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God Making in China: Notes Towards a Theory of Deification

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Abstract

Some religious leaders tend to gravitate towards claims of increasingly greater holiness. This sometimes results in the assumption of explicitly prophetic roles or in more extreme cases, claims of divinity. The present paper discusses the apotheosis of Li Hongzhi, the founder of Falun Gong. Although a comprehensive theory of divinization remains elusive, some general points can be made. First, we argue that any effort to theorize deification must include the observation that it is a process that arises in the context of social interaction between leader and followers rather than exclusively within the psyche of the leader, a point which has sometimes been missed in previous analyses. Second, divinization is a gradual process, with claims of divinity typically being amplified over time. Third, one must consider that divinization typically takes place within social spaces more or less set apart from the larger society, with group dynamics that facilitate deification. Fourth, divinization can be a strategy for coping with external threats like critical outsiders and repression. Finally, we argue that any effort to understand deification needs to consider the wider cultural and religious context. ‘God’ is a polythetic term, and divinization may therefore take on many different forms.

Keywords: Deification; divinization; apotheosis; China; Frederick Lenz; Li Hongzhi; new religions; Falun Gong

During the early to mid 1980s one of the co-authors subscribed to a popular periodical entitled the *Yoga Journal*. At the time it was a black-and-white newsprint magazine, held together by several staples in the spine, and

encompassed by a single, glossy full-colour 11- x 17-inch cover. There were perhaps half a dozen pages at the back of the journal that held a series of modest ads, including one that stated ‘Come Meditate with Frederick Lenz, PhD’, with a photo of an attractive young fellow with his hair up in what might be described as a white man’s afro. In the background the ad noted that Lenz had received his MA and PhD degrees from SUNY at Stony Brook.

That ad continued to be placed for some months. Then one day an issue appeared containing Lenz’s full-colour, full-page smiling face on the inside front cover, one of the pricier locations to place an ad. Instead of his civilian name, Lenz’s self-designation was now Sri Atmananda, and instead of calling attention to his secular degrees, Lenz noted that he had been an abbot in a Japanese Zen Buddhist monastery, as well as the master of a Jnana Yoga ashram in India in past lifetimes. But his growing sense of self did not end there.

Lenz’s Atmananda ads continued for some more months until he eventually re-manifested as Zen Master Rama (minus notifications of his prior incarnations). In turn, this new persona appeared in several more issues until Lenz’s final apotheosis appeared on the back cover (the most expensive location to post an ad) under the bold heading, ‘Come see Rama, the Eighth Incarnation of Vishnu’. And there was Lenz again, in what appeared to be Hugh Hefner’s lounging robe, wearing a more restrained expression – which we suppose was more appropriate for an incarnation of divinity.

We have gone into some detail in reporting the specifics of Dr Lenz’s growing deification as reflected in his *Yoga Journal* ads because, although this kind of process is common enough, it rarely manifests in such a tangible succession of progressive images. The present paper will discuss divinization¹ through a series of concrete manifestations of divinization drawn from the Chinese tradition. The survey of Sinological examples will then culminate in an effort to understand deification in terms of a variety of different theoretical perspectives.

Divinization in China

Before we can discuss the process of divinization more theoretically we need to address the question of what a ‘god’ is, and what marks the distinction

1 Despite his evocative title, Paul Joosse’s ‘Becoming a God: Max Weber and the Social Construction of Charisma’ (2014) is not about what we are here calling divinization. The process of divinization builds on the charismatic process. There are useful summaries of studies of charisma in new religions in Erin L. Prophet’s articles ‘Charisma and Authority in New Religious Movements’ (2016) and ‘Charisma in New Religious Movements’ (forthcoming).

between the human being and god. 'God' is a polythetic term that may carry a range of meanings. It may refer to a certain type of agency (gods cause events), to a certain object of address and worship, and to a certain mode of being. These meanings may overlap, but they are not co-extensive, and the concept and understanding of divinities is sensitive to context. Einar Thomassen proposes to replace 'god' with 'superhuman agents' as a general and comparative term in religious studies (2013). However, this strategy is challenged by the fact that some traditions draw a sharp normative line between humans and deities, while others do not.

Some gods are portrayed as superhuman entities that reside in spheres beyond the empirical realm. In such cases there is a clear distinction between god and human beings. The distinction becomes less straightforward when we are dealing with gods that are, or have been, human. The history of religions is full of examples of humans that have been ascribed a divine status: Jesus of Nazareth, Emperor Augustus, Satya Sai Baba, and Chaitanya are just some examples of living human beings who have been perceived as divine in some sense. But what distinguishes a god from a human with extraordinary qualities? Where does one draw the line between *human gods* and other humans with extraordinary religious abilities, such as prophets, oracles, clairvoyants, and healers?

