

## Recomposing Religious Plotlines

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Students often write and rewrite their own cultures without realizing that they are doing so. They are, perhaps, especially inclined to maintain unreflectively the perspectives about religion that are, in their various circles, socially normative assumptions that shape many of their views regarding gender, sexuality, family, law, race, ethics, art, science, government, patriotism, international affairs, and war. Students constantly investigate these related topics during their undergraduate years. But, unless they take courses in Religious Studies—and at most universities only a small fraction of them do—they rarely, if ever, formally explore views and presumptions about religion that undergird (or, at a minimum, are concomitant with) their perspectives on these topics. It is as though faculty prod students to explore the many floors in the multistory dwellings that students call home without ever asking them to examine the foundations of the building. But if students don't analyze the foundation, they may never understand how to design and furnish their own houses or, more importantly, grasp how other richly designed and elegantly furnished homes can rest on decidedly different foundations.

Consider American civil religion, which seamlessly fuses Judeo Christianity with intense nationalism. Seldom do teachers and students seriously probe or critique American civil religion, even though it buttresses the entire worldview of many Americans and informs and bolsters virtually every speech of virtually every important American politician.

Consider also that students cherish highly standardized plots of Hollywood celebrities, athletic achievers, and politicians—plots often found, for example, in *People* magazine and on both front pages and sports pages of newspapers—including such narratives as Cinderellas, Cinderfellas, and Horatio Algiers who find true love while surmounting impossible hurdles as they ascend from hovels



to McMansions (or White Houses); nobody Davids conquering unbeatable Goliaths; unblemished innocents fighting a once-and-for-all cosmic battle of good versus evil; invulnerable Napoleons collapsing in utter and grotesque defeat (often a Waterloo occasioned by drug or alcohol abuse) while losing true love; and cultural icons magically and permanently resurrecting themselves from total loss and disgrace (often occasioned by drug and alcohol abuse) to a state of renovated innocence (only to fall again a year or two later). These same plots animate many students' favorite movies and television programs—from *Shrek* (an ogre as Romeo) to *Seabiscuit* (a horse as Cinderella) to *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* (unsullied young people wrestling unspeakable evil) to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (wholesome versus satanic forces with the whole world at stake) to the *Star Trek* canon (all these plots isolated or combined in one episode or another) to reality TV (wannabe Cinderellas and Cinderfellas competing on islands). Inasmuch as these plots, even at their most simplistic, address questions about the meaning of life, they are, we would argue, religious narratives. Further, many students' devotion to these plots is so unshakable and so total that that devotion itself can only be called religious.

Yet faculty and students have good reasons for avoiding talk about religion. Often conversations on that topic, in the classroom and elsewhere, prove highly unproductive. An obvious problem is that, by expounding well-rehearsed views about religion that they gleaned from their parents, their communities, their peers, and the media, students can expound loudly and platitudinously while refusing to listen. Or their dialogues can become extremely freewheeling and unfocused. Discussing arguably religious plots in television and film can also prove fruitless: alas, in our experience, students often love their favorite TV shows and movies so much that they protest any attempt to examine the plots, no matter how predictably codified those narratives might be.

The question then becomes this: How can teachers approach religion in a way that does not yield predictable, polemical debates and resistance to analysis but rather enables students to appreciate many varied perspectives on religion and to enrich and complicate their views about it, whatever those views happen to be? Here, we address this question by proposing that teachers prod students to study the rhetoric of religion by focusing not on metaphysics but on textual constructions. While students can obviously explore the rhetoric of religion in many, many ways, we suggest one particular set of possibilities, hoping that this suggestion might spawn further thought.

Specifically, we propose that teachers and students examine perspectives on religion that appear regularly in American journalism since, in our experience, students have little or no emotional investment in the generally bland and highly standardized news accounts of religion that appear in the press. We do so by asking students to examine, scramble, dismantle, and recompose common forms of reporting on religion that appear repeatedly in the mass-market press. By testing the adequacy of standard journalistic forms in communicating the complexities of religious experiences and institutions, both orthodox and



unorthodox, students can begin to interrogate religion intelligently and dispassionately while simultaneously expanding their critical thinking skills, reading and writing abilities, and grasp of audiences and rhetorical situations—all prominent goals in the Council of Writing Program Administrator's (WPA) Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition—in a well-focused, thematic course that introduces them to rhetoric.

