

Alternative Spiritualities, New Religious Movements, and Jediism in Australia

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Australia, it could be argued, has a low rate of occurrence of religious intergroup hostility, and can be seen to have a diverse composition of alternative forms of religion; New Age and Neo-Pagan networks, New Religious Movements; and a new type of religiosity, the hyper-real religion (e.g. Jediism). However, several legal battles have surrounded the case of, for example, the Church of Scientology, the Family, and Ananda Marga. Sentiments towards new forms of religions in the Australian media can be quite negative, and two recent Government reports, which dealt with the freedom of religious beliefs, suggest that more animosity exists towards new religions than one might expect. Given the long history of relative openness toward new religious groups in Australia, these relatively recent negative sentiments might create a sense of fear and anxiety towards them, which might become more amplified in the post September 11th period.

Introduction

Australia is among the most culturally and religiously diverse countries in the world (Bouma, 1998). To a certain extent, it is also a success story of religious settlement involving highly diverse religious groups (Bouma, 1996: ix), and is home to many ideas and practices found in alternative spiritualities and New Religious Movements (NRMs). This country has a rich occult heritage and has welcomed the local variations of many new religious and occult movements such as the Theosophical Society and Spiritualism (Drury and Tillett, 1980) and is currently hosting many New Age practices and ideas. Despite this religious and occult diversity, there are no notable new religions of Australian origin (Bouma, 1998). Most of these religions are either direct import or minor variations from existing groups – e.g. some nature religions adapting their spirituality to the southern hemisphere (Hume, 1999).

Can we argue that this success story, especially for new forms of religions, is still the case in this post September 11 period and its ‘culture of suspicion’ (Armitage, 2002)? Are we to expect any changes? Should we expect a growth in

these new religious movements and alternative spiritualities, and/or will they be under more scrutiny by the government and anti(new)-religious lobbies?

This article will explore these issues by exploring the panorama and diversity of these new religious experiences in Australia by addressing first New Age and Neo-Paganism, second NRMs, and third a new type of religion which I will refer to as hyper-real religion. I will also give a quick overview of the implication of the post Sept11 period of fear and anxiety on new forms of religion.

New Age And Neo-Paganism

While the number of people reading New Age books or attending New Age workshops has increased rapidly since the 1990s, it has not lead to many identifying themselves as belonging to 'New Age' religions/spiritualities (Hughes, 2000; Possamai, 2001).

Not only does the term 'New Age' create problems when used in the field (Lewis and Melton, 1992) but it also lacks a clear denotation in the academic literature and among the likes of the New Age spokespersons listed by York (1995), e.g. Gayce, MacLane.

As Bruce (1996) notes, the popularity of 'New Age' cannot be measured by the number of 'New Agers' identifying with constituent groups but rather by the extent to which people are influenced in everyday life by 'New Age'. For instance, the Sydney Morning Herald reported in 1996 that Australians buy more self development and spiritual books per head than the US and Britain (Jonhson, 1997). Australian New Age magazines such as *Conscious Living*, the *Golden Age*, *Southern Crossings*, the *Whole Person* and *Australian Well Being* have healthy distribution rates. The attendance figures for the Mind Body and Spirit festivals in Sydney have been between 50,000 to 60,000 during the mid 1990s (Jonhson, 1997). Since then, the attendance seemed to have levelled out.

Apart from these urban festivals, Australia also attracts New Agers in more rural environments. ConFest, a bi-annual gathering of alternative lifestyle and spiritualities and radical political movements, is one example; held in Australian bush land and often comprising 8,000-10,000 people. It has operated since 1976 and was held for the last seven years on the Murray River near Tocumwal and Moama, New South Wales. This biannual event has been host to a wide variety of 'villages' – e.g. "Spiritual", "Rainbow Dreaming", "Spiral", "Self Development and Therapy", "Pagan", "Forest", "Healing", "The Labyrinth" –, camping and performance zones where hundreds of workshops are conducted – on themes ranging from "Celtic Chakras" to "Nuclear Free Futures" (see St John, 1997; 2001a; 2001b). Also, there is an emergent genre of psychedelic gatherings mixing elements of rave music, shamanism and New Age in the Australian bush. These gatherings are called 'bush parties' and 'doofs' (Tramacchi, 2000).

