

THE INTERNET IS HOLY: NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS
AND THE FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE OF THE INTERNET

Shannon Trospen Schorey

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Religious Studies (Religion and Culture).

Chapel Hill
2018

Approved by:

Randall Styers

M. Gail Hamner

Juliane Hammer

Lauren Leve

Deborah Whitehead

© ⓘ ⓘ 2018

Shannon Trooper Schorey

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

ABSTRACT

Shannon Trosper Schorey: *The Internet is Holy: New Religious Movements and the Fight for the Future of the Internet*
(Under the direction of Randall Styers)

What can the intersection of information technology and religious creativity in contemporary culture reveal about the nature of modernity? Through close readings of three case studies (Open Source Scientology, the Missionary Church of Kopimism, and Jason Silva's influential video series *Shots of Awe*), I show how the value and nature of information is highly contested and that religion has been a particularly important site in which debates about information and information access have been framed. Despite the differences in how each of the religious movements considered in this dissertation stages the debates about information, each demonstrates in a concrete way the impossibility of the binaries that are at the heart of the fragile myth of modernity (religion and science, religion and technology, religion and secularism).

The religious movements considered here are hybrids. Their religious creativity reveals important and surprising insights into the ongoing cultural development of the concept of religion, into changing cultural perceptions of technology, and into the brittle, mythic nature of modernity. These religious movements demonstrate how information access has been configured as a religious right and how the control and freedom of information has been used to legitimize and delegitimize new forms of religious expression. All parties formulate these debates in such a way that they are actively transforming what the very categories of the religious and the secular might mean. In their fight over information flows on the internet, they are reworking the mythic contours of modernity. They undermine the modern myth of disenchantment, and they confirm that there can never be any stable differentiation between religion and technology at all.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for the support of several generous grants which have strengthened this dissertation considerably. I am especially grateful to the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as well as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Graduate Program, both of whom funded key conference travel awards as well as a dissertation completion fellowship. I am also grateful to Williams College, whose "Beyond Disenchantment" workshop provided a platform for early drafts of this project.

At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill my thinking has been shaped, challenged, fostered, and sharpened by a brilliant and generous community of scholars. My advisor, Randall Styers, provided crucial and discerning feedback on this project. I am grateful for his patience and guidance. M. Gail Hamner is, by far, the most careful and the most generous reader I know. Juliane Hammer continues to be my model for critical, constructive approaches to scholarship that are attentive to power, effect change, and celebrate the margins. Lauren Leve has patiently and gently grounded me again and again in the materiality of my research, and it is because of her that I have learned how to play with theory in productive, liberating, and generous ways. Whenever I was lost Deborah Whitehead pulled me back to American history—inspiring me, contextualizing my questions, and encouraging me to explore new connections. I am deeply grateful for the support of this committee. They have taught me how to think sharply and kindly, and I will forever be indebted to them.

I would like to express deep gratitude to the faculty, graduate students, and reading group cohorts who have welcomed me into their communities over the last several years. Brandon Bayne, Jess Boon, Eric Chalfant, Kathy Foody, Megan Goodwin, Timothy Isley, Randall

Johnson, Adrienne Krone, and Ali Na have sustained me with their laughter, curiosity, and conversation. I am especially grateful to Sarah J. Bloesch, who read several early drafts of chapters and supplied me with both the encouragement and thoughtful questions that significantly elevated this project. I am also grateful to my colleagues and friends in the Department, especially Andrew Aghapour, Samah Choudhury, Brian Coussens, Bo Eberle, Brad Erickson, Alejandro Escalante, Stephanie Gaskill, Micah Hughes, Michael Muhammad Knight, Katie Merriman, Candace Mixon, Shaily Patel, Travis Proctor, Ben Sheppard, Sara and Timothy Smith, Barbara Sostaita, and Brook Wilensky-Lanford. I am especially grateful to Matthew W. Dougherty, who read several drafts and was my indispensable conversation partner throughout this process. My work stands in his shadow, and my friendship with him is one of my most treasured.

While writing this dissertation life happened, as it does. I am grateful for my colleagues at Red Hat, who not only supported my decision to finish this project but ensured that I would laugh everyday while doing so: Nicholas Heling, Torrie Peterson, Dawn Quinn, Jason Carabelli, Elizabeth Hammond, Rob Byars, and my manager Colby Hoke.

I would also like to thank my family. I grew up in a home that read books, asked questions, worked hard, and laughed harder. My parents, Roxanne and Andrew Trosper, are—without hyperbole—my heroes.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my best friend, Trenton Wayne Schorey. I cannot possibly begin to untangle your influences upon my life, so I will not try. *Timor interfactor mentis est*. You make me brave. I love you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
A Question	1
Conversations and Contributions	5
“Religion” and/as Media.....	7
Technology, Agency, Actants.....	14
New Religious Movements Online.....	16
Religion and the Internet.....	22
Mythinformation	29
Thesis and Outline	32
Open Source Scientology.....	37
“Message to Scientology”	37
Scientology: Money, Information, and Spiritual Advancement	40
Anonymous vs. Scientology	44
The Church of Scientology and Information Control	55
Scientology and the Cold War: Computer Mind, Thetan Soul.....	58
Open Source Scientology: Countercultural Visions of Information.....	63
Pirate Religion	72
Conclusion	82
Jesus is My Co-Pirate.....	84
A Pirate Wedding.....	84
A Note on Terms.....	88
A Funeral for Copyright.....	92
Kopimism and The Hacker Ethic.....	99
Protestantism as a “Usable Past”	105
Religious Studies Responds	112
Conclusion	121
An Ontological DJ	123

Shots of Awe.....	123
Entering Godmode	126
Cyberpunks and Chaos Religions	130
New Gods.....	135
Protestant Gnostics.....	143
Dis/embodyment.....	149
Conclusion	158
Information Wants	162
“Indistinguishable from magic”	162
Algorithmic Gods.....	164
Nerd Theology	168
Frauds in the Machine.....	173
Disenchantment.....	179
Either / Or	184
Hauntings	190
Conclusion	193
The Fight for the Future of the Internet	195

Introduction

I have sought to offer humanists a detailed analysis of a technology sufficiently magnificent and spiritual to convince them that the machines by which they are surrounded are cultural artifacts worthy of their attention and respect.

— Bruno Latour

A Question

In the spring of 2012, I was finishing my master's degree in the religious studies program at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Under the careful and generous guidance of my committee (Deborah Whitehead, Stewart Hoover, and Greg Johnson), I had completed a thesis that explored many of the legal and media disputes that resulted from "Scientology v. the Internet"—a colloquial name given to Scientology's myriad struggles online. At the time, Scientology's status as one of the most controversial new religious movements of the twentieth century had been cemented in popular culture and through the global media attention from broadcast news organizations and rogue collectives of internet activists. My thesis examined the power that citizen activism could wield against the perceived failures of social authority (the law, the media) and how that activism reflected contemporary understandings of religious pluralism, religious tolerance, and religious freedom.

Once that project was finished, a nagging question remained: why had an internet subculture (represented by the hacker collective Anonymous, who I will discuss in chapter one

below) been able to so quickly (and on such a large-scale) organize global support against Scientology? At my thesis defense, my committee asked exactly the right question: why had this passionate internet activism not been brought to bear against other secretive, esoteric religious organizations? This question stayed with me even as I believed, at the time, that I had moved away from my interest in Scientology and began my doctoral work at UNC Chapel Hill with the goal of studying religion and media in the United States more broadly. I watched with an eye to new religious movements online to see what might or might not change in the conflicts over free information and religious pluralism. I wondered, in a vague and unarticulated way, if part of the hostility toward Scientology came from a diffuse culture of information freedom that was shared by significant portions of the internet's most active users.

This chapter begins by positioning the development of my project out of questions raised at my thesis defense. I broadly outline the trajectory of my research question and the theoretical framework that drives my dissertation. I then identify the primary scholarly conversations that this project participates in. Next, I outline my approach to religion and media (in the section “Religion and/as Media”) as well as technology (“Technology, Agency, Actants”). The following two sections survey more specific sets of literature that provide important context for the location of this dissertation within religious studies and communication studies: the first considers new religious movements and media, while the second surveys religion and the internet. The purposes of these last two sections (“New Religious Movements Online” and “Religion and the Internet”) is to place my work in its proper context for the two subfields I am most in conversation with. I then consider how scholarly debates about information and information technologies, specifically, are relevant to scholarly understandings of how religion and technology are enmeshed in contemporary life. I end with a brief overview of my argument and a chapter outline.

The question—raised at my thesis defense—of the existence of a diffuse internet culture mobilized around the freedom of information stayed with me throughout my doctoral training. Then, in 2012, a significant new development occurred: the Missionary Church of Kopimism gained legal recognition as a religion, first in Sweden and then shortly thereafter in the United States. The leaders of this new Church were loosely connected to Pirate Bay, an infamous file-sharing and copy-left website (“copy-left” refers to an activist position of anti-copyright). Media outlets mostly treated the Church in a fleeting way, as a funny joke—a clever hack. But I wondered if the group itself might offer some part of an answer to the question I had been asked at my defense.

As I pursued my doctoral studies, I learned of Jason Silva (Emmy-award winning *National Geographic* television personality), Kevin Kelly (co-founder of *Wired* magazine), Stewart Brand (an influential countercultural figure)—all significant media personalities who espouse a rhetoric of information freedom while offering metaphysical arguments in defense of free access, distribution, and information sharing. Copyright is wrong, they say, because it is immoral, unethical, and antireligious, a spiritual burden. Instead, they argue that information is sacred and animated—a living force whose very freedom of movement and distribution is central to the religious liberty of all humanity (never mind that they mostly used male pronouns and never acknowledge the uneven technological access among peoples of different races, classes, genders, and geography). I learned about a new group of Scientologists who, after leaving the Church for various reasons, had allied with Anonymous and adopted the trope of “Open Source Software” (detailed in chapter one) as their primary structuring metaphor. Information is sacred, this new group agreed with the Church of Scientology, but precisely because it was sacred, information should be free.

I eventually began work at a software company, which sent me to one of the world's largest and longest-running hacker conventions, where the technological director of MormonLeaks and FaithLeaks (Wikileaks-inspired non-profit organizations dedicated to exposing secretive religious materials online) spoke to a crowded room at "Skytalks"—a parallel, unofficial presentation track that hosted only the most controversial speakers. Recording equipment was not allowed in the room, and the line to speak to the presenter after the talk (an ex-Mormon who was clearly grieved by the subject matter of his own presentation) reached to the door. FaithLeaks and MormonLeaks represented the other part of this story: information freedom activism that, while important and interesting, did not demonstrate the same tensions and hybridity between religion and technology that the religious movements I will analyze here do. This last insight is a significant part of my argument, which I will now explain.

The figures I have been introducing are all discussed in various parts of this dissertation, which I have come to recognize as a more exhaustive answer to a cluster of interests that generated from that single question posed many years ago. As my project developed in parallel with my scholarly training, I realized that what was at stake in Scientology vs. the Internet was much broader than the question of Scientology and religious pluralism online. I began to understand that debates over the value and nature of information, framed in the language of religion and religious knowledge, are key sites where the binaries of religion and science, religion and technology, and religion and secularism deconstruct—once examined close up, it is hard to imagine any easy separation at all. These binaries bolster the myth of secular modernity (as detailed in chapter four), and so my leading research question was also transformed: What can the intersection of information technology and religious creativity in contemporary culture reveal about the nature of modernity?

Through close readings of three particular case studies (Open Source Scientology, the

Missionary Church of Kopimism, and Jason Silva’s influential video series *Shots of Awe*), I show how the value and nature of information is highly contested, and that religion has been a particularly important site in which debates about information and information access have been framed. Despite the differences in how each of the religious movements considered in this dissertation stage the debates about information, each demonstrate in a concrete way the impossibility of the binaries (outline above) that are at the heart of the fragile myth of modernity.

Conversations and Contributions

This dissertation is primarily a contribution to two scholarly conversations: (1) scholarship that seeks to challenge the classical analysis of religion and media as separate ontological realms—and instead asserts that religion, media, and technology are co-constituted historically and socially constructed formations that influence one another; and (2) scholarship that explores the nature and assumptions of secular modernity, especially as secular modernity has been configured upon a relationship between science, technology, and religion that relies upon their separation and conflict (science and technology as forces of and for disenchantment, on the one hand, and religion on the other).

Two insights drive this dissertation. The first is that technologies do, in fact, have politics. Technologies and the technological communities that surround them are never neutral, but instead they are informed by their social, geographical, and historical circumstances. This dissertation will explore the role that religion—as a historical category and marker of historically informed ideas and practices—has played in technologically-focused debates about the freedoms of information.

The second key insight is that new religious movements are not marginal to the study of religion and culture but instead offer particularly rich insights on broad cultural shifts affecting

the social networks of which they are a part. Since its emergence as a field of scholarship in the 1970s, the study of NRMs has been guided largely by the attempt to collect and categorize the theologies, demographics, and organizational histories of new religions.¹ This research agenda is usually defended by invoking the values of pluralism, as scholars of NRMs argue that such “content-centric” approaches help to raise the profile of marginalized and minority religions. Such a project is exemplified by Harvard’s Pluralism Project and guided by the assumption that more information will eventually (and somehow organically) foster a more empathetic, educated, and pluralistic America.² The unfortunate consequence of this well-meaning approach is that it assumes that NRMs are only important insofar as they add to the diversity of religious life in America. Against this approach Hugh Urban has argued that NRMs can serve as cultural magnifying glasses that allow us to identify broader questions and anxieties precisely because they tend to cluster around evolving cultural boundaries.³ I follow Urban’s approach.

This project also seeks to contribute to scholarly discussions of media and religion more broadly in three ways. First, this dissertation will argue that digital spaces and the communities that form there are never inherently sacred, secular, or neutral. Instead, digital technologies and communities are structured by the social histories of which they are a part, and they contribute, in turn, to those social histories. Investigating how particular values emerge and the effects that

¹ See Eileen Barker, “The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must Be Joking,” in *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*, ed. Lorne Dawson (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003), 7-25; Lorne Dawson *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Susan Palmer and David Bromley, “Deliberate Heresies: New Religious Myths and Rituals as Critiques,” in *Teaching New Religious Movements*, ed. David Bromley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 135-158.

² Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Now Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001).

³ Hugh Urban, *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 3-5.

are produced when values are expressed in explicitly “religious” terms allows scholars to explore some of the socially creative ways in which discourses of the religious and secular are mobilized within contemporary technological culture.

Second, this dissertation will demonstrate how new information technologies have served as ideological and material resources for new religious movements and how, in turn, the theologies and practices of these new religious movements reveal widespread, though often obscure, social transformations that have accompanied the widespread adoption of these information technologies. The case studies considered in this dissertation illuminate a much broader set of historical and cultural trends in the United States in which religion and information technologies have co-produced new ways of understanding our social worlds.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to contemporary debates about religion and media—as well as contemporary activism regarding the right to information in a world dominated by data exchange—by demonstrating that both technologies and new religions are crucial to our understanding of the evolution of “religion” in social worlds dominated by information technologies. Technology and religion are both in motion, and the hybridity of new religions in intertwining the two can be deeply illuminating. The case studies in this dissertation offer such a magnifying glass, allowing me to explore how binaries that sustain the myth of secular modernity (religion and science, religion and technology, subjects and objects) are myths themselves.

“Religion” and/as Media

How have scholars understood the relationship between religion and media?⁴ Since at least the mid-nineteenth century, Americans have often ascribed “mystical powers” to electronic and information technologies in one of the most “pervasive cultural myths” of our national history.⁵ Resting on long-held Protestant and Anglo-American traditions of democratic practice, the idea that information circulation is valuable for its own sake has been taken for granted in the widespread adoption of new information technologies. Public descriptions of information technologies have been wrapped in normative languages of promise, progress, and liberation, justified by the ability of information technologies to transmit information instantaneously across wide geographical ranges.⁶ Spiritualists, Scientologists, Transhumanists, New Agers, and a variety of electronic rights activists fighting for the “future of the internet” all share in this cultural legacy, though how the notion of religion has served as a resource for each group varies.

Religious studies scholars investigating the encounters of religion and media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have largely framed religion and information technologies as two separate modes of culture. They have asked such questions as: What does “genuine”

⁴ Thanks to Oxford University Press for permission to reprint here revised portions of my chapter “Media, Technology, and New Religious Movements,” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, vol. 2, eds. James R. Lewis and Inga Tøllefsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 264-277.

⁵ Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 6.

⁶ Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 7-11.

religious practice look like online?⁷ How do media technologies offer space(s) for religious practice or religious critique?⁸ How are information technologies used by religious people?⁹

This perspective on the relation between religion and media is formulated precisely around the “and.” That is, it focuses on the adoption or rejection of media by religious people and organizations or on how new technological artifacts (apps, cell phones, etc.) are being used by religious people to update religious practice for new media (meditation or prayer apps, virtual temples, etc.). This line of questioning has produced some innovative, compelling scholarship, but it also tends to assume that religion is a phenomenon fundamentally separate from media culture. Religion is configured as an essentialized, transhistorical, transcultural, and *sui generis* category. At the same time, this line of questioning also frames information technologies as uniquely separate and inert modes of culture that act as neutral vessels of communication rather than as contingent political formations that organize human relations. Both technodeterminist and social-determinist scholarship make the error of assuming that one term on one side of the “and” must be active while the other must be acted upon with little or no resistance. The methodological choice to isolate “religion” from “media” ignores the realities of media saturation and incorrectly assumes that practice, structures, and discourse can be untangled to the extent that we can identify the dominant agent.

⁷ For representative examples, see Douglas E. Cowan, *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Christopher Helland, “Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet,” *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1 (2005): 1-16.

⁸ See Stewart Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2006); and Heidi Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁹ For representative examples, see Morten Hojsgaard, *Religion and Cyberspace* (London: Routledge, 2005); and Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

This dissertation seeks to demonstrate that religion and media, or religion and technology, are neither obviously nor easily distinct historical entities. I investigate how specific, localized beliefs and practices of religion and media have always existed as hybrids and are only bifurcated into the separate categories of religion and media in a secondary effort of analysis and description by academics and journalists who work to identify and describe the very formations that they are caught in. The casual identification of religion and media as fundamentally separate is, therefore, a political act that relies on historically and culturally situated patterns of practice and thought that construct the religious and the secular as distinct.

Although this project is rooted in the insights of Bruno Latour (as explained in chapter four), Jeremy Stolow has specifically called this approach to the study of religion and media the “and/as” approach—it is an attempt to analyze the relationships between religion and media in a way that includes but moves beyond the restrictions of the “and.” The goal of this approach is to raise questions about how the two categories (religion, media) intermingle, sometimes so much that they appear to have completely flipped roles. Drawing attention to the ways in which religion has been enacted through texts, images, architecture, music, objects, markings, and bodies, Stolow argues “religion always encompasses techniques and technologies that we think of as ‘media’, just as, by the same token, every medium necessarily participates in the realm of the transcendent, if nothing else than by its inability to be fully subject to the instrumental intentions of its users.”¹⁰ Religion is mediated, Stolow argues, just as media slips beyond our control, intentions, and expectations. Is it really so surprising that the distinctions between the two categories also slip, in the vibrancy of cultural practice? To think of religion and/as media, then, is to ask:

¹⁰ Jeremy Stolow, “Religion and/as Media,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 22, no. 4 (August 2005): 125.

[How] media and mediation constitute inherently unstable and ambiguous conditions of possibility for religious signifying practices, as well as their articulation with broader, public realms of religious belonging, to say nothing of the incorporation of religious regimes of discipline, virtuous conduct or ecstatic performance in embodied everyday life contexts, and in the cultivation of the self.¹¹

It is necessary at this point to step back and define what I mean by the category “religion.” Rather than a transcultural or distinct phenomenon or formation, I understand religion as an assemblage or mobile trope that exists as a “real” social construct (by which I mean really felt and having real consequences) that has been wielded in specific locations to produce particular effects, but which is always rooted in a larger discursive pattern. Because the material, ideological, and political social practices of people on the ground are not born out of distinct and identifiable processes, no single theory can be nuanced enough to account for the range of creative religious life.

Furthermore, the attempt to account for the totality of the content of religion risks mimicking nineteenth-century scholars’ efforts to collect and categorize all the world’s data. For some time now, the scholarly study of religion has engaged in a self-reflective conversation sparked by various efforts to historicize the term “religion,” the results of which have been to ask if the field can be coherent if the object around which it is organized is not stable. The strongest voices arguing for the abandonment of the notion of “religion” altogether have done so on the grounds of the category’s (1) uniquely European (and Christian) origins, (2) its long use in justifying colonialism and conquest, and (3) its tendency to reify in an essentialized, transhistorical and transcultural manner.¹²

¹¹ Stolow, “Religion and/as Media,” 125.

¹² See Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

Though the importance of historicizing the term is clear, the resulting call to purify scholarship of “religion” is nonsensical. Abandoning this notion not only deprives us of a useful term of analysis, but also risks the re-colonialization of non-Western peoples who have adopted “religion” and refashioned the term according to their own strategies. To fail to recognize that religion’s deployment in colonialism has meant that at least two actors—the colonizers and the colonized—have engaged with and transformed the term only accomplishes a second erasure of the colonized. The assumption that the West somehow owns and controls the notion of “religion” and that the notion has never escaped the West’s logic implies also that non-Western peoples have had minimal agency or impact of their own, a move that re-asserts the colonial violence that many scholars seek to avoid.¹³

Tisa Wenger draws attention to an example of how unexpected violence would occur if we were to get rid of “religion” entirely. She shows that Puebloan people were able to save their dance traditions from multipronged attacks by seeking the legal protections of religious freedom legislation. Through this case study, Wenger demonstrates the ways in which many indigenous traditions would be at risk of extinction had the tool of religious freedom not been available. In this way, the question of whether religious freedom is merely a rhetorical notion is not always answered with a simplistic “yes,” but must be re-situated to consider the ways in which marginalized groups have been able to use various legal strategies for their own survival. These strategies have consequences: for the Pueblo their deeply communal traditions—now legally protected as “religion”—were configured into something privatized, individualized, and optional.

Another common tactic by scholars of religion is to reaffirm the primacy of meaning-making in definitions of religion. The argument here is that religion must affirm something about

¹³ Tisa Joy Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

the fundamental nature of reality through the mode of meaning-making. Clifford Geertz, to offer one classic example, argues that symbols carry meaning as humans reaffirm and renegotiate these meanings through ritual activity. These meanings work to orient the individual, establishing their purpose, their confidence in that purpose, and their “moods and motivations.”¹⁴ Likewise in William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, religion is affirmed because of what it does for individuals: it connects them to some deep form of meaning that orients the individual both to their immediate world and the cosmos.¹⁵

In this context, Talal Asad’s critique of the notion of “meaning” is instructive. Meaning, Asad argues, is produced, activated, and authorized according to relations of power. Symbols, therefore, do not carry meaning in and of themselves. Meaning is merely an epiphenomenon of the power relations within which the symbol emerges. Asad and Brent Nongbri both explore the cultural history of the term religion, and both urge us to move religious studies forward by asking new questions about the nature and use of the term rather than by attempting to eliminate the term altogether.¹⁶ Adopting this approach, in which scholars are attentive to the local deployments of religion as a mode of discourse and the myriad ways in which the notion of religion is both transformed and transformative within those contexts of deployment, allows us to ask important questions about the formation of social worlds and their attendant norms and material practices.

¹⁴ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *Eight Theories of Religion*, ed. Daniel L. Pals, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 260-291.

¹⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, ed. Matthew Bradley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

Technology, Agency, Actants

I will now turn to theories of media and technology that have been particularly influential to this project. One popular approach has focused on the power of technology in shaping culture. Marshall McLuhan, for example, argues that technologies work directly to set the limits on the human range of consciousness, making certain forms of subjectivity only possible under certain technological conditions. McLuhan's work, though, is built on a stilted understanding of cognitive psychology and the reception of technologies. There is little recognition in his arguments of the differences in how people think or respond to similar technologies, and hence he offers little opportunity to attend to resistance, multiplicities of use, or ambiguous reception.¹⁷

Stuart Hall corrected this over-reach by focusing on practices of mediation, remediation, circulation, and reception. Arguing against scholars who had emphasized structural determinants over practices of reception and mediation, Hall highlighted how meaning is produced within circuits of production and consumption. Using the example of television, Hall argued that viewers were able not only to engage in varied responses to programming but that those differences also stemmed from their different social locations. Audiences are not homogenized but are instead located in different positions in relation to dominant social power. Viewers most closely aligned with the hegemonic culture are more likely to receive the programmer's intended meaning and messages, while viewers in marginalized positions can read completely unintended meanings out of the same messages.¹⁸

¹⁷ Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," in *The New Media Reader*, eds. Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 193-210.

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 2007), 477-488.

Contemporary research has largely sought to push back against the claim that technology is an ontologically separate realm from other cultural or social forces, instead viewing technology as both engendered by and engendering various “forms of life.” In this view, technology is understood to be infused into the patterns of our daily lives as technological innovations function as ideas put into material practice.¹⁹ These material practices, in turn, have the capacity to radically alter cultural patterns by encoding and privileging certain forms of power over others.²⁰

One influential form of this argument assumes that media has reached a level of supersaturation in developed societies and that scholars can no longer imagine technology to act as a neutral tool but must instead account for the localized meaning-making potentials of a given technology within a specific historical and cultural context.²¹ It is the specified geographical, historical, and social context that mediates and materializes the relations between users and technology—accounting for the field of movement in which individuals, communities, and technological forms are negotiated. Robert Latham and Saskia Sassen foreground these negotiations by calling for a new, emergent object of study: “digital formations.” Digital formations are new sociotech relations that may be ontologically thought of as social “things,” in that they have coherence and endurance, but that are never static or fixed objects. Instead, digital

¹⁹ Langdon Winner, “Technologies as Forms of Life,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology*, ed. David Kaplan (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 108.

²⁰ Winner Langdon, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 22.

²¹ Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi, “Media Theory and the ‘Third Spaces of Digital Religion,’” The Center for Media, Religion, and Culture, last modified 2014, <https://www.colorado.edu/cmrc/2016/09/01/third-spaces-digital-religion-draft>.

formations are shaped both by technological properties and by social contexts that work together to provide the conditions of possibility for activity online.²²

In the introduction to his edited volume *Deus In Machina: Religion, Technology and the Things in Between*, Stolow asks if it is still useful or even possible to continue to think about religion and technology as two ontologically separate entities. Drawing on the insights of Bruno Latour, Stolow argues that technology is not an ontologically separate mode of life, but that important boundary work has been done to differentiate it from other aspects of the social field. This boundary work requires constant maintenance and defense, and it also serves as an ideological cover for the production of hybrids, formations that by their very existence blur or otherwise transgress those boundaries. By drawing our attention to this discursive boundary work, Stolow and Latour highlight the ways in which nonhuman and human actants are always in relations of translation. Agency need not be placed on one side or the other of a simple conjunction but takes shape through multiple networked “statements” shared in the entangled webs of relations between humans and nonhumans.²³ Gesturing to a long line of critical work in religious studies that has emphasized the political work of categories, Stolow asks us to “attend more closely to the modes of wonder-making” that shape and frame techno-scientific knowledge and practices in much the same way scholars of religion have looked at religion itself. What could happen, Stolow asks, if we allow such categories to “intermingle promiscuously”?²⁴

New Religious Movements Online

²² Robert Latham and Saskia Sassen, *Digital Formations: IT and New Architectures in the Global Realm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3-9.

²³ Bruno Latour, “Technology Is Society Made Durable,” *The Sociological Review* 38, no. 1 (May 1990), 103-131.

²⁴ Stolow, *Deus in Machina*, 3.

The media supersaturation of contemporary Western culture embeds individuals in a new context of mass media and information technologies. The study of new religious movements and media, in particular, has tended to highlight media supersaturation as an enchanting backdrop to religious creativity online. One significant portion of this literature describes new religions online as “hyper-real religions”—a simulacrum of religion shaped by popular culture and enabled by media structures (further explained below). I will first survey a representative sample of this literature before providing an alternative perspective.

On a practical level, media supersaturation means that popular culture, along with its counterparts of advertising and commodification, is increasingly used as a resource for religious practice and belief. Products created for secular entertainment, such as the “Star Wars” or “Matrix” films, are sometimes actively adopted by groups that assert that these works produce “real” religious effects for their members, either metaphorically or as actual manifestations of the sacred. Other movements, like the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster or the Missionary Church of Kopimism, mobilize popular culture and religious discourse as part of their efforts to satirize certain forms of privilege given to religious groups (but not to secular ones). An increased scholarly awareness of the interplay among capitalism, popular culture, and religion online has produced important new work that attempts to think through issues of ownership, intention, sincerity, strategy, and political satire as each relates to new articulations of religious beliefs and practices entangled with media structures.

Attention to the interplay among these forces is not new, but the new religions emerging in this context provide a rich opportunity to consider how the resources for religious practices and meaning making have always been negotiated. The extraordinary creativity of new religious movements pushes us to shift from classifying individuals primarily as consumers of religion and to reimagine them as active “prosumers.” Prosumers (a portmanteau of “professional” or

“proactive” and “consumer”) are consumers who remix commodities to create new things, which are then released back into public circulation. Prosumption is an interactive, generative, and creative practice of consuming and remixing resources to actively forge new possibilities from the materials originally received, a process that occupies the middle ground between passive consumption and totally new invention.

The language of prosumption relates closely to another body of scholarly literature that describes online religion in terms of “branding.” This literature uses the notion of branding (the mechanism through which a name, icon, motto, and mythos work together to orient a product within the mind of a consumer in a distinctive fashion) to understand the struggle of religions to promote themselves and succeed in the American religious marketplace online.²⁵ A major assumption underlying this perspective is that information technologies have been central to the development of the contemporary American religious marketplace by providing a platform for the dissemination and access to alternative religious practices and worldviews.²⁶

Since its publication in 2012, Adam Possamai’s edited volume *The Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions* has had a significant impact on scholarly discussions of NRMS, offering one of the first sustained discussions of many of these themes. *Hyper-Real Religion* is an attempt to theorize the boundaries between popular culture and religion with attention to religious and spiritual authority, reception, and meaning-making in various contemporary religious practices. Although *Hyper-Real Religion* deals with case studies as diverse as the Otherkin, the Church of the Jedi, and Evangelical responses to tabletop role-playing games, in her preface Eileen Barker

²⁵ Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (London: Routledge, 2008), 130.

²⁶ Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (London: Routledge, 2010).

situates the project within the context of NRM studies and growing scholarly attention to new forms of spirituality that challenge traditional notions of religion.²⁷

Possamai adapts the name of this paradigm from Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyper-real, but Possamai is also eager to reinterpret Baudrillard. Possamai extends Baudrillard's notion of the hyper-real to engage the boundaries between "popular culture" and "religion." Possamai defines "hyper-real religions" as the mode of new religions that mobilize popular culture as a central meaning-making resource, writing that hyper-real religions can be understood as a "simulacrum of religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commoditized popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or a source of beliefs for everyday life".²⁸ Central to hyper-real religion is an ability to use popularly "profane" imagery, language, and resources in order to both "[discover and create] sacred space in cyberspace."²⁹

Danielle Kirby critiques the hyper-real framework by arguing that it treats participants as static consumers of popular culture, missing how these individuals are constantly involved in processes of negotiation with their chosen religious texts. Using Discordia, the Church of the SubGenius, and the Temple of Psychic Youth as her case studies, Kirby emphasizes "remixture," the copying, pasting, borrowing, and mixing of religious texts in a playful and ongoing process. Far from seeing religious textual materials as closed, static documents given in their perfected

²⁷ Eileen Barker, "Preface," in *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*, ed. Adam Possamai (Leiden: Brill, 2012), ix.

²⁸ Martin Geoffroy, "Hyper-real Religion Performing in Baudrillard's Integral Reality," in *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*, ed. Adam Possamai (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 31.

²⁹ Barker, "Introduction," x.

form through divine revelation, these movements put editing and playing with religious source materials at the center of their relationship to texts.³⁰

Kirby's conclusions echo an important body of research that examines how the changing materiality of digital texts is leading to new forms of religious practice and an emphasis on open, collective, and dynamic religious truth. Scholars working outside of the hyper-real religions paradigm, for example, have emphasized the performativity and communal practices central to many communities that blur popular culture and religion online. Martin Geoffroy argues that "hyper-real religions" might be more productively thought of as "integral religions," which he defines as a performance religion of networked individuals who communicate through an interface about questions of ultimate meaning. Alternatively, Graham John and Chiara Baldini find the language of "assemblage" more useful. In their work analyzing the festival environment of Boom—a music festival that promotes the "neomystical" and that began in the full moon dance parties of Goa, India, in the 1970s—they describe the festival as a moving assemblage of techniques that include pharmaceuticals, music, and religious ideology. John and Baldini argue that individuals who participate at the festival act primarily as prosumers, repurposing the various interactions of each assemblage to "maximize the typically private encounter with the numinous" while at the same time optimizing their participation in the public dance.³¹

I argue instead that scholarship that recognizes the complex interplay between religion and media and that urges methodological and theoretical pluralism is able to be more nimble and

³⁰ Danielle Kirby, "Alternative Worlds: Metaphysical Questing and Virtual Community amongst the Otherkin," in *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*, ed. Adam Possamai (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 129–140.

³¹ John Graham and Chiara Baldini, "Dancing at the Crossroads of Consciousness: Techno-Mysticism, Visionary Arts and Portugal's Boom Festival," in *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*, eds. Carole Cusack and Alex Norman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 527.

to bring us closer to the questions I am most interested in as a scholar of religion—questions about genealogy, about cultural formation, and about the mediations of social life.

Overemphasizing the physical and structural capacities of technologies places agency solely on the side of technology and collapses people (users, audiences, etc.) into a homogenized block capable only of undifferentiated reception. Ironically, this approach also ignores the ambiguities within technology's structural potentials by assuming that technological capacities work in only one way, rather than recognizing that certain technologies can often be used in unanticipated ways.

The study of new religious movements is especially well positioned to advance the conversations about religion and media and particularly religion and the internet, but it cannot do so if scholars assume that new religions are somehow uniquely “hyper-real.” Instead, the field of NRM studies should be recognized as being well suited to investigate the political work of categories while working at the same time to unsettle traditional classification schemes. Some of the most common questions NRM scholars have worked with over the past few decades—What is “new” about new religions? Are they religious at all? What are the consequences of such a categorization? What are the sociocultural mechanisms by which such decisions are authorized?—make clear the field's commitments to thinking through the dynamics of scholarly classification.

In a similar vein, NRMs themselves have been doing much of the work of unsettling the “clear” cultural distinctions among religion, the internet, and media technologies more generally. The so-called hyper-real religions such as Jediism and the Church of the SubGenius push at our culturally received boundaries among capitalism, fiction, and religion and mark the triumph of the prosumer. The Missionary Church of Kopimism, a NRM that claims file sharing as its most sacred religious practice, reflects both the contemporary use of the categories of religion to

critique the political sphere and the ways in which the information age itself has become subject to narratives of sacralization. Contemporary scholarship on media, religion, and culture must take these blurred practices of intersection and negotiation as the first step in developing a framework with which to understand religion in an age dominated by the internet and information technologies.

Religion and the Internet

If new religions and the media have often been analyzed in terms of the “hyper-real,” how have scholars envisioned the study of internet and religion more broadly? To answer this question, I will briefly survey the major trends in literature attending to religion and the internet in religious studies before considering how the history of the internet in particular has been presented in communication studies and computer science. I end this section by highlighting a set of alternative histories of the internet that highlight how new religions, the counterculture, and computer culture have been intimately entangled. I understand my project to be a contribution to this last set of literature that posits alternative histories of religion and the internet.

In 2005 Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg described the history of the field of religion and the internet as having been characterized by two distinctive and successive waves. The first wave (from the late 1990s to the early 2000s) was characterized by a fascination with the newness of internet technologies. The preferred methodology was meta-content analyses of the web (such as projects that asked how many websites were dedicated to “sex” rather than “religion”). Scholars applied quantitative methods to understand who was using the internet and

how. Undergirding scholarship in this first wave was a shared sense of techno-determinism in which information technologies were cast as wielding either utopic or dystopic potentials.³²

By the early 2000s this technological determinism was tempered by a more realist perspective: technologies were reconfigured as mechanisms that would not likely be the sole determinants of social change. Researchers began to adopt longer historical and sociological approaches to the study of religion and the internet and began to contextualize quantitative data more thoroughly within social history. This second wave of research worked to overturn the techno-determinism of the first, as scholars widely came to the conclusion that “the internet does not generate religion, only people do”.³³ In particular, this second wave was characterized by calls for a heterogeneous set of methodological and theoretical tools as questions of use brought attention to the variety of ways in which individuals responded to, used, and understood the internet.³⁴

A clear example of this second-wave thinking appears in the article, “Virtually Religious: New Religious Movements and the World Wide Web,” in which Douglas E. Cowan and Jeffrey K. Hadden emphasized a theoretical approach that distinguished between “religion online” and “online religion” in ways that privileged the ability of reified “religion” to determine the uses to which technology was put.³⁵ First advanced by Christopher Helland, “religion online” was

³² Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg, eds., *Religion and Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2–3.

³³ Hojsgaard, *Religion and Cyberspace*, 9.

³⁴ Massimo Introvigne, “A Symbolic Universe: Information Terrorism and New Religions in Cyberspace,” in *Religion and Cyberspace*, eds. Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg (New York: Routledge, 2005), 102–118.

³⁵ Douglas E. Cowan and Jeffrey K. Haden, “Virtually Religious: New Religious Movements and the World Wide Web,” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 119–142.

initially a term used to describe the strategies through which established religious traditions used the internet as a tool for disseminating information and communicating with active practitioners.³⁶ The term “online religion” was adopted to signal the use of the internet as a virtual arena for religious participation and performance—highlighting the ways in which virtual rituals and cyber-pilgrimages were transforming the ways in which religion was practiced in a digital age.³⁷

Such a framing led Cowan and Hadden to focus primarily on the contributions of online religion, highlighting questions about the interrelation between online and offline religious practices. In their introduction, they asked:

How is online participation in religious ritual or liturgy similar to these practices in real life? In what ways does it differ? How do the different technological and meta-technological factors associated with religious observance in cyberspace enhance or constrain the experience? Does the Internet offer unique opportunities for religious evolution, or merely more advanced versions of strategies already deployed?³⁸

Online religion/religion online has since been reimagined by scholars to function more like a spectrum in which online religion/religion online serve as opposite poles of digital religious practice rather than absolute or fixed categories.

If the first wave of research on religion and the internet can be understood as primarily dominated by a technological determinist approach and the second as an attempt to resituate the internet as a “tool” in multivalent use, the contemporary field of inquiry can be understood as a collective effort to mark some type of middle ground. Finding resources in the works of

³⁶ Christopher Helland, “Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communitas,” in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, eds. Doug Cowan and J. Hadden (New York: JAI Press, 2000), 205–223.

³⁷ Cowan, “Virtually Religious,” 120-121.

³⁸ Cowan, “Virtually Religious,” 121.

poststructural and postcolonial theorists like Bruno Latour, Homi Bhabha, and Landon Winner, this third wave of research has sought to nuance the ways in which religion and digital technology are already imbricated. There has been an important turn to “hybrids,” ambiguities, and “third spaces,” and scholars have mined the insights of recent philosophy of technology and science.

Research following this model discusses the internet and religion in terms of third spaces, distributed materialities or subjectivities, and co-constitutive histories and locations. This shift has been due in part to the opening of the field to methodological and theoretical approaches borrowed from cultural studies, the philosophy of technology and science, communication studies, and legal studies in addition to the field’s more traditional sociological analyses. To better attend to that interdisciplinary conversation, I will now shift to consider what a religious studies perspective could add to histories of the internet that have been largely produced by scholars in communication studies and computer science.

Until recently the history of the internet was largely narrated around a series of major technological developments, moving from the creation of Arpanet, to the Trans Control Protocol/Internet Protocol, and finally to CERN’s public release of the “worldwide web” in the early 1990s. This history focused on the role of the United States while emphasizing the research and funding efforts of military and higher education systems to account for the internet’s creation. But contemporary efforts to explore alternative histories of the internet and religious practices online have the capacity to reshape the broader conversation about religion and technology.³⁹

³⁹ Monica Emerich and Stewart M. Hoover, *Media, Spiritualities and Social Change* (London: Continuum, 2011); and Fred Turner *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Martin Elton and John Carey have argued that the failure of traditional histories of the internet to account for early online end-user services has caused scholars to both overemphasize the contributions of the United States and to obfuscate the early intersections between commercial and government entities that were always at work behind the development and use of the infrastructure. In their “Prehistory of the Internet,” Elton and Cary argue that pre-web online end-user services significantly fostered the Internet’s growth by giving an early platform to non-specialist users. Although the internet was still the nearly exclusive domain of research scientists and engineers, these end-user services made space for now-crucial commercial services like banking, conferencing, forums, and e-mail to take hold. Elton and Cary argue that recognizing these hidden actors helps modify the classic formula that describes the development of the internet as a narrative of hardware advances, allowing us in turn to identify how negotiations among a complex network of commercial, government, and research entities contributed to the online world we have inherited. Making these negotiations clearer, they argue, helps anchor contemporary discussions of important issues such as government surveillance, privacy, and anonymity online into a longer historical context that is implicated with the infrastructure of the internet itself.⁴⁰

This dissertation also seeks to contribute to another set of alternative histories that contextualize the imagination of what personal computers do (and what they are) against the backdrop of the American counterculture of the late twentieth century. Exploring the relations between secular and spiritual or religious discourses that emerged out of the American

⁴⁰ Martin C. J. Elton and John Carey, “The Prehistory of the Internet and Its Traces in the Present: Implications for Defining the Field,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies*, ed. William H. Dutton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10.

counterculture since the 1960s, these histories demonstrate how a number of new religious movements reflect important developments in hacker culture.

