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## Being Human: Symbolic Orientation in New Religious Movements

The emergence of new religious movements in the western world, and particularly in the United States, has served to call into question basic notions of human identity. New religious forms and practices, whether imports from other cultures, products of indigenous experimentation, or some amalgamation of foreign and domestic elements, directly challenge long-standing assumptions of what a human being is and how a human being is related to the larger environment of social and inter-personal relations. In America, the traditional post-industrial ethic, and ethos, of "utilitarian individualism" — the conviction that things are to be used and people are to be useful—has been challenged by new religious movements of both the therapeutic and totalitarian varieties.<sup>1</sup> Even when effective administrative, mass-marketing and promotional techniques are employed, they seem to be used for a different agenda of human values than simply utility or economic advantage. The individual is called upon to play a different role in a dramatically different set of social relations. Whether it is "human potential" or "god-realization" there is a different range of experience

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1. See the analysis by Robert Bellah, "The New Consciousness and Crisis in Modernity," in Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah, (eds.), *The New Religious Consciousness*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 334-7; The literature on new religions is extensive and of uneven quality. For descriptive accounts of new religions see Robert Ellwood, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973) and Irving I. Zaretsky and Mark P. Leone, (eds.), *Religious Movements in Contemporary America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); for sociological analyses see Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, (eds.), *In Gods We Trust: New Patterns of Religious Pluralism in America*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1980) and Robert Wuthnow, *Experimentation in American Religion*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); and for philosophical discussions of issues raised by new religions, see Jacob Needleman, *The New Religions*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969) and Peter Rawley, *New Gods in America*, (New York: David McKay, 1970).

implicated in new religious movements, suggesting alternate possibilities for human identity.

The immediate qualification that must be made, of course, is that new religions are, in fact, not new, but represent the surfacing in our media-awareness of spiritualities, practices, and counter-cultural social experiments which have a long history in America.<sup>2</sup> The question that must be asked is, why did our media-supported awareness of religious movements, cults and alternate spiritualities in recent years become so acute? According to the recent Gallup poll, less than 3% of the American population is involved in any form of eastern spirituality, and less than 1% is directly involved in what they would identify as a religious cult.<sup>3</sup> And yet they have become an integral part of America's popular imagination. These alternative religious movements provide no direct, tangible threat to the institutions of government, nor to the membership of the established churches. The challenge they do seem to present, as witnessed by the virulent opposition to new religious movements by anti-cult organizations, founded by concerned relatives and members of the family is to the institution of the nuclear family and the network of inter-personalities that locate human identity within such a family structure.<sup>4</sup> It is true that these alternative religious movements tend to systematically dissolve the family ties of blood and to establish powerful and compelling kinship arrangements among its members. This appears as a radical shift in human identity. And in an era in which the nuclear family is already perceived as severally

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2. See, for example, Wendell Thomas, *Hinduism Invades America*, (New York: Beacon, 1930) and Jan Karel von Baalen, *The Chaos of Cults*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1938) for treatments of eastern imports and alternative spiritualities in the United States long before the explosion of "new religions" in the late 1960s; Robert Ellwood has suggested the term, "emergent religions," to indicate this quality of something that may have been there all along, but has recently emerged in our awareness in some new way, giving the appearance of both novelty and striking contrast to the established traditions that surround it. Robert Ellwood, *Alternative Altars; Unconventional and Eastern Spirituality in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 13.
  3. For a review of recent statistical surveys, see George Gallup, Jr., and David Poling, *The Search for America's Faith*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980).
  4. David G. Bromley and Anson D. Shupe, *Strange Gods: The Great American Cult Scare*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), pp. 60-91; for the anti-cult efforts of concerned relatives, see the periodical, *The Advisor*, published by The American Family Foundation.

threatened by changing economic, social and cultural patterns, these alternative religious identities are perceived as a threat, not by overwhelming statistical impact, but by the very fact of their existence<sup>5</sup>. Like all marginal social groups, these new religious movements have served as the boundary of what mainstream society and popular imagination recognizes as legitimate human identity. They become the abnormal, by which the normal is defined. We could look at the possibilities for human identity presented by new religious movements as symptoms of aberrant behaviour, as some of the less successful and less useful psychological approaches to new religions have attempted. Or we can approach them and try to understand them as legitimate constructions of what it is to be a human being.

The purpose of this paper is to recognize within new religious movements in the United States a legitimate (although marginal) construction of human identity: to analyse the functional process of orientation that is engaged in the universe of discourse, practice and experience that new religions occupy. This is an exercise in the history of religions. But it is also an attempt to evaluate a situation of religious conflict in which alternative religious movements have developed systems of classification, by which they identify what it is to be a human being, and strategies of symbolic orientation, by which that human being is located in space and time, that confront some of the comfortable assumptions of contemporary western society.

