

Rockchopping With the Little Pebble: Mainstream, Fringe and Criminal

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Introduction

With the July 2005 conviction of William Kamm (aka Little Pebble) on sexual assault charges, an entire matrix of concerns unravelled. This paper begins to unpick some of the issues in Kamm's rise and fall in order to examine many of the biases that may impede a clear scholarly appraisal of this religious leader-turned-criminal. This approach, it is hoped, will encourage other scholars to join in the examination of Kamm, perhaps less from a New Religious Movements perspective which is the central approach of our research. Taking this approach our study links Kamm to theories of leadership, group dynamics, control and, ultimately child abuse and issues of law. We will consider the part the media has played, both mainstream press and internet, in depicting Kamm and his Nowra-based Order of Saint Charbel as a sect, a cult and a doomsday movement. We will also fit Kamm into the wider study of Australian Marian movements. At the end we shall consider the Academy's approach to controversial figures such as Kamm.

Some History

William Kamm, described as the leader of 'Australia's greatest cult' or Australia's '...most dangerous doomsday cult'¹ remains a figure of mystery to most religion scholars. Originally a bank clerk, Kamm was born in Cologne on the 16th May 1950. His first mystical experiences occurred from Easter 1968. He founded the 'Marian Work of Atonement' in Australia in 1970-1972. By 1983,

¹ The major anti-Kamm site can be found at:
<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~wanglese>.

he received his name 'Little Pebble' from the Virgin Mary via a mystical encounter from the Virgin. On his website, Kamm claims to receive regular visions and messages from numerous members of the Holy Family (God, Saint Joseph, Jesus, Saint Michael and so forth) but principally, of course Mary.² These include prophecies on the coming destruction of the world. Kamm has messages prophesising numerous global catastrophes, mainly centred on comets, such as Hale-Bopp, crashing to the Earth. Despite these dimensions to his theology, Kamm, and it seems most of his followers, believes himself to be a genuine member of the Catholic Church. All the significant referents for the group are drawn from Catholic terminology. Thus, Kamm's compound outside Nowra holds a chapel and school on what are called 'The Sacred Grounds,'³ his group is also referred to as 'Our Lady of the Ark, Mary Our Mother Help of Christians' and Kamm says he is leader of the 'Order of Saint Charbel.' Janet Kahl adds, '[Charbel] is an Eastern Maronite saint which perhaps gives the perception of Orthodoxy.'⁴ The main prophecy of the group explains how Kamm will be shortly elevated as the next pope after the coming cataclysm. He will transform from the Little Pebble to become Peter II. Clearly he relies on the authority of the Church and the promise of becoming a great authority within the Church in order to help promulgate his own claims for leadership.

² Having collected a history of sexual abuse and claiming from time to time to have been abused sexually himself, the idealization by Kamm of this heavenly ideal family has fascinating psychological dimensions outside the scope of this introductory paper.

³ Alan Gill, 'Comments by the Virgin Keep Arriving Via Nowra' in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14/12/84, 9.

⁴ Janet Kahl, 'Virgin Territory: Mariology in Australia,' Honours IV Thesis, University of Sydney, 1998, 65.

A Sect, A Cult, or Just Conservative Catholicism? What Leadership Demonstrates

Max Weber's analysis of the nature of authority describes two broad categories.⁵ The first is the type derived from the institutions and bureaucracy that provide for the needs of everyday life, the second is that derived from personal qualities of the leader alone. This personal 'charisma' sets the leader apart from ordinary people, and in a religious context is often equated with supernatural powers or qualities. The importance of a charismatic leader is often focused on in explanations of the emergence of New Religious Movements (NRMs), because leaders of such religions do not have access to institutional authority. While this holds for the most innovative NRMs, the charisma of a leader may not play the only important role in the emergence of NRMs which break away from more established religions, but in this case the move seems clear. In this case Kamm has actively sought the bureaucratic authority of the main group. Moreover, the Order of Saint Charbel is clearly designed to confuse the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate Church organs. This leaves us wondering to what extent do Weber, and other commentators' 'schism' theories apply here. Catholic authorities may see Kamm's movement as a breakaway group. Kamm and his followers do not.