There is no obvious and short answer to these questions. In Islam the prophet Muhammad is perceived to be the most perfect human with extraordinary prophetic abilities, but the tradition draws a sharp distinction between Allah and his last prophet. Greek religion, by contrast, had a pantheon that included the Olympian gods, lower spirits, and local heroes, and the boundary between the human and the divine was fleeting. Humans could be understood as having divine capacities or as being directly under divine protection and providence, as in the case of oracles. In the Greek provinces of the Roman empire, the emperor was worshipped as a divine figure, a feat which was later incorporated into the stately imperial cult. The Greek and Roman pantheon consisted both of mortals who had become gods (like the hero Hercules or Emperor Augustus) and gods who had always been gods (like Jupiter and Mars) (Warrior 2006, 106f.). These examples highlight the fact that there are different perceptions of what a god ultimately is. In the strictly monotheistic Islamic tradition God is a unique, non-human entity. Prophets are humans that stand directly under divine guidance but remain entirely human. In the polytheistic context of Greek and Roman religion there were many modes of being divine. Because different religious and cultural traditions have different views of what a god ultimately is, and

different cosmologies and mythologies related to the relationships between man and god, context is crucial when discussing processes of deification.

What characterizes a deity in the Chinese tradition? To begin with, there is no single supreme creator god in the Daoist and Buddhist traditions. In Daoism the universe comes from the 'Tao', an impersonal principle or force. Nonetheless, Daoism has many minor gods that are believed to exist within this universe and are themselves subject to the Tao. Similarly, in Buddhism, there is no omnipotent being beyond the cosmos, who created and controls the universe. In Mahayana Buddhism gods are venerated and considered part of a rich cosmology that encompasses humans, animals, gods, demons, and bodhisattvas. However, the gods are believed to be subject to the same natural laws and karmic forces as other beings and are not believed to exist above and beyond this world. Second, and in contrast with the sharp spirit-matter divide in the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic complex, the Chinese tradition views spirit and matter as intertwined dynamic aspects of one whole – rather like the Chinese yin-yang symbol. It is thus somewhat less difficult to imagine human beings as divinities in East Asia. Traditionally, the Emperor of China was considered a divinity or demigod – the Son of Heaven (*Tianzi*), who ruled by virtue of the Mandate of Heaven (Dull 1990, 59). Additionally, for several millennia, Chinese millenarian movements, both Daoist and Buddhist, were often led by a divinized messianic figure (Lowe 2011; Shek 2019). A somewhat different yet structurally similar Chinese millennialist movement was the so-called Taiping Rebellion of the nineteenth century, the leader of which claimed to be the younger brother of Jesus (Kilcourse 2015).

One unforeseen consequence of Christian missionary efforts in China was the generation of numerous new religions which often represented deviations from orthodoxy, including blends of Protestantism with indigenous Chinese spirituality. In recent years, one of the most well-known, and certainly the most controversial, of these has been the Church of Almighty God, frequently referred to as Eastern Lightning.² A core teaching of the group is that Christ has returned in the form of a woman, Yang Xiangbin. While the traditional Protestant Bible is accepted as scripture – though outdated (Heggie 2017, 4; Folk 2018, 62) – it is viewed as having been superseded by Yang's *The Word Appears in the Flesh*.

In the second chapter of her study of the Church of Almighty God, *Lightning from the East*, Emily Dunn describes the typical leaders (to whom

2 The latter designation is derived from Matthew 24:27: 'For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.'

she refers as heresiarchs) of Protestant-related new religious movements in China as:

...male [Yang Xiangbin being a notable exception], middle-aged, and from rural north China. He has converted to Christianity early in the reform era, and thus is familiar with some Christian traditions and doctrine. None of the heresiarchs have been involved with the TSPM [the state-approved Protestant church], but rather have been associated with unofficial, autochthonous groups that draw on millenarian Pentecostalism. The founder claims to have received divine revelation that he is Christ incarnate or a prophet specially anointed by God to undertake His work in these 'end times.' Holding out promises of access to the truth (or at least a superior version of it), everlasting salvation, and perhaps physical healing or material blessing, he attracts and leads a handful of followers from his former church who proceed to proselytize Protestants and establish organizational and doctrinal frameworks. (2015, 51f.)

For example, converts to The Efficacious Spirit movement are taught that Christ did not save himself on the cross, and so they should not pray in his name but in that of the 'New Lord' – that is, Hua [Xuehe]. Members celebrate Hua's birthday on 17 January instead of at Christmas (Dunn 2015, 44).

However, these examples should not be taken to indicate that the deification pattern we have been examining here has been entirely taken over by Chinese Protestant-related new religions. In a fascinating account of an emergent Confucian congregation in China, Chen Na, Fan Lizhu, and Chen Jinguo describe how the head of the congregation, Mr Li Yusheng (Master Li) was not only the leading organizer of the group but was also worshipped by the members as a deity with supernatural powers (Chen, Fan, and Chen 2018, 8). This was seemingly because, in the words of a prominent congregant, 'If they [Li and his co-leaders] had not been Deities, how could they know so much and how could they talk so eloquently?' (ibid., 12).