### 1. The religious construction of identity

There are, of course, a number of different constructions that can be placed on the term, "human." There is a biological construction, in which humans are identified as a particular species of animal life, characterized by such distinguishing features as bipedal locomotion, an opposable thumb, and the complex mastery of tools and language; and within which it can be confidently asserted that "we *are* animals, not vegetables or gods."<sup>6</sup> There is a psychological construction, in which humans are considered as individual centres of consciousness and will, of course, with the one qualification that they are continuously beset

5. Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Beseiged*, (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

6. Vernon Reynolds, *The Biology of Human Action*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: W. H. Freeman, 1980), p. 45.

by a vast array of drives, instincts, urges and motivations, from some unknown recesses of the unconscious. As one psychologist recently remarked, humans are "a dark cellar in which a maiden aunt and a sex-crazed monkey are locked in mortal combat, the affair being referred by a rather nervous bank clerk."<sup>7</sup> There is a social, or sociological construction, in which humans are understood as units, or even ciphers, in a highly conditioned and structured system of social relations, and in which the very idea of "person" is recognized as a social product.<sup>8</sup> When examining religious identity, or the religious construction of human identity, however, we are looking at the universal human ability to symbolize the sacred. It is convenient to characterize the sacred as the opposite of the profane; but if we were to give it some essential characteristics it would have to be identified as that aspect of experience which encompasses *transcendence*, or that which rises above or goes beyond ordinary experience, and *ultimacy*, that which is of ultimate, final or most important significance within the life-cycle. Even with these essential characteristics, however, the sacred is basically a functional entity: that which is sacred is that which is held (or beheld) to be sacred. Humans, as *homo symbolicus*, display the universal ability to symbolize what they hold to be sacred in its theoretical aspect (as myth and doctrine), in its practical aspect (as ritual and ethics), and in its experiential aspect (as inner experience and social institutions).<sup>9</sup>

Within those alternative religious movements that have emerged since the late sixties and early seventies there also emerged what seemed to be new configurations of individual identity. These new patterns of identity have been positively identified as the "Protean Style" by the psychologist, Robert J. Lifton, a style of fashioning personal identity through a rather rapid series of personality transformations, in search of a type of psychological experience of such great intensity

7. D. Bannister, in Brian M. Foss, (ed.), *New Horizons in Psychology*, Vol 4, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 363.
8. Marcel Mauss, "A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person, the Notion of 'Self'," in *Sociology and Psychology*, translated Ben Brewster, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 57-94.
9. This brief statement of method owes its formulation to the approaches represented by Joachim Wach, *The Sociology of Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), pp. 17-34 and Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion*, (New York: Seabury, 1973).

that it somehow transcends the ordinary limits of the human consciousness of time and space.<sup>10</sup> He sees this "Protean Style", this search for experiential transcendence through intense and transformative psychological experience, as one of the major functional modes of our age. Some analysts, while recognizing this style as a major feature of our time, have been less optimistic regarding the potential for creating human identity through such forms of rapid personality change.<sup>11</sup> These new patterns of identity, on the other hand, have been somewhat negatively, and even cynically, identified as a "New Narcissism" by such cultural analysts like Tom Wolfe and Christopher Lasch, a full-blown pathological obsession with the total gratification of desire and the realization of self, and its potential, at the expense of more enduring and traditional values associated with family and community.<sup>12</sup> What may seem on the surface to be a time of religious awakening, is, according to Wolfe and Lasch, the mass incidence of all the symptoms of secondary-narcissism, the reversion to a condition of infantile megalomania. Such critiques, and others, have found it useful to employ psychological models derived from Greek classical mythology—Proteus, Narcissus, Prometheus, etc.—in an attempt to identify some new style of personal identity. Some even opted for the whole pantheon.<sup>13</sup> Although these may all be interesting exercises in popular psychology, they ignore the more basic systems of symbolic classification which are at work in the formation of religious identity.

What these, and other, examples of popular psychological theorizing about new religious movements ignore, in their attempt to diagnose the symptoms of alternative religious experience in terms of unconscious motivations, is the fact that all religions, including these new religious movements, embody conscious systems of classification in the formation of religious world-views. The University of Chicago anthropologist, Robert Redfield, defined world-view, simply, as "the way a man, in a

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10. Robert J. Lifton, "Protean Man," in Donald R. Cutler, (ed.), *The Religious Situation*, (Boston: Beacon, 1969), pp. 812-828.

11. Flo Conway and Jim Siegleman, *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*, (New York: Dell, 1979).

12. Tom Wolfe, "The Me Decade," *New West*, 1 (August 30, 1976), pp. 27-48; Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, (New York: Norton, 1979); see also Peter Marin, "The New Narcissism," *Harpers*, 251 (1975), pp. 45-56.

13. David Miller, *The New Polytheism*, (Dallas, Texas: Spring, 1982).

particular society, sees himself in relation to all else."<sup>14</sup> It is a particular construction of the universe which begins with the self, or a sense of self, as the axis, and then establishes a particular orientation to all that is perceived as not-self. World-view necessarily involves two major dimensions: (1) The first dimension is the categorization of people. In the words of Redfield, a world-view implies "groupings of people, some intimate and similar to oneself, others far and different."<sup>15</sup> This is what he calls, in another paper, "the essential distinction between Them and Us."<sup>16</sup> Some classes or categories of people, whether within a given society, or outside the boundaries of a given society, are symbolically classified as "like us" and others are classified as "not like us." This systematic classification of people is an essential ingredient in any world-view. (2) The second dimension is spatial and temporal orientation. In the words of Redfield, "every world-view includes some spatial and temporal dimensions. . . man is necessarily orientated to a universe of extension and duration."<sup>17</sup> World-views locate the individual within a meaningful universe, with a sense of both its centre and its limits, and they locate the individual in a temporal continuum, whether linear, cyclical or some other pattern, thus overcoming what Eliade has called "the vertigo brought on by disorientation."<sup>18</sup> The analysis of this process of symbolic orientation is essential to our understanding of the conflict of world-views at issue in the emergence of contemporary religious movements in western society.

