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Editorial note

Since their inception Religious Studies in Finland have been dominated by ethnography. In part this emphasis is associated with the creation of a Finnish identity and nation in the latter part of the 19th century, and the need to find roots among perceived brother nations further East in the great Russian empire. When such painstaking linguistic and anthropological fieldwork was combined with the theoretical sophistication of the British evolutionary anthropology of Edward Westermarck (1862–1939), a long series of robust ethnographical studies, such as those conducted by Uno Holmberg-Harva (1882–1949) and Rafael Karsten (1879–1956), was the result.

Much water has passed under the proverbial bridge since these men. Towards the end of his life Westermarck himself had the less than pleasing experience of seeing his contemporaries viewing him as a respected but largely irrelevant historical figure, clinging to outdated and even exploded ideas. Indeed, ethnographic method as a whole is occasionally challenged, as shown, for example, by Martyn Hammersley's thought-provoking *What's Wrong with Ethnography?* (Routledge 1992).

Nevertheless, while theories and methods have developed, the passion for ethnography has remained in Finnish and indeed Nordic religious studies. It is therefore a great pleasure for me to present this ethnographically focused issue of *Temenos*. In the first article Eva Toulouze and Niglas Liivo follow in the trail of the early scholars of Finno-Ugric peoples to Northern Bashkortostan, where the traditional Udmurt religion is still very much alive. Their article focuses on the key figure in Udmurt ritual, the *vös'as'*, or sacrificial priest. Toulouze and Liivo sketch a fascinating pattern of performance and transmission, taking into account the variations in practice in two local groups of villages. The researchers conclude on a sombre note: while Udmurt religion and society are doing quite well, the next few years will probably bring substantial social challenges.

In the second article Sabina Hadzibulic turns our attention to Serbia and the celebration named the *slava* or *krsna slava* (celebration of the christened), in which a family annually celebrates its patron saint. In Serbia the *slava* ranks alongside Christmas and Easter in importance, but, although its roots reach as far back as medieval times, it was marginalised during the communist period of Serbian history. After an overview of the *slava's* history Hadzibulic turns to the present, as the *slava* has regained its significance and recognition with the reaffirmation of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the end of the last century. It has now transcended the private family sphere,

becoming an indicator of ethnicity and status with little connection to its original religious meaning and purpose. Additionally, what was originally a family tradition has become a festival for many public institutions, companies, and professional associations. The transformation of the *slava* therefore illustrates the profound changes that this Balkan country has undergone in the last few decades.

From the Urals and the Balkans we turn to Finland and netnography. Instead of looking at persons and institutions as the first two articles do, Teemu Pauha examines the rhetorical construction of a global Islamic community in the Facebook prayers of young Finnish Muslims. He convincingly shows that the prayers portray a universalising umma identity. However, he goes further, showing that they are also a mechanism used in its construction. Pauha argues that rhetorically oriented discursive psychology has proven a fruitful framework for approaching online prayers. Perceiving prayers as argumentative communication, Pauha claims, aids in making sense of the questions and contrasts embedded in them.

Staying in Finland, in her exciting article Iлона Raunola examines the conditions of spiritual process in a new kind of religiousness called Lightprayer, founded by a Finnish-German couple. Using extensive ethnographic material analysed through actor-network theory (ANT), Raunola emphasises the contributions and roles of both human and non-human actors in the actualisation of the spiritual process in Lightprayer, arguing that the interaction within the practices of Lightprayer is essential to understanding this new kind of religiosity.

From Finland our journey becomes paradoxically international but simultaneously ephemeral. In his empirically rich article Stefano Bigliardi takes a close look at the booklet *Scientology and the Bible* (1967), reconstructing the historical circumstances of its publication as well as analysing its potential for interreligious dialogue. Through this booklet Bigliardi takes us on a tour of the history of Scientology, showing that for a limited period public relations with other religions became an increasingly important topic for Scientology. Nevertheless, as this transient state of affairs soon disappeared, the booklet, originally published under the ambitious label of a 'manifest', is now no more than an anomalous piece of Scientology ephemera.

Finally, we return to the Balkans and ethnography. The Temenos lectures, sponsored by the Finnish Association for the Study of Religions, are annual lectures by noted international scholars of religion. Last year's lecture, given at Turku University on 26th September 2016, by Professor Mirjam Mencej of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University

of Ljubljana, affords a fascinating insight into discourses on witchcraft and uses of bewitchment narratives in contemporary rural eastern Slovenia.

Together, these articles show us some of the exciting methodological and theoretical richness of contemporary religious studies. I am sure that Westermarck, Holberg-Harva, and Karsten would be pleased by the ways in which their heritage is being conserved, developed, and reinvented.

Måns Broo

The *Vös'as'*, the Udmurt Sacrificial Priest: An Old Task for Young Men¹

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Abstract

In the Udmurt diaspora of Northern Bashkortostan the traditional Udmurt religion is very much alive: it is part of the villagers' everyday life. Rituals are regularly held both at the village level and in the wider community, composed of several villages, and they involve the whole population. This article focuses on the key figure in Udmurt ritual: the sacrificial priest, called the *vös'as'*, and attempts to sketch a pattern of function-performing and transmission, taking into account the slightly varying practice in two local groups of villages. It also reflects on its historical perspective in a Finno-Ugric context in which the practice of ethnic religions is often seen and/or used as a marker of ethnicity.

Key words: sacrificial priest, ritual, Udmurt religion, transmission, ethnicity

The Udmurt are a people who speak a Finno-Ugric language in the Volga region. Since 1920 most Udmurt have lived in an administrative region, now a Republic, but there are Udmurt communities in the neighbouring regions, some of them the descendants of migrants who have settled in Muslim areas since the 17th and mostly in the 18th centuries (Minniyakhmetova 1995, 332). Before the arrival of the Russians, and for some time afterwards, the Udmurt practised an agrarian religion based on animism. Although the Udmurt who remained in their core territory had converted to Orthodoxy by 1765, it is particularly interesting to follow the religious situations in areas where ethnic religions were able to persist without interference until the Soviet period. They are still very much alive at the beginning of the 21st century.

As in most traditions, rituals occupy a highly significant place in the Udmurts' lives. The main output of any ceremonial action was (according

1 This research has been funded by Estonian Research Council (PUT590).

to ethnographers²), and is still the cooking of a porridge made of lamb broth, crops, and lamb. In some cases the ceremony can be performed by the male head of the family, while in others – important calendar feasts and seasonal agricultural turning points – the ritual is to be led by a specialist. The authors' fieldwork assists in ascertaining what still exists, what has disappeared, and what has changed.

While previous research has mainly focused on reconstruction – attempting to ascertain the details of the rituals before modernity – our goal is to focus on the current practice of this peculiar form of worship, and to analyse how the population understands it. We intend to study a key figure in the perpetuation of the tradition, the sacrificial priest, for in the context of urbanisation and rural exodus transmission is a core question. In a wider context the question of the possible use of ethnic religion as an identity marker and the priest's possible role in this must also be considered.

Very few of these practices have resisted the successive efforts of evangelisation and sovietisation in Udmurtia. As Ranus Sadikov, an Udmurt ethnographer who specialises in this region, emphasises, the disruption of the village community by collectivisation has seriously transformed collective life in the countryside (Sadikov 2012, 48), in Udmurtia as well as in the further-flung Turkic regions. There are still places where tradition has shown itself more resilient. One of these is Bashkortostan, where Udmurt peasant communities practise forms of worship as ethnographers described them in the 19th century.

This is easily explained. In Udmurtia the communities had to face evangelisation and then collectivisation, the first imposing a new and enduring way of thinking about oneself in the world, the second revolutionising the way people related to each other in everyday life. In Bashkortostan the first disruptive phase did not take place. The effects of collectivisation were similar in Bashkortostan as elsewhere: the basis of community life changed, and anti-religious ideology was spread through school, the army, and state institutions, while more or less active repression led to the fading of the Udmurts' traditional mental world. However, the areas they inhabited were totally rural and remote, and they were able to retain much of their religion.

Contemporary scholars have emphasised the persistence of Udmurt rituals in this region: Tatiana Minniyakhmetova and Ranus Sadikov (1973), themselves natives of Northern Bashkortostan, have defended doctoral

2 Among others, Pervukhin 1888, Aptiev 1891, 1892, Holmberg 1914.

dissertations and written many studies about them in their current forms, and have described rituals in continuity that have created a corpus, based both on fieldwork and on older literature, whose main emphasis is on the beginning of the 20th century, a period in which tradition was still strong and modernity had not yet penetrated. Nevertheless, external research on these questions is still practically non-existent: although Finnish (Kirsti Mäkela, Seppo Lallukka) and Hungarian researchers (Boglárka Mácsai, Zoltán Nagy) have conducted fieldwork in the region, their findings are still to be published. In the present article we reflect on what we have witnessed, while concentrating on the key role of the sacrificial priest.

Is the Udmurt religion a religion?

As a general introduction, is it proper to call what the Udmurt call '*Udmurt oskon*' ('Udmurt religion') a religion? We shall not develop this point, but we would like to pinpoint a terminological confusion that is difficult to unravel because of the lack of proper concepts in our toolbox.

The kind of practice we shall study is usually called 'paganism' in Russia. The main problem with the term 'pagan' lies in the fact that it was originally used in opposition to 'Christian'; scholars prefer to approach the phenomenon from a more neutral starting point. Moreover, the word 'pagan' contains other implicit features that do not fit the fluid and situative object of our study: a developed and fixed mythology; a sophisticated polytheism; and no explicit connection with nature. However, the term has been integrated into the discourse as an objective scientific category.

We might use a term from both anthropology and folklore studies: 'belief' in a formalised and dogmatic system as opposed to religion; but 'belief' is also somewhat problematic, for it implies the conscious act of believing. In spite of what is suggested by Christianity's dominance, not every 'belief system' is based on belief. A 'credo' is rather a peculiarity of monotheistic world religions such as Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Faith and belief are quite improper concepts in many other systems, where the propositional dimension is not articulated into a rigid system. These notions have been imposed on the natives by missionaries, who as professionals could only interpret the unfamiliar by using familiar categories: their thinking habits and their languages did not and do not provide them with appropriate tools to understand the realities they discovered. At the same time, these categories have been accepted and interiorised by the natives themselves (Asad 1993): in contact situations, speaking a language that was not theirs,

they domesticated the conceptual tools introduced by the ‘other’. They have become weapons: even if they did not fit theoretically, they could still be pragmatically and advantageously used. This is the case with the Udmurt, who have adopted the term *udmurt vera*, which can be directly translated as ‘Udmurt faith’, in contrast to *Žuč vera*, ‘Russian faith’ (Orthodox Christianity) and *biger vera* ‘Tatar faith’ (Islam).

We thus face the challenge of expressing something without the appropriate conceptual tools. We have been tempted by the concept of spirituality, as used by Hann (2007, 387), but even this term is critical and we shall not use it in this article, for the boundary between the spiritual and the profane is somewhat nebulous. Here, moreover, the practice consists in everyday common actions in the countryside – the slaughtering of animals, cooking, and eating, although they are encompassed in a framework that makes them sacred and gives them place, time, performers, words, and gestures. In conclusion, we are forced to compromise and use the unsatisfactory term ‘religion’.

The Udmurt religious world in Bashkortostan at the beginning of the 21st century

In the second decade of the 21st century peasant life in the Udmurt communities of Northern Bashkortostan is still punctuated by religious gatherings. Continuity is clearly felt, as we observed in our fieldwork in June 2013, 2014, and 2015, as well as in December 2013. We attempted to penetrate the world of Udmurt rituals by attending and filming ceremonies, but also through the mediation of sacrificial priests. We stayed in the Tatyshlinskii *raion*, in Northern Bashkortostan, and worked in several of the area’s villages. Being acquainted with specialist literature, we could observe some changes: many ceremonies that once existed have been forgotten. Others have not faded, while some have been revived, and new forms have also been invented. We have thus merged into a single common practice elements with a different historical status. A comparison with Udmurt religious practice in Udmurtia itself may provide further insights.

Some ceremonies have been forgotten: the Easter ceremony, the *Badzhym Nunal* (Great Day) festival,³ is of very limited importance in Bashkortostan.

3 The Mari have the same kind of holiday, also called the ‘Great Day’ (*kugu keche*), corresponding to the Easter period. Its absence or lesser resilience in Bashkortostan may be connected to the absence of Christianity in the area (there is no church in the Tatyshlinskii *raion*). There are memories of its existence, but it has lost its significance: according to our main informant people used to gather and eat porridge in groups of three or four families; today the celebration is limited to one family, without outsiders, and the head of the family says ritual words over the porridge

Another example is the spring three-village festival. People remember which villages performed it and with whom, but the tradition is no longer alive in some places, while in other places it has undergone transformation. The tradition of the village ceremony (*gurt vös*) at the solstice has never been held without interruption.⁴ In general, grass root level ceremonies have been less disrupted by political interference.⁵ The *mör vös*, the following ceremony in the cycle, one or two weeks after the village event, is observed together by eight to ten villages, and has also been quite resilient. It is the only ceremony of the winter cycle that has been preserved. It was interrupted for seven years in Vilgurt, but was immediately revived when the Soviet Union collapsed. It is now a very public ceremony, attended by a large gathering. It is also attended, as our fieldwork reveals, by 'expatriate' Udmurt, i.e. by Udmurt who work outside the compact Udmurt area but who return for the occasion.

Another ceremony had indeed totally disappeared: the 'country' ceremony, *Elen Vös*, where all the Udmurt of Bashkortostan and the Perm region used to gather, was attested to in older literature (Sadikov 2008, 46). It rotated between three villages, Varyash, Kirga, and Altaevo, where its memory had faded (Sadikov 2008, 194): as no data are available after the beginning of the 20th century, we may assert that by the beginning of the Soviet period it was no longer being held. It has now been revived and has been held since 2008 in the three villages that hosted it previously (Sadikov 2010, 34), becoming a very popular event.

Having illustrated and sampled the overall framework with these examples from our fieldwork, we shall focus on one key issue. What is the current situation of the specialised bearers of this tradition, the sacrificial priests?⁶ Has their role changed, what is it, who are they, how have they become what they are, and how do they perpetuate themselves? Is this role somehow political? These are the concrete questions we shall attempt to answer.

The central role of the sacrificial priest, the *vös'as'*

In the continuation of a tradition the existence of 'people who know' is crucial. In the Udmurt tradition, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries,

4 This is true of the spring cycle. However, in winter it is the village ceremony that has disappeared, while the collective ones are still performed.

5 However, people still recall a time when party officials interrupted the ceremony and the contents of the sacrificial cauldrons were thrown on the floor. This did not affect the practice, however: the inhabitants of the village simply changed the location of the ceremony to more hidden places.

6 We use here the expression introduced by Aado Lintrop (Lintrop 2003).

the ritual specialists, the *vös'as'*, were responsible for larger ceremonies, while the family head (or the kin's elder) could pray in everyday life and at family events (Khrushcheva 1995, 197).⁷

Not everybody could perform at public ceremonies. We know of various kinds of priest: the leader of the ceremony, the *vös'as'*, was responsible for the whole ceremony and recited the prayers; the *tylas'* was responsible for the fireplace and for throwing whatever was supposed to go there into the fire (pieces of bread, blood, bones, entrails); and the *partshas'* was responsible for the sacrificial animals (Sadikov 2008, 191). This task-sharing has now disappeared.⁸ We know that until the 1920s the *vös'as'* was elected by the assembly of the family heads,⁹ but this is no longer the case. However, in 1928 the *Kenesh*¹⁰, the village council, became the enemy, the incarnation of the kulak's power. Moreover, especially after the 1930s, all religious specialists were grouped with Orthodox priests, accused of being exploiters of the people and repressed. All the local leaders were accused of being kulaks and eliminated. While no statistics are available, it is likely that many *vös'as'* were victims of repression. However, they had a lower public profile than Orthodox priests: they were peasants like everyone else, and many survived. Thus, after the war, the communities had not been totally deprived of their priests.

The main problem lay elsewhere, however: younger people, trained by Soviet education in the cult of modernity and material progress, seldom followed the spiritual traditions of their elders. From this perspective the 1980s and 1990s were years of decline: the older men who had continued to lead ceremonies died without anybody to replace them. Without a priest, worship might disappear. Even if people wanted to continue, they were not able to do so: '[W]e may say that in the 20th century it is only thanks to

7 This is still the case. Although it is not the focus of this article, let us mention an event that happened during our fieldwork: Tolya, the son of our host's neighbour was called up, and was to leave on 25th June very early in the morning. The celebration started in the evening, and at about 4 am the father prayed for his son and a ritual porridge was distributed to those who attended.

8 We heard the word *partshas'* only once, in the mouth of the older *vös'as'*, Nazip, used to mean 'assistant'. Ranus Sadikov, who has spent years studying the Udmurt religion, reacted to this word, for it was the first time he had himself heard it in current speech.

9 This is what Khrushcheva asserts (1995, 197). Lintrop argues that, with reference to Udmurtia, in former times the *tuno*, or wizard, used to appoint the fore-prayers; now the vacant places are filled by voting (Lintrop 1995, 271).

10 The Udmurt word *Kenesh* was used in the 1920s for the Russian 'Soviet', but it became taboo, and the institution was abolished. There is abundant literature on this issue, especially by Galina Nikitina (1993, 1998).

the *vös'as'* that the tradition of collective ceremonies was preserved. If the priest had no successors, the holding of sacrifices was interrupted' (Sadikov, Danilko 2005, 230-231).

For this reason we focus on this figure, who is so crucial for the survival of the tradition.

The task of the *vös'as'*

Today the sacrificial priest's task is varied. He is the master of ceremonies of a fairly complicated ritual that includes several simultaneous actions. He therefore has assistants. The tasks formerly undertaken by particular priests are now entrusted to these assistants. However, the priest must ensure that everybody acts according to the rules. We shall describe his tasks in the simplest ceremony, the village one.¹¹ We have chosen to describe Balzjuga,¹² because it is a tradition that has never been interrupted. Nazip *agay*, a sacrificial priest for sixty years, who has thoroughly trained his assistants and successor, has continued to conduct it.

Before the event the priest gathers offerings – bread, crops, sacrificial animals, and money. All these items are brought to the venue of the ceremony. Every ceremony starts with an opening ritual, the *siz'is'kon*, held on the morning of the main ceremony. Porridge is cooked without meat, and only the main priest prays to ask permission to make a sacrifice while holding some porridge in a bowl on a towel and some birch¹³ branches. Then all the people¹⁴ eat a spoonful of the ritual porridge and continue to eat from the general pot. Only then may the preparations for the sacrificial ritual itself start.

During the first prayer two assistants present the sacrificial animal, a lamb, and 'purify' it before the sacrifice with a birch branch, with which they cut the lamb's throat, while another assistant is ready with a spoon to gather the first blood and to throw it into the fire. He repeats this three times. At the same time the priest prays, holding the bread baked by the former

11 Our description is based on our observation and video recording of the Balzjuga *gurt vös'* in 2014.

12 Although we have attended two other village ceremonies, in 2014 (Uraz-Gilde) and 2015 (Aribash), these two ceremonies have either been revived in a more elementary shape (Uraz-Gilde) or merged with another form of ceremony, the *Keremet vös* (Aribash).

13 The branches used in the ceremonies differ according to the season: in spring-summer, they are birch; in winter, fir. Whenever branches are used, the season determines which tree they are taken from.

14 Usually, at this stage, only assistants – and anthropologists – are concerned.

owners of the sacrificial animal. It must have a coin baked inside it. During the prayer the other assistants kneel and bow when the priest says 'Amin'. Afterwards the sacrificed animal must be skinned and cut into portions.

The priest must then pour salt into the pot, the meat must be thrown into the pot onto the salt, and only then must water be added. At the same time, the crops given by the population must be prepared and the money counted. It takes a long time for the meat to be cooked. The priest then looks for the ritual parts and puts them on a plate,¹⁵ and recites a prayer over it, holding it as before on a towel and branches, while some assistants separate the meat from the bones, give the audience some bones to chew before throwing them on the fire, and put the meat back into the pots, into which other assistants have meanwhile placed the crops. Their task is physically hard: to stir the porridge in the pots with huge wooden poles until it is ready. Finally, the porridge is distributed to the assembled people, and the priest recites the last prayer in gratitude for the money offerings. The fireplaces are then 'closed' by sweeping them with the birch or fir branches, and all the utensils must be cleaned and packed away. The remains of the porridge are brought back to the village and distributed there to those who were unable to attend.

This is a complex ritual with many concomitant activities, and it is the sacrificial priest who is responsible for the whole.

The transmission of knowledge and the choice of priest

With the disruption of the rural community in the 1930s, it was clearly impossible to maintain this competence in the framework of the furiously anti-religious collective farm. The formerly elected *vös'as'* continued in secret, and were solely responsible for the future.

Nazip Sardiev, born in 1930,¹⁶ and today the region's most prestigious and famous *vös'as'*, told us how he became a priest: he was in his twenties, and he had long been an assistant. One of the *vös'as'* ceased to pray and another died. Then a remaining *vös'as'* told him: 'Now, son, you will pray.' 'The first time, my hands shook. They decided that it was too soon and postponed it. Next year I passed the test, ... although my hands still shook.'¹⁷

15 Some particular parts of the animal have been previously marked and will be used in the next prayer: the heart, the head, the liver, a right rib, and the right fore thigh.

16 He worked with horses in the local *kolkhoz* and never left his village, where he married and had five children (Sadikov, Danilko, 2005, 229). He still lives there.

17 Oral information, 2013.

He was thus co-opted by a functioning priest, but he had learnt the prayers beforehand only by listening to them for a long time and incorporating his elder's experience.

The problem of transmission is a real concern for Nazip *agay* (Sadikov, Danilko 2005, 232).¹⁸ He is today considered the specialist to consult in the entire Udmurt diaspora, and he is often invited to lead ceremonies (Sadikov, Danilko 2005: 232). In the last decade he has concentrated on teaching younger people to provide the communities with priests. As is to be expected, the results are mixed. With some, he believes, it has not worked. With others, it has worked weakly, and with others adequately.¹⁹

How did he choose the persons to be instructed?

Several preconditions were to be respected. The conditions about which Nazip *agay* is strict concern the person of the future *vös'as'*: as in the past, he must be a married man (Lintrop 2002: 44), as must his assistants. They must all be full members of the community – bachelors are not 'whole' and cannot be trusted with such responsibility: 'The scope of peasant society is to reproduce itself. You cannot be an active member if you have not done all you can to fulfil your aim,' explains Sadikov. The second personal criterion is that the person must have an impeccable social profile: priests are not supposed to drink; they should not smoke; and they should be good workers, husbands, and fathers.

Although people in the village marry early, it is much more difficult to find men who do not drink and who are motivated for the task. According to our observations the rule not to smoke is not taken seriously nowadays. Some well-respected and experienced *vös'as'* actually smoke during breaks in the ceremonies, though not inside the sacrificial space. The choice is still quite limited. Nazip *agay* therefore ignores some other criteria from earlier times in choosing a *vös'as'*.

According to ethnographic data only those older than forty can be elected as *vös'as'* (Sadikov 2008, 191). But Nazip *agay* does not require any age limit: some years ago, he chose a young man in his late twenties to be

18 *Agay* is the honorific title which is given to older men. Its meaning in Udmurt is "elder brother, uncle".

19 His assessment is actually based on what he considers to be the only right way to act. Still, in parallel with his tradition, there are other competing traditions: in the neighbouring area of Alga, ceremonies vary in detail, but are considered by Nazip *agay* as erroneous, while for the local priests, they correspond to their local traditions.

his successor in his own village; and in the winter prayers we noticed that along with experienced priests in their fifties there were some very young men, who had been assistants in the previous ceremonies. They were 'appointed' by the 'head of the ceremony' (*vös' kuz'o*), who in this case was not a sacrificial priest, but was still very active in organising the ceremony. The second important criterion on which Nazip *agay* has compromised is the need for the candidate to have priests among his forebears. If none is found with such forebears, he does not refuse men who lack a priestly 'pedigree'.

How are the candidates trained?

Training 'methods' today very much follow the traditional pedagogical methods of native societies. They do not rely on verbal expression or theoretical knowledge, but on experience and observation (Ingold 2000, Vallikivi 2011). Nazip himself was trained in the natural way, by staying close to sacrificial priests, seeing them performing, and imitating them. He teaches in the same way: the apprentices are close to him and observe what he does. They are then expected to imitate their master.

One of the central aspects of the priest's work is prayer. Every priest has one prayer, whose core is repeated in every situation, while the introduction and/or the conclusion depend on the aim of the prayer and its place in the ritual. According to tradition the priest had to 'steal' a prayer, which meant that he had to learn it naturally, by hearing it without attempting to memorise it (Sadikov 2008, 192). But very few living priests have learnt their prayers in this way.

Most have learnt them from older people, not orally, but from a written text, or by cutting it from newspapers or journals.²⁰ For example, the younger Balzyuga *vös'as'* gave us two prayers by copying them on our memory stick from his computer. He himself has not yet learnt his prayers by heart: during the ritual he reads them from a paper, as some others do in other villages. Thus, the penetration of written culture can be observed, and it is accepted by Nazip *agay*. Other priests take over a prayer and introduce changes, adapting them to modernity: this is an old practice: already in the Soviet period *vös'as'* would pray for tractor drivers and machine operators; today they pray that drug addiction will not spread in the village.

20 In the 1990s and 2000s prayers were published in the local press.

Perpetuation and transmission: some portraits of *vös'as'*

In the Tatyshlinskii *raion* there are several priests, who are quite different from one another. We have met many of them, but we shall concentrate only on some, whom we have recorded in action and in interview. Let us comment on their journeys.

Balzyuga

Balzyuga is a small village of 240 inhabitants, homogeneously Udmurt (99%), with two priests. One is Nazip *agay*,²¹ who is now 85 and retired. After sixty years as a priest he still has his wits and is willing to share his knowledge widely. He is an old man full of dignity, with intelligent, benevolent, and penetrating eyes. Today he is the primary tradition bearer, and he is unhappy to see his disciples neglecting some of the rules he has attempted to teach them. He often does not hesitate to formulate opinions concerning them we would not dare to repeat. He claims he has trained all the active priests in the region,²² and approves more or less of them. His last choice, in his own village, has been to train a young man as his successor, who has already led village ceremonies, both with and without his elder's supervision.

This new *vös'as'* is a modest, 35 year-old man, Fridman, who considers himself still very much a student. His grandfather was a *vös'as'*. He is of course married, and has a ten-year old son. He is a respected member of the rural community: he drinks very moderately and only occasionally, and he does not smoke; he has studied music in Udmurtia, so he is a trained singer and musician who teaches in the music school of the neighbouring village of Bigineevo. He reads his prayers throughout the ceremony. This is a huge change from the practice of his elder: for some in the village it is a mistake and it diminishes the gravity of the ceremony, but most are happy to see a young man take this role.

Vil'Gurt

In Udmurt *Vil'gurt* means 'new village' and it is the Udmurt name of a village called in Russian *Noviye Tatyshly*, 'New Tatyshly', as opposed to 'Upper Tatyshly', *Verkhniye Tatyshly* (the centre of the *raion*). It is a large

21 He has already been presented in an article (Danilko, Sadikov, 2005).

22 Nevertheless, this assertion is probably only partly justified: at least two of the priests we have interviewed did not mention Nazip *agay* as having played any part in their training: one learnt from his father, the other from his grandfather.

village of around six hundred inhabitants, and its importance is due to its being the headquarters of the cooperative, the biggest local employer. It is led by a charismatic leader, Rinat Galiamshin, who, while he was the *kolkhoz* chairman, created the Udmurt national and cultural centre, which is the equivalent of the local national movement. Later he handed over the post of leader of the enterprise to his son and concentrated on the revival of Udmurt identity in the region, taking advantage of his authority and connections. Thus, Vil'gurt has benefited from the strength of its leader, thanks to whom many necessary facilities have been built in the village, including a new prayer house on the local ceremonial ground.²³

In the local press and in interviews the workers of the cultural centre and local teachers all acknowledge only one *vös'as'* in the village, the retired agricultural worker, Salim *agay*, who makes and sells handmade artefacts. He has a prosperous household. Salim is the 'official' priest to whom foreigners are sent, and who performs in ceremonies as ordered by the cooperative.

He told us that nobody in his family had been a *vös'as'* and that he was chosen because he was a 'virtuous' member of the community.²⁴ Nazip confirmed that he had chosen and trained him, and is not entirely satisfied with the result. When asked about his succession, Salim answered without ambiguity that none of the youngsters was interested.

We were a little surprised to discover when we arrived at the *mör vös'* in June 2013 that Salim was not leading the ceremony, even though he was present. The leading priest, Rais *agay*, was a simple cooperative retired worker from the same village; he led the ceremony very confidently, without hesitation, keeping everything under control. He was the one who prayed the introductory *siz'is'kon* at the opening of the ceremony; in the two following prayers he was accompanied by three other priests (there were four priests, four lambs, and four loaves), among whom was Salim; and the closing prayer was performed by him and Salim. We discovered that the journalists present did not know him at all. He seems to avoid all publicity. However, he has authority, though not unshared, in religious matters. His personality fits the function; he has quick, benevolent, sparkling, and smiling dark blue eyes, and inspires confidence (which, to introduce a personal opinion, Salim does not do as convincingly). However, Salim is the one who acts as *vös'kuz'o*, and organises the material part of the ceremony.

²³ He also built a Moshe in the village, although there are only some Muslim individuals. He is quite able to exploit the political context.

²⁴ We do not yet have enough insights into the local society to appreciate the degree of tension that might be connected with being or not being virtuous.

Nazip also told us that Rais had learnt his job well, and when he watched the video of the ceremony, he approved of many of the decisions he had taken. Nazip complained, however, that Rais had not thanked him for teaching him. The text of Rais's prayer also differed considerably from Nazip's own prayer. We decided to interview Rais, who lives alone with his wife, a Tatar, in a household that seemed more modest than Salim's. We learnt that Rais's father was a *vös'as'* and that Rais himself had learnt his prayer properly by standing next to him, according to the old tradition of 'stealing' it. Asked about the transmission to younger generations, he answered that he was training his son.

During this interview we could understand part of the tension between him and Nazip: while the latter considered himself the teacher who had given Rais the opportunity to learn the job, Rais placed more importance on what he had learnt from his father, and was attached to his own prayer. The old master is more dogmatic than his pupils, who, in performing ceremonies in slightly different ways, also follow local tradition.

We also met other sacrificial priests in the field, although we did not spend as much time with them as with those previously mentioned. Today the nineteen Udmurt villages in the compact territory of the Tatyshlinskii *rayon* are traditionally divided into two village groups separated by a river, the Yuk. Both groups have their own rituals, which are almost parallel. The villages hold their ceremonies the same day, but the collective ceremonies are not held on the same day (the Vil'gurt group performs its *mör vös* a week before the Alga group's event) to allow people to visit the other's ceremony. The Alga group²⁵ also performs a slightly more complicated cycle in June and December, because they have not only maintained but developed the principle of the three-village ceremony, with, in both cycles, an eight-village ceremony held one week before the *mör vos*. The comparison between both *mör vös'* allows us to identify clear differences in ritual performance, but these will be dealt with in another study. What we wish to emphasise here is the persistence of strongly differing local traditions.²⁶ We shall only comment here on some differences in the role of the *vös'as'*.

The main *vös'as'* in the Alga group of villages is Evgenii, who works as the main bookkeeper of the *Rassvet kolkhoz*, based in Nizhnebaltachevo,

25 We call it this for the purpose of this article; this is not a recognised name.

26 The acknowledgement of these peculiarities has led us to a long term project, which is to record all nineteen village ceremonies, so that we do not involuntarily become the means of standardising the ceremonies according to those we have already recorded and left as DVDs with the sacrificial priests.

where he lives. What is still characteristic of the way the Alga ceremony is led is that Evgenii is very efficiently supported by a sort of ‘main’ assistant, the *vös’ kuz’o*, Farhullah, an older man who is not a priest, but seems to be a knowledgeable and practical guardian of tradition; he is a former village head and has clear authority. He materially organises all the ceremonies, and Evgenii has only to perform his own role, which is to pray and to give all the signals connected with the ceremonial activities. Farhullah prepares all the background: having the grass cut, having the logs ready to make the fire, and making sure the sacrificial animals are in the right place. He is also in charge of ‘promoting’ sacrificial priests: if one of the appointed *vös’as’* is absent, he decides who will pray in his stead. There is always a *vös kuzo*, but in many cases, it is the sacrificial priest, as in Balzjuga; thus, *vös’as’* and *vös kuzo* exercise two distinct functions, which are sometimes concentrated in the same person, but sometimes shared between two villagers.

Another difference is that in the Alga group the population brings an offering to the ceremony and gives it personally to the *vös’as’*, who receives it with a personal prayer. In Vilgurt the people simply put the offerings on a bench.

A political leader?

If we examine the Eastern Udmurt situation within the regional context and extend our observations to other Finno-Ugric communities in the region, we can observe that traditional religions are often used as a powerful ethnic marker (Luehrmann 2011, 42; Leete & Shabaev 2010, Alybina 2014, 90-91). This is particularly true of the Mari in Mari El. The Mari are the least Christianised of the Volga Finno-Ugric peoples: their religious identity proved most resistant to forced evangelisation, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union the ethnic Mari religion has been powerfully revived (in 2004 19.4 percent of the Mari considered themselves followers of the Mari religion in more or less syncretistic ways – Sharov 2007, 175). The public discourse around it is thoroughly connected with national identity (Alybina 2014, 91). This is not the case among the Udmurt. In Udmurtia there are only a few villages in which the ethnic religion has been preserved without explicit Christian interference (this does not exclude indirect influences from the general environment, while all over the country there are other manifestations of syncretism in the people’s religious practices), which are seen more as a curiosity than as a lighthouse for Udmurt ethnicity.

Although Mari religion has been institutionalised in Mari El,²⁷ with publications, new rituals, and a strong hierarchy including sacrificial priests (Alybina 2014, 92, 98-99), in Bashkortostan the political and identity dimension seems to be reduced to the more or less emotional feelings of particular *vös'as'*, and it never appears in public discourse. Even at the Congress of the Udmurt National Cultural Centre in November 2015,²⁸ no mention was made of religious practice during the entire day the Congress lasted, and few priests attended. Their absence shows the almost total disconnection of religious activities and the Udmurt national movement in this area.

The Bashkortostan ceremonies are not accompanied by any public or personal ideological discourse. While analysis clearly shows that they are probably now the only place where communication in Udmurt is guaranteed (because of the rise in mixed marriages, the minority language may no longer be dominant in the family), and thus might be a strong pillar of Udmurt identity, it does not seem to act as such, at least for now. When asked why these ceremonies are important, both sacrificial priests and the lay population simply emphasise the 'natural' link to what the ancestors did: things have to be done, because it is how they have always been done. When asked what happens if one does not attend the ceremonies, answers are hesitant. People look for examples of misfortunes affecting lazy adherents, and usually find them, but this is a reflection of their desire to please the interviewer. This question does not seem relevant: tradition is self-justified by its own existence, without the need to give any foundation through rational arguments.

This is a strength but also a weakness that may in the dangerously near future threaten the very existence of this religious practice. It is a strength because it is an intrinsic part of life that is taken for granted. Even where it is the result of revival or of a recent construction, the aim is to put things right and to re-establish order and balance where there was chaos. No additional meanings are added in the process. This does not mean that the revivers do not intend to enhance ethnic awareness. Usually the impulse for revival comes from the centre: its *primus motor* is the head of the *kolkhoz* – later of the Udmurt cultural centre – Rinat Galliamshin, who has initiated the building of prayer houses, the fencing of the sacred places (a new feature of the tradition), and even some village prayers. He usually asks a respected older man, somebody active in local politics, to fetch an older sacrificial priest or his sons and tell them to officiate again, even after breaks

27 Officially, Mari Traditional Religion.

28 Where the authors attended.

of years or decades. When people are told by influential personalities to organise ceremonies they are obedient, and traditions have thus been started everywhere. In some places local activists have taken over and devoted themselves to these activities (e.g. the Garaev couple in Aribash). In others the involvement has been more mechanical, but the response from the population is unanimously positive, and the new ceremonies have quickly taken root and are massively attended.

However, the lack of an ideological background supporting and accompanying this activity is also a weakness: if the situation becomes critical, there will be no supporting mental framework to maintain it. The language situation, while still very comforting in terms of minority language use and preservation, is already wavering: young Udmurt couples leaving their home area to look for work in other more industrial regions find themselves in the midst of the Russian population and start speaking Russian to their children, even though Udmurt is their mother tongue. They are not supported by an ethnic ideology that will motivate them to raise their children bilingually or multilingually. We therefore have the impression that the situation is aptly comparable to the position of Animism in the face of Christianity or Islam: it is weak, because of the lack of a strong dogma that can withstand pervasive ideologies.