To understand the issue we are examining here, the problem with all these examples is that they present deification as a *fait accompli*; the stages leading up to such exalted assertions are mostly invisible.

The divinization of Li Hongzhi

The case of Li Hongzhi, the founder-leader of the Falun Gong movement, offers a particularly rich example of processes of divinization in contemporary

China. The Falun Gong movement keeps meticulous records of Master Li's speeches. Through a detailed analysis of this source material that follows the process of divinization over time we can trace developmental steps related to the expanding status of Li Hongzhi.

It seems that even from the very beginning of his career as a qigong master Li was intent on placing himself in a category above other masters. This intention was reflected in his early lecture series (which formed the basis for *Zhuan Falun*, the central text of the movement), in which he claimed:

I have unveiled the eternal mystery – it was the secret of secrets that absolutely could not be disclosed. I have revealed the root of all different cultivation practices throughout history... I have said that I have done something unprecedented and opened the widest door... Our school practices cultivation this way, enabling you, yourself to truly obtain gong. That is unprecedented since the beginning of heaven and earth... (Li 2002, 319-321, as quoted in Frank 2004).

When Li Hongzhi founded Falun Gong in 1992, there were other popular qigong groups that were far more influential than Falun Gong. According to Yunfeng Lu 'as a new comer in the qigong circle, Falun Gong was actually not as competitive in healing diseases as Li Hongzhi himself described if we compare it with other qigong organizations' (Lu 2005, 179). Part of Li's competitive strategy was to characterize other qigong teachers as being under the influence of demons:

There are also demons coming to interfere with you, 'Come and learn from me, and I will teach you something.' Some people, especially those who practice other Qigong, will easily develop some kind of spontaneous movements the moment they sit there and their hand movements seem to be very beautiful. Let me tell you that demons also know such things (Li 1996).

However, to survive and eventually come out on top, Falun Gong needed a broader strategy to win the uneven match. As Lu points out, the solution was to offer different services exclusive to Falun Gong (Lu 2005, 179). Falun Gong soon shifted its focus to 'teaching an all-encompassing moral system' (Goossaert 2008, 23) that ultimately promised salvation, a claim from which other qigong groups had shied.

Li Hongzhi detached Falun Gong from its qigong origins as early as 1993. David Palmer and Yunfeng Lu have called attention to the fact that

Li stopped providing treatment of diseases at this time – which had been a decisive factor behind Falun Gong’s early expansion (Lu 2005, 175; Palmer 2007, 225). Additionally, Li also began forbidding Falun Gong practitioners from treating others (Lu 2005, 175). While he de-emphasized direct healing, the element of healing remained. Li claims to have innumerable ‘Dharma bodies’ (*fashen*) that accompany, protect, and heal his disciples. The Dharma bodies know all that goes through the minds of his followers. Li further claims to be able to eliminate the illnesses of his followers and to give them paranormal powers (Palmer 2019, 46–47). Those true to Li and his teachings will thus remain healthy.³ The relationship between Li and his disciples is thus directly personal. Li presents himself as a saviour of his individual followers – and of the world as a whole. According to Falun Gong, he is the omniscient and omnipotent saviour of the universe who has revealed the fundamental law of the universe – which is the protection against evil forces and the apocalypse.

The messianic theme distinguishes Li Hongzhi and Falun Gong from the thousands of other qigong masters who were active in China in the 1980s and 90s (Palmer 2019, 46). At the same time as he was retooling Falun Gong from a qigong health-oriented movement into a salvationist sect, he began propagating a fantastic hagiography in which a series of exalted masters visited the young Li, preparing him for his world-saving mission. Benjamin Penny has written insightfully about this early hagiography, both in his book on *The Religion of Falun Gong* and in a previous article, placing it in the context of traditional Taoist and Buddhist religious biographies.

Master Li’s biography is ... of particular interest, as it belongs to a long tradition of Chinese biographies of religious figures. There are both Daoist and Buddhist subtraditions within the greater stream of religious biography, but they share a great deal, especially from the structural point of view (Penny 2012a, 80).

In places the youthful segment of Li’s biography is reminiscent of gnostic hagiographies of the young Jesus (e.g. Burke 2009), in which he uses his spiritual powers to best his playmates at childhood games. These accounts make clear that Li was exceptional:

³ Getting conventional medical treatment would therefore be unnecessary and seen as a sign of spiritual weakness. This is part of the reason Falun Gong has also been considered dangerous outside China (Yan 2017).

