

The Drink Tank



The Drink Tank 427

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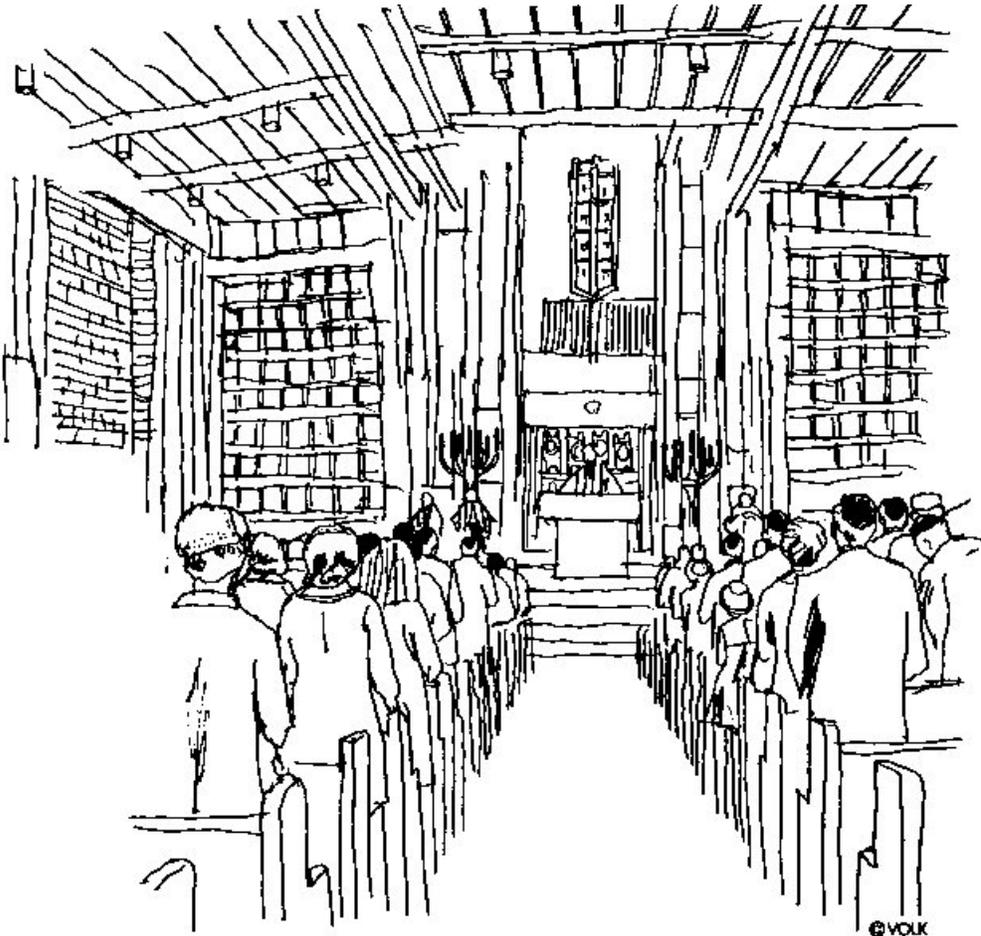
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by Kathryn Duval

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The Line Between Religion and Cults

by Crystal Lewis

To talk about a cult, one must start by defining it. I've read on several occasions that cults are like porn, "You know them when you see them," but that is intangible, abstract. The best definition I have seen is from an accused cult leader, Mike Bickle, the founder of the of International House of Prayer (IHOP), who has defined these seven ways to recognize the difference between a religion and a cult:

- opposing critical thinking
- isolating members and penalizing them for leaving
- emphasizing special doctrines outside of scripture
- seeking inappropriate loyalty to their leaders

- dishonoring the family unit
- crossing biblical boundaries or behaviors (vs. sexual purity and personal ownership)
- separating from the church

(Herrington, 2014).

It's a decent place to start, but like any paradigm it must be able to shift.

All religions oppose some degree of critical thinking in that they require you to start from a foundation of faith, blind belief which cannot be proven. Christianity toes that line, trying to align itself with faith and science, but if something cannot be tested in the vein of scientific method (observation, questioning, research, hypothesis, experimentation, collection of data, analysis, and conclusion), then to some degree it's asking for a leap of faith, or worse it directly opposes critical thinking.

Most organized religions isolate members or penalize them for leaving, also known as apostasy. These rules have softened over the years, but still hold true with biggest, oldest religions, such as Catholicism, Judaism, Muslim, and Hinduism. In this day and age, it's hard to have full follow-through with concepts such as excommunication, but they can prevent a lapsed member from being buried near loved ones, or even being married or receiving a formal annulment (even after children are born) within the church.

The idea of emphasizing “special doctrines” outside of scripture only makes sense if there is consensus on the standard for scripture. In modern, western society, the Bible is accepted, as is the *Tanakh* and *Talmud* and *Quran* (*Qu'ran*, *Koran*), but what about the *Book of Mormon*, the *Vedas*, the *Agamas*, the *Konjiki*, or the *Book of Shadows*? Where does one draw the line? If there is no room outside of what already exists, does that make all newer religions cults?

The remaining of the concepts of “inappropriate” loyalty, dishonoring the family unit, crossing biblical boundaries, and separating from the church are all extraordinarily abstract. What I glean from all of this is that the rules of what is outside the accepted is defined by those already in power. As Frederick Douglass famously said, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will,” (Douglass, 1857).

While the likes of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, David Koresh, or Jim Jones may seem more outlandish than the Dalai Lama, Sadiq al-Shirazi, or Pope Francis, the latter make the rules. It is hard to reconcile that those with a seat at the table would open up a seat to anyone new. This is not to say that the ideas of so-called cults should be normalized or receive blanket acceptance, more that we should use caution whenever anyone asks us to suspend disbelief or shun those that think different than we do.

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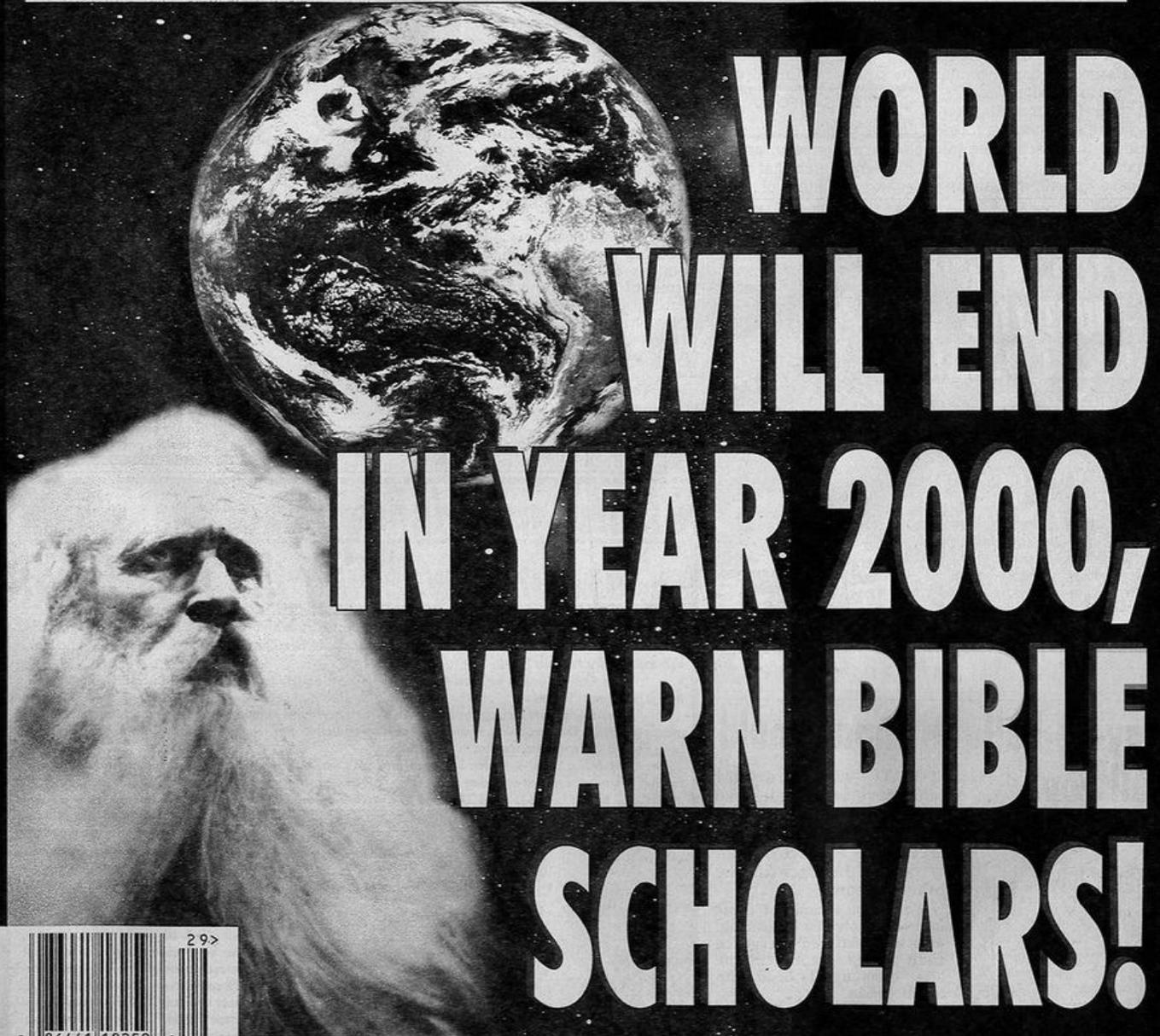
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Cults and Millenarianism

by Kathryn Duval

I've been thinking a lot on how the dawning of a new millennium ties into the emergence and popularity of cults.

For those of us were born in the middle or late twentieth century, we looked forward to the year 2000. It was a milestone by its round number alone. I remember the end of 1999 on New Year's Eve we sat around wearing our sparkly 2000-shaped frames, drinking champagne, and looking forward to a new century and millennium.

Yes, I know the millennium didn't start until the year 2001. But it's that big round number quality that gets us. We feel like something special should happen. Unfortunately, people in cults feel similarly.

I mean, I get it. As a child, I imagined the future millennium. It might be filled with flying cars and space houses like George Jetson had. Or it might be a world choked in deadly air pollution. Both seemed possible to me as a child.

Even as early as the 1960s we saw that desire for change with the talk (and of course the famous song) about the coming Age of Aquarius when "peace will guide the planets, and love will steer the stars."

Of course, warnings of impending doom were happening simultaneously. Many predictions were made that nuclear war would break out and we all watched the doomsday clock inch closer to midnight. In twentieth-century astrological predictions, we were warned that Pluto was moving into Scorpio in the 1983-1995 and that this would be a dangerous time for war. Now I'm reading online that millennials born in that time frame are the "Pluto in Scorpio Generation" and their coming of age is in a time of decay, collapse, institutional corruption and societal change, and possibly even a path of annihilation (according to LiveAbout.com).

Whether you are part of that generation or older like me, we all are living through a time where millenarianism influences many cults. A large number of apocalyptic predictions came from both new and old religious groups at the end of the last century. Some popular Christian literature focused on the Rapture at the end of the world. We all heard about how the Mayan calendar would end in 2012 because they knew something. In the twentieth century there were several doomsday cults that come to my mind: Jim Jones, the Branch Davidians, Heaven's Gate, and Aum Shinrikyo. I won't go further on naming cults and their predictions; you've probably already read about them elsewhere.

Like all of us, cultists also see the significance of the millennium, and it gives an urgency for predicting a near-future date for when the big change will come. And it feels like that is one of the engines that is driving the cults' popularity today.

