be made.

### **Introduction: Typologies of New Religious and Spiritual Movements**

There are many more NRMs in existence than can be manageably dealt with in a single volume. If we are to understand them, it is therefore necessary to devise some kind of typology... (Chryssides, 1999: 23)

There have been countless endeavours to classify the proliferation of NRSMs in the academic literature (Barker, 1985; Beckford, 1985; Bird, 1979; Campbell, 1978; Chryssides, 1999; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985; Robbins, 1988). Many recent attempts have been primarily influenced by the Troeltschian dichotomy of churches-sects and by the typologies of Yinger (1970) and Wilson (1970). The latter typologies were modifications of the original one developed by Troeltsch enhanced to account for the rise of “cults”. Nevertheless, the more robust typologies to emerge have primarily delineated movements according to the religious tradition and geographical area from which they sprang (Hunt, 2003). For instance, Ellwood in an Introduction to the annotated bibliography entitled *New Religious Movements in the United States and Canada* presents nine main categories with which to classify NRSMs (Choquette, 1985). Based on identifying the historical and geographical origins of movements the nine groupings are: (1) Theosophical, Rosicrucian, Gnostic; (2) New Thought; (3) Spiritualist/UFO Groups; (4) Occult/Initiatory Groups; (5) Neo-Paganism and Its Allies; (6) Eastern Religions I: From India; (7) Eastern Religions II: From East Asia; (8) Eastern Religions III: From Islamic Countries, and (9) Christian Movements. Historians of religion particularly appreciate this form of typology because it presents an accurate classifying scheme for NRSMs on the basis of historical/theological data.

Barker (1985) offers a similar classification also based on religious traditions from which groups ultimately derive. For example, ISKCON and members of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University take their inspiration from the Hindu religion. Zen groups have their roots in Buddhism, and the Worldwide Church of God from Christianity. Other NRSMs are more eclectic and merge together different religious traditions. A prime example is that of the Unification Church, which mixes Christian ideas with elements of Taoism and Confucianism. Others have a pagan, occult or witchcraft source, such as House of the Goddess. Some groups have little connection with previous religions being part of what Barker calls the human potential movement, with Scientology being a classic example. Barker acknowledges that certain groups are so idiosyncratic that they defy any classification and that the beliefs and practices of other movements are genuinely “new” expressions of religion.



Therefore, Barker also suggests an alternative way of classifying NRSMs, which is according to the degree of commitment shown by the members. On her scale Heaven's Gate would have been at one end, while movements such as Transcendental Meditation, which require little more of members than to attend a short course, would be at the other extreme of the continuum. Ellwood and Barker's categories for classifying NRSMs are less reductionistic than other typologies that employ a very small number of categories, frequently two or three (e.g. Glock and Bellah, 1976). However, both Ellwood (1985) and Barker (1985) are outdated when compared to the recent typology developed by Partridge (2004), and their classification schemes seem no more than tentative suggestions when compared to more ideological systems of classification like the one articulated by Wallis (1984). I present a new classification based on Partridge/Wallis and call it the "origins-orientations" typology. This exercise helps outline an agenda for future sociological research, by showing how a typology can be used to produce quantitative facts about NRSMs.

#### ***The Partridge Typology and the Creation of a NRSMs Database***

[S]ome kind of conceptual scheme must inevitably be used to make simpler sense of the surfeit data available about NRMs... (Dawson, 1997: 364)

The population of NRSMs active in either/or Great Britain (henceforth GB) and the United States (henceforth US) matching the definitional criteria outlined in the section on conceptual issues (see chapter 3), was initially compiled into a comprehensive list using the INFORM database and Melton (2003a) as benchmarks. This matching exercise produced a list of movements totaling some 1,100 and was identified as the sampling frame. To obtain a representative sample from this sampling frame, the 1,100 movements were then stratified into an enhanced nine-fold typology based on Partridge (2004).<sup>1</sup> This new "origins" typology split the NRSMs into those with: (1) Christian roots; (2) Jewish roots; (3) Islamic roots; (4) Indian roots; (5) East Asian roots (6) Indigenous or Pagan roots (7) Western Esoteric or New Age roots; (8) UFO based beliefs, and (9) Personal healing/human development origins. After the 1,100 NRSMs were stratified into these distinct nine types a sample of 20 percent of the major movements from each stratum of the population was selected for inclusion and

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<sup>1</sup> I modified Partridge by dropping his category based on Zoroastrianism, and split his category called Modern Western Cultures into UFO based beliefs and Personal Healing/Human Development origins.

subsequent analysis in the database (Bloch, 2004: 173-5). In total 220 NRSMSs were entered in the eventual database.<sup>2</sup> Quota sampling was used to select the major movements from each stratum of the frame to insert into the database, excluding groups that had incorrect contact information or those lacking web sources.

**Table 5 –NRSMSs (in database) by type and the country(s) they operate within\***

Movements split according to the roots they have in major traditions	NRSMS only active in the United States	(%)	NRSMS only active in Great Britain	(%)	NRSMSs active in both the US and GB	(%)	TOTAL	(%)
<i>Indian</i>	9	13%	3	9%	34	29%	46	21%
<i>Esoteric/New Age Beliefs</i>	15	21%	4	13%	25	22%	44	20%
<i>East Asian (Chinese/Japanese)</i>	11	15%	2	6%	14	12%	27	12%
<i>Indigenous/Pagan roots</i>	12	17%	9	28%	5	4%	26	12%
<i>Personal/Human Development</i>	-	-	10	31%	15	13%	25	11%
<i>Christian</i>	11	15%	3	9%	8	7%	22	10%
<i>UFO Beliefs</i>	10	14%	-	-	4	3%	14	6%
<i>Islamic</i>	3	4%	-	-	7	6%	10	5%
<i>Jewish</i>	1	1%	1	3%	4	3%	6	3%
<b>TOTAL NRSMS</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>100%</b>
<i>Share of NRSMSs active by Country</i>	72	33%	32	15%	116	53%	220	100%

Note: \* The percentage for the last row was calculated going across to the total, while the other percentages were calculated going down the columns.

As table 5 above shows of the 220 groups included in the database 53% had centers of operation and a notable following in both the US and GB. The most common form of NRSMSs of the nine types was those with Indian roots (21%), while the least common were those with roots in Jewish traditions (3%). A fuller elaboration of what these nine types actually meant in practice is now needed; I do this by providing examples of NRSMSs that were included under each banner in the database (see CDROM).

<sup>2</sup> Practically I could not analyse more than 220 groups, statistically 20% is an acceptable sample size.

The first three types presented in the classification scheme of new movements are quite straightforward, being based on whether they gain inspiration from the old religions of the book: (1) Christianity (2) Judaism, and (3) Islam (Hamilton, 1998; Smart, 1989).<sup>3</sup> The old religions of the book are complex traditions and have birthed many new offshoots because the Holy Scriptures (i.e. Koran, Bible, Torah) upon which they are largely based can be prone to different interpretations (Novak, 1995). For instance, the Celestial Church of Christ founded in 1947 (originally in Nigeria and later spreading to the United States and Great Britain in the 1970s) is largely inspired by Samuel Oshoffa's personal reinterpretations of the bible. While Ellel ministries a Charismatic Evangelical organization founded in 1986 (GB) focuses primarily on healing and derives its teachings from the scriptures of Luke in the bible (Barrett, 2001: 233-4). The Twelve Tribes of Israel founded in 1968 and perhaps the most important branch of Rastafarianism in the West, also places great importance on original biblical interpretation (Campbell, 1985; Garrison, 1979; Murrell *et al.*, 1998). In general Rastafarians are very suspicious of much traditional Christian biblical interpretation and only accept doctrine once it has been internally validated through *Jah* (meditating). Thus, many new religions with roots in Christianity claim that their interpretation of the bible is the correct and only true one.

Jewish spiritual traditions are the least common source of inspiration for new movements; however some adaptation from such root sources in the discourses of new groups is still evident (Solomon, 1991). The Kabbalah Centre founded in 1922 (US), for example, bases its teachings on the Jewish mystical text the Zohar, and has found a home among the rich and famous including celebrity followers like Madonna. Kabbalists believe the world can be grasped through numbers and letters, and that their job is to discover the meaning hidden within the symbols through traditional methods. The number "ten" for instance is seen as the main organizing foundation for the universe. Through the ten numbers (sephirot), the basic working principles of life are organized and are pictured in the Sephirotic tree. The Sephirot are emanations of God who is seen as sitting at the "top of the tree", man's destiny is to climb this tree by means of magick in order to reach the level of the divine (Wilson, 2004: 258-344). The Society for Humanistic Judaism (1963) is also a NRSM rooted in the Jewish

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<sup>3</sup> There are complex typologies or families derived from each of the World Religions, an adequate summary of which is beyond the remit of this thesis; but for a good overview see Melton (2003a).

spiritual tradition, but denies any specific form of supernatural belief and instead pursues a quest to create Judaism consonant with a scientific and pluralistic age.

Islam, like Judaism, has spawned fewer Western offshoots than Buddhism and Hinduism and when it has this has tended to be in the form of NRSMs catering for reactionary and disprivileged sections of the Western population. A prime example is The Nation of Islam (1931), which bases its teachings on Elijah Muhammad who taught that blacks were the original human beings created by Allah and that the white race was a product of genetic experimentation by a corrupt black scientist called Yacub (White, 2001). According to Elijah Muhammad the whites would be destroyed at the end of times when the fabled Imam Mahdi of the Koran would return to establish paradise on earth. In contrast, new Sufi movements such as Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi (1970s) or the Osho Mevlana Foundation (1976) are based on the alternative discourses found in Islamic mysticism, which challenge various forms of Muslim orthodoxy (Helminski, 2000; Nicholson, 2000). The Sufism offered by these movements attracts Western seekers of an experimental truth by introducing the students to Symbology (a deeper understanding of the symbolic in daily life).

The fourth class of NRSMs is groups that can be identified with Indian roots, such as in Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism as well as Indian inspired Tibetan forms of Buddhism (Burghart, 1987; Lipner, 1994; Somers, 1991). However, it is the classical philosophy and the meditative disciplines of Hinduism that have most commonly been repackaged into new religious and spiritual forms by enterprising gurus for consumption by seekers in the West. For instance, the Self-Realization Fellowship founded by Yogananda in 1925 (US) first introduced the practice of kriya yoga to westerners claiming to be a scientific technique of God-realization and method for achievement of inner peace. Ananda Marga meaning “way of bliss” came to the West in the 1970s and is based on the practice of tantric yoga, with the ultimate aim of the movement being to set up a united world government of enlightened individuals. The 3HO Foundation (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization) founded in 1969 has roots in Sikhism and offers Western converts the opportunity to learn kundalini yoga. This “yoga of awareness” is claimed to promote strength, beauty, improved relationships, a heightened spiritual awareness and freedom from negative habit patterns (Khalsa, 1986). The New Kadampa Tradition founded in 1991 (GB), is a Tibetan led Buddhist movement, which traces its roots back to the Indian teacher Atisha. It offers

westerners a traditional Gelugpa Buddhism, not a westernized Buddhism, and hence claims to be a truly “pure” form of Buddhism (Kay, 1997). According to the website:

By integrating their knowledge of all Buddha's teachings into their practice of Lamrim, and by integrating this into their everyday lives, Kadampa Buddhists are encouraged to use Buddha's teachings as practical methods for transforming daily activities into the path to enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

The fifth type of pool from which NRSMs can spawn is East Asian, which includes Shintoism, Japanese Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, Korean Buddhism, and Taoism (Bell and Chaibong, 2003; Jochim, 1986). For example, Reiyukai (The Spiritual Friendship Society) founded in the 1920s in Japan and exported to the US in 1972, is an East Asian movement that began life by following the Buddhist teachings of Nichiren. Like the Soka Gakkai, it emphasises recitation of the Lotus Sutra (a key text in Mahayana Buddhism) and reverence for the ancestors as key practices (Hammond and Machacek, 1998; Wilson and Dobbelaere, 1994). Fo Guang Shan, founded in 1992, is a movement located in the heart of London based on Chinese religious thought, which integrates the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism with modernisation. The teachings of the movement aim to enable the individual to attain awareness of the original pure mind (*Ch'an*, or Zen in Japanese). Students of the movement gain understanding through studying the Buddha's teachings (Dharma) and are taught to master their minds through meditation. They also have to abide by five simple rules of conduct to ensure that they stay on the correct path: (1) abstain from killing; (2) abstain from stealing; (3) abstain from engaging in unlawful sex; (4) restrain from lying and, (5) from taking intoxicants. The London Tao center was founded in 1993 (GB) by westerner Kris Deva North whose teachings integrate Shamanic, Tantric and Taoist traditions. The center offers numerous courses that attempt to draw together the threads of esoteric knowledge and practice, with the aim to initiate people into full awareness of their inner power:

Self-realisation, stress relief, health and harmony of mind, body and spirit can be attained through the Moving and Still Meditations of the Tao. In the transmission of ancient Taoist secrets we westerners can understand and relate to the real and the now, to learn to love others; to love ourselves as we are, or as we would like to become, to grow our spirit, to channel and recycle

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<sup>4</sup> See [http://www.kadampa.org/english/tradition/kadampa\\_buddhism.php](http://www.kadampa.org/english/tradition/kadampa_buddhism.php) accessed 24/08/2004.

negative emotions, to live in harmony with our external and internal environment.<sup>5</sup>

The Tao center derives primary inspiration from East Asian religious traditions but also mixes and matches these with western esoteric thought, such as the New Age.

Groups derived from indigenous or pagan origins are the sixth type of NRSMs in the West (Hutton, 2002; Pearson, 2002a). Modern Paganism is gaining momentum throughout the world. Numerous scholars have covered its emergence and practice in Britain (Crowley, 1989; Luhrmann, 1989; Harvey and Hardman, 1996) as well as in America (Adler, 1979; Starhawk, 1979; Orion, 1995). The actual term “pagan” is generally used to refer to a broad range of nature venerating religious traditions, encompassing Wicca or Goddess worship, Druidry and Heathenism (Bowman, 2002). The most common theme that cuts across pagan traditions is the concern with natural cycles: bodily, lunar and solar with celebration expressed through various associated seasonal festivals. Wicca (also called the Old religion or witchcraft) has influenced the discourses of many new movements since the 1950s, particularly after Gerald Gardner’s publication of *Witchcraft Today* (Hunt, 2003). The prime deity in Wicca is the Goddess who has a multiplicity of aspects such as the maid, mother, crone, nurturer, destroyer, as daughter, wife, as distant and elusive, as well as intimate and close (Pearson, 2002b). Wicca based religions also tend to emphasise an ethics of responsibility. Thus, the Covenant of the Goddess founded in 1975 (US) claims to be ‘a confederation of covens and solitaires of various traditions, who share in the worship of the Goddess and the Old Gods and subscribe to a common code of ethics’.<sup>6</sup> The Fellowship of Isis founded by Olivia Robertson in 1976 is dedicated to honouring the religion of *all* the Goddesses and pantheons throughout the planet. The College of Isis offers structured Magi Degree courses to prospective members. There are 32 working degrees each requiring completion before initiation to a higher degree can be granted. The degrees are simply a way for an individual to chart a path for their growth by keeping track of spiritual progress. About Wiccan rituals Hume says,

[They] provide an imaginary enclave, enveloping participants in a dramatic realm of heightened imagination where anything is possible. Wiccan (and other Pagan) festivals provide a forum for the enactment of colourful rites replete with sensory stimulation. Witches move between landscapes of the

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<sup>5</sup> See [http://www.healing-tao.co.uk/ht\\_kris.htm](http://www.healing-tao.co.uk/ht_kris.htm) accessed 24/08/2004.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.cog.org/general/pamphlet.html> accessed 24/08/2004.

earth and landscapes of the mind in an effort to capture the magical qualities of this life and beyond. (Hume, 1998: 318)

Druidry also an initiatory-based tradition has in contrast a far deeper concern with matters of environmental justice than Wicca (Ellis, 2002). In popular perception, Druidry and Stonehenge are inextricably linked. Druids have free access to the site at festival times for ceremonial purposes. Ceremonies tend to reflect on the time of year, passing of the seasons, and connectedness with both the land and the ancestors. Nevertheless, some Druids feel that rather than travelling to ancient sites, people should be honouring and sacralizing their local landscape. They believe direct action should be sought against road building and quarrying. For example, the Dragon Environmental Network (1990) is a new Druidry inspired group who claim to use ecomagic (magical and spiritual action for the environment) to help conservation campaigns. Another related practice is Heathenism, one of several labels for a strand of contemporary Paganism with roots in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Germanic traditions (Pearson, 2002c: 6). New movements inspired by Heathenism practice in a number of ways, with the use of runes and the re-enactment/re-creation of ancestral lifeways often being central. Two examples of such movements are Frigga's Web Associations (1995/US), and Midgard's Web (1999/UK). The former aims to build a strong, multi-faceted, viable Heathen community in the modern world, as well as providing a space that is focused on peace and the practical arts and skills of running and living in such a community. The latter was formed by a group of friends seeking to foster contact within the Heathen community, and to support all those with an interest in Heathenry.

Groups with Western Esoteric/New Age roots are the seventh type of NRSMs. This category includes Spiritualism, Channelling, Occult Magick orders, Theosophy, Alice Bailey groups, Rosicrucianism, and Satanism. Spiritualism can be defined as the science, philosophy and religion of a continuous life, based on the premise that communication by means of mediumship with those who live in the spirit world is possible (Melton, 2003a: 155). It originated in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century in part as a reaction to the sweeping technological, scientific and social changes of the period. As historian Moore notes, communication with spirits became 'one way in which the generations whose social patterns were most shaken by the changes wrought by science and technology reanchored themselves; at the same time, [it] made the very real miracles of science and technology less incredible' (Moore, 1977:5). The Independent Spiritualist Association of America, founded in 1924, tried

to establish Spiritualism as a clearly religious movement. In part it succeeded; within 5 years there were a conservatively estimated one million Spiritualists within the United States alone (Nelson, 1969: 5-6), making Spiritualism the fastest growing religious movement in American history. Nonetheless, during the 1970s and 1980s many smaller spiritualist groups disappeared greatly suffering from the growth of *channels* promoting the New Age Message (Riordan, 1992; York, 1997).

Channeling is an extension of Spiritualism with the impulse not only to prove the existence of life after death, but also to gather some detailed information from the unique sources of the “higher” world concerning the nature of spirit existence and the various realms within the cosmos (Bjorling, 1992). Porter observes that many modern spiritualists have started adopting extraterrestrials as spirit guides because, ‘this New Age element may reflect the perception among Spiritualists that the New Age Movement holds tremendous appeal and acceptance among mainstream North Americans, whereas Spiritualism in the late twentieth century holds a place of relative obscurity’ (Porter, 1996: 345). New Age channeled material often claims to come from a plethora of sources and realms. Therefore,

It is difficult to offer a clear, coherent definition of ‘New Age’: anyone who has visited a New Age shop will recognize the multiplicity of topics, viewpoints and paraphernalia that are associated with it. Its variety and eclecticism are as much part of its inherent nature as they are part of its appeal. A cursory browse through a New Age bookshop’s shelves will yield a plethora of material on meditation, visualization, interpretation of dreams, self-improvement, astrology, Tarot and crystals. The paranormal is well covered, with material on extrasensory perception, telepathy, clairvoyance, psychometry, divination (runes, Tarot, dowsing) precognition, out-of-the-body experiences, and more. The New Age interest in alternative spirituality includes channelling, spirit guides and angels... (Chryssides, 1999: 315)

New Age movements like the White Eagle Lodge founded in London (1936), for example, claim to be in contact with a spokesperson for the Great White Brotherhood called White Eagle. Based on these communications with the brothers in the spirit realm the Lodge teaches that God, the Eternal Spirit, is Father and Mother, and the Son, the Cosmic Christ, is the light which shines within the human heart.<sup>7</sup> Agasha Temple of Wisdom founded in 1943 also channels wisdom from the Ascended Masters within the higher astral realms. The philosophy of the movement is based on the belief that ‘God is not an omnipotent being sitting on a throne, but that God is a

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<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.whiteaglelodge.org/>.



collective Universal Consciousness – the collective thought of all creation. This simple fact makes you responsible for your own life and the events that unfold. We each are a microcosm of God and a master of our own destiny'.<sup>8</sup>

Occult magick orders and ancient wisdom schools like the Arcane School (1923) and Benjamin Crème's the Share International Foundation (1972) derive inspiration from theosophy and the works of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Alice Bailey (Sinclair, 1984; Tingay, 2002). Often such groups reinterpret the discourses to complement their own paradigms regarding the nature of human existence and history. Rosicrucianism is another occult tradition, which contains an eclectic mix of wisdom that is said to originate from Atlantis and Egypt (Yates, 2001). Lectorium Rosicrucianum originally founded in the Netherlands (1924) and exported to the US and GB in the 1970s is the most important new Rosicrucian Order. Barrett states:

In common with other Rosicrucian movements, Lectorium Rosicrucianum places a great deal of emphasis on symbols, including the golden rose on a golden cross, the circle containing a square and an equilateral triangle – 'the Circle of Eternal Love containing the Trigonum Igneum or Fiery Triangle and the Square of Construction', and the Pentagram, 'ever the symbol of the reborn, new Human Being'. (Barrett, 2001: 358)

Satanism also referred to as "Devil Worship", is normally erroneously (by the media) associated with Wicca/witchcraft or other forms of Paganism. Paganism as outlined previously is a nature religion in which the biblical figure of Satan has no part (Ellis, 2000). Pagans are also quick to point out that their tradition chronologically pre-dates Christianity. That is, it exists in its own right, much as other non-Christian religions. Satanism, on the other hand, is logically derived from an inversion of Christian belief. Satanists hope for the overthrow of the Christian deity by their God, and the resultant rituals stand in a polemical relation to the tenets of Christianity. The most famous element used by Satanists is the Black Mass, an obvious corruption of Christian liturgies (Graham, 1995; Medway, 2001). Major groups based on Satanism are the Church of Satan (1966), the Temple of Set (1975), and the Temple of the Vampire (1989). The Satanism practiced by these groups is a cult of opposition, in this specific context dismissal of the Christian religion and worldview. Foundational to the beliefs promoted by the Church of Satan is an emphasis on indulging in the "animal" or physical appetites of humans, which are to be relished rather than condemned, as

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.agasha.org/faq.htm> accessed 24/08/2004.

implied by the Christian notion of Sin. The Temple of Set unveils what it sees as Christian propaganda by stating that: ‘Satan was not the evil scarecrow of Christian myth, but rather a champion of anti-hypocrisy - a crusader against the corruption and moral bankruptcy of society’.<sup>9</sup> The more recent Temple of the Vampire is loosely based on Satanism, as well as on the worship of the Undead Gods. The practice of black magic and following the teachings laid out in the Vampire Bible are central elements to the belief system, which also requires obedience to the following rules:

Temple members are welcome to join virtually any organization or support nearly any cause they wish. However, we will not retain any member supporting an organization or cause, which attacks the Temple's image or supports criminal activity or blood-drinking. For example membership in racist, neo-Nazi or similarly anti-social fringe groups is not only unacceptable, but is contradictory to the Teachings of the Temple.<sup>10</sup>

The 8th scheme used in the database to classify movements is one not used by Partridge (2004), but was instead based by me on classifying groups that claim contact with aliens. Many NRSMs have some sort of UFO beliefs (see Rothstein, 1997); nonetheless those that predominantly attribute religious and spiritual messages to extraterrestrial origin were placed in this distinct category (Lewis, 1995; Partridge, 2003a). The recent wave of UFO religions appeared shortly after 1947 when Kenneth Arnold sighted “unidentified flying objects” from his private plane. After further UFO sightings both in the US and GB a growing number of people began to claim to have met and talked with occupants of the UFOs (Good, 1998). These alien beings were often described as supernatural entities since they were far superior in every respect (physically, spiritually and technologically) to humanity. Often messages to human contactees were of a moral or spiritual kind (Melton, 1995b). Frequently the aliens implore the human race to reconstruct the world it threatens to destroy through ignorance and greed as well as warning of a future nuclear holocaust (Wilson, 1999).

Two major UFO groups are the Aetherius Society (1955) and the Association of Sananda and Sanat Kumara (1965). George King who claimed to be in constant contact with extraterrestrials through cosmic transmissions founded the Aetherius Society. Specific to the Aetherius Society is the belief that each planet in our solar system is akin to a classroom, where we can learn certain life lessons before

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<sup>9</sup> See [http://www.xeper.org/pub/lib/xp\\_FS\\_lib.htm](http://www.xeper.org/pub/lib/xp_FS_lib.htm) accessed 24/08/2004.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.vampiretemple.com/law.html> accessed 24/08/2004.

progressing to the next planet. A person may live on the same planet for thousands of years before graduating to the next planet depending on how much effort he/she puts into living God's laws (Smith, 2003). According to the group's website, 'Making a positive difference is the most important reason why we are here. By wisely managing our own karmic pattern and achieving harmony with the Divine Will, we develop ourselves as individuals and evolve through Love and Service'.<sup>11</sup> Founded in Mount Shasta, California by sister Thedra (formerly Dorothy Martin) the Association of Sananda and Sanat Kumara present the teachings of the Great White Brotherhood. This extraterrestrial brotherhood is also sometimes called the Ashtar Command and is led by Sananda (who was Jesus in a previous incarnation). According to the Association, the brotherhood has been, and still is, engaged in a battle with evil forces on other dimensions and in the skies above earth for the determination of the future of humanity's spiritual evolution. Thus, as with other channelers and contactees (Balch, 1995), Thedra has often incorrectly predicted mass evacuations aboard spaceships of the benevolent Great White Brotherhood preceding major apocalypse on the earth.

A final pot from which NRSMS often sprout (and also not in Partridge) is Personal Healing or Human Development philosophies (Stone, 1976). Many of these appear to be free standing, bearing no directly obvious relationship to traditional world religions. The seeker's involvement consists of pursuing numerous courses or seminars, which are not made freely available to all. Perhaps the best example of a NRSMS with clear roots in personal healing/human development philosophies is Dianetics or latter incarnation Scientology (1954). The primary aim of Scientology is to bring an individual to a sufficient understanding of himself and his life and hence free him to make improvements where he finds them necessary and in the ways he sees fit. The founder L. Ron Hubbard first presented his thoughts on what he called "Dianetics" through an article in *Astounding Science Fiction*. Hubbard believed that the human mind is a very sophisticated computer, which operating perfectly would have complete recall of all sense impressions and vastly improved mental agility. However, achieving this optimal operating potential could only be realised by completing numerous levels of auditing (see chapter 8). Hence, 'Scientology is often criticised for being expensive... many Scientologists have spent a great deal of money on courses' (Chryssides, 2004: 387).

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<sup>11</sup> See [http://www.aetherius.org/NewFiles/What\\_We\\_Do.htm](http://www.aetherius.org/NewFiles/What_We_Do.htm) accessed 25/08/2004.

From the mid-twentieth-century, positive thinking and belief in the power of mind was further transformed into a vast configuration of psychologically based self-improvement groups. Many such movements claim to facilitate the transformation and reshape of identity, especially through healing and therapeutic techniques, while others claim to satisfy the needs of people to create dynamic and drastic changes in their self-image. These groups peaked in the 1970s (see table 6) based on influences such as Gestalt training, psychosynthesis, rebirthing, and biofeedback, all of which merge psychological insights and life coaching with positive thinking to enhance performance. For instance, Body Alignment Technique (1970s) claims to heal and align the physical and subtle bodies, leaving people feeling empowered and whole.<sup>12</sup> A similar technique of self-improvement is Neuro-Linguistic Programming (1970s), which is seen by advocates as the art and science of personal excellence. Training includes enhancing interpersonal skills, business skills, and assertiveness. Although not a religion in the strict sense, Neuro-Linguistic Programming does still function in a similar way to other NRSMs, by teaching the ways to make desired changes in personal and other people's behaviour. McGuire (1983) connects the rise in personal healing movements to the acceptance of alternative medicine and practices related to the spiritual journeying, popularised during the era of counter-cultural experimentation. The influence of such beliefs has since infiltrated wider dimensions and institutions within mainstream society. For example, spirit based and human development methods have been adopted in teacher-training colleges, academic courses, and in management training programmes (Casey, 2000; Puttick, 2000). Masterworks International (1994) runs intensive trainings in polarity from its base in Exeter. These trainings are ideally suited to the health care professional who has experience of working with others in the fields of nursing, osteopathy or massage by teaching a powerful system for creating energetic alignment in body, mind and spirit.<sup>13</sup> The Concord Institute for Integral Studies (1999) is dedicated to 'developing and promoting an integral model for health that takes into account nutrition, bodywork practices, communication and self-expression. By emphasizing a body-mind approach to living the institute aims to empower people to move beyond personal limitations in terms of health and vitality, creativity and joy in living'.<sup>14</sup>

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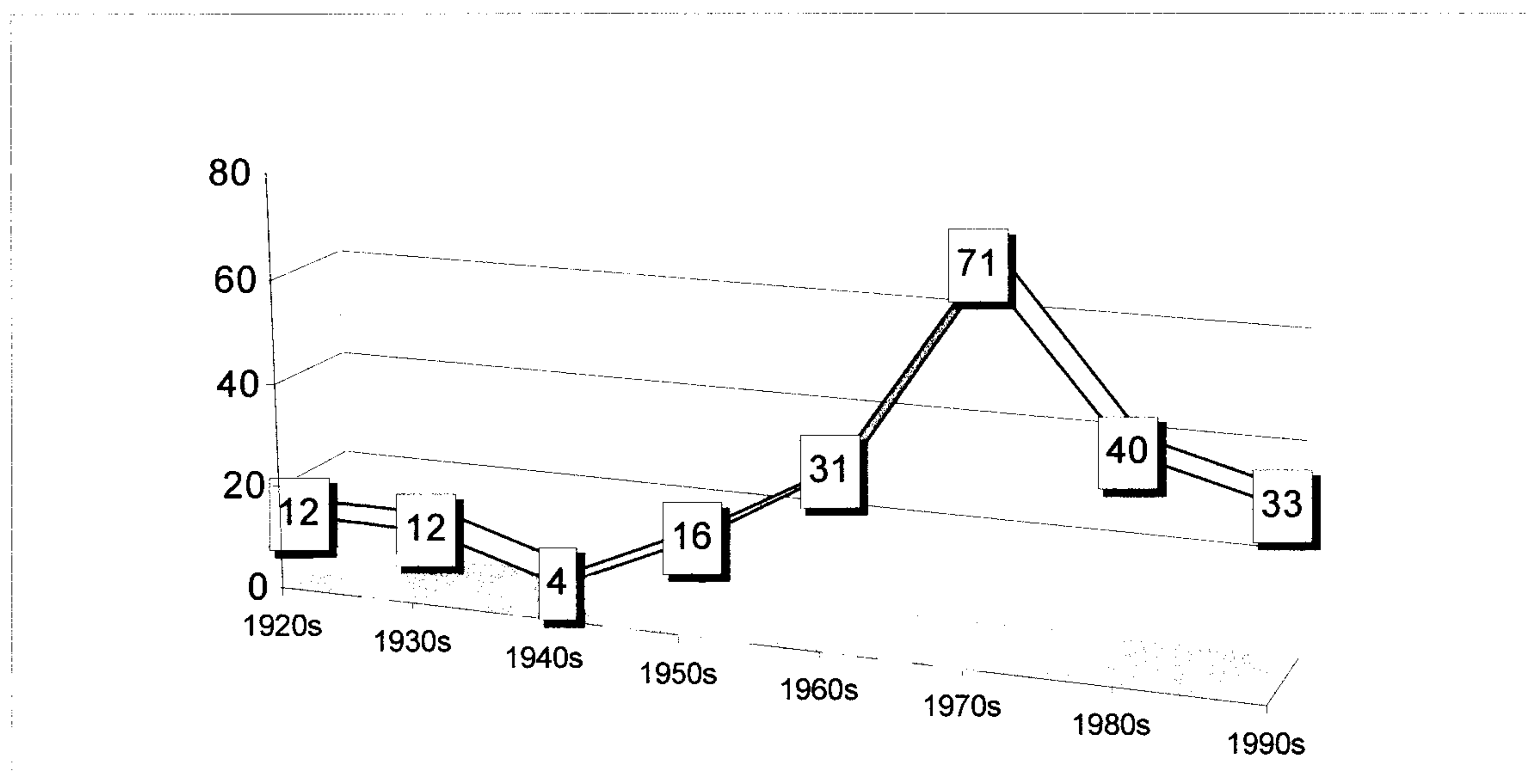
<sup>12</sup> See: <http://www.bodyalignment.org/>.

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://www.masterworksinternational.com/introcourses.htm>

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.concordinstitute.com/> accessed 25/08/2004.

The main method of statistical investigation carried out after using the above typology to class NRSMs in the database was trend analysis (McClave *et al.*, 2001). This meant conducting frequency counts of the types of NRSM in the United States and Great Britain, plotted against the decade they first arrived in the West. In certain cases this was not the initial inception date of the organisation, which may have been founded earlier and in another country outside the West (see fig 2 and table 6 below).

**Figure 2 – NRSMs (in database) by decade they were brought to the West**



**Table 6 – NRSMs (in database) by type and decade brought to the West**

	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	TOTAL NRSMs
<i>Indian roots</i>	3	1	0	1	8	19	9	5	46
<i>Esoteric or New Age roots</i>	7	7	2	3	6	12	3	4	44
<i>East Asian roots</i>	0	1	0	2	1	7	10	6	27
<i>Indigenous or Pagan roots</i>	0	0	0	1	1	8	8	7	26
<i>Personal Healing/Human Development</i>	0	0	0	1	4	10	4	6	25
<i>Christian roots</i>	0	2	1	3	3	7	5	1	22
<i>UFO Beliefs</i>	0	0	0	4	4	2	1	3	14
<i>Islamic roots</i>	1	1	0	1	2	4	0	1	10
<i>Jewish roots</i>	1	0	1	0	2	2	0	0	6
<b>TOTAL NRSMs</b>	12	12	4	16	31	71	40	33	219*

Note: \* The total is not 220 – one movement founded after 1999 was excluded in the trend analysis.

As table 6 above highlights the 1920s and 1930s (post World War I, 1914–1918) were dominated by the founding of NRSMs based primarily on Western Esoteric and New Age roots, groups like the Builders of the Adytum (1922) and the Lemurian Fellowship (1936) emerged during this period. In these decades the ancient wisdom family symbolised by the Theosophical Society, Spiritualism and Aleister Crowley's ritual magick were the primary influences on the formation and articulation of the discourses of new movements. Melton (2003a: 174) observes just before this period in the late 1890s and early 1900s: 'Spiritualism and what was to become Theosophy were having a major cultural impact', thus this provided the 'fertile soil in which new magical orders could grow'. Tingay (2002) argues the spiritual excitement of the 1920/30s engendered by the novel publications of the Theosophical Society, which inspired the birth of numerous magical orders, were to be followed by a period of retrenchment. The departure of Krishnamurti, the death of Annie Besant,<sup>15</sup> and the difficult years of World War II (1939–45) all caused the visionary hopes for spiritual evolution to be stifled by the realities of Western conflict, destruction and death.

Figure 2 highlights the 1940s as the least active era in terms of the formation of NRSMs, which is unsurprising since this decade included the brunt of World War II. Beckman's historical narrative on the fortunes of religion in America lends support to the hypothesis that war contributed to a decline in religious innovations:

... after the second Great War, the populace seemed eager to replenish its spiritual wells. At midcentury, Americans streamed back to church in unprecedented numbers. The baby boom (those born between 1946 and 1965) had begun, and parents of the first baby boomers moved into the suburbs and filled the pews, establishing church and family as the twin pillars of security and respectability. Religious membership, church funding, institutional building, and traditional faith and practice all increased in the 1950s.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, as table 6 testifies, the main type of religious innovation in the 1950s was not the formation of NRSMs with Christian roots, as Beckman's narrative indirectly implies (although this tradition was the second most popular source of

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<sup>15</sup> Jiddu Krishnamurti was a 14 year old boy with a supposedly "radiant aura" reflecting his spiritual wisdom. Leadbeater a co-leader of the Theosophical Society discovered him in 1908. Krishnamurti was heralded as the next "great teacher" of humanity and initially attracted large crowds to lectures; but he left the movement after becoming disillusioned in 1929. Besant became the leader of the Theosophical Society after the death of Blavatsky, and was responsible for expanding the movement and encouraging the formation of new offshoots. Her death was a great blow to the creative activities of Theosophy.

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/trelww2.htm> accessed 26/08/2004.

inspiration); but instead those based on UFO or alien beliefs.<sup>17</sup> George Adamski and other famous contactees of the 1950s were largely responsible for the formation of such inspired movements, and their associated spiritual and religious discourses. Melton provides support: ‘More than half founded their own occult religion or became prominent in one founded by another... No less than five different groups were led by Adamski devotees’ (1995b: 8). In addition, other factors like: (1) the rising frequency of UFO sightings; (2) increasing numbers of science fiction films depicting alien visitors from other worlds and, (3) fears of nuclear holocaust from war with the former Soviet Union, all contributed to the growth of UFO discourses in the 1950s (Partridge, 2003a). According to Saliba, the rise in interest and the subsequent birth of UFO religions during this decade also attempted to ‘make religion relevant to life, to instil a cosmic dimension into an earth-bound religious worldview, and to inject into spiritual experiences the element of scientific verifiability’ (1995b: 55).

Nonetheless, it was the 1970s when overall religious innovation was strongest demonstrated by the numbers of NRSMs founded in that decade. Of the 71 NRSMs formed in that era the most common type were those derived from Indian roots (27% of total), in fact groups with Indian roots were also the most common type (26% of total) to have been founded in the previous decade (1960s). One explanation for this according to Arweck and Clarke (1997: xxvii) was related to immigration laws:

In the case of the United States, 1965 when the new law on Asian immigrants was introduced putting Asia on a par with Europe in relation to immigration quotas and leading to an unprecedented influx of Asian immigrants... it was from that time that many of what were to become the most popular and influential NRMs began to establish themselves in the United States.

In Britain the tightening of the immigration rules in 1962 and 1968 had a similar effect making it imperative for those who had right of entry under the new rules to beat the set deadlines and hence the arrival of many more Asian religious traditions in the 1960s.

The above is only one contributory factor, as many leaders of Indian derived NRSMs were not solely from migrant communities. Countless Western seekers have also gone to India bringing back Eastern spiritual knowledge in the process (Holm, 1998). Hence, there seems to be more of a dialectical relationship. The importance of Eastern traditions as the main inspiration behind religious creativity continued into the 1980s:

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<sup>17</sup> I should note here that many “new” Christian congregations were excluded from inclusion in the database. I only designated a movement as “new” with roots in Christianity if the discourse demonstrated a significant reformulation of the main beliefs (e.g. Creation Spirituality see chapter 6).

but with a slight change in emphasis as the most frequent type of NRSMs to sprout became those with East Asian roots (25% of total). This has been primarily driven by the successful export of Japanese new religions, such as Byakko Shinko Kai and Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyodan (World Divine Light Organization) into the US and GB. These groups initially catered for Japanese immigrants only. The passage of time led to these groups beginning to appeal more to non-Japanese Americans. An obvious result is the rise in conversion of non-Japanese as ‘schisms of groups introduced from Japan’ occurred (Melton and Jones, 1994: 36). The 1980s also witnessed a significant growth in Zen centres across the US, many with East Asian origins (Ibid: 45). Somers charts the rise of Japanese new religions in Britain since the 1980s, arguing that although most ‘are still very small they are growing’ because of ‘their promise of paradise now. A paradise which is mental, emotional and physical’ (1994: 76).

In the 1990s religious creativity by resident westerners seemed to have reasserted itself as the most important source for the formation of NRSMs, with the most common root of inspiration for new groups being ones based on Indigenous and Pagan traditions (21% of total). In this respect, Hunt concludes from his overview charting trends in alternative spiritualities through the 1980s and 1990s that ‘neo-Paganism appears to be both growing and diversifying’ (2003: 154). Bloom (1996) and York (1995) both convincingly argue that this revival is largely the consequence of electronic communications, which allows the cheap, effective and widespread dissemination of pagan religious ideas. The Worldwide Web seems to have become a particularly potent tool for successful proselytising and recruitment activities used by Pagan and Wiccan inspired movements since the 1990s. The birth of largely web-based pagan networking groups like the Dragon Environmental Network (1990), the Association of Hedgewitches (1994), and Avalonia (1999) serve as relevant examples.

#### ***Applying the Wallis Typology to the NRSMs Database***

An important classification method is offered by Wallis (1984), which groups NRSMs according to their ideological stance to the world. He identifies three main criteria for grouping movements: (1) world-affirming, (2) world-rejecting, and (3) world-accommodating. This “logical trichotomy”, as Wallis describes it, schematises NRSMs based on the way they orient themselves to the social world in which they operate:

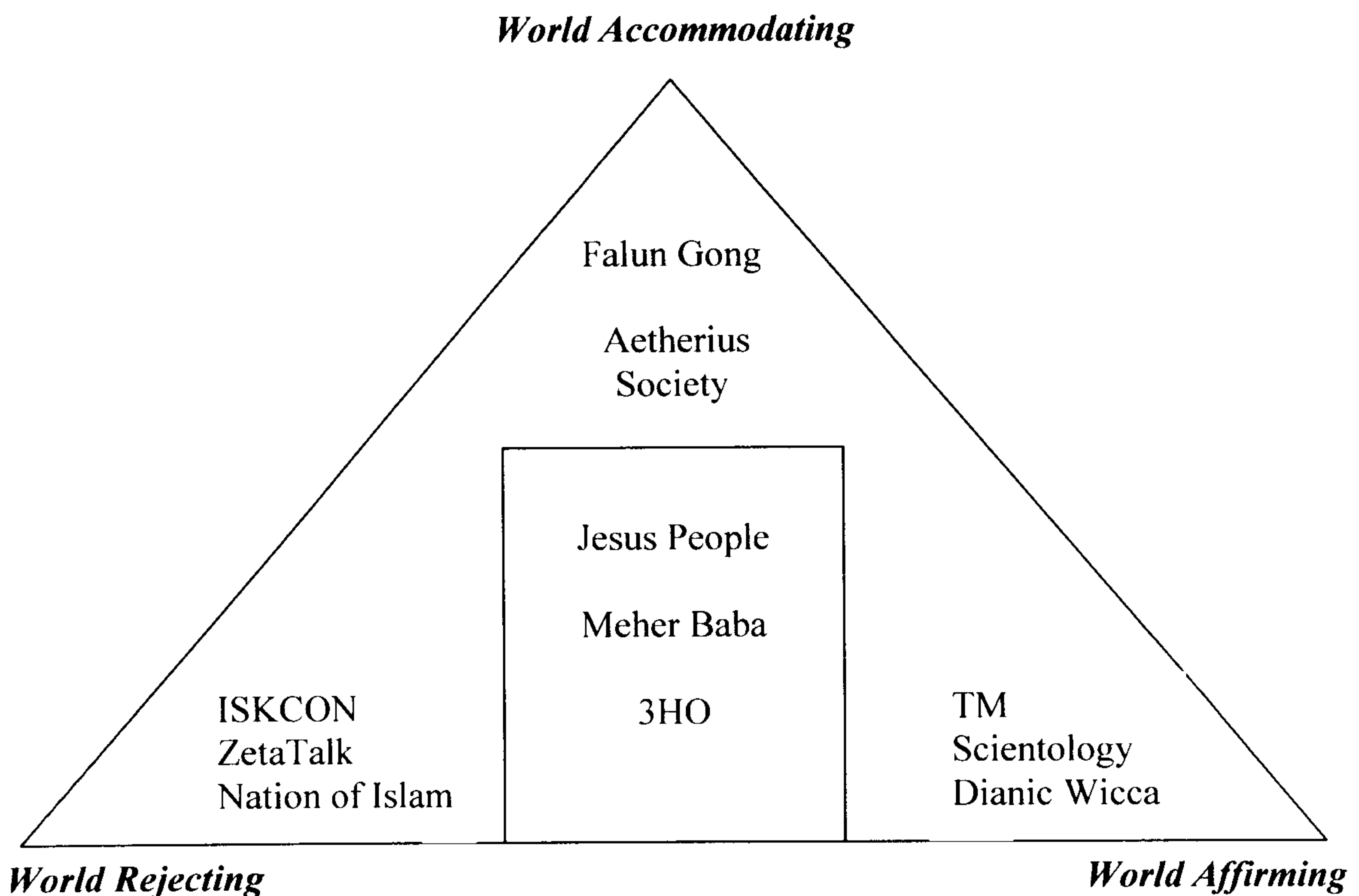


A new movement may embrace that world, affirming its normatively approved goals and values; it may reject that world, denigrating those things held dear within it; or it may remain as far as possible indifferent to the world in terms of its religious practice, accommodating to it otherwise, and exhibiting only mild acquiescence to, or disapprobation, of, the ways of the world.

(Wallis 1984: 4)

Wallis provides detailed examples of the sorts of movement that could fit into each respective category (see figure 3 below), and argues that ‘knowledge of the dominant orientation is an excellent predictor of a wide range of further attributes’ (1984: 5). He also acknowledges the caveat that there will be cases when a NRSM will ‘only approximate to these types... often combining elements of more than one orientation’ (Wallis: Ibid). He identifies a number of groups that fit such an intermediate position, which he calls “middle”. In figure 3 such groups would be placed in the rectangular central section, one example is the Healthy Happy Holy Organisation (3HO).

**Figure 3 – Types of NRSMs according to their orientation to the world**



Source: Adapted from Wallis (1984: 6) *The Elementary forms of the New Religious Life*. London: Routledge.

The main benefit of the above “ideal types” is the tri-dimensional orientation, which facilitates comparative analyses. Stark and Bainbridge argue that sociologists should

seek to coin types that serve to ‘anchor a single continuum along which it is possible to rank order all empirical or hypothetical cases’ (1985: 20). In this regard, Wallis’s typology enables comparative rankings. It can also be un-problematically combined with, and used to extend, the origins based typology outlined in the previous section. Using the above categorisations as a benchmark I classified all the 220 NRSMs in the database according to their “responses to the world” (see CDROM). The general methodology used to determine how to place movements was by evaluating the main beliefs of the groups, as recounted in the secondary sociological literature, and where this was unfeasible by downloading and examining discourses from their specific web sites. The following criteria were used to designate movements:

***(1) World Rejecting:***

- Those that most closely resemble the epistemologically authoritarian sect. They and they alone have the absolute truth.
- Ones that impose uncompromising standards of conduct on their followers, standards that they demand in the name of a Deity more of judgment than of love. This is generally related to some sort of doomsday vision.
- Movements that see human beings as sinful creatures whose salvation can be achieved only through obedience to God(s) commandments. In other words, divine intervention and mercy is essential to spiritual advancement.
- Those in which the cost of membership is high; members are expected to show uncritical acceptance of self-denying lifestyles, often in the context of life in a temple, ashram or other form of religious community.
- NRSM communities that generally deny salvation can be attained outside the faith. Thus, non-members are often branded with derogatory labels.

***(2) World Affirming:***

- Movements that find much to value in the world. Humanity is not innately sinful but rather blinkered, restricted or held back. There is the associated optimistic philosophy of human perfectibility.
- The emphasis in such groups is on individual growth and liberation often using a plethora of spiritual methods and practices that merge traditions.

- These movements emphasise discovering and understanding the “true” self. People are encouraged to cast off the social constraints of convention and tradition, and the personal shackles of repression and inhibition.
- The emphasis on self-discovery often has as the ultimate objective the aim to foster more intimate contact and authentic relationships with others.
- There is general acceptance of, and cooperation with, other faiths. Human creativity is admired and the common themes shared by different religions to worship are emphasised, reflecting the seeking of unity and holism.