To facilitate an analysis of the new through the familiar, we propose that teachers use a framework derived mainly from Mark Silk's *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* (1995), an astute treatment of press accounts of religion. Silk observes that, not unlike reporters in general, journalists who write about religion emplot their accounts in a small number of predictable ways. These *topoi* (his term) or plotlines (our term) include:

1. Worthy religious people and institutions perform "good works," especially aiding the needy. Religious groups who help the poor deserve public recognition and praise for behaving properly. Those who fail to do so deserve public disapprobation. For example, the press consistently uplifts former president Jimmy Carter as a "good Christian" who works to ameliorate poverty.
2. Everyone should practice religious tolerance. For example, in 1960 the press generally criticized explicitly anti-Catholic arguments against the election of John Kennedy, a Roman Catholic, to the White House. In 1992, the news media labeled the Republican alliance with the Christian Right as an embrace of religious intolerance.
3. Hypocritical religious leaders deserve unmitigated condemnation. For example, during the late 1980s, reporters repeatedly skewered Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, two leading Protestant fundamentalists and television evangelists, for their adulterous escapades. More recently, journalists have excoriated Roman Catholic priests who practiced pedophilia and the bishops who protected them from legal consequences.
4. False religious prophecy warrants unalloyed scorn. Reflecting the Protestant bias of the entire nation, early American newspapers sometimes identified and blasted Catholicism as false prophecy. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, much of the press proudly and repeatedly denounced Mormonism as another false prophecy until the Mormon Church outlawed polygamy. In 1993 journalists unanimously branded David Koresh of Waco, Texas, as an extremely dangerous false prophet. Reporters sometimes label small, unpopular religions as "cults."
5. Various religions deserve acceptance as "normal" American faiths. After World War II reporters largely succeeded in prompting many readers, first, to accept Mormons as "normal," meritorious citizens and, second, to accept Jews as meritorious and worthy constituents of "Judeo-Christianity," a phrase that reporters popularized after 1945.



6. Claimed indications of the supernatural deserve press coverage. These include the reported discovery of Jesus' shroud and statements about visitations by the Virgin Mary.
7. Old-line "mainstream" Protestant churches are declining. In Silk's words, "Since the days of the Puritans, American religious leaders have rarely let slip the opportunity to lament the decline of religious devotion," especially dedication of the sort fostered by conventional Protestant denominations (1995, 135). Evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants, however, are gaining adherents, partly through commercial, media-savvy appeals and partly through enthusiasm and imagination that is lacking in "stodgy" churches.

We hold that journalists emplot their articles not only according to Silk's seven patterns but also following an eighth plotline: science conflicts with religion.<sup>1</sup> Journalists generally treat science and religion as diametrically opposed. Consider the media portrayal of the teaching of Darwinian evolution versus the teaching of religion. In 1999, evolution—a basic tenet of scientific thought—was dropped from the curricula standards for the state of Kansas. The coverage of this decision—and its later repeal in 2001—exemplifies the current mode of thought that religion and science are inherently contradictory. An even more contemporary example can be seen in the heated topics of cloning and biotechnology: more often than not, the headlines of such topics telegraph an alleged conflict between theology and the advancement of science. Also, reporters typically present prevailing astrophysical theory about the origin of the universe—the Big Bang—as clashing with religious explanations of creation. Even with the brief examples given, one can see that, while news media do not necessarily side with religion over science, the media often portray the two as incompatible.

Regarding these plotlines, we want to be clear that we wholeheartedly agree that helping the poor is meritorious, tolerance is desirable, and hypocrisy deserves opprobrium. But, as Silk argues, two problems arise from these often-repeated narrative threads. First, they reinforce unexamined paradoxes and contradictions. By some unreported, magical process—*abracadabra presto!*—dangerous movements led by false prophets suddenly become completely acceptable institutions. Allegedly bland "mainline" churches are touted as laudably tolerant, yet condemned as spiritually weak. Religious allegiance is forever declining, though a revival is always beginning to percolate. Signs of the supernatural deserve to be respected—for they might be true—even though the press is ostensibly secular.

A second problem is that the stereotypical narrative forms seriously oversimplify religion. By obscuring complications in favor of predictability, the plotlines, Silk maintains, wrap readers in "mental straitjackets" (1995, 149). Silk argues that the plotlines encourage passivity and discourage curiosity: "From reports on good works to exposés of 'cults,' a lot of religion news does not strike most consumers of news as reflecting any point of view,



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This assignment encourages students to confront the problematics of the plotlines, as one or more of them pertain to a specific instance. For example, a student named Lauren Savaglio (2003) analyzed journalist Alan Cooperman's "Is Terrorism Tied to Christian Sect?" As she explains, Cooperman raises the question of whether the press should label an extremist Christian group as "Christian terrorists," just as it often labels extremist Islamic groups as "Islamic terrorists." She concludes by stating that both phrases—"Christian terrorists" and "Islamic terrorists"—exemplify religious intolerance and should be dropped. Savaglio convincingly identifies this article as one that follows Silk's plotline about the importance of religious tolerance and argues for the value of that plotline. She also contends that American political leaders, reporters, and public too frequently stereotype and scapegoat Muslims and that "not one group is safe from intolerance as long as religion is used as a way to lower another group." (See Appendix A.)

Savaglio's essay succinctly demonstrates an understanding of one of Silk's plotlines and ably discusses its implications in a given scenario. In doing so, she effectively "focus[es] on a purpose" and "use[s] writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating," both primary goals of the WPA Outcomes Statement. Her ability to effectively meet these goals within the parameters of the assignment illustrates the potential of analyzing religious plotlines in the composition classroom.