Coming back to an attempt to define New Age, it can argued that this term is often connected to that of the Age of Aquarius (Possamai, 1999b) which is based on the astrological assumption that the sun changes its zodiacal sign every 2160 years; according to the astrological law of the precession of equinoxes (Le Cour,

1995). This migration into another zodiac is supposed to create important modifications on earth; and just such a profound alteration is about to happen in the third millennium. The sun is leaving the zodiac of Pisces and will gradually enter the zodiac of Aquarius, affecting the behaviour and attitudes of every living creature. This is referred as the coming of the Age of Aquarius. If we associate the word 'New Age' with the 'Age of Aquarius' (Possamai, 1999b), we could define New Agers as spiritual actors who believe in this Aquarian coming and follow a syncretic spirituality, which interprets the world as **monistic** (the cosmos is perceived as having its elements deeply interrelated. It recognises a single ultimate principle, being, or force, underlying all reality, and rejects the notion of dualism, e.g. mind/body); whose actors are attempting to develop their **Human Potential Ethic** (actors work on themselves for personal growth); and whose actors are seeking **Spiritual Knowledge** (the way to develop oneself is through a pursuit of knowledge, be it the knowledge of the universe or of the self, the two being sometimes interrelated).

Neo-Pagans share the same spiritual characteristics as the Aquarians, but tend to valorise pre-modern pagan values and lifestyles instead of working towards the Aquarian coming. If Aquarians are more concerned in pursuing a transcendent metaphysical reality to awake a global transformation, Neo-Pagans tend to re-awake pre-modern values, do not search for global transformation per se, and are more oriented toward a sense of community. Neo-Pagans, contrary to Aquarians, view their spirituality as a nature based religion, they worship the Goddess and they tend to follow rituals and ceremonies (Possamai, 1999a; York, 1995). Different from the above mentioned movements is a third type, discovered during previous research (Possamai, 1999a), and called presentist perennism; that is a group which has no concern with the past, no vision of a succession of age and which focuses exclusively on the present.

If we take a look at the 1996 and 2001 Australian censuses, Neo-Pagans have identified themselves under different sub-categories. Some of the neo-pagan sub-categories used for this article might be questionable – e.g. Druidism which at times can be more Christian than neo-pagan and Satanism in which Satan is viewed more as a Pagan God than as the Christian Devil – but will nevertheless be used for the purpose of this article. It can be noted in Table 1 that Neo-Paganism has increased by 113.7% between 1996 and 2001. People identifying with Wiccan/Witchcraft have increased by 373.5%. On the other hand, Satanism seems to be in decline (-14%).

Table 1: Neo-Pagan Sub-Categories as Listed in the 1996 and 2001 Censuses

<i>Census sub-Categories</i>	<i>1996 Census</i>	<i>2001 Census</i>	<i>96-01 Growth Rate</i>
Nature Religion, nec	1617	2176	34.6
Nature Religion, nfd	117	9	-58.1
Animism	727	763	4.9
Druidism	554	697	25.8
Pantheism	835	1085	29.9
Paganism	4353	10632	144.2
Satanism	2091	1798	-14
Wiccan/Witchcraft	1849	8755	373.5
	Total	Total	
	12143	25955	113.7
Percentage of Australian Population	(0.07%)	(0.14%)	

Source: Data from Australian Bureau of Statistics reports.

New Religious Movements

New Age and Neo-Paganism are not a NRM (Heelas, 1996: 9; Introvigne & Melton, 1996: 48). Instead they tend to form (affinity) networks and are more individualistic (Possamai, 2000). Indeed, NRMs tend to have a – somewhat – more organised structure than New Age and Neo-pagan networks, and provide a –somewhat – more systematised belief systems than the eclectic beliefs found in New Age and Neo-Paganism.

In Table 2, it can be noted that New Religious Movements', as listed in the Census reports, are growing in Australia (13.9%), but not as fast as neo-paganism. In 2001, Scientology, Spiritualism and Theosophy have had more people identifying themselves with these movements.