14. Robert Redfield, "The Primitive World View," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 94 (1952), pp. 30-36; reprinted in Redfield, *Human Nature and the Study of Society: The Papers of Robert Redfield*, Volume 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 270.

15. Redfield, *Papers*, Volume 1, p. 273.

16. Robert Redfield, "Ethnic Relations: Primitive and Civilized," in Jitsuichi Masuoka and Preston Valien, (eds.), *Race Relations, Problems and Theory*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961); reprinted in Redfield, *The Social Uses of Social Science: The Papers of Robert Redfield*, Volume 2, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 163; see the treatment of this type of classification in Jonathan Z. Smith, "Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit," *History of Religions*, 11 (1971), pp. 67-90; reprinted in *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1978), pp. 240-264.

17. Redfield, *Papers*, Volume 1, p. 272.

18. Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Volume 1, tr. Willard R. Trask, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 3.

## 2. The categorization of people

Religious identity is constructed in the face of "the other." An individual identifies himself as either being like or unlike other beings. There is a fundamental momentum toward either identification or dis-identification with "the other." New religious movements clearly present the possibility of alternative human identities; but they cannot be alternative in a vacuum. They must stand as an alternative to something perceived as basically "like us." The classic model for such distinctions is, of course, the ethnographic account of the Egyptians by Herodotus: "not only is the climate different from that of the rest of the world, and the rivers, unlike any other rivers, but the people also, in most of their manners and customs, exactly reverse the common practice of mankind."<sup>19</sup> One of the most important features of new religious movements is a clearly defined boundary between Us and Them. There is a conscious attempt to clarify the dividing line between those who are "like us" and those who are "not like us," measures taken to maintain ritual purity by avoiding contact with those who are "not like us," and definite symbolic terminology is often devised to accentuate this difference. Sometimes, as in such movements as the Divine Light Mission, and other initiatory movements, the distinction may be simply between the *initiated* and the *uninitiated*.<sup>20</sup> Other groups, however, have developed a more specific range of terms for "the other." The International Society for Krishna Consciousness, for example, makes an absolute division between *devotee* and *karmi*.<sup>21</sup> The latter becomes a technical term to indicate those who are subject to the laws of cause and effect and therefore, remaining bound to the world of illusion, have not become fully human through the grace of Kṛṣṇa. Scientology, a new religious movement with an almost science-fiction aura, makes a distinction between a *clear* and a

19. Herodotus II, 35-37; tr. A. D. Godley, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946-50).

20. James V. Downton, Jr., *Sacred Journeys: The Conversion of Young Americans to the Divine Light Mission*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) and Jeanne Messer, "Guru Maharaj Ji and the Divine Light Mission," in Glock and Bellah, (eds.) *The New Religious Consciousness*, pp. 52-72.

21. Francine Jeanne Daner, *The American Children of Krishna*, (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976); Gregory Johnson, "The Hare Krishna of San Francisco," in Glock and Bellah, (eds.), *The New Religious Consciousness*, pp. 31-35; and J. Stillson Judah, *Hare Krishna and the Counterculture*, (New York: John Wiley, 1974).

wog.<sup>22</sup> A wog remains bound to the old patterns of conditioned responses, called engrams, contained in their reactive minds, and therefore have not become fully human through the techniques available in Scientology practice. The Children of God, a counter-cultural Christian organization, defines "the other" as a *systemite*.<sup>23</sup> The Unification Church sees "the other" as *satanic*, subject to the influence and control of demons.<sup>24</sup> And Jim Jones apparently felt besieged by "the other," composed of a coalition of traitorous concerned relatives, persecuting media, and a fascist government which he perceived as a conspiracy in opposition to his religious and revolutionary socialism.<sup>25</sup> In each of these new religious movements, each with very different and distinctive ideologies, organizations and aims, there is evident a common trend toward clearly defined boundaries and the systematic classification of "the other"—*karmi*, *wog*, *systemite*, etc.—as categorically "not like us" and therefore not fully human. The most dramatic social statement of this kind of classification, of course, was the mass suicide of Jonestown; an act, in the self-perception of Jones, and probably most of his followers, performed by heroic humans against an "inhuman world."<sup>26</sup>

22. William Sims and Rodney Stark, "Scientology: To Be Perfectly Clear," *Sociological Analysis*, 41 (1980), pp. 128-36; and Roy Wallis. *The Road to Total Freedom: A Sociological Analysis of Scientology*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).
23. Rex Davis and James T. Richardson, "The Organization and Functioning of the Children of God," *Sociological Analysis*, 37 (1976), pp. 321-39; and Roy Wallis, "Observations on the Children of God," *The Sociological Review*, 24 (1976), pp. 807-29.
24. David G. Bromley and Anson D. Shupe, Jr., "*Moonies*" in America: *Cult, Church and Crusade*. (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1979); and Irving L. Horowitz, (ed.), *Science, Sin and Scholarship: The Politics of Reverend Moon and the Unification Church*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978).
25. John R. Hall, "Apocalypse at Jonestown," *Society*, 16 (1979); reprinted in Robbins and Anthony, (eds.), *In Gods We Trust: James T. Richardson, "People's Temple and Jonestown: A Corrective Comparison and Critique."* *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 19 (1980), pp. 239-255. Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
26. Jones was recorded as declaring that "We didn't commit suicide. We committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhuman world." Shiva Naipaul, *Journey to Nowhere: A New World Tragedy*, New York: Simon and Shuster, 1980), p. 58.