Conclusion

This short overview is an attempt to decipher the present state of the spiritual world of the Bashkortostan Udmurt, who have been more successful than others in Russia in preserving their old values. Their keeping of their ritual traditions is not led, as our examples show, by a desire to reproduce precisely the ancient practices that have disappeared. Even the most conservative of activists, like Nazip, acknowledge that things change and seek in their own practice to ensure the vitality of the whole system and not to reproduce it mechanically. The differences among *vös'as'*, emphasised also by Lintrop (Lintrop 2002, 54), even on the small scale we chose, reveal real tensions and problems as in all human communities, as well as different ways to be *vös'as'* and to set ceremonial practices. We may therefore argue that the system is vibrant and that its diversity is its strength, and the presence of younger men among those chosen suggests there is a future for these forms of worship.

In conclusion, we have examined here a core problem in the practice of religion: the role of the key figure in its ritual, with his abilities and

knowledge, and how this role is being transmitted to younger generations. The *vös'as'* is an entirely ordinary member of the village community, who is respected and considered 'virtuous', and who takes upon himself the organisation of the community's ritual life. The transmission of this role is possible because being a *vös'as'* is something that may be learnt, and does not require, at least today, peculiar features or extraordinary knowledge. It is facilitated by the position of the elders in charge of transmission, who have chosen to encourage young people to act as religious leaders. It seems a reasonable adaptation in a wider social context where youth is increasingly challenging old age for prestige in society. However, unlike in other nearby regions, their role as leaders is merely religious, and currently has no political implications.

The elders responsible for Udmurt religion in Bashkortostan have chosen the most reasonable path to allow their religion to be preserved. Nevertheless, the challenges are not in practice itself, but in its context. The Udmurt religion is thoroughly connected to rural life, while rural life itself is threatened by modern ways, by a set of values that relegate the rural to the bottom of social prestige: today, even in the remote villages that are involved in these community rituals, the younger generation is computer and town-oriented and shares networks and entertainments with youngsters all over the world. Will they remain in the village, or will they return to marry and become members of the community, allowing it to thrive? Moreover, the traditional structure of village life is being shattered. In some parts of the country this collapse took place two decades ago. But here the collective farms were successful at the end of the Soviet era, and have been replaced by cooperatives that reproduce the previous model quite closely. While these cooperatives have been able for some years to adapt to the market economy and have achieved good productivity, this well-being is seriously threatened. What will happen if the cooperative fails? It will be important to follow the viability of rural life if the chances of this unique religious practice's survival are to be assessed.

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Appendix:

Photo 1: Nazip Sardiev (Photo Eva Toulouze, June 2013)



Photo 2: Fridman Habibjanov (Photo Eva Toulouze, June 2013)



Photo 3: Salim *agay* (Photo Eva Toulouze at the Vil'gurt mör vös', June 2013)



Photo 4: Rais *agay* (Photo Eva Toulouze, June 2013)



Photo 5: Evgenii (Photo Eva Toulouze, June 2013)

The *Slava* Celebration: A Private and a Public Matter

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Abstract

A family celebration named the *slava* or *krsna slava* (celebration/glorification or christened celebration) is a unique custom within the tradition of the Serbian Orthodox Church when each family annually celebrates its patron saint. Besides Christmas and Easter, *slava* is the most important celebration in the life of every family. Although its roots reach as far back as medieval times, the *slava* and its role in family tradition were neglected and marginalised during the communist period of Serbian history. With the revitalisation of religion, and especially the reaffirmation of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the end of the last century, the *slava* has regained its significance and recognition, and even transcended the private family sphere. Today it is often used as an indicator of one's ethnicity and status with little real connection to its authentic religious meaning and purpose. Additionally, what was originally a family tradition has become a festival for many public institutions, companies, and professional associations. This paper aims to present the *slava's* distinctive structure and features, as well as to explore ways in which this transformation is related to the revitalisation of religion and the growing nationalism in transitional Serbian society.

Keywords: *slava*, the Serbian Orthodox Church, revitalisation of religion, nationalism.

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) celebrates all Christian holidays according to the Julian calendar.¹ However, what distinguishes it from all other Christian communities, even those belonging to the Orthodox tradition, is the *slava* or *krsna slava* celebration. Besides Christmas and Easter the *slava* is one of the most important celebrations in the life of every family. Its unique status was recognised internationally, in November 2014, when the *slava* celebration was included in UNESCO's Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage, thus becoming the first Serbian intangible cultural asset to be registered.²

1 I would like to thank Professor Mikko Lagerspetz for all the insightful and knowledgeable comments regarding different drafts of this article.

2 See <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/RL/01010>>, accessed May 20, 2015.

In what follows I will first discuss the relationship between the SOC and the Serbian state, with a focus on recent history. I will then present some of the key features of the *slava* family celebration by analysing its structure and some of its distinctive elements. Finally, I will attempt to describe and analyse the *slava*'s transformation in the context of the revitalisation of religion and the growing nationalism in Serbia during the transition crisis of the last decade of the 20th century and beyond. My discussion is based on the debate in media and literature, media reports of events, and my own personal experience and involvement in the last three decades.

State, Church, and nation

The Serbian Orthodox Church (Српска православна црква) became an autocephalous church in 1219, although the modern SOC was established later, in 1920. It claims to be the second oldest Slavic Orthodox Church in the world. During the 20th century the SOC passed through several different stages in its relations with the state (Vukomanović 2001, 101–4). In the Kingdom of Serbia (1882–1918) it had the privileged position of the official state religion (1903). All state and national holidays were accompanied by church rituals, while the church's clergy had state salaries. Likewise, confessional religious education was a mandatory subject in all public schools. With the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 the Serbian Patriarch became a member of the Royal Council and several priests became members of the National Assembly.

During the Second World War the SOC lost a quarter of its clergy, and many churches and monasteries were destroyed. With the establishment of the new communist government and the subsequent agrarian reform in the immediate post-war years 'the Church was deprived of its material basis, with no regular source of income, impoverished and, therefore, was dependent on state aid' (Radić 1994, 352).³ Although the church has formally separated from the state, with no open conflict between them, the dominant public discourse treated religion as an undesirable phenomenon – a 'bourgeois remnant'. The role of the SOC was marginalised and its presence reduced strictly to the private sphere. This coincided with the massive secularisation of the population of the dominantly Orthodox areas of Yugoslavia. According to the 1953 census the confessional (self-)identification of citizens was 85.2 per cent, while 12.4 per cent were atheists. Three decades later

³ It has been estimated that during the agrarian reform between 1945 and 1948 the state confiscated nearly 85 per cent of all land and properties owned by the SOC.

almost half the population declared themselves atheist, whereas less than a quarter declared as religious (23.8 per cent), and about as many (22.8 per cent) as undefined (Djordjević 1984). The intense secularisation in homogeneously Orthodox regions had largely been conditioned by the church's de-monopolisation, as well as its continued centuries-old dependence on the state which had prevented it from creating an independent political identity (e. g. Paić 1991; Benc 1991; Radić 1995; Blagojević 1995; Vukomanović 2001). In retrospect its dependence on and constant symbiosis with the state was one of the SOC's greatest weaknesses, but it has again resulted in a new modification of its status in the public sphere.

The collapse of socialism in Central and Eastern European societies and 'the overall instability [...] of the 1990s and the late 1980s seems to have produced an experience of "value vacuum"' (Lagerspetz 2004, 9) and ideological void. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the period of uncertainty intensified by the civil wars in the ex-Yugoslav states (1991–1995), the question of religion in the public sphere resurfaced. Following decades of isolation the church again gained media visibility, and new churches and other religious buildings were constructed. Religious studies became popular again, as did both male and female monastic orders. A new wave of religious literature and journals began to be published (see, e. g., Radisavljević-Ćiparizović 2006: 37–8). The growing visibility of the church in public life was accompanied by a rapid and massive return of people to religion. Two extensive surveys on religiosity in Serbia (Blagojević 1995; Radisavljević-Ćiparizović 1999) both indicate a notable increase in religiosity at the beginning of the 90s (with 71 per cent of respondents confessionally self-identifying), followed by a slight decrease and stabilisation at the end of the decade (with 60 per cent of respondents reporting themselves as belonging to a confession).

As Brubaker (1996, 2011) argues, all Yugoslav successor states demonstrated nationalising dynamics after the great reconfiguration which was a product of the 'unfinished and ongoing nature of nationalist projects and nationalization processes. [...] The reorganization of political space had produced (nominally) independent states; it had not produced 'genuine' nation-states [...]. From a nationalist point of view, the states were organizational shells that had to be filled with national content, bringing population, territory, culture and polity into the close congruence that defines a fully realized nation-state' (2011, 1786). In Serbia the period of 'blocked transformation' (Lazić 2005) from 1991 until 2000 was politically dominated by the goal of resolving the 'Serbian question', i. e. of creating a Serbian state

comprising all ex-Yugoslav regions with Serbian settlements. Orthodoxy was recognised as a significant element of Serbian national identity (see, e. g., Perica 2002). The SOC became actively engaged in re-nationalisation and homogenisation by following a simple formula equating nation and religion, i. e. ethnic and confessional affiliation. This development was often publicly presented as a matter of the national culture's survival: as the church is deeply rooted in the national ethos, the latter cannot survive without the former (Ramet 1988). As the then Serbian Patriarch Pavle stated, 'To be a Serb means to be Orthodox by default. ...[A] Serb cannot be an atheist. ... [A] Serb is never not baptized' (Srpski Patrijarh Pavle 2002).

Despite the newly created more positive relationship, the status of the SOC *vis-à-vis* the state remained largely undefined because of President Slobodan Milosević's refusal to clearly determine his stance on the matter. In the public discourse religion was treated as a significant element of ethnicity, but the church still lacked any official position. It was, indeed, at the beginning of a new millennium, and with the establishment of the first democratic government in October 2000, that a striking change took place.

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (2006) the Republic of Serbia is a secular state, churches and religious communities are separate from the state, and there is no state or compulsory religion.⁴ Nevertheless, the transition in Serbia has been characterised by a newly established relationship between the young democratic state and the SOC, which can be said to involve the greater and more frequent participation of the church in the state and in political affairs, but can also be interpreted as the church's effort to 'provide a new ideological and value framework for the state institutions such as the school and the army' (Vukomanović 2008, 105). This particularly refers to confessional religious education, (re-) established in all Serbian public schools in 2001, and also to the re-joining of the Orthodox Theological Faculty to the state-owned Belgrade University in 2010. Moreover, the SOC has a strong claim on property seized as part of agrarian reform and nationalisation at the end of the Second World War. Since 2001 Orthodox priests have been a part of the national army's (at that time the Federal Army of Yugoslavia) mandatory staff. At the same time one of the bishops has been made responsible for cooperation with the Army (Vukomanović 2008, 131). This new connection can be interpreted as part of a more general attempt by the SOC to restore its pre-WWII position of wealth and political privilege.

4 Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (2006), Section One, Secularity of the State, Article 11 (*Ustav Republike Srbije, Prvi deo, Svetovnost države, Član 11*).

The *slava* celebration

The name itself denotes celebration (*slava*) or christened celebration (*krsna slava*), and refers to the family custom of annually celebrating a patron saint on a particular feast day.⁵ Other names used for this celebration are christened name (*krsno ime*), saint (*svetac*), holiday (*praznik*), holy (*sveti*), service (*služba*), and wisdom to the holy (*pamet svetom*).

Although it greatly varies, the ritual of the *slava* always includes a number of basic elements. According to the Encyclopaedia of Orthodoxy (*Enciklopedija pravoslavlja* 2002, 1056) it is based first on a prayer for the consecrated *slava*'s boiled wheat (*slavsko žito – koljivo*). The wheat represents a bloodless sacrifice prepared for both the celebration of god and the celebration of a saint, as well as for the souls of deceased family members and the health and prosperity of the living. Necessary elements of the ritual are also the *slava* cake/bread (as a sacrifice and praise to God), the *slava* candle (as a sacrifice from the pure and fragrant soul of the celebrating family), sacred water, red wine (to be poured over the cake), incense (*tamjan*) (as the pleasure of celebration), and oil (as a sacrifice to God). Ham as a blood sacrifice is part of the ritual only if the *slava* is not celebrated during the fasting season.

The celebration of the *slava* should start at church, when the *slava* cake and wheat for consecration (Sinani 2012, 176) are offered. An Orthodox priest, together with the family, takes part in the consecration ceremony in which the *slava* cake is cut in the shape of the cross as a symbol of Christ's suffering, and red wine is poured over it, signifying that the family is now released of all its sins. This traditional part of the custom is completed by the cutting of the *slava* cake into four parts as it is lifted up. It can be conducted in the church or at the family home 'by the host together with the oldest or the most important guest (*dolibaša*), the host's heir, and other family members' (UNESCO Representative List 2014, 3). The celebration then continues at the family home, where the *slava* feast starts with a toast by the host in honour of God and the patron saint. According to tradition a multitude of dishes on the table of the feast secures the progress and fruitfulness of the coming year. The dishes are eaten with friends and acquaintances – collectively, according to a determined schedule, using imitative magic to capture happiness and prosperity (Vlahović 1968, 127).

The custom seeks to make a Serbian Orthodox family part of the church by filling it with the church's and God's blessing (Radisavljević-Ćiparizović

5 According to the Christian liturgical year every day of the year is dedicated to one or more saints and is called a feast day.

2006, 78). In church tradition the *slava* is generally understood as a holy day of the 'small church', since a Christian family is regarded as a household, or small church.⁶ As a joint celebration of the family as a collective the *slava* is the only holiday that 'belongs to a certain, specific family' (Bandić 1986, 18). In this respect the former Serbian Patriarch Pavle emphasised:

Other Christian Orthodox people celebrate their name days or birthdays, but we, on the other hand, celebrate our patron saint's day. Actually, the patron saint's day is both a name day and birthday, not of an individual, but of the entire family, the whole tribe. It is a spiritual birthday, when our ancestors became Christians, entered the Church of God and were thus spiritually born. And it is also a name day, because as of that time up until now they have been called Christians (*Srpski Patrijarh Pavle* 2009).

According to Serbian Orthodox tradition there are seventy-eight patron saints or Christian names celebrated as *slava* (Vojnović 1963). The most popular is St Nicholas (St Nicholas's Day – *Nikoljdan*) on 19th December, which, it is estimated, about half the Serbian Orthodox population celebrates. A traditional Serbian saying states that everyone celebrates on St Nicholas's Day, because half the population is celebrating, while the other half is invited to visit and participate in the celebration.⁷

The earliest reference to the *slava* is in 1018, when the Greek chronicler Skilica described an occurrence at the home of Duke Ivac, whose enemy misused the *slava* custom of receiving even uninvited guests in order to come and hurt him (Prokić, cited by Vlahović 1968, 120). Although Skilica makes no direct reference to the *slava*, the feast he describes is similar. The *slava* was later thoroughly described by a Serbian philologist and linguist who was the major reformer of the Serbian language, Vuk Karadžić (Vlahović 1968, 120), in one of his celebrated works at the beginning of the 19th century.⁸

Because the *slava* is specific to and widespread among Serbs there are numerous interpretations of its origins and development. Despite a lack of sources the most frequent reconstructions of the roots of the *slava* are

6 In support of this argument the SOC usually refers to Paul's words, 'Greet Priscilla and Aquila [...] and the church that meets in their house' (Rom.16:3–5), as well as his greeting to 'Philemon, our beloved friend and fellow worker [...] and to the church in your house' (Philemon 2).

7 Also among the most common are St George, with two celebrations in the year (*Djurdjevdan* on 8th May and *Djurdjic* on 16th November), and St Archangel Michael (*Arandjelovdan*) on 21st November.

8 The work in question is the first Serbian dictionary (*Srpski riječnik*) of 1818, written in the newly reformed language.

based on two key arguments, both of which rely for the most part on interpretations of the ceremonial props used in the celebration. Several authors refer to pre-Christian times, interpreting the tradition as a compromise between Christianity and the old religion, which included a transfer of the cult of pagan gods and heroes to the characters of saints (e. g. Vasić 1901/1985; Skarić 1912; Čajkanović 1921, 1940; Truhelka 1985). In the light of these arguments the *slava* was regarded as a type of cult of collectivity, while 'its several days' ritual, to a great extent, reflects a specific assimilation or syncretism between the old pagan and Christian motifs, acts, and symbols' (Vukomanović 2001, 71). However, another group of academics emphasises the church's role in the creation and development of this custom. They stress the importance of reforms introduced by the first Archbishop of the SOC, Sava the First (*Rastko Nemanjić*, later also known as St Sava) in the 12th century (e. g. Grujić 1985; Bogdanović 1985; Kalezić 2000). The claims of the historian Dimitrije Bogdanovic (Bogdanović 1985) reflect such arguments:

The creator of the *slava* is exactly the church of St Sava. The *slava* is the cult of St Sava. Thus, only Serbs, as the ethnic group that has been exposed to the continuous and determining influence of the church of St Sava, are the ones who celebrate the *slava* today. The *slava* thus represents one type of missionary practice of the church of St Sava, one form of its fight against paganism, for a more complete evangelisation of medieval Serbia (Bogdanović 1985, 510f.).

Notably, the SOC's own interpretation follows the same view, i. e. it opposes the argument that the origin of the *slava* lies in the Christianisation of pagan cults. The following statement of one of the representatives of the SOC stands as a typical example of such a view:

We reject this interpretation as incorrect and unfounded [...]. And it (the *slava*) is related to the most significant day in the life of our ancestors. On that day, through christening, they became members of the Church of Christ and were spiritually born. As a matter of fact, that day of christening is their spiritual birthday. In honour of their christening they started celebrating the *slava* of christening, or the feast day or the saint of that day. Mother Church blessed it and proclaimed the *krsna slava* as a Christian institution (archpriest Života Mihajlović 2000).

The *slava* can be inherited and chosen according to many different criteria, the most common being transference from a father to a son (Sinani 2012, 175). The oldest son in a family inherits it from his father and passes it, in turn, to his oldest son. If the *slava* is passed during the lifetime of the host, this is usually accompanied by a symbolic act in which the father gives the son a piece of cake. A woman can be a *slava* host if she becomes a widow, and hence inherits her late husband's family celebration. There are rare cases when a *slava* is inherited through the purchase of land or houses, and thus received through property. These cases, however, are largely confined to rural areas and the past. Besides, 'a *slava* can be brought to a new family by marriage, or it can be accepted through a vow or likewise – there are many ways to take over or chose a *slava*' (Sinani 2012, 175).

If a family has inherited no *slava* but is willing to celebrate one, the protopresbyter Stavrofor Slobodan Lalic (Lalić 2016) explains:

A newly christened male person can get a *slava* in agreement with the priest who christened him. There is no rule which should be strictly followed in this case [...]. Of course, it is welcomed that the person himself suggests a saint to be celebrated. Usually, that choice is determined by the characteristics of the saint's life and his or her interpretation of Christianity (Lalić 2016).

Usually, a family celebrates one patron saint, and some can trace their *slava* tradition through several generations. Once chosen, a *slava* should not be changed. Such a change happens only because of major family or personal distress. Even in such cases the old *slava* is never forgotten or neglected, but remains as a more moderately celebrated side-celebration called the *pre-slava* (*preslava*) or *little slava* (*mala slava*).

Slavas today

The increased visibility of the SOC in the public sphere, as well as its politicisation and political instrumentalisation, has had a profound effect on even private and personal religious acts of devotion such as family celebrations. Data on celebration of religious holidays provided by the research of Djordjević (1984), Blagojević (1995), and Radisavljević-Ćiparizović (1999) show that the indicator of traditional connectivity to church and religion

closely follows the dynamics of general religiosity in Serbian society.⁹ Hence, the number of people celebrating religious holidays in 1984 was 56.7 per cent, while in 1993 it increased to almost 94 per cent. At the end of the century a stable 87 per cent of the population was registered as being religious. However, the percentage of people celebrating religious holidays is always higher than the percentage of those who report themselves as religious, implying that many of those who declare as atheists or nonbelievers do in fact actively participate in religious celebrations. These celebrations are therefore always about something more than just religion.

The family slava

As shown above, the *slava* is the day when a family is symbolically placed under the protection of a saint to whom it turns to as its prayer representative before God, and to whom it annually pays its respect. From that moment, according to Serbian Orthodox tradition, the church has entered the family home and brought a new spiritual meaning to it. Hence, the religious function of the *slava* seems both unique and transparent. The *slava* is not just one of the family holidays, but the only holiday devoted to a particular family (Bandić 1997, 246). As such it represents a private experience of the highest rank that celebrates not only a patron saint, but the unity of the family, as well as its will and strength to persist in time and faith. By celebrating their *slava* a family is announcing its identity in a distinctive way. It is a uniquely and specially understood feature. This 'denoting potential of the *slava*' (Bandić 1997) has been used for different purposes by many.

The latest flowering of religion has led to a new recognition of the place of the *slava*, shown in a rapid increase in the number of families celebrating it. For some the *slava* was a family experience deliberately forgotten for almost fifty years that now needed to be revived. For others the *slava* was the first step into a newly discovered territory of spiritual identity. For both its importance lies in the opportunity to show one's religious affiliation and ethnic identity. The *slava* represents one of the most important elements in the national symbolism of Serbs, so it almost goes without saying that the family which celebrates it is Serbian (Sinani 2012, 190).

The *slava* is not celebrated alone, but with the front door open to all family friends, as it is also an opportunity for people to meet and socialise.

⁹ According to these researches the indicator of traditional connectivity to the church and religion refers to practice and participation in traditional religious rituals such as the christening of a child, church funerals, and the celebration of religious holidays.

Guests contribute to the collective spirit, and to the family as a unique collective. Many host families consider the *slava* a central annual event, and try to make it more visible by including more guests in it. The increased number of invitees is one of the reasons the celebration has increasingly moved out of host families' homes and become a public event celebrated in restaurants or wedding or lunch halls. Sometimes the celebration lasts for three or more days. This extended celebration sends a clear message about the host family's commitment to this unique Serbian Orthodox custom, and thereby to its own identity. At the same time it makes a strong statement about the family's social status and power, since organising such sometimes quite impressive gatherings requires some resources. Although it is legally possible to receive a day's paid leave for the celebration, many are forced to take some extra days because of all the challenges its organisation entails. The most demanding part is the feast. It usually includes four to five courses, each of several dishes. Large quantities of alcohol and soft drinks are made available. According to some media estimates the average cost of a *slava* table in 2013 was almost twice the average Serbian monthly income (Dragović 2.11.2013).¹⁰ As one *slava* host stated in the media: 'No matter how much the guests consume, the host needs to have everything necessary ready' (Petrović 8.12.2013). Guests are also involved in this competition, as they are expected to bring presents for the host. Furthermore, people are sometimes invited to several different celebrations on the same day. A traditional belief suggests that one should not refuse an invitation to a *slava* as attending its celebration is an act of respect for the host family. Regardless of this, one *slava* host is reported as saying: 'We must always have (the means) for a *slava*, and we will find the ways to cover the minus afterwards' (Avalić 17.12.2014).

Media outlets are keen to show Serbian public figures celebrating their *slava* with many celebrity guests, a rich feast, and protracted festivities.¹¹ Such reports and pictures suggest that the sublime and transcendent purpose of this private family event has been completely neglected and even forgotten. Besides, some basic elements of *slava* ritual are often banalised or avoided. Some families do not prepare the *slava* wheat at all, nor do they make the *slava* bread in the family but pre-order it. Nor do they observe the consecration of the ritual elements of the *slava*, or observe fasting and non-

¹⁰ In some cases entertaining a large number of guests brings the extra expense of providing live music and catering staff.

¹¹ See e. g.: <<http://www.svet.rs/nas-svet/estrada/domacinski-brena-i-boba-proslavili-krsnu-slavu-svetog-arandela>> accessed May 30, 2015.

fasting days in accordance with the traditional calendar. Some are so busy with all the organising that they do not find time to attend the liturgy on the *slava* day. Although 'the *slava* is not about eating and drinking, but about bread, wheat and candle' (Bilinac 2012), many know little of the saint they celebrate. Inevitably, a market for *slava* props has emerged, so *slava* candles are now available in different sizes and colours, and there are competitions for the most beautiful *slava* bread.¹²

The slava as a school celebration

The *slava* celebration opened the way into the public sphere for the SOC by making it possible for its representatives to gain official access to the educational system through public schools. Shortly after the old system collapsed at the beginning of the nineties, the *slava* celebration dedicated to the first Serbian Archbishop and prominent medieval intellectual St Sava was established in all public schools as a mandatory school holiday. This revived a practice that was customary from 1840, when it was legally declared a general school celebration, until 1945, when the authorities abolished it.

According to church tradition St Sava was proclaimed the protector of all schools. The *slava* of St Sava, or St Sava's Day (*Savindan*), has been celebrated on the day of his death, 27th January, every year in all public schools. There are no classes on this day, but the attendance of all students and teachers at the celebration is compulsory. Its central part is a ceremony based on the ritual of breaking the *slava* cake and toasting. It is followed by a mixed programme of music and drama jointly created by teachers and students, along with a feast for all the participants and guests. The celebration often includes a larger public celebration in the evening called the St Sava Academy (*Svetosavska akademija*), attended by state and church officials. Its programme includes a variety of speeches, poetry, and music related to the life and work of St Sava.¹³

The religious message is explicit in the numerous pictures, videos, and descriptions of the event available online.¹⁴ *Slava* related props, icons, and priests are prominently visible at the celebration. At many schools students

12 See e. g.: <http://www.smederevo.org.rs/Print-Smederevo_408_cir> accessed 9th June 2015. Or: <http://www.smederevo.org.rs/OpstinaSmederevo-Na-Dan-Sv.-Atanasija-izlozen-141-slavski-kolac_626_cir>, accessed 9th June 2015.

13 The Belgrade St Sava Academy is broadcast live on the Serbian state-owned television channel.

14 Some of the websites used as examples in this analysis are listed in the references section at the end of the paper.

and teachers attend the liturgy.¹⁵ A similar celebration is organised in some pre-schools and kindergartens with the aim of this becoming a regular annual event.

Despite the positive public discourse about the school *slava* as a significant Serbian educational tradition, its practice has faced criticism, mostly from scholars and intellectuals. A study of primary school students in the Serbian capital (Malešević 2007) reported on the importance of this day in the life of each school as a transparent indicator of modern schools' identity, and hence of the basic and most important values of Serbian society. This is aptly shown by a description of the interior of a typical primary school in the capital¹⁶:

In the main hall, on all the boards, display cases, and walls, there are pictures with only religious contents. Students' creative achievements are represented by two exhibitions of their most beautiful works: the first theme is the decorating of Easter eggs, and the second is the portrait of St Sava. In one display case the children's literary works for a competition dedicated to St Sava, 'the Serbian teacher and educator', are displayed. In the next display case there are ten photographs from the last school *slava*, capturing the most significant moments: the school director and the priest breaking the *slava* cake, parents and teachers standing with candles in their hands while the priest reads the prayer, children in national costumes performing appropriate programmes (...). On the first floor, on the main wall across from the teachers' room, there is a big painting of St Sava surrounded by children, called St Sava Gives his Blessing to Little Serbs (Malešević 2007, 136f.).

School identity built on the *slava* as a central event has an explicitly religious dimension, although other interpretations of the celebration would be possible given that St Sava is a significant historical figure because of his educational, teaching, and diplomatic role. The religious dimension's dominance has raised objections from the mainly Muslim Bosniaks of Western Serbia, among others. They have interpreted the celebration of the school *slava* as 'an act of violation of religious and human rights [...]. The state should not,

15 In some schools in Belgrade special honour was given to Prince Aleksandar II Karadjordjević, the heir of the pre-war Serbian dynasty, who returned to Serbia after decades of exile after the fall of communism.

16 As part of this study the author visited several primary schools, and was greatly surprised by what she found. The cases were more or less similar, and I present here the one her paper singles out.

by any regulations and laws, declare that day as a school *slava*, especially not [as obligatory] for all teaching staff and students [...]’ (Isabegović 2011). This brings into question the (in)ability of schoolchildren to identify with the day, and, accordingly, properly interpret the entire event. It also results in the imposed separation of schoolchildren based on confessional and national belonging. In a broader context the school *slava* also raises concerns about ‘a quiet attempt to assimilate and christen Bosniaks’ (Isabegović 2011).

The SOC’s presence in the public sphere has now expanded to other public institutions which have adopted the tradition of celebrating a patron saint as their protector. Public *slava* celebrations of state-owned institutions, private companies, towns, and even political parties have become common.

Institutional slavas

According to Serbian Orthodox tradition it is a common practice that a church, monastery, or temple is under the patronage of one saint or more, so each has its own *slava*. Almost every town has one or several sites for religious ceremonies. The socialist era brought about new social circumstances and changed existing practice. However, since the 1990s it has become increasingly common to present the patron saint of the local church as the patron of the town itself. Thus, the day of the church *slava* becomes the day of the town *slava*, i. e. the day of that town, an important annual event.¹⁷ This pre-war practice has been revived in almost every Serbian municipality.¹⁸

The celebration of town and municipal *slavas* usually starts with the liturgy in the central town church, which is followed by the official procession (*litija*) through the streets of the town centre. The ritual of the breaking of the bread is observed in the town hall, on the central town square, or in the grounds of the church. It is common to conclude the celebration with a feast in the town hall or in the grounds of the church. The larger and richer municipalities celebrate their *slava* for three to ten days, and the celebration is accompanied by various cultural and sports events paying homage to Serbian national traditions. The organisers, i. e. the hosts, of a town *slava* are both the town officials and the representatives of the SOC. They are supported by the representatives of the Serbian Army, police, and leaders of major cultural institutions. In many cases the town *slava* also has a godfather,

¹⁷ A list of websites with examples of town *slavas* is given in the references at the end of this paper.

¹⁸ In towns consisting of several municipalities there are several individual *slavas* for each, besides the central town *slava*.

who is usually the head of one of the most important public institutions.¹⁹

One of the striking examples of this practice is the Belgrade *slava*. According to the city's official website the Ascension of the Lord (*Spasovdan*) became its *slava* as early as 1403, when Belgrade was declared the nation's capital.²⁰ The celebration was revived in 1992 in a procession led by the then Serbian Patriarch Pavle, so the media often refer to this town *slava* as 'the legacy of Patriarch Pavle' (Blic 21.5.2015). The culmination of the celebration is a procession through the centre of the city, which symbolically completes a circle in the grounds of the Church of the Ascension, built as the town church in 1863. The procession is led by the Serbian Patriarch, numerous SOC and local government officials, Prince Aleksandar Karadjordjevic, and the representatives of the Serbian Army and police, followed by the citizens, and lasts for several hours. At the suggestion of the current Patriarch Irinej the entire procession is preceded by the cavalry and students of the Military Academy. Representatives of the police and army carry large icons, while male Orthodox seminarians, dressed in church robes, carry smaller icons and the banner and the flag of the City of Belgrade. The cross of Jerusalem has a prominent place at the front of the procession. Groups of young people also join the procession dressed in Serbian national costume. The procession stops at several locations for a prayer (*moleban*) to be read. The Mayor of Belgrade lights the ceremonial candle and carries the icon of the Ascension of the Lord into the building of the Municipal Assembly, where the ceremony of the breaking of the bread follows. The entire procession is broadcast and comprehensively reported by several media channels.

The town spokesman describes the *slava* celebration as a significant tradition and as a day for all the citizens. However, apart from the sporadic cultural events of the accompanying programme, the celebration's explicitly religious dimension conveys a uniform message that leaves little room for any other interpretation.²¹ The overall conception and details of the celebration are also a declaration of continuity with the pre-war period. On the occasion of one of Southern Serbia's largest town's *slava*, its mayor stated 'that in the previous period, the celebration of the town *slava* was occasion-

19 For example, the godfather of the town *slava* of the second largest city in Serbia, Novi Sad, is the president of the oldest Serbian literary, cultural, and scientific society, *Matica srpska*, which is based in the city.

20 < <http://www.beograd.rs/cms/view.php?id=1218> >, accessed 25th May 2015.

21 The town *slavas* are also used as an opportunity for certain state institutions to begin working or to be re-opened after renovations and consecrated and blessed by local clergy. In writing this paper I have found examples of the opening and blessing of healthcare institutions, local municipal government offices, theatres, roads to a church located outside the town, etc.

ally interrupted, and the connection between the people and the church is especially expressed today' (Južna Srbija info 9.6.2014). His brief statement encapsulates the idea and goal of the entire event.

Media outlets offer regular reports of the *slava* celebrations of government institutions, political parties, healthcare centres, professional associations, etc.²² In January 2015 the public municipal water supply company *Vodovod* in Novi Sad, the administrative centre of a multi-ethnic province with six official languages, celebrated its *slava* by consecrating the city's drinking water. The act of consecration aimed to 'symbolically transfer the blessing to the water distributed to all the citizens of Novi Sad via the water supply system' (B92 20.1.2015). This provoked a strong response from numerous citizens of other confessions, as well as from non-governmental organisations. The provincial Ombudsman condemned what had happened, stating that it was a violation of the constitution, as Serbia was a secular country in which church and state were separate.

The role of *Vodovod* is to supply all the citizens, regardless of their nationality, language, religion, or any other personal characteristic, with high-quality drinking water. It is inappropriate for the public institutions, as executors of public authority, to celebrate religious holidays and hence question basic constitutional principles. The role of the state is to enable everyone to follow and practise a religion of their own choice, rather than through a public institution exclude particular religions and traditions and thus call into question the constitutionally guaranteed equality of the citizens (B92 20.1.2015).

Similar criticism was expressed by several academics and intellectuals. The act was widely interpreted as a transparent imposition of religion on those who were neither believers nor members of the SOC, which 'in any case ... could not be justified by the canons of the SOC at all [...]. It all looks like show business and the commercialisation of religious customs' (Nikola Knežević, cited in B92 20.1.2015). It was also emphasised that:

These customs introduce additional divides into our heterogeneous society [...]. There are 30 religious communities in Novi Sad [...], and around 180 in

22 For example, special coverage is given to the *slava* of the Serbian police and the Ministry of Internal Affairs which, along with the breaking of the *slava* bread in the Minister's office, also includes a parade of police officials and combat vehicles of the members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and tactical exercises of the police.

Serbia. Does this mean that each of these can now enter public institutions [...] and practise its own rituals? Or do we simply talk about one church being favoured over the others and hence acting from a position of power? (Miroslav Keveždi, cited in B92 20.1.2015)

Recently, many state universities have joined the list of public institutions celebrating a *slava*. The celebrations follow the same course, with the inevitable ritual of the breaking of the bread and a speech in honour of the saint. At the first celebration of the *slava* of the Faculty of Medicine at one of the biggest universities in Serbia, attended by the mayor, the dean, professors, students, and numerous guests, a church official said:

From the beginning of time both science and medicine (...) have discovered and provided medications, but the medicine for immortality has not been given by anyone but Christ (...). That winner and excellent doctor was chosen by St Sava, (...) who was the founder of medicine in our country, since our monasteries were the first healing places and hospitals. By celebrating St Sava we are going in the direction of receiving the eternal medicine, the medicine of immortality and the kingdom of heaven (Bishop Jovan of Nis, interview, 2014).

This statement expresses the SOC's tendency to present its connection with the Serbian state and nation as organic and inseparable. Simply to choose Christ's path (and, implicitly, Orthodoxy) brings 'medicine and healing'. The reference to St Sava also serves as a way of emphasising the specificity of Serbian Orthodoxy and its significance for Serbian society. The SOC and its founder are here defined as founders of some of the society's most prominent institutions.

Conclusions

The *slava* is a complex celebration. Besides having a distinctively religious character, its social aspect is mostly expressed through the feast as a profane element, and its function in regulating interpersonal and intergroup social relations is based on the reciprocity of hospitality (Bandić 1997; Sinani 2012). It also promotes the integrity of the family, as well as its integration within the wider community. Simultaneously, the *slava* has increasingly been understood as a sort of national ethnic Serbian symbol. From a wider perspective, however, this transformation raises a number of questions.

The post-socialist transition brought about, among other things, a closer relationship between the post-socialist state and the SOC. In terms of the greater awareness of religion and its renewed presence in the public sphere one can argue that Serbian society may be regarded as post-secular, as defined by Habermas (2008). However, the case of the *slava* celebration and its new public role testifies to the favouritism shown by the state to the SOC. Instead of exercising a neutral and secular role that enables tolerance between different views and religious communities (Habermas 2007), the government seems to be developing a symbiotic relationship with the church, as is shown by the latter's privileged position in the public sphere. This is evident in the school *slava*, which neglects other possible interpretations of St Sava's role in Serbia's educational history. The opportunity to give it a wider meaning acceptable to all students, irrespective of their religious affiliation or lack of it, has been lost. The same can be said about the *slavas* of other public institutions, especially the town *slavas*. The display of strongly religious and national symbols and the important part played by selected guests and invitees do not indicate a tolerance for and openness to everyone. The town signals its devotion to tradition, but at the same time its neglect of those outside it – such as citizens of other confessional affiliations, atheists, immigrants, and non-Serbs.