In order to analyse the role charismatic leadership plays in the emergence of this group, the problem of defining what constitutes a NRM must first be addressed. As David Bromley points out, 'distinguishing NRMs from established religions is more complex than it first appears. Most New Religions are not entirely novel'.⁶ Melton introduces Yinger's definition, that 'the

⁵ Max Weber, 'The Sociology of Charismatic Authority', in Gerth and Mills editors, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, London, 1948, 245.

⁶ David Bromley, 'New Religious Movements: New Religious Movements and Violence', in Lindsay Jones, editor, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol 10, 2nd edition, Detroit, 2005, 6551.

presence of a charismatic leader' is an important factor in identifying a cult or NRM.⁷ However, if charismatic leadership were taken as the defining trait of NRMs, then it is a tautology to argue that charismatic leadership is important in the emergence of NRMs. To debate the issue of leadership, a more general definition of a NRM is required. Such a definition is offered by Stark and Bainbridge,⁸ who define NRMs by the presence of innovative or imported religious ideas. These groups are termed 'cults'.⁹ 'Sects' are then defined as schismatic movements whose existence '...began as an internal faction of another religious body.'¹⁰ These sects and cults are presented as quite distinct types, implying that only cults constitute NRMs. However, it is possible to argue that many schismatic groups, like the Order of St Charbel, also involve innovative and imported religious ideas. Stark and Bainbridge deal with this by defining the term sect in a very restrictive way.¹¹ In doing this, they preclude a discussion of the importance of links with established religion in the emergence of NRMs. Therefore, although the Order of St Charbel is, by Stark and Bainbridge's system, a cult, an analysis of both its cult-like and sect-like aspects is necessary when considering its formation and the importance of William Kamm's charisma in that process.

The dual sect and cult-like aspects of the Order of St Charbel mean that theories of both sect and cult formation must be considered when analysing its emergence as a NRM. Stark and Bainbridge outline Niebhur's theory of Sect formation; that sects arises 'because the parent body, having made peace with the

⁷ J. Gordon Melton, 'Introduction: When Prophets Die: The Succession Crisis in New Religions', in Timothy Miller, editor, *When Prophets Die: The Postcharismatic Fate of New Religious Movements*, Albany, 1991, 2-3.

⁸ Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation*, Berkeley, 1985, 24-26

⁹ Although we recognise the generally pejorative use of this word, we use it here as a necessary and technical term of Stark and Bainbridge's work.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 24.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 149.

world, no longer [serves] the needs of a substantial minority of its members, namely, the disinherited'.¹² The leaders of sects are then identified as having 'past experience relevant to leading the movement... sect leaders usually have previous leadership experience – and thus some significant status – in the parent body'.¹³ Thus, in the emergence of sects the relationship between the parent religion and society is of key importance. Furthermore, rather than relying on personal charisma, the leaders of such schisms are more likely to rely on bureaucratic authority carried over from their position in the parent religion.

In contrast to sect formation, the role of the individual is emphasised in two out of three possible models of cult-formation¹⁴. These 'Psychopathology' and 'Entrepreneur' models stress the role of the leader in convincing his/her followers of his/her supernatural qualities, or 'charisma'. In the former, 'cult innovation [occurs] as the result of individual psychopathology that finds successful social expression'.¹⁵ In the latter, a cult founder consciously develops a new religion in order to gain rewards.¹⁶ While these two models stress the role of the individual, the third 'subculture-evolution model emphasises group interaction processes'.¹⁷ However, the three models are not unrelated. For example, Bainbridge and Stark describe the way 'the People's Temple of Jim Jones... began as an emotionally extreme but culturally traditional Christian group, then evolved into a cult as Jones progressively became a Prophet with an ever more radical vision'.¹⁸ Although the Psychopathological and Entrepreneur models may play a part, the group dynamic is also a factor in the emergence of this NRM.