Once, when he was in the fourth grade, he forgot his schoolbag when he left school. When he returned to fetch it, he found the door of the classroom locked and the windows shut. Then, an idea came to him: 'It would be good if I could get in!' As soon as the thought flashed into his mind, he suddenly found himself in the classroom. And with another thought, he was out again. Even he was amazed at what had happened. Then another idea occurred to him: 'What would it feel like if I stopped right in the glass?' And with that, he was in the middle of the window, his body and brain all filled with pieces of glass. He was in such pain he wanted to get straight out. And with that thought, he was (Penny 2003, 648f.).

In the early days of the group the public face of Falun Gong was just another qigong organization. However, as the official attitude towards qigong changed from support to criticism, Falun Gong became what James Tong refers to as a 'chameleon' organization, (Tong 2009, 29) adopting new self-definitions in an effort to sidestep the increasingly anti-qigong atmosphere emerging among Chinese officials.

As a consequence of these changing conditions, in 1994 Li Hongzhi decided to recast Falun Gong as a Buddhist organization.

From then on, Li fashioned himself as leader of a religious movement rather than the head of a qigong organization. He changed his birthday to that of Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism. His writings became sacred scriptures (*jingwen*). Meditation and reading of the Li's [sic] scriptures were added to the daily routine of Falungong practitioners. Falungong congregations were not only practice sessions on breathing exercises but also 'Dharma Assemblies' (*fahut*) to study Li's sermons on spiritual cultivation (Tong 2009, 9).

Li attempted to deflect criticism aimed at his change of birthday by subsequently downplaying its significance, asserting that:

During the Cultural Revolution, the government misprinted my birthdate. I just corrected it. During the Cultural Revolution, there were lots of misprints on identity. A man could become a woman, and a woman could become a man. It's natural that when people want to smear you, they will dig out whatever they can to destroy you. What's the big deal about having the same birthday as Sakyamuni? Many criminals were also born on that date. I have never said that I am Sakyamuni. I am just a very ordinary man (Li quoted in Spaeth 1999).

Li was over forty years old when he ‘corrected’ his birthdate. So one might ask why he chose to wait until 1994, the same year in which he ‘declared that he would devote his time to the study of Buddhism’ (Tong 2009, 9) to correct his birthdate. After he changed the year of his birth, Li’s birthdate corresponded with the date Buddha’s birthday was celebrated.

Li Hongzhi’s expanded self-presentation was also evident in an interview in the Asian edition of *TIME Magazine* (10 May 1999) that was conducted in the immediate wake of the movement’s suppression in China:

TIME: Are you a human being?

Li: You can think of me as a human being.

Here Li is implicitly claiming to be from a higher spiritual level, masquerading as a human being. This implicit claim is evident in more than a few of Li’s other statements. To refer again to his TIME interview:

TIME: Are you from Earth?

Li: I don’t wish to talk about myself at a higher level. People wouldn’t understand it.

This part of the interview immediately follows a discussion of Li’s teachings about aliens, meaning that the interviewer is asking him whether he is an extra-terrestrial. However, Li sidesteps the overt thrust of this question to imply that he is an interdimensional being whose true status is so exalted that ordinary, unenlightened people would be unable to comprehend it.

While the narrative of Li’s tutelage under a series of spiritual masters in his early biography was clearly intended to provide him with a prestigious lineage, it seems that later in his career Li’s expanding self-image prompted him to diminish the status of even these teachers so that they were merely following his original instructions:

Actually, everything that I have done was arranged countless years ago, and this includes who would obtain the Fa – nothing is accidental. But the way these things manifest is in keeping with ordinary humans. As a matter of fact, the things imparted to me by my several masters in this life are also what I intentionally arranged a few lifetimes ago for them to obtain. When the predestined occasion arrived, they were arranged to impart those things back to me so that I could recall my Fa in its entirety (Li 2001, 24).

However, Falun Gong can distance Li from the extraordinary claims of this hagiography by pointing out that the relevant document was not written by Li himself. His own writings imply that he is a kind of celestial *bodhisattva* in the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism. In a 1998 message to his followers he stated that ‘at present I have *once again* come to this world to teach the Fa [“law” or in the Buddhist context “Dharma”] ... and directly teach the fundamental law of the universe’ (Frank 2004, 236f., quoting from Li 2001, 53).

In terms of iconography the Falun Gong organization has also sold paintings of Li wearing Buddhist robes and standing on or sitting in a meditation posture – paintings that followers venerate (Tong 2009, 77) – and that clearly assimilate Li into the traditional iconography usually reserved for representations of Buddhist Bodhisattvas (e.g. <https://www.tiantibooks.org/products/copy-of-master-lis-picture-large>).