This type of fever for change and predictions of doom happened back in the year 1000 as well. It probably didn't help that a supernova was visible in the sky from 1003 to 1006 CE. During the decades before and after, there were reports of famines, plagues of holy fire, prodigies, and rains of blood according to the religious writers of the times. Many pilgrimages were taken during this period. As often with cults, when the end of the world didn't occur, a new date was chosen. One particular year, 1033, was a peak year. A famous monk historian, Ademar of Chabannes, even created a liturgy for the doomsday cult of St. Martial. Apparently, that didn't go so well for him. As late as 1065, a huge group of pilgrims followed the Bishop of Bamberg to Jerusalem "deceived by the vulgar belief that day (March 25) would bring the last judgement," according to the historian Rodulfus Glaber.

The many decades of recalculation and revision after the year 1000 lead me to worry about our age. Will current cults dig in and reformulate new dates for the world's end or will they mellow out and become just another religious group? I can only hope the continuing existence of the world diminishes the desire for its end. Of course, we still have a way to go. We're still in the midst of a pandemic and global climate change is only getting worse.

We've moved past the year 2000 but troubles still loom. How long will it take to move past that apocalyptic fever? And on a more personal note, when will I finally be able to relax and stop my Twitter doomscrolling?



Spirit Matches: A Cult Leader Cultivates His Targets
by Kristy Baxter

“It’s all about who you know.”

That saying can apply to both the business world and cults.

Namely, if you’re trying to start a cult, you should target the right people. If you happen to know a few wealthy businessmen whose upbringings and beliefs prime them to take every word you say as literal gospel . . . well, you’re in business.

“Matthias the Prophet,” born Robert Matthews, figured that out eventually, but there was a lot of tumult leading up to that epiphany. And plenty of tumult after it, of course.

“The Prophet of the God of the Jews,” another alias he would assume, came into the world without that lofty title in Washington County, New York in 1788. His parents died in 1795, and Matthews and his nine siblings were split up and sent to the care of neighbors and extended family. Young Matthews ended up with the church elders. Since the community had a strict Presbyterian bent, he was immersed in religion as he grew.

For a little while, once he reached adulthood, he led a normal life, with a wife, children, and a store. Then other concerns stole his attention. Religion swallowed him whole, and he took to street preaching. He also indulged in fits of rage, which didn’t really help his business—or his chances at any sort of stable employment. He bounced between Manhattan, where plenty of street corners held willing, or at least curious, ears—and Albany, where his wife and children waited.



Matthias in his Pontifical Robes.

They likely preferred him in Manhattan. His wife, he insisted, caused all his problems. Or at least, the evil spirits inside her had. And he did his best to drive them out — with a rawhide strap.

His religious views shifted during this time. For all that he would go on to influence others with his views, they weren't set in stone. That, though, may have been the cornerstone of his short success as a cult leader: he could roll with the punches and twist any moment to suit his needs. Matthews had decided that he wasn't actually a Christian. His ancestors, he insisted, were Hebrew.

This new angle didn't always work. An evangelical church rebuffed his attempt to join its ranks. His views, it turned out, were too extreme for them. Another church got a taste of Matthews' extreme style on June 20, 1830, when his religious fervor and bouts of rage came together in a twisted tango that ended with an arrest after he disrupted church services in Argyle, New York. This marked his first recorded brush with the law, but of course, not his last.

Soon after this, Matthews met Elijah Pierson. In Pierson he found a soul perfectly molded to receive his prophecies. A son of Morristown, New Jersey, Pierson had grown up in a faith that believed God would directly interact with the world. He then spent a large chunk of his life expecting these interactions. Waiting for them. Listening.

As an adult, Pierson lived in Manhattan, where Matthews had returned to the street corners to preach and proselytize. Pierson had found some financial success in the city owning and operating a store in lower Manhattan. He'd also found tragedy.

He and his wife, Sarah, had joined the Retrenchment Society, a religious group that promoted asceticism, specifically as regarded material goods. The Retrenchment Society didn't do half-measures, either—this self-denial frequently included such luxuries as food. And if the Piersons did allow themselves sustenance, it came in the form of bread and water.

But no matter how dedicated, some people can't help but try to strike out on their own. Pierson started his own church, as well as a mission through which he and his wife brought spiritual aid to sex workers.

He also held frequent conversations with Jesus Christ. While these conversations started out one-sided, they eventually turned into a more equal exchange, which Pierson would faithfully record in a journal. On the very same day that Matthews was tossed out of a church and hauled off to jail, Elijah Pierson received a distinct message from Jesus: "Thou art Elijah the Tishbite. Gather unto me all the members of Israel at the foot of Mount Carmel."

Elijah Pierson's true identity, it seemed, was the prophet Elijah from the Books of Kings in the Hebrew Bible. And the prophet Elijah, it should be noted, performed some miracles in his day—including resurrection.

When Sarah died of consumption—a condition that may have been less brutal without all that fasting—Pierson thought the time had come for one of those handy miracles. At Sarah's funeral, he sprang into action. For well over an hour, he repeated "The Lord shall raise him up," a line from the Prayer of Faith in the book of James. "And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up." But the only things raised that day were the eyebrows of two-hundred-plus mourners who attended the funeral only to be treated to Pierson's sad, frantic display of grief-fueled hubris.

It was through the Retrenchment Society that Pierson had met and befriended successful businessman Benjamin Folger, who hosted meetings at the home he shared with his wife, Ann. The Folgers had gone on to join Pierson's church, and true friends that they were, didn't abandon him in this trying time. Most of his congregation didn't share such commitment and went in search of other churches.

According to the *New York Journal of Commerce*, the friendship between Pierson and Folger had long been established, while Pierson's friendship with Robert Matthews still had a shiny new excitement in 1832. Pierson, "whose piety and good sense [Folger] highly respected and esteemed," listened eagerly to every word of Robert Matthews' teachings. Matthews declared himself Matthias the Prophet. He drew his identity

from that of the apostle Matthias. Matthews' logic took this revelation farther than most would dare. Matthias, he said, had received the spirit of Jesus Christ upon the latter's resurrection, and therefore he, Matthews, was the second appearance of Jesus on Earth. But in the second half of this double feature, he wasn't Jesus.

He was God.

Pierson bought into this fully. Of course, he had to share the good news with his best friend, and thus he introduced Matthews to Folger. Folger and a few others also bought what Matthews was selling. Of course, as we all know, persecution comes with the territory for an almighty being on earth. Matthews, upon bringing two men of means under his spell, made sure they knew it. Being so persecuted, he needed their help to survive.

He targeted Folgers in particular. In case his twisted logic didn't work, he tossed in both a threat and a promise: refuse to obey Matthews' demand for whatever money he wanted, and the wrath of the almighty would fall upon Folger's head. Acquiescence, though, would buy him entrance into the Kingdom of God, as well as eternal happiness.

Folger folded like a cheap suit, and so Matthews was able to purchase some expensive ones. The *Herald of the Times* newspaper describes his wardrobe as "of the richest and most costly description." Linen shirts with lace-trimmed wristbands; silk stockings and handkerchiefs; cloaks of velvet and silk; a crimson sash; highly polished Wellington boots; and merino morning dresses. His wife and an unmarried daughter remained at home in Albany, where they barely scraped by doing washing and ironing for locals.

He also carried both an iron rod—a vital tool for ruling the world—and a sword he claimed, "came from Him who was first and last," although the inscription on the blade, *E Pluribus Unum*, suggested that it actually came from a U.S. Army officer. A gold key he kept in his possession was, he said, meant to unlock the gates of heaven.

Matthews looked to Pierson, too, for assistance. He had one thing of particular value: his pulpit. Matthews preached on it once, and it was his thereafter. His favorite subjects to rail against were devils and women, and now he ranted about those twin terrors to Pierson's congregation.

Even deities need shelter, so he moved into Pierson's house. There, another came under his spell: Pierson's housekeeper, an ex-slave named Isabella Van Wagenen. She becomes Matthews' personal maid—for free. She, too, spent money on him, buying him furniture.

Benjamin and Ann Folger owned a mansion in Sing Sing, New York, now called Ossining. They named the mansion Heart Place, but the name didn't stick after the arrival of Matthews in August 1833. Thus, ensued what had to be a terribly confusing period for Folger, which would end in the implosion of his personal and financial life, to say nothing of his spiritual life.

Matthews came with enough luggage to imply that he'd planned a long stay. After a week, though, he said sharing the mansion didn't suit him, and told Pierson and Folger that they needed to lease him other accommodations. They agreed, but by the time they told Matthews, he'd come to the realization that living in a home leased by his friends would be improper. He should live in a house they'd *bought* for him. They agreed again, but the house hunt was short lived as Matthews had another realization: Folger had purchased Heart Place under the direction of the spirit of truth, which meant he had bought it for Matthews. This, he believed, was where his kingdom would really flourish, and so he renamed the home Mount Zion. He called his followers to his kingdom and assigned them jobs on the 29-acre estate.

Alliances began to shift at this point. Ann Folger received word from the Holy Spirit that she and Matthews were "match spirits." She and Matthews acted on this, and soon enough the community considered them married. As Matthews was the community's "Father," Ann became the Mother. Other members of the cult paired off with their match spirits as assigned by Matthews—except Isabella Van Wagenen. And as the women of the community spent more time in the mansion's many bedrooms, celebrating their unions with their matches, Van Wagenen found herself shouldering the responsibilities they neglected.

She wasn't alone in her discontentedness. His wife's change in position within the cult left Benjamin

Folger alone and furious. His match spirit awaited him, though, and he found her when Matthews sent him to fetch his daughter, Isabella. This revelation at first enraged Matthews, and he beat his daughter savagely, but he came around soon enough. The only person who didn't come around was Isabella's husband. He brought the authorities in to retrieve his wife. Folger found himself alone once again. Matthews' kingdom found itself entangled in a legal mess.

Pierson, meanwhile, was not faring well. Nervous fits he'd suffered in the city had followed him to Mount Zion, only to increase in frequency and severity. This, despite having pledged his estate to Matthews. Matthews insisted that only prayer could cure this malady; it was no medical issue plaguing Pierson, after all. It was "fitty devils" that had invaded his body. Matthews announced that he "had the power of life and death, and Mr. Pierson would not die!"

On July 28, 1834, two plates of blackberries proved him wrong.

The blackberries were Pierson's dinner, and he got terribly sick after eating them. Still, Matthews would not allow any medical intervention. Pierson died on August 6. Three doctors performed an autopsy and determined that he'd been poisoned.

This, as well as a disagreement over whether Folger or Matthews should inherit Pierson's estate, shattered the community. The Folgers fled to Manhattan, determined to break with Matthews. Matthews followed, determined not to let them. He settled into their city home. When they told him to leave, he threw his usual threats at them. If they deserted him, "sickness, and perhaps death" would descend upon them. Still, they gave him an eviction date.

The next incident, which occurred the morning Matthews was preparing to leave, was likely the product of Folger's subsequent rumormongering. He later claimed—and newspapers repeated the claim—that he and his family suffered a violent illness after eating a breakfast prepared by Van Wagenen. Matthews and Van Wagenen abstained from this breakfast. Folger insisted—and newspapers repeated—that Matthews must have paid Van Wagenen to poison the Folger family. Van Wagenen later filed a libel suit against Folger, and the court sided with her. Folger had to pay the ex-slave \$125, or close to \$4000 in modern valuation.

The poisoning allegations are particularly shocking in light of who Van Wagenen became. Like Matthews, she later assumed a new name, although hers has a much stronger foothold in history -- Sojourner Truth, the famous abolitionist and women's rights activist.

Matthews, meanwhile, still managed to wheedle some money from Folger, a total of \$630 in cash and gold coins. Thus, weighed down with ready capital, he finally left the Folger home. Folger wasn't done with him, though—he immediately contacted the authorities about the man who had stolen \$630 from him and also killed his friend. Matthews was arrested in Albany.

His initial interview by police provides more of his unique gems. In response to a query about his residence and occupation, he stated: "I am a traveler, and my legal residence is Zion Hill, Westchester County; I am a Jewish teacher, and priest of the Most High, saying and doing all that I do, under oath, by virtue of my having subscribed to all the covenants that God hath made with man from the beginning up to this time." He at least had the wherewithal to refrain from any lofty pronouncements about actually being God.