¹² Ibid, 100.

¹³ Ibid, 105.

¹⁴ William Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, 'Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models', *Sociological Analysis*, 1979, 40, 4: 283.

¹⁵ Ibid, 284.

¹⁶ Ibid, 287.

¹⁷ Ibid, 291.

¹⁸ Ibid, 293.

In addition, links to the social environment and other religious groups are also identified as playing a part in the successful emergence of cult-like NRMs. A social atmosphere of crisis or distress can improve the chances of an individual's innovative religious ideas being taken up in the psychopathological model.¹⁹ Leaders of entrepreneurial-type NRMs often 'imitate those features of other successful cults which seem to them most responsible for success.'²⁰ Thus, although charisma is identified as important in the development of cult-like NRMs, it is by no means the only factor involved. Of all the factors noted, the link to Church authority seems the most persuasive.

As early as 1985, (as far as we could find) the Catholic Church, principally through the office of the Bishop of Wollongong, has been at work distancing itself from Kamm through the Catholic press. Some websites have echoed this call and a small number of articles have appeared in Sydney and Wollongong (principally *The Mercury*). Kamm is, nevertheless, not well known outside the South Coast region. Moreover, the lack of official action directly from the Vatican has been used by Kamm to suggest that Rome's reticence underscores his own legitimacy. It was not until 16 June 2002 that an official Church decree was issued against Kamm.²¹ Until then his leadership aspirations went generally unchecked.

The cult-like aspect of the Order and the role of Kamm's charisma and personal religious innovation are most obvious when its links to the mainstream Catholic Church are challenged. The 2002 decree outlining the findings of the Ecclesiastical Investigation into the Order refuted its links to the Church and declared, 'There is nothing supernatural about the alleged visions of Mr. William Kamm'.²² In his response to the Bishops,

¹⁹ Ibid, 287.

²⁰ Ibid, 290.

²¹ The full decree is archived at: <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~wanglese>.

²² Bishop Peter Ingham, 'Reflections on a schism - a false claim to legitimacy', *The Catholic Weekly*, 29/6/03, [cited 25/7/05]. Available from

Kamm emphasises his personal mission from God; 'the God who governs the chair of Peter...came to me through his Most Blessed Mother, Mary'.²³ A further challenge was presented to the Order in April 2005, when, following the death of Pope John Paul II, William Kamm was not elected Pope as prophesied, but Pope Benedict XVI took the chair. Interestingly, instead of decreasing the resolve of the movement and turning them back towards the mainstream church, Kamm's prophesies became even more innovative. Kamm's response to the death of Pope John Paul II, as given on the Order's website, is 'The Pope is not dead, even though in outward appearance [it] may be so... When the Anti-Pope is denounced, Pope John Paul II will announce the true successor of Saint Peter, who will be the last Vicar for the Holy Mother Church'.²⁴ He then quotes his own visions and those of many other seers around the World as support for this view. In this way, when challenged, Kamm's authority moves further away from bureaucratic authority derived from his links to the Church to a more charismatic form of authority derived from his personal messages from Mary. Such intensification of innovative religious ideas has been identified as one of the ways NRMs generally deal with the failure of prophecies as Festinger et al., principal amongst others, shows.²⁵

Following the Vatican guidelines for how an order should be established, the Order of St Charbel attempts to claim legitimacy, 'we are not simply a group – we are a religious order which was formed in 1986 under guidelines which subsequently have been promulgated by Pope John Paul II', 'We are members of the Roman Catholic Church'.²⁶ The first image on his *A Brief*

<http://www.catholicweekly.com.au/03/jun/29/23.html>.