**ASSIGNMENT TWO:** Write your own piece of religious journalism about some past, present, or imagined religious topic that fails to lend itself to any of Silk's plotlines. Be sure to write about some religion other than your own. While you are not analyzing examples of religious journalism, you may draw on public discourse (including journalism) to create and explore your topic.

Like the first assignment, this second task invites—but does not intrusively demand—that students spend time revising not only their writing but also, at least in a small measure, their common processes of conceptualizing religion, culture, and society.

For the second assignment, Lacey Jones (2003) reflected on current issues by reporting the claim by Raelians, who call themselves an "atheist, nonprofit, spiritual organization," to have cloned a baby girl. Unlike some journalists, Jones rejected Silk's plotline about dangerous prophecies and refused to label the Raelians a "cult" or to judge them. She also showed that the Raelians integrated their religion with science by enlisting the assistance of a group of scientists devoted to human cloning. By authoring a creative piece of semifictional journalism, Jones exemplifies the potential breadth of such an assignment. (See Appendix B.)

While the content of Jones' essay obviously speaks to her grasp of the critical thinking portion of the WPA Outcomes Statement, the structure and mechanics of her essay also convey her understanding of additional desired outcomes. Originally submitted in traditional, journalistic double-column



style, Jones' essay demonstrates her understanding of rhetorical practices—another goal of the WPA Outcomes Statement, which contends that students should “use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation; adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality; learn common formats for different kinds of texts; and develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics.” Her double-columned essay mimics the format, structure, and tone of most newspaper articles and as such differs from the conventional notion of a scholarly essay. By making this leap from one rhetorical context to the next, she augments her understanding of different writing situations.

For our final assignment (below), we ask students to propose frames or plotlines that are richer, more complex, and more satisfactory than those that journalists ordinarily use. If they wish, teachers can make a comprehensive list of alternate plotlines from different groups of students, omitting any discriminatory or otherwise inappropriate suggestions. This process naturally invites a large-group discussion that addresses the advantages and disadvantages of possible new approaches. For teachers who wish to suggest possibilities to students, we provide six alternative plotlines—all of which we believe are more inclusive, more interesting, and more sophisticated than the plotlines normally employed by reporters. By discussing potential plotlines not explicitly championed by the media, students have the opportunity to see the breadth of potential in creating their own, new plotlines.

Our first alternative plotline argues this: *all people are equally religious*. John Dewey proposes that religion need not refer to the supernatural but should consist of the process of implementing ethical improvements. Paul Tillich provides an expansive account of religion. Challenging routine definitions, Tillich contends that a person's religion consists of her ultimate commitment: “Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned. The content matters infinitely for the life of the believer, but it does not matter for the formal definition of faith” ([1957] 2001, 4). A member of the clergy can commit herself to serving a religious body and her understanding of God. But a “national group,” Tillich declares, can choose “the life and growth of the nation” as “its ultimate concern” (2). Assiduously climbing the ladder at work, some define their careers as their ultimate concern; social and economic success is, in Tillich's words, “the god of many people in the highly competitive Western culture” (4). When certain CEOs loot millions of dollars from their disintegrating companies, they evince an ultimate commitment to greed and wealth. For Tillich, “. . . secularism is never without an ultimate concern” (144). For that reason, Tillich holds that *any* ultimate commitment is religious, and every person is just as religious as everyone else. Reinhold Niebuhr makes a parallel observation, at least with respect to international conflict: “. . . all wars are religious wars, whether fought in the name of historic creeds or not.” Soldiers, he explains, are “‘religiously’” devoted to their causes; none of them will fight



"until the cause seems to them the center of their universe of meaning. This is just as true in a supposedly secular age as in an avowedly religious one" (1935, 233–34).

Like Tillich and Niebuhr, Kenneth Burke blurs the distinction between religion and non-religion. Burke defines "secular prayer" as "the *coaching of an attitude* by the use of mimetic and verbal language"; he also defines prayer as "any mimetic act" ([1937] 1984, 321–22). He coins the phrase "God term," which, he explains, "designates the ultimate motivation" of a person. "Money," he notes, serves as a "God term" for some ([1945] 1969, 355–56). For Burke, God terms instantiate humans' overwhelming desire for perfection. Explicating Burke, David Tracy explains that, as wielders of symbols, we humans—including avowed secular thinkers like Freud—"are driven, wherever we begin, to god-terms" or "perfection-language" (2000, 187–88).<sup>2</sup>

The Tillich/Burke redefinition of religion undercuts a big problem that reporters characteristically fail to examine: their reinforcement of facile and unworkable binaries, especially conventional versus "deviant" religion and religious versus non-religious people. This redefinition also dismantles reporters' ready identification of religious devotion with formal membership in a recognized body or with intellectual adherence to well-established sets of denominational doctrines. Further, the new framework undermines journalists' binary of institutional religion versus make-up-your-own spirituality, which Robert Bellah and his co-authors term "Sheilaism" (quoted in Silk 1995, 146–47). Unlike the untenable, unexamined binaries that ballast Silk's seven (plus our eighth) standard plotlines, Tillich's redefinition accounts for religious complexity and ambiguity by including everyone.