THE PROPHET!
A
FULL AND ACCURATE REPORT
OF THE
JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS
IN THE
EXTRAORDINARY AND HIGHLY INTERESTING CASE
OF
MATTHEWS, alias MATTHIAS,



CHARGED WITH HAVING
Swindled Mr. B. H. Folger,
OF THE CITY OF NEW-YORK,
OUT OF CONSIDERABLE PROPERTY:
WITH THE
*Speeches of Counsel, and Opinion of the Court on the motion of the District
Attorney, that a Nolle Prosequit be entered in the Case.*
ALSO
A Sketch of the Impostor's Character,
And a detailed History of his Career as a "Prophet," together with many other Particulars, which
have not hitherto been published.

BY W. E. DRAKE, CONGRESSIONAL AND LAW REPORTER.

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Price Six Cents.

The resulting court appearances for murder and other charges also fascinated the public. The courtroom overflowed with onlookers, and Matthews ramped up his eccentric personal style. He wore, on one occasion, green cashmere trousers, a yellow cashmere vest crossed by a red sash, a claret frock coat topped with a purple cloak, both made of the finest fabrics. On all of his frock coats he had embroidered seven silver stars, six small and one large, on each breast. It's noted that he wore no cravat, as his huge beard would have obscured it. *The Hillsborough Recorder* recounts that “his deportment was more that of a dandy in a drawing-room than a prisoner about to be tried.”

He didn't remain calm, though. On the first day of the murder trial, he exploded into a rant about grand juries, which earned him a contempt of court charge.

At least Matthews provided some entertainment for the eager masses. Participants in the trial, on both sides, took pains to avoid any of the sexual shenanigans that had occurred at Mount Zion. After some questions as to his mental competence, the judge declared him fit for trial. Matthews' brother-in-law testified that, in all things but religion, Matthews was perfectly sane. That was enough for the judge.

The trial only took four days, as the defense poked large holes in the testimony of the autopsy doctors. The defense attorneys then asked outright for a dismissal, and the judge agreed. It wasn't over yet though—Matthews had also been charged with assault for beating his daughter, Isabella. After competing testimony from Isabella, who'd forgiven her father, and her husband Charles, who most definitely hadn't, the jury returned with a guilty verdict. Matthews spent a mere four months in jail; three months for assault, and one month for contempt.

His religious career had one more brush with history left, though. Joshua the Jewish Minister, as he began calling himself, met with another fervent religious mind in 1835: Joseph Smith, best known for founding the Church of Latter-Day Saints. While at first blush the tentative friendship seemed promising, things went awry quickly. After a dinner together and a stint preaching to Smith's followers, the two parted ways on less than amicable terms. Both made it known that the other was under Satan's spell.

Matthews' days of swaying powerful men to believe in him, it seemed, had faded. In his heyday, though, he had a particular talent for picking his marks. Respectable men of means who would not only follow his twisted logic and mental gymnastics, but literally buy it with cash and favors, were hard to find. As the *Albany Evening Journal* put it: “the fact that three intelligent citizens of New York were thus deluded will form one of the darkest pages in the whole chapter of modern fanaticism.”

The *Herald of the Times* newspaper had its own explanation: “superstition . . . often finds the weak side of human character.” It seems like Matthews, like so many cult leaders, felt the same way. And for a brief time, he exploited it—and he reveled in it.

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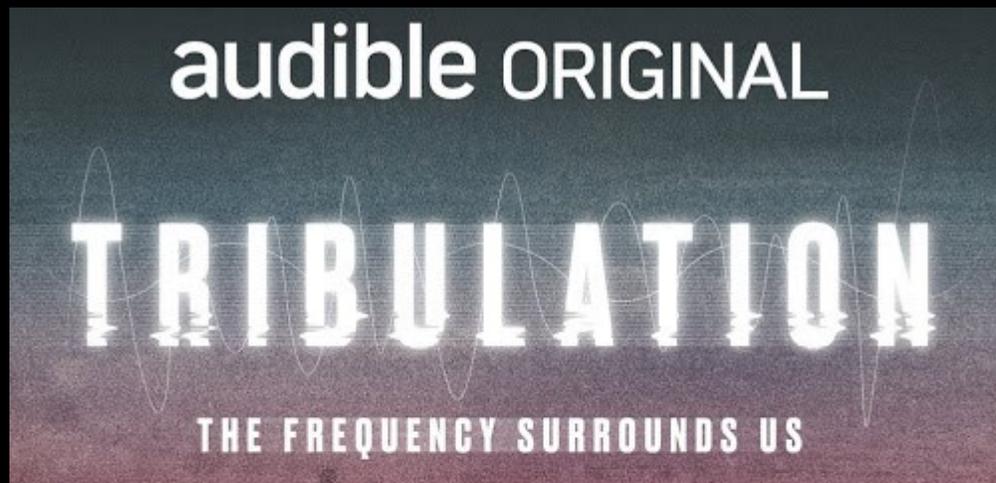


Saturday Return

by F. C. Moulton

Saturday

morning they returned. I had glimpsed them from my front window but fortunately they had not seen me. Why this Saturday? Why this neighborhood? I heard them now, they were at my front door. I knew not to answer; not to call out; not to make a noise. I stood still and waited. Then quietly I checked the peep hole in the door. They were still there. I heard the doorbell chime followed by a knock. I was lucky; my TV was off; no radio; no music; no noise to betray that anyone was home. Did I risk warning the neighborhood? I must, it is my duty. I started at the top of my neighborhood call tree; my goal to get through my part of the list as quickly and quietly as I could. I kept my voice low as I made my first call and announced, "Be warned; they are here in force. Alert everyone. It is the return of the Jehovah's Witnesses."



A Review by Chris Garcia

Cults are something that I've been interested in for the last 5/5th of my life.

I've been reading and watching the stories of cults since I was old enough to realize that Mystery Inc. was likely a cult that was being manipulated by Velma with Fred as the figurehead. I remember Jonestown happening, the news reports, and I totally remember reading incredibly deeply into Aum Shinrikyo after the Tokyo Subway attacks. It's a fascination that my friend M knew about, and when she was looking at finding her father she had me help her dig through the mass of Scientology materials she acquired. It was enlightening . . . and took up a lot of space in the apartment.

As a part of my obsession with Audible Original audio dramas, I came across one that really struck me, and fed directly into my obsession – *Tribulation*.

On a road trip across East Texas after holidays with her family, Stacy Carlson and her husband Greg come across a weird religious broadcast. It's something both apocalyptic and messianic, fire and brimstone and violent. There's what sounds like a scourging, and a perhaps a burning. It's garbled and crazy, and it freaks them out. Brother Elisha is the preacher speaking, fiery and powerful.

Then someone says Stacy's name.

Of course, Greg pulls over and gets out when they see a transmitter, and that leads to the story that rides the line between science fiction, technothriller, horror, and conspiracy fiction. It's engaging as hell, though things keep popping up, something new every hour or so, and sometimes they're allowed to drop, and other times they're allowed to flourish. There is method to that madness, though, and it's a lot of fun.

The elements of fiction that were clear influences include some of my all-time faves. *Twin Peaks* has the element of a world within our world, so to speak, as well as the idea of electricity as a conduit for . . . well, that's a bit difficult, innit? *The Matrix* expands on that thought, and it's obviously in Tribulations. There's

also the element of The Force, and a strange religion that seems to have a dark and a light side that flows through us in here too. It's all over the place, along with a detective case in the mode of *Conspiracy Theory*, a sadly forgotten pre-terrible human Mel Gibson flick.

But the real-life influences are more fascinating.

First, there have been revival-style preachers since the 1800s, though really, they took off in the 1920s with the wider introduction of radio. The program *Tribulation* presents sounds a lot like the fire-and-brimstone preachers of the 1920s and 30s, and there are a few surviving recordings, and there's "It's Gonna Rain" by Steve Reich that's an amazing piece of tape music of a Pentecostal preacher. That style of delivery was classic, and Josh Charles (of *Dead Poets Society* and *Sports Night*) does a great job in his delivery.

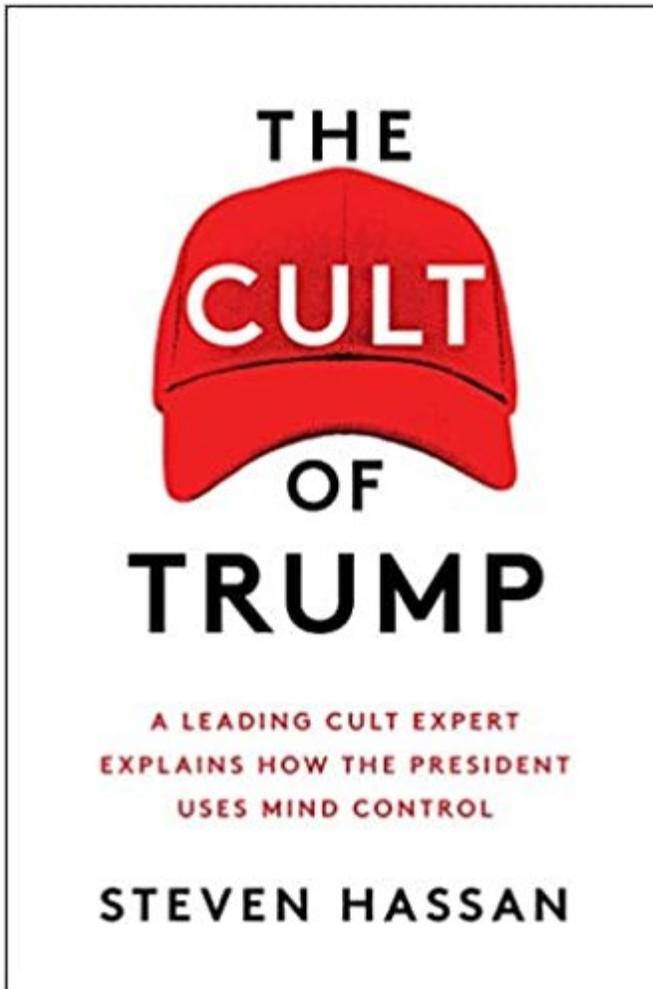
The single most important element in a modern cult is a charismatic leader. The closest figures to Elisha are probably Jim Jones of the People's Temple (and you can see several ties to the People's Temple) and Shoko Asahara of Aum Shinrikyo. His delivery reminded me of George Went Henley, the founder of the Church of God with Signs Following, the sect that popularized snake handling. There are a lot of elements of Opus Dei as well, where suffering is a part of the cleansing of the soul.



The funny thing is that it's basically a form of doomsday cult, but instead of being a cult based around dates where the world will end, people are convinced they must suffer for seven years, then they get a 75-day interval, followed by heavenly bliss eternal, and all the things that means. This is certainly the kind of thing that Marshall Applewhite, the leader of Heaven's Gate, would have recognized.

Also, there's an Art Bell-type, a podcaster who deals in conspiracy and the supernatural. He ends up as the guy who helps Stacy navigate her way towards Greg, largely because he once heard the call as well. He used to be a rock star, but he went the out-there podcast route. Now, this may seem weird, but there is a near-exact match to him. Tom DeLonge, formerly of Blink-182, has always been interested in the paranormal, and especially in aliens. He even founded a production company to make documentaries about UFOs.

This entire presentation is well done in all aspects, but most importantly, it takes this idea of a woman trying to save her husband from a cult as a serious topic. That is something that has come into focus lately with those emboldened through the work of Leah Remini to find and bring back her family from the cult of Scientology. The way she does it is far more paranormal, of course, but she presents all the normal themes that accompany these sort of stories.