**(3) World Accommodating:**

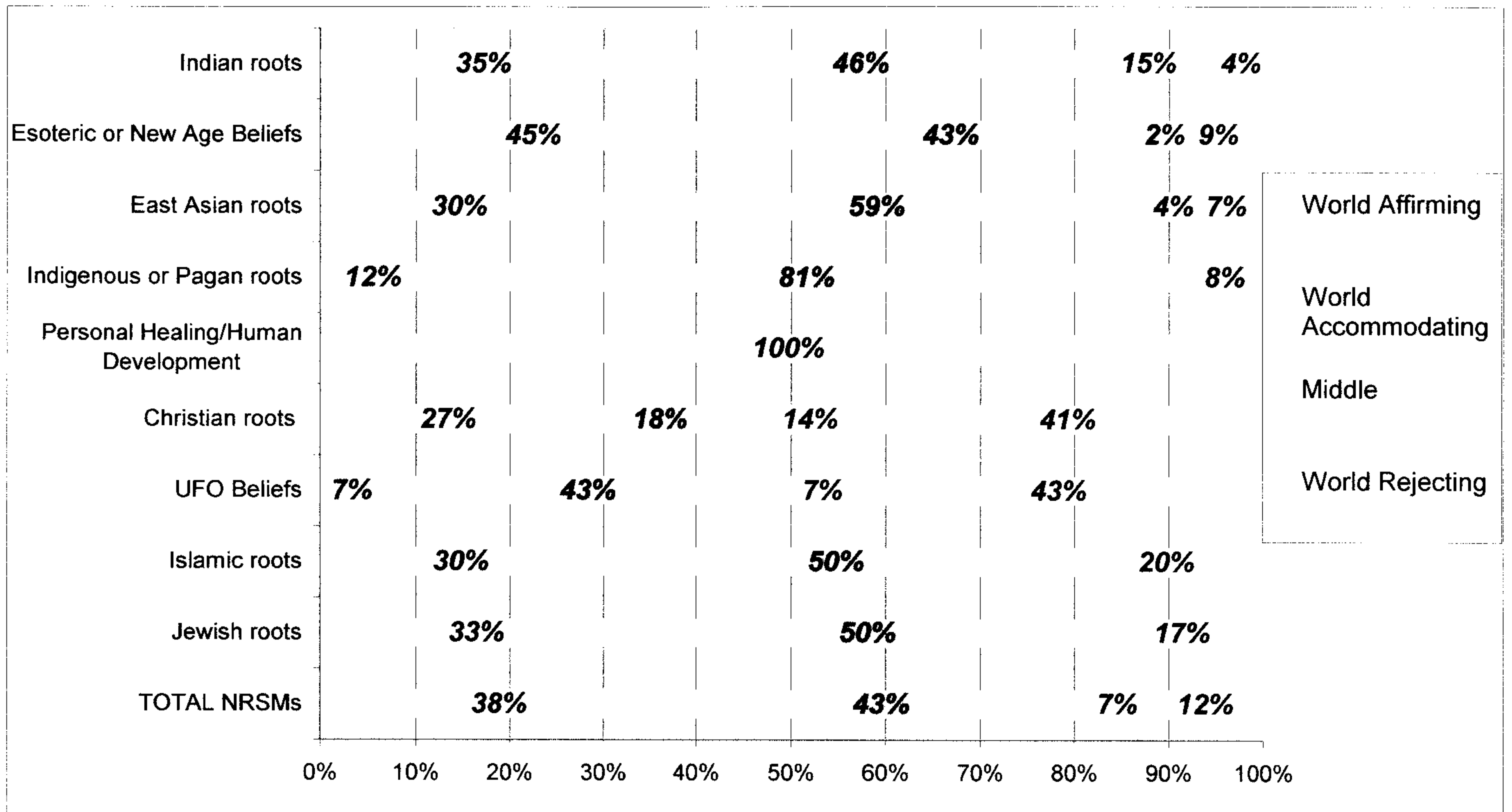
- Such movements are largely content with or at least indifferent to the state of the wider world. They do not entirely reject societal norms and values, but rather teach that humanity has erred from some divine plan.
- A renewed spirituality is sought and cultivated through collective forms of worship or spiritual exercise.
- These groups generally voice a different type of protest, one that is less directed to the world than against traditional religious organisations, which are held to be spiritually redundant.

Table 7 and figure 4 below present the results of the above classification exercise.

**Table 7 – NRSMs (in the database) by origins and orientations to the world**

	<i>World Accommodating</i>	<i>World Affirming</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>World Rejecting</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
<i>Indian roots</i>	21	16	7	2	46
<i>Esoteric or New Age Beliefs</i>	19	20	1	4	44
<i>East Asian roots</i>	16	8	1	2	27
<i>Indigenous or Pagan roots</i>	21	3	2	0	26
<i>Personal Healing/Human Development</i>	0	25	0	0	25
<i>Christian roots</i>	4	6	3	9	22
<i>UFO Beliefs</i>	6	1	1	6	14
<i>Islamic roots</i>	5	3	0	2	10
<i>Jewish roots</i>	3	2	0	1	6
<b><i>TOTAL NRSMs</i></b>	<b>95 (43%)</b>	<b>84 (38%)</b>	<b>15 (7%)</b>	<b>26 (12%)</b>	<b>220 (100%)</b>

**Figure 4 – NRSMs (in the database) by type and orientation to the world (%)**



The world-rejecting type of movement accounted for 12% of all groups in the NRSMs database (see figure 4). These NRSMs find the present material world and social order unsatisfactory, corrupt, and unspiritual. They promote a clearly defined perception of God(s), a strong system of morally ascribed codes of conduct, and often a puritanical set of rules. Thus, nothing less than the upheaval of the world (often by apocalypse) is seen as adequate to help usher in a new spiritual order. Such groups are more clearly religious than world-affirming movements, teaching that personal fulfilment can only be realised through the practices and rules taught by the movement. Many have controversial beliefs and the more extreme groups (like Heaven’s Gate) often teeter on the brink of self-destruction (Chryssides, 1999: 33-76). On the latter Barker (1989) lists five warning signs: (1) a movement isolating itself off from the wider society geographically or socially; (2) dependence on the movement for one’s definition and sense of reality; (3) a movement drawing a sharp, nonnegotiable divide between “us” and “them”; (4) important decisions being taken for members by the leadership, and (5) charismatic leaders claiming divine authority and powers. These groups therefore impose rigid standards of behaviour on their followers. The emotional and financial

price of membership is often very high – literally so in cases like the Family (formerly Children of God) and Embassy of Heaven Church, where followers are encouraged to surrender their own assets to the movement. The latter movement goes even further teaching that those who are non-members are unregenerated men. Membership of secular society, it is preached, conflicts with being a resident of the kingdom of heaven. The Embassy of Heaven Church issues its own officially approved documents – identity cards, passports, driving licences and vehicle registrations – to be used instead of secular documents. This is an example of world rejection at its strongest.<sup>18</sup>

It was NRSMs with UFO based origins and those with Christian roots that had the highest concentration of world-rejecting groups when compared to the other types, with 43% and 41% respectively (see figure 4). This is unsurprising because such derived movements generally hold millenarian beliefs, which means they expect an imminent apocalyptic collapse of the existing world system and its replacement by a perfect new order. In the Christian tradition this involves active belief in the Second Coming of Christ. Hence the Family (formerly Children of God) are firmly convinced of the future downfall of America, which will be followed by the return of Christ and the commencement of his 1,000-year reign (Kyle, 2004). A Shiite inspired Islamic parallel, which is present in the Nation of Islam, is the anticipation of the return of Imam Mahdi. This “hidden imam” is a religious teacher who will appear and establish a reign of peace and justice on earth according to the will of Allah. Similarly several UFO groups like Mark-Age Inc, Chen Tao (God's Salvation Church), the Cassiopaea Experiment, and ZetaTalk all prophesise future world cataclysms that will serve to purge earth's inhabitants of their evil nature. For instance, according to Mark-Age the period 1960-2000AD was the interim period before the Golden Age of Aquarius. Apparently Jesus (Sananda) has been in orbit around the earth since 1885 in the etheric realms, and will return in physical form once the cataclysms that are “marks of the ending of an age” cleanse the planet, thus heralding the start of the *new age*.<sup>19</sup>

Wallis (1984: 120) suggests two key factors that can neatly categorise likely members of world-rejecting NRSMs. Firstly, these groups will appeal to people who are marginal to their own society or have been marginalised by it (e.g. the appeal of the Nation of Islam to black people in the 1950s). However, this factor by itself is not decisive. Many disprivileged groups – the poor, old people, ethnic minorities – are

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<sup>18</sup> See: <http://www.embassyofheaven.com/>.

<sup>19</sup> See: <http://www.thenewearth.org/markage.html>.

repelled by world-rejecting new religions. Instead, their appeal has been mainly to white, middle class, well-educated young people (Barker, 1984; Judah 1974). This is where Wallis's second factor is relevant. They attract people whose values are at odds with those of the wider society, and who find the groups values more in tune with their own. They offer an invitation to "drop out". In the 1960s and 1970s the membership of the world-rejecting NRSMs was largely drawn from the so-called counter culture consisting of hippies, surfers, LSD and marijuana users (Glock, 1976). Combining Wallis's two factors it is evident why world-rejecting movements seem to attract young white adults from economically comfortable backgrounds. These are the people for whom "dropping out" has the lowest opportunity cost, as they have good prospects of re-entry back into society after the period of "time out". For instance, Barker (1984: 141-8) notes that The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church or Moonies) has always had a very high turnover of members: of which 80 percent were between 19 and 30 and from predominantly white middle class backgrounds. In fact, Picknett and Prince observe that the teachings of many world-rejecting NRSMs, such as the Ashtar Command, 'are not actually very radical. If anything, they uphold the American Dream, reinforcing white, Christian middle-class values and the concept of a ruling elite' (1999: 372).

At the opposite end of the continuum to the world-rejecting groups we find the world-affirming movements. These movements were more prevalent than world-rejecting groups; accounting for 38% of all NRSMs in the database. Such movements in Wallis's terms find much to value in the world. In many ways these hardly appear to be religions at all and this brings them close to Stark and Bainbridge's (1985) definition of 'client' and 'audience' cults. Typically, adherents to these movements do not really constitute a membership in any meaningful sense, but are customers who are often literally buying a service, such as healing or the secrets to realising personal abilities. What is marketed is the means to attain freedom through enlightenment, and this is primarily individually focused rather than collective liberation. The latter it is hoped could be the by-product of the former, if the former occurred in great enough frequency and intensity. The optimistic ethos of world-affirming movements is one of individual self-realisation, which will facilitate collective improvement. They generally market a set of techniques that virtually anyone can use to improve their mental, spiritual and physical powers. Therefore, Wallis identifies three main and interrelated themes in world-affirming movements. First, they claim to help people

not only to succeed but also to cope with the stress of the “rat race” in capitalist society. Second, they emphasise discovering the “true” self through experimentation. People are encouraged to be more spontaneous and less conservative or tradition bound in their attitudes. The novel approach to sexuality condoned and practiced by the world-affirming UFO based Raelian religion is a good example (Palmer, 1995: 110-115). Third, world-affirming movements offer strategies for coping with the loneliness and alienation of modern life. The emphasis on self-discovery often goes together with a quest for more intimate contact with other people, usually in the ‘safe’ emotional environment of the movement. For instance, the Emissaries of Divine Light believe that in order to remind individuals of their inner divinity group healing and awakening workshops are vital. Today there are several communities based both in America and Britain operating on the principles of such teachings.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps predictably all the NRSMs in the database derived from Personal Healing/Human Development philosophies were classified as world-affirming (100% - see figure 4). None of these movements required practitioners or members to cut themselves off from contact with friends and family, or to withdraw from college or abandon a promising career. On the contrary, personal relationships, educational self-improvement and career aspirations are all supposed to benefit from practising the techniques, or enrolling on the courses administered by these particular movements. A relevant example is the Metamorphic Association, which is a group who condone the practice of the metamorphic technique. This practice aims to tap into an individual’s own life force in order to heal and transform them, thereby helping them to cope better in situations of difficulty or crises. Through energy manipulation the technique assists people to let go of negative patterns that no longer serve them; improving their potential for success and ultimately their interaction and relationships with others.<sup>21</sup> Using Bruce’s (1995: 98-99) arguments the Metamorphic Association would clearly be an example of a world-affirming movement in which a spiritual dimension has been successfully combined with western secular psychotherapy practice.

There are also several movements that have taken eastern religious-philosophical systems and adapted them to match western goals, such as materialistic self-improvement. In this context, 35% of NRSMs with Indian roots and 30% of groups with East Asian origins clearly fitted the criteria of world-affirming (see figure

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<sup>20</sup> See: <http://www.emissaries.org>.

<sup>21</sup> See: <http://www.metamorphicassociation.org.uk>.

4). A classic example is the Indian derived Transcendental Meditation [TM] founded by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The Maharishi taught that there are two main laws that govern our nature and hence life. Thus, for contentment or *being* there needs to be a union of the two sides of life: the values of the *inner absolute*, and the physical world in which one exists. Although technically the physical world is *maya* (illusion), TM is world affirming, offering physical and mental benefits for the student, society and the world. The Maharishi himself tended to emphasise the positive aspects of humanity, focusing on the good that exists in everyone and making little mention of one's evil tendencies.<sup>22</sup> As the Maharishi explains:

All suffering in life would be alleviated if Being were to be established on the conscious level of life where discord and disunity prevail. Since there is a way to establish Being on the level of mind (TM), body and surroundings, perfect health is possible at all levels. (Maharishi, 1963/1995: 113)

Like TM, the East Asian derived Byakko Shinko Kai is also world-affirming. The group states the ultimate purpose of life is to bring peace to all humankind through healing and prayer. The movement believes in direct action through 'world peace prayers', and teaches that humans are spiritual emanations of God. Thus, humans live on earth protected and watched over by loving guardian spirits from other realms.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to world-rejecting movements, world-affirming NRSMs draw their membership not from the socially marginal but from the socially integrated. These are the very people whose drive for material success and prosperity in capitalism requires them to seek tools to enhance their potential and performance. Therefore, most of the people who use the services of world-affirming movements do so as consumers. To effectively market commodities and courses the world-affirming movements typically resemble secular multinational organisations in the ways that they are structured and led (Frank, 2004). They often arrange seminars and workshops at convenient times to clients. Nonetheless, world-affirming movements do still often have an inner core of committed members – devotees or adepts – who practise more advanced techniques. In the case of TM, these techniques, known as the *sidhis* include levitation. However, the more ordinary consumer of TM interested perhaps in a meditation course is not required to participate in the *sidhis*, and may not even be aware of their existence.

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<sup>22</sup> See: <http://www.tm-london.org.uk>.

<sup>23</sup> See: <http://www.byakko.or.jp/en/about/>.



The majority of the movements in the database exhibited characteristics of the world-accommodating type (43% - figure 4). Examples of such groups are Subud, the Aetherius Society, Brothers of the Earth, western forms of the Japanese Soka Gakkai International (Value-creating Society), and Christian renewal organisations like Ellel Ministries and Alternatives. World-accommodating NRSMs are largely content with or at least impartial to the world. Regardless, at times they can tend to adopt a rather elitist standpoint that is accompanied by the self-designated mission of restoring an older religion. Hence some renewal groups focus on cultivating the interior religious life of members through collective forms of worship or spiritual exercise. This may have the benefit that members perform secular tasks more effectively. Nonetheless, unlike groups based on Personal Healing/Human Development philosophies, which were all classed as world-affirming, this is not the primary goal. As Wallis (1984: 36) says, such worldly consequences are unintended rather than designed.

Unlike world-rejecting types, world-accommodating NRSMs are not of social protest. Instead, they promote a different form of mobilisation, one that is less against a corrupt world than against religious institutions that are perceived as a spiritual void. Organisations such as Ellel Ministries and Alternatives aim to reinvigorate the spiritual life of Christians, and in the particular case of Ellel Ministries restore to contemporary Christianity its long-lost access to deliverance ministry. Dancing, hugging and kissing, faith healing, exorcism, using non-traditional methods of worship, all can be classified as deliverance methods. Deliverance ministry essentially involves casting evil spirits or demons from people and as a result delivering them into safety. Christian renewal movements like Ellel Ministries justify these practices, which are often opposed by mainstream Christians, by tracing them back to biblical texts.<sup>24</sup> For example, the Gospels according to St. Luke frequently describe Jesus in the act of casting evil spirits from people, as the following passage illustrates:

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<sup>24</sup> On the 24 February 2005, Channel 4 aired the first ever TV exorcism. The programme brought anger from viewers and religious groups amid claims it was sensationalist and exploited someone who is likely to be mentally fragile. The programme, called *The Exorcist*, featured a man known only as Colin who believes he is possessed by demons. In a ritual that lasted about two minutes Rev Trevor Newport (from Ellel Ministries) stood over Colin, prayed and then demanded that evil spirits be cast from his body. There was no shaking or rocking associated with the traditional images of exorcism and Colin did not demonstrate any violent reaction. Overall the procedure seemed very tame to me and I cannot understand the subsequent national outcry.

And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him. And when the devil had thrown him in the midst, he came out of him, and hurt him not.

And they were all amazed, and spake among themselves, saying, What a word is this! for with authority and power he commandeth the unclean spirits, and they came out. (The Bible – The Gospels according to St. Luke)<sup>25</sup>

Groups with Indigenous or Pagan origins are mainly composed of the world-accommodating type (81% - figure 4), since they usually entail beliefs and benefits of practice that are personalistically oriented, while the form of practice in worship or ritual will be characteristically collective. Movements such as the Odinic Rite are primarily concerned with renewing the ancestral religions practiced by the indigenous peoples of Northern Europe, while also clearly stating on their website that there are no political aspirations. The Children of Artemis, a Wicca based NRSM, seeks to enable newcomers to safely practice with ethical Wiccan/Witchcraft covens. They make it clear that they view Wicca or Witchcraft as one potential spiritual path chosen by some; in other words, other religions are equally valid for those that choose them.<sup>26</sup>

When witches look at society outside Wicca, they see a world bereft of stories. They respond to this lack in ritual, in the belief in the goddess, her multiplicity and her immanence, in a natural world resacralised, that is, through narratives of enchantment. Wicca is an attempt at these communities of memory, communities which re-attach individuals into a resacralised world peopled by powerful actors, communities that attempt to put the *Habits*' 'second language' into practice. (Scarboro and Luck, 1997: 77)

World-accommodating movements based on Islamic roots include Sufi groups like the mystical Chisti Order of America and the Osho Mevlana Foundation. Both are concerned with teaching humanity divine love of the Creator. Neither is troubled with rejecting the world. Instead importance is placed upon self-fulfilment through ego-transformation, and hence renewed fervour and enthusiasm toward spiritual life is the primary mission. Subud is a similar organisation and followers regard it not as a religion but simply understand it as a way of strengthening one's faith and spiritual practice, whatever faith or spiritual practice that might be. Subud literature uses ideas and vocabulary from a variety of traditional religions, seeking to enhance them rather than compete with them. Like Sufism, it is a more mystical expression of Islam; the claim made is the Creator's "spiritual energy" can be experienced through "spiritual

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<sup>25</sup> See: Carroll and Prickett (1997: 77), *The Bible*, Oxford: Oxford World Classics.

<sup>26</sup> See: [www.witchcraft.org/about.htm](http://www.witchcraft.org/about.htm).

exercise” (*latihan*), which involves complete surrender to divine will. The latihan (similar to meditation) lasts for about half an hour and is usually conducted twice a week in a group setting. The ultimate aim is to facilitate the “opening” of the soul to divine energies. Among people the pace of development varies, as do the experiences brought about by the eventual opening. Some report joy, others peace; some an inner vibration, others a quiet simplicity; some will laugh, cry, dance or pray (Rieu, 1983).

East Asian inspired organisations like the Soka Gakkai International recruited during the 1960s a large number of indigenous American followers (Hammond and Machacek, 1998). This was due to a successful systematic strategy seeking ‘to accommodate to American society and to ingratiate itself with Americans’ (Wallis, 1984: 38). The teachings as well as the social outlook are world-accommodating by emphasising interconnections between desire and enlightenment. The two are seen as inseparable, and it would be a mistake to believe that desire was unequivocally evil; after all, one cannot be human without having desires for food and drink, sleep and sex. Hence chanting the mantra *nam myoho renge kyo*, is a key practice that is said to enable the follower to attain all manner of benefits, both material as well as spiritual. Soka Gakkai rejects the idea of Pure Land Buddhist teaching, that there is a perfect Buddha-world, which transcends the unsatisfactory earthly world that we currently inhabit. Although this world does have problems such as war and environmental degradation the whole earth can still be a paradise for which one should strive.

The Aetherius Society a UFO influenced NRSM can also be seen as world accommodating (43% of all UFO based NRSMs matched this type – see figure 4). The society’s members take part in esoteric rituals in a cosmic battle on behalf of humanity against the forces of metaphysical evil. Nevertheless, this role as cosmological warriors does not prevent members from returning to conventional jobs and societal roles such as accountants, shopkeepers and housewives. Further although the movement advances a critique of contemporary society fundamentally emphasising violence and ecological damage as the result of greed caused by excessive materialism, the world is still perceived as ameliorable. The ills can be remedied with time and effort. Hence the response to the world is one of accommodation while the mission to save it from its self-inflicted problems using magical means is pursued. Thus, world-accommodating movements typically have a largely middle-class membership. They do not attract socially marginal groups, and joining them does not necessitate “dropping out”. Members are free to decide whether

or not to reveal their religious identity to outsiders. Involvement can therefore be unobtrusive, and may have little impact on a member's lifestyle or life chances. The case of the Aetherius Society supports these assertions (Wallis, 1975: 17-34).

Another category used to group NRSMs in the database was called "middle", which included groups that best fitted into the rectangular central theoretical space conceptualised by Wallis (see figure 3). Comparing such groups to the three main types Wallis argues they combine in various degrees all three types. 3HO, for example, is similar to world accommodating NRSMs in that it is an offshoot of an established religion; in this case the Indian based faith of Sikhism. As in world-affirming movements, it employs techniques that it is claimed will bring personal benefits such as happiness and good health. On the other hand, 3HO does possess characteristics in common with the world-rejecting movements. There is a clear concept of God. Members clothe themselves in a distinctive and unconventional way by wearing turbans on the head and dressing in white. They live communally in ashrams, but the ashrams do not enforce total sharing as in ISKCON: individuals pay for their own room and board. Some restrictions are also placed on behaviour: eating meat is forbidden, as is alcohol, and taking mind-altering drugs (Khalsa, 1986).

Using the self-reported membership statistics collated for 81 movements in the database, a rough estimate of the distribution of NRSM followers by orientation of the group in the US and UK combined was made (see CDROM). Based on adding the claimed membership data, the numbers of people involved with NRSMs across the West was calculated to be around 5.5m. Based on the available data world-affirming NRSMs accounted for the highest share of total membership (out of the three types) with 85%, while the world-rejecting type recorded the lowest with 3% (see table 8).

**Table 8 – Estimate of the distribution of NRSM followers by orientation of group**

	<i>World Affirming (n = 31)</i>	<i>World Accommodating (n = 32)</i>	<i>World Rejecting (n = 11)</i>	<i>Middle (n = 7)</i>	<i>TOTAL (N = 81) *</i>
<i>Share of Total</i>	85%	9%	3%	2%	100%

Note: \* n = number of NRSMs of that type for which data was available, N = sum of all the n's.

***Classifying NRSMs: Some limitations of any typological enterprise***

There are two basic requirements for a taxonomy. First, it should be exhaustive, enabling no religion to elude the parameters it sets. Second, it should highlight distinctions that are genuine and, as far as possible, unproblematic. (Chryssides, 1999: 31-2)

Conducting the “origins-orientations” typological enterprise was both time consuming and arduous. However, I was motivated in the task by the above assertions. The two combined typologies did prove to be a powerful classification scheme, which was applied rigorously and successfully to all the NRSMs included in the database. Nonetheless, no typology of NRSMs is going to be totally without problems or exceptions to the rules it sets for categorisation (Dawson, 1997; York, 1995: 237-314). Wallis was well aware of this fact when he stated: ‘There is no claim advanced here that the analysis is of universal applicability, relevant to all new religious movements in no matter what historical or cultural period they arose’ (Wallis, 1984: 5). NRSMs do indeed emerge in very different contexts and tend not only to be highly syncretistic, but also to be syncretistic in very different ways, making it difficult to classify them simply in terms of their orientation to the world, as Aldridge observes: ‘Society and culture change, and religion changes with them’ (2000: 55). Heelas (1985) highlights some of the specific shortcomings of Wallis’s typology. He rightly points out that among other things, the term world-accommodating is highly ambiguous and even when taken in the sense of indifference to the wider society, it is not always easy to support with examples. Further, the middle category proposed by Wallis (1984: 39) for “more clearly mixed cases”, is very similar conceptually to the world-accommodating type. This makes any distinctions seem arbitrary rather than genuinely empirical. In many ways all NRSMs could fit neatly into the middle category, which undermines the value of Wallis’s typology somewhat. Chryssides suggests ‘it would be more accurate to say that all religions possess world-affirming, world-renouncing and world-accommodating characteristics, and that most religions possess all three in varying degree’ (1999: 28). Beckford (1985) questions the worth of defining some groups as world-rejecting. In his view, no group can afford to reject the world altogether since they rely upon contacts with the wider economic system for their very survival. Beckford also argues that Wallis pays insufficient attention to the diversity of views that can often exist within a single NRSM. I grant that all these criticisms are valid; but as York argues: ‘Whatever its shortcomings, Wallis’s analysis

of the new religious movement on the basis of its response to the world provides us with an additional investigative tool' (York, 1995: 299).

The "origins" part of my typological exercise was significantly inspired by Partridge's (2004) taxonomy, but the latter can also fall foul to misclassifications under certain circumstances. For example, Eckankar: Religion of the Light and Sound of God is classed as a group with Indian origins both in Partridge (2004) and hence in my database. However, according to the Eckankar pamphlet: *What is Eckankar?* The organisation gives the following explanations as to where the teachings came from:

Saints, mystics, and religious aspirants have long spoken of the Light and Sound of God. These teachings can be traced throughout the spiritual history of the world. The ECK teachings of Light and Sound have been passed on to spiritual seekers by ECK Masters since before recorded history... The high teachings of ECK had been scattered to the four corners of the world. Paul [the founder of the movement] gathered these golden teachings of Light and Sound and made them readily available to us.

Lewis also states that: 'Eckankar's vision of the human condition is related to the religions that originated on the South Asian subcontinent as well as to the worldview of the West's metaphysical-occult subculture' (2004: 189). Thus, the source of inspiration behind the movement's beliefs and practices is not so easily pinned down. This observation holds true for many of the other NRSMS in the database. In other words, limitations 'in such quasi-historical taxonomies stems from the quasi-historical approach itself. This tends to confuse the developmental picture of how, where, or from whom a religious movement took its inspiration or origin' (York, 1995: 303-4).

A general practical difficulty that arises when applying any new typology is the subjective element involved in determining the classification of movements. For instance, the Falun Gong was classed as world-accommodating in my database based on their stated beliefs, relationship with the wider western society, and on personal insights gleaned from interviewing practitioners. However, the Chinese Government clearly perceives Falun Gong as dangerous and a threat to the Chinese social order, and officially banned the movement in July 1999 (Rahn, 2002). According to the Falun Gong report, 'as of February 2002, at least 1,600 Falun Gong practitioners or their immediate family members have died from torture while in police custody' (Falun Gong Human Rights Working Group, 2002: 3). The argument I am proposing is that different people will interpret the nature of NRSMS in varying ways. Thus,

classifying groups is not always a purely objective task and is therefore not totally value neutral:

The use of ideal types, Weber stressed, is contingent upon the acceptance of the ultimately 'subjective' or, what I would call, the 'hermeneutical' nature of the sociological enterprise. (Dawson, 1997: 370)

Another factor compromising the value of any typological enterprise is the issue of time and thus relativity. Once we designate any NRSM to whatever category of ideal type, we have abstracted and thereby removed that movement from the fluid and dynamic influences of time. In essence "ideal types" will always be static; rather like a book that has been shelved in a library, the location of a movement also becomes fixed after classification. One potential avenue for adding a dynamic element to any typology lies in placing analytical emphasis on mode of membership and consequent organisation. In this regard, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) have already proposed a relevant scheme, which differentiates between 'audience cults', 'client cults' and 'cult movements'.<sup>27</sup> Their typology places the developmental and relative nature of the analytical distinctions being made to the fore. Each of the types of NRSM may exist in perpetuity, but as movements gain in size and social stature, they will tend to change from audience cults to client cults and eventually to cult movements. In different geographical contexts (e.g. different regions of a country), the same NRSM may exist simultaneously in two or more of these forms. It may be a movement in London, but only a client cult in California. Moreover, with changes in time and location, groups may fluctuate from being client cults to cult movements and then back again to being essentially client cults, and so forth. While this scheme goes some way towards fashioning a pseudo-dynamic element, its analytical values will be best realised only if focused upon case studies of specific movements, rather than on a

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<sup>27</sup> 'Audience cults' are the least organised consisting of loosely structured forums, which provide lectures and distribute (usually selling) literature about a diverse array of esoteric, mystical, eccentric, and occult topics. Many New Age movements match this type, as do UFO groups like ZetaTalk. Once such groups become more organised they develop into 'client cults'. At this second stage a doctor-patient type of relationship gradually develops, with followers remaining free to pursue other religious activities. Finally, after success in converting numerous clients, transformation into a 'cult movement' may occur. Stark and Bainbridge (1985: 29) describe this last stage as follows:

When the spiritualist medium is able to get his or her clients to attend regularly on Sunday morning, and thus, in a Christian context, to sever ties with other religious organizations, we observe the birth of a *cult movement*. Cult movements are full-fledged religious organizations that attempt to satisfy all the religious needs of converts... Attempts to cause social change. by converting others, become central to the group agenda.

large-scale generic typological exercise. If used for the latter purpose it will also be prone to the criticisms directed at the other typologies above (Dawson, 1997: 374-5).

All typologies are simply sociological tools that will require refinement overtime. The new “origins-orientations” typology presented here is no exception. However, in my humble opinion it remains one of the more original attempts made to produce some quantitative facts regarding new movements, such as: (1) of the 220 organisations in the database 53% operated both in the US and GB; (2) the most common form of NRSM based on the origins typology were groups with Indian roots (21%); (3) the least common were those with roots in Jewish traditions (3%); (4) the most common stance of NRSMs towards wider society was one of world-accommodation (43%); (5) of Wallis’s three main types (excluding the middle category) world-rejecting groups were the least common (12%); (6) NRSMs with Christian roots (41%) and those based on UFO beliefs (43%) had the highest concentration of world-rejecting groups; (7) Personal Healing/Human Development groups were all (100%) world-affirming in their orientation, and (8) NRSMs with indigenous or Pagan roots were mostly of the world-accommodating variety (81%).

## **Conclusion**

NRMs are not only worth studying in their own right and from the perspective of the student of religion, but also for what they say about the wider society in which they seek to establish themselves and which many of them seek to save from itself. At the same time, it needs to be emphasised that there is little that is permanent or static about the NRMs, making prediction as to future trends extremely difficult and unwise. (Arweck and Clarke, 1997: xxxix)

This chapter began by briefly reviewing a number of ways in which NRSMs have been classified sociologically. There are many more classifications in the sociological literature than those reviewed here – so many so that it is unrealistic to examine them in their entirety (Beckford, 1985; Dawson, 1997, 1998b; Robbins, 1988; York, 1995). Many of the typologies are, in any case, variants of the ones discussed above. Nevertheless, the primary purpose of this chapter was to outline the foundations to a new “origins-orientations” typology, and demonstrate its analytical value by applying it to 220 NRSMs active in the West. The classification exercise had the key advantage of generating statistical results for discussion, which sets a tentative agenda for future



sociological research by showing how typological statements could be linked to the wider historical research available on the evolution of NRSMs.

The underlying objective of this thesis is to investigate the causes (sources) and consequences (interactions) of the rise of NRSMs across the West. Hence, the NRSMs in the database were categorised based on identifying their religious “origins” (knowing these sources uncovers some of the potential causes of formation). While the ways in which NRSMs interact with wider society was established by classifying them according to their “orientations” (understanding these provides clues about the consequences of their formation). According to Chryssides, ‘a typology is, to a large extent, a classification scheme that is designed to suit one’s particular purposes’ (1999: 31). In the chapter to follow the reasons why people join NRSMs are explored. The five movements from which conversion narratives were drawn include ISKCON, the Nation of Islam, Scientology, New Age and Falun Gong. These groups were chosen because they claim inspiration from a diverse set of religious “origins”, as well as encompassing the three different “orientations” to the world outlined in this chapter.

### Introduction: Conversion Controversies

Given the secular orientation of most academics (at least in the United States, the United Kingdom, and most of northern Europe), it is no wonder that conversion is a perplexing phenomenon to them. Why would anyone give up the freedom, independence and “truth” of the scientific, secular world-view for a life requiring discipline, restraint, obedience, tithing, etc.?

(Rambo, 1999: 261)

In current times, controversy continues to surround NRSMs and associated theories of conversion in the sociological and psychological literature (Argyle, 2000; Fontana, 2003; Dawson, 1998c; Robbins, 2003). The movements under consideration have been variously described as unfairly maligned new religious groups on the one hand (Richardson, 2003), and as destructive cults on the other (Singer, 1995, 2003). Thus, there is a lack of consensus in resolving the question of what should be the most appropriate analytical framework through which to theorise and explain conversions to NRSMs (Rambo, 1999; Bromley, 2001). In this chapter I take an analytic step back from the controversy and make a renewed attempt to inquire why *some* people are joining such movements. I state *some* because generalisations can fall into the trap of implying all people are predisposed to joining NRSMs, when in reality this is clearly not the case:

While those who have not read sociological accounts of the new religions might still be at a loss to understand why anyone joins the movements, those who have read some of the sociological literature could well be at a loss to understand why *all* young adults are not members, so all-encompassing are some of the explanations. (Barker, 1986: 338)

The above caveat acknowledged, I frame my arguments as to why *some* people join NRSMs with reference to two interrelated concepts: structure and agency. In respect to the former, conversion reflects anxiety and alienation caused by broad social change in the West driven by economic, cultural, and familial transformations. Based on the latter, conversion signifies the attempts made to transform the self by turning to *new* ideas, hopes, values and explanations in response to confrontations with acute emotions related to life. The data upon which arguments and inferences are based derive from conversion studies in the literature and from depth interviews conducted with members of various new groups as well as with non-members (see appendix 1).

### **Key Characteristics of those who join New Religious and Spiritual Movements**

In the literature there has been no clear consensus or reliable social profile of typical converts to NRSMs. However, two things are clear from the numerous studies: (1) because of different recruitment methods of different groups, each new religion tends to attract a rather homogenous group of followers; (2) the overall membership of NRSMs is much more heterogeneous than commonly expected, for instance the New Age Movement tends to attract somewhat different kinds of followers (Rose, 1998). Nevertheless, four broad generalisations can still be attempted (see Dawson, 2003).

First, the members of most NRSMs while initially disproportionately young are now ageing. Barker (1984: 206) found that 50 percent of the members of the Unification Church in Britain were between 21 and 26 years of age. The average age at which people joined the movement was 23. Rochford (1985: 47) reports that 56 percent of the members of Krishna Consciousness were between 20 and 25, and that more than half had joined before their twenty-first birthday, while Judah (1974) in an earlier study reported that 85 percent of the devotees surveyed were twenty five years or younger. In a comparative study of participation rates in new religious movements in Montreal and San Francisco, Bird and Reimer state: 'In comparison to the adult population in general, participants in New Religious and Parareligious Movements are more likely to be younger, single, female, and middle class' (1983: 224). More recently, Wilson and Dobbelaere (1994) found that while the members of Nichiren Shoshu in Britain were also young, they were not as young as those who join the Unification Church or Krishna Consciousness. Their research revealed that 68 percent of the members were under the age of 34 and that 88 percent were under 44. Meanwhile, Wallis (1977) found that the average age of recruitment to Scientology in Britain was about 32 years old. Predictably, as some of the NRMs of the 50s and 60s have matured, the average age of members has likewise risen (Barker, 1995: 168-9). The first generation of converts to ISKCON, the Unification Church, and the Family (formerly the Children of God) are now in their late thirties and early forties. For example, the average age of the seven Krishna Consciousness members I interviewed was 34, while the seven Scientology interviewees had an average age of 50 years old.

Second, with few exceptions studies have found that recruits to NRSMs are on average markedly better educated than the general public. Wallis (1977: 163) reports in his admittedly rather small sample, 57 percent of the Scientologists had either

professional training or college/university degrees. Likewise Wilson and Dobbelaere (1994) found that 24 percent of their large sample of the membership of Soka Gakkai in Britain had attended university, whereas in 1990 only 8 percent of the general population had a university education. Rochford (1985: 48-50) discovered that 65 percent of his sample of very young American devotees of Krishna had at least one year of college. Barker (1984: 197-8) cites comparable findings for the *Moonies* in Britain, as Stark and Bainbridge (1985: 406-10) do for other American groups. Wilson and Dobbelaere suggest the reason for higher levels of educational achievement in converts to NRSMs is fairly obvious: ‘To be properly understood, the teachings [of most NRMs] demand literate intelligence, a willingness to study, and lack of fear in the face of unfamiliar concepts and language’ (1994: 123). In support of this assertion Mansoor, a spiritualist, recalls the extensive reading he undertook to develop his beliefs: “*I was lucky that I had a natural willingness to want to read... books by Alice Bailey and the Theosophical Society’s publications... [And] Madame Blavatsky’s book the Secret Doctrine, which is very difficult to read – it really is*”.<sup>1</sup> Dani a member of the Spiritualist Church states on the development of her partners, as well as her own personal spiritual knowledge, “*We have read up on so many complex spiritual theories that in a way we could have a PhD in the subject*”.<sup>2</sup>

Third and not surprising given the educational levels, recruits to NRSMs are also mainly from middle to upper-middle-class households, or the more advantaged segments of the population (a fact which would further undermine Marx’s assertion that religion is largely an opiate for the disprivileged within society). These findings hold true for Scientology (Wallis, 1977), the Unification Church (Barker, 1984: 198), ISKCON (Judah, 1974; Rochford, 1985), and the New Age Movement (Rose, 1998).

Fourth and last, on questions of sex there seems to be some dispute. Machalek and Snow (1993) suggest there is an over-representation of women in new religious movements; at some points Stark and Bainbridge (1985) do as well. But the evidence, as Stark and Bainbridge themselves admit is highly variable. In the past, according to Stark and Bainbridge (1985: 413) women were disproportionately present in fringe religions such as in the 1920s when 75 percent of Christian Science members were female. Wilson and Dobbelaere (1994: 42-43) found about 59 percent of the Soka Gakkai movement in Britain to be female. Rose notes that while participants in the

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from interview with 32-year-old male (9/03/2004).

<sup>2</sup> Extract from interview with 39-year-old female (9/03/2004).

New Age on the whole are drawn from many walks of life, three facts still stand out, ‘first, almost without exception, participants are middle-class; secondly, almost three-quarters of the New Age population are women; and thirdly, over half are middle-aged’ (1998: 11). In contrast, Barker (1984: 206) reports a two-to-one ratio in favour of men for the Moonies in Britain, Wallis’s (1977) sample of Scientologists is 59 percent male, and Lewis’s (2003: 237) sample of Satanists was 74 percent male. Of the 26 members of NRSMs interviewed by me 65 percent were men (see table 9 below); while Rochford (1985) observes there was little substantial discrepancy between the sexes in the group he studied. On the whole, it seems that while some NRSMs may attract more of one sex than the other (e.g. I found more female New Agers than male), there is still no really conclusive evidence that women are more susceptible to joining new religious or spiritual movements than men (Palmer, 1994).

**Table 9 – Key characteristics of the 26 members of NRSMs interviewed**

<i>Average age</i>	41
<i>Range</i>	20 (youngest) to 92 (oldest)
<i>Average length of membership</i>	16 years
<i>Range</i>	2 years (shortest) to 53 years (longest)
<i>No of Males</i>	17 (65%)
<i>No of Females</i>	9 (35%)

### **Structural Transformations and Religious Conversions**

Several important factors have engendered structural shifts in the West, like increased travel and the more widespread use of communication technologies, which have assisted in the creation of more pluralistic societies. In such societies fewer people are able to avoid learning about other cultures and religious communities, and in some cases choose to adopt these alternative religious beliefs in preference to those that are dominant in their own culture (Beckford, 1986; Partridge, 2004). Peter, a management consultant whose parents are Sikh, describes his conversion to Falun Gong as follows:

*I had a good understanding of what Sikhism is about and I read about and was brought up in this country so I knew about Christianity... but nothing really clicked... the difference with Falun Gong is it is very tangible you can see immediate physical effects in your body, face and hair. You can really feel the energy, it is not like the other religions where you have to believe with faith – in Falun Gong you get a physical manifestation. So it is much easier to*

*believe in... I'm a mathematician I graduated in mathematics, so believing in esoteric things is very hard for me... it is wrong to say I didn't look at other religions, I did look at others, but they didn't connect at the deep level.*<sup>3</sup>

Through reflexivity some individuals are increasingly assessing new and alternative solutions to modern problems caused by upheavals and transformations in structure. One important challenge facing most humans is the search for a stable identity, which is catered for by novel and competing religions or spiritualities (Champion, 2000; Jones, 1978; Stark and Bainbridge, 1987). Thus, it is unsurprising that the primary theme explaining conversion to emerge after thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was related to a search for truth and meaning, with 16 counts (see table 10 below).

**Table 10: Eight key reasons why people join NRSMs**

<i>Key concept</i>	<i>Main Themes</i>	<i>Count (N = 26)*</i>
<i>Search for Meaning or Truth:</i>	Something is missing in mainstream society, often an adequate conception of values, morals or absolute truth.	16
<i>Bodily Transcendence:</i>	Drawn in by health benefits of the spiritual practice. Desire for more control of physical body.	8
<i>Seeking Self-improvement:</i>	Learning and study leading to spiritual belief could result in feelings of alienation, spiritual belief seen as self-sacrifice.	8
<i>Desire to Help or Serve Others:</i>	Looking to fix the world or contribute more to social issues and problems.	7
<i>Boredom and the wish for Re-enchantment:</i>	Lack of fulfilment in society, another dimension of alienation leading to interest in fringe or mysterious beliefs.	5

<sup>3</sup> Extract from interview conducted with 41-year-old male (11/03/2004).

<b>Charisma:</b>	Drawn in by teachings of the founder, who is perceived as superhuman in some way.	4
<b>Search for Mediating Structure:</b>	Loss of family member; fear of death resulting in instability and a need for secure identity.	4
<b>Pure Alienation:</b>	Resentment or anger towards mass society leading to reactionary beliefs.	3

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*\*Note: The sum of the counts is greater than 26 (sample size) as some transcripts contained more than one theme or reason for conversion.*

The 16 narratives displayed similar patterns in the text all echoing the perception that something crucial was ‘missing’ in mainstream society. Often this was an adequate standard for morality and values as well as an authoritative source from which to draw truth claims. These anxieties were alleviated after the adoption of the discourses of the NRSMs in question. This perceived need to connect with a deeper reality beyond the superficiality of socio-structural relations is consistent with Snow and Machalek’s description of the purpose and effect of conversion as ‘not only a change in values, beliefs, and identities, but more fundamentally and significantly... the displacement of one universe of discourse by another or the ascendance of a formerly peripheral universe of discourse to the status of primary authority’ (1984: 170).

The second chapter argued that the reflexive nature of modernity, and the cyclical environment in which societal flux and transformation operate, both provide fertile grounds for religious and spiritual revivals. In combination with an era of free-flowing information available to identity seekers, traditional religious discourses like Christianity (among others) have increasingly been exposed to sceptical questioning (Luckmann, 1967), and once undermined by self reflexive-agents new worldviews are sought (Giddens, 1991; Mellor, 1993). Consider John’s reflections,

*I look at it like this. The great religions have carried the torch for the human spirit for millennia. In Scientology the subject has been boiled down to its simplicities, by a great deal of meticulous research, by defining exactly what we are talking about, and thereby developing techniques by which anyone can actually discover his own nature and spirituality. In so doing, gradually step-*

*by-step, one realises that this is the way one really is and should be. There is nothing strange about it, but the results can nevertheless be remarkable, even fascinating. Not only is the route to better states of being made a hard and fast reality in Scientology, I also gained an understanding of why other religions, in my view, have been unable to fully deliver.*<sup>4</sup>

The empowerment of the self to forge a new identity in a reflexive modernity could be satisfied either by the adoption of original (re)-interpretations of religious and spiritual discourses, or lead to acceptance of atheistic or materialistic worldviews. For instance, Bhatt argues against ‘giving religious ideology an *a priori* epistemic, ethical or moral privilege in comparison with any secular or atheistic discourse’ (1997: xvi).

### ***Reflexive Modernity: Competing Religious Discourses and Alienations***

The choice of a specific religious system to follow can cause groups and even nations to feel alienated from others who adopt different systems. Therefore, problems such as religious fundamentalism arise when one religious discourse is rigorously enforced or advocated in preference to other competing discourses (Denemark, 2004; Tétreault, 2004; B.S. Turner, 2003). Bramley illustrates this point: ‘To most “infidel” Christians, Moslems were nothing more than savage “heathens” (“nonbelievers”). This set up an inevitable conflict into which millions of people would be dragged’ (1993: 153). The process of religious conversion can be unsettling to both the person who has supposedly seen the light and error of their previous ways, as well as to cynical onlookers advocating and promoting alternative religious or non-religious meanings systems (Dawson, 2003; Levine, 2003). The latter scepticism often stems from well-founded concerns regarding the sometimes naïve and wholly inadequate *authoritarian* religious discourses and their solutions to important social issues such as economic conduct and family planning (Bhatt, 1997). In this regard, a relevant example is the social policies of the Islamic Regime in Iran, policies like the Majlis encouraging high birth rates through condemning contraception with the added slogan more Muslims constitute extra arrows through the heart of the great Satan (i.e. United States). Although the US and the West is far from the high moral pedestal its political leaders

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<sup>4</sup> Extract from interview conducted with 62-year-old male (06/09/2004).



generally view themselves to be on, such political religious rhetoric by the Majlis just amplifies external alienation, as well as internal problems for Iranian people.<sup>5</sup>

The specific argument here is that *politicised and institutionalised* religious discourses can serve to alienate groups and indeed nations from stranger “others”. Through such institutionalisation religion and spirituality no longer remain personal attempts aimed at seeking metaphysical understanding in the face of shifting social conditions, but become powerful tools for mass management. Machiavelli (2003) famously discussed third party strategic manipulations as a potent tool for socio-political control. He outlined several techniques used by various Italian rulers to ensure the docility of a conquered (or exploited) populace. One method was to breed conflict. Human disunity was a valuable commodity to the princes because it made people less able to mount a collective and unified challenge against oppressive authority. The way to keep in-fighting artificially alive was to create un-resolvable issues, which can only be settled by the annihilation of one of the opponents. Religious discourse deals with numerous un-resolvable issues, such as ‘Is there a God?’ ‘How best is this divine being pleased by my actions?’ and ‘What happens after Death?’ Thus, when used for stealth like agendas of political hegemony, religious and spiritual beliefs become powerful myths to operationalise for breeding conflict and fragmentation amongst subjugated masses, by less than virtuous polities:

I have thought it proper to represent things as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined. Many have dreamed up republics and principalities which have in truth never been known to exist; the gulf between how one should live and how one does live is so wide that a man who neglects what is actually done for what should be done moves towards self-destruction rather than self-preservation... Therefore if a prince wants to maintain his rule he must be prepared not to be virtuous... (Machiavelli, 2003: 50)

Sarah a student who is not a member of any religious or spiritual group made the following observations regarding the negative aspects of religion and the types of conflict she believes it has engendered:

*I don't like a lot of these religions because they say you must do this, you must do that. I know it's wrong to kill my neighbour – I know that certain things are wrong... some of these religions they preach all this right and wrong, but then who do you see killing each other?... I sort of grew up saying that I hate all*

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<sup>5</sup> A private sector businessman in 1996 summed up one problem observing that in the latter half of the 1970s the Iranian government had annual oil revenue of \$22bn for a population of 30m, whereas in 1996 annual revenue from oil was \$14bn for a population of 60m (Allen, 1996).

*religions they just cause distrust, war and exploit people – look at women in Islam... I don't need to be told how to live my life by some God botherer or an ancient book... what I'm trying to say is a country shouldn't be ruled purely by a religion.*<sup>6</sup>

Mansoor a householder and spiritualist also gave a critique of organised religion:

*Why I never moved towards any particular type of religion was I never liked anything that had too many rules and too many restrictions. In retrospect from what I understand today it is important that I feel empowered through a belief system, and I didn't feel that religions were in anyway empowering, they were disempowering. Because what they were doing was saying that yes you can talk to God, but only through [pause] Christ as your saviour, or through the commandments of Moses, or Krishna, or whatever the belief was. I always felt if that was the case then that kind of really limits God, it makes him human.*<sup>7</sup>

The choice of what religious discourse to follow is in certain circumstances a manifestation or source of alienation from the wider values of society (Baum, 1975; Feuerlicht, 1978). Specifically alienation between individuals and groups causes two main underlying structural reasons for conversion: (1) it can serve as a suppressant for alienated consciousness stemming from the ill effects of exploitative ideologies such as capitalism in a Marxist guise, or (2) religious conversion itself becomes a necessary step towards overcoming alienation, expressed by the desire to transform self and in the process mass consciousness in a Hegelian sense. Troy, a member of the Nation of Islam expressed a mix of both dimensions to alienation in his conversion narrative.

*I grew up on devils isle [England] being told in school I was a useless black man who will never amount to anything. If you are white everything is handed to you on a plate... The older I got the angrier I became, white society designated me intellectually and morally inferior... I sacrificed and learnt about real black history and religion in the Nation of Islam, while my friends accepted the lies of the white man... I try to educate my black brothers and sisters about our true identity, but generally there is no unity... things can get dread at anytime, this is the white mans island and we should not forget that, we will never be accepted as equal.*<sup>8</sup>

The above passage demonstrates how an oppositional ideology can be constructed in reflexive modernity. A Black Muslim identity is adopted to oppose and liberate the self from the perceived 'White Christian' values of mainstream British society.