Our second alternative plotline is this: *religion is a source of social reform*. Using arguments based heavily on the Bible and Christianity, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Grimke, and many others assaulted slavery. In less than thirty years—between the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society (1832) and the beginning of the Civil War (1861)—the abolitionist campaign reversed dominant attitudes in the North, making possible the eventual elimination of American slavery. In its overt appeals to the dominant religion, the American crusade mirrored British abolitionists' earlier, successful movement. Similarly, in the early 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, and many others made many, similar references to the Bible and Christianity as they sought to repeal legalized segregation. During the same period, Malcolm X appealed to Allah and Islam as his authority for denouncing white supremacy. Douglass, Garrison, Truth, Stowe, Grimke, King, Hamer, Malcolm X, and legions of other radicals and reformers theorized and harnessed religion as a source for extremely important social change.

Our third alternative plotline is this: *religion affirms tragic limits*. Despite the importance of reforms, no political or social system can eliminate tragedy. Niebuhr warned: "The highest achievements of social good will and human



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data proves difficult in religious studies, maintaining the connection between religion and science is both possible and desirable since humanity exhibits a desire "to see patterns in wholes" (1997, 94). Both science and religion address this need to find order in life.

To reevaluate the relationship between religion and science is to recognize that each uses distinct narratives. All modes of human thought present stories; and, as Samuelson notes, religion and science are no exception. In *Reconstructing Nature: The Engagement of Science and Religion*, two prominent scientists, John Brooke and Geoffrey Cantor, note the importance of constructing stories to show various ways of explaining life, including geometric and genetic stories. However, each area of knowledge relies on perspective. Brooke and Cantor emphasize that "the absorbing question is why different individuals and social groups should be drawn to different interpretations and how far we may account for their predispositions" (2000, 22). Samuelson furthers this thought by proposing a combination of overlapping stories—those of religion and science—without dismissing the capability of each story to stand on its own. In other words, the stories contain meaning relevant within their own contexts as well as provide meaningful data to fill in gaps of other stories.

The full value of dialogue between science and religion has yet to be realized. Acknowledging and valuing similar aspects of religion and science would encourage a dialogue between the two and provide new plotlines that may help lift the limitations that journalism, academia, and popular culture now impose on discussions of religion.

After teachers and students have brainstormed new frames and plotlines, teachers can create their own assignments. We suggest the following:

ASSIGNMENT THREE: Write a paper applying newly generated plotline(s) to some phenomenon. Explain why your plotline is useful to expanding religious perceptions and portrayals. OR find one article that disobeys common plotlines; for example, find one that explains religion as devotion/commitment rather than formal adherence to religious doctrines or institutions. Analyze the plotline of that essay.

Student Jesus Davila created his own new plotline—people are individualizing religion—and explained how it pertains to the decentralization of churches (2003). He incorporated a philosophical perspective into his essay and wrote multiple drafts to achieve the interweaving of various perspectives, sources, and prewriting techniques to achieve the product. His essay exemplifies the possibilities of such a course by showing that "students' abilities not only diversify along disciplinary and professional lines but also move into whole new levels where expected outcomes expand, multiply, and diverge" (WPA Outcomes Statement). (See Appendix C.)

Lacey Jones (2003), on the other hand, analyzed an essay/interview authored by Kate Sullivan and appearing in *Spin* magazine that explores the Red Hot Chili Peppers, a rock/funk/punk band. Prefacing her essay with a



reference to Jimi Hendrix's dictum, "Music is my religion," Jones analyzes the essay as an interpretation of the band as bent on an unorthodox religious quest through music and the bassist's 'epiphany' about the spiritual nature of rock music. In doing so, she demonstrates her ability to "integrate [her] own ideas with those of others" and to "understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources" (WPA Outcomes Statement). Jones' essay demonstrates that students can understand religion as more than a choice of institutional affiliation while simultaneously expanding their understanding of writing. (See Appendix D.)

We hope that examining, unraveling, scrambling, deconstructing, and reconstructing religious plotlines might prompt students to investigate and reconceive not only religious plotlines but also other types of received plotlines and stereotypes in journalism and popular thought.

We unequivocally repudiate any pedagogical attempt to undermine students' convictions about religion, and we do not suppose that the course we propose would prompt students to volunteer to shift their convictions dramatically in one direction or another. We do claim, however, that composing essays about religious journalism can potentially enrich, vary, and complicate students' perspectives not only about writing and journalism but also about religion itself, in all its multifarious complexities. Composing and recomposing essays can mean taking steps toward composing and recomposing a culture—a goal with obvious assets to first-year composition.<sup>4</sup>

## Appendix A

### Religious Terrorists?

Lauren Savaglio

"Is Terrorism Tied to Christian Sect?" by Alan Cooperman (located on A30 of *The Washington Post*, Monday June 2, 2003) was an unusual find. Where most religious journalism that I was able to come across supported the Christian religion, which most Americans consider themselves to be in association with, this article applied many stereotypes tied to other religions to Christianity. It questioned religious intolerance vigorously.