In the post-socialist transition the desire to 'return' to older national and political traditions became the starting point of a much-exploited political discourse (Lagerspetz 1999). The new flourishing of the *slava* custom, an important part of Serbian Orthodox tradition, also reflects this desire. However, a tradition, with everything it stands for, can never be recreated as being identical with something in the past. It is not a 'frozen image', but will rather follow the needs of the current social context, and be reinterpreted accordingly. In today's Serbia the desire to 'return' easily leads to a failure to recognise society's real cultural and religious diversity. The past provides no self-evident argument for a restoration *tout court* of the pre-WW II status, privileges, and social impact of the Orthodox Church. The revival and new visibility of the *slava* tradition has emphasised its religious and ethnic dimensions. It has become a channel to advocate nationalist ideas and conservative political attitudes, allowing no room for alternative identities, loyalties, and ways of belonging. From today's perspective, however, the tradition also has a larger potential to promote the ideal of egalitarian relationships, which could be seen as one of its key features. In another setting, promoting inclusiveness and community spirit as its key values, the *slava* could be regarded as an annual gathering of all Serbian citizens.

As a long and important tradition the *slava* will certainly remain an element of Serbian public and private lives for a long time to come. Significantly, it is a tradition with a rare capacity to relate to several spheres of life – the private, the public, the ecclesiastical, and the mundane. For the time being much of its obvious potential to create bonds between members of society has however been sacrificed to the church's quest for influence and the state's quest for legitimacy. Opening the *slava* to new, alternative, cooperatively motivated interpretations might give everyone a chance to identify with a shared celebration.

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Praying for One *Umma*¹ — Rhetorical Construction of a Global Islamic Community in the Facebook Prayers of Young Finnish Muslims

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Abstract

In this paper, I demonstrate how a universalising Muslim identity is constructed in the Facebook prayers of young Finnish Muslims. By analysing the rhetorical devices utilized in the prayer updates, I argue that the prayers serve a function similar to the ‘flagging’ of national identity; the prayers portray the Islamic *umma* as a unified community and seek to diminish possible counter-discourses that emphasise ethnic divisions among Muslims. This study thus supports earlier observations of a novel ‘*umma* consciousness’ that is on the rise among young Muslim generations in Europe.

Keywords: *Islam, Facebook, Prayer, Identity, Rhetorical Psychology*

In the last few decades several analysts have observed that a new kind of Islamic consciousness is emerging in Europe. As Islam increasingly becomes a religion of native Europeans instead of immigrants, it is also being delinked from ‘any given culture in favour of a transnational and universal set of specific patterns (beliefs, rituals, diet, prescriptions and so on)’ (Roy 2004, 120).

At the same time as Islam has been decoupled from its ethnic and national underpinnings, it has also become the most salient identity marker and a mobiliser of collective action for many European-born Muslims. In other words, ‘Islam’ has largely replaced labels such as ‘leftist’ or ‘Turkish’ as a common denominator of political activists (Adamson 2011, 902).

A similar disdain for the ethnic and national has been witnessed in the Finnish context: in a previous study I conducted interviews with some ac-

1 I am grateful to the University of Helsinki Research Foundation and the Finnish Cultural Foundation for funding this research. Gracious thanks go also to professors Tuula Sakaranaho and Inga Jasinskaja-Lahti for their numerous insightful comments.

tivists of Islamic youth organisations, and discovered that they explicitly rejected certain religious practices of their first generation immigrant parents because they were ‘ethnic’ or ‘cultural’ instead of ‘Islamic’. From this I concluded that young Finnish Muslims are showing signs of a universalising Muslim identity. (Pauha 2015; cf. Jensen 2011, 118.)

‘*Umma*’ has become a catchword in the construction of transnational Muslim identities. Derived from the word *umm* (mother), the word *umma* has come to mean the Islamic community – and in today’s usage especially the Islamic community as transnational and pan-Islamic (Cesari 2013, 130; Jones & Mas 2011, 4). The subtitles of two central works, Olivier Roy’s *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (2004) and Peter Mandaville’s *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma* (2001), hint at the centrality of the *umma* concept as well as a few of its connotations; the *umma*, as it is understood today, is transnational and global.

Just like the Muslim *umma* the internet reaches beyond national and ethnic boundaries, which makes it especially valuable to transnational and diasporic communities. According to Peter Mandaville (2001, 169) ‘we need to understand [new] media as spaces of communication in which the identity, meaning and boundaries of diasporic community are continually constructed, debated and reimagined’. Accordingly, the internet has become a key platform for the construction of a novel ‘*umma* consciousness’ that is on the rise among new generations of Muslim thinkers (cf. Mandaville 2001, 140 & 175). Furthermore, the World Wide Web has proven especially important as a site of religious agency for those, such as young people, who fall outside traditional positions of power (cf. Helland 2004; Linjakumpu 2011, 38f.).

The importance of the internet for transnational identity construction is thus well acknowledged. What needs to be better understood, however, are the mechanisms that lead to the development of such an identity. What kind of online activities are involved in the development of an *umma* consciousness?

If scholars such as Christoph Wulf *et al.* (2010, vii–viii) are correct, prayers and other rituals have a natural connection to identity construction, because the function of ritual is to create social cohesion and to reduce intragroup conflict. Ritual activities provide a stage for performing and thereby reinforcing feelings of intimacy, solidarity, and oneness (Wulf *et al.* 2010, vii–ix). Rituals are thus a tool for bringing people together and for constructing a communal identity. Thus, ritual may provide an effective mechanism for constructing a universalising *umma* consciousness.

In this paper I provide further evidence of the developing *umma* identity among young Finnish Muslims, and argue that online prayers can be

understood as media rituals that serve to create and maintain an *umma* consciousness among them. My main goal, however, is to explicate some of the discursive mechanisms that the prayers employ. Working within the framework of rhetorically oriented discursive psychology (see, for example, Billig 2009; Kaposi 2008), I claim that such mechanisms are not merely a means of identity representation but also of identity construction. Viewed discursively, identities are not things inside people's heads but processes that occur between them. Identity – like prayer – is argumentative communication, and can be analysed as such.²

Finnish Muslims on Facebook

Besides revolutionising communication and media, the internet has deeply affected business, politics, and religion (cf. Dawson & Cowan 2004, 5f.). The internet has become a major forum for seeking information on religion, but also a site for practising it – doing a pilgrimage, getting married, or praying.³ There are, for example, several Facebook pages dedicated to praying for a sick or otherwise troubled child.⁴ The father of one such child described his experience of Facebook prayers as follows: 'Facebook had suddenly become my digital, virtual temple. I was surprised to connect with others on such a spiritual level. For me, the social network had long since transcended the trivial and entered the divine' (Moret 2011).

With other religious studies scholars, researchers of Islam have reacted to the growth of online religiosity (see, for example, Aly et al. 2017; Al-Kandari & Dashti 2014; el-Nawawy & Khamis 2009; Hoekstra & Verkuyten 2015; Johns 2013; Kalinock 2006; Larsson 2016; Larsson 2005; Rothenberg 2011; Sands 2010; for a review, see Larsson 2011). Of special importance here are

2 By background, I am a psychologist of religion with clinical experience of child and adolescent mental health. I am especially interested in identity formation in adolescence, which I understand as a thoroughly interpersonal and interactional process. Accordingly, in my research I have adopted a social psychological approach that is especially informed by rhetorical and discursive psychologies. In my view one's sense of self is constructed of culturally available representations, to which I have previously referred as 'identity scripts'. At times these raw materials of identity can be easily combined, but at others there may be tensions (cf. Pauha & Jasinskaja-Lahti 2013). For example, the widespread othering of Islam in Europe (cf. Creutz-Kämppi 2008) may make it difficult for young Muslims to construct an identity as both European citizens and Muslim believers.

3 Gary R. Bunt (2009, 77–129) has provided an extensive, if somewhat outdated, survey of the basic religious practices of Islam as they appear online.

4 'Prayers For Bryson Fowler', 'Prayers For Kali Le Ann', 'Praying for Tim', etc.

the journal *CyberOrient*⁵ as well as the Islamic studies scholar Gary R. Bunt (see, for example, 2009; 2003; 2000). Increasing scholarly attention has been devoted to Facebook because it is one of the most popular internet sites of any kind (see, for example, Al-Rawi 2016; Carvalho 2016; Croucher & Rahmani 2015; Jarvandi 2014).

Recent years have seen a proliferation of social media forums both maintained by and aimed at Finnish Muslims. Muslim youth organisations, such as *Nuoret Muslimit Ry* (the Young Muslims NGO in Finland), as well as mosque associations such as *Helsingin Muslimit* (Helsinki Muslims), have their own Facebook pages. *Tulevaisuus.org* has, among other things, a chat room and a message board. There are also plenty of Finnish Muslim blogs, several of which, for example, are maintained by young female converts to Islam.⁶

Next, I will present data collected from the Facebook group *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit*,⁷ which is – at least where the number of subscribers is concerned – probably the most important online forum for young Finnish Muslims.⁸ The group was launched in February 2012 with the self-stated goal of providing ‘information and *da’wa* to Muslims and non-Muslims’. Most updates to the group are posted by its voluntary administrators, whose composition has varied over the years. These updates are the work of relatively few people, but as the number of likes and shares demonstrates, the updates mirror the sentiments of many more.⁹ The group is not explicitly

5 *CyberOrient: Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East*. <<http://www.cyberorient.net/>>, accessed January 9, 2017.

6 The proliferation of online spaces for young Finnish Muslims reflects the changing demographics of the Finnish Muslim community: in Finland, there are ca. 70,000 Muslims, the majority of whom are first-generation immigrants who have come to the country as refugees or asylum seekers or through family reunion (Pauha 2017, 248; Martikainen & Tiilikainen 2013, 12). In 2011 the size of the second generation was estimated to be between ten and fifteen thousand, but since then the numbers have grown and continue to grow. The average age of Finnish Muslims is therefore low, with approximately 50 percent being less than 20 years of age. Compared to many other European states the Muslim community in Finland is markedly multi-ethnic (Pauha & Martikainen 2014, 218–219). Finnish Muslim youth confront a variety of forms of Islam in their everyday lives, and share their RE classes with co-religionists from all over the world. For a more thorough overview of Islam in Finland see Pauha & Martikainen (2014).

7 *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit* <<https://www.facebook.com/MuslimiNuoretSuomessa>>, accessed May 19, 2016.

8 In May 2016 the Facebook group had ca. 6,400 members, thus greatly outnumbering other important sites, such as *Suomen Muslimit* (ca. 1,600 members), *Nuoret Muslimit ry (numu)* (ca. 1,800 members), *Tulevaisuus.org* (ca. 1,000 members), *Nuorten Muslimien Foorumi* (ca. 600 members), and *Suomen Islamilainen Neuvosto - Nuorisio ja opiskelijalautakunta* (ca. 600 members).

9 Not all the site’s followers are young. Nor are they all Muslims. However, young Muslims are decidedly the site’s target audience, as revealed, for example, by its choice of name: *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit* translates as ‘the Muslims of the Finnish youth’.

linked to any mosque association or other offline religious community. The preachers recommended on the site, for example, are not defined by a common nationality or school of thought but by fluency in English and a slightly humorous approach to the topic at hand.

Besides the Facebook page, the group administrators also maintain YouTube and Instagram accounts. Regular updates include educational stories, inspirational images, aphorisms, religious instructions, and quotations from the Quran or Hadith. The site also features translations of videotaped sermons. Regular topics, in turn, include respect for parents, the life of the Prophet, the *hijab*, and gender relations. In discussing these topics the group administrators lean towards the conservative and, for example, present strict norms of modesty in dress and interaction as binding to all Muslims. However, the conservative content comes in a modern package: the group administrators are very familiar with internet genres and employ, for example, popular memes to convey their message. Humour and irony are an integral part of the group's contents.

The emphases of *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit* generally resemble those of neo-fundamentalist and *dawa*-oriented groups as described by Marko Juntunen (2008, 41f.): for them, being a Muslim is about making a conscious commitment to a global community of believers and structuring the minutiae of one's life according to the principles of *sunna*. Furthermore, religious authority that is independent from a traditional religious education and established religious institutions is typical of both European Islam (see, for example, Juntunen 2008; Linjakumpu 2011, 37–9) and online religiosity in general (see, for example, Cheong 2013; Howard 2011). Similarly, the administrators of *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit* do not claim any religious credentials, but they nevertheless display religious authority.

Online prayers as virtual rituals

In this paper I concentrate on a very specific kind of content on the *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit* site, namely, petitionary prayer or *dua*.¹⁰ Over the years

10 The five daily prayers (*salat*) are considered one of the pillars of Islam and are compulsory for all Muslims. In addition, one may pray the voluntary *dua* prayers. *Duas* are often petitionary in nature and include requests for the fulfilment of specific needs and wishes. *Duas* may be spontaneous and free in form, but there are also collections of traditional *duas* that one may use. Unlike the prescribed daily prayers, *duas* may be prayed in a language other than Arabic (O'Connor 2009, 558; Parvez 2016, 37).

the site administrators have published several such prayers – indeed, so many that a separate ‘*Dua* folder’ (*Dua-kansio*) has been created for them.¹¹

A typical *dua* is featured in Figure 1 in appendix. As in Figure 1, all the *duas* feature an image and a prayer text. Sometimes the text is embedded in the image and sometimes, as in Figure 1, the text and the image are separate. The images of the early *duas*, especially, often contain just the prayer text and a simple background, such as a nature scene. Most often, however, the images portray people, especially Muslims. The people are typically pictured deep in prayer.¹² Children and families are also common themes, as we will see in what follows. Compared to the rest of the group’s contents, humour and irony are downplayed in favour of a more serious tone; the *duas* convey a general sense of solemn piety and earnestness.¹³

The published *duas* address several different topics, and the visitors to the group have been invited to pray, for example, for a sick relative or a deceased friend. In preparation for my analysis I read through all the site’s *dua* updates. However, because of the focus on transnational and universalising Muslim identities, I have excluded from my data all prayers that did not concern the Muslim community at large but, for example, one’s family or one’s own spiritual life. In analysing the *duas* I have examined both the images and the accompanying texts, as well as the comments posted by the visitors to the site.¹⁴

The use of both word and image to convey a prayer distinguishes the online *duas* from their offline equivalents. Apart from multimodality, however, the online *duas* embody relatively few characteristics typical of digital religion (cf. Grieve 2013, 108). Hypertextuality and interactivity, in particular, are employed only in a limited way. Despite the possibilities as a platform afforded by Facebook, the online *duas* do not connect to other internet resources, and visitors’ contributions are mostly limited to exclamations signalling agreement (cf. Figure 1). Such exclamations are almost

11 On 18th May 2016 the folder contained 84 *duas*. The figure does not represent the total number of published *duas*, because not every prayer is included in the folder. However, a more precise number cannot be given because – especially with regard to short comments written by site visitors – it was difficult to determine in some cases whether a certain post constituted a prayer or not.

12 Hands with palms facing upwards are regularly used as a synecdoche for prayer.

13 For a noteworthy exception see Figure 6, which makes a playful reference to the popular ‘Keep calm and carry on’ motif.

14 *Duas* are often published on the initiative of the administrators of the group, but there are also examples of visitors asking for a prayer. For example, on 1st December 2014 a plea for prayer was published on behalf of a bereaved family.

always derived from the context of Islamic prayer, which suggests that the site visitors do indeed perceive the updates as prayers.

After examining the communications in one Islamic Facebook group, Ahmed Al-Rawi (2016, 28, 30) concluded that the group ‘functions like a virtual mosque’ in that it is a ‘a congregation where people meet and pray together’[.] The role of the site administrator is to serve as ‘a virtual preacher’ and the role of the group members is to join in the prayers he initiates (Al-Rawi 2016, 28f.). Similar dynamics between the site administrator and visitors were also evident in my data.

Al-Rawi (2016, 28) posits an equivalence between online and offline prayers, and claims his study demonstrates that the prayers ‘performed online resemble what goes offline in real life’[.] However, outward verbalisations do not necessarily correspond to internal experience. Indeed, several authors have expressed overt scepticism concerning the ability of online rituals to transmit the experiential aspects of religion (see, for example, Bunt 2009, 78f.; Dawson 2005; O’Leary 2005). Instead of conveying a certain experience, the ritual exclamations may be used, for example, as a means of identity performance. The participation in the Islamic language game thus serves as a badge of identity that demonstrates one’s self-identification as a Muslim.

Influenced by Émile Durkheim, media anthropologists have tended to conceptualise media rituals from a functionalist standpoint as tools for creating a community. In short, rituals such as prayers bind people together by gathering them around a common symbolic core such as a totem (Sumiala 2010, 47f.). In contrast, post-Durkheimian theorists, especially Nick Couldry, have challenged all assumptions of a unified community as anything but a social construction. From a post-Durkheimian perspective there is no common symbolic core shared by the whole community. The purpose of the media ritual, however, is to create and maintain a belief in such a core. Although no community is ever unified, media rituals work to create a representation of such a community, or a ‘myth of the centre’ (see, for example, Couldry 2003, 45f.; Sumiala 2010, 54–7). The prayer updates in my data are also engaged in creating the ‘myth of the centre’: a belief in a unifying foundation behind the diversity apparent among the world’s Muslims (cf. Couldry 2003, 45f.; Sumiala 2010, 57).¹⁵

The examples on the following pages have been chosen to illustrate the variety of the *duas* analysed. As can be seen, the prayers in the data were

15 In a somewhat similar vein Al-Rawi (2016, 21) and Bunt (2009, 31) have noted that, despite the rhetoric of a single *umma*, the virtual *umma* is hardly singular but divides into several separate communities.

often, but not always, associated with wars and conflicts. The images on the following pages may therefore be uncomfortable or even shocking. Dead or injured children, blood and open wounds, firearms, heaps of corpses, and crying faces are all typical elements of the *duas* under study, and the peaceful nature scenes typical of other *duas* are all but absent.

Rhetorical psychology and Facebook prayers

Like previous authors (see, for example, Gill 2005, 7367; Sumiala 2010, 34f.), I emphasise the communicative nature of prayers and other rituals. Ritual is communication on at least two different levels. On one hand, the ritual participants are communicating with each other. This is especially true of my data published in social media and therefore reaching a large number of people. On the other hand, ritual, and especially prayer, is communication with God. The prayers in my data, for example, directly address God and make petitions to him. The main purpose of a prayer is not to claim truth but to make things happen – to express emotions, to bind a community together, and, hopefully, to secure divine assistance. A prayer is thus a textbook example of an Austinian speech act (cf. Gill 2005, 7369).

To accomplish things through words, one must persuade and convince others. Where prayer is concerned, the ultimate target of persuasion is, of course, God, in that the person praying is trying to convince God to intervene on her or his behalf. Thus, prayers are not just communication but argumentative communication, and they are analysed as such in this paper.

In seeking to understand the argumentative structure of online prayers, I aim to offer an insight into the formation of a universalising Muslim identity because, as Michael Billig (1996, 141) has stated, ‘the structure of the way we argue reveals the structure of our thoughts’. As Billig (1996, 140–2; 1991, 48) and other rhetorical psychologists have claimed, human beings tend to think in the form of argumentative dialogue. Arguing and broader cognition may even be developmentally interdependent in that learning to argue paves the way to attaining other cognitive abilities (Billig 2009; Billig 1996, 141; Billig 1991, 49).

If Billig (1996, 142f.) is correct, internal arguments are also the method by which religious identities are formed. The formation of a religious identity involves deliberation – that is, an imagination of alternative futures and

assessment of reasons for aiming either towards or away from any of them (Billig 1996, 143).¹⁶

The prayers are thus analysed here as arguments. They argue for a universalising Muslim identity and, as such, serve as a mechanism for identity development: as a person is trying to persuade God or other people with her or his prayers, she or he is also persuading her or himself to commit to a certain kind of Muslim identity.

My analytical process followed the three-part structure introduced by Sakki and Cottier (2012, 375f.). In other words, the data was analysed concerning its content, form, and use. The analytical process was thus guided by the three questions, what, how, and why?¹⁷

First, the content of the updates was categorised in a bottom-up, data-driven manner, following the principles outlined by Billig (1997). The key content in Figure 2 in appendix is a young and seemingly dead child, half-buried in rubble. The lower part of the picture features a caption that reads: 'Her fate was not in my hands, why should I care...'¹⁸ Accompanying the picture there is also a prayer 'for the whole Muslim *umma*'. In the prayer God is called on to 'save all Muslim countries and to bless Muslims all over the world'.

Having identified the key contents, I proceeded to the second phase of the analysis and investigated how the contents were used to demonstrate a point. Like Sakki and Cottier (2012, 375f.), I did this by identifying the rhetorical devices used in the updates (on rhetorical devices, see Jokinen 1999; Potter 1996). Examples of such devices include footing, detail, fact construction, and categorisation (cf. Potter 1996, 122f., 162, 177).

The rhetorical device of special importance to the prayer accompanying Figure 2 is that of metaphor. The metaphor of *umma* as one body permeates

16 In a somewhat similar vein a giant of developmental identity research, James E. Marcia (1966, 551), considers identity formation to involve two aspects, crisis and commitment: 'Crisis refers to the adolescent's period of engagement in choosing among meaningful alternatives; commitment refers to the degree of personal investment the individual exhibits.' In other words, identity formation is about considering alternative lifestyle options and then committing oneself to some of them.

17 The same principles were also applied in the analysis of the prayers' visual aspects. In this I have followed Halla Beloff (1997, 56, 58), who treats an image as a rhetorical stance or as a 'psychological argument'. Therefore, according to Beloff (1997, 56) images are subject to the techniques of rhetorical and discursive analysis (cf. Hayes 1997, 14). Gillian Rose (2001, 137) also maintains that visuality constitutes a form of discourse. Visual images define reality by rendering certain things visible and others invisible (Rose 2001, 137). The focus is thus on how the images attempt to persuade a viewer of the truthfulness or naturalness of a certain worldview (Rose 2001, 139).

18 All excerpts from the data are translated from Finnish by the author.

the whole prayer update. The metaphor is borrowed from the Prophet and further elaborated by likening the suffering of others to experiencing hurt in one's own body; sympathy for other Muslims is 'fever' and 'pain'.

The Prophet (sAas) has said: 'The love, mercy, and care among Muslims is like a single body; if one part is hurting, the whole body is suffering from sleeplessness and fever.' [...] When one part of your body is trying to fight the enemy, the whole body gets involved in this process. This is why the Prophet (sAas) compared the Muslim umma to a human body. Thus, if Muslims are hurt anywhere in the world: in the core of the body or in its extremities, in fingers or in toes; you should also feel that pain. If you are interested only in your own safety and the safety of your family, something is wrong with you. You are not part of this body (July 12, 2014).¹⁹

Besides being explicitly likened to body parts, believers are also visually represented as such; in addition to the dead child, the image features several other people that appear to be uncovering her or him from the rubble. However, the helpers are shown only in part. More specifically, only their hands are visible. The believers are thus, quite literally, body parts in service of one another. Hands are also used as a metaphor for agency in the picture's caption.

In its use of metaphor the prayer defines the sympathy felt for one's co-believers worldwide as a religious duty. The metaphor of *umma* as one body is also used to encourage people to act: if Muslims are hurt somewhere, the whole *umma* should 'feel that pain', but also engage in 'trying to fight' it. Perhaps even more evocative is the final sentence in the quotation above, in which those who care only for the immediate family are deemed not to belong to the body. Instead, they appear as severed limbs or removed organs – and as such, useless without the rest of the body.

Besides arguing for the universality of Islam, the prayer takes an equally explicit stand against any ethnic or national division among Muslims. Furthermore, even sectarian divisions are viewed negatively.

19 Interestingly, although it does not explicitly mention it, the quoted text is in large part an obvious translation of an English text that has been circulating on the internet (see, for example, <<https://www.kalamullah.com/story-of-the-bull.html>, <http://www.ummah.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-351937.html>>, or <<https://www.facebook.com/islamfordunya/posts/715441995172252>>). The quotation provided here is my own back-translation of the Finnish version.

Sometimes the way we see things is that only me and my group are true Muslims, but why? Because someone does not do what I do? As long as you cannot prove that someone is a kaafir (a non-Muslim), he is a Muslim. As long as you do not have proof that a person is a hypocrite, he is a Muslim. Whether he belongs to the same sect, group, or nationality, it makes no difference (July 12, 2014).

The first part of the quotation above anticipates a sectarian view that recognises only the people of one's own nationality or 'group' as Muslims. The quotation demands justification for such a position by asking 'why?', but instead of waiting for an answer the quotation denies the validity of any justification. The update thus provides a good example of the argumentative structure that, according to Michael Billig, characterises psychological processes. 'Thinking is a form of internal argument', and argument always entails a counterargument (Billig 1996, 2). Indeed, to understand what kinds of identities are offered, one needs to analyse what kinds of identities are opposed (cf. Billig 2009). In the previous two excerpts identities that prioritise family, sect, group, or nationality are represented as alternatives to a universalising Muslim identity, and as such, vehemently rejected.

Muslims as helpers and in need of help

Figure 2 is in many ways illustrative of the data more generally. The *topos* of dead or wounded children, for example, is widely used in the updates. This may be because children are often associated with innocence and vulnerability, and thus may be used to arouse strong feelings of sympathy, sadness, and even anger.²⁰

Figure 3 in appendix and the text accompanying it are another example of the key characteristics just described. The text starts with 'Some readers may be bored with this news and scroll past this petitionary prayer'. Having acknowledged the reader's potential resistance, the text immediately counters it by making the request: 'This will only take a few seconds from you, so I ask that you pray with me.' The text then continues by quoting from the Quran (2:250) and asking for 'consolation', 'faith', 'trust', and 'a better tomorrow, in which those who have fled the war get to go back home'.

20 In a somewhat similar vein film theorist David Bordwell (2008, 52) has suggested that filmmakers employ the seemingly universal tendency to feel sympathy for children to evoke strong feelings in their audience.

I have so far discussed the first two phases of the analytical process. Until this point the analysis has stayed close to the data as I have identified the key contents of the prayer updates and the ways in which they are used to demonstrate a point. In the third phase the analysis moves beyond the data, and the updates are studied in the context of Islam in Finland (cf. Sakki & Cottier 2012, 375f.).

In this broader context all the updates may be viewed as counterarguments to the widespread perception of Muslims as perpetrators of violence: as a number of media researchers have observed, the Finnish media tends to associate Islam with terrorism and represent it as a threat (see, for example, Creutz-Kämppi 2008; Taira 2014; for a review, see Maasilta, Rahkonen & Raittila 2008). The prayer updates turn the tables and portray Muslims as victims in need of ‘consolation’ and ‘a better tomorrow’, or alternatively as helping and caring for victims of violence. The images in Figure 3 show Muslims in both roles: as caring mothers and vulnerable babies; or as children taking care of a puppy or lying in hospital.

Neither the images nor the accompanying texts discussed so far identifies a specific war or other crisis to which they refer. In this way the updates are sufficiently generic to appeal to a wide audience. In reading the update, a visitor to the site may associate it with a context that concerns her or him the most, whether that context is Palestine, Syria, Iraq, or somewhere else. If, in contrast, a certain context was specified, it might distance those whose primary concerns are about another part of the world. As I will demonstrate later, this geographical ambiguity appears to be a conscious decision by the site’s administrators.

From global to local – and back again

Figure 4 in appendix provides an interesting parallel to the previous update. As in Figure 2, the key contents in Figure 4 include children who appear to be wounded or, at the very least, sad and needy. Furthermore, as in Figure 2, Figure 4 features a caption that implicitly attributes responsibility for the suffering of children to every Muslim.

However, unlike the previous updates, this image is set in a very specific time and place: ‘On 15.3.2014 the war in Syria will have lasted for THREE YEARS[.]’ Specificity is further accentuated by a list of concrete facts and figures. The plausibility of the figures is reinforced by crediting them to a source, the Huffington Post:

The number of the dead is already well over 130,000 (information from December 2013, Huffington Post). 95 percent are c i v i l i a n s [...] Almost 50 percent of the population of Syria have been forced to leave their homes, and are refugees either within or outside the borders of the country[.] 2 million Syrian children have been forced to quit school (March 14, 2014).

Such fact construction is yet another rhetorical device and an important part of effective rhetoric. It involves portraying a controversial statement as objectively true (Jokinen 1999, 129). More specifically, and to use Jonathan Potter's term, (1996, 122f.), the use of facts and figures in the description of a controversial issue may be seen as an example of distanced footing: because exact numbers have a certain aura of neutrality and objectivity, they can be used to frame an account as impartial and reliable. As a result, the writer no longer appears as partisan, but as a neutral reporter who presents the truth of an issue.

Besides fact construction, another rhetorical device and a key aspect of practically all rhetoric is categorisation, that is, endowing objects with properties such as 'good' or 'violent' (Jokinen 1999, 129f.). In my data the category of Muslim is especially endowed with the properties 'compassionate' and 'caring'. It is important to note that such properties are not mere ideals or goals, but are presented as essential characteristics of the category of believer. Figure 4 above, for example, is accompanied by a text that states: 'For believers these people are not just statistics, but OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS! We also know that faith involves caring for others' (March 14, 2014).

Instead of the metaphor of the body, the prayer here draws on a different metaphor, that of the family, to argue for solidarity with the whole *umma*. This is one of many instances in which the metaphor occurs. Besides brothers and sisters, the prayer updates also refer to other Muslims as 'my mothers', 'my children', etc. For example, 'my mother(s), my sister(s), my child(ren) in the middle of the terrors of war! I have not forgotten you!' (May 3, 2013).

The comment stream of Figure 4 contains an interesting dialogue that further exemplifies the rhetorical construction of the category of Muslim. The dialogue begins with a non-Muslim visitor answering the question posed in the caption: 'I have done nothing to them [Syrians] so my conscience is clean[.]' The site administrators' response is in line with the general argument made in the update: 'The Muslim believer's way of thinking is different in that (s)he feels guilty if (s)he could have helped but did not do so.' The category of 'Muslim believer' is thus endowed with an essential 'way of thinking' – that of feeling guilty for not helping enough.

Breaches in unity

At this point it is worth considering the special features of Facebook as a platform. Like many other social media sites, Facebook allows the user relative freedom in constructing her or his online identity. When designing her or his profile, a Facebook user can freely choose how to portray her or himself. As a result she or he can suppress certain aspects of her or his identity, while at the same time emphasising or even inventing others (cf. Lövheim 2013, 42–6).

Thus, ideally, a Facebook group can become a utopian space, a place without ethnicity and race. However, as several commentators have noted, the online lives of people are in many ways linked to their offline existence (see, for example, Dawson 2005, 32f.; Grieve 2013, 111–5; Nordenson 2016). Offline causes may have online effects, and offline ethnic conflicts may penetrate the online. Accordingly, despite all the efforts to diminish ethnic and racial boundaries, ethnicity sometimes seeps through into the virtual *umma*.

In this respect an interesting exchange occurred on a thread that concerned the arrest of three Finnish Muslims on suspicion of participating in terrorist activities in Syria. The administration of the *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit* group posted a statement in defence of those accused, to which one visitor reacted angrily:

Visitor: [...] Kurds have demonstrated constantly and you have not said on your site LET US SUPPORT THE KURDS! AND THE INSTANT THAT SOME TERRORIST IS ARRESTED YOU WRITE HERE!! [...] (12.10.2014, 17:47).

Suomen Nuorten Muslimit: My brother [...]. Your comment is oozing with blind nationalism, and you are forgetting completely what Islam teaches a believer [...] (12.10.2014, 19:25).

Suomen Nuorten Muslimit: SNM-site has been established for the purpose of *dawa*. Not as a political ad channel. We have purposely avoided taking a stand on a conflict of any single people (if you ever happen to watch any news but that from your home country, you will notice that everywhere in the world there is a war going on somewhere). For this reason, whenever we make a *duaa*-related posting on our wall ... we formulate the petitionary prayer so that it covers ALL MUSLIMS EVERYWHERE [...] (12.10.2014, 19:27).

Visitor: Read again the post that you wrote! NOT AS A POLITICAL AD CHANNEL! How about your previous postings that BROTHERS AND SISTERS SHOULD PRAY about GAZA! (October 12, 2014, 19:31).

The above exchange is revealing in several respects. It defines the group's explicit policy with regard to *dua* updates. As noted above, the updates are kept vague in terms of geographical location, which is here confirmed as a conscious decision of the site administrators. The purpose is to formulate *duas* so that they concern all Muslims everywhere, and 'politicality' is therefore to be avoided. However, one does not need to follow the site long to notice that politicality is deemed problematic only with regard to issues that divide the Muslim community. Expressing even harsh criticism of Israel or the United States, for example, is not seen as similarly problematic. Indeed, as the visitor remarks in the exchange above, the site administrators explicitly endorse, for example, demonstrations against the Israeli presence in Gaza.

That support for the Kurds is considered political, whereas support for the Palestinians and the related critique of Israel is not, is another instance in which categorisation is used as a rhetorical device; the Palestinian cause is not political, because politics are about opinions and values, whereas sympathy for Gaza is something that should be felt by every reasonable person. In a similar vein an update made on 12th July 2014 proclaims: 'You don't have to be a Muslim to defend Gaza, it's enough that you are A HUMAN BEING!!!' Support for Palestinians is thus not about a political worldview, but about being human. Furthermore, the wording implicitly portrays opponents as something other than human beings.

It appears that being critical of Israel is allowed or even encouraged in the group for precisely the same reason that the highlighting of disagreements among Muslims is discouraged: both of these serve to demarcate the boundaries of the Muslim community. To use the Durkheimian term, Palestine serves in the updates as a kind of totem that provides a common symbolic core for the site's visitors. The struggles of the Palestinians represent the common struggle of the whole Muslim *umma*. Israel, in contrast, appears in the updates as an Other – an outside adversary that is to blame for communal suffering. The updates make a clear-cut distinction between us and them, Muslims and the Other. The unity of all Muslims, in turn, is emphasised and the differences between them downplayed.

However, as the post-Durkheimian notion of the 'myth of the centre' implies, the unity of the community is more or less imaginary. It therefore needs constant support and renewing. Conversely, debates such as the one

above are perceived as a problem because, by bringing up divisions internal to the Muslim community, the debates challenge the myth of the centre.²¹

Tackling with theodicy

Figure 1 constitutes an interesting parallel to the updates discussed so far. The atmosphere of the image is calm and serene; the Earth is pictured from afar, making 'worldly problems' appear small and distant. The feeling of serenity is further accentuated by the lack of a caption. It is as if the force that is holding our world together is so majestic that no words can do it justice. The dead and dying children are nevertheless not absent: instead of being in the picture, they are in the prayer accompanying it. The peacefulness of the picture is in stark contrast with the vivid brutality of the words accompanying it:

This is a dua for all the brothers and sisters who have died in Egypt and Syria, for all the mothers who are crying in Afghanistan, for all our sisters who are crying in Iraq, to all those who have been burned alive or hanged in Burma, for all the crying children of Palestine [...] (August 17, 2013).

The suffering women and children are again featured in the update, but this time in words, not in images. Interestingly, a similar contrast between word and image characterises several updates. Sometimes a peaceful image is coupled with gruesome words; sometimes the opposite is the case. An example of the latter case, a shocking image accompanied by a calming text, is provided by Figure 5 in appendix.

The figure features a black and white photo of an uncovered grave with a corpse. The corpse is in an advanced state of decomposition. Indeed, it would be difficult to recognise the corpse as a human being were it not for its head in the lower left corner. Its head is slightly twisted backwards and its mouth is wide open, as if screaming. The corpse's posture elicits pain and agony.

Although Figure 5 is set in a specific context ('Srebrenica 11.7.1995'), the accompanying prayer associates it with other tragedies affecting Muslims: 'The history of mankind repeats itself constantly, and worse is yet to come before the Final Day. Let us pray for our dead brothers and sisters in faith

21 In an interesting contrast to the updates discussed above a *dua* posted on 16th March 2014 commemorates a historical atrocity that was committed by Muslims against other Muslims – in this case the killing of Kurds by Saddam Hussein. However, despite discussing a conflict internal to the Muslim world, the *dua* is far from challenging the myth of the centre. On the contrary, the event is condemned especially because it involved Muslims who turned against their co-believers: 'We nevertheless want to remember and remind of these events because here those who caused the destruction were supposed to be believers?! Did they forget that a believer does not kill a believer! [...] Our nationality is certainly a part of our identity... But the most important thing uniting us is our faith! It makes us brothers and sisters!'

all around the world.’ After these gloomy words, however, the update provides something in the way of consolation: ‘As Muslims we believe that everyone will get what they deserve on Judgement Day. May God reinforce the feet and hearts of the believers in the right way, may He give comfort to the wounded and those bereaved in the war. Aamiin!’²²

This tension between hope and despair is generally characteristic of the updates. Instead of concluding at one end of the axis, the updates keep the tension alive between both ends. Billig (1997, 42–4, 49f.) paid special attention to similar contrasts in his own data, and even considered contraries to be an essential feature of human psychic functioning.