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<sup>6</sup> Extract from interview with 27-year-old female (10/03/2004).

<sup>7</sup> Extract from interview with 32-year-old male (9/03/2004).

<sup>8</sup> Extract from interview with 29-year-old male (29/01/2004).

**Marx: Religious conversion as a product of alienation**

Religious conversion can be a product of alienation according to Marx (see chapter 1). He reached this conclusion after depicting religion as opiate for the exploited working classes who were increasingly alienated from the product of their labour in capitalism. His deductive reasoning was the consequence of an inversion of Hegel's dialectic, which shifted focus from the phenomenology of spirit to the practical material needs of humans in evolving economic systems. From a Marxist perspective then alienation can lead to religious conversions until humanity realises the real source of its grief and seizes the forces of production to usher in liberation under socialism:

Marx thought that people who are unable to find themselves and their happiness in the world to which they belong tend to create another world for themselves in which their true destiny appears. Religion is, therefore, man's self-awareness so long as he has not found himself... Man's destiny is to be fulfilled in happy community. (Baum, 1975: 32; 38)

But Marx inaccurately predicted the future trajectory of societal progress, rather than capitalism being replaced by economic transition to socialism; many people instead decide to simply opt out of capitalistic relations. The majority of converts to NRSMs I interviewed said they saw society as too materialistic, which made them strive to lead more spiritual lifestyles (Casey, 2000). So in Marxist terms they would be indulging even more in the illusion of religion and spirituality as a means to suppress alienation.

Simon, a Falun Gong practitioner for the last two years, describes how he gave up a "top job in advertising" to spend time travelling the world as a voluntary worker. His parents were atheists, but they were very "caring people". The older he became the more he felt something was missing in life. He started to feel more and more alienated from colleagues at work. His job allowed him to travel extensively, but there was too much backstabbing and rivalry: "I never felt like I fitted in, I didn't like the drinking culture and was branded unsociable". He now hosts regular Falun Dafa exercise sessions at home, and says he will never return to a purely materialistic lifestyle, one that left him "empty unfulfilled and extremely stressed out".<sup>9</sup>

*The problem is that in mainstream society there is no knowledge of the true self and there is no knowledge of what the meaning of life is... We can see this practically, no one is satisfied, and we need to constantly invent new things, try the same things a million different ways, and go somewhere else to see if*

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<sup>9</sup> Extract from interview with 35-year-old male (29/11/2003).

*we can find happiness there. This is because we have forgotten our eternal nature. There is surely too much concern simply for the body. If people learn to satisfy the soul in connection with God then they will be satisfied.*<sup>10</sup>

(Nanda Sunu dasa, ISKCON devotee, 2004)

*I think there is too much concern about materialistic things, or, more relevantly, not enough concern about spiritual things. It's not that material things are inherently bad; it's a question of priorities. Too many people are trying to get out of life what they can for themselves and maybe for a few others, but don't have regard for their wider communities. Too many have lost sight of the desire to help others, yet this is a fundamental purpose in Man.*<sup>11</sup>

(Graeme Wilson, Scientologist, 2004)

The passages above illustrate the complex interplays in the relationship of alienation to materialism in conversion narratives. The western world is depicted as excessively materialistic, which results in alienation from the values of consumer society. This leads to subsequent religious conversion, but the interviewees rejected traditional religion (i.e. Marx's illusion) for a novel type of "spiritually based socialism". Marx made the oversight of not envisaging the fact that membership of new religions can satisfy the human need for a 'happy' community; the economic system does not need to be liberated physically, it can be transcended mentally.

### ***Hegel: Religious conversion as a source of alienation***

The concept of God is his Idea, to become and to make himself objective for himself. This is intrinsic to God as *spirit*: God is essentially in his community, he has a community, is an object for himself, and is this truly only in self-consciousness; his highest determination is self-consciousness. The concept of God thus leads necessarily of itself to religion. (Hegel, in Taylor, 1999: 483)

It is also feasible that through religious or spiritual conversion people are trying to de-alienate themselves by looking deeply into their spirit as a human being and thereby nourishing the hope for a more just social order. Alienation resulting from the feelings of meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and powerlessness are increasingly the common experience of groups and individuals within Western societies (Bier, 1972; Engel, 1972; Kalekin-Fishman, 2000; Norris and Inglehart, 2004). Feuerlicht argues alienation is necessary and not all negative as man needs to 'alienate himself from many persons and things. He must give up, forget, suppress feelings in order to grow,

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<sup>10</sup> Extract from interview with 20-year-old male (17/09/2004).

<sup>11</sup> Extract from interview with 45-year-old male (30/08/2004).

to have more important relationships, more valuable experiences’ (1978: 8). Mansoor and Tom (Scientologist) described their spiritual journeys in the following ways:

*I don't think I can change the world externally. I can only change the world by changing internally, so it's only when I change myself that I can start to begin this task of changing the world... To reach a point where I can become a creator of my outcomes rather than the product of them, and once I reach that state within then I can have a much better impact on the world without. So that means I will be in a place to lead not only a better quality of life, but also be in a position to help as many people as possible to rapidly achieve the same thing, at this point the link forms much quicker. Now we are trying to save people while we are drowning ourselves and we wonder why we are failing. There are those of us saying hey let me try and get myself to dry land, it's not that I am abandoning you or the human race, but once I'm on dry land I will be in a much better place to help you.<sup>12</sup>*

*If you have gained greater understanding of others as you inevitably do as you gain greater understanding about yourself, you find that relationships are much easier, fewer arguments, much more camaraderie. As a business owner and manager, I use these things on a day-to-day basis with staff... Scientology also has given me many tools to help others with their personal problems, physical difficulties, upsets, etc. And it has helped me find from inside a much greater desire to help others than I had before Scientology. Prior to Scientology it would be fair to say that I was very self-centred. I had just finished university Phi Beta Kappa, cum laude, with an excellent record in sports, and yet having very little interest in society. I had started smoking marijuana in college as a way to explore the unknown and, if I had not come across Scientology at that point, I have no doubt that I would have experimented with other drugs.<sup>13</sup>*

Hegel viewed the potential alienating properties of religion as a vital stage on the road to the eventual realisation of spirit; at this penultimate stage men are not yet ready, they have not yet achieved the universal consciousness, which fully reflects their unity with *Geist*: ‘If the state is to come into existence as the *self-knowing* ethical reality of *Geist*, it is essential that its form should be distinct from that of authority and faith’ (Hegel, in Taylor, 1999: 485). Charlotte, a registered shiatsu practitioner and member of the UK Falun Dafa, told me that spiritual elevation in accordance with qigong exercises and meditation requires extreme personal sacrifice:

*You really have to be dedicated in order to cultivate your energy correctly. I meditate and practice every day... People misunderstand religion and spirituality it is not about authority, control or third parties; you just have to*

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<sup>12</sup> Extract from interview with 32-year-old male (09/03/2004).

<sup>13</sup> Extract from interview with a 55-year-old male (07/09/2004).

*go deep within to that quiet place of the soul – to feel the connection between all things – that really takes time and effort.*<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the above passages illustrate that religion can be a potent source of alienation, but this estrangement can lead to the awakening of profound feelings of collective unity. Hegel argued the ultimate reality that must come to fruition and full self-realisation through history is knowledge of God or cosmic *Geist*, whose being is the embodiment of the universe. He claimed the eventual revelation of *Geist* would come in a community that fully understands itself as its vehicle. For this community God will be both separate and above, as well as detached and within, and they will have to be able to grasp both propositions as true together through speculative reason. In this respect, Wexler (1996) argues that de-alienation according to the New Age movement can be achieved individually and collectively through a *resacralisation of culture and a resacralisation of self*. According to this framework, alienation must be overcome by individual regeneration through the renewed encounter with religious and spiritual values. The following extract from an interview with Dr X, a University lecturer and Falun Gong practitioner, reinforces this conjecture:

**Author:** *A lot of other people I have spoken to, for example people who practise New Age beliefs, imply that they need to transform themselves in order to transform the world, to make the world a better place. I am not sure exactly what Falun Gong's higher principles are – is it looking for that as well, is it expecting change spiritually in the world?*

**Dr X:** *I can only talk about my own understanding. Falun Gong emphasises looking inward for solutions when there is a conflict with others rather than trying to change or influence the other party. By becoming more tolerant and compassionate, one will be more in peace and harmony with the environment around him. And of course by being more peaceful and kind, he contributes to a better environment for others. That is how I see my relationship with my environment. Again, it is easier said than done to cultivate spiritual values, but it can be done and is rewarding to do it.*<sup>15</sup>

Most of the structural themes explaining conversion were related to alienation in some guise from the values of mainstream consumer society. Nonetheless, the least frequent cause of conversion was “pure alienation” (3 counts – table 10); this is alienation stemming from resentment or anger towards aspects of mass society leading to the adoption of radical or reactionary belief. In this context, both the Nation of Islam

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<sup>14</sup> Extract from interview with a 31-year-old female (19/05/2003).

<sup>15</sup> From interview with a 40-year-old male (17/04/2004).

members and one Falun Gong practitioner met this pattern.<sup>16</sup> The other manifestations of alienation to emerge in narratives were often far subtler and were generally enmeshed with two or three more important causal factors determining conversion.

***Religious conversions as the search for mediating structures***

In the modern world, natural community has largely disappeared... Yet there is no doubt that [people] hanker after the benefits of community, seek contexts in which they are personally known, and in which they share responsibilities with others. New religious movements can supply precisely this context in a way that no other social agency can do. (Wilson, 1982a: 134)

Historically, family and faith in the Church provided the foundations for personal identity, beliefs and values in Western societies (Irwin, 2003; Settles, 2000). These institutions produced a sense of permanence and stability, but in contemporary society the family and the Christian Church are at a crossroads (Bruce, 1995; Finke and Stark, 1992). The traditional forms of these structures have been under increasing attack and criticism, designated by sceptics as patriarchal (Atwood, 2001; Gerson, 2004). Thus, numerous sociologists have concluded that an inevitable polarisation of social life has, and is occurring, between the extremes of public and private life, setting the stage for an intense and cyclical identity crisis among adolescents (Barker, 1983; Bellah, 1976; Glock, 1976; Ozorak, 1989). Robbins (1988: 169) suggests the high rate of structural differentiation has gradually eroded the “traditional supportive mediating structures” like the Church, leaving the nuclear family increasingly isolated, enabling NRSMs to successfully recruit by stressing the affectionate, loving, family-like character of their internal bonds. Following similar reasoning Dawson argues NRSMs have successfully gained converts because they ‘provide a way to reintegrate the expressive and the instrumental in a single cohesive social unit and, hence, provide a stable identity for their young members’ (1998c: 56). The search for a mediating structure was cited four times in conversion narratives (see table 10).<sup>17</sup> For example, a 23 year-old female member of the Church of Scientology confided in me that she turned to the religion after the death of her mother, which had left her totally alone in the world:

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<sup>16</sup> The low importance of ‘pure alienation’ as a factor explaining conversion found in my analysis is consistent with research carried out by Bromley and Shupe (1979) into NRSM recruitment patterns.

<sup>17</sup> Two were from Scientology narratives, one by a spiritualist and one by an ISKCON devotee.

*When I lost my mum I was devastated... My mum and dad got divorced when I was eleven... when she died I found no comfort in Church I kept thinking what if she has gone to hell, after all the Roman Catholic Church is against divorce. You know this became more depressing for me... I read about Scientology, I got a book from the library by chance. I learnt how Scientology believes humanity to be basically good, mistakes as just a part of learning, and refuted the existence of rigid sins to which one will go to hell for... I attended the life training courses and felt more confident and happier... I have found a whole new family in other Scientologists.<sup>18</sup>*

Margaret another member of Scientology gave similar reasons for her conversion:

*Life was not easy. My parents were not getting along – they divorced when I was 10 years old. No one in my family, close relatives, friends etc seemed able to speak to each other about what really mattered. Also at the time when I married I wanted to ensure that my marriage succeeded and became an asset to my life. I also pondered a lot as a child, early teens on the real value to life and what we were here for and what I, as an individual, could do to make my own life and environment better. I felt the effect of my environment and the people around me at that time [i.e. around period of conversion].<sup>19</sup>*

In modernity the downsizing of the traditional nuclear family has proceeded endlessly with the norm progressively being that of the single-headed household. Not only is divorce more common (see table 11), but also with regard to marriage unwed parenthood has increasingly become the standard (see Gernsheim, 2002). In practical terms unwed parenthood almost invariably means unwed motherhood (Blankenhorn, 1995; Burghes and Brown, 1995; Davies, 1997; Pearlstein, 1997). Tocqueville (1945) comprehensively investigated the evolving structural tensions in modern American society causing family decline and attributed them to major social, cultural, economic and technological trends that have been under way for several centuries (see Crowley, 1998 and Irwin, 2003, for UK trends). Tocqueville realised that a healthy society required a *buffer of mediating structures* between the state and individual. The erosion of these middle-level institutions produces the mass society. Such a society is polarised between a throng of atomised and alienated individuals on the one hand, and an overbearing state on the other. In mass societies individuals pay allegiance only to themselves and their Nation State – nothing in between. The masses can easily be swept up into nationalistic frenzies and wars. There are no alternative bonds and allegiances to deflect and mitigate the dominance of the polity over the individual. In this context, throughout history, the family has been the single most important

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<sup>18</sup> Extract from interview (13/07/2003).

<sup>19</sup> Extract from interview with 54-year-old female (29/11/2004).



institution commanding the attachment of individuals and preventing the excesses of atomised individualism and massified group life (Hoover, *et al.*, 2004; Mander, 2001).

**Table 11 – Marriages and Divorces in the United Kingdom (in thousands)**

Decade	All Marriages	All Divorces
1950s	4,004	297
1960s	4,213	391
1970s	4,375	1,207
1980s	3,959	1,635
1990s	3,310	1,692

Source: Calculated from Social Trends 35 (2005 edition)

To Davies (1997) and Mander (2001) the above two excesses have become increasingly discernible in modern Western societies. On the one hand, there is the possibility of total Statism whereby the citizen becomes a robot like automaton, or a conformist, merely the sum total of his or her institutional roles. At the opposite extreme lies the possibility of total individualism and anarchy; here people are ruled solely by their impulses. These two excesses may also go hand in hand. For instance, two interviewees both with no religious or spiritual affiliations gave accounts in relation to the meaning and purpose of life, which were a reflection of the extremes identified. Kavandeep, a civil servant expressed a very individualistic view of life:

**Author:** *How do you give meaning to the issues of life and death or morality and evil, taking into account you do not adhere to any religious belief?*

**Kavandeep:** *Simple there is no purpose to life – I believe in chaos theory... the universe has no purpose, it was a random occurrence, as is life on this planet.*

**Author:** *Ok – but what about meaning or right and wrong? Are you saying because life is meaningless none of these questions are relevant?*

**Kavandeep:** *Well [pause] yeah it doesn't really matter – what is right and wrong anyway? You just have to live for the moment. You just have to enjoy your life.*

**Author:** *Where do you draw the line at enjoyment? – If life is chaos and has no meaning what does enjoyment mean to you?*

**Kavandeep:** *I suppose buying things or going on holiday [Long Pause] I have never really thought about it too much to be honest.<sup>20</sup>*

<sup>20</sup> Extract from interview with a 29-year-old male (2/02/2004).

The above supports the observation that some individuals are primarily driven by the frantic search for the immediate gratification of hedonistic impulses, so in modernity ‘we find more and more guidebooks and practical manuals to do with health, diet, appearance, exercise, lovemaking and many other things’ (Giddens, 1991: 218). Vicky a housewife described the purpose of life in the following terms:

*I think we are just [pause] a part of the whole natural world and we are here to reproduce basically. Once that is over with we die [pause] so you die... very simple things make me happy [pause] I'm not materialistic at all [pause] just nice company, a happy home, my little girl, that is it really.<sup>21</sup>*

The above is reflective of a very conformist view, and according to Mander (2001) demonstrates how in mass society some people merely perceive themselves as the sum total of their institutional roles, in the particular case of Vicky as a mother.

After analysis of the open-ended responses from the British Household Panel Survey, Scott (2000) reports that the eight most frequently referred to social changes were: (1) rising unemployment; (2) lack of safety; (3) lack of discipline; (4) increased pressure; (5) moral decline; (6) greater crime and drugs; (7) environmental problems, and (8) family breakdown. She suggests these main social representations of how the world has changed are significant predictors of child-rearing values, and concludes:

The pessimism of responses is pervasive with four out of five mentions having a clear negative orientation... In particular, mentions of lack of safety, crime, and drugs, are disproportionately mentioned by young people... Our data lend support to the depiction of the Second World War as marking a value-divide. Pre war cohorts are far more likely than those born after the war to deplore the lack of discipline and to endorse obedience over autonomy. (Scott, 2000: 374)

Scott's findings reinforce the proposition that in modernity structural conditions are such that as greater emphasis is placed on the capitalistic virtues of accumulation and consumption by the state, and more families disintegrate, individuals will increasingly mature with under-developed values. This causes an inherent hunger among certain people for re-acquirement of a moral standard, one that Western society is perceived as no longer promoting for guiding social relationships. Consider how the following statements depict a state of gradual ‘*moral decline*’ in society,

*I am old enough to be able to consider social conditions of the last 50 years with those of the preceding 40. Until the end of the 2nd World War the moral*

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<sup>21</sup> Extract from interview with a 34-year-old female (13/03/2004).

*standards of the previous 150 years evenly persisted in the West. Since 1950 there has been a rapidly accelerating change of standards, confusion of thought, indulgence in shallow distraction and selfishness.*<sup>22</sup>

(Lord Thurlow, Falun Gong Practitioner, 2004)

*My view of mainstream society is there are lots of very well intended good people out there, but on the flipside it is obvious to me that the erosion of the rights of the individual, of the family unit, of moral values and of literacy have contributed to increased crime, and drug abuse as well as a destruction of the basic fabric of our society. These are some of the things our social betterment programs deal with and this is why I contribute both time and resources to them.*<sup>23</sup>

(Piers, Scientologist, 2004)

Some people will be satisfied with the meanings offered by mass capitalist consumer society along varying points of the two dimensional scale outlined above, while others seek purpose in new religious and spiritual discourses due to the mounting criticism of Christianity in the West, which has undermined its official status (Berger, 1969; Luckmann, 1967; Wilson, 1982b).

One of the basic distinctions made by sociologists is between the primary and the secondary group. The former is the small, intimate, affective group exemplified by the family and dominant in pre-industrial society. The latter is the large-scale, depersonalised, rational organisation illustrated by the contemporary corporation and the modern state. Modernisation is, essentially, the progressive rationalisation of society and the gradual eclipse of primary relationships by secondary ones (Wilson, 2003a). Hence, the concomitant erosion of traditional supportive mediating structures like the Christian Church and the decline of primary socialising institutions such as the traditional family have laid the seeds for the birth of NRSMs (Nelson, 1987). The concomitant attempt made by religious converters to reconstruct the world socially by ‘reimposing institutionally reliable meanings upon existence’ (Dawson, 1998c: 60), also reflects the broader reflexive nature of modernity. The search for absolute truth and meaning, the need for mediating structures, rising alienations and the perception that the world is heading for an imminent moral collapse, all contribute to ensuring a steady structural output of new religious visionaries and their subsequent disciples.

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<sup>22</sup> Extract from interview with a 92-year-old male (10/10/2004).

<sup>23</sup> Extract from interview with a 36-year-old male (06/10/2004).

### **The Agency Side of the Equation: Personal Motivations for Conversion**

Whatever our views on the transcendent dimension of religion and spirituality may be, men and women appear to have an innate propensity to find in these experiential systems a meaning and purpose for their existence, and a code of beliefs and values that give psychological strength and that inform and guide their actions. (Fontana, 2003: 229)

The understanding of the agent as knowledgeable is fundamental to Giddens's (1976, 1979) reformulation of the concept of agency in his theory of structuration. By emphasising the agent's knowledgeable ability, Giddens emphasises that systems and structures do not function behind the back of the actor. The voluntaristic element, i.e. the element of will, is strengthened by the agent's discursive capacity. Discursive reflexivity around the action, besides enabling us to provide explanations, connotes the possibility of changing our patterns of action. Thus, according to Giddens, the 'notion of agency connects directly with the concept of *praxis*... as an ongoing series of practical activities' (1976: 75). Ontological security, practical consciousness, reflexive monitoring of action, and rationalisation of choice give the agency concept a recursive character, providing both the concepts of agent and agency with a reproductive dimension. These elements help to explain why the same patterns of action are repeated and create the foundation for a relatively stable social order. The concepts of transformative capacity, discursive consciousness, embodied charisma, unintended consequences, and unacknowledged conditions of new actions are, however, aspects that may change existing routines. Therefore, religion in modernity becomes an object of the reflexive monitoring of alternatives and options by agencies, resulting in the transformation of existing religious routines (like Christianity), as well as the creation and adoption of new routines (such as Falun Gong and Scientology).

#### ***Reflexive Agency: Conversion as intellectual, experimental and affectional seeking***

To change the world, man only has to realise himself. (Bhaskar, 2000: 152)

Individuals in reflexive modernity are increasingly making attempts to transform the self either physically (i.e. cosmetic surgery), intellectually (e.g. going to university), materially (i.e. through career progression), or spiritually (by joining new religious or spiritual movements) in efforts to remake and re-organise their own relations to the encompassing social world (Giddens, 1984, 1990, 1991). In regard to the charismatic

transformations by individual agents Warburg states that conversion to NRSMs should be analysed as a process, because the potential convert to such movements often ‘defines himself/herself as a seeker’ (2001: 92). Seekers, according to Warburg, (2001: 98) are not just the ‘young and restless person searching for meaning in life’, but are also those who finally convert to a religious or spiritual belief system after investigating foreign (i.e. non-Christian) perspectives (Rochford, 1985, Wilson and Dobbelaere, 1994; both also emphasise the importance of seekership in conversion).

The inherent searching propensity of discursive consciousness and reflexivity in action expressed by seekers who become converts, reflects the unconsciously motivated routines that reproduce our ontological security, or in the words of Giddens the ‘threat of personal meaninglessness is ordinarily held at bay because routinised activities, in combination with basic trust, sustain ontological security’ (1991: 202). Positive and predictable routines, like meaning and a moral framework fostered by the family and religion, engender ontological security in the child (Kinnvall, 2004; Scott, 2000). The effect of these routines in adult life is that most of our activities – day-to-day rituals – provide us with a feeling of security and stability. We require this security to cope in those situations where we are exposed to extreme anxiety and need to maintain our self-esteem, such as when directly confronting the ever-present terror induced by fear of death (Berger, 1969; Webb, 1998). For example, Fontana observes that elderly people with strong religious or spiritual beliefs tend to have conquered fear of death, and ‘actually express themselves as looking forward to death, which they associate with happiness and reward’ (2003: 93). Argyle (2000: 218) acknowledges that several studies have discovered juvenile delinquents exhibit lower rates of church attendance and spiritual belief than control groups of non-delinquents.

Dani, a housewife and member of the Spiritualist Church, states a belief in life after death played an important role in the adoption of her spiritual beliefs:

*Being a spiritualist means someone who believes in more than the five senses, but mainly life after death... I am a member of the spiritualist church currently and the reason I have been a member is because it seems to be the only religion so far that agreed with my view of life after death. That seems to be something that is very important to me at this point in my life, and has been for quite a while. Particularly the belief that we can't do anything we want in this life because there are consequences, both are very important.*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Extract from interview conducted with 39 year old female on 9/3/2004.

The act of reflexively seeking meaning and the eventual conversion to a new religious or spiritual framework encompasses several of the major conversion motifs Lofland and Skonovd (1983) identify in their theory, specifically the intellectual, experimental and affectional dimensions. Intellectual conversion is a form of self-conversion that results from the private study of alternative systems of values and beliefs, through ‘reading books, watching television, attending lectures, and other impersonal or “disembodied” ways’, hence ‘a reasonably high level of belief occurs prior to actual participation in the religion’s ritual and organizational activities’ (1983: 5; 6). Experimental conversion involves a process through which the individual investigates and joins a movement. Conversion is the end product of a lengthy period in which the recruit becomes involved in the wider activities of the movement. The affectional motif emphasises the importance of personal contacts in the conversion process. These include not only the support and affection of fellow members, but also the possibility of achieving status within the group and sometimes even actual material rewards. Dani’s conversion narrative includes all three of the above processes:

***[Intellectual motif]** I think about six years ago one of the books that changed – not so much changed the way I thought – but really affirmed the way I thought, was ‘Conversations with God’ by Neale Donald Walsch. Now that book really opened my mind to many more levels than I had previously thought on... I used to think of God as a person sitting in heaven, as I got older I understood God more as in everything and then [pause] reading that book particularly as well as others it opened my mind to so much more...*

***[Experimental motif]** I’d say that the religion I am in I am not 100% in it for rules. For instance, the spiritualist church still accepts you even if you say you have another religion, that’s what I like it is open-minded; the people are open to other ideas unlike the Roman Catholic Church. But if I see that change then I will have to go in there and blast the whole system [laughter] and then see what happens from there...*

***[Affectional motif]** On the opportunity front I get to do training, like I have been doing as a medium, which means channelling information from the other side. I believe that if you are in the right environment you can develop these skills – at the moment the right environment for me is the Church. You do have opportunities to develop yourself... Being with other people is also important specifically praying with other people at the Church. There is a power in numbers, although I can pray at home knowing that there are other people all focusing on the same thing is a feeling that really satisfies me and makes me feel happy.<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> Extract from interview conducted with a 39-year-old female on 9/3/2004.

Intellectual, experimental and affectional seeking by the reflexive agent was the most common processes to conversion among the NRSM members I interviewed. The dynamism of seeking was especially evident among the New Agers, where ‘it is clear that most participants adopt a variable plurality of spiritual teachings [according] to the unique direction of each person’s spiritual path’ (Rose, 1998: 17). Mansoor had the following to say about the development of his spiritual beliefs and practice:

*... modern seekers such as Benjamin Crème, who speaks about the emergence of Maitreya, all led me to see the pieces of a puzzle in my mind. Each new piece that came up so nicely fitted into a slot and each new piece made the puzzle more complete, before pieces used to come in long gaps whereas now everything is happening more quickly, pieces come on a daily basis... As much as I want to push this thing forward I can only comprehend only so much of this puzzle at any one time. Being able to see the whole puzzle in one frame requires almost a level of madness... There is a belief that I’ve got and say to some people that you know you don’t have to go up to a cave for fifteen years in this age to reach enlightenment. Sometimes the cave is actually right here. If you can in the chaos of family life, working life, study life, in amongst all of that chaos, if you can find yourself, then how different are you then to the monk who spent the 15 years in the cave? <sup>26</sup>*

Lofland and Skonovd (1983) also identify the coercive motif, which involves using either physical or mental force to secure a convert, none of the NRSM members personally interviewed by me gave any sort of conversion narrative indicative of coercive recruitment. If coercion occurs it is more likely to develop after initial contact and be found in a rigid hierarchical religious organisation that completely cuts itself off from the wider world (Barker, 1989). Coercive recruitment is unlikely to be a viable practice employed by a loose network of individuals following multifarious spiritual teachings, such as in the New Age movement. However, politicised and institutionalised religious discourse can become a powerful form of social control and a potential cause of alienation or bloody conflict, as Bhatt concludes in his study of some new religious groups:

The ideas of liberation and purity that characterize authoritarian religious movements are products of the Enlightenment and Romantic discourse and exhibit the tensions within and between both these traditions. The mystery of land, of blood, or nature or God is combined with the specialness of (some) humans, their civilizations and their beliefs. (1997: 235)

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<sup>26</sup> Extract from interview conducted on 9/03/2004

Putting things into a broader perspective, many of the members of NRSMs I talked to (over half) were very sceptical of traditional hierarchical religions such as Christianity and Islam, seeing them as divisive, inflexible, dogmatic and disempowering. The New Agers in particular were very critical, but this is to be expected given the emphasis on mixing traditions in their truth seeking agendas: ‘the individual searching for spiritual growth may find his effort inhibited rather than helped by becoming a member of a religious movement’ (Nelson, 1987: 145). Both the Nation of Islam followers, dismissed Christianity as the “white man’s lie”. On the other hand, the Scientologists and Falun Gong practitioners were more of a mixed bag, some were uncritical of traditional religion and more reconciliatory emphasising the common grounds to all religions, or the “golden thread in spirituality”. ISKCON devotees were the least incredulous seeing their faith as an ancient tradition, but they were exclusive rather than inclusive in their perceptions of what constitutes a genuine religion, with inevitably the absolute truth only being guaranteed through practicing their faith.

Returning specifically to the issue of brainwashing, the results of transcriptual analysis in table 10 shows themes such as striving for self-improvement (8 counts), a hope for bodily transcendence (8 counts), and the desire to help or serve others (7 counts) as significant patterns explaining religious conversion. These themes all imply a very self-conscious agent who actively seeks to join a movement to fulfil a specific objective. This runs contrary to the traditional notion of brainwashing, which paints the convert as weak, exploited, unstable and ultimately a passive victim of a devious charismatic leader. In fact, only 4 transcripts (3 by ISKCON devotees) included the charisma of the leader, as a significant causal factor explaining conversion, and all of these instances were subsidiary to another more important explanatory theme.

*I was looking for the best way I could help people. I wanted to do something useful with my life, and could see that a lot of people needed help in the world, and wanted to know how I could best do something about this. I came across Scientology in Edinburgh when I was studying at Edinburgh University and it held the answers I was looking for.<sup>27</sup> (Graeme, Scientologist, 2004)*

*I was always militant at school asking the teachers uncomfortable questions. I used to ask, and still want to know, why what happened to the Jews is just a holocaust - what about black slavery? Our race, that includes you my brother, was systematically destroyed and oppressed by the white man for his greed, why is real black history not taught...*

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<sup>27</sup> Extract from interview with 45-year-old male (30/08/2004).



*The Nation and Islam gave me the answers, but I was always asking the questions... The older I have got the less I agree with some of the teachings, but the most important thing we need is a strong black identity, the Indians and Chinese stick together, us blacks are fragmented.*<sup>28</sup>

(Cipher, member of the Nation of Islam, 2005)

Both narratives above are connected to the notion of being a religious truth seeker: the image of someone on a personal journey for *spiritual knowledge, growth and healing*. Identifying self-improvement in a transcript involved finding a clear textual pattern describing a period of learning, study and self-sacrifice resulting in conversion, and was a most frequent occurrence among the New Age (4 counts) and Scientology (2 counts) narratives. Related to self-improvement through religious understanding was the hope for greater bodily control, which entailed adopting spiritual practices due to the acquired health benefits. For example, Ms N – a New Ager – found regular meditation helped her to cope with the symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder, while a Falun Gong practitioner told the following story about his conversion:

*I used to play a lot of squash and then I injured my knee, I went to the doctor and he couldn't fix it. So I went to an acupuncturist and he fixed it, but then the pain came back and he said why don't you try qigong, which is a form of Chinese exercise based on the same principles as acupuncture... traditionally in Chinese medicine they know there are energy channels in your body that become blocked when you are sick so acupuncture uses needles to unblock those channels. But they can become blocked again; through qigong you can unblock them through the exercises each day... So really I began practicing Falun Gong for my health...*<sup>29</sup>

The desire to help or serve others was given most notably by Scientologists. This is a very messianic hope based on a clear mission to solve world problems using spiritual solutions or scientology “technology”. This is perhaps not surprising given the outward looking and world affirming nature of the movement, as well as its focus on providing solutions to social problems (see chapter 8). Ken’s view was typical:

*Christianity gives me many good examples of how to communicate and live with others and the Ten Commandments are rules for sane living. However, I find that Scientology goes further by giving me a real “spiritual technology” and a very workable understanding of mankind which I can apply to the problems of daily life in ways which make living more comfortable, not just for me, but also for my family, friends, colleagues and the community at large.*<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Extract from interview with 45-year-old male (05/02/2005).

<sup>29</sup> Extract from interview with Peter (11/03/2004).

<sup>30</sup> Extract from interview with 76-year-old male on 14/10/2004.

The above narratives indicate that the social agent engages in a conscious act when deciding to convert to an NRSM. Many get ‘something’ out of conversion and seek to give ‘something’ back. This demonstrates the cyclical nature of social interaction and the duality of structure.

***The Magic of Faith: Conversion as mystical attempts at reenchancing the world***

... no one can *first* be convinced of the existence of a highest being through any intuition; rational faith must come first, and then certain appearances or disclosures could at most provide the occasion for investigating whether we are warranted in taking what speaks or presents itself to us to be a Deity, and thus serve to confirm that faith according to these findings. (Kant, 2002: 11)

Meditation in God is my capital. Reason and sound logic are the root of my action. Love is the foundation of my existence. Enthusiasm is the vehicle of my life. Contemplation of Allāh is my companion. Faith is the source of my power. (The Prophet Muhammad, cited in Helminski, 2000: 175)

Giddens (1991) has argued that in late modernity we are beset with radical doubt and scenarios of risk, which present a problem to the reflexive agent, because there are no determinant authorities. Hence a dilemma of choice presents itself, whether to opt for authority or uncertainty. In respect to the former option, submission to some sort of power normally entails placing trust and faith in an all-knowing figure such as a charismatic leader or God. All NRSMs stress faith in one guise or another; here I am defining faith as a particularly unshakable form of belief based upon ideas, teachings, and reported historical events that to the individual follower of a religious or spiritual worldview seem conclusive:

*Looking from a historical point of view, ISKCON is not a new cult. It is just a continuation of the eternal spiritual disciplic succession established by Lord Krishna Himself millions of year ago. Having such a solid lineage, ISKCON naturally provides the best of spiritual life. What is most wonderful about ISKCON is that it demands its members to practice what they preach, and that makes ISKCON a unique society in the world. ISKCON doesn't preach any vague philosophy. If you talk to any senior and well-read ISKCON member, you will find that he or she has all the answers to your inquiries about spiritual life. That is the most attractive thing I personally find in ISKCON and no doubt, it's all due to the unfathomable purity and endless knowledge of its founder and acharya Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.<sup>31</sup>*

(Bhadra Balaram das, 2004)

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<sup>31</sup> Extract from interview with 40-year-old male (24/09/2004).

The reflexive agency acts of intellectual, experimental and affectional seeking lead to conversion, but once recruited it is the cohesive properties of faith that maintain conversion. Fontana rightly argues faith is ‘simply the conviction that a spiritual path is worth following, and must be put to the test by following the practices for mind/spirit development taught on that path’ (2003: 22). Mansoor describes the meaning, development and reinforcement of his spiritual faith in the following way:

***Author:** In day-to-day life and conversations, if you come onto the subject of your spiritual views and beliefs how do you tend to see other people react?*

***Mansoor:** I think in the beginning because I found the subject of spirituality so fascinating I would talk about it in a wishy washy sort of way... what I know now to be my spiritual truth came later... so I find today that when I sit down and talk to people about spiritual matters I definitely get a more attentive audience... whether that person wants to believe me or not then in that sense it will prove itself to be so to that person. Not because I have said so, not because I have created it, but it is almost like saying if you are travelling up this road towards a deeper understanding of life, you are going to inevitably hit the town called spirituality that is the way you are going.<sup>32</sup>*

Dani recounts the dialectical interplay between faith and evidence in the development and strengthening of her spiritual beliefs and how they combine with a submission to an external authority, which in her case is the belief in a universally beneficent healing energy emanating from an omnipotent creator:

***Dani:** As you heal yourself individually and I heal myself individually, and it goes on and on throughout the universe, we will all begin to see it manifest more and more everyday it has to be that way. As a healer myself I see the evidence from the results of my physical healing, which is really wonderful mainly because I need evidence in my life. Although at times I can be gullible, I need that gullibility because it is part of my faith, but I also do need to see evidence. [Pause and short silence] Maybe that reinforces my faith; perhaps that faith is there to give me a reason to live. I like everybody else have my ups and downs, when I do come to those low moments I find I will do anything to focus myself back up. My higher self or love and compassion get me back up – whatever it takes I’ll do it. If that doesn’t work I will be down in the dumps for a while until it works and I get myself back up. That is probably why I have faith; nobody or nothing else has answers for me in this world except for eternity as a whole. I am using that as a dramatic umbrella, but I mean everything that comes with that word like God.*

***Author:** So you see faith rejuvenating yourself?*

***Dani:** Yes my soul.<sup>33</sup>*

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<sup>32</sup> Extract from interview (09/03/2004).

<sup>33</sup> Extract from interview (09/03/2004).

Faith is a nourishing and transformative dimension in religious/spiritual belief, when it is combined with the more exotic and mystical notions of religious destiny centred on the fulfilment of the will of a supernatural being, or order, it can lead to an enchanted world in the eyes of the individual seeker (Helminski, 2000; Wilson, 2004). Faith as long as it refrains from blindness and dogmatism, is not a negative quality, because even if religion is regarded ‘along with the arts, as emanating only from the creative imagination, it would nevertheless seem potentially to have a significant role to play in expressing the fullness of the human personality, and perhaps in the maintenance of psychological health’ (Fontana, 2003: 139; see also Francis and Lester, 1997). Piers describes his faith in Scientology applied in a practical way:

*Scientology is something you do rather than just believe in or trust in. In fact it is quite interesting that in Scientology you may learn a particular useful piece of information, but the whole basis of the philosophy is that you have to find out for yourself that it is true and it isn't that way just because someone said it is, you really have to use it and see if it works and only then can you say it is true. In this society people often accept what is said without looking for themselves... Most people rich or poor, bright or dull are looking for solutions to the daily problems of living. Whenever I have a chance I will give them some help or advice based on what I have learned, then they can see what Scientology is for themselves.<sup>34</sup>*

Smart (1989) traces two basic types of religious experience common among the world religions, the *numinous encounter* and *mystical union*: the former produces a sense of awe and reverence, mystery and wonder, holiness and sacredness. The overwhelming character of the experience suggests an exalted view of the divine and an emphasis on transcendence, with a corresponding human self-abasement and recognition of finitude (see chapter 6); the second, mystical union, features intensity, immediacy, unitary consciousness, unexpectedness, joy, and serenity. The realisation of unity can lead to liberation from self-centredness. Both these generalised religious experiences also emerge in some of the transcripts from my interviewees, reflecting modern attempts to re-enchant the mundane world by connecting to the collective will of the divine.

**Author:** *What is your specific understanding of the spiritual aspect to the Church of Scientology, how do you interpret that?*

**Tom:** *That I (and you, and others) are spiritual beings inhabiting physical bodies which we operate to help us achieve our goals and plans; that I (and*

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<sup>34</sup> Extract from interview (06/10/2004).

*you and others) have an innate strong sense of ethical conduct which comes more and more to the fore the more aware one becomes of one's spiritual nature; that we are not purely existing just for ourselves but that we also have responsibility towards the family, the groups one is in, mankind and the environment, as well as other life forms.*<sup>35</sup>

Transformation of the mundane adds mystery to an individual's life in an increasingly logical, practical, materialistic and rationalised Western social landscape. Wilson (2004: 168, 169) explains the lure of the occult in this way,

In modern civilisation, most people are involved in boring routine jobs that seldom stir the will, and certainly not the imagination. The result is inevitable... Place a man in a completely black and silent room, and within a few days he will go insane, or at least suffer extreme mental strain. Why?... the will crashes into collapse when it is blinded, and the collapse is out of all proportion to its cause. A little boredom causes total demoralisation.

Boredom was the fourth most frequent reason for conversion with 5 counts (see table 10) and was one of the more unexpected themes to emerge after interpretive analysis of the transcripts: three New Agers, one Falun Gong practitioner and one Nation of Islam member cited this as a factor resulting in their adoption of spiritual beliefs. These narratives exhibited a common pattern whereby the lack of fulfilment in the interviewee's career or personal life was repeatedly expressed. So exploration of fringe beliefs and the engagement in mystical spiritual practices alleviated 'boredom' from the mundane routines of an overly rationalised society. In these cases there seemed to be an underlying narcissism combined with the need for self-importance (Heelas, 1996). For instance, Tara, a beautician and New Ager became interested in spirituality after visiting a Mind-Body-Spirit exhibition during which she had her aura read. She believes that reading about the meaning of colours in a book she bought to decipher her aura photo, led her to the purchase of other books she would previously have not considered (e.g. on UFOs and life after death). Tara's awakened interest in fringe beliefs, paranormal phenomena and spiritual mysteries was satisfied by alternative book purchases. These helped her overcome the chronic boredom she was experiencing with her occupation, and instilled within her a renewed courage to change a stale and predictable lifestyle:

*Reading about deeper spiritual reality made me understand how we each have a destiny to fulfil here on the material realm; so I made a conscious decision*

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<sup>35</sup> Extract from interview with a 55 year old male (07/09/2004).

*to change my friends and activities to match my astrological life chart and aura reading, which greatly lifted my spirits... I decided to leave my job as a retail manager and go into beauty and therapy, because I needed to follow my creative urges... Everyday my life is full of exhilaration; I have rediscovered a missing magic in what I thought to be a boring and aimless life.<sup>36</sup>*

Puttick empirically charts trends in Mind-Body-Spirit publishing in the US and UK, and notes the rapid rise of interest in books catering to alternative beliefs, which now boasts a worldwide market worth £5 billion (2005: 136). She suggests,

New spiritual movements are marginal groups in society, but they function as agents of transformation, crucibles for new experiments. Some ideas and practices are too avant-garde or impractical for the mainstream, but the best are taken up – usually in a more diluted, digestible form – and used to transform and revitalise the culture. Holistic spirituality has now grown to the point where it encompasses both polarities; global brands at the centre, promoted by media conglomerates; innovative, regenerative ideas on the fringe, serviced by smaller, more radical publishers and the internet.

(Puttick, 2005: 146)

Conversions to NRSMs mirror a broader Western trend whereby interest in the supernatural has slowly made a diversion back into mass consciousness (Casey, 2000; Gill *et al.*, 1998), more and more people are attempting to spiritualise self and enchant life to redress the balance tipped overly in the favour of logical and rational reasoning that were excessively promoted by the narratives of Enlightenment (Gibbons, 2001; Hanegraaff, 1996). Based on the ISSP Religion survey (1991) in Great Britain 79% of people agreed that there are *basic truths in many religions*, while in the United States 84% held the same view; during the same survey year 13% of Britons believed that *there is little or no truth in religion*, with only 4% of Americans sharing the same opinion. In other words, the credibility of religious worldviews and explanations of reality are far from losing widespread appeal, even in this age of modern science.

**Dani:** *I find people very accepting... Everything that is in my religion like the way we see life after death is a thing people are interested in. Things such as magic, anything unusual, I find anyone I have come across has not found that uninteresting at all. We can talk for hours and hours about all these subjects, so no, people are interested in alternative beliefs people are very open.<sup>37</sup>*

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<sup>36</sup> Extract from interview with a 27-year-old female (22/08/2003).

<sup>37</sup> Extract from interview (9/03/2004).

## **Conclusion**

For him who penetrates to the intelligible ground of the heart (the ground of all the maxims of the power of choice), for him to whom this endless progress is a unity, i.e. for God, this is the same as actually being a good human being (pleasing to him); and to this extent the change can be considered a revolution. (Immanuel Kant, 1998: 68)

If man did not believe that he must live for something, he would not live at all. (Tolstoy, cited in James, 1985 [1902]: 184)

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts shows that the most cited cause of conversion is a search for meaning or absolute truth. Converts who matched this theme generally expressed the opinion that something was missing in the value constructions of mainstream society, often an adequate moral framework. Thus, the ethical discourses of the NRSM they adopted seemed to fill this void for them. I discovered and realised conversion to be a very intense experience for those recruited which is not well conveyed by written words or a dispassionate academic terminology. I met people deeply concerned with the purpose of life and the state of the world. They were looking for definite answers and hopes for the future; many felt they had found them. My lingering impression of the majority of the converts is their clear need for self-respect, and a faith in a superior intelligence that watches and guides them through life's various tribulations (Giovanni, 2003). We could follow Kant and call religious belief mere opium for conscience, or a buffer from the terrors of finitude and death (Webb, 1998), as well as humanity's search for ethical self-realisation (Hegel, 1987); it is indeed all these things and yet even more. Wilson (2003b) captures my feelings the best when he suggests religious belief is a search for absolutes in a world filled with too many relatives. I sensed a clear feeling of empowerment emanating from the converts when they spoke about their religious or spiritual beliefs. Empowerment is a clear virtue, which only becomes vice if it leads one to self-delusion, or external persecution when the source is challenged.

The explanations offered in this chapter as to why some people join NRSMs (Barker, 1986) were framed against the interplays between structure and agency, or what Giddens (1976, 1976, 1984) calls "duality of structure". This depicts social practice as occurring via dialectical processes that constantly re-produce and alter institutions and agency interactions in a cyclical fashion (Bhaskar, 1998b; Walsh, 1998). Hence, micro-agency conversions to NRSMs often reflect identity anxieties

induced by macro-changes, which are the consequences of recent economic, cultural, and familial transformations in the West (Anderson, 1997; Beckford, 1986, 1989; Bellah, 1976; Robbins, 1988; Tocqueville, 1945). The specific process of conversion attempts to stabilise self-identity to fit within a shifting social structure through turning to alternative values and explanations in response to the uncertain emotions encountered throughout life (Jones, 1978; Levine, 2003). These emotions such as fear of death, or lack of purpose, threaten ontological security of self and are exacerbated by the increasingly sceptical nature towards the traditional bases for religious truth, like the Christian Church in modernity (Berger, 1969; Giddens, 1991; Kinnvall, 2004; Luckmann, 1967; Norris, 1993, 1996). Nevertheless, no theory of conversion is going to be universally applicable by cataloguing all the diverse factors causing religious recruitments. Religious and spiritual conversion is a complex phenomenon, so it is likely some theories will be more applicable to certain historical situations than others (Dawson, 2003; Rambo, 1999). Thus, the factors identified and generalised as crucial to conversion that emerged from the interviews with members of NRSMs examined in this chapter, may not be replicated if a larger and more diverse sample of interviewees was used, or if analysis were to shift focus to other groups.



## Introduction

This chapter delineates how a selection of NRSMs understand, critique and resolve the public debates between science and religion in order to construct and legitimate alternative discursive formations regarding the social realm. Apart from Lewis (2003) and Locke (2004) very little sociological research has focused on how NRSMs use the public meaning of science as a cultural resource to reconstruct an ethic of conduct and legitimate their claims about the purpose of human existence. Although it was religion (particularly Christianity) that lost intellectual credibility in the early exchanges with science during the Enlightenment critique of superstitions, we now increasingly see science and the validity of the scientific method questioned. Using Kuhn's notion of paradigms and Barbour's methodological bridge between science and theology as heuristic devices, I demonstrate how a selection of NRSMs have socially constructed an understanding of science and religion, as simply cognitive techniques ultimately concerned with collating knowledge of the universe, human origins and destiny. Thus, according to some NRSMs science and religion are not necessarily competing, but potentially complementary paradigms concerned with forming frames of meaning in confrontations with a higher reality, or what can be called the metaphysical realm.

## The Science and Religion Debate

We still believe that the universe should be logical and beautiful. We just dropped the word "God". (Stephen Hawking, in Weber, 1986: 212)

Only in worship and reverence can we acknowledge the mystery of God and the pretensions of any human system that claims to have mapped out his ways. (Barbour, 1971: 463)

The public debates between science and religion, particularly Christianity, are both complex and wrought with numerous conflicts and controversies (Barbour, 1990, 1998; Brooke, 1991; Gilbert, 1997; Kurtz, 2003a). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to give adequate coverage to all the views and actors in this evolving historical saga, which has shaped modern Western thought (Weber, 1986). However, the salient points can be brought to the fore with a discussion of the issues that seem to be at the forefront of the hostilities.<sup>1</sup> The major assault by science on religion (i.e. orthodox

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<sup>1</sup> Not all debates have been hostile. For instance, the journal *Zygon* was launched with the objective to permit constructive dialogue between scientists, theologians, and other scholars (Jackelén and Hefner,

Christianity) came during the Enlightenment. This period in Western history did much to revive the Greek ideals of science as being applicable to both the systematic study of nature as well as to human society. Enlightenment heirs such as Comte and Marx dared to image a social science unhindered by religious dogma, which could also provide a sure route to secular salvation for humanity (Budd, 1977). Thus, Durkheim influenced by Comte's Positivism, pioneered a scientific method of rational deductive reasoning to the discovery of 'social facts'. The founding fathers of sociology were all confident in the decline of religion as a consequence of the rise of science, which was seen to finally provide "real truth", rather than "superstitious belief" (see chapter 1).