For example, Dorien Zandbergen's essay "Silicon Valley New Age" offers an alternative history of the counterculture as it developed in the San Francisco Bay area. Highlighting the thought of Timothy Leary, Ken Kesey, Aldous Huxley, and Stewart Brand, Zandbergen reimagines the computer as an inherently countercultural symbol rather than a Cold War weapon. An early "hacker ethic" emerged among California engineers whose lives were shaped both by major military demands and by the counterculture. These engineers designed computer technology as a pathway for "authentic" personal empowerment. As Zandbergen states it, "Hack your own reality" [was] a technophile transformation of the New Age idea that we create our own reality."⁴¹

Zandbergen offers this alternative history as a corrective to narratives in religion and media scholarship that argue that digital technologies are marked by intrinsic spiritual characteristics that demonstrate a "natural affinity" with certain forms of spirituality (such as neopaganism). Instead, Zandbergen argues, religious imaginaries and technological development often form in one another's images. She adopts a genealogical approach to explore some of the specific mechanisms leading to this discourse of "natural affinities." What is shared between neopagan forms of religiosity and digital technologies is not a natural affinity, Zandbergen concludes, but a "specific expression of a social cultural climate that has a longer history of celebrating spirituality through high tech, and in which science and technology have become natural forces of life".⁴²

⁴¹ Dorien Zandbergen, "Silicon Valley New Age: The Co-Constitution of the Digital and the Sacred," in *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*, eds. Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 173.

⁴² Zandbergen, "Silicon Valley," 163.

Working parallel to this process of coevolution are discourses that simultaneously secularize the sacred and sacralize technology. As Zandbergen states, “the sacred self is sacralized and imagined as a function of the computer.”⁴³ The resulting discourse of “cyberspirituality” is characterized by the utopic expectation that digital technologies will eventually provide the means for humans to experience direct, total, and authentic spiritual communication. In this utopian dream, the Internet is often imagined as the final platform in which all knowledge will come to rest, transforming into the very “instantiation of the collective higher consciousness that [many pagan and New Age] spiritual seekers...envisioned.”⁴⁴

In a similar manner, Andrew Fergus Wilson and Alexandra Boutros seek to revise our understanding of the relationship between the growth of the internet and marginalized religions. Wilson explores how the apocalyptic visions of various online communities are disseminated, censored, and accessed to explore how communication technologies simultaneously empower and disempower alternative, new, and marginalized religious sensibilities. Wilson argues that the internet allows for the rapid proliferation of a “global cultic milieu” because its infrastructure provides for the relatively free and rapid transmission of knowledge—even when that knowledge is stigmatized.⁴⁵ Alexandra Boutros makes a similar argument in “Virtual Vodou, Actual Practice,” where she claims that media technologies accomplish important work in fostering

⁴³ Zandbergen, “Silicon Valley,” 161.

⁴⁴ Zandbergen, “Silicon Valley,” 161.

⁴⁵ Andrew F. Wilson, “On the Outskirts of the New Global Village: Computer-Mediated Prophecy and the Digital Afterlife,” in *Network Apocalypse: Visions of the End in an Age of Internet Media*, ed. Robert Howard (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 20-22.

religious pluralism simply by providing access to alternative or marginal religious perspectives through the internet's open sharing structure.⁴⁶

This dissertation has been fundamentally informed by scholars working at the intersection of technology and new religious movements. By detailing the histories and contexts of the religious people I introduce in chapters one through three, it is my goal to add yet another “alternate history of the internet”—one that highlights the role of religious creativity in debates about the freedom and control of information online.

Mythinformation

Finally, this dissertation contributes to scholarly debates about the value and nature of information, especially as that literature intersects with the language of religion. Debates about religion and the internet are not the only discussions relevant to our understanding of how religion and technology are enmeshed in contemporary life. A parallel conversation that focused on the sacrality of information shows that the notions of religion, “data,” and “information” have intermixed over a much longer history. Johanna Sumiala argues that since the late nineteenth century Americans have increasingly lived in a “network society” in which everything is always in circulation.”⁴⁷ The term “informationalism” (coined by Manuel Castells) calls our attention to the ways in which the global economy now largely depends on access to, and the ability to manipulate, information.⁴⁸ But this leads to a basic question: what, exactly, is information?

⁴⁶ Alexandra Boutros, “Virtual Vodou, Actual Practice: Transfiguring the Technological,” in *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*, ed. Jeremy Stolow (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 239–261.

⁴⁷ Johanna Sumiala, “Circulations,” in *Keywords in Religion, Media, and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 44.

⁴⁸ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

Media historian Lisa Gitelman shows that some of the earliest colloquial uses of the term “information” in the seventeenth century referred to that which was given before analysis or hypothesis. But the act of identifying what “counts” as data is always an act of classification.⁴⁹ The very work of classification, therefore, conceals the truth that information, like religion, is always contingently produced by decisions rooted in political, cultural, and historical contexts.

Allied with Gitelman’s argument that scholars should attend to the concrete ways in which data is produced, Geoffrey Bowker (Professor of Informatics) uses nineteenth century descriptions of bee colonies (which were thought to be led by kings because females of any species were seen as incapable of leadership) to highlight how cultural assumptions feed the interpretation and identification of data.⁵⁰ Bowker argues that our contemporary tendency to read data everywhere and in everything generates an implicit ontology in which all differences are reducible to the same basic units of life: “data.” Because the consequence of such an ontology is that if something cannot be measured it does not exist, the political implications of this ontology of data cannot be overstated.

English literature scholar Ellen Gruber Garvey explores the ideology of information at work among nineteenth century American abolitionists. With their belief that information could be extracted and used to moralize, these abolitionists used press information about the slave trade to produce their own pamphlets highlighting the “simple facts” about the violence that such trade generated.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Lisa Gitelman, “Introduction,” in *Raw Data is an Oxymoron*, ed. Lisa Gitelman (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013), 1-14.

⁵⁰ Geoffrey C. Bowker, “Data Flakes,” in *Raw Data is an Oxymoron*, ed. Lisa Gitelman (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013), 167-172.

⁵¹ Ellen Gruber Garvey, “‘Facts and FACTS’: Abolitionists’ Database Innovations,” in *Raw Data*, ed. Lisa Gitelman (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013), 89-102.

Information is both a highly abstract concept and fundamentally material in nature. This dual nature of transcendence and imminence has led to several influential communications scholars finding resources in religious language to explain cultures articulated around information. Ken Hillis has followed this line of thinking by arguing that the very performance of an online search—the most performed activity online—works to sacralize information on a daily basis.⁵² The act of search has re-made us into searchers, and the ritual act of search sanctifies information into reality itself: if Google doesn't find it, it either doesn't exist or doesn't matter. Hillis thus uses religion as a metaphor to understand how humans relate to information in the current information age. He describes the geeks as a priestly class and the unknown workings of technology as “magic,” and he explains our inability to question both the history of information and search by claiming that we do not question the sacred but only attend to it through ritual. Hillis's argument here also echoes the classic argument of the leading cybernetics researcher Norbert Wiener in *God and Golem*, where Wiener argued that information would eventually come to stand in for the Christian God.⁵³ Wiener's objective was to put forward a new secular ethics.

Langdon Winner has also used religious terminology to describe what he calls “mythinformation,” the “religious belief” in the total transformative power of information over humanity. Calling mythinformation our new “prosperity gospel,” Winner argues that our dependence on computer technology demands the existence of such a powerful mythos because of the major social changes information technologies has caused. Because the global economy depends on the control and management of information, we require a mythos to justify the huge

⁵² Ken Hillis, Michael Petit, and Kylie Jarrett, *Google and the Culture of Search* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁵³ Norbert Wiener, *God and Golem, Inc.: A Comment on Certain Points Where Cybernetics Impinges on Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1964).

sacrifices that attend the rise of new information technologies (the deskilling of labor, sustained and cyclical disruption of job loss to robotics, and the advancement of surveillance technologies).

Winner wants us to focus as well on the ways in which mythinformation is inherently paradoxical, because of its complex set of assumptions: (1) people are bereft of knowledge, (2) information is knowledge, (3) knowledge is power, and (4) access to knowledge will lead instantaneously to increased democratic or social power. But, Winner argues, in this myth “information” actually refers only to electronic information. Geeks, hackers, and other cultures of code that emphasize this mythos do not advocate that libraries or universities can do the same thing.⁵⁴

Information, like religion, is a contested category. Because it is both rooted in material processes (data transfer, electricity, server farms) and highly abstract (it is everywhere, and yet often invisible and its logics difficult to discern), some influential communications theorists have found religious language to provide useful metaphors to describe contemporary cultures and their relations to information. This dissertation, however, departs from that trajectory. I take seriously the constructed and contested nature of information, but rather than use religious language to better understand information I analyze how contests over the value and nature of information reveal important legacies of religious thought in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Thesis and Outline

Information and religion are categories that are actively constructed and radically entangled. This dissertation investigates three sites in which debates about information access have been framed through debates about the value and nature of religious knowledge. Though

⁵⁴ Wiener, *God and Golem*.

there are important differences in how this debate is staged by each of the religious movements considered here, each gives valuable, tangible evidence of the impossibility of the ontological separation between information and religion, technology and religion, secularism and religion, and subject and object. What can the intersection of information technology and religious creativity in contemporary culture reveal about the nature of modernity? It reveals, as Bruno Latour has argued, that we have never been modern.⁵⁵

Chapter one will introduce an illuminating conflict among contemporary Scientologists. While the hacker collective Anonymous and the Church of Scientology waged a war across the internet, Anonymous also became an ally to former and independent Scientologists who were otherwise cut off from their key religious texts. Beginning in the 1990s, many independent Scientologists adopted the rhetoric of Open Source Software, particularly as they re-defined their own theological understanding of the nature of information and information access. The conflict and tensions among Scientology, Anonymous, and Open Source Scientology have had a number of important repercussions on issues of copyright, religion, and information flows online.

This opening chapter provides much of the historical background that shapes my project by exploring competing definitions of the nature of information. I introduce the hacktivist collective Anonymous, which represents an important aspect of internet culture that promotes a distinctive and highly influential perspective on the freedom of information. This chapter analyzes primary source materials from the Church of Scientology and Open Source Scientologists to demonstrate how Scientology continues to adopt scientific and technological advances. These competing beliefs about information—and the accompanying values of open access, modification, and distribution—fuel Scientology’s struggles online. Finally, this chapter will also consider the concrete and practical effects at stake in these debates over the freedom of

⁵⁵ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

information and the freedom of religion through an analysis of how copyright law is entangled in this conflict about information and religion.

The second chapter moves forward to introduce the Missionary Church of Kopimism (MCK), a new religious movement that believes copyright is a cosmic evil and that information freedom is a religious right. I explore how the MCK is not an anomaly (it is not a joke nor “a clever hack”, as some media coverage has argued) but instead representative of the confluence of two distinct ideologies whose entanglement has been largely unrecognized: the hacker ethic and the Protestant Ethic.

As a new religious movement, Kopimism illuminates a broader ethics of information access that has been formed in the shadow of Western religious history. New religions like the MCK are worthy of study precisely because they allow us to identify broader concerns and anxieties that may otherwise remain obscure because these new religions tend to cluster around the experimental boundaries of a changing culture. Because of the MCK’s explicit claims to information freedom as a religious value, this chapter also explores an important new formulation of “religion” in an era of information technology. To date there has been very little scholarly analysis that brings together hackers, the freedom of information, and religion together as a significant cultural assemblage. In my analysis I make a double movement of connecting this case study to previously “recognized” religious traditions (Protestant Christianity), while at the same time asserting that this material also merits scholarly attention beyond the boundaries of those traditions.

Chapter three explores how an important public figure in media circles, Jason Silva, carries these themes even farther in asserting that information itself is fundamentally sacred. This chapter focuses on Silva’s highly successful video project *Shots of Awe*. Silva is not a member or a leader of a new religious movement, but his video series espouses a vision of technology and

religion quite similar to that of the Open Source Scientologists and Kopimists. Silva's success and public visibility are a testament to the market for his religiously-inflected, corporate-ready perspectives on the power of technology to enchant an (assumedly) disenchanted world. As his configuration of the nature of information veers toward gnosticism, he also demonstrates, more vividly than the other case studies considered here, what is at stake in an enchanted, but disembodied, worldview.

In chapter one and two I argue, in part, that the information freedom commitments of Anonymous, Open Source Scientologists, and the Kopimists extend out beyond these groups. Silva exemplifies these tendencies. First, he inherits, and build upon, the same countercultural understandings of information that we can see at work in the ideologies of Anonymous, Open Source Scientology, and Kopimism. Second, Silva's explicit reliance on a form of gnosticism helps to demonstrate the trajectory of this discourse—in particular, Silva demonstrates how some ways of thinking about the nature and potency of information serve to divide the body from the mind (reconceived here as the realm of information and information flows). As I detail how Silva uses (and builds upon) the ideas of Timothy Leary and Erik Davis, I will also use Philip J. Lee's *Against the Protestant Gnostics* to explore how Silva's explicit use of the category of gnosticism further demonstrates the legacy of particular Protestant religious notions on discourses of information freedom.

The final chapter pulls these case studies together to consider how the language of secularization and re-enchantment has been at work in each of them. I analyze this language by highlighting some of the key scholarly literature exploring the intertwined roles of magic, secularization, enchantment, and technology. I also return to my argument that new religions provide important insight into broader cultural change, launching my discussion from a Red Hat corporate event and the writings of *Wired* magazine co-founder Kevin Kelly. I end with an

analysis of the writings of Bruno Latour and Jason Josephson-Storm, adding my case studies to the conversation about modernity, science, and religion that they have been participating in.

Seven years ago I left Boulder wondering about a diffuse culture of information freedom. My training there prepared me well for UNC, but the research for this dissertation has led me down avenues I couldn't have imagined and to questions that I didn't know how to ask. How do technologies structure our social worlds? How do technologies inherit cultural assumptions, weaving those legacies into the communities that surround them? How do new religions actively re-imagine both technologies and the very category of religion itself? What can the intersection of information technology and religious creativity in contemporary culture reveal about the nature of modernity? These are the questions that have driven this project. Over the next five chapters I hope to do justice to the scholars, mentors, and conversation partners who have helped me ask these questions, and to provide a series of sites from which I will begin to answer them.

Chapter 1

Open Source Scientology

This is useful knowledge. With it the blind again see, the lame walk, the ill recover, the insane become sane and the sane become saner. By its use the thousand abilities Man has sought to recover become his once more.
– *Scientology: A History of Man* (1952)

Knowledge is Free
– Anonymous, “Message to Scientology”

“Message to Scientology”

In January 2008, the Church of Scientology (CoS) filed a Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) violation against YouTube.⁵⁶ The claim included a request for the removal of leaked material internal to the Church, an interview with popular actor Tom Cruise. The request went viral. This was not the first DMCA request the Church had issued—they had made many similar requests and employed various other tactics to remove secret, internal documents from

⁵⁶ Thanks to Brill Press for permission to reproduce my article “LRH4ALL: The Negotiation of Information in the Church of Scientology and the Open Source Scientology Movement,” in *Handbook of Scientology*, ed. James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 341-359, which has been modified in this chapter.

unsanctioned release on the internet since the mid-1990s.⁵⁷ What made this claim special, then, was not the content, nor the tactic, but rather the response.

Within two weeks, by mid-January, an anonymous user in 4chan (an infamous anonymous messaging forum that has since become well-known for its status as an organizing board for internet trolling activity) posted an initial rallying cry: “I think it's time for /b/ to do something big. People need to understand not to f*k with /b/, and talk about nothing for ten minutes, and expect people to give their money to an organization that makes absolutely no f*king sense...It's time to use our resources to do something we believe is right. It's time, /b/.”⁵⁸ One week later a new video was posted to YouTube, this time appearing under a close clone of the Church’s own name (“Church0fScientology”). This video, titled “Message to Scientology,” featured a digitized male voice that began to speak in a slow, methodological clip. “Hello, leaders of Scientology,” the automated voice began. “We are Anonymous.”⁵⁹ The voice, accompanied only by fast-passing storm clouds and the sounds of a high-pitched wind tunnel, continues:

Over the years, we have been watching you. Your campaigns of misinformation; your suppression of dissent; your litigious nature, all of these things have caught our eye. With the leakage of your latest propaganda video into mainstream circulation, the extent of your malign influence over those who have come to trust you as leaders has been made clear to us. Anonymous has therefore decided that your organization should be destroyed. For the good of your followers; for the good of mankind; and for our own enjoyment, we shall proceed to expel you from the Internet and systematically dismantle the Church of Scientology in its present

⁵⁷ For a brief history of these controversies, see Hugh Urban, “The Rundown Truth: Scientology Changes Strategy in War with Media,” *Religion Dispatches*, March 17, 2010, <http://religiondispatches.org/the-rundown-truth-scientology-changes-strategy-in-war-with-media/>.

⁵⁸ Jeff Jacobsen, “We are Legion: Anonymous and the War on Scientology,” accessed September 15, 2018, <http://www.lisamcpherson.org/pc.html>.

⁵⁹ Anonymous, “Message to Scientology,” January 21, 2008, video, 2:41, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCbKv9yiLiQ>.

form.⁶⁰

The video ends with a simple declaration: “Knowledge is free.”⁶¹

This was a significant moment in the history of the internet, in part because “Message to Scientology” (which in 2018 has had close to 5.5 million views on just the originally posted video alone) did two things. First, it marked the beginnings of the first significant collective, global, organized actions of the hacker-activist (“hacktivist”) organization Anonymous, which has since become perhaps the most famous hacker collective. Second, the video organized these efforts around policing the internet—and the freedom to share, access, and distribute information throughout the internet—from perceived abuse by a religious organization with an alternative understanding of what information is and does.

Hugh Urban has argued that Anonymous “presents itself as the inverse image of Scientology”—that its decentralized, hydra-headed, and fluid coalition of loosely linked and sometimes fleeting alliances between individual hackers and geeks has formed directly in opposition to Scientology’s hierarchical, centralized, bureaucratic, and highly controlled organization.⁶² Anonymous’s efforts, which I will explore below, resulted in a significant global campaign against the Church that continues (in a more fractured form) today. Indeed, in an early bid to divert supporters away from Anonymous, the Church attempted to fake several YouTube videos that used the same aesthetic type but highlighted the ills of other major religions (either to divert Anonymous’s ire toward these better-established religions (particularly the Mormon or

⁶⁰ Anonymous, “Message to Scientology.”

⁶¹ Anonymous, “Message to Scientology.”

⁶² Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 180.

Catholic Church) or to discredit Anonymous as more generally anti-religious.⁶³ These efforts did not succeed.

This chapter will serve to establish much of the historical background that informs all of my case studies in this dissertation. In it, I will trace early and competing definitions of information as well as introduce the hacktivist collective Anonymous. Anonymous exemplifies a significant movement within internet culture that seeks to protect the freedom of information from competing interpretations of what information is and should be. In addition, in this chapter I will analyze primary source materials from both the CoS and a group known as Open Source Scientologists to demonstrate how Scientology continues to mimic and adopt scientific and technological advances. I will explore how competing beliefs about information—and the values of open access, modification, and distribution—fuel Scientology’s struggles online. Finally, I briefly detail how current articulations of copyright law pose a unique challenge for esoteric religious knowledge online.

Scientology: Money, Information, and Spiritual Advancement

The Church of Scientology is an esoteric movement that fiercely protects secret religious materials. The Church argues that secrecy is essential to their religious freedom, comparing it to the belief in Resurrection for Protestant Christians.⁶⁴ It makes this argument upon the basis that secrecy is necessary for Scientologists to be able to travel upon the “Bridge to Total Freedom.”

⁶³ Anonymous, “Anonymous Message Regarding Fake Videos,” March 7, 2008, video, 1:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d06oINVcqYc&lc=z13rizpjbwu3ilc0v23jj10zut2phzlsi>.

⁶⁴ “Questions and Answers: Religious freedom, copyright law, and trade secret protection on the Internet,” Church of Scientology International, accessed October 6, 2018, <http://theta.com/copyright/qa.htm#four>.

The Bridge is the central religious practice of Scientology. It is a graded spiritual journey in which the Scientologist advances through auditing sessions. In an auditing session, Scientologists are questioned by Church leadership on a variety of questions meant to identify “engrams,” or troubling memory traces that cause spiritual and intellectual disfunction.⁶⁵

Auditing is based upon Hubbard’s theory of Dianetics—a “new science” (as detailed in his book series *Dianetics*) that he hoped would completely replace psychotherapy.⁶⁶ In the system of Dianetics, the human mind is composed of an analytical mind and a reactive mind which are in tension with one another. The analytical mind functions as a “flawless computer” (as discussed below), but it is prevented from working appropriately by the reactive mind, which houses hundreds or thousands of hidden “engrams.”⁶⁷ Through auditing, engrams are methodologically identified and removed by the “auditor” (the Church leader), allowing the Scientologist receiving the auditing to move forward upon the Bridge, attaining various stages of spiritual enlightenment. Movement through the graded levels of the Bridge eventually lead the Scientologist to the Eighth Dynamic (thereby achieving a version of godhood and reaching the apex of spiritual advancement—sometimes loosely compared to Buddhist nirvanas).⁶⁸

Initiation to each new level of the Bridge occurs through auditing, but each auditing class has its own associated financial cost. For all Scientologists, the goal of auditing is to reach the state of “Clear,” in which all engrams have been identified and removed. For the select few who

⁶⁵ “The Solution to the Reactive Mind,” Church of Scientology International, accessed October 23, 2018, <https://www.scientology.org/what-is-dianetics/basic-principles-of-scientology/the-solution-to-the-reactive-mind.html>.

⁶⁶ Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 20-22.

⁶⁷ Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 46.

⁶⁸ “The Eight Dynamics,” Church of Scientology International, accessed October 6, 2018, <https://www.scientology.org/what-is-scientology/basic-principles-of-scientology/eight-dynamics.html>.

reach Clear in this lifetime, the remaining (and most advanced) levels of the Bridge are called the Operating Thetan (or “OT”) levels. Achieving the various stages of OT signal that the Scientologist in question has advanced and supernatural powers, realizing their “own immortality as a spiritual being.”⁶⁹ Attaining Clear is a process that can take several years per level and cost (accumulatively) several hundreds of thousands of dollars, and the OT levels have associated higher costs per session.

Officially, the Church of Scientology maintains that auditing sessions do not have set financial costs.⁷⁰ Because of the relatively short history of their religion (founded in 1950), the Church stresses that donations for auditing and spiritual training are the primary ways by which they are able to function and grow, and that “training donations” are similar to tithing systems within Christian traditions.⁷¹ The Church argues that financial donations are the primary method of funding “because it is the most equitable,” and that all funding goes back into the community, per the requirements of a non-profit organization.⁷² Each new level of the Bridge to Total Freedom gives Scientologists access to esoteric religious materials—information that is crucial for their spiritual advancement. By securing essential teachings behind a paywall connected to initiation levels, those who cannot afford to pay for auditing classes are left to donate time and labor, a practice that has resulted in several accusations from ex-members that the Church participates in human slavery and trafficking.⁷³

⁶⁹ “What is meant by Operating Thetan (OT)?,” Church of Scientology International, accessed October 6, 2018, <https://www.scientology.org/faq/operating-thetan/what-is-ot.html>.

⁷⁰ “How are churches of Scientology financially funded?,” Church of Scientology International, accessed October 6, 2018, <http://www.scientology.org/faq/church-funding/church-funding.html>.

⁷¹ “How are churches of Scientology financially funded?,” Church of Scientology International.

⁷² “How are churches of Scientology financially funded?,” Church of Scientology International.

The Church, in return, argues that the financial donations for esoteric materials is for the spiritual protection of all humankind. The Church likens the level of importance of this hierarchical practice to the fundamental position of the belief in the Resurrection to Protestants and the pro-life beliefs of Catholics, believing premature exposure to secret materials (exposure that occurs before the proper level of training is reached) presents a major destructive force on that Scientologists spiritual development, further pushing away Scientology's ultimate goal of spiritual enlightenment for all peoples on the planet.

In order to protect these materials, the Church has aggressively used legal protections, copyrighting sensitive religious material and suing independent Scientologists and other online users who attempt to distribute these materials online. The Church imagines its use of legal protections to secure secrecy as a major mark of the success of religious freedoms in the U.S., stating that "trade secret and copyright laws are the secular vehicle to protect the core religious precepts of the Church" and that "when these trade secret rights and copyrights are violated, so are the First Amendment rights of all Scientologists."⁷⁴ Publicly, the Church is adamant that access to secret materials is not based upon financial donation but rather by invitation only. However, the qualifications needed to be invited is left mostly unknown to the general public, as the Church only goes so far as to explain: "To gain access to these materials, more is expected of

⁷³ For representative examples, see: Elspeth Reeve, "Scientology: Slave Labor, Beatings, and an FBI Investigation," *The Atlantic*, February 7, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/02/scientology-slave-labor-beatings-and-an-fbi-investigation/342337/> and Lawrence Wright, "The Apostate: Paul Haggis vs. the Church of Scientology," *The New Yorker*, February 14, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/14/the-apostate-lawrence-wright>.

⁷⁴ "Questions and Answers," Church of Scientology International.

a Scientologist than spiritual advancement. Access is not automatic, nor is it dependent solely upon donations. It is by invitation only.”⁷⁵

These are the arguments that the Church used to protect their esoteric materials online, and this was the context in which Anonymous declared war upon the Church.

Anonymous vs. Scientology

Four days after the release of “Message to Scientology,” Anonymous disseminated a second video on YouTube, this time aimed at the mainstream news media. Titled “Response to the Media,” this new video featured the same mechanical voice, which now argued that Scientology had successfully manipulated an otherwise legitimate legal system and that mainstream news media had succumbed to the politics of religious pluralism in its coverage of Scientology as a legitimate religion.⁷⁶ The video argued that it was now Anonymous’s duty to hold Scientology in contempt:

Dear News Organizations. We have been watching your reporting of Anonymous’s conflict with The Church of Scientology. As you said, the so-called Church of Scientology, have actively misused copyright, and trademark law, in pursuit of its own agenda. They attempt, not only to subvert free speech, but to recklessly pervert justice to silence those who speak out against them...Their activities make them an affront to freedom. Remember, all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing...This is not religious persecution, but the suppression of a powerful, criminal fascist regime. It is left to Anonymous.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ “Questions and Answers,” Church of Scientology International.

⁷⁶ In several transcript versions of the video, “Church” has been replaced with “cult” despite the video narrator’s explicit use of the term Church, perhaps indicating that Anonymous users understand how powerful the categorical term “Church” is in its relation to “religion” and how “cult” functions to classify a group as inauthentically religious.

⁷⁷ Anonymous, “Response to the Media,” January 25, 2008, video, 2:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcr1trjtLaU>.

Why did Anonymous take this stance? Why establish their role as the primary policers of Scientology online? It is not just that they disliked the organization, nor that they believed media and legal authorities had failed. Instead, the answer lies in how central the issue of information access is to both Scientology and Anonymous's worldviews; they are diametrically opposed to one another over the thing each values the most, the freedom of information.

"Response to the Media" portrays the internet as a the ultimate enlightenment tool—"This information [about the Church's crimes] is everywhere," the video states, "it is your duty to expose it...Google is your friend."⁷⁸ The resulting "Project Chanology" (the name given to Anonymous' organizing efforts against Scientology) marked the largest global collective action against Scientology that the organization has ever experienced. Within two weeks of the posting of "Message to Scientology" and "Response to the Media" on YouTube—on February 2, 2008—150 people gathered to protest Scientology in Orlando, Florida, with several additional protests occurring in parallel across the United States. Eight days later, on February 10, approximately 7,000 protesters gathered in a coordinated 100 cities worldwide. Images of Anonymous protest signs went viral. "Religion is free," one sign read, "Scientology is neither."

In order both to maintain their identity as Anonymous offline and to prevent personal retaliation from the Church against protestors (Scientology was, at the time, especially known for their surveillance of critics), Anonymous protestors donned Guy Fawkes masks in the streets. The masks hid their identities, but also helped symbolically organize the movement around the freedom of information. The mask was very purposely borrowed from the popular movie *V for Vendetta* in an effort to evoke the symbolism of the movie's anti-hero as the unofficial mascot of the protests (interestingly enough, Time Warner owns the rights to the image and gets a portion

⁷⁸ Anonymous, "Response to the Media."

of the profits from each mask sale).⁷⁹ A ten-issue comic book and 2005 film adaptation, *V for Vendetta* is the story of an anonymous revolutionary, “V,” who single-handedly (and violently) overthrows a totalitarian government that has effectively controlled and censored its opposition. V is the ultimate anti-hero; working alone he saves individuals from corrupted government officials through his knowledge of guerrilla fighting tactics, computer hacking and technology skills, and genius-level recall of literary, historical, and philosophical materials. V works above all else to release information from authoritarian control (understood broadly as censorship) and to convince “the people” to “think for themselves,” making decisions according to their own free access to information.⁸⁰

By adopting this iconic mask as the face of their organization, Anonymous was able to harness the charisma (and audience) of the original series, communicating most of the broad strokes of their own philosophical and methodological perspective through the use of a singular image. Anonymous in name and face, the Guy Fawkes mask served as a potent symbol for the battle against censorship and the empowerment of the people through anarchy and the complete freedom of information.

The website “Operation Clambake” (xenu.net) serves as a major web hub for Project Chanology. Established in 1996 as a Norway-based non-profit, the site devotes a great deal of

⁷⁹ I describe V as an “anti-hero” because even though he is clearly the hero of the story (fighting against tyranny and oppression), he uses controversial, criminal, and terrorist tactics to effect change, ultimately bombing the Houses of Parliament. V is portrayed as an ambiguous, anarchistic, destructive figure who waffles between madness and sanity. V’s female companion, Evey Hammond, represents the somnambulism of the general population. V first finds and rescues Evey as she is about to be raped by a man from the secret police. He takes her home and educates her, but he does so by staging an elaborate test of her loyalty: imprisoning and torturing her for a lengthy amount of time. V gives viewers enough cause to wonder if he is the mirror image of the dictator he seeks to overthrow, grooming Evey by way of a stringent “education” and punishing her accordingly for stepping outside of what he wishes for her. Although he can be (and is) portrayed as a hero by some real-life protestors, he is not an easy hero figure.

⁸⁰ The Wachowski Brothers, *V for Vendetta*, DVD, directed by James McTeigue, Warner Bros. Picture Limited, 2005.

time and web space advocating the right of all peoples to practice their own religions, including Scientology. The conflict over Scientology thus does not concern Scientology's beliefs but the Church's practices of control—control of information, control of finances, and control of its members. The website's name (“Operation Clambake”) further echoes three simultaneous images or notions, all of which are explained on the website in further detail: (1) a reference to one of the claim of L. Ron Hubbard (the founder of Scientology) that humankind evolved from clams; (2) “clam” as a slang term for money, as the clam “reference [is] in this context the high cost for Scientology”; and (3) a humorous reference to a traditional clambake in which clams are steamed in an outdoor party-like setting.⁸¹

In a notable twist, Operation Clambake—again, one of the central hubs for Project Chanology—does not entirely dismiss Hubbard as an insincere criminal. The site instead tells the story of a simple charlatan who, through an over-active imagination and the desire to be popular, succumbed to his own psychosis in believing his Church was real. Under the header “Brainwashing Bites Back,” the site details an account of the ways in which Hubbard fell victim to his own scheming, imagination, and delusions of grandeur so that “what started out as a mass confidence trick backed up with brainwashing became a monstrous and insane organization with fantastic, fanatical ideals.”⁸² In this way the Church of Scientology is portrayed as a monster religion, a delusional scheme that has forgotten its own con and convinced itself it is a religion, and it is because of these erroneous religious convictions that the Church is so difficult to stop.

Scientology, Operation Clambake argues, hides behind “the protection afforded it by

⁸¹ “The Clam FAQ,” Operation Clambake, accessed September 6, 2018, http://www.xenu.net/clam_faq.html.

⁸² “What is Scientology,” Operation Clambake, accessed September 6, 2018, <http://www.xenu.net/roland-intro.html>.

copyright laws in a way that copyright laws were not designed to address,” and the hackers who break these laws in order to leak confidential and copyrighted Scientology documents are restoring justice in the face of a failed legal authority.⁸³ The members of Anonymous claim to be motivated by public duty and “care for their fellow men,” and they claim to understand and willingly break copyright laws because they are “acting out of conscience and out of high human ideals.”⁸⁴ By allowing lay Scientologists access to full transparency about Scientology teachings—by releasing information from the Church’s grasp—they seek to offer Scientologists the freedom to understand what it is they are buying. In this way Operation Clambake understands itself to work as a dismantling mechanism for the Church-run bait-and-switch con by revealing “the switch part of the bait-and-switch fraud...[and letting] people know in advance the trick that is going to be pulled on them about five years and \$30,000 later.”⁸⁵ In fact, ex Scientologists (apostates who no longer believe or in any way identify as Scientologists, but wish to access secret Church materials for their own interests) and independent Scientologists (those who have either been forcefully “disconnected”—the CoS term for excommunication—or have otherwise left the Church of Scientology but still identify as practicing Scientologists) confirm using Scientology materials that have been distributed online through Project Chanology’s efforts.⁸⁶ A third set of dissenters, who I will introduce later in this chapter, are the Open Source Scientologists. These are a vocal subset of independent Scientologists who advocate for an “open

⁸³ “Some Copyright Considerations,” Operation Clambake, accessed September 6, 2018, <http://www.xenu.net/roland-intro>.<http://www.xenu.net/copyright.html>.

⁸⁴ “Some Copyright Considerations,” Operation Clambake.

⁸⁵ “The Xenu Leaflet,” Operation Clambake, accessed September 6, 2018, <http://www.xenu.net/archive/leaflet/>.

⁸⁶ Relatedly, “Free Zone” Scientology is often used online synonymously to refer to independent Scientologists. Free Zone indicates a loosely affiliated organization of sub-groups of independent Scientologists, practicing outside of the purview of the Church and, therefore, in the “free zone.”

source” approach to Scientology, modeled off of the Open Source Software movement, which advocates for transparency and the freedom of access of information. Open Source Scientologists believe that “open sourcing” their religion will ensure that all those who identify as Scientologists can access the tech that is central to their religious beliefs and practices.⁸⁷

Other Project Chanology websites echo these sentiments but frame them in a more internal rhetoric familiar to only Anonymous members. Using an aesthetic strategy of the “lulz” (a slang term for laughing-out-loud), Anonymous often interprets their project of leaking Scientology documents as having an additional layer of meaning beyond destruction of a financial con—it is, quite simply, an effective and humorous way to troll.⁸⁸ Through leaking Scientology documents, Anonymous understands itself to be “closely mirroring the Church's own ‘Fair Game’ policies which it uses to justify...trolling of anyone who crosses them including its own members.”⁸⁹

Although Project Chanology is still underway (making it the longest running Anonymous operation in history), Anonymous seems to believe that they are winning the war. In a long list of “CoS Fails” and “Anon Wins” Anonymous quantifies their victory in a number of ways, including increased attention and support from legal and media authorities. Anonymous lists positive coverage of Project Chanology in a number of high-profile magazines, newspapers, and news agencies (including “ZOMG! positive reports from FAUX NEWS of all people”) and

⁸⁷ Mark Patterson, “Open Source Scientology.” *The Work Was Free. Keep It So*, modified 2010, accessed October 6, 2018, <https://ahgrasshopper.wordpress.com/>.

⁸⁸ “Project Chanology,” Encyclopedia Dramatica, accessed September 6, 2018, https://encyclopedia.dramatica.rs/PROJECT_CHANOLOGY.

⁸⁹ “Scientology,” Encyclopedia Dramatica, accessed September 6, 2018, <https://encyclopedia.dramatica.rs/Scientology>.

celebrates their success at re-focusing and encouraging media authorities to “print the truth more and more often.”⁹⁰

The greatest indicator of success for Anonymous by far is the widespread availability of copyrighted and secret Scientology documents across the internet. Internally, Anonymous defends their breaking of copyright law by reference to the “Hacker’s Manifesto.”⁹¹ Also called “the Conscience of a Hacker,” “The Manifesto” is a short essay published in the mid-1980s in the hacking journal *Phrack* that attempts to introduce the nonhacker to the hacker’s motivations and psychology. Written by “the Mentor” after an arrest, the essay is often considered to be one of the founding documents for the hacking subculture and serves as an ethical orientation for new hackers.⁹² “The Manifesto” details the lack of imagination and challenge in the everyday world and inverts the criminal act of hacking into a celebratory act of discovery and education. In particular, Anonymous members quote the following as the definitive defense for their criminal actions:

Yes, I am a criminal. My crime is that of curiosity. My crime is that of judging people by what they say and think, not what they look like. My crime is that of outsmarting you, something that you will never forgive me for. I am a hacker, and this is my manifesto.⁹³

⁹⁰ “Project Chanology,” Encyclopedia Dramatica. “ZOMG” is popular internet slang from the early to mid 2000s online. It is a variation of “OMG” or “oh my god!” that originally occurred when users attempted to hit the “shift” key for capitalization and instead hit the “z” key located immediately next to it.

⁹¹ The Mentor, “Conscience of a Hacker,” *Phrack Magazine* 1(7) (January, 1986), <http://www.phrack.org/issues.html?issue=7&id=3> .

⁹² “Conscience of a Hacker” has become so popular as a touchstone of hacking culture that it features prominently in 1995’s *Hackers*, directed by Iain Softley and quoted at length throughout the movie.

⁹³ The Mentor, “Conscience of a Hacker.”

The hacktivist activities of Anonymous against the CoS have been met with positive public attention and reciprocity. Operation Clambake was one of the first sites to publish secretive OT documents and was itself subject to a DMCA takedown notice. OT documents are high-level esoteric documents that correspond to graded levels of Scientology itself, available only to the initiates that have reached those levels.⁹⁴ Although Google complied, they also chose to archive the DMCA request in their “Chilling Effects” hub, a portal that informs the public about the nature of material that has been removed due to legal threats. Google also posted an explanatory note in the locations where the OT materials were removed, further prompting readers to explore the Scientology requests compiled in the Chilling Effects hub. Eventually, Google restored all original links. Today, all of these materials are publicly available and rank highly in Google search algorithms (i.e. they are often on the first page of Google results for their related search inquiries).

Today many former Scientologists report that when they had been members of the Church they had been instructed by leadership to avoid the internet at all costs, a sure indicator that Anonymous has gone a long way to accomplish the goals set forth in Project Chanology. Scientology’s continued struggle to protect its esoteric teachings in a world filled with information technology and a popular, albeit often implicit, ethics of information access and distribution is well documented.⁹⁵ The Church continues to expound an understanding of information that describes information as both sacred and under threat. That is, the CoS believes

⁹⁴ Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 36-37.

⁹⁵ For representative examples, see “Church of Scientology: Copyright and Trade Secrets on the Internet,” Theta.com, 2003, <http://www.theta.com/copyright/index.htm>; Massimo Introvigne, “So Many Evil Things: Anti-Cult Terrorism via the Internet,” in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, ed. Jeffrey K. Haden and Douglas E. Cowan (New York: JAI, 2000), 277-308; Alan Prendergrast, “Stalking the Net,” *Denver Westword*, October 4, 1995, <https://www.westword.com/news/stalking-the-net-5055577>; and Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 178-201.

that sacred information, in the form of discrete data, must be carefully defended from both entropy and misuse (a theology that I examine below). Since the late 2000s, however, a new, schismatic movement of former members of CoS has embraced a competing understanding of the nature of information and how it is best managed. This group identifies itself as Open Source Scientology and challenges the Church's definition of information. Open Source Scientologists argue that sacred data should not be secret and need not be protected from change and misuse. Instead, they believe information is something that is living and dynamic and that benefits from open access, modification, and distribution.

By analyzing Open Source Scientology, we can see the ways in which Scientology continues to mimic and adopt scientific and technological advances and also consider an important emerging discourse in which the authority and definition of sacred texts is changing. In distinction to the CoS's Cold-War-era understanding of information, Open Source Scientology is influenced by a counter-cultural conceptualization of information that understands the flows of data to be a process or organism with transformative power. While the counter-cultural dimensions of this understanding of information are further explored in chapter three, this chapter will demonstrate that these competing beliefs about information—and the accompanying values of open access, modification, and distribution—fuel Scientology's struggles online. It is this competing understanding of what information is and how humans should relate to information that has given rise to new forms of practice and belief for the Scientologists who have left the Church but still practice their religion outside of the Church's official reach. They have taken up this competing understanding of information, a notion central to Scientology theology, as they work online to restructure and reform their tradition.

Definitions of information have been a core issue of concern for Scientology since the CoS's establishment in the early 1950s. The CoS emerged in the cultural environment of the

Cold War and reflected the contemporary American government's concerns with surveillance, secrecy, and defense (detailed below). This milieu made information control a seemingly natural and central activity of Church efforts.⁹⁶ L. Ron Hubbard echoed contemporary cultural understandings of information and information machines in his writings for the Church, often borrowing terms from computer science to describe the human mind and its supernatural potentials.