In expressing the tension between the all-good Creator and the pain-filled creation, the virtual prayers tackle the problem of theodicy.²³ Their aim, however, is not to provide a rationally satisfactory answer to the problem but an existentially satisfactory one. As Jan Koster (2003) has suggested, rituals do not operate on the level of the rational mind but more on the level of ‘deep emotions’ and ‘the direct, visceral experience’. Therefore, they may be especially effective in dealing with theodicy and other problems that are hard to resolve with logic and intellect.²⁴ Similarly, the Facebook rituals of

22 As Robert Fuller (1995, 8, 22) has noted, the apocalyptic expectation of the ‘end times’ in which the tables will be turned may emerge as a way to find meaning and comfort in the midst of disaster or deprivation: ‘[A]pocalyptic writing commonly originates during times of crisis and tension. [...] Apocalyptic thinking helps the believing community by locating its problems in a transcendental or mythic context in which a victorious outcome is assured. Its purpose is to show that people can and must endure such crises, secure in the knowledge that their tribulations are part of God’s plan for the final triumph over evil.’ Fuller’s (1995) own focus is on Christian apocalypticism, but his description corresponds very closely to my data.

23 In an article on martyrdom and media Hannele Koivunen (2005, 116f.) has compared the motif of suffering children and grieving mothers to the *Pietà* in Christian art. According to Koivunen (2005, 101) both the sacred art and the modern mass media tackle the problem of explaining evil, or theodicy, by sanctifying human suffering. Certain individuals, such as Mohammed al-Dura, a twelve year-old child killed in a gunfight between Israeli and Palestinian forces during the Second Intifada, have come to represent suffering for the media audience. As the Christian Church has glorified the suffering of Christ, Mary, and the martyrs, so the modern media glorifies the suffering of its heroes. Suffering thus becomes an extraordinary affair of extraordinary people. By turning suffering into a sacred act, the media creates distance between an ordinary audience and human anguish. Martyrs are thus essential for the media. Martyrdom, in turn, involves innocence, which makes children ideal martyrs (Koivunen 2005).

24 Johanna Sumiala and Matteo Stocchetti (2007, 340) have also conceptualised the circulation of pictures of Yasser Arafat as a collective attempt to make sense of his death and to reduce anxiety about the future without him. To survive the loss of a leader, the community needs to interpret it as somehow meaningful. The way the images of Arafat were used in the media ‘presents patent ritualistic connotations that are inspired not by the search for an “objective truth”, but rather by the discursive construction of a “narrative truth”’ (Sumiala-Seppänen & Stocchetti 2007, 340).

the young Muslims attempt to make sense of the senseless. This does not mean avoiding tensions and contradictions but embracing them: the prayers fully acknowledge the injustices endured by the Muslim *umma*, but at the same time they place faith in future justice.

Concluding thoughts

In this paper I have examined petitionary prayers, or *duas*, that have been published in a Facebook group for young Finnish Muslims. The prayers exemplify the development of a novel *umma* consciousness that has been documented in a variety of contexts. Olivier Roy (2004, 120), for example, has noted that 'Islam is not taking (and cannot take) root in the West along cultural lines imported from the pristine cultures. These cultures usually do not survive the first generation as such, either fading away or being recast along "Western" lines.' In a similar vein the young Muslims who were interviewed for my previous study expressed strong criticism of ethnic influences in Islam and considered them to be a corruption of the true Islam, free of any ethnic dimension (Pauha 2015).

The prayers in my data exemplify similar processes as they appear online: like the young interviewees in my previous study, the Facebook prayers were concerned with the unity and diversity of the Muslim community. More specifically, the prayers strongly endorse a view of Islam as the supreme identity of all Muslims, and at the same time strongly oppose the alternative view of national and ethnic identities as primary.

The prayers thus portray a universalising *umma* identity. However, in this paper my aim has been to show that the online prayers do more than just portray a certain identity. They are, in fact, a mechanism that is used in its construction. The dynamic at play resembles the psychological notion of 'flagging' (as described by Michael Billig 1995). In a Billigian view national identity is not something stable or permanent, but is maintained through everyday flagging practices.²⁵ Similarly, the recurring Facebook updates calling young Muslims to sympathise with their co-believers worldwide 'flag' the Muslim identity and recreate the *umma* as a trans-national community.

25 Despite its name, flagging is not necessarily about waving flags, but such ordinary and scarcely noticeable matters as referring to national events with a definite article (for example, 'the weather' or 'the prime minister'). Even the division of news into domestic and foreign reminds people of their place in the world and thus sustains their national identities (cf. Billig 2009; Billig 1995, 93–6).

Although not working within a Billigian framework, Jan Koster (2003) also makes the connection between ritual and flagging: 'Ritual performance is like planting a flag on a symbolic piece of land, it is the tribal impulse of claiming a territory for the collective body at hand. [...] It is appealing to deep emotions, the direct, visceral experience of collective unity at the cost of one's individual and more rational self.' The overall tone of Koster's definition is rather negative, the reason for which is made clear in his paper: according to Koster (2003) rituals contain 'aggressive potential' that may 'overflow', causing violence and death. My analysis may also help in understanding the identity processes that motivate people to fight against perceived injustices, sometimes even violently.²⁶ Indeed, identifying with the global *umma* and wanting to relieve its suffering have been shown to be among the most important factors motivating Finnish Muslims to travel to Syria as foreign fighters (Creutz 2015, 17, 33–8, 46).

Figure 6 in appendix summarises the dynamic I see at work behind the updates well. First and foremost, the updates aim at encouraging the site visitors to 'pray for one *umma*'. The view propagated here is that Muslims form one community, regardless of their ethnic, linguistic, and national differences. Elements of the universalising Muslim identity as they appear in the prayer updates include a sense of being part of an *umma*-as-one-body or an *umma*-as-a-family. The Muslim *umma* is imagined²⁷ as a seamless whole, the parts of which are useless without each other. The unity of the *umma*, however, is maintained by constructing a strict boundary between Muslims and their oppressors. Palestine, Syria, and other Muslim-majority conflict areas serve as a kind of totem around which the virtual *umma* can gather – or, in other words, as a synecdoche for the suffering of the worldwide Muslim community.

However, the listing of adversities that have fallen upon the Muslim community may have the unintended side effect of creating doubt and despair. The updates seek to counter this by making promises of justice in the afterlife. It is important to be patient and have faith because God will one day fix everything, if not in this life then in the next. Thus, besides calling for transnational solidarity among Muslims, the updates also carry the hopeful

26 It is worth noting, however, that despite all the anger and the rigid boundaries that are drawn between Muslims and those perceived as their foes, I am hesitant to view the updates as encouraging extremism and violence. Rather, it may be that the *Weltschmerz* and the black-and-white thinking reflect the general turmoil typical of adolescence.

27 In the sense of the imagined communities of Benedict Anderson (1983) (cf. Mandaville 2001, 170).

message to 'keep calm'. In the words of one *dua* update, in reference to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza: 'Is there something else we can do other than just grieve and get depressed? YES! 1) Don't stop the *du'a!* God will hear our prayers but He alone knows when things will change.'

* * *

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Appendix:

Figure 1. A typical *dua* update.

Suomen Nuorten Muslimit löysi uuden valokuvan
 albumin Dua-kansio
 17. elokuuta 2013 ·

Tämä on dua'a kaikille Egyptissä ja Syyriassa kuolleille vaimille ja siskoille, kaikille Afganistanissa kuolleille äideille, kaikille Irakissa kuolleille siskollemme, kaikille heille jotka on poltettu hengiltä tai hirtetty Durmassa, kaikille Palestinan kuolleille lapsille ja kaikille Somaliin unohdetuille siskoille ja vaimille... Sekä kaikille muslimisiskoille ja -vaimille, jotka elävät ja tukevat kärsivänsä keskellä ympäri maailman.

"Allah (swt) suokoon heille kaikille oikeutta ja palkan Jannahissa, Amin."



Tykkää · Kommentoi · Jaa

166 henkilöä tykkää tätä. Huippukommentit ·

1 jako

Kirjoita kommentti...

Allahomina amin
 Tykkää · Vastaa 2 · 17. elokuuta 2013 kello 14:20

Aamiin!
 Tykkää · Vastaa 1 · 17. elokuuta 2013 kello 10:06

Figure 2. 'Her fate was not in my hands, why should I care...' (July 12, 2014)



Figure 3. 'The dua of the day' (June 14, 2013)



Figure 4. 'What will we answer to God when he asks us about them on Judgment Day?!' (March 14, 2014)



Figure 5. 'Srebrenica 11.7.1995' (July 11, 2013)



Figure 6. 'Keep calm and pray for one umma' (14.10.2014).



Spiritual Process in Lightprayer: A Network of New Religious Practice

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Abstract

This article considers the conditions of spiritual process in the new kind of religiousness called Lightprayer. Based on the analysis, it is argued that Lightprayer itself and the practice involved can be seen as a processual approach towards the self and spirituality. It is part of a wider change in religious behaviour. To approach the spiritual process I will draw upon the procedures of actor-network theory (ANT). The ethnographic material, field notes, photographs, and interviews concerning the practices of 'I am' clauses and the 'fire ritual' are interpreted from the perspective of ANT. The perspective of ANT foregrounds the contributions and roles of the human and non-human actors in the actualisation of the spiritual process in Lightprayer. The spiritual process functions as a protocol in Lightprayer and sustains the connections that have been negotiated. However, it also enables the participants to negotiate their individual worldviews. Analysing the interaction within the practices of Lightprayer is essential for an understanding of this new kind of religiousness.

Keywords: Lightprayer, spiritual process, Actor-Network theory, interaction, 'I am' clauses, 'fire ritual', new kind of religious practice

In organising events and retreats between 2005 and 2012, Lightprayer was active mainly in Finland and for Finns in Europe. Lightprayer is both the title of the activity and a kind of non-verbal prayer that the leaders Helena and Michael Blanka performed with the participants (Raunola 2010, 290–91). Until 2012 the Blankas lived as a Finnish-German married couple in Germany.¹ Lightprayer was a combination of ideas rooted in Christianity with Mary as a central character (see Raunola 2017), esoteric New Age and Indian religions, and the dietary particularity of living on light. According to Lightprayer the aim was to help participants to become open to their inner selves, to Light, and to silence.

¹ Since relocating to Finland in 2013 the Blankas have launched two separate working arenas. Both continue to work with the teachings of Sri Kaleshwar.

stillness speaks more clear than words
 drumming and lightprayer – experience of the inner stillness and light
 we will start with the drummingmeditation and go on it as silent lightprayer
 (LP4)

This article presents Lightprayer from the perspective of the spiritual process that is assumed to take place during retreats. The concept of spiritual process is here a functional concept born of the research material itself. The concept helps to approach the function of Lightprayer and the significance of the retreats.

I consider aspects that contribute to the actualisation of the spiritual process from the perspective of actor-network theory, made famous by sociologist Bruno Latour (Latour 2005). Actor-network theory (ANT) reading enables the observation of complex group interaction between people and things (Callon 1986, Law 1992). Reading through ANT reveals multiple human and non-human actors in the retreats and in practices therein: in addition to the organisers and participants, the venue of the retreat, textual material, instruments, and other actors also enable the spiritual process, not excluding experienced or assumed spiritual actors such as Light.

As Mika Lassander points out, 'ANT can be a fruitful approach for studying beliefs and worldviews in those Western societies that are experiencing relatively rapid changes in their religious landscapes' (Lassander 2012, 239). Lightprayer is one example of this change.² The notion of spiritual process would seem to emphasise the importance of the individual experience in a new kind of religiousness. Lassander illustrates the change with the concepts of *mould* and *trellis*. Whereas a mould provides security and norms for behaviour and belief, a trellis enables orientation towards self-expression and individuality (Lassander 2014, 153–6).

What role does the practice of spiritual process play in Lightprayer and for the participants? This article concerns the interactions in the practice of spiritual process during retreats both as an individual experience and as manifested in the material surroundings of the retreat. The anthropological research material guides the reading of the interaction with examples from interviews, field notes, and other research material.

2 The exact definition of the shorthand 'new' religiosity is beyond the scope of this article. 'New' compared to *what* is the obvious question to be discussed. The emphasis of this article lies in the interaction amongst actors in a particular instance in the field of new religion. It might well turn out that studying the networks of the 'old' religion will yield equally complex and surprising results.

I will first explicate my theoretical and methodological underpinnings. I will then give an overview of the spiritual process as *a religious way* of tying entities (Latour 2005, 239). Next I will proceed by presenting an interpretive reading of the research material regarding the exercise of the 'I am' clauses as an example of individual process. Clauses are given as *a black box*, i.e. as something that is not explained but nonetheless something that the participant can open (see Table 1).

In the fifth part of the article I will analyse the 'fire ritual' as a special kind of practice and place, *a centre of calculation*, for the spiritual process to happen. In the last part I will concentrate on a fire ritual at an Assisi retreat as an example of a place for individual negotiations and the shaping of understanding.

Material

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork between 2008 and 2009 by participating in five retreats and several evening events. Retreats and evenings can be regarded as the most essential forms of Lightprayer work. My approach is that of a participating researcher. Dialogical positioning and ethical fieldwork require intuition and vigilance on the part of the researcher (Raunola 2010). The retreats in question were held in Assisi (Italy), Airisto (Finland), Schwangau (Germany), and Uusi Valamo (New Valamo Orthodox Monastery in Heinävesi, Finland). In addition to the interviews with the participants and the Blankas, the research material consists of numerous photographs and comprehensive field notes. I will also draw on material published on the Lightprayer website (maintained in English, Finnish, and German) and the blog entries written by Helena Blanka in Finnish.

I have changed the names of the interviewees to maintain their anonymity. Pseudonyms have been selected from the Finnish name-day calendar around the times of the retreats.

The interpretive frame of the actor-network theory

Actor-network theory is also called the sociology of translations (Latour 2005, 106, Callon 1986, 1 Law 1992, 1). Latour's idea of sociology can be summarised as follows: 'Society is not what holds us together but what is held together' (Latour 1986, 276). For Latour the social is dual and problematic in nature. Instead of providing sharply delineated definitions, Latour considers the social as a peculiar movement of reassociation and reassembling (Latour 2005, 7).

As Lassander describes, an actor network is a 'process-oriented view, focusing on translation as the process in which actors construct meanings and definitions [--] in the pursuit of individual and collective goals' (Lassander 2014, 27). An actor is not the source of an action, but what is made to act by many others (Latour 2005, 46). Creative action is both required and instantiated by change.

For Latour neither society nor social ties exist, but *translations* between *mediators* that may generate traceable associations (Latour 2005, 108). In contrast to mediators *intermediaries* transport meaning without transformation (ibid. 39). Latour adds that when actors are treated as mediators instead of intermediaries, they render the movement of the social visible to the reader (ibid. 128). Reading through ANT helps to explicate the interaction between the actors, while anthropological interpretation seeks the associations linked to the subject matter itself.

The social in the Lightprayer network is movement in the individual and between the individual and the Light, the quasi-object (see table 2). For Latour quasi-objects belong to nature and society only insofar as they are subjects. Quasi-objects are the attachment points of human categories (Latour 2006, 89, 108). According to Lassander the quasi-object seems to be immutable and appears unproblematically as an object (Lassander 2014, 29). Lightprayer events and retreats in particular are *centres of calculation* where participants and the Blankas meet. Latour describes them as landmarks, as the star-like shape of an oligopticon,³ where literal calculations are made possible. From the oligopticon it is possible to see narrow views of the (connected) whole, as long as connections hold (Latour 2005, 178, 181).

In the Lightprayer material, each participant comprises an actor network of her own. These micro-actor-networks relate to the macro-actor network of Lightprayer and become visible in the research material (see Callon & Latour 1981, 279). The micro and macro-networks connect to each other and interpenetrate.

Spiritual process – a protocol in Lightprayer

This is Helena Blanka's description of the process on the Lightprayer website:

Lightprayer starts in you a process of opening and becoming more whole.
What kind of process – it depends on Your situation now here, on Your

3 cf. Michel Foucault's panopticon (see Latour 2005, 181).

highest will. Your inner power wakes up and becomes stronger and You by yourself begin to help you. The process may go on several weeks, may be longer. You choose, You want, You choose, what you want during the light-prayer and how to go on then later after it. Lightprayer listens our will. (LP 3)

In the retreats the practice of lightprayer seeks to activate the participant through drumming and spiritual exercises. These initiate the loosely-defined spiritual process described above by Helena Blanka. In the description the spiritual process is considered to happen between 'you' the participant and the 'higher self', while the higher self is connected to Light. According to my interpretation the communication of Light is to take place as the inner knowledge and experience of the participant. The Light is approached with a question and it will answer in individual ways. This I call the *agency of Light*.

The 'higher self' and 'you' are presented to the participants as a *black box*. 'A black box contains that which no longer needs to be reconsidered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference' (Callon & Latour 1981, 277). What 'being whole' or, inversely, being incomplete in fact mean remains undefined.

In the quotation the self as a combination of deep and surface levels chooses how to go on with the process. Lightprayer is considered to listen; nothing happens that the subject of the spiritual process does not want. However, the participant is not able to consciously control the process, and the aspects and themes the process raises cannot be premeditated.

When someone has signed up for a retreat, Helena sends general information prior to the event and a specific request for spiritual preparation.

CAN YOU ALREADY HEAR YOUR QUESTION...?

our retreat is a process, a journey [--] we want it to be for you and for all of us a journey for opening and growing together and journey of the touch of deep light, journey that continues long after our retreat. and we want and ask love and compassion and joy and all the best to your journey! (Email HB 18.4.2008)

The process is consciously activated with the question. In describing the retreat as a process in itself, Helena Blanka utilises the cognitive metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY (Lakoff & Turner 1989, 9), famously expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882): 'Life is a journey, not a destination.' This emphasises the connotations of a journey towards oneself and the unexpectedness it involves.

The metaphor 'life is a journey' is parallel to the notion of the spiritual process and symbolises it (see Figure 1). A spiritual process can then be considered as a protocol and a *religious way* to associate and tie entities together (Latour 2005, 239). According to Latour religion is about gathering entities and creating new associations between non-social elements in a certain way, much as law or science do in their own way (ibid. 239). The spiritual process can be understood as a kind of protocol that Latour suggests, as actors communicating with each other. For Lassander the religious is an outcome of the network instead of a negotiation about the connections. Lassander suggests that ANT reading illuminates 'what people do with religions and what religions do for them' (Lassander 2014, 149, 153). In the case of Lightprayer it is about both aspects. On the one hand, the spiritual process is a religious way to communicate a certain protocol that the actors use to connect to each other and negotiate the connection. On the other, Lightprayer is an outcome of these negotiations.

Helena Blanka's email continues:

[--] asking activates an important natural law. [--] we must ask to receive. by asking we call it into our life – it and answers how... or whatever we have asked. [--] the questions helps us to stay aware. aware even as we fall. for already rising up the journey continues. [--] (Email HB April 18, 2008.)

Helena defines awareness as a means of understanding oneself and one's present situation in life. Thus, the spiritual process and journey could be understood as a change within or in the conditions of life to learn and gain understanding. The reference to the possibility of falling is conspicuous: problem or discontinuity is here contrasted with being whole. Nonetheless, falling is also considered to be part of the process.

The preliminary questions need not be conscious. However, the Blankas want the participants to reflect on why they wish to take part in the retreat and what they expect from it. Arja has participated in Lightprayer for a while and has formulated a definite question for her second retreat in Airisto.

IR: Did you prepare somehow for this retreat? Or did you feel that you'd already waited for this for a long time?

Arja: Of course, you had to think about those questions and wishes, so there was that, but I did not manage to do a lot or didn't have time otherwise. But of course, I have thought about what I wish for and things like that.

IR: Is the question or wish that you probably sent earlier the basis here?

Arja: Yeah.

IR: Are you conscious of it?

Arja: Well it does pop into mind sometimes but I don't like to think about it all the time.

IR: If you wish to say it, go ahead, but you don't have to. (Chuckle)

Arja: Well this is precisely what I was telling you earlier, about opening up and when you know there is like the other side but there are only kind of flickers from it. You would like to see and feel and hear more about it.

IR: And the one thing here is then like the strengthening of that?

Arja: Right, right, yeah. And of course, some of these more concrete wishes about personal life. But well perhaps this was the biggest of all, to be able to hear oneself better (September 28, 2008).

In Arja's case becoming more open involves the strengthening of the translation between 'you' and a 'higher self'. Arja thinks this would help her to sense 'the other side', the Light, which is present all the time. This is also part of the request to strengthen the protocol, and being involved in Lightprayer.

Peppi describes the process as a more comprehensive part of life, of which the retreat is part.

Peppi: But like I've been there [Orthodox service] for an hour and a half every morning and evening. It has like somehow supported the cleansing. It has been like a journey to the world of Orthodox faith, into the song brought about by the voice that resonates in the body and into the prayer. And then after that the joint sessions of lightprayer that have somehow been taken really deeply and brought about many mental images. And both days I also had personal lightprayers so that this has joined and crystallised into a big process in me that lives in a way. [--]

IR: What made you come to this retreat?

Peppi: I don't know, divine providence, something. [I]t is guidance, a leading light in life. It feels somehow that a circle closes in life that began like a year ago, so now it feels like one journey has all but come to an end or is coming to an end. [--] There has been a kind of a theme, [--] somehow first there was gratitude that I'm here. Then came humility, immense humility. Then came joy. Something like that and a certainty. [--] But every day has had like a theme of its own that arose by itself. And it has too in a way gone along in this. This has been a marvellous experience (April 1, 2009).

The retreat at Valamo was exceptional in the sense that it took place in surroundings provided by the Orthodox monastery, but was not organised by the institution. For most of the retreat Michael was the sole leader, as Helena had to leave for family reasons after the first day (notes March 29, 2009).

Peppi invokes the metaphor of a journey and describes her process as a combination of the Orthodox services and Lightprayer. She also describes how the process arises from within, as do the themes or phases of the process: gratitude, humility, joy, and certainty. The Orthodox services, song, and prayer become actors in addition to Lightprayer. For example, both services and lightprayers are mediators that activate Peppi's process. Peppi does not define what she means by cleansing, her experience suggests it might concern emotions and memories. The positive emotional work is the outcome of successful translation and the spiritual process.

For Peppi the spiritual process is formed in a bodily manner by the Orthodox services and the communal and individual acts of lightprayer. She describes her experience as 'depth', as if travelling to her soul and bringing back evocations to be consciously processed. J. Gordon Melton states that the New Agers have found affinity with the shaman traditions. The shaman is a mystic communicating in interconnection with nature, who goes off into the wilderness to seek a vision if needed, returning to the everyday of the community (Melton 1990, 409). In Lightprayer the participants are seen to go into the wilderness of their inner experience. The Blankas act as spiritual mentors, guides, and supervisors. During the retreats the spiritual process usually takes the place of guidance. In this case there are practically no directions: each participant follows her own guidance. Yet the Lightprayer and Orthodox surroundings remain to serve as the centres of calculation for the event.

The examples of Arja and Peppi illustrate a successful negotiation of connection, in which Helena Blanka's letter is taken as given and 'you' and 'higher self' as normative. The acceptance of these black boxes creates the grounding for the notion of spiritual process that in turn upholds the network of Lightprayer. As a result, the spiritual process is also, apart from being an experiential feature of the retreats and communication with Light, a protocol that is used to strengthen the sense of connection to Lightprayer.

'I am' clauses – opening the black box

In what follows I will analyse the exercise of 'I am' clauses as an example of the practice of spiritual process. The clauses have found their way into

Lightprayer through Jukka Hirvonsalo, a cooperative spiritual teacher of the Blankas at some of the events. Helena has been using these clauses occasionally at some retreats, for example, the New Year retreat. According to Helena in the order she uses them they are connected to the chakra system from one to seven,⁴ roots to the top so that 'true vine' equals the first chakra, as advised by Hirvonsalo (HB December 31, 2008). The idea of the clauses is to programme the mind with the help of breathing.

keep your eyes closed
 concentrate on your breathing
 breath deep peacefully in and out
 breath in: I am love
 and out: the one that I am
 I am love, the one that I am

Let this love fill each of your souls
 your whole beings
 let it flow through you out of your aura into the world, everywhere

now breath in
 I am the true vine [John 15:1]
 And out: the one that I am
 I am, the true vine, the one that I am

I am the way, and the truth, and the life, the one that I am [John 14:6]
 I am the door, the one that I am [John 10:9]
 I am the bread of life [John 6:35]
 I am the good shepherd [John 10:11]
 I am the resurrection and the life [John 11:25]

Drumming follows. (Field recording December 31, 2008)

The Blankas present the exercise as a black box, i.e. something that is supposed to be taken as given. Clauses are *intermediaries* and not explained; instead, each participant is instructed to listen to her or himself about what the clauses mean. However, in the case presented below the black box is opened and applied by Leea. When opened, the black box is activated and

4 One sentence is missing from this practice, the 'I am the light of the world' for the sixth chakra.

becomes a network itself: the intermediary becomes mediator. Opening reveals the interaction within and enables an analysis of the translation.

Leea has previously mentioned 'I am' clauses and compared them to mantras because of their repetitive nature. She has also said that she repeats the clauses during the retreat.

IR: [--] and what about these, you mentioned them already briefly, the clauses, the 'I am' clauses, mantra-type, what did it accomplish, did it have an effect on you? [--]

Leea: Well I experienced them and I thought they were good. I don't really know if they stirred anything big in me, but I notice that I've kind of begun repeating them more generally. And for instance, when we have been out there in nature and when I was alone on Tegelberg and had those terrible fears that were so shocking, whew. So then I tried to kind of repeat them to make myself calm down.

[--] I go on for a little while, I am panicking as I go. I just leaned on the rock and thought that I won't look at the, that I imagined every time that I would just roll down off the ledge. (Laughter.) Then I went to the safe spot of sorts and then I thought that this is really like an exercise in being present, really concrete. I tried to calm down. I figured that I have nothing to fear now, that I'm completely safe. But I was all the time, I couldn't be in that moment because I kept thinking that I have to go through that terrible journey again on the way back. [--] Because I was alone in there. There was nobody anywhere around to save me. (Laughter). That's how it was, I was just trying, breathing in love and peace and I am love. And then I composed myself and went another two metres forward. This second mountain trip to Tegelberg was a pretty powerful process (Laughter) (January 4, 2009).

When the black box is opened and used in this case, the most essential actors become the mountain, the emotions, and the clauses as scenery in which the spiritual process occurs. Leea considers the clause 'I am love'⁵ to be particularly helpful in soothing fear. The clause acts for the interviewee as a mediator that is involved in the formation of inner knowledge, the 'higher self'. The clause was not connected to any particular chakra in Hirvonsalo's guidelines. Instead, it refers to a holistic conception of the relationship between 'you' and the 'higher self'. In the exercise led by Helena Blanka the

5 The verbatim phrase is not found in the Bible. John presents similar passages about love such as '*that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them*' (John 17:26). In Lightprayer "I am love" is used to tune one's awareness and to the state of love.

'I am love, the one that I am' clause brings together love and God's well-known self-designation: 'I am who I am' (Exodus 3:14).

For Leea the process appears as emotional an undertaking as it was for Peppi. The Light agency offers an inner solution in the fear situation. Interestingly, Leea also utilises the concept of journey when describing the way back from the top. In this case the journey is comparable to the metaphor and spiritual process, which is not always pleasant: the emotions vary.

IR: So, in what context have they have been, or what do they mean in Christian belief?

Leea: Well I just think that, they are, they are like the bread of life, it is like all that is. Like what the light perhaps also is. I would think that they aim at just the experience of the divine and its opening in oneself. And I in fact wrote them [the clauses] down in my diary, so I think I would like to begin saying them. But at the same time I noticed that this is the kind of thing, for example, that I would not want to tell to my mother, because she would think that I now imagine myself as some kind of Jesus.

IR: Mocking Jesus.

Leea: Yes, she would see it in a very negative way. Or that is how I imagine her reaction. I can't say that she would take it this way (January 4, 2009).

Climbing the mountain demonstrates the processual work and the interactive aspects that become present and significant in this instance (see Figure 2). Christian beliefs are actors, as is the mountain climber and the diary. The diary replaced the mountain and became the mediator in the individual process and the experience of the significance of the clauses after the retreat. Leea thinks that both the clauses and the Light make the experience of divinity and opening oneself to it possible. The example also shows the change in religious behaviour. Leea's way of belief, reminiscent of Lassander's concept of the trellis, where clauses from the Bible can be newly interpreted, is seen in juxtaposition with her mother's more traditional way. Leea's opening of the black box gives us an idea of what she does with religion and what religion does for her (see Lassander 2014, 149).

A couple of days after the retreat I sent a list of 'I am' clauses to some participants who had requested them. I took the opportunity to ask about the jewellery they wore. This is Leea's answer:

My necklace is made of mountain crystal. I got it before Christmas, and I just felt like taking it with me on the trip. I wore it only a little at the retreat. The

little rose quartz heart was hanging on my neck more. The bracelet on my wrist is chakra jewellery, there's a rock for every chakra. I perform a couple of chakra meditations with it on car trips. I wear it on my wrist every once in a while. I am particularly delighted about my guardian angel pendant I bought in Füssen. I have worn it ever since! (Email 19.1.2009).

In Leea's worldview the pendants, 'I am' clauses, and the chakra necklace have an effect on her energy system. We visited Füssen on the last day of the retreat. It is easy to surmise that the mountain climb the day before and the emotions experienced in it had something to do with the decision to buy the jewellery. The guardian angel is universally considered to have the function of purveying shelter and guidance. The necklace assumed a role in the interviewee's everyday, and perhaps is a material reminder of the retreat process and hence serves as a mediator, like the 'I am' clauses themselves.

Fire ritual – centres of calculation

Since 2007 the fire ritual has increasingly taken place at the retreats. Michael Blanka was instrumental in bringing the use of fire to the Lightprayer's spiritual practice. Michael had participated in a *fire puja* ceremony led by his Hindu teacher guru Sri Kaleshwar (1973–2012) before meeting Helena and had been impressed by its power (email January 20, 2015). *Puja* means 'worship' and 'divination' in the Hindu tradition, and the rituals are many and varied and typically demand the presence of a priest (Dwivedi 2004, 171f.). The fire ritual of Lightprayer was strongly linked to and reinforced by the *puja* of Kaleshwar. In the absence of an explicated divinity (Hindu or otherwise) the fire ritual in Lightprayer became a ceremony aimed at the personal and communal spiritual process.

As mentioned earlier, I consider retreats as well as the fire ritual (which is often included in a retreat) as *centres of calculation*. According to Lassander and Ingman the connections remain as long as the actor network maintains its activity. The centres of calculation not only connect with other sites, but also 'structure the connected whole by translating it'. Lassander and Ingman continue that the translations that are performed at these sites are innovations of the reactions of other actants to the materials circulated through the site (Lassander & Ingman 2012, 215). Retreats and fire rituals are thus places where human and non-human entities gather together and maintain the connections of Lightprayer, particularly through the practice of the spiritual process.

At the New Year's retreat in Schwangau the fire ritual was a special event. It was organised outdoors during the night of New Year's Eve near the Blanka's home, which served as the retreat's venue (see Figure 3). With torches and headlamps, the participants carried the sleighs, firewood and other paraphernalia from the car to the snowless beach along a narrow path.

At about 00:30 we had gathered our things and put the bonfire out. Some went ahead when Michael smelled the coconut. He had put a small coconut into the fire. It looked like a big cone in the incandescent fire. Michael told us that it possessed a large amount of energy. I remember on some [previous] retreat that Michael told us about a person who had performed a ritual with a coconut and how the coconut had finally exploded. We should have stayed for a while for the same thing to happen to Michael's coconut (Notes January 1, 2009).

Here the fire ritual as a centre of calculation illustrates the flexibility of the ritual in accommodating various situations. Here it becomes a grand event of the New Year. It also emphasises Michael Blanka's role as an exemplar for participants. Figure 4 illustrates the act of translation (fire ritual) between the mediators of fire and Michael Blanka. The coconut is the material index of the translation. The presence of the mediator's coconut suggests a connection to the Indian religious tradition. However, in Lightprayer the fire ritual changes according to the situation and cultural context. From the perspective of ANT this is an example of the way in which religious content is negotiated collectively in interaction between actors in the centre of calculation.

The fire ritual is typically performed as part of the Lightprayer session. The ritual lasts between one and two hours. The preparations for the fire ritual begin in the morning as Helena Blanka informs the participants that the ritual will take place later the same day. The participants wander in the nearby nature and gather something to burn, such as a branch, leaf, or cone. The mediating substance to be burnt – such as the coconut – is instilled with one's own will. The participant may carry the notion with her the whole day before it is put on the fire. During the fire ritual each participant puts her object and issue on the fire. Helena Blanka describes the way in which the group and the ritual bring together the power to accomplish that what is wished for, typically, letting go or receiving. At the same time, Helena refers to the fire *puja*:

[--] So until now the fire ritual has been a means of creation for us, so we create with it what we want. I'm not sure what we are going to do with it

today. Today it has had to be empty, bare, clean, until now. Until I say at the end of the lightprayer what we are going to put onto it. And where do we now focus our attention, what do we concentrate on, what do we create (Field recording September 28, 2008).

The quotation from the Airisto retreat illustrates the flexibility and contextual mutability of Lightprayer. Helena waits for inner guidance, Light agency, and delivers the theme for the fire ritual only having received it in the present moment. Helena is the leading actor of both the fire ritual and the retreat, and can be characterised as the administrator of the centre of calculation of the fire ritual. She receives the information and spreads it further.

A few days later, at the same Airisto retreat, a fire ritual was dedicated to forgiving.

IR: How about these others, for example the fire rituals [--], have any of those felt particularly close to you?

Saila: [A]nd then these fire rituals, well, they are indeed immensely kind of impressive. As in somehow doing things in concrete terms. Like today the forgiving.

IR: Yes and it became, we've done it twice in a way. Was it the thing you put into the fire that occurred or something different?

Saila: Yes, it was the same thing for me. I felt it so strongly then the first time that the next night, not in a dream but in this kind of, I suppose it was a bit like a meditative state, one of these people appeared. I got to experience something I experienced as a little girl that she caused me, well, by being unjust that is, I got to the emotion, grasped it. The child that I was there was in such huge despair. Yes, it appeared like, I haven't thought of that person for ages, I suppose that it was kind of raised then.

IR: Did you experience the forgiving also or?

Saila: Yes. The forgiving is based on understanding that we have in a way made peace. Most of all because I have the mother relationship, or perhaps I have most to forgive to my mother. The previous child in our family, a year-and-a-half before I was born, she drowned as a four-and-a-half-year-old. [--] So I have understood it in a way that we have made the agreement, it must be very difficult to fulfil such an agreement when you are the mother of that child, that you would want to love, but you have agreed, when it has wanted, her soul has wanted for her to treat me this way.

IR: Have you had similar processes on other retreats? That you go through some emotions or life situations?

Saila: Yes, but perhaps here the most for some reason (October 3, 2008).

In this translation the material and individual aspects, as well as the Light agency of the fire ritual, are interconnected. The fire ritual elicits a dreamt actor network in which the retreat building, the ritual, the place of sleep, the mother, the deceased sibling, souls and agreements amongst them, water, the recalled living infant, despair, sorrow, and forgiveness all create a meeting ground for the past and present. The perspective of ANT facilitates focusing on the emotions and the experience specified by Saila: the despair of a child and the mother's perspective, and the events made understandable through forgiveness.⁶

Fire rituals and retreats in general can be considered venues in which knowledge production builds on the accumulation of resources through circulatory movements to other places, as the various places and events in Saila's account demonstrate (see also Jöns 2011, 1). As Latour puts it, the mobilisations are 'the true heart' of the networks. It is more important to interpret them than facts or mechanisms (Latour 1987, 240f.). In the concrete action of fire ritual the ephemeral actors of the spiritual domain provisionally become observable actors in the network of Lightprayer. At the same time, the idea of the fire ritual as part of the spiritual process strengthens the significance of the centre of calculation.

The examples of Michael Blanka and Saila demonstrate the kind of things the fire rituals as centres of calculation gather together. The rituals are organised to facilitate the spiritual process and the protocol involved. In Lightprayer the fire ritual has become thematically specified: forgiving, for instance. The emotional work has thus become more organised. The centres of calculation not only bring together different kinds of actors; they also provide a physical exercise for the gathering.

Fire of Assisi – a case of negotiation

The preparations begin on the first day of the retreat after arriving at the house. Where ANT is concerned, the fire ritual and its preparations involve various kinds of agency. The house is damp and bleak, yet it is equipped

⁶ In another piece of research an interviewee reported having prayed on behalf of his child who died as a grown-up and having received a reassuring and comforting answer from the deceased in a dream (Raunola 2012, 160).

with a fireplace. Lyidia and another participant, Lilja, developed a personal bond because of Lyidia's sore back that Lilja healed with her hands. In turn Lyidia wanted to prepare the firewood for Lilja. The Blankas had brought firewood for two fires and possible fire rituals, but firewood was not otherwise provided in the house and twigs and kindling were not easily found in the surroundings either. Lyidia had found a dried cypress branch that she was cutting for Lilja and described it as 'an artistic performance'. The cut and dried wood was used to make the communal fire, against Lyidia's aims.

IR: But, well, what are your thoughts so far of this retreat?