The interesting point about this issue of classification is the fact that the categorization works just as intensely, if not more so, from the other side of the boundary. Within the history of western culture there have traditionally been classifications of "the other" as radically "not like us." The category of "primitive" was employed in both ancient and medieval western culture;<sup>27</sup> the category of "wild man" was used to symbolize a class of people outside of the bounds of civilized human society;<sup>28</sup> and the portrayal in popular imagination of the "marvels of the east" included depictions of those strange, almost human, inhabitants of India who had dog's heads, or two heads, or no heads [but who did have eyes, nose and mouth conveniently located in the area of the chest], or those remarkable one-legged, semi-human beings who ran like the wind and, when the weather was hot, used their one huge foot for an umbrella.<sup>29</sup> These are just a few examples, not to mention heretics, witches and infidels, of categories of people in western culture who are classified as most clearly and definitely "not like us."<sup>30</sup> In contemporary western society, at least since the eighteenth century Enlightenment, there have been two major categories for "the other," classifications by which we seek to identify, manage and control those who are not fulfilling legitimate roles in human society: the asylum and the prison. Michel Foucault's studies of these two disciplinary institutions in western society is willing to

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27. George Boas and Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1935); George Boas, *Essays on Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1948).
28. Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952).
29. Rudolf Wittkower, "Marvels of the East: A Study of the History of Monsters," in *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977).
30. The history of religious intolerance toward "the other" in western civilization has been documented by Norman Cohn, *In Pursuit of the Millenium*, (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1957) and *Europe's Inner Demons*, St. Albans: Paladin, 1976). The latter study is particularly useful for the consideration of modern cults and new religions because he reminds us that the nascent Christian movement was accused of atheism (because they refused to observe the state cults), cannibalism (because of reports they ate body and blood), and incest (because they married their brothers and sisters in Christ).

recognize as fully human identity.<sup>31</sup> They represent the movement by which western culture rejects what it classifies as outside of itself. The asylum and the prison are *l'Exterieur* of western culture. They define the alternate pole in our distinction between normal and abnormal. They are boundary. New religious groups, as alternate world-views, necessarily stand on the margin of the larger society. Therefore, they register as exteriority. And consistently our newspapers, electronic media and popular psychologizing insist on appropriating the dominant images of "asylum" and "prison" as informative metaphors with which to interpret new religious movements.

As institutions of constraint and correction, the asylum and prison have a number of common features: (1) minute regimentation of daily activity; (2) constant supervision by disciplinary experts; (3) enforced obligation to work; (4) disciplinary methods used to produce a change in attitudes; and (5) conditions designed to achieve a systematic break between the inmates past and present. These are precisely the characteristics that are consistently attributed to cults, and other new religious movements, by our media and popular psychology. Mainstream popular imagination views them through the lens of exteriority, and the primary models available for interpreting, making sense out of and coming to terms with exteriority are the asylum and the prison: therefore, cults and other new religious movements, are classified as either "crazy," "criminal," or both.

The stereotype of "cult madness" is a common feature in literature about new religious movements. The extended exposition of what is described as deviant behaviour in cults by journalists, Carroll Stoner and Jo Anne Parke, covers many of the characteristics of the "asylum" metaphor: (1) cults demand absolute obedience to norms and standards of behaviour; (2) cult members are closely supervised by cult leaders; (3) cults require members to do demeaning work; (4) cults discourage thinking and suppress accepted views of social reality; and (5) cults

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31. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); translated Richard Howell, *Madness and Civilization*, (New York: Mentor, 1967); *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, Paris: Gallimard, 1975); translated Alan Sheridan, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Pantheon, 1977); for a helpful survey of Foucault's work to date see James W. Bernauer, *The Thinking of History in the Archaeology of Michel Foucault*, Dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, May, 1981.

severe the convert's former ties with the greater society—jobs, schools, families and friends—and a new life is created. This particular kind of “total environment” registers on the scale of exteriority as an “asylum,” the members register as “crazy,” and the religious identity constructed in such an environment is pronounced “psychologically unwholesome.”<sup>32</sup> There is, of course, a pre-critical assumption as to what counts for normal, or wholesome, identity in American society. As Harvey Cox has pointed out, “it is thought that no sane person could belong to a movement ‘like this’ and therefore the participant must be there involuntarily.”<sup>33</sup> And, of course, that pre-critical assumption is that human nature is defined by *reason*. The assumption about human nature at work here is based on a notion of inherent rationality, dating back to developments in enlightened eighteenth century thought, in which “reason ceased to be for man an ethic and became a nature.”<sup>34</sup> Human nature is reason. Madness is “non-reason.”<sup>35</sup> The social definition of madness, as non-reason, which emerged in western society during the Enlightenment demonstrates its persistence in the current understanding of new religious movements, in such books as *The Cults of Unreason*, which seek to demonstrate that new religious movements display a kind of madness in their apparent defiance of accepted canons rationality.<sup>36</sup> Eli Shapiro, M.D., has even gone so far as to diagnose “cultism” as a disease “which makes its victims ill both physically and emotionally.”<sup>37</sup> And even more moderate attempts at psychological analysis of new religions often invoke such stereotypes as group shared messianic delusion,

32. Carroll Stoner and Jo Anne Parke, *All God's Children: The Cult Experience*, (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Chilton, 1977), for a good introduction to the issues involved see Herbert Richardson, (ed.), *New Religions and Mental Health*, (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1980).