²³ Official website, the Order of St Charbel, [cited 28/7/05]. Available from http://www.shoal.net.au/~mwoa/documents/appeal_to_bishops_1july2002.html.

²⁴ Official website, the Order of St Charbel, [cited 26/7/05]. Available from http://www.shoal.net.au/~mwoa/documents/statement_lp_6april2005.html.

²⁵ Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails*, Minneapolis, 1956, 23.

²⁶ Official website, the Order of St Charbel, [cited 28/7/05]. Available from

Introduction to Little Pebble is 'The Little Pebble in private audience to Pope John Paul II.'²⁷ There is some evidence that suggests these links to the Catholic church helped draw some of the Order of St Charbel's members to the group, and hence that they were important in its emergence. A girl who Kamm sexually assaulted was described in the media as having 'moved to his rural NSW community... with her strict Catholic family who had become disenchanted with modernisation of the church after the second Vatican council'.²⁸ When the girl's mother read sexually explicit letters written to her daughter by Kamm, she was shocked, 'while aware of mainstream Catholic teaching, she didn't know when she joined Kamm's community that his order was outside the mainstream church. [She said] "We just thought it was extra conservative."²⁹ The comment suggests that at some time she did discover that Kamm was outside the Church, but by then decided to continue to participate in his group. Such comments suggest the importance of bureaucratic authority in the emergence of the movement, however, they may be coloured by personal bias against Kamm after it was known that he abused a number of young girls. Nevertheless, it suggests that a combination of different factors was involved in the emergence of the Order of St Charbel.

Regrettably at the moment it is difficult to more concretely assess the reasons people joined with Kamm. The Academy is yet to conduct interviews with those still in the movement and little has been archived on those who have left. Perhaps the best way to evaluate the importance of charismatic and bureaucratic authority in NRMs is to analyse what happens when they fail. The Ecclesiastical Investigations made by the Catholic Church

http://www.shoal.net.au/~mwoa/important_events/faq.html.

²⁷ Official website, the Order of St Charbel, [cited 27/7/05]. Available from http://www.shoal.net.au/~mwoa/brief_introduction/index.html.

²⁸ Ben Martin, 'Cult leader damned by explicit letters', *The West Australian*, 9/7/05.

²⁹ Rebecca Senescall, 'Father's apology letter to Kamm', *Illawarra Mercury*, 22/6/05.

into The Order of St Charbel offer us one insight. The failure of Kamm's predictions offer another perspective and the trial and subsequent conviction of William Kamm on sexual assault charges offer yet another.

Marianism and Millenarianism

In the material distributed by the Order of St Charbel on their website, there is a strong emphasis on the role of Kamm as leader, and on his divine 'messages' from the Virgin Mary. There is no doubt that the Catholic Church has had a long tradition of schism. And a good amount of conservative schism most recently seems to be developing among groups claiming connection with the Virgin Mary. Most dramatic of all these movements has been the Ugandan *Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God*, but others such as the *Magnificat Meal Movement*, also founded in Australia, pursue strong millenarian and Virgin-oriented directions. What is most interesting is that members from these Marian groups talk with each other and offer a strange kind of support. They may not respect the authenticity of the *content* of the messages each receives from the Virgin, but they support each other in the idea that the Virgin does indeed visit and pass-on messages. Thus Kamm has said that '...even to listen to a single word from Debra [Geilesky – founder of the Magnificat Meal Movement] will corrupt minds.'³⁰ He also notes that the messages from Veronica Leuken, the main message receiver of the 'Our Lady of the Roses' movement in New York, have been tampered with by the Devil. This comes despite Kamm working with and visiting these groups extensively. His most famous connection has become his visit to Uganda.