Lyidia: [A]nd then as for myself and my own process, for example the fire ritual last night did cause pretty powerful, powerful conflict that I noticed in the evening too, but I just wondered what's going on. [--] It's very, very interesting that my own personal process beginning from this firewood and logs thing went completely differently than I had thought with the wood I had brought that was part of a particular kind of process that has begun and was perhaps an artistic performance and had to do with Lilja this treatment that she gives to my back and so on. And still there's this will thing that I had, that I put into the fire was that I want to hold on. No, I want to stay on the path. And I just happened to give in, or I agreed to leave my own path because Helena had another idea about what was going on. [--] This is just an example of how in the middle of this being together and the whole structure I feel that I go through very important personal issues (May 21, 2008).

Lyidia reflects on her own actions and feels that she has acted against herself by delivering her firewood for general use. Here the intermediary – the firewood – became a mediator. This translation turned out to be significant for her and she worked on it throughout the retreat by means of several fire rituals. On the one hand, Lyidia did not want to let go; on the other, she wanted to please Helena. This was for her also part of a bigger question about what Lightprayer is and why she wants to be part of it. Once again the cognitive metaphor 'life is a journey' is evoked by a participant, this time to describe Lyidia's own will. Stepping off her path was agreeing with Helena. At the end of the interview Lyidia stated that in subsequent fire rituals she aims to remain more firmly on her own path.

The fire ritual held after the interview on the same day (May 21, 2008) was particularly expressive, loud, and constantly changing (see Figure 5).

The fire isn't burning well.

Erkki thinks that the logs are too big.

Helena comments that they need to bring an axe and a saw with them next time.

Lyydia suggests that each of us should try to make the fire burn better while taking one's thing to burn, as a part of the ritual.

Now the fire is burning again, but Erkki wants to arrange the logs and returns in front of the fireplace for a moment.

Lyydia sits down in front of the fireplace and blows on the fire before setting her branch there. The others are watching quietly, until they start to laugh after Lyydia blows on the fire again and starts to bark like a dog and make other noises before taking her seat. Performance? [--]

Erkki rises to help the fire. Michael goes to upstairs to get the last logs.

Lilja says: 'This fire has a different character (than last night). It doesn't crackle happily, but smoulders and burns in turns.'

Michael brings the rest of the logs and a small hairdryer (for the fire).

Everyone is laughing.

Lilja goes to put branches on the fire. Some of them are still wet. They were collected near the house.

It makes me want to laugh when Lilja is blowing on the fire trying to make it burn. Michael plugs the hairdryer into the extension cable.

[--]

Lyydia moves the candles away from the front.

Rebekka whispers: 'I want to make my wish before it's too late.' She rises from her place, takes a handful of leaves to the fire and returns quickly to her place. The wood leans and is about to fall on the floor. Lyydia: 'What a lovely play.'

Everyone is silent and watches the fire (Notes May 21, 2008).

The fire ritual performed by a group signifies individual things to each participant. Putting the will into the fire, however, creates a communal and negotiated state of process. Finally, in the communal fire ritual the element of fire is the dominant actor and the participants relate themselves to it. However, Lyydia is an active agent throughout the ritual and exhibits a certain intensity towards her own process by applying herself to the way in which the fire burns. Eventually, she brings wood from her room to dry, and says aloud that it is not to be burnt yet (see Figure 6).

There is a dramatic quality in this fire ritual 'play', as Lyydia puts it. The whole group improvises to keep the fire going and performs the ritual more

or less towards Lyidia. At the New Year retreat the fire ritual, however, constituted a specific performance organised in advance by the Blankas. The participants felt no need to alter it.

The last fire ritual was held outside (May 22, 2008). I did not take notes on Lyidia's activity but summarised the balanced atmosphere during the last phase of the retreat in which the fire ritual was essential. One of the participants had named the retreat 'the Fire Retreat' in the afternoon.

In an interview with Lyidia, conducted four months later, we returned to the firewood process. Angels are to be added to the list of actors; these were discussed on the last few nights of the retreat. The interviewee continues talking about remembering her own childhood angel prayer and considers that it became a continuation and endpoint to the firewood episode as part of her spiritual process. The interviewee feels that after the first fire ritual, with other participants, she was able to stay on her own path and the matter received closure – all the more so since she and Lilja virtually organised the last communal fire ritual held outside. They thus appropriated the traditionally conceived authoritative role, and the Blankas let it happen as part of the participants' process. It is peculiar that Lyidia changed her mind in the end:

Lyidia: But for me that, I, I don't remember how much we talked about this, but for me the fire ritual overall was not particularly important. Perhaps I couldn't get into it, or I have done so much of those kinds of things sometime a long time ago, so it was like, wait a minute, like. Bringing some, some wish or will, or something then putting it on the fire, that, that does not actually work for me. I do get fire as an element, maybe for me it is like a purifying element most of all and the warmth that it gives, there it is. Yeah, it does not really work for me (September 4, 2008).

Surprisingly, Lyidia states that the fire ritual was not important to her after all. I try to go through the practical matters of making the fire and the trouble of acquiring the firewood as part of the process (see Table 3). Lyidia sees that the events depicted in the earlier interview have been transformed into an *artistic process* of sorts. She refers to a paper on *Fire ritual and agency* I presented at a conference on the sociology of religion (Augusts 14, 2008), in which I characterised her activity as performing art. This interaction of the researcher and the participant is an interesting example of the complex interrelationships present in participatory anthropological research (see Raunola 2010).

The fire rituals of Assisi and the negotiations involved illustrate Lasser's concept of a trellis, a 'framework [that] is not particular about its

boundaries [and] allows the harvesting of traditions from different cultures for symbols and narratives that suit the individual' (Lassander 2014, 155). Lyidia was able to stay on her path and negotiate her understanding of the fire ritual in a more artistic than religious way. The centre of calculations, the retreat in Assisi, and the fire rituals seemed to function for Lyidia not only as a place to negotiate but also as a test for her worldview. She agreed to take part in the process, but her negotiations shifted from the Lightprayer network to her own individual purposes.

Conclusion

During the retreat we exercised surrendering to the present moment and took the journey ever deeper to oneself – into who I am – and to feel and experience this moment in the silence of one's own, as the true being of oneself and also together as a group (Blog January 31, 2008).

Helena wrote this blog entry during the New Year retreat. To my mind this entry depicts the idea of the spiritual process both in the individual and as a group, and the whole meaning of Lightprayer. The function of Lightprayer and the retreats in particular was to create an environment that supported the spiritual process of the participants with various preparatory exercises and practices, such as 'I am' clauses and 'fire ritual', to get to know 'the true being' of oneself.

As a procedure in the anthropology of religion, ANT makes the human and non-human conditions of interpretation tangible, and it facilitates a flexible way of approaching the research material. As a result, the role of the practice of the spiritual process in Lightprayer is connected with interaction. The successful translations and shared protocol strengthen the connections and the status of Lightprayer. Once the participant accepts and takes part in Lightprayer according to its protocol, she receives personal knowledge that sustains her interest. The holistic and existential spiritual process is seen to involve the interplay of different levels of the individual. It seems that there are two levels of consciousness. The actors are 'higher self' and 'you'. The deep surface engages in a dialogue with the 'you' of the everyday cognitive activity and life situation to facilitate change and make it permanent – the work of becoming 'more whole'.

The metaphor 'life is a journey' is often equated to the spiritual process in Lightprayer. While the retreat entails momentarily retreating from 'life', the subsequent continuation of the journey suggests that the retreat is in

fact an integral part of life with powerful repercussions beyond its temporal scope. Based on the analysis of the research material, the spiritual process is used to bring something new into the consciousness of the participants in addition to enhancing self-awareness. The metaphors of 'path' and 'journey' are used to illustrate personal views and emotions. The spiritual process in Lightprayer facilitates individual knowledge in each participant, Light agency, and experience of the relationship with oneself. The emphasis on the spiritual process may have intrigued and encouraged participants' 'trellises', or it may have formed a barrier between the Lightprayer and potential participants' 'moulds'. As an essential way of communicating, the spiritual process in any case performed a significant role in sustaining the Lightprayer actor network.

As a trellis-type formation, Lightprayer was very tolerant, transformable, and non-hierarchical. In centres of calculation such as the fire ritual the participants were able to actively take part in the organisation of the event. However, in certain matters the Blankas took the role of leading actors and the administrators of Lightprayer. The retreats and fire rituals were essential centres of calculation for enabling the spiritual process and hence the Lightprayer protocol that upheld the continuation of the activity of Lightprayer. Yet centres of calculation also enable the negotiation of individual worldviews.

In his research on paganism Lassander states that a definition of what constitutes religion is not necessary for actor-network theory (Lassander 2012, 251). Instead, it is essential to examine the creative activity and interaction of the actors. In my case this means those involved in Lightprayer. Lightprayer is representative of new religious practices and is an antithesis of inertia and institutionalisation. There is no reason, however, to exclude the perspective or concepts of the study of religions in determining the religious aspects of the phenomenon. As this discussion demonstrates, a more fruitful approach is to assess the methodological gains of the interplay between different modes of research. This is what makes it *anthropology of religion*.

* * *

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Research Material

Retreats referred to in the article

May 21 – May 24, 2008 Assisi, Italy

September 27 – October 4, 2008 Airisto, Finland

December 27, 2008 – January 4, 2009 Schwangau, Germany

March 29 – April 1, 2009 New Valamo Orthodox Monastery in Heinävesi, Finland

Interviews

Research interviews, notes, photographs, and recordings are in the custody of the author.

Helena Blanka

December 31, 2008. Duration 51 mins, Schwangau.

Arja, September 28, 2008. Duration 38 mins.

Peppi, April 1, 2009. Duration 33 mins.

Leea, January 4, 2009. Duration 1 h 5 mins.

Saila, October 3, 2008. Duration 54 mins.

Lyydia, May 21, 2008. Duration 58 mins.

Lyydia, September 4, 2008. Duration 103 mins.

Notes May 21, 2008, Assisi: Picture of Mary on the mantelpiece & the fire ritual description.

Notes May 22, 2008, Assisi: Fire ritual outside.

Notes January 1, 2009, Schwangau: Coconut on the fire.

Notes March 29, 2009, New Valamo: About the retreat.

Field recording September 28, 2008, Airisto: About the fire ritual (original in Finnish).

Field recording December 31, 2008, Schwangau: 'I am' clauses (original in Finnish).

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Appendix

Table 1: The ANT vocabulary of Lightprayer

Spiritual process	Religious way of associating/protocol
'I am' clauses	Black Box
Fire ritual	Centres of calculation
Assisi case	Fire ritual as negotiation

Table 2: Actors of Lightprayer

Light and Light agency	Quasi-object
Lightprayer events	Centres of Calculation
Retreats	Centres of Calculation
Blankas	Mediator
Participants	Mediator

Table 3: The Fire Ritual in Lyidia's network

Blankas' firewood	Intermediaries
Lyidia's and Lilja's branches	Mediators
Fire ritual as spiritual process	Centre of calculation and setting for negotiations and spiritual process

Figure 1: The path is a common metaphor for spiritual progress. Destination, vehicle, and companion are optional components of a journey (Lakoff & Turner 1989, 61). Lakoff points out the ubiquity of the path metaphor in the Judaeo-Christian cultural tradition. The most well-known biblical references are Psalm 23 and Matthew 7:13–14 (ibid. 1989, 9–10) (IR, December 31, 2008).

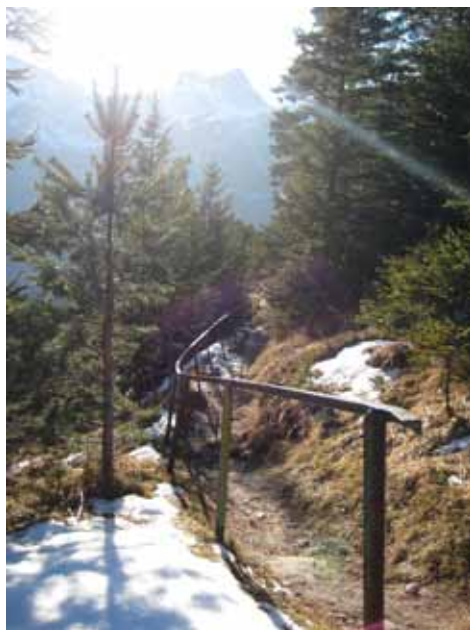


Figure 2: Mount Tegelberg and the cross at the top. The red coat of the interviewee is visible against the blue sky as she descends (IR, December 29, 2008).

Figure 3: Fire ritual on New Year's Eve (IR, December 31, 2008).



Figure 4: The fire ritual as a centre of calculation as negotiated by Michael Blanka.

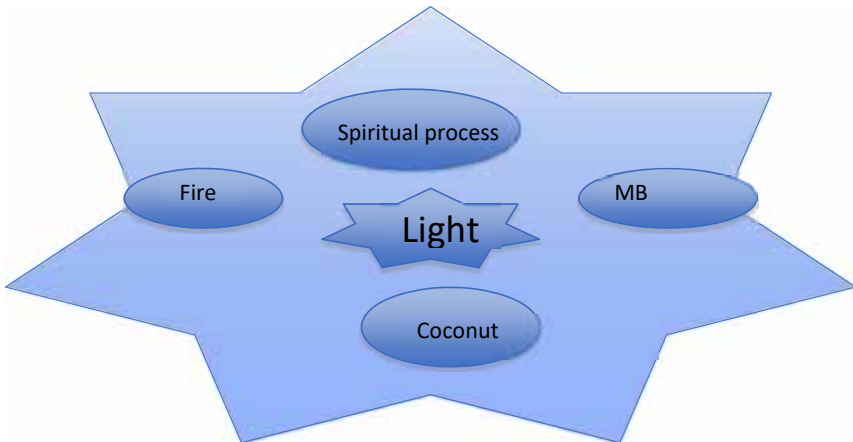


Figure 5: Helena and Michael Blanka prepare the fire ritual in Assisi. Helena chooses music from the laptop for the exercise. The picture of Mary has been placed on the mantelpiece and thus it is present during the fire ritual like an altarpiece (see Rau-nola 2017). In my field notes I recount how



some of the participants had gone to particular trouble to get firewood for the ritual. One participant reports having seen Lydia chopping firewood in the rain like one of the seven dwarves. Including the Blankas, there were seven of us at the retreat. The healer adds that the picture of Mary on the mantelpiece is akin to Snow White (Notes May 21, 2008). This is an illustrative comparison because much as Snow White guides the dwarves, Mary is present as an agent (IR, May 21, 2008).

Figure 6: Lydia drying wood slats on the gas oven collected from the bin in the kitchen. Modern technology aids making the fire (IR, May 23, 2008).



On an Anomalous Piece of Scientology Ephemera: The Booklet *Scientology and the Bible*¹

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Abstract

The article scrutinises the booklet *Scientology and the Bible* (1967), reconstructing the historical circumstances of its publication as well as analysing its potential for interreligious dialogue.

Keywords: *Scientology; Scientology and Christianity; Scientology and the Bible*

The teachings on which Scientology is based are contained in a wealth of publications directly produced, or strictly supervised, by its founder Lafayette Ronald Hubbard (1911–1986), who undoubtedly was endowed with remarkable creativity and productivity. While Scientology is coming under increasing scrutiny by NRM scholars, who try not only to study Scientology from a sociological perspective but also to scrutinise its theories and beliefs, Hubbard's tremendous corpus is examined accordingly and in detail, revealing conceptual shifts over time as well as analogies between Hubbard's narrative production and Scientology's canon.

A relatively unexplored subfield in this regard is Scientology's publications co-authored with Hubbard or even produced by some Scientologists other than the founder, which currently have second-class status and are less prominent, if non-existent, in many churches, since Hubbard's writings are central and it is claimed that they are conserved and transmitted without change or variation. An especially intriguing case is the booklet *Scientology and the Bible*, which dates from 1967. This small publication appeared during a

1 I would like to express deep gratitude to the anonymous reviewers, to Liesl Drew who proofread the first and the second version of the present article, and of course to all the informants. As always, fellow scholars Donald Westbrook and Bernard Doherty provided me with precious materials, contacts, and insights for which I am most thankful. Bernard inspired the title of the article by defining *Scientology and the Bible* 'a fascinating piece of Scientology ephemera' in a 12 March 2015 message in the mailing list New Religious Movements (NRM 7826). The research upon which the article is based was conducted while I was in receipt of generous support from FIIRD in Geneva. I dedicate this article to the students and colleagues who attended the AUI Interfaith Alliance Club Dinner Discussion 'Just a Shade above Clear: Scientology and Interreligious Dialog' on Monday 26 September 2016.

particularly problematic time for Scientology and is credited to seven authors or compilers, one of whom is reported to have died in the year prior to its publication. The booklet addresses the analogies between Scientology and Christianity and displays interesting traits both as to its structure and content.

The analogies between Scientology and other religions, as well as Scientology's approach towards other faiths and beliefs, have become increasingly relevant with globalisation, the church's expansion worldwide, and its increasing aspiration to be recognised not only as a religion in its own right but also as a credible interlocutor in interfaith dialogue. The present article is an attempt at contextualising and analysing *Scientology and the Bible*. The first section presents Scientology's most general teachings, with some emphasis on its theory of knowledge and of God. The second discusses the question of whether Scientology should be considered a genuine religion. The third focuses on Scientology's stance towards Christianity and Jesus Christ. The fourth touches on the role of language in Hubbard's theological writings. The fifth presents the events that marked Scientology's history around 1967. The sixth examines *Scientology and the Bible* by focusing on its structure, declared sources, and concepts. The seventh contains information concerning the booklet's production and circulation provided by several informants. In the eighth I try to reconstruct, in the light of the previous sections, the booklet's *Sitz im Leben*, i.e. its role at the time of its publication and the possible reasons that prompted its production. The conclusions contain some hypotheses as to why the booklet is no longer in use, despite Scientology's concern for interreligious recognition.

Some observations should be added about what prompted me to write the present essay and the method followed in the investigations that provided the material for the seventh section, which is instrumental for the conclusions drawn. I first came across *Scientology and the Bible* while conducting a simple internet search for the terms 'Scientology' and 'Bible', in the context of wider research concerning Hubbard's discussions of the Abrahamic religions. The booklet was (and still is) mentioned and displayed in several discussion groups with disparaging tones. It struck me as intriguing by virtue of three elements: the enigmatic cover illustration, its multiple authorship, and its subject. I soon realised that precise and reliable data about its production and circulation were lacking, both in academic literature and, more generally, on the web. Clearly, the booklet was not referenced in current Scientology, official web pages, and texts underscoring the movement's commitment to interreligious dialogue, and this was paradoxical. Indeed, there was very little to hold on to beyond the derogatory remarks. I decided to produce the academic paper I would have liked to have read after I first encountered *Scientology and the Bible*, i.e. an

essay reconstructing the circumstances in which the booklet was written and circulated, but also assessing its content: how was the booklet structured, and was it well-argued, clear, and convincing? What could be guessed about the authors' competence concerning the Bible? What could be its present value in Scientology's discussion of interreligious issues? To answer such questions I decided to put derogatory comments within brackets and to read the booklet with an open mind, i.e. by charitably assuming it had been the result of a genuine (albeit possibly amateurish) theological effort by its authors.

Given that at the outset there was little information on the circumstances of the booklet's production, its history had to be built from scratch based on the accounts of informants. A special problem emerged as to potential informants. In the study of Scientology they can be roughly divided into ex-members and members (and obviously in this case, they had to be selected among long-serving ones in both groups). Given the extremely controversial character of Scientology, any response to scholarly queries, including those about factual matters such as those in which I was interested, is likely to be formulated with a certain bias. Disgruntled ex-members, although factually well-informed, might be eager to belittle both the relevance of the booklet as well as the very initiative of writing it, and so on. Scientologists interested in enhancing the movement's reputation might overstate the relevance of the work, but also pass over 'embarrassing' circumstances connected to the fact that (as I realised at an early stage) the booklet never became a central publication in Scientology's canon, and so on.² It should also be remarked

2 Similar observations regarding bias and undertones hold for written sources in the form of books and articles. Jon Atack, Bent Corydon, and Russell Miller, whose monographs are referenced in the present essay, all fall under the (broad) category of authors hostile to Scientology, as well as journalist Tony Ortega. When reading Corydon & Hubbard Jr. 1987 we must bear in mind that Hubbard Jr. (Ronald DeWolf), on whose memoirs and interviews the book is based according to Corydon (himself a former high-ranking Scientologist), made a retraction of his co-authorship prior to the book's official release that was nevertheless indicated in the first edition (Hubbard Jr.'s official complaint to the Federal District Court of New Jersey available at: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/73/Ronald_Edward_Dewolf_01_July_1987.pdf). All such caveats considered, these works still constitute a useful starting point for a discussion of Hubbard/Scientology given the wealth of detailed first-hand information they contain, in particular about episodes that have yet to be examined academically in great detail (as is the case, for example, with Hubbard's forays in South Africa and Rhodesia). That a work is generally hostile does not necessarily mean it is *not* well-researched. Atack (who is also a former, long-serving Scientologist) especially supports his claims with a system of references that places his monograph on a par with academic texts, and the gist of historical reconstruction he and Corydon and Miller present (i.e. the specific *facts* they recall) is also discussed or presented in the same terms in more academic historical works (for example, those of Roy Wallis or Hugh Urban). In my opinion awareness of different (negative) biases should

that secrecy plays an important role in Scientology (which is, as we will see, initiatory in character), that the movement's relationship with researchers has undergone a process of détente only in relatively recent times, and that a single member, although eager to interact with a researcher, might at the same time be afraid of being reproached by higher-ranking members for having disclosed too much information.

The variables involved are subtle and numerous. To this we should add general and commonsensical *caveats* concerning anybody's capacity to accurately recall events that occurred half a century ago. Well aware of these challenges, I decided to consult with representatives of both groups in order to strike a balance, given that they had served in the movement for long enough to potentially hold relevant, first-hand information. I thus made enquiries of three prominent ex-members (two based in the US, one in the UK), as well as with three high-ranking Scientologists based respectively in the US, the UK, and Australia. Of the former, both US-based ex-members came up with articulate answers. Of the latter, only my Australian informant was able to help, yet did so thoroughly, even being in a position to exchange information with one of the booklet's authors.

I formulated my question as neutrally as possible: 'Do you happen to recall any information concerning the production and circulation of the 1967 booklet *Scientology and the Bible?*' I did not explicitly ask for personal evaluations of its content and function, although of course I expected the informants to add their opinion, which eventually happened. I decided to act very tactfully and respectfully and to take all my informants' statements at face value, i.e. not to challenge them on any factual points or opinion (unless they stated blatant contradictions or inaccuracies, which was never the case). In the case of the Australian informant I did *not* insist on getting directly in touch with the booklet's co-author, nor on obtaining more information than the informant was willing to share. For all these reasons all such information is provided in the form of a direct quotation from my private exchanges.³ This Scientologist also preferred to remain anonymous, a

lead to critical discussion and presentation, not to their rejection altogether. It is also highly disputable that academic reconstructions are completely free of any bias or self-censorship, especially considering Scientology's attitude towards investigations of any kind over the past decades. For these reasons I have made extensive mention of historical passages by 'hostile' authors in the present essay. I have principally mentioned passages from such monographs that concern factual information rather than the authors' judgement of Scientology, or in any case passages in which such authors are clearly trying to be as objective as possible (e.g. when Miller criticises the Anderson Report). I also complement such reference with mention of analogous passages in Wallis's and Urban's work (as well as other scholarly sources such as Bernard Doherty's discussion of the Anderson Report) when possible. For a discussion of the sources concerning Scientology (especially the Sea Org) and of their respective biases see also Melton 2001 no. 60.

3 I have selected the parts I deemed relevant. The full texts are in my archives and available to all who are interested.

wish I respected.⁴ In the light of all such choices and provisos, it is my hope that my readers will still appreciate the information concerning a booklet whose examination started in a sort of vacuum, and that on this basis they will be able to form their own opinion both as to the circumstances of its production and its content.

Dianetics, Scientology, and the concepts of soul and God

The first nucleus of what are today Scientology's teachings stemmed from what Hubbard presented as his research into the human soul performed after the Second World War, and which he organised into a method called *Dianetics* (according to Hubbard's explanation from the ancient Greek terms for 'through' and 'knowledge'). Dianetics was first explained in an article appearing in a science fiction magazine in May 1950, and later in an independent volume published that year (Hubbard 1950a; Hubbard 1950b). Dianetics claims that the human mind is impaired by *engrams*, mnemonic traces of traumatic or negative experiences. The mind is described as mainly divided into two parts. The passive one, where engrams are accumulated, is called *reactive*, and is opposed to the active, or *analytical*, mind (CSI 1998, 16). Through a procedure called *auditing* (from the Latin verb for 'listening'), performed with the help of a device called an E-Meter (Electropsychometer), the engrams can be identified and eliminated, leading to the drastic improvement of a person's potential for action and success (CSI 1998, 33–7).

From the outset Hubbard faced intertwined challenges to the recognition, doctrinal integrity, and financial success of Dianetics. Auditing can recall a session of psychotherapy and Hubbard, at least indirectly if not because of direct reading, was influenced by Freudian ideas. However, when his attempts to obtain the recognition and approval of psychologists and psychiatrists were met with suspicion, contempt, and rebuttal, Hubbard started attacking their disciplines (including medicine more generally) as inhumane and abusive, and they have since remained a principal polemical target of Scientology (Wallis 1976, 23; Urban 2011, 45f.; 59; Kent & Manca 2014). Furthermore, practitioners began discussing, inventing, and implementing their own variants of Dianetics (Wallis 1976, 81). With a series of practical initiatives, among the most important being the incorporation of three new organisations in December 1953 in

⁴ I set out not to be influenced by any suggestions from my informants as to the paper's structure and content. The responsibility for how the informants' texts (and their statements in general) are used, especially in the evaluative sections, is entirely mine.

Camden, NJ (the Church of Scientology, the Church of American Science, and the Church of Spiritual Engineering – Urban 2009, 65), and with the adoption of a new lexicon and narratives, Hubbard began presenting the movement as a religion.

Where doctrine is concerned the birth of Scientology (according to Hubbard from the Latin term for ‘knowledge’ and the ancient Greek suffix denoting ‘study’) was marked by Hubbard’s encapsulation of Dianetics in a broader conceptual system and narrative. The human soul is defined as *thetan* (from the ancient Greek letter theta, taken by Hubbard as representing ‘life force’), a spiritual unity that goes through a process of successive (human) incarnations (CSI 1998, 17f.). In this enlarged system the engrams are attributed to traumatic experiences, or ‘incidents’ undergone in lives dating back even millions of years. The thetans’ collective vicissitudes are absorbed in a grand narrative whose details are gradually revealed to Scientologists according to their advancement on the path of improvement, defined as the Bridge to Total Freedom, which is walked by successfully performing auditing sessions (CSI 1998, 31, 56). The phases of the advancement through auditing are elaborated in great detail together with hierarchies, auditing procedures, and prices. Before an individual is liberated from the content of the reactive mind he or she is defined as *pre-clear*. A liberated individual is described as *clear* (CSI 1998, 37). One of the Bridge’s higher stages is defined as *Operating Thetan* or OT, and is said to be able to control the matter, energy, space, and time (MEST) (CSI 1998, 18, 37, 55, 104-9) that have otherwise entrapped thetans (since ancestral times, when they forgot their own creative, infinite capacities and thus became entangled in their own creations). Scientology also contains a meticulously numbered taxonomy of emotions called *tone levels* (Harley and Kieffer 2009, 194f.).

Another relevant theory concerns the eight *dynamics* or *dimensions of survival*, perspectives from which thetans can examine themselves and aspire to continue their lives, the eighth being the *Supreme Being* or God, which is left vague or open (CSI 1998, 22–26). Currently, an official webpage answers the question of whether Scientology has a concept of God as follows: ‘Most definitely. In Scientology, the concept of God is expressed as the Eighth Dynamic – the urge toward existence as infinity. This is also identified as the Supreme Being. As the Eighth Dynamic, the Scientology concept of God rests at the very apex of universal survival.’ This observation is, however, qualified as follows: ‘Unlike religions with Judeo-Christian origins, the Church of Scientology has no set dogma

concerning God that it imposes on its members. As with all its tenets, Scientology does not ask individuals to accept anything on faith alone.' Full knowledge of God is presented as a supreme achievement on the Bridge: 'Accordingly, only when the Seventh Dynamic (spiritual) is reached in its entirety will one discover and come to a full understanding of the Eighth Dynamic (infinity) and one's relationship to the Supreme Being' (Scientology 2015a).

Dianetics, Scientology, and religion

Some remarks should be added regarding the shift from Dianetics to Scientology, and the current relationship between the two sets of doctrines. Roy Wallis's ground-breaking monograph (Wallis 1976) described the initial phase as 'cult' and its successor as 'sect'. Although this terminological choice can be considered outdated, Wallis's analysis is correct insofar as the factual reconstruction is concerned, and sufficiently detailed to provide the reader with an overview of the problems related to the Dianetics/Scientology relationship and transition. From a historical perspective the Dianetics movement occurred from 1950 until the incorporation of the first Scientology churches. However, Dianetics and Scientology are separate *subjects*, the former (Hubbard's mental health system) being presented as the sub-study and forerunner of the latter (Hubbard's applied religious philosophy). The lines between the two are at times blurred; most notably, the language and techniques of Dianetics appear in the OT levels. Wallis writes that the developments in the ideology and organisation

[...] emerged partly as the resolution of a variety of strains and conflicts in the Dianetics community, which existed between Hubbard and other leaders; between Hubbard's desire for a stronger central organization and the amateur groups keen to retain their independence; and between Hubbard and other innovators of theory and practice (Wallis 1976, 77).

Organisational changes and the emergence of new teachings marking Hubbard's movement as *new* (and *specific*, as opposed to independent, practice) identity can be considered as two sides of the same coin. Their interaction is open to discussion, and ultimately depends on a judgement of the sincerity of Hubbard's claims. A new teaching such as the existence of previous lives could well stem from his genuine conviction of having made a major 'discovery' that proved controversial and divisive; conversely, emphasis on

a new teaching might be used as a strong identity marker to differentiate the movement from other groups and test affiliates' loyalty.⁵

The issue of whether Hubbard's discoveries were genuine or instrumental inevitably leads to the important (and enduring) question of whether Scientology is 'really' a religion. Besides having proven decisive in juridical contexts (most notably, when the issue at stake was whether the movement qualified to enjoy a specific fiscal policy) this question is often raised by non-experts. It should also be remembered that, even if one is eager to recognise Scientology as a religion or takes for granted that the answer is in the affirmative, according to Scientology's own narrative it did not stem from a revelation proper, but rather from the 'discoveries' of its founder. In this sense, even by its standards, Scientology is a religion, but a special one. Significantly, Scientology scholar J. Gordon Melton calls one of the chapters of his 2000 monograph 'But is it a religion?' (Melton 2000, 53ff.). Melton recalls in detail both the reasons advanced by the advocates of the position, according to which Hubbard was merely opportunistic in introducing the religious turn, and the reasons Scientology should be considered a religion. Although he is finally inclined to embrace the latter position, he accurately states why Scientology is ultimately a religion *sui generis*, and he proves able to empathically understand why, above and beyond matters of personal hostility to Hubbard or scepticism towards it, Scientology itself can still be perceived as not completely falling under the category of religion. Having pointed out that Hubbard's 'research', although presented as 'scientific', 'led him quickly into metaphysics and speculation about areas beyond the realm of contemporary science', thus making statements that any scientist would deem religious in character, J. Gordon Melton concludes:

Thus Scientology has found itself in the middle. [...] In developing an organization to embody and perpetuate such a spiritual science, it has created a church, but one that looks unfamiliar to those used to churches and temples which house other more well-known religious groups [...]. Believers and crit-

5 Ex-Scientologist and author Jon Atack provided me with a completely deflationist account of the birth of Scientology, as far as theological and theoretical matters were concerned: '[Hubbard] sold his rights to Dianetics to Don Purcell [a business man who initially supported him], so he created Scientology. In 1955, Purcell returned the rights, so Hubbard began to use the term again. He later suggested that Dianetics was the "mental science" and Scientology the "spiritual". There is no really consistent definition – Hubbard was an opportunist and reframed his terms to suit the situation. [...] I would simply say that Hubbard first called his subject Dianetics, but adopted the term Scientology after selling the rights to Dianetics' (private communication, 28th December 2015).

ics agree: the feeling one receives from a Church of Scientology is completely different from a Christian sanctuary or a Buddhist temple (Melton 2000, 58f.).

Melton's remarks help us to understand the complexity of the issues and their nuances. Such questions must be touched on here, although of course they cannot be fully explored. However, the present study adopts a *via media*, although I am aware that this approach will probably disappoint both Scientologists and Scientology's critics. First, as we have already pointed out, conceptual and organisational shifts are strictly intertwined. In the absence of documents demonstrating with absolute certainty that Hubbard introduced new teachings in a purely instrumental and opportunistic vein, the problem is, to a certain extent, like that of the chicken and the egg. Moreover, we are discussing the relationship (and analogies) between Scientology and Christianity, which everyone considers a proper religion. Precisely for this reason what ultimately matters is that Scientology *does* contain a theory including *concepts* (such as God and spirit), *narratives* (such as the spirit's development and destiny), and *prescriptions* (such as the behaviour to be embraced in this life) that is shared with, or analogous to, religions in general and Christianity in particular, independently of what prompted Hubbard and his followers to advance these concepts, narratives, and prescriptions. Our preoccupation will be to examine such analogies from a conceptual perspective rather than to guess the reasons for their emergence.

Christian signs and Christ narratives

Between 1954 and 1959 Scientology emerged as a fully-fledged religion, and established a visual, linguistic, and practical continuity with extant ones. Scientology adopted among its symbols a cross, currently to be seen on major buildings, that shows eight arms. These arms are said to symbolise the above-mentioned eight dynamics. Auditors began wearing white, priestly collars. Similarities emerged in language as well: for example, since auditing started to be called 'pastoral care', auditors were called 'pastors', Scientology seats 'missions', and audited Scientologists 'parishioners'. Hubbard also established ceremonies, such as Sunday services, weddings, and funerals that, analogously to similar ceremonies in other religions, mark both an individual's and the community's existentially most important and most emotion-laden moments (Urban 2011, 66 and Dericquebourg 2009). Again, regardless of the question of whether Hubbard was 'sincere' or not, it seems safe to state that all these traits fulfilled a reassuring function es-

pecially in the eyes of the US-American public, contributing to the creation of an impression of familiarity.

Over time, and with the emergence of interfaith concerns on a global scale, Scientology strove to present itself as one religious interlocutor among others and on a footing of equality with them. Currently, an official webpage dedicated to the question of Scientology's stance towards Moses, Jesus, Buddha, and Muhammad refers to a lecture given by Hubbard on 3rd June 1955 entitled 'The Hope of Man', in which he stated: 'These great spiritual leaders have been hanged, reviled, misinterpreted, badly quoted, have not been at all comprehended, but nevertheless, they are the hands through which a torch has been handed forward through the centuries.' Among such great spiritual leaders Scientology's founder explicitly names Jesus: 'But what I am telling you is that these people handed on a torch of wisdom, of information, generation to generation. It was handed along geographical routes and one of those geographical routes was the Middle East. And one of the people who handed it on was a man named Moses. And again it was handed on to a man named Christ' (Scientology 2015b).

Indeed, it seems that Hubbard explicitly suggested that the formal acceptance of Jesus Christ was a useful, instrumental strategy in interfaith relationships: "'The way to handle an individual minister of some other church' includes agreeing that Jesus Christ was the Savior of Mankind and that 'the Bible is a holy work'" (Urban 2011, 232, n. 33, quoting Hubbard's 'The Scientologist', 1955, Vol. 2, 158).

If one digs more deeply into official statements a more nuanced doctrine seems to emerge that is potentially troubling for Christians. I am not referring to the overall compatibility of Scientology's teachings with Christianity's, but rather to the very figure of Christ and the way in which Hubbard conceptualises it. We should first recall that former members of Scientology who reached the level of Operating Thetan VIII testify that they were assigned to read a posthumous letter by Hubbard in which, *inter alia*, he referred to Jesus in very unflattering terms:

The historic Jesus was not nearly the sainted figure he has been made out to be. In addition to being a lover of young boys and men, he was given to uncontrollable bursts of temper and hatred (...). It is historic fact and yet man still clings to the ideal, so deep and insidious is the biologic implanting (reported in Ortega 2014).

The reference to 'implanting' is connected with another doctrine supposedly disclosed at high OT levels, according to which their archenemies filled the thetans in ancestral times with deceiving images or false memories, including those relating to world religions and, more specifically, to Jesus. The former Scientologist and author Jon Atack states in *A Piece of Blue Sky*: 'In confidential issues, Hubbard dismissed Christian teaching as an "implant". [He] attacked Christianity as an "implant", and said that Christ was a fiction' (Atack 1990, 376, 383).