It should also be said that the Falun Gong organization has not been shy about presenting Li as a divine saviour figure to the general public. Thus, for example, in the final scene of one of the group’s 2019 Shen Yun performances,

... a huge tidal wave is set to destroy the city, but Master Li steps on stage, waves his hands, and sends the water back into the ocean, as... interdimensional wheels fly around in the sky. The spotlight shines on Li, unmistakably cast as a supernatural savior of mankind. Dancers gather near him to celebrate, holding a sign that reads ‘Falun Dafa is Good,’ and the curtain falls (Silverman 2019).⁴

Li Hongzhi was not, however, content to present himself as being on a par with figures like the historical Buddha. Eventually, one finds numerous places where he places his teachings – and by implication himself – high above Shakyamuni:

Throughout history, people have been studying whether what The Enlightened One taught is the Buddha Fa. The Tathagata’s teaching is the manifestation of Buddha-nature, and it can also be called a manifestation of the Fa. But it is not the universe’s true Fa, because in the past people were absolutely prohibited from knowing the Buddha Fa’s true manifestation. The Buddha

4 Other observers add that the tidal wave contains ‘an ominous picture of Karl Marx’ (Robertson 2019), and that Li Hongzhi appears as a ‘deity, both Christ-like and Buddha-esque, descend[ing] from heaven, radiating yellow light... The savior had arrived; the day was saved’ (Spera 2018).

Fa could only be enlightened to by someone who had reached a high level through cultivation practice, so it was even more the case that people were not allowed to know the true essence of cultivation practice. Falun Dafa has for the first time throughout the ages provided the nature of the universe – the Buddha Fa – to human beings; this amounts to providing them a ladder to ascend to heaven. So how could you measure the Dafa of the universe with what was once taught in Buddhism? (Li 2001, 11).⁵

And to go even further:

In July 1998, Li finally implied that he was the creator of the cosmos rather than merely the messenger bringing new revelations to mankind. He said: ‘No matter how great the Law is, I am not within it. Except for me, all beings are in the law. That is to say, not only are all beings created by the Law, but also the circumstance all of you live in is created by the Law.... The Law covers the Buddhas, the Dao and all other kinds of gods whom you do not know. No matter whether you are Buddha, Dao or gods, only through the cultivation of Falun Dafa can you return to where you came from’ (Li 1998, cited in Lu 2005).⁶ ... This claim indicates that Li Hongzhi is superior to all beings; and, if there is an omnipotent god, it is Mr. Li himself (Lu 2005, 178).

Li’s appropriation of the status of the highest god is also reflected in the Shen Yun song lyrics below, where he appears to have assumed the position of ‘The Creator’:

The Only Hope
 It was formed over the ages
 Five millennia of glory, in turmoil today
 The final stage now arrives
 For history holds: where there is creation, extinction
 Yet all hope is not lost
 The Creator has not forgotten mankind

5 In addition to the Buddha, he also explicitly sets himself above Jesus. In this regard refer to Penny (2012b).

6 The lecture from which Lu quotes here, ‘The Buddha Law of Falun: The speech at the Falun Dafa assistants meeting in Changchun 1998’, appears to have been removed from the web, but Li made the same sort of claim during that same year in Switzerland: ‘[W]hether it be Jesus or Shakyamuni, they are, after all, enlightened beings of a small scale. I’m not inside the cosmos, so I can resolve problems of the lives at different levels and in different cosmic bodies of the cosmos’ (Li 1998).

But in this illusory place, you must see the truth
 In the followers of Dafa lies the lone hope of salvation (Anonymous 2011).

It turns out one can find so many places in Li Hongzhi's books and lectures where he implicitly or explicitly claims his own divine status that it would take a thesis-length treatment to recount them all. However, it is interesting to reflect upon Li and Falun Gong's reasons for resorting to deification. Why did this occur in the Falun Gong movement as opposed to other qigong groups? The answer to this question may bring us closer to some theoretical elements of deification.

Deification: some theoretical fragments

Observers have noted processes of deification in every major religious tradition. But such commentary is often shallow and judgemental. For analytical purposes, however, a major weakness of both wo/man-in-the-street and journalistic explanatory inferences is that they often utilize a one-sided model of attribution. Minus the social contexts in which both Frederick Lenz and Li Hongzhi are embedded, their gradual evolution from (apparently) humble teachers of meditation and qigong into self-declared divinities seems driven by an entirely internal mechanism – the straightforward unfolding of megalomaniacal personality types.

Even scholars of religion sometimes proffer explanatory schemes based on intrinsic psychological tendencies, as when the prominent Japanese scholar, Shimazono Susumu, asserts that Shoko Asahara and his group, Aum Shinrikyo, exhibited anti-social traits 'from the very beginning' (1995, 400), an attribution of origins shared by the British Japanologist, Ian Reader (2000). This implies that the seeds of Aum's violent climax – the poison gas attack on the Tokyo subway system or potentially, another event of comparable horror – were lodged in Asahara's persona from the very beginning. Parallel to Lenz and Li, Asahara had a similarly enlarged sense of self, as reflected in his book, *Declaring Myself the Christ* (1992), in which he highlights the parallels between himself and Jesus of Nazareth.