Table 2: New Religious Movements as Listed in the 1996 and 2001 Censuses

<i>NRMS</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>96-01 Growth Rate</i>
Scientology	1488	2032	36.6
Eckankar	829	747	-9.9
Swedenborgian	504	427	-15.3
Spiritualism	814	9279	13.9
Theosophy	1423	1627	14.3
TOTAL	12384	14112	13.9

Source: data from Australian Bureau of Statistics reports.

The term NRMs tends to describe new forms of religions which have developed during the 1960s in the Western World. Even if some of these groups, such as Theosophy and Spiritualism appeared in the 19th century - and are thus called old NRMs (Chryssides, 1999) – they still remain within the confines of this appellation as they ‘fully’ emerged in the public sphere around this period. Within these groups, two large sub-types tend to typify the phenomenon. The world rejecting NRMs appear to create a sense of community, their membership tends to be more demanding, and the tension with the external world can be high. Interestingly, none of these groupings were officially counted for in the census results. On the other hand, world-affirming NRMs do not ask of its members a rejection of mainstream society and believe that human beings have a (godly) potential within themselves that can be developed. All of the movements officially counted for in the census (Table 2) are from that ideal-type of NRMs.¹

Some of these NRMs have created tension in Australia. For example, several legal battles have surrounded the case of the Church of Scientology (Kohn, 1996), the Children of God or the family (Kohn, 1996; Sheen, 1996), and Ananda Marga (Richardson, 1996). At another level, tension also exists in the media. Richardson (1996) examined Australian Media and New Religions and concluded that Australian media relates to NRMs the way American media did a decade or so ago.² Now in the US, it seems that with the passage of time, many journalists are more informed. Australian journalists appear to know little objective information about NRMs and as a consequence seem quite negative towards them. These negative sentiments can be seen to create a sense of fear towards new forms of religion.³

At the governmental level, two recent reports have dealt with the freedom of religious beliefs. These are the *Commonwealth of Australia, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Article 18: Freedom of Religion and Belief*, July 1998 (CA98) and the *Commonwealth of Australia, Joint standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Conviction with Compassion: A Report into Freedom of Religion and Belief*, November 2000 (CA00).

Reflecting on these reports and the way they portray NRMs, Hill (2001: 120) claims that they lapse into popular stereotypes.

The problem with these reports is that they failed to recognise the appropriate expertise on which reliable conclusions might be based and sound policies developed; they lent themselves to the agendas of interest groups [e.g. Cult Aware which ceased to operate in 1999]. One has to conclude that in their attempts to investigate the nature of NRMs the reports are expensive but largely futile exercises.

The reports suggest that more animosity exists towards new religions ‘than one might expect, given the long history of relative openness toward new religious groups’ in Australia (Richardson, 1999: 263).

To further aid our understanding of the Australian enquiries of their subsequent reports, we can explore a typology developed by Richardson and Introvigne (2002) who have analysed the different governmental reports that were

recently produced in Europe. The type I reports are thorough-going in their anti-cult orientations - such as those from France, Belgium and the Canton of Geneva - whereas type II reports are more moderate in tone, with some attention paid to scholarship on new religions - such as that from the German Parliament and the Italian police report. However, even if the type II reports

prove that cooler tempers can prevail [they] are still uncertain concerning the use of brainwashing/mind control metaphors, and most contain suggestions that problems remain in the area of recruitment and retention techniques, and that such problems should be attended to by governmental authorities (Richardson and Introvigne, 2002: 146).

In my analysis of the senate inquiry transcripts and of the reports, Australia does not appear to be thorough-going in its anti-cult orientations and thus would fit with the type II reports. For example, Australia was not working towards a 'black list' of cults, as was the case in France and Belgium, but it remained uncertain in regards to the use of brainwashing and retention techniques.

So perhaps the discourses of 'fear' and demonisation of NRMs lay dormant in Australia. Such fear has reared its head briefly on other occasions as was highlighted above without ever becoming all-pervasive. However, as explored in other research (Possamai and Lee, forthcoming) there are no guarantees that with the right trigger, the 'fear' around NRMs could not radically alter the Australian social landscape. This will be explored in the last section of this article after having analysed the possible consequences of 'September 11'.