***The Cult of Trump: A Leading Cult Expert Explains How the President Uses Mind Control* by Steven Hassan**

A Review by Chuck Surface

After January 6, 2021, public rhetoric about Donald Trump as cult leader has escalated, but such discussions aren't new. Trump's obvious narcissism, his penchant for repetitive, slogan-ridden language, and the political rallies that play more like tent revival meetings certainly meet criteria for defining a charismatic leader, and I'm using the term "charismatic" in the sense of a leader who draws many followers. I'm not likely to invite Trump, Keith Raniere, or David Miscavige out for steaks, and I suspect neither are you, but many have plugged into their messages deeply.

Much has been written about Trump's state of mind and his supporters' dispositions. Bandy X. Lee M.D., for example, joined with 36 other mental-health professionals to step beyond the Goldwater Rule – an ethical standard

that dictates against psychiatrists, therapists, and social workers offering opinions about public figures they haven't examined – because the duty to warn outweighs this proscription. You can explore their thoughts by reading *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 37 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President* edited by Bandy X. Lee, M.D., M.Div. Two years later, Lee and company's worries have been validated.

Another book appeared that same year, 2019, Steven Hassan's *The Cult of Trump: A Leading Cult Expert Explains How the President Uses Mind Control*. Hassan's been helping "deprogram" individuals from cults for decades now, his motivation stemming from his own two-year stint within Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. In an interview with Sean Illing of Vox, Hassan clarifies his motives for writing this book:

I began this book with the assumption that Trump is a malignant narcissist. Actually, watching him and listening to him reminded me of Sun Myung Moon, the leader of the cult I joined in college, in that both have a kind of God complex where they're the only one with the answers, the only one who can fix things. Moon was going to create a theocracy and Trump was going to "drain the swamp." But the way they carry themselves is similar.

But what really made me think of Trump as a cult was the way the groups who supported him were behaving, especially religious groups who believed that God had chosen Trump or was using Trump. There are actual pro-Trump religious groups, like the New Apostolic Reformation, whose leaders

were saying, “We’re of God. The rest of the world is of Satan, and we need to follow our chosen leaders who are connected to God.”

Hassan frames his analyses within findings from others who have influenced how we define cults – Robert Jay Lifton, Janja Lalich, Margaret Singer, and Robert Cialdini, for example – along with his BITE model (Behavior, Information, Thought, and Emotion) to advance his ideas. He also explores how Trump employs hypnotic techniques such as repetition to sway audiences. Media outlets including Fox News, the One American News Network, and Newsmax have given him a broad voice, and his Twitter was a legendary platform for his messaging.

Additionally, Hassan wants us to consider our own well-beings. What makes us susceptible to though reform? Have we cornered ourselves into limited sources of information that hinder freethinking? I remember spending a summer reading books by Ann Coulter, Ralph Reed, David Horowitz, and, yes, Rush Limbaugh. I went into it heavily biased toward leftist progressivism, but with a need to understand the other side. I came away seeing their points of view and with knowledge about manipulative techniques as well. Ann Coulter really can write even if she’s full of crap. So, after all that I’m still profoundly leftist, but I see how my side plays the demagogic, mind-screw game too. Broad reading enhances critical thinking . . . who could have imagined?

All cults have something in common. They strip away freedom of thought and realign ideas with those of the leader. The author discusses his original way of conceptualizing cults, called the BITE model-the acronym for controlled Behavior, Information, Thought, and Emotion. Even more revelatory was his discussion of how hypnotic techniques such as repetition, subliminal messages, programming amnesia, and even guided meditation can be so effective in swaying followers.

Do we have a Trump cult, or is Trump just a charismatic leader who has provided a means to an end for those with authoritarian agendas? Both. I’ve observed where grifters – far-right politicians, evangelical leaders, and white supremacists -- have taken advantage of trends set loose before and after Trump’s election, and many MAGA members have criticized their leader when he’s seemed to step away from the central message. After telling insurrectionists to “go home” on January 6, one supporter who wasn’t in Washington tweeted, “Trump cucked,” although Trump did go out of his way to tell the crowds that he loved them and that they were special people. He’s a useful tool, for sure. But I’ve also witnessed those awash with blind faith and cognitive dissonance, trapped like the students from that famous after-school special, *The Wave*.

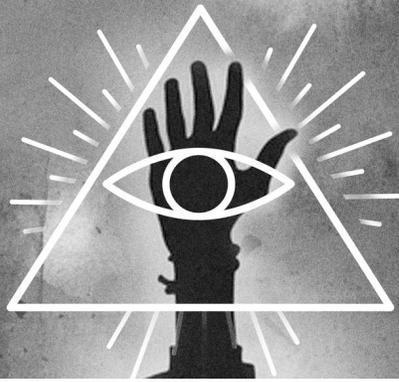
But . . . if the Trump Movement is a cult then how much culpability do red-cap and Confederate-flag-waving insurrectionists have for January 6, 2021? Hassan spends the final portion of his book outlining how to help those who have been trapped into cults. He believes that open, loving conversations with friends or families can bring them back to freethinking. Also, exposing them to various points of view through film and books to enhance questioning will further the process from cemented adherence. These are the techniques Hassan suggests individuals practice to keep minds open, which I mentioned above.

I can imagine many raising their brows while reading Hassan’s suggestions for extracting others from thought reform. I’m not feeling so magnanimous toward MAGA followers myself. And, again, we have the question of culpability. Hassan never brings up, say, the Manson Family murders and other crimes committed

by cultic groups. These, to be fair, are beyond the scope of *Cult of Trump*, which was written in 2019, but if we do define Trumpism as a cult, does that open the door for leniency in the courts for the storming of the Capitol? It didn't for the Mansons, and it shouldn't here.

Finally, *The Cult of Trump* offers a good starting point for those wanting to learn more about cults from an interventionist's angle. I'd also suggest *Cults Inside Out: How People Get in and Can Get Out* by Rick Alan Ross, and for theoretical underpinnings there's Robert Jay Lifton's magisterial *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China*. "New religious movements" is another term for the subject and many worthy volumes exist using this less weighted phrasing. It's all worth your time, and it's all about learning how to dodge grifters and narcissists.





Cults: A Parcast Original by Christopher J. Garcia

True-crime podcasts are hot right now. They have been since *Serial*, though things like *Last Podcast on the Left* have been around for much longer. The area of cults has been covered in a bunch of great shows, from *Heaven's Gate: The Cult of Cults* to *The Indie Scientology Podcast*. One podcast that I love is *Cults*, one of the best from the Parcast family of podcasts.

One thing that Parcast does really well is fitting their hosts to their content. Vanessa and Greg, who host the wonderful show *Serial Killers*, are a pair who have good chemistry, and more importantly, excellent voices. The two of them are so good, they manage to trade off without making it feel like they're over-reading, which is a curse many two person podcasts have. The writing is good, if slightly sensational, but the way the two talk is smart and engaging.

Vanessa is pegged as the one who gives the psychological background, citing the articles and such that inform the episode. Greg moves the story forward, but the pacing is dead-on, largely because it's cut well, but really because it feels as if they're actually playing off each other. I know enough about podcast production by pros to know it's a difficult thing to pull off.

The content is great, and a buddy of mine from college, Tim Davis, was one of their writers. The way they covered the Order of the Solar Temple, and especially the way they covered the People's Temple, is smarter than most. When *Last Podcast on the Left* covered the People's Temple, it was less about the cult aspects than it was about Jim Jones. Here, they focus on how the cult formed, and what the cult meant. Only the way that *Bay Area Mystery Club* covered Our Black Muslim Bakery approaches the quality of the point of view.

The highlight, and if you only listen to one set of Parcast podcast, it's the look at the Satanic panic. The fact is it wasn't real, but at the same time, there were elements that 100% were. They take both seriously and make some impressive notes on the psychology of the whole thing.



Using Cults in *Dungeons & Dragons* by Chris Duval

Before I moved to California in the fall of 1978, I encountered a cult within *Dungeons & Dragons* (DnD) named—with a prefixed “True”—after a branch of a real-world major religion. The label made me uncomfortable.

Later I read about the Temple of the Frogs cult in the DnD book, *Blackmoor*,¹ owned by the Dungeon Master (DM) of the games I played before 1984. In worlds that same DM created, the players’ characters (PCs) took the goddess Bast and elevated her importance—probably beyond the vision of the DM.

These examples show three possible sources of cults or any other theme in DnD, and generally in tabletop² role-playing³ games: a commercial publication—here, the Temple of the Frogs; a DM’s creation—here the one I was uneasy about; and the joint creation of the players and the DM—the Bast example. There are other combinations like DM-modded commercial modules.

Thus, doing cults in DnD so everyone is happy is tricky: You may have to clean up a commercial module, and in every case, you must be sensitive to your players’ creative input.

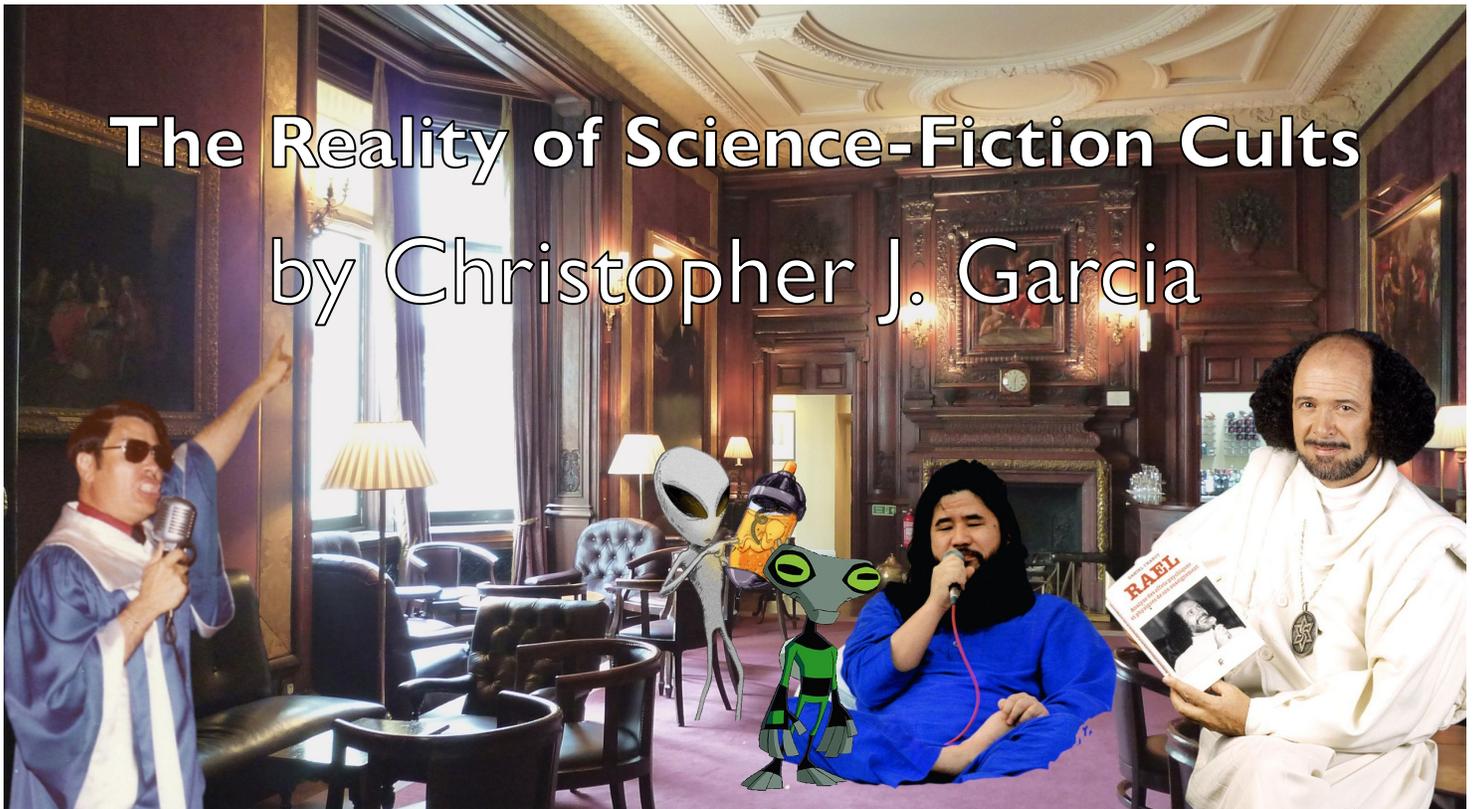
You and all your players may accept something today that some of them are uncomfortable with tomorrow—not to mention on reading a game’s written log a decade later—people change! And some players may only appear to go along. So, what should you watch out for?