According to Cooperman, the arrest of Eric Robert Rudolph (the accused Olympic bomber) prompted many to make associations between his religious faith and his violent actions. This is more commonly practiced since the aftermath of September 11th. The reason why this is so notable in this situation is that Rudolph readily identifies himself as a Christian. If one were to label him as other terrorists are in recent history, one would not only see him as a terrorist, but as a Christian terrorist. This has caused quite a stir among mainstream Christians in the United States who are uncomfortable with the word "terrorist" being associated with them. Idaho State University sociology professor James A. Aho feels that the phrase "Christian terrorist" is clearly an



"oxymoron" and should be refrained from use (par 7). As the author points out only sentences later, Christians are beginning to feel what Muslims have been subjected to here in the United States (par 8). The term "Islamic terrorism" has become part of common vocabularies, especially since September 11th. Since many claim that Islam is inherently peaceful, the phrase "Islamic terrorism" would also be an oxymoron. However, few outside of Islam see any problem with this idiom. Many Muslims have felt the repercussions of correlating religion and violent actions. Many civil liberties have been revoked from Muslims and other Arabs in the United States and anti-Muslim sentiment has taken root in many. One may look around in the news and among one's community to see that often most who carry anti-Muslim sentiments seem to be Christians who want to fight, as President George W. Bush says, the evil-doers. According to President Bush's Axis of Evil, Arab countries happen to form the heart of evil-doers.

The underlying plotline, one could even say moral theme, is religious tolerance. While Cooperman makes one simple connection between the prejudice against Christians to Muslim discrimination, he shows that not one group is safe from intolerance as long as religion is used as a way to lower another group. One may see it as the golden rule, do unto others as you want done to yourself. Be careful, point a finger at any one religion as a breeder of terrorism or other "evil" and you may have a finger pointing right back at you. Using religion and all of its members as scapegoats for problems that plague everyday life will overlook the people who are to blame. Those individuals who commit such atrocities as September 11th and the bombings of the Atlanta Olympics typically do not follow the main teaching of religions, but rather the extreme version teachings. It is unjust to hold an entire religion, such as Christianity and Islam, responsible for the few people who take otherwise peaceful beliefs and practices to the extreme. This plotline is particularly beneficial since it educates readers in mass about the dangers and repercussions of intolerance.

## Appendix B

### Raelians Clone Baby Girl

#### Lacey Jones

LAS VEGAS—Monday, May 25, 2003. Earlier today, representatives of the controversial company Clonaid announced that they had successfully cloned a baby girl. This news came as quite a shock to many, especially those in the scientific community and members of many religious groups. Immediately following the announcement a spokesman for the Archdiocese stated that the Church strongly denounces the cloning of human beings, stating that to even attempt such an endeavor was the "ultimate blasphemy" and "morally irresponsible." In response to the Church's statement Clonaid issued a response saying that "the pursuit of knowledge to achieve such marvelous miracles of science, medicine, and technology in order to improve the quality of life for



all mankind is in no way 'morally irresponsible,' and that to imply such is to deny human nature." Members of the scientific community have speculated for years that this form of reproductive human cloning could have a tremendous impact on society, benefiting everyone from infertile and homosexual couples wishing to have children, to sufferers of the HIV and AIDS viruses.

Clonaid, the world's first human cloning company, was founded in February 1997 by Rael, a former French journalist and the leader of the Raelian Movement. The Raelian Movement is an international religious organization that claims that a human extraterrestrial race called the Elohim used DNA and genetic engineering to scientifically create all life on Earth. The Raelian Movement also claims that Jesus was resurrected using an advanced cloning technique performed by the Elohim.

Rael handed over the Clonaid project in 1999 to Dr. Brigitte Boisselier, a Raelian Bishop, who is now managing director of Clonaid. The main goal of Clonaid is to offer reproductive human cloning on a worldwide basis to infertile couples, homosexual couples, people infected with the HIV virus, and those who have lost a beloved family member, among others. Rael has said that, "Cloning will enable mankind to reach eternal life."

But even amidst the heated controversy surrounding the morality of cloning a human baby, officials for the Department of Health and Human Services as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation have yet to confirm that the claims made by Clonaid and the Raelian Movement are true. For what Dr. Boisselier calls "obvious security reasons," the specific details of the project are being kept secret.

Despite the lack of certainty regarding the truth of Clonaid's announcement, religious groups worldwide are already voicing varied opinions. However, members of the Raelian Movement, which calls itself an "atheist, nonprofit, spiritual organization," have not been daunted by criticisms. They hold to their version of creation as firmly as most more well-established religious groups. Today the Raelian Movement claims more than 25,000 members worldwide and growing. In addition, Clonaid has projected an estimated one million customers interested in its services as well as several laboratories seeking partnership with it in this venture. Lila Morgan, a member of the Raelian Movement and a proponent of human cloning says, "We have as strong a sense of morality and the value and sacredness of life as anyone else. We simply don't shy away from using our minds and exploring our own potential and all of life's possibilities."