Hyper-Real Religions

We recently received the news 70,509 people, that is 0.37% of the 2001 Australian population, have identified with the Jedi religion from Star Wars (AAP, 2002). Is it a joke or does this reflect a trend that social scientists of religion should seriously take into account? Out of this amount the Australian Star Wars Appreciation Society President estimates that about 5,000 people would be true hard-core people that would believe the Jedi religion - most probably at a metaphorical level. He also estimates that 50,000 fans would have put down Jedi Religion just for fun, and 15,000 people 'did it just to give the government a bit of curry' (Agence France-Presse, 2002).

In the U.K., the 2001 census reveals that 390,000 people have declared to be followers of the Jedi 'faith'; that is 0.7 % of the U.K. population. John Pullinger, the Director of reporting and analysis at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) claims that the Jedi supporters are in their late teens and 20s (Anonymous, 2003).

In my fieldwork, I have met people who use the Star Wars mythos to support their religious views of the world. Christina - a so-called New Ager - spoke about a flow of energy that surrounds us, and she made reference to the metaphor of the force from Star Wars:

It's like if I can use a Star Wars term, you know. Just went to see Star Wars again. It's like you know they keep talking about this

force. That's whatever word you want to use. I believe that's there and that's not the physical body but the energy which creates the physical body, and I believe it is there and that somehow it can be tapped into.

Moving towards the Internet medium, we can discover that the introduction to the 'Jedi Knight Movement' discussion list states⁴:

The Way of Jedi transcends the science fiction series of Star Wars. It encompasses many of the same truths and realizations of the major world religions, including Zen Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Catholicism, and Shinto and is both a healing art and a meditative journey that the aspirant can take to improve every aspect of their life.

One of the messages from the same 'Jedi Knight Movement' discussion list states about 'Jediknightism':

Life on planet earth has become much more complex – the churches, although meaning well, many times fall short of the mark of addressing the complexities. The political arena many times disappoint us and fall short of inspiring either ourselves or others to action.

We can read from this statement that the people who embrace this religion might be critical of mainstream religions and of political movements. Left without these grand narratives, as presented on the site, they are left with another type of narrative:

Storytelling is an age-old tradition that has followed mankind for millennia – and has been used effectively for transferring ideals, from philosophers to prophets. It is an ideal medium to both entertain and enlighten simultaneously, which is why it is so powerful and its effects so profound when used expertly.

From this glance on this Site, it becomes clear that it entails a desire by interested people to develop their spiritual potential outside of mainstream religions, that they are critical of governments and that they can do this in an entertaining fashion.

On 'Jediism: the Jedi Religion'⁵, an Internet Site dedicated to present Jediism as a religion, we can find that this specific view of the Star Wars mythos bases less its focus on the myth and fiction as written by Lucas, but upon the 'real life' examples of Jediism. As explained:

Jediism is not the same as that which is portrayed within the Star Wars Saga by George Lucas and Lucasfilm LTD. George Lucas' Jedi are fictional characters that exists within a literary and cinematic universe. The Jedi discussed within this website refer to factual people within this world that live or lived their lives according to Jediism, of which we recognize and work together as a community to both cultivate and celebrate. ... The history of the path of Jediism traverses through which is well over 5,000 years old. It shares many themes embraced in

Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, Stoicism, Catholicism, Taoism, Shinto, Modern Mysticism, the Way of the Shaolin Monks, the Knight's Code of Chivalry and the Samurai warriors. We recognize that many times the answer to mankind's problems comes from within the purified hearts of genuine seekers of truth. Theology, philosophy and religious doctrine can facilitate this process, but we believe that it would be a futile exercise for any belief system to claim to hold all the answers to all the serious questions posed to seekers of truth in the 21st century. Jediism may help facilitate this process, yet we also acknowledge that it is up to the true believer who applies the universal truths inherent with Jediism to find the answers they seek.

The site then lists different resources on meditation for Jediism such as the Force, the Temple Jedi, and the 7 steps guide – which are seven steps towards effective prayer. Malhotra (2001) in his introductory book on Yoga philosophy draws some close similarities between this mythos and his philosophy.