The Anderson Report (written by Kevin Victor Anderson QC), the result of an official inquiry published in 1965 into the Church of Scientology conducted for the Australian State of Victoria, discusses Scientology's relationship with extant religions and observes: 'In *Certainty Magazine*, Vol. 5, no. 10, it is written, "Two and a half thousand years ago a handful of clears civilized half a billion people. What if we were all clear. Neither Lord Buddha nor Jesus Christ were OTs according to the evidence. They were just a shade above clear."' (Anderson report, Chapter 27). This passage is also quoted (in reference to the magazine *The Ability* no. 81, 1959) by Russell Miller in his biography of Hubbard, *Bare-Faced Messiah* (Miller 1987, 203).

In a webpage entitled 'The Scientology Comparative Theology Page' authored by Perry Scott, and more precisely in its section entitled 'Hubbard maligns Christianity', reference is made to Hubbard's lecture 'Krakatoa and Beyond' (no. 10 in *The Class VIII [Auditor's] Course*, held on 3rd October 1968 aboard the ship Apollo), in which Scientology's founder stated:

Somebody somewhere on this planet, back about 600 BC found some pieces of R6. And I don't know how they found it, either by watching madmen or something, but since that time they have used it and it became what is known as Christianity. The man on the cross. There was no Christ. But the man on the cross is shown as Everyman. So of course each person seeing a crucified man, has an immediate feeling of sympathy for this man. Therefore you get many PCs who says [*sic*] they are Christ. Now, there's two reasons for that, one is the Roman Empire was prone to crucify people, so a person can have been crucified, but in R6 he is shown as crucified.

This can be heard in Hubbard's own voice through a link to an audio file reported on the same page. 'R6' is Hubbard's jargon for implants, and 'PC' is the abbreviation for 'pre-clear'. The same passage is also quoted in *L. Ron Hubbard, Messiah or Madman?* (Corydon and Hubbard Jr 1987, 362). It seems clear that Hubbard delivered the statement 'There was no Christ' as

a punch line (he can even be heard taking a short pause and a puff on his cigarette before saying 'The man on the Cross'), intentionally speaking in a way that most Christians would find unsettling.

In the light of these last observations one can consider Scientology as characterised by a double standard where Christianity is concerned. To be sure, what we have just heard from Hubbard's narratives is scarcely reconcilable with Christian faith and teachings, not to mention its tone, which is incompatible with current interreligious dialogue etiquette. However, the problem of the double standard is not only Scientology's; nor does it necessarily whet the blades of those who maintain that Scientology is not religious. It is rather a shared problem of all religions. Claims of compatibility and observations concerning doctrinal analogies invariably emerge in a political context (*lato sensu*), in which diplomacy must be favoured above accurate analysis of the founders' doctrines (not to mention their private or theologically more marginal statements, as was the case in Hubbard's *Apollo* lecture). Indeed, when two religious messages confront each other, two 'truths' are inevitably at stake, even when one revelation is said to integrate rather than cancel out another. This is the case, for example, with Islam, whose similarities with and recognition of Christianity are often eagerly underscored in interreligious dialogue both by Muslims and Christians, whereas the Qur'ān explicitly denies both Jesus's divine nature and his supremely symbolic and theologically central death on the cross – statements that present a major theological challenge to interreligious tolerance and dialogue (Bigliardi 2014). In this sense Scientology's attitude is the rule rather than the exception.

Scientology jargon

In listing the factors that determine the survival of a new religious movement, Rodney Stark states that it should bear enough resemblances to extant ones so as not to be unsettling (Stark 1996). At the same time, a new religious movement should be different enough both to entice the curiosity of potential affiliates and to mark affiliates' identity. Both elements can be clearly detected in the language of Scientology. On the one hand, cultural continuity is mainly represented by the above-mentioned terminology and visual devices, which echo Christianity. On the other, Hubbard devised neologisms that define central concepts, roles, or practices in the church that create a special, dense Scientology jargon. They can be newly created or pre-existing terms to which Hubbard gave a new and specific meaning.

'Engram', 'thetan', 'pre-clear', 'auditor', and 'auditing' are only a few examples among thousands.

This makes for a special feature of Hubbard's books, as well as of Scientology studies: the insistence and focus on terminology and on its correct understanding. Hubbard's books usually open with an 'Important Note', which reads:

In reading this book, be very certain you never go past a word you do not fully understand. The only reason a person gives up a study or becomes confused or unable to learn is because he or she has gone past a word that was not understood.

The confusion or inability to grasp or learn comes AFTER a word the person did not have defined and understood. It may not only be the new and unusual words you have to look up. Some commonly used words can often be misdefined and so cause confusion.

This datum about not going past an undefined word is the most important fact in the whole subject of study. Every subject you have taken up and abandoned had its words which you failed to get defined.

Therefore, in studying this book be very, very certain you never go past a word you do not fully understand. If the material becomes confusing or you can't seem to grasp it, there will be a word just earlier that you have not understood. Don't go any further, but go back to BEFORE you got into trouble, find the misunderstood word and get it defined.

Correspondingly, all Hubbard's books are integrated with a glossary and 'word clearing' (in itself a piece of Scientology jargon) broken into several passages and illustrated in detail, which is an important element of Scientology studies (CSI 2015).

Hubbard and Scientology, 1965–7

Scientology and the Bible was published in 1967. No period in the history of Scientology can be characterised as genuinely normal; and 1967 and the years prior to it were *surely* not.

In 1959 Hubbard had established the British head office of Scientology at Saint Hill Manor in West Sussex, where he had moved with his

family in the spring. Here he was soon to be the subject of articles in local newspapers (Miller 1987 233ff.). In March 1961 he would launch a 'Saint Hill Special Briefing Course' for auditors to be trained under his guidance (Miller 1987, 242) and the manor would thus become the Mecca of Scientology. Bent Corydon remarks that '[At Saint Hill Hubbard] was in touch with all Scientology activities around the world by a modern telex system that rivalled those of major corporations. Of the 300 to 400 crew members, some 20 worked long hours just manning the telexes and other communications systems between Hubbard and his world-wide organizations' (Corydon and Hubbard Jr 1987, 23).

This was the start of several years of prosperity for the movement. We read in *Messiah or Madman*: 'In the 1960s Scientology boomed. On five continents students of Scientology studied intently in "academies" at their "local Churches." People arrived in droves to take courses' (Corydon and Hubbard Jr 1987, 20). Scientology was going international, first reaching English-speaking countries, but at the same time attracting the attention of the authorities. In the Australian State of Victoria a Board of Inquiry was established in response to a Member of Parliament who had sought a ban on Scientology. The result was the above-mentioned Anderson Report. In the words of Russell Miller:

In October 1965, the Australian Board of Inquiry into Scientology published its report. Conducted by Kevin Anderson QC, the inquiry sat for 160 days, heard evidence from 151 witnesses and then savagely condemned every aspect of Scientology. No one needed to progress beyond the first paragraph to guess at what was to follow:

'There are some features of Scientology which are so ludicrous that there may be a tendency to regard Scientology as silly and its practitioners as harmless cranks. To do so would be gravely to misunderstand the tenor of the Board's conclusions. This Report should be read, it is submitted, with these prefatory observations constantly in mind. Scientology is evil; its techniques evil; its practice a serious threat to the community, medically, morally and socially; and its adherents sadly deluded and often mentally ill' (Miller 1987, 251).

Even Miller recognises that Anderson's tone was exaggerated: 'In his determination to undermine Scientology, Anderson completely ignored the fact that thousands of decent, honest, well-meaning people around the world believed themselves to be benefiting from the movement. To condemn the

church as “evil” was to brand its followers as either evil or stupid or both – an undeserved imputation’ (Miller 1987, 252).⁶

In October 1959 Hubbard had flown to Australia where ‘[a]t the Hubbard Communications Office in Spring Street, Melbourne, he was greeted by an ecstatic crowd of Scientologists who cheered noisily when he announced his belief that Australia would be the first “clear continent”’ (Miller 1987, 236). The Report seriously questioned his sanity, describing him as delusional, megalomaniacal, and histrionic. He rebutted this immediately, calling it the outcome of a ‘Kangaroo Court’ that had already made its decision before even beginning the hearings, and making several unpleasant comments about the origins of the Australians and what might be expected from them. He also hinted that while serving in the Navy in the Second World War he had helped save Australia from the Japanese, and that the country was therefore ungrateful. Despite this, he stated, he would continue ‘helping them’ (Miller 1987, 253).

However, this inspired him to define a precise policy of how to react in such cases. In the words of Miller: ‘The first step was to identify the antagonists, next investigate them “for felonies or worse” and then start feeding “lurid, blood sex crime actual evidence on the attackers” to the press. “Don’t ever tamely submit to an investigation of us,” he warned. “Make it rough, rough on attackers all the way”’ (Miller 1987, 254). This was soon implemented when Great Britain followed the example of the State of Victoria. In December 1965 the Australian State of Victoria passed the Psychological Practices Act, outlawing Scientology. On 7th February 1966 Lord Balniel MP, at that time Chairman of the National Association for Mental Health, asked the Minister of Health to initiate an inquiry into Scientology in Britain, and Hubbard hired a private detective to start an investigation (Miller 1987, 253-254). Meanwhile, Scientology had experienced major problems in the US, the FDA having raided its Washington headquarters in January 1961 and

6 Doherty 2015 presents a meticulous reconstruction of the events leading up to and following the Anderson Report, mainly based on previously unexplored government material. Concerning the general tone and content of the report, Doherty remarks: ‘[it] delved heavily into the scientific and medical claims which Hubbard had made in various writings and into the technical efficacy of the E-Meter, but [it] gave short shrift to the claims made by everyday Scientologists about the alleged benefits they received from their involvement’ (Doherty 2015, 24-25); ‘Despite its hyperbole, the report was in certain aspects exhaustive and featured extensive analysis of much of Hubbard’s written work, as well as details about the financial operations, organization, and alleged harm caused by the group to family life and community morals. However, the later charge that the report bore the imprint of Anderson’s own conservative morality, and the repugnance with which he viewed what he called “Hubbard’s morbid preoccupation with perversion,” is well founded’ (Doherty 2015, 26).

confiscated books and E-Meters (Miller 1987, 247). This latter event would result in a long series of court battles in the US (Urban 2011, 63).

In March 1966 Hubbard established the Guardian's Office, whose function was to protect the organisation, gathering information about agencies and individuals who might constitute a threat to the church. It was headed by Hubbard's third wife, Mary Sue (1931–2002).

Miller also reports that, in an attempt to restore Scientologists' morale, Hubbard started circulating the news that John McMaster, a South African Scientologist who started auditing after an operation for his stomach cancer, was the world's first clear after passing an E-Meter test on 8th March 1966 (Miller 1987, 254f.). McMaster would leave the church only a few years later, having been designated a major spokesperson and even 'Pope' of Scientology, which attracted considerable attention and made Hubbard envious (Miller 1987, 273; see also Corydon and Hubbard Jr 1987, 25f.; 181; 316f.; Ortega 2015).

In 1966 Hubbard issued a statement in which he renounced his title of 'Doctor' (which had, in fact, been issued by a diploma mill), a protest against all those who, endowed with PhDs, had harmed humanity (Miller 1987, 255). He then headed for Rhodesia, a British Territory in Southern Africa (now Zimbabwe), where Prime Minister Ian Smith and his cabinet had issued a Unilateral Declaration of Independence on 11th November 1965. Hubbard, who had already lectured to Scientologists in Cape Town and Johannesburg in October and November 1960 and in Johannesburg in January 1961 (Miller 1987, 242), tried to exploit the politically troubled situation by presenting himself as an American millionaire who could help the state's finances. He developed links with prominent citizens and politicians and even penned a draft for a new constitution, which he submitted to the Prime Minister's office, receiving a diplomatic but non-committal response. It is even reported that Hubbard identified with Cecil John Rhodes (1853–1902), the British millionaire and politician who was the territory's eponymous founder. It is likely that his controversial status, grandeur and success inspired Hubbard. However, Hubbard was forced to leave the country after his application for a temporary residence extension failed. He delivered a speech (filmed by Rhodesian television) on 15th July, and flew back to England, where he received an enthusiastic welcome. The Rhodesian enterprise resulted in a major financial loss (Miller 1987, 256–260).

Aware that trouble was also mounting in the US, where the Internal Revenue Service had started questioning Scientology's tax-free status, Hubbard formulated a new and secret plan. In September 1966 he formally stepped

down as Scientology's president, claiming that the church was sufficiently organised to survive without him. On 12th August 1967 he launched the Sea Org. In the words of Miller: '[Hubbard] raised a private navy, appointed himself Commodore, donned a dashing uniform of his own design and set forth on an extraordinary odyssey, leading a fleet of ships across the oceans variously pursued by the CIA, the FBI, the international press and a miscellany of suspicious government and maritime agencies' (Miller 1987, 263).

The Sea Org initially comprised four ships: the *Diana*, the *Athena*, the *Apollo*, and the *Excalibur*. During his eight-year 'extraordinary odyssey' Hubbard was to elaborate new Scientology teachings (we have already seen that a lecture touching upon Jesus Christ was delivered on board the *Apollo*). The daily routine and Hubbard's on-board behaviour have been described by former members as characterised by blatant disrespect for basic human rights, with onerous chores and food deprivation for Scientologists deemed guilty of various failures.

Based on land, the Sea Org remains a core, upper-level institution of Scientology whose members, according to its entry on the official web site, 'work long hours and live communally with housing, meals, uniforms, medical and dental care, transport and all expenses associated with their duties provided by the Church. They also receive an allowance to purchase personal items, as all of their other expenses are fully covered by the Church' (Scientology 2015c; see also Melton 2001).

Scientology and the Bible

Scientology and the Bible is a fifty-page pamphlet (four supplementary pages contain the customary Glossary of Dianetics and Scientology terms). The cover displays a white drawing on a black background of a long-haired, bearded face with an enigmatic expression. The expression might be of slight suffering or compassion. It might be interpreted as a portrait of a prophet, or as a representation of a fatherly God (the white hair makes it unlikely that it represents Jesus Christ). Under the drawing is the motto 'Scientology is here to rescue you'. There is a biblical verse on the title page, Proverbs 21:30: 'There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord' (translations from the Authorised Version).

The title is repeated on the second page, where there is also an interesting subtitle that defines the pamphlet: 'A manifest paralleling the discoveries of Scientology by L. Ron Hubbard with the Holy Scriptures'. This page also reports that it was compiled by Catherine Biggs, Colin Chalmers, Margaret

Chalmers, Doreen Elton, Gladys Goodyer, Catherine Steele, and Dorothy Penberthy, and that the booklet was published by the Department of Publications World Wide.

On the third page there is a quotation from a 1964 text by Mary Sue Hubbard ('Supplement to "Communication"') under a heading in capital letters: 'Scientology is a religion'. In this short paragraph we read that

Scientology is a religion in the oldest sense of the word, a study of wisdom. Scientology is a study of man as a spirit, in his relationship to life and the physical universe. It is non-denominational. By this is meant that Scientology is open to people of all religious beliefs and in no way tries to persuade a person from his religion, but assists him to better understand that he is a spiritual being...

The fourth page provides the reader with some further insights into the booklet's production. Here we read that the Department of Publications World Wide is a branch of the Church of Scientology of California, registered in England at Saint Hill. The Copyright is by L. Ron Hubbard, and the booklet was printed by Southern Publishing in Brighton.

More importantly, there is also a dedication: 'IN MEMORIAM. To Katie Steele, who in August 8, 1966, left her body for life elsewhere, our love and gratitude for having concluded and piloted the completion of this pamphlet.' A note with an asterisk specifies that Steele was 'Killed by medical doctors administering an incorrect drug in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, 1966.'

The fifth page reports a short version of the usual instructions about clearing words while studying a text. The sixth contains a short foreword that gives further clues as to the booklet's production: 'The relationships drawn between [Hubbard's works quoted] are those discovered by the compilers. The reader making his own studies will undoubtedly find many more.'

The text itself starts on page eight. Each page is divided into two columns. The one on the left prints passages of Hubbard's works. The one on the right prints passages from the Holy Scriptures. A section towards the end of the booklet displays the same structure but is entitled 'Similarities between the discoveries of Scientology by L. Ron Hubbard and the aims and goals of the fathers of the Church'. The fathers of the church referred to are Saint Augustine (354–430 CE), Leo the Great (390–461 CE), and Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–74 CE). Their works referred to are: Augustine's *Confessions* (398 CE), *Sermon on Passion Sunday* (undated), *On Christian Doctrine* (397 CE), *The City of God* (426 CE); Leo the Great's *Sermon on the 4th Sunday in Lent*

(455 CE); and Thomas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* (1270–3 CE). However, in the column on the right a quotation from the *Proslogion* (1077–8 CE) of Anselm (1033–109 CE) is also printed. Anselm's name is mentioned here, although it does not occur in the section's title. On page 48 the column on the right is abruptly headed 'Anglican Church' (without further explanation) and the texts quoted are the *Catechism*, *Articles of Religion*, the *Apostles' Creed*, the *Athanasian Creed*, and further quotations from the Holy Scriptures.

Hubbard's works quoted in the first column include *Science of Survival* (1951), 'The Creation of Human Ability' (1954), a piece for the magazine *The Auditor* (1964) and one from 'Professional Auditor's Bulletin' (1965), as well as numerous and extensive quotations from unspecified material compiled between 1923 and 1953. Hubbard's texts touch on both the theoretical tenets of Dianetics and Scientology, and the ethics of the auditors and of Scientologists in general.

The parallels are presented as self-evident. Indeed, there are occasional terminological connections between Hubbard's passage and those from the Holy Scriptures. For example: '11. Never get angry with a pre-clear' is paired with Proverbs 15: 'A soft answer turneth away wrath. But grievous words stir up anger' (p. 11). Sometimes the connection is vaguer. For example, the passage '18. Estimate the current case of your pre-clear with reality and do not process another imagined case' is paired with Proverbs 20, 'Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out'. More often the connection is difficult to make, especially when Hubbard's passages touching upon universe and knowledge are paired with scriptural ones. For example, 'Bringing the static to create a perfect duplicate causes the vanishment of any existence or part thereof' is paired with Psalm 32, which starts with 'Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered' (p. 17). Or again, axiom 26, 'Reality is the agreed-upon apparency of existence' is paired with Proverbs 23 'Remove not the old landmark; (and enter not into the fields of the fatherless)'.

It should be noted, however, that the passages are not always paired one to one. Sometimes a long quotation in the left column is paired with a short one in the right, and *vice versa*. In two cases lengthy quotations in the right column, from Proverbs, Ruth, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and the Gospels, are presented *without being paired with any quotation from Hubbard*, but we only read, in the corresponding left-hand column, the headings 'On the Scientology Ethics System' (p. 42), 'On receiving payment or emolument for such great service and benefit' (p. 43) and 'On disseminating Scientology' (p. 44). The scriptural passages are sometimes repeated, i.e. identical ones

are paired with different passages from Hubbard's works.

Occasionally, the column on the right presents small pieces of exegesis. For example, on page 13, after a quotation from Matthew 12, 'For by thy words thou shall be justified, and by thy words thou shall be condemned', we read: 'justified = cleared'. On page 30, in the right-hand column, we read the comment: 'People who have practiced listening – auditing - 1. Jesus 2. Solomon 3. Isaiah (possibly others)'.

There is scarce information about the authors or compilers in extant Scientology sources. In a 1967 issue of *The Auditor Worldwide* Katie Steele is included among the 'deaths' under the heading 'Vital statistics' (p. 7). No date is given. It is revealed that she was an HPA, a Hubbard Professional Auditor, and she is described as 'an early old-time Scientologist who did the major work on the drawing up of parallels between Scientology as a religion and other major religions, to be published soon at Saint Hill'.⁷

Indeed, *Scientology and the Bible* is not the subject of much serious discussion or reference on the internet. The only discussion of any depth is that of Joseph Martin Hopkins, who, although writing as an academic, is very critical. Concerning the booklet he writes: 'Forty-four pages of the booklet *Scientology and the Bible* are set up in parallel columns with this objective. That often there is not the remotest correspondence between the Hubbard passages and the accompanying biblical quotations.' He also criticises Scientology's compatibility with Christianity as follows: 'Absent from Scientology practice are the basic constituents of the Christian religion: reverent faith, prayer, worship, reading of and preaching from the Christian Scriptures,

7 Steele was probably an Australian Scientologist who was either a student or employed at Saint Hill for some time: one can infer from books such as *Messiah or Madman?* that such stays were far from infrequent. The ex-Scientologist 'Don Carlo' (who prefers to remain anonymous) has provided me through the web site *Operation Clambake's* discussion forum with the results of the research he expressly (and generously) undertook after he was asked about his opinion of the booklet's authorship, but the trails on genealogy UK and Australian websites proved somewhat weak. 'Familysearch has: Name Dorothy G Penberthy Event Type Marriage Registration Quarter Jul-Aug-Sep Registration Year 1978 Event Place Crawley, Sussex, England Spouse Name Thomas B Minchin <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QVX7-XPZV>; Googling 'Minchin' + 'Scientology' gave many hits, including the "Church's Australian vice-president the Reverend T. B. Minchin" fighting for religious status in 1972, at <http://www.suburbia.net/~fun/scn/presst...0829AU.HTM> There are a lot of Dorothy Minchin names in Australia and the UK. The trail gets harder after this' (private message, 3rd October 2015); 'Colin Chalmers was an early Clear in Melbourne, Australia, but like the others, disappears from Scientology news reports after this book. I agree that nobody is supposed to be an official writer in Scientology except L. Ron. Hubbard or HIS ghostwriters. They likely got criticized and quit or were expelled. They would likely be at least in their seventies, now, if they are still alive' (private message, 3rd October 2015).

observance of the sacraments as instituted and explained in the New Testament' (Hopkins 1969, part 2).

Informants

Questioned about the booklet, its authors, and circulation, William Burke, an ex-Scientologist who runs the blog *Ask the Scientologist*, explained:

Around that time, there were a few secondary books being produced by Scientologists. Ruth Minshull wrote a number of them, 'Miracles for Breakfast', 'How to Choose Your People', 'Ups & Downs'. Peter Gillham wrote 'Fundamentals of Success'. 'Scientology and the Bible' was written around the same time. I think there might have been others. Initially they were welcomed and some even showed up in some Scientology bookstores. Some felt they were 'easier to read' than Hubbard's writings. But then Hubbard decided they were 'squirrel' [deviant] and all non-Hubbard books were banned, at least from the bookstores. I believe the authors were called into 'Ethics' [punished] and ... discouraged from selling those books or writing any more (private communication, 3rd October 2015).

He continued:

[The booklet] was authorized for a short time, and a number of other books were also officially authorized at that time, as I mentioned. There was even a standard line to get such 'secondary' books approved. ('Secondary' meaning they were not authored by Hubbard). That didn't last too long. Initially these 'secondary' books/booklets were accepted by Scientology and were even sold in the church bookstores. Some of these books were even considered by many Scientologists as being better for new publics to get them interested in Scientology. After a few years, Hubbard noticed this trend, non-Hubbard books being preferred over his books. This did not sit well with Hubbard. Initially, he just forbade church bookstores from carrying such books but then he revoked all such authorizations, which effectively killed all such activities. The only approved books were his books. I don't know that 'Scientology and the Bible' was ever very popular. It was considered more of a 'PR' endeavor, trying to make Scientology appear 'normal' and even 'compatible' with the Bible (private communication, 11th October 2015).

Jefferson Hawkins, an ex-Scientologist who runs the blog *Leaving Scientology*, explained:

I don't know much about it. I recall the booklet, and we had some copies of it at Pubs Denmark in 1968, so it was 'authorized' in some way. I knew Dorothy Penberthy. Her husband Barry worked at Pubs in the E-Meter area, repairing and restocking meters. They were Aussies. The name Margaret Chalmers rings a bell, although I didn't know her. The other names are not familiar to me (private communication, 17th October 2015).

Similar questions were posed to a lifetime Scientologist in Australia, well-acquainted with the local 'old-guard'. After some investigation following our initial contact my informant explained:

I have found out [...] that Margaret Chalmers is still alive and working for the Church overseas, so I am sending her an email to ask if she can give me some information to provide to you. All the others have passed away. She is our last link to provide specifics. [...]. I have found out that Katie Steele was the mother of Catherine Steele, one of the authors. The authors were all from Melbourne, Australia and wrote in [*sic*] while there. The Church had just been banned in 1965, so this was two years after that. The Church had moved underground as it was illegal to practice Scientology or use the word, but it had never stopped and was spread around Melbourne in various houses. Quite a few Melbourne Scientologists had moved to Sydney where there was no barrier to being a Scientologist and some went to Saint Hill, England (private communication, 13th March 2016).

Some more investigation followed and the informant eventually wrote:

I heard back from the remaining person alive (Margaret Chalmers) who worked on this research. She said that she did the research but was not aware it had been published and had not ever seen the published booklet. She couldn't enlighten me on the booklet otherwise. I asked some others and they had seen the booklet in the late 1960s, but only in passing like 'Oh yeah, I recall that booklet,' but not much else. It was some time ago and a lot of people from that time have passed away, so the story is lost to a large extent. It was only published that one time and there are some rare copies around. Margaret wasn't aware of the circumstances of the death of Katie Steele so could not shed any light on that entry in the booklet. She

had already left Melbourne for England. So I have hit a dead end on that one. Her recollection of the time was in 1964 she and the other Melbourne Scientologists compiled the passages. There was at that time misunderstanding about Scientology in Melbourne. Scientology, quite unfairly, was seen to challenge the 'status quo.' A religious philosophy that was more akin to Eastern faiths was intolerable in a strongly Christian community that was struggling as a whole with the rapid change that was taking place in the 60s and the emergence of new ideas. It was a volatile time in general (private communication, 24th March 2016).

Discussion

The booklet *Scientology and the Bible* has some features seemingly unparalleled elsewhere. Scientology publications not authored by Hubbard are rare and group authorship for a work exploring theological, comparative matters is unique (cf. Frenschkowski 1999, § 4). The title, further elaborated by the term 'manifest', is enticing and allows (or rather allowed, if the text was eventually banned) any Scientologist who was aware of its existence in reference to such a work to claim that the analogies between Christianity and Hubbard's religion had been successfully explored.⁸ The book's small dimensions probably made for cheap production and easy distribution, so one can suppose that the pamphlet could be used for proselytism.

However, the text is hopelessly univocal and substantially incomprehensible to anyone of a Christian background and without any knowledge of Scientology. It seems the result of the reflection of someone who, although possibly from a Christian background, had been more trained in Scientology's practice of 'word clearing' and in the reading of Hubbard's work than in the exercise of engaging with the (Christian) counterpart's texts and mindset. Its use of columns was perhaps suggested by the synoptic gospels, but it is also the most intuitive one for anyone who wants to (literally) pair texts. Indeed, the booklet appears weak even if one tries to read it as a mere introduction to Scientology's teaching, which supposedly a Christian reader would be unable to master. Fragments of Hubbard's work are presented completely without context, notwithstanding the presence of the final, customary Glossary. No analytical explanation of Dianetics/Scientology is presented, not even in sketchy form, and the parallels between Hubbard's texts and biblical fragments are often completely opaque. Quite apart from

⁸ It is uncertain whether the term 'manifest' is used as 'manifesto' or as a synonym of 'list' (a definition of 'manifest' being a document listing the cargo, passengers and crew of a ship).

the fact that the booklet's project stemmed from a genuine desire to show analogies between Scientology and Christianity or that it was only written in the interest of public relations, it is simply inefficacious. Jesus is not a central topic, some correspondences are left completely obscure, and even the choice of specific Christian authors is left unexplained. In this regard we should also observe, however, that references to Christ are so scant that the resulting effect is almost neutral or harmless, unlike the innuendo of the above-mentioned *Apollo* lecture.

Reading *Scientology and the Bible* is like being confronted with the outcome of an autonomous rumination penned quite spontaneously and hastily printed, a tip of an iceberg whose supporting and greater part remains under the surface. Anybody approaching this booklet in the hope of finding inspiring theology, even embryonic or simplistic, would be disappointed. It is an expression of individual, unilateral conviction, not a real attempt to build a bridge between different systems of belief. At the same time, we must recognise that the choice of Christian authors does display some degree of knowledge or sophistication, unless we believe that they were randomly selected from a handbook or digest of Christian thinkers (we should remark that interestingly, and in latent tension with the reference to Anglicanism, Leo the Great was also a Catholic Pope). The booklet's fragmentary character might be explained by the absence of a genuine intention to elaborate a text displaying structure and some depth, or perhaps by the compilers' lack of writing and critical skills and editorial experience.

The collective character of the enterprise may also contribute to an explanation of such features. It is as if *Scientology and the Bible* was an extemporary collection or patchwork of individual reflections on the same texts that were assigned to different Scientologists, upon which they reflected in the light of their knowledge of Scientology's teaching to eventually discuss them briefly and glue them together in a publication that was not further coordinated or edited. I hypothesise that the texts assigned to the different compilers were identical because of the repetition in the column of biblical materials. Thus, even if this text had not been eventually forbidden by Hubbard, it could have hardly been of use in any interreligious debate or reflection.

However, this booklet *was* published and it *did* circulate as official church material. How can we explain this? Having established that the booklet fails to meet the expectations it raises and that it is theologically weak, we may still ask: what was its *Sitz im Leben*, that is, its precise function when it was released? It is possible that the death of the mother of one of the compilers

was a decisive factor in its publication.⁹ There was probably a need to honour Katie Steele and the very fact that her death happened under circumstances that could be presented as confirming Scientology's antagonism towards, and criticism of, the medical establishment may have prompted the publication. However, it may also seem unlikely that anybody would embark on such a project, albeit amateurishly, without harbouring from the very beginning the intention of publishing its outcome. Indeed, in 1966 Scientology needed to reaffirm its ties with its surrounding culture, especially in an Anglican context. The case of Katie Steele, whatever the precise events were, happened in a country where Scientology was at the centre of a virulent debate. Finally, Hubbard had just left Saint Hill and was fully absorbed in Sea Org matters. His physical absence probably entailed a relaxation in the chain of command, thus allowing the authorisation of a publication like *Scientology and the Bible*.

Conclusion

Scientology and the Bible's overall theological and communicative weakness alone cannot have been a decisive factor in its prohibition or disappearance. Even in the absence of confirmation that the booklet was formally forbidden by Hubbard we can accept Jefferson Hawkins's reconstruction as highly plausible. As we have seen, from the earliest period of Dianetics Hubbard was struggling with internal 'scientific' deviations. Where Scientology's teaching was concerned, Hubbard was a 'one-man lab' and enterprise – or at least he wanted to be treated and perceived as such. He was likely to view any creative elaboration drawing on his teachings as a blow to his ego, besides constituting a dangerous precedent of intra-Scientology creativity (as the case of McMaster indirectly shows). Indeed, the problem was not that somebody else was helping Hubbard to elaborate his own ideas. This was actually a common practice, especially in the magazine *Advance!*, which directly addressed the continuity of Scientology with other religions (see Bigliardi 2015). But *Advance!* was strictly supervised by Hubbard, its real authors were scarcely credited, and it was not the forum in which major 'discoveries' were announced. The major problem with *Scientology and the Bible* was that somebody else's authorship was clearly recognisable. Although there might have been a phase in which 'satellite works' were tolerated and perhaps even encouraged, it was only a matter of time that

⁹ Before receiving this information from the Australian Scientologist, I was inclined to think that Katie and Catherine Steele were one and the same person.

any publication that threatened Hubbard's centrality (in his eyes as well as the eyes of Scientologists) would be forbidden.

It should be emphasised that the idea that a work such as *Scientology and the Bible* was likely to be perceived by Scientology's founder as a threat is compatible both with the thesis of his sincerity and that which suggests he was opportunistically introducing new teachings. In this sense this interpretation should not be automatically thought of as instrumental to a more general interpretation of Hubbard's doctrinal changes: even an inspired prophet (which, as we have seen, was *technically* not the case with Hubbard's unfolding message) is interested in maintaining the revelation intact and incorrupt, and any external addition and discussion while the prophet is still alive can be perceived by the prophet as unnecessary and centrality-threatening.

If one considers internal Scientology dynamics, it appears quite natural that *Scientology and the Bible* had a short life. Over time PR with other religions (as well as with institutions by which Scientologists wanted to be perceived as a religious community engaged in a dialogue with other religious communities) was to become an increasingly important topic for Scientology. However, its publication and perceived usefulness was the result of a transient state of affairs that would rapidly disappear. Thus, under the ambitious title *Scientology and the Bible* all we are left with today is an anomalous piece of Scientology ephemera.

* * *

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How and Why to Talk about Witchcraft? Discourses on Witchcraft and Uses of Bewitchment Narratives in 21st Century Rural Eastern Slovenia

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Abstract

The article, based on fieldwork conducted in rural Eastern Slovenian region, discusses specifics of various discourses – Christian, rational, New Age, and, in particular, witchcraft discourse – that the inhabitants of the region use in discussing witchcraft. It shows the occasions in everyday life in which the witchcraft discourse may be mobilised and strategically used by people for their own benefit. Later, it compares the discourse used by traditional magic specialists in the unwitching procedure, performed when misfortune is ascribed to bewitchment, with the discourse used by a contemporary New Age therapist in therapy performed for the same reason. The author argues that in basic elements they resemble each other, the main difference being that the key underlying premise of the traditional unwitcher, i.e. that the source of misfortune threatens from the outside, loses its importance in the New Age therapy. In this, the main arena of counteraction against the perpetrator is transferred from the outside to the inside, to one's own body and mind.

Keywords: discourse, witchcraft, magic, New Age, Slovenia

In summer 2000 I first arrived, together with a group of students, in a secluded rural region of eastern Slovenia to conduct field research. As part of a joint project between the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Ljubljana and a regional institution, our aim was to record folklore that could serve the institution's mission

to promote the local heritage. What I hoped for were etiological legends about various features of the landscape and other legends related to particular places in the region, yet knowing that these tend to be rarer than the so-called 'belief legends', I also instructed my students to inquire about narratives on the dead, witchcraft, and the supernatural in general – just

in case. However, when the groups met in the evening to share the results after the first day of fieldwork, as well as in the following evenings, one thing became clear: *the* topic in the region was witchcraft. Narratives on witchcraft were abundant and clearly predominated – one could say that witchcraft was the dominant tradition (cf. Honko 1962, 127f.) in the region.¹

The region in which we were doing our research is mostly remote and hard to reach, with poor traffic connections.² The farms are small, the land divided into small parcels, and the people mainly engaged in subsistence agriculture, particularly fruit growing and viticulture, and perhaps keeping a cow or two, a few pigs and some hens. The inhabitants of the area are mostly Roman Catholic. This was an extremely impoverished region until at least the beginning of the seventies, when it experienced changes in economic development and living conditions became somewhat less harsh: the electricity and water supply became available to more households than before, many houses were rebuilt, free medical care became available even to farmers, who made up the majority of the population, and several factories and tourism facilities were established at the periphery of the region and offered job opportunities. This, improved the standard of living of at least part of the population and, due to daily migrations, triggered the improvement of the roads and traffic facilities; better roads also allowed the use of tractors, which improved agricultural yields. Furthermore, this was also the time when television started to make its way into the region's rural households.³ (cf. Mencej 2017, 35–9.)

All these changes triggered the loosening of the bonds of the close village communities (cf. Sok 2003, 39f.) and changes in the communities' social life. In the research area the key setting for the communication and evaluation of witchcraft narratives and the basic context which allowed for the maintenance of witchcraft discourse and the persistence of witchcraft as a social institution had always been shared work, particularly in the autumn and winter evenings, when people gathered together in this or that house to husk corn, shell beans, and pluck feathers, but also during crop harvests,

1 The paper was adapted from several chapters of my book *Styrian Witches in European Perspective. Ethnographic Fieldwork*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan 2017, and it partly overlaps with my paper *Discourses on witchcraft and uses of witchcraft discourse*, published in 2016 in *Fabula* 57 (3–4): 248–62. The research leading to the results presented in the paper has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013) / ERC grant agreement № 324214, and from the Slovenian Research Agency under the programme *Slovenian identities in European and global context*.

2 Due to the delicate nature of the topic the exact location of the region is not given.

3 The first TV transmitter stations were installed in the region in 1971 and 1972.

wine harvests, pig slaughtering, and other domestic activities related to the rural economy that brought villagers together (cf. also Devlin 1987, 198; Kvideland and Sehmsdorf 1991, 13f.). Due to the economic changes, and in particular daily migrations, but also the improvement of agricultural machinery, however, the evenings of shared work more or less ended in the seventies (Sok 2003, 116).

Once the main setting for the communication of witchcraft narratives was no longer there, witchcraft discourse inevitably started losing its adherents and communal support. Those who were still thinking within its framework were no longer in a position to estimate public opinion and could no longer rely on having support for witchcraft accusations and actions within the village community as a whole, which must have ultimately led to the withdrawal of their beliefs and actions to within the family unit and the restricted circles of those who still communicated among themselves and on whose support they could rely. However, while witchcraft as a generally accepted and more or less publicly supported social institution lost its value as a result of the economic and social changes in the seventies, it had not yet died out completely. While people may not have had the opportunity to speak about it as openly and as often as they used to, and could not always expect to receive public support if they spoke and acted openly from within the witchcraft discourse, their personal belief may nevertheless have continued, albeit in a restricted form and limited in expression. Bewitchment practices have continued to be practised, although not by everyone and certainly less frequently than in the past, and witchcraft as a social institution has, to a limited extent, continued to provide a means for the explanation of misfortune and to regulate social relationships for at least part of the population.