Modeling their reforming aesthetics on the open source software giant Linux, Open Source Scientologists retain the Scientologist belief in the transformative power of information while reflecting the alternative values of computer scientists and programmers who participate in open source and copyleft activities (copyleft indicating the moral and ethical opposition to copyright policies, at least in their current formulation). Open source communities believe that the informational "source code" of any given project should be left available for all to readily access and modify as they see fit. Rather than believing that information must be rigidly controlled, Open Source Scientologists believe that information is a dynamic sacred force and should therefore be accessible and open to all. Borrowing especially from open source software aesthetics, these independent Scientologists believe that Scientology's "technology" should be completely accessible for use, modification, and distribution without the oversight of the Church of Scientology.

Although their numbers are relatively small, Open Source Scientologists' arguments for the free and open access, use, modification, and distribution of information echo those of cyber activists worldwide. Scientology's impact on the formation of current internet architecture

⁹⁶ Hugh Urban, *The Church of Scientology*; and Hugh Urban, "Fair Game: Secrecy, Security, and the Church of Scientology in Cold War America," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74(2) (June 2006): 356–89.

(detailed below) and its status as one of the most controversial NRMs in contemporary America means that Scientology—in both its CoS and Open Source varieties—provides an important window onto greater shifting cultural understandings of information, authority, textual control, and ownership.

Open Source Scientologists believe that adopting the practices and aesthetics of open source computer programming will usher in a spiritual reformation of Scientology technology and spiritual practices in much the same way that the Protestant Reformation changed Christianity. For the members of these communities, the medium of the internet has become a crucial revolutionary force. Beyond the obvious benefits of providing access to esoteric spiritual resources and community-making, the internet serves them as a living illustration of the power of free access to information to act as a check against corruption and spiritual deception.

Technology has served Scientology as a set of resources, negotiated within a larger network of material practice, that makes possible specific forms of culture and lived religion. Accordingly, the relations among technology, politics, and culture move in multiple directions. Technological innovations are politics put into material practice, which, in turn, have the capacity to radically alter cultural and social patterns as they encode and privilege certain forms of power and power relations.⁹⁷ Technologies are thus both the result of politics and the foreclosure of an imagination of the future; they are a central component of the “conditions of social and moral life” organizing our lives.⁹⁸ The practices and beliefs of Open Source Scientologists have found metaphorical and structuring resources in open source software, the internet, and emerging new formation technologies. As Erik Davis has argued, new technology

⁹⁷ Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3-19, 22.

⁹⁸ Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor*, 6.

has the potential to create new gods.⁹⁹ For Open Source Scientology communities, these technologies are imbricated in a radical restructuring of the relationship between Scientologists and information itself, a relationship that has been at the very center of Scientology doctrine and practices since the movement's inception in the early 1950s.

The Church of Scientology and Information Control

Scientology has long struggled with the issue of whether and how to control distribution of information about the religion's practices and techniques. In February 1965 L. Ron Hubbard released an internal policy letter within the CoS entitled "Keeping Scientology Working" (KSW). The letter condemned "non-standard" Scientology beliefs and practices, blaming these practices for divisions within Scientology. The CoS quickly adopted KSW and formulated around it a series of policies condemning "non-standard" Scientology beliefs and practices. KSW would be re-printed at least two times over the coming decades when internal tensions rose in the Church. By its third reissue in 1980, Hubbard used the policy letter to justify efforts to purge Scientology of practices and beliefs unauthorized by Church executives, adding that:

Neglect of this [Policy Letter] has caused great hardship on staff, has cost countless millions and made it necessary in 1970 to engage in an all-out, international effort to restore basic Scientology over the world. Within 5 years after the issue of this [policy letter], with me off the lines, violation has almost destroyed orgs... Therefore, actions which neglect or violate this policy letter are HIGH CRIMES.¹⁰⁰

At the heart of KSW is a mandate that Scientology technology must always be practiced according to official CoS guidelines. Also known by Scientologists simply as "the tech,"

⁹⁹ Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2004), 37.

¹⁰⁰ L. Ron Hubbard, "Keeping Scientology Working, Series 1," HCO Policy Letter, 1995 (emphasis in the original).

“Scientology technology” refers to the practices of auditing and spiritual advancement outlined by L. Ron Hubbard throughout Scientology scriptures. The CoS International, the self-defined “mother Church” of the CoS, defines the tech broadly as “the methods of application of the principles” of Scientology.¹⁰¹ The mandate in KSW to guard against non-standard tech, which was couched in the language of the correct relationship of Scientologists to the science and technology of Hubbard’s “discoveries,” signaled the re-assertion of official Church control over the proliferation of adaptations and interpretations of Scientology practice that had emerged from the lived practices of Scientology since the early 1950s.¹⁰²

Implicit in KSW was Hubbard’s struggle with a growing movement of independent Scientologists, individuals who had become convinced of the efficacy of Scientology practices but disillusioned with the hierarchy and insistence on control. Calling these practices and individuals “aberrant” and “suppressive,” Hubbard insisted up to his death in 1986 on the need to protect Scientology from “improper” use.¹⁰³

Hubbard feared that the spread of non-standardized tech would render Scientology unworkable, contaminating and sabotaging the spiritual health of the entire universe by burying Hubbard’s “true” and “original” discoveries under a campaign of misinformation. Hubbard’s authority as the sole arbiter and manager of Scientology’s doctrines, texts, and practices was

¹⁰¹ Church of Scientology International, *What Is Scientology?: The Comprehensive Reference on the World’s Fastest Growing Religion* (Los Angeles: Bridge Publications, 1992), 155.

¹⁰² L. Ron Hubbard is known, in part, for his early adoption of many scientific rhetorical devices into the language of church doctrine and mythology. He described himself as both the “researcher” and “discoverer” of Scientology, which he further described as a set of new universal spiritual “laws” that together “provide a systematic oath with exact procedures, which achieve standardized predictable results” that would perfect human society. James R. Lewis has argued that these rhetorical devices have served primarily as a legitimation strategy for the movement. See Lewis’s “The Science Canopy: Religion, Legitimacy and the Charisma of Science,” *Temenos* 46(1) (October 10, 2010): 7–29.

¹⁰³ Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 124.

central to the KSW policy. The letter exemplifies the struggles between Church authority and lived religion more broadly in early Scientology. Hoping to sway disgruntled members to his side, Hubbard worked in KSW to balance his own explanations of the universal scientific validity of his discovery of Scientology with assertions of his personal authority over the ways in which that science could be duplicated.

To alter CoS beliefs or practices in any way, Hubbard argued, was to participate in a practice known in Scientology circles as “squirreling.” Squirreling, defined as “going off into weird practices or altering Scientology,” was, for Hubbard, an act of disinformation that obfuscated the true tech under “bad data.”¹⁰⁴ It was not only a disciplinary problem, but also mirrored what Hubbard saw as an existential problem. Corrupted or bad data was, according to Scientology, the single greatest spiritual and psychological threat to humans. Hubbard’s auditing methods focused on correcting bad data that has been erroneously recorded in the brain to restore the mind to a state of “Clear.”¹⁰⁵

Since 1965, squirreling has been categorized as an egregious crime against the Church, punishable by excommunication and shunning. The CoS’s broad definition of squirreling has caused many members to leave voluntarily, becoming independent Scientologists who position themselves as disillusioned with hierarchy and what they see as mismanagement of the tech since Hubbard’s death.¹⁰⁶ The issue of non-standard tech, however, is more complicated than suggested by this familiar story of a religious movement’s attempt to assert control over

¹⁰⁴ L. Ron Hubbard, “My Philosophy,” accessed October 27, 2018, <http://www.lronhubbard.org/articles-and-essays/my-philosophy.html>.

¹⁰⁵ L Ron Hubbard, *Dianetics: The Evolution of a Science* (Los Angeles: Bridge Publications, 1989), 80–82.

¹⁰⁶ Not all independent Scientologists are part of the Open Source Scientology movement, but all Open Source Scientologists are recognized as independent Scientologists by their peers.

contested scriptural interpretations and practices of dissent. Instead, KSW represents an important moment in what might be called the information wars of Scientology, in which disagreements over the meaning of information itself marked serious fault lines within the movement.

Scientology and the Cold War: Computer Mind, Thetan Soul

The Church of Scientology's approach to information about its teachings developed in the context of the Cold War. Building on L. Ron Hubbard's approach to heterodox movements within Scientology, the CoS adopted a theory of information that reflected contemporaneous beliefs (reflected in popular texts like Norbert Weiner's 1950 *The Human Use of Human Beings*, discussed below) that information unmoored from centralized control would suffer entropy, drifting from an original purity to become dangerous misinformation.

The tech, in practice, is largely about the control and correct behaviors of Scientologists in their relationship to information. The CoS has long held that its core teachings should be protected under a veil of secrecy precisely because premature exposure to the content of those teachings would cause irreparable spiritual harm to the uninitiated.¹⁰⁷ Outside of the Church, independent Scientologists have spent much of their efforts seeking out and disseminating these same teachings, in the process re-thinking the potential of information alone to cause transcendent and immediate effects on their spiritual lives. In the five decades since KSW was first issued, a small but growing number of these independent Scientologists have adopted internet and computer technologies in their efforts to decentralize and reform Scientology. Their understanding of what information is and how information works has changed along the way, in

¹⁰⁷ "Copyright and Trade Secret Issues on the Internet," Church of Scientology International, accessed October 6, 2018, <http://www.theta.com/copyright/>.

step with contemporary shifts in computer science and largely in response to the rise of internet technologies.

Since his first presentation of *Dianetics* to the American public in 1950, Hubbard tied his vision of the Scientology technology to a concern with the relationship between humans and information. Borrowing on the cultural capital afforded the sciences in America during the Cold War, Hubbard celebrated the computer as the ultimate information machine and used computer programming language to describe the evolutionary movements of the thetan as it worked its way through the Bridge to Total Freedom.¹⁰⁸ Like many of his contemporaries, Hubbard celebrated the liberatory potential of an imagined perfect computer, capable of fantastically complex problem-solving and the eventual instantiation of a social utopia. Hubbard co-opted computer programming rhetoric and aesthetics to describe the Scientology program, tapping into the cultural valence of the perfect computing machine by locating it centrally in his theology: “What would you want in a computing machine?” Hubbard asked in *Dianetics: the Modern Science of Mental Health*, “The analytical mind is not just a good computer, it is a perfect computer.”¹⁰⁹

Hubbard described the human brain as the “perfect computer” or information machine. In his rendering of the mind, information (or “data”) is input into the brain through sense simulation and then processed to solve problems. Engrams, or negative or false recordings captured by what Hubbard identified as the “reactive mind,” were “bad data” that prevented the otherwise “perfect

¹⁰⁸ James R. Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003); and James R. Lewis, “The Science Canopy: Religion, Legitimacy and the Charisma of Science,” *Temenos* 46(1) (2010): 7–29.

¹⁰⁹ Hubbard, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (Los Angeles: Bridge Publications, 2007), 56.

computer” from producing the correct result.¹¹⁰ Although analogizing the human mind to the computer was a common metaphor at the time Hubbard was writing, he was adamant that he was speaking literally. The mind is a computer, Hubbard argued again and again, and it can, and should, be restored to its perfect state through the removal of engrams.¹¹¹

Hubbard believed that the correct functioning of information processing separated humans from animals. When the mind is given bad data, Hubbard argued, it “short circuits,” causing humans to react rather than analyze and blurring the distinction between themselves and animals. Similarly, all errors in thought, Hubbard explained, were always simply the result of insufficient or erroneous data. This implied that all answers produced by the computer mind are always as right as they possibly can be given the data provided.¹¹² By 1953, Hubbard had introduced Scientology as a spiritual science capable of removing engrams through processes called “auditing,” eventually resulting in the restoration of the computer mind to its original, perfect state of “clear.” Directly borrowed from computer sciences, Hubbard described clearing as a process akin to that of clearing a calculator:

The analytical mind, when the reactive mind has been restimulated and exhausted by artificial means, instantly clears itself. This can be considered to make new circuits and computations available. The action does not change in any slightest degree the basic personality of the individual, but delivers to that personality a clear mind relieved of harmful emotional content and an organism which is no longer anxiously telegraphing information about false, but nevertheless real, pain.¹¹³

As Hugh Urban has argued, the CoS’s dominating concern for secrecy, surveillance, control, initiation, and universality stems from both the cultural norms of upper-middle class

¹¹⁰ Hubbard, *Dianetics: The Modern Science*, 52–56.

¹¹¹ Hubbard, *Dianetics: The Modern Science*; Hubbard, *Dianetics: The Original Thesis* (Los Angeles: Bridge Publications, 2007); and Hubbard, *Dianetics: The Evolution of a Science*.

¹¹² Hubbard, *Dianetics: The Modern Science*.

¹¹³ Hubbard *Dianetics: The Original Thesis*, 121.

white America of the 1950s and far older European esoteric and hermetic traditions.¹¹⁴ Emerging in the American west in 1952, the Scientology was born in a nation whose relationship to big science was still evolving in the wake of Cold War nuclear technology and the emerging critiques of the ecology movement. Scientology identifies with a utopian and unrestrained celebration of big science, going so far as to describe itself as a universal scientific method as well as the ultimate religion. It promised that humanity could reach its full potential with the proper “application” of “standardized religious technology.”¹¹⁵

Hubbard’s concern over the corrupting presence of bad data was common in the cultural climate of the Cold War. At the same time as Hubbard was issuing lectures about the dangers of negative data, mathematicians Norbert Wiener and Claude Shannon were working on the problem of entropy and the natural degradation of information in the developing field of cybernetics. Wiener and Shannon also believed in the transformative power of information, which they defined as the content of the feedback loop existing between humans and their world. In Wiener’s view, information cycled serially through stages of reception, use, adaptation, and output, serving as the main arbiter of our relationship to the world and directly influencing our quality of life, but always suffering loss through natural processes of degradation.¹¹⁶

Although concerns over entropy dominated the field of cybernetics for much of its first decade, by the end of the 1950s Wiener had begun to re-articulate the theory and definition of

¹¹⁴ Hugh Urban, “Secrecy and New Religious Movements: Concealment, Surveillance, and Privacy in a New Age of Information,” *Religion Compass* 2(1) (2008): 66-83; and Urban, “Fair Game: Secrecy, Security, and the Church of Scientology in Cold War America,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74(2) (2006): 356–89.

¹¹⁵ Church of Scientology International, *Scientology: Theology & Practice of a Contemporary Religion* (Los Angeles: Bridge Publications, 1998).

¹¹⁶ Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, 2nd rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954), 17–19, 26.

information by focusing on process rather than storage.¹¹⁷ He increasingly described information as an organism that, because it was a process rather than a discrete entity, worked through growth and escape. Information, he claimed, naturally breaks national boundaries and efforts at control. Hence, the attempts of Cold War political agents to control information through secrecy and bureaucracy would not only ultimately fail but would also contort the proper development of information through dissemination adaption.¹¹⁸

Wiener's understanding of information as an organic process reflected larger cultural transformation in the American imagination of the nature of information. By the late 1960s, science was the target of multipronged attack arising from an increasing public awareness of environmental destruction, the ethical transgressions of scientists (in, for example, the "medical experiments" of Nazi scientists), and the specter of the atomic bomb. Bureaucratic, authoritative, and hierarchical ways of knowing were challenged by countercultural experiments attempting to change how the world was known. The American counterculture often articulated these experiments through a rhetoric of disease and cure, claiming that American society was radically sick and required treatment at its very core.¹¹⁹ Information and its control had been central to the Cold War ethos, but the very same computer programmers and engineers who had been employed by the military to keep information under control began to articulate new values concerning the nature and potential of information. Information, they claimed, was something

¹¹⁷ Cybernetics is a term coined by Norbert Wiener in 1948 and first presented to a non-specialized public in his 1954 text *The Human Use of Human Beings*. There Wiener defined cybernetics as the probabilistic theory of messages as means of control, especially as it is applied to the automation of information machines. See Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, 15.

¹¹⁸ Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, 119–121. For contemporary manifestations of this idea, see Andy Greenberg, *This Machine Kills Secrets: How WikiLeaks, Cypherpunks, and Hacktivists Aim to Free the World's Information* (New York: Dutton, 2012); and Lawrence Lessig, *Code: Version 2.0* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

¹¹⁹ Ira Chernus, *Nuclear Madness: Religion and the Psychology of the Nuclear Age* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 57.

powerful, something transformative—a mobile process that benefited from the values and practices of open access, modification, and distribution.

Open Source Scientology: Countercultural Visions of Information

An increasing amount of scholarly attention has been paid in recent years to the ways in which computer technologies and the American counterculture became entwined in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.¹²⁰ The San Francisco Bay area became an important site in this development both because the most influential computer engineers and programmers involved in early computer culture lived in the area and because it was an important pilgrimage site for activists, hippies, poets, and dropouts. Through these decades, the San Francisco area fostered an environment that melded spiritual and technological pursuits towards many of the common goals of the counterculture: the search for a utopian, equal society free from the shackles and maladies that were understood to be plaguing mainstream America.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow identifies the American counterculture, in part, as a movement deeply marked by the departure from “home dwelling” religions of the 1940s and 1950s to the “seeker spirituality” of the 1960s and 1970s.¹²¹ Increasingly influenced by the co-optation of Eastern traditions and a disillusionment with bureaucracy, hierarchy, and “the

¹²⁰ See Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984); Stef Aupers, “‘Where the Zeroes Meet the Ones’: Exploring the Affinity between Magic and Computer Technology,” in *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital* (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 219-238; David Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention*, 1st ed. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1997); Theodore Roszak, *From Satori to Silicon Valley: San Francisco and the American Counterculture* (San Francisco: Don’t Call It Frisco Press, 1986); and Theodore Roszak, *The Cult of Information: A Neo-Luddite Treatise on High Tech, Artificial Intelligence, and the True Art of Thinking*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

¹²¹ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

system,” “seeker spirituality” emphasized the decentralized journey of an individual seeking metaphysical truths that conformed with one's own internal sense of “authenticity.” Seekers placed an emphasis on an anti-authoritarian journey that was also an individualized expression of one's inner self. Seekers informed one another on their journeys, creating and experimenting with radical new ways of organizing social life. Communal living, new religious movements, sexual and gender experimentation, and anti-capitalist environmentalism all were highlighted by these seeker spiritualities.

The image of the seeker as anarchic individual relied in large part on its rejection of a Cold War vision of “systems.” McCarthy-era policies emphasized citizens' reliance on rational, functional systems for nurturance and protection. The military industrial system was especially emphasized as a locus for security, stability, and power. As the Cold War ramped up in intensity, the economic systems underlying the United States became increasingly dependent on military industry, and the systems of instrumental rationality and the military became conflated. As Todd Gitlin writes, “Science was mobilized by industry, and capital was channeled by government as never before.”¹²² By 1960 such an emphasis was placed on science and the university that America became the first nation in the world to have more college students than farmers. Science, as Ira Chernus writes, “became our faith.”¹²³

The counterculture responded to that faith alternatively by abandoning it or intensifying it. Theodore Roszak identifies two dominant tendencies that shaped countercultural approaches to technology, one that believed it to be dystopian, and one that believed it to be utopian.¹²⁴ The

¹²² Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987): 13.

¹²³ Ira Chernus, *Nuclear Madness: Religion and the Psychology of the Nuclear Age*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

¹²⁴ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), 1-10.

former advocated the complete abandonment of science and its technological counterparts, often urging a return to the earth and an emphasis on the “natural,” the “organic,” and the “holistic.” Techno-revisionists, on the other hand, believed that technology could provide the path to utopian futures. Their vision of technology emphasized individual liberation through accessing networked, communal relations.¹²⁵ They highlighted the personalizing effects and structures of technology, arguing that individuals could use technology to express and liberate themselves while also connecting to other humans in a more egalitarian way through networked communities.

Later as the first digital spaces emerged on the worldwide web, many of the programmers and engineers involved in the counterculture adopted the techno-revisionist logic to envision virtual spaces as the first loci of truly egalitarian communication. Virtual technologies, they thought, would be the first tool humankind could use to overcome all of the social problems of meat spaces (the racialized, gendered, and classist readings of the bodies of Others that prevented egalitarian communication between peoples in the physical world).¹²⁶ Digital technologies opened the portal to a cyberspace that everyone to entered on equal footing, allowing the discovery of an imagined pure and authentic subjectivity. (This theme is explored at greater length in chapter three.)

In 1968 Stewart Brand’s popular counterculture magazine, the *Whole Earth Catalog*, advocated for the liberating potential of technology to realize social utopia, pointing to the ways

¹²⁵ Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, 10.

¹²⁶ Sorin Adam Matei, “From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Virtual Community Discourse and the Dilemma of Modernity,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 10, no. 3 (April 1, 2005), <https://academic.oup.com/jcmc/article/10/3/JCMC1031/4614532>.

in which information alone could liberate the seeker.¹²⁷ Like Hubbard, Brand believed that the proper information, received at the right time, had total transformative power. But Brand also believed that Moore's Law—the demonstrated pattern of technology to store greater and greater amounts of information at a rapidly cheaper cost—was demonstrative of the utopian nature of information itself and would eventually culminate in a world radicalized by the imminence of information.¹²⁸ Today Brand is credited for the popular tech-activist slogan “information wants to be free,” and the *Whole Earth Catalog* has been described as advocating a “new Jeffersonian democracy based, not upon equal distribution of land, but upon equal access to information.”¹²⁹

Brand succeeded in creating an alternative vision of computing that depicted information technologies not as weapons of the cold war, but as personal computers capable of empowering individuals to act as engineers of the counterculture. The use of the personal computer, now conceived as an amplifier of an individual's ideas, became in and of itself a countercultural act. The *Whole Earth Catalog* advocated for this “tool centric” worldview, arguing that technologies would allow for a fully democratic and decentralized evolution of society. The counterculture's scorn for centralized authority,” Brand wrote, “provided the philosophical foundations of not only the leaderless Internet but also the entire personal-computer revolution.”¹³⁰

It is this countercultural conceptualization of information as a process or organism with total transformative power and its accompanying values of open access, modification, and distribution, that fueled the Church of Scientology's struggle with its online opponents. And it is

¹²⁷ Roszak, *From Satori to Silicon Valley*, 145.

¹²⁸ Roszak, *From Satori to Silicon Valley*, 147.

¹²⁹ Roszak, *From Satori to Silicon Valley*, 147.

¹³⁰ Stewart Brand, “We owe it all to the hippies” *Time Magazine*, March 1, 1995, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,982602,00.html>

this anarchical understanding of the nature of information and how humans should relate to information that has given rise to new forms of practice and belief among Open Source Scientologists.

Open Source Scientologists often conceptualize the internet in ways that echo Brand and other countercultural computer scientists. Demographically, they are most often ex-members of the CoS who maintain that the Scientology tech works even if the Church has become corrupted. Their continued belief in the efficacy of auditing methods, the importance of definition and clarity of word use, and the ability of the Scientology tech to advance their spiritual lives leads these ex-members to seek Scientology practices and resources outside of official Church control.

Despite the CoS's efforts to use intellectual property laws to guard its esoteric scriptures, independent Scientologists have had great success in accessing an astonishing amount of secret religious material online. Since the hacktivist Project Chanology began in 2008, resources from within the CoS have been distributed, mirrored, and scattered across the internet, producing a massive collection of information. Popular websites like Xenu.net, TruthAbout-Scientology.com, and whyweprotest.net are central stops in net rings that provide the public with instantaneous access to a broad range of material, including copies of confidential teachings such as the controversial OT materials, internal memos, government affidavits, international news coverage, and personal staff files (including L. Ron Hubbard's birth and death certificates).

Yet the turn to the internet can also be complicated for independent Scientologists. These sites are often run by people explicitly categorized by the CoS as "suppressive persons" (or sps) and represent a transgression not only against loyalties to the Church but also against the ideals of information control at the heart of official CoS practices. Ex-Scientologists routinely report that internet use is adamantly discouraged within the CoS, not only because of the possibility of

accessing advanced esoteric materials but also because of the net's propensity towards "black pr" (negative information spread by suppressive persons during disinformation campaigns).¹³¹

Much of the independent Scientology activity online consists of advertisements for independent auditing services and training because these practitioners are working to build reputations, paying clientele, and new lineages of authority for control of the tech. Yet a vocal subset of independent Scientologists use these networks for another purpose. These are Open Source Scientologists, who believe that "open sourcing" Scientology will allow all of humanity to access the materials they need to spiritually advance across the Bridge to Total Freedom.¹³²

Free and open-source software (FOSS) is a method of software production, dissemination, and code architecture that relinquishes control over the behavior of the recipient of the software as a basic condition of access.¹³³ Once software code has been produced and handed off to the user, the user is free to modify, distribute, and change the code without fear of legal repercussions. Members of FOSS communities reverse the popularly imagined relationship between authority and technology. Rather than linking technological advancement to the control of the technology by elites (such as engineers, computer scientists, and professionals), they believe that technology will be better advanced by the promotion of the fast and spontaneous innovation that results from communal participatory construction and adaptation of the code.

¹³¹ "The Scientologists Freezone Information," Association of Professional Independent Scientologists, last modified 2006, <http://scientologistsfreezone.com/information.shtml>.

¹³² Patterson, "Open Source Scientology."

¹³³ E. Gabriella Coleman, *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 187.

They re-imagine the FOSS platform itself, rather than experts' control, as central to the success and development of technology.¹³⁴

FOSS programmers often tie this belief that software code is best improved through communal participation to the promotion of human freedoms around knowledge production and access. The ability to work directly with the code, it is believed, is a freedom that cultivates self-expression, education, and citizen activism.¹³⁵ These freedoms translate into a moral imperative of hard work, collaboration, and social advancement, as these communities interpret the very freedom of adaptation and play as “a necessary precondition for a world where ‘software doesn’t suck.’”¹³⁶

Open Source Scientologists understand Scientology technology using the terms of the FOSS software community. They see Scientology tech as the source code for spiritual evolution and argue that Scientology can only succeed if Scientologists adopt an open access approach to the tech. One of the leading advocates for Open Source Scientology, Geir Isene, draws explicit connections between software and Scientology tech based on his biography. Isene's authority among independent Scientologists is based both on his claim to have been a high-ranking Scientologist in his 25 years in the Church and on his experience as a computer professional. He claims to have left the Church in 2006 after mounting public controversies caused him to conduct his own online research into the movement despite the Church taboo against internet use. Since then, Isene has drawn on his experiences with free and open source software to make

¹³⁴ Russ Nelson, “Defining Open Source,” *Open Source Business Resource*, September 2007, <https://timreview.ca/article/74>.

¹³⁵ Coleman, *Coding Freedom*, 3.

¹³⁶ Nelson, “Defining Open Source.”

Scientology open source, arguing that it is time to “stop the technology of L. Ron Hubbard from being dragged down by misapplication and the ensuing bad pr.”¹³⁷

Implicit in the Open Source Scientology movement is a suspicion that the professional guardians of Scientology tech have been secretly and inappropriately altering it for their own purposes. These suspicions often focus on David Miscavige, the contemporary leader of the CoS and the Chairman of the Religious Technology Center. The Religious Technology Center is the CoS organization dedicated to policing the illegal dissemination of Scientology texts and is the primary organization responsible for copyright and trademarking Scientology materials. Open Source Scientologist posting under the pseudonym TRUTH, for example, argues that making the original materials open source “would be awesome because it would allow humankind to study Scientology without Miscavige’s [*sic*] influence/alteration in the tech.”¹³⁸ Blaming Miscavige and other CoS leaders for a secretive and controlling approach to information (which, as we have seen, started with Hubbard) allows Open Source Scientologists to argue that their versions of Scientology are more original and “authentic” than those of the present-day Church.

Practitioners involved in the Open Source Scientology movement believe that adopting FOSS methodologies would preserve the sacrality of Hubbard’s technology, which they see as the source code of Open Source Scientology, while simultaneously allowing each individual to alter the code according to their own spiritual needs. This double movement of preservation and alteration, bound up in narratives of authenticity, allows these Scientologists to claim that their tech is authentic in both its source (the original tech of L.R. Hubbard) and its liberation from

¹³⁷ Geir Isene, “Doubt Write-up on the Church of Scientology,” Xenu.net, last modified 2009, http://www.xenu.net/archive/personal_story/20090807-Geir_Isene_doubt_COS.pdf.

¹³⁸ Geir Isene, “Open Sourcing Scientology,” *Geir Isene: Straight Talk on Scientology*, last modified October 11, 2009, <http://elysianchakorta.wordpress.com/2009/10/11/open-sourcing-scientology/>.

corrupt authority. In other words, once the tech has been freed from corrupt influences, Open Source Scientologists believe it will continue to advance. Open source advocate with the pseudonym “MostlyLurker” illustrates this point vividly when celebrating the liberatory potential of FOSS not only for individual Scientologists, but for the tech itself:

[FOSS would mean] No more hidden data lines. Everything available to be used, evaluate[d] or discarded as one sees fit. That way errors could be corrected... Also in the Open Source Software, with every new release there is usually a list of new features, improvements, corrected bugs... No efforts by developers and users to misrepresent or hide anything. This will make it possible for Scientology to grow and evolve too.¹³⁹

This assumption that open source architecture works as a natural check on corrupting authorities is one shared by both traditional FOSS communities and Open Source Scientologists. Activist scholar Lawrence Lessig, for example, argues that open code does not allow for a singular stable target of regulation but instead presents a mobile network. In other words, FOSS works as a check on regulatory power because it inevitably involves voluntary adoption. Users “take only what they want.”¹⁴⁰

For FOSS communities, the corrupting authority is usually government or commercial control, but in Open Source Scientology, corruption comes from the official Church. Mark Patterson, a vocal proponent for Open Source Scientology, described this process:

We are in a new era. One can call it ‘Open Source Scientology’. If you had asked me in 1995 about whether or not Linux, an open source operating system for computers, could be any good, I would have answered ‘absolutely not!’ There is no real central control, and everyone who contributes to it is not paid, but does it for free, and it is free to use by anyone who wants to use it. Of course it is crap! The Open Source movement in software is the most improbable thing I have ever heard of – and yet it works. Linux is the standard operating system for powerful computer servers. You can get it for free, or you can pay money to a company that standardizes it and tests it, and will support it for you – your choice. But it is free.

¹³⁹ Geir Isene, “Open Sourcing Scientology.”

¹⁴⁰ Lawrence Lessig, *Code: And Other Laws of Cyberspace* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 105-107.

And it is free from serious corporate or government influence... We are at the stage now where the only option for Scientology is open source. This is anathema to purists, and I know Ron would have issues with this, but Ron's been dead for 25 years, and the top-down totalitarian method of keeping the tech in has not worked.¹⁴¹

Open Source Scientologists' argument that the Church has corrupted the original tech echoes the language of the Protestant Reformation. Both movements argued that the individual, if presented with access to information (whether the text of the Bible or Hubbard's tech), can lead their own spiritual life more authentically than when they instructed by external authorities in what to do and believe. Open Source Scientologists believe that an information architecture based on FOSS, combined with the instant access of internet search engines, will allow practitioners to reassert control over their spiritual lives.

Open Source Scientologists broadly claim that their belief in the freedom of information has explicit doctrinal precedent within Scientology. Most often cited is L. Ron Hubbard's famous quote from his 1965 essay "My Philosophy": "The first principle of my own philosophy is that wisdom is meant for anyone who wishes to reach for it. It is the servant of the commoner and king alike and should never be regarded with awe."¹⁴² Combining this quotation with Hubbard's assertion, "The work was free. Keep it so," Open Source Scientologists often argue that an open source relationship to information was always at the heart of the CoS, even if it could not be effectively realized early on.¹⁴³

Pirate Religion

¹⁴¹ Mark Patterson, "Open Source Scientology."

¹⁴² Hubbard, "Keeping Scientology Working, Series 1." HCO Policy Letter, 1965.

¹⁴³ Hubbard, "Keeping Scientology Working."

The struggle between the Church of Scientology and Open Source Scientologists reflects not only larger concerns in Scientology over the nature of information, but also shifting cultural imaginations of information, authority, textual control, and ownership. FOSS is fundamentally about organizing a new kind of relationship to information. For L. Ron Hubbard and the CoS, information has been embedded in Cold War values of control, manipulation, and graded access. For Open Source Scientologists, the sacral power of information remains intact, in that the confidential materials and the tech are still totally transformative and lie at the heart of Scientology belief and practice, but information has been re-imagined as organic rather than static. Information, according to Open Source Scientologists, grows with adoption and modification rather than decaying from an onslaught of entropy when removed from precise control. These contrasting beliefs mirror larger cultural shifts in how we think about information, including religious information, in the context of emerging new digital technologies.

At the heart of Open Source Scientology lies a double movement of preservation and alteration bound up with narratives of authenticity. Restructuring their relationship to the tech allows these Scientologists to argue that their movement is inherently more authentic than the Church, demonstrating that, while approaches to modification of religious texts may be changing in the information age, the belief in textual authority remains. As J.R. Lewis has shown, independent Scientologists have shifted their strategies of legitimation from ones that privilege the rhetoric of science (the primary legitimization strategy of the CoS) to locating spiritual authority solely in the writings of L. Ron Hubbard. This shift, Lewis argues, has helped independent Scientologists critique the CoS while turning to the internet and mass digital

technologies as a means to access Hubbard's materials despite the Church taboos against internet use.¹⁴⁴

There is still much work to be done on the question of what Open Source Scientology can tell us about our changing cultural context more broadly. How does Open Source Scientology change our understanding of what kinds of values, aesthetics, and worldviews are likely to be celebrated online, and which will be patrolled for their transgressions? Contrasting Open Source Scientology with the Church of Scientology's attempts to use copyright protection to control the distribution of its esoteric materials online gives us new insight into Scientology's contemporary struggles. It allows us to better understand the competing definitions of information that are at stake between various parties and to better understand what how these competing interests inform internet citizenry practices more broadly.

Beginning with what is now an infamous altercation with alt.religion in the mid-1990s, the CoS has aggressively employed copyright and trade secret litigation against internet users who attempt to publish, duplicate, and access confidential Scientology materials online. This effort at online censorship has become so central to Church priorities that an affiliated organization, the Religious Technology Center, was established in 1996 to protect the tech from internet "abusers." Calling these confidential religious secrets "advanced tech materials," the CoS has argued for the removal of sacred information from the internet on the grounds that the materials "are not only copyrighted and trade secrets but also confidential religious texts."¹⁴⁵ This claim has produced a number of major copyright and intellectual property lawsuits involving the attempted application of the rhetoric of religious rights to the evolving medium of

¹⁴⁴ James Lewis, "The Dwindling Spiral: The Dror Center Schism, the Cook Letter and Scientology's Legitimation Crisis," *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 5, no. 1 (2014): 55-77.

¹⁴⁵ Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 179.

the internet and to intellectual property law, resulting in a prolonged struggle between freedom of information activists, internet users, and the CoS that has been colloquially labelled “Scientology v. the Internet.”¹⁴⁶

In his essay “God Save this Honourable Court,” Jonathan Z. Smith argued that it is in the bleak offices of the Internal Revenue Service that some of the most important political consequences of the term “religion” have been accomplished. Always careful to call our attention to the ways in which the category “religion” is reflective of historical, cultural, and political contests, Smith argued that it is in the deceptively anonymous act of deciding whether an organization qualifies for tax-exempt status that the U.S. government worked to declare some religious movements authentically real and some not.¹⁴⁷

Yet increasingly, for new religious movements a different branch of the government is doing this work, one equally mundane and, perhaps, equally insidious. Over the past two decades copyright law has become an important ground on which new religious movements battle for legal protections and rights.¹⁴⁸ At stake in these battles is the control over access to religious doctrine and practice, the legally sanctioned suppression of “heretical” movements, and changing definitions of “scripture” in an information age.

¹⁴⁶ See J. Lippard and J. Jacobson, “Scientology v. the Internet: Free Speech & Copyright Infringement on the Information Super-Highway,” *Skeptic* 3(3) (1995): 35–41; A. Brill and A. Packard, “Silencing Scientology’s Critics on the Internet: A Mission Impossible?,” *Communications and the Law* 19(4) (1997): 1–23; and Douglas E. Cowan, “Contested Spaces: Movement, Countermovement, and E-Space Propaganda,” in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (New York: Routledge, 2004), 255–273.

¹⁴⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith, “God Save This Honourable Court: Religion and Civic Discourse,” in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), 375–390.

¹⁴⁸ Thomas F. Cotter, “Gutenberg’s Legacy: Copyright, Censorship, and Religious Pluralism,” *California Law Review* 91(2) (March 2003): 323–392.

Legal historian and former intellectual property lawyer Thomas Cotter has argued that over the past 50 years American and Western European courts have witnessed a dramatic increase in the use of copyright to censor minority religions. The dominant pattern in these cases follows this scenario:

Group 2 breaks off from Group 1, reproduces/adapts/distributes Group 1 religious texts (either for practice or critique), while in the meantime the original group, Group 1, will file for copyright infringement successfully, and *despite* the defendants having claimed the need to use the texts for religious practice.¹⁴⁹

This process positions the secular authority of the state to act as heresiologist with the ability to discount some religious movements as inauthentic. Given this power to grant or deny access to the written forms of sacred texts and the resulting larger consequences of the state's role in constructing and maintaining both the public and private limits of religious practice in the forms of property and ownership, intellectual property legislation is an important emerging arena in the broader public and legal negotiation of media, markets, money, and "religion" in the West.

The origins of copyright legislation are closely linked to the rise of Protestant Christianity. Among other things, the Reformation led to the mass distribution of the Bible and the subsequent loss of control of the text, with a dramatic proliferation of vernacular translations. By 1529, England's King Henry VIII attempted to stem this proliferation through the Proclamation Enforcing Statutes Against Heresy, which forbade the dissemination and possession of heretical works. Henry employed the Stationer's Company guild to police the statute; in return the guild received the exclusive rights to publish certain texts. Copyright battles, in this way, were an important part of the complex chapter of early modern European history in which "religion" came to be defined as increasingly privatized and increasingly subject to the logics of the marketplace.

¹⁴⁹ Cotter, "Gutenberg's Legacy," 330-331 (emphasis in original).

Underlying these historical developments is an important relationship between how citizens of liberal modernity think about scripture not only in terms of access and ownership, but also in terms of materiality. The “book” has long served as one of the primary anchors by which we popularly envision scripture, but as we move further into a new “information age” we witness new ways of relating to texts and textuality as the digital transmutes this materiality from the personal book to the public virtual forum. Technologies afforded by present digital and internet architectures are reshaping the ways humans relate to sacred traditions in dramatic ways that are not entirely new, but which have for the most part not yet been adequately explored by scholars.

Copyright considerations are further complicated when we recognize that the Church of Scientology is an esoteric religion—insider knowledge is reserved for, and granted to, members of the organization that are elite in some way. Esoteric knowledge is generally understood either to be too dangerous for the uninitiated or too complex to be successfully (and correctly) grasped by the untrained mind.¹⁵⁰ Scientology is unique in that virtually all members become initiates of sacred knowledge when they enter the Church. Initiation to each new level of spiritual training within the Church occurs through a process called “auditing.” It takes several years and cost several hundreds of thousands of dollars to successfully complete the process. At each level a new layer of secret religious material is unveiled, building on the Scientologist’s preparation in previous training levels to be able to receive this new information with the appropriate spiritual foundation. The Church likens this hierarchical practice to the acceptance of fundamental beliefs among Christians (such as belief in the resurrection of Jesus for Protestants or pro-life beliefs for Catholics), arguing that premature exposure to secret materials presents a major impediment to

¹⁵⁰ Urban, “Secrecy and New Religious Movements.”

proper spiritual development, further pushing away Scientology's ultimate goal of spiritual enlightenment for all peoples on the planet.¹⁵¹

The Church of Scientology maintains that auditing sessions do not have set financial costs. Because of the relatively short history of the religion, the Church stresses that donations for auditing and spiritual training are the primary ways by which the Church is able to function and that these training donations are similar to tithing within Christianity.¹⁵² The Church also explains that donations are the primary method of church funding "because it is the most equitable" and that all funding goes back into the community (following the requirements of a non-profit organization).¹⁵³ In a somewhat contradictory turn, though, the Church also details a number of free and public services available to those who are not able to afford donations for services or training, suggesting that financial donations are indeed required to progress to the more advanced levels of spiritual training.¹⁵⁴

The Church of Scientology states that their use of legal actions to maintain secrecy is a major mark of the success of religious freedoms in the U.S., stating that "trade secret and copyright laws are the secular vehicle to protect the core religious precepts of the Church" and

¹⁵¹ "Why is everything copyrighted and trademarked in Scientology?" Church of Scientology International, accessed October 25, 2018, <https://www.scientology.org/faq/scientology-in-society/why-is-everything-copyrighted-and-trademarked-in-scientology.html>.

¹⁵² "How are churches of Scientology financially funded?" Church of Scientology International, accessed October 27, 2018, <https://www.scientology.org/faq/church-funding/church-funding.html>.

¹⁵³ "What is the significance of the IRS ruling regarding churches of Scientology?" Church of Scientology International, accessed October 27, 2018, <https://www.scientology.org/faq/church-funding/significance-of-irs-ruling.html>.

¹⁵⁴ "What about those who cannot afford to make donations for services?" Church of Scientology International, accessed October 27, 2018, <https://www.scientology.org/faq/church-funding/what-about-those-without-funds-for-donations.html>.

that “when these trade secret rights and copyrights are violated, so are the First Amendment rights of all Scientologists.”¹⁵⁵ Access to secret materials is by invitation only, although the criteria for that invitation is left mostly unknown to the general public as the Church only goes so far as to explain: “To gain access to these materials, more is expected of a Scientologist than spiritual advancement. Access is not automatic, nor is it dependent solely upon donations. It is by invitation only.”¹⁵⁶

The church’s emphasis on the secrecy of its religious information reflects important preoccupations of a 1950s Cold War America. The Church of Scientology has encapsulated, and in many ways, calcified these American norms within the Church’s structure. While outsiders may see these rules of secrecy and hierarchy as a form of censorship, the Church appears to understand these principles through the lenses of safety, security, and the application of a spiritual science. With the rise of the internet and new digital technologies, the Church of Scientology has been unable to keep their secrets secret, and even though the Church has been recognized as a religion for First Amendment purposes, it has struggled to obtain copyright and trademark protection of its internal religious materials. Today the Church has only succeeded in slowing the dissemination of Church materials online through the use of these laws. Given Cotter’s insight that copyright law is increasingly used to police religious dissent, it is worth pausing to briefly consider some of the details of these cases.