The easiest (stated as a minimum): Do not cast religions as evil cults that either your current members may have been brought up in—even those they now reject, nor those that a future player is likely to connect to: the three Abrahmic⁵ religions, the four Indic⁶ religions, any of the religions that trace back to pre-Christian Europe,⁷ and those indigenous to the place you're are playing.

The harder: striking a balance between the wondrous and the hurtfully exotic. The encounter with that which is different from our mundane experiences is a chief joy of DnD. But the portrayals must not mock or demean a real-world culture—directly or through stereotypes that the other culture would perceive as coded references to them.

There isn't a hard and fast guide for doing this rightly. Maintaining players' enjoyment means not only advance work but frequent tweaking as the game runs and you observe—perhaps boredom/ distraction, perhaps frustration/ withdrawal, perhaps engaged animation. So also, there's an ongoing effort with sensitivity. Firstly, since the potential offense is social and social things shift, a DM has to adjust his style with time: goodness is negotiated by us all. Secondly, one or more players may drift over the DMs ideal line. As always, because the game is collaborative, a DM can only guide, not instruct, not command. And a DM's hand must be so nearly invisible that players are not pulled out of immersion from the game's reality.

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1. By Dave Arneson, edited by Tim Kask (TSR Games, 1975).
 2. On-line games are sometimes conflated with their tabletop thematic homologues. This goes beyond my experience so I'm limiting my analysis to the latter.
 3. Role-playing games are ones where a player performs as a character. These can be live-action, tabletop, or -online. They are usually a blend of performance, and a pre-set tableau or world and a governing set of rules that might include resolution by probability (e.g., by dice). The games usually include a moderator (DM in DnD; Game Master is the more generic label). The moderator reveals the tableau or world, facilitates the enjoyment and sociability of the game, and announces impacts to PCs as they interact with the world. In DnD the world can be as small as a roadside inn plus a nearby underground dungeon, or as expansive as a planet. Other games range widely in space or time.
 4. For more on the creative partnerships of players and the DM, see the examples and analysis in Jennifer Grouling Cover's *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing of Games* (McFarland & Co., Inc., 2010). Her text can be understood by non-players.
 5. The ones that include Abram/ Abraham in their texts.
 6. The extent ones that trace to what is now India.
 7. Goddess worship traces itself back at least to the Roman Empire but considers itself universal. I use the word 'trace' to try to be respectful. A secular historian might not agree with any religion's internal history, but their version of history is part of a culture toward which outsiders must be sensitive.



Since the 1950s, there have been science-fiction cults.

Ultimately, science fiction might be the myth of our time. Typically, religions form from myths, coalesced, and made firm with the addition of ritual and traditions. The conflagration of science fiction with UFOs is pretty dang strong. I've heard that it was the increase of science-fiction stories on film and magazines that helped to bump up the saucer mania of the late 1940s and early 1950s. I've written a lot about the crossover, notably in comics. The idea of the UFO cult is a bit nebulous, as there are even mainstream Christian churches that hold interpretations of passages in the Bible that are UFOlogy-ish. Still, they feel science-fiction flavored for the most part.

Probably the novel that had the most influence was Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*. People have pinned the rise of the Manson Family on this Heinlein tome for years, and it's likely not a book that Charlie himself read, since he was barely literate according to most. But it was big in prison, along with *Dianetics*, and both of those made it into Charlie's sermon/orgy times. In fact, he named one of his children Valentine Michael, after the main character. There is some indication that a couple of members had read it, most likely Valentine's mother, Mary Brunner.

Probably the most famous science-fiction-based cult was Heaven's Gate. Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Nettles, better known to their brood as Ti and Do, were both science-fiction geeks, and they took many of the ideas they read in books by the likes of Arthur C. Clarke and . . . wait for it . . . Robert Heinlein. They were also heavily into *Star Trek*. Like insanely so. I've heard tell of members attending *Trek* conventions, but that might just be a legend. They were actually active in Santa Cruz county at one point, and there were members who grew up in Felton, and I believe two or three from Santa Cruz. The group was far less *Stranger in a Strange Land* than almost any other cult, though. They were much more like the monks in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, I think.

So many UFO cults have existed over the last century. The first is a matter of argument, though many folks who study cult thinking think that the "I AM" Activity was the first, an offshoot of Theosophy that dealt heavily with the ideas of Ascendant Masters, and communication between the masters and adherents through ritual, after a fashion. This was prior to the Arnold Sighting that made Flying Saucer a household name. The Urantia Movement likely was also founded prior to that momentous event, and there are those who say that Nation of Islam is a UFO religion, though I think that's going a whole lot too far.

The Seekers are the ones that really had UFO all over them. The Seekers were a doomsday cult, with the date of December 21st, 1954. I'm not 100% sure they qualify as a doomsday cult, they actually had a lot in common with Heaven's Gate, but they had a specific date from the start, and that date came, and nothing happened as always happens with doomsday cults. If they don't commit ritual suicide after the date was re-scheduled, and passed without the UFO, people started to lose interest. Funnily, the idea of cognitive dissonance was first brought to the world by Leon Festinger in his book about the Seeker, *When Prophecy Fails*.

The fifties saw a few other good ones. Unarius and the Aetherius Society were both kind of scientific, but also fairly cult-like. The Cosmic Circle of Fellowship is closer to the Moose Lodge than Heaven's Gate. Founded slightly later by "followers" of one of the first wave of American UFO contactees, Mark-Age was a significant cult-like movement with the charismatic leader being a charlatan named Charles Boyd Gentzel. Gloria Lee was supposedly their guide from the great beyond, and she had claimed to have been contacted by aliens for years until her death in 1962, after which Mark-Age was founded.

It was the 1970s and early 1980s that were the Golden Age for UFO cults.

Heaven's Gate was founded in the 1970s, and many of the members who joined then were with them to the end. The Nuwaubian movement started out as a Black Muslim movement, got more and more radical, and eventually devolved into a Egyptian-themed UFO cult and amusement compound. It's an interesting study in the interconnection between the idea that the pyramids had to be built by aliens and religious thought. They're still around today, but in smaller numbers.

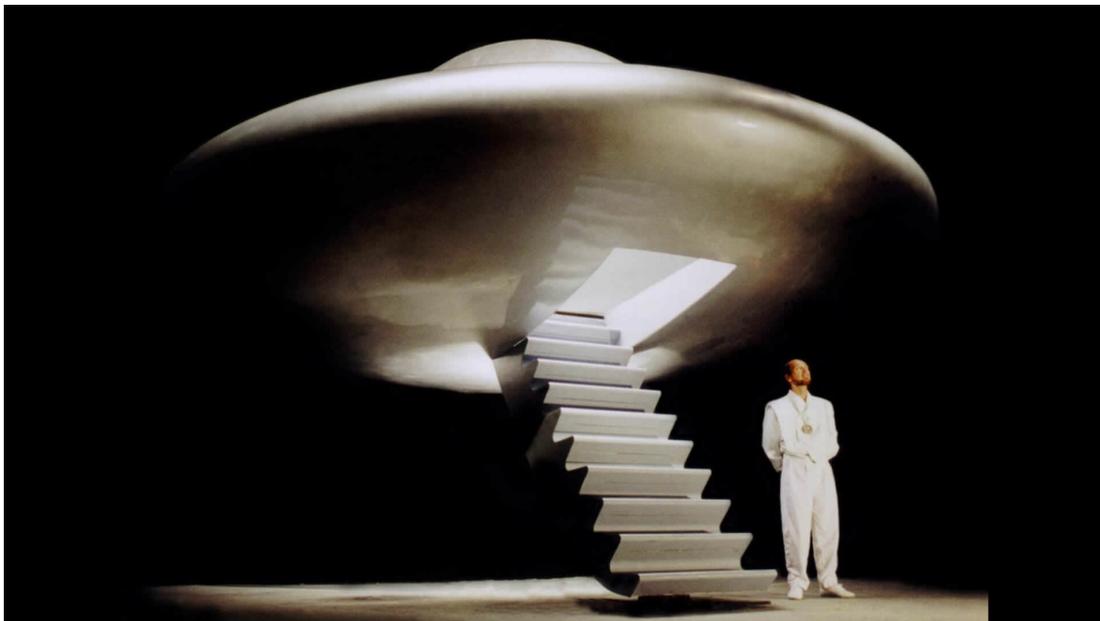
One of the most successful, strangest, and longest-lasting UFO cults is Raëlism. If you want to understand the form of a cult, this is the one to look at. It's based around a charismatic leader, Claude Vorhilon, also known as Raël. The cult that has formed around him, and it's very substantial and all over the world, is based around the Elohim, an alien race who created Earth and of whom Raël is prophet -- well, the last of forty that includes Jesus, Buddha, and various others. Around the idea that humans were created using advanced technology by an alien race, they've actually done some really interesting work in the area of cam-

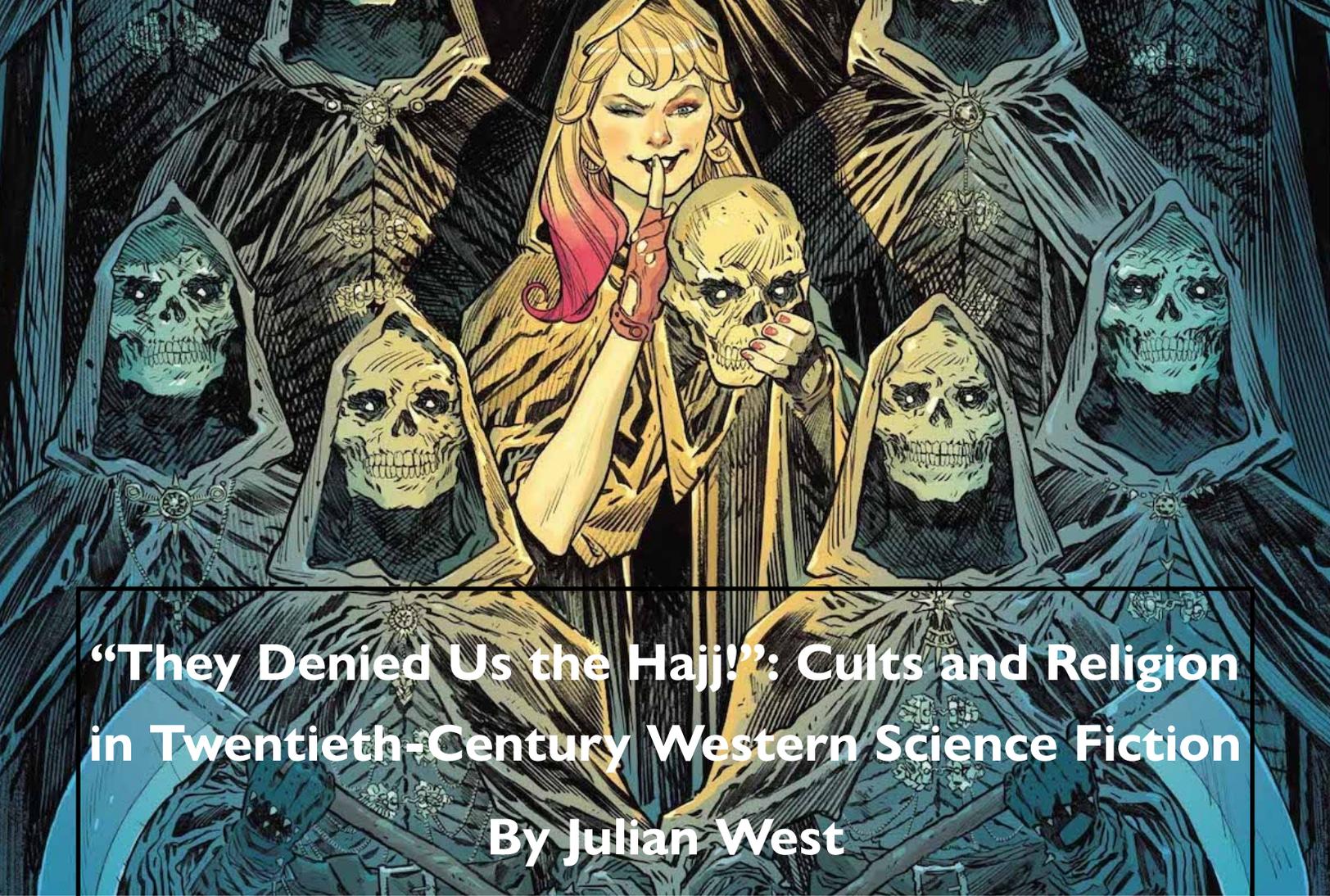
painging against female genital mutilation, and basically a bunch of sex stuff. It's the kind of cult that eventually becomes a religion.