Critics of non-mainstream religious groups tend to fall back on this single-factor naive attribution of motive, in part because it dovetails nicely with their critical portrayal of leaders of new religions as morally defective manipulators (Lewis 1989, 394). In this view followers are innocent dupes or at the very least largely passive victims – guru worshippers in the thrall

of charismatic leaders (Jones 2008, 72).⁷ This kind of portrayal reflects a strategy of 'cognitive distancing' (Chidester 1991), placing alternative spiritual claims beyond the pale and thus saving us the trouble of taking them seriously. The reality, however, is often much more nuanced.

In part a reaction to this simplistic Svengalian judgement call, academic researchers have called attention to factors in the environment that tend to shift the analysis from a narrow focus on the leader. Thus, in the case of Aum Shinrikyo's violence, Martin Repp points out a variety of ways in which Shimazono and Reader share a 'significant tendency to decontextualize Aum and the Aum incident' (2011, 155) and highlights environmental factors that should be taken into account in any comprehensive analysis of Asahara and the Aum incident. However, this style of analysis can be taken to an extreme, such that it can operate as an implicit apologetic (Robbins 2002, 58). Any complete analysis must thus necessarily situate itself in the middle, placing one foot on each side of this dynamic process.

David Bromley outlines a series of stages through which episodes of NRM mass violence develop. Bromley's variant on conflict amplification is useful as a metaphorical description of the process of divinization:

(1) latent tension, in which the foundational logic and organization of movement and society stand in contradiction to one another, although there may not be direct engagement; (2) nascent conflict, in which emergent, bilateral conflicts are not articulated in ideological terms, future adversaries have not mobilized organizationally, and parties therefore orient toward one another as 'troublesome'; (3) intensified conflict, in which there is heightened mobilization and radicalization of movements and oppositional groups, entry of third parties, and orientation by parties toward one another as 'dangerous'...; and (4) dramatic denouement, in which polarization and destabilization of dangerous relationships lead to orientation by parties as 'subversive' and to projects of final reckoning intended to reverse power and moral relationships... (Bromley 2011, 16).

What is clear from this outline is that such conflicts are dyadic – dependent on the actions and reactions of each side – and that they are dynamic and processual. Bromley's theory states that these steps are not inevitable. Just as conflict can be resolved at each stage, there are different stages in a process of divinization, and different degrees to which a religious leader may be regarded as divine.

⁷ An attribution to AUM members insightfully criticized by James W. Jones (2008, 72).

The conflict with the People's Republic of China indirectly contributed to strengthening the messianic and sectarian aspects of Falun Gong. In 1999 the conflict between the Chinese government and Falun Gong intensified following a series of demonstrations arranged by Falun Gong practitioners against the People's Republic of China. On 25 April 1999 a large demonstration was held outside Zhongnanhai in central Beijing in reaction to how a Falun Gong protest in Tianjin had been handled by the Public Security authorities a few days before. Falun Gong was subsequently banned by the Chinese authorities (Penny 2012a, 56f). The apotheosis of Li can in part be seen as a way of responding to and coping with the difficulties Falun Gong has met as a result of the anti-Falun Gong campaign. The repression of Falun Gong is seen as evidence of the demonic forces of society that threaten the Great Law (Palmer 2019, 56). Isolation is not part of the doctrine, but an effect of the anti-Falun Gong campaign. In the face of the isolation, harassment, and sufferings of followers in China, bestowing their leader with divine features provides Li and Falun Gong with an absolute legitimacy. Repression increases sectarianism; sectarianism increases repression. It is well known that leaders tend to become more popular in times of crisis (Mueller 1970). Divinization can be seen as a strategy to gain absolute legitimacy and endure – and indeed find spiritual significance in – the hardships experienced by Falun Gong practitioners.

To now come full circle and refer back to Dr Lenz, what is missing from the series of *Yoga Journal* ads we discussed earlier is his audience of students and the dyadic,⁸ relational context which nurtured the progressively growing sense of his own divinity. Each instantiation of Lenz's persona in the sequence is metaphorically parallel to each of Bromley's stages. And like the social conflicts analysed by Bromley, one needs the dynamic interaction between both sides of the dyad to move forwards to the next step.

As most people who have taught spiritual disciplines (as well as some who teach secular subjects) have experienced, one easily becomes the target of a variety of projections and exaggerated expectations. While many of these projections feel good because they stroke the teacher's ego, one must disabuse students of their expectations that the teacher is more spiritual than is actually the case.