Since 1995, Scientology has participated in at least seven major lawsuits related to copyright infringement.¹⁵⁷ Hugh Urban charts the most important copyright battles involving

¹⁵⁵ “Why does the Church have confidential scriptures?” Church of Scientology International, <https://www.scientology.org/faq/scientology-in-society/why-does-church-have-confidential-scriptures.html>.

¹⁵⁶ Church of Scientology International, “Why does the Church have confidential scriptures?”

¹⁵⁷ Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 183.

Scientology in *The Church of Scientology*. These are too complex to describe at length here, but what is significant is that esoteric religious materials were presented as evidence in an ongoing civil case between the Church and an ex-Scientologist (spanning from 1980 to 2002). These materials were eventually marked for public consumption at the clerk's office by a judge in the mid-1980s. Despite attempts by the Church to jam access through the brute force of hundreds of photocopy requests (thereby keeping the documents occupied and therefore not accessible to the waiting public), the *Los Angeles Times* was able to obtain OT materials and make them public in 1985.¹⁵⁸ After this ordeal the Church changed legal tactics, forgoing a defense based on religious harm to one based on economic harm. In 1999 the Church argued that "its advanced tech materials are trade secrets *precisely because they are so expensive*."¹⁵⁹

Unfortunately, by 2009 any success the Church had in keeping their esoteric materials secret was undone through a highly public feud with the popular online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*. *Wikipedia*'s arbitration council had found that numerous editors using difficult to track IP addresses were repeatedly editing hundreds of articles across the site in a concerted propaganda and disinformation campaign.¹⁶⁰ They had edited articles so that Scientology was bolstered, while anything the Church didn't like (psychology, for example) was edited in a negative light. In a 10-0 decision, the council voted to permanently ban all users with IP addresses associated with Scientology. Until this point, *Wikipedia* had never banned anyone.

Scientology's actions on *Wikipedia* are a prime example of what some scholars call "information terrorism." New religious movements scholar Massimo Introvigne defines

¹⁵⁸ Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 183.

¹⁵⁹ Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 186 (emphasis in the original).

¹⁶⁰ Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 189.

information terrorism as a verbal “terrorist” strategy of disseminating information “aimed at damaging or destroying” an individual, movement, or corporate entity with defamation, perception management, spamming, lying, or systematic copyright infringement.¹⁶¹ Introvigne argues that information terrorism is especially relevant to the scholarly study of NRMs online, as NRMs are already familiar with many of the strategies of information terrorism from the American cult wars and anti-cult movements of the twentieth century. For Introvigne, this reality means that groups with better technology and technological skill sets can create social hierarchies online in order to win the “information overload” game; they can cut through the information overload of the Web so that their messages rise to the front pages.

Copyright infringement is a particularly effective strategy of information terrorism precisely because it can render the most important assets of a corporation meaningless.¹⁶² Over the past fifty years, American and European courts have witnessed a dramatic increase in the use of copyright litigation in the effort to censor minority religions as courts enforce copyright protection over the right to reproduce, adapt, or distribute texts for religious practice. As more NRMs are subjected to copyright litigation, either because they use it or because groups seeking to control them do, information terrorism will become an increasingly important lens through which to understand the politics of religious pluralism online.

Finally, the tension between the CoS’s efforts to maintain its esotericism and Project Chanology’s wide distribution of secret Scientology materials across the internet have led some scholars to question the ethical legitimacy of using those materials in scholarship. Sociologist and new religious movements scholar Jeffrey K. Haden has argued that the decision by some scholars to validate Project Chanology by using secret texts that have been disseminated online is

¹⁶¹ Introvigne, “A Symbolic Universe,” 104.

¹⁶² Dorothy Denning, *Information Warfare and Security* (New York: ACM Press, 1999).

paramount to denying constitutional protections for Scientology. Haden states: “To deny a religious group the right to protect its esoteric knowledge, indeed its most sacred texts, runs contrary to history and the American experience. It constitutes a denial to that group the protection of the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution.”¹⁶³ Yet as Hugh Urban argues in *The Church of Scientology*, the alternative is simply to pretend that these materials are not available, even as other movements (Anonymous, ex-Scientologists, independent Scientologists) use them for new purposes.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to move our reflection on these questions forward by introducing competing understandings of the nature of information that have been particularly influential in American culture since the mid-twentieth century. The hacker collective Anonymous—an organization that is in important respects an inverse to the Church Scientology—became a close ally for independent Scientologists who were otherwise cut off from their religious scriptures. Beginning in the 1990s, Open Source Software served as a structuring metaphor for a number of important independent Scientologists. These conflicting ideologies of information and access have led to a surprising intersection where the claims of esoteric religion and the legal structure of copyright and trade mark law run up against demands for the free flow of all information.

The following chapter will build on the histories and contested perspectives on information set out here to explore how some of these perspectives are at work—in a new form—in the theology of the Missionary Church of Kopimism, a new religion that claims digital piracy as its most sacred religious practice. The Missionary Church of Kopimism is useful for this project because it is so heavily influenced by the ideologies of Anonymous and Project

¹⁶³ Jeffrey K. Hadden, quoted in Douglas E. Cowan, “Contested Spaces,” 255.

Chanology—indeed, many Kopimists are active members of Anonymous. Chapter two will explore how the notion of “religion” continues to evolve in an era of information technologies, as I examine how a number of the hacker values that form the foundation of Project Chanology come to be identified as “religious” in their own right.

Chapter 2

Jesus is My Co-Pirate

[Hackers represent] a much larger spiritual challenge to our time.

— Pekka Himanen, *Hacker Ethic*

What is Kopimism? You probably already are one.

—Lauren Pespisa, PirateCon 2012

A Pirate Wedding

A young man, donned in black robes and wearing the Guy Fawkes mask of Anonymous, stands center stage at the 2012 Share Conference in Belgrade. It has been four years since “Message to Scientology,” and Anonymous has become an infamous hacker organization with several high profile, parallel, and fractured projects and sub-groups.¹⁶⁴ What continues to tie the collective together is a loose, moral orientation toward the freedom of information. The Guy Fawkes mask, highly distinctive in Anonymous street protests and online avatars, has become the best-selling mask on the retail website amazon.com.¹⁶⁵ This young man wears the mask and

¹⁶⁴ For a general history of Anonymous’s growth since Project Chanology, see Gabriella Coleman, *E. Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (London: Verso, 2014).

¹⁶⁵ See Nick Bilton, “Masked Protesters Aid Time Warner’s Bottom Line,” *The New York Times*, August 28, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/technology/masked-anonymous-protesters-aid-time-warners-profits.html>; and Nick Carbone, “How Time Warner Profits from the ‘Anonymous’ Hackers,” *Time*, August 29, 2011, <http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/08/29/how-time-warner-profits-from-the-anonymous-hackers/>.

speaks through a computer—typing so that the now familiar voice of “Message to Scientology” and “Response to the Media” rings out new words, words speaking in real time to an audience of several hundred programmers, activists, and engineers. While most of Anonymous is overtly atheist, basing their ethical arguments for information access and distribution on claims that make no reference to the category of religion, this man is different. He is not a member of Anonymous, but rather an officiant of a new religious movement that shares many of the same values as Project Chanology—freedom of information, anti-surveillance, policies of open access, a flare for masks—but that does so in such a way that evokes the language of religion explicitly. This man is a Kopimist, and he is officiating the first Kopimist wedding.

“We are here to announce a new pair of noble peers,” the man announces (through his laptop speakers). “Copying of information is simply right,” he continues, “dissemination of information is ethically right...Do you want to share your love, your knowledge, and your feelings with [the bride] as long as that information exists?”¹⁶⁶ He gently lifts a computer motherboard wrapped in a red ribbon between the bride and groom. The groom, dressed in elaborate pirate regalia, kisses the bride. The bride is dressed, rather fabulously, like an extra from the Ed Wood classic *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. The audience cheers.

In the previous chapter, I introduced these questions by examining competing understandings of information that have been particularly influential in American culture since the mid-twentieth century. I then explored how Anonymous—an organization that is in many ways the inverse of Scientology—became a close ally for independent Scientologists who were otherwise cut off from their religious texts. I then considered how the notion of Open Source Software served as a structuring metaphor for a number of independent Scientologists beginning

¹⁶⁶ “File-Sharing Church’s First Marriage: Noble Peers Encouraged to Mix DNA,” *RT News*, May 8, 2012, <https://www.rt.com/news/church-kopimism-first-wedding-762/>.

in the 1990s, especially as they re-defined their own theological definitions of information and information access and distribution. Finally, I highlighted some of the practical effects the tensions among Scientology, Anonymous, and Open Source Scientology have had on the architecture of the internet itself.

This chapter introduces the Missionary Church of Kopimism—a new religious movement built around the beliefs that copyright restrictions are a cosmic evil and that information freedom a religious right. I will first introduce the Missionary Church of Kopimism (MCK), before turning to consider how the MCK is not an aberration, but instead representative of an important friction or conflict between two distinct ideologies: the hacker ethic and what Max Weber called the Protestant Ethic. The study of new religions like the MCK is valuable precisely because they exemplify broader contemporary concerns and anxieties that may otherwise remain obscure. Exploring the ideology of the MCK can shed valuable light on significant issues that contemporary scholars of religion have often ignored. I will detail how the Protestant Reformation haunts contemporary technological communities, of which the MCK is a part. The most important effect of the legacy of the Protestant Reformation upon these communities has been the broadly Protestant idea (detailed below) that texts and religious knowledge ought to be available for everyone to interpret individually. This ethical commitment has been re-inscribed as a sacred religious practice for Kopimism. Echoes of the Protestant Reformation are found amongst the Kopimists, technological communities, and the hacker ethic.

As a new religious movement, Kopimism unveils a broader ethics of information access that is historically formed by enduring tropes in Western religious history. Because of the MCK's explicit claims to information freedom as a religious value, this chapter also traces out an important new formulation of “religion” in an era of information technology. Like the prior chapter on Scientology, my objective is not to identify something “authentically” religious (or

not religious), but rather to understand how the notion of religion is deployed and activated by the groups I will examine here, the Kopimists and the authors of the *Hacker Ethic* (distinct from the hacker ethic, both of which I will introduce below).

To date there has been very little scholarly analysis that has recognized the community of hackers, the freedom of information, and the rhetoric of religion together as a significant cultural assemblage. My objective in this chapter is to engage in a double movement: (1) connecting this case study to previously “recognized” religious traditions and themes (from Protestant Christianity), while at the same time (2) demonstrating that these new communities are also worth scholarly attention in their own right. My hope is that this investigation will be a useful contribution to religion and media studies, as it offers a new perspective and an easily overlooked case study.

I will begin by introducing the MCK in more detail. I will then place MCK theology within its historical and cultural contexts. Protestant understandings of materiality, access, and information deeply influence Kopimism. These understandings are further shaped by a semi-cohesive set of secular moral, practical, and ideological commitments first popularly identified by Steven Levy as the “hacker ethic.” By tracing the formation of an ethics of circulation that builds on Protestant assumptions and commitments while claiming to be secular, post-Protestant, and, at times, anti-religious, I highlight the need for religious studies scholars to interrogate the bifurcation and deployment of the categories of religion and the secular in communities that share many of the same commitments as Kopimists, including particularly religiously-inflected corporate perspectives emerging out of Silicon Valley (and further investigated below in chapter three).

In these efforts my work is indebted to Kathryn Lofton’s 2017 *Consuming Religion*. In that text, Lofton examines central aspects of popular culture through the lens of religious studies

not because those phenomena are somehow essentially religious, but because the people participating in them deploy the term “religion” to self-describe their own activities.¹⁶⁷ What is at stake for my project, then, is not a question of what religion might be, but rather of how the rhetoric of religion is deployed, activated as a resource, and reconfigured as a living discourse. Though academic debates about how to define religion persist, Lofton’s insight is that “religion” as a category and a form of life is not solely produced and managed by scholars, but rather takes on new contours in the discourses, practices, and collective imaginings of people who deploy the term to identify who they are, what they are doing, and how they are connected to the world around them.¹⁶⁸

The great difficulty with this methodology is that it is impossible fully to understand what people mean when they use the term religion.¹⁶⁹ As I will argue, the Kopimists are informed by twentieth century American discourses of a hacker ethic, which has been formulated, in turn, in opposition to a popularized understanding of Weber’s *Protestant Ethic*. Kopimists and the authors of the *Hacker Ethic* position themselves, to an interesting and significant degree, by how they understand the role of Martin Luther in history. This chapter, then, demonstrates how important themes from the Protestant Reformation, particularly the Protestant work ethic (very broadly conceived), have a surprising continuing legacy both in rhetoric and in distinctive material practices (including the material practices of information access, distribution, and sharing).

A Note on Terms

¹⁶⁷ Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1-4.

¹⁶⁸ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 3.

¹⁶⁹ David Chidester, “Featured Review Essay: Disrupting Religion,” *Journal for the Sociology of Religion* 78 (July 2018): 380.

Recent scholars of secularism have made a wide range of arguments detailing that the “religious” and the “secular” are not, in fact, distinctly opposite cultural formations but are better understood as interlocked and formative of one another.¹⁷⁰ In chapter four below, I will focus on the relationship between secularism and religion (particularly in discourses about technology and dis/enchantments), but even in the present chapter it is important to clarify what I mean by these two concepts. For my purposes here, I will draw on secularism studies that focus on American religious history and that have carefully detailed how modern Western secularism inherits cultural attitudes and values from both the Reformation and the Enlightenment. These scholars demonstrate that secularism has, in many ways, been configured by Protestant thinkers who imagined a world animated by individuals rather than collectives and that diffusely Protestant ways of being (and social norms) have been re-imagined as secular standards.¹⁷¹

In my analysis of the religious influences that shape my objects of study in this chapter, I will use the very broad term “Protestant,” because of this trajectory in secularism studies, because of the explicit references within the *Hacker Ethic* to Protestantism (including references to Martin Luther and Weber’s *Protestant Work Ethic*), and because of the implicit effort to structure the Kopimist religion on standards of “religion” deeply informed by Protestant Christianity.¹⁷² I use this term in a very broad fashion, both to acknowledge the dynamic

¹⁷⁰ For representative examples, see Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007); Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Secularisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); and John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America: With Reference to Ghosts, Protestant Subcultures, Machines, and Their Metaphors; Featuring Discussions of Mass Media, Moby-Dick, Spirituality, Phrenology, Anthropology, Sing Sing State Penitentiary, and Sex with the New Motive Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

¹⁷¹ Kathryn Lofton, “Secular Shadowboxing,” *Critical Research on Religion* 1 (July 2013): 218.

¹⁷² For more on the history of how “religion” as a category was established on Protestant standards, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); and Tomoko

influence of Protestantism and the irreducible variety of theologies, norms, and practices of Protestantism. My goal is to explore how discourses about hackers and discourses about Protestants have interwoven in Kopimist thought both in ways that are surprising (because of the easily imagined gulf between hackers and Protestants), but also in ways that are unsurprising—the complexly interconnected nature of Protestant and secular ideologies in American history deeply shape cultural perspectives on technology and information.¹⁷³ To be clear, “Protestant” and “secular” are not synonymous terms nor indicate synonymous cultural formations.

For the purposes of this chapter, I define “hackers” using Gabriella Coleman’s definition of hackers as computer aficionados who share a passion for technological systems and a commitment to information freedom (see below for further detail).¹⁷⁴ Though there is no singular “hacker ethic,” I use that term to refer to the loose set of ethical and social norms shared among hackers in the US (and especially at MIT) as they were first identified by Steven Levy who coined the term in his 1984 book *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*, and further codified in Pekka Himanen’s 2001 *The Hacker Ethic, and the Spirit of the Information Age*. (I offer further rationale for this terminology below.)¹⁷⁵ In this chapter, hacker ethic refers to Levy’s configuration of a diffuse set of ethical and practical hacker commitments, while *Hacker Ethic* refers to the text of the same name.

Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2005).

¹⁷³ Christopher Kelty, has, in fact, thought Hackers:Protestants, but not in the ways that I detail here. I outline Kelty’s arguments below. To my knowledge he is the exception, not the rule.

¹⁷⁴ Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*, 3.

¹⁷⁵ Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984); and Pekka Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic, and the Spirit of the Information Age*. (New York: Random House, 2001).

I am also using these terms (hacker ethic, Protestant, etc.) in the vein of the anthropologist Web Keane, treating each as “expressing a general cluster of ideas, practices, and social forces.”¹⁷⁶ They refer to social practices, ideas, and habits that are contested, historically mobile, and loosely congealed. Like Keane’s *Christian Moderns*, while this chapter “is about historical phenomena, it is not, except at moments, intended as a work of historical explanation as such.”¹⁷⁷ Indeed, the hacker ethic does not inherit a neat or strict legacy from Protestantism, but Protestantism and the Protestant Work Ethic are significant cultural resources that the Kopimists and authors of the *Hacker Ethic* draw on to understand and position themselves in the world. It is, in other words, not an accident that the *Hacker Ethic* and its dictates for living are defined in close parallel to Weber’s *Protestant Work Ethic*. Indeed, the *Hacker Ethic* is explicitly formulated as an extension of the *Protestant Ethic* for a new, later stage of capitalism.¹⁷⁸ (These elements of connection are considered below in the sections “Hacker Ethic” and “Protestantism as a Usable Past.”)

The influences I seek to trace here cannot be understood in a clear, linear, or reductive fashion. The discourses, movements, and influences under investigation are multiple in every instance. Rather than providing a comprehensive picture of what is at work, my case study in this chapter instead focuses on significant and culturally robust articulations of the ways in which religion and the secular are being (re)imagined.

To better understand the interaction of these influences, I employ the concept of “fantasy echo” developed by historian Joan W. Scott and further elaborated by critical theorist Bruno

¹⁷⁶ Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 38.

¹⁷⁷ Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 39.

¹⁷⁸ Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic*, 11-12.

Perreau. Like echoes in a cave, the hacker and Protestant ethics are mutual influences that borrow and build on the resonances of one another. These resonances then “sound” in variously strengthened ways, appearing in punctuated locations and moments in time. Identifying the origins of influence by means of an “original” echo is of no use, because echoes are by definition reverberations rather than original sources. This notion of history-as-echo frees us to disregard the search for origins, for causes, and for stable translations of phenomena between time and place.¹⁷⁹

By thinking about historical and cultural influence in terms of echoes rather than lineages, I am able to de-emphasize questions of causality and bypass the problematic tendency to render history as a series of identifiable and sequential causes and effects. This chapter is, instead, about the ways in which certain configurations of the hacker ethic—the deeply entrenched values of open access and anti-surveillance, the celebration of remixature and copying of data, a set of aesthetic and affective commitments that emphasize a highly playful, semi-ironic, but also utopian worldview that envisions an open information world to be a fundamentally better world—draw on, are informed by, and extend Protestant assumptions about freedom, autonomy, agency, materiality, and human identity.

A Funeral for Copyright

In 2007 several members of Sweden’s popular anti-copyright organization Piratbyrån (the Pirate Bureau) gathered around a Walpurgisnacht (“Witches’ Night”) bonfire.¹⁸⁰ Energized by

¹⁷⁹ Bruno Perreau, *Queer Theory: The French Response* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2016).

¹⁸⁰ In German folklore, Walpurgisnacht is believed to be the night when witches hold a raucous meeting with the Devil on the Brocken Mountain. In Sweden and across Western Europe,

the mischievous atmosphere attached to traditional Walpurgisnacht celebrations, the small crowd watched as the May Queen placed four piles of books ritualistically across the ground. “Today,” she announced, “we will finally put an end to the so-called ‘file-sharing debate.’” She lifted a burning torch in her hand. The books surrounding the Queen were all of the remaining physical manuscripts of *Copy Me*, an anthology of philosophical, technological, and legal essays debating the ethical and material merits of copyright restrictions. The texts had been compiled and printed from the forums and webpages of the Piratbyrån’s website, as part of an ongoing effort to wrest the conversation from copyright monopolies. The texts were ritualistically staged to represent the end of these debates. The Queen led those gathered in a funeral for copyright.

“This book,” the Queen continued, “is the only enduring and burnable document from [these conversations]. By destroying that document, we will sweep out the old and frozen positions, and make room for new ones. Hereby we burn, in four book-fires, four conceptual opposites.”¹⁸¹ She placed the torch upon one of the piles, “legal/illegal,” she announced. The torch touched the second pile: “here/there.” The third: “free/charge.” And, finally, the fourth pile was lit, “art/technology/life.” The Queen looked again at the crowd. “We are now done with [these divisions, as they] are already collapsing.”¹⁸² The books smoldered and turned to ash in the

Walpurgisnacht bonfires have been lit since the early eighteenth century to scare away mischievous spirits. Many believe that, as a precursor to Beltane, Walpurgisnacht fires provide protection during a night marked by the uniquely heightened access to the magical and spiritual worlds. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Walpurgisnacht fires were cast in a revolutionary glow, as they were used to mark the beginning of May Day labor protests across the world. For more on Walpurgisnacht, Beltane, and the sacred fire, see Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2006).

¹⁸¹ “Walpurgis manuscript,” Piratbyrån, accessed October 27, 2018, <http://piratbyran.org/walpurgis/manuscript.txt>. Available as a snapshot on the Wayback Machine at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160415000000/http://piratbyran.org/walpurgis/manuscript.txt>.

¹⁸² “Walpurgis manuscript,” Piratbyrån.

flames. The Queen, collecting ash from each of the four piles, threw the ash into the wind. “The file-sharing debate is hereby buried!” she exclaimed. “When we talk about file-sharing from now on it is as one of many ways to copy... not whether it is right or wrong. Winter is pouring down the hillside. Make way for spring! Make way for spring!”¹⁸³

This funeral for copyright marked a significant early moment for a small but evocative group of digital rights activists who believe that information, and information access, is sacred. Many of those who attended would later become the first members of the Missionary Church of Kopimism. By 2012, the MCK had formalized, developing branches in 18 countries within three months of its legal recognition as a religion by the Swedish government. Christopher Carmean, a leading figure of the United States branch of the MCK, attributed the Church’s rapid global growth to a widespread, though implicit, acceptance of the values and philosophies underlying Kopimism among youth on the internet today.¹⁸⁴ “I like to think that the church has brought a philosophical dialogue to issues of copyright and data sharing that people generally take for granted,” Carmean argues. “I think that there is an expanding number of people holding the beliefs of Kopimism without even calling themselves Kopimists, and that’s why the church began in the first place.”¹⁸⁵

Founded by a nineteen-year-old philosophy student, Isak Gerson, Kopimism claims digital file sharing (or copying) as its central religious practice. Global media coverage was playful but quick to dismiss the MCK as a satirical attempt to use religious rights protections to wage war against anti-piracy policies, in the process conflating the semi-ironic flair of the

¹⁸³ “Walpurgis manuscript,” Piratbyrå.

¹⁸⁴ “‘Ctrl+C me, my brothers’: Piracy preachers paste themselves in US,” *RT News*, April 23, 2012, <https://www.rt.com/news/online-piracy-religion-us-698/>.

¹⁸⁵ Lisa Janson, “Kopimism—the Religion of File Sharing,” *Flip the Media*, October 24, 2012, <http://flipthemedia.com/2012/10/kopimism-the-religion-of-file-sharing/>.

Kopimists with the tongue-in-cheek political activism of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.¹⁸⁶ Much was also made in the media of the fact that legal recognition of the MCK had coincided with a series of widespread protests against the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect IP Act (PIPA), bills before the United States Congress that had attempted to aggressively extend the scope of copyright protection. Popular media interpreted Kopimism as a strategic move in the war on digital piracy, highlighting the failed initial efforts of the MCK to be recognized as a religious organization by the Swedish government (they only succeeded on their third application).

Kopimists, in turn, passionately defended their claim that their religion was neither ironic nor sophistic legal strategy. Kopimist leaders argued that the principles of Kopimism were already widely (though perhaps implicitly) adopted by many internet users. The MCK, they explained, was merely providing a formal language for a latent spiritual reality already present in the twenty-first century.¹⁸⁷

Described in *The Atlantic* as a global “new religion of file-sharers,” Kopimists take their name from “copy me” and celebrate digital file sharing (sometimes known as “piracy”) as their most sacred practice, swearing to defend it as their fundamental religious right.¹⁸⁸ “Kopimi”—“copy me” in English—is a term first used on pirate forums in the early 2000s as a shorthand way to celebrate and invite others to file-share, legally or not. Since its adoption by Kopimists,

¹⁸⁶ For examples of coverage, see Jackson, “The Information Will Get Out;” “Ctrl+C me, my brothers” *RT News*; and Janson, “Kopimism—the Religion of File Sharing.”

¹⁸⁷ John Tagliabue, “In Sweden, Taking File Sharing to Heart and to Church.” *The New York Times*, July 25, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/26/world/europe/in-sweden-taking-file-sharing-to-heart-and-to-church.html>.

¹⁸⁸ See Nicholas Jackson, “The Information Will Get Out: A New Religion for File-Sharers,” *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2011 <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/04/the-information-will-get-out-a-new-religion-for-filesharers/>.

kopimi has become an affirmation of faith as much as a directive. Now signaled on websites by a singular “K,” kopimi is intended to promote a worldview that celebrates a dynamic relationship between humans and information (understood as an animated, living force) in which both parties benefit from the unrestricted and organic movement of information in the world.

The Kopimist “K” is often accompanied by the “sacred symbolism” of the pictorial depiction of the keyboard configuration “ctrl C + ctrl V”—the common command for “copy and paste.”¹⁸⁹ Kopimists argue that websites with these symbols are sacralized, and these inscriptions are included at the end of digital messages to signal membership to other Kopimists. Because worship consists primarily of information sharing, spreading the “holy symbols” across the internet is understood as one of the three primary duties of Kopimists. The second duty is to become an “op,” the Kopimist equivalent of a pastor whose duty is to provide counseling and pastoral care for other believers.¹⁹⁰ Because “ops” are prepared to give pastoral care to Kopimists who may be serving prison time for computer related crimes, the Kopimist constitution is clear that “[in] repressive states where public electronic monitoring is taking place, encryption [of the communication between an op and a Kopimist] is recommended to ensure privacy of pastoral care. When an op is performing the secondary task, s/he should be clearly marked with a Kopimist symbol.”¹⁹¹ The third and final duty of a Kopimist, is to “drive public opinion against invasive surveillance” and copyright legislation.¹⁹²

The Kopimist Constitution, its central statement of doctrine, is, of course, a collaborative venture. All doctrine is open-sourced and remixing is encouraged. However, it is rare to find the

¹⁸⁹ “Kopimist Constitution (English),” First United Church of Kopimism.

¹⁹⁰ “Kopimist Constitution (English),” First United Church of Kopimism.

¹⁹¹ “Kopimist Constitution (English),” First United Church of Kopimism.

¹⁹² “Kopimist Constitution (English),” First United Church of Kopimism.

central tenants of the religion substantially changed. As the Constitution declares, “All Knowledge for All! Copying of information is ethically right. Dissemination of information is ethically right. The Internet is holy. Code is law.”¹⁹³ Kopimists live a “correct” life through “sanctifying” these religious principles. The Kopimist Constitution is clear that these few “basic axioms” are rooted in the “strong defense of the intrinsic value of information” precisely because information itself is holy.¹⁹⁴

Copying, in Kopimist theology, is not understood merely as imitation, but as an animated process in which feedback and remixure are encouraged. The underlying assumption is that information fundamentally changes humanity, rebuilding and extending the physical body into the environment through a feedback loop between the informational code of the body (DNA) and that of the cosmos. To cultivate this feedback process, Kopimists encourage members to share, play, and build on information exchanges with no particular view toward an outcome. There is no identifiable information product at the end of the Kopimist telos. Information is only process.

Kopimism makes no claims about gods, supernatural entities, or ultimate powers. The doctrine is also noticeably unfocused on the lives and moral policing of its members. Instead, Kopimist doctrine is almost exclusively oriented around a loose and collaborative theology of information itself. Everything else, including Kopimist understandings of the nature of the human, is derived from this theology of information. In an interview with the London based author Chris Baraniuk, Isak Gerson was pressed on how this understanding of information related to the individual practitioners:

“What is the ultimate goal of this faith? What is the ultimate goal of your devotion?” [Baraniuk] asked. “To copy as much as possible,” replied Gerson with characteristic frankness. “Is there not a point at which that becomes arbitrary?”

¹⁹³ “Kopimist Constitution (English),” First United Church of Kopimism.

¹⁹⁴ “Kopimist Constitution (English),” First United Church of Kopimism.

Could you not just write programs to do that? Does it have to be an action carried out by a human being?" Gerson: "Well our religion is not that focused on humans so I guess it doesn't really matter if it's a human person or software that is copying."¹⁹⁵

This emphasis on copying information over all other concerns is rooted in the Kopimist belief that DNA is the key to understanding all forms of life. "Life as we know it originated with the DNA molecule's ability to duplicate itself, irrespective of the original creation of the Universe" reads an informational section of First United Church of Kopimism website. "DNA is really just an information carrier...Reproduction is the very condition for cell division and life in the form we know it [therefore copying] is fundamental to life and runs constantly all around us. Shared information provides new perspectives and generate new life."¹⁹⁶ Finding meaning in DNA's ability to duplicate itself, evolving in fits and starts as it is shared and copied, Kopimists argue that DNA reveals the centrality of information sharing in the construction and maintenance of the universe. Shortly after the 2012 Share Conference in Belgrade, the Church made this connection between information, DNA, and the sacred even more explicit. The Church proudly announced the Belgrade wedding on TorrentFreak (a popular file sharing site), stating:

We are very happy today. Love is all about sharing. A married couple share everything with each other... Hopefully, they will copy and remix some DNA-cells and create a new human being. That is the spirit of Kopimism. Feel the love and share that information. Copy all of its holiness.¹⁹⁷

To make the jump from biological necessity to ethical right, Kopimists invoke a perennialist move by identifying major texts and leaders of world religions that can be read

¹⁹⁵ Chris Baraniuk, "The Pirate and the Priest: How Digital Turned Divine," *The Machine Starts*, January 17, 2012, <http://www.themachinestarts.com/read/2012-01-the-pirate-and-the-priest-how-digital-turned-into-divine>.

¹⁹⁶ "About," First United Church of Kopimism, January 2012, <https://kopimistsamfundetus.wordpress.com/about/>.

¹⁹⁷ "About," First United Church of Kopimism.

through the lens of their own philosophy.¹⁹⁸ Kopimists cite verses from the Bhagavad Gita and the Quran, and a particularly popular reference is borrowed from 1 Corinthians 11:1. This verse is commonly translated in the New International Version as “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” or in the Authorized Version as “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ,” but Kopimists argue that the correct translation is “Copy me, my brother, just as I copy Christ himself.”¹⁹⁹ In the words of Isak Gerson: “For the Church of Kopimism, information is holy and copying is a sacrament. Information holds a value, in itself and in what it contains and the value multiplies through copying.”²⁰⁰ For Kopimists, 1 Corinthians 11:1 affirms the principle of copying as sacrament.

Kopimism and The Hacker Ethic

Shortly after the MCK gained legal recognition in Sweden, Lauren Pespisa, a hacktivist (“hacker-activist”) known as “Splendid Spoon,” introduced the religion to the Massachusetts Pirate Party at PirateCon 2012. Standing in front of a projector displaying a black pirate flag with a white cutout of Massachusetts, Pespisa began her talk by announcing the introduction of a “non-theistic, non-exclusionary religion based on the idea that copying and sharing information

¹⁹⁸ I use “perennialist” here to indicate the popular, nineteenth century strain of perennial philosophy adopted by the Transcendentalists and later the Theosophists, which emphasized a belief that each of the world’s religions shared a single, universal truth, differently expressed. For more on the history and impact of perennial thought in the United States, see Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); and Leigh Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

¹⁹⁹ *Holy Bible New International Version* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001); and *The Holy Bible, King James Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1999).

²⁰⁰ “Sweden Recognizes New File-Sharing Religion Kopimism—BBC News.” *BBC*, March 8, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-16424659>.

is a sacred virtue.”²⁰¹ The crowd met her with laughter. Pespisa grinned before flipping to the next slide: an off-white screen with the emboldened title “Exploring Kopimism: The Bytes Must Flow.”

“Basically, the idea,” Pespisa asserted, “is that copying and sharing information is sacred and holy and should be celebrated [because it] is ethically right.” She paused as the PirateCon crowd again erupted into laughter, this time accompanied by raucous applause. “I think that fits really well with what the pirate party thinks and what the internet thinks in general.” The slide behind her read, “What is Kopimism? You probably already are one.”²⁰² This is a significant statement from Pespisa, and one that was received by laughter and applause at PirateCon 2012. Pespisa was able to make this connection because of the deep similarities of ethical commitments and aesthetic values between Kopimism and what has been more broadly identified as the “hacker ethic.”

The hacker ethic was first explicitly compared to the Protestant Ethic in Pekka Himanen’s 2001 text, *The Hacker Ethic and the Information Age*. At the age of twenty, Himanen earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Helsinki. Since then, he has become a well-known philosopher and has served as the director of the UC Berkeley Center for the Information Society, a counselor to the Finnish government, and a visiting professor at the Oxford Internet Institute. Since the late 1990s, he has been invited to speak at the World Economic Forum as well as the Technology Industry Leaders, a gathering of the CEOs of the world’s biggest IT companies. His most recent endeavor is Global Dignity, a non-profit organization co-founded with the HRH Crown Prince Haakon of Norway and American entrepreneur John Hope Bryant.

²⁰¹ Lauren Pespisa, “Kopimism,” filmed by the Massachusetts Pirate Party March 23, 2012, video, 37:52, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHsG0hADhas>.

²⁰² Lauren Pespisa, “Kopimism.”

Himanen understands Global Dignity's mission to be a synthesis of his earlier philosophical work. Much of this work pivots around the themes of *The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age*, redistributed in 2002 with the subtitle "a radical approach to the philosophy of business." *The Hacker Ethic* describes itself as an ongoing collaboration among Himanen, Linux Operating System creator Linus Torvalds, and the sociologist and author of the *Information Age* trilogy Manuel Castells. The book is the product of collaborative research conducted in California in which Torvalds represented the "authentic" hacker perspective, Castells connected the work to broader theories of the information age, and Himanen provided social scientific analysis.

Himanen's text borrowed its title from a concept widely attributed to journalist Steven Levy, who in 1984 identified a set of implicit principles so common amongst hackers that he identified them as a "hacker ethic," the bedrock values of hacking communities. These principles included a general ideological and material commitment to sharing and openness, a distrust of authority, the promotion of decentralization and the free access to computers, and a belief that computer technologies were uniquely capable of making the world a better place. Underlying these principles were two fundamental ideological and material commitments: (1) a radical belief in the freedom of information; and (2) a commitment to meritocracy, or the idea that hackers should be judged only by the quality of their work and not by race, age, sex, title, or any other qualification.²⁰³ Levy argued that these principles arise naturally from a dialectical relationship between new computer technologies and the people working with them. The hacker ethic, in other words, is a natural outgrowth predicated on the recognition of an intimate and inextricable relationship between humans and machines, as each structured and was structured by the potentials and limits of the other.

²⁰³ Steven Levy, *Hackers*.

Although Levy was responsible for articulating this ethic in a rather comprehensive form, the idea that humans and machines structure one another is, of course, not original to him.²⁰⁴ Technologies are one way in which humans make the world—they are, as Ken Hillis argues, “ideas in built form.”²⁰⁵ As technologies are built and used, they alter human activities and institutions. They become woven into everyday existence, shedding their tool-like qualities to become part of the backdrop of human experience and imagination.

Take, for example, the introduction of a robot to a workplace. The robot not only increases productivity (assuming all goes well), but also changes the processes of production by redefining what it means to work in that setting. These changes become habits, recurring patterns of life activity. It is the habitual nature of this codetermining that makes it difficult to recognize the extent to which humans and machines become entangled—in fact, science and technology studies scholar Langdon Winner argues that it is extremely difficult to see outside of the moment in which we directly encounter technologies.²⁰⁶ We have a hard time, in other words, understanding exactly how technology determines us, even as we determine it.

For Winner, technical systems involving human operators always bring with them a reorganizing and reconstruction of social roles and relationships, as technological patterns are set out in the world and “new worlds are being made.”²⁰⁷ It is for this reason that Winner argues for

²⁰⁴ Levy’s *Hackers* was not the first text to make this argument nor the first to articulate the contours of this emerging relationship. Specific arguments are anticipated in Ted Nelson’s *Computer Lib: You Can and Must Understand Computers Now* (Chicago: Nelson, 1974), published nearly a decade earlier, and both were indebted to Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog* (Menlo Park, Calif.: Portola Institute, 1968-1972).

²⁰⁵ Ken Hillis, Michael Petit, and Julie Jarrett, eds., *Google and the Culture of Search* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 9.

²⁰⁶ Langdon Winner, “Technologies as Forms of Life,” in *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

²⁰⁷ Winner, “Technologies as Forms of Life,” 108.

reconceptualizing technologies as forces that reshape human activity and its meanings, or “technologies as forms of life.”²⁰⁸ Information technologies provide a new range of what is possible both to do and to imagine—indeed, what it is possible to be.

Levy’s hacker ethic is better understood as a metaphor rather than as a reality. After all, as Gabriella Coleman argues, Levy’s description collapses fundamental distinctions within hacking culture:

To be sure, hackers can be grasped by their similarities. They tend to value a set of liberal principles: freedom, privacy, and access. Hackers also tend to adore computers...Foremost, hacking, in its different forms and dimensions, embodies an aesthetic where craft and craftiness tightly converge. Hackers thus tend to value playfulness, pranking, and cleverness...Hackers, however, evince considerable diversity and are notoriously sectarian...Yet almost *all* academic and journalistic work on hackers commonly whitewashes these differences, and defines all hackers as sharing a singular “hacker ethic.”²⁰⁹

If the hacker ethic is a helpful (though limited) rubric with which to think about an emergent set of widely shared values connected to hackers and their machines, the question remains: who exactly are hackers, and why should religious studies scholars care about their ethic(s)?

Gabriella Coleman describes hackers as “computer aficionados” who are “driven by an inquisitive passion for tinkering and learning technical systems, and frequently committed to an ethical version of information freedom.”²¹⁰ This radical commitment to sharing information is the central element of hacking, and it is this commitment, with no other consistent philosophy or politics, that, Coleman argues, unites the members of Anonymous, the largest hacker

²⁰⁸ Winner, “Technologies as Forms of Life.”

²⁰⁹ Gabriella Coleman, *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 17 (emphasis in original).

²¹⁰ Coleman, *Coding Freedom*, 3.

collective.²¹¹ Yet the hacker ethic extends beyond hackers themselves, informing the people reading, writing, and sharing hacker manifestos without necessarily practicing the technological craft of computer hacking. Gabriella Coleman and Christopher Kelty are instructive here when they expand these community boundaries outwards to include “geeks,” or those who are highly technologically literate and involved in these communities but not necessarily active participants in traditional hacking activities.

According to Kelty, “geek” is best understood not as a form of identity but as a mode of thought and practice as it is expressed through technology.²¹² Kelty argues that geeks express themselves through technology, which in turn allows them to both actualize and shape culture (through reflection, identification, and alliances). Questions of technology, then, become questions of material culture and the material politics of cultural action. Technologies contain an “archeology of their history”: the ideas, cultural desires, and utilitarian purposes that propelled their development. Understood in this way, computer code both constitutes an ideological affect and has ideological affects, contributing to a general aesthetic or way of life.²¹³ Other scholars believe that “hacking” and the hacker ethic can be extended even further, as a popular descriptor of any do-it-yourself, tinkering, or clever shortcutting of an activity (such as “productivity hacking”). *Lifehacker*, *Wired*, and TED Talks have all contributed to the extension of the notion of “hacking” beyond a relationship with information technologies. The concept of a “hacker ethic” can highlight the broader influences of the philosophical commitments that gave rise to hacker culture.

²¹¹ Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*, 3.

²¹² Christopher Kelty, *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

²¹³ Hillis, *Google and the Culture of Search*, 21.

Protestantism as a “Usable Past”

The Protestant Reformation has served as a surprisingly popular point of reference among hackers and geeks involved in the free and open source software (FOSS) movement. In his introduction to *The Hacker Ethic*, Himanen argues that the “digital generation” (which he never precisely defines) has moved beyond Max Weber’s notion of the Protestant work ethic, yet neither Weber nor Protestants are discussed at length by Himanen. Himanen argues that it is relatively self-evident that early Western capitalism was indeed marked by a Protestant ethic and that this ethic was subject to radical change as capitalism moved from its early to its contemporary forms. Like the Protestant ethic, Himanen asserts, the hacker ethic will extend beyond hackers themselves, eventually becoming the dominant marker for ways of being in societies heavily entwined with digital technologies.