The Order of the Solar Temple was founded in 1984 and is one of those stories that gets covered by a lot of true-crime podcasts. They weren't strictly a UFO cult, though the idea of ascendant beings was much ingrained in the groups belief structure. They were much more an occult religion that borrows from the Order of the Golden Dawn, and a bit from Theosophy and Madame Blavatsky. The reason they get so much attention? Well, first off, they murdered an infant by stabbing him with a stake believing he was the Antichrist. There were a series of murders and suicides. It weren't always easy to make the difference out, but they all basically had massive ritualistic overtones. The first set happened in the mid-1990s, and more throughout the 1990s. The co-founder, Joseph Di Mambro, was pretty much nuts. There are still some of these folks around, mostly in France and Spain.

Of course, I've left out arguably the most important, and certainly the most successful cult based around science-fiction beliefs. Scientology was founded by L. Ron Hubbard. There are lots of origin stories. The one that Forry told me had LRH and Heinlein hanging out at a Worldcon and there was a bet that led to the founding. I don't believe that. It's far too simple, honestly, but Hubbard first wrote *Dianetics*, and then morphed it into the Church of Scientology. It wasn't the worst move a writer could make because Hubbard got stupid rich. The entire premise is based on the science fictional idea of Xenu, ancient beings that are actually attracted to (or are they eating?) our worst instincts, and a whole bunch of alien/interdimensional stuff that's crazy. The really crazy stuff, though, is how they treat people who join. They have a boat, and people work on the boat, and they're forced to sign a billion-year contract. They are often denied medical care, which is apparently what killed M's dad, and the most public stuff, like the anti-psych stuff, ain't good either.

The whole cult thing has, in fact, slowed down, and morphed a bit. You can argue Amway and many other MLMs have cult-like tendencies like charismatic leaders, subtle coercion, milieu control, and isolation. There are still UFO cults that were founded within the last couple of decades, they tend to be a bit more subdued. There are a lot of web-based groups that come close, but really, you don't see true science-fiction cults. We are probably the better for it!





“They Denied Us the Hajj!”: Cults and Religion in Twentieth-Century Western Science Fiction

By Julian West

There’s a conflict involved in any discussion of religion and science fiction. There are certain markers that divide science fiction and fantasy, and they aren’t necessarily logical. One of them is the presence of some kind of religion. If it’s a central element, that tends to make the work seem more like fantasy than science fiction. Nevertheless, there are works of science fiction which do indeed have religion as a theme, and I will discuss some of them here. I do not assert that the works cited present a comprehensive picture, but I’ve tried to illustrate some themes as far as my ignorance will permit. There’s a bias toward pre-1980 fiction, and towards English as the typical language. Apologies in advance for any errors. Ideally, I would have reread all these works, but time did not permit.

When science fiction emerged as a distinct form of literature, due to Wells and Verne, it dealt with the impact of technology on society. The development of religion wasn’t considered a topic of interest. The likes of Machen, Lovecraft, and Cabell explored themes involving religion, but not in a science-fictional context. Conan Doyle had Professor Challenger, his hard-headed rationalist scientist, at first skeptical and then totally convinced by spiritualism, in *The Land of Mist*. One can only be grateful that this terrible idea wasn’t perpetrated on Sherlock Holmes.

The American science-fiction magazine tradition didn’t have any great interest in religion, either in the early Gernsback days, or after the Campbell revolution or even the *Galaxy* more socially aware version. The future was going to be religion-free, or if there was any, it would manage itself privately. Alfred Bester made this absence explicit in *The Stars My Destination*, where science is the officially accepted religion and actual reli-

gious belief is considered obscene, disgraceful and illegal. But Bester was making explicit a religion-free future which in general was implicit by the absence of any references to worship or belief.

The British tradition was somewhat different. Wells, though not a believer, was fascinated by religion. *War of the Worlds* has a central character of a curate whose faith (and sanity) is shaken by the Martian invasion. Religion occasionally features strongly for Wells' successor Olaf Stapleton. His most metaphysical work, *Star Maker*, features a supreme being with quite different characteristics to the Christian god. *Odd John*, about a super-intelligent mutant, is concerned throughout with moral and metaphysical issues. John grapples with issues of religion and trying to decide what morality would mean to a superior being, leading to a shocking conclusion.

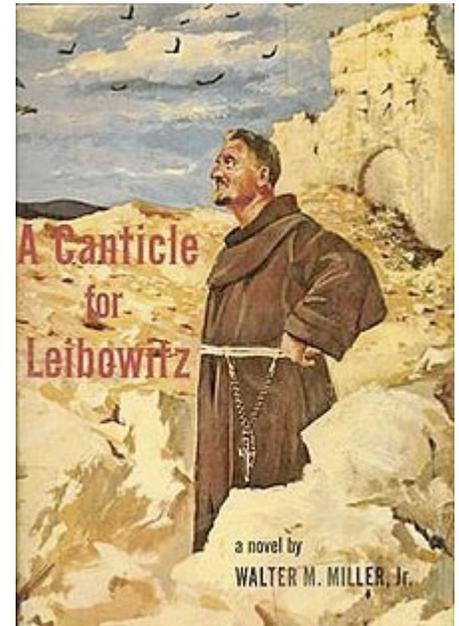
A highly influential work was David Lindsey's *A Voyage to Arcturus*. It is impossible to summarize briefly, but its themes of morality and metaphysics remain haunting and thought-provoking. Each chapter set on his strange planet presents a different philosophical viewpoint.

C.S. Lewis was influenced by Lindsay, as well as American science fiction and stimulated to write an answer to the stories of Wells and Stapleton. He regarded *Star Maker* as an immoral work, akin to devil worship. His so-called Cosmic Trilogy is one of the first works to deal with the problem of the Christian attitude to intelligent beings on other worlds. His solution is, broadly, that beings from other planets would be potentially sinless beings, and that the presence of human beings might corrupt them. *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Peregrina*, and *That Hideous Strength* are possibly the only significant examples of a purely Christian science-fictional cosmology, and while they are old-fashioned in many respects, remain popular.

A writer who came from the British tradition though via a more conventional route was Arthur C. Clarke. His works tended to be hard science fiction with a mystical feel to them. *The Nine Billion Names of God* has the universe being ended by a computer printing out a list. One doubts if Clarke took the concept very seriously, but the story remains powerful with its iconic closing line. Clarke's work as a whole has a feeling of cosmic awe, with alien beings having capacities close to divine.

By the late 1950s some of the writers of American science fiction, other avenues having being fully explored, started to include references to religious issues. James Blish's *A Case Of Conscience* addresses the same issue as Lewis – the status of intelligent creatures from another world. His Jesuit protagonist grapples with a world apparently without either sin or belief. Blish, though an agnostic, falls into the class of writers who could be called Respectful Rationalists. He addressed the moral issues presented in the story with great seriousness, and on their own terms. The book forms part of a trilogy also, though the first volume is not science fiction but historical fiction, and the third (a pair of novellas) is a fantasy dealing with a magician literally creating Hell on Earth, though it has some science-fiction elements.

The other major work of religious science fiction of the time was *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter Miller, who was a Catholic convert. His slightly irreverent attitude to his own religion would have him classified with the Blasphemous Believers, who knew their own religion well enough to play around with it. *Leibowitz* is set in a post-apocalyptic world where the Catholic Church preserves knowledge. A circuit diagram is turned into an illuminated manuscript by a monk, while the priests of the Order of Leibowitz debate its allegorical meaning. The novel presents an argument for the value of the Catholic Church, while having a cynical view of how it operates in practice.



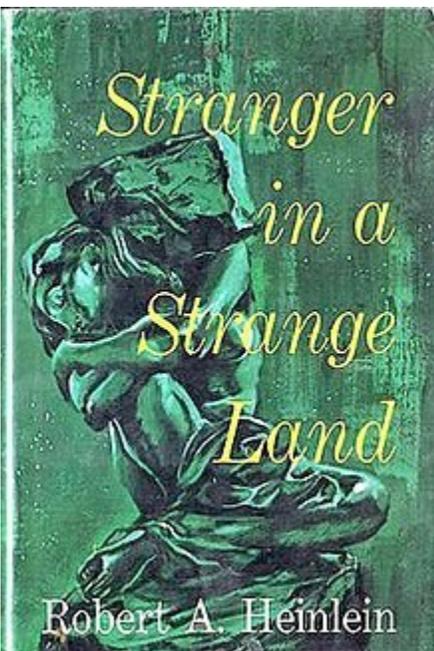
Canticle was not highly regarded by Harry Harrison, who could possibly be classified among the Angry Atheists* – authors who regarded religion as on the whole an unhealthy thing. The short story “The Streets of Ashkelon” addresses the same issue (of sinless aliens) as Lewis and Blish. His conclusion is that apparently sinless aliens would most likely only discover sin when they were exposed to religious belief. Another Angry Atheist was Thomas Disch. In *The Genocides* he portrays a fundamentalist religious community surviving an alien invasion by adapting Christian beliefs to permit the murder of anyone not part of the community. James Tiptree, a pseudonym of Alice Sheldon, wrote (as Raccoona Sheldon) “The Screwfly Solution,” which also deals with a genocidal alien invasion, but in this case, a biochemical agent leads religious leaders to find spurious justifications for murdering women.

Stories of time-travel to the time of Christ include “Let’s Go to Golgotha!” by Gary Kilworth. Time travelers who wish to see the crucifixion eventually find out that they are responsible for bringing it about. Michael Moorcock’s *Behold the Man* features a time-traveler who attempts to meet Jesus but ends up filling his role. Both Clifford Simak and Robert Silverberg depict robot Popes. Simak, in *Project Pope*, has a religious community trying to use a supercomputer to find perfect religious truth. Silverberg’s robot Sixtus VII, in “Good News from The Vatican,” is more satirical in intent. Silverberg hinted at religious issues in a number of stories.

The possibility that a supercomputer might in fact become not only capable of finding religious truth, but might turn into god, is addressed in one of the most iconic science-fiction stories of all time, Fredric Brown’s “Answer,” and in a more measured form, in Isaac Asimov’s “The Last Question.” Harlan Ellison also presented a malevolent quasi-divine computer in “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream.”

John Varley’s “Persistence of Vision” depicts a cult based around a community of the blind. Depending on how you read it, it can be viewed as an idealistic description of a perfect society, or a warning of the dangers of cultish belief.