In this paper I shall focus particularly on the discourses on witchcraft. I shall first present various discourses within which people may talk about witchcraft: witchcraft, Christian, rational, and New Age discourse. I shall then discuss various uses of witchcraft discourse, i.e. various situations in which it may be employed, with various purposes and various intentions.

Witchcraft as a discourse

While during our fieldwork we often heard narrations about practices and behaviour related to witchcraft, we never witnessed any – the narratives in which these practices and behaviour were interpreted in terms of witchcraft were the only available source of information about witchcraft in the region

and were thus the only means for the researcher to be able to grasp the underlying experience and understand the narrators' underlying propositions. On the other hand, they were also an essential means for people to structure, interpret, and share their experiences: while people may have witnessed and performed countermeasures against witchcraft and participated in the identification procedures, or even performed bewitchments themselves, the narratives were a prerequisite for their proper understanding in the framework of witchcraft discourse, in the upholding and maintaining of witchcraft as a social system, and were also the main means of providing people with strategies about how to respond to witchcraft assaults (cf. Stark 2004, 86; Eilola 2006, 33). Through these narratives the inhabitants of the region were socialised in terms of a particular discursive construction of the world, which informed their experiences and helped them make sense of them (cf. Rapport and Overing 2007, 137-138, 142).

Indeed, scholars of traditional witchcraft have often understood witchcraft as a particular sort of discourse used by the narrators, and have even claimed that cases of bewitchment were not only expressed, but manifested especially or solely in narratives, thus emphasising the importance of language in witchcraft. Jeanne Favret-Saada, researching witchcraft in Mayenne, France, wrote how she had first planned to research witchcraft practices but soon realised that all she came across was language, and that the only empirical facts she was able to record were words: '[...] [A]n attack of witchcraft can be summed up as follows: a set of words spoken in a crisis situation by someone who will later be designated as a witch are afterwards interpreted as having taken effect on the body and belongings of the person spoken to, who will on that ground say he is bewitched.' (1980, 9) Consequently, Favret-Saada concentrated not on practices but solely on narratives: the facts of witchcraft cases are a speech process, she claimed, and a witch a person referred to by people who utter the discourse on witchcraft and who only figures in it as the subject of a statement (1980, 24f.). While Favret-Saada reduced witchcraft solely to narratives, de Blécourt broadened the understanding of witchcraft discourse to also include concepts and actions. In 1990, and again recently (2013, 363, 369), he argued that the label 'witch' only makes sense within a particular system, 'not so much a "belief system", but something that can best be termed a "discourse", as it is primarily through language that it can be accessed', and defined a discourse as 'a coherent system of concepts, stories, and actions'. Stuart Clark has also emphasised the importance of language in witchcraft reality. He discussed the question of how language authorises 'belief' and argued

that to make sense of 'witchcraft beliefs' one needs to begin with language. Clark understood language not as a direct reflection of an objective reality outside itself, but rather as something that constitutes it:⁴ it is language, i.e. the linguistic circumstances, that enable the utterances and actions associated with witchcraft beliefs to convey meanings that should become the object of attention, and not its relationship to the extra-linguistic world, i.e. a question of whether it corresponds with an objective reality or not. What is real about the world to the users of a language, he claims, is 'a matter of what sorts of reality-apportioning statements their language successfully allows them to make' (Clark 1997: 6, cf. 3–10).

Within the framework of witchcraft discourse people therefore relied on concepts, exchanged stories, and performed actions⁵ that conveyed specific meanings and carried specific messages which could only be properly understood from within this discourse. In applying the term discourse in my research, I refer to it in its broadest anthropological sense, as 'socially situated language-use' (Cameron 2001, 7), 'speech in habitual situations of social exchange', implying intrinsic ties between speech and behaviour, and the embeddedness of speech-making in routine social relations and behaviours (cf. Rapport and Overing 2007, 134; cf. also Valk 2011, 850).⁶

Witchcraft discourse

Objects like eggs or bones buried in the ground do not have any particular meaning in and of themselves – they can lie in one's field or under thresholds or in the byres and pigsties for various reasons other than witchcraft. When a neighbour borrows something on the new moon, one would probably not even notice the correspondence with the moon phase. There are many causes for calves to be stillborn. People get angry and threaten others for various reasons and with various intentions. All these objects, acts, words, behaviour, etc., however, acquire a particular connotation when one is thinking, talking, and acting from within the witchcraft discourse. For people think-

4 cf. Bruner who argues that since people organise their experiences and memories of events mainly in the form of narratives, narratives not only represent but also constitute reality, and are versions of reality (1991, 4f.).

5 Yet while concepts are part of the discourse, they pertain to the level of conceptual reality, whereas stories and actions *articulate, express* the concepts.

6 cf. also Henry and Tator's definition of discourse: 'Discourse is the way in which language is used socially to convey broad historical meanings. It is language identified by the social conditions of its use, by who is using it and under what conditions.' (2002, 25)

ing, talking, or acting from outside the witchcraft discourse they will bear very different connotations, or they will have no particular meaning at all.

The specifics of witchcraft discourse in the region can already be observed at the level of language: several idioms typically uttered within the discourse conveyed meanings that were completely different from the connotations they had were they uttered from outside the discourse, and could only be understood in this particular sense within it. When people thought they were bewitched, the typical expression was 'This was done', i.e. connoting an act of a malevolent agency. To say that 'something was done' or that 'someone did it' invariably pointed to an accusation of bewitchment carried out intentionally by somebody who wished them ill.

Yes, they said that if you found an egg [placed on your property], that your hens wouldn't lay anymore, that this was done. That was heard.⁷ (95)

I: [He said:] Mother, I am ill, my toes are hurting. And he was moving around for a while and then he went to see the fortune-teller. She said: What hurts you? It was done.

F: What did she say?

I: That it was done. That it was done. (29)

While the characteristic expression for bewitchment that was considered to be the consequence of the malice of neighbours was 'This was done', when referring to a bewitchment that occurred at night, and usually resulted in losing one's way, people would typically use expressions such as 'witches carried me', 'witches chased me' or 'witches led me astray', 'witches mixed me up', or 'witches drove me':

I: But another time ... another time I went right there on my way home from work, but then I went at twelve o'clock. I walked there many times, many times every day ... to work and back, you know, but suddenly I can't find my way home, suddenly I can't find my way home, I don't know which is

⁷ The transcriptions of the interviews are done verbatim. Due to space limitations I have omitted the parts of the texts in which authors were discussing topics that were not relevant for the present topic, explaining local words and expressions, etc. Numerous archaisms and aspects of the local dialect which are evident in the Slovenian transcriptions have been rendered in modern or standard English in translation. F in the transcriptions indicates a folklorist and I the informant. All of the tape-recordings and transcriptions are stored in the archives of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Ljubljana.

the right path. There was this path and another path, I saw, the paths met, a little way ahead, I saw a house, I saw our home, but I couldn't get to it. I was twenty years old.

F: But how, what did your parents ...?

I: They told me that the witches led me astray. (128)

'To know' is another typical expression which only within the discourse refers to a very specific sort of knowledge and needed no additional clarification – it always referred to the knowledge of witchcraft. Outside it, it could refer to any sort of knowledge, and would usually need an additional object clarifying the verb (one knows *something*). Similarly, to say about somebody that 'they know' referred exclusively to the person that was considered to have magical knowledge: either a witch or an unwitcher.

F: Is there anybody here who is still believed to be able to bewitch?

I: That someone would know? That is how people used to say: that someone knows. Not here, no, not any more. (53)

I1: Yes, they said there were witches. It is true that they knew. This is correct, this could be [true]. (...) Up there, close to where we had a vineyard, there was one such [woman]. That one really knew. (25)

I1: And they also said that here, across the river, up in the forest there was a man who could predict the future from cards, but they said that...

I2: ...that he knew what he was doing.

I1: That he knew many things. (25)

Within the discourse certain *behaviour* also acquired very specific connotations. Not to respond to somebody, not to look someone in the eye, and not to give or accept a gift or a loan from someone communicated a very clear message to the addressee that they were considered witches in the eyes of the person behaving in this way. The refusal to talk to the neighbour in the following narratives was a common and generally acknowledged behavioural strategy of people who acted within the witchcraft discourse to prevent the witch from gaining or retaining power over them, as clearly demonstrated by the following narrative:

There was a miller here [...] Well, he was saying: Good Lord, witches! We sometimes talked with him. He said: 'Can you imagine, she came to visit me,

the damned bitch!' 'But what did she do to you?' 'She came to ask me for a vessel, for a sieve to sprout wheat. I, poor devil, said: Here, you have it, take it! What she did to me, everything possible, only death I didn't await from her! My cows died, pigs died..., and plenty of other things happened! 'But why,' I asked him, 'why would she do that to you?' 'Because,' he replied, 'because I gave something of mine to her. I shouldn't have done that.' Then he said: 'Then somebody told me: 'You go there to P., there is Gretička there. She will tell you.' That woman was called Gretička, she was kind of a witch. She told me: 'Janez, you go home. You have to gather brushwood from three different streams.' And I did. 'What do I need to do next?' 'Then you should burn the brushwood by the stove and the first person to drop by to see the fire will be the person that bewitched you. That's why your livestock keeps dying.' I don't know how much he paid her for that, he must have paid her something. 'So I went back home and I gathered the brushwood and put on a fire by the stove. She warned me: But Janez, when this person comes in to see the fire, you should not say a word, just point at the door for her to leave.' [laughs] He said: 'So I picked all that up and put it on the fire and there she is, that damned bitch who asked me for a sieve.' 'Christ, Janez, what are you burning?' I only pointed at the door. 'Good Lord, Janez, are we not friends anymore? But we are neighbours.' 'So I pointed at the door once again, and the woman still didn't want to leave. So I held her by the throat and pushed her through the door out of the house. And uttered no word. And I have had peace ever since.' [laughs] These are stories, bed time fairytales! [laughs] (149)

Dragging sheets over another person's wheat on certain days in the annual cycle (usually Pentecost), borrowing something on particular days, burying objects on a neighbour's property, for instance, were actions that were understood as bewitchments only within the witchcraft discourse. Outside it they would be either meaningless or they would trigger questions about their aim and meaning.

Otherwise they also used to make witchcraft on Pentecost Monday. Up here, in the area, there was a woman, a widow, and she fastened an apron around her waist and ran around P.'s wheat in order to take over the loot, you know, so that she would take their profit, so that they wouldn't have any profit from the wheat, while they would. And that little that she got, she wrangled into her chest. But that didn't help, that was witchcraft, it was nothing. (53)

I heard tell that the young one [the daughter of the woman that was believed to be a witch] also became a witch. He said that when it is new moon, the first day of the new moon, she always comes to borrow something, to get something – and that you shouldn't give [anything to] her. She usually comes to get something that they have at home, they know that she has it at home, and yet she comes to borrow it. Last year she came to get eggs for brooding and when their eggs hatched, they had no chickens that year. (141)

I: A piece of bacon too could be found buried in the field.

F: And what did this mean?

I: Well, as long as people believed in witches, [that meant] that someone wanted to bewitch the field so that it wouldn't bear fruit. (58)

While a discourse can be understood as 'an authoritarian and coherent web of ideas and statements, prescribing a normative worldview, and upholding certain social norms and values' (Valk 2011, 850), discursive exchange is not fixed: it is mediated by the creative individual improvisation of its conventions. Although the discourse provides a means of expression, it does not necessarily determine what is meant by it – different personal meanings can be imparted to discourses by individuals, and it is their personalisation of discursive structures that keeps them alive (cf. Rapport and Overing 2007, 141f.). One could, for instance, adapt a discourse to provide a meaningful interpretation when the 'usual' interpretation within the discourse does not fit one's understanding and purpose. As we have seen above (cf. inf. 149), not to answer someone when thinking from within the witchcraft discourse as a rule conveyed a clear message that the one who is not being talked to is being accused of witchcraft. According to the following narrative, however, the 'accused' person transformed the interpretation of the silence into evidence of the opposite. Instead of acknowledging that the behaviour of the neighbours who remained silent in spite of his repeated attempts at communication suggested that they have identified him as a witch, he interpreted their silence as a proof of *their* bewitching act.

And he said that that his father came, his younger son drove him by car to the place where they had dug out the foundations to build a house, and they arrived by car. And he said that they went to that place and the old man stood there and uttered no sound. He asked them what they were doing

and he said that they kept totally quiet. And he said that they had managed to build their house in no time. While he was struggling with building his house, it only took them one year to build their house. He said that it was like they took his success⁸away, everything went wrong afterwards. (53)

Witchcraft discourse, however, was not the only possible discourse people in our region could employ when narrating about witchcraft. Several discourses coexisted in the region and were available to people to build a functional model for their lives and, moreover, there were various ways of combining them (cf. Wolf-Knuts 2002, 149). Apart from thinking, talking, and acting from within witchcraft discourse, people might choose to talk from within a 'rational'⁹ (scientific) discourse. This is the discourse supported and propagated by the educational system, and by various media, especially radio and television, which are nowadays available to most of the population in the area. Moreover, this discourse is often endorsed by the representatives of the church, even though clergy might also draw upon another discourse within which witchcraft may be explained – i.e. 'Christian' discourse. Lately, New Age discourse is also starting to affect the ways in which witchcraft is being conceptualised and talked about, even though, for now, only to a very limited extent.

Christian discourse

Christian discourse is a discourse which is occasionally embraced by the clergy, and only marginally by the people in the region (when talking about witchcraft). This discourse does not deny the reality of the effect of malevolent magic deeds, but ultimately ascribes it to the agency of the devil. This is how the act of burying objects in a neighbour's field, typically understood as a bewitching act within the witchcraft discourse, was interpreted by a Catholic priest:¹⁰

8 The narrator used a rather unusual dialect word, explaining it in standard Slovene as 'success, effect, speed'; the meaning more or less coincides with the word 'luck' (cf. Honko 1962, 119f.; Schiffmann 1987, 161; Stark-Arola 1998, 116).

9 I use the word 'rational' not as my personal evaluation of the discourse, in the sense that I find this discourse more rational than witchcraft discourse, or that I implicitly claim that witchcraft discourse is irrational. Witchcraft discourse represents just another sort of rationality, based on a set of beliefs which are culturally valid, albeit not compatible with the Western elite's views. The 'rationality' of the discourse thus refers exclusively to the emic position of those who used it as an opposition to the perspective of narrators who employed the perspective of witchcraft. I would like to thank Kaarina Koski for her remarks on rationality and the use of the term. (On the cultural grounds of rationality see Tambiah 1993; Eze 2008.)

10 This particular priest does not come from the strict research area, but the practice of burying objects is not limited to our region alone; it is also common elsewhere in Slovenia.

A man once came to me and said that nothing ever grew on the field where he was planting. And then he noticed that his neighbour was always burying some things in it, which were causing the vegetables not to grow. We call this spells [...] this is the external manifestation of the direct work of the devil. [...]

Later he explains the 'spells' as

the most frequently used manner of harming others, when via certain objects which are first given to Satan to imprint his evil power into them, one can harm others. [...] Spells do not depend so much on the material as such, as they depend on the will and hatred of the person who wants to harm others with the help of Satan. (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwmUaU0jYK0>>, accessed 5 May 2015)

Obviously, the priest did not understand the act of burying the object, as narrated to him by a client, as witchcraft – in fact, the term is not mentioned at all. While he believed in its harmful consequences, he instead interpreted it a manifestation of 'Satan's' deed. The procedure of an unwitcher, which within the witchcraft discourse was often understood as necessary to counteract the effects of witchcraft, was also understood as the devil's work within the Christian discourse, and to visit magic specialists was no more than to summon the devil:

Black, or I should say white¹¹ magic, means to direct evil against a certain person through magic formulas and rituals in which Satan is being summoned, in order to affect a sequence of events or to affect people on someone's behalf. [...] In order for a fortune-teller to affect a certain person, they need something of theirs: hair, nails, an undergarment or a photograph. [...] Now, the problem is that I know people who claim to be very religious, they go to mass, but on Monday at three they scheduled a bioenergeticist, on Wednesday at five they go to their fortune-teller... Well, you can't follow two different paths – if you do, the devil will come. (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwmUaU0jYK0>>, accessed 5 May 2015)

Christian discourse, within which bewitchments were ultimately ascribed to the agency of the devil, was not strongly embedded in our region. Even the

11 He probably made a mistake and must have meant to say the opposite: 'White, or I should say black magic [...]'

name Satan, common in Christian discourse (cf. Wolf-Knuts 2002, 152), never appeared in the narratives of the people we interviewed; instead, euphemistic appellations such as *hudič* (*malus*), *vrag* (*inimicus, hostis*), *hudobni duh* (evil spirit) were used in the sense of 'devil'. Occasionally, however, both discourses, the Christian (attributing the malevolent magic actions ultimately to the devil) and the witchcraft (attributing them to malevolent people, i.e. witches), partly overlapped: while the witchcraft discourse attributed bewitchments to the agency of witches and the Christian discourse ultimately to the agency of the devil (without any mention of witches), people would sometimes attribute the source of witches' power ultimately to the devil. As Wolf-Knuts has observed, people were forced to combine Christian doctrine and 'knowledge of religious topics apart from Church teachings [...] otherwise it would be impossible to maintain a functional world view. This does not have to be logical, neither does it have to be consistent, and it does not have to avoid contradictions' (2002, 148). Typically, however, the relationship between the devil and the witches was only evoked when explicitly asked about, and seems to refer more to a general stereotype of witches being evil and evil being ultimately related to the devil, than being an intrinsic part of the discourse.

Actions too may acquire different meaning in the Christian discourse than they have in witchcraft discourse. An example of how the same action can be interpreted differently within the two discourses is the annual blessing of the homesteads with holy water, performed by priests. While the blessing according to Christian doctrine was understood as '[...] an appeal to God to be merciful and close to the person who receives a blessing or who uses a blessed item or stays at a blessed place' (<<http://zupnija-stolna-nm.rkc.si/zakramentali/>>, accessed 6 May 2015), people thinking within the witchcraft discourse understood the same ritual as a protection against witchcraft, and priests were occasionally called to perform the blessing not only as a preventive measure, but also against witchcraft when misfortunes, interpreted as a result of bewitchment, had already occurred. In the eyes of the people blessing rituals helped prevent (further) bewitchments even if the (church) officials held witchcraft to be mere superstition (cf. also Dobler 2015) and never consciously and willingly performed rituals as aimed against witchcraft.

Rational discourse

However, it seems that even the priests in our region did not often resort to the Christian discourse within which evil deeds of envious neighbours,

would ultimately be ascribed to the agency of the devil. As the educated elite they seemed to prefer to draw on the 'rational', 'scientific' discourse, pronouncing all talk about witchcraft to be 'superstition' (cf. Valk 2015, 149). During my field research in 2000 I talked to the local parish priest, who boasted that after having read the results of a study of local 'beliefs' done by students at the local primary school (which had taken place not long before our conversation) that indicated a belief in witchcraft among the local population, he vehemently warned against 'superstition' in a sermon.

Such a devaluation of witchcraft to lore that has outlived its usefulness, that has grown outside the bounds of accepted views, incompatible with the modern rational mode of reasoning, was part of the Enlightenment process of discrediting and displacing previous modes of thought and behaviour and labelling them primitive and superstitious, in order for 'rationalist', 'scientifically proved', 'logical', enlightened forms of knowledge to become the dominant social discourse. The labelling of traditional beliefs as 'superstitions' was a means of weakening their potential opposition to the scientific way of knowing, which has been the practice of those in positions of intellectual, political, and economic power (cf. Motz 1998, 341–4). Discourses convey social meanings in the sense that they often transmit concepts of power that reflect the interests of the power elite: by defining their opponents as superstitious and dismissing their discourse as irrational, backward, and foolish, while on the other hand declaring their own discourse to be 'self-evident' and 'common-sensical' (cf. Henry and Tator 2002, 25), those who wanted to be excluded from the 'superstitious folk' marginalised the proponents of witchcraft discourse and established their own discourse as dominant. Rational discourse, however, was not embraced by priests alone. Although not predominantly, many people spoke from outside the witchcraft discourse and took a rational stance, proclaiming those that believed in the reality of witchcraft to be 'superstitious', 'stupid', 'foolish', and the like – these designations were typically adopted by people talking within this type of discourse. The following examples relate the act of placing an object on another's property and getting lost in the woods at night through the lenses of 'rational' discourse:

People used to bury eggs at crossroads so that when you crossed them, you [would experience] misfortune, or a plague. These were superstitions. (23)

Yes, this they would say too: when they went to the forest at night and suddenly they got lost. And they wandered about for the whole night long and

they would say that witches led them astray. And that such lights burned – the same, these were witches. Folk used to be very superstitious! Well, nowadays, this is no longer. (49)

New Age discourse

The people living in the villages and small settlements were unaware of and did not use New Age discourse, which is more typical of urban environments. Indeed, the only person who occasionally used this discourse was the grandson and great-grandson of unwitchers from a famous family of fortune-tellers, Ivan H., who did not officially live in the researched territory but just across the border in a neighbouring region – nevertheless, his family had been intrinsically linked to witchcraft as a social institution in the region since the beginning of the 20th century, as people from the region sought help from this particular unwitching family whenever they assumed their misfortune was due to witchcraft. When talking to me, he used particular terminology, like ‘bioenergy’, ‘bioenergeticists’, and ‘energy’, which can be identified, in a broader sense, as a typical or even as a key concept of New Age discourse (Valk 2011, 862; cf. Mencej 2015, 8). Indeed, this particular narrator tended to switch from witchcraft to New Age discourse and back again, but it is not unusual for the narrators to combine various discourses in the course of the interviews, and individual narratives can be moulded by more than one discourse (cf. de Blécourt 2013, 363). While throughout the interview my interlocutor mostly talked from within the witchcraft discourse and clearly expressed his firm belief in the power of witches and the reality of witchcraft, he switched to New Age discourse on two occasions: first, when talking about his great-grandmother, the famous unwitcher, whom he designated as having strong ‘bioenergy’, grounding his statement with the claim of another bioenergeticist:

She is a hospital nurse [...] everybody likes her, she’s got such energy. She saw a picture of Una [his great-grandmother], and she immediately said: This one had power, she really was a bioenergeticist! This you must know: A bioenergeticist recognises another bioenergeticist. (164)

and second, when talking about priests, whom he clearly also held as magic specialists and considered utterly suspicious and dangerous. Discussing their ability to bewitch, he referred to them with the expression ‘they knew’, typically used within witchcraft discourse, yet at the same time he associ-

ated their ability to bewitch with the 'system of chakras'. The teaching of chakras comes from the Hindu religion but has become known to laymen in the West mainly through New Age discourse (cf. Heelas 2003, 1), and in the given context I consider it as typical of New Age discourse. In addition, he equated priests' exorcisms with witchcraft in the sense that they both take power away from people – power that he equated with 'energy' – resulting in an illness:

F: How could a priest be harmful?

I: He performed exorcisms, he practised witchcraft.

F: But how did he do it? What could he cause by it?

I: Illness. If he took your power, he took your energy. Now we are getting somewhere, we have arrived at the basics: up there we have points, this is a system of chakras, seven points. You are getting energy there – yes or no? Good, that is all perfect, right? But as they, the priests, know about that, they know that if they took energy from someone... - not everybody could do this, they have to have power, they have to know, and even if they didn't know, they had power, everybody can have power, but in their case they have to practise. Others, bioenergeticists – they give [energy], while these [the priests] take it away.

F: But how can they take it away?

I: They take it away in an instant. I don't know how, but they can. A bioenergeticist took energy away from me by phone. (164)

Choosing to speak from within the New Age discourse enabled the narrator to talk about witchcraft as real, not dismissing his personal belief in its reality, while at the same time using (pseudo-)scientific and rational rhetoric to analyse and explain it. It enabled him to discuss witchcraft without degrading it to mere 'superstition', which he would have done were he talking from within rational discourse, while at the same time to present himself as a rational, educated, and analytical person. This switch to New Age discourse seemed to have imparted to the narrator the authority to elevate his own position to one that was equal to that of magic specialists in terms of knowledge. By doing so, he also refrained from talking from the position of a (potential) victim who feared their knowledge and power, which he would have had were he using the witchcraft discourse. Instead, he took the position of the one who 'knows' as much as priests and is able to compete with them. His family background was certainly not insignificant in this regard, as it gave him the authority to

take such a position in the first place – a position that was obviously not available to other narrators.

When talking from within the witchcraft, Christian, and New Age discourses, people who believe in the power of magic do not need to deny their personal views. Rational discourse, on the other hand, represents the opposite: it is the ‘discourse of disbelief’. Scientific and pseudo-scientific rhetoric could be used in the rational as well as in the New Age discourse, while elements of Christian discourse could be partly integrated into witchcraft discourse, as mentioned above. Moreover, New Age and witchcraft discourses, or rational and witchcraft discourses could be used by the same narrator, and even intermingled in the course of the same narration, with the narrator slipping from talking from within the ‘rational’, or New Age discourse, to talking from within the witchcraft discourse and back again (cf. 53 below). The introduction of rational discourse, however, does not necessarily reveal the narrator’s true attitude toward the reality of witchcraft. There are a number of reasons why an individual may choose not to disclose it to the researcher, and such a use of a rational discourse could just as well be a strategy to conceal one’s belief from the researcher (cf. Mencej 2017, 47–59). But rational discourse was not the only discourse used strategically when thinking and acting within the witchcraft discourse in everyday communication, and not only in the communication with outsiders like us. Witchcraft discourse could also be used strategically, even in communication with insiders, as I will discuss below.

Uses of witchcraft discourse

As long as witchcraft discourse had enough open support in the region, it constituted the context in which witchcraft narratives were ‘shared with licence’ (cf. Ellis 1988, 66) and whose acceptability was governed by convention and ‘narrative necessity’ rather than empirical verification and logical requirement (cf. Bruner 1991, 4f.). Even if narratives told from within the witchcraft discourse may have provoked doubt, smiles or laughter, or scepticism among people thinking from outside the witchcraft discourse, they were imparted an authority that could not easily be shaken. This enabled people to draw upon and mobilise them for various purposes and with various intentions. Not necessarily related to one’s personal belief or disbelief in the proposition, these narratives could serve as a strategy that individuals could appropriate and use to their benefit in everyday life – usually not as calculated and manipulative acts but rather as a strategy based on the habitus (Argyrou 1993, 267f.).

Several examples can give us a glimpse into the various uses of witchcraft discourse in the region. When a young man suddenly withdrew from society and was then unable to find a job – probably suffering from depression or a more serious mental illness – ascribing his failure to witchcraft was a convenient and handy explanation. On the one hand it helped the family cope with the sudden change in their son’s behaviour, and on the other it offered an acceptable explanation of their son’s behaviour to the community at large, which, not acknowledging depression as a serious mental state, would likely proclaim him an idler and disapprove of his behaviour. Moreover, it might affect the reputation and consequently lower the social position of the family if the son’s behaviour were ascribed to an inappropriate upbringing. Ascribing the source of problems to witchcraft thus gave the family an opportunity to offer a suitable interpretation to the community which prevented its reputation from being destroyed (cf. Hesz 2007, 30f.).

I: Now let me tell you something else. When I was very small, we were husking corn, and we had an early apple-tree and we always went to shake that tree, these were the first fruits. And my cousin was very, very diligent and very smart, and he ran there before me. And he found seven small pads made from various pieces of cloth on the ground. And he picked them up. That boy stopped working, he shut himself away, and even nowadays there is nothing of him!

F: Did she [the village witch] put them there?

I: She wasn’t there, I have no clue where these small nicely made up pads that he put in his pocket came from... [...] He brought them home. Throw them away immediately! His mother was a bit superstitious and she said: Janez, why did you pick them up? He picked them up so that I wouldn’t take them before him. And he picked them up, but – the boy finished school, but he hasn’t done any work, never got a job, he’s on the dole, in short – nothing, he shut himself away...

F: Did this start immediately after?

I: Immediately afterwards! He was 16 or 18 at the time when he did this. This I strongly believe, that this did him harm, this I strongly believe! (53)

While buried objects have invariably been interpreted as a proof of bewitchment aimed against the fertility of the crops or against the fertility and production of the domestic animals of the person on whose property they were buried, the interpretation of the burial of bones as a means of triggering conflict in the community was quite unusual:

Sometimes they bury something [...] that is not visible and then everybody in the parish hates each other. One woman said that in the parish K. all neighbours were cross with each other. And then someone found those bones and they burnt them together and became friends again (35).

Such an interpretation of the source of communal conflicts and the 'discovery' of the bewitching object as well as the spread of the information about it must have ultimately been the conscious action of a particular individual who deliberately acted to achieve a resolution of the tensions in the community. The subsequent joint action of the villagers, i.e. the burning of the bewitching object that allegedly caused their conflicts, psychologically speaking, undoubtedly bound the inhabitants together and united them in counteracting a common enemy from the outside – the witch – and helped them resolve conflicts and re-establish friendly relationships in the community.

Keeping in mind that arranged marriages, mostly on an economic basis, were prevalent until at least late into the 20th century, it is no surprise that disagreements between marital partners were not uncommon. The interpretation of marital quarrels as a consequence of bewitchment undoubtedly offered a practical solution, at least temporarily, to the pair's problems – the notion that a witch was trying to separate the couple not only offered an excuse for their behaviour towards the family and the community, but also helped them unite against the threat of malevolent powers and redefine their relationship (cf. Argyrou 1993, 264):

I: She fought with her husband at home, she threw him out of bed, and she said: The moment I threw him out of bed, a witch in a shape of a toad jumped out from the bed [...] She said: You won't [succeed]! And I stabbed her [the toad], she said: I destroyed her, I trampled her! She said: Kaja K. lost her leg at just the same time! [laughs] And they have quarrelled with her about that ever since. (11)

If a mother interpreted the unacceptable behaviour of her son toward her as a result of bewitchment, this redirection of the blame from her son to a witch helped her accept and possibly forgive her son for physically abusing her. Moreover, the use of this interpretation in persuading other people that the true source of her son's behaviour lay not in his bad character or her failed upbringing, but in a bewitchment caused by a third party, helped her clear his son's as well as her own name:

I knew one [witch]... she lived in that house, she was old... her mother left her... and she lived there, unmarried, she still isn't married. And her son pretty much hated her and beat her and everything. So one day she paid a visit to the fortune-teller. She went there and she [the fortune-teller] told her it was done so that he was behaving badly, that this was done by... [...] and she gave her some remedy so that this son then started to beat his mother-in-law, and not her anymore. (142)

The conclusion of the narrative, i.e. the son beating his mother-in-law instead of his mother, indicates that she must have suggested to her son that the unwitcher had identified his mother-in-law as the witch. As the unwitchers never pointed the finger at a particular person as the witch, but only offered vague notions about their identity which were completed by the clients, her identity must have been either unconsciously invoked by his mother, or else she had consciously concocted her identity herself, perhaps because of the jealousy she must have felt when her son seemed to prefer his mother-in-law to her. This accusation, therefore, not only helped redefine the position of her son, and herself, in the community, but also improved her own position in her relationship with her son, even if at the same time it worsened the position of his mother-in-law.

Many narratives that presented misfortune as being a result of witchcraft can also be read as narrative strategies used by people when they transgressed the social norms; in these cases witchcraft was invoked to vindicate their behaviour, justify their actions, and redirect or annihilate suspicions of illicit deeds that the community would not sanction. The employment of narratives accusing a woman whom one was supposed to marry of being a witch, for example, might serve as an excuse for men who wanted to break off an engagement, as the identifying of their betrothed as a witch seemed to be a comprehensible and sanctioned reason for the cancellation of a marriage (cf. Devlin 1987, 199). Although no direct indication in the narrative below suggests that the narration was intentionally initiated by the man himself (it might actually hint at the neighbour being the source of the gossip – perhaps the rival in competing for the same man), it nevertheless indicates that the reputation of a woman as being a witch could provide an excuse for a man not to marry a woman he had been promised to:

I know that down here, my grandfather told me this, there were two neighbours who didn't have the best relationship. And my grandfather was

supposed to marry that woman and [they said] she was a witch. Well, this I can tell you about. That she was a witch and she went to her neighbour's byre and people found her doing some witchcraft there. That she was doing witchcraft. Then my grandfather said, my grandpa, he said: I shall not take this witch, I shall marry another! And this is how it happened. (79)

Parents unsatisfied with their children's choice of marital partner might also intentionally spread the rumours about witchcraft to prevent the undesired marriage being executed. In this case it seems that the usual subjects of rumours became the mothers of the future brides-to-be, who were accused of having bewitched their sons to make them fall in love with their daughters:

There used to be a great difference between a rich farmer and small cottager and if that farmer's son fell in love with a poor girl, they said that her mother bewitched him, that her mother did that, for her daughter to come to a large estate and to have a good life there. And then they said that the old one was a witch. They said that she bewitched. It was often like that. If that boy was firm enough, he married her and they left the house. But it often happened that the family won, that they would have enough to eat. There used to be a terrible poverty, terrible poverty! People lived very poorly; they had nothing to eat, to dress, nothing at all. Even if that boy loved the girl very much, he left her and married the one picked up by his parents, just that she was rich enough, but in secret he kept visiting that one ... (130)

The following statement explicitly refers to jealousy, rivalry, and wounded vanity playing their part in intentionally launched accusations of witchcraft by rejected men, as revenge against the woman who chose another:

F: But in your village there was no one who would say that some woman was a witch?

I1: Now, that someone is a witch? No, no, that was in the old days. You know what? I will tell you this. [pauses] If two [men] went to the same woman [to propose], and she decided on the other one, then this one [the rejected man] would say that she was a witch, out of vindictiveness. (108)

Tradition is a convenient excuse to rationalise one's behaviour (cf. Devlin 1987, 88, 73, 199). While it seems reasonable to assume that in many cases memorates about night encounters with witches who led people astray were intentionally invoked when one needed an excuse for behaviour that

would not meet with the approval of their family or the community, one cannot search for direct proofs that would substantiate such assumptions in the narratives themselves, since they obviously had to be presented in such a way that the disclosure of what the narratives were aiming to conceal would not compromise the narrator. Nevertheless, some narratives about night witches indicate that it is likely they were used when one needed an excuse for returning home late due to excessive drinking. Several narratives indeed suggest that the experience occurred in connection with drinking bouts after fairs or communal work. Using the notion of witches' work as an excuse for having spent a night in the forest after a night's drinking was certainly a suitable explanation that would have discharged the drunken men of any guilt and shame. Narváez has also argued that narratives from Newfoundland about people being carried away by fairies, similar to the narratives in our region, expressed youthful tensions with regard to courtship and illicit sexual relations, and served to cover up sexual assaults, to conceal sexual encounters or the sexual harassment of children, and similar (1991, 354, 357; cf. Lindow 1978, 45). Nakedness, exceptional in the narratives about nocturnal encounters with witches, as well as other allusions to sexuality, might indicate that some narratives may have indeed served to conceal sexual experiences, or at least reflected the sexual fantasies.

Dammit. [laughs] There was one man, they called him J. Š. and he was from B. He was the kind of guy who was always dirty and greasy, which is why they called him Š. And he went to S. down into the valley, for a day's work. He was poor, maybe he had a wife and kids, and there was no food, and so he went and helped cut wood or grass, and things like that. And then down here, a little bit further from our mill – now it is a road but before it was a lane, a muddy farm lane, and another footpath crossed this lane so that you did not have to go through the mud, so that you could walk a little bit better, you know. And then one night, he was a little drunk and in a good mood and he went home in the evening. And he saw that at a crossroads of this lane and the footpath there was a fire. What could that be? And he goes closer and closer, and he saw four women roasting something. He said: I bet my head that they were roasting pig shit. [laughs] Whether they were or not I do not know. And he said: Yes, what else. And he knew them. Well, you fucking witches, what are you doing here? What are you doing here? I'll show you! You are witches. And he gave a detailed account of who those four women were. Shame on you! And on top of everything you are naked too! I'll show you! And he had to pee, and he peed into their fire [laughs],

so that the fire went out. Then the witches grabbed him and dragged him to B., into the stream below us. And they gave him a terrible bath: You wait, Š., we will show you, we will give you a little washing, so that you won't be so greasy. They bathed him all over his body, and they [laughs] they took all his clothes off and then whipped him with thorn branches, he said, with sticks they beat him on his behind. Of course. And they disappeared. They were gone. And he was left there and he woke up only at the break of dawn... (130)

Considering that the husbands were younger than the wives in 27.4 per cent of marriages, on average 5.8 years younger (Sok 2003, 141–4), and that the fathers were not always that much older than their daughters-in-law, the arrival of a bride into a new (extended) family could have perhaps occasionally led to illicit sexual relationships between the father and daughter-in-law, or triggered sexual violence. The following narrative about a daughter-in-law being a witch who tries to make an attempt on her father-in-law's life clearly transmits the father-in-law's interpretation of the event, even though told by a fellow villager. As nudity, as mentioned above, only exceptionally appears in the witchcraft narratives in our region, this detail could not be ascribed to the general stereotypical features of witches, and seems to imply the situation in which a rape, or perhaps a consensual sexual relationship between the father and daughter-in-law, was either attempted or indeed took place:

He knew that their daughter-in-law was a witch, right, he knew that she can bewitch, and she hated him, and she pushed him in [the water] when he was fishing, when he was drunk, to drown him. But he was so strong that he destroyed that, so that she didn't have power over him anymore. And he kept her there until the dawn. When the sun was rising, she was already naked in front of him. And then she asked him to let her. That is what my mother was telling me that it really happened. (4)

The detail of the nakedness of the daughter-in-law as a proof of her witchcraft could serve as a strategy to offer a suitable explanation to the people who caught them naked together, or, more likely, an answer to the silenced woman's accusation of her father-in-law of an attempted rape which she might have tried to prevent by pushing him into the water. In the latter case the obviously widespread acknowledgment of the father's version by fellow villagers seems to reflect the powerlessness of a woman's voice against a man's in the traditional community. The accusation of bewitchment in this case might have thus served as a strategy to interpret the situation in such

way as to avert socially damaging consequences (cf. Argyrou 1993, 267; Hesz 2007, 31f.): the reputation of a man accused of rape, or of an adulterous relationship with his daughter-in-law, would have suffered were he not to ascribe the event to her bewitchment. In this way, however, it was 'only' the reputation of the woman which was ultimately destroyed.