Himanen argues that “the hacker” possesses an ethic toward work that is parallel to, though distinct from, the Protestant Ethic described by Weber. Hackers, he asserts, demonstrate a set of five key ethical commitments: (1) passion, in which mundane or difficult activities are transformed into a sort of “intense play” emphasizing the joy of mastery and creation; (2) freedom, in which life is organized by “dynamic flow between creative work and life’s other passions” rather than a routine workday; (3) a money ethic, in which money is not supposed to serve as a primary motivator for action or creation; (4) a net ethic organized around “complete freedom of expression,” privacy, and “active pursuit of one’s passion;” (5) the creative surpassing of oneself through clever new modes and methods of mastery; and (6) anonymity, which frames the internet as central to the freedom of speech and information.²¹⁴ Linus Torvalds, likewise, summarizes the hacker ethic as a reversal of the Protestant ethic: life should be spent in

²¹⁴ Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic*, 140-141.

creative pursuits marked by joy, rather than dutiful menial labor.²¹⁵ It is this reaching out to joy that returns the hacker ethic to the Protestant past it seeks to replace. Himanen gives a telling example in the case study of a hacker named Tom Pittman, who exemplifies for him the kind of joy produced by creative computer hacking: “In that instant,” Pittman explains, “I as a Christian thought I could feel something of the satisfaction that God must have felt when he created the world.”²¹⁶

But the connections between the Protestant and hacker ethics go beyond the fact that similar language is occasionally used to discuss religion and hacking. Instead, Protestantism is connected to this story in two important additional ways: first, it routinely serves as what Christopher Kelty has identified as a “usable past,” and second, it is a structuring force in the kinds of secular and religious self-making that Himanen, as well as the Kopimists, are participating in.

In *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software*, Christopher Kelty argues that hacker communities love allegories and stories about the Protestant Reformation precisely because the legacy of the Reformation allows them to make sense of the relationships between contemporary social actors (mainly the state, corporations, and themselves).²¹⁷ Kelty connects this reflexivity to core practices at the heart of free and open-source communities, arguing that the community involved with FOSS is fundamentally a “recursive public,” vitally concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the means of its own existence. As Kelty explains:

²¹⁵ Linus Torvalds, “Prologue: What Makes Hackers Tick? a.k.a. Linus’s Law,” in Pekka Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic, and the Spirit of the Information Age* (New York: Random House, 2001), xvi-xvii.

²¹⁶ Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic*, 141.

²¹⁷ Kelty, *Two Bits*, 66-67.

A recursive public is a public that is constituted by a shared concern for maintaining the means of association through which they come together as a public. Geeks find affinity with one another because they share an abiding moral imagination of the technical infrastructure, the Internet, that has allowed them to develop and maintain this affinity in the first place.²¹⁸

In other words, technology is not just a mechanism for producing particular effects but also a mechanism for creating publics. Refigured in this way, for Kelty the FOSS community is marked deeply by social practices committed to (1) sustaining the movement; (2) sharing source code; (3) conceptualizing and defining openness and open systems; (4) creating copyright and copyleft licensing that seeks to remedy copyright overreach; and (5) fostering practices of collaboration. Kelty argues that these social practices pivot around the core values of openness and modifiability, which by their very nature suggest the importance of continual reflection and adaptation.

This leads to Kelty's major contribution in *Two Bits*: the insight that "geek" is not an identity as much as it is a mode of thought and practice expressed through technology, which allows FOSS culture to be realized. The recursive nature of FOSS communities makes the prevalence of rhetorical turns to the Protestant Reformation that much more intriguing. Kelty argues that the Reformation serves these communities as a form of "usable past." By this, Kelty means that the Reformation serves as a storytelling device, loosely combining facts and fiction not to adequately or accurately account for the past, but to make sense of these communities' own contemporary social, political, and historical locations. Usable pasts therefore reflect communal attitudes and ways of thinking about the past but also about the present. Geeks use the Protestant Reformation because there are "no 'ready to narrate' stories that make sense of the practices of geeks today":

²¹⁸ Christopher Kelty, "Geeks and Recursive Publics: How the Internet and Free Software Make Things Public," accessed October 27, 2018, <https://kelty.org/or/papers/unpublishable/Kelty.RecursivePublics-short.pdf>.

The Protestant Reformation makes for good allegory because it separates power from control; it draws on stories of catechism and ritual, alphabets, pamphlets and liturgies, indulgences and self-help in order to give geeks a way to make sense of the distinction between power and control and how it relates to the technical and political economy they occupy. The contemporary relationship among states, corporations, small businesses, and geeks is not captured by familiar oppositions like commercial/noncommercial, for/against private property, or capitalist/socialist—it is a relationship of reform and conversion, not revolution or overthrow.²¹⁹

Because most geeks are not anti-capitalist, Kelty argues, they turn to the Protestant Reformation for its language of reform and conversion rather than revolution. In this schema, large corporations stand in for the Catholics, startups for the Reformers, and “sheep” for the laity. Figures like Linus Torvalds are configured in these narratives as modern-day Martin Luthers—described as singular heroes who level the playing field of access and control to centralized information regimes.

Kelty further identifies three metaphorical levels at work in FOSS community references to the Protestant Reformation. The first level makes use of the language and community assumptions underlying religious war. Here, largely atheist and anti-religious geeks lay bare their assumptions that religious differences are fueled by irrationality and superstition rather than practical or material grievances. This level of allegory is especially applied to sub-cliques within the community who wish to accomplish similar goals but believe that different technological solutions are needed. These competing loyalties are often seen as zealous and arbitrary, as “[such] stories imply that two technologies are equally good and equally bad and that one’s choice of sect is thus an entirely non-rational one based in the vicissitudes of background and belief.”²²⁰

²¹⁹ Kelty, *Two Bits*, 65.

²²⁰ Kelty, *Two Bits*, 67.

The second level of metaphor at work in these references “makes precise use of Protestant Reformation details [allowing geeks] to see their struggles as those of Luther-like adepts, confronted by powerful worldly” actors.²²¹ Just as Luther “freed” the Bible so that it could be accessed and modified (through personal interpretation) outside of priestly authority, many hackers imagine themselves as freeing information. In this way Luther is used to articulate the ways in which hackers position themselves as “watchers” who hold powers accountable, whether those actors are the state or corporations. Third and finally, Kelty argues that the most compelling way FOSS communities make reference to the Protestant Reformation is to position themselves as reformers rather than revolutionaries: “Geeks...see themselves as fighting to uphold Christianity (true capitalism) against the church (corporations) and to be reforming a way of life that is corrupted by church and monarchs, instead of overthrowing through revolution a system they believe to be flawed.”²²²

By articulating a mode of creation that is driven by “joyful passion” and not money, the ethic Himanen identifies builds on the assumptions of a tradition of gendered labor that has haunted tech communities since the Second World War. As documented by historian Jennifer Light, computer programming has been depicted since the 1940s as joyful, tinkering, clever, and masterful work when it is demographically a male-centric occupation. When the same professional roles are fulfilled by women, that labor is re-classified as repetitive, menial, and secretarial.²²³ Job descriptions for programming and engineering work oscillated between these two poles as men left for the war and, later, came back home. Because women’s programming

²²¹ Kelty, *Two Bits*, 68.

²²² Kelty, *Two Bits*, 70.

²²³ Jennifer Light, “When Computers Were Women,” *Technology and Culture* 40 (July 1999): 455-483.

work was historically described as more menial during the mid-twentieth century, women rarely gained positions of authority in technological fields. This further meant that women scientists working on information technologies often suffered from the Matilda effect—breakthroughs they made in their work were attributed to their male superiors or, at times, to the computers themselves (for example, pictures of key programmers in early computing projects described the women not by their names, but collectively as “refrigerator ladies.”)²²⁴

Through tracing the development of occupational feminization during and after World War II, Light demonstrates how women were pushed out of computer programming—both in the historical record (women worked in male-owned laboratories, and therefore their research was published under the lab names rather than their own) and through the process of changing job descriptions that ensured women would be at a continual disadvantage in a career hierarchy. The resulting invisibility of women in the information technology workspace has resulted in measurable gaps in both scholarship addressing women’s contributions in these areas and the number of women currently employed in these fields today.

This erasure of women has been so thorough that Douglas Thomas’s 2003 *Hacker Culture* described hacking communities as instances of “boy culture” in a postmodern age.²²⁵ Today self-identified hackers are overwhelmingly white, heterosexual, and male—so much so that Gabriella Coleman explicitly figures the hacker as “he” in her monograph *Coding Freedom*.²²⁶ This is significant for Himanen’s claims that the hacker ethic, so thoroughly rooted in one particularly gendered way of being in the world, will extend out to colonize all subjects of information societies.

²²⁴ Jennifer Light, “When Computers Were Women.”

²²⁵ Douglas Thomas, *Hacker Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

²²⁶ Gabriella Coleman, *Coding Freedom*, 25.

Some critics also argue that Kelty's concept of the recursive public serves to privilege a masculinist perspective. Indeed, as anthropologist Tom Boellstorff has noted about *Two Bits*, "Save for a single footnote admitting that the 'question of gender plagues the topic of computer culture' (p. 318) and the recounting of a dinner at which the sole woman present became the object of heterosexual male geek desire (pp. 243–244), Kelty never asks after the ramifications of the fact that nearly every named social actor in the book is male."²²⁷ This exclusion of women, Boellstorff makes clear, undoes the "fantasy" of individuals with the capacity to form publics that function independent of other forms of constituted power (and we might also inquire about race, disability, and other forms of difference elided in the text). Boellstorff's critique of Kelty and computer geeks extends to the Protestant Reformation itself. Citing the work of Stefan Helmreich and Carol Delany, Boellstorff connects his critique of this notion of a recursive public to the broader vision of agency he describes as inherent in the male-dominated Protestant Reformation and popular Protestant theologies that understand the Christian God to be an autonomous male entity who creates without female input or agency.²²⁸ Boellstorff is therefore critical of the Reformation, but ultimately agrees that its legacy haunts contemporary computer culture. The "geeks," Boellstorff is suggesting, are the new Protestant Reformers, celebrating their own creative energies with no recognition of the communities or networks within which they exist.

The masculinist descriptions of the FOSS community in Kelty's work largely reproduces the male domination of the actual FOSS community. FOSS programmers tend to celebrate a strict, Enlightenment-defined sense of rationality. Their community, meanwhile, is largely male; according to a wide-ranging 2017 survey by GitHub, a primary software development platform

²²⁷ Tom Boellstorff, "Open and Free" *Current Anthropology* 50(6) (December 2009): 965.

²²⁸ Boellstorff, "Open and Free," 965.

for FOSS, “95% of respondents are men; just 3% are women and 1% are non-binary.”²²⁹ Kelty’s descriptions of these programmers are reminiscent of popular descriptions of “New Atheism,” a largely white and male form of atheism of the late 20th century that celebrates a rigid and truncated form of scientific rationality and assumes the existence of truth, autonomous individualism and “pure” logic.²³⁰

Himanen’s *Hacker Ethic* and Kelty’s *Two Bits* are important resources for understanding the context of the Missionary Church of Kopimism. Himanen identifies longstanding tropes about Protestantism and capital to argue that the hacker ethic also reflects shifts in the motivational and affective relations between work and money. Just as Weber argued that “the spirit of capitalism found its essentially religious justification in the Protestant ethic” but eventually moved beyond specifically Protestant material and ethical practices, Himanen argues that the hacker ethic will do the same in an era of late or changing capitalism.²³¹ Both ethics are united in a loose and largely undefined commitment to information access (whether it be religious texts outside of priestly authority or information-writ-large).

Returning then to the Kopimists, what are we to make of their blending of these two cultural configurations (hacker and Protestant ethics)? What can they tell us about the larger movements of Protestant hegemony and hacker cultural ethics in the West? How has the discipline of religious studies responded to Kopimism more generally?

Religious Studies Responds

²²⁹ “Open Source Survey,” *GitHub Open Source*, accessed October 2018, <http://opensource-survey.org/2017/>.

²³⁰ For an overview of this movement, see Stuart McAnulla, Steven Kettell and Marcus Schulzke, *The Politics of New Atheism* (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2019).

²³¹ Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic*, 6, 11.

As I outlined in the introduction to this dissertation, some scholars believe that information technologies have a distinctive capacity to generate new religious experiences and phenomena and that “digital religion” should be studied as something separate from, although adjacent to, “offline” religion. Gregory Grieve encapsulates this approach in his pivotal chapter “Religion” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*.²³² Grieve argues that digital religion is not simply “traditional religion packaged in a new media form,” but that “digital religion is unique because it addresses the anxieties produced in a liquid modern world by using new media’s technological aspects to weave together religious meta-narratives and the ideology surrounding them.”²³³

Grieve is enlisting Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity, which argues that the West is experiencing a continuation of modernity better described as “late” rather than as a “postmodern” break with modernity. Liquid modernity is a formation shaped by global capitalism, privatization, and the large-scale adoption of information infrastructures. It is “liquid” (here earlier forms of modernism where “solid”), in that Bauman believes that social change (motivated by social, cultural, technological, political, environmental, and economical factors) occurs at a faster rate than ever before, leading to a constant state of fluidity. Bauman identifies earlier, more “solid,” forms of modernity with hardware, and he invokes software as the structural metaphor for liquid modernity. We moderns are, the metaphor suggests, in a constant state of iteration.

²³² Gregory P. Grieve, “Religion,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi Campbell (London: Routledge, 2013), 104-118.

²³³ Grieve, “Religion,” 110.

Liquid modernity is further characterized by the nomadic individualism of those caught in the continually shifting relations of a newly fomented “network” society.²³⁴ Because digital religion is constantly in flux, the argument goes, it falls short as a meaning-making apparatus in liquid modernity by failing to provide long term “solutions” and instead maintaining a reactive relationship to the world.

Sean O’Callaghan builds on Grieve’s assessment in his 2014 essay “Cyberspace and the Sacralization of Information,” where he uses Kopimism as a prime case study to argue that cyberspace is best understood as a platform that is uniquely capable of generating new forms of religious expression. Sociologist of religion Stef Aupers argues that a broader explanation for the rise of digital religion is that the digital age is characterized by “opaque technology.”²³⁵ For Aupers, digital user interfaces are increasingly easier to operate, but the technology underlying the interface is made up of increasingly complicated technical layers, rendering our technology into what he, following Bruno Latour, calls a “black box.”²³⁶ While Latour’s concept of the black box is meant to draw our attention to the ways in which actor networks are momentarily congealed into technological artifacts (as I discuss in the introduction), Aupers uses the term instead to gesture to a technological phenomenon that has become fundamentally mysterious to the vast majority of users. Such users, when encountering any element of technology other than the user interface, are left lost between the technological layers—hence Aupers’ notion of “opaque technology.”

²³⁴ Grieve, “Religion,” 109.

²³⁵ Sean O’Callaghan, “Cyberspace and the Sacralization of Information,” *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 6 (2014): 90.

²³⁶ Stef Aupers, “‘Where the Zeroes Meet the Ones’: Exploring the Affinity between Magic and Computer Technology,” in *Spirituality in the Modern World*, ed. Paul Heelas (London: Routledge, 2012), 235.

As technological objects become both smaller and more intangible, Aupers argues, they also become ever more opaque. This trajectory ultimately results in a pervasive feeling of awe, as users interact with technological devices that seem autonomous, impossible to understand, and increasingly ubiquitous.²³⁷ Drawing on Max Weber’s analysis of enchantment (discussed below in chapter four), Aupers contends that these feelings of awe ultimately allow technology to re-enchant the secular sphere, inducing mystical and religious responses on the part of some users. Working against “the assumption that [technology and] technological experts are at the frontier of a progressive ‘disenchantment of the world,’” Aupers argues that “we are witnessing an ‘elective affinity’ between modern computer technology and magic.”²³⁸

If we understand Kopimism through Aupers’ and Grieve’s perspectives, the MCK can be seen as an organic religious and emotional response to the widespread adoption of information-sharing technologies like the internet. Yet while aspects of this approach—such as the concept of opacity—are useful, it ultimately obscures more than it elucidates. If we are looking for convincing historical and cultural contexts for Kopimism’s claims, Aupers’ and Grieve’s conceptions of religion inadequate. Grieve’s use of Bauman’s notion of liquid modernity both essentializes a vaguely universal and trans-historical concept of religion and marginalizes digital religion as “lesser than” its offline counterparts. In doing so, Grieve employs a rhetorical and political trope commonly used against new religions, which have historically been treated as forms of inferior or “bad religion” when they are recognized as religion at all.²³⁹

²³⁷ Aupers, “Where the Zeroes Meet the Ones,” 236.

²³⁸ Aupers, “The Force is Great: Enchantment and Magic in Silicon Valley,” *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology* 3(1) (2009): 153-154.

²³⁹ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

This notion of “bad religion” (discussed in more detail in chapter four) is, unfortunately, shared by the popular media. For journalist Chris Baraniuk, Kopimist’s close attention to legal language betrays the fact that “religion is a ‘cloak’” for the movement, a “helpful collection of signs which allows Kopimism to exist during our age” and to pursue its copyleft activism in peace.²⁴⁰ Isak Gerson, responding to similar assertions in a *New York Times* interview, has responded as follows: “For me it’s a kind of believing in deeper values than worldly values...I think we see it as a theological remix. Christianity took from Judaism and turned it into something new, and the Muslims did the same. We are part of a tradition...Our angle is not to mock religion. We recall that Christianity and the Gospels, with their collections of little stories, are examples of copying.”²⁴¹ Focusing on issues of legality and authenticity thus gets us nowhere.²⁴²

Dorien Zandbergen has delivered a pointed critique of these approaches. In her 2010 article “Silicon Valley New Age,” Zandbergen argues that while it may be fine for religious practitioners to argue that technology is somehow inherently religious, it is quite another matter for scholars of religion and media to do so. Building upon Talal Asad’s fundamental critique of the category of religion, Zandbergen calls on scholars to analyze discourses of sacralized technology not as evidence that these technologies actually have spiritual characteristics, but

²⁴⁰ Baraniuk, “The Pirate and the Priest: How Digital Turned Divine.”

²⁴¹ John Tagliabue, “In Sweden, Taking File Sharing to Heart and to Church.”

²⁴² The questions of authenticity and sincerity have haunted the study of new religious movements since its inception as a field of inquiry in the early 1960s. In religious studies, these questions have largely been dismissed from professional inquiry, due in equal parts to the theological nature of the question and to the overwhelming body of work critically deconstructing the very term upon which the authenticity test rests: “religion.” See chapter four, “Information Wants,” for a further exploration of the problem of bad religion and authenticity in the study of religion. The question of how hacker humor and trolling intersect with that of sincerity, authenticity, and bad religion is a compelling one—but outside of the scope of this project as it currently stands.

rather as “specific expression[s] of a social-culture climate that has a longer history of celebrating spirituality through high tech, and in which science and technology have become natural forces of life.”²⁴³ Scholars of religion risk reifying these discourses, Zandbergen argues, when they forget that the “possibility and authoritative status [of religious practices and utterances] are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces.”²⁴⁴

My objective in this chapter has been to build on Zandbergen’s critique to analyze the discourses that have shaped Kopimism’s claims about the organic sacrality of information sharing online. These claims are not the result of any sort of “magical affinity” (as Aupers would suggest) between technology and religion but are instead deeply shaped by two conjoining cultural discourses: Protestantism and the hacker ethic. The distinctive confluence of these discourses contributes to the rise of an ethics of circulation that borrows upon and further embeds Protestant assumptions and commitments about information and agency while claiming to be secular, post-protestant, and, at times, anti-religious.

An Ethics of Sacred Access

It is worth exploring the underlying notion that computer code, like language, creates newly structured worlds. Hackers, programmers, and “geeks” often argue that code (software programming languages) is itself speech. This assertion has led some MIT scholars to argue both that code, like language, creates the structuring possibilities for life activity even as it is itself modifiable through its use and that those who have the capacity to code act as a new class of

²⁴³ Dorien Zandbergen, “Silicon Valley New Age: The Co-constitution of the Digital and the Sacred,” in *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 163.

²⁴⁴ Zandbergen, “Silicon Valley New Age,” 163.

elites with special access to configure dominant new forms of subjectivity.²⁴⁵ By exploring how digital technologies may be related to the range of possibilities available for subject formation in the twenty-first century, we open up new possibilities for analysis of the connection between Protestantism and the hacker ethic.

In his essay “Do Artifacts Have Politics?,” political theorist Langdon Winner argues that technological objects have political properties in two primary ways. His first, less controversial, claim is that technologies are political through their positioning in culture. Using the example of city planning, Winner shows how objects are literal ways of building our social worlds and of settling affairs in particular communities. For example, overpasses in New York were designed to limit racial minorities from accessing the best parks by causing public transit to circle, but never approach, those parks. Technological objects, by their very placement and use within societies, can serve as a pervasive factor in ordering social relations.²⁴⁶

But Winner’s second claim goes much farther than this, as he argues that many technologies are inherently political. Leaning on Marx’s observations that material conditions of production produce a range of possibilities from which human subjectivities are crafted, Winner argues that humans are not simply determined by the structuring forces of objects but are instead actively involved as agents, and thus responsible for the ways in which changing the form of material objects changes the shape of ourselves and our environments.²⁴⁷ This argument works on two fronts: first, the adoption of a given technological system requires the creation and maintenance of the social conditions required to operate that system; and second, a given kind of

²⁴⁵ For a representative example, see Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey, *Evil Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012).

²⁴⁶ Winner, “Do Artifacts Have Politics?,” in *Whale and the Reactor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986),19-40.

²⁴⁷ Winner, “Do Artifacts Have Politics?” 38-39.

technology is strongly compatible with (though does not strictly require) certain relationships of power. Winner suggests, for example, that the atomic bomb, by its very nature, demands a highly ordered, hierarchical, and secretive set of maintenance structures.

Technologies, Winner argues, are be inherently political because they are, fundamentally, ideas that have been built and put to use, causing significant alterations to human activity and institutions as they become widespread.²⁴⁸ In this way, technologies shed their instrumental tool-like qualities, instead becoming woven into our everyday existence as social agents.

Technologies, in this view, cease to be objects separated from subjects and instead become forces that help shape the possibilities of what it means to be human. They are both structured (they arise out of specific material circumstances in order to answer particular historical needs) and they, themselves, become structuring forces that help determine what it is possible to imagine. “In an important sense,” Winner argues, “we become the beings who work on assembly lines, who talk on telephones...who eat processed foods, who clean our homes with powerful chemicals.”²⁴⁹ With the adoption of new technologies, Winner argues, “new worlds are being made.”²⁵⁰

With regard to digital culture, Winner is especially critical of what he has termed “the rise of mythinformation,” the “almost religious belief” in the ability of information access to effect total progressive transformations of society at all levels.²⁵¹ The popularity of mythinformation, Winner argues, can be attributed to the widespread Western dependence on

²⁴⁸ Winner, “Technologies as Forms of Life.”

²⁴⁹ Winner, “Technologies as Forms of Life,” 108.

²⁵⁰ Winner, “Technologies as Forms of Life,” 108.

²⁵¹ Winner, “Mythinformation,” in *Whale and the Reactor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 98-120.

computers and information technologies. The enormous demands of the management of information and data at such a scale means, for Winner, that the telos of modern society has increasingly changed to adopt information access, management, and distribution as its primary mission. This telos allows citizens to rationalize the widespread disruption of unemployment, deskilling, and other consequences of the information infrastructure—they become convinced that these sacrifices are worth it for the sake of access to information.²⁵²

This ideology of mythinformation is deeply ahistorical. If improving society were just about information access, libraries would be our greatest successes.²⁵³ Yet programmers, geeks, and hackers do not invest their time and energy in libraries. Instead, Winner argues, mythinformation rests on the thin assumption that widespread access to computers will necessarily produce more democratic, egalitarian, and diverse societies simply through access to and dissemination of electronic information. The PC is re-figured as a great equalizer, ushering in decentralized authority and an equality of social classes in a new "global village."²⁵⁴

Winner's critique of technology can be reductive. It seems to imply that if everyone were to just speak with one another (engineers, scholars, politicians), we could assert control over our technological futures. Winner's analysis is sometimes reminiscent of media historian and social theorist John Durham Peters' arguments in his classic 1999 book *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Peters' argues that the "dream" of communication has long been structured by a religious longing for direct communion between souls,

²⁵² Winner, "Mythinformation," 113-114.

²⁵³ This author believes that libraries *are* societies' greatest success, but the point nevertheless stands.

²⁵⁴ Winner, "Mythinformation," 102-103.

unencumbered by time, space, and misunderstanding.²⁵⁵ For Peters, this dream has long been fueled by the increasing sophistication and powers of technological devices. In a similar vein, Kopimism's quest for the free and unencumbered access and distribution of information reveals an ethic deeply shaped both by hacker commitments and by the legacy of Protestant Christianity. It is on the foundation of these two cultural formations that Kopimists declare their most sacred values: "Copying information is ethically right. Sharing information is ethically right. Remixing is the holiest act a person can undertake with data, as it validates the worth of the data as a foundation for new forms of data. The Internet is holy."²⁵⁶

Conclusion

The prior chapter demonstrated the conflict between competing contemporary ideologies concerning the fundamental nature of information and the ethics of information access, particularly in the context of religious knowledge. This chapter has moved the argument forward by exploring how the fundamental ethical values shared by groups such as Project Chanology and Anonymous have been adopted and developed by the Kopimists and the authors of *The Hacker Ethic*. At a very basic level, this chapter has shown how Kopimists are not aberrant but instead build on widespread assumptions about information access, and I have argued that Kopimism should not be dismissed as fringe to the study of religion but rather central to it. The Kopimists demonstrate in an inventive fashion the intertwining two dominant undercurrents of our times: the pervasive hacker ethic and the deep cultural legacy of Protestant Christianity.

²⁵⁵ John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²⁵⁶ Janson, "Kopimism—the Religion of File Sharing."

The following chapter will turn to explore how a set of influential contemporary public figures, particularly Timothy Leary and Jason Silva, have configured the discourse of information freedom as more broadly religious, in a rhetoric that echoes the particular cultural residue of gnosticism. At the beginning of this chapter, I noted that the information freedom commitments of Anonymous, Open Source Scientologists, and the Kopimists extend in a pervasive and diffuse form. The following chapter will explore the surprisingly religious form that ideology can assume.

Chapter 3

An Ontological DJ

Men have become like gods. Isn't it about time that we understood our divinity? Science offers us total mastery over our environment and over our destiny, yet instead of rejoicing we feel deeply afraid. Why should this be?

— Edmund Leach, *A Runaway World*

Our ability to create virtual future possibilities... to realize the freedom that we have to compose our lives—what Timothy Leary calls the ‘vertigo of freedom’—to realize that we are bound by no limits ... we engineer, literally, our own divinity. Woah.

—Jason Silva, “Engineering Our Own Divinity”

Shots of Awe

Jason Silva cannot sit still before a camera. His hair is wild, his beard scruffed. He rocks back and forth, using his hands to propel his words forward. He delivers his monologue in a rapid, breathless clip, with the brute force of an energy that his body can't seem to contain. On the greenscreen behind him a floating Buddha head drifts by, then an exploding star, then a cyberscape. He leans so far back in his chair that it threatens to topple, saved only by his sudden jump forward, a bodily motion that serves to emphasize his breathless name-dropping of philosophers, artists, scientists, and poets. Silva is weaving a story about divinity, information, and well, you, dear viewer. His videos, a long-running “minidocumentary” series called *Shots of*

Awe, are hosted on YouTube and have accumulated over 100 million views as of mid-2018.

These videos have launched his career—propelling him onto television, onto the corporate stages of Silicon Valley, and into an Emmy-nomination.

When asked to describe what it is that he does, Silva responds with a simple answer: “philo-poetry” (a portmanteau of “philosophy-poetry”).²⁵⁷ Indeed, as I show below, Silva’s video series builds on a lineage of poet philosophy popular in the 1960s counterculture, updating many of the same themes of liberation, mind-body dualism, and psychedelic freedom highlighted in the works of Timothy Leary, who he cites at length. Silva combines themes in Leary’s thought with the early career insights of religious studies scholar Erik Davis, who has published several well-received pieces on the rise and impact of “techgnosticism” (a technologically-focused form of gnosticism that I detail below). Silva’s final product is a highly influential video series focused on the hidden-yet-innate, enchanting potentials of information technology, which—when recognized appropriately, Silva argues—provide literal “shots of awe” in an otherwise disenchanted world. Indeed, Silva is particularly fond of telling his audience that technology will (if acknowledged and harnessed appropriately) enable us to “become gods.”²⁵⁸

Silva is illuminating for this dissertation for a number of reasons. First, he inherits, and advances, the same countercultural understandings of information that have already been at play in the ideologies of Anonymous, Open Source Scientology, and Kopimism. Second, Silva’s explicit reliance on the concept of gnosticism helps to put some of the implications of this countercultural discourse in heavy relief—in particular, Silva demonstrates how some ways of

²⁵⁷ Jason Silva, “What is Poetry?” *Shots of Awe*, June 17, 2014, video, 1:32, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_CsInWru-8.

²⁵⁸ Jason Silva, “Entering Godmode,” *Shots of Awe*, March 17, 2015, video, 2:29, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fB-48RCOdA>.

thinking about the “freedom of information” serve to divide the body from the mind (reconceived here as the realm of information and information flows).

Although it is a highly contested term (as I detail below), gnosticism has traditionally been framed in many of the same ways that Scientology frames information: secret knowledge that is highly protected and policed from access by anyone other than properly initiated elites (who can only comprehend such knowledge after moving through a particular and secretive process). The echoes of gnosticism that I identify in this chapter pose similar values as that of Scientology, but these echoes are reformed under the conditions of late capitalism. Information technologies, the mostly highly congealed and material products of capitalism, promise to open access to information for all. The gnostic impulse to protect religious knowledge is almost reversed—sacred knowledge is shepherded out into the world, rather than protected from it.

Through this chapter, first I will detail how Silva uses (and builds on) both Leary and Davis. I will then use Philip J. Lee’s *Against the Protestant Gnostics* to explore how Silva’s explicit use of the category of gnosticism further highlights the continued legacy of Protestantism on discourses of freedom of information. Together, these sections will demonstrate how this marriage of gnosticism and techno-philosophy, arising out of the American counterculture, infuses information with forms of agency while at the same time that robbing the human body of those same characteristics. The final sections of this chapter will argue that, for the thinkers examined here, access to information becomes politically and spiritually crucial because information is understood precisely as the medium that will allow us to foster our own divinity.

In chapter one, I set the stage for these questions by introducing competing definitions of information that have been particularly influential in American culture since the mid-twentieth century. I demonstrated how information and information freedom were at the heart of the

ongoing tensions between Anonymous, Open Source Scientology, and the Church of Scientology. In chapter two, I explored how many of the values espoused by Anonymous and Open Source Scientology have been further exemplified by the Missionary Church of Kopimism, but also extend out beyond the new religion itself. There I showed how certain configurations of the hacker ethic—the deeply entrenched values of open access and anti-surveillance, the celebration of the remixature and copying of data, a set of aesthetic and affective commitments that emphasize a highly playful, semi-ironic, but also utopian worldview that envisions an open information world to be a fundamentally better world—draw on, are informed by, and extend theological themes from the Protestant Reformation and the Protestant work ethic.

This chapter builds on chapters one and two by analyzing Jason Silva’s highly successful video project *Shots of Awe*. Silva is not a member or leader of a new religious movement, but his video series espouses a vision of technology and religion that is shared by the Open Source Scientologists and Kopimists. Silva’s success and speaking tours (before such audiences as Google, the Singularity Summit, and *National Geographic*) are a testament to the enthusiasm for his religiously-inflected, corporate-ready perspectives on the viability of technology to enchant an (assumedly) disenchanted world. He also demonstrates to a greater degree than the other case studies considered here what is at stake in this enchanted, but disembodied, worldview. Silva is important because he is thoroughly embedded in, and representative of, the firmament of people who are thinking about technology as sacralized but are doing so as members of the corporate world, rather than as members of new religious movements.

Entering Godmode

The National Geographic has described Silva as “some kind of Ontological DJ, [recompiling] the source code of western philosophy by mixing and mashing it up into a form of

recombinant creativity, which elevates understanding from the dry and prosaic, to a sensual cognitive romance.”²⁵⁹ The *Atlantic* more dryly describes him as “a Timothy Leary” for the digital age.²⁶⁰ Whatever it is that Silva delivers, it sells. He has been invited to talk at Google, TEDGlobal, and the Singularity Summit. His speaker profile lists him as a futurist who is “part Timothy Leary, part Ray Kurzweil” (the most famous transhumanist living today).²⁶¹ He is best known for his work as a filmmaker and host of the *National Geographic’s Brain Games* (a popular television series). Silva’s most significant project is his long running web series, *Shots of Awe*. The two-to-three-minute documentary shorts are hosted on TestTube, an online channel for the Discovery Digital Networks, and on curated YouTube playlists. *Shots of Awe* invites audiences to watch Silva “freestyle his way into the complex systems of society, technology and human existence and discusses the truth and beauty of science in a form of existential jazz.”²⁶²

Many of Silva’s videos—including his keynote presentation at the Festival of Dangerous Ideas in 2015—discuss enchantment and technology through the concept of “entering godmode.” Although “godmode” is a term that was originally coined to describe the use of cheat codes to gain invulnerability in a video game, Silva uses the phrase as shorthand for describing how technology breaks physical, cultural, psychological, and spiritual limitations. “The passport for the numinous lies within,” Silva tells his audiences, “and we can hack it.”²⁶³ He looks up into the

²⁵⁹ “Jason Silva, Futurist, Philosopher, Host of Brain Games,” National Geographic, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/brain-games/articles/jason-silva/>.

²⁶⁰ Ross Andersen, “A Timothy Leary for the Viral Video Age,” *The Atlantic*, April 12, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/04/a-timothy-leary-for-the-viral-video-age/255691/>.

²⁶¹ “About Jason,” accessed October 7, 2018, <https://www.thisisjasonsilva.com/>.

²⁶² Jason Silva, “Welcome to Shots of Awe,” *Shots of Awe*, May 22, 2013, video, 0:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmJVCrOROKI>.

²⁶³ Jason Silva, “We Are the Gods Now,” *Festival of Dangerous Ideas*, September 28-30, 2012, video, 37:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cF2VrefjIjk>.

camera: “We are as gods,” he triumphantly states, “we might as well get used to it.”²⁶⁴ This idea is likely familiar to many of his older audience members, who first read these same lines in Stewart Brand’s highly influential opening of the inaugural *Whole Earth Catalog* in 1968: “We are as Gods, we might as well get good at it.”²⁶⁵ Indeed, Silva’s approach to godhood owes much to the counterculture in general, and to the thought of Timothy Leary in particular.

Silva’s “Entering Godmode” video in the *Shots of Awe* series begins by drawing on a quotation from spiritual literature author Diana Slattery: “We are Ontological Engineers: hacking reality and constructing worlds.”²⁶⁶ Slattery’s book *Xenolinguistics: Psychedelics, Language, and the Evolution of Consciousness* builds on American mid-twentieth century traditions of psychedelics and mysticism to argue that the mind is uniquely responsible for creating reality, and it drawn on many of the utopian themes of the psychedelic revolution Timothy Leary attempted to establish in the 1960s. In “Entering Godmode,” Silva marries Slattery’s claim that that the mind is uniquely responsible for creating reality with technology:

The word Entheogenic means God Facilitating. It’s this idea that tools and techniques can act as conduits, as mediation catalysts for encounters with the numinous... They are essentially “God-Hacks!” It’s this notion that we are able to tweak our subjective experience to catalyze a shift in consciousness that leads us to a kind of “God-Mode.” Do not give in to the astonishment. The realization that reality is but a matrix of perception that we can pierce that veil, that we can raise the stage is astonishing. It means we are ontological engineers.... Shamans were literally ecstatic technicians of the sacred. This notion that we are able to create conditions, to create spaces for all of us to become ecstatic technicians of the sacred. The passport for the numinous lies within. And that we can hack and

²⁶⁴ Jason Silva, “We Are the Gods Now.”

²⁶⁵ Stewart Brand, “We are as Gods,” *Whole Earth Catalog*, Fall, 1968, accessed October 27, 2018, <http://www.wholeearth.com/issue-electronic-edition.php?iss=1010>. Brand was borrowing lines from the first page of Edmund Leach’s *A Runaway World?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968). At the time Brand believed the lines evoked the image of amateurs *doing* things in the world—taking charge of their destinies and reworking the world accordingly.

²⁶⁶ Silva, “Entering Godmode.”

there is a “God Hack!” Boundaries are being dissolved and we are being reborn. It is our birthright, it is our birthplace.²⁶⁷

Silva thus posits technological media as the new psychedelics: technology can, and should, be used to expand our consciousness, to (re)create the world around us by opening new conceptual realms, and to allow us to conquer these new frontiers. Silva conflates the unidentified, archetypal “shaman” with the inner potential of technology-users everywhere, thereby leveraging the cultural power latent in the image of the shaman to portray technology as an apparatus for magic. The shaman’s assumed magical power becomes a modernized commercial promise: the secret is within, provided you consume the technology necessary to access it.

Silva draws on important strands of religious studies to make this claim. He finds inspiration in Erik Davis, describing him as one of a small group of “cultural luminaries or digital shamans, ecstatic technicians of the sacred,” as well as in Mircea Eliade, a canonical scholar now critiqued for his transhistorical and transcultural definition of religion.²⁶⁸ Silva conflates the two in his video *Technologies of Ecstasy*:

So there's an amazing philosopher called Eliade, who wrote a book about shamanism, where he spoke of psychedelic drugs as technologies of ecstasy. Notice that he uses the term "technologies" here. He talks about them as mankind's cognitive toolkit, agents of psychic transformation. We've been engaging for tens of thousands of years to transform the perceptions of the body, mind. Hacking our awareness and our perceptions, you know that effervescent flux of sensation and perception that is in a way of all we have and all we are, as Erik Davis says... And I think today, these modern digital shamans, these ecstatic technicians of the sacred [are trying to] unplug us and show us the bigger, wider, more far reaching universe that goes beyond what the eye can see.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Silva, “Entering Godmode.”

²⁶⁸ Jason Silva, “Digital Shamans,” *Shots of Awe*, August 27, 2013, video, 2:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfJVOM5v1HI>.

²⁶⁹ Jason Silva, “Technologies of Ecstasy,” *Shots of Awe*, February 11, 2014, video, 1:58, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRFMI5CLxg>.

Silva connects Davis and Eliade to a countercultural lineage that embraced psychoactive hallucinogens primarily as a “technology of the sacred,” a tool for breaking out of the mundane. The most influential figure in this lineage is Timothy Leary, who is famous for his role in the psychedelic movement of the 1960s but who by the 1990s was arguing that network information technologies did everything psychedelics could do, but better.²⁷⁰

Cyberpunks and Chaos Religions

Before moving forward to consider how countercultural ideas about technology and religion have been reprocessed by Silva in his *Shots of Awe* video series, it is useful to explore some of the most prescient writings of Timothy Leary. In the 1960s, Leary connected the use of psychedelics to religious rituals of mind expansion. This link had already been forged in Alan Watts's influential essay, “Psychedelics and Religious Experience.”²⁷¹ Borrowing from a psychology of religion that stemmed ultimately from William James, Watts argued that altered states of consciousness allow for “continuous process with God, the Universe, with the Ground of Being” or whatever else culture might call “the ultimate and external reality.” Watts blamed Western systems of logic and economic practices for the lack of acceptance of drugs as a primary route to connect with the divine, claiming that in the West drugs were “bad for business” and that Eastern traditions were much better suited for truths wrought from psychedelic experiences because those traditions were more open to personal experience (as opposed to external authority or expertise).

²⁷⁰ For more about Timothy Leary as a “performance philosopher,” see Robert Greenfield, *Timothy Leary: A Biography* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2006), 537.

²⁷¹ Alan Watts, “Psychedelics and Religious Experience,” *California Law Review* 56, no. 1 (1968): 74-85.

Leary's psychedelic revolution popularized the belief that objects and tools could be used to free the mind from the prison of the normative behaviors that had worked on the body. Fused with a shallow, Protestant understanding of Eastern traditions, the psychedelic revolution was driven by the belief that the mind could connect directly to the divine, a glimmer of which remained trapped within the body itself.²⁷² Beginning in the 1960s, the idea of the personal computer was transformed away from its status as a key symbol of the military-industrial complex. Until this point, computers were mainly used by the military to produce ballistics tables and to facilitate collaborative research on weapons systems. The counterculture emphasis on individual expression and liberation made the idea of the personal computer possible.²⁷³ Positioned by Leary and others alongside psychedelics, the personal computer was re-envisioned as the ultimate technology of mind and spirit expansion.

Part of this radical re-envisioning of the computer as a tool for personal enhancement, rather than military use, was due to the proximity of Silicon Valley to the heartland of the Californian countercultural scene. Engineers, programmers, and computer scientists who fueled the local economy by day through military research funding spent their evenings taking LSD, attending Grateful Dead concerts, participating in communes, and converting the most advanced computer science laboratories into nightly video arcades. Performance art and the innovative and playful use of electronic technologies were adopted alongside other countercultural tools to break out of, and otherwise augment, rational thought.

Leary extended this connection between psychedelics and mind expansion to computer technologies. He translated his vision into the terms of the digital age by leaning heavily on the

²⁷² Dorian Zandbergen, "Silicon Valley New Age," 168.