## **Appendix C**

### **Postmodern Religion: a Brew of Beliefs**

Jesus Davila

Droves of people circle in line in the city of Mecca, the Wailing Wall commands piety from Jews, and a myriad of Catholics strive to catch an elusive glimpse of the Pope. But what does it all mean? Do these symbols of belief



venerate the tenets of a religion? In order to believe, does humanity crave reassurance from the masses? Is religion held together by the shreds of that which is divine *and* tangible? I argue that one new plotline in religion is the individual quest for spirituality. This is a sojourn that the majority of individuals seek in our post-antiestablishment Western Society. With a melting pot of tolerance and a country with countless religious doctrines, every day more people are defining religion on their own terms. Religion is shifting from institutions of worship to an individual's own spiritual beliefs. The reason for this movement is that space between cultures is vanishing. People in Western Society experience a growing resentment and distrust of organized religion while simultaneously encouraging a respect for all theologies as valid.

This trend of decentralization of beliefs is pervasive in many areas of Western Culture, including the United States, Great Britain, and even New Zealand. In the late nineteenth century, almost 50 percent of the population of these predominately Christian countries attended church (sPanz 2002). Over the last seventy or so years, however, global influences ranging from the Vietnam War to immigration have caused Western culture to lose faith in institutions in general and to gain insight into the potential of the individual. This globalization has caused greater tolerance for cultures with different faiths, but it also has caused a drastic decline in church attendance. The result is a Western Culture that is becoming increasingly fragmented in faith because of loose individual and family beliefs that are relatively tolerant about other theological perspectives. This change was most drastically seen in the sixties and early seventies.

In the 1960s the cultural shift returned in dramatic new forms; although intellectuals contributed to the shift, its chief carriers were the generation of young adults born during and after World War II. It was they who flouted traditional norms concerning sexuality, marriage, and personal appearance, who challenged "establishment" authority, and who stopped going to church. (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1994)

The culture transformations from this generation caused a drastic drop in the importance of attending church, because many church annals went against new norms of society.

Spirituality differs, more than mildly, from religion. Religion is an organized system, an equation to get into heaven. Each denomination or sect feels that abiding by its principles is the true way to reach heaven, negating the validity of other theologies by ignoring them. Many people, however, are now finding that a more individual approach is just as viable a means to reach heaven, enlightenment, or any goal in life. For instance, the number of people attending church in 1871 in Great Britain to 1998 has gone from 40 percent to below 10 percent (Brierley 2000). One of the fears of humankind is to be alienated from a group, isolated and called eccentric, even crazy. However, with a mix of pervasive religious ideas in cities, suburbs, and quaint towns across all



of Western society, we are becoming more united and more open to other perceptions of life after death. People are beginning to accept the validity of other views and to see the antiquated theory that God can only be reached in places of designated sanction as hurting individuals more than helping them. The baby boomers who started this revolution had a drastic change in moral value, "A study by Roof on baby boomers indicates that they have changed from denying themselves to self-fulfillment in order to 'find meaning,' 'to grow,' and to find 'self-expression'" (Roof 1993, 165). The root of religion in the Western World used to be the concern for what it could do for society. Now the individual is seeking out what religion can do for him or her. Theological philosophies are now congealed into a resource for individual gain, "... goals of personal advancement and success have displaced the collective purposes that have traditionally under girded the organized church" (sPanz 2002). The idea of looking for the religion with the greatest marginal benefit leads people to not only accept the views of their neighbors but also to explore them. Another key factor in the integration of religious beliefs is the juxtaposition of people with near-antithetical views. Before the 1960s many neighborhoods and communities were built around moral tenets of religion, making it difficult for people to stray from their beliefs and the beliefs of their neighbors. Now, especially in suburbs, neighborhoods are rife with dissenting views and opposing theologies, but instead of making suburban tribes and declaring war, America not unlike the rest of Western Culture, has embraced diversity, seeing it not only as politically correct but also as beneficial. The soul-searching that has resulted from an increasingly diverse demographic has aided the overall decline of organized religion, but transformed America into a more spiritually diverse nation. "Religious life, like so many other features of post-industrial or postmodern society, is not so much disappearing as mutating, for the sacred undoubtedly persists and will continue to do so, but in forms that may be very different from those which have gone before" (Davie 1994, 198).

The questions then come into light. Why did we ever need a base of people to stand on in order to reach divinity? And why are we ultimately separating ourselves from the social facet of religion that in the past seemed like such a necessity? The most logical reason for this is the need to belong. This changed after society began to embrace the individual's needs before the masses wants. This does not mean that the belief in God is remiss in society. On the contrary, according to American Demographics, "Amid crumbling foundations of organized religion, the spiritual supermarket is on the rise. Numerous surveys show that Americans are as religious as ever—perhaps more than ever" (Climmo and Lattin 1999). People are still buying Bibles and spiritual self-help books like, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. For many this need to belong that is no longer found in church is now satisfied in other aspects of life, like the company they work for or where they live. Many indignant churchgoers would regard the idea that they need a group to reassure them that their beliefs in the divine are correct as insulting and preposterous, but it's



common in all walks of human life to cling on to each other as if we were in indigenous moral tribes. Why are some of us raised with biases to one religion or the other? This is the paradox that most commonly arises in a pluralistic society and is answered by tolerance and annexation of beliefs. The Massey ISSP Survey conducted in New Zealand perhaps says it best. They found that from 1991 to 1998 that 31 percent of people believed in God, an increase from 29 percent, a belief in the afterlife went up to 60 percent from 50 percent, and the people that prayed weekly was 30 percent compared to 22 percent in 1991 (International Social Survey Programme 1991, 1998). This increase occurred while overall church attendance declined.