Unfortunately, it is not so rare that some teachers cave into these projections. They then try to live up to raised expectations by presenting students

8 'Dyadic' obviously refers to the initial relationship between teachers and their students. Assuming a group expands beyond this first stage, new levels emerge within the group that 'complexify' these interactions, such as the body of followers that Weber referred to as the 'charismatic aristocracy' (Jossee, 2017).

with an incrementally holier persona. In Roy Wallis's words the leader 'seeks to realise in his behaviour the powers and status with which he has been credited, to live up to the image with which he has been endowed' (1982, 38). Students can respond to the teacher's new persona by further raising expectations. The teacher can then respond accordingly by ramping up the apparent holiness of their persona yet further. This continues in seesaw fashion until the façade crashes, or the teacher embraces full divinization, as in the cases of Dr Lenz and Li Hongzhi.

An important point to realize here is that although the person who is the focal point of this process enjoys certain psychological and often some temporal benefits, they are (at least at the beginning) every bit as much a victim of this dynamic as their followers. In Lenz's case he met his end in a very strange suicide in the midst of what appeared at least from the outside, a highly successful career (Lei 1998).

Theory related to deviance amplification also provides us with some insights relevant to deification. Deviance amplification postulates a distinction between 'Primary Deviance' and 'Secondary Deviance', the latter being 'the behavior and experience...which follow the real or imagined response of others (awareness, labelling and the application of social sanctions) to the [initial] deviation and the individual's own interpretation of its significance' (Petrunik 1980, 217). This process was articulated within labelling theory (Wilkins 1965), and originally applied to such behaviours as delinquency, alcoholism, and mental illness, this feedback-loop effect could (minus the negative connotations of 'deviance') be applied to an interpretation of the deification process. However, deviance amplification, though it captures the 'amplification' of the teacher's persona less cynically than popular anti-cult interpretations, tends to downplay essential aspects of the process, such as the role of the other half of the dyad – the teacher's students.

If followers are 'dupes', as the cult stereotype has it, that still leaves the mechanism of students' susceptibility to a teacher's 'trickery' unexplained. Psychoanalytic projection is a popular option: in this reading followers project an unfulfilled need for a father/mother figure onto the teacher, and then adopt infantilized roles as obedient children (e.g. Downton 1973, 225). When we project our ego ideal onto the leader, they in effect relieve us of the burden of failing to live up to these ideals. Instead, we are only required to follow the leader (Wallis 1993, 171).

An alternative, non-psychoanalytic model for understanding how students might amplify a teacher's insightfulness is provided by the so-called 'Dr Fox Effect' (Ware and Williams 1975). The Dr Fox Effect refers to an ex-

periment originally carried out at the USC School of Medicine in 1970. Two speakers gave lectures to an audience of psychologists and psychiatrists on Game Theory. One of the lecturers was an actual expert, while the other was an actor who was given the name Dr Myron L. Fox, who had supposedly graduated from the Albert Einstein School of Medicine.

The experimenters created a meaningless lecture and coached the actor to deliver it 'with an excessive use of double talk, neologisms, non sequiturs, and contradictory statements.' At the same time, the researchers encouraged the actor to adopt a lively demeanor, convey warmth toward his audience, and intersperse his nonsensical comments with humor. The actor fooled not just one, but three separate audiences of professional and graduate students. Despite the emptiness of his lecture, fifty-five psychiatrists, psychologists, educators, graduate students, and other professionals produced evaluations of Dr. Fox that were overwhelmingly positive. The disturbing feature of the Dr. Fox study, as the experimenters noted, is that Fox's nonverbal behaviors so completely masked a meaningless, jargon-filled, and confused presentation (Merritt 2008, 242).

The Dr Fox Effect is an amplification of the 'Halo Effect' (Feeley 2002), in which extraneous impressions (such as an attractive appearance) cause observers to rank someone higher (e.g. on competency) than they might otherwise merit. In the case at hand students find themselves drawn to the personal charisma of a teacher, an attraction for which one does not have to postulate explanations based on psychoanalytic mechanisms.

We should here note in passing that in Max Weber's analysis what we might term 'garden variety' charisma already contains more than a hint of divinization. For Weber charisma applies

...to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which [they are] set apart from ordinary [people] and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader (1964, 358).

We should also ask other sorts of questions about follower motivations for building up a teacher. In an important analysis of L. Ron Hubbard's hagiography Dorthe Refslund Christensen describes how the Church of Scientology

continues to idealize the founder as the brilliant, never-equalled source of Scientology's teachings. 'He is not a figurehead with no significance; he is the only ultimate source and legitimizing resource of the religious and therapeutic claims of the church... Hubbard is, at one and the same time, an ordinary human being and a superhuman being with special, non-ordinary qualities' (2005, 227, 249). Even long after his passing Scientologists continue to exalt Hubbard, because doing so legitimates their practice of Scientology.