²⁷³ Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

writings of communication theorist Marshall McLuhan. In both content and form, Leary evoked McLuhan by playing with typeface and constantly reminding his audience that the world was experienced through a series of mediations that were both formed—that is, historically and culturally situated, like the Gutenberg printing press or the internet—and forming—productive of a certain way of seeing and therefore relating to the world. Arguing that media technologies and institutions were structuring the potentials of the mind and brain—which he equated—Leary wrote, “You create the realities you inhabit...Far more than by weapons, society is controlled by multimedia, neurological imprinting. Marshall McLuhan reminded us that the medium is the message.”²⁷⁴ Informational networks, according to Leary, would finally allow us to transcend our flesh—giving way to the true dream of authentic, fully communicative meetings between individual minds.²⁷⁵ Readjusting to this new vision of life requires that individuals become “cyberpunks,” informational pilots able to manipulate and travel along the threads of data across the universe.²⁷⁶

Leary believed that traditional religions motivated certain technologies of consumption and that the technology of the Bible could be re-understood as an example of brain control in the most literal sense. The Bible, Leary argued, was not a manual that advocated for self-control and experiment, but one that spoke of a universe that was “operated” and “owned” by a bureaucratic figure.²⁷⁷ Like the Bible, traditional religions resonated with technologies that placed individuals in hierarchies. This was most represented in the television, and Leary spoke of television

²⁷⁴ Timothy Leary, Michael Horowitz, and Vicki Marshall, *Chaos & Cyber Culture* (Berkeley, Calif.: Ronin Pub., 1994), 38.

²⁷⁵ Timothy Leary, *Cyberpunks Cyberfreedom: Change Reality Screens* (Berkeley, Calif.: Ronin Pub, 2008), 26.

²⁷⁶ Leary, *Cyberpunks Cyberfreedom*, 134-135.

²⁷⁷ Leary, *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, 37.

audiences as unable to do anything other than consume.²⁷⁸ Alternatively, digital technologies like video games and the internet allowed individuals to take control and to be interactive – to mold and assume their own realities through access and participation in a truly networked and collaborative fashion.²⁷⁹

Leary outlined a tradition of “chaos engineers” who he believed had reached their pinnacle expression in the lives and works of contemporary computer scientists.²⁸⁰ Charting a network of influence that hit all the countercultural favorites, Leary outlined a lineage from Eastern yogi traditions, to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, to the computer sciences – all working, according to Leary, though a logic of saving chaos. “Saving chaos” for Leary was about encountering the world in its “glorious complexity.” Finding a metaphor in neurobiology, Leary argued that while science could be understood as chaos in the world, our brains are better understood as the chaos within ourselves—the goal is to learn how to expand and operate our brains.

Leary mapped this tradition onto technological as well as religious history. The television works in the same way as old “law and order” religions that misguidedly attempted to “order chaos” instead of allowing for the natural play of exploration.²⁸¹ These technologies, broadly understood, dampen individual thought in favor of hierarchy and control. The internet is the definitive expression of the parallel but inverse human trend: “chaos engineers” who value play and experimentation.

²⁷⁸ Leary, *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, 3.

²⁷⁹ Leary, *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, 50.

²⁸⁰ Leary, *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, 20-22.

²⁸¹ Leary, *Chaos & Cyberculture*, 8.

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* was one such expression of chaos engineering, and for those readers familiar with his famous 1964 text, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Leary's attempts to analysis the tensions between control and experimentation will be all too familiar. The computer engineers at work behind early internet and Apple systems were Leary's newest chaos engineers, his monks for the digital age.²⁸² The key to understanding the utopic potentials of information technologies, according to Leary, was the ability of information networks to allow humankind to transcend flesh.

As a form of chaos engineering, digital technologies could completely "rewire" the brain and, along with it, traditional modes of thought. After the failures of the commune experiments and the drug cultures to achieve a utopian form of social living, Leary began advocating for the adoption of information technologies as the "true" and "final" counterculture. Leary celebrated seekers who became "cyberpunks"—individuals who learned how to code and actively use information technologies to bypass the limitations of their physical bodies and traditional social and cultural boundaries of race, gender, and class.²⁸³

Cyberpunks, Leary argued, would eventually bring about the true goal of the counterculture in a site he called "Cyberia"—a nonphysical leisure space in which mind/body would collapse into a truly egalitarian world. Cyberia was thus the ultimate expression of the commune experiments of the 1960s. Believing that digital technologies shared the same liberatory potential as psychedelics, Leary argued new technologies could completely "rewire" the brain and, along with it, traditional modes of thought. After the failures of commune experiments and drug cultures to achieve a utopian form of social life, Leary began advocating for the adoption of information technologies as the "true" and "final" counterculture.

²⁸² Leary, *Chaos & Cyberculture*, 97.

²⁸³ Timothy Leary, *Cyberpunks Cyberfreedom*, 63.

Leary connected this potential to the interactivity of the computer versus the passivity of the television screen. The television is a “reality screen” that is primarily about consumption. Programming is consumed by families gathered as receivers in their living rooms night by night, presented with a false choice between programs. The television, much like traditional religious organizations and bureaucratic structures, works to control the consumer by dictating reality and preventing interactivity.

Conversely, the arrival of the internet has transformed users into producer-participants. “Cyberpunks” actively create their reality screens while at the same time working with their peers in networked relations that bypass traditional social and cultural boundaries of race, gender, and class.²⁸⁴ Cyberia is the “re-tribalized” global village of McLuhan.

New Gods

With Leary’s technological utopianism in mind, I now turn to explore the particular formulations of “religion” that have been most influential on Silva’s *Shots of Awe* series. Silva promises “rapture,” “awe,” “magic,” and “gods.” These are not neutral words, nor is Silva’s mysticism the bland universalism he implies. His philosophy of technology is deeply informed by his reading of Erik Davis, a former tech-journalist and now doctoral candidate in the religious studies program at Rice University. Davis’s *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (1998) is one of the most heavily cited texts in Silva’s *Shots of Awe*. It is Davis who introduces the language of techgnosticism into Silva’s videos. To understand Silva’s ideology of technology, it is important to grasp Silva’s use of Davis to anchor his videos in a theory of “techgnosticism,” leveraging the idiom of religious concepts to argue that the technological capacity for spiritual evolution is an important expression of the same deep “drive”

²⁸⁴ Leary, *Cyberpunks Cyberfreedom*, 63.

that produces all of the world's important religious traditions. I will also analyze some of the fundamental assumptions about information and religion that underlie Silva's theory.

In his 2015 introduction to the most recent edition of *TechGnosis*, philosopher Eugene Thacker praises Davis for taking up the mantle of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* and applying the spirit of that book to the 1980s and 1990s. Thacker writes: "TechGnosis was among a handful of books from the 1990s that...was unique in that it refused to see the development of new technologies as a purely secular phenomena. Where the 'religious impulse' cropped up could be in the most unexpected of places."²⁸⁵ Indeed, Davis describes the crux of his project as attempting to answer the following paradox: "here we are: a hypertechnological and cynically postmodern culture seemingly drawn like a passel of moths toward the guttering flames of the premodern mind."²⁸⁶ Throughout this text, Davis, like most of James's commentators, treats religious variety as stemming from the same essential root, as deriving from the same fundamental impulses. This is the kernel that drives Davis in *TechGnosis*. Davis believes that different cultures at different points of history have expressed the same, essential, spiritual impulse in various ways. In a version of the secularization thesis (which will be explored further in chapter four), Davis argues that although this fundamental human drive has been suppressed in modern times, it has found recent expression through technology:

More than any other invention, information technology transcends its status as a thing, simply because it allows for the incorporeal encoding and transmission of mind and meaning. In a sense, this hybridity reflects the age-old sibling rivalry between form and content: the material and technical structure of media impose formal constraints on communication, even as the immediacy of communication

²⁸⁵ Eugene Thacker, "Foreword (2015): 'We Cartographers of Old...,'" in Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic + Mysticism in the Age of Information* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2015), xiii.

²⁸⁶ Davis, *TechGnosis*, xviii.

continues to challenge formal limitations as it crackles from mind to mind...and information flow. By creating a new interface between the self, the other, and the world beyond, media technologies become *part* of the self, the other, and the world beyond.²⁸⁷

Technology, rather than dispelling transcendent meaning, provides new resources for seeking it. “The passport for the numinous lies within,” Silva tells the viewer, his beanie tilting precariously over the back of his head, uttering a claim that scholars have long associated with gnostic traditions.²⁸⁸ In other videos Silva attributes his use of the language of gnosticism explicitly to Davis. *Techgnosis*, Davis writes, is a “secret history” of the ways in which the story of technology in America has also always been a story about marginalized religions.²⁸⁹ Using the occult, psychedelics, and cases of the supernatural as his case studies, Davis argues that what ties these two stories together is the centrality of an essentially gnostic spirituality (here meaning a spirituality which crucially depends upon knowledge), which “naturally” finds an ally in the use of technological devices. Technology drives religion by providing new tools for meaning-making, and religious impulses (in the form of the spiritual drive), Davis argues, have in turn fueled technological innovation. When asked for concrete examples, Davis is keen to gesture to any and all technologies. He reads all technological innovation as essentially, fundamentally, religious. As Davis explains in an afterword to his text, published by the *LA Review of Books*:

I became seized by the McLuhanesque [*sic*] conviction that the history of religion was really just a part of the history of media. As a pagan dabbler, I grokked that the hermetic and magical fabulations that had gone underground in the modern West had returned, like Freud’s repressed hankeringings, in technological forms both built and imagined, demonic

²⁸⁷ Davis, *Techgnosis*, xx.

²⁸⁸ Scholars who work on ancient forms of gnosticism argue that the term should be plural, as it is used as a “catch-all” for several different ancient religions. See Michel Desjardine, “Rethinking the Study of Gnosticism,” *Religion & Theology* 12(3-4) (2005): 370-384; and Karen L. King, “Why is Gnosticism so Difficult to Define?,” in *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2003), 5-19.

²⁸⁹ Davis, *Techgnosis*, xviii.

and transcendent, sublime and ridiculous. I began to track these secret histories, and my notes grew until they demanded to be a book.²⁹⁰

As the world is increasingly structured by information, information technology has assumed a techgnostic role for Davis, becoming a powerful technology molding “the source of all mystical glimmerings: the human self.”²⁹¹ Information technology transcends its “status as a thing” because it allows “for the incorporeal encoding and transmission of mind and meaning.”²⁹² The spiritual drive captures and uses these potentials of information technology for its own purposes, so that in this sense, “technologies of communication are always, at least potentially, technologies of the sacred, simply because the ideas and experiences of the sacred have always informed human communication.”²⁹³

Underlying this argument are three fundamental assumptions about the nature of media, religion, and information. The first is an understanding of media influenced by Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan. Following McLuhan, Davis understands media as extensions of the body that fundamentally transform how humankind interacts with and perceives the world. New interfaces and new technologies, in this view, are intimate: they change the self by mediating the interconnections between “the self, the other, and the world beyond.”²⁹⁴ Media encode human thought and experience into the technology itself, which in return makes new perceptions and new activities possible. Media become both a vehicle for self-expression and an influencing structure that changes the very “nature of the self.”

²⁹⁰ Erik Davis, “Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information,” *LA Review of Books*, March 29, 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/myth-magic-mysticism-age-information/>.

²⁹¹ Davis, *TechGnosis*, 6.

²⁹² Davis, *TechGnosis*, 7.

²⁹³ Davis, *TechGnosis*, 11.

²⁹⁴ Davis, *TechGnosis*, 7.

The second assumption in Davis's work is that digital information, which begins as a mathematical concept, acquires new power as it extends into information technologies. Technology, as Davis notes, tends to act against our wills and expectations. It is a trickster, producing unintended consequences and new opportunities not imaginable before its production. For Davis, this trickster nature combined with the conceptual pressures placed on information leads to information technologies being especially fruitful for appropriation and revision by the spiritual imagination.²⁹⁵

Finally, Davis's third assumption is that the spiritual imagination is made up of two parts: the soul, which he links to the creative imagination that finds itself in enchantment, and the spirit, which he describes as an impersonal spark that seeks clarity.²⁹⁶ For Davis, our earliest or most primitive resource to satiate this drive is religion. Different expressions of this drive account for the vast differences amongst religious traditions. Although Davis acknowledges some level of human construction of experience, including religious experience, he argues that those differences are always an expression of one same, essential drive.

These assumptions, working together, enable Davis to argue that with new technologies new gods are created. Davis argues that the spiritual drive urges humans to find meaning and communion with one another. Because communion for him is fundamentally about communication, technologies are uniquely suited to spiritual ends. In fact, Davis consistently describes technology as disproving the secularization thesis. Rather than dispelling meaning by disenchanting the world, technology feeds the religious drive. "New technologies," Davis

²⁹⁵ Davis, *TechGnosis*, 11.

²⁹⁶ Davis, *TechGnosis*, 9.

explains, “open up new spaces, and these spaces are always mapped, on one level or another, through the imagination.”²⁹⁷

Hence, Davis argues that technology allows for new expressions of a fundamental, cross-cultural spiritual drive. When new technologies emerge, there is a necessary gap in our understanding of them. They slip past our expectations, enforce their own limitations and failures and unexpected potential. “[Every] time culture succeeds in revolutionizing its cybernetic technologies,” Davis writes, “in massively widening the bandwidth of its thought-tech, it invites the creation of new gods.”²⁹⁸ This is, for Davis, “technomysticism,” or the proliferation of spiritual imaginings and possibilities in the face of newly adopted technologies.

Therefore, for Davis, technology does not only become religious when religious people use it as a tool. Instead, technology is always-already latent with mystical possibility. For Davis, the consequence of this understanding of the human is that, first, spirituality moves on its own accord, finding expression wherever it can, and, second, that spirituality loves expressing itself through the new worlds of possibility that attend emergent technologies. Davis calls this the “techgnostic drive” of humankind, and his book is an attempt to document some of the ways in which that drive has found particularly robust expression in American new religions: the Spiritualists and their telegraph; the ghostly, disembodied voices on the telephone; and the search for spiritual transcendence of individual cognition within the digital hive mind.

Davis attributes this mystical quality to the opaque, but omnipotent, powers of information. “There is so much pressure on ‘information’—the word, the conceptual space, but also the stuff itself,” Davis writes, “that it crackles with energy, drawing to itself mythologies,

²⁹⁷ Davis, *TechGnosis*, 90.

²⁹⁸ Davis, *Techgnosis*, 29.

metaphysics, hints of arcane magic.”²⁹⁹ This magic, Davis argues, does not stem from information’s compatibility with magical systems, as Stef Aupers (discussed in chapter one) would have it, but rather that information and data is itself serves as gnostic knowledge. In *Flame Wars*, Davis cites the early Christian gnostic theologian Valentinus (c.100-160 AD) claiming that, “What liberates us is the knowledge of who we were, what we became, where we are, where into we have been thrown, where to we speed, where from we are redeemed, what birth is and what rebirth is.”³⁰⁰ Davis builds on this to argue that information is the very heart of religious truth, that “Gnosis comes in the *form* of information: a sudden blast of immediate data which is identical with the abrupt recognition that such information exists.”³⁰¹

Davis’s vision of technognosticism modifies David Noble’s argument that Western technology is a religious project formed out of and inescapably tied to Christian millenarianism. Broadly, Christian millenarianism refers to the belief in the eminent coming of an ideal society, often ushered in by revolutionary action.³⁰² Noble’s use of the concept highlights several specific characteristics: an imminent apocalypse that is prophesized in the Book of Revelation, the saving of an elite chosen by God, themes of transcendence and human redemption, the possibility of immortality, and the perfectibility of humankind.³⁰³ In particular it is this last clause (the perfectibility of humankind) that has resonance with the values of technology. Noble identifies

²⁹⁹ Erik Davis, “Techgnosis, Magic, Memory, and the Angels of Information,” *Southern Atlantic Quarterly* 11 (Fall 1993): 30.

³⁰⁰ Valentinus, as quoted in Davis, *TechGnosis*, 93.

³⁰¹ Davis, “Techgnosis, Magic, Memory, and the Angels of Information,” 48 (emphasis in original).

³⁰² John M. Court, *Approaching the Apocalypse: A Short History of Christian Millenarianism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 1.

³⁰³ David F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1997), 22-24.

three guiding values of technology: progress, perfection, transcendence. These values are what roots technology so thoroughly to Christian millenarianism. Through technology, Noble argues, humankind seeks to restore themselves to Godliness, through the perfection of themselves, their societies, and the mastery of nature. They seek, Noble quips, to build a “new humanity.”³⁰⁴ Religion and technology are spun from the same belief system.

Noble argues that Christian beliefs—whether explicitly or implicitly held—have guided every major technological development since the Middle Ages and have contributed to the hegemony of Christian ideas and ideals even in self-identified secular countries. Noble defines technology as “the making and using of artifacts,” a definition that allows him to argue that religion itself is a kind of technology, “a maker and user of its own kind of artifacts.”³⁰⁵ For him, the key moment in technological history was when medieval monks decided that the practical arts were a good method for pursuing redemption. This, he argues, shaped technological imaginations for religious ends. In time, Christian millenarianism became the guiding principle for technology, and the use of technologies in the quest for human perfection became a central factor in the relationship between humans and their tech. The belief in human redemption, transcendence, immortality, the superiority of elites, and the perfectibility of humankind—especially as they are repackaged in more secular notions of progress—all come from this merger of Christian ideals and the ideologies of technology. In the contemporary world, the explicit use of Christian theology has given way to the unthinking use of technology to pursue human perfectibility. Noble wishes to unyoke technology from this implicit religious directive and to champion responsibility and reflection in the creation and use of technologies, most often by critiquing the notion of progress.

³⁰⁴ Noble, *The Religion of Technology*, 29.

³⁰⁵ Noble, *The Religion of Technology*, 41, 145.

Davis champions a version of Noble's argument. They share the same project, which is to track the ways in which technology has served the religious imagination, but Davis believes this is a more broadly gnostic project (imagining saving religious knowledge to come from anywhere), not a specifically Christian one. For Davis, the term gnosticism gestures toward an individually-experienced spirituality that begins in alienation and searches for meaning. This notion encompasses a communion that is marked deeply by "transcendence," a return or an overcoming of the state of alienation in the move toward one that is more "real" (though the real changes given different contexts, accounting for both techno-utopianism and techno-terror or dread).³⁰⁶ It is this disinterest in immanence and in worldly matters that has caught critical attention.

Protestant Gnostics

The last two sections have provided important historical and intellectual context for many of Silva's claims in the *Shots of Awe* series. I will now turn to set these influences against the framework of Protestant gnosticism as it has been articulated by theologian Philip J. Lee. Lee's 1987 book, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, is a widely-cited condemnation of "crypto-gnosticism" in Protestant Christianity.

Gnosticism is a controversial and much debated term. It was first coined in the eighteenth century to designate religious movements claiming special access to "gnosis," a superior form of divine knowledge.³⁰⁷ Gnosis, most generally, refers to divine knowledge that is capable of awakening and returning fallen beings to divinity, hence it is often called a "saving knowledge"

³⁰⁶ Davis, *Techgnosis*, 364.

³⁰⁷ Alastair H. B. Logan, "Gnosticism," in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip F. Esler, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 907.

as salvation hinges upon access to this type of knowledge.³⁰⁸ Scholars refute the term based upon the fact that most religious texts categorized as gnostic do not self-identify as such nor do they always contain the term *gnosis*.³⁰⁹

I am not concerned with this important scholarly debate here, however, and am instead interested in how Silva and Davis use this term. Silva and Davis find use in the terms “gnosis” and “gnosticism” because of the ways in which it points to a saving knowledge. I am interested in the way their use of the term points to a set of ideological tendencies that are the very ones Silva identifies: information (conflated with knowledge) as salvific, a division between the mind and the body, a celebration of elite individuals who are capable of understanding and putting knowledge to use, and a view of the world as broken (so that the only way out is personal transcendence).

Lee uses the term gnosticism to identify a perennial world-denying mood in Christianity that began with (but is clearly not limited to) the early gnostic that were condemned as heretics by the Christians who became Catholic and Orthodox. Lee’s project is theological and organized as an attack upon “Protestant gnostics”—Protestants who have succumbed to a gnostic way of thinking and being. Still, Lee is useful for this project because he connects a diffuse understanding of gnosticism (that is reflected in the writings of Silva and Davis) to the modern American context. Tracing the characteristics identified by Lee in Silva’s thought highlights how Silva and other thinkers enchanted by the spiritual potential of technology rely on an understanding of technology that is deeply informed by a diffuse Protestant worldview.

Lee identifies several key characteristics of the discourse of Protestant gnosticism: a general “mood of despair” about the human condition, a great distance between creator and

³⁰⁸ Logan, “Gnosticism,” 907.

³⁰⁹ Logan, “Gnosticism,” 909-910.

created, and the proliferation of harsh binary oppositions between pairs such as the individual and the communal and knowledge and faith. Several of these characteristics result from an inward-looking self, who believes in its own abilities to detach from (and in Lee's view "escape") the surrounding world. In American Protestantism, Lee argues, these deep values have taken on a uniquely American modality, beginning with the early Puritan colonists.

Lee believes that seventeenth-century Puritans moved in what he characterizes as gnostic directions by individualizing the covenant with God and cultivating a generalized sense of doom, failure, and alienation. Lee argues that Puritan theological and affective changes brought New England theology "perilously" close to gnosticism on several occasions, particularly in what he believes was the Puritan concentration on the inward self as the site for salvation.³¹⁰ The individualization of the divine covenant transformed American Protestant Christianity into an "essentially...private psychological event" within which the relationship between God and the believer is transformed from a communal contract of the Abrahamic tradition into a private transaction between the individual and God alone. Hence, self-knowledge became saving-knowledge, offering an escape from the world and a discovery of God that occurs solely within the individual self.³¹¹

This individual seeker-self is attended by the "gnostic mood," or a sense of despair mixed with a potent elitism. The gnostic individual despairs because they know that the world is marked by limitations: time, death, and decay. With the potential for saving knowledge internal to the individual, the gnostic is naturally drawn to believe that, although the world cannot be saved, they themselves might.³¹² The gnostic, therefore, desires to escape, but, as Lee argues, the

³¹⁰ Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2987), 74.

³¹¹ Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 26.

³¹² Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 8.

escape is not outward but inward: “the escape the gnostic accomplishes is, in simple terms, an escape into the *self*... The search for God and the search for self, because of this ontological identification, become synonymous.”³¹³ In the search for God outside of the world, inside of the self, Lee argues, the creator God also becomes unattached from the creation, abstracted away from the world of God’s making.³¹⁴

Lee’s text has been criticized in two important respects. Lee defines gnosticism in the negative, and his text is a theological polemic that seeks to expose this hidden, parasitic threat to what he understands to be authentic Christianity. For Lee, the American colonial experiment latched onto the worst themes of Protestant gnosticism, producing a supercharged variant that has spread through American culture more generally. Influenced by Weber’s use of “ideal types,” Lee believes his conceptualizing of gnosticism as an ideal type allows him to trace a “destructive heresy” that has recurred perennially in Christian thought from ancient to modern times, but particularly in modern America. Because of this use of an ideal type, Lee is unconcerned with defining gnosticism in a historically-rigorous way. Sidestepping recent debates about the meaning and value of the term, Lee, in the words of one reviewer:

sees gnosticism as a *type* of religion that arises from a cultural mood of despair. Profound hopelessness gives rise to a religious worldview with these characteristics: 1) metaphysical alienation, which regards this cosmos as a ‘colossal error’ rather than a good creation; 2) affirmation of a saving *gnosis* that provides the key to escape from this prison-world; 3) focus on the true self or spirit within, and repudiation of the body, sexuality, and the material world; 4) elitism in the sense that only those who have spiritual understanding can be saved; 5) syncretism, as Gnostics are ready to turn all ideas, whatever their origin, to their own purposes.³¹⁵

³¹³ Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 26 (emphasis in original).

³¹⁴ Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 43.

³¹⁵ William Becker, “Review: *Against the Protestant Gnostics*,” *Theology Today* 45, no. 3 (October 1988): 361-362.

Despite these concerns, Lee remains useful because he is pointing to an important historical theme in American religious history, even if the contours of this theme are not as clean or as linear as Lee would like it to appear. The tropes that Lee identifies as gnostic resonate throughout the writings of thinkers who believe in the magical properties of technology. Framed in another way, this naturalized rhetoric of Protestant gnosis provides an important tool for understanding longstanding and pervasive discourses that attribute magical affinities to technology.

Jason Silva himself makes the connection between technology and Lee's formulation of gnosticism explicit in several videos throughout his series. He does so most clearly in *Cellphone Wormholes*.³¹⁶ Differentiating himself from thinkers who believe that technologies are merely tools used to expand creativity, Silva instead details what he believes to be a "hidden dimension to technology that's actually metaphysical, that was explored brilliantly in the work of Erik Davis."³¹⁷ This understanding of technology, for Silva, emphasizes that technologies and humans construct one another: "we build the tool," he explains, "and the tool builds us. We are designed by that which we have designed."³¹⁸ To him, the promise of progress and transcendence of the body that technology offers justifies an uncritical approach to consumption: "we should be sympathetic to the reason that we run in droves to buy the new smartphone...We're literally getting a mind upgrade."³¹⁹ Cellphones—branded, surveilled, and crafted with planned obsolescence—become not our accessories, but our "mind-ware upgrades."³²⁰

³¹⁶ Jason Silva, "Cellphone Wormholes," *Shots of Awe*, October 14, 2014, video, 2:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4jYxmUJJvI>.

³¹⁷ Jason Silva, "Cellphone Wormholes."

³¹⁸ Jason Silva, "Cellphone Wormholes."

³¹⁹ Jason Silva, "Cellphone Wormholes."

In other videos, Silva draws the same connections that Leary did between technology and psychedelics. Technology, for both thinkers, is just another, more powerful type of psychedelic. Because Silva and Leary are both working with a definition of technology that emphasizes how technology extends and surpasses the physical body, they redefine technology as “outsourced cognition” that reaches its apex in information systems. In “Psychedelic Technology,” Silva makes the connections between his and Leary’s thinking explicit, arguing “the counterculture 1960s ethos of expand your horizons, transcend your reality, make that cognitive leap is no different than the manifestation of our information technology.”³²¹

This is where Leary and Silva meet most readily, with a theology of information and individual divinity that is based on the power of technology to surpass the human body and other physical limitations. Writing decades earlier, Leary articulated his view on the connections between spirituality and the digital: “Recite to yourself some of the traditional attributes of the word ‘spiritual’—mythic, magical, ethereal, incorporeal, intangible, nonmaterial, disembodied, ideal, platonic. Is that not a definition of the electronic-digital?”³²² Silva is able to draw on these diffuse countercultural assumptions about information and spirituality, connecting the psychedelic revolution with information technologies and ultimately with the mission statements of technology corporations. “Google is the first psychedelically informed super power,” he argues, “its visions of inter-connectivity, inter-conductivity and repository of all of human knowledge becomes almost like Gaea, like a collective consciousness.”³²³

³²⁰ Jason Silva, “Cellphone Wormholes.”

³²¹ Silva, “Psychedelic Technology.”

³²² Leary, *Cyberpunks Cyberfreedom*, 22.

³²³ Silva, “Psychedelic Technology.”

Silva ties this vision of information to a commitment that nanotechnology and genetic engineering will continue to progress until “aversive experience” (sickness, death, but also sadness) will vanish from the living world. “Malaise,” he argues, “will be replaced by the biochemistry of bliss...Every moment will be autopoietic. It’ll be like creating God.”³²⁴ Godhood, he argues, is attained through technologically-assisted, individual enlightenment, knowledge, and transcendence. That technology can unlock awe lost in a secular age is, for Silva, a sign of its gnostic potential.

Dis/embodiment

It is at this point that Silva calls for his viewers to embrace “secular religiosity.” Silva suggests that religious institutions understand something important that secular institutions do not—that human beings “long for [encounters] with the epic, to rub up against the numinous.”³²⁵ I will now turn to explore the role of the body and materiality in Silva’s videos and to highlight the capacity for violence that this understanding of information can manifest. The disembodied nature of this understanding of information allows thinkers like Silva to ignore materiality and the concrete material conditions of human identity—fueling Silva’s penchant for global platitudes (“create your own possibilities!” “We are Gods!”) rather than acknowledging troublesome particularities. As critical theorist and communications scholar Kathryn Hayles has argued, popular theories of information are often the vessel for a twenty-first century revival of

³²⁴Jason Silva, “The End of Suffering,” *Shots of Awe*, August 12, 2014, video, 1:51, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQYroNcfXRQ>.

³²⁵Jason Silva, “Secular Religiosity to Experience the Transcendent,” *Shots of Awe*, August 20, 2013, video, 2:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLz9cxCeULM>.

René Descartes’s argument that minds are fundamentally disconnected from bodies—only now, consciousness is reconceived as a flow of information.³²⁶

The bifurcation of mind/body, information/context, is realized for Silva in the idea that DNA is essentially information (an idea that will be very familiar to readers, as the Kopimists make this same claim, as discussed in chapter two). In particular, Silva argues that the essence of both body and mind is information:

Even biology is made of language. Biology is code. DNA is code. It's software that writes its own hardware. The words come before the matter emerges. Just think about that, because it resonates in all kinds of transcendental ways, this notion that mind came before matter. That mind didn't emerge from matter, but rather that mind preceded matter. It's a wild idea, but it does seem to be that everything can be described in terms of words, whether it's music, whether it's the atoms that describe the laws of physics. It's all describable. It's all information.”³²⁷

By defining DNA and biology as specific types of information, Silva bolsters a further link to Leary’s counterculture vision of humans as the gods of information. Writing in *Cyberpunk Cyberfreedom*, Leary argued that the “bio-computer brain” also housed the divinity latent within each individual person.³²⁸ Central themes in Silva’s *Shots of Awe* series—the denigration of the body, the celebration of the seeking individual, the search for knowledge that untaps the divinity within—are ways of thinking about information technology’s relationship to the metaphysical that build on Leary’s thought. Despite the ambiguities of the category of gnosticism, it is unsurprising that Silva would link his argument to Erik Davis’s interpretation of “techgnosis,” a gnostic, mystical dimension of technology that has otherwise been hidden. The central ties between Silva and Leary are also the same central ties that connect this understanding

³²⁶ Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

³²⁷ Jason Silva, “The World is Made of Language,” *Shots of Awe*, February 3, 2015, video, 1:49, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3V7DC5ywsU4>.

³²⁸ Leary, *Cyberpunks Cyberfreedom*, 93.

of technology more generally to Lee's version of gnosticism, as it has been understood (at least popularly) in the United States.

Silva assumes that human identity is housed in the mind, not the body. This allows him to dismiss material specificity and limitation as fleeting. "The human mind lives in the liminal zone," Silva argues, "It is not bound by time, by space, and by distance."³²⁹ Virtual reality, or what Silva calls "real virtualities," provides a faster way to realize this truth and to break out of the limitations of the physical body and the world it occupies. When we enter "real virtualities [the] mind unplugs from the body and is not bound in any capacity," Silva argues.³³⁰ The mind, housing identity, creativity, and the soul, utterly transcends the body.

Silva's vision of the disembodied, perfected mind borrows heavily from Leary. Leary refers, as many hackers and science fiction aficionados do, to the human body as the "meat bag" and strives to break free from the prison of the body in order to engage with one another as our authentic selves, that is, as pure minds. This vision of the self draws on a long tradition in Western thought with roots in Plato, Descartes, and, closer to Leary's time, Spiritualism and New Thought. Leary's innovation in this context is to read the mind as information:

Plato, it turns out, was magnificently on beam. He said that the material, physical expressions are pale, crude distortions of the ideal forms that are fabricated by the mind, the brain, the 'soul.' We are talking about learning how to operate our minds, our brains, our souls. And learning the rudiments of mind-fucking, silky body juicy fucking, and brain-soul fucking.³³¹

Leary does not suggest that the body has no value whatsoever, but his attempt to think through the importance of senses and of feeling good—themes important to both psychedelics

³²⁹ Jason Silva, "Reality of the Virtual," *Shots of Awe*, April 1, 2014, video, 2:25, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xnz_Uc5sWOI.

³³⁰ Jason Silva, "Reality of the Virtual."

³³¹ Leary, *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, 19-20.

and drug cultures of bliss—remains muddled. He goes on to offer that sex of the mind will be more intimate because the participants will know what each other is thinking. Leary claims that “interscreening,” or sex between the mind interfaces (screens) of individuals, “does not imply a derogation or neglect of flesh interactions.”³³² But he never fully resolves these contradictions, arguing elsewhere that “if you think about it, we are basically brains.”³³³

Leary builds on McLuhan’s understanding of media technologies as extensions of the human body and senses that augment and accelerate our bodily capabilities. Leary both under-theorizes and over-loads the meaning of the body. The body remains abstract in Leary’s thought even though McLuhan’s idea that the “medium is the message”—which is otherwise a crucial concept for Leary—seems to imply that the body is a primary meaning-making component of the human self. In this sense, the medium makes different ontologies possible, reorganizing our relationships to everything around us and centralizing the body as the connective tissue of those networks. But Leary privileges the mind as the essential medium over the body. He attempts to maintain a stance that is not radically anti-body, but instead utilizes the language of evolution to suggest that information sharing is the part of the body that matters the most: DNA and the matter of the mind. “Interscreening does not imply a derogation or neglect of flesh interactions,” Leary argues.³³⁴ This is what allows him to imagine mind-sharing as a complement to physical sex, while at the same time ensuring that whatever makes the body special or gives us reason to care about the body is downplayed or ignored as extraneous. All utopian potential emerges from information and informational relationships alone.

³³² Leary, *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, 149.

³³³ Leary, *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, 35.

³³⁴ Leary, *Cyberpunks Cyberfreedom*, 177.

Making the body so abstract and secondary to information technologies fuels Leary's imagination of the utopic potentials of information flows and of what mere exposure or access to information can do. Information becomes so completely abstracted from its context—so violently disembodied—that it becomes a metaphysical and essentialized agent, with characteristics that are independent of context: “Sticks and stones may break your bones, but information can never hurt you. Although it can, alas, totally control your mind.”³³⁵

For Leary, the complexity and scale of humanity collapses into a single, bumper-sticker truth: we are computer brains. As in the rest of his writings, Leary often oscillates between claiming that this slogan is a metaphor and claiming that it expresses a truth. At one point, for example, he argues that “there is no naive assumption here that the brain is a computer. However, by using cybernetic terminology to describe mind and brain functions, we can add to our knowledge about the varieties of thought-processing experiences.”³³⁶ At the same time, though, he pins all his claims on the idea that by “changing your brain” you can “change reality screens.”³³⁷

While the computer-brain metaphor is explored more fully above in chapter one, it is worth exploring how this metaphor serves Jason Silva in his embrace of gnostic tropes outlined by Lee. Silva cites Leary liberally in his *Technologies of Awe* series. Like Leary, Silva believes information technologies and psychosomatic drugs have the same kinds of effects on the mind; “The PC is the LSD of the 1990s,” Silva says, citing Leary.³³⁸ That is, both psychedelics and information technologies release the mind from the material cage of the body. Silva, like Leary,

³³⁵ Leary, *Cyberpunks Cyberfreedom*, 26

³³⁶ Leary, *Cyberpunks Cyberfreedom*, 95.

³³⁷ Leary, *Cyberpunks Cyberfreedom*, 192.

³³⁸ Jason Silva, “Psychedelic Technology,” *Shots of Awe*, September 3, 2013, video, 2:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YddWybgvszs>.

believes humans should engineer their realities. “We need to go Carl Jung on our own brains using a cocktail of chemical technologies that will thrust the bodymind into liminal spaces of exploration,” Silva argues, “We need to engineer inception-like dream spaces to explore.”³³⁹ By collapsing psychedelics and information technologies into substances that “make manifest the mind,” Silva is able to decouple imagination from material realities and constraints.³⁴⁰ In the course of conflating technology with psychedelics, Silva dematerializes them by making them processes of our mind: “Is technology not,” Silva asks, “a manifestation of the human mind...the actualization, the rendering of our hallucinations into existence?”³⁴¹

By centering all human identity in the power and movement of the mind, Silva goes beyond Leary to suggest that any division between humans and artificial intelligence will vanish once both humans and machines can grow beyond the physical structures that keep them connected to the earth (such as the body and the “bare metal” of computer hardware). Once the physical limitations of data storage and the body are overcome, Silva argues, humankind will have built “minds that create minds. Computers that build better computers.” This statement echoes the transhumanist concept of the technological singularity—often called simply “the singularity”—a thought experiment about an anticipated utopic moment in which technological advances (particularly those connected with artificial intelligence) will occur so rapidly that there will be no way to predict or even fathom what kinds of changes will occur to human civilization.³⁴² While some scientists fear the singularity out of a concern that it will spell the end of humanity, Silva believes that this event will permit humanity to evolve finally and fully into it

³³⁹ Jason Silva, “Drugs as Tools For Spirituality,” *Shots of Awe*, January 13, 2015, video, 3:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCsDiOy66FY>.

³⁴⁰ Silva, “Psychedelic Technology.”

³⁴¹ Silva, “Psychedelic Technology.”

³⁴² Murray Shanahan, *The Technological Singularity* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2015).

ultimate form: “The human era will have ended. We will have become our creations. They will be our children, but they will really be us. There is no reason to fear this. This is just evolution.”³⁴³ The conflation of human and machine minds allows Silva to see the singularity as a promise of limitless progress. In it, he anticipates, there will be no distinction between the abilities of the human mind and the omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence attributed to God in Western religious thought.

For Silva, this process has already begun in the “Internet of Things.” The Internet of Things is a broad network of physical items and software that makes those physical devices “smart” (so called because of the data gathering and communicating software embedded in them). The Internet of Things today includes everything from telephones to toasters to televisions—all of which now share data across both home wireless networks and the internet. Optimists believe that the Internet of Things will bring a more naturalized, interconnected physical and virtual environment tailored to users’ unique desires. (For example, a person with vision loss might be able to have their refrigerator recite its contents to them.) But fears about unlimited surveillance temper this optimism and raise the specter of what Elaine McArdle has described as a “Golden Age of Surveillance” in which our personal and private data is continually mined and shared.³⁴⁴ Some fear that this age of surveillance is already here. Domestic abuse victims, for example, have detailed to *The New York Times* how their abusers have used smart devices to control and surveil them in frightening ways.³⁴⁵

³⁴³ Jason Silva, “Artificial Intelligence,” *Shots of Awe*, October 22, 2013, video, 1:59, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gq3_G3_wylo

³⁴⁴ Elaine McArdle, “The New Age of Surveillance,” *Harvard Law Today*, May 10, 2018, <https://today.law.harvard.edu/feature/new-age-surveillance/>.

³⁴⁵ Nellie Bowles, “Thermostats, Locks and Lights: Digital Tools of Domestic Abuse,” June 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/technology/smart-home-devices-domestic-abuse.html>.

Silva believes that the Internet of Things will allow the full expansion of mind into the world, as everyday objects come to act as if they share the capabilities of the mind. “You walk into a room, and the room knows how you like the lighting,” Silva claims, “the computer will offer you a snack, the curtains will raise or lower according to your energy levels—your mind will be fully integrated with the information networks surrounding you in your home, and the full flourishing of these technologies will promise to blur the distinction between self and world. The entire world will have mind in it.”³⁴⁶ Because Silva believes that our technologies are extensions of ourselves, “when our tools start talking back...we will have fully spread our minds out into our universe.”³⁴⁷ These ordinary devices, now infused with mind, will become at the same time endowed with agency. Citing Erik Davis again, Silva continues, “when everything becomes linked with everything else, matter becomes mind.”³⁴⁸ Of course, this utopia is mediated by technologies that come with their own costs in money and privacy. Silva’s video praising the Internet of Things is sponsored by Norton Security, whose website guides the user to a variety of security products to safeguard these newly animate devices of the domestic sphere.³⁴⁹

Silva and Leary are thus deeply committed to a mind/body distinction that leans heavily on what they imagine to be the spiritual and enchanting possibilities of a mind that can transcend all physical limitations. Both envision technology to be uniquely capable of expanding and opening up human potential because they see technology as an extension of the mind. But unlike Leary, who attributes these potentials to a diffuse, New Age idea of the nature of religion and

³⁴⁶ Jason Silva, “What is the Internet of Things?” *Shots of Awe*, November 4, 2014, video, 2:29, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wL34vK-On3o>.

³⁴⁷ Silva, “What is the Internet of Things?”

³⁴⁸ Silva, “What is the Internet of Things?”

³⁴⁹ “What is the Internet of Things (Internet of Things)?” Security Center, Internet of Things, Norton Security, accessed June 29, 2018, <https://us.norton.com/internetsecurity-iot.html>.

spirituality, Silva instead anchors these same potentials to an essential transhistorical gnostic tradition that Davis outlined. Davis's *Techgnosis* fosters this perspective and has deeply shaped the *Shots of Awe* video series that Silva writes and promotes.

For Davis, it is a gnostic move to distance the divine from the creation and it is mirrored by an abstraction of the self from the body. This is one of the key ties between gnosticism and technology that Erik Davis describes in *Techgnosis* and that Silva adopts enthusiastically in *Shots of Awe*. "Gnosis is not just mystical transcendence," Davis argues, "it is data."³⁵⁰ For Davis, the search for saving knowledge perfectly mirrors an abstracted world of data flows, in which access to information is paramount and life-changing. The internet and information technology, Davis writes, has made communication increasingly intimate, immediate, and omnipresent. Data is shared in the background of our lives as, for example, our phones share our locations, contacts, activities to corporations that further disseminate our identities and data.

Silva, Davis, and Leary advance a specific techno-spiritual discourse that reconfigures the nature of the individual and the individual's relationship to an extremely abstracted form of divinity. All other particulars—geographical, historical, material—are disregarded, so the language of spirituality and technology that these figures use masks any actual people, places, things, or material conditions that may be negatively affected by the information economy. The crises of global e-waste, the exclusion of women from tech environments, and the weaponization of information for surveillance all pass without a mention in their works.