When I used to attend church regularly I had the sense of robotic monotony, and although I enjoyed learning about God I questioned why my beliefs were more correct than my Muslim and Buddhist friends. On this subject I spoke to a friend of mine who is also Catholic and had asked a priest about the subject; he paraphrased the priest's response: "As long as you follow your beliefs, no matter your religion there is a place in heaven for you." To say the least I was shocked to hear a Catholic priest accept other religions as valid, but society is changing as we are all becoming more secularized. An increasing encouragement to become more politically correct and accepting has caused America to adopt a policy of, "if it doesn't hurt me it's ok." Gallup numbers indicate that in 1957 69 percent of Americans thought the Church was gaining influence while in 1970 only 14 percent thought that it was becoming stronger. Changes in tolerance and value shifts toward independence are seen as the causes of this increase in empty pews. Baby-boomer liberalism started this trend; as the authors of *Vanishing Boundaries* put it, "We did find that counterculture participants are more relativistic and more liberal regarding personal morality than other participants" (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1994, 176). This growing tolerance from post Vietnam antiestablishment couldn't have come at a better time as more Hispanics moved into America, more West Indians moved into Britain, and more Pacific Islanders moved into New Zealand in the late 1960s (sPanz 2002). It's easier for someone to say, for example, that Hindus don't know what they're talking about when they are thousands of miles away, but when people start living and working with others of different cultures and they are productive, kind members of society, it's harder to disparage their beliefs.

Sociologists claim that as a society becomes more advanced then more and more specialization will occur. To some extent this is what we are doing with our beliefs. "The Presbyterian Church has historically been at the very center of American culture and society but with the culture itself disintegrating into increasingly hostile fragments, Moorhead fears—in the words of William Butler Yeats—that 'the center cannot hold'" (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1994, 179). As individuals we have decided to take from religion what we need and break our culture into even more complex cliques down to the



very individual. If most wars are in essence over ideals in religion then wouldn't a better understanding and a more eclectic belief system help the world in general? Perhaps America is doing the world a service without even knowing it.

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## Appendix D The Religion of the Red Hot Chili Peppers Lacey Jones

We've all heard it before, the old line, "Music is my religion." Jimi Hendrix said it, Patti Smith said it, and countless lesser mortals have said it too. There are few who doubt the power of music. It touches our lives every day and helps to define us as humans and to distinguish us from our furry cousins in the animal kingdom. Yet, what exactly does it mean to say that music is one's religion? Is it a literal statement or just a way of expressing the importance of music in our life? Do people say that it all means the same thing? If it is literal, how is it practiced?

In order to answer these questions we have to consider what we mean by the word *religion*. Not everyone has the same conception of this often controversial and ultimately personal phenomenon. When most people think of religion, they probably visualize a traditional institution based on doctrines and teachings by a spiritual head or leader that dictate how one should live one's life. But is this the only way to conceptualize religion? There are many that would argue otherwise. Some say that all people are equally religious in that



everyone has an ultimate commitment to some higher good, whether it be a formal deity, the pursuit of money, or the creation of music. I myself see religion as the embodiment of each person's own spirituality, their own inner core of peace and joy.

In August 2002 a biographical article/interview appeared in the popular magazine *SPIN*, featuring the band The Red Hot Chili Peppers (RHCP). The RHCP, an L.A.-based rock/funk/punk band that formed in the late seventies deeply rooted in jazz, early punk and grunge, proto rap, and funk, have been, as some might say, to hell and back. Over their twenty-odd-year career they have suffered heartache, loss, and failure. In the first years of the band, the original guitarist, Hillel Slovak, died tragically of a heroin overdose. Jack Irons, the original drummer, quit soon afterward. But the two remaining Chili Peppers, Anthoni Keidis and Michael Balzory (a.k.a. Flea) held it together and replaced their former band mates with Chad Smith (drums) and the boy guitar genius John Frusciante. But tragedy struck again when Frusciante, following in the footsteps of his predecessor, fell into heavy drug addiction in 1994 and disappeared from public sight for six years. Miraculously, the prodigal guitar genius cleaned up just in time to rejoin the band and appear on the 1999 smash hit *Californication*. But the author of the article in *SPIN*, Kate Sullivan, only glazes over this now well-known history of the Red Hots and focuses on something a little more interesting: the spirituality behind the music . . . or in front of it.