The intellectual challenge by science to religious beliefs particularly those of the Christian variety came on several fronts. First, the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* (1859) undermined the traditional belief in human creation by a divine God, as described in the Bible. Instead, Darwin argued that more complicated species such as man evolved through *natural selection* from the "lower" animals like the great apes. As a consequence, a paradigm shift took place in 1860 from Genesis to Darwinism at the British Association after Huxley confronted Bishop Wilberforce in a debate (Barker, 1979). The debate between the Evolutionists and Creationists had by the 1920s spread to the United States, causing several religious groups and churches to begin campaigning for anti-evolution laws prohibiting the teaching of Darwinism in schools (Bowler, 2001; Busse, 1998; Dayton, 1997). The Evangelical Christians in America were particularly outraged by evolutionary theory. Arguing that according to the Bible man was made in God's image, and God, they claimed, was certainly not a monkey (Gallaher, 2004). Regardless, the ascent of the twentieth century has led to evolutionary theory becoming the mass consensus of human origins, both in scientific circles and more broadly (Brooke and Cantor, 1998). However, the debate still rages:

Creationism and its latest spiffed-up manifestation, the "Intelligent Design" (ID) movement, have almost nothing to do with real science and real scientific controversies and everything to do with belief laden personal and religious politics. But their promoters use scientific language and pretend they are presenting politicians, school board members, and the media alternative scientific views. (Frazier, 2003: 84)

A close look at the scientific view, that all life on Earth, including humans, occurred through random, chance circumstances, will reveal that there are

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2004). Many recent contributory articles seek convergence between scientific and religious worldviews rather than divergence (Carr, 2001; Moore, 1997; Raman, 2004; Watts, 1997; Wolf-Chase, 2004).

gaping holes in this scenario... the scientific view becomes the most unbelievable, farfetched, implausible theory of human origins and development ever put forth... because of the false assumptions and massive denial of the data. (Horn, 1994: xxviii)

Second and related to the dismissal of supernatural human creation, was the broader rejection by some scientists that the universe necessarily serves any purpose and is indeed the creation of an intelligent designer.<sup>2</sup> Kant referred to the notion of intelligent design of the universe by God as the cosmological or ontological argument, which he repudiated by arguing: ‘The concept of a supreme being is in many respects a very useful idea; but just because it is a mere idea, it is altogether incapable, by itself alone, of enlarging our knowledge in regard to what exists’ (Kant, 2000: 341). On similar reasoning mainstream science has put aside answering the question of God’s existence due to lack of “evidence or data”.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the consensus promoted by the “Godless” modern scientific view is that the universe was created by means of random quantum fluctuation (Stenger, 1988). This scientific explanation of the origin of the universe refutes God’s act of creation as detailed in the Bible. Barrow and Tipler (1986) present a cosmological defence for intelligent design, which has become an argument that many see as a sophisticated derivative of Christian Right Creationism.<sup>4</sup> They observe that life on earth is very sensitive to the values of several fundamental physical constants. The slightest alterations in any of these would result in changes so drastic that life as we know it would not exist. Hence the delicate

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<sup>2</sup> Here I should clarify that not all scientists are atheists, many do hold religious beliefs. For instance scientists such as David Bohm, Rupert Sheldrake and Fritjof Capra are more open to mystical cum scientific explanations of the creation and purpose of the universe. However, those that are atheists such as Stephen Hawking, Richard Dawkins, and Victor J. Stenger generally oppose any collaboration between religion and science seeing them as distinctly different spheres, as well as viewing the former with scepticism and contempt. On the other hand, many Christian fundamentalists see science as inherently evil, with some even arguing that dinosaur bones were planted in the ground by scientists to disprove creation, and the world is not a sphere but flat: <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/flatearth.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Hume’s sceptical philosophy has also been influential; he argued that all knowledge is derived from sensory experience, so there are no cogent grounds for believing anything about either the existence or nature of God, or any of the other metaphysical claims of religion. Kant agreed with Hume that theoretical reason cannot prove the existence of God, but he conceded that practical reason requires us to presuppose his existence. Kant argued sensory experience alone is insufficient for the interpretation of sense data because the human mind supplies conceptual categories in the interpretation of reality. In the realm of morality God is a necessary postulate to give laws meaning. Thus, Kant assigned separate realms and functions to science (empirical knowledge) and religion (morality) – see Logan (1998).

<sup>4</sup> The Intelligence Design (IDE) argument like Creationism is often seen as a largely American inspired Religious Right response to evolutionary theory. Jackelén and Hefner (2004) argue the IDE movement has only been important in the US and is far from a central idea in other parts of the world. Based on the evidence I reject such country or tradition specific views of IDE. Islam has developed a defence of Creationism (Edis, 2004), as has Buddhism (Ingram, 2004), several NRSMs also present sophisticated counters to scientific notions of random biological evolution (e.g. Bhaktivedanta, 1990: 242-53).

connections between physical constants and life are called the anthropic coincidences. They argue how could the universe possibly have obtained the unique set of physical constants it has, as exquisitely fine-tuned for life as they are, except by purposeful design. The scientific response has been that infinite universes can exist, with all possible combinations of physical laws and constants. Thus, according to this multiple universe hypothesis, we just happen to be in the particular universe that was suited for the evolution of human life (Weinberg, 2003). Using such notions of probability is akin to arguing that if we had an infinite number of monkeys typing on typewriters one would by random according to the laws of statistical chance type the entire works of Shakespeare. But, ‘It seems obvious that a monkey would not produce an intelligible sentence – by accident – in a year of strumming on a typewriter, and there is therefore no reason to suppose it would produce half a billion intelligible sentences in half a billion years’ (Wilson, 2004: 156). Crucially, Gingerich argues that while ‘the mathematics might show that alternative universes *could* indeed exist, it would be a matter of faith that they *actually do* exist, with no hope of observational confirmation’ (2003: 57). The implication is that although scientific knowledge has challenged some of the inaccurate tenets of creation promoted by the Roman Catholic Church, such as the Earth is only 7,000 years old. There are still many questions left unanswered:

At the moment, cosmologists do not know the nature of “dark matter” that holds together galaxies, or how fast the universe is expanding, and hundreds of other unanswered questions. Biologists do not know how life arose on Earth or whether there is life on planets in other solar systems. Evolution is a fact, but deep mysteries remain about how it operates... No one knows how consciousness emerges from the brain’s complicated molecular structure. We do not even know how the brain remembers. (Gardner, 2003: 325)

Third, the traditional Christian belief in an omnipotent and benevolent creator has been questioned by some philosophers based on the reality of widespread evil and cruelty in society and nature (Peterson and Vanarragon, 2004). For instance, in the first chapter it was shown that historically Christian religion was used to justify the slave trade; by suggesting it was acceptable according to divine will. Weinberg notes: ‘With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil – that takes religion’ (2003: 40). How many times have we seen people kill others in the name of religion – too many unfortunately (Reuveny, 2004). The panorama that is nature includes beauty as well as cruelty; animals kill and

eat each other to survive. This paradox reflected in nature, argues Mackie, shows that God's omnipotence must be restricted in some way: 'unqualified omnipotence cannot be ascribed to any being that continues through time. And if God and his actions are not in time, can omnipotence, or power of any sort, be meaningfully ascribed to him?' (2000: 591). The standard Christian response to such questions has always been to have faith in an afterlife; in which those acting "righteously" and those engaging in "sin" will be given their just rewards, i.e. heaven and hell. However, such concepts prove simplistic and fail to explain the fate of animals – if God cares for all creatures great or small – by what standards are the animals judged and rewarded/punished?

A more complex resolution to the existence, persistence, and issue of evil normally connects itself to notions of free will, by conceptualising different layers and types of wrongful actions in the world, as consequences resulting from the exercise of human volition. Thus, Swinburne (2000) talks of physical evil, mental evil, state evil and moral evil. The first three evils relate to those things that happen to men, women, animals or the world, while evils of the fourth type are specific evils that people cause. The first three types according to Swinburne are passive evils, such as illness, which are akin to tests to be overcome. The fourth evil results from the free will of humanity granted by the creator, and can cause the first three evils to arise: 'Now much of the evil in the world consists of the evil actions of men and the passive evils brought by those actions' (2000: 601). But why is all this evil necessary? Surely an omniscient and omnipotent God could easily create to start with a perfect universe? Swinburne responds to such observations optimistically stating, 'God knowing the worthwhileness of the conquest of evil and the perfecting of the universe by men, shared with them this task by subjecting himself as man to the evil in the world' (2000: 613). This explanation seems unsatisfactory and anthropocentric.<sup>5</sup> Why would an omnipotent creator endure billions of years of evolution to witness the eventual perfection of humanity? Earth is less than one grain of sand on a beach, when compared to all the potential planets residing within the cosmos. Therefore, what makes humanity and earth so special? What if there are other life supporting planets like Earth and intelligent creatures, do they serve the same purpose as humanity?

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<sup>5</sup> Spezio (2004) argues human nature should be viewed by framing the consequences of freedom and interaction against three reference points: (1) I or first person effects, (2) You or second person effects, and (3) He/She or third person effects. He advocates the notion of "embodied experience", rather than a Cartesian Mind/Body split, but argues the former does not necessarily deny the existence of the soul.

Even in the face of these seemingly irresolvable debates, all NRSM followers I interviewed expressed a belief in pantheism, polytheism, theism, or some other higher intelligence (e.g. extraterrestrials) guiding human destiny, rather than atheism. Clayton (1997), Peacocke (1993) and Yerkes (1998) argue that a faith in God or a higher intelligence is more satisfying for some people than the belief in nothing (see also Francis and Lester, 1997). However, religions purporting to have definite knowledge about the purpose of the universe and the nature of a deity are according to some scientists merely speculating (Kurtz, 2003a). Scientists have been accused of doing the same, as Hanson famously remarked, “all data are theory-laden” (Hanson, 1958). There is nothing inherently wrong with speculating as without it we would not accumulate knowledge, but we have to remain open-minded enough to admit when speculations could be in need of revision (Bhaskar, 1989; Groff, 2004). I agree with Young that ‘we are grownups, on our own and responsible for ourselves, not children for whom someone else is responsible’ (2003: 349). I question his added statements that far from despairing we should be hopeful because, ‘science and technology have given us shorter working weeks, more abundant food and resources, and more leisure time; and our political systems have given us more freedom and dignity’ (2003: 349). Science has brought some practical benefits and conveniences to humanity, which we should rightly share. Regardless, Young is being selective by not putting matters into a richer context. Was it not this very model of rational scientific thinking that led to the creation of nuclear weapons, environmental degradation and the mass extinction of numerous species? As Bendle (2002: 51) reminds us:

The millions in Africa and elsewhere who are dying from AIDS in the face of the scientific failure to develop a cure or even affordable treatment, or who stagger along legless and maimed from landmine explosions and high-tech civil wars, might have different views about the power of technology... [Some] might think this is an accidental outcome of humanity’s encounter with technology: a more sophisticated analysis of the economic and cultural role of technology suggests that there is nothing at all accidental about it.<sup>6</sup>

Twenty (i.e. 77%) of the NRSM members interviewed by me connected the development of scientific knowledge with accelerating ecological degradation and condemned aspects of technological progress such as the invention of modern weaponry. The narratives revealed the perception that science and technological

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<sup>6</sup> See Shinn (2004) for a discussion of the urgent need for ethical intervention in technological progress.

advancement lack clear ethical frameworks. Several interviewees suggested this stems from the mass promotion of evolutionary theory based on Darwinian natural selection, which has served to deny the existence of a soul, and along with it any higher purpose to human existence other than physical survival and adaptation. Piers made the following observation:

*I recognise that the trend in society is to treat man as just a body governed by a bunch of chemical reactions in the brain. This basically amounts to taking the view that man is an unthinking animal with very little responsibility for his own existence, as any downfall is obviously a chemical imbalance.<sup>7</sup>*

This perceived ethical and moral void wrought by the public understanding of science can be filled by a return to spiritual understanding, according to all those interviewed. Most (17 out of 26) believed science and religion were compatible and not necessarily in conflict, while others (6 out of 26) suggested quantum mechanics and theories of biological evolution were outdated, being based on questionable foundations and far too mechanistic. For example, Ms N, a New Age follower and Biomedical Scientist, expressed her growing doubts about the traditional theory of Darwinian evolution:

**Author:** *In general you say you do a lot of scientific work, do you see a conflict between spirituality and science?*

**Ms N:** *The only thing is I used to think we came from apes, but now I am not so sure. That is the only thing I have started to question.<sup>8</sup>*

### **Scientific and Religious Paradigms and the Metaphysical Realm**

There is a profound *difference between science and religion in its conception of truth*. Science requires an open mind, free inquiry, critical thinking, the willingness to question assumptions, and peer review. The test of a theory or hypothesis is independent (at least one would hope) of bias, prejudice, faith, or tradition; and it is justified by the evidence, logical consistency, and mathematical coherence. (Kurtz, 2003b: 13, emphasis added)

In contrast to the hopeful quote above, limitations to the scientific method have been widely recognised in recent writings on the philosophy of science (Bhaskar, 1998a; Caldwell, 1994; Clayton, 1997; Hanson, 1958). As Barbour points out the ‘influence of the observer on the data is inescapable in modern physics. The creative role of the human mind in inventing concepts by which to correlate observations has been

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<sup>7</sup> Extract from interview with male Scientologist (06/10/2004).

<sup>8</sup> Extract from interview with 26-year-old female (9/11/2004).

acknowledged. The theories of physics are highly abstract and symbolic, often only very indirectly tied to experiments' (1971: 3). Furthermore, Kuhn's (1996) theory on the nature of scientific revolutions demonstrates the fallacy of progressive consensual science. He argues that although normal science is a cumulative enterprise, it has unintentional non-cumulative effects. Kuhn suggests that normal science works and develops within a paradigm. The notion of a paradigm describes the system of rules, conventions, norms, techniques and methods shared by a scientific community:

Scientists, it should already be clear, never learn concepts, laws, and theories in the abstract by themselves. Instead, these intellectual tools are from the start encountered in a historically and pedagogically prior unit [paradigm] that displays them with and through their applications. (Kuhn, 1996: 46)

This implies scientific knowledge develops not in terms of the rational, cumulative process described by Popper, but at moments of crisis, when the old paradigm cannot account for new evidence or theories. If such a crisis situation arises in science when a challenging anomaly appears, a scientific revolution will follow, after which a new paradigm emerges and a battle over its acceptability is waged. However, if no better replacement is forthcoming that can solve the old problems, the existent scientific paradigm may nullify the apparent anomaly, and therefore no revolution will occur. In general Kuhn suggested that scientists/people adopt new paradigms when: (1) it gives an answer to problems or enigma that are not resolved in the old paradigms; (2) the predictions it generates are more accurate; (3) it gives access to phenomena unknown till then; (4) the way it is formulated is more aesthetic, and (5) it encompasses the promise of new results. Compared to earlier empiricist accounts like Popper's, Kuhn gives a greater role to historical and cultural factors in the development of scientific knowledge and indicates a reflexive element in paradigm change and transformation.

Clément says, 'religious systems have been so successful throughout history... because they were able to propose comprehensive stories explaining the past causes of today's misfortunes and a detailed way to get a better life, in this world or in another one' (2003: 86). This emphasis on giving knowledge for a better life is how religion and spirituality can be seen as having a methodology, rather like science (Barbour, 1990). In this context, Champion has described the New Age spiritual methodologies concerned with accruing knowledge of life by working towards inner enlightenment to achieve outer transcendence, but these methods 'are still legitimated by reference to a foundational past' placing 'great value on anchoring themselves to a great tradition'



(Champion, 2000: 55). Therefore, metaphorically religion and spirituality like science can also be seen as exhibiting distinct paradigmatic elements:<sup>9</sup>

There are many parallels between science and religion: the interaction of data and theory (or experience and interpretation); the historical character of the interpretive community; the use of models; and the influence of paradigms or programs. In both fields there are no proofs, but there can be good reasons for the judgements rendered by the paradigm community. (Barbour, 1990: 65)<sup>10</sup>

According to other popular texts and scholars that have investigated the differences between religion and science (e.g. Capra, 1999; Moore, 1997; Watts, 1997), they also conclude that any contrasts tend to be in emphasis or degree, rather than the absolute oppositions sometimes imagined. For example, we could ask: How different is the notion of the existence of multiple universes to that of creation by an omnipotent creator? And are not both notions largely based on speculative faith?

The argument I am developing is that at the most abstracted level both science and religion are perceived to be concerned with providing theories about the nature of social reality, which will always be open to revision and extension. As Locke argues,

Such appeals should not be dismissed as simply wrong, or misleading, or misunderstandings of science, or anything else of the kind... That science may be turned to religious ends is not an outcome of rationalisation, whether of the “iron cage” or “charisma”. It is rather a consequence of the socially constructed nature of science that it may be turned to support ends that other constructions of science see as quite at odds with its nature. A greater understanding of this process promises to provide clearer insight into NRMs that draw on science by viewing them less as a consequence of a supposed external “logic” dictated from without by science and more as actively created human constructions arising within a world where, while science may reign, precisely what that reign means for ethics of conduct remains open to interpretation. (Locke, 2004: 128)

The discourses of numerous NRSMs use this limitation of “public science” (i.e. the transient nature of knowledge accumulation and unclear ethical agendas) to legitimate their claims about the nature of the social realm and of human agency. For instance, based on my discussions with ISKCON devotees at the Berkeley temple, the primary difference between science and religion according to them lies in the ways knowledge is sought; in the case of science by ascending methods, while religious and spiritual

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<sup>9</sup> A metaphor achieves its effect by holding in tension two incompatible meanings (in this case science and religion as paradigms) that reveal some new insight (see Grassie, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Barbour has become one of the most important and well-respected thinkers in modern times to contribute to the creative dialogues between science and religion (see Russell, 2004).

knowledge is received by descending revelation via higher sources. This demonstrates the public understanding of science and religion by NRSMs as simply two systems focused on grasping what we can call the metaphysical realm (that which is infinite), into manageable understanding for the finite (but evolving) intelligence of humanity:

What is limited [does] not [exist] through itself – otherwise it would be eternal, eternal matter existing independently in and for itself. It is rather the opposite that has been assumed. So upon closer examination there only [occurs] a disintegration into two abstractions... It is not because the finite exists that infinite being exists but because the finite does not exist; it is the negation [of it] that is absolute being. (Hegel, 1987: 103)

At this point, I would like to introduce a circular hermeneutic in tandem with the metaphoric association of religion and science as paradigms, to help us understand human action (i.e. knowledge seeking) in relation to the wider whole (metaphysical realm), which gives it meaning.<sup>11</sup> This notion of a wider whole or metaphysical realm is akin to Durkheim's deep grammar of society; Plato's supra-sensible realm; Hegel's universal consciousness leading to ultimate ethical realisation of Geist, and the elusive fourth dimension transcendental realism attempts to capture by giving, 'adequate account of science... in the three main dimensions: the intransitive or ontological dimension; the transitive or epistemological dimension; and the meta-critical dimension' (Bhaskar, 1989: 183). As the human species has evolved through time and space we have gained greater knowledge of the forces acting upon nature and those governing our societies. This knowledge accumulation has not occurred in a linear fashion, but rather through cyclical reflexive processes best shown in the theories of Giddens (see chapter 2/3).

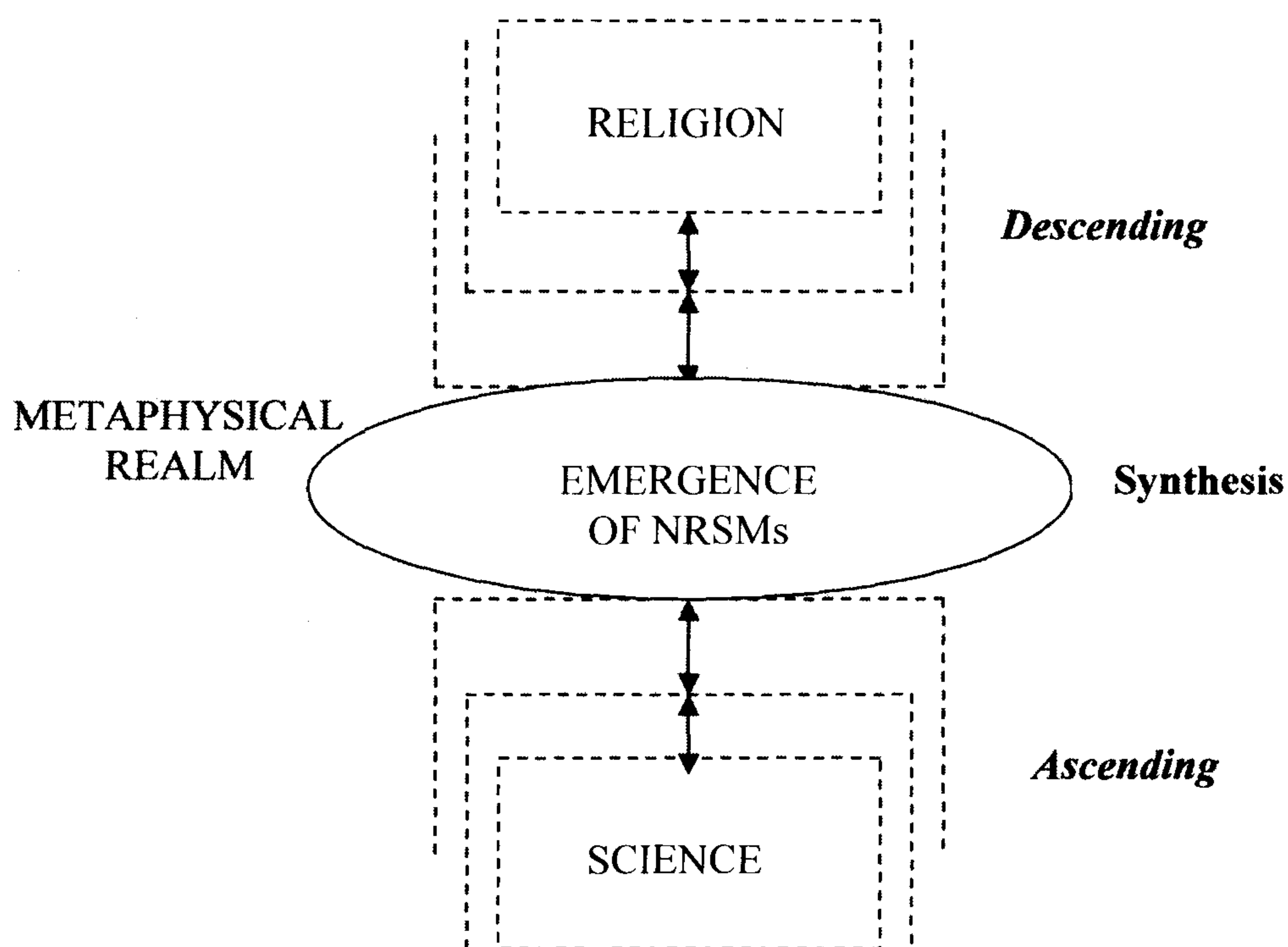
Figure 5 below is a heuristic device I will use to graphically present my key arguments about how NRSMs socially construct, and try to transcend, the challenges Enlightenment science wrought for religious and spiritual legitimacy (see chapter 1). I apply the notion of a metaphysical realm not as confirmation of the existence of supernatural powers, which lies beyond the scope of this thesis (Beckford, 2003), but rather as a tool to frame and depict the rhetorical strategies NRSMs use to engage public debates about science and evolution in Western society. The outer border of the

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<sup>11</sup> Hermeneutics is the philosophical discipline in which theoretical problems of interpretation are confronted. On the face of it one interpretation of the meaning of an action or a text is as good as another (a la Deconstruction). The resolution of this problem lies in the 'hermeneutic circle', which implies we have to understand the part in terms of the whole, and vice versa (see Giddens, 1976: 54-8).

metaphysical realm (the numinous or place of infinite knowledge and mysteries) is shown as broken because it too has the capacity to extend as humanity accumulates knowledge. For example, since the invention of powerful telescopes our awareness of the size and magnitude of the universe has expanded considerably. The vastness of potential knowable information in the universe is graphically reflected in the difference in size between the metaphysical realm box and the religion/science boxes. The two-way arrows emerging from and feeding back into the science/religion boxes signify the transient nature of knowledge; gains in the latter are depicted by the emergence of new dotted boxes that encompass a larger area than the original boxes. The opposing locations of the religion and science boxes within the metaphysical realm reflect the social understanding NRSMs such as ISKCON have constructed about the differing approach to knowledge each pursues (Bhaktivedanta, 1990, 1997).

**Figure 5 – The Metaphysical Realm and Ascending and Descending Knowledge**



The activities of religions according to several NRSM founders differ from modern science in the way that they search for and legitimate knowledge by accepting higher authority or re-interpreting Holy Scriptures (Lewis, 2003). This process could be called the ‘descending path of knowledge about social reality’, which involves gaining understanding about things beyond immediate experience by consulting

literatures authored by higher beings (i.e. faith in revelation), or through attaining spiritual enlightenment from deeper realities by personal techniques (e.g. meditative intuitions/channelling). NRSMs often use these methods to legitimate their discursive formations. L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology claimed that through his personal studies he had gained access to the time track or realm of thetans (soul), a reality beyond the physical universe of MEST (Hubbard, 1996). When this occurred Dianetics shifted to Scientology and provided Hubbard with a transcendental basis for legitimating the authority of his speculations (see Wallis, 1977). He recorded the knowledge from this higher realm, eventually presenting it as the ethics to life and the universe recounted in Scientology's eight dynamics (see chapter 8). Graeme suggests:

*L. Ron Hubbard applied a scientific approach to the humanities in developing Scientology, which partly explains why it is so effective. He discarded anything that did not get a result, and did not take anything on "faith", or accept things as true just because someone said they were true.<sup>12</sup>*

Laura Knight (the Cassiopaea Experiment) and Nancy Lieder (ZetaTalk) both claim to interface with higher intelligence out in the depths of the universe, and based on this contact construct alternative histories about human origins and social life (see chapter 9). They discard and transcend scientific knowledge by using what Wallis (1977) calls a 'nihilation' and 'legitimation' discursive strategy. This involves using the concept of conspiracies to undermine opposing beliefs (i.e. government cover-ups of UFOs = nihilation) and justify supporting beliefs that UFOs and extraterrestrials do exist, and so contact with them can occur (i.e. legitimation). These methods clearly bypass the scientific technique of acquiring knowledge, which involves not taking anything as "fact" until it has been directly perceived by the senses, or by technical apparatuses, and validated by repeated experiments. This procedure can be called the 'ascending path to knowledge about social reality' and is based on the systematic and objective classification of physical phenomena or data (see Popper, 1989).

There is the possibility in theory that advocating and pursuing either ascending or descending knowledge solely in isolation could result in undesirable development-trajectories. Graphically this would reflect the eventual return of the arrows to either the religion or science box without a concomitant push outwards in the boundaries of the original box, such drives when they happen are paradigmatic revolutions. If the

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<sup>12</sup> Extract from interview (30/08/2004).

opposing paradigms do not reconcile and enter into a synthesis leading to *emergence* eventual implosion of the separate religion or science box could occur. In other words, if the opposing but related paradigms of scientific and religious knowledge formation are seen as self-contained and perfected; the necessary emergence of a third superior paradigm based on synthesis of the original two will not transpire. Here I am using a critical realist dialectical argument that suggests ‘the contradiction that leads to the expansion of the universe of discourse or conceptual field by the positive identification and elimination of absences’, leads to the emergence of a ‘dialectic of content from truth to freedom via wisdom’ (Bhaskar, 1998d: 599; 1998e: 680).

### **The Dangers in taking Scientific or Religious Paradigms to Extremes**

For the safety of our species we must be careful not to let science become an unbridled wild horse or allow religions to bicker and quarrel among themselves instead of serving to actualize the best in the human spirit.

(Raman, 2004: 398)

In the previous section I hinted at the danger of pursuing either science or religion in isolation, now I will outline the specific threats through substantive examples. There has been much recent talk by some of an *End of History* caused by the triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism in the great battle of ideologies (Fukuyama, 1992). However, in contrast to such banal linearity a more complex dialectical notion needs to be applied to historicity. Only then can we discuss the possible trajectories of endless continuity and the limitless development potential of humanity (see Barker, 2001). This specific aim will not be feasible in a situation where religious discourse or any such ideology is perceived as self-contained ultimate truth, because by silencing critical reflection and opportunities for reinterpretations one witnesses a rise in fundamentalism, which generally exhibits the following negative characteristics:<sup>13</sup>

First, it is marked by paranoia and self-righteousness. There is always some terrible enemy out there that has to be fought and ultimately destroyed... secondly, by fear and rage directed not only against the enemy outside the ranks but even more intensely against the enemy within, including bishops,

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<sup>13</sup> The term fundamentalism was originally Christian. It was coined to describe the reaction first by American Presbyterians and then by other Protestant groups to two threatening intellectual trends: higher criticism, a novel historical approach to biblical studies, and the growing infiltration of Darwinian theories about the origin and genealogy of the human species into mainstream thought. In reaction, several Christian groups drew up lists called *The Fundamentals*, rigid criteria for distinguishing true believers from non-believers (Wills, 1990). The label has also since been used to describe other major religious traditions that advocate a return to strict beliefs.

priests, sisters and theologians... Fundamentalists are captivated, thirdly, by the "myth of the Golden Age." They imagine that Catholicism in the decades just before Vatican II was in its pristine and ideal state, exactly as God intended it to be, without problems or deficiencies of any kind.<sup>14</sup>

Contemporary fundamentalism is paradoxical and deeply embedded in the structures and processes of modernity. Communities of potential adherents see it as not only an avenue along which to return to some idyllic past but also as a freeway to rush toward a post apocalyptic future. In essence if religious fundamentalists successfully limit and silence critics of their discourses religious paradigms will not be expanded or transcended in light of visible anomalies, resulting in stagnation and implosion, rather than expansion or emancipation. The destructive fundamentalist desire for return to some "golden age" when the religious paradigm was supposedly pure (i.e. uncriticised by insiders or outsiders) is both naïve and degenerate. The Nation of Islam is a NRM that exhibits fundamentalist characteristics. It legitimates questionable claims about human origins by constructing a dark picture of social reality that requires destruction before return to some idealised state is possible (see Lee, 1996). It derives inspiration from Islam, which has a history of opposition to western ideals (Buruma and Margalit, 2004) and orients itself to world-rejection; hence it is unsurprising scientific knowledge is completely discarded. Instead, Elijah Muhammad's claim to have met God in the form of Fard Muhammad suffices as a foundation for legitimating the movement's religious-political agenda (Curtis IV, 2002; Keener and Usry, 2005).

Considering the other extreme, if a purely rational and un-criticised science were to proceed unhindered by ethical constraints we would be faced with an equally undesirable development outcome. Bendle describes such a situation as Posthumanist ideology that has 'dominant characteristics of a naïve brutalism, embracing scientific speculation, mythic aspiration and capitalist triumphalism in a resolutely non-critical fashion' (Bendle, 2002: 4). Posthumanism, Bendle argues is the ideological interpellation of humanity into an increasingly dominant scientific and technological order based on the cultural and scientific ascendancy of the informational paradigm. Posthumanists emphasise the merits of creating engineered viruses to modify genetic

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<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.the-tidings.com/2004/0924/essays.htm> accessed 16/10/2004. There is a vast and growing literature on fundamentalism (Brasher, 2001b). For general overviews on the subject see Denmark (2004), Riesebrodt (2000) and Tétreault (2004). On Christian Right fundamentalisms see Buss (2004) and Gallaher (2004). Kepel (1994) provides one of the better studies outlining the causes of the resurgence in the West of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic varieties of fundamentalism. On Hindu nationalism and fundamentalism see Bhatt (2001) and Biswas (2004).

codes and nanotechnology to alter the structure of matter, including human bodies. Bendle rightly views such objectives with both scepticism and pessimism:

...like all ideologies, posthumanism tends to *allow little or no room for doubt*, and does so by putting forward propositions as if they are no more than common sense or common knowledge. Dissent then appears as mere ignorance. Disbelief is suspended and centuries of hard-won experience and intense *critical thinking* about science, technology and the social formation within which they flourish are swept aside by *an uncritical “will to believe”* propositions about the possibilities of science and technology that are often preposterous, and even undesirable. (Bendle, 2002: 50, emphasis added)

Giddens (1976) makes two criticisms of Kuhn regarding his conception of paradigms, which are relevant at this juncture. First, he argues that Kuhn exaggerates the internal unity of paradigms. For instance, ‘while many scientists, particularly those of an empirical bent, may be ranked as “normal scientists”, in any given period of scientific development the frames within which they work are frequently, and perhaps usually, the subject of deep-rooted division between vying theoretical schools’ (1976: 142). Second, ‘the development of science is constantly interwoven with and affected by social influences and interests that nominally stand outside of science itself’ (1976: 143). In sum, Giddens suggests that Kuhn treats paradigms as ‘closed systems’ making explanations of transition from one separate self-enclosed universe to another very problematic: ‘In lieu of this, we must substitute, as a starting point, that all paradigms... are mediated by others’ (1976: 144). I agree with this assertion, but with the following qualifications: (1) not only are paradigms mediated by others, they also compete with others, and (2) all paradigms jostle within the metaphysical realm as articulated above. Therefore, when “new” paradigms emerge they carry over some of the limitations of the specific “old” paradigms they attempted to replace, while other paradigms remain resistant to change acting as closed systems.

### **Seeking Unity: The Synthesis of Religious-Scientific Paradigms in NRSMs**

The first form is thus the pure, simple totality, though for that very reason still the abstract totality. It is the form in which God is known as what truly has being in and for itself, and known truly as this; so God is in truth what is independent, what is inwardly determinant, and hence God is the good.  
(Hegel, 1987: 609-10)

One of the characteristics that distinguish many NRSMs from traditional Christianity is their high regard for modern science. Often NRSMs have been at the forefront of a

drive towards a unified worldview, which integrates and reinterprets “older” religious and scientific paradigms. For example, borrowing from Kuhn’s (1996) insights, many New Age discourses argue that established science reflects an outdated reductionistic paradigm that should be replaced by a “new” paradigm, one based on a more holistic perspective (reflecting the concept of emergence in figure 5). Hence, ‘New Age religion cannot be characterized as a return to pre-Enlightenment worldviews but is to be seen as a qualitatively new syncretism of esoteric and secular elements’ (Hanegraaff, 1996: 521). This drive for syncretism and holism in the discourses of certain NRSMs is based on interpretations of the new science derived from the works of Bohm (2002), Capra (1999), Peat (1987), and Talbot (1980; 1996).<sup>15</sup>

In his theories regarding the nature of reality the eminent physicist David Bohm suggested that the whole universe could be thought of as a kind of giant, flowing hologram, or *holomovement*, in which a total order is contained, in some implicit sense, in each region of space and time. The deeper explicate order is a projection from higher dimensional levels of reality, and the apparent stability and solidity of the objects and entities composing it are generated and sustained by a ceaseless process of enfoldment and unfoldment. This “holographic paradigm” as it has been called by New Agers essentially implies fragments of particular intermediate frequency patterns (e.g. three-dimensional images) contain in them the information of the whole object. In other words, although we perceive reality as matter separated in time and space this illusion of separation is a projection from a deeper unified totality:

The individual is universal and the universal is individual. The word “individual” means undivided, so we could say that very few individuals have ever existed. We could call them dividuals. Individuality is only possible if it unfolds from wholeness. (Bohm in Weber, 1986: 30)

Likewise certain holographic theories of the brain propose memory fragments are not locally stored in the mind. Instead, each memory fragment is distributed over the whole of the brain so that each fragment of the brain, reversely, contains the information of the whole: ‘It’s inherent in thought that it is not going to grasp the actual totality. But the holistic part of thought would be thought which does not make a break, thought which is unbroken’ (Bohm in Weber, 1986: 33). These scientific

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<sup>15</sup> Main (2002) charts the emergence and evolution of New Age Spiritualities against the backdrop of the historical and contemporary interactions and frictions between religion and science.



speculations by Bohm are to New Agers evidence of the holistic nature of existence. Thus, New Age methodologies often seek to apprehend higher and higher realities, and ultimately absolute reality through the praxis of individual spiritual investigation.

Peat's (1987) *Synchronicity* and Talbot's (1996) *Holographic Universe* have both been influenced by the insights of Bohm, and consequently also on the formation of the "new" holographic view emerging in theoretical physics.<sup>16</sup> Peat presents a highly holistic account of the interdependence of mind and matter, while Talbot suggests that mainstream science is hopelessly inadequate in accounting for what is actually occurring in the world due to its limited perspective. Talbot argues that the "new physics" of Bohm offers a basis for 'a religion based on the psychology of human consciousness – indeed on the psychology of the entire universe as a conscious force acting upon itself' (Talbot, 1980: 161). Capra (1999) also notes the parallels between modern physics, on the one hand, and oriental mysticism, on the other. He is quite explicit about his aims, nothing less than the reconciliation, within one unified whole, of what have traditionally been regarded as extreme opposites:

[T]he erroneous association of mysticism with things vague and unclear is now changing. As Eastern thought has begun to interest a significant number of people and meditation is no longer viewed with ridicule or suspicion, mysticism is being taken more seriously even within the scientific community.  
(Capra, 1999: 337)

Li Hongzi (2003) modifies and uses scientific theories to develop and construct Falun Gong cosmology (Frank, 2004). This fits the world-accommodating stance of the movement and its recent objective to appeal to western seekers (see chapter 7). Lord Thurlow, a Falun Gong practitioner, summed up the science and religion debate in the following way:

*There is no conflict as they are both concerned in a search for truth. But many engaged in scientific disciplines consciously or unconsciously close their minds against concepts that do not easily fit into present paradigms.*<sup>17</sup>

Among the other practitioners I met several had strong scientific and mathematical backgrounds. Some even claimed that modern physics (e.g. superstring theory) and biology (specifically pineal gland functioning) provided a scientific basis for their beliefs. In a similar vein Frank records,

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<sup>16</sup> The eminent physicist Hawking (2001) includes a chapter on holographic theory in his latest book.

<sup>17</sup> Extract from interview conducted (10/10/2004).

90 percent of the practitioners interviewed had been educated in the natural sciences, their scientific training in no way hindered them from uncritically accepting Li Hongzhi's writings. Several mentioned physical experiences that had confirmed Li's paranormal claims for them. (2004: 255)

Li's writings on the structure of the universe and the development of paranormal capabilities are compatible with many Western New Age ideologies. For instance, his depiction of the mega-cosmos being duplicated in microcosms of worlds within worlds could be straight out of a "New Science" text. Li describes it in the following way; one grain of sand contains three thousand worlds, with Buddhas, Taos, and Gods as well as human beings, animals, substances, mountains, water, heaven, earth, air and grains of sand. In turn these grains of sand contain three thousand more microscopic worlds containing still more grains of sand with their microscopic worlds – and so on to infinity (Li, 2003: 161-8).

The discourses of several NRSMs based on the above themes emerging within science herald the dawn of a "new age" or paradigm. They hope that such a paradigm can shed light on and even explain the workings of the divine in the cosmos – in essence by securing a scientific basis for religion. Campbell (2001) makes such an argument when exploring the idea that science can be viewed as a religion. He argues our understanding of science will be enhanced, if we study it in the same manner we use to study religion. The guiding logic should be to identify the ways that science promises liberation and pinpointing the institutional conditions under which that freedom could occur. To a certain extent this exploration by Campbell might well be viewed as another effort to demonstrate the benefits of opening up the scientific enterprise to more thorough and critical external examination. Several of the NRSMs classified as world affirming/accommodating generally condone the ideals and values of the modern world (see chapter 4). On their part there is no desire for a complete rejection of science, rather reinterpretation to complement spiritual discourses (Locke, 2004; Porter, 1996). They often favour and foster the integration of members into global society by providing them with the means (spiritual-scientific, religious-psychological) to mobilise all their personal resources in order to lead productive lives. Champion argues this 'kind of syncretic mixture of religion, magic, borrowings from science and psychology is nowadays very common' (2000: 51).

Perhaps the most well constructed example of this hope for a new paradigm based on combining science and religion (in this case Christianity) is Matthew Fox's

Institute for Culture and Creation Spirituality (a.k.a. Green Spirit in the UK). The aim of this NRSM is to teach a novel spirituality concerned with connecting to the right side of the brain. Fox criticises Western societies and the traditional churches for their emphasis on the brain's left hemisphere, with its analytic, verbal, and logical processes. Instead, Fox wants people to incorporate into thinking the right hemisphere of the brain, with its emotion, connection making, mysticism, cosmic delight, and orientation toward the maternal, silence and darkness.<sup>18</sup> In terms of figure 5 above, the scientific paradigm would be depicted as a reflection of the right hemisphere and the religious paradigm as the left, but only through combination can greater knowledge be obtained (Fox, 1983, 1988, 1991).

I realized that you can't teach spirituality in the Western model of education. This is why you don't get it in the seminaries or any place else as such – our Western models of education, being Cartesian or Enlightenment oriented, are only about the left brain. Our education doesn't get to the heart that is in the body. (Fox in Fox and Sheldrake, 1996a: 5)

Fox had originally ordained as a Dominican priest in 1967, but advancing the ideas and practices of Creation Spirituality led to his eventual expulsion from the order in 1993. This was because Fox saw the dominant Christian worldview as amounting to little more than a heresy – signifying a radical departure from the original teachings of Jesus. He further identified a great error in relation to the nature of the cosmos and humanity's relationship to it as revealed by spiritual tradition and modern science. Specific elaborations of the latter's limitations were outlined in a series of dialogues between Fox and the biologist Rupert Sheldrake (Fox and Sheldrake, 1996a, 1996b). The basis of Sheldrake's compatibility with Fox lies in his New Age friendly accounts of unresolved problems in evolutionary biology and the anomalies to which orthodox science has not been able to find an explanation:

The traditional mechanistic model [of evolution] was a thoroughgoing and consistent application of the machine analogy. A machine is meaningless apart from the maker and designer of the machine. (Sheldrake in Weber, 1986: 115)

Sheldrake's (1991) alternative explanatory hypothesis of evolution is called "formative causation", which postulates the existence of invisible organising fields in

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<sup>18</sup> Sagan (1977: 163-95) also charts the different functions performed by the right and left hemispheres of the brain. For instance, the right side is seen to be involved in creative and intuitive thinking while the left is associated with logical and critical thought.

nature that operate by “morphic resonance”, rather than through random chance and physical laws. To Sheldrake this implies that the ‘meaning of the universe can’t lie within the matter of the universe. This leads naturally to the whole question of the nature of God, the nature of consciousness or ultimate mind, the nature of meaning itself’ (Sheldrake in Weber, 1986: 119). In order to bypass the perceived inadequacies of the “old” paradigms of Orthodox Christianity and Darwinian evolution; creation spirituality doctrines (taught via courses at the group’s University) aim to synthesize the right and left hemispheres of the brain. This synthesis claims to engender a “truer” understanding of the “genuine” science behind the creation of life and the optimum framework for managing social relations (Szerszynski, 2004). Comprehending the rules of the universe and armed with the gifts of creation spirituality Fox envisages the possibility of a united world, one in which First world nations co-operate with Third world nations in a mutually beneficial exchange. The gifts of wisdom enable humanity to move ‘from the hegemony of the overdeveloped nations over underdeveloped nations to justice between nations’ (Fox, 1991: 115).

## **Conclusion**

According to the NRSM members I interviewed, and based on their interpretations of the public debate between science and religion, both were at the abstract level simply seen as methods for acquiring knowledge about the universe, nature, evolution and human destiny. Therefore, based on critiquing the public meanings attached to science, NRSMs such as ISKCON have attempted to legitimate their discourses.

Science may be constructed differently in different social contexts to accomplish different ends... This is possible because science is open to a contrasting characterization as a positivistically inspired vision of the grand unity of knowledge and as a materially grounded socially-restrictive community of practitioners; science, thus, both transcends the confines of immediate social interests and yet is also enclosed and restricted by those interests. It may then be constructed differently to suit different specific purposes. (Locke, 2004: 127)

The classics in the sociology of religion failed to foresee that human agencies could skilfully reconstruct the object of religion even in the face of the intellectual challenge to its authority by the object of science (chapter 1). The various discursive strategies used by NRSMs to re-enchant the mundane world reiterate the overt determinism of

secularisation theory. As Giddens (1976: 162) argues, the production and reproduction of society is the accomplished outcome of human agency (chapters 2 and 3). For example, it was illustrated how Creation Spirituality has *produced* a “new” religious-scientific paradigm by *reproducing* “older” paradigms. The ultimate aim of Creation Spirituality – along with most other religious or spiritual movements – is human liberation, while such ideals warrant pursuit; we should ‘balance utopian ideals with realism in much more stringent fashion’ (Giddens, 1990: 155). Put another way, even the combination of scientific-religious paradigms will not necessarily guarantee, or equate to, a liberating interpretation of the metaphysical realm (see figure 5).

Critical realism acknowledges that all paradigms, models and theories are partial, providing only a limited and inadequate picture of reality (see chapter 3). The world is both diverse and complex with differing aspects being better represented by one model than another, so concepts of uniqueness and lawfulness are both important. Reality can be genuinely pluralistic even though every entity is constituted by a set of relationships. Yet this spontaneity and novelty occurs through structures of regularity within which the contributions of subject and object are never completely separable. Therefore, ‘if human beings, and social forms in general, are emergent from but conditioned by nature, then there is at least the possibility that, provided we do not anticipate the world with our dogmas but instead attempt to observe the new world through the critique of the old, the human sciences could still be of some benefit to the greater majority of humankind’ (Bhaskar, 1998c: 441).

### **Introduction: Globalisation and the Easternisation of the West**

The heightened individuation attendant on the relativization of the particular sociocultural context into which each individual is born forces people to more directly confront and make choices about what Talcott Parsons called “telic concerns” – questions about the ends (*telos*) of humanity. These telic concerns are the traditional subject matter of religious discourse and expertise. Thus both the resurgence of the religious right and the rise of so many NRMs may be traced to a renewed need to address and resolve these questions, and to provide cosmic legitimation for the answers chosen. (Dawson, 1998a: 587)

In recent decades the term globalisation has increasingly found its way into economic, political and sociological discourse.<sup>1</sup> The concept refers to a broad set of modernising dynamics that have shaped and transformed the interactions of social actors across the globe (Held and McGrew, 1999). A major consequence and transformation wrought by modernity has been the compression of time and space, what Giddens calls “time-space distanciation”. Hence, ‘Globalisation concerns the intersection of presence and absence, the interlacing of social events and social relations “at a distance” with local contextualities’ (Giddens, 1991: 21). Stretching is another product of the globalising process, which heightens pressure for local autonomy and regional cultural identity. Therefore, Giddens (1990) challenges sociologists to no longer perceive society as a bounded totality, but instead as multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power. Rosenau (1990) refers to this as the era of “post international politics” – an age where nation states have to share the global stage with international organisations, multinational companies and transnational movements. Rosenau places great significance on technological progress for the intensification of cross border interconnectedness: ‘It is technology... that has so greatly diminished geographic and social distances through the jet-powered airliner, the computer, the orbiting satellite, and the many other innovations that now move people, ideas and goods more rapidly and surely across space and time than ever before’ (Rosenau, 1990: 17).

Some remain unconvinced by theories and notions of globalisation (e.g. Hirst and Thompson, 1996), but even they argue the need for political intervention to make the consequences of international economic activity more equitable. So while Fukuyama (1992) enthusiastically proclaims the undisputed victory of western democracy, liberalism and individuality over Marxism in the great battle of political ideologies, suggesting we stand witness to the end of history – I remain more cautious

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<sup>1</sup> Robertson (2003) summarises the major debates around globalisation, which cut across disciplines.

and sceptical. For Fukuyama the good life should follow from the progressive recasting of the modern world on liberal principles. In such a world the individual is, in essence, sacrosanct, and should be free to realise self-chosen ends and personal interests. Equal justice can be maintained between individuals through the enforcement of law. The preoccupation here is with the creation and defence of a world in which “free and equal” individuals can flourish with minimum political impediment. Callinicos (1991) rightly challenges the view that these values can be realised by individuals left, in practice, to their own devices in a “free market” economy. Equality, liberty and justice are great universal ideals and cannot be achieved in a world dominated by private ownership of property and based on the morals of capitalism. Therefore, we can ask Fukuyama to what extreme should we go in promoting individual rights over collective rights? Where he stands on the balance between liberalism and democracy is unclear. Fukuyama also perceives markets as essentially powerless mechanisms of coordination. This neglects how power relations often constrain and limit market processes making them undemocratic (Held, 2001).

There are no quick solutions to the economic, political and psychological problems of inequality, poverty and war exasperated by globalisation (Kinnvall, 2004; Nafziger and Auvinen, 2003). Aggravation of a broad range of dialectically related polarities have fuelled the changes, such as the processes of universalization versus particularisation, integration versus fragmentation, modern versus tradition, Western versus non-Western, and so forth (McGrew, 2001: 74-6). Globalising trends have affected religious discourses by encouraging fundamentalism, nationalism, as well as the emergence of new spiritual interpretations (Beckford, 2003, 2004; Dawson, 1998c; Denmark, 2004; Tétreault, 2004). The primary tension religion has profited from is rising uncertainty regarding individual identity when cast beneath the imposing shadow of global choice (Bokser, 2002). Globalisation evokes religious and political response because it is profoundly relativising, which produces an ongoing negotiation and reconstruction of what constitutes “authenticity”. Wilson sees this destabilising effect of modernisation as engendering greater desire for absolutes in place of relatives. Consequently NRSMs have found success converting followers in contemporary times of identity crisis by marketing themselves as the culmination of the Western search for “truth”. Hence, ‘the effective and “inspired” new movement is almost always spurred into existence by its self-interpretation as a prophetic,

iconoclastic or messianic agency, sent to set aside old truths and proclaim what are offered as essentially new ones' (Wilson, 2003b: 18).