33. Harvey Cox, “Deep Structures in the Study of New Religions,” in Jacob Needleman and George Baker, (eds.), *Understanding the New Religions*, (New York: Seabury, 1978), p. 127.

34. Michel Foucault, *Maladie mentale et psychologie*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), p. 103; translated Alan Sheridan, *Mental Illness and Psychology*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 81.

35. Foucault, *Histoire de folie*, p. 261; *Madness and Civilization*, p. 93.

36. Christopher Evans, *Cults of Unreason* (New York: Dell, 1973).

37. Eli Shapiro, “Destructive Cultism,” *American Family Physician*, 15 (1977): pp. 80-83.

psychologically disturbed idealists, etc., and suggest that "the cult scene is now dominated by what is labelled religious 'kooks and quacks'."<sup>38</sup>

As to the stereotype of "cult criminality," the recent study of Gallup and Poling, based upon their statistical researches into the character of religion in America today, titles one of its sub-sections: "The Crime of the Cults." But, rather than documenting specific criminal activities of religious movements, and certainly some illegal activities could be documented, the authors devote this section almost exclusively to a series of suggestions intended to assist mainstream Christian denominations in holding the interest, attention and commitment of young people in America.<sup>39</sup> Is it crime or heresy? The alternative identities that are constructed in new religious movements apparently register on the scale of exteriority as crimes against society. Or, they register as forms of imprisonment and slavery.<sup>40</sup> In a recent study of new religious movements the authors found it appropriate to employ this metaphor in the title of their book: *Prison or Paradise: The New Religious Cults*.<sup>41</sup>

The extra-legal activities of anti-cult deprogrammers, in capturing and coercively removing individuals from religious movements, engages both these issues of the psychological and legal status of cult members. Ted Patrick, the notorious and colourful deprogrammer, employs both of these models to validate his crusade against cults. First, all members are like inmates in asylums in that they refuse to accept reality. Patrick mentioned in an interview that "a lot of people in mental hospitals have nothing wrong with them... they just don't know how to accept life for what it is, and not for

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38. Andrew J. Pavlos, *The Cult Experience*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1982), p. 75.

39. Gallup and Poling, *The Search for America's Faith*, pp. 29-39.

40. Richard Delgado, "Religious Totalism as Slavery," *Review of Law and Social Change*, 9 (1979-80); see also his influential legal brief in defence of deprogramming, Delgado, "Religious Totalism: Gentle and Ungentle Persuasion under the First Amendment," *Southern California Law Review*, 51 (1977), pp. 1-98.

41. James Rudin and Marcia Rudin, *Prison or Paradise: The New Religious Cults*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

what they want it to be."<sup>42</sup> Deprogramming is then simply a matter of telling such an individual what reality is. Secondly, he employs the metaphor of "prison," to suggest that cult members are not only incarcerated against their will, but their freedom of will has in fact been forcibly taken away. But, more than simply redefining the psychological and legal status of the cult member, Patrick, and the anti-cult movement he has inspired, see cult members essentially as "non-persons." Patrick asserts that "anytime someone destroys your free will, when they take away your mind and your natural ability to think, then they've destroyed the *person*."<sup>43</sup>

This is the essential point of the conflict: alternative constructions of human identity within conflicting religious world-views. As we have seen, for the cult, "the other" is classified as a condition, or status, "not yet human." The *karmi* is still bound in illusions, the *wog* is still bound to a reactive mind, the *systemite* is still locked in the worldly establishment, and so on. For the other side of the boundary, "the other," those who have adopted a variety of marginal, alternative constructions of what it is to be human, is systematically classified, in the appropriation of the two dominant cultural metaphors for exteriority, as "no longer human."

### 3. Spatial and temporal orientation

The second dimension in the formation of a world-view, and the construction of human identity within a world-view, is some type of orientation in space and time. Spatial orientation is based on a sense of the centre, some notion of a central axis, around which the world revolves, and in relation to which the cosmos derives its meaning. This is a concept which is certainly integral to Eliade's work in the history

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42. Conway and Siegleman, *Snapping*, p. 76; see Ted Patrick and Tom Dulack, *Let Our Children Go*, (New York: Ballantine, 1977); for a bibliography on the issues involved, see Thomas Robbins, (ed.) "Civil Liberties, 'Brainwashing,' and 'Cults': A Select Annotated Bibliography," (Berkeley, California: Centre for the Study of New Religious Movements, 1981).

43. Conway and Siegleman, *Snapping*, p. 75.

of religions;<sup>44</sup> and it has more recently been amplified in a number of important case studies.<sup>45</sup>

The first Amendment to the United States Constitution, forbidding laws that would establish a state religion or prohibit the free exercise of religion in America, acknowledged the existence of a "civil space" in America which many different religious traditions may occupy. It created a civil space in which different religious groups could mutually co-exist. The central fact of religious life in America is this *pluralism*. At the same time, that civil space came to be invested with certain powerful symbolic associations, derived from America's historical experience, which carried with them a sacral quality. This quasi-religious ethos connected with America's self-understanding as "one nation under God" has been called "civil religion." In the words of Robert Bellah, it is "an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality."<sup>46</sup> Powerful biblical themes, such as "exodus", "covenant" and "the new Jerusalem," were deployed to understand the American situation and crucial events in American history, such as the Pilgrims, the Revolution, the Civil War, etc., took on a mythic quality as collective representations in the national consciousness. Therefore, "civil space" in America has been constructed out of two things: (1) the fact of pluralism which has led to a general policy of tolerance and mutual co-existence, what John Murray Cuddihy has called "the religion of civility," the agreement (often provisional) by which the various religious groups in America sacrifice the enforcement of their particular, absolute truth-claims in

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44. For a bibliography and useful analysis of Eliade's "symbolism of the center," see Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot," *The Journal of Religion*, 52 (1972), pp. 134-149; reprinted in Smith, *Map is not Territory*, pp. 88-103.