Within the article/interview, Sullivan talks to the two "weird" members of the band, musical soul mates as she puts it, Flea and John Frusciante. As she talks about and to the two unique musicians, a sense of their intense musical spirituality is readily apparent. In the first few paragraphs, Flea describes the experience he had one night listening to a favorite album: "One night I put on X's *Los Angeles* [1980 punk classic] *really loud*, and I just had a total epiphany about why I wanted to play rock music in the first place. I started jumping around and threw my plate against the wall! I was smashing shit! . . . I threw myself on the ground. I was on the verge of tears, but also of ecstasy" ("The Red Hot Chili Peppers" 2002, 62). As Flea continues to describe his feelings about making music, one cannot help but muse at how the religious side of music must be so much stronger for the people actually creating it, rather than those just listening to it.

Throughout the essay, all four members of the band talk of the different emotions and feelings that help to influence and create their unique sound.

Frusciante's [reemergence] on *Californication* . . . has deepened the core of the band's music. "John's being back makes a huge difference," says producer Rick Rubin. "He's brimming with ideas and he lives and breathes music more than anyone I've ever seen in my life." Frusciante's songwriting has helped Flea and singer Anthony Keidis . . . capture a more complete vision of their L.A. "The soul of this city is a huge part of who we are," says Flea, "and I think the soul of this city is an old and beautiful thing." (62)



Rick Rubin, a legendary producer of bands such as Run D.M.C. and the Beastie Boys, could not have defined religion any better I think. To "live and breathe" for something is the essence of spirituality; it is having an "ultimate commitment." But there is more to religion than a commitment to something higher. There are benefits to a person's soul, to their well-being, that religion provides. Religion gives us comfort; it helps ease our pain. Religion also often offers us a leader, an idol, someone to whom we can look to for support and guidance.

Although Flea takes care of the funky bass lines for the RHCP, as a child he was thought to be a trumpet prodigy. He worshipped jazz legends and fancied himself to join their ranks someday. He describes how he was able to meet his idol, jazzman Dizzy Gillespie:

"I snuck backstage, and there's Dizzy, holding his trumpet and talking to someone," Flea says excitedly. "I run up to him, and I'm like [looks up with wide eyes], 'Mr. Gillespie.' And I can't even talk. I'm in awe. And he just puts his arms around me and hugs me real tight, so my head's kind of in his armpit. He smiles and just holds me there for, like, five minutes while he talks. I'm just frozen in joy—oh my God, oh my God, oh my God." (62–64)

Later, Flea also talks about the violence of his childhood, his abusive stepfather and street life, and how he found solace only in his music; how it saved him. This can also be said of Frusciante and even of Keidis. The singer, referring to their music, stated that, "there's loss, but also joy and love and that little burst of euphoria when the whole world makes sense for about 30 seconds" (64).

Of all the damaged musicians in the band, Frusciante is probably the most damaged of all, according to Sullivan, but he also has the most intense spiritual life: "He speaks often of a Guardian Spirit and say that when he was closest to death during his heroin addiction, he was visited regularly by figures from the other side. 'I was so happy someone was visiting, I'd make food for them,' he says, 'when they were gone, I'd cry.'" (66). In the interview transcript, Sullivan asks Frusciante if he knew as a kid that he wanted to be a rock musician. He replies, "Well it was put to me by 'that guy' [guardian spirit] when I was, like, four" (66). Sullivan goes on to ask if he ever struggled as a beginning songwriter and he answers, "oh yeah. But I realized that there was a way to hold onto something that doesn't exist yet. That's what takes place when a song is written: You see something that isn't there. Then you use your instrument to find it" (66).

None of the RHCP ever actually say that old line about music being their religion. But if religion is simply the embodiment of a person's spirituality, then I cannot help but to conclude that making music is a religious experience, at least for this band. And whether or not it was Sullivan's intention to showcase the religious aspect of their music making is also unknown to me, but if it wasn't her intention then it becomes more significant because it stands out on its own. When William James argued that specific private experiences form



the cornerstones of religions, I think he hit the mark. If music can be a religion for so many, then the experiences of musicians such as the RHCP must be the "primordial thing," the "primary mystical experience" from which all else grows. So Jimi Hendrix and Patti Smith were also probably very literal when they stated that, "Music is my religion."

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### Notes

1. Silk (1995) frames a discussion of the conflict between science and religion within the tolerance plotline. However, such a framing overlooks the important intricacies of the issue that could be elucidated with a clear topoi. In view of these intricacies, religion and science do not remain confined (nor do they neatly fit) within Silk's plotline of tolerance. See Appendix B, where a student essay addresses potential issues of religion and science via cloning.

2. Reflecting on the "perfection language" embedded in this alternate frame may lead to class discussions or student work on obsessive-compulsive behavior, such as alcoholism, gambling, drug abuse, or eating disorders, illustrating the additional breadth of possibilities associated with this type of course.

3. Samuelson's book does not deal explicitly with the history of religion and science but instead evaluates the relationship of God and creation; in doing so, Samuelson traces specific instances of the history of science and religion.

4. We thank Kelton Cobb, who initially suggested that we write this essay.

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