Two of the biggest science-fiction books of the 1960s, which had an impact beyond the field, both dealt with religion in different ways. Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* had a Messiah figure who brings a new religion from Mars. The Christ stand-in Valentine Michael Smith struggles against the Church of the New Revelation, a satirical depiction of modern American religion. The book had considerable impact at the time, and was hugely controversial, though its impact has faded somewhat. It’s an example of the construction of an entirely artificial religion. One wonders what might have happened if Heinlein had tried to found a movement instead of write a novel. As with Varley, the story could be considered either as an exploration of religious ideas, or the depiction of a messianic cult.



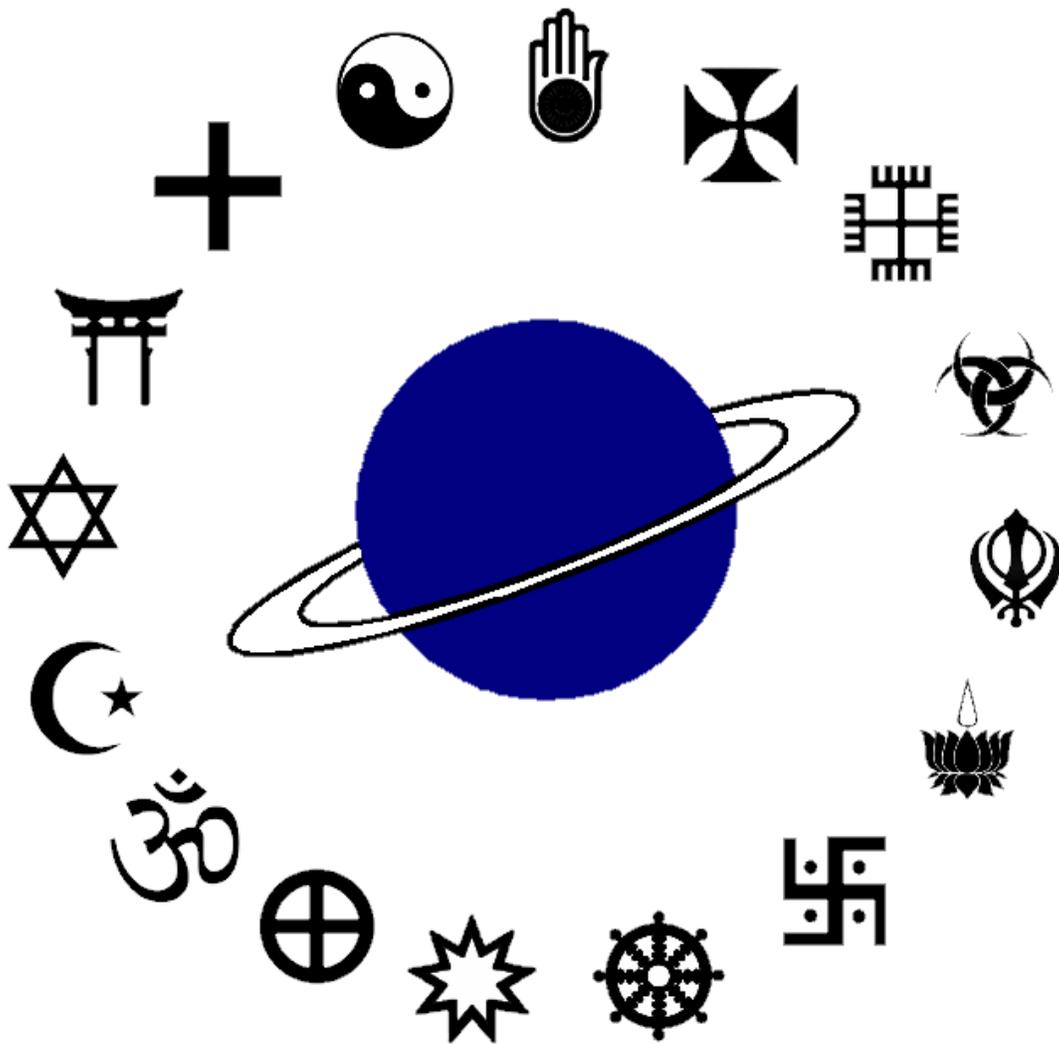
The impact has not faded for another major book of the 1960s – Frank Herbert’s *Dune*. In some ways, film adaptations of *Dune* have to play down its modern relevance. It depicts a jihad led by a messiah figure and in the Fremen, a group whose beliefs are clearly based on Islam. In the end, the entire galactic empire is conquered with enormous loss of life. The Fremen complain “They denied us the Hajj!” and are described as being descended from Zensunni wanderers. The Bene Gesserit were a quasi-religious order, who deliberately planted beliefs in isolated communities in order to manipulate affairs to their own obscure ends. *Dune* was published in John Campbell’s *Analog* magazine, and is a surprising reversal of the Campbellian religion-free future. Herbert shows a future where religion, at its most visceral and irrational, can still be the most important influence in human affairs.

The most significant religiously-informed work of the late twentieth century is probably Gene Wolfe’s *Book of the New Sun*. Wolfe, a Cath-

olic like Miller, would in my opinion fully qualify as a Blasphemous Believer. He has written straightforwardly religious short stories such as “La Befana,” which deals with the incarnation being repeated on other planets for alien races – a story that might have found favor with C.S. Lewis. Lewis might have had more trouble with *The Book of the New Sun*, which seems to portray Christianity through a distorting mirror. Severian is a Christ figure, but he is also a torturer, who does more terrible things than any other broadly sympathetic protagonist that I can think of. The Eucharist is depicted as a kind of cannibalistic feast. We are given hints at formal religion, with figures such as The Conciliator being referred to, but not precisely described. Severian eventually saves the world by, effectively, destroying it. The book is extremely dense, and a difficult read, but may well be one of the great masterworks of the field.

In conclusion, I have no conclusion. There is no consensus in the field of science fiction as to how religion should be depicted or explored, which is probably just as well.

* *Angry Atheists* describes only the work – the authors themselves tended to be affable and friendly people.





Cults in Comics by Chuck Serface

In his *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China* (1961), Robert Jay Lifton identifies techniques related to thought reform, once called “brainwashing,” that applies to how destructive cults inculcate their members and keep them indoctrinated:

1. Milieu Control: the control of communication, of everything a person sees, hears, or reads. This includes control over personal associations as well.
2. Mystical Manipulation: group leaders manipulate news, information, meditation, or religious writings in an effort to influence the thinking and feelings of group members.
3. The Demand for Purity: members must conform absolutely to behaviors derived from group ideologies. This results in forcing adherents toward feeling like they must pick between “good” or “evil” as defined by their leaders.
4. The Cult of Confession: the right to privacy doesn’t exist, and members undergo what Lifton calls a “symbolic self-surrender” to the leader’s authority. Confessions can occur in highly ritualized ways.
5. The Sacred Science: cults operate under or toward the “ultimate vision for the ordering of all human existence,” the rights and wrongs as defined by the leadership. The rules are quite nar-

row, and there's no tolerance for ambiguity.

6. **Loading the Language:** The leadership creates cliches and definitive phrases that becomes insider jargon repeated heavily within the group. The language, says Lifton, is “totalist,” “all-encompassing,” “highly categorical,” and “relentlessly judging” – “the language of nonthought.”
7. **Doctrine Over Person:** individual human experience becomes replaced by doctrine. Everyone and everything must be subjected to, and fitted in, this doctrinal framework, including those who use it.
8. **The Dispensing of Existence:** those not sharing the group's ideology are inferior and not worthy of respect. This generates elitism and social isolation. Lifton explains, “the totalist environment draws a sharp line between those whose right to existence can be recognized and those who possess no such right.” Family, old friends are now outsiders and “others.”

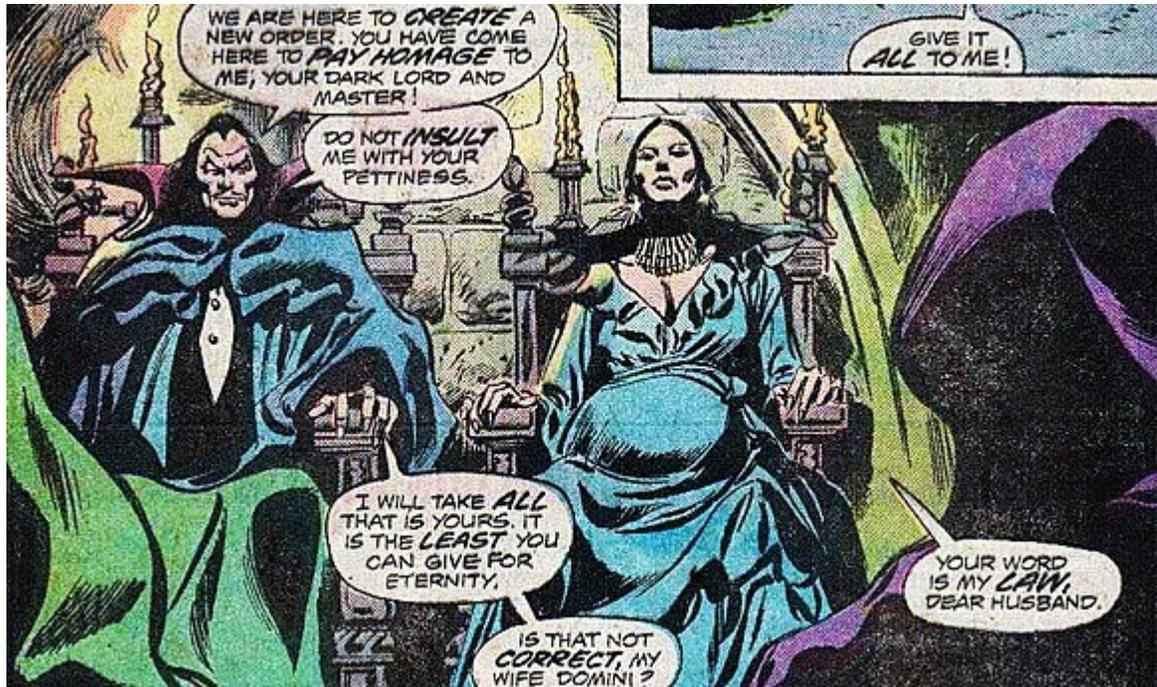
This rubric applies not only to actual cults – whether they're religiously, politically, economically, or otherwise based -- but to those depicted in comics as well. Evil cults and cult leaders abound throughout the history of comics, but I've chosen ten that came to mind while reading Lifton's criteria. You could make multiple alternative choices – Batman's the Court of Owls and all those blood cults that annoyed Conan the Barbarian, for example. These are mine, presented without numerical order.

Hydra



The preminent example must be Hydra, especially during the days when Stan Lee and Jack Kirby were expounding on the relentless battle between this terrorist organization and Nick Fury, Agent of SHIELD. Hydra members constantly reiterate loaded language: “Hail, Hydra! Immortal Hydra! We shall never be destroyed! Cut off a limb and two more shall take its place!” This oath also encompasses the sacred science and doctrine over person aspects of thought reform. Milieu control is shown through the green uniforms each member wears, and nothing matters but the ideologies set forth by Baron von Strucker, the ruthless leader with a Nazi background, who’s obsessed with world domination and who preaches the dispensing of existence for all outsiders who won’t bow before Hydra’s might.

Church of the Damned



The Church of the Damned first appeared in *Tomb of Dracula #45* (1976), led by Anton Lupeski, the horned-mask wearing high priest. This church was a modest Satanic sect operating in Boston, Massachusetts until Dracula himself stumbled into a ceremony, a wedding Lupeski was performing between a member, Domini, and Satan. Dracula convinces the cult that he's Satan and takes command, marrying Domini himself. Over time, Dracula bends all to his will, recruits wealthy members to fund operations, and as with any cult leader, he controls the milieu and sacred science. He's the Dark Lord himself, after all. Eventually, Dracula and Domini bear a son who's killed when Lupeski attempts to assassinate Dracula, who then turns and crushes Lupeski's skull with his bare hands. Domini later resurrects Janus, their son, who becomes an angelic figure and his father's enemy, and like with many cults, we don't see a good ending here for anyone.