This marriage of themes of gnosticism and a techno-philosophy arising out of the American counterculture also fosters the animation of information itself with agency. The supposed disembodied nature of information is paramount across these thinkers—it is, in many ways, what enables the discourse towards global platitudes rather than troublesome

³⁵⁰ Erik Davis, "Techgnosis, Magic, Memory, and the Angels of Information," 48.

particularities. This is, as Kate Hayles has argued, a twenty-first century revival of Descartes's argument that human identity lies in our minds and not our bodies, and that our minds are essentially information.³⁵¹

Conclusion

Access to information becomes politically and spiritually crucial, Silva argues, because it is precisely the material processes which will allow to foster own divinity. Yet there is a key tension here. Information technologies are arguably some of the most hardened material products of late capitalism. They require an enormous global political economy and material infrastructure. Silva, Leary, and Davis talk about information flows in deeply spiritualized ways, but the processes that make these technologies possible is a global network of machines, markets, and matter that has to be produced, sold, and maintained. The conditions of possibility that underlie Silva's ideology is deeply material—upgrading your mind with the newest digital technology also deeply depends on global sweatshop labor, mineral mining, heavy metal pollution, and a class system that means some will be able to afford better, more elite technologies than others.

Overlaying the material conditions of this ideology is the language of enchantment. Silva's welcome video to the *Shots of Awe* series, posted to YouTube in May 2013, describes the videos as "a series of reflections on my current thinking on the human condition, the ways in which we use technology to transcend all previous limits. Think of them," he continues, "as inspired nuggets of technorapture."³⁵² The language of technorapture is both specific and telling. Silva's career has been built to a substantial degree on a liberal use of the language of re-

³⁵¹ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*.

³⁵² Silva, "Welcome to Shots of Awe."

enchantment. *Shots of Awe*, in fact, pivots around the idea that digital and information technologies serve to bring “awe” and “magic” back into the modern world. The videos are meant to serve as both literal and figurative, two-minute shots of awe for the disillusioned but seeking modern. Information flows and information technologies are central to the re-enchantment of the world.

Silva is capitalizing on a common assumption in the twenty-first century: that modern, industrial societies are deeply marked by a loss of enchantment and that this loss has been, at least in part, a consequence of the increasing urbanization and overreach of capitalism, science, and technology. Most famously expressed by Max Weber, this thesis posits a cultural shift toward investing authority in science over religion. As the secularization thesis explains, the social ills blamed on religion or “superstition”—the latter almost always serving as a shorthand for the differences of a colonized other—would be slowly eradicated, as humankind collectively succumbed to an Enlightenment formulation of rationalization that encapsulated many of the highest priorities, assumptions, and values of Western, white, masculine, and upper-class society. The world would be united, finally, by the ontology of the West under the neutral guise of science. Technology, it was assumed, as the practical medium through which science interacted with the world, would become one of the primary means through which secularization would spread, like the updated blankets of the colonizers, handed out with a smile. Religion would fade away through antiquation.

By the end of the twentieth century, it had become apparent not only that “religion”—whatever was meant by that overly-allusive, and under-defined term—was not dying out, but that it remained as robust a social formation as ever. In light of this failed prediction, scholars turned new attention to how certain peoples’ beliefs, practices, affective networks, and traditions were excluded from Enlightenment-era definitions of “religion.” As discussed above in the

introduction, religion, science, and rationality were gradually recognized as far more entangled socially, historically, and conceptually than had been previously recognized. Furthermore, scholarship on the political inheritances and consequences of definitions, categorizations, and language applied further pressure on the easy assumptions of the secularization thesis, causing it to go out of fashion among scholars of religion and much of the rest of the humanities. Instead, a host of scholars became interested in thinking about the ways in which secular spaces (now plural) were attended by, and co-producing of, religious ways of thinking, being, and doing in the world.

Yet the secularization thesis persists in popular discourses about technology and religion, often in surprising ways. Silva serves as an important case study precisely because he is a prime representative of an important strand of contemporary technological thought that attributes “re-enchantment” to the powers of technological devices. Because Silva inherits the secularization thesis without critique, he provides a prime opportunity to observe how a number of important advocates of technology have advanced their claims, using the technological medium as the stage from which to launch their argument. Silva believes that the West has indeed become secularized and hyper-rationalized and thereby suffered a loss of what he describes as “awe.” Silva has made a prominent career identifying the ways in which technology, the very apparatus to which he believes others attribute this loss, instead holds the key to our rediscovery of the spiritual.

This chapter has shown how Jason Silva draws on many of the same understandings about the relationship between religion and the freedom of information as Anonymous, Open Source Scientology, and Kopimism. At the same time, Silva’s reliance on a broadly gnostic perspective bolsters his deeply spiritual and disembodied utopic vision. The thinkers explored in this chapter assert that access to information is politically and spiritually crucial precisely

because it is conflated with who humans are, who some want to them to be (Silva’s “godhood”), and how they are able to imagine evolving in this gap.

In the following chapter, “Information Wants,” I will seek to explore how the language of secularization and re-enchantment has been at work through each of my primary case studies. I will analyze these discourses on technology by highlighting some of the key scholarly literature surveying new religions and the intertwined relations of magic, secularization, enchantment, and technology. I will also return to my argument that new religions are able to provide vivid insight into cultural change that is otherwise implicit. Activism for a free and unrestricted internet collides with the discourses of religion and information freedom that have been at the heart of this project.

Chapter 4

Information Wants

Information wants to be free.
—Stewart Brand

Information doesn't want to be free.
People do.
—Corey Doctorow

“Indistinguishable from magic”

In April 2018 I sat in the back of a darkened and crowded auditorium in the heart of San Francisco. I was one of seven thousand people (engineers, programmers, executives, and marketers) gathered for the Red Hat Summit.³⁵³ Ellie Galloway, a school-aged girl, stood on the center stage. Three looming screens enveloped her, projecting her small frame out into the auditorium. Ellie was in the middle of a live coding demonstration, standing on a sturdy box to reach the podium.

Live coding demonstrations seem to invite any and all sorts of technological failure. Presenters must have nerves of steel and charisma to cover dead time on stage. Ellie typed on a laptop encased in a plastic cover with rainbow stickers, nervously explaining each step of her

³⁵³ The Red Hat Summit is an annual business conference run by the open source software company Red Hat. The conference serves as a platform for Red Hat products and services, but also highlights their business partners and open source culture more generally. Since November 2017, I have been employed full time by Red Hat.

code as she finished the lines. Her goal was to program a small piece of plastic jewelry to flash different colors depending on who was present in the room. Her anxiety, projected first onto her face and then onto the screens encircling the audience, betrayed the fact that she was struggling. Twice the audience caught their breath, as Ellie became frustrated and choked up. Eventually the jewelry worked, and the code was successful. The tense atmosphere cracked. Where it had been still and silent, as if to bolster her confidence in even the smallest of ways, the mood was now boisterous and joyful. The audience gave Ellie a standing ovation.

What is remarkable about this scene is the juxtaposition between this very emotional demonstration of an effort to include women and girls in the male-dominated tech world and the framing that preceded and then accompanied it on the massive projection screens in the auditorium. The earlier presentation slides had contained detailed quantitative information about the STEM and tech fields, gender and age demographics, and corporate return-on-investments (ROI). But during the live coding demonstration, the slides settled for several minutes on a single dominating image. Stretched out dozens of feet to cross the entire stage, bright blue and shining in the darkness, a single white-lettered statement declared: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

This chapter explores the ways in which the language of secularization and re-enchantment has been at work in recent debates over the nature of information and information access. I will analyze this discourse using some of the key scholarly literature that considers technology and the intertwined relations among magic, secularization, and enchantment. I will also return to my argument that new religious movements can provide invaluable insight into cultural change that can otherwise remain hidden. The religious groups analyzed in the prior three chapters are best understood as vivid, living examples of Bruno Latour’s argument about

the impossibility of secular modernity.³⁵⁴ These groups use debates over the value of information and the right to information access in ways that shed important light on the very notion of modernity, demonstrating that there does not exist any coherent differentiation between religion and secularism, religion and technology, or even subjects and objects. These movements are what Bruno Latour calls “hybrids”—they exemplify the instability of the binaries at the heart of the Western myth of secular modernity.

As I will show, the writings of the co-founder of *Wired* magazine, Kevin Kelly, and the distinctive slide at the Red Hat Summit both reflect a broad and pervasive cultural formation that interweaves notions of religion and technology. This intriguing formation builds on a distinctive cultural history, even as it transforms our understanding of each of these categories. The new religions explored in this dissertation have been part of that same formation and exemplify a much broader cultural mood about the power, ubiquity, and movement of information.

To explore these issues, I will first reflect more on the slide at the Red Hat Summit. I will then introduce Kevin Kelly and offer a brief history of the famous (or perhaps infamous) slogan “information wants to be free” (attributed to Kelly’s mentor Stewart Brand, founder of the *Whole Earth Catalog*). I will then turn to key scholarly literature about the relation between technology and enchantment in order to consider the relevance of religious studies scholarship to contemporary conversations about information freedom.

Algorithmic Gods

I opened this chapter by noting a memorable quotation from a slide at the Red Hat Summit: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” Readers of science fiction will recognize that quotation as one of Arthur C. Clarke’s famous “three laws.”

³⁵⁴ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

Clarke, a well-known author and futurist, penned the laws in his 1962 essay “Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination.”³⁵⁵ The first two laws encourage scientists and technologists to think beyond the conceptual limitations of their peers. The third law, quoted above, is the most famous of the three. Clarke stated the set of laws as follows:

1. When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.
2. The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.
3. Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.³⁵⁶

What are we to make of the inclusion of this third law at a large corporate event? Perhaps the use of this third statement struck audience members as a soft marketing flourish—a piece of text accompanying a demonstration that is evocative but otherwise airy and unanchored to any serious meaning. In this view, the slide is a little less than metaphorical, a tactical maneuver used to elicit an affective mood and to invite audience participation in feelings of joy and wonder. If this is the case (which it surely was, at least in part), it must also be pointed out that a slide about wonder, joy, and playfulness accompanying a demonstration of the creativity of women and girls was an unfortunate gesture given the long history of women in tech being dismissed as inferior.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Enquiry into the Limits of the Possible* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1984), 14, 21, 36.

³⁵⁶ Clarke, *Profiles of the Future*, 14, 21, 36.

³⁵⁷ See Jennifer S. Light, "When Computers Were Women," *Technology and Culture* 40, no. 3 (1999): 455-83. Light details the history of women in programming roles in post-war America. She highlights how changing job descriptions were used to erase women from STEM roles (e.g. when women occupied programming roles, the work was described as rote, repetitive, secretarial, whereas when men occupied the same roles title and description changes would indicate that the same work was difficult, requiring mastery, skill, and mathematical problem solving).

But as this dissertation has demonstrated, there is another way to read the 20-foot neon blue slide celebrating the affinities of magic and technology at an otherwise secular, corporate, capitalist event. Discourses of the secular and religion, of technology and magic, are deeply intertwined. This corporate slide functions both as an affective tactic and also as a reflection of a pervasive sensibility about the relation between technology and religion. The Church of Scientology, Open Source Scientology, the Missionary Church of Kopimism, Jason Silva—all have demonstrated how technology and technological metaphors can resonate with religious images, doctrines, and practices, and vice versa. As I have shown, religion and technology have served as two components of the same cultural assemblage for these movements.

The language of magic and religion has provided a useful set of metaphors for scholars, journalists, and bloggers attempting to describe shifting understandings of what technology is and does. Consider Nicholas Carr's argument in his Pulitzer Prize shortlisted book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brain*.³⁵⁸ There, he attributes the rise in contemporary language that describes our brains as computers to a historical pattern of using technology to describe ourselves to ourselves: "When the mechanical clock arrived, people began thinking of their brains as operating 'like clockwork.' Today, in the age of software, we have come to think of them as operating 'like computers.'"³⁵⁹ Technologies are compelling metaphors because explaining our present circumstances through capitalist industries and

³⁵⁸ Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

³⁵⁹ Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *The Atlantic*, July 2008, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>.

products grounds our metaphors in familiarity, and thus, as media studies scholar Ian Bogost argues, “they feel convincing.”³⁶⁰

Oftentimes, however, metaphors about religion and technology hinge on contested understandings of enchantment, rationality, and science. Consider, for example, a 2015 article for *The Atlantic* in which media scholar Ian Bogost argued that technology has become so diffuse (and, in his view, “pervasive and distorted”) that technology and its infrastructures have begun to serve as a “new type of theology.”³⁶¹ Lamenting this “theological reversal of the Enlightenment,” Bogost explained his concerns:

Here’s an exercise: The next time you see someone talking about algorithms, replace the term with “God” and ask yourself if the sense changes any. Our supposedly algorithmic culture is not a material phenomenon so much as a devotional one, a supplication made to the computers we have allowed to replace gods in our minds, even as we simultaneously claim that science has made us impervious to religion.³⁶²

Using religious imagery to explain science would appear to be a cardinal sin in secular modernity, and this particular category violation appears to explain Bogost’s frustration and contempt for these metaphors when religion is used to explain science.

As I will show in my discussion of Ludwig Feuerbach below, one of the defining aspects of secular modernity has been an effort to establish the superiority of science over religion (framed, as Latour explains below, in terms of knowledge over belief). Bogost’s discomfort appears to come from his displeasure that the constitutive religion/science binary is being disrupted by our metaphors.

³⁶⁰ Ian Bogost, “The Cathedral of Computation,” *The Atlantic*, January 15, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/01/the-cathedral-of-computation/384300/>.

³⁶¹ Bogost, “The Cathedral of Computation.”

³⁶² Bogost, “The Cathedral of Computation.”

As I argued in the introduction to this dissertation, it is important to understand religion and/as technology—that is, religion and technology is a false binary, so our attention is better spent on the production of hybrids at this constructed intersection. Religion and/as technology re-orient us to regard the two categories as long-standing, culturally formed and culturally forming tropes in a much broader historical assemblage. This analysis requires very close attention to the terms of the discussion (magic, religion, technology). To place the Clarke’s Law presentation slide at Red Hat Summit into its cultural context—as reflecting a long-standing association between the awe-inspiring powers of technology and magic—is to contextualize these metaphors, to place them within a wider discourse of enchantment, religion, and technology.

Nerd Theology

The examples discussed above demonstrate how enchantment and magic have served as guiding metaphors for our relationship to technology, as seen in the popularity of Clarke’s third law. For some, though, the language of enchantment and technology is not merely an affective or tonal flourish. Indeed, Corey Doctorow, a leading copyleft activist and prolific author on online information freedom, bemoans the fact that some information freedom advocates have based their arguments on quasi-mystical or spiritual grounds—what he calls the “information wants to be free” crowd.³⁶³ The claim that information wants to be free “is a good Zen koan,” Doctorow argues, but “the ‘desires’ of information are totally irrelevant...Information doesn’t want to be free—people do.”³⁶⁴

The phrase “information wants to be free” has become so interconnected with internet culture that it has been described as “a battle cry for the relentless march of the Internet,” “the

³⁶³ Cory Doctorow, *Information Doesn’t Want to Be Free: Laws for the Internet Age* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2014), 94.

³⁶⁴ Doctorow, *Information Doesn’t Want to Be Free*, 93.

single dominant ethic” in information activism, and “the defining slogan of the information age.”³⁶⁵ The slogan appears to have first emerged in a conversation between Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak and *Whole Earth Catalog* founder Stewart Brand. As the two debated how for-profit information technology companies chose which products to fund and which to defund according to market demands, Brand stated: “On the one hand information wants to be expensive, because it’s so valuable. The right information in the right place just changes your life. On the other hand, information wants to be free, because the cost of getting it out is getting lower and lower all the time.”³⁶⁶ Those lines about the paradox between technological innovation and business logic took on a far-flung life of their own. As literary agent John Brockman states, the phrase about information freedom “became a mantra, it became an ideology, for some it’s a religion, for others it’s a cashbox for stock or speaker fees.”³⁶⁷

When Brockman states that “for some it’s a religion,” he is likely making a veiled reference to the co-founder of *Wired* magazine, Kevin Kelly, and similar thinkers (including, most directly, Jason Silva). As Stewart Brand’s student, Kelly translated countercultural values onto the pages of *Wired* magazine, and he has shaped a type of tech journalism that is fueled by religious affinities, sympathies, and imagery. Kelly has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *Time*, *Science*, *GQ*, and *Harper’s Magazine*. His books were given to actors in the film *The Matrix* to help shape the atmosphere on the set, and he served as a “futurist adviser” on Steven Spielberg’s film *Minority Report*. Highly influenced by both Marshall McLuhan and

³⁶⁵ Steven Levy, “Hackers at 30: ‘Hackers’ and ‘Information Wants to be Free,’” *Wired*, November, 21, 2014, <https://www.wired.com/story/hackers-at-30-hackers-and-information-wants-to-be-free/>.

³⁶⁶ Doctorow, *Information Doesn’t Want to Be Free*, 94.

³⁶⁷ Levy, “Hackers at 30.”

Timothy Leary, Kelly is a convert to Christianity who argues that information technology is a living, dynamic, and agentive force. His 2016 book *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces that Will Shape Our Future* asserts that technology has innate “trajectories,” essences-by-design that mold their paths into the future. Kelly argues that humanity’s best hope is to ally with what information technologies “want” rather than to resist them.

In June 2016 I interviewed Kelly for *Religious Dispatches*, and in our conversation I asked how he envisioned the relationships among technology, secularism, religion, and enchantment.³⁶⁸ He responded as follows:

I definitely see a spiritual dimension to technology...the origins of technology [go] back to the Big Bang, the very beginning of the universe. The roots of technology are actually governed by exactly the same dynamic, self-organizing force that has made life. That it is, in some ways, an extension and acceleration of those forces of life...Therefore, I place it in the cosmic realm as being on its same trajectory that the other self-organizing forces that we see at work in the galaxy and the universe and life on this planet, and that technology is the latest and the most recent realization of those forces, so that it's deeply connected to the other things that we find interesting. Intelligence, life, the presence of the galaxies and all these other self-organized structures.³⁶⁹

Kelly thus believes that technology is a recent realization of what he is calling a “life force”—an organizing principle that is capable of structuring other cosmic forms of life. It is this formulation of technology that allows Kelly to define information as something that is animate and living.

³⁶⁸ Kevin Kelly, “What’s the Relationship of Technology to God?": A Q&A with *Wired* co-founder Kevin Kelly,” interview by Shannon Trosper Schorey, published in part in *Religious Dispatches*, June 16, 2016, <http://religiondispatches.org/kevin-kelly-interview/>.

³⁶⁹ Kelly, “What’s the Relationship of Technology to God?”

Elsewhere Kelly describes this phenomenon as the “technium,” the idea that technology is a living, cohesive system greater than the sum of its parts.³⁷⁰ “A spoon or shoe does not have any lifelike attributes,” he explained to me, “but all the technology in the world together does.”³⁷¹ If you cast your conceptual net beyond the plastic of your telephone to the thousands of other technologies that must be in place in order for the telephone to be constructed (mining equipment, electricity, etc.), Kelly argues, you approach something much closer to the life force of technology. “The digital internet,” he explains, “exhibits many lifelike patterns, even though none of the pieces are living...The spoon is not alive...but if you take the entire network of all these things that are interrelated, that that [*sic*] network...does exhibit lifelike behaviors.”³⁷²

It is this lifelike aspect of technology that Kelly connects to religion. “I think that technology is a reflection of the divine,” he states, before more pointedly bemoaning, “It’s not uncommon for Christian theologians at least to wrestle with the role of nature and God and man. [Where’s] that stewardship...almost nobody is asking the [correct] question, ‘What’s the relationship of technology to God?’”³⁷³ Indeed, since the 1990s Kelly has attempted to carve out a connection between information and Christian theology, going as far as to formalize his assertions in the short article “Nerd Theology” for *Technology in Society* in 1999.³⁷⁴

In “Nerd Theology,” Kelly argues that information is a particularly malleable concept, allowing it to easily stand in for God:

³⁷⁰ Kevin Kelly, “The Technium and the 7th Kingdom of Life,” *The Edge*, July 18, 2007, https://www.edge.org/conversation/kevin_kelly-the-technium-and-the-7th-kingdom-of-life

³⁷¹ Kelly, “What’s the Relationship of Technology to God?”

³⁷² Kelly, “What’s the Relationship of Technology to God?”

³⁷³ Kelly, “What’s the Relationship of Technology to God?”

³⁷⁴ Kevin Kelly, “Nerd Theology,” *Technology in Society* 21 (1999): 387-392.

Nerds know that this stuff we call information is as weird and as intangible as prayer in many ways. When you hear people talk about information, they could be talking about the Holy Spirit. We use the same kind of vague vocabulary. In truth we have no idea what information is. There is no theory of information that really withstands scrutiny, yet we have a whole culture and economy based on this metaphor. It is curious that many people who do not believe in God somehow believe in information. Dig down into atomic matter as deep as you want, and you find information at the bottom.³⁷⁵

Information, Kelly is arguing, has become central to our contemporary cultural and media environments, but it is not precisely defined. Two central characteristics—omnipresence and abstraction—allow information to serve in a wide variety of roles. Not only is the data that your telephone shares about you “information,” but so is your DNA, as is the content of your conversations, as is text, as is electricity. Information, conceived in this way as both everything and nothing, becomes the basic element of all matter, all life forms, and all forms more generally. Kelly asserts that the true nature of information, understood as the basic building block of all forms of life, is precisely what makes information sacred.

Those who work most closely with information technologies, Kelly argues, are able best to comprehend information’s existence as a dynamic and living force. It is this conclusion that allows him to proclaim that “computer hackers, geeks, and nerds are developing a unique theology, a theology coming from the wired street” that will eventually affect Christianity and other organized religions more broadly.³⁷⁶ In this vein, Kelly echoes Himanen’s claims about the *telos* of the *Hacker Ethic*, as well as the argument I have made about how Open Source Scientologists ally with Anonymous, and how Jason Silva spreads counterculture spirituality to hundreds of thousands of YouTube followers.

All of the religious advocates considered in this dissertation have used debates over the nature and value of information—and particularly religious knowledge—to critique the

³⁷⁵ Kevin Kelly, “Nerd Theology,” 391.

³⁷⁶ Kevin Kelly, “Nerd Theology,” 387.

fundamental differentiation between religion and technology, a differentiation that has been foundational to the ideological myth of secular modernity. To better understand how these new religious movements have contributed to the cultural evolution of the notion of “religion,” I will now turn to important themes in recent scholarship on religion, technology, and enchantment.

Frauds in the Machine

Many prominent voices in contemporary culture argue that technology is at odds with “authentic” religious practice, that technological artifacts are empty and inert. One of the key corollaries of this perspective is that anyone who believes otherwise is a dupe or a fraud: there is *no deus ex machina*.

The idea that technology is entangled with religious frauds is a venerable one. Leigh Eric Schmidt has described the distinctively American deployments of this notion in detail in his 2002 monograph *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*.³⁷⁷ Schmidt explores how since the eighteenth century new technologies could serve as tools of demystification, used in the service of secularizing the American public and moving it away from what Robert Orsi has described as “bad religion” (religious practices, performances, and beliefs that were configured as abnormal or otherwise disruptive to mainstream society).³⁷⁸

The Enlightenment was characterized by dramatic developments in science, philosophy, society, and politics. In the United States these included the adoption of political democracy, the bifurcation of religious and secular governmental authority, and the formal disestablishment of

³⁷⁷ Eric Leigh Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

³⁷⁸ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 183.

older, hierarchical class systems with the promise that capitalism could give people control over their own futures and fortunes.³⁷⁹ As a series of social, political, scientific, and technological revolutions through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Enlightenment can also be understood through the cluster of ideals it organized itself around: freedom and equality, human reason, progress, democracy, and individualism. Science was invoked to undermine older religious understandings of the cosmos that had placed the earth (and humanity) at the center of a religious narrative.

Science's new potential for rationally explaining the natural world also transformed the historical relationship between Christian theology and natural philosophy. Until the Enlightenment, science could be seen as the "handmaiden of theology," serving an apologetic role supporting the dominant religious doctrines of the time.³⁸⁰ The Early Modern Period saw a shift in this role, as scientific inquiry was un-yoked from this role to become an independent source of knowledge and authority, working under new moral, ethical, and ideological constraints different from those of the church.

One important Enlightenment project was a concerted effort to debunk or expose the assumed frauds and impostures of what was dubbed "superstition." As Schmidt details in *Hearing Things*, technology—popularly understood as the neutral application of new scientific tools—was put to use to monitor and police sense perception. By this, Schmidt means that technology was used to civilize the superstitious, to change how their bodies interacted with the world by disciplining them into practices deemed to be rational and empirical. New notions of

³⁷⁹ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 26.

³⁸⁰ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 147.

science were deployed to teach the superstitious how to become citizen scientists—detached and demystified in their observations and evaluations of the world around them.³⁸¹

Schmidt argues that socially dominant groups came to believe that the senses were a problem for general citizenry—untrained sense perception contributed to superstition, irrationality, and “excessive” religiosity. To combat these tendencies, empirical observation and the scientific method were put to work to train the citizenry to cultivate (correct, improve, extend) their senses in ways that could be deemed precise and discerning. This was a civilizing project aimed at the broad American public. Its goal was not only to make the population scientifically literate, but also to prevent the public from participating in socially disruptive forms of religious thought and practice—to prevent them from being “duped” or “conned” into ways of religious life that were at odds with bourgeois and genteel society.³⁸²

This was a period of internal scientific colonization, in which technologies were used to demystify and debunk popular religious ideologies. In particular, Schmidt argues, this was a process of dulling—quieting the heavenly and demonic voices of popular religious enthusiasm by demonstrating, through technology, their fundamental absence or unreality. These tactics were employed against common religious practices particularly during America’s two Great Awakenings (1730-1750 and 1790-1820).³⁸³

Schmidt argues that the enthusiastic Protestant revivals of the Great Awakenings were as much reactions against the Enlightenment as they were embodiments of specific Enlightenment ideals (free-thinking, individualism, etc.). He points to the emphasis on the informal training of ministers, lay participation, and the popularity of religious enthusiasm among huge numbers of

³⁸¹ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 78-81.

³⁸² Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 7.

³⁸³ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 70, 80-82.

people attending meetings, who embraced charismatic religion as a sign of authentic spiritual or religious practice. While enthusiasm could represent a type of democratizing of religion, according to Schmidt, it could also serve as a protest against the sanitized style of religious practice that many saw in scientifically colonized forms of Christianity.³⁸⁴ Revival meetings were noisy, smelly, and emotional.³⁸⁵

Lurking as a backdrop of the First Great Awakening was the rise of new forms of natural philosophy. Setting the stage for the emergence of modern science, natural philosophy was often invoked to convert America from a “Land of Spirits” to a genteel America, one that was tamed and civilized to the standards of an imagined genteel democracy.³⁸⁶ Auditory perception— hearing—was seen as particularly unstable and especially in need of management: it was easy to hear things that were not there. To illustrate his argument that technologies played a key part in the demystification of “bad religion,” Schmidt follows the touring schedule of the Acoustic Temple. The Acoustic Temple was a French machine, designed by William Frederick Pinchbeck and brought from France to the United States around 1804. The machine was designed to imitate the sounds of ancient oracles, featuring a disembodied female voice and the sound of distant trumpets. Pinchbeck marketed the machine as an illusion, evoking magic in order only to dispel it, in order to allow people to see how their ears could deceive them. Pinchbeck described the device as having been designed to “open the eyes of those who still foster an absurd belief in ghosts, witches, conjurations, demoniacs,” as well as to “enable the attentive observer to form a

³⁸⁴ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 60-65.

³⁸⁵ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 60.

³⁸⁶ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 97.

just idea of the artifices [that charlatans have used against] the superstitious, in this and former ages.”³⁸⁷

Schmidt ‘s work here shows the construction of a differentiation between good and bad religion quite similar to the one Robert Orsi has detailed in his monograph *Between Heaven and Earth*. In his concluding chapter “Snakes Alive: Religious Studies Between Heaven and Earth,” Orsi argues that new religions are often registered as “bad religions,” as ways of being religious that are overly-visible and enthusiastic. Bad religion is positioned against “true religion” or “good religion,” which Orsi details as:

...epistemologically and ethically singular. It is rational, respectful of persons, noncoercive, mature, nonanthropomorphic in its higher forms, mystical (as opposed to ritualistic), unmediated and agreeable to democracy (no hierarchy in gilded robes and fancy hats), monotheistic (no angels, saints, demons, ancestors), emotionally controlled, a reality of mind and spirit not body and matter. It is concerned with ideal essences not actual things, and especially not about presences in things.³⁸⁸

Bad religion is irrational, disrespectful, coercive, immature, anthropomorphic, undemocratic, polytheistic, emotional, and invested in objects that do not remain properly inert.

At the heart of the project of modernity has been an effort to define and police forms of religion that are properly contained and decorous. New religious movements are commonly portrayed as overly emotional and irrational. But at the same time, they can also be depicted as violating the constraints of rationality in other ways. For example, the media has portrayed the Kopimists as hyper-rational and logically disingenuous. In this narration, the Kopimist cannot really believe that information is sacred because they are (at least potentially) religious frauds, cleverly (and humorously) attempting to game the legal system to defend their (otherwise

³⁸⁷ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 80.

³⁸⁸ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 188.

secular) activities.³⁸⁹ In a similar manner, Jason Silva is not accused of outright irrationality, but he is aligned with shallow modes of New Age spirituality, understood as relatively harmless but not really religious.³⁹⁰ Open Source Scientologists are collapsed in with Scientologists more broadly—they believe too much, too ridiculously, and are therefore not rational at all.³⁹¹

As I discussed in the introduction, the category of religion is always a political category. As Orsi shows, scholars regularly invoke the category to demarcate between what are seen as socially appropriate forms of believe and practice and those that seem to run counter to socially sanctioned notions of self and society.³⁹² Bad religions are border crossers. They blur the boundaries of what is understood to be authentic, real, or otherwise worthy of serious scholarly study.

The case studies I have explored in this dissertation are doubly fixed in the category of bad religion. Not only are they new religions (deemed fraudulent by their novelty), but they also seem to transgress one of the fundamental and constituent principles of capitalist modernity, the

³⁸⁹ See Rollo Romig, “The First Church of Pirate Bay,” *The New Yorker*, January 12, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-first-church-of-pirate-bay>; Jesus Diaz, “File Sharing is Now an Official Religion in Sweden,” *Gizmodo*, January 4, 2012, <https://gizmodo.com/5873001/file-sharing-is-now-an-official-religion-in-sweden>; and Bill Chappell, “Pro-Piracy Group Says It’s Now A Recognized Religion in Sweden,” *The Two-Way: Breaking News from NPR*, January 4, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2012/01/04/144691912/pro-piracy-group-says-its-now-a-recognized-religion-in-sweden>.

³⁹⁰ See Ross Anderson, “A Timothy Leary for the Viral Video Age,” *The Atlantic*, April 12, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/04/a-timothy-leary-for-the-viral-video-age/255691/>; and Marianne Schnall, “Interview With Futurist Jason Silva, Host of *Brain Games*,” *HuffPost*, December 6, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/marianne-schnall/interview-with-futurist-j_b_7093382.html.

³⁹¹ Carole M. Cusack, “Media Coverage of Scientology in the United States,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the American News Media*, ed. Diane Winston (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 303-318.

³⁹² Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 187.

basic division between the religious and the secular, as they assert that there are real, animated, essences within the mechanical materials of technological objects. While embracing the technologies of science, they configure those very technologies to pursue and buttress a worldview and ethics of awe. They disregard the cultural logic that demands that technologies disenchant. To better understand the nature of this transgression, I will now turn to examine recent debates about the role of technology and disenchantment among important scholars of religion.

Disenchantment

The idea that technology is linked to the process of secularization remains a dominant narrative in the academy. Secularization here is defined as the historical and cultural process through which religious authorities are replaced with non-religious ones, including the social processes by which religion (loosely defined in both its influence and scope) becomes increasingly limited and contained.³⁹³ From this perspective, technology is understood as the practical apparatus extending the logic of quantification outside of the realm of science to consume all forms of life and as one of the primary methods through which secularization is accomplished.

For our purposes here, let me invoke the nineteenth century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach as exemplifying the modernist perspective that seeks to demystify and debunk the cultural residue of religion. As Feuerbach would argue, it is precisely because we fail to understand how technology works that technology can enchant. Feuerbach's explanation for mystification is echoed in a number of contemporary popular and scholarly understandings of religion and technology. Popular especially amongst engineers and scientists, this perspective

³⁹³ Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 33-34.

asserts that technology can appear enchanting only because of basic ignorance about how the technological process works—technology inspires awe or is otherwise seen to be magical simply because it is misunderstood.

The logic Feuerbach used in his 1841 *The Essence of Christianity* in his efforts to demystify Christianity fits well with current debates about technomysticism, and it provides contemporary thinkers a ready-made path to demystify the workings of technology. Feuerbach sought to explain the origins and operations of religion through his account of a process of objectification, projection, and forgetting. Strongly influenced by Hegel, Feuerbach argues that it is humanity's dialectical relationship to objects that allow humans to become acquainted with themselves. "We know the man by the object" Feuerbach argues.³⁹⁴

The problem, for Feuerbach, begins when humanity loses track of this dialectical process—subjects and objects are misapprehended. This misapprehension is vividly demonstrated in the creation of religion, which is produced in the misunderstanding of our own projections. Humanity objectifies its highest ideals and projects those ideals onto the divine, a product of the human internal dialogue. Religion thus becomes "man's earliest and also most indirect form of self-knowledge."³⁹⁵ In Feuerbach, the divine projection, the God of Western Christianity, is configured as exemplifying the best, most perfected human attributes (so that, for instance, God looks and acts a lot like the ultimate king). But humanity comes to mistake this projected God as having an objective existence—we desire those ideals to be real, so we make God real—because humanity forgets and misapprehends the nature of this process of projection. "Man...projects his being into objectivity," Feuerbach argues, making himself into an object for

³⁹⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (1841), Chapter 1, Section 1, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Essence_of_Christianity.

³⁹⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, Chapter 1, Section 2.

submission under the gaze of “this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject.”³⁹⁶ Humanity falls under the sway of the “highest subjectivity” of God only by splitting itself into subject and object.³⁹⁷

Feuerbach is arguing that religion is the imaginary product of humanity. Objectified and alienated human values and desires are projected out in such a way that humans fail to recognize their role in the constructive process. But Feuerbach’s contribution is not merely to argue that religion is an illusion. He also emphasizes the formative role of emotions and affect in the origins of religion; the processes of objectification and projection are driven by emotional desires and misapprehension.

For our purposes, Feuerbach exemplifies a deep cultural logic that resonates through many contemporary debates about technology, religion, and secularization. We can see this logic at work in the recurring suggestion in popular media that internet use is linked to secularization. As an example, let me focus on one particular instance of this story that circulated online in April 2014 and then re-emerged in 2018 (though there are numerous other examples).

On April 4, 2014, the *MIT Technology Review* ran a story titled “How the Internet is Taking Away America’s Religion,” with a subheading stating that “Using the Internet can destroy your faith. That’s the conclusion of a study showing the dramatic drop in religious affiliation in the U.S. since 1990 is closely mirrored by the increase in Internet use.”³⁹⁸ This story was prompted by a computer data study performed by computer scientist Allen Downey at the Olin College of Engineering (using data from the General Social Survey, a University of

³⁹⁶ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, Chapter 1, Section 2.

³⁹⁷ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, Chapter 1, Section 2.

³⁹⁸ “How the Internet is Taking Away America’s Religion,” *MIT Technology Review*, April 4, 2014, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/526111/how-the-internet-is-taking-away-americas-religion/>.

Chicago sociological survey carried out since 1972). Downey asserted that “correlation does provide evidence in favor of causation,” and he concluded that the widespread adoption of information technologies (and internet access in particular) appeared related to a significant decline in religious affiliation. As he stated it: “Internet use decreases the chance of religious affiliation.”³⁹⁹

Four days after the original *MIT Technology Review* story, on April 8 *The Guardian* picked up the story, re-summarizing Downey’s arguments in Andrew Brown’s “Is the internet really killing religion in the US?”⁴⁰⁰ Brown agreed with the *MIT Review*, and he did little to question Downey’s conclusions, largely because the idea that technology disenchanters seemed comfortable and obvious to Brown. “What keeps religious affiliation alive,” Brown argues, “is practice, or ritualized belief...and someone online is almost by definition not performing collective religious acts.” For Brown, technological activity cannot be religious activity precisely because, in his mind, it is inherently secular. “What kills American religion isn’t argument,” he continued, “it’s Facebook.”⁴⁰¹ By April 10, the story had reached the national section of the *Washington Post*, where the *Religion News Service* Kimberly Winston recapitulated Downey’s findings alongside some soft push-back from University of Southern California communications professor Stephen O’Leary. As a specialist in the study religion online, O’Leary asked for nuance in Winston’s piece, arguing that internet use must be understood as part of the wider

³⁹⁹ “How the Internet is Taking Away America’s Religion,” *MIT Technology Review*.

⁴⁰⁰ Andrew Brown, “Is the Internet Really Killing Religion in the US?” *The Guardian*, April 8, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/08/internet-killing-religion-us>.

⁴⁰¹ Brown, “Is the Internet Really Killing Religion in the US?”

secularizing effects of the “religious marketplace” and new options for religious affiliation (and de-affiliation) since the 1960s.⁴⁰²

By April 28, the story came full circle. Jared Keller of the *Pacific Standard* directly confronted Downey’s arguments in his own, bluntly titled essay “No, the internet is not killing religion in America.” Keller’s no-nonsense subheader reads, “The decline in religiosity in the U.S. is accompanied by a rise in Internet access. But the factors determining faith are far more complicated than a Wi-Fi connection.”⁴⁰³ Unfortunately for Keller, and what is instructive for my argument here, is that this fundamental story about technology as a secularizing force is a very common one. In January 2018 the cycle repeated, when *PsyPost* published the findings of yet another research study published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. The headline for this coverage, written by blogger Eric W. Dolan, read: “Increases in internet use linked to a loss of religious affiliation, study finds.”⁴⁰⁴

These news cycles illustrate the common assumption that technology is linked to the processes of secularization. Feuerbach’s fundamental logic is used both to demonstrate that an increase in knowledge and self-awareness will lead to demystification and to explain why some people mistakenly persist in perceiving technology in religious terms. This logic provides critics of technomysticism with an explanation for the phenomenon, while at the same time positioning

⁴⁰² For contemporary accounts of the history of the “religious marketplace” in the United States, see Philip Godd, Detlef Junker, and Jan Stievernann, *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴⁰³ Jared Keller, “No, the Internet is Not Killing Religion in America,” *PS Mag*, April 28, 2014, <https://psmag.com/environment/internet-killing-religion-america-80149>.

⁴⁰⁴ Eric W. Dolan, “Increases in Internet Use Linked to a Loss of Religious Affiliation, Study Finds,” *PsyPost*, January 12, 2018, <https://www.psypost.org/2018/01/increases-internet-use-linked-loss-religious-affiliation-study-finds-50568>.

the critics as superior, rational citizens of secular modernity, performing their scientific duties of debunking and purifying their realm.

Yet as the new religious movements I have analyzed here have shown, the modernist ideology that Feuerbach and his progeny promote has always been fallacious. The secularization thesis, championed by so many, falters again and again as religious energy and creativity never seem to wane. The commonsensical binaries of religion and secularism, subject and object, are foundational to the ideological myth of Western modernity. But key terms in the formulation of this “modern constitution” have never been stable; they have never worked in the ways that Feuerbach would have desired. As Bruno Latour has famously asserted, “we have never been modern,” and the case studies at the heart of my project here provide rich and vivid confirmation of Latour’s fundamental claim.⁴⁰⁵

Either / Or

Bruno Latour has repeatedly argued that the fundamental binaries on which Western modernity has been founded—binaries between subject and object, the human and the natural, the religious and the secular, religion and technology, and many more—are merely the product of a particular modern logic. He argues, for example, that discourses about whose objects are animated (and when) pull on different, historically situated, relationships of power (i.e. Spanish colonizers believe indigenous beliefs in objects are bunk, but that their own use of objects is rational).

Debates about technomysticism reflect larger disputes about the relationship between science and religion. New technologies are the prestigious legacy of science, its most highly developed products, expanding human capabilities in unimaginable ways, while their opacity

⁴⁰⁵ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

obscures the social networks within which they are produced. Latour is illuminating for this dissertation because he challenges important ideologies of science and the vision of secular modernity that those ideologies uphold.

Traditional modern science and religion debates have posed each side as ontologically separate from the other. On the one hand, Latour explains, these debates have defined religion as the realm of belief—it is “supposed to deal with the far, the vague, the mysterious, the personal, the uncertain, and the unknowable.”⁴⁰⁶ Science, in contrast, has been “defined as the grasp of the visible, the near, the close, the impersonal, the knowable.”⁴⁰⁷ The religion/science binary is set up so that each side has its kingdom. Religion assumes rule over belief (the supernatural, inner authenticity, sentimentality). Yet as has become a well-tread argument in the scholarly study of religion, religion is more than belief—and, perhaps, not even very much about belief at all.⁴⁰⁸ The supposed attributes of religion are not stable, cohesive, or essential. They are the products of a very particular cultural history of the notion of religion, formed in the West under the shadow of Christianity.⁴⁰⁹

In a similar manner, modern science itself does not simply observe the visible and identify (unproblematically, easily, and without contestation) a series of facts guided by rationality. Science is also the product of a very particular cultural history. It is created through

⁴⁰⁶ Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Duke University Press, 2010), 113.