Moving away from the different consumptions to the production of this mythos, in an interview⁶ with George Lucas, the Star Wars creator states:

I don't see Star Wars as profoundly religious. I see Star Wars as taking all the issues that religion represents and trying to distill them down into a more modern and easily accessible construct. ... I put the force into the movie in order to try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people – more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system. I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery... I didn't want to invent a religion. I wanted to try to explain in a different way the religions that have already existed. I wanted to express it all. ... I'm telling an old myth in a new way.

Asked about the question if young people seem to be turning to movies for their inspiration instead of organised religion, Lucas' answer is:

Well, I hope that doesn't end up being the course this whole thing takes, because I think there's definitely a place for organized religion. I would hate to find ourselves in a completely secular world where entertainment was passing for some kind of religious experience.

Are we moving towards this phenomenon? Will people use entertainment as a kind of religion experience? Becoming a Jedi Knight, or working towards such state of being, appears attractive to anyone who wants to develop their spiritual abilities. Since Jediknightism, or Jediism, is presented as an old religion re-mythologised to a contemporary public, old techniques of development of the self such as meditation, yoga, shamanism are used towards this Jedi path.

This practice of using popular culture for religious purpose is not limited to Star Wars. For example, the Church of All Worlds (Cohen et al., 1987: 330), a Neo-Pagan group bases its teaching in part on Robert Heinlein's novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* which narrates the story of a Martian living on earth with god-like powers. This group is not limited to the reading of this novel and even extends its consumption to the Star Trek mythos; as one of their members states:

This whole period (late 1960s) fell under the shadow of the Damoclean Sword of impending nuclear holocaust, and a dominant Christian culture that fully embraced an apocalyptic mythos. For many of us, a powerful antidote to that mythos was found in science fiction, and particularly Gene Roddenberry's Star Trek, with its Vulcan IDIC: 'Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations'. CAW [Church of All Worlds] and Green Egg avidly embraced this vision of, as Roddenberry said, 'a future everyone will want to be part of'.⁷

Horror Stories can also provide a reservoir of cultural content to be consumed by spiritual actors. In 1966, in San Francisco, Anton LaVey founded the Church of Satan as a medium for the study of the Black Arts. In his *The Satanic Rituals*, LaVey (1972) refers to the metaphysics of H.P. Lovecraft. H.P. Lovecraft was a writer of weird fiction who wrote most of his tales during the 1920s and 1930s. He developed a pantheon of gods, the Great Old Ones, who are waiting in secrecy before coming back to earth to conquer the human race. Lovecraft always claimed that his stories were fictional and that he was a total agnostic. However, LaVey (1972), believing that 'fantasy plays an important part in any religious curriculum', developed some rituals for his Church of Satan based on this fictional mythology.

More specifically to Neo-Paganism, the literature labelled 'Fantasy' seems to express and explore Pagan issues (Harvey, 2000; Lurhmann, 1994). J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Marion Bradley's *The Mist of Avalon*, Brian Bates' *The Way of Wyrld*, Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* corpus - and even Gibson's cyberpunk *Neuromancer* and Wagner's operas - contribute to neo-pagan thinking. While there is no 'Biblical' text of reference in Neo-Paganism, the construction of the pagan self entails reading works of fiction. These Fantasy books describe the pagan world and consequently contribute to the pagan experience of the reader (Harvey, 2000). Other spiritual actors, as seen above, use works of fiction to express their non neo-pagan spirituality; they use stories such as Star Wars, Star Trek, the Lord of the Rings, H.P. Lovecraft, ... as a source of inspiration to be selectively drawn on (e.g. Harvey, 2000; Hume, 1997; Lurhmann, 1994; Possamai, 2002a and 2002b).

It seems that for these social actors, the real and the unreal might have imploded and might have created an unclear sense of distinction between them. Baudrillard (1988) who has theorised this implosion could be helpful in understanding this new religious phenomenon.

Western culture appears to be dominated by simulations (Baudrillard, 1988) – these are objects and discourses that have no firm origin, no referent, no ground or foundation. The 'Spectacle' and these simulations are part of consumer culture in which signs get their meanings from their relations with each other, rather than by reference to some independent reality or standard.