Not to be successful in domestic work, especially for women who were under strong family and social pressure to work hard, was considered intolerable behaviour and inevitably ruined their social position. When the results of their work were assessed as insufficient, attributing their ineffectiveness to witchcraft seemed a suitable way to explain it, as is evident from the following narrative:

One girl was reaping, without success. Nothing, nothing was ... the more she was hurrying on with the reaping, the less she ended up doing. Well, she went to reap a small parcel for three days. And then she finally noticed the toad. And then I don't know who told her that she should grab it by the leg and stick it into the ground with a stake, to stab it with a stake and stick the toad to the ground. And she did this. In the afternoon, toward the evening. And the next day the neighbour was bound there where she stuck that toad. (125)

The witchcraft discourse could also be evoked intentionally by workers in order to have an excuse to stop working after long hours of exhausting work:

I1: One time we went to do a harvest at night, when it was too hot during the day, but at two o'clock one woman said that she was going home. I said that we should harvest until two, but she said that she was going home, because the witches would come. Soon we saw light after light. Then the woman said that we shouldn't work anymore, because the witches would do something to us. Every night we stopped working at two, and then we went for tea and brandy, and to sleep. (127)

Witchcraft discourse might also be strategically employed in discouraging people from leaving their homes at night to do illicit things, like meeting others' wives or men, thieving and so on (cf. Stewart 1991), and may also have been employed as a means of education in the upbringing of children, to serve the pedagogical function of scaring them from wandering through the forests at night (cf. similarly in Lindow 1978, 44; Widdowson 1978, 35; Devlin 1987, 77):

F: Did they ever scare you, when you were young, not to walk around at night?

I1: Oh, you bet they did!

F: What did they scare you with?

I2: Well, that there are witches, right?

I1: That witches walk around... (127)

Conclusion

To understand misfortune in terms of witchcraft certainly helped people to explain it, and thus find some consolation and release their tensions. Moreover, we have seen that interpretations within the framework of witchcraft discourse helped people understand, and even forgive, others' intolerable behaviour, and also unite them in the struggle against the witch and thus redefine their relationship. But while in all these cases a certain level of belief in the reality of witchcraft was imperative – and one can imagine that the truth of witchcraft reality was readily embraced by people in times of trouble, even if not relied upon when they faced no misfortune – witchcraft discourse could also be employed by people who did not necessarily believe in its reality. As long as witchcraft discourse had enough support in a community, its application could be used strategically for various reasons and with various intentions, not always as a conscious, but rather as an intuitive and spontaneous, act. It provided people with a communicative framework within which they could offer an acceptable interpretation of a situation or an action to the public when socially damaging consequences needed to be averted. The discourse could also be employed when social norms were transgressed for people to save face, not necessarily as a conscious act aimed at achieving an objective. However, the situation could change when the bewitchment narrative did not relate a personal misfortune which affected the narrator or their family but was based on the gossip of others, which implied a certain amount of intentionality and could be applied to manipulate public opinion (Hesz 2007, 32). As rumours and gossip are constitutive of, rather than simply reflect, social reality, these could be effectively used in competitive situations against other members of the community, especially rivals, to forward and protect an individual's interests, or employed to redefine a social hierarchy: lowering the social prestige of another member and strengthening one's own position in the community (cf. Bleek 1976, 527, 540; Gustavsson 1979, 49; Gijswijt-Hofstra 1999, 175; Stewart and Strathern 2004, 33ff., 56).

One may wonder what happened in contemporary society that witchcraft is no longer a suitable explanation of misfortune for the majority of the population. Do we no longer fear people that transgress the accepted boundaries of human space, behaviour, and experience and threaten our health, well-being, and prosperity? The improved economic situation, medical care, transport, and social security have to some extent lessened the feelings of insecurity and precariousness of life in contemporary society, and the lack of the social settings, that is, shared work in the evenings, in which the explanation of misfortune by way of witchcraft was given public support, additionally helped in the process of the abandonment of witchcraft for alternative explanations of misfortune. However, these changes, which in our region occurred in the 1970s, went hand in hand with another radical change that occurred in Western society in the late 1970s and early 1980s. If at the end of the Second World War the enemy, and anxiety related to it, was perceived as coming from the outside, in this period the object of horror was becoming increasingly located within society and especially inside the human body (whereas from the beginning of the new millennium they both started to act together and follow a similar pattern) (cf. Salecl 2004: 4ff.). Such a general societal change in the perception of the source of anxiety is clearly reflected in the change of the discourse on misfortune.

In July 2014 I had the opportunity to conduct an interview with a 54-year-old woman, Barbara, living in a modern house in the centre of a densely populated village on flat land, only a few kilometres away from the strict borders of the region under research. In her youth she had studied at the university in the capital, but had to abandon her studies just before obtaining a degree due to her family situation. She has since lived as a housewife, taking care of her family, a rather large garden, and some hens. An intelligent and articulate woman, she narrated about her knowledge and personal experiences with witchcraft and the supernatural for nearly two hours. I shall present just a part of the interview, in which she discussed her own experience with bewitchment, to illustrate the changes that the discourse on witchcraft has undergone in the last few decades.

In 2010 Barbara was repeatedly finding eggs buried in her garden, in places where the hens could not possibly have laid them. After a while she mentioned this to her sister-in-law, who explained that the eggs were buried there to cause her harm and suggested that it was her neighbour, who allegedly already had the reputation in the village of being a witch, who was burying eggs on her property. Like so many of our interlocutors, she too refrained from accusing her neighbour directly. Unlike our interlocutors,

however, she did not first resort to the traditional modes in dealing with the eggs herself, but immediately turned to a specialist for help. She too decided to pay a visit to a specialist outside the boundaries of her region. The specialist she turned to, Sarah, was, however, not a traditional unwitcher, but a New-Age practitioner from the capital. Her website advertises her as a transformative adviser and a soothsayer who is 'able to see and dismiss the reasons for the disharmony with the help of angels';¹² in her practice she actually combines various kinds of therapies. This is how Barbara described her séance with Sarah:

Barbara: And then I went to see someone in Ljubljana who deals with that ...

Mirjam: A fortune-teller?

Barbara: Kind of, yes ... Well, not only fortune-telling, she also gives angels' blessings. She has an above average bioenergy confirmed by the Jožef Štefan Institute,¹³ so there is some truth about it. Well, she told me that this was done by someone living nearby, she told me so, but she was not allowed to tell who that person was. Nevertheless, she could see this person and this person allegedly wished me bad.

Mirjam: Did she describe her?

Barbara: No, that was all she told me. She said she would give me some blessings, of course, I had to pay quite a lot for that, but I must say that since then I haven't found eggs any more, whereas before I kept finding them, whenever I was weeding, I don't know, once a month, three times a year – since I have no time [to weed] often anymore – and they were always there.

Mirjam: When did you visit Sarah?

Barbara: This was about three, four years ago. Since then I have found no more eggs, even though we had a dispute [with the neighbour], so it may have been her or not ... She [Sarah] said she shouldn't tell [who it was] (...) She only told me that it was a woman living nearby.

Mirjam: Can you tell me how exactly the conversation went on when you went to see her?

12 For more on angelic therapy see Kis-Halas 2012.

13 Slovenia's main scientific institute.

Barbara: Well, she said: Somebody wishes you evil ...

Mirjam: Did you tell her that you had found eggs?

Barbara: My daughter is her friend and my daughter told her what was happening. She [Sarah] said: Well you know, somebody wishes her harm, I know about these things, she said, it's best if she comes to me, and she will receive a blessing and that will pass. And it actually did pass. My husband said that I was totally crazy, and how can I even believe in such things. I said: You know what, I'm going, at least I'm going to see what there is in it, there's nothing to lose except for some money. And I did it and there were no more eggs.

Mirjam: How did she determine who was doing this to you?

Barbara: She sees in pictures, she has these tarot cards and she lays out those cards, and then just turns them over. She just turns one over. But she also put something else in my hand before that, so that I had to turn one over, and then she reads from that one. Such things, for instance. These are sometimes things, that it really gives you the creeps. Things happen that I don't believe, but when you think of some of these facts, when you see this ... Well, I tell you that human intelligence is so limited, we're never going to know what's going on around us. There is something above us, but what it is we do not know ... Some say it's God, some say it's something else, but in my own life I have learned that there truly is something above us.

When things happen that you can't [explain] ...

Mirjam: But did she at least describe your neighbour?

Barbara: No, she just said that it was some woman. She said that she couldn't divulge anything. That she lives nearby. Later, when my sister-in law told me [that it was the neighbour who was burying eggs], I suspected her, because I get along well with all of my neighbours. And I got on well with her before, she taught me how to bake, I really learned a lot from her, we worked together, and helped each other out and all ...

Mirjam: You never had any problems before that?

Barbara: None.

Mirjam: Why did she do that?

Barbara: I have no idea. I have no idea, not a clue! Just that my sister-in-law says that they are exceptionally envious. If someone is doing well, she wanted to do us harm.

Mirjam: Why couldn't Sarah say who it was?

Barbara: She says that in her work she is not allowed to tell. There are certain matters which are very sensitive, and they warn you: protect yourself against this person. Well, she warned me about one person, she said – this person is actually my brother [quietly] ... she said: Your brother is just the type [of person] who doesn't bring certain things. We understand each other, but we have never had any deep connection, you know, birthdays, holidays, at those times we see each other, and help each other out and such, but that there would be any deep relationship between us, that never was [the case]. But there was never any dispute between us either, since I'm not the arguing type.

Mirjam: Did you pay in cash?

Barbara: In cash, she has her price, and you pay it.

Mirjam: Did she offer you the chance to destroy the bewitchment, or for you to find out which woman it was?

Barbara: No, she did not give me those opportunities, but she said that that with which she had performed the blessing had destroyed the spell, that there was nothing more on me, whereas before she had seen some sort of negative aura – she has some professional terms for it – above me.

Mirjam: Did she use the term witch for her?

Barbara: No, no: person. She very specifically said that a 'person' lives near you who wishes you evil ... She only stated a couple of facts, right, so that you could explain it in one way or another ...

Mirjam: Did you ever say to that person that you knew it was her?

Barbara: No, never. I say that if I don't see something, I can't say [anything], it could be anybody. When people are so secretive, you just don't know, if you do not socialise with someone, you don't know what they're like.

The discussion with Barbara reveals many elements that we have encountered in the bewitchment narratives in our region: the narrator finding buried eggs but claiming that she cannot blame anyone because she did not see the perpetrator; assuring that she 'doesn't believe', yet at the same time swearing that there is more to it than meets the eye; the therapist giving vague suggestions about the identity of her victim's 'enemy' ('an envious woman living nearby'), but is not allowed to reveal her true identity. Just as the label *witch* was not necessarily used by the victims or unwitchers – they would often rather refer to *envious*, *bad neighbours* – the New-Age therapist also referred to her enemy as *someone who wishes her ill*. Moreover, when I later conducted an interview with Sarah myself, when asked to elaborate on 'secret enemies', she particularly underlined *envy* as the key emotion: 'Envy is usually the main emotion of all these ...'.

The procedure of the therapist in all basic elements also mirrors the typical elements of the procedure performed by traditional unwitchers (cf. Mencej 2015a): (1) *the confirmation of witchcraft*: the misfortune (in this case the anticipation of misfortune, i.e., the finding of bewitching object) is declared to have been caused by a person who wishes the client ill ('She told me that this was being done by someone living nearby (...) this person wished me ill.');

(2) *the identification of the witch*: the person is vaguely identified (an envious woman living nearby), whereas the precise identification is left to the client ('Well, she told me that this was being done by someone living nearby, she told me, but she was not allowed to tell who the person was. Nevertheless she could see this person (...) She only told me that this was a woman who lived nearby.');

(3) *the bewitchment is annihilated*: some medicine (angels' blessings) and probably instructions on how to use it against bewitchment is given to the client in order to annihilate the bewitchment ('She said she would give me some blessings, of course I had to pay quite a lot for that, but I must say that since then I haven't found eggs any more').

Despite all these similarities between the New-Age therapy and traditional unwitching, witchcraft was not mentioned once by the therapist – yet, as mentioned above, nor was it necessarily explicitly mentioned by traditional unwitchers. However, while during the consultation of the client

with a traditional unwitcher, the unwitcher as well as the client were both aware that they were talking about witchcraft when the unwitcher declared that 'this was done', even if the word witchcraft as such was not explicitly uttered, the New-Age therapist, although her own discourse in every way resembled that of the traditional unwitcher (she too declared that 'this was done!'), denied that witchcraft was at stake and decisively dismissed any assumption of bewitchment:

Plenty come here who have already been visiting a million other people [therapists]. And I help them in the end, I truly help them! They say they are bewitched. But I tell them they are not bewitched, these are negative thoughts, this [witchcraft] does not exist. When we work on this, purify this, they realise that I was right, because they free themselves of these thoughts, because they are free. They work on themselves at home, meditate, go on with their life, discover the talents they possess, and so on.

There is yet another difference between the procedure of a traditional unwitcher and the New-Age therapist. In their procedure traditional unwitchers usually gave some advice on hygiene, nutrition, and similar matters, and perhaps some traditional medicine, and prescribed the exact procedure aimed at the annihilation of the bewitchment and the identification of the witch – only when the witch was identified and the misfortunes then stopped was the unwitcher's role accomplished. The identification of the witch in the traditional unwitching procedure was considered crucial for the effective overcoming of the witch's power and the prevention of further bewitchments. The New-age therapist, on the contrary, while also giving advice (which negative emotions to eliminate, how to meditate and pray) and some objects (angels' blessings), and vaguely confirming clients' suspicions about their enemies, unlike a traditional unwitcher, redirected the client's focus of interest from the external perpetrator to themselves:

Sarah: We shouldn't condemn anybody. We all have secret enemies, nobody has a clear conscience, nobody in this world has one. The background of the situation needs to be disclosed: what is wrong with this soul, what kind of help is it seeking. I work on the principle of self-purification, that is, for people to grow, if you know what I mean. So that they realise that spells and black magic – that these don't exist. I show them that life energy is within them and that light is stronger than all these negative influences that disturb us from the outside. That they need to have strong energy, which they ought

to purify through meditation, since by realising what you must purify in yourself, by realising the cause, you get power. Because when you disclose your secret enemy, they lose their power, they automatically fall. The secret enemy can be, for instance, your boss who doesn't like you.

Mirjam: But how do you know who the enemy is?

Sarah: One realises that by oneself after a while. One undergoes a therapy with me, I tell them the background, here and there [you must work on yourself], then they work on themselves and function in this domain. These are just energies. Then the source is disclosed. These are just energies.

Mirjam: Do you ever tell them directly: This or that person is your enemy?

Sarah: No, never. I help them by directing them so that they can understand what is going on with them, why they are feeling so bad. Perhaps they need to forgive themselves or others, perhaps they are taking on guilt and have to free themselves from it. (...) No one can harm you by black magic. Black magic does not exist, but envy does and an envious person can destroy your life. But people explain this wrongly. When somebody's energy is stronger [than yours], they can do you harm. (...) But if your energy is strong enough, a million people can envy you, and yet this will do you no harm.

The protection against evil, and consequently against further misfortunes, is thus in the New-Age therapy no longer achieved by the identification of the enemy threatening from the outside and their counteraction, but ultimately lies *inside* the individual's own body and psyche. The process of personal growth, implying the elimination of negative emotions and the strengthening of one's 'energy' with the help of prayer, meditation, and therapy, is the process leading to the permanent and ultimate protection against all sorts of 'enemies' from the outside. One's life, health, success, and well-being thus ultimately lie in one's own hands and are under the control of each individual:

Mirjam: Can one protect oneself against another person's envy? Do you give them something for protection, like an object, or a talisman?

Sarah: No, nothing like that. No protection. I was studying this for years and went through several things myself. The best protection is a prayer, a conversation with God, everyone can maximally protect oneself, but one needs to do that by oneself, you alone can protect yourself!

The traditional unwitcher's suggestion of redirecting the bewitchment back to its source, that is, to the witch, was seldom mentioned by the interlocutors, and when it was, no one admitted to having accepted the proposal. Barbara did not mention that the therapist offered her this option either. However, this last step of the traditional procedure is carefully 'hidden' in the discourse on 'personal growth' within the New-Age procedure too:

Mirjam: Can one stop envy, harm coming from another person – can you stop such a person?

Sarah: They alone stop themselves. When you purify what was being imposed on you by another person, the energy automatically returns to that person and they have so much work with themselves that they forget about envy and everything else. This is called a reversal of energy in Taoism. You just return what was being inflicted upon you to the source.

I have argued that the main role of the traditional unwitcher in our region was to help relieve the victim of the responsibility for the misfortunes that befell the household, by redirecting the blame to the witches coming from outside the household. The anxiety felt by the victims when the household did not prosper was certainly grounded in economic insecurity, but it was also strongly related to their social position in the community – when it was threatened, they needed, with the support of an unwitcher, to transfer the responsibility from themselves to an external source. The identification of a witch from the outside was thus crucial for releasing the tension that the victims experienced due to the expectations of the community imposed on them. (cf. Mencej 2015a) While in the context of traditional witchcraft the key underlying premise was that the source of misfortune threatened from the outside, this premise, while still implicitly present in the background, loses its crucial importance in the further steps of the 'unwitching' procedure in New-Age therapy – instead, the main arena of counteraction against the perpetrator is transferred from the outside to the inside, to one's own body and mind.

This basic difference between traditional and contemporary procedures aimed at the resolution of personal misfortune, and ultimately, at the release

of anxiety, seems to reflect the changes that have occurred in the last few decades in contemporary, individualised neoliberal society, in which individuals are encouraged to look at their own life as an artistic product or an enterprise (Kamin and Ule 2009; Salecl 2011) and to take it into their own hands. Yet, just like the specialists of the past who helped people relieve their anxieties in times of misfortune by relocating the blame from themselves to another member of the community, and thus ultimately helped them maintain their social position when it was threatened, contemporary New-Age specialists also help people relieve the tensions in times of misfortune by helping them to resolve, or at least to stay in control of, their own anxieties – and thus at the same time, ultimately, to maintain their social position in society.

‘Unwitchers’ who have adapted to the New-Age discourse and the demands of contemporary society thus continue to be in demand by people in times of anxiety, triggered not only by economic uncertainty but also by the problems people experience with regard to their social roles. At the same time, however, they help protect contemporary neoliberal society at large

from any ‘disturbances’ by individuals who are not constantly maximally productive and fully in control of themselves, as society expects them to be (cf. Salecl 2004: 2f., 7ff.). Thus, while in the New-Age therapy the witchcraft discourse is carefully veiled and the process of resolution of the source of anxiety accommodated to the demands of neoliberal capitalism, ‘witchcraft’ has, nonetheless, remained a part of our lives. There is only one difference: in times of misfortune, we no longer obtain relief by finding our ‘witches’ on the outside – instead, we have learned to search for them within, and have become trained to take responsibility for any failures in our lives, health, careers, and jobs – even when ‘not guilty’.

* * *

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Informants:

4/ a woman, born 1933.

5/ a woman, born 1931, a secretary.

11/ a man, a farmer.

23/ a man, born in 1936, a technician, lives in the capital.

25/

I1: a woman, born 1938, a housewife.

I2: a man, born 1931, a farmer.

29/ a woman, born 1925, a housewife, a widow.

35/ a woman, born 1923, a housewife, completed six years of primary school.

49/ a woman, born 1925, a housewife.

53/ a woman, b. 1955, a housewife.

58/ a woman, b. 1923, a midwife, a housewife.

79/ a woman, born 1923.

95/ a woman, born 1932.

108/ a man, born 1933, a farmer.

125/ a woman, born 1925.

127/

I1: a woman.

I2: a woman.

128/ a woman, born 1932.

130/ a woman, born 1926.

141/ a man, born 1931, a locksmith.

142/ a woman, a hairdresser.

149/ a woman, born 1920, a housewife.

164/ a man, born around 1950, a technician.

Book Reviews

Ugo Dessì: *Japanese Religions and Globalization*. London: Routledge, 2015, 191pp.

Ugo Dessì, specialist in Japanese religions, lectures at the Institute for the Study of Religion, University of Leipzig. His *Habilitation* (qualification) work for full professorship, *Japanese Religions and Globalization*, was published in 2013 in hard cover. The book under review is the work's paperback version.

The dialectics between the global and local started in earnest in Japan in the late nineteenth century, during the Meiji restoration, and accelerated after the Second World War, when Japan established itself as a major economic power. This period was characterised by the birth of a multitude of new religions, to the extent that in his 1970 book Neill McFarland called it the 'rush hour of the gods'. With the information revolution *pace* the internet, as well as the escalated mobility of people, one is tempted, with the Japanese scholar Inoue Nobutaku, to talk about 'neosyncretism' (*neo-shinkurechizumu*), which is happening not only in Japan but worldwide. Dessì illuminates these modern, intensified processes, also known as globalisation, in his *Japanese Religions*.

In his introduction, relying on Peter Beyer, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, Roland Robertson, and other theoreticians of globalisation, Dessì divides his approach into fourteen dimensions covering the effects of

global to local and local to global. For example, do religions try to adapt external influences or reject them by emphasising native traditions? Do religions regard each other as equal? Alternatively, do they impose a hierarchy on religious views? How do the Japanese religions influence the other religions, and how do they transform, or 'glocalise', the others' influences? How does globalisation affect the Japanese religious identity? Dessì deals with these and other topics at the systemic level of religion.

He begins by commenting that it may be risky to apply religion, as a western-created term, to cultures that lack any clear equivalent to it. Building on Jan Platvoet, he suggests that, in the Japanese case, a working definition of what one means by religion is: religion is a sort of communication between individual(s) or group(s) and being(s) whose existence cannot be verified or falsified, to legitimise and/or realise access to certain this-worldly or otherworldly 'goods'. It goes without saying that this fits well with the Japanese practice of appealing to the *kamis*, *bodhisattvas*, and other such beings to gain some *genze riyaku*, worldly benefits. In parenthesis, this formulation remains me of Melford Spiro's and Clifford Geertz's approach to defining the term religion. Thus, it may be impossible for a western scholar to escape his or her cultural bias, but it is good, of course, to acknowledge it.

In chapters two to nine, Dessì points out, among other things, that global ecological concern has transformed both Shinto and Zen traditions and spurred them to 'find out' that taking care of nature is a 'natural' part of their views, and that several Japanese religions implicitly or explicitly reject individualism as a western concept not truly belonging to Japanese culture.

On the other hand, Japanese religions have also been bearers of globalisation by 'selling' their views as the highest, or deepest, truth, or, in the form of *manga* and *anime*, for example, which have made Japanese religious conceptions and figures a part of global popular culture. In Japan, as elsewhere, religions have also negotiated their way into politics, lobbied for the reintroduction of the teaching of 'national values' (i.e., Shinto) in schools, or tried to show their usefulness as bodies capable of combating present spiritual miseries (in Japan especially suicides) that cannot be adequately solved by technology.

An important effect of globalisation is its influence on discourses, or debates, about pluralism. Japanese religions in general claim to advocate value pluralism and the view that every religion is the true one among other true religions. On this basis several Japanese Buddhist religions have promoted religious dialogue and been among the most active players in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, while the Zen 'sitting meditation' (*zazen*) has attracted several Christians, particularly Catholics,

especially in the United States. Globalisation has also brought issues to the fore that have been (almost) taboo in Japan, such as discrimination in some parts of the society, particularly towards the 'low caste' *burakumin*, most of whom belong to a *Shin*, or the Pure Land Buddhism, school. With globalisation, *Shin* organisations have started to defend the rights of *burakumin*.

Another effect, which is self-evident but not always fully explicated (to take an example from chapter eight), is the interplay of traditional (Buddhist) values and (global) bioethical issues, focusing on the debate about 'organ harvesting' from the brain dead. The traditional view is that even the brain dead have the right to dignity based, philosophically, on the integrity of what westerners call the soul and body. To affirm this means the rejection of such organ harvesting. However, because harvesting is legal from a western juridical perspective, Japanese society in general has been more liberal in this case; it seems that the unhindered stream of this-worldly benefits from the West is more important here than the stubborn support of tradition. The latter therefore requires reinterpretation, as has been done by some Japanese religions.

I have singled out only some of Dessì's examples of the Japanese dialectic between globalisation and localisation, but I think they suffice to show what I consider the work offers to the reader. First, at a general level Japanese globalisation does not

diverge much from its counterparts worldwide. Second, focusing on a single case illuminates globalisation processes perhaps better than an overall survey (cf. Durkheim's analysis of 'elementary religion'). Third, however, because of local differences a systemic approach requires the unravelling of global-local dialects, which can be truly understood only by continuously probing the reasons for and contexts of the encounters between the global and local. Fourth, the study offers a short but rich theoretical framework (in chapter one) and a consistent application to concrete cases, which also provides a good starting-point for more theoretical studies. In other words, we have here an erudite work and a model worth following and improving. As Dessì states in his conclusions, globalisation is not a threat but a process in which religions continue to reposition themselves.

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Liselotte Frisk and Peter Åkerbäck: *New Religiosity in Contemporary Sweden: The Dalarna Study in National and International Context*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2015, 193pp.

In *New Religiosity in Contemporary Sweden: The Dalarna Study in National and International Context*, by Liselotte Frisk and Peter Åkerbäck (2015), the authors focus on contemporary religiosity in the rural county of Dalarna in Sweden. In the history of 'project Sweden' Dalarna has a special place. As a projection surface for the construction of Swedishness its landscape, traditions, and people have played an important role and continue to do so. Dalarna has become both the ideal and the symbol of national culture, values, and traditional heritage. In the Swedish context everything that happens in Dalarna is of great symbolic value.

At the forefront of Frisk and Åkerbäck's interest lie expressions and arenas within the cultural field, inspired by religious studies scholar Steven Sutcliffe, which they call 'popular religious milieus'. The term popular religion in this understanding denotes a wide range of religious elements beyond those of the established churches. It points to the non-hegemonic, unofficial character of disparate expressions ranging from healing, séances, astrology, energy massage, life coaching, to courses of different kinds. In other research literature this field is often referred to as 'new age', (new) 'spirituality', or a 'holistic milieu'.

The arena in focus is delimit-

ated and described by Jonathan Z. Smith's spatial categorisation as religion *anywhere*, meaning as expressed in the space between religion *there* (the established churches) and *here* (privatised religion). Religion anywhere is expressed by businesses, associations, and societies in places other than temples or churches, as in health centres and gyms, for example. This approach takes the idea seriously that popular religiosity is mainly expressed outside the conventional venues of religious practice.

New Religiosity in Contemporary Sweden ties into many of the ongoing theoretical discussions concerning the parameters of the field of religious studies, as well as that of appropriate terminology for these kinds of 'fuzzy' phenomena. I read this work as part of the scholarship that critiques the theoretical logics of secularisation – logics that disregard, for example, the circulation and reproduction of religious meanings, interpretations, and imaginations in spaces and/or people often thought of as secular.

The study engages with a number of arenas and activities that cannot easily be categorised as religious or secular, such as mindfulness, yoga, and Waldorf schools. Hence, methodological considerations play an important role, as the demarcation of the area of research is in no sense clear-cut. This becomes important for reasons of comparison between different contexts, which is particularly obvious in chapter four, when the study is juxtaposed

with other local mapping studies, and the challenge of comparing the results from Dalarna to other regions is addressed.

The methodological considerations in this book are conscientious to say the least, and a critical discussion about terms and categorisations recurs throughout. This groundwork of thinking through the challenge of studying popular religious milieus is an important and valid contribution to the scholarship on contemporary religiosity.

Frisk and Åkerbäck's main contribution, however, is an empirical one. By focusing on social contexts where answers to existential questions or super-empirical beliefs are offered, the authors map the religious landscape of Dalarna. Here they present both church-oriented expressions and established religions, as well as more ambiguous expressions, from religious arenas ranging from commercial enterprises to associations and retreat centers. Their survey of the people and organisations that establish and organise various kinds of religious meetings, sessions, and courses is of great interest. Here they offer a wide range of examples that raise questions about the suitability of cultural demarcations and categorisations that rely on a strict separation between religious and secular spheres and practices. Indeed, Frisk and Åkerbäck bring new and fascinating material to the fore and make a substantial empirical contribution to the discussion of the role and expression of religion in contemporary Sweden.

The study focuses on the producers within popular religious milieus, but a quantitative estimate of the numbers of consumers of popular religion in Dalarna is also included. In this discussion it is worth mentioning that the figures for church attendance in Sweden are extremely low by international standards. In a nationwide survey in 2000 attendance at organised religious gatherings was as low as six per cent on an average weekend. With regard to participation and involvement in popular religious activities Frisk and Åkerbäck estimate that 2.7 per cent of the population between 20 and 64 are active in this milieu.

New Religiosity in Contemporary Sweden also contains chapters providing cases that exemplify various aspects of religious change in Dalarna. In chapter six mindfulness is presented as an example of a once religious phenomenon that has migrated to the secular sphere. In chapter seven responses to religious pluralism within the Church of Sweden are discussed as an example of the obliteration of sharp divisions between official and popular religious elements. One of the main conclusions that Frisk and Åkerbäck draw from their material is that in the venues in which popular religion is played out in contemporary Dalarna, such as the beauty salon where you can both have your hair cut and your aura read, categorisations of 'the religious' and 'the secular' are superfluous and even misrepresentative. These Swedes are simply unconcerned

with traditional boundaries between the secular and the religious, the mainstream and the alternative, as these are performed as if intertwined. In the popular religious milieus and the new religious arenas that are emerging in Dalarna they see evidence of what has been observed in other parts of the world, namely that people cross borders between denominations with apparent ease, that ideology is downplayed in favour of inner experiences, that secular and religious activities are staged side by side, and that defining practices, ideas, or people as either religious or secular seems irrelevant to many people today. Hence, Frisk and Åkerbäck emphasise that an important part of the process of religious change is that distinctions between the religious and secular are becoming less obvious and less significant.

This result encourages us to think about alternative sets of questions for scholars attempting to understand the contemporary religious landscape in general. Here Frisk and Åkerbäck suggest that instead of maintaining boundaries between milieus that in binary terms are regarded as separate, one step forward might be to conduct transboundary or thematically based research, for example, by focusing on particular phenomena such as healing, charisma, or relationships with ancestors. In this way the notion of religion or the need to construct religious milieus might be side-stepped.

The ambition of this project was to investigate what contemporary

religious expressions look like, to estimate how many people are involved in this milieu, and why contemporary religion is expressed in the manner and form that it is. I read their final chapters, in which they talk about the popular religious milieus as affected by/an effect of the converging processes of globalisation, secularisation, and individualisation as the beginning of a discussion of the equally important question: how are such processes played out in the context of Dalarna? With *New Religiosity in Contemporary Sweden* Frisk and Åkerbäck have laid a solid foundation for further investigations of the specifics of secularity and religiosity in Sweden and for comparisons between contexts with differing religious histories.

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James R. Lewis: *Sects & Stats: Overturning the Conventional Wisdom about Cult Members*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2014, 209pp.

James R. Lewis's *Sects & Stats: Overturning the Conventional Wisdom about Cult Members* is an invaluable contribution to the ever-growing body of studies on new religious movements. As the title promises, Lewis challenges many common assumptions concerning the members and ex-members of new religious movements (NRMs). It should be mentioned to the reader who is familiar with Lewis's previous research that, although several of the chapters in this book have been published in previous forms in journals, they appear in updated versions here. Besides these there is also some completely new material, among them an article co-authored with his colleague from Tromsø University, Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen.

Lewis has divided the book into four parts, starting with the provocative main question of the introduction: 'Are meaningful generalizations about New Religious Movements members still possible?' The following sections seek to answer the question with data from longitudinal and quasi-longitudinal studies, surveys, and national censuses.

Lewis argues that there are common assumptions about NRMs and their membership that are based on outdated demographic data. The generalisations made on the data from the 1970s and 1980s are

no longer valid. Lewis argues that the dominance of qualitative studies has created a situation in which generalisations on movements and their members and ex-members are made using outdated quantitative data. It seems there is an assumption that although the world may change, NRMs remain the same and their membership profile remains constant and as youthful as thirty years ago. Lewis argues that the academic study of NRMs lacks an adequate empirical base. For this empirical base Lewis turns to the often neglected quantitative approach to information available on affiliates of new religions from current national censuses in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, as well as surveys and longitudinal studies on the Order of Christ Sophia, Scientology, the Hare Krishna movement, Pagans, Satanists, the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness, and others.

In recent decades alternative religions and spiritualities have become increasingly mainstream. This mainstreaming is connected to the ageing of the new agers and members of NRMs. This does not only mean that existing members are getting older, but also that the average age of initial contact with a movement has been increasing. There are several reasons for this, including the transformation of the movements themselves. Lewis presents an insight from Burke Rochford, who shows how the profile of an average member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness

has changed as the organisation has become less world-renouncing and more family-oriented since the 1980s.

Lewis shows that despite the common assumption of the youth of new members of NRMs, they are no longer in their early twenties but rather in their late thirties. Longitudinal studies also indicate changing patterns in how people are introduced to the new movements: face-to-face social networks of friends and relatives are losing their importance to on-line social media. Lewis has noted this change among the affiliates of the Order of Christ Sophia, where between 2008 and 2011 websites became second to friends as the most common initial contact. The internet and social media like Facebook may well now be the most important initial point of contact with alternative religions. Lewis's Satanist surveys, at least, indicate that the internet is the most common place where initial contact with Satanism occurs.

Lewis also turns his attention to the national census data available from the Anglophone countries. Population censuses are an invaluable source for data on alternative and minority religions, as other surveys tend to ignore minorities because of their small number of followers. Lewis's conclusions from the census data make clear that the percentage of the population affiliated with NRMs is actually very low. Furthermore, the population census data shows the diversity of the NRMs. It is also important that

censuses collect different data that can be used in profiling members of the movements. Lewis considers both age and gender. In comparing the data from different rounds of national censuses, it also becomes evident that while in some movements the average age of an affiliate is increasing there are some NRMs that continue to attract the same segment of society. Thus, Satanists and Rastafarians, for example, continue to be predominantly young males.

James R. Lewis's book is an extremely important addition to the discussion concerning the quantitative approach to the study of contemporary religion and especially minority religions. It may be time for academics again to turn seriously to numbers, statistics, and other available demographic data, because numbers *do* count, even in religion. National censuses provide a necessary background to surveys, and numbers form a framework and context for qualitative studies. Numbers place the common assumptions and rhetoric of the movements about their membership or affiliates in a more sober context. Sometimes they also have a sobering effect on the general public, who tend to take some claims and assumptions at face value. In 1999 the claims of the self-proclaimed leader of Estonian Satanists about the numbers of Satanists in Estonia almost created moral panic in the country. According to him there were thousands of Satanists in Estonia and at least four to five hundred of them were practising. When the national census

results for 2000 were published, the grounds for this panic was swept away: it turned out that there were only 43 Satanists in Estonia, mostly young Estonian males in their twenties.

In conclusion, I wish also to draw attention to the special issue of the journal *Religion* (Volume 44, Issue 3, 2014), edited by Abby Day and Lois Lee, which focuses on surveys, censuses, and religious self-identification in various countries. As Lewis remarks in his conclusion, survey and census data is a source for original research. However, there may be a danger in this, as the removal of the religious identity question from forthcoming censuses in some EU countries, including the UK and Estonia, has been discussed for several years. What would this mean for the study of minority religions? Presumably, it would result in the prevalence of new/old common assumptions and the dominance of conventional wisdom with little basis in reality.

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