45. Alfonso Ortiz, *The Tewa World; Space, Time, Being and Becoming in a Pueblo Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969; Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery; Essays in Macrosociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); and Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters; a preliminary enquiry into the origins and character of the ancient Chinese city*, (Chicago: Aldine, 1971).

46. Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, (eds.), *American Civil Religion*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 40; This article originally appeared in *Daedalus* (Winter, 1967).

order to live together in the public arena;<sup>47</sup> and (2) the tendency to locate the sacred in a complex of symbols, values and institutions associated with an idealized America. Both of these elements in the construction of American "civil space" were called into question during the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the result that Robert Bellah could say, as he did in 1975, that "today the American civil religion is an empty broken shell."<sup>48</sup>

The emergence of new religious movements in contemporary America can be understood as response to this sense of a disrupted civil space. In the United States, new religious movements are currently involved in two basic movements directed toward locating, establishing and sanctifying a sacred centre. The first trend has produced a certain degree of social displacement by constructing a spiritual geography in which the centre is outside the geographical boundaries of American society. This is what Robert Ellwood has called "the centre out there".<sup>49</sup> This is a strategy which has certainly been available to, though not always exercised by, Catholics and Jews in America, who have strong traditional ties with powerful symbolic centres outside the geographical limits of America. This kind of social displacement was definitely an important ingredient, for example, in the Black Muslim movement, with its identification of Mecca as the symbolic centre in its spiritual geography.<sup>50</sup> For many new religious movements in America, that symbolic "centre out there" has been India. Behind the emergence of many contemporary religious groups has been, as Ellwood has pointed out, "the emergence of the East as a powerful symbol of an alternative spiritual centre."<sup>51</sup> The momentum by which Americans have looked to the East as a symbolic centre has built over a long period of time. It is possible to understand the late nineteenth century origins of the Theosophical Society as embodying many of the motives and sentiments which inspire some alternative religious movements to locate their sacred

47. John Murray Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste*. (New York: Seabury, 1978).

48. Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial*. (New York: Crossroads, 1975), p. 142.

49. Ellwood, *Alternative Altars*, p. 131.

50. Charles Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, rev. ed., (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

51. Ellwood, *Alternative Altars*, p. 105.

“centre out there.” Henry Steel Olcott, one of the founders of Theosophy, spoke of “breaking the ties of circumstance which bound me to America.”<sup>52</sup> The civil space of America did not contain the powerful spiritual centre, for Olcott, that India represented. He described “an insatiable longing. . . to come to the land of the Rishis and the Buddhas, the sacred land among lands.”<sup>53</sup> And when finally he was able to make a pilgrimage to this symbolic “centre out there,” he kissed the ground in a spontaneous act of devotion, for, as Olcott declared, “we were at last on sacred soil.”<sup>54</sup> So, for many contemporary religious movements, inspired by their predecessors in Theosophy, the Vedanta Society, Self-Realization Fellowship, etc., India presents itself as a powerful symbolic centre.

The implications of this, of course, for the world-view they occupy, is an intense awareness of being on the periphery in relation to this “centre out there.” The ties of circumstance which connect the individual to American society, which locate the individual within American civil space, register as invalid. There results what has been called a “positive disengagement” from American civil space because there is nothing within it that holds the symbolic power of the “centre out there.” And so this peripheral location is experienced as a kind of social displacement, a sense of alienation and disenfranchisement from American society, a symbolic exile by the rivers of Babylon, as it were. This accounts for the sense of urgency that many such groups demonstrate to create a network ritual and experiential processes to symbolically make the centre present. By enacting the dress, music and rituals that symbolize the “centre out there” they create a provisional situation in which life on the periphery mirrors the sacred centre and thereby eases the tension produced by displacement.

The other movement is more common, and has been perceived as a greater threat by mainstream American society: that is the attempt by new religious movements to appropriate the central symbols of American identity and make them their own. Many religious groups do not seek to disengage themselves from American civil space.

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52. Henry Steel Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves: America 1874-1878*, first series. (Adyar, Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1895), pp. 376-7.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 367.

54. Henry Steel Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves: America 1878-1883*, second series. (Adyar, Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1900), pp. 13-14.



Rather, they make a concerted effort to appropriate the symbols of American civil religion and resacralize them in some unique, alternative way. They seek to locate themselves at the "centre in here." As Protestant Fundamentalists in America have increasingly moved into the political arena, this "New Religious Right," has obviously attempted to appropriate and revitalize civil religious symbols. As Walter Capps has recently pointed out, "the New Right has captured the prominent positive national symbols: nationalistic feeling, patriotism, the family, motherhood, virtue and moral rectitude."<sup>55</sup> These conservative fundamentalists have made direct attempts to appropriate those collective representations of American identity, such as the flag, the common history and shared values of America, and interpret them from a narrowly conceived biblical basis. But this strategy of claiming and resacralizing American civil religious symbols is not just a tactic of Protestant Fundamentalism. It is a strategy common to a number of different new religious movements.