Baudrillard's (1988) theory of commodity culture removes any distinction between objects and representation. In their place, he pictures a social world constructed out of models or 'simulacra' which have no foundation in any reality except their own; e.g. theme parks representing Hollywood movies or Mickey Mouse cartoons rather than 'reality'; day-time television viewers speaking about

soap opera characters rather than 'real' people; and popular news broadcasts that are more about entertainment than information about 'real' social issue.

In this world, there is no fixed meta-code. (Post/Late)Modern society is saturated by images with the media generating a 'non-material', a de-materialised concept of reality. It seems we live in an economy of signs in which signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real.

If Marx's vision of society was a giant workhouse, Baudrillard's (1998) vision is that modern society is now structured by signs and symbols in which it becomes difficult to distinguish the real from the unreal: from this, hyper-reality – that is a situation in which reality has collapsed – takes over. This vision portrays current western postmodern times in which people seem to seek spectacle more than meaning. In this hyper-real world, fictions offer a library of narratives to be borrowed and used by anyone ready to consume them.

By Hyper-real religion I thus refer to a simulacrum of a religion created out of popular culture which provides inspiration for believers/consumers at a metaphorical level.

The Fear of Religion?

In recent research undertaken with criminologist Murray Lee (Possamai and Lee, forthcoming), an application of the theory of the fear of crime to NRMs in Australia was undertaken. We speculated that the discourses of 'fear' and demonisation of NRMs lay dormant in this country. Such fear has reared its head briefly on certain occasions as was quickly highlighted in the section on NRMs without ever becoming all pervasive. However, there are no guarantees that with a strong trigger, the 'fear' around NRMs could not radically alter the Australian social landscape.

In the risk society (Beck, 1992) the unknown and strangeness are no longer exciting; rather they become an anxiety or indeed a fear. In the search for ontological security we increasingly attempt to 'tame chance' (Hacking, 1983); to identify and evaluate risks, but many NRMs by nature defy the logic of calculation. They are unknowable. But why should this be a reason for demonisation? We might think that in the post/late modern world, where there has been a general collapse of certainties – family life, job security, and sexuality for example – we are more tolerant of difference? This is indeed true. We no longer crave the modernist dream to normalise, we no longer long to tame or correct the 'other'. However, this increased fragmentation means that our insecurities – often distorted – are projected elsewhere.

The September 11 events have already been theorised (e.g. Armitage, 2002; Beck, 2002; Bendle, 2002a and 2002b; Encel, 2002; Hoffmann, 2002; McDonald, 2002) and could herald the beginning of a new era and paradigm. Beck (2002) even states that the 11th of September stands for the complete collapse of language, since we have problems using current concepts to describe what happened. He believes that the perception of terrorist threats 'triggers a self-multiplication of risks by the de-bounding of risk perception and fantasies' (Beck, 2002: 44). This has many

implications and this article will focus instead on the expected development of two trends (among many others) that could affect new forms of religions in this 'post September 11 society'. The main form of religion that is directly affected by these changes is of course Islam –the major target of an increase of fear and anxiety-, however, this is not a topic under scrutiny in this article. The remainder of this article is purely speculative and presents merely two of a number of possible future scenarios. I do this in the hope of stimulating discussion and enquiry rather than providing conclusions.

1. Since Sept 11, there are concerns that we are moving towards a hyper-surveillance society to fight against terrorism. It is expected that the destruction of the World Trade Centre towers will 'make surveillance, at least for the purposes of law enforcement, all the more acceptable' (Pecora, 2002: 347). Indeed, in a recent survey (Etzioni, 2002) conducted in the U.S., it was found that as fear subsided, support for safety measures remained at a high level, even at the cost of civil liberties.

The development of this hyper-surveillance might increase the level of intolerance against new forms of religions, and the strength of some anti-cultist moral entrepreneurs. By the anti-cultist lobby network, I refer to the most influential interpreters of NRMs (Bromley and Shupe, 1989: 317) which has become a repository of information for the public, the press, and governmental agencies. Its different associations are aimed to put pressure on 'cults' by enlisting the support of political, economic, religious, media, and educational institutions which have access to greater resources and sanctioning power.