Although the fact of globalised economic and political involvement makes supranational moral discourse necessary, it is extremely difficult for supranational institutions to establish norms or criteria for judgement that constituent members would accept as legitimate. The problem is delicate because different religions and philosophical traditions have radically different visions of the individual, the nature of freedom, and the meaning of rights (Beckford, 2004). Therefore, globalization has often appeared as 'a Western imposition on the non-West; meaning that the West is more global and the non-West more local' (Beyer, 1998: 82). Said (1978) analyses some of the western discourses that have created an archive of information about the Orient (in this case the Middle East), which casts the latter as inferior to the superior West. Visions of western supremacy were often embroiled and related to racial superiority. The results of this degradation of the "oriental other" or "ignoble savage", still haunts the pages of the modern discourse of "the West and the Rest".

So the Rest was critical for the formation of western Enlightenment – and therefore for modern social science. Without the Rest... the West would not have been able to recognize and represent itself as the summit of human history. The figure of 'the Other', banished to the edge of the conceptual world and constructed as the absolute opposite, the negation of everything which the West stood for, reappeared at the very centre of the discourse of civilisation, refinement, modernity and development in the West.

(Hall, 1992: 314)

The above narrative tells half the story, while Western Europe was busy colonising and exporting Christianity to India, Africa, North and South America among other countries, the mere act of interaction with the exogenous Rest (Orient, East etc) was also causing subtle alteration of the endogenous religious discourses of the West.

Globalisation facilitates the western consumption of eastern imports whether products (e.g. spices), practices (e.g. yoga or acupuncture), or complete religious systems (e.g. Hinduism and Buddhism).<sup>2</sup> In this context, Campbell (1999) suggests that western cultural ideas about religion have steadily become more easternised. He notes a gradual rise of belief in reincarnation among Britons, which is not an official doctrine of any mainstream Christian Church. Eastern religious ideas largely based on

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<sup>2</sup> For case studies of NRSMs in the UK based on Buddhist roots see Waterhouse (2001).



Indian origins first gained prominence after the 1960s and 1970s (chapter 4).<sup>3</sup> Initially finding acceptance among the counter culture, many movements have since infiltrated the mainstream (Daner, 1976). In particular Eastern concepts of God and the purpose of life along with ecological concerns have become increasingly commonplace.

To speak of ‘Easternisation’, therefore, is thus to talk of the abandonment of the traditional Western conception of the divine as transcendent and personal and its replacement by a view of the divine as immanent and essentially impersonal... the Eastern concept of spiritual perfection or self-deification replaces the Western idea of salvation, the notion of a Church is replaced by a band of seekers attached to a spiritual leader or guru, while the distinction between believer and unbeliever is replaced by the idea that all beings exist on a scale of spirituality, a scale which can extend beyond this life.

(Campbell, 1999: 41, 42)

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s East Asian (i.e. Chinese and Japanese) religious ideas have encroached on and modified western sensibilities (McLaughlin, 2003; Melton and Jones, 1994; Somers, 1994). The main reason Eastern religious and spiritual ideas have gained prominence is due to the fact they are less vulnerable to attack from the discourses of scientific Enlightenment dominant in the West (Capra, 1999). However, it would be wise to remain more cautious than Campbell who says, ‘the traditional Western cultural paradigm no longer dominates in so-called “Western” societies’ having ‘been replaced by an “Eastern” one’ (1999: 41), instead, there is a situation of co-determination (Buruma and Margalit, 2004). In many instances Eastern mysticism has had to adapt to western reality in efforts to flourish (Warburg, 2003). The remainder of this chapter critically examines the discourses of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness [ISKCON] and Falun Gong; both groups owe their origins to the East so their arrival and adaptations in the West are very intriguing.

### **ISKCON: Forget the World, Just Chant ‘Hare Krishna’ and be Happy?**

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness, more commonly known as the Hare Krishna Movement gained prominence in the West during the late 1960s. Its founder, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swāmi Prabhupāda (1896-1977) first arrived in the United States in 1965, having been charged by his spiritual master (Bhakti Siddhanta) to take Krishna Consciousness to the West. Prabhupāda’s humble clothes and exotic

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<sup>3</sup> Although that is not to say the influence does not also stretch further back than this period. However, the greatest numbers of Indian inspired movements do seem to have appeared during the 1960s and 70s.

origin ensured he found a home and attentive audience amongst the hippies of the Bowery District of New York, and shortly after in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco (Daner, 1976; Judah, 1974). ISKCON was formally founded a year later in a disused shop called Matchless Gifts, with numerous related temples soon emerging across America (Rochford, 1985). The Beatles hosted Prabhupāda in England in 1969 based on George Harrison's interest in the philosophical ideals behind the group. This association would result in major promotional and financial benefits for ISKCON's British mission. First, in 1969 helped by Harrison, the "Hare Krishna Mantra" was recorded, which later reached the Top Twenty in the British pop charts (Knott, 2000). Second, in 1973 Harrison purchased Bhaktivedanta Manor on ISKCON's behalf; this building and surrounding land was converted into a shrine and training college, and remains the movement's British headquarters. ISKCON expanded rapidly until Prabhupāda's death in 1977. However, in the last twenty years the organisation has increasingly experienced challenges to its survival (Nye, 1996). Some challenges have been external such as a loss of revenue during the 1980s due to falling book sales, while others have been self-inflicted such as the negative publicity and controversy created by the activities of an immature leadership (Barrett, 2001). Nevertheless, the main force shaping the future success of ISKCON's mission to raise consciousness will be how the movement integrates teachings based on self-denial within a Western materialistic context. According to the latest statistics there are one million devotees worldwide (1999), 13,000 (2004) of which are in the United Kingdom, while 250,000 (of which 3,000 are core) reside in the United States (1998) [see CDRROM].

### ***Prabhupāda and the Translation of the Bhagavad-gītā***

The origin of ISKCON's spiritual tradition lies in India and can be traced back to the beliefs of Hindu saint Chaitanya (c.1485-1533), founder of the Vaishnava Movement. The movement extolled the virtues of honouring Krishna by bhakti, which entailed renouncing one's secular life in order to follow the path of devotion. The followers of Chaitanya believed that amongst the plethora of Gods worshipped by Hindus, Krishna was the supreme and original deity.<sup>4</sup> Chaitanya is therefore accredited with originally teaching the "maha mantra", made famous in the West by ISKCON devotees:

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<sup>4</sup> A detailed history of Vaishnavism is beyond the parameters of this case study; see Judah (1974).

*Hare Krishna; Hare Krishna  
Krishna Krishna; Hare Hare  
Hare Rama; Hare Rama  
Rama Rama; Hare Hare*

Prabhupāda claimed his teachings and practices of *bhakti-yoga* or yoga of devotion were derived from an unbroken line of spiritual masters going back to Chaitanya and ultimately Krishna (Bhaktivedanta, 1990: 13). He preached that salvation from the pains of material existence could only be attained through following the wisdom revealed in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. The *Bhagavad-gītā* or “song celestial” is a story in the sixth of eighteen books of the *Mahabharata*, one of ancient India’s greatest epics. This popular text has eighteen chapters and begins with the hero, Arjuna, showing a marked unwillingness to engage in combat on the eve of battle, largely because some of his foes are family members. He is finally persuaded to fight by Krishna (his charioteer), who reveals himself as an incarnation of God to a stunned Arjuna in the eleventh chapter. Seven chapters follow in which Krishna instructs Arjuna in the *absolute truth* of the Cosmos, leading him to eventually show his readiness to fight.<sup>5</sup>

Prabhupāda translated the epic into English adding his own commentary, and made it the scriptural basis of the ISKCON faith. His translation remains the primary source devotees refer to for spiritual enlightenment (Bhaktivedanta, 1989). Therefore, the underlying foundation of ISKCON belief lies in Prabhupāda’s own interpretation of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, which reduces to a rejection of material reality. I say personal because Prabhupāda’s translation amounts to over 800 pages. A straight translation of the actual text would not need more than 80 pages, but in Prabhupāda’s version each translation is accompanied by “a personal purport of the meaning”. Prabhupāda also renamed his translation the *Bhagavad-gītā: As it is*. The “As It Is” part is baffling. Translating the *gītā*, adding over 600 pages of commentary, and then renaming it implies, “My version is the correct one and every other version is wrong”. For instance, Prabhupāda translates Text 15 of the *gītā* as follows:

Those miscreants who are grossly foolish, who are lowest among mankind,  
whose knowledge is stolen by illusion, and who partake of the atheistic nature  
of demons do not surrender unto Me. (Bhaktivedanta, 1989: 384)

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<sup>5</sup> Like the parables Jesus taught his followers, the *Bhagavad-gītā* has an outer and an inner meaning. Outwardly we see Arjuna and Krishna arrayed for a battle over land and family rights. While inwardly the *Bhagavad-gītā* concerns the internal war each human being must eventually wage for self-mastery. Self-mastery is achieved when one performs all actions for Krishna, with no thought of reward.

He then proceeds to write five pages of speculative commentary on the meaning of the above passage arguing along the way,

All the unauthorized interpretations of the *Gītā* by the class of *māyayāpahṛta-jñānāh*, outside the purview of the *paramparā* system, are so many stumbling blocks on the path of spiritual understanding. The deluded interpreters [other translators of the *gītā*] do not surrender unto the lotus feet of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, nor do they teach others to follow this principle. (Bhaktivedanta, 1989: 387-8)

Prabhupāda goes beyond the remit of simple translation by also demeaning the authority of others who have interpreted the *gītā* differently from him. Crucially some scholars simply see Krishna as just another human being, and not as the personality of Godhead. This questioning of Krishna’s divinity greatly enraged Prabhupāda and he referred to such scholars as “rascals”. In essence apart from the claims in the *gītā* we have little corroborating evidence to confirm Krishna was actually God. In the face of reasonable doubt conclusive evidence seems to be of minimal importance.<sup>6</sup> Instead, Prabhupāda merely reiterated the need for devotees to submit to his spiritual authority due to his disciplic succession (Bhaktivedanta, 1997: 90). According to Chryssides:

Prabhupāda himself did not accept his sannyasa vows until some two years after BhaktiSiddhanta’s death [his direct spiritual master], when the latter appeared to him in a dream. If this is the case, then this calls into question the legitimacy of the *parampara* both for the Gaudiya Math and for ISKCON. When controversies about the succession first emerged, a few ISKCON devotees left the movement to find a guru who had greater claim to a direct lineage. (Chryssides, 1999: 170)

Sharma (2004) provides a useful interpretation of the *Bhagavad-gītā* in which he notes three sensory states experienced by Arjuna during the course of the events. Each state reflects a distinct valence, ranging from negative to positive and back to neutral. In the first chapter Arjuna is in the third primary state – that of negativity – and does not want to fight. In this state the universe is seen as absurd and material

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<sup>6</sup> In contrast, many philosophers like Spinoza recognise God to be a force that is beyond name or form. Spinoza argued rigorous thought reveals that there can only be one single substance, of which we (and everything else) are merely insignificant parts. God is a being with infinitely many attributes, and everything that happens is not only casually determined, but actually flows by logical necessity from immutable laws. Since God is defined as a being with infinite attributes, then nothing exists that could limit or take away its being: in every respect it is without limits. So God could not be human, because to be human is to be finite. Spinoza saw human liberation as based on self-determination, rather than self-denial. Once we acquire adequate knowledge of the emotions and desires that are the internal causes of our actions we begin to understand why we do what we do. Only at this point can we truly claim to be free. Spinoza suggested we should not hope to be rewarded in some afterlife, but instead live and act with the confidence that we are a necessary component of an infinitely greater and more important whole (see Scruton, 2001). Einstein famously remarked that he believed in “Spinoza’s God”.

existence as futile. After Krishna reveals his divinity to Arjuna in the eleventh chapter the latter's mood shifts down to the second primary state characterised by a "cosmic consciousness". In this state the universe is seen as worthwhile and positive, with all parts fundamentally related into a unified whole.

However, Arjuna is still not ready to fight. Earlier he was depressed to the point of panicking; now he can't fight because he is elated to the point of being terrified! He wants God to return to his normal state and himself too... because Arjuna can only resume fighting in the first primary state, what d'Aquili calls the baseline state. (Sharma, 2004: 711)

Arjuna willingly fights in the first state – neutrality – as he no longer questions the consequences of his actions. He simply acts because he has submitted responsibility to the divine Krishna. This outcome can be interpreted in several ways. Prabhupāda views it as evidence that through serving the supreme Lord the entity becomes 'the liberated servant of God' (Bhaktivedanta, 1989: 858). However, the words liberated and servant in the same sentence strikes me as rather incompatible and contradictory.<sup>7</sup> The three valences can be identified in ISKCON discourses and convert transcripts. For instance, converts (both those interviewed as well as devotees I informally spoke with) often described a spiritual pain and lack of meaning pre-conversion to ISKCON (i.e. state of negativity); after conversion the answers provided by the movement filled them with a renewed purpose and sense of joy (i.e. positive state), they then slowly became aware that the purpose of human life is to escape materiality, which led to detachment from physical illusions (i.e. neutrality). The narrative below is illustrative:

*Srila Prabhupada's books and teachings filled a hole in my life and made sense where nothing else did [negative valence]. I have discovered truth and meaning, which makes me more confident about leading a good life [positive valence] and accepting death [neutral valence].*<sup>8</sup>

(Narayani Devi dasi, 2004)

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<sup>7</sup> Having studied and discussed the *Bhagavad-gītā* extensively with devotees during the last three years, my personal interpretation (much to the annoyance of the devotees) is that Arjuna clears his conscience and justifies killing others (including his friends and family members) after becoming convinced of a higher purpose. Krishna the charioteer would clearly have been fearful for his life if Arjuna (a great warrior) did not fight back against his adversaries. Understandably Krishna would be willing to go to great lengths to persuade Arjuna to fight, even perhaps resorting to claims of divinity. Sathya Sai Baba, a famous Indian guru, has recently claimed to be an incarnation of Krishna, so such claims of divinity are not uncommon in Hindu culture and history (Chryssides, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Interview extract with 28-year-old female (17/09/2004).

***Prabhupāda and the Limits of Embodied Charisma***

The ISKCON devotees I interacted with during the course of my researches generally emphasised the charismatic and authoritative quality of their founder. Few had actually met him in person, but all seemed to know mythic stories about someone who had. Along with many other founders of NRSMs, Prabhupāda possessed an embodied charisma, which even after death still commands veneration from ISKCON devotees. For example, when I visited Bhaktivedanta manor in October 2004, I came face-to-face with a lifelike resin statue of Prabhupāda, which was quite disconcerting. Indeed, his statues were as large as those depicting the human form of Krishna in the main worship chamber. I was also given a tour of his personal quarters at the manor, which has remained unused since his death. Radha told me the chamber was used by many for meditations and to feel close to the founder at moments of spiritual anguish. This is an example of how a religious movement can attempt to enshrine founder charisma and mobilise it by transmitting it to new devotees to maintain identity (Weber, 1968).

Regardless of Prabhupāda's charisma and ability to instil confidence in *some*, his written words are rife with derogatory comments reflecting intolerance towards the philosophical perspective of others. While all philosophy should rightly be open to debate, the branding of Marx as a “nonsensical rascal and a fool” and the suggestion that Sartre was “insane and useless” is disrespectful, rather than constructive criticism (Bhaktivedanta, 1990: 230, 1997: 208). Zablocki and Robbins argue that charismatic leadership ‘is clearly a double-edged sword’ (2004: 322). The embodied charisma of NRSM founders and their seemingly authoritative assertions about the nature of the social realm and purposes of human agency, help guard others from the terrors of existential anxiety and ontological insecurity. But this does not mean that charisma cannot fail or operate destructively. The unquestioned (by devotees), and inconsistent identities of Krishna presented by Prabhupāda, are the product of an unsubstantiated acceptance of claims to divinity made in ancient and mythic scriptures. Squarcini argues ‘identity would not be a quality to be recognised in individuals apart from their social context; rather, it is given to the subject through assumptions which belong to a precise system of coherent and outlined thought’ (2000: 256). The ISKCON thought style, depicting Krishna as it does, derives from the Bengali school of the Vaishnava movement, a thought style that has proved increasingly outdated in modern times:

...conceptual blurring is symptomatic of ISKCON's ongoing transformation into a congregationally based religious movement in North America, and, as the findings presented here suggest, increasingly worldwide.

(Rochford, 2000: 179)

### ***ISKCON teaching the Science of the Soul (ātma-tattva)***

Nature is working, providing us with material bodies. This body is a machine. This machine, just like a car, has been offered to us by material nature, by the order of God, Krsna. So the real purpose of life is to stop this perpetual transmigration from one body to another, one body to another, and revive our original, spiritual position, so that we can live an eternal, blissful life of knowledge. That is the aim of life.

(Bhaktivedanta, 1990: 15)

Prabhupāda taught that Krishna consciousness could be found in the “you that does not change” known as *atman* (or soul), which resides within but also transcends the body. In order to be liberated from material existence physical pleasures such as the eating of fish, meat or eggs (i.e. a strict vegetarian lifestyle), the use of intoxicants, illicit sex, gambling, and frivolous sports should all be renounced. These are the four regulative principles, serving as the reference point for ISKCON's various techniques of self-actualisation. The precepts for “correct” conduct practiced by the devotees are micro-reflections of a broad dismissal of mainstream western lifestyles. Key elements of the macro-establishment that devotees of Krishna have rejected are: (1) material success for themselves through competitive labour; (2) an education which promotes that objective; (3) the accumulation of unneeded possessions for sense gratification; (4) authority, civil and parental that favours the status quo; (5) any war, such as the Iraq conflict, that is regarded as a product of imperialistic purposes with a selfish economic motivation, and (6) the hypocrisy of many belonging to the establishment, especially regarding civil rights and racial relationships (Judah, 1974).

Some ISKCON ideals are appealing in a social realm where most actions and motives are increasingly seen to be based solely on self-interest (Scott, 2000). Several devotees highlighted this in their narratives:

*The mood in the entire western world is the same: get as much sense gratification as you can. This greed and lust is degrading the good qualities of the living entity and is increasing the suffering and chaos of this world.*<sup>9</sup>

(Krsnadasa Kaviraja dasa, 2004)

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<sup>9</sup> Interview extract with 50-year-old male (06/10/2004).

*I think most people in UK are generally very materialistic and have no knowledge of their actual business in this world as human beings. They live in darkness.*<sup>10</sup> (Bhadra Balaram das, 2004)

The media bandwagon encourages us to consume and not waste time thinking about our actions or consequences. The modern “compensation culture” tells us that we are never personally at fault for misfortune; there is always someone else to blame. People want the “easy” not the “right” way out of difficult situations. Therefore, as collective societies there seems the need to re-establish clear frameworks of what is “acceptable” and what constitutes “unacceptable” behaviours, so the clear guidelines set by ISKCON on things like gender roles and abortion appeal to traditional values:

*Spiritually men and women are equal... there is no difference; however materially obviously there is in terms of practicalities... We wouldn't support feminism in its hardest sense. We would go for the more traditional thing where the man is the breadwinner and the woman is looking after the children or the house. There will be problems in society when that breaks up, for example if both members of a couple are on equal salaries they are more likely to split up. Because they are both financially independent, which is a bad thing – well if they have children it's a bad thing. So to prevent this happening we are against divorce. There are certain occupations, which are more suited to men. For example, garage mechanics or working on an oilrig or joining the army – generally seem to be male things. There will always be exceptions, but I don't see a problem with that. Women are better looking after children, there are men too but you often find – it just isn't natural. So we are into that traditional thing by and large...*

*I think at some stage or in most circles people are becoming more materialistic, and therefore morals and ethics and spiritual values decline as a result – they are all connected. For example, if someone doesn't believe in an afterlife, someone believes this is the one life that we should just enjoy, then one is less likely to have morals and ethics because one is like lets just enjoy this one life and forget everyone else kind of thing. [Pause] So if your thinking in terms of your karma, the long term ramifications of your actions, for example lets say everyone was to do something like take drugs, go to prostitutes etc – then that is in conflict with spiritual life. Because it is on a public platform, it's trying to enjoy the body and not trying to enjoy the soul on the spiritual platform, which is detached from these kinds of enjoyments. So if we do a very simple thing like eating meat, which is very common in society one has to take a reaction for it in a future life, or later on in this life. There are so many things like abortion; abortions now are more frequent than they ever have been on a global level, including India, including everywhere. This is very bad because we believe life begins at the moment of conception when the soul enters the womb of the mother. So those people performing abortions*

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<sup>10</sup> Interview extract with 40-year-old male (24/09/2004).



*will have to, who are immoral, be punished by the law of karma. Maybe they themselves have to be aborted in future lives.*<sup>11</sup> (Radha Mohan das, 2004)

In regard to controversial social issues such as abortion, a total ban (which ISKCON supports) is obviously impractical. Reversion to traditional family values and gender roles is a securing anchor that seems attractive in a global society devoid of certainties (Kinnvall, 2004; Webb, 1998). Nevertheless, something initially caused the anchor to dislodge and that something is progress. Steering the anchorless global ship through muddy waters towards a safe destination requires a rudder. Humility (admitting the destination is hazy) tempered with a critical facility (acknowledging when we have gone the wrong way) should be the qualities used to steer the rudder. This analogy encapsulates my main reservation about ISKCON's science of the soul, or technique for self-actualisation; it is simply another anchor, which can be dislodged.

When we examine more deeply ISKCON's ethical framework contradictions emerge. For instance, the Hare Krishna's believe in the *samsara* or an eternal cycle of reincarnation. In one's subsequent births, one inherits karma (positive or negative consequences) from the actions one has or has not performed in current and previous lives. By natural arrangement the Lord allocates particular souls with particular bodies that reflect past deeds. If one has acted sinfully in a current life his punishment in the next life could be confinement to an animal body. Likewise souls progress upwards through lower species to human bodies. However, ISKCON discourse remains vague on the criteria-qualifying animals for upward mobility. Prabhupāda simply states this 'present life is only a flash – a moment in our journey through millions of species' (Bhaktivedanta, 1997: 13). The ultimate goal of human life (however attained) is to break away from the repetitive reincarnations and achieve *mukti* (liberation).

Now is your choice whether to be transferred again, by the cycle of transmigration, from one body to another in the lower species of life, or whether to be transferred to the spiritual sky. (Bhaktivedanta, 1990: 118)

The only way to achieve *mukti* is through the aforementioned *bhakti*, a state of active devotion to the deity as well as submitting to the mercy of a spiritual master.<sup>12</sup> But why place trust in a guru who does not know the exact mechanisms of reincarnation?

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<sup>11</sup> Interview extract with 34-year-old male (23/08/2004).

<sup>12</sup> Nine devotional services are practiced: (1) hearing the name and glories of the Supreme Personality of Godhead (sravana); (2) chanting His glories (kirtana); (3) remembering the Lord (smarana); (4) serving the Lord's feet (paricarya); (5) worshipping the Deity (arcana); (6) offering obeisances unto the

The great anchor of ISKCON is submission to Krishna. Devotees are taught that anxiety can be alleviated by chanting the Lord's name, but by busily clinging to the anchor of the Lord Krishna in this way how can genuine progress be possible? In reality a detached attitude to life translates into conservatism and acceptance of social injustice, which is the antithesis of the messages of other spiritualities (Chopra, 2004). Prabhupāda claimed the caste system in India fairly designated people according to past karma, if one is born in hellish conditions or to a low caste that was just reward:

By pious activities you can take birth in a very aristocratic or rich family. You can become a very learned scholar. You can become beautiful. You American or Western people are supposed to be very learned, advanced in material science. You are also good-looking and richer than people in other countries. This is due to your past pious activities. (Bhaktivedanta, 1997: 34)

According to karma those born to wealth should theoretically be predisposed to pious acts, yet in the span of history this has not really been the case. Many humanitarian people throughout history have emerged from poverty stricken backgrounds. In the West (especially in the United States and Great Britain) obesity has become rife along with material wealth and the increase in consumption.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, we could speculate that perhaps this is karma for the historical pillage of third world resources carried out by industrialised nations? Some new age philosophies also take the idea of karma to the extreme, teaching motiveless crime could be due punishment of the victim (Diem and Lewis, 1992). In other words, a delayed reaction by the perpetrator to an action the victim committed against them in a previous life. The notion of karma encourages passivity to life and ultimately trivialises the genuine inequalities promoted by social systems. Devotees confidently label the material world as “illusion”; but Marx would have seen the real “illusion” as ISKCON religious ideology.

To immerse fully in the study of the science of soul most initiated devotees of ISKCON live in Krishna temples, and adopt a major transformation in appearance and dress, which reinforces convert identities. Male devotees shave their heads except for a small tuft of hair at the back of the head called a *sikha*. Both sexes wear holy markings (*tilaka*) on twelve locations on the body. Men wear Indian style lower robes called *dhotis* with long, loose shirts called *kurta*. Women wear Indian style garments called *saris*. All wear small tulasi beads and a sack with a string of one hundred eight

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Lord (vandana); (7) acting as the Lord's servant (dasya); (8) making friends with the Lord (sakhya), and (9) surrendering oneself fully to the Lord (atmanivedana).

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.iotf.org/>, which is the website for the International Obesity Taskforce.

japa beads around their necks. Each devotee must complete sixteen rounds on the japa beads everyday with one rotation of one hundred and eight beads constituting one round. Although the daily routines of devotees and temples vary due to the nature of the work performed, most temples have similar schedules. A majority of devotees rise around 4am, begin chanting, perform religious ceremonies, and worship for a couple of hours. After breakfast they perform duties in their communities and for the temple for around three to four hours. Following lunch, devotees perform *sinkirtana* (group chanting in public places), have class about the Vedic texts, and perform an *arati* ceremony. Most devotees go to bed around 9pm (Bhaktivedanta, 1990: 289-302).

As I witnessed on my visits to Bhaktivedanta manor in Hertfordshire, the day-to-day life of a devotee is very structured. Despite this there also remains a great sense of serenity and detachment. I was always treated hospitably and devotees spent time openly discussing philosophical issues with me during mealtimes. On the other hand, I encountered occasional disagreements during trips to the Berkeley temple while in America. Particularly when entering debates with devotees about the interpretation of the *Bhagavad-gītā*. I received the odd brash retort to my personal observations on the epic, but nothing hostile. The main strain ISKCON can suffer when in contact with outsiders is challenges to its strict worldview. For instance, in a study charting the fortunes of the Hare Krishna Temple in Philadelphia, Zaidman (1997) notes how the leaders have had to make compromises regarding deity worship. Declining sources of revenue have forced the temple leaders to open the doors to immigrant Hindus. These traditional Hindus do not see Krishna as the supreme deity and have requested the worship of different Gods to also be permitted, so continued challenges to its survival have forced ISKCON to become more tolerant of outsiders.

In 1975, when I began researching ISKCON in North America, it was common to hear devotees refer to outsiders as “demons”... By the late 1970s, as some devotees began taking jobs outside the movement, and establishing independent households, outsiders were more commonly referred to as “karmies”. Although still derogatory and boundary-affirming, “karmie” held far less pejorative connotations than “demon”. When large numbers of North American householders began to move outside the communal fold, in the early and mid-1980s, terminology changed yet again. “Karmies” became “non-devotees”. In devotees’ having to make peace with the world to support themselves and their families, “karmies” were no longer distasteful outsiders, who had to be either preached to or avoided. (Rochford, 2000: 179)

In regards to how the religious or spiritual beliefs of an NRSM member were reacted to in interactions with non-believers, a predictable pattern emerged. The ISKCON and Nation of Islam members, whom Wallis (1984) identifies as belonging to world-rejecting NRSMs, generally expressed friction from outsiders. Allan said:

*People are prejudiced because of lack of real knowledge about ISKCON. Thereby, they react in different but normally negative ways, i.e. ISKCON is a sect, it is brainwashing, and it is idol-worship, and so on.*<sup>14</sup>

### ***A Survival Strategy for ISKCON: Critical thought, openness and tolerance***

In terms of the generational transmission of faith all the interviewees were adamant that they would let their children choose their own spiritual path. Many had children who were devoted members of the same religion, while others had children who were pursuing a different path. An ISKCON devotee made the most forceful announcement that children should follow the path of their parents and even this was rather tame:

*If one knows what is the best then he honestly should try to give that best to his dependents including children. Similarly, if one knows what the worst is, he must, by all means, try to keep others, especially his dependents, from getting into it. There is no question of letting the children touch the fire or taste the poison just because they want to do it. No loving parents will knowingly allow their children to spoil.*<sup>15</sup> (Bhadra Balaram das, 2004)

However, words like “spoil” or “touch the fire” used above to describe the possible outcomes if a child does not devote to Krishna, reflect the continued insular thought style and identity ISKCON tends to promote and transmit. Consider the following:

*Well British society, or western society, or the World society is definitely too concerned with materialistic things. Not that everyone's bad, but generally you can see that people are driven by the commercial media bandwagon and they are more or less blind to their true identity. Because there are so many universities; so many schools; so many books; so many televisions, and programmes at the cinema etc. But virtually none of it – if any at all – is teaching people about spiritual life. Therefore, they are wasting their human form of life. Consequently we have a civilisation, which cannot exist without environmental damage, moral damage, political damage, for example, wars over the world's resources and economic instability, use of third world countries as factory sweatshops around Indonesia, Africa etc. So it's so false*

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<sup>14</sup> Extract from interview with 23-year-old male (22/09/2004).

<sup>15</sup> Extract from interview with 40-year-old male (24/09/2004).

*it's a false society, and it's a stealing society. But it's not all bad there are good things; there are animal rights groups. [Pause]*

*But a lot of it is superficial underneath the externals – underneath around us there are slaughterhouses where millions of cows, chickens and pigs are slaughtered everyday... There is degradation in consciousness and people are spiritually completely lost and don't have a clue.<sup>16</sup> (Radha Mohan das, 2004)*

There is much that one could agree with above, but the experiences, including the joys and pains of material existence need not be denied. This is the rigidity found within much Eastern spirituality. ISKCON teaches physical life is illusion; hence, the dress code, the wearing of flowers around the neck and chanting are all also illusionary – Is not the offering of food to a statue of Krishna simply worshiping an illusion? Critical reflection, openness and tolerance of alternative viewpoints are essential if the Hare Krishna movement is to continue to survive. In the words of an ex-member:

There was a great deal that was very good during my time in the Temple but the movement is tremendously naïve and badly managed. It urgently needs devotional counsellors nationally who will not try to preach or interpret in philosophical terms. There is fear of expressing fears and emotions and a pretence they do not exist, at all levels. Sometimes new devotees feel an obligation to keep their reactions philosophical and not emotional and this can build up internal pressures. There are not many leaders within the movement prepared to open up. They have not learned how to talk about experiences or bare their souls and there is an element encouraging the stiff upper lip which can be hard to cope with. (Cited in Harrison, 1990: 115)

Prabhupāda promised “simple truths” for people who were “so dull brained” (Bhaktivedanta, 1997:130). Knowledge based on mimesis of a conservative spiritual tradition with all its contradictions for the modern age is actually what he provided.

[M]imesis is truly primitive; it can be counted on to do its work in minds on every level of development. Rational thinking, on the other hand, can only function in minds that have developed the capacity for it – and in those only when they are operating in the rational mode. For persons who have not developed powers of critical reflection, mimesis will probably be the determining factor in judgement – and to the extent that this is the case, social worldviews may indeed be little else than shared illusions. (Webb, 1998: 84)

Illion (1997[1938]) a German traveller across Tibet in the 1930s tells a fascinating story about his encounters with eastern mystics and hermits. Some of these mystics he encountered were of the “shadow” or “soul snatchers”. He recounts a meeting with the Gentle Friend a spiritual guru whom he soon realises to be an agent of darkness.

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<sup>16</sup> Extract from interview with 34-year-old male (23/08/2004).

The only way to salvation, he went on, was through disappearance of *gti-mug* [ignorance]. Man must discard his separate spiritual existence, observed the Gentle Friend with great vigour. And this result is reached by introspection, that is by giving up what I consider the most Divine thing in man, his Will!... How could critically minded people swallow such an idea? Prehistoric man was group conscious. Modern man is not fully I-conscious... So the trend of evolution in modern man is from group consciousness towards full I-consciousness. And now the Gentle Friend proposed that man, whose I-consciousness is just emerging from group consciousness, should jump back to a state of “total” consciousness which existed prior to group consciousness. (Illion, 1997: 176; 177; 178)

The above passage highlights how denial of self or *I-consciousness* really serves to strip life of any true meaning for the individual and is akin to spiritual annihilation. To ISKCON devotees the ultimate aim of life is return to total consciousness: ‘if a person takes to Krsna consciousness even for a few days, if he gets the injection of Krsna consciousness... That one injection will someday make him perfect in Krsna consciousness, and he’s sure to go back to Godhead’ (Bhaktivedanta, 1997: 76).

There are limits to any spiritual worldview that discourages critical reflection in favour of experiential thinking, while also condoning unquestioning obedience to charismatic authority. Squarcini (2000) notes that six of the original eleven gurus who took over leadership after Prabhupāda’s death eventually left the movement because they could not erase memory of their pre-conversion identities. The stress of keeping an oppositional identity includes the added by-product of potential hostility towards people or groups holding different views or values (Wallis, 1984). Here lies the main explanation of the survival challenges ISKCON has had to overcome (Knott, 2000; Nye, 1996); a moderation of its world-rejecting stance is vital for its future prosperity.

### **The Falun Gong and the Wheel of Law**

The largest (but by no means the only) eastern qigong group to have emerged in the West in recent decades is Falun Gong.<sup>17</sup> Its founder, Li Hongzi, was probably born in 1951 (the question of his precise birth date has been the source of controversy) and established his peculiar brand of qigong in 1992 (Penny, 2003). The origins of Falun

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<sup>17</sup> Qi Gong is the generic name of a complex of techniques aimed at cultivating physical and spiritual well being, with a tradition predating the Christian era. It is often referred to as Chinese yoga. Although spiritual/religious activities in general are viewed with suspicion in Communist China, Qi Gong has been tolerated as a traditional set of physical exercises. A semi-official National Qi Gong Federation has never been seriously disturbed by the regime. For a good history of Qi Gong see Yang (1997).

Gong can be traced back to Li's engagement with the qigong boom of the 1980s and early 1990s in China. In 1998, Li moved permanently to New York City, from where he oversees the expansion of Falun Gong internationally. Small groups exist in the main metropolitan areas of the United States, Britain, and Canada and in some thirty other countries. In 1999, the Chinese regime launched a new campaign against spiritual and religious groups, and Falun Gong was targeted as a superstitious and reactionary group by a press campaign. Unlike other groups, Falun Gong reacted with an unauthorised demonstration of more than 10,000 followers outside Beijing's Zhongnanhai, the residence of China's top leaders, the largest such demonstration in recent Chinese history (Rahn, 2002). The regime was particularly scared by the failure of its intelligence service to prevent the demonstration, and by membership in Falun Gong of some medium-level political and military leaders. The authorities started an unprecedented public campaign against the movement with the help of tracts and comics, and hundreds of local leaders and members were arrested. China also asked United States officials to arrest and extradite Li, a request quickly turned down, with the US instead inviting the Chinese to stop what the outside world perceived as an obvious instance of religious persecution. Although the persecution has scared many followers and driven them underground, millions remain in China and several thousand abroad. Exactly how many "members" Falun Gong has is a matter of dispute (the government uses a figure of 2 million; Li claims 100 million), and "membership" may not even be an entirely applicable concept (Tong, 2002). However, based on the latest statistics there were an estimated 170 practitioners across the United Kingdom and over 10,000 throughout the United States in 2004 (see CDROM). Although the movement recommends a nine-day introduction course and frequent contacts with local centres, it also states that anybody can start practising Falun Gong by following the instructions from one of the many books available free online.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Some factors behind the rise of Falun Gong***

Facing the increasingly severe social crisis, such as the widespread corruption, protests by unemployed workers, drugs, gambling, and gangs, Jiang's regime does not do anything to ease the pain. Instead, they viciously suppress people who believe in "Truthfulness, Compassion, Forbearance." Their perverse act is pushing the Chinese people towards an abyss. Those who are benefiting or

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<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.falundafa.org/eng/books.htm>, which provides downloadable copies of key texts.

expecting to benefit from the regime, whether you are a businessman, the head of an organization, a public servant, policeman, or some other profession, please do not act against your conscience. Don't be used by Jiang's regime to perpetuate the evil persecution. (Clear harmony, 2002)

In order to understand the origins of Falun Gong we have to examine the reasons for its growth and suppression back in China. As Frank argues, 'we cannot separate Falun Gong from the political and economic conditions in which it arose, nor can we absolve the state from responsibility for creating those conditions' (2004: 262). With many religious revivals, underlying economic hardships often play a key role in providing fuel to the ideological fires. Globalisation and the return of ownership over Hong Kong have fostered China's transformation from an inwardly focused socialist state to a key player in international economics and politics. In such a transitory climate the Chinese socialist party has encouraged consumerism and entrepreneurship (Morris *et al.*, 2002). One by-product of such reform has been greater uncertainties and inequalities. Workers and peasants who constituted the backbone of the party are precisely the social sections who have been alienated by the reform packages. The leadership has experienced – as a result of its hybrid system – the worst results of socialism (bureaucracy and lassitude) and of capitalism (growing income disparities and rising unemployment).<sup>19</sup> Thus, China has periodically backtracked, retightening central controls at intervals. The government has struggled to: (a) sustain adequate jobs growth for tens of millions of workers laid off from state-owned enterprises, migrants, and new entrants to the work force; (b) reduce corruption and other economic crimes; and (c) keep afloat the large state-owned enterprises, many of which had been shielded from competition by subsidies and had been losing the ability to pay full wages and pensions. From 80 to 120 million surplus rural workers are adrift between the villages and the cities, many subsisting through part-time, low-paying jobs. While some of the younger generation get new skills and take jobs in other sectors, the living standards of older people still deteriorate (Saywell, 1999).

The increase in urbanisation and industrialisation has brought successes to a new middle class. China has especially benefited from a huge expansion in computer Internet use, and foreign investment remains a key element in remarkable economic

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<sup>19</sup> Lu and Wang (2002) analyse the evolution of China's regional inequalities during the reform period of 1978–1998 based on three geographical scales. Their results indicate that inter-provincial and regional inequalities declined between 1978 and 1990, but have widened steadily since 1990. Urban-rural disparity diminished before 1984 then experienced a decade long surge afterwards to peak in 1994 at a much higher level. However, since 1994 inequality has been declining again.



growth rates. But the price paid for these “successes” is the stress and strain that accompanies them. Accession to the World Trade Organization has helped China strengthen its ability to maintain strong growth rates, but at the same time puts additional pressure on the hybrid system of strong political controls and growing market influences (Zhai and Wang, 2002). Increasing urbanisation has also led to the development of highly impersonal environments in which the sense of community has slowly eroded. In such a fragmenting urban context a movement emphasising prayers, breathing exercises and a return to traditional morality gains support. Falun Gong is one outcome. Falun Gong membership in China consists mainly of middle-aged, middle class retirees, civil servants, factory managers, office workers and housewives. The loose structure of the movement attracted followers for diverse reasons. The target group include those alienated by the injustices of the market economy: people who fear the unstable employment scenario; those drawn by the promises of mental advancement which may help cope with a fast changing society, and others frustrated by widespread government corruption (Tong, 2002). Most are attracted by Falun Gong’s promise of societal salvation and redemption. A majority of the members also see Falun Gong as a safe means of socialising (at least before the clampdown), and many genuinely enjoy the physical exercises (Pramod, 2000).

A key factor accounting for the rise of following in Falun Gong across the West is Li’s skilful marketing on the Internet combined with a strategy of distributing free books, tapes and conducting cheap training seminars. Li learnt of the benefits of such dissemination strategies through his membership in China’s professional Qigong Scientific Research society. He left the society in March 1996 to concentrate on establishing Falun Gong overseas. As part of this objective Li increased postings on the Falun Gong website and also had them translated into English. Many writings signify knowledge of what would appeal to the already established Euro-American New Age audience. For example, *Zhuan Falun* argues that the Earth has been visited by ancient astronauts (Li, 2003), a theory popularised across the West by Erich Von Däniken (see chapter 9). The Web has become an invaluable resource for those wishing to disseminate alternative or controversial beliefs without having to go through the editorial processes associated with other mediums. This platform is now host to numerous conspiracy theories (the most popular in terms of dedicated sites is government mind control) as well as fringe religions (Barkun, 2003; Mayer, 2003). Penny suggests, ‘Falun Gong’s growth and continued diasporic existence is strong

evidence of the power of electronic communication technologies, and in this sense the movement could not have existed in the same form before their development' (2003: 661). Peter's eventual conversion to Falun Gong was based on initial Internet contact:

*There were two qigong groups on the Internet in March 1996 and I read the websites. One was Falun Gong and the other [pause] I can't remember what that one was now. For Falun Gong everything was available free on the Internet so I could download it... anyway me and my wife started doing the exercises and we felt a lot of energy and all the benefits. So afterwards we started feeling pretty good and decided to go to Sweden where there were some people who practise Falun Gong. We went to Sweden to learn from them – so they could check our movements. Then I came back from Sweden and practiced more seriously here. Gradually more and more information became available here on the Internet.<sup>20</sup>*

The recent activity of the Falun Gong in the West needs to be understood with reference to events in China, many western followers are currently engaged in protest campaigns as a result of the ban of 1999. Consequently recruitment of new members has become a periphery aim, as the following two passages illustrate:

**Author:** *Are more people practising Falun Gong as time has progressed?*

**Peter:** *When I started in 1996 to 1999 then it grew very rapidly, from one class in London we ended up having about 30 classes all around the UK. But in 1999 the Chinese regime labelled it a cult, even though it had been around a while, and the negative publicity around the world has led many people to be suspicious of it. Obviously we don't have the media power of the Chinese government, so since the ban many Falun Gong practitioners have focused on human rights, in terms of helping the people who have been persecuted in China and killed by the Chinese government for practicing it. For this reason we haven't really been out promoting it. Now we are not really worried if one person is practising it, or 5 million in the UK. We are more focused on helping the people back in China.<sup>21</sup>*

*Falun Gong practitioners are enjoined not to seek to convert people though encouraged to give them an opportunity to know about it if they are interested. In such cases among my family and acquaintances the reaction is usually mild and polite interest, but without inclination to make the considerable effort of learning to reach any significant understanding. Big changes of external events may change this climate.<sup>22</sup> (Lord Thurlow, 2004)<sup>23</sup>*

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<sup>20</sup> Extract from interview conducted (11/03/2004).

<sup>21</sup> Extract from interview conducted (11/03/2004).

<sup>22</sup> Extract from interview conducted (10/10/2004).

<sup>23</sup> Lord Thurlow is a former senior British diplomat who has actively campaigned for the human rights of Falun Gong practitioners detained and tortured by the Chinese government since the clampdown of 1999. See <http://www.clearharmony.net/articles/200404/19348.html> and <http://www.faluninfo.net>.

***Falun Dafa: A Practice not a Religion?***

The term *Falun Gong* translates as “attaining skill through the Dharma Wheel”, or as “Dharma Wheel Workout”. The Wheel of Dharma has a particularly important spiritual connotation referring to belief in cycles of birth and death (i.e. the notion of reincarnation). Nevertheless, practitioners see Falun Gong primarily as a practice; something ones does rather than believes (Madsen, 2000). They refer to their qigong exercises interchangeably as either *Falun Dafa* (Fundamental Law of the Dharma Wheel) or *Falun Fofa* (Buddhist Law Dharma Wheel). The physical aspect of the practice consists of a set of five exercises that share features of both Buddhist and Daoist meditation systems, though practitioners are careful to point out that Falun Gong does not conform strictly to either school (Li, 2003: 19-23).<sup>24</sup> Of the five set exercises used to channel and harmonise the *qi* (energy) that circulates the body, four are performed standing and involve stretching various parts of the body while moving the arms in circular motions around the torso.

The first exercise set consists of eight separate stretches of the arms in eight different directions. Between each stretch the practitioner briefly tenses the muscles, followed by a sudden release. Many of the stretches have specific names; some borrowed from Buddhism, such as *Mile Shenyao*, “Maitreya Stretching his back”. Between each of the stretches the hands are folded in front of the chest:

This stretching unblocks areas where energy is congested, stimulates the energy within the body and under the skin so that it circulates vigorously, and automatically absorbs a great amount of energy from the universe. This enables all of the meridians in a practitioner’s body to open at the beginning. When one performs this exercise, the body will have a special feeling of warmth and of the existence of a strong energy field. (Li, 2001c: 52)

The following exercise set is named *Falun Zhuang Fa*, or “Falun Standing Stance”. There are four separate postures each held for a minimum of five minutes, several resemble stances used in self-defence systems of martial arts, such as *yiquan*. Li claims frequent performance of “Falun Standing Stance” will facilitate the complete opening of the body’s energy channels, which will enhance wisdom, increase strength, raise one’s level, and develop divine powers. Exercise set three is referred to as *Guantong Liangji Fa*, or “Penetrating the Two Cosmic Extremes”. Two main movements comprise this set and involve the arms being stretched upwards, first one

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<sup>24</sup> Page numbers are based on the downloaded Word version of the document.

at a time then together. Men begin with the left arm, women with the right. The fourth set of exercises is known as *Falun Zhoutian Fa*, the “Falun Heavenly Circuit”, which entails nine repetitions of an intricate coordination of bending and arm moves. These exercises enable the energy of the body to circulate over large areas – from the entire *yin* side to the entire *yang* side of the body, back and forth continuously. The final set of exercises is performed sitting in the lotus position, and requires focusing the mind to visualise a wheel spinning within the abdomen. It is known as *Shentong Jiachi Fa*, “Way of Strengthening Divine Powers”, while in the sitting position seven separate hand gestures are performed. The total sitting time required in order to complete these movements correctly amounts to approximately one hour (Li, 2001c: 52-86).<sup>25</sup>

For ethnographic insight during the last two years, I have regularly practiced five simple cultivation techniques derived from the above sets of exercises.<sup>26</sup> I slowly built up from holding postures for five minutes to over ten minutes; each session (conducted every other day) lasts just under one hour. My personal physical experiences have been tingling and sensations of internal heat mostly in the chest area, especially if I have weight-trained the day prior to my cultivation session. I have also experienced energy surges through my arms when performing *Fo Zhan Qianshou Fa*, “Buddha Showing a Thousand Hands”. This exercise involves standing upright holding one arm pointing outward to the side, while the other arm is tucked under the chest. Maintaining this posture for over five minutes evokes the feeling that my arm no longer exists, and that an external force rather than my own volition is holding it aloft. After finishing the exercise routine I generally feel extremely relaxed and tend to lie down on the bed and fall asleep for a few minutes. Most practitioners I have spoken with report similar bodily sensations in addition to various health benefits:

*I mostly experience definite heat and tingling at the top of my head... probably because I feel relaxed, especially if I am listening to music. I sometimes sweat if I have not done the exercises for a couple of days. I guess the qi is trying to move through blocked channels... I find I have more energy during the week in general I think the exercises make me feel far more healthy.*<sup>27</sup>

(Charlotte, 2003)

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<sup>25</sup> Page numbers refer to Word version of the document. For downloadable videos of all sets of the five exercises demonstrated by Li Hongzhi, see [http://falundafa.org/cng/media.htm#EXERCISE\\_VIDEO](http://falundafa.org/cng/media.htm#EXERCISE_VIDEO).

<sup>26</sup> The Falun Gong journal (*Compassion*) illustrates the five simplified exercises I have been practising; see Falun Dafa Information Center (2004: 70-1).

<sup>27</sup> Extract from interview conducted (19/05/2003).

*The exercises have greatly helped me overcome severe stress symptoms. My blood pressure dropped from 150:200 to normal. My mum in law's lupus healed after 12 months of practice and medical tests.*<sup>28</sup> (Dr X, 2004)

The physical exercises are only half of the story. Chinese qigong traditions assume a profound interpenetration of matter and spirit, body and soul. To maximise health benefits the physical exercises must be accompanied by moral cultivation. In this regard Falun Gong is no different. Two guiding principles lie at its heart: first, *zhen-shan-ren*, “truth, benevolence, and forbearance”; second, that one must cultivate *xinxing* or “innate morality” in order to become enlightened to the truth of human life, and through this to cultivate oneself to higher levels of existence. As far as the latter is concerned Falun Gong texts serve a key scriptural function (Li, 2001a, 2001b, 2003). In other words, simply doing the physical exercises (while having health benefits) is ultimately insufficient for spiritual growth. According to Lord Thurlow:

*Falun Gong has given me new meaning to life and hope for the future of mankind. It offers first, a coherent scheme of values, and, secondly, a clear and credible exposition of the place of humanity in the cosmos, using as far as possible contemporary scientific concepts and terminology. It is not a religion, in so far as it lacks ritual, hierarchy and organised structure. Practitioners work together as a community with close coordination by Email, but remain simply individuals responsible for using their own initiatives, and leading ordinary working and family lives. There are valuable health benefits, assisted by a set of simple daily exercises, but these are accessory, facilitating the practice of inner work and contribution to the spread of the teaching.*<sup>29</sup>

Li Hongzi admits Falun Gong has certain characteristics commonly exhibited by religion, such as “cultivation” leading to “salvation”, but that the movement does not qualify as a religion because it lacks form. His argument is that Falun Gong is not organised with a clear hierarchical base of authority and professional clergy. In contrast, Li presents Falun Gong as a loosely organised network of practitioners who remain “ordinary people” fully immersed in their broader societal roles. The main reason for denial of organisation comes after brutal suppression of the group in China:

There are political and legal issues inherent in the question of whether or not the *falun gong* was a formal organization. Politically, it is in the interests of the regime to demonstrate that the *falun gong* was well organized, to make the point that its many protest rallies were not spontaneous acts of its practitioners, but premeditated protests orchestrated by its leaders to challenge

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<sup>28</sup> Extract from interview conducted (17/04/2004).