The Unification Church, for example, has worked hard to appropriate American civil religious symbols. Sun Myung Moon has declared that "this nation is God's nation," the second Israel, with a special role in the acceptance of the Lord of the Second Advent from Korea, the third Israel.<sup>56</sup> Of course this has been frequently perceived as the creation of an alternative, subversive space within American society as witnessed by the controversies over political intrigue ("Koreagate") and tax evasion that have plagued the Unification movement. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) *guru*, Hansadutta Swami, one of the eleven disciples appointed by the founder A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada to take over the world-wide leadership of the organization, and the founder of the Berkeley, California, Temple, provides another example of the resacralization of civil religious themes. He has declared that America's is the world's only hope and a return to religion, and more specifically the worship of Kṛṣṇa, is the only way to save America from ruin at the hands of madmen, homosexuals and those over-loaded with sensory gratification. Addressing an audience at the Berkeley

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55. Walter Capps, *The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience*, (Boston: Beacon, 1982), p. 134.

56. Thomas Robbins, *et al.*, "The Last Civil Religion: Reverend Moon and the Unification Church," in Horowitz, (ed.), *Science, Sin and Scholarship*, pp. 46-71.

Temple, he said, "We are appealing to American youth. . . Become a hero and save your country. . . make the whole world God-conscious." When questioned about recent newspaper stories regarding the discovery by police of automatic weapons in the temple, the swami invoked a curious justification in his assertion that "America was won by the gun and it's maintained by the gun."<sup>57</sup> Even an alternative Buddhist movement, such as the Nicheren Shoshu movement in America, can make claim to American civil religious symbols and sentiments. The American flag flies over all Nicheren Shoshu of America (NSA) buildings in the United States and, in fact, the flags at the Denver and Seattle headquarters are certified as having flown over the Capitol in Washington, D.C. The General Director of the organization, speaking as an American, was quoted as asserting that "only Nicheren Shoshu can actualize our forefathers' dream of a perfect democracy."<sup>58</sup> The Healthy-Happy-Holy Organization (3HO), an off-shoot of Sikhism, with a mixture of *kundalini yoga*, started by Yogi BhaJan in Los Angeles, in 1967, represents a similar appropriation of civil religious symbols. Like a number of other groups, they "raise the American flag and sing 'God Bless America,' for this is a way to claim a new space within American culture, a space delimited by the founding myths taken as literal exemplars."<sup>59</sup> This series of attempts to appropriate and resacralize American civil religious symbols is certainly a response to the disruption of American civil space, where new configurations of American identity seem possible and new enclaves of religious meaning within American society can be established.

This situation has also produced a sense of relatively rapid social change. The disruption of American civil space has contributed to a series of shifts in what is perceived to be sacred or profane. For the formation of religious identity these shifting perspectives on the sacred and the profane present a crucial problem. As Marcel Mauss once stated: "Since there is nothing in the world but the sacred and the profane any positive act is either the consecration of the profane

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57. Carol Brydolf, "Krishna guru: 'Americans should bear arms'," *Oakland Tribune*, May 25, 1980.

58. Emma McCloy Layman, *Buddhism in America*, (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976), p. 134.

59. Alan Tobey, "The Summer Solstice of the Healthy-Happy-Holy Organization," in Glock and Bellah, (eds.), *The New Religious Consciousness*, p. 29.

individual or the desacralization of a sacred person.”<sup>60</sup> The dynamic of religious change is based upon this dual movement: the sacralization of the profane and the desacralization of the sacred. The dynamic energy in this time of religious change is generated by precisely this pendulum of resacralization and desacralization.

The most characteristic temporal orientation to emerge in new religious movements is the sense of being on the edge of history. This represents a desacralization of the long-standing western notion of graduated progress based on a confidence in an open ended history. Most new religious movements operate with some sense of imminent closure of history. For those new religious world-views that adopt a cyclical understanding of time, similar to the tradition of *yugas* in India, or the succession of golden, silver, bronze and iron ages in Ovid, the temporal location is on the edge of a “New Age,” or an “Age of Aquarius.”<sup>61</sup> For those groups that adopt a linear understanding of time, an understanding in which time has a definite beginning and end, that temporal location is on the edge of “Armageddon.”<sup>62</sup> Both of these temporal orientations, so characteristic of alternative religious movements in America, expect an imminent and sudden breakthrough of sacred time.

George Steiner has pointed out that every historical period in western thought, even those we might identify as periods of vitality and advancement, has tended to think of itself as suffering from *malaise*.<sup>63</sup> It seems that in western self-understanding time is always tired. Usually the present *malaise* is unfavourably contrasted to some

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60. *Année Sociologique*, 11 (1909), pp. 200-202; cited by David F. Pocock, “The Anthropology of Time-Reckoning,” in John Middleton, (ed.) *Myth and Cosmos*, (Garden City, New York: The Natural History Press, 1967), pp. 307-8.

61. Marilyn Fergusson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s*, (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1980).

62. The best selling book in America during the 1970s was a detailed description of this expected Armageddon, Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1976); other titles by Lindsey include *The Terminal Generation*, (New York: Bantam, 1977) and *The World's Final Hour*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1976).