Cult of the Unwritten Book



During his time writing *Doom Patrol*, Grant Morrison injected much weirdness into the world. His Cult of the Unwritten Book, under the leadership of the Archons of Nurnheim, sought to release the Decreator, a cosmic being who would turn all into nothingness. Real-world cult leaders often claim to possess divine powers, even to be special emissaries of God(s), but often they're only narcissistic grifters gaining material wealth through exploitation and fraud. Many make-believe cults from comics have truth behind their claims, but that makes them no less manipulative and destructive than, say, the People's Temple or Scientology, even if the sacred science is real. You can see the Cult of the Written Book for yourself in *Doom Patrol* (Vol. 2) #31 - #3

Church of Blood

The first Brother Blood rose during the thirteenth century after gaining superhuman powers from Christ's prayer shawl. Through time, Brothers Blood have led the Church of Blood, the eighth ascending after murdering his paternal predecessor, patricide being the method for getting the job. This Brother, Sebastian Blood VIII, first appeared in *The New Teen Titans* #21 (1982), returning again and again to plague the Titans.

The Church of Blood functioned primarily in the fictional nation of Zandia, but the eighth Brother Blood wanted to expand his enterprise worldwide. He established an American branch, and the Titans became involved when Cyborg's ex-girlfriend reached out while trying to escape the cult. Blood successfully thought-reformed Nightwing, attempted stealing Raven's powers, but eventually failed.



Years later, another Sebastian Blood murdered Brother Blood VII and took over the Church of Blood, and finally fans learn that members worship Raven's father, the demon Trigon. How's that for sacred science? Finally, matters ended poorly for Brother Blood IX as well.

The Cult of Kobra



Jeffrey and Jason Burr were conjoined twins, but after surgical separation Jeffrey was kidnapped by the Cult of the Kobra God, a sect dedicated to bring the Kali Yuga, the Age of Chaos while worshipping the Indian snake god of the same name. The cult raised Jeffrey into a dangerous warrior and scientist who devised technologies for taking over the world. Followers referred to him as “Naga-Naga,” but overall he was known as Kobra.

Because of their birth circumstance, Kobra maintained a psychic link with Jason, who’d been recruited by an agency dedicated to beating Kobra. Kobra eventually manages to shutdown the psychic link and murders Jason. Jason remained in spirit form, however, or maybe he was just an imaginary delusion?

This all began in *Kobra* #1 (1976). DC canceled that title after seven issue. The projected eighth issue appeared in *DC Special Special Series: 5 Star Super-Hero Spectacular* (Vol. 1) #1 as the Batman story, “The Dead on Arrival Conspiracy.” Kobra and the Cult of Kobra would return repeatedly until Black Adam and his team finally killed Kobra. Black Adam himself has been a charismatic leader with worshippers attending his every breath. I admit to wondering how Dwayne Johnson will do playing him in the sequel to *Shazam*.

The Kobra Cult wouldn’t die so easily, however, after various iterations, cultists unearthed Jason Burr’s body and dipped him into a Lazarus Pit, resurrecting him to lead them, hopefully toward the Kali Yuga. More on Lazarus Pits as we move into the next cult . . .

The League of Assassins

Dennis O’Neil and Neal Adams introduced the League of Assassins in *Strange Adventures #215* (1968) as part of the Deadman story entitled, “A New Lease on Death.” At that point, this organization was the Society of Assassins, a section of the overall network, led by the Sensei. Then in *Detective Comics #406*, who meet Ebenezer Darrk who enjoys a leadership role. But the most infamous League leader, the big boss himself and arguably the most charismatic leader of any comic cult, is Ra’s al Ghul.

Ra’s al Ghul (the Demon’s Head) was born over 600 years ago to Bedouin parents somewhere in the Arabian desert. His actual name has been lost over his long life sustained through successively bathing in Lazarus Pits, natural pools of liquid possessing rejuvenating and resurrecting abilities. Over centuries, Ra’s has traveled the world amassing an empire based on fortune, terror, and followers who act upon his every whim.

As with any cult, there have been divisions and upheavals, but Ra’s always bounces back. Members are highly



trained assassins who live only for Ra's and his goals. Loaded language reinforces this practice, since the phrase, "the fang that protects the head," defines the ultimate purpose under Ra's. Add to this equation doctrine over person, sacred science, and milieu control. Yes, the League of Assassins is a cult.

The Cult



Often people have a cognitive bias toward assuming that a person's actions depend on inherent qualities rather than social or environmental influences. Psychologist Lee Ross calls this the fundamental attribution error, of example of which involves how many will blame crime victims for being stupid or gullible instead of blaming criminals themselves. Those working to free cult members remind us that not all who fall into these organizations actually are naïve and "born every minute."

Could anyone imagine Batman joining a cult? Or falling sway to the thought-reform techniques Lifton has outlined? This indeed happened in *Batman: The Cult* (1988), a four-issue miniseries by Jim Starlin and Bernie Wrightson. Several small-time crooks have been murdered,

and while investigating, Batman is shot and stabbed, waking to find himself chained within the sewers beneath Gotham, imprisoned by a religious cult led by Deacon Joseph Blackfire, whose primary aim is to rid Gotham of crime.

Blackfire drugs Batman, limits his food, and employs mental manipulation until the Dark Knight's thoroughly indoctrinated and joining the raids that Blackfire and his acolytes undertake throughout the city. Years later, Bane would break the Bat physically, but before that Deacon Blackfire broke the Bat mentally.

Narcissistic cult leaders often don't need drugs or chains, although some have not been above using them. They're skilled at perceiving vulnerabilities and distorting perceptions. Reasonable people have succumbed to these methodologies. Be careful.

The Hand



Four billion years ago, the Sickly Ones worshipped an elder god called the Beast. Over millennia, they evolved into the Hand, now a ninja cult with various sects operating mostly out of Japan. Daredevil, Elektra, Spider-Man, the Avengers, the X-Men, Wolverine, and many heroes from the Marvel Universe have encountered Hand assassins, Elektra having been a member of a one branch, the Chaste.

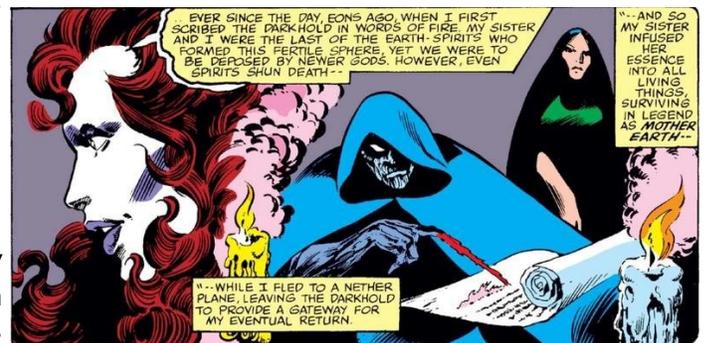
Like with the League of Assassins, Hand martial-arts training is intense, physically and mentally, a program containing, you guessed it, sacred science, loaded language, milieu control, mystical manipulation, the demand for purity, the cult of confession, the dispensing of existence, and, most importantly, doctrine over person.

Interestingly, the Hand has connections with Hydra. In the 1950s, Elspeth von Strucker, Baron von Strucker's wife, incorporated her belief in the Sickly Ones into Hydra dogma. Then for a period, Gorgon, a Hydra agent, died, underwent ritual resurrection,

and led the Hand. Now apparently the Beast itself runs things.

Darkholders

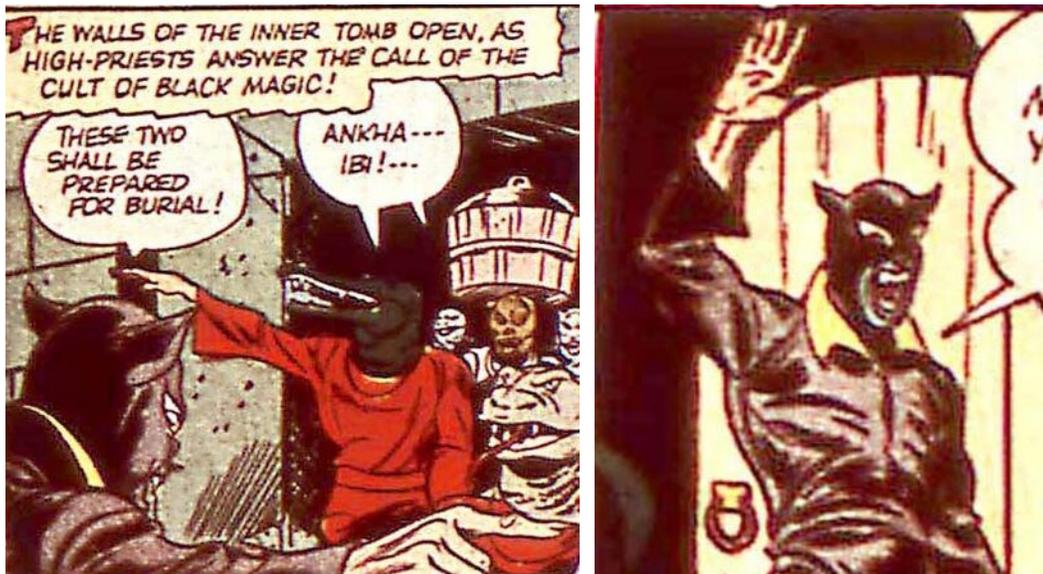
The Marvel Universe has its own *Necronomicon*. Gerry Conway and Mike Ploog first mentioned *The Darkhold* in *Marvel Spotlight #4* (1972) when developing background for Jack Russell, the Werewolf by Night. Since, other writers and artists have crafted a back story for this tome and the cult surrounding it, the Darkholders. Chthon, an elder god and brother to Gaea the Earth Mother, scribed *The Darkhold* billions of years ago, placing within it the key for returning from the plane to which he fled once newer gods took over Earth. 18,000 years ago, Atlantean wizards used spells from



Chthon's scrolls to create the first vampire, Varnae, and in the Arthurian era Morgan Le Fay bound the whole into a book. This evil little publication even has been featured on *Marvel's Agents of SHIELD*.

Anyone touching *The Darkhold* risks corrupting themselves, but those after the book only want it for power, but all transactions come with costs. At different junctures, Dracula faced off against Doctor Strange when the vampire sought ways to eliminate vampires' weaknesses. Then later, Doctor Strange would use "The Montesi Formula" to eliminate vampires altogether. My favorite *Darkhold* moment? Mark Gruenwald, David Michelinie, Steven Grant, and John Byrne's "Nights of Wundagore," *Avengers* (Vol. 1) # #181-187 (1979), where Chthon possesses the Scarlet Witch hoping to regain a permanent foothold on this plane, and we discover portions of the history I summarize above. The Marvel Universe isn't finished with *The Darkhold*, however, not even close.

Cult of Black Magic



I want to end with a classic. Once upon a Golden Age, Captain America and Bucky found themselves gassed, wrapped like mummies, and nearly sacrificed to the Witch Queen of Egypt, who led the Cult of Black Magic. The action happens in *Captain America* #20 (1942), art by Al Avison. The Witch Queen's son, the Spawn of the Witch Queen (obviously), had been resurrected earlier and now sought to bring his mother back to reignite the cult through spells from *The Book of Thoth*. We have murders, evil magic, acolytes adorned with animal-headed costumes, all the beloved pulp elements fans eat up like chocolate sundaes.

The story ends with a follower shooting the Spawn, *The Book of Thoth* burned, and the temple collapsed. Another cult meets a grim ending, and a son has failed his mother woefully. Onward for Cap and Bucky, and onward for we fans loving these aspects of comics history.

**This issue of The Drink Tank is brought to you by
the letter Q & the number 666.**