<sup>29</sup> Extract from interview conducted (10/10/2004).

regime authority and disrupt social order. The more organized the *falun gong* could be shown to be, then the more justified the regime's repression in the name of social order was. (Tong, 2002: 638)

The intricate details of the disputes between Falun Gong and the Chinese regime have been comprehensively covered elsewhere, and need not be repeated here (e.g. Frank, 2004; Pramod, 2000; Rahn, 2002). What is central is practitioners have repeatedly claimed that the movement is not a religion, but merely a routine set of practices. Thus persecution by the Chinese authorities as a dangerous cult is unwarranted. Li Hongzhi has stated that Falun Gong members can be of many different faiths, as the practice does not contradict nor preclude any religion. In this light the Chinese authorities need to be held accountable for their questionable rhetoric justifying the aggressive clamp down on practitioners (Falun Gong Human Rights Working Group, 2002). But having acknowledged this it is clear upon closer scrutiny of Falun Gong discourse that the movement did (and does) have a spiritually driven political agenda.

*Falun gong* texts involve a challenge to the state's claims on the bodies of individual practitioners, elaborate an alternative hierarchy of values and detail a set of practices designed to realise these goals. The political dimensions of this process become clearer when one views the prescriptive elements of such texts as metaphorical discourses on the nature of the Chinese "body politic." The inherent power of both forms rests in their ability to encapsulate a set of moral critiques of state power from within the boundaries of hegemonic state control. (Thornton, 2002: 666; emphasis in original)

### ***Li Hongzhi: Teaching Moral and Political Salvation in these "End of Days"***

Apart from the bodily centred practices promoted by the Falun Gong there is also a colourful and complex cosmological system (Chang, 2004). This cosmology includes everything from notions of multiple universes, a hierarchy of Gods, existence of previous civilisations, belief in UFOs, aliens and parallel dimensions, to what become more mundane concepts such as reincarnation and karma. The following passage captures the abstruse nature of the cosmology:

I'd say that if the human body really is so immense in the microcosm, then it's not a hallucination. Daoist practices have always thought of the human body as a universe, so if it really is a universe, then the distance from your forehead to the pineal gland is going to be thousands of miles. Go ahead and sprint out, it's far. (Li, 2003: 163)

In these universes within universes, there are multiple dimensions and many vertical levels. According to Li as soon as a human being is born, he or she is also born simultaneously in other dimensions of the cosmos. When human beings die, their bodies in other dimensions still live because these bodies are our moral superiors (similar to New Age concept of a higher self). According to Li moral laws govern the universe, thus human evolution is similarly rule based. The purpose of human life is to eliminate negative energy (karma) from our field and elevate our current selves to the level of Buddhas, or “Gods”. The body is a universe within a universe therefore correct inner cultivation can lead to supernatural abilities. These teachings provide a rationale for energy cultivation. Predictably, if Li Hongzhi’s disciples can become gods by engaging in falun gong, it stands to reason that the founder of this cultivation practice must himself be a deity. This conclusion can be reached not just by inference; it is supported by Li’s own words (see also Penny, 2003):

There are a lot of people who’ve cultivated to high realms but who don’t have any abilities. Their masters have locked them, since they’re worried they won’t handle themselves well and will do bad things. So they don’t let them use their divine powers along the way. There’s a good number of people like that.... There are a lot of people who’ve cultivated pretty well, and they can handle themselves well, so they’re allowed to use a portion of their abilities. If you ask someone like that to just go and show you some of his abilities, there’s no way he would. He’s able to handle those situations. (Li, 2003: 52)

Li is providing such knowledge to assist salvation in these *End of Days*. In this context, the teaching of Falun Gong can be seen as part of the long tradition of Chinese folk religions (Chang, 2004: 32-59). Often the discourse of such inspired groups has a millenarian element: the belief that this world was hopelessly corrupt and would come to an end. Some of these teachings inspired massive revolts, like the *White Lotus Rebellion* at the end of the eighteenth century (Kuhn, 1980).<sup>30</sup> Falun Gong draws on this folk tradition and although the published writings are not clear about this, it can encourage some members to believe in an imminent apocalypse.

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<sup>30</sup> China has a long history of social unrest, which may explain in part the unease of the current socialist party? For instance, the Taiping Rebellion of 1851-64, was a political-religious upheaval led by a Chinese visionary who believed himself commissioned by Christ to wage war on the demons of the Manchu dynasty. Hong Xiuquan, a Cantonese schoolteacher proclaimed himself Heavenly King, formed the God-worshipping Army (comprised of famine-stricken peasants) and in 1853 seized Nanking as his capital. Finally defeated by a Manchu army and a force of volunteers under British Army officer Charles "Chinese" Gordon after 11 years of rebellion, Hong's movement left 20 million dead in its wake. Widespread unrest stirred by the Taiping Rebellion led to Sun Yat-sen's overthrow of the Manchu's in 1911-2 (Spence, 1996). On the later Boxer rebellion of 1900 see Esherick, (1987).

Likewise Western consciousness has also increasingly been influenced by apocalyptic beliefs, as the success of films like *The Day After Tomorrow* indicates (Fenn, 2003b). In recent decades there has also been much scientific debate about the potentially ecologically catastrophic consequences of global warming (Radford, 2003).<sup>31</sup> Certain scientists have repeatedly warned of floods, storms and droughts, which will become more frequent in the future, and have reiterated that climate change is the most severe long-term threat to the planet's life support systems. Some religionists have gone as far as citing the recent Asian Mega Tsunami as physical evidence of the imminent end to the world prophesied in religious scripture like the Bible (Bible Revelations, 2005).

Li (like most modern prophets) pinpoints moral degradation as the primary cause of impending disaster, which has attracted many Westerners open to New Age and ecological ideals, as well as those generally fed up with materialistic lifestyles (Frank, 2004). He also predictably denigrates mainstream scientific knowledge, and thereby in the process casts himself as the potential saviour for all world problems.

People think that the renowned persons, scholars, and different sorts of experts in human society are great. In fact, they are all really insignificant, for they are everyday people. Their knowledge is only that tiny bit understood by the modern science of human society. In the vast universe, from the most macroscopic to the most microscopic, human society is exactly in the very middle, in the outermost layer, and on the outermost surface. Also, its living beings are the lowest form of existence, so their understanding of matter and mind is very limited, superficial, and pitiful. Even if someone were to grasp all of mankind's knowledge, he would still remain an everyday person.

(Li, 2001: 11)

Li encourages Falun Gong practitioners to step forward in China to show defiance to the authorities, which leads to their torture and imprisonment. According to Rahn,

Li makes it clear that the persecution continues and intensifies only because FLG practitioners have not *let go of all their attachments and been able to step forward*. Those followers who step forward and are beaten or die, those who *sacrifice everything are gods*. Those who *renounce* FLG while in re-education camps and become 'reformed' are said by Li to be '*fiends*' and '*malignant tumors*'.  
(Rahn, 2002: 55, emphasis added)

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<sup>31</sup> For instance, Landsberg argues: 'it appears that on the local scale man-made influences on climate are substantial... potential for anthropogenic changes of climate on a larger and even global scale is real. At this stage activation of an adequate worldwide monitoring system to permit early assessment of these changes is urgent' (1997: 225). It seems ironic America (the largest polluter) and self-promoted moral crusader for world democracy did not feel it was urgent enough to sign the Kyoto agreement.



The violence and persecution in China against Falun Gong after 1999 has been increasingly spiritualised by Li. This is a classic strategy justifying counter violence in the face of ideological oppression: ‘Not only is the “other” being demonized in the Falun Gong teachings... practitioners are increasingly told they are elevated to a status higher than human... believing that one’s task is to ‘eliminate evil’, has the potential to justify violent behaviour’ (Rahn, 2002: 58). The result is an endless battle between the paradigm advocated by the Chinese State and that of Falun Gong. Unfortunately, based on the weight of human history there is unlikely to be an easy resolution to the conflict especially since it has now become spiritualised. At this stage victory requires one group’s total placation or complete annihilation (see B. S. Turner, 2003). Juergensmeyer (2000) shows how religious violence provides a sense of empowerment to alienated individuals, marginal groups, and visionary ideologies. One of his main conclusions is that the current climate of global transformation has provided an opportunity for religion, with all its images and ideas to be reasserted as a public force. Lurking in the background of much of religion’s unrest and the occasion for its political revival is the devaluation of secular authority and the perceived need for alternative ideologies of public order. As Madsen argues, ‘Whatever consequences Falun Gong may have for the short-term stability of China, movements like it will play a large role in the long term of twenty-first-century history’ (2000: 247).

Falun Gong will in the long run become another exhibit in the emerging global market place where even enlightenment is offered at a price. There is undoubtedly the need for pressing investigation into human rights violations committed by the Chinese state. Nevertheless, the American and British governments are unlikely to press too hard for explanations that would jeopardise commercial engagement and profit from China. Economic interest not altruistic concern tends to guide interventionist agendas (Townsend and Gordon, 2002). As for the mainly liberal and secular ethos of western academic establishments, tolerance of a group that flatly condemns homosexuality and criticises female equality will be short lived. Chang lists Li’s radical views:

In the coming “apocalypse” (*jienan*), good people will be protected. Some people, however, are not “redeemable” and will have to be “destroyed” (*xiaohui*) and “eliminated” (*taotai*) “in a big plague” or an explosion.” The gods will first destroy homosexuals for violating “the rules that were given to humankind.” Other “evil people” will also be destroyed “in a horrific manner”: Not only will they suffer great pain, their suffering will be prolonged. Human beings, in general, will be “obliterated” because man has

“indulged in his demonic nature (*moxing*) by doing whatever he desires,” resulting in his having “fallen to the lowest level” instead of “living in openness and light.” For that, “he will be thoroughly obliterated from the universe.” (Chang, 2004: 94)

Is the world in need of complete destruction for redemption? Perhaps, but the less radical explanation is that globalisation has raised complexity and amplified identity concerns and terror due to the rise in clashes of culture (Kinnvall, 2004; Webb, 1998).

Wilson (2004) argues Man was not made for civilisation, and hence the latter is un-natural and will always be prone to destruction. As an aggressive, highly energetic creature, man finds it difficult to adjust himself to social restraints. Under urban conditions sex becomes the only outlet for expression and frustration, the negative side effects of which are hyper-sexuality or perversions. We could also add that when humans experience complexity and uncertainty they generally react with trepidation and fear, both primordial survival instincts. Thus, safe socio-evolutionary progress requires critical reflection to ensure our fears do not drive us to commit insane acts. The wish for apocalypse expressed by Li is the outcome of hopelessness with a society gone awry and one seen to be governed by un-pious leaders.<sup>32</sup> In the West we are also feeling the pinch from the actions of fear filled authorities:

The president’s current attribution of evil to an ‘axis’ of only three countries includes whole societies in addition to Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network, while excluding the United States as it inevitably and regretfully inflicts ‘collateral damage’ on innocents abroad. When apocalyptic imagery has moved from the theatre and ritual into official rhetoric, there is no time or place potentially immune to terror. (Fenn, 2003b: 223)

## Conclusion

The import of ISKCON and Falun Gong to the West is a product of the globalisation and exchange of religious ideas. Although beliefs of the groups – like in reincarnation – are relatively new to the predominantly Christian West (Campbell, 1999), they still derive from a long tradition of Eastern spiritual doctrines (Chang, 2004; Daner, 1976).

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<sup>32</sup> Li also promotes passivity and conservatism – like Prabhupāda (ISKCON’s founder) – based on similar beliefs in reincarnation. He teaches disciples should refrain from interfering in others’ affairs in general because the truth is not readily evident. For example, when we see one person beating another, what appears to be an act of aggression could be the “act of clearing karmic debt”. He also states, ‘we shouldn’t stir up conflict if we disagree with certain things. The things you dislike might at times not necessarily be wrong’ (Li, 2001c: 38). Could not his very own stirring up of troubles in China be wrong? In his own view obviously not because he and Falun Gong practitioners are enlightened beings.

Thus, after peeling away the layers to the discourses of these particular groups a very conservative core emerges. This conservative core rejects aspects of modern culture such as moral relativism and liberal attitudes towards sexual behaviour, while emphasising the importance of communal responsibilities and individual sacrifice for spiritual progress. While such Eastern religions seem exotic and novel (and in some ways they are) to western sensibilities, at the core they simply offer old Gods (with new names) and familiar promises of purification and salvation from damnation.

The notion of reincarnation implying a preordained spiritual scale is central to both ISKCON and Falun Gong worldviews, but such a belief translates to a very passive outlook to life and taken to extremes a conservative and intolerant attitude towards suffering. Total obedience to the doctrines of a deified leader also negates the reality that ‘worldviews take shape historically in communities and [that] their limits of development are largely set by the prevailing levels of psychological development among those who engage actively in intellectual and spiritual exploration’ (Webb, 1998: 85). Prabhupāda’s spiritual worldview derived from an uncritical acceptance of Bengali interpretations of ancient Hindu texts. Li Hongzhi’s Falun Gong was initially an attempt to revitalise the spiritual practice of qigong in a “spiritless” communist state. But the accompanying discursive formation that has emerged is a syncretization of the religious folk traditions of China mixed with aspects of contemporary Western New Age culture, the latter probably included for wider commercial appeal.

There continues to be transition and uncertainty in the trajectory of the modern global world, climate change and the threat of ecological catastrophe serve as constant reminders of human fragility (Forsyth, 2001; Goudie, 1997; Tickell, 1997). Giddens would say we are in an epoch of high-risk scenarios within which ‘the minimising of danger must be the overriding goal’ (1990: 155). This leads some to submit to the authoritative promises made by charismatic leaders, while others seek peace from the turmoil of life through the adoption of more detached and seemingly “pure” lifestyles. S. Turner (2003) suggests that the decision to follow a charismatic leader is a drastic all or nothing choice. The situation in which such a choice becomes rational is in times of trouble or hopelessness. For many we seem to be in such times. Prabhupāda insightfully realised many western people want a return to “simple truths”; while Li Hongzhi preaches individuals demand effective protection from “demonic influence”.

Postmodernists would correctly assert that all ideas are products of existing societal structure and norms. Therefore, no framework even religious ones devised for

understanding things, such as human rights or morality will be universally valid. For this reason postmodernism is closely related to cultural relativism, the idea that the beliefs and practices of a society can only be judged in terms of how well they function in that society. Thus, in their postmodern turn cultural relativists such as Baudrillard (1983; 1993) and Jameson (1998) have suggested that distinctions within media and between texts, audiences and contexts are increasingly difficult to make. In other words, cultural studies exclude the very possibility of progressive or critical encoding or decoding of texts, and the subsequent production of truth claims.

On the other hand, because it is idealist, postmodernism cannot help us at all to address the problems arising from the more objective social structures associated with capitalism and the world system. Critical realism can. Alone today, critical realism affords a philosophical foundation for an emancipatory politics that is collective, macrosocial and reorganisational in orientation. Although critical realism cannot itself persuade people to pursue such a politics, a critical realist sociology ought to provide the analysis that an eventual reorganisational movement will need. (Porpora, 2001: 266)

If we admit human evolution is cyclical and knowledge transient as the relativists imply, then the only tool we have to assist us in making upward progress along the evolutionary spiral is the development of a critical facility (Groff, 2004). Sociological research can help in this endeavour: ‘via an immanent critique of alternative accounts of being’ (Cruickshank, 2003: 95). Postmodern relativism is not the most promising way forward for grasping the complexity of a globalising world (Norris, 1993, 1996). We should acknowledge several points, which relativists omit: (1) the existence of a real world (mind and belief independent); (2) law-governed (e.g. casual) regularities within the physical domain; (3) their ability to hold good from one particular context to another, and (4) their invariance across cultures – likewise across languages, paradigms or sociohistorical locales – regardless of whether they are known or accepted by members of some given community. In the words of Bokser (2002: 267):

[R]econstitution of civility is also understood as a counterweight to pluralism and its potential fragmentation. It is in the midst of this type of society that the experience of collective identities – among which religious identity plays a central role, with its mutuality, commonality, mutual involvement and common purpose – may provide the basis for a shared and peaceful life.

There will always be some “good” in religious or spiritual discourses; the task should be to uncover what is of social value through explanatory critique.

### **Scientology: Clearing the World?**

With man now equipped with weapons sufficient to destroy all mankind on Earth, the emergence of a new science capable of handling man is vital. Scientology is such a science. It was born in the same crucible as the atomic bomb. The basic intelligence of Scientology came from nuclear physics, higher mathematics and the understanding of the ancients in the East.

(Hubbard, 1997: 163)

Scientology is a new religious *Movement* that promises to “clear” the human agent or self of deviances and the external world of *social injustices*. The word ‘movement’ has been emphasised here to bring to the fore the social change motivations driving the organisation (Zablocki and Looney, 2004). Scientology is one of the largest NRSMs claiming an estimated 50,000 active followers worldwide in 1997 (see CDROM for additional membership data). The organisation has significant financial and marketing resources at its disposal and is one of a handful of NRSMs that are genuinely multinational. Despite its visible and high profile, the discourses and social agenda of Scientology have received minimal systematic investigation in the sociological literature (exceptions are Bainbridge and Stark, 1980; Locke, 2004; Wallis, 1977; Whitehead, 1974). The history of the Church of Scientology and the personal biography of the late founder L. Ron Hubbard, have both been subjected to conflicting accounts (contrast Church of Scientology International, 2004a with Miller, 1987). Regardless of the precise details concerning Hubbard’s personal life, one fact is undeniable; the man was a prolific and successful writer. According to Scientology sources (i.e. New Era publications catalogue 2003-2004) he wrote 40 million words on Dianetics and Scientology, spoke 25 million words in 3000 lectures, not to mention his 500 novels and short stories (mostly in the science fiction genre). I will not concern myself with sketching the peculiarities of his life based on secondary sources, as even ‘with modern founder-leaders it is difficult to disentangle hagiographic myth from historical fact’ (Chryssides, 1999: 281). Instead, the main questions I address are: What techniques of self and modes of action does Scientology promote, and how do these construct and maintain convert identity? Second, what does Scientology actually seek to change in the structures and institutions of society as object?

***Techniques of the Self: Dianetics, Auditing and the notion of “Clear”***

Hubbard founded the Church of Scientology officially in 1954, as a by-product of Dianetics, a successful therapeutic movement he had originated in 1948. Two formal books outlining the philosophy of Dianetics (Hubbard, 2002, 2003) first published in 1950 had become something of an overnight sensation. According to Wallis (1977) because of its popular success Dianetics began to fragment, leading Hubbard to form Scientology in the hope of preserving the ideals of the movement.<sup>1</sup> The primary aim of Dianetics is to enable humanity to unlock the limitless potential of the mind, by becoming “clear” through the therapeutic procedures of auditing. Hubbard (2003: 15) defined and highlighted the merits of “A Clear” as someone who:

...can be tested for any and all psychoses, neuroses, compulsions and repressions (all aberrations) and can be examined for any autogenetic (self-generated) diseases referred to as psychosomatic ills. These tests confirm the Clear to be entirely without such ills or aberrations. Additional tests of his intelligence indicate it to be high above the current norm. Observation of his activity demonstrates that he pursues existence with vigor and satisfaction.

Dianetics, in contrast to the many philosophical and religious discourses promoting dualism by emphasising the mind or the soul as the real essence of self, contends instead that while both mind and body are things possessed by the self, neither can be associated with the ultimate self. The true self is the “thetan” or spirit, a godlike creative force that is immortal. Matter, energy, space and time (‘MEST’) the four principal elements comprising the physical universe are the direct consequences of creative thetan activity. MEST has no independent reality; it seems real only because thetans agree that it exists. Here Hubbard (1997) resorts to the traditional Hindu spiritual dictum of “all is illusion”, arguing that thetans have become entrapped in MEST forgetting their real godlike state of being, which ultimately transcends MEST. The thetan is described in Scientology as having no mass, no wavelength, no energy and no time or location in space. Hubbard (1997: 77) deliberately avoided using the traditional word “soul” (defined as the spiritual and immortal part of a human being), due to the historical baggage associated with the term and its confusion with the mind:

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<sup>1</sup> Wallis says, ‘A severe challenge to Hubbard’s standing in the movement came when independent auditors began to proclaim that they had produced “clears”. Such auditors were eagerly sought for guidance, training and auditing, and rapidly moved into positions of leadership in the Dianetics community’ (Wallis, 1977: 84). The implication of this development according to Wallis and shared by Aldridge (2000: 14) is that Hubbard recast his science of the mind as a religion in order to centralise authority solely into his hands.

‘The thetan receives, by the communication system called the mind, various impressions, including direct views of the physical universe’ (Hubbard, 1997: 81).

Clearly distinguishing the notion of mind from that of thetan, Hubbard, introduced two specific dimensions to mind involved in managing sense impressions: (1) the analytical mind and (2) the reactive mind. The analytical mind when operating optimally functions like a super-efficient computer managing bodily processes by providing as accurate as possible data to assist mental computations. However, the performance and computations of the analytical mind can be degraded by engrams (memories of past traumatic events) that are stored by the second aspect of mind – the reactive element. Thus, the sole task of auditing ‘is the removal of the content of the reactive engram bank’ (Hubbard, 2003: 227). Through the therapeutic process of auditing, which involves reading outputs from the “E-meter” emotional stresses are gradually deleted from the reactive mind in the guise of a “Release”.

When the person holding the E-Meter electrodes thinks a thought, looks at a picture, reexperiences an incident or shifts some part of the reactive mind... These changes in the mind influence the tiny flow of electrical energy generated by the E-Meter, causing the needle on its dial to move. The needle reactions on the E-Meter tell the auditor where the charge lies, and that it should be addressed. (Church of Scientology International, 1993: 81)

The above procedure of using the E-Meter to release negative engrams from the memory bank continues until the behaviouristic reactive mind is completely replaced by the fully self-aware analytic mind – the coveted state of clear. The Scientology Classification Graduation and Awareness Chart of Levels and Certificates (i.e. The Bridge to Total Freedom) outline seven grades of processing that need to be passed before reaching the status of clear (Church of Scientology International, 1993: 97). Auditing has extended even further than this and “clear” is now a relatively low status compared to that of the Operating Thetan (OT). OTs are “at cause” meaning they can create and manipulate MEST at will. This implies paranormal capabilities such as being able to leave the body. Fifteen OT levels exist beyond clear, however, not much is known about them due to secrecy (Church of Scientology International, 1993: 97).

Another pre-requisite of attaining “clear” status directly involves the body and entails ridding and keeping it free from toxins. Pre-clears (person being audited) are told to enrol on the Purification Rundown course, which aims to eliminate toxins with prescriptions of vitamins and regular saunas (the latter effectively expel toxins

through prolonged sweating). Scientologists avoid taking recreational drugs, alcohol in large quantities and medication unless absolutely vital. A pre-clear who undergoes auditing must not have consumed alcohol, even in moderation, within the previous 24 hours, and the use of paracetamol or similar pain killers makes one ineligible for auditing for seven days. I underwent a complimentary auditing session during a visit to the Church of Scientology in East Grinstead. I was asked about my personal habits on the above matters before the auditing session, and it was explained how they could affect the outcome of the procedure. I never drink alcohol and had not taken any painkillers for several months. Therefore, the auditor seemed reasonably confident of the value of conducting my session. I experienced no physical pain or discomfort from holding the electrodes connected to the E-Meter. The auditor asked me general questions about my PhD and inquired how I felt it was going. I responded naturally to all the questions and explored my feelings in depth. This interaction lasted for about 30-40 minutes and I was told that no engrams seemed to be emerging from discussion of my PhD. I took this as positive news by surmising that I was at least operating as well as possible in this particular area of my life!

Those casting a cursory eye over auditing would remark that it appears similar to psychoanalysis, psychiatry or hypnosis. Hubbard made it clear that he rejected any such comparisons (Hubbard, 1997: 9-10). He emphasised the interpretative dimension to Freudian psychoanalysis, arguing it is based on the psychologist's own assumptions of what was happening in the patient's mind. Dianetics auditors do not attempt to provide interpretations. They simply rerun incidents with the pre-clear till the negative engrams vanish. Hubbard stressed the empirical basis of auditing:

Discharge the reactive engram bank and the schizophrenic faces reality at last, the manic depressive sets forth to accomplish things, the neurotic stops clinging to books which tell him how much he needs his neuroses and begins to live... These are scientific facts. They compare invariably with observed experience. (Hubbard, 2003: 70)

Scientologists also claim that psychologists or psychiatrists treat human beings simply as bodies; hence they do not cure the root causes of mental illness, by addressing the spiritual side of humanity. They either incorrectly treat mental conditions chemically (with harmful mind drugs) or through electric shock (which causes more aberrations to form in the reactive mind). Through his studies of the mind Hubbard had become convinced of the existence of the immortal thetan after discovering the "Time Track".



This is the record of a persons past lives and became apparent from memories arising during auditing, some of which did not fit the known record of human history, while others were overtly extraterrestrial (Hubbard, 1996). According to Piers:

*As you increase the awareness of the individual, you are also increasing his abilities and it is noticeable to me that as Scientologists progress on their own 'Spiritual' path. This results in them having more of a sense of responsibility and ability to help others. They tend to do much more for others and have a greater social conscience along with this increased ability to help. The goal of Scientology is a world without crime, insanity and war where the able can prosper and honest people have rights. This tends to become the goal of its parishioners as they see how this can practically be achieved.<sup>2</sup>*

### ***From Dianetics a Science of mind, to Scientology the science of Life***

Dianetics was originally concerned with addressing problems pertaining to individual selves and minds in a scientific manner, but according to Whitehead (1974) the move to Scientology and recognition as a religion led to the development of a more complex metaphysical system. Here in the development of Hubbard's philosophy we see once again the reflexive nature of modernity at work. Referring to the Dianetics stage as the 'materialist version' (1974: 578) of Hubbard's beliefs, Whitehead argues that his 'commitment to a sober non-charismatic science, if it existed at all, was never very deep' (1974: 580). After Scientology Hubbard became 'a more honest man' with a set of ideas able to 'account not only for past lives and the wild assortment of incidents which people found in their earlier lifetimes, but also for the whole range of uncanny phenomena which have hitherto been relegated to the realm of the supernatural' (Whitehead, 1974: 580-1). Scientology also tried to diverge from traditional religious discourses by depicting humanity's true nature as "good" and hence the body as not innately sinful (see chapter 2). Instead, Hubbard cast the "villain of the piece" as the reactive mind (Hubbard, 2002: 73-89).

This is the mind which keeps war a thing of alarm, which makes politics irrational, which makes superior officers snarl, which makes children cry in fear of the dark. This is the mind which makes a man suppress his hopes, which holds his apathies, which gives him irresolution when he should act and kills him before he has begun to live. (Hubbard, 2003: 69)

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<sup>2</sup> Interview extract with 36-year-old male (06/10/2004).

Hubbard (1997) reasoned that interior aberrations of the reactive mind stem from the traumatic experiences encountered in the exterior world. Humanity is basically good and is concerned with survival, but aberrations occur when this drive for survival is threatened. In order to develop an ethical framework for optimum survival Hubbard devised the eight dynamics. These dynamics show the interactions and interrelations between the self (first dynamic) and other dimensions of the external realm. The ‘self’ dynamic concerns not merely the physical survival of one’s self, but also maintenance of good health for as long as possible, as well as active engagement in hobbies: ‘Here we have individuality expressed fully’ (Church of Scientology International, 1993: 70). The second ‘creativity’ dynamic is making things for future survival and is linked with propagation of the species, which entails maintenance of the family unit. The third dynamic of ‘group survival’ emphasises the social nature of human beings and how groups emerge and coalesce. Some groups have serious humanitarian concerns such as ecological organisations, while others exist solely for recreational purposes. The fourth dynamic is ‘species’ or ‘humanity’. Whereas British nationality would be a third dynamic for Britons, all nationalities together would be considered the fourth dynamic. War would be an example of when the fourth dynamic breaks down.

Alongside the human species there are other life forms (animals, birds, insects – the fifth dynamic), which constitute an essential element of life on earth (the sixth dynamic). This is also the dynamic of the physical universe of MEST, which is also striving to survive. Transcending the physical realm are spiritual beings, some of whom are men and women who have “left the body” to experience spiritual existence beyond physical death. Thus, the seventh dynamic is life force: ‘A subheading of this dynamic is ideas and concepts and the desire to survive through these’ (Church of Scientology International, 1993: 71). The final dynamic is ‘infinity’ and is sometimes referred to as the ‘Creator dynamic’, since it refers to the Supreme Being who sustains the physical universe: ‘It actually embraces the allness of all’ (Ibid). There is little in Dianetics that addresses the eighth dynamic. Dianetics, rather, prepares the individual to reach a state where he and she can comprehend the Supreme Being dynamic, an exploration of which awaits the OT levels that properly belong to Scientology.

The eight dynamics make fuller sense when combined with Scientology best-practice ethical guidelines. The ethically correct course of action in any given context is that which results in the best possible outcome for all eight dynamics. So a course of action that benefited one’s self (first dynamic), but which was detrimental to one’s

family (second dynamic) or social group (third dynamic), would not be a satisfactory policy to pursue. Predictably Hubbard foresaw much to fear in western society, which is largely modelled on the capitalist ideals of individualism, private ownership and promotion of an entrepreneurial (i.e. profit maximising) rather than social spirit:

Activities which brought minimal survival to a lesser number of dynamics and damaged the survival of a greater number of dynamics could not be considered rational activities.

One of the reasons that this society is dying and so forth is that it's gone too far out of ethics. Reasonable conduct and optimum solutions have ceased to be used to such an extent that the society is on the way out. (Hubbard, 1995: 46)

On the other hand, a policy that sacrifices one human being (a loss on dynamic one) for the good of humanity (a gain on the fourth dynamic), could be ethically justifiable in Scientology terms: 'To be good, a thing must contain construction which outweighs the destruction it contains. A new cure which saves a hundred lives and kills one is an acceptable cure' (Hubbard, 1995: 49).

Scientology ethics mirror utilitarianism, which is based on the philosophy of John Stuart Mill (Scarre, 1996). According to utilitarianism, an action is judged to be right if it maximises total or average utility, which is similar to the notion of acting in the interests of higher dynamics. It has been argued that constantly attempting to put utilitarianism into practice could be self-defeating, in that utility will not always be maximised in the long-run by doing so (Scarre, 1996). Acting in the interests of the highest dynamics also assumes perfect knowledge on the part of the actor/actors undertaking the actions. Nonetheless, much conflict in the world stems from feelings of injustice and oppression, which can cross-cut the linear formulation of dynamics. Hubbard's ethical framework is based on the principle of survival in line with the greater good, but this makes the leap of faith that the two could be complementary. In addition, Hubbard's assumption about the innate goodness of humanity mirrors Scientology's world-affirming nature, rather than the complexity of social reality.

When a person finds himself committing too many harmful acts against the dynamics, he becomes his own executioner. This gives us the proof that man is basically good. When he finds himself committing too many evils, then, causatively, unconsciously or unwittingly, man puts ethics in on himself by destroying himself; and he does himself in without assistance from anybody else... The criminal who leaves clues behind is doing so in hopes that someone will come along to stop him from continuing to harm others. He is basically good and does not want to harm others; and in the absence of an

ability to stop himself outright, he attempts to put ethics in on himself by getting thrown in prison where he will no longer be able to commit crimes.  
(Hubbard, 1995: 48)

The above is not valid or reliable evidence upon which to attribute goodness as an innate predisposition shared by all men or women. For example, *The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers* recounts numerous instances of mass murderers being captured and then released by incompetent authorities (Lane and Gregg, 1992). These serial killers often went on to murder again. If they were innately good, as Hubbard says, they would have confessed to their crimes on their initial capture. Furthermore, data for the United States from the *Religion and Religion II Survey Programs* shows that belief in “human nature” as fundamentally perverse and corrupt had increased from 5.5 percent in 1991 to 6.8 percent in 1998. In addition, those saying they believe human nature to be basically good declined from 15.2 percent (1991) to 14.7 percent (1998). The majority of those surveyed believed innate human nature to be neutral, rising from 23.4 percent (1991) to 25.3 percent (1998). As Collier rightly argues, ‘it does not follow that there is a good and free being fully formed inside each evil and enslaved one, just waiting to get out... As against this I think spiritual liberation is a work of transformation’ (2004b: 173). Goodness is a potential to be realised by human beings, not a pre-given quality (Kant, 1998). If goodness is innate why does Scientology training require such complex processes and daunting grading systems to realise it?

### ***Scientology and World Problems: Educational and Rehabilitation Programs***

With Scientology, man can prevent insanity, criminality and war. It is for man to use. It is for the betterment of man.  
(Hubbard, 1997: 163)

Apart from the “other worldly” and sometimes mysterious elements of belief (i.e. OT levels), Scientology is also plain and clear having many programs that are focused on providing practical solutions for “this worldly” problems. With more than 2,300 churches, missions, groups and organisational offices in at least 107 countries (and still expanding), Scientology is evolving into a formidable international operation (Church of Scientology International, 1994: 8, 11). Scientology follows a well-researched strategy upon entry into new markets (countries) ripe for “clearing” and “tech that works” (Kent, 1999). First ‘The Way to Happiness’ campaign is launched, which aims to improve morals and restore honesty and trust around the world. In

essence this amounts to distribution of a series of moralistic booklets that publicise Hubbard's name and written works, as well as outlining 21 moral precepts. Some 50 million copies of these booklets have been distributed in 40 countries and translated into 17 languages (Church of Scientology International, 1994: 44). Emphases in the booklets are also placed on the practical benefits people can and have derived from applying Hubbard's moral philosophy of happiness. 'In one year alone, 324 major recognitions were received by the Foundation, 131 of them from government officials worldwide acknowledging *The Way to Happiness* for its role in fostering greater social responsibility and tolerance' (Church of Scientology International, 1993: 343). Members of NRSMs were generally adamant that modern society lacked a clear moral code or ethical framework, hence their conversions. The following is illustrative:

*I have lived here 30 years. I think British society is less caught up with materialistic things than the United States, but certainly looking at the younger generation, I would say yes they are more materialistic. The morals that had come with the expectation that a family would be associated with a church have disappeared. This has left a true moral vacuum.*<sup>3</sup>

(Tom, 2004)

Aside from this generic strategy to improve morality in societies throughout the world, Scientology also strives to disseminate and institutionalise the teachings of its founder on the correct drug rehabilitation methods (Narconon), as well as effective prisoner reform procedures (Criminon). Scientology reports that a sociological study by a Spanish research group in 1987, 'confirmed the remarkable results of Narconon. Of the students surveyed, 69.2% were still off drugs two years later' (Church of Scientology International, 1993: 373). Criminon tries to rehabilitate inmates by re-instilling a sense of social responsibility. Hubbard argued: 'If you want to rehabilitate a criminal, just go back and find out when he did lose his personal pride. Rehabilitate that one point and you don't have a criminal anymore' (Church of Scientology International, 1993: 327). There have been no independent longitudinal studies on the value of Criminon (as far as I am aware). However, there are some testimonials by prisoners, which were sent to the Church that express satisfaction with the courses (Church of Scientology International, 1993: 328-9). Piers asserted:

*I have seen Scientology expand massively in the UK... but the far bigger expansion that I have seen is in the general participation in our social*

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<sup>3</sup> Interview extract with 55-year-old male (07/09/2004).

*betterment programs, which encompass many millions of people. These are not Scientologists as such, but people interested in helping others that use sections of the Scientology 'technology' to assist with Criminal Reform, Broken Marriages, Bringing up Families, Business and work, with Drug and Substance Addiction, Social Betterment and Community Programs, Disaster Relief, Illness and Injury Recovery, Human Rights, and so on.*<sup>4</sup>

Applied Scholastics is a third Scientology program that aims to improve the educational performance of individuals by teaching them a study technology. The main ideal of the program is to help remedy the learning difficulties of people across all ages and intellects. This is based on the tactic of targeting six areas of education provision: (1) teacher training; (2) schools; (3) English as a second language; (4) tutoring individuals; (5) training business staff to apply the study technology, and (6) training human resource professionals, so that they, in turn, can train their staff. The advantages of implementing this teaching “tech” are emphasised using the familiar Scientology zeal and polish (Church of Scientology International, 1993: 334-9). Since 1988 the Applied Scholastics program along with Criminon and Narconon have all fallen under the jurisdiction of Scientology’s Association for Better Living and Education (ABLE). The Church of Scientology International charts ABLE’s goals:

While ABLE’s mission is to reverse the decline of our civilisation – to once again make learning a joy, our streets safe, our people able to face life sanely and rationally – the satisfaction gained by the staff of ABLE and its Scientology supporters and volunteers comes from helping individuals, those building blocks of our society so often ignored and over looked. There is no greater fulfilment in any act than there is in safeguarding life, in restoring to an individual hope and pride and competence. (1993: 347)

The strategy Scientology follows to instigate change within the institutions of society as object lies in the projection of its “tech” into all the facets of collective life. Here we see what would be termed in marketing a blanket strategy. Scientologists I met formally for interview, as well as those spoken with informally, expressed great confidence in their various techniques of the self as solutions to life’s challenges. From developing the individual mind, unleashing the operating thetan, rehabilitating the addict, reforming the criminal degenerate, teaching the illiterate, to providing the secret to happiness – Scientology “tech” was seen as invaluable. Margaret reinforces the point:

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<sup>4</sup> Interview extract with 36 year-old male (06/10/2004).

*When others see a person doing well in life generally they want to know the 'secret'. Many a successful businessman has made a fortune in writing a book on his successful actions. People do want to know how to improve themselves... The main benefits one can get from being in Scientology are improvement in the way they handle their lives and how they influence (for the better) those around them. It gives the knowledge of life. It differs from person to person. Improvement of self is definitely part of the benefits.<sup>5</sup>*

### ***Psychiatry, Scientology's reviled "Other"***

Scientology has had a truly turbulent history. Since the emergence of Dianetics in the 1950s and through to the present day, the religion has constantly been in conflict with various parties. The primary conflict has been with the psychiatric profession, but there have also been legal cases filed against ex-members, anti-cult organisations and Internet user groups (Aldridge, 2000; Beckford, 1985; Peckham, 1998). Hubbard had the following to say about the evils perpetrated by psychiatry:

The psychiatrist and psychologist have carefully developed a lawless and irresponsible public attitude towards crime... Crime statistics, ever since these men have taken over in courts, prisons, education and social welfare, have soared to a point where the honest policeman is near despair. (1995: 61)

Scientologists following Hubbard are therefore highly critical of the use of psychiatric drugs, electric shock and brain operations to treat mental illness and criminality. As a by-product of this distrust a social action group was established in 1969 to uncover psychiatric malpractices and is still active today under the guise of the Citizens Commission on Human Rights (CCHR). This group researches, catalogues and publishes information on psychiatric abuses across the world (Citizens Commission on Human Rights, 2003). A particularly successful recent campaign targeted the drug Prozac. Through television appearances and newspaper advertisements, CCHR claimed that Prozac caused violence and suicide. As a consequence of the campaign in mid-1991 sales of the drug fell from 25% to 21% of the market share of all anti-depressants within the pharmaceutical industry (Fieve, 1994: 92-3). The CCHR is also actively campaigning against the drugging of children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), because: 'ADHD is an invented label with no objective, valid means of identification' (CCHR, 2001: 12). CCHR argues that the psychiatric obsession with prescribing drugs for ADHD, and antipsychotics as the

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<sup>5</sup> Interview extract with 54-year-old female (29/11/2004).

treatment for schizophrenia stem from corporate greed not humanitarian concern. In such cases pharmaceutical companies manufacturing the drugs are the real winners along with their psychiatric co-conspirators, not those fraudulently diagnosed:

In 2000, the total annual U.S. sales of antipsychotic drugs was \$4 billion. By 2003, sales had reached \$8.1 billion. Internationally, the sales were over \$12 billion... Today, psychiatry clings tenaciously to antipsychotics as the treatment for “schizophrenia,” despite their proven risks and despite studies which show that when patients stop taking the atypicals, they improve.

(CCHR, 2004a: 7)

Knowledge about chemical imbalances in the brain leading to mental illness is far from an accepted science. It is not just the Scientology affiliated CCHR that has noted this lacuna in psychiatric diagnostic methodology and drug treatments based on it. As far back as 1964 Don Jackson, a graduate from Stanford Medical School and former Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, argued that biological theories of mental illness, particularly genetic or hereditary theories, were not based on hard scientific evidence or data (Jackson, 1964). He rejected the term mental “illness” and used the term “disorder” instead, which to him had a different meaning. He argues, ‘Mental disorders cannot be diagnosed by such anatomical or chemical means as urinalysis or blood pressure or X rays’ (1964: 4), a statement that remains as valid today as when he wrote it some 40 years ago (Valenstein, 1998). He observes that the ‘fathers of modern psychiatry were, in the main, medical men’ and this ‘situation led not only to using medical terms but to classifying mental disorders like physical diseases, and the problems created by this understandable but mistaken technique still plague the profession’ (Jackson, 1964: 5-6).<sup>6</sup>

Hubbard and the CCHR justifiably open the methods of psychiatry to outside scrutiny and critique. However, Kent believes Hubbard goes too far by portraying psychiatrists as “demons” who have ‘not only ruined this world but had been adversely affecting humanity throughout all of people’s previous lives’ (Kent, 1999: 148). Here we discover a classic example of how group and self-identity is affirmed

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<sup>6</sup> A seemingly successful approach to treating mental disorder is based on treating vitamin deficiencies or targeting an individual’s diet as the causes of brain impairment. Holford suggests a balanced diet of essential brain foods (i.e. Optimum Nutrition) can be a key factor in curing many serious conditions, from autism to schizophrenia.

[T]hese nutrients ‘tune up’ different aspects of our brain, and it is likely that the drugs currently used employ similar mechanisms, but with much more undesirable side-effects. They are like sledge-hammers compared to nutrients, and although useful in the short-term are best avoided in the long-term. (Holford, 2003: 205)



(i.e. as a Scientologist) by de-humanising a dangerous other (i.e. psychiatrists). It would be naïve to deny the possibility that psychiatrists are indeed sometimes prone to incompetence and even malpractice, but demonising and alienating *them all* in a messianic crusade creates rifts within the social realm. Many psychiatrists themselves are critical of using drugs as a panacea for mental ills (Breggin, 2000).<sup>7</sup> In a series of scathing publications the CCHR blames psychiatry for a whole host of greater evils such as creating racism, attempting to destroy religious morality, as well as being the intelligence behind terrorist groups operating around the world.<sup>8</sup>

Through their history of invented racial “diseases,” arbitrary judgments on “better stock” and bogus scientific claims like “lower IQ” and “racial inferiority,” psychiatry and psychology have not only legitimized 19th, 20th and 21st century racism, but also provided the reason for outright genocide.

(Citizens Commission on Human Rights, 2004b: 9)

Certain influences and events have shaped the course of religious and moral decline the world over. The materialistic practices of psychiatry, psychology, and other related mental health disciplines are at the root of the problem. They were given virtually free rein in the moulding of “modern” humanist thinking for most of the last century. (CCHR, 2004c: 5)

From Hitler’s “Final Solution” in Germany 70 years ago and the unthinkable “ethnic cleansing “ and terrorist purges in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s, to today’s suicide bombers, the world has suffered greatly at the hands of programmed assassins and genocidal maniacs... This publication reveals the hidden key players in the alarming and explosive upsurge in terrorism today – psychiatrists and psychologists. (CCHR, 2004d: 3)

The above extracts are examples of the targeting strategy employed by the CCHR and its parent Scientology to completely destroy psychiatry on several fronts, with the motive of replacing the profession with the new “tech” (i.e. Narconon and Criminon).

Social problems are more complex and multifaceted than the picture painted by the CCHR. Racism, scepticism towards religion, and terrorist activities all pre-existed the advent of the psychiatric profession (Fredrickson, 2003). In justification of their ongoing attack on psychiatry the Church of Scientology International claims, ‘what Scientologists are doing, they are doing for you. And in doing so, they are bringing all mankind to a higher and better civilisation’ (1993: 309). The road to

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<sup>7</sup> See also <http://www.breggin.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://cchr.org/publications/index.htm>.

recovery and salvation from the evils of psychiatry, obviously, lies in the adoption of Scientology “tech”. Bainbridge and Stark say the following about Scientology:

Many people come to Scientology with specific complaints about chronic unhappiness or inability to perform at the level they demand of themselves. We suspect that Scientology cures the complaints by ending the person’s freedom to complain, not by solving the underlying problems. (1980: 134)

Judging from Scientology’s history of extensive and usually successful litigation to contest criticisms from ex-members, non-members, Interpol, Internet users and the Cult Awareness Network (Barrett, 2001; Peckham, 1998), one could conclude that perhaps there was a grain of truth in Bainbridge and Stark’s observation.

### ***Scientology and its Critics: An Evaluation***

Several sociological criticisms have already been directed at Scientology. First, some question its status as a genuine religion. For example, Chryssides concludes after a case analysis of the movement that part of ‘Scientology’s problem in being viewed as a religion perhaps lies in its lack of use of overtly, conventional religious vocabulary... Some may find such features surprising, but I do not think they are defining characteristics of a religion’ (1999: 291; 292). Aldridge (2000: 31) asks the same question and concludes that Scientology acts like a diversified multinational company, rather than a religion. Cynics suggest that Scientology preoccupation with recognition as a religion stem from the financial benefits, as many countries grant tax concessions to registered movements (Kent, 1999). The Church of Scientology had a long-running battle with the Internal Revenue Service in the USA over this very issue, finally triumphing when granted tax-exempt status in 1993. Scientology has been less successful gaining recognition elsewhere, such as in Germany where the authorities regard the group as a threat to democratic principles (see Barrett, 2001: 471). Scientologists in Germany experience widespread discrimination because of their religious beliefs.<sup>9</sup> As a result of the continuous struggles over its recognition status the Church established the International Association of Scientologists (IAS) in 1984:

Regrettably, history has seen many attempts to suppress religious freedom and human rights. From the persecution of early Christians in Rome, to the nineteenth-century assault on Mormons in the United States, to the slaughter

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.humanrights-germany.org/>

of Jews in Nazi concentration camps, many faiths have suffered dearly. The International Association of Scientologists also serves the purpose of protecting Scientology from similar attempted persecution.