63. See *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Toward the Redefinition of Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) and *On Difficulty*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978)

prior idealized time of vitality. Contemporary religious movements, however, tend to anticipate the imminent, future redemption of time. Kluckhohn and Strudbeck have observed that one of the primary constituents of a social group's identity is its dominant time perspective: past, present or future.<sup>64</sup> Rather than looking back to an idealized past, most new religious movements demonstrate a predominant future orientation, a sense of being on the edge of time, with the expectation that the future, whether Aquarius or Armageddon, will be a radical transformation, a profound sacralization, of our ordinary profane temporal existence. And as the study of apocalyptic movements, from early Christianity to the revitalization movements of Melanesia, has shown, there is always a tendency toward a proleptic eschatology: there is an effort to make the future now. Most new religious movements live in such a temporal orientation, and it is an important ingredient in the construction of religious identity within the various world-views that such movements represent.

#### **4. Conclusion: biopolitics and new religions**

For the study of religion, based as it must be on the study of the variety of ways in which human beings construct meaningful identities in relation to what they hold to be sacred, the expression—"nothing human is foreign to me"—must stand as a guiding principle. But for both the cult and the anti-cult forces, that principle is inverted, precisely as it is in every instance of religious intolerance, as both sides seem to be claiming that "nothing foreign is human to me." This categorization of people, as we have seen, is part of a larger conflict of world-views involving issues of human identity and the orientation of that identity in space and time. There is a resultant competition by various vested interests to establish themselves within the civil space of America. To the mainstream American society these alternative religious movements naturally register as "exteriority." As they begin to compete more actively for positions within American civil space, they begin to register more forcefully as "subversive." At this point it becomes difficult to separate the religious from the political consequences of this tension: the issues are simultaneously sacred and civil.

64. Florence Kluckhohn and F. L. Strudtbeck, *Variations in Value Orientations*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 48.

At its basis it is a question of being human. Michel Foucault has characterized modernity as the advent of *biopolitics*. Methods of knowledge and power have been developed and implemented to assume responsibility for human life-processes and to systematically control, discipline and modify them. This has produced in the west a disciplinary society; a society in which "prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons."<sup>65</sup> Technological experts are responsible for the management of life and death, with an expertise based on the discourse of scientific method and scientific discipline. The conditions of possibility in the modern world for managing life and death are generated by our biopolitics. And, as Foucault has observed, "a normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life."<sup>66</sup>

New religious movements represent alternate biopolitics for the management of life and death. Some of the important human issues that are involved include the following:

- (1) *Techniques of the body*: New religious movements provide alternative ways of managing what Marcel Mauss called "the techniques of the body."<sup>67</sup> This includes patterns of waking and sleeping, work and leisure, diet, sexuality and so on. In any biopolitics, what can be regulated, will be regulated. And new religious movements create distinctive styles, dispositions and habits for the management of these bodily processes.
- (2) *Health and healing*: Western religion in the twentieth century has abrogated its responsibility to manage the physical, emotional, mental as well as spiritual health of its members. It has been pointed out that "no religion has survived that does not heal."<sup>68</sup> In response to this situation, most new religious movements include some attempt to reclaim this central function of religion and incorporate some component that addresses directly the health and healing of the whole human being.

65. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 229; *Discipline and Punish*, p. 228.

66. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, Vol. 1, (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 16; translated Robert Hurley, *The History of Sexuality*, (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 8.

67. Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," in *Sociology and Psychology* pp. 95-123.

68. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Healing Cults," *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Volume 8, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 685.

- (3) *The politics of perception:* Protestant religion is characterized by an almost exclusive dominance of the auditory mode, in the centrality of the Word, the sermon and *fides ex auditu*. Many new religious movements represent an attempt to reclaim the religious function of the full range of the human sensorium. In ISKCON, for example, worship involves the smell of incense, the taste of *prasada*, the kinetics of dancing, the visual display of candle light, statues and icons, along with the more diverse auditory play of music and chanting.
- (4) *The recovery of death:* In response to the pervasive "denial of death" that has characterized western society since the advent of the medical management of death, new religious movements represent an attempt to incorporate symbolic death equivalents into religious life. The symbolism of the "born-again" experience, initiation, self-sacrifice, and so on, place death-imagery at the centre of religious experience. There is also an attempt, which cannot be underestimated in the emergence of alternative religious movements, to give some meaning to death in a world confronted with the prospect of nuclear annihilation.<sup>69</sup> In response to a situation which dehumanizes us all there is a certain urgency to recover the human face of death.

These are some of the major issues of human identity that are raised simply by the existence of alternative religious movements in America today. But they are also perennial issues in the formation of world-views and alternate ways of constructing human identity. To accept them as such is to advance beyond the polemical categorization of people into "Them" and "Us," to advance beyond the competition for positions within the shared civil space, and to achieve a certain empathic neutrality. If this is in fact possible—and the study of new religions represents a real test to both empathy and neutrality—then it may provide an opportunity for a richer and deeper understanding of what is involved in being human.

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69. Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth*, (New York: Knopf, 1982); For the influence of the image of nuclear annihilation on the decision of Jim Jones to move his church to Ukiah, California, and then to Guyanna, see Robert J. Lifton, "The Appeal of the Death Trip," (New York Times Magazine, January 7, 1979), pp. 26-31.