In this growing surveillance society the struggle is not directly between religion and the State, but rather, the struggle 'is primarily between groups competing for the ability to define the religion/State relationship in particular ways. In other words, the main actors are identifiable groups within civil society' (Beckford, 1993: 134). Further, from the politicians' point of view, the cult issue is not as strong an issue as education, health, the economy, ... However, since the public at large are much inclined to see NRMs as bizarre and threatening, politicians have more to gain by sympathizing with the counter-cult position (Chryssides, 1999: 359).

Since the September 11 attacks and its 'culture of suspicion' (Armitage, 2002: 29), we might see pressure increase from the anti-cultist lobby to control new forms of religions. Indeed,

These events have offered a window of opportunity for a range of political interests and forces around the world to consolidate the construction of new forms of political reasoning that seek to conceal real political struggles and conflict under the cover of the wide-ranging rubric of security' (Jayasuriya, 2002).

Jayasuriya (2002) argues that the new forms of risk have been turned into a new politics of fear in which the relocation of power 'both within the state and through various forms of international cooperation, poses difficult questions about the process and structures of democratic accountability'. In this politics of fear, we

might indeed see an increase of control on what will be labelled as terrorism¹¹; an increase which might act as a snowball effect and lead to, at least, an increase of fear and anxiety towards new forms of religions.

Previous action from 'Destructive Cults' – e.g. Waco, the Order of the Solar Temple, the Aum Shinri-kyo, Heaven's Gate group and the movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda – might retrospectively have the label 'terrorism' applied to them. Further, some anti-cult members have very recently created the new cult category of Terrorist Cult to refer to terrorists' organisations using mind control techniques¹². Since most Anti-Cult Movements have the tendency to lump many new religious groups together as though they were a single entity, 'the sins of one being visited on all' (Barker, 1995: 297), we might expect the label 'terrorism' to be extended to many non-destructive NRMs as well. Perhaps this increase of fear and anxiety will give more power to the anti-cultist lobby network, and this could even lead to even more control towards NRMs.

There are, of course, different levels of anti-cult sentiments within these movements (see e.g. Barker, 2002). However, these movements undoubtedly produce, in a variety of ways, an increase of surveillance and control over NRMs thus also heightening social tension around NRMs more generally. The argument of the anti-cult movement is that such controls are likely to reduce any deleterious effects of various NRMs. However, we might equally assume to claim that encouraging religious freedoms and forgoing social control might prevent some religious groups engaging in criminal and destructive activity. Undoubtedly violence and criminal activity can be a by-product of a minority of these already marginal groups, and should be dealt with appropriately through the criminal justice system; for a sociological investigation of destructive NRMs, see Bromley and Melton (2002). However, given the relatively low incidence of this fear of NRMs and how this might be destructive is also a legitimate area of investigation and was the focus of this first speculative point.

2. Since the 1960s there has been a growing move away from institutionalised religions which favoured the development of new religious movements. This created a platform which allowed the more individualistic beliefs and practices found in New Age and Neo-Paganism to develop from the 1980s. In his analysis of different surveys of the American population, Etzioni (2002) concludes that Americans have become more spiritual – but not more active in organised religion. The Sept 11 violence and its mediatisation might not only increase this shift but it might even give a support to the development of a new form of religion that is still embryonic at the moment, and which we have already addressed: the hyper-real religion. Indeed, if we have experienced in the period from 1960 to today a move from a form of individualism towards a form of narcissism as expressed in the literature on postmodernity (e.g. Lipovetsky (1987; 1993)), we might expect in the future Narcissus to stop looking at himself, and to look instead at an image of himself as portrayed and tamed in the media and popular culture; that is an hyper-real image of himself.

How to interpret this move towards hyper-real religion, if it happens? An understanding of what popular culture is would be a good starting point to answer this question.

Bar-Haim (1990: 281) suggests that

The wide range of popular culture phenomena are generated at the expense of dominant belief systems such as ideology, religion, various forms of spiritual movements, and the like- often for the purpose of suggesting their inadequacy or bankruptcy.