(Church of Scientology International, 1993: 269)

Matching Scientology discourses against the criteria of what constitutes a religion according to the definition I proposed in chapter 3, and weighing up the evidence: *Scientology is a religion*. Therefore, I would support Scientologists in their rights to claim, and fight for, such recognition (as have several other sociologists of religion).<sup>10</sup>

A second criticism directed at Scientology is related to the first above, and suggests the cost of the courses is proof that Scientology is simply a moneymaking scheme (Lamont, 1986; Miller, 1987). Many rightly observe that thousands of dollars or pounds need to be spent in order to attain clear status: ‘a tremendous amount of revenue rests on a member’s movement through the stratified system’ (Peckham, 1998:328). Although progress up the Scientology hierarchy seems costly, economic theory dictates that in the long run if a product is poor people will stop consuming it (Gravelle & Rees, 1992). Completing a degree, masters, or PhD costs both time and money, but people do them as an investment and for the promised (not guaranteed) after-rewards like better career prospects. The arguments below are a good summary:

The fact that the material basis for the religion of Scientology is organised in a business-like manner can have no implications for its status as a religion. Does a work of art cease to be a work of art when it is efficiently produced for sale or exchange? It is naïve to think that any new religious movement could survive in the modern world without a business-like material basis for its operations...Lacking the benefits of inherited property-wealth, endowments, patronage and a “birth right” membership, new religious movements must either act in a business-like manner or perish. (Beckford, 1980)<sup>11</sup>

A third criticism of Scientology has been accusations that it systematically brainwashes members and promotes “irrational beliefs” (Atack, 1990, Kent, 2001). The evidence of “irrational beliefs” derives from some postings on the Internet in the mid-1990s on a news forum called *alt.religion.scientology* (Peckham, 1998). The postings claimed to expose OT III course material, which has been described by some as science fiction nonsense being “impossible, when viewed against the abundant

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<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.humanrights-germany.org/experts/>, a website that has links to numerous papers written by sociologists (e.g. Bryan R. Wilson) that support Scientology’s rights to be seen as a religion.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.humanrights-germany.org/experts/eng/beckford01.pdf> accessed 21/12/2004.

scientific evidence available”.<sup>12</sup> The story at the heart of the saga involves Xenu the evil dictator of a Galactic federation and the continuing consequences of his actions carried out some 75 million years ago on Earth.<sup>13</sup> The OT III material contains a space opera plot and sits rather uncomfortably with the more down to earth beliefs of Dianetics. I will not dwell further on the OT III material due to the legal background to the story. Regarding the accusations of brainwashing, we should not condone such negative labelling, as it reflects sweeping value judgements. Assigning the generic label of “brainwashed” to all members of NRSMs implies they are “weak” or “unstable” people, which is derogatory.<sup>14</sup> Ken, a retired voluntary charity worker and Scientologist for *over 50 years* reflects positively on his experiences in the religion:

*In my experience of living and working with both scientologists and others including 3 years in H.M. wartime Navy, 11 years as a Boy Scout and Scout Master, 8 years as Local Councillor, service as a Magistrate and Justice of the Peace, 50 years of earning a living from management, and nearly 17 years as a volunteer charity worker in the drug rehabilitation field, I find that the benefits of Scientological training and the view point it develops are many and varied, and crop up nearly every hour in every day in those small ways which make the difference between a happy, healthy and successful career and a miserable, sickly, depressed and failing life. I am therefore now enjoying life to the full, and I know that this is due to my own endeavours and to the way in which I have applied Scientological principles to my Christian upbringing and lifestyle.<sup>15</sup>*

Members of Scientology I spoke to and met during the course of my research seemed genuinely happy with the time and money they had invested in the religion. We could grant that every person’s set of religious beliefs (or beliefs about religion, including secularism) is likely to contain some truth and some error. This acknowledgement enables rational discussions of the intrinsic values of different religious belief systems, rather than *a priori* dismissive and derogatory ones (Collier, 2004c).

The final criticism of Scientology is the strongest; Hubbard takes psychiatry and the gradual degradation of morals in society to task, but never really relates this to the contradictory nature of capitalistic economic development. Marx has already pre-empted much of Scientology’s dissatisfaction. Scientology is quick to accuse the psychiatry profession of drugging the world for profit, but the solution it offers is the

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<sup>12</sup> See [http://www.xs4all.nl/~kspaink/cos/essays/forde\\_volcanos.html](http://www.xs4all.nl/~kspaink/cos/essays/forde_volcanos.html) accessed 23/12/2004.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.xs4all.nl/~kspaink/fishman/ot3.html> a site that details the full OT III story.

<sup>14</sup> We could also call football supporters who spend thousands of pounds buying season tickets and the latest “kits” of their team brainwashed or irrational, but such labelling holds no analytical value.

<sup>15</sup> Extract from interview with 76-year-old male on 14/10/2004.

application of its own “tech”, also at a price (Church of Scientology International, 2004b). Problems such as crime, injustice, racism, and war all generally stem from economic inequality and distrust of the other between nations and among peoples. Inequality is amplified by the contradictory nature of capitalist expansion, the tensions and transformations it undergoes in order to reproduce itself. Beckford (1989: 169) charts some of the main changes wrought by transition to late capitalism in the West: (1) the possibility of nuclear annihilation; (2) the intensification of moral dilemmas caused by the pace of changes in controls over human/physical environments driven by scientific and technical developments; (3) the increasingly divergent income gap between the rich and poor; (4) the rising debt of Third World countries; (5) the deskilling of workers and downsizing of companies; (6) the increase in divorce, single parenthood, and remarriage; (7) the concentration of mass media ownership into fewer corporate hands, and (8) escalating levels of crime. Most of the social problems cited here are outgrowths of class and income inequalities exasperated by capitalism. Scientology does not address the structural basis of these social ‘ills’; does not the hierarchical scheme used to attain ‘clears’ just serve to reproduce a new class system?

Hubbard (1995, 2002, 2003) claimed to have developed a system of organised knowledge leading to spiritual liberation and eventual control of matter by mind. Nevertheless, Bainbridge and Stark make the following observation regarding the shifting definition of “clear” during the course of Scientology evolution.

The superhuman capacities once associated with clear status, and now ascended to the new levels of OT, may eventually move out of the empirical realm altogether. That is, people may no longer expect to develop genius-level I.Q., perfect health, and a magnetic personality in this incarnation. But they may be promised such achievements in their next life, if they scrupulously follow Scientology’s procedures. (Bainbridge and Stark, 1980: 135)

The above quote highlights the ultimate limits to Hubbard’s ambitious approach and aims. Completing the OT courses may genuinely make some people feel more in control of their lives and increase their confidence, but in the words of Clarke:

One of the great lessons of modern science is that millennia are only moments. It is not likely that ultimate questions will be settled in such short periods of time, or that we will really know much about the universe while we are still crawling around in the playpen of the solar system. (Clarke, 2003: 186)

Kent suggests that ‘in the long run, Scientology’s social, psychological and medical ineffectiveness hinders its chances of achieving world domination’ (1999: 157). I disagree. Of the NRSMs I have studied Scientology impresses me the most, and is likely to achieve modest world recognition (like Christianity once had). Scientology in the long run is not going to be hindered by lack of enthusiasm (psychological ineffectiveness), or inadequate expertise (social ineffectiveness) in endeavours to thrive and expand in the capitalist system. Thus far, they have proven to be skilful manipulators of the legal apparatus to defend and forward their cause. What may eventually stop Scientology’s agenda for positive social change is its ultimate affirmation of capitalism.

***Personal Reflections on the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the IAS: 29<sup>th</sup> October 2004***

My invitation to the IAS anniversary celebrations at Saint Hill Manor (East Grinstead) greatly impressed me. The evening was professionally organised by Graeme Wilson. I was collected by car promptly from the station in East Grinstead and treated to a free dinner and tour of the Manor by Tom Shuster (my guide). He was very gracious spending time with me when he could have been with his own family enjoying the celebrations. There were thousands of people around the grounds and everyone was visibly happy and friendly. I spent an hour or two with Tom Shuster talking about life and my studies, before being seated by Graeme Wilson in the grand hall (for VIPs) at 8pm for the official award ceremony.<sup>16</sup> To my surprise I was placed only ten rows directly behind Tom Cruise (who I briefly met and talked to after the event). I listened to a summary of IAS news about the previous year, heard of the recent acquisition of a new Scientology building in central London, and witnessed the presentation of freedom medals to various Scientologists in recognition of their activities on behalf of the religion. Tom Cruise received the medal of Valour (the first Scientologist to do so) because he has used his considerable fame and wealth to spread the Scientology message to over a billion people (according to the announcer). Each presentation was greeted with immense zeal and when the various speakers ended their individual talks they acknowledged LRH (L. Ron Hubbard) by turning to his giant painting next to the stage hall. Even after death Hubbard’s charisma was used to spark social solidarity

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<sup>16</sup> There were only a few hundred of the most important Scientology people in the hall, so I was very privileged. All the other attendees (including Tom Shuster and his family) were seated in the fields and grounds of the manor in makeshift marquees, watching the proceedings in the hall via large screens.

and focus the course of events. Looking around the hall and sensing the feeling of unity and common purpose, I grasped what Durkheim meant when he described the essential nature of religion as *collective effervescence* (Durkheim, 1915/1965). Tom returned me to the station at midnight. I had a pleasant evening that did not cost me any money; there was also no attempt whatsoever made to convert me.

Walking, greeting, talking and eating amongst the Scientologists, I sensed a great conviction and confidence in the righteousness and eventual success of their desires to “Clear the World”, but I also noted signs of an inability to see beyond the cause. On their way to solving social problems, Hubbard and the Scientologists are perhaps making a rash assumption: that they alone have a monopoly on the answers to the questions of human nature, the secrets of life and therefore correct living. Critical realists would suggest that knowledge is transient so we can only work towards a better understanding of reality through experience (Bhaskar, 1993). Scientologists are angry at the state of the world, as are many other people across the globe. However,

If this anger is to be translated into citizenly activity of a globally public-spirited, but also cognitively effective kind... *we need to do so in a reflective rather than determinate mode.* (K. Dean, 2003: 179, emphasis added)

Locke suggests that Hubbard promoted ‘Scientology as the culmination not only of the world’s religions, but also of the Western pursuit for knowledge through science’ (2004: 119). In other words, Hubbard presented Scientology as a closed and perfected paradigm, one that transcended critique. If Scientology maintains such a stance and silences genuine well-founded appraisal both from within and without, it will always be restrained by the limits of Hubbard’s mind. This is because conditions for spiritual and social emancipation change with any given epoch (Collier, 2004b; Wilson, 2004).

## Conclusion

The potent combination of irrationality and hubris which capitalism currently displays has provoked an eruption of anger across the globe; anger which is expressed in novel forms of collective action. (K. Dean, 2003: 179)

My suggestion is that to liberate oppressed bodies we have to identify the means of control used by capitalist powers. One common method of subjugation has been the careful selection of statements from nationalistic and religious discourses, dispersed in a manner that divides masses and so maintains the political and financial hegemony

of key accumulators (ruling classes) in capitalist societies (Althusser, 1971, Gramsci, 1971). These statements target a set of myths (such as racial superiority) that antagonise the differences between and within exploited classes, races and peoples (i.e. different embodiments), to ensure the continued economic privilege of the few at the cost to the majority. Wallerstein (1995) argues economic structure is the primary force propelling global changes, and with the collapse of the command economies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, capitalism has gained a firm grip as the governing logic of the world economy. With this has come the increasing penetration and consolidation of capitalist social relations on a global scale. Those resisting the transformation become ever more marginalised and eventually excluded. A world driven by capitalism results in simultaneous processes of transnational integration and national disintegration, as some communities are incorporated into the economic system and others filtered out. Some undesirable products of this continued drive in modern times have been increasing rootlessness and loss of stability as people experience the effects of media overflow, structural adjustment policies, privatization, urbanization, unemployment, forced migration, and other transformative forces. Wallerstein notes the accompaniment of “liberal” ideology along with the process of capitalistic globalisation. Collier summarises the marvels of global capitalism,

It does not matter whether you are humanist, Christian or Muslim, it will still sell you electric batons for torturing your political opponents. It does generate a certain degree of social mobility denied by more traditional class systems, and the consequent rise of the occasional person of lowly origins to a position where they can cheat and oppress their former peers looks egalitarian to those who think that equality of opportunity is important. (Collier, 1999: 101)

The engine driving capitalism is profit maximisation in tandem with cost minimisation, which leads to rampant greed and oppression of others (K. Dean, 2003). These aspects corrupt through alteration and dilution any liberating statements to be found in religious discourses: ‘for capitalism nothing is sacred... like any iconoclasm, it desecrates what it regards as false sanctities for the sake of its god: money’ (Collier, 2004a: 85). Essentially global capitalism is both totalising and expansionary seeking to subsume all cultures and all non-human nature under the laws of value, as an economic system it is extremely contradictory and exploitative as anyone who studies the inequalities within and between the countries of the world should grasp (Ghatak, 1995; Townsend and Gordon, 2002). Thus, freedom and equality in contrast to the



Scientology arguments will surpass a world in which psychiatry is simply erased. This makes the oversight of continuing to affirm capitalism as a valid economic basis for social emancipation. As Collier argues, ‘spiritual liberation, like political liberation, is a work of transformation of a bad structure... into a good structure, not a work of shedding veils which obscure an already existing good structure’ (2004b: 174).

### **Introduction: Main themes in UFO Religions**

Speculations about life on other planets can certainly be traced as far back as the seventeenth century (perhaps even further) in, for example, the work of Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772). Swedenborg's primary teaching was the Law of Correspondences. This meant the belief in two realms of existence; the physical (phenomenal) and the spiritual (real). These realms were seen as counterparts of one another. Swedenborg wrote that 1770 was the beginning of the New Age when the New Jerusalem as envisioned by Saint John appeared. He spent much of his life channelling divine guidance from angels and described his astral travels to numerous other planets (Melton, 2003a: 154-55). Therefore, UFO groups that claim to channel extraterrestrials have roots in the early practices of Swedenborg's spiritualism (Porter, 1996). Partridge (2003b) agrees, and goes on to argue that many UFO movements also borrow heavily from Theosophy. They have incorporated in their discourses the concepts of cosmic wisdom and cosmic masters who exist on other planets. Their leaders often channel or communicate with these masters through psychic methods such as telepathy. According to Partridge (2003b: 20):

highly evolved beings channelling advanced teachings through sensitive individuals is wholly adopted by many UFO religions. The entities reside on other planets or occupy spacecraft and, whilst the process of channelling may be interpreted in much the same way as it is in Theosophy, it is usually described using scientific (often pseudo-scientific) terminology.

The 1950s (see chapter 4) was the era in which the first movements based primarily on the channelling of extraterrestrials or UFO contact actually emerged and organised as formal religious or spiritual groups. These movements, like the Unarius Academy of Science (1954), began to deal with important and ultimate issues in human life, often claiming contact with and wisdom from entities bearing some resemblance to traditional religious beings, such as gods, supernatural heroes and angels (Tumminia, 2003). In this context, Unarians often channel Jesus and believe that Satan, the leader of Tyron (a planet in the Orion Constellation) is responsible for the "psychic amnesia" earthlings suffer. Thus, the movement claims the earth has been invited to become the thirty-third member of the Interplanetary Confederation and a Starship representing the earth is being built. The Starships were meant to arrive in 2001, which was due to be the clarion call for the New Age (see: <http://www.unarius.org/>).

Novel UFO groups continued to emerge in the 1960s, but the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a decline. Nonetheless, the 1990s once again marked a renewed fervour in the articulation of discourses based on UFO beliefs (see chapter 4). The ascent and popularity of the Internet in the 1990s has been particularly influential in this revival (Bloom, 1996; Mayer, 2003; York, 1997). Barkun suggests that esoteric teachings or UFO based discourses that promote stigmatised knowledge – knowledge claims that have not been validated by mainstream institutions – benefit from using the Internet, ‘because of its large potential audience, the low investment required for its use, and – most important – the absence of gatekeepers who might censor the content of messages’ (2003: 12). Barkun (2003: 27) further differentiates stigmatised knowledge claims into five main varieties:

- (1) *Forgotten knowledge*: knowledge once known but lost through cataclysm (e.g. sonic healing technology and energy producing crystals supposedly possessed by inhabitants of the legendary Atlantis).
- (2) *Superseded knowledge*: claims that were once authoritatively recognised as knowledge but that have since lost such status (e.g. astrology and alchemy).
- (3) *Ignored knowledge*: knowledge that persists in marginal social groups but which is not taken seriously by mainstream society (e.g. herbal medicine).
- (4) *Rejected knowledge*: knowledge claims that are rejected as false from the outset (e.g. UFO abductions).
- (5) *Suppressed knowledge*: claims already known to be valid by authoritative institutions, such as the government, but which are suppressed from the public domain because of fear of the consequences, or some other evil motive for hiding the truth (e.g. the alien origins of UFOs and suppressed free energy devices). UFO groups, such as ZetaTalk place great emphasis on suppressed knowledge, claiming they are providing *the truth* for the benefit of humankind.

The above forms of stigmatised knowledge UFO religions present constructs a basis for members to believe the alternative claims, such as the genetic creation of humans by advanced extraterrestrials. To followers the latter proposition seems just as feasible an explanation for humanity’s existence, as creation by a supernatural God or the

scientific theory that man evolved from bacteria over billions of years (Good, 1988; Horn, 1994). Clayton (1997: 102) argues ‘the highest epistemic status we can attribute to a theory or a set of theories is not yet falsified, despite our best efforts’. UFO sightings and by association the extraterrestrial hypotheses have been repeatedly denied, but as yet not all cases have been totally discredited (Good, 1998; Hynek, 1972; Sagan, 1972). These arguments have been used by UFO religions to legitimate their discourses (Palmer, 2004). Hence the religions have gained appeal because they,

provide contemporary society with alternative cosmologies or worldviews to those offered by traditional religions and modern science... [And] Many of the answers that religion and science give to some of the perennial questions of life, such as those regarding the origins of the human race, remain somewhat ambiguous, if not contradictory. (Saliba, 1995b: 48-9)

Apart from trying to add scientific credibility to their discourses (Chryssides, 2003; Denzler, 2003; Partridge, 2003b) several specific religious themes also tend to be found in the beliefs of NRSMs based on UFO origins (Denzler, 2001; Rothstein, 2003; Saliba, 1995b; Wojcik, 2003). First, mystery, the sacred is also mysterious and often seen as something we cannot grasp with a rational mind, yet which we endlessly attempt to comprehend. Likewise, UFOs defy rational belief travelling at incredible speeds while performing impossible aerial manoeuvres. There is also no agreement over the intentions of such aliens, which adds to their allure. Some see them as benevolent (i.e. Raelians), others as hostile (Icke, 2001) and some as neither because their advanced nature means their actions are incomprehensible to humans who are of far lower intelligence (Wilson, 1999). Second, UFOs as objects reflect transcendence. They come from planets beyond the limits that earth technology allows us to penetrate and explore. In other words, they occupy a space beyond our understanding of matter, making them far superior to us in all kinds of knowledge. Third, is the belief that the beings from outer space and their mediums on earth transcend human nature making them supernatural entities. For instance, sister Thedra of the Association of Sananda and Sanat Kumara claims Sananda (Jesus) of the Great White Brotherhood ordained her as priestess of the Temple of Light (Bjorling, 1992). Fourth, the space brothers are seen as having acquired perfection in their intellectual, spiritual and moral state (Porter, 1997). For this reason they are able to preach to inferior humanity. The fifth theme of salvation is related to perfection, thus the mission of UFOs is often one of redemption. These perfected beings suffer for the salvation of humanity; we can rely

on them to save us when we destroy our planet through ecological degradation or nuclear holocaust (Wojcik, 2003). Lewis claims:

Out there in the great depths of space, there are countless stars and planets dotting our universe. There are other advanced civilizations, other systems of great philosophies and other avenues to God. For those who are proven worthy, there are other worlds... worlds that are free of self-made tribulation, greed, selfishness, and premature death due to human errors. There is another planet that knows no crime, famine, power-crazed political governments or the mistreatment of fellow humans. (Lewis, 1978: 108)

The five main themes overlap to varying degrees and are present in differing intensity in the discourses of the UFO based NRSMs. They provide the foundation for individually inspired, but often substantively similar worldviews. Encounters with UFOs (particularly contact with the occupants) are seen to be profound spiritual experiences, often leading those contacted to completely change their lifestyles and consciousness. These encounters are similar to being born again and are comparable to mystical conversions of historical visionary saints. Many UFO inspired discourses attempt to justify their claims of alien intervention in human affairs by also offering alternative histories (Bramley, 1993; Scott, 1983; Sitchin, 1976). Often evidence of prior alien visitation is found from within ancient religious scripts, such as the strange aerial crafts called *Vimanas* described in detail in the Hindu texts the *Puranas*, or the Bible's passages about the ascension of Elijah in a chariot drawn by 'horses of fire' (Kings 2:11). Famous landmarks and historical sites such as the Great Pyramids of Egypt are also attributed to the handiwork of ancient astronauts. Erich von Däniken (1999) makes the aforementioned observations to substantiate and give evidence to support his extraterrestrial hypothesis. The miraculous events of the Bible become the activities of superhuman beings from other planets. Superior technology and genetic engineering employed by extraterrestrials replaces the supernatural creator God as the prime cause and monitor of life on earth. The Raelians take this scientific creationism to the limit and teach a form of ufological atheism (Chryssides, 2003), which has been termed a 'strong physicalist religion' (Partridge, 2003b: 22). Based on these pseudo-scientific reinterpretations of many ancient texts, Rothstein (2003: 271) observes that:

Apart from being a core doctrine of a number of specific UFO religions, today people from many different faiths have incorporated a belief in UFOs into otherwise non-UFO belief systems. UFOs must, therefore, be acknowledged as an important mythological innovation in contemporary religion.

In 1997, the United States Gallup Poll telephone survey assessing national opinion reported the following on UFOs: (1) 87% of Americans have read or heard about UFOs; (2) 12% reported that they had seen something that they thought was a UFO; (3) 45% think UFOs visit earth; (4) 48% believe UFOs are something real; (5) 31% believe UFOs are the result of people's imagination; (6) 72% believe that there is life in some form on other planets in the Universe; (7) 38% believe that there are people somewhat like ourselves living on other planets, and (8) 71% believe that the US Government knows more about UFOs than it claims. In June 1997, the largest UK opinion poll on UFOs was conducted after a live UFO debate on ITV entitled *Strange but True*. The question was "Have aliens already visited earth?" The audience rating for the programme was just under 7 million. 92 percent of those phoning in voted in favour of the extraterrestrial hypothesis with a sampling error of (+/-) 6%. Three days after the program ITV Telecast ran their own telephone poll and asked "Do aliens exist?" out of 2,215 votes cast, 87% answered *yes* and 11% answered *no*.<sup>1</sup> What these recent surveys indicate is the successful invasion of UFOs into the fabric of mainstream cultural consciousness. Additional evidence of the encroachment of aliens into society is reflected in the numerous UFO organisations and networks dedicated to detecting intelligent alien life and potential visitations.<sup>2</sup>

It seems plausible given the size of the universe to believe that life must exist elsewhere in the cosmos. For instance, Britt (2002) reports that an estimated 50 billion earth like planets could subsist in our Galaxy alone. It is therefore not unwise in my opinion to remain open-minded about the possibility of extraterrestrial life. Having made this observation, the main purpose now is to examine two new UFO religions, ZetaTalk and the Cassiopaea Experiment. These movements are investigated because they are very "new" (both were formed in the mid 1990s) and have not yet received attention in the sociological literature. My initial contact with the groups and their subsequent refusal to be studied makes external investigation and knowledge about them even more valuable, particularly because they exhibit clear tendencies reflective of extreme world-rejecting ideologies. I am also concerned about the wellbeing of a member of ZetaTalk I liaised with during late 2002 and early 2003. Contact with

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<sup>1</sup>See <http://www.ufoevidence.org/documents/doc999.htm> accessed 09/09/2004.

<sup>2</sup> Examples are groups such as BUFORA (the British UFO Research Association), the more famous MUFON (the Mutual UFO Network), and CUFOS (the Centre for UFO Studies). The latter was founded by astronomer J. A. Hynek and publishes the *International UFO Reporter*, as well as the scholarly *Journal of UFO Studies*.

Starlight (her on-line identity) was lost in March 2003 after I indicated my agreement to visit her in LA, and be taken to see the compound ZetaTalk was constructing in Nevada. However, she ceased email communication with me when I informed her I was writing a PhD about NRSMs. Perhaps her initial enthusiasm about my contact and desire to get involved had been due to the possibility of converting me to the group? Similarly, I lost contact with the Cassiopaea Experiment in November 2003, after the movement relocated to France.

The loss of contact with gatekeepers who could provide direct physical access to these NRSMs, has meant that I have had to rely on analysing web sources to piece together the beliefs they promote and the activities they have instigated. Given the nebulous nature of email communication and the difficulties in verifying on-line identities, the authenticity of web documents was checked through *investigator triangulation*. This procedure involves verifying the content of web material using multiple forums and observers of the same object, to ensure that the online reality presented by the host is not a hoax (Macdonald, 2001; Odih, 2004). Accessing online discussion forums and gathering information relayed by other parties previously involved with ZetaTalk and the Cassiopaea Experiment, confirmed the existence of these groups as “genuine” movements with distinct ideological agendas. However, there is no information on how large these movements are, in 2003 Starlight told me via email that 200 people were involved with the site in Nevada. Online discussion forums suggest there are several communities across the world who are preparing for apocalypse based on the ZetaTalk message.<sup>3</sup> In 2003 the Cassiopaea Experiment consisted of 35 to 40 people who regularly met to channel spiritual messages by contacting the Cassiopaeans, whether this figure has increased or decreased is unclear.

I argue the ideologies promoted by the founders of both ZetaTalk and the Cassiopaea Experiment are examples of the tribulations facing the self in ‘a secular risk culture’ that ‘is inherently unsettling’, and in which ‘unconscious fears of an “ending to everything” are prevalent among many sectors of the population’ (Giddens, 1991: 181, 183). The apocalyptic messages of the movements and promises of a new age are the product of ideological disconnection, which expresses a desire for transformation of society in the face of saturated power relations and a perceived moral decline, all this via earth’s complete destruction (Juergensmeyer, 2000).

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<sup>3</sup> Some in the UK are also beginning to adopt the ZetaTalk message, see: [www.poleshiftprepare.com](http://www.poleshiftprepare.com/).

### **ZetaTalk: The Universe According to Nancy Lieder**

ZetaTalk first appeared on the Internet in the form of a website in late 1995, and is a collection of information being relayed by the Zetas (extraterrestrials) to their human emissary Nancy, through a telepathic mind link.<sup>4</sup> The Zetas claim to be fourth density beings originating from the Zeta Reticuli star system. Their stated purpose is to assist in the awakening of humanity and to warn us of the Earth changes, which portend the coming pole shift (the tilting and realignment of earth upon a new axis). They claim to have been engaged in human affairs from the start of our historical, cultural and thus evolutionary development. Their ultimate allegiance and accountability is to the Council of Worlds (a united league of benevolent alien races). The council supervises the activities of numerous extraterrestrial species (apart from the Zetas) that currently guide and monitor the genetic modifications and spiritual progressions of humanity.

### ***Service to Other or Service to Self? – Make your choice human***

According to the Zetas, as a collective species humanity is currently third density, which reflects the spiritual maturity of souls incarnated in human bodies. The purpose of third density existence for the human level soul is to make a definite choice of spiritual orientation. This decision amounts to choosing whether to be service-to-other (i.e. good) or service-to-self (i.e. evil). The density lesson should be passed before individual or collective graduation to fourth density is possible. For orientation to be conclusively decided by the soul, millions of choices, spanning thousands of years, encompassing hundreds of physical lifetimes, could and can be required. The key characteristics of each orientation are summed up in the following way:

*There is a common misunderstanding, that being that Service-to-Others is all bleeding heart concern and the Service-to-Self is snarling greed. Nothing could be further from the truth. These animals come in various sizes and shapes. One must look for the key characteristics, in fact, to even identify them. An example, look to ourselves. We are Service-to-Others Zetas. Do we not defend ourselves? Do we not have particular goals we press? Do we lie down and let others walk all over us? Yet we are concerned for the general welfare and work hard to improve this for ourselves as well as others.*

*Likewise, the Service-to-Self are often misunderstood. As we have mentioned elsewhere, they can be charming and diplomatic. The key is the goal, not the goal stated, which may be packaged to appeal to those to be*

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<sup>4</sup> See: [www.zetatalk.com](http://www.zetatalk.com).



*duped, but the actual goal... In sum, the Service-to-Others individual may be gruff, distracted, dishevelled, and inaccessible. But what are they working toward? How do they react when a truth test comes, where they must be willing to sacrifice themselves for others? Do they come through? And the Service-to-Self individual may be suave, seemingly generous, even defending others. But when their welfare is lined up against another, when they must truly share and words are asked to be replaced by actions, what then?*<sup>5</sup>

The Zetas define themselves as operating on a fourth density service-to-other spiritual plane. This means they are benevolent to humans, but invisible to perception because their atoms vibrate at a different and higher frequency rate than ours do.<sup>6</sup> From their vantage point in fourth density the laws of physics and time are different to us humans operating in third density.<sup>7</sup> They emphasise this through discussing the speed of light:

*Regarding how we move through space faster than the speed of light. We are allowed to explain this to you within the limitations of your ability to understand and what you are allowed to know at this time. Things are not as they seem to you. Travel is done in a different density. Where the speed of light seems the fastest to you, in 3rd Density, this is not nearly the fastest in, say, 4th Density. In 4th Density the speed of light is over 17 times as fast.*<sup>8</sup>

The Zetas mention higher density service-to-self extraterrestrials that also interact with humanity, but with much more malevolent intentions. They exist on a similar plane to the Zetas and are thus invisible to human perception. Their primary intention is to recruit as many souls to the “evil” path as possible through lies, deceit and false promises. George Bush (American president) and other human elites (e.g. British Royal Family) are said to generally be in contact with the service-to-self aliens. They collaborate to keep the “undecided” (humans yet to make the spiritual orientation decision) oblivious about the alien presence and the true point of human existence.

Dogma, fundamentalism and superstition aside, at the heart of many religions are the aims to give us an ethical framework of right from wrong. In this regard the notion of service-to-other and service-to-self is not a new revelation. Roberts (1970) already covers these ideas more comprehensively in her channelled Seth material. In

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.zetatalk.com/orientat/o14.htm> accessed 26/04/04.

<sup>6</sup> This notion of varying intensities to energy is very similar to Wiccan beliefs; see Hume (1998: 311).

<sup>7</sup> Modern superstring theory in physics acknowledges the possibility of the existence of ten (one is time) dimensions to the universe. Three dimensions are long and extended, while the other six are tiny and invisible: ‘we see that although we are aware of only three extended spatial dimensions... reasoning shows that this does not preclude the existence of additional curled-up dimensions, at least if they are very small. The universe may very well have more dimensions than meet the eye’ (Greene, 1999: 191). This does not prove the existence of the Zetas, but does provide some food for thought.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.zetatalk.com/density/d02.htm> accessed 26/04/04.

fact, much channelled material contains similar revelations about good versus evil and the eternal balance between the two. Normally the balance is tipped in the favour of evil and that is why destruction and redemption is required. These are all classic themes found in a world-rejecting NRSM (see chapter 4 and Wallis, 1984). From a practical perspective we can never really hope to measure the balance of ‘good’ in respect to ‘bad’, as Hegel stated around 200 years ago:

The highest purpose is the good, the universal final goal of the world, the purpose that is directly grounded in the category of reason, the purpose beyond which spirit [itself] cannot go. And the source in which this purpose is recognized is thinking reason... and nature stands over against it – physical nature, on the one hand, which goes its own way and has its own laws, but also the natural aspect of humanity, with all the private purposes that run counter to the good. When we appeal to perception, we can see that there is much good in the world, but also an infinite amount of evil; and one would, of course, have to count the sum of evil and of the good that does not come to its own fruition in order to learn which has the upper hand. (1987: 717-18)

### ***The 12th Planet: Omen of doom or figment of a vivid imagination?***

The potentiality of a rogue planet existing in our solar system, with a 3,600-year orbit around the Sun, first captured public imagination after Zecharia Sitchin’s translation and interpretations of ancient Sumerian tablets and texts were published (Sitchin, 1976).<sup>9</sup> Sitchin reached the conclusion after deciphering these ancient sources that extraterrestrials (called the Anunnaki) living on the twelfth planet (known as Nibiru to the ancients), had created the human species (through genetic engineering) during a periodic passage past earth thousands of years ago.<sup>10</sup> Although Sitchin does not believe another passage will occur in the foreseeable future, the Zeta Emissary Nancy has the following to add to the saga surrounding the twelfth planet:

*The giant hominoids from the 12<sup>th</sup> Planet tinkered with genetic engineering, and doodled their fantasies, like science fiction, in murals. This has been taken as fact by Sitchin, who failed to consider that these murals might constitute a plan, not past fact. These hominoids did not create man, nor did they create cross-breeds between man and animals - mythological creatures with the bottom half a horse, the top a man... We have stated that Planet X will be visible in the daytime sky, 7 weeks before passage. Given that we have stated that passage is shortly after May 15, 2003, as at this time those wanting to survive should be at their safe locations, this is putting the visibility into the*

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<sup>9</sup> See chapter 8 of Sitchin for attempted evidence and justification regarding the twelfth planet’s orbit.

<sup>10</sup> The ancients counted the sun and moon as planets, plus the nine main planets, plus Nibiru = 12.

*last week of March at the earliest. We have stated that the Planet X complex, the planet body itself and its immediate cloud of dust and moons, will appear not larger than the Moon upon passage.<sup>11</sup>*

According to the above we should have experienced the after-shocks of a pole shift in May 2003, caused by the passing of the twelfth planet through our part of the solar system. The actual effects of a pole shift are described as follows:

*As the giant comet approaches, the Earth becomes what might be described as confused. There are conflicting pulls, gravitational as well as magnetic. The Earth is normally magnetically aligned, along with the other planets in the Solar System, according to an axis that exists in your part of the galaxy. This axis reflects the sum of a number of solar systems and other matter not understood yet by your scientists, but is normal and natural for your part of the galaxy. Now comes the giant comet, from a distance, swinging through your Solar System, and picking up speed as it approaches... At first, your planet Earth reacts by additional swirling about in matter deep within its core. In the final days, as the giant comet begins passing between the Earth and its Sun, total interference occurs. The Earth slows in its rotation, and actually stops... This is recorded in written history and spoken folklore, worldwide, as a long day or night. The period of time, due to the lack of mechanical clocks, was not measurable, but the humans who experienced this described this as anywhere from a few hours to several days. The latter is more correct.<sup>12</sup>*

The above has obviously not occurred and there does not seem to be any visible rogue planet spelling imminent doom visible in the sky. Juergensmeyer (2000) documents how different or marginal value systems can lead to disconnection in the ideological sphere. When this happens diversity becomes so extreme that co-existing subcultures are no longer able to even agree on the basic symbols of discourse. Since this failed prophecy the Zeta emissary Nancy has been far quieter, arguing the Zetas deliberately confused the pole shift date to stop the human elites gaining an upper hand over the masses. Although she has used the recent Asian Mega Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and various photographic images of “twin suns” and “red dust in the atmosphere”, as continuing physical evidence of an imminent pole shift.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the underlying cause of such claims are a product of the reflexive nature of modernity, it is highly likely Ms Lieder read the work of Sitchin (1976), Velikovsky (1969 [1950]), Däniken (1999), Roberts (1970) and came up with an apocalyptic vision based on the plot of the film *Starship Invasions* (1977), which was as follows:

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.zetatalk.com/poleshift/p172.htm> accessed 26/04/04.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.zetatalk.com/poleshift/p20.htm> accessed 03/05/04.

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://www.zetatalk.com/index/z03.htm>.

Telepathic aliens belonging to the Legion of the Winged Serpent from the planet Alpha invade Earth in UFOs and begin abducting humans and conducting breeding experiments. They decimate the members of the peaceful League of Races who guard Earth from inside a pyramid beneath the Bermuda Triangle. As the Legion triggers an orbiting weapon that drives humanity to commit suicide en masse, survivors of the League contact astronomer and noted UFO debunker Professor Allan Duncan, imploring his help in repairing their damaged ship and defeating the Legion.<sup>14</sup>

Like Nancy's "Zetas", the aliens in the above film have a pyramid-shaped secret base on the floor of the ocean, and are a member of a league of races, which are supposed to be keeping the peace in the universe and stewarding younger races such as humans. The film also contains other classic issues that frequent message boards on conspiracy theory websites such as government mind control programs, the real perpetrators behind the assassination of JFK, and discussion of secret government technology like time-travel devices. Ironically all these issues get significant space and attention on the ZetaTalk site, with the Zetas being determined to set the record straight about all these controversies.<sup>15</sup> Mörth notes how UFO religious discourses provide a complete system of meaning incorporating elements from science fiction literature 'around a charismatic contact-person, comprising philosophical interpretations of the history of mankind and of other religions and going as far as rituals and behavioural guidelines for the salvation of the Earth' (1987: 106). In this respect ZetaTalk is no exception.

### ***The Zetas on Human Knowledge and the Failings of Science***

The Zetas have much to say about our science, from whether the big bang did actually create the universe, to if and how man really landed on the moon. They also discuss the "genuine" process of human evolution, which according to them goes as follows:

*Man, in each of the 6 races, was developed in stages, and between these development stages was allowed a period of time for things to settle down and for the genetically engineered product to be road tested. Would it break down? Frequently this happened, resulting in intervention, fine tuning the product to correct whatever was deemed to be the problem. Archaeologists discover bones, such as those of Neanderthal man, and wonder what became of him. Did he die out? Did he evolve? It seems he rather abruptly disappeared, and such a strapping fellow, he was... The bones of Homo erectus simply mark the evolution of more than one race at a particular stage.*

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<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.moria.co.nz/sf/starshipinvasions.htm> accessed 03/05/04.

<sup>15</sup> My personal favourite is the "truth about the devil", see: <http://www.zetatalk.com/call/c24.htm>.

*Where did he go? Into the labs to become the next stage... The missing link in the evolution of man is not a particular pile of bones as yet undiscovered, it is the teams of genetic engineers who periodically descended on Earth to check on their handiwork, and left when mankind had made another leap.<sup>16</sup>*

In partial support of the Zetas (and Nancy) there is a great deal of genuine mystery and gaps in knowledge surrounding the specifics of human evolution on this planet. For instance, Cremo and Thompson (1996) offer an interesting summary of anomalous human fossils found from the pre-Cambrian to the late tertiary eras. They suggest researchers have found bones and artefacts showing that humans like us have existed on earth for millions of years (not since 100,000 to 200,000 years ago), but that the scientific establishment has ignored these remarkable facts because they contradict the dominant paradigms of human origins and antiquity. The Zetas also argue that the development of human scientific knowledge is based on the ego of individual scientists and academics, instead of reflecting the genuine nature of reality:

*In any discussion about human science there is more than discussion about facts, assumptions, and theories. There is also posturing and the need for comfort. Postulating a theory becomes, too often, a matter of ownership and pride. The theory thereafter cannot be wrong, or the owner is somehow discredited and falls in stature. Then there is the structure built around a theory - published books, lectures and curriculum's, clubs meeting regularly and discussing the matter. All this is like a web, holding the theory up, and any attempt to change the theory brings howls of distress from the web, which must likewise change. Thus, in human society, one has the Catholic Church apologizing only recently for dismembering and burning alive those who pronounced the Earth round, not flat, and the Flat Earth Society still in existence today.<sup>17</sup>*

Barbour (1998), Caldwell (1994), and Clayton (1997), among countless others, have already more skilfully sketched the fallibilities of the scientific method to knowledge accumulation. For instance, according to Kuhn (1996), by its very nature science leads practitioners to awareness of anomalies, which are a prerequisite to new discoveries that ultimately necessitate paradigm change. However, such anomalies often take some time to be recognised and acknowledged. Additionally, they are often met with resistance, which serves a useful purpose in guaranteeing that 'scientists will not be lightly distracted and that the anomalies that lead to paradigm change will penetrate existing knowledge to the core' (1996: 65). Conspiracy theorists such as

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<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.zetatalk.com/science/s24.htm> accessed 03/05/04.

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.zetatalk.com/beinghum/b83.htm> accessed 06/05/04.

Lieder's Zetas are stating the obvious, that on occasion science is not as reflexive as it should be. In this context, the natural sciences like the social sciences also need to be reflexive even if they cannot alter the tendencies of the underlying mechanisms they study (Bhaskar, 1986, 1989, 1998a). It is in this framework that the comments of the Zetas and Nancy (along with numerous other NRSMs) can be placed (Denzler, 2001, 2003; Hanegraaff, 1996; Locke, 2004; Main, 2002; Smith, 2003); they simply reflect reflexive modernity – the desire, to subject tradition (in this case scientific tradition) to sceptical questioning and, having undermined it, to break free from it.

***The ZetaTalk Messages: Late modernity and tribulations of the self?***

The most alarming by-product to emerge from the ZetaTalk phenomenon is the affiliated website Troubled Times, which is a public benefit non-profit corporation. This site is dedicated to educating the public on the consequences of the impending pole shift by providing advice on how to deal with such a cataclysm, as well as giving solutions for life afterwards. The website seeks donations towards various projects whose ultimate aim is to establish self-sufficient communities across America. Self-sufficiency in this respect means no dependence on the outside world for food, heat and other basic living needs. These are disturbing signs, matching many of Barker's (1989) criteria for distinguishing potentially harmful groups. Chryssides identifies two common elements leading to self-destruction after his analysis of four suicide cults:<sup>18</sup>

[G]roups had their own communities, separated off and remote from everyday society. Those who follow a religion in conjunction with a working life and unbelieving friends inevitably find their beliefs challenged from time to time, and encounter concrete confirmation that not everyone shares their chosen religion's world-view... [In addition] all four groups seem to have believed in an imminent end to human affairs... (Chryssides, 1999: 76)

It is not Nancy in isolation who gives advice on the site, but also other followers who share unquestioning belief in the validity of the ZetaTalk messages. For example, the following passage is advice about how to defend the self-sufficient service-to-other communities from intruders after the earth changes have occurred:

*The best defence is a low profile, such as having no windows to conceal your location. Having a good location and being discrete about where your*

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<sup>18</sup> The cults investigated were People's Temple, Branch Davidians, Solar Temple, and Heaven's Gate.

*survival group is going to locate is of primary importance. But in the event that a survival group finds itself under attack by those determined to rape, kill, cannibalize, or enslave, self-defence is a must. Silent weapons allow a defence that won't alert others to the group's location. The Long Bow has advantages over a crossbow or short bow. Knowing the lay of the land gives the survival group the upper hand. Non-lethal defences have infinite possibilities, however, the Aftertime may require vigilante justice. Arguments for guns or no guns can be made, expertise is required and the alternatives are many, plus guns can backfire. A secure area allows the group to sleep safe, but honking geese or a motion detecting tachometer can alert those who are sleeping. Dog attacks from hungry dogs can be deflected.*<sup>19</sup>

The ZetaTalk discourse is a carefully constructed expose (in places) of the challenges facing humanity in the late modern era. This technique of the self signifies Nancy Lieder's personal fears/doubts and the attempts made to transcend them, which also reflects how NRSMs try to use the notion of a metaphysical realm to legitimate their discursive formations, in a desire to re-energise the mundane. In modernity, Giddens (1991) argues, one main tribulation afflicting the troubled self is growing feelings of powerlessness in relation to a diverse and large-scale social universe, where the influences shaping life have shifted increasingly to external agencies. Two main pathologies or techniques of the self can result to overcome such tribulations:

Where an individual feels overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness in the major domains of his phenomenal world, we may speak of a process of *engulfment*. The individual feels dominated by encroaching forces from the outside, which he is unable to resist or transcend. He feels either haunted by implacable forces robbing him of all autonomy of action, or caught up in a maelstrom of events in which he swirls around in a helpless fashion. At the other pole of the powerlessness/appropriation divide is *omnipotence*. Like all personality pathologies, it is a fantasy state. The individual's sense of ontological security is achieved through a fantasy of dominance: the phenomenal world feels as if it is orchestrated by that person as a puppeteer.

(Giddens, 1991: 193-4)

The above passage eloquently frames the probable inspiration behind Nancy Lieder's ZetaTalk discourse, which reflects the unconscious fears rampant in late modernity brought into conscious existence as the channelled Zeta message. On the one hand, fears of *engulfment* are represented in the form of the impending 12th planet, which is an inevitable and encroaching force; and on the other hand *omnipotence* is reflected in the nature of the fourth density Zetas, who have supposedly observed and directed human evolution like puppeteers since the beginning of time.

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<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.zetataalk.com/info/tinfo13b.htm> accessed 09/05/04.

### **The Cassiopaea Experiment: Laura Knight and the Reframing of Metaphysics**

Since 1995 Laura Knight has been placing spiritual truths onto a website gained from her channelled contacts using an Ouija board, with sixth density beings from the constellation Cassiopaea. The beings identified themselves in the following way:

*“We are you in the Future,” they said. “We transmit 'through' the opening that is presented in the locator that you represent as Cassiopaea, due to the strong radio pulses aligned from Cassiopaea, which are due to a pulsar from a neutron star 300 light years behind it, as seen from your locator. This facilitates a clear channel transmission from 6th density to 3rd density.”*<sup>20</sup>

The transmission transcripts that encapsulate the Cassiopaea message are presented in the form of question and answer sessions, Laura asks questions about the true nature of reality and human history, and the Cassiopaeans provide the answers. In her channelling activities and methods Laura claims to be as reflexive and scientific as possible, she states:

*...we assess the Cassiopaeon Transmissions as simply raw data that requires research and intense scrutiny in order to determine its validity and the noise to signal ratio. It is NOT “the word of God” nor does it “belong” to those who are incapable of dealing with it as a data set.*<sup>21</sup>

The topics discussed are very similar to the ZetaTalk messages, as well as mirroring themes found in much other channelled material (Bjorling, 1992; Montgomery, 1976; Ramala Centre, 1986; Roberts, 1970; Samsel, 1998; Schlemmer, 1993). For instance, the Cassiopaeans claim to be sixth density service-to-other beings (i.e. good guys) rather than service-to-self (i.e. bad guys). They also inform us that politics and all organised religion serves as a very effective way to control and manipulate large numbers of human beings. Thus, most mainstream discourse is antithetical to their beliefs and message, which is solely one of spirituality. Once again like the Zetas they suggest that malevolent forces have manipulated humanity since the beginning of history. In this specific case they identify the fourth density service-to-self reptilians as the controllers of a “secret” order, which exists above all the world governments. However, the approaching wave signals an opportunity for humanity to usher in a new

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<sup>20</sup> See <http://www.cassiopaea.org/cass/faq.htm> accessed 10/05/04.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



age of openness and to expose the conspiracy of control on planet earth. They differ with the Zetas in that they do not prophesise a specific apocalypse, instead they state:

*...what does present itself as a result of painstaking research and networking, is the theory that time is cyclical and repeating and that the earth goes through cyclic catastrophes, which mirror human experiential cycles. What is referred to, as “the end of the world” may well be the culmination of one of these cycles. The general concept that “the end of the world” signifies the end of existence or “everything” and that is not something we necessarily consider to be an accurate representation... Based on research, it seems that cycles may include catastrophic periods possibly involving a cometary shower such as those which killed the dinosaurs, and which represents, more or less, macrocosmic Quantum Jumps.<sup>22</sup>*

### ***The Elusive and Evil Reptilians: The Source of Human Suffering?***

They have probably found it difficult enough to recognise that their history, their economics, their social practices, the language that they speak, the mythology of their ancestors, even the stories that they were told in their childhood, are governed by rules that are not all given to their consciousness.

(Foucault, 2002b: 232)

The Cassiopaeans talk about different hyper dimensional realities, which are behind many religious conceptions and mythological representations of gods and goddesses and creatures of all sorts. They state all that really exists is “waveforms” and that we humans are simply one of the many waveforms of reality. Hence our consciousness is something that enables the reading of certain waves of a specific frequency. We give form and structure to the waves we “read” according to some agreed upon convention. The agreed upon convention of humanity is third density. Before we can move onto a higher wave or density we have to choose our spiritual orientation. Again as with the Zeta message there is a branching off in fourth density into service-to-other and service-to-self. Unfortunately for us, the evil fourth density service-to-self reptilians have according to the Cassiopaeans controlled this lower dimensional reality since the beginning of our evolutionary phase, and thus enslaved humanity. According to the Cassiopaeans the reptilians exist in a frequency range beyond human sight. From this ‘higher’ dimension they tug the strings of humanity, feeding off the induced collective negative energies they stimulate, such as those created by fear, death and war. This grand conspiracy enables Laura to weave a whole alternative tapestry regarding the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

nature of human history and from whence to reconstruct a theory of the true nature of reality. In order to reinvent and reinterpret human knowledge Laura embarks on a critical tour de France of numerous religious texts as well as metaphysical works. The essence of the Cassiopaea message is that although humanity is in turmoil and under the control of the insidious reptilians, the upcoming macrocosmic quantum wave will push us into fourth density awareness. This will level the playing field and allow liberation, by making humans comprehend the truth (i.e. Laura's) of reality on earth.

*The Wave is a term used to describe a Macro-cosmic Quantum Wave Collapse producing both a physical and a "metaphysical" change to the Earth's cosmic environment theorized to be statistically probable sometime in the early 21st century. This event is variously described by other sources as the planetary shift to 4th density, shift of the ages, harvest etc., and is most often placed around the end of 2012.<sup>23</sup>*

The foundational basis of Laura's argument regarding the reptilians is in no way novel, and is the product of a host of other earthly sources put together into a new alternative paradigmatic explanation of human history. This paradigm is supposedly given normative authority by the all-knowledgeable sixth density Cassiopaeian seal of endorsement. Many other new age prophets have also attempted to expose the sinister reptilian connection and their subsequent negative manipulations of circumstances on earth. Most cast the reptilians as a "soulless demonic species" that has been opposed to the "soul possessing" humans since the beginning of creation:

The Reptiles are known by many as the Reptoids. They were created long before the Humans, on the planet of Aln, in the Orion constellation. The Reptiles were created first so that they could achieve technological superiority. They had already attained space travel when we, Humans, were just emerging from the oceans in Vega... The Reptiles colonized many planets and star systems in our galaxy. They were given a creation myth that stated they owned the galaxy and had the right to colonize any planet or star they desired.