The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God [MRTCG] developed in the late 1980s in a Uganda deeply

³⁰ Debra Geilesky, *What God Might Say to Me Today... in Australia*, Dairy 7, 66.

concerned with modern developments, particularly the HIV/AIDS epidemic that has been sweeping Africa.³¹ Scholars such as Jean-François Mayer are still attempting to piece together the history of the group, but it seems its relationship to the Catholic Church mirrored that of Kamm's order: 'While the MRTCG was outside the pale of the Roman Catholic Church, its practices were largely inspired by Roman Catholicism, thanks to the presence of priests within the group.'³² In its rituals of silence [sign language was mainly used to communicate], communal living and shared poverty the MRTCG offered '[the] promised reward [of] the passage to a new generation and the gift of heaven.'³³ The messages from the Virgin that told of the end were found in this group's main text *A Timely Message From Heaven: The End of the Present Times*. Under the guidance of the leader, Joseph Kibwetere, on 17 March 2000, several hundred people died in a fire on this group's compound. An additional 444 corpses were found in other locations, suggesting a very calculated move by the group to leave the planet before the foretold cataclysm. It was an act at least as big as Jonestown.

When anti-Kamm website operators heard of Uganda, they were quick to make the link, suggesting Kamm was involved in supporting the world view that permitted the mass suicide. Scholars and the foreign press were also eager to highlight the link. Of Uganda, Mayer writes:

Des visionnaires venus de l'étranger ont aussi leur public, par exemple l'Australien d'origine allemande William Kamm, alias 'le Petit Caillou' et présenté comme le futur pape Pierre II:

³¹ Jean-François Mayer, 'Un Temple Solaire à L'Africane' in *La Liberté*, 16 Mars 2001, 7.

³² Jean-Francois Mayer, 'Apocalypse in Uganda' in *Religioscope*, 9 March 2005, 3.

³³ Bernard Atuhaire, *The Uganda Cult Tragedy*, London, 2005, 29.

plusieurs témoins se souviennent de l'avoir vu lors de sa visite en Ouganda en 1989.³⁴

More surprisingly Britain's *The Guardian*, just days after the massacre [18 April 2000] declared 'Documents show Ugandan sect leader "inspired" by visits from Australian doomsday group.' Their story was partly correct. Much of Kamm's literature was found in the ashes of the MRTCG compound. None of this, however, seemed of interest to Australian scholars.

The Virgin Mary, for complex reasons beyond the scope of this paper, has become a figure of significant millenarian intent.³⁵ Many of Kamm's prophecies from her speak of the end of the world. She explains, however, that:

Kamm and his followers would be safe, because God had chosen Kamm to be 'the new Abraham,' to take from his followers 12 queens and 72 princesses who would spawn a pure race to live in the new world.³⁶

One can see that the end of the world can entail a reassessment of values. It is in this process that Kamm felt justified in taking under-aged girls as his 'spiritual' and of course, allegedly, sexual partners.

Sexual Assault and End of the World Values

Scholars should have realised long ago that Kamm was a suspicious figure in the face of the law. In some internet reports,

³⁴ Mayer, 'Un Temple Solaire à L'Africane', op cit, 8.

³⁵ Millenarian Virgins seem to be a reaction (from 1832 onwards) to recent tendencies in the West with the Virgin representing a past security in an age of seemingly end-time Modernist developments. See both Carole M Cusack, 'The Virgin Mary at Coogee' in *Australian Religious Studies Review*, Vol 16, No 1, Autumn 2003, 116-129, and S Zidmars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary*, New York, 1992, *passim*.

³⁶ Rebecca Senescall, 'A dose of reality for Little Pebble', Illawarra Mercury, 9/7/05.

Kamm claimed that he himself was abused when younger.³⁷ Could this have been indicative of a cycle of abuse and point to Kamm's behaviour with his subsequent victims? Moreover, there are very early reports of Kamm's proclivities. On 24 December 1993, the Sydney Press reported accusations from the New York based, *Our Lady of Flowers* group who asked Kamm to leave after claims of sexual harassment.³⁸ In fact it leads one to suspect that Kamm's breaking of the law and conviction were simply a matter of time. In this way Kamm's proclivities may have short-circuited further millenarian developments in Nowra. Or have they?