Followers also want to build up the stature of their leaders before they pass away and will sometimes actually prompt leaders to embrace additional amplifications of their status and authority. In the case of Knutby Filadelfia, a small Pentecostal community in Sweden, members of Åsa Waldau's community (in her telling) persuaded her that she was the Bride of Christ described in various places in the New Testament. In Liselotte Frisk's account (2018)

This belief originated in a question brought up for discussion during the late 1990s, namely if the bride of Christ really should be interpreted as The Church, like most Christian congregations teach, or if it could be a human woman. Pastor Helge Fossmo's statement to Åsa is today quite famous: 'If the bride of Christ is a woman, then it must be you.' Åsa Waldau claims that she thought it to be her duty to try within her if there could be any truth in this suggestion and that she did reflect upon this matter for a while, but says that the whole idea came from Helge Fossmo and not from her (Waldau 2007).

Thus, like the Church of Scientology, members of Knutby Filadelfia desired to perceive themselves as a special group, which they proceeded to do by persuading their leader to assume an exalted status. Early companions who encourage leaders to perceive themselves as 'someone special' are often crucial in their assumption of having an extraordinary role or status (Wallis 1993, 172; Tumminia 2005, 54–55). It is rare that this kind of prompting by followers is quite so explicit, but an unspoken version of the same expectation is at work whenever spiritual leaders begin responding by amplifying their own holiness: '[F]ollowers ... pressure their leader for displays of power, demand to see the extraordinary, which is reciprocated with awe and devotion' (Tumminia 2005, 52).⁹

9 Both Eileen Barker (1993) and Lorne Dawson (2011) insightfully discuss the process of accepting a leader's charismatic authority in terms of a relatively static set of social conditions. However, there is a useful description of the dynamic, interactive process by which David Berg came to accept a prophetic role in Roy Wallis's important article on the social construction of charisma (1982), and Paul Jossee paints a fine-grained portrait of how John de Ruiter came to accept an exalted spiritual status in his 'Max Weber's Disciples' (2017). Another useful reference is Diana Tumminia, *When Prophecy Never Fails: Myth and Reality in a Flying Saucer Group* (2005).

For the process of divinization to evolve beyond the experience of simple charisma, the group needs to at least partly close ranks so that core followers have movement spaces within which they can interact with other followers, free from the sceptical gaze of outsiders – which is a different but related variant of Fantasia's and Hirsh's notion of movement 'free spaces' (1995). This is another way of saying that outsiders provide insiders with a reality-testing feedback loop, preventing them from going overboard in the subculture that is emerging around the spiritual teacher. This semi-segregated milieu is necessary before followers embrace such radical teachings as that their human teacher is themselves a god. When this separation becomes extreme, it is referred to as a social implosion (not in Jean Baudrillard's sense) or social encapsulation (cf. Dawson 1998, fifth chapter). At the same time the teacher also reduces or cuts themselves off from interactions with outsiders who might disabuse them of their growing sense of spiritual self-importance. Many groups isolate themselves physically, while others cultivate a sense of themselves as a distinct community and spiritual elite that while in this world symbolically sets itself apart from it (Dawson 1998, 148). This observation can be extended to the elite group implied by the sharp distinction Li Hongzhi draws between Falun Gong practitioners and 'ordinary people'.

Concluding remarks

In the above discussion we have not pretended to lay out an integrated model of the divinization process. Rather, we have isolated certain aspects of deification and applied theoretical elements that seem to fit different phases of the process. Part of the problem is that differing theoretical frames can sometimes be applied to the same aspect of divinization. And while different cases of deification share commonalities, there are also enough variations that, taken together, they resist any straightforward homogenization. This variability makes one or another explanation seem preferable in different instances.

Nevertheless, we have emphasized the more general point that deification can never be considered in isolation from social interaction. Deification is a dynamic dyadic process which seesaws between leaders and followers, gradually building as the process cycles across time. To borrow Wallis's core insight about charisma and apply it here, deification 'is essentially a relationship born out of interaction between a leader and his followers' (1982, 26). Many analysts, especially psychologically oriented critics but also certain

mainstream NRM researchers, miss or downplay the central importance of the charismatic bond in the divinization process.

Divinization is a gradual process, with claims towards divinity typically amplifying over time. A similar dynamic can be seen in processes of conflict augmentation and the more extremist claims and actions of some religious groups. There are different stages in a process of divinization. A religious leader may go through only some initial stages or claim the status of a supreme god. This also points to the fact that some religious traditions enable many different modes of divinity, and that some traditions do not necessarily draw a sharp distinction between gods and humans.

We have further indicated that a greater or lesser degree of social separation – tending towards social implosion (or social encapsulation) – seems necessary before the amplification process veers from garden variety charisma to become deification. Sectarianism protects the group and leader from criticism by mainstream society. External threats like hostility or straightforward repression by mainstream society can act as catalysts for divinization. A strong leader with a divine providence affords the group an absolute legitimacy that helps the followers cope with hardship.

Finally, we have argued that a theory of deification needs to be sensitive to cultural and religious context. ‘God’ may carry a range of different meanings, both as an analytical concept and as an insider term. Our empirical material primarily relates to the Chinese context, and we would welcome further efforts to theorize based on other cases.

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