Within this view, popular culture, it is suggested, comments on ideological effects without necessarily proposing a realistic nor utopian alternative (Bar-Haim, 1990: 285). It does provide 'symbolic and expressive commentaries to those everyday living concerns that emanate from ideological imperatives (Bar-Haim, 2002: 280), and these can be expressed as forms of escapism and/or as rituals of resistance. These two forms are now being addressed in the light of hyper-real religion.

Would hyper-real religion be a form of escapism that will allow spiritual actors to move away from 'real' religions and their perceived violence; that is a move toward a popular culture that is less confrontational than reality. In this instance, 'Unreal' religion might bring more comfort to certain religious actors.

Or would hyper-real religion be a form of protest against mainstream culture as found in some life-affirming popular religions – e.g. in Latin America. In these popular religions, we find the expression of the marginalised, the demonised and the dominated. Popular religion in this instance 'provides the dominated with a space for the perpetuation of their threatened culture by protecting against assimilations forces, and functioning as a vehicle of social empowerment' (Mejido, 2002: 305). With these hyper-real religions, we might expect the same type of protest but not necessarily from a marginalised, demonised and dominated strata of western societies; but what specific type of protest?

If we come back to the Star Wars example as discovered in the 2001 census results, we found that it was estimated that about 5,000 people would be true hardcore people that would believe the Jedi Religion. While there are issues with the accuracy of this figure, it might be possible to argue that while the Star War mythos provides these spiritual actors with a source of inspiration for their spirituality, that in this post Sept 11 risk society, it might provide a source of escapism as well. Believing at a metaphorical level to gain the power of a Jedi Knight might provide a more interesting route to self-development than the diverse routes from mainstream religion and their perceived lack of touch with everyday life and their perceived lack of touch with everyday life. For the remaining people who declared Star Wars to be their religion, they might have used the Census as a form of protest against the government; or just for fun.

More studies, of course, remain to be conducted to analyse the potential growth of these two post September 11 trends, but suffice it to say for this article that these two potential futures could affect these multiple types of spiritual actors.

Endnotes

- ¹. Unfortunately, the census does not reflect the rich diversity that Australia has in terms of NRMs and discussing New Immigrant and Ethnic Community (NIEC) such as the Baha'i and Caodaism also found in the census would take us too far a field (See Ireland, 1999).
- ². This happens to individuals as well. From a private letter to the Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, one of my students, a faith healer, has been portrayed as a folk devil of the type described by Schaefer (2002) in the TV program 'A Current Affair'.
- ³. Richardson (1995) details the role of the media in the Waco tragedy involving David Koresh and the Branch Davidians and explores how the media, through its involvement with the government, prepared the general public to the justified violence against a group labelled as deviant.
- ⁴. See Internet Site: http://groups.yahoo.com/groups/Jedi_Knight_Movement/ (25/10/2002).
- ⁵. See Internet Site: <http://www.jediism.bigstep.com/> (7/03/03)
- ⁶. See Internet Site: <http://www.next-wave.org/may99/starwars.htm> (7/03/03) from an interview with Bill Moyer published in Time magazine (April 26, 1999, Vol. 153 No 16).
- ⁷. 'Oberon's Editorial' Internet Site: <http://www.greenegg.org/issues/123/oberonedit123.html>, Issue 123, p. 2 (05/01/00).
- ⁸. There is an Internet Site which gives a detailed religious/spiritual explanation of the force entitled: 'A way to the Force by Yoda of Dabobah' (Internet Site: http://www.quantumlight.com/theforce/writings/force/the_force.htm (03/02/00)).
- ⁹. See http://www.cesnur.org/testi/mi_picard2K.htm (23/06/00) and http://www.cesnur.org/2001/fr_may03.htm (4/05/01) for a quick account on how brainwashing has been made a crime.
- ¹⁰. See Shupe, A. and S. Darnell (2001) and Richardson, J. and M. Introvigne (2002).
- ¹¹. Terrorist groups include Christians, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus and new religious groups like Aum Shinkyō (Bendle, 2002a).
- ¹². See Internet Sites: <http://www.factnet.org/letters/FACTNewsOctober2001.html>; <http://factnet.org/cults/terrorism/Terrorism.htm?FACTNet>; http://www.disinopedia.org/wiki.phtml?title=Terrorist_cult (03/09/03)

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