Leaving to one side the process of the law and our deep concern for Kamm's victims. Issues of leadership can be examined more closely when Kamm's moral basis for personal authority is challenged. This certainly happened when he was convicted. It was at this point that the defiant solidarity of the group became more prominent. Primarily, without its leader, group members lurched towards the group's institutional nature. When confronted by the Media after the guilty verdict, Kamm's followers emphasised their independence from him and adherence to the Order; 'We don't follow him like some guru. We have our own lives. We certainly don't kiss the feet of Little Pebble' and, 'His role is as the founder of the Order; there is no leader as such.'³⁹ The spokesperson for the Order also expressed the view that 'Mary would continue to communicate with members...' 'Mystics and seers are very common.'¹⁸ Similarly, Kamm's response distanced the group from his own personal authority, but in this case by re-emphasising his link to his ideal family. In his statements Kamm declared, 'this is a time for suffering like Jesus

³⁷ And as he claimed again in court. See, Geesche Jacobsen, 'Cult Leader Jailed for Sex with Girls,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15/10/05.

³⁸ Susan Borham and Rosa Maiolo, 'Prophet and Loss' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24/12/93, Supplement 1A and 4A-5A.

³⁹ Nicolette Casella, 'A long fall for a Little Pebble – The next voices this short guru hears will be the hard word of the law', *Daily Telegraph*, 15/7/05

and Mary did... Be assured, I am fine, as I am privileged to share the cross with Christ.⁴⁰

In conclusion, it is often implicit in the definition of a 'cult', or New Religious Movement, that it is led by a charismatic leader with 'supernatural' qualities. However, when the term NRM is defined more generally as any recent religious movement with innovative or imported religious ideas, the emphasis on the role of the leader is decreased. In this case it becomes clear that there are many factors that may play an important role in the emergence of the NRM. These include: the social climate at the time of emergence, the links of the NRM to other successful NRMs and established religions, and the charisma of the NRM's leader. An analysis of the origins of authority in the Order of St Charbel, a NRM with both cult-like and sect-like aspects, demonstrates that, more generally, the emergence of the NRM can be linked to both charismatic and institutional authority. Furthermore, by analysing the way such a NRM reacts when either form of authority is challenged, it becomes clear that the interplay of both charismatic and institutional authority is essential to maintaining a NRM.

Coda

As this conference is about methodology the case of Little Pebble raises another significant issue. That is, why has the Australian Academy been so slow in attempting to understand a figure that has stood out as one of the most controversial figures in recent religious history. In fact the Academy, as with most controversial issues, has left this issue solely to the media and internet writers to help the public understand this issue. Currently Little Pebble's controversial aura is matched only by Ken Dyers, the founder of the Kenja movement that has been operating

⁴⁰ Official website, the Order of St Charbel, [cited 28/7/05]. Available at http://www.shoal.net.au/~mwoa/documents/letter_lp_verdict_trial_9july2005.html.

since 1982. In a haunting parallel, Dyers was convicted of sexual abuse of a young girl but acquitted. He has featured most recently in the Cornelia Rau incident when Rau charged Kenja on the current affairs show *Sixty Minutes*, with triggering her most serious and recent psychotic episode. The episode that saw her constrained in a immigrant detention centre. Not surprisingly, like Little Pebble, Kenja is a subject the Australian Academy has gone out of its way to ignore. This does not seem, however, to be an Australian phenomenon. With the Jonestown incident in mind, Jonathan Z Smith has written of the American Academy,

From one point of view, one might claim that Jonestown was the most important single event in the history of religions, for if we continue, as a profession, to leave it un-understandable, then we will have surrendered our rights to the academy.⁴¹

⁴¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, 'The Devil in Mr. Jones' in Russel T. McCutcheon, *The Insider-Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, London and New York, 1999, 372.