(Starr, 1999: 65)

The above story according to Starr (1999) is why the reptilians are concerned with the covert domination and control of planet earth. David Icke (2001) paints a similarly grim picture of human reality. He argues the reptilians have been involved in everything from the death of Princess Diana, to the demonic possession of Hitler, as well as the start of the Second World War. Icke's dark vision of the reptilians paints

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<sup>23</sup> See <http://www.cassiopaea.org/cass/waveindex.htm> accessed 10/05/04.

them as a species of blood drinking, energy draining, and sex-mad psychopaths. A species responsible for all that is ill and wrong with the world. He even claims (very sincerely) that the British royal family are shape shifting demonic reptiles. Regardless of your view of the monarchy this is transference in its most extreme guise, where human problems are blamed on an elusive evil and is rather reminiscent of the vampire legend (see Konstantinos, 2002). Icke suggests that, ‘the leading world governments, particularly the United States, have entered into “treaties” of mutual benefit with the reptilians and greys in return for technological knowledge, but these “agreements” have been used to further establish their control’ (2001: 374).<sup>24</sup>

There are some less sensational theories that have inspired talk of reptilians. For instance, the long sojourn of the dinosaurs on earth is well established by evolutionary scientists. The dinosaurs existed for millions of years before they finally became extinct. Sagan (1977) speculated on the reptilian origins of humans dating back to the dinosaurs, and on the mysterious leap in brain evolution that can be found in the fossil record. Sagan noted that if people had evolved naturally from reptiles, as Darwinists claim, it should have taken 200 million years for mammals to first evolve, and then another 5 to 10 million years for humans to evolve. According to Sagan, the fossil record simply does not substantiate this conclusion. He suggested ‘we [humans] are not descended from Neanderthals and may not be from Cro-Magnons either. But their existence raises the question: Who were those fellows? What were their accomplishments?’ (1977: 107). These mysteries surrounding the exact sequence of evolution have inspired UFO prophets, independent researchers and even biological professors to give alternative paradigms explaining human history, which compete with accepted scientific perspectives (Chryssides, 2003). For example, Boulay (1999) conducts an extensive analysis of ancient sources such as the *Nag Hammadi* texts (named after the town where they were found) as well as the lost books of the bible, reaching the conclusion that reptilian gods created humanity. He warns that eventually ‘mankind will have to learn the truth about his origins and face the fact that his gods and ancestors were reptiles’ (Boulay, 1999: 263). Horn (1994: xv) a former professor of biological anthropology reaches similar controversial conclusions:

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<sup>24</sup> Barkun (2003) traces the idea of a shape-shifting Serpent Race back to Robert E. Howard’s (1906 - 1936) short story called “The Shadow Kingdom” published in *Weird Tales* in 1929. Howard’s plot involved a battle between evil snake men whose human adversary Kull, came from Atlantis. Howard was a fantasy writer who is best known for the creation of his character *Conan the Barbarian*. Of course we also have the evil snake of the Bible who tricked Eve getting humanity banished from Eden.

[G]roups of regressive ETs [the reptilians], always with the help of a few humans, have conspired and are conspiring to keep the knowledge of the ET influences in human evolution hidden from mankind. I discovered that the principal information that these regressive ETs have distorted and concealed, is the spirituality of humans. They do this to keep humankind from spiritually evolving to the point where their own dark influences and imprints would no longer have an effect upon humankind.

The dissatisfaction of UFO prophets with scientific explanations on human evolution, reflect and bring to the fore the public understanding about problems in the processes driving forward scientific knowledge (Locke, 2004). During late modernity the latter is increasingly victim to questioning by both disillusioned insiders (e.g. Horn, 1994) and observant outsiders (e.g. Laura), rather like religious paradigms were during the Enlightenment by the rationalists (e.g. Descartes) and atheists (e.g. Marx). There is a growing archaeology of knowledge about ‘alternative’ evolutionary theories and earth histories, which is drawn upon by NRSMs (especially UFO groups) to construct a seemingly legitimatised genealogy for their ‘novel’ paradigms (Foucault, 2002a, b).

### ***Introducing the Quantum School: From Laura Knight to Laura Knight Jadczyk***

In 1998 after a two-year Internet romance Laura finally met and married Ark Jadczyk (a professor at the University of Wroclaw, in Poland), claiming that the Cassiopaeans had guided her to him. The story, extracted from *The Exorcist in Love* and volume two of Laura’s autobiography, goes something like this. After a few years of channelling the Cassiopaeans, Laura suddenly realises that her first husband Lewis has been abducted by the reptoids and replaced with a zombie replica designed to monitor and interfere with her activities. She divorces him, goes into a deep depression, from which she is miraculously saved by the Cassiopaeans. In 1997 with the guidance of the Cassiopaeans she meets Ark online, at the time she was interested in gravity waves and Ark a physicist responded to her query on a message forum. The online friendship develops into eventual marriage and gradually the Cassiopaeans become less and less important in Laura’s spiritual postings on her Internet site.<sup>25</sup>

The above turn of events once again throws light on the genuine inspiration behind the Cassiopaea phenomenon. It is merely the playing out of a classic dilemma

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<sup>25</sup>See <http://www.sptimes.com/News/webspecials/exorcist/exorcist1-2.html> for the full story.

confronting the troubled self in Giddens's depiction of late modernity, namely whether to give into uncertainty or seek authority in a tradition. Giddens elaborates:

The dilemma of authority versus doubt is ordinarily resolved through a mixture of routine and commitment to a certain form of lifestyle, plus the vesting of trust in a given series of abstract systems. Yet this 'compromise package', under pressure, can begin to disintegrate...

At the other pole, we find pathological states in which individuals are virtually immobilised through a tendency towards universal doubt. In its most marked versions, this outlook takes the form of paranoia or a paralysis of the will so complete that the individual effectively withdraws altogether from ordinary social intercourse. (Giddens, 1991: 196)

Since her marriage to Ark, Laura has once again found authority in the tradition of marriage, which she had lost in her union with her first husband. Her increasing channelling of the Cassiopaeans during the unhappy final years of her marriage to Lewis was the vesting of trust in an abstract system. This channelling was merely her unconscious mind attempting to direct her mental energies to the cause of her uncertainty, in other words, her dissatisfaction with her marital relationship. Why else would the Cassiopaeans (supposedly enlightened beings) care to describe her husband as a zombie replica placed in her life by the reptilians? Why would the all-conquering reptilians care about Laura a mere housewife interested in metaphysics? The explanation is Laura was trying to confront her unhappiness and fear through a safety buffer. The evidence is plain to see on her Internet site, since her new happy relationship with Ark; Laura has channelled the Cassiopaeans far less. Instead she is concentrating on developing the Quantum Future School, which aims to help those who join (for a fee) to find the path of service-to-other spirituality, the website claims:

*Before we can become our own masters [i.e. Service-to-other], we need to take steps toward seeing who we are now in a logical, scientific manner. We are all STS [service-to-self], that is, our thoughts and actions serve ourselves, and we learned long ago how to manipulate to achieve our ends. In a world where this is the default setting, how could we have learned otherwise?*

*We have a predator's mind that uses us until we become conscious of it. This mind constantly views the world in terms of "us and them", tapping into our basic desires of fear, sex, and survival to **inflame our passions and obscure our perceptions of that which really is...** For whatever reason, some become **sickened by this state of affairs and search the world for answers.** Some begin to look within, and face the darkness. Some begin to see the symbolic nature of our reality. If you are one of those people, then perhaps this school is for you... Only human beings of iron will, guided by a higher consciousness, or Noë, will advance into the New Heaven and New Earth, in literal terms.*

*The coming era has Two Faces: One of Paradise Restored, the other a Deluge of Fire. We can choose which Face of God we behold.*<sup>26</sup> (Emphasis added)

Once again the above is simply reflecting another dilemma in late modernity that of unification versus fragmentation. Service-to-other represents unification, a state where such inclined selves construct ‘identity around fixed commitments, which act as a filter through which numerous different social environments are reacted to or interpreted’ (Giddens, 1991: 190). Service-to-self reflects fragmentation when ‘the false self overrides and blankets out the original acts of thinking, feeling and willing which represent the true motivations of the individual. What remains of the true self is experienced as empty and inauthentic’ (Ibid: 191). Much of Laura’s recent research is concerned with psychopaths, or what she calls the “soulless” organic portal.

### ***The Pursuit of Money and the Internet Prophets***

Both ZetaTalk and the Cassiopaea Experiment cater for a growing wave of interest in alternative spiritualities, concern with conspiracy theories, knowledge about ancient mysteries and wisdom from enlightened beings. Both prophets have been embroiled in allegations of financial fraud. An ex-member of the Cassiopaea movement tells us:

*Laura Knight Jadczyk, her husband Ark Jadczyk, and other members of the Perseus Foundation did in fact commit serious fraud with the fake house raffle scam, the so-called Raffle of the Millennium...*

*They took in money, between \$100,000 and \$150,000 from October to January 2002–03, as a non-profit raffle sponsor even though Perseus Foundation is not now, and never has been, a legal 501-c-3 with the ability to grant tax write offs for donations.*

*They never gave their house away, didn’t even pay off the mortgage, and as recently as this summer, 2003, were trying to sell it themselves.*

*They left quickly for France, where, by Laura’s own figures in various instalments of the French Connection, they have spent over \$80,000 in moving and living expenses, in addition to a \$50,000 down payment on a castle.<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>26</sup> See [http://www.cassiopaea.org/qfs/qfs\\_intro.htm](http://www.cassiopaea.org/qfs/qfs_intro.htm) accessed 11/05/04.

<sup>27</sup> See <http://www.cassiopaea.net> accessed 12/05/04.

A curious astronomer investigating the ZetaTalk prophecy about the twelfth planet, in an interview with one of Nancy's former colleagues at CSC Consulting (where she used to work), found out the following background information about her:

*Q: What kind of work did you and she do?*

*A: We were computer consultants... Working for her was like working by myself. I would only hear from her around annual review time. This wasn't completely unheard of from these managers, however.*

*I actually found out about her "hobby" in an interesting way. At my annual review in early 96, I expressed an interest in moving my career towards the Internet. She mentioned that she had a website that got a lot of hits. Of course, I asked what it was, and she refused to tell me, saying that it was "rather controversial", and that she didn't want anyone in her professional life to know about it until she "didn't have to work anymore". Being the curious sort, and expecting something like a strongly pro-life or pro-choice website, I did a websearch on her name. At the time, she didn't have her last name on the web anywhere. But, a quick "who is lieder" pulled her up. Imagine my surprise!<sup>28</sup>*

## Conclusion

[T]he period of high modernity is one of fundamental transition... The expansion of internally referential systems reaches its outer limits; on a collective level and in day-to-day life moral/existential questions thrust themselves back to centre-stage. Focused around processes of self-actualisation, although also stretching through to globalising developments, such issues call for a restructuring of social institutions, and raise issues not just of a sociological but of a political nature. (Giddens, 1991: 208)

As a consequence of the Enlightenment the traditional religions such as Christianity, were and continue to be, increasingly prone to sceptical questioning by the doctrines of rationality and empiricism, represented by science and the scientific method. In a reflexive modernity we see the cyclical nature of social transformation at work, now the doctrines of rationality and empiricism are the traditions that are the object of critical questioning (Hanegraaff, 1996). The Enlightenment philosophers envisioned a new era free from the dogmas and superstitions of religion, thus the modern UFO prophets ultimately promise a new age free from the evils of scientific materialism, such as excessive production and superficial consumption driven by modernisation of the West. The UFO religious discourses with the help of extraterrestrial endorsement (the new God's) promise the same old liberation and salvation repackaged in pseudo-scientific terms. As Denzler surmises: 'If the UFO myth has done nothing else in the

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<sup>28</sup> See [http://www.laughton.com/paul/rfo/nancy/whois\\_nancy.html](http://www.laughton.com/paul/rfo/nancy/whois_nancy.html) accessed 12/05/04.

twentieth century, it has crystallized within itself the language and praxis of a scientific modernity along with the myths and symbols of an ancient and venerable human quest that first found a home in religion' (2001: 159).

The hope and striving for a utopian new age is the most valuable lesson we can gain from engaging the discourses of groups like ZetaTalk and the Cassiopaea Experiment. Nonetheless, we do not need 'otherworldly' help or apocalypse to attain deliverance. Feelings of impending doom and the salvation of a select few sound very reminiscent of the exclusionary doctrines of traditional religions, while also mirroring age-old fears of humanity (Fenn, 2003b). In an era plagued by the threat of nuclear weapons, terrorist cells, environmental destruction, chemical and biological warfare, deadly viruses, and other potential expressions of extinction, the apocalyptic and millenarian aspects of UFO beliefs have an obvious appeal, directly addressing fears of collective extermination by offering the promise of salvation and the assurance that a superhuman (or extraterrestrial) plan underlies history. Grünschlob explains:

It is not difficult to understand how, in contexts of economic vulnerability, socio-cultural discomfort and obscurity, the promises of UFO religions can appear very appealing. The individual becomes a 'star seed', a 'light worker', or a Thetan, located 'above' the merely material world with all its complexities; as a new-born being a person enters a new social circle, becoming a member of an enlightened elite. (2003: 189)

Eventual death is a constant companion breathing down the neck of all living organisms walking the face of this planet, but it need not cause us to slide into pessimistic nightmares or salvational fantasies. 'The knight's resoluteness lies in his determination to finish his task, undeterred by Death: in his looking past Death even while facing him' (Collier, 1999: 116). The potential to change the world lies here on earth, not out there in the vastness and indifference of the cosmos. The tentative foundations are already being erected to a critical and moral realism that promises a liberating social science with far reaching ramifications (Bhaskar, 1986, 1991, 1993; Bhaskar and Collier, 1998; Collier, 2004b). Millions suffer under the contradictions and strains of capitalistic expansions (K. Dean, 2003; Townsend & Gordon, 2002), so the promotion of social and economic policies based on reducing inequalities between peoples and imbalances with nature, requires us to fashion "new" realisms (Archer, 1998, 2004; Cruickshank, 2003; Groff, 2004). Perhaps then, as Capra (1999) hoped, can a multitude of movements representing different facets of the same new vision of



reality, gradually coalescing to form a powerful force of social transformation become the realistic and sure-footed foundation to a truly liberating future age?

*I choose to live in a world of harmony, I choose to have the brotherhood of man, I choose to have peace on earth, I choose to have the resources of the earth shared – I choose to have those things. Whereas right now I can't choose to have those things, because I am not in a place to make those things manageable, so in answer to your question my journey within upon completion will complete the journey without.*<sup>29</sup> (Mansoor, 2004)

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<sup>29</sup> Extract from interview with male New Ager (09/03/2004).

### **Towards A Model Explaining the Causes and Consequences of NRSMs**

The primary aim in this thesis has been to credit the investigation of NRSMs with the necessary sociological respect. My contribution to this endeavour has been to open up a third space towards the analysis of such movements, beyond the extreme positions taken by the cult ‘bashers’ on the one hand, and the cult ‘apologists’ on the other (Zablocki and Robbins, 2001). The theoretical and methodological perspective chosen to inform this study drew on a critical realist epistemology and made use of a plurality of research techniques, which in the author’s humble opinion is the least value-laden strategy with which to appraise religious and spiritual phenomena:<sup>1</sup>

we do not attempt a deductive proof of God’s existence (and probably no such proof is possible), we are trying to enhance the plausibility of belief in God [or a metaphysical reality] as a matter open to rational discussion.

(Archer *et al.*, 2004a: 6)

The first two chapters re-evaluated the classics in the sociology of religion and the secularisation debate, arguing these theories link decline in religious belief to a rise in modernisation, which is overly simplistic. The inspiration behind such linear theories can be traced back to the grand narratives of Enlightenment that heralded a scientific emancipation of the social with a critique of religious superstition. As a result the role of religion as object has transformed over time, but proposing eventual disappearance proves too deterministic. Thus, the enthusiastic embrace of the secularisation thesis in industrialised countries like Britain is the result of supportive empirical data, such as continuous downward trends in church participation. But if degree of modernisation was the key variable explaining declining piety, we should expect the modern United States to exhibit similar trends. This is not borne out by the statistical evidence, as church attendance in North America has not suffered the levels of erosion recorded by the European countries (Norris and Inglehart, 2004: 79). The implication is something far more complex is occurring, as implied by Grace Davie’s (1990) ‘believing without belonging’ argument. Therefore, multi-casual theories of religious change are needed in order to be more reflective of social complexity; some have already been attempted building on the structuration tools of Anthony Giddens (e.g. Lee, 1992; Mellor, 1993).

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<sup>1</sup> This contrasts with the arguments made by Creaven (2001) who advocates a materialistic atheistic approach to the study of spirituality. His position is inadequate because one begins with *a priori* value judgements about religion that end up in a glossing over and dismissing explanation of the phenomena.

Figure 6 below presents a model depicting the many layered and abstracted processes/interrelationships determining social transformations. The model will help guide future sociological investigation about NRSMs, by allowing researchers to focus on understanding the agency causes behind NRSM formations and the social consequences of their various emergences. The highest or base level of abstracted totality underlying society is the metaphysical realm (see chapter 6). This is akin to Durkheim's deep grammar of society, or Rudolf Otto's phenomenology of religious consciousness derived from humanity's naked confrontation with the sacred.

Here the human experience of sacred reality or the numinous is seen to express a sense of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, an experience in which the plenitude of being and power resident in the numinous as the ground of all existence both frightens and fascinates, daunts and delights human self-consciousness. This experience provides the nonrational surplus of meaning which both energizes and transcends the intellectual and moral schemas of particular religious traditions. (Yerkes, 1998: 437)

Thus, it is an alien reality that lies outside the world of mundane human experience. It is the place beyond finite understanding and the seedbed for the growth of infinite mysteries. The ultimate ordering notion of a creator resides here, with the advance of space technology and science we now see extraterrestrials emerge into the parameters of our most abstracted reality. Many new religions particularly the UFO movements redraw from this level, the demons and angels of the bible become modernised and rationalised as negative/positive aliens (Porter, 1996; see chapter 9). Creation stories, earth histories and the limits imposed by evolution on the traditional depiction of an omnipotent supernatural cosmic creator are all reinterpreted leading to a recasting of God as ancient astronaut and geneticist. As the New Age discourses argue, rational scientific progress has failed to comprehensively demystify the metaphysical realm or convincingly explain all the factors behind environmental and biological processes (Hanegraaff, 1996). Until it has, Gods, angels, extraterrestrials and the intuitive insights from the infinite sacred will all continue to engender awe and inspiration.

The next more solidified layer is the exogenous arena, the hexagon inside the metaphysical realm box. This is the domain of the transformative variables found outside a particular nation state, which can inject new ideas or concepts into its social realm. Migration of peoples, cross fertilisation of cultures, globalisation of ideas and information, are some of the main external forces operating an influence upon the social realm. Chapter 4 analysed the trends in, and origins of, new religions formed in

the West since the 1920s. The zenith for religious innovations was shown as the 1970s and 1980s when Indian and East Asian religious ideas greatly infiltrated Western consciousness; a process Campbell has called the Easternisation of the West (see chapter 7). Holm suggests,

[I]t can be argued that those young people who became committed to the Indian-orientated new religious movements had failed to find a foundation for the motifs in their inner existence space from the social symbolic world offered by their parents' generation. They now had access to new channels of information; they had lost interest in the forms of expression of cultural values in their own society, and were, therefore, driven to look further afield to find a lifestyle which would better correspond to their ideals. (Holm, 1998: 105)

The most solid or mundane level of the model is the social realm where the actions of agents and institutions are continuously reproduced and transformed via the duality of structure (see chapter 1, 2, 3), so hither the influence of the metaphysical realm is expressed in the form of the various religious traditions and institutions.<sup>2</sup>

This universal sense of the numinous, then, is what produces humanity's various religious traditions in history. If religion as personal experience is religion as revelatory disclosure, then religion as tradition is religion as institutional response. That is to say, religions are institutional responding constructions which take the threefold forms of cult (the aesthetic or liturgical element), creed (the rational or conceptual element), and code (the ethical or discipline element). (Yerkes, 1998: 437)

Several theories about the rise of NRSMs emphasise rapid social change as the cause of religious innovations and the force driving conversions. Rapid social change is a catchall term referring to a socio-cultural matrix of structural transformations such as the gradual erosion of values in a rational, scientific and materialistic capitalism, which can be abstracted as a significant dislocating force upon agents. Change causes a jolt to the predictable actions of agents and some may need to re-interface with the base metaphysical realm to regain new meaning leading to religious or spiritual conversions. These structural observations bring to the fore the limitations of pursuing an *a priori* negative stance to NRSMs, as encouraged by the countercult movement (Melton, 2004). New religions are often the creative responses to identity crises, so conversion is the outcome of the conscious choices made by self-reflexive agents (see

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<sup>2</sup> See Nellhaus (1998) who combines critical realism with semiotic theory to grasp both the intransitive dimension of reality, and the semiotic nature of our mental access to it in the transitive dimension, which promises a deeper account of the dynamics behind power.

chapter 5). Thus, operationalising reflexive modernity, human embodiment and using the New Age discourses as a reference frame, it was demonstrated how these writings emphasise transformation of individual agency and the social realm by adding new statements to religious discourses, resulting in a hope for novel societal configurations (i.e. a new age). This is removed from the traditional portrayals of religious discourses (such as Christianity) as a mere bastion for repressions and of oppressions: ‘Though a tradition can be the repository of much thoughtlessness and harm, a tradition is never simply all bad’ (Grassie, 1997: 93). Chapter four outlined the most common type of NRSMs across the West as world-accommodating (43%), or those indifferent to the values of broader society, while the least common were the world-rejecting (12%). This questions sensationalist media portrayal of modern ‘cults’ as solely malevolent forces operating in the shadows to prey on, dupe, and corrupt society’s vulnerable.

The multifarious NRSMs created in the present state of the model are derived from past conditions (the arrow in figure 6 pointing left), and will determine the subsequent forms of NRSMs in future societal configurations (the arrow pointing right). It is interesting that in the 1990s the most common inspiration determining new religions were those with pagan and indigenous origins, or the so called nature faiths.

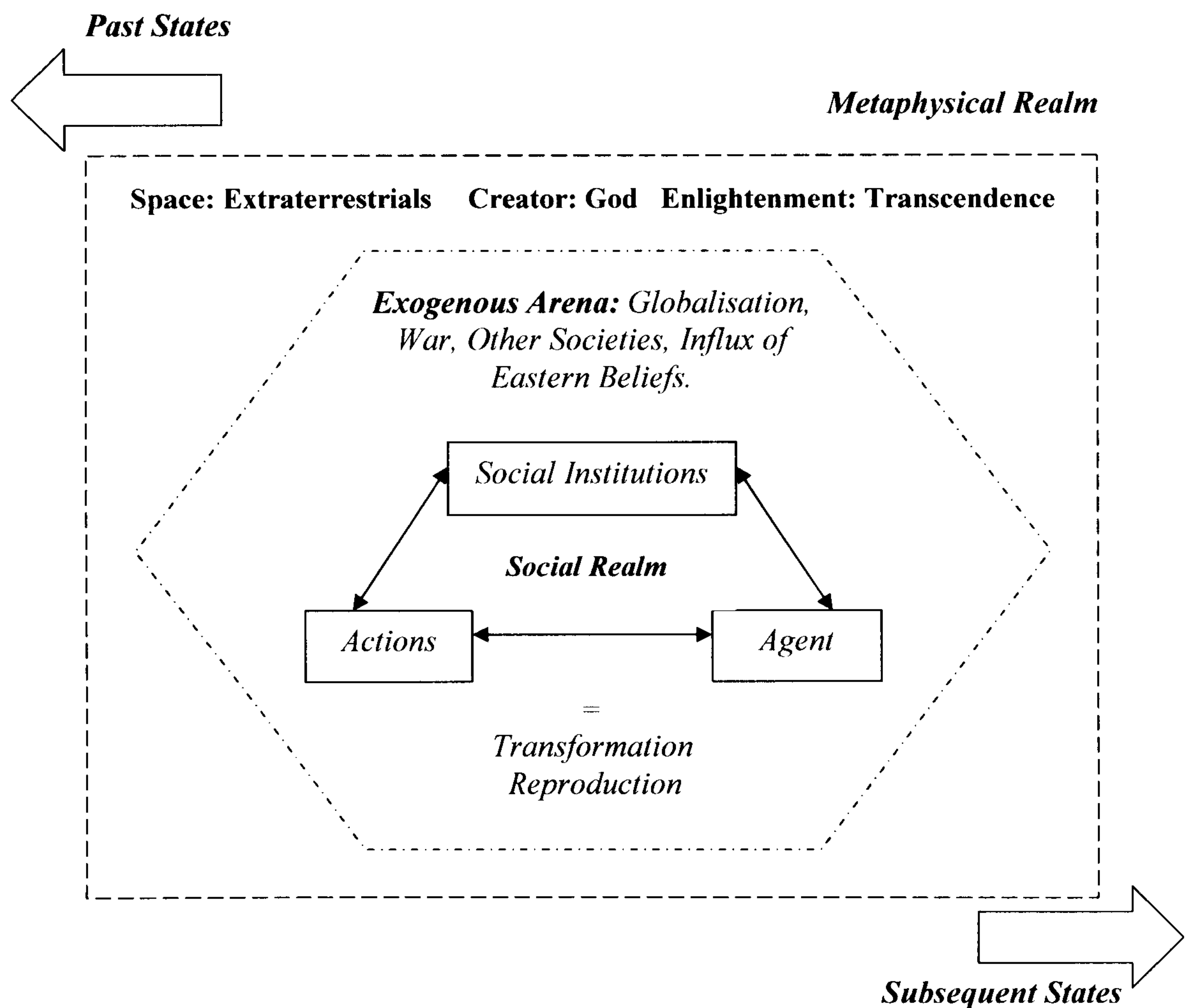
[I]f we are to survive and flourish as a species in the changed conditions of the new century, we will have to move on, via “the unity of theory and practice in practice”, to a new outlook and a new life – come both to see ourselves, and to act, as part of the cosmic whole. To that extent, all critical realists can agree that the new orientation expresses the alethic truth of our situation, and that TDCR [transcendental critical realism] is the culmination of an extraordinarily powerful attempt to overturn the philosophical props of the world of generalised master-slave-type relations, as enshrined in the Western dogmas of actualism and ontological monovalence, from Parmenides to Rorty, and to forge a worldview fitting for an ecologically sustainable post-slave order.

(Hartwig, 2001: 162)

The interplays between structure-agency have led to the re-interpretation of religion as object in the face of scientific critique. Chapter 6 demonstrated how a selection of NRSMs legitimate their discursive formations by reconstructing science and religion based on their public understandings of the historical debates, as simply cognitive systems trying to decipher the ultimate truth of reality. However, science, materialism and Darwinian theories of evolution are combined and criticised as the prime causes of moral decay. In this manner, religion and spirituality is reasserted as a necessary public force for ethical and social reinvigoration. Therefore, new religions and

spiritualities should be primarily seen as social movements that aim to instigate value change within wider social institutions. They tend to argue public-spirited intercession is vital in global capitalism, as markets possess no intrinsic values of self-regulation. Religion is seen as having an important role to play, ‘by drawing moral boundaries between a socially destructive behaviour fostered by the market ethos’ and balancing them with the ‘religiously informed, social values of civil society’ (Haddorff, 2000: 499, 500). The ideological stance of a movement will significantly determine the extent of the changes it seeks; extreme world-rejecting groups like ZetaTalk expect complete destruction of Earth before a utopian reconstruction is possible.

**Figure 6 – A Model of Societal Transformations**



The fundamental weakness of postmodernism is the assumption that there is no viable foundation for discovering the absolute truth of human being (Rule, 1995:

220-2). Postmodernist error stems from a misunderstanding of Kantian idealism. The super-idealism of postmodernism results in judgemental relativism, the idea that there can be no rational criteria for choosing between different theoretical frameworks or explanations, and that moral, aesthetic, or instrumental values or conventions always play an essential part in such choices. In other words, truth is socially constructed and always relative to cultural and subjective worldviews. Hence there is a denial of the environmental and biological determinants upon behaviour. This derives from Kant's arguments that no external reality exists beyond the categories imposed by the rational human mind, which optimally orders sense data according to *a priori* categorical imperatives (see Kant, 1998, 2002). However, Stark (1997) refutes Kant's view of the categorical rationality of valuing oneself, because assuming self-respect is innate to mind idealises social problems and oppressions. Self-respect, equality, and goodness of being are all qualities to strive for, if we want maximised social communities and relationships with others (i.e. the universal principle of right). They are an outcome of real social interactions and experiences. Critical realism sees human freedom as a real potentiality through actual experiences and explanatory critiques. Thus, in practice effective intervention in cyclical transformations can lead us to successively higher states of enlightenment or self-understanding (Archer, 1995; Steinmetz, 1998).

In truth, our leaders and propagandists know very well that liberal capitalism is an inegalitarian regime, unjust, and unacceptable for the vast majority of humanity. And they know too that our "democracy" is an illusion: Where is the political power for third world peasants, the European working class, the poor everywhere? We live in a contradiction: a brutal state of affairs, profoundly inegalitarian, where all existence is evaluated in terms of money alone, is presented as ideal to us. (Badiou, 2001: 2)

Established new religions like the Church of Scientology have distinct social change orientated agendas (see chapter 8). The institutionalisation of the metaphysical realm in the discourses and practices of the organisation means that it has clear-cut opponents in its struggle for freedom within the social realm.

*Whilst capital and some material benefit are clearly vital to our own and other people's survival, the production and distribution of such benefits must be governed by moral and ethical values. Without these we would live a life more closely allied to the "seven deadly sins" than to spirituality. Greed and gluttony are rife in many parts of our society, but it is obvious that those with*

## Conclusion

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*a truly spiritual viewpoint are more concerned with establishing a 'fair exchange' with the rest of the community.*<sup>3</sup> (Ken, 2004)

Scientology like most NRSMs uses the interpretations of the metaphysical realm recorded by its charismatic founder, to guide and energise its modes of action and institutional agendas. All NRSMs resort to some form of transcendent legitimation strategy to justify their struggles in the social realm and to affirm their identity as a distinct social movement. The notion of embodiment is a useful addition here,

our experience with our bodies is mediated by learned roles and other expectations; it is shaped by the immediate social context, as well as by historical antecedents of which the individual may not even be aware; and it is apprehended and communicated indirectly through language and other cultural symbols. (McGuire, 1990: 285)

Embodiment directs our attention to the body and helps us conceptualise how the differences between bodies (i.e. sex, race etc) or roles (e.g. Scientologist, Psychiatrist) are used by dominant powers (i.e. NRSM founders, elites, governments) to maintain the hegemony and legitimacy of their institutions in the social realm. However, once solidified in the social realm NRSM discourses become static unless there is a forum of auto-critique to continually reappraise the enchanted numinous to assist in the challenges to gain freedom from mundane reality. To clearly grasp the roots of conflict between social groups and to gain freedom we need to examine how various embodiments are played off against different 'others' who are also embodied (Bokser, 2002). Nationalism, religion, and spirituality are particularly potent stories and beliefs that assist in anchoring identity of the self and group. Kinnvall argues: 'They do this by being portrayed as resting on solid ground, as being true... The world, in this view, "really" consists of a direct primordial relationship to a certain territory' (2004: 763). Fear of change and the insecurities of self and group are projected on the blank canvas of the intruder. Any similarities and grounds for mutual understanding are ignored. To counter such social ruptures Kinnvall identifies our task as one that should focus on unmasking 'those hidden power structures involved in the appeal to one and only one exclusionary identity' (2004: 763). In conjunction with this first task we need to recognise and deal with the real structural insecurities faced by many people as they learn to cope in increasingly complex, interconnected and globalized societies.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview extract with 76-year-old male Scientologist (14/10/2004).



There are key socio-economic trends that have mobilised movements such as Scientology, Falun Gong and ZetaTalk into programs of action to alleviate social ills. Inequality in the United States has steadily risen to the extent that the gap between the rich and poor is larger now than at any point in the past 75 years, and is greater than any other industrialised nation (Wolff, 1995). In particular Reagan's presidential era did much to intensify the inequality of ethnic minorities and assist the shift in US political ideology towards a dangerous neo-conservatism (Halper and Clarke, 2004). Reagan's policies deliberately masked the structural economic basis of falling living standards experienced by the majority of Americans through the scapegoating of welfare, crime and affirmative action programs. Thatcher took a similar right-wing political trajectory in the United Kingdom, through rationalising public services and promoting privatisation she managed to accelerate inequality past US levels in the 1980s (Atkinson, 2002: 27). New Labour's election in 1997 owed much to the socio-economic consequences of Thatcherism and Majorism (Heffernan, 1999), but rather than alleviating the damage of his predecessors' policies, the neo-liberalism of Blair equates to market liberalisation, which has generated even greater inequality.

Plotting on a graph all EU countries' levels of inequality and social security rates shows how countries with similar economies make very different decisions about wealth distribution. There is no iron economic rule that determines how people should be rewarded or wealth shared. Fairer countries (Scandinavia, Holland) tend to do better than the unfairest - Britain.

(Toynbee, 2003)

The case analysis chapters argued that any NRSM with a static totalising framework for transformation based on definite truth claims and unquestionable knowledge would prove in the long-run to be an ineffective agent of progressive change. Social transformation is an open-ended process; 'we cannot seize "history" and bend it readily to our collective purposes. Even though we ourselves produce and reproduce it in our actions, we cannot control social life completely' (Giddens, 1990: 153). Acknowledging this point need not lead to a slide into postmodern relativism or social defeatism (Bhaskar, 1986, 1989; Tisaw, 2003). Evaluation of social experience via explanatory critique is a tool available to guide sociology in the agenda to realise a "freer" and more "equal" social realm for the majority of agents (Groff, 2004).

[T]here is potential for the development of a universal piety. Such a piety would not be in competition with existing forms of piety, seeking to supplant

them. Neither would it simply affirm them all, giving them democratic rights to speak and exchange. A universal piety is a basis for critique... [drawing] our attention to that which matters. (Goodchild, 2002: 252)

The many-layered diagram depicting social transformations I have presented can effectively be used as a theoretical framework to analyse any NRSM. In a reflexive modernity some embodied charismas experiencing alienations in the social realm, will strive to re-enchant mundane reality by devising new religious/spiritual discourses through interfacing with, and drawing upon the metaphysical realm as an object underlying physical reality. This is the key regularity or pattern explaining the cyclical emergences of, and conversions to, NRSMs in the West during the last century and into this new millennium.<sup>4</sup>

### **NRSMs: Some Suggestions for Future Sociological Research**

What I am pointing to is a substantial deficit in any sort of convincing notion of ‘community’, of the ‘we’... to understand today’s barbaric if fragmented new nationalism, as well as the collective representations of the new social movements, not to mention other kinds of contemporary ethics of practice, some fundamental thinking about the ‘we’ is surely needed. (Lash in Beck *et al.*, 1994: 144)

Modernist social theory such as Marxism has been heavily criticised for presupposing the existence of a utopian ‘metanarrative’ of social change. To this, postmodern analysts like Lyotard (1993, 1997) and Baudrillard (1983, 1993) have counterposed by espousing what seems to be a dystopia based on fragmentation, relativism and the disappearance of a concern with a ‘collective we’, to a narcissistic preoccupation with ‘individual I’s’. Nevertheless, as Bhaskar, Lash and Giddens have argued social theory can best understand and guide change if a dialectical character is added to the notion of modernisation (Beck *et al.*, 1994, Bhaskar, 1993, 1998a). In this thesis I have demonstrated the strengths of such a reflexive theoretical approach when applied to understanding the reasons behind the emergence of multifarious NRSMs. This has also been taken one stage further with an explanatory critique of the new forms of ‘we’ or ‘community’ diverse NRSMs have constructed in reflexive modernity. There has already been a call in the sociological literature to move towards ‘how’ questions,

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<sup>4</sup> However, this does not equate to the proposition that religion is an anthropological or biological necessity innate to all human beings; instead, my claim is that a certain percentage of people will often choose to adopt a religious/spiritual belief over a physical/material one.

or ‘a heightened awareness of religious movement participation as an open-ended process of identity formation, extending inwardly toward the formation of personal identity and outwardly to the formation of social identity’ (Zablocki and Looney, 2004: 325). Thus, further research will be required to establish the precise processes behind ‘how’ convert loyalty is maintained in NRSMs. Put another way, the question of ‘why’ people convert to NRSMs is only one side of a very important equation.

More historically focused research is needed to locate the sociological factors accounting for the dominant patterns of religious traditions to have influenced the formation of NRSMs in specific decades. For example, why were indigenous or nature traditions the most common inspiration behind the formation of NRSMs during the 1990s? Another avenue worth exploring is a typological comparison of NRSMs active in the West, with those recently mobilising in the ‘new’ Russia (Shterin, 2004), to uncover what contrasts, synergies or similarities exist. In this respect, the World Values Surveys contain comprehensive longitudinal data on cross-national religious trends, but still remain an underused resource (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). These data sources provide a fruitful foundation from which to launch systematic comparative work about the fate of religions, which transcend national boundaries. Encompassing these issues there is the demand for more sophisticated amalgamations of quantitative data charting patterns in religious beliefs/values, combined with focused qualitative analysis, to provide deeper theoretical statements and insights about NRSMs.

In a western landscape post 9/11 and the more recent 7/7, there is a hazard that research on religion will skew too much towards studies of extremist Islamic groups. As a result certain other ‘fringe’ or ‘new’ religious movements could be overlooked. Another danger is a return to the predisposition of grouping all ‘exotic’ or ‘marginal’ religious ideas together as a sinister threat to Christian or secular sensibilities, thereby amplifying restrictions on religious freedoms. As Lucas (2004: 355) argues,

It is my view that the societal good that results from freedom of religious conscience and freedom of religious association far outweighs the societal harm a few of these movements bring upon societies on rare occasions.

Nonetheless, as sociologists we do have to be brave and objective enough to criticise a movement when necessary, if the beliefs and practices it promotes are dangerous for converts or for wider society (Bhatt, 1997). There is already significant and warranted value being placed on conducting more in-depth case studies of selected NRSMs by

scholars who have contributed to the recent literature (Arweck, forthcoming in 2005; Chryssides, 1999; Enroth, 2005 etc). In this context, the model developed in figure 6, combined with the critical realist tool of explanatory critique, as well as the database of movements collated in the CDROM, will all assist future students of NRSMs. There is a great deal of work left to be done, but the richness and variety of the field makes this one of the most exciting and rewarding arenas for sociological research.

### **Reflections on NRSMs, Life and the Universe**

The poet is right to be mistrustful about 'other worlds' as a solution to the problems of this one... the other world is not intended to be a solution... The possibility of achievement lies back here, where we are. We see the 'answer' to the riddle of physical existence in all moments of great intensity. 'God is fire in the head,' said Nijinsky; when the brain blazes like a bonfire, we no longer need to ask why we are alive. (Wilson, 2004: 762)

There are a plethora of causes explaining the rise of NRSMs. Alteration of traditional family structures, decline in values and the lack of a clear standard for ethics, the globalisation of cultures, information and exchange of ideas, the failure of science to disprove the existence of God, the transformation of Church based faiths, all these create a space that can be filled by reinterpreting the object of the sacred... We live in an era of mass charisma, now the lives of everyday people (i.e. the birth of countless reality shows) become just as vital to us as the Hollywood blockbusters. All the while the big businesses encourage us to consume, we are told we are 'special'; just forget about tomorrow, concern yourself about today. But there is a dark side to all this razzmatazz, inequality is increasing, ecosystems are eroding, more animal species are becoming extinct and fundamentalisms across the world are intensifying. In the midst of all this seeming chaos new prophets emerge who promise the human race peace and their devotees truth, meaning and hope. The end of this world and the birth of a new one drive everyone to distraction, the grass always seems 'greener' on the other side... We are becoming the products we consume, bodies with multiple personalities that shift and change based on whims and needs. During our lives we teach each other about love, laughter, sadness and then choose a coffin before death. Television shows us images of worlds beyond, the history of the past is replayed in modern tones, and the future of the species is repeatedly predicted. Societies have risen and fallen in cycles, like the earth endlessly orbits the sun. Will human creation and destiny ever be

explained? Are we simply a cosmic tragedy, or some magnificent progeny? What is the point? What is the universe expanding into? Where are we going? When will it end? This thesis has opened up as many personal questions for me as the answers it has provided; but of one thing I am sure, the notion of God, religion and spirituality signifies humanity's desire and hope for answers to all of these ultimate questions.

Our galaxy is now in the brief springtime of its life – a springtime made glorious by such brilliant blue-white stars as Vega and Sirius, and, on a more humble scale, our own sun. Not until all these have flamed through their incandescent youth, in a few fleeting billions of years, will the real history of the universe begin.

It will be a history illuminated only by the reds and infrareds of dully glowing stars that would be almost invisible to our eyes; yet the somber hues of that all-but-eternal universe may be full of color and beauty to whatever strange beings have adapted to it. They will know that before them lie, not the millions of years in which we measure eras of geology, nor the billions of years which span the past lives of the stars, but years to be counted literally in trillions.

They will have time enough, in those endless aeons, to attempt all things, and to gather all knowledge. They will be like gods, because no gods imagined by our minds have ever possessed the powers they will command. But for all that, they may envy us, basking in the bright afterglow of Creation; for we knew the universe when it was young. (Clarke, 2003: 186-7)

### **Ethical Issues: Confidentiality and Informed Consent**

On initial contact with all the research participants I assured them that the responses they gave in the interviews would be used solely in my PhD thesis, and would not be passed to any other third party. I explained the general purpose of the study and asked them if they consented to participating. I received either written or verbal consent from all those included in this study. A few participants asked that their responses remain confidential; in such instances the comments they provided was anonymized by using a substitute name.

### **Interview Structure and Procedure**

The main key identifiers listed below were also collected from all the research participants before the actual interviews.

Date of Interview:	
Tape reference:	
Name:	
Age:	
Sex:	
Ethnicity:	
Occupation:	
Parents Religious Affiliation:	
Membership of Previous Religious group (if any):	
Current Membership of Religious group:	
Length of Membership of religious group:	

The actual depth interviews were conducted in two parts. First, I activated the IC recorder (if they had agreed to its use) and asked each person to tell me the story of his/her spiritual journey or conversion in as much detail as he/she felt comfortable. I tried to avoid interrupting the speaker during this phase of the interview – I wanted to see what themes (if any) interviewees brought up themselves, without prompting from me. This was particularly important during the five pilot interviews, as it helped to develop the topic guides and themes to be explored in greater detail in subsequent interviews. Only when the interviewee explicitly stated that he or she was finished with his or her story did I probe for clarification on any things he/she had said.

The second part of the interview involved me directing the interview by asking short questions based on working through the topic guide items (see below). These

were not always covered in the same order, being instead completed in a loosely planned manner depending on the flow of the particular interview conversation. My interviewing skills improved and the theoretical concepts emerged more clearly after conducting the pilot interviews. Each successive interview became more of a resource rather than a topic. I started collecting data in contrast to simply trying to generate it.

***Topic Guide followed if member of a Religious or Spiritual Movement:***

1 – Reasons for joining the religious or spiritual movement in question:

Was there any family/parental influence?

Is there any indication of a search for meaning or stability?

Are emotional issues such as pain or loneliness important?

Did the charisma of the leader of the group play any role?

What aspects of the belief attracted them (health, transcendence etc)?

What length of time did they take to decide to join (are they a seeker)?

Did they consider other groups?

Why not a more traditional religion?

2 – What is it about religion or spirituality that is important to them?

What are the spiritual/religious objectives of the movement?

What are the sources of their spiritual information and inspiration?

How is conversion maintained: is it by faith or based on evidence?

3 – Their view of mainstream society (looking for alienation):

Do they exhibit acceptance or rejection of mainstream society?

What does society (other institutions) lack?

4 – How do they see the relationship between science and religion?

How are the movement's beliefs legitimated?

What is their understanding of the purpose of science?

5 – How their religious belief and practice interacts with other aspects of their life:

Is there any friction in the general reaction of others?

Does daily life ever present them with challenges to their spiritual beliefs?

6 – Their personal attitude to the religious belief of their children:

Do they have any children?

Would they influence them to adhere to their religious or spiritual beliefs?

### **Key Concepts and Associated Themes Explaining Religious Conversion**

The key concepts identified as potential causes of religious conversion like alienation, charisma and the search for meaning/truth were derived from reviews of the sociology of religion literature (chapters 1, 2 and 4). To produce quantifiable data the interview transcripts were constantly compared to identify illustrative instances of key concepts or related themes appearing in the text. However, I also discovered negative instances after the analysis; some transcripts did not contain these concepts. Instead new themes and concepts emerged leading to deeper investigations and identifications of a wider variety of circumstances explaining religious conversion. I analysed/reanalysed the 26 interview transcripts until theoretical saturation (chapter 3). The main themes were then quoted throughout chapter five to show not only the number of times different emotional states are mentioned, but also the ways they are talked about. The internal validity of transcripts was checked through repetition of certain questions that were rephrased to interviewees at different points. This was to ensure a consistent pattern emerged from the interviewee regarding factors influencing their conversion.

### **A Summary of the Control Group Interviews**

I also interviewed five non-members of religious or spiritual movements. I decided such people would talk differently about the topic of religion, and so divided analysis into two groups to explore this assertion. First I asked them to explain the beliefs they held regarding the purpose of life and reality. I did not interrupt them in this part of the interview. Only when they stated they had finished did I probe certain issues further. I was interested to discover whether there was any sort of belief in God or a divine higher force. I was particularly interested in how they gave meaning to life and what sort of moral codebook they referred to. The second part of the interview consisted of me exploring issues by working down the list of topics detailed below. I was interested in the overall content of the narratives and how they contrasted with the narratives above. In general the interviews with non-members were far shorter in duration than those with NRSM members, often including far less detailed replies to the questions asked. The respondents were also far less certain in their overall assertions. For instance, a noticeable trend in the interviews were high incidences of statements such as: “I don’t know really” – 13 counts; “I haven’t thought about it to be honest” – 9 counts and “I don’t like to speculate” – 7 counts. The average age of



the interviewees was 34, ranging from 25 (youngest) to 53 (oldest). Two were male and three female. Three were white, one mixed race and one of Indian origin. Occupations were: Student, Civil Servant, Housewife, Accounts Clerk and Management Consultant. Parents with no religious affiliation had brought up four of the five interviewees. One interviewee had parents who identified themselves as Sikh. None of them had ever been a member of any religious organisation in the past.

***Topic Guide if not a member of any specific religious/spiritualist group***

- 1 – Do they have any sort of belief in God or a divine higher force?
- 2 – Their views of new religions in comparison to older traditional religions
- 3 – Hobbies or interests: what is important to them (physical pursuits/ making money)
- 4 – How do they give meaning to the issues of life and death, morality and evil?
- 5 – Their views of mainstream society: acceptance or rejection
- 6 – Do they have any children and how would they influence them regarding religion?

**Some General Themes from the Narratives**

None of those interviewed who were non-members of a religious/spiritual movement had any specific belief in a God or a higher being that created humanity for divine purposes. In brief two were strict atheists (both male) broadly claiming that there is no specific purpose to life and that humans are biological organisms who have appeared randomly on earth as a result of evolutionary processes. Another interviewee believed that we are a simply part of the natural world (along with the animal kingdom) only born to reproduce and propagate the species. She argued we have no soul and there is nothing after death. The fourth research participant claimed that she did not believe in any type of God, although she did wonder what could have caused the “Big Bang” that scientists believe created the universe. The final interviewee stated:

*I suppose I believe there is something in the universe... like an energy force, which ultimately controls everything. But I don't believe in a little guy with a big white beard or any type of deity. I just believe it's like an energy force, like a light in the centre of the universe creating new planets and new stars.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from interview with Sarah (10/03/2004).

Generally all those interviewed had negative views about both the new and old world religions. Scientology was mentioned on three occasions as being particularly “dodgy” and “simply a money making scam”. Religion in general was associated with the following words: “control” – 12 counts, “exploitation” – 9 counts, “war” – 7 counts, and “hatred” – 5 counts. While religious belief was described as being based on “irrationality” – 4 counts, and “weakness” – 3 counts. But two (both female) of the interviewees did confess to engaging in Tarot card reading sessions in the near past.

Two of the five (both male) were primarily concerned with earning money and developing their careers – one was particularly concerned with “getting to the top”. Hobbies involved watching or playing sports, particularly football. The three female interviewees were less materialistically focused being more concerned with doing things that made them “happy” emotionally. Things such as being in the company of friends or loved ones were associated with happiness. All the interviewees mentioned in some form, “eating well” and “going to the gym” as important concerns.

Four of the five interviewed believed *values* and distinctions between right and wrong were simply things you should know innately. In other words, these did not need to be enforced dogmatically by an external religious authority. However, one interviewee (male) suggested that right and wrong did not mean anything and that everything was relative. When pressed for clarification on what he meant – whether this implied “anything goes and survival of the fittest” – he admitted he had not given such issues much “consideration”. He simply stated life was to be enjoyed. All expressed general acceptance of mainstream society, although two of the female interviewees did feel people were becoming too “materialistic” in their “constant demands for new things”.

All the research participants said they would leave it up to their children to decide their religious/spiritual beliefs. Only two interviewees (both female) actually had any children and said they would not be upset if they expressed an interest in religion. One had a young toddler, while the other had three grown up daughters all of whom were not members of any religious or spiritual movement.

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