⁴⁰⁷ Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 113.

⁴⁰⁸ See David Chidester, *Religion: Material Dynamics* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); and Saba Mahmood and Jean-Michel Landry, eds., *Anthropology of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴⁰⁹ See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

processes that involve peer review, laboratories, individual personalities, funding, complex technologies, and much more. As Latour explains, science relies on theories that build “extraordinarily long, complicated, mediated, indirect, and sophisticated paths so as to reach the worlds [that are invisible except] through concatenations of layered instruments, calculations, and models.”⁴¹⁰

The traditional science and religion debate that understands each side as an ontologically separate realm of life serves to mask and preserve deep cultural assumptions about the nature of religion and science that are actually historically contested and unstable. Even those who wish to valorize the culturally inferior term of the debate (religion) are only able to do so in a confused way, since the very terms of the debate reduce religion to a caricature and segregate it from the broad networks within which it actually functions. Latour describes these participants of the science/religion debates as “Camp David diplomats drawing lines on maps of the Israeli and Palestinian territories. They try to settle disputes as if there was on single domain, one single kingdom to share in two.”⁴¹¹ Latour bemoans, “[I almost prefer] naturalistic accounts than with this sort of hypocritical tolerance, which ghettoizes religion into a form of nonsense, specialized in transcendence and feel-good inner sentiment.”⁴¹²

Latour challenges the fundamental logic of secular modernity while seeking to show how complex the broad network of material relations actually is. The ideology of modernity has sought to bifurcate the world in an attempt to purify itself, to distinguish itself from lesser, impure, irrational, pre-moderns.⁴¹³ Instead of distinct social forces and modes of knowledge,

⁴¹⁰ Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 111.

⁴¹¹ Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 109.

⁴¹² Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 109.

⁴¹³ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 3, 13.

transhistorically, transculturally, and ontologically separate, Latour argues that there have only ever been actants (both human and non) influencing one another through larger and larger networks.⁴¹⁴

So how might Latour respond to the logic of Feuerbach and his progeny? Latour argues that complex techno-social relations are congealed within the “black boxes” of technological objects. “Society and technology are not two ontologically distinct entities,” Latour asserts, but instead social groups are deeply transformed by, and go on to innovate and re-transform, the non-human actants (like technology) with which they are embedded.⁴¹⁵ The computer screen before us appears oblique—it hides the mining work needed to take the rare minerals out of the earth, the workshops that slice casings and blast chemicals to condition the hardware, the environmental tolls of electricity production and e-waste, the historically gendered labor among engineers, programmers, and sales teams, the circuits of global economic exchange that produces a single machine with parts from around the world, and the code and information technology infrastructures that steadily streams information between your device to the network of devices that gives yours the ability to function.

This Latourian perspective helps us understand that no one—not the engineers, or the programmers, or the techies who can do far more with a single machine than most mere mortals—can fully comprehend the social and material networks congealed behind the dim glimmer of a stained laptop screen or a worn keyboard. To re-read Clarke’s third law in a generous way, in the spirit of Latour, we could then argue that technology is perceived as

⁴¹⁴ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 117-120.

⁴¹⁵ Latour, “Technology Is Society Made Durable,” 129.

magical precisely when the social relations and control that crafted the device become so opaque that the machine seems to work and move and do on its own, beyond any human capacities.

But discourses of magic are, of course, not themselves neutral either. In fact, the rhetoric of magic—and especially magical thinking—is closely tied to colonial projects that privilege Western, enlightenment forms of rationality over other modes of thought.⁴¹⁶ Latour is instructive for our purposes, though, because of his interest in objects. In his 2015 essay “Fetish-Factish,” Latour centers objects within the story about magic and moderns. He describes an imaginary, loosely historical encounter between the conquering Portuguese and several West Africans from the Gold Coast. Confronted with the religious objects of the Africans, the Portuguese insist that they themselves have no objects that “speak back” of their own accord—they know the difference between subjects and amulets. A thing is a thing, in other words, and a subject a subject. Latour describes this as a harsh choice—is the divinity of the object real, or is it fake? But what particularly frustrates the Portuguese is not necessarily even the existence of the amulets, but their inability to communicate their distress to the Africans. Latour explains:

Whatever root we may prefer, the either—or choice remains the one the Portuguese insisted on and the Blacks rejected: “Who is speaking in the oracle? Is it the human being, or the fairy-object itself? Is the divinity real or artificial?” “Both,” the defendants reply at once, since they are unable to grasp the difference. “You have to choose,” say the conquerors, without further hesitation.⁴¹⁷

This imaginary dialogue, Latour argues, highlights something essential about modern identity. Noting the Catholic artifacts the Portuguese carry on their travels, Latour suggests that what we actually see in this episode is “one group of people covered with amulets scoffing at

⁴¹⁶ Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴¹⁷ Bruno Latour, “Fetish-factish,” in *Key Terms in Material Religion*, ed. Brent S. Plate (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 89.

another group of people covered with amulets.”⁴¹⁸ This is because, ultimately, “a Modern is someone who believes that others believe” —modernity claims to have knowledge, and it projects belief onto the non-modern.⁴¹⁹ In other words, the language of enchantment (here represented by what the Portuguese see as the fetish objects of the Africans, in distinction to their supposed rational objects of Catholicism) simply marks important points of friction in an existing social network. “Belief,” Latour argues, “is not a state of mind but is a result of relationships among people.”⁴²⁰ The question then is not whether we should believe objects are enchanted or not (for the very same reasons that most religious studies scholars long ago stopped asking about the sincerity and authenticity of religions) but rather why moderns need “so badly” to believe that others believe.

If the Portuguese can get the Africans to admit that they fabricate their own fetishes (or if they refuse), the Portuguese’s own sense of superiority over the Africans is confirmed. On the one hand, if the Africans do admit fabrication, the Portuguese confirm that the Africans are but the latest in a long line of “manipulators of popular beliefs.”⁴²¹ If the Africans refuse to admit fabrication, than the Portuguese can feel superior in their knowledge that the Africans are merely dupes, conned by bare materials that they have themselves forgotten that they animated. This is the “either / or” choice that Latour speaks of, and it is the same rhetorical device that Feuerbach extends to other religious peoples. “From the mouths of the Fontenelles, the Voltaires, and Feuerbachs of the world,” Latour explains, “the same either-or alternative keeps spewing

⁴¹⁸ Latour, “Fetish-factish,” 90.

⁴¹⁹ Latour, “Fetish-factish,” 87.

⁴²⁰ Latour, “Fetish-factish,” 88.

⁴²¹ Latour, “Fetish-factish,” 91.

forth.”⁴²² Either you’ve pulled the strings, or you are being pulled. Either you’ve built it, or it’s real. Technology, as crafted matter, cannot be both.

Latour is useful for the purposes of this dissertation because of the way in which he illustrates how these binaries, so formative to the ideology of modernity, collapse when you look at them closely. Indeed, rather than reflecting or enforcing any stable and convincing distinction between science and religion, religion and technology, the new religious movements explored in this dissertation represent vibrant, living examples of hybridity, the inevitable mixing of religion and science, religion and technology. Latour argues that beneath the rhetoric of binarism and purity, the moderns have only ever produced hybrids. The religious creativity of these new movements demonstrates that even the most seemingly secular, inert, and neutral products of science—these technological artifacts—are haunted by the religious.

We can carry this exploration of technology’s role in dis/enchantments a step further by turning to Jason Josephson-Storm’s *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*. Josephson-Storm seek to reposition the discussion of enchantment at the heart of his proposed method for the study of religion: “reflexive religious studies.” With Latour and Josephson-Storm, I will argue that a nuanced perspective that acknowledges entanglement rather than hard binaries is the most productive way to understand the case studies I have explored in this dissertation.

Hauntings

In the introduction of this dissertation, I argued that the “and/as” model Jeremy Stolow puts forward for the study of religion and technology is particularly illuminating in exploring the questions that have motivated my research. Religion and technology are not two separate,

⁴²² Latour, “Fetish-factish,” 92.

ontologically distinct formations but are instead social forms that emerge in specific contexts (geographically, historically, culturally), occur in multiple instances and with multiple formations, and are always radically entangled. Latour gives scholars a theory with which to understand the hybridity produced at the intersection of religion and/as technology, as well as a way to understand the importance of hybridity in Western attempts to assert a narrative of secular modernity. Jason Josephson-Storm moved this conversation forward by describing how secularism has always been haunted. Not only are the religion/secular, religion/technology, enchantment/disenchantment binaries impossible to maintain, they were never successfully conjured up in the first place.

Modernity, quite simply, has never been disenchanted. This assertion is not new; it echoes Latour and a number of other recent scholars.⁴²³ But Josephson-Storm is particularly helpful for my analysis because of his focus on the issue of technology. As we will see, the religious creativity of the groups I have analyzed here offers a vivid demonstration of Latour and Josephson's fundamental argument that the religion/secular binarism at the heart of modernity is inevitably and essentially unstable. Pointing to Max Weber's theory of disenchantment, Josephson-Storm traces the ways in which modernization has regularly been "equated with the rise of instrumental reason, the gradual alienation of humanity from nature, and the production of a bureaucratic and technological life world stripped of mystery and wonder."⁴²⁴ Echoing Leigh Schmidt, Josephson-Storm highlights how many scholars have commonly identified the demise of religion and magic as a key element in the effort to make capitalist societies modern.⁴²⁵

⁴²³ See Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Secularisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); and Craig J. Calhoun, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Michael Warner, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁴²⁴ Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 4.

⁴²⁵ Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 4.

These processes of disenchantment are regularly linked to processes of objectification. Rational and systematic epistemologies colonized nature, turning it into an object to be conquered and controlled. It was a logical next step, then, when enlightenment ideology extended the domination of nature into the domination of “humans over each other,” transforming human and natural life “into abstractions—mere numbers and statistics.”⁴²⁶

It is worth pausing to consider how Josephson-Storm is here responding to an historical narrative highly influenced by Heidegger’s *Question Concerning Technology* (1954). There Heidegger outlined a theory of technology in which instrumental reason becomes the primary mode of being for humanity in a technological world, or rather that in “the context of the being-question, [technology] does not name a human comportment but a manner of the essential swaying of being.”⁴²⁷

To clarify his argument, Heidegger uses the example of a hydroelectric plant that has been placed on the Rhine. The river, Heidegger argues, had once been the subject of poetry, of wonder, and of awe. The hydroelectric plant collapses these possibilities, transforming the Rhine instead into a mere supplier of electrical power.⁴²⁸ This “monstrous” conversion corrupts the river, spoiling nature and humanity alike by reducing a source of wonder to a commodity now designed for exploitation. Heidegger argues that this episode exemplifies the technological mode of being—a logic of instrumentalism that is not peripheral to a world with technological

⁴²⁶ Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 10.

⁴²⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, eds. Rischard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 88.

⁴²⁸ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (New York: Garland Pub., 1977), 321.

infrastructure, but that defines it.⁴²⁹ By making humanity essentially measurable, technology reduces beings to not-beings; it makes subjects into objects. What is worse, for Heidegger at least, is that this process is marked by an abandonment of awe and wonder that we do not even realize we suffer—we are indifferent to the loss, as the world becomes disenchanting.⁴³⁰

This fundamental narrative is what Josephson-Storm seeks to overthrow, demonstrating through *The Myth of Disenchantment* how the type of absence or lack on which Heidegger's account depends was actually never felt, never proved, and certainly never fully established. Josephson-Storm's case studies demonstrate "that reason does not eliminate 'superstition' but piggybacks upon it; that mechanism often produces vitalism; and that often, in a single room, we can find both seance and science."⁴³¹ The West, in his view, was never uniquely disenchanting, and it surely does not stand apart from a world Western anthropologists and scholars have so regularly described as superstitious, enchanted, and magical. (In a 2017 interview with *Religious Dispatches* Josephson-Storm states that an alternative title for his book was "Magic Never Vanished").⁴³² Josephson-Storm is, in his own words, "challeng[ing] the most widely held account of modernity and its break from the premodern past."

Conclusion

"Sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." Clarke's law, stretched out upon the looming screen at the Red Hat Summit, is of the same world as the people

⁴²⁹ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 328.

⁴³⁰ Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 328.

⁴³¹ Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 3.

⁴³² Jason Josephson-Storm, "Magic in the Air: How Intellectuals Invented the Myth of a Mythless Society," *Religious Dispatches*, August 29, 2017, <http://religiondispatches.org/magic-in-the-air-how-intellectuals-invented-the-myth-of-a-mythless-society/>.

considered in this dissertation. Clarke did not conjure his law from nowhere. Instead, religion and technology have existed as interrelated components of the same, enduring cultural assemblage. There has never been a coherent separation between religion and secularism—both are categories that are deployed to produce social effects (rather than to reflect essential essences). This dissertation identified unexpected and concrete contemporary examples of hybridity, sites where we can see the creative interplay of religion and technology.

Conclusion

The Fight for the Future of the Internet

Ethan Dodge is the lead engineer and technical adviser for a network of new web-based communities: MormonLeaks, FaithLeaks, and their parent organization the Truth and Transparency Organization. For the first year and a half of his work with MormonLeaks, Dodge worked under the pseudonym Privacy P. Pratt, a play on the name of Parley P. Pratt (1807-1857), an early leader in the Mormon Church and one of the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. In August 2018 I travelled to Las Vegas in part to see Dodge's presentation at "Skytalks." Skytalks is a shadow conference that runs parallel to, and is loosely affiliated with, DEF CON (the world's largest and longest running hacker conventions). Skytalks is hosted by the anonymous hacker collective 303 and is not sponsored by any official organizations, in part so that it can feature hosts and topics that are too controversial for other venues.⁴³³ During Skytalks presentations, electronic and recording equipment is expressly forbidden to protect speaker's safety and confidentiality. Hall monitors patrol the audience searching for offending recording equipment (including cell phones), which is publicly smashed with a mallet at the front of the room. The lines to attend Skytalks wrap around the building, often taking several hours with no guarantee for entrance.

In 2018 Dodge spoke as a follow-up to his presentation the year before. Both talks were about his works with MormonLeaks (formerly Mormon Wikileaks). MormonLeaks began in

⁴³³ "Welcome," *Skytalks*, accessed October 2018, <https://skytalks.info/>.

October 2016, when founder Ryan McKnight published fifteen confidential videos of Mormon leaders (most of whom were leaders in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, a high ranking and secretive organization in the church) in private conversation. The videos included audio of church leaders discussing marijuana, the “homosexual agenda,” and the specifically relevant issue of whether the church should be worried about a WikiLeaks style disclosure campaign.⁴³⁴

These videos had been leaked and distributed first on the Reddit forum r/exmormon for Mormon apostates seeking community, guidance, and support as they break their ties with the Church. After the *New York Times* covered the leaks, Ethan Dodge had reached out to McKnight to establish a more secure technological mechanism for protecting leakers and hosting controversial content about the Mormon church. Within several months, MormonLeaks had a formalized name, website, and policy statement. A few months later, FaithLeaks was created to host sister content from other ex-religious members who wanted to leak secret or otherwise controversial material. By late 2017, both organizations were joined under a parent project, the Truth and Transparency Foundation (TTF).⁴³⁵

The mission statement of the TTF asserts that “increased transparency results in fewer untruths, less corruption, and less abuse within religion and other faith centric organizations.”⁴³⁶ Through providing technical tools and protections of whistleblowers (in the form of anonymous distribution), TTF supports “citizen journalists for starting and expanding news reporting, public commentary, and criticism related to religion and faith,” and it aims its disclosures squarely at a

⁴³⁴ Find all original videos at “MormonLeaks,” accessed October 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJTIFO9JJWiXABNXHDKj4A>.

⁴³⁵ “The MormonLeaks Team Launches FaithLeaks and the Truth and Transparency Foundation,” MormonLeaks, accessed October 2018, <https://mormonleaks.io/newsroom/2017/11/07/the-mormonleaks-team-launches-faithleaks-and-the-truth-and-transparency-foundation/>.

⁴³⁶ “Our Objectives” and “Our Mission,” The Truth and Transparency Organization, accessed October 2018, <https://truthandtransparency.org/>.

three-pronged target: finances (where money comes and goes), policies (particularly policies that adversely affect Church members), and statistics (reporting on sexual abuse, legal cases, membership demographics, attendance records).⁴³⁷

MormonLeaks, FaithLeaks, and the TTF are quite different from the case studies explored in this dissertation because they argue for the freedom of information (in the form of whistleblowing and leaking) for the explicit purposes of critique and reform rather than on the basis of any metaphysical arguments about the nature of information and information freedom. MormonLeaks and its related organizations represent an important aspect of the struggle for information freedom—they believe information has the power to bring social change. They use information to assert the values of transparency and responsibility between religious institutions and their members. These organizations are performing important political work, but they do so in a way that conforms quite easily with the dominant narrative of religion and secularism in Western modernity. They are using information to debunk and to enlighten. In this way, they offer a compelling but unsurprising cultural formation of religion and technology. They configure the relationships among information, religion, and technology in a way that fits well with the promises and projects of secular modernity.

The religious movements I have analyzed in this dissertation are up to something more transgressive, something that reveals deeper tensions and shifts underlying contemporary life and its values, assumptions, and lineages. These religious movements are hybrids. Their religious creativity—anchored in debates about the value and nature of information—reveals important and surprising insights into the ongoing cultural development of the concept of religion, into changing cultural perceptions of technology, and into the fragile, mythic nature of modernity. These religious movements demonstrate how information access has been configured as a

⁴³⁷ “Our Objectives” and “Our Mission,” The Truth and Transparency Organization.

religious right and how the control and freedom of information has been used to legitimize and delegitimize new forms of religious expression.

The Church of Scientology, Anonymous, and the Open Source Scientologists demonstrate how the very concept of information itself is contested in ways that shape and reconfigure fundamental debates about the nature of religious knowledge and access. These competing beliefs about information—and the accompanying values of open access, modification, and distribution—fuel Scientology’s struggles online. Copyright and copyleft activism provided the context for these debates, the practical effects of which leave a particularly thorny ethical conundrum for scholars of Scientology. Increasingly, copyright law is used to police religious dissent, potentially making Scientology’s troubles the canary in the coal mine.

The Missionary Church of Kopimism recasts the ethical commitment to radical information freedom as its core religious imperative, reformulating theological themes deeply rooted in the Protestant Reformation. The Kopimists have combined a longstanding and deeply held religious tradition that individualizes access to religious knowledge with the cultural values of new hacker subcultures. The Kopimists claim to represent a much broader, latent spiritual reality of twentieth and twenty-first centuries culture. They demonstrate in a highly inventive fashion the intertwining of two dominant undercurrents of our times: the hacker ethic and the cultural legacy of Protestant Christianity.

Jason Silva draws on the work of Timothy Leary and Erik Davis to reconfigure these debates yet again, this time in ways that echo a set of distinctively gnostic directives. These three public figures demonstrate the prevalence of the religious framing of information access as religious knowledge, but they do so in more extreme and eschatological ways. They argue that information itself is salvific, and they carry the strand of Protestant theology identified in chapter two in peculiarly gnostic directions by articulating a hyper-spiritualized and individualized

investment in information. Because of the opacity of contemporary capitalism, those who think that technology (highly formed capitalist products) will provide liberation to everyone appear most prone to these gnostic echoes. Yet this confidence in the salvific potential of information is deeply paradoxical—these thinkers want to democratize the benefits of information access while at the same time preserving the special status of technological elites.

The religious movements explored in this dissertation have focused on one of the central questions underpinning contemporary society: what is the nature of information? This is a key question, becoming more and more significant as we see information flows and technologies shaping our world and ourselves in unimaginable new ways. Pervasive data collection and monitoring have become the conditions upon which our contemporary global economy and its telecommunications infrastructure have been built. It should surprise no one that the nature of information—so fundamentally material yet so abstract, so deeply eminent and at the very same time so transcendently powerful—has been a key site for religious creativity. New information technologies appear to be omnipresent and omniscient, so they can easily be configured in the religious language of Western monotheism. This is not to argue that information and information technologies actually are sacred, or omniscient, or omnipresent; technologies fail, and their powers are often completely mythical (my iPhone, for instance, breaks every two years—not much of a mind upgrade). But these debates about the nature of information are at their core debates about the nature of modernity. They allow us to see, in real time, the impossibility of any stable differentiation between the religious and the secular.

The practices, ideologies, and activism of the Open Source Scientologists, Anonymous, the Missionary Church of Kopimism, and Jason Silva are all configured around a free and unrestricted internet (one in which all peoples are guaranteed access to all information). The Church of Scientology argues the exact opposite, mounting a defense for the tight control of

information based upon the need for regulation of esoteric religious knowledge. All parties formulate these debates in such a way that that they are actively transforming what the very categories of the religious and the secular might mean. In their fight over information flows on the internet, they are reworking the mythological contours of modernity. They undermine the modern myth of disenchantment, and they confirm that there can never be any stable differentiation between religion and technology at all.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albanese, Catherine L. *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Andersen, Ross. "A Timothy Leary for the Viral Video Age." *The Atlantic*. April 12, 2012. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/04/a-timothy-leary-for-the-viral-video-age/255691/>.
- Anonymous. "Anonymous Message Regarding Fake Videos." March 7, 2008. video, 1:25. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d06oINVcqYc&lc=z13rizpjbwu3ilc0v23jj10zut2phzlsi>.
- . "Message to Scientology." January 21, 2008. video, 2:41. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCbKv9yiLiQ>.
- . "Response to the Media." January 25, 2008. video, 2:20. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcr1trjtLaU>.
- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- . *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Association of Professional Independent Scientologists. "The Scientologists Freezone Information." Last modified 2006. <http://scientologistsfreezone.com/information.shtml>.
- Aupers, Stef. "'The Force is Great': Enchantment and Magic in Silicon Valley." *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology* 3, no. 1 (2009): 153-173. <https://journals.muni.cz/mujlt/article/view/2530/2094>.
- . "'Where the Zeroes Meet the Ones': Exploring the Affinity between Magic and Computer Technology." In *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*, edited by Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, 219-238. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Baraniuk, Chris. "The Pirate and the Priest: How Digital Turned into Divine." *The Machine Starts*, January 17, 2012. <http://www.themachinestarts.com/read/2012-01-the-pirate-and-the-priest-how-digital-turned-into-divine>.
- Barker, Eileen. "Preface." In *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*, edited by Adam Possamai, ix-1. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- . "The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must Be Joking." In *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*, edited by Lorne L. Dawson, 7-25. 1st ed. Wiley-Blackwell, 2003.

- BBC News. "Sweden Recognizes New File-sharing Religion Kopimism." BBC. March 08, 2012. <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-16424659>.
- Becker, William. "Review: Against the Protestant Gnostics." *Theology Today* 45, no. 3 (October 1988): 361-362.
- Bilton, Nick. "Masked Protesters Aid Time Warner's Bottom Line." *The New York Times*, August 28, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/technology/masked-anonymous-protesters-aid-time-warners-profits.html>.
- Bogost, Ian. "The Cathedral of Computation." *The Atlantic*, January 15, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/01/the-cathedral-of-computation/384300/>.
- Boutros, Alexandra. "Virtual Vodou, Actual Practice: Transfiguring the Technological." In *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in between*, edited by Jeremy Stolow, 239-261. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.
- Boellstorff, Tom. "Open and Free." *Current Anthropology* 50, no.6 (December 2009): 964-965. <https://doi.org/10.1086/605990>.
- Bowker, Geoffrey C. "Data Flakes." In *"Raw Data" Is an Oxymoron*, edited by Lisa Gitelman, 167-172. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2013.
- Bowles, Nellie. "Thermostats, Locks and Lights: Digital Tools of Domestic Abuse." *The New York Times*. June 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/technology/smart-home-devices-domestic-abuse.html>.
- Brand, Stewart. "We Owe It All To The Hippies." *Time Magazine*. March 01, 1995. <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,982602,00.html>.
- . *Whole Earth Catalog*. Menlo Park, Calif.: Portola Institute, 1968-1972.
- Brill, Ann, and Ashley Packard. "Silencing Scientology's Critics on the Internet: A Mission Impossible?" *Communications and the Law* 19, no. 4 (1997): 1-23.
- Brown, Andrew. "Is the Internet Really Killing Religion in the US?" *The Guardian*, April 8, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/08/internet-killing-religion-us>.
- Calhoun, Craig J., Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Michael Warner, eds. *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Campbell, Heidi. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- . *When Religion Meets New Media*. London: Routledge, 2010.

- Carbone, Nick. "How Time Warner Profits from the 'Anonymous' Hackers." *Time*, August 29, 2011. <http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/08/29/how-time-warner-profits-from-the-anonymous-hackers/>.
- Carr, Nicholas. "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *The Atlantic*, July/August, 2008. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>.
- . *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011.
- Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000.
- Chappell, Bill. "Pro-Piracy Group Says It's Now A Recognized Religion in Sweden." *The Two-Way: Breaking News from NPR*, January 4, 2012. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2012/01/04/144691912/pro-piracy-group-says-its-now-a-recognized-religion-in-sweden>.
- Cheong, Pauline Hope. *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, and Futures*. New York: P. Lang, 2012.
- Chernus, Ira. *Nuclear Madness: Religion and the Psychology of the Nuclear Age*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.
- Chidester, David. *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- . "Featured Review Essay: Disrupting Religion." *Journal for the Sociology of Religion* 78, (July 2018): 379-383.
- . *Religion: Material Dynamics*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.
- . *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003.
- Church of Scientology International. "Copyright and Trade Secret Issues on the Internet." Last modified 2003. <http://www.theta.com/copyright/>.
- . "The Eight Dynamics." Accessed October 6, 2018. <https://www.scientology.org/what-is-scientology/basic-principles-of-scientology/eight-dynamics.html>.
- . "How are churches of Scientology financially funded?" Accessed October 6, 2018. <http://www.scientology.org/faq/church-funding/church-funding.html>.
- . "Questions and Answers: Religious freedom, copyright law, and trade secret protection on the Internet." Accessed October 6, 2018. <http://theta.com/copyright/qa.htm#four>.

- . *Scientology: Theology & Practice of a Contemporary Religion*. Los Angeles: Bridge Publications, 1998.
- . “What about those who cannot afford to make donations for services?” Accessed October 6, 2018. <http://www.scientology.org/faq/church-funding/what-about-those-without-funds-fordonations.html>.
- . “What is meant by Operating Thetan (OT)?” Accessed October 6, 2018. <https://www.scientology.org/faq/operating-thetan/what-is-ot.html>.
- . *What Is Scientology?: The Comprehensive Reference on the World’s Fastest Growing Religion*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Bridge Publications, 1992.
- . “What is the significance of the IRS ruling regarding churches of Scientology?” Accessed October 6, 2018. <http://www.scientology.org/faq/church-funding/significance-of-irs-ruling.html>.
- . “Why does the Church have confidential scriptures?” Accessed October 6, 2018. <http://www.scientology.org/faq/scientology-in-society/why-does-church-have-confidential-scriptures.html>.
- . “Why does the Church keep certain of its scriptures confidential?” Accessed October 6, 2018. <http://www.theta.com/copyright/qa.htm#two>.
- . “Why is everything copyrighted and trademarked in Scientology?” Accessed October 6, 2018. <http://www.scientology.org/faq/scientology-in-society/why-is-everythingcopyrighted-and-trademarked-in-scientology.html>.
- . “Why is Scientology opposed to psychiatry?” Accessed October 6, 2018. <http://faq.scientology.org/psychtry.htm>.
- Clarke, Arthur. *Profiles of the Future: An Enquiry into the Limits of the Possible*. New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1984.
- Coleman, Gabriella. *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- . *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Cotter, Thomas F. “Gutenberg’s Legacy: Copyright, Censorship, and Religious Pluralism.” *California Law Review* 91, no. 2 (March 2003): 323-392.
- Court, John. *Approaching the Apocalypse: A Short History of Christian Millenarianism*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2008.

- Cowan, Douglas E. "Contested Spaces: Movement, Countermovement, and E-Space Propaganda." In *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, edited by Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, 55-273. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- . *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Cowan, Douglas E., and Jeffrey K. Hadden. "Virtually Religious: New Religious Movements and the World Wide Web." In *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, edited by James R. Lewis, 119-142. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Cusack, Carole M. "Media Coverage of Scientology in the United States." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the American News Media*, edited by Diane Winston, 303-318. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Davis, Erik. "Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information." *LA Review of Books*, March 29, 2015. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/myth-magic-mysticism-age-information/>.
- . "Techgnosis, Magic, Memory, and the Angels of Information." *Southern Atlantic Quarterly* 11 (Fall 1993).
- . *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic Mysticism in the Age of Information*. London: Serpents Tail, 2004.
- Dawson, Lorne L. *Comprehending Cults the Sociology of New Religious Movements*. Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998.
- Dawson, Lorne L., and Douglas E. Cowan, eds. *Religion Online Finding Faith on the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Denning, Dorothy. *Information Warfare and Security*. New York: ACM Press, 1999.
- Desjardins, Michel. "Rethinking the Study of Gnosticism." *Religion and Theology* 12, no. 3 (2006): 370-84. doi:10.1163/157430106776241169.
- Diaz, Jesus. "File Sharing is Now an Official Religion in Sweden." *Gizmodo*, January 4, 2012. <https://gizmodo.com/5873001/file-sharing-is-now-an-official-religion-in-sweden>.
- Doctorow, Cory. *Information Doesn't Want to Be Free: Laws for the Internet Age*. San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2014.
- Dolan, Eric W. "Increases in Internet Use Linked to a Loss of Religious Affiliation, Study Finds." *PsyPost*, January 12, 2018. <https://www.psypost.org/2018/01/increases-internet-use-linked-loss-religious-affiliation-study-finds-50568>.
- Eck, Diana L. *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001.

- Einstein, Mara. *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Elton, Martin C.J., and John Carey. "The Prehistory of the Internet and Its Traces in the Present: Implications for Defining the Field." In *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies*, edited by William H. Dutton, 27-47. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Emerich, Monica, and Stewart M. Hoover, eds. *Media, Spiritualities and Social Change*. London: Continuum Publishing, 2011.
- Encyclopedia Dramatica. "Project Chanology." Accessed September 6, 2018.
http://encyclopediadramatica.ch/PROJECT_CHANOLOGY.
- . "Scientology." Accessed September 6, 2018.
<http://encyclopediadramatica.ch/Scientology>.
- Fessenden, Tracy. *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Feuerbach, Ludwig. "The Essence of Christianity." Translated by Marian Evans (1841).
https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Essence_of_Christianity.
- First United Church of Kopimism, US. "About." Accessed May 2017.
<https://kopimistsamfundetus.wordpress.com/about/>.
- . "Kopimist Constitution (English)." Accessed May 2017.
<https://kopimistsamfundetus.wordpress.com/kopimist-constitution-english/>.
- Fuller, Matthew, and Andrew Goffey. *Evil Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012.
- Garvey, Ellen G. "Facts and FACTS." In "*Raw Data*" Is an Oxymoron, edited by Lisa Gitelman, 89-102. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2013.
- Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System." In *Eight Theories of Religion*, edited by Daniel L. Pals, 260-291. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Geoffroy, Martin. "Hyper-real Religion Performing in Baudrillard's Integral Reality." In *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*, edited by Adam Possamai, 23-38. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- Gitlin, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1987.
- Gloege, Timothy E. W. *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.
- Godd, Philip, Detlef Junker, and Jan Stievermann. *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

- Graham, John, and Chiara Baldini. "Dancing at the Crossroads of Consciousness: Techno-Mysticism, Visionary Arts and Portugal's Boom Festival." In *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*, edited by Carole M. Cusack and Alex Norman, 519-52. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- Greenberg, Andy. *This Machine Kills Secrets: How WikiLeaks, Cypherpunks and Hacktivists Aim to Free the Worlds Information*. New York: Dutton, 2012.
- Greenfield, Robert. *Timothy Leary: A Biography*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2006.
- Grieve, Gregory P. "Religion." In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi Campbell, 104-18. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." In *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 507-517. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, edited by Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.
- . *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. New York: Garland Pub., 1977.
- Helland, Christopher. "Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet." *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 2005, 1-16. doi:<https://dx.doi.org/10.11588/rel.2005.1.380>.
- . "Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communitas." In *Religion and the Social Order. Research Prospects and Promises*, edited by David G. Bromley, Jeffrey K. Hadden, and Douglas E. Cowan, 205-223. Greenwich, CT: Jai Press, 2000.
- Hillis, Ken, Michael Petit, and Kylie Jarrett. *Google and the Culture of Search*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Himanen, Pekka. *The Hacker Ethic, and the Spirit of the Information Age*. New York: Random House, 2001.
- Højsgaard, Morten T., and Margit Warburg. *Religion and Cyberspace*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Holy Bible New International Version*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001.
- Hoover, Stewart M. *Religion in the Media Age*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Hoover, Stewart M., and Knut Lundby, eds. *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*. London: Sage Publications, 1997.

- Hubbard, L. Ron. *Dianetics: The Evolution of Science*. Los Angeles, CA: Bridge, 1989.
- . *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*. Los Angeles, CA: Bridge, 2007.
- . *Dianetics: The Original Thesis*. Los Angeles, CA: Bridge, 2007.
- . “Keeping Scientology Working, Series 1,” HCO Policy Letter, 1995.
- . “My Philosophy.” Church of Scientology International. Last modified January 1965. <http://www.ironhubbard.org/articles-and-essays/my-philosophy.html>.
- Hutton, Ronald. *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Introvigne, Massimo. “So Many Evil Things: Anti-Cult Terrorism via the Internet.” in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, edited by Jeffrey K. Haden and Douglas E. Cowan, 277-308. New York: JAI, 2000.
- . “A Symbolic Universe: Information Terrorism and New Religions in Cyberspace.” In *Religion and Cyberspace*, edited by Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, 102-118. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Isene, Geir. “Doubt Write--up on the Church of Scientology.” Last modified 2009. http://www.xenu.net/archive/personal_story/20090807-Geir_Isene_doubt_COS.pdf.
- . “Open Sourcing Scientology.” *Geir Isene: Straight Talk on Scientology*, October 11 2009. <http://elysianchakorta.wordpress.com/2009/10/11/open-sourcing-scientology/>.
- Jackson, Nicholas. “The Information Will Get Out: A New Religion for File-Sharers.” *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2011. <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/04/the-information-will-get-out-a-new-religion-for-filesharers/>.
- Jacobson, Jeff. “We Are Legion: Anonymous And The War On Scientology.” Lisa McPherson Site. Accessed September 15, 2018. <http://www.lisamcpherson.org/pc.htm>.
- Jakobsen, Janet R., and Ann Pellegrini. *Secularisms*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Edited by Matthew Bradley. Oxford: Oxford Press, 2012.
- Janson, Lisa. “Kopimism—the Religion of File Sharing.” Flip the Media. October 24, 2012. Accessed February 09, 2016. <http://flipthemedia.com/2012/10/kopimism-the-religion-of-file-sharing/>.
- Jason Silva. “About Jason.” Accessed October 7, 2018. <https://www.thisisjasonsilva.com>.

- Josephson-Storm, Jason. "Magic in the Air: How Intellectuals Invented the Myth of a Mythless Society." *Religious Dispatches*, August 29, 2017. <http://religiondispatches.org/magic-in-the-air-how-intellectuals-invented-the-myth-of-a-mythless-society/>.
- . *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Keane, Webb. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Keller, Jared. "No, the Internet is Not Killing Religion in America." *PS Mag*, April 28, 2014. <https://psmag.com/environment/internet-killing-religion-america-80149>.
- Kevin, Kelly. "Nerd Theology." *Technology in Society* 21 (1999): 387-394.
- . "The Technium and the 7th Kingdom of Life," *The Edge*, July 18, 2007. https://www.edge.org/conversation/kevin_kelly-the-technium-and-the-7th-kingdom-of-life.
- . "The Whole Earth Blogalog." *Conceptual Trends, Current Topics*. Accessed September 17, 2008. <http://kk.org/ct2/2008/09/the-whole-earth-blogalog.php>.
- Christopher Kelty. "Geeks and Recursive Publics: How the Internet and Free Software Make Things Public." Accessed October 27, 2018. <https://kelty.org/or/papers/unpublishable/Kelty.RecursivePublics-short.pdf>.
- . *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- King, Karen L. *What Is Gnosticism?* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Kirby, Danielle. "Alternative Worlds: Metaphysical Questing and Virtual Community amongst the Otherkin." In *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, edited by Adam Possamai, 129-140. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- Latour, Bruno. "Fetish-factish." In *Key Terms in Material Religion*, edited by Brent S. Plate. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- . *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- . "Technology Is Society Made Durable." *The Sociological Review* 38, no. 1 (May 1990): 103-131.
- . *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.

- Leach, Edmund Ronald. *A Runaway World?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- Leary, Timothy, Michael Horowitz, and Vicki Marshall. *Chaos & Cyber Culture*. Berkeley: Ronin Pub, 1994.
- Leary, Timothy. *Cyberpunks, Cyberfreedom: Change Reality Screens*. Oakland, CA: Ronin Pub., 2008.
- Lee, Philip J. *Against the Protestant Gnostics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Lessig, Lawrence. *Code: And Other Laws of Cyberspace*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.
- Levy, Steven. *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984.
- . "Hackers at 30: 'Hackers' and 'Information Wants to be Free.'" *Wired*, November 21, 2014. <https://www.wired.com/story/hackers-at-30-hackers-and-information-wants-to-be-free/>.
- Lewis, James R. "The Dwindling Spiral." *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 5, no. 1 (2014): 55-77.
- . *Legitimizing New Religions*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003.
- . "The Science Canopy: Religion, Legitimacy and the Charisma of Science." *Temenos*, (October 2012): 7-29, <https://journal.fi/temenos/article/view/6939>.
- Light, Jennifer. "When Computers Were Women." *Technology and Culture* 40, no. 3 (July 1999): 455-483, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25147356>.
- Lippard, Jim, and Jeff Jacobsen. "Scientology v. the Internet: Free Speech & Copyright Infringement on the Information Super-Highway." *Skeptic* 3, no. 3 (1995): 35-41.
- Lofton, Kathryn. *Consuming Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- . "Secular Shadowboxing." *Critical Research on Religion* 1, no. 2 (July 2013): 214-220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303213490101>.
- Logan, Alastair H.B. "Gnosticism." In *The Early Christian World*, edited by Philip F. Esler, 180-198. London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002.
- Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Mahmood, Saba, and Jean-Michel Landry, eds. *Anthropology of Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

- Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Matei, Sorin A. "From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Virtual Community Discourse and the Dilemma of Modernity." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 10, No. 3 (April 2005): <https://academic.oup.com/jcmc/article/10/3/JCMC1031/4614532>.
- Mazur, Eric Michael. *The Americanization of Religious Minorities: Confronting the Constitutional Order*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- McAnulla, Stuart, Steven Kettell and Marcus Schulzke. *The Politics of New Atheism*. Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2019.
- McArdle, Elaine. "The New Age of Surveillance." *Harvard Law Today*, May 2018. <https://today.law.harvard.edu/feature/new-age-surveillance/>.
- McCloud, Sean. *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955-1993*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
- McLuhan, Marshall. "The Medium is the Message." In *The New Media Reader* edited by Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, 193-210. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003.
- Modern, John Lardas. *Secularism in Antebellum America: With Reference to Ghosts, Protestant Subcultures, Machines, and Their Metaphors; Featuring Discussions of Mass Media, Moby-Dick, Spirituality, Phrenology, Anthropology, Sing Sing State Penitentiary, and Sex with the New Motive Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Moore, R. Laurence. *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Nelson, Russ. "Defining Open Source." *Open Source Business Resource*, September 2007. <https://timreview.ca/article/74>.
- Nelson, Ted. *Computer Lib: You Can and Must Understand Computers Now*. Chicago: Nelson, 1974.
- Noble, David F. *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention*. A.A. Knopf, 1997.
- Nongbri, Brent. *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
- O'Callaghan, Sean. "Cyberspace and the Sacralization of Information." *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, (2014). doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.11588/rel.2014.0.17361>.
- Operation Clambake. "The Clam FAQ." Accessed September 6, 2018. http://www.xenu.net/clam_faq.html.

- . “Some Copyright Considerations.” Accessed September 6, 2018.
<http://www.xenu.net/copyright.html>.
- . “What is Scientology.” Accessed September 6, 2018.
<http://www.xenu.net/rolandintro.html>.
- . “The Xenu Leaflet.” Accessed September 6, 2018.
<http://www.xenu.net/archive/leaflet/>.
- Orsi, Robert Anthony. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005.
- Palmer, Susan, and David Bromley. "Deliberate Heresies: New Religious Myths and Rituals as Critiques." In *Teaching New Religious Movements*, edited by David Bromley, 135-158. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Patterson, Mark. “Open Source Scientology.” *The Work Was Free. Keep It So*. Modified 2010.
<https://ahgrasshopper.wordpress.com/>.
- Perreau, Bruno. *Queer Theory: The French Response*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016.
- Pespisa, Lauren. “Kopimism.” Filmed by the Massachusetts Pirate Party. March 10, 2012. Video 37:52. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHsG0hADhas>.
- Peters, John Durham. *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Possamaï, Adam. "Introduction." In *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, edited by Adam Possamaï, 1-13. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- Prendergrast, Alan. “Stalking the Net.” *Denver Westword*, October 4, 1995.
<https://www.westword.com/news/stalking-the-net-5055577>.
- Reeve, Elspeth. “Scientology: Slave Labor, Beatings, and an FBI Investigation?” *The Atlantic*, Feb 7, 2011. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/02/scientology-slave-labor-beatings-and-an-fbiinvestigation/342337/>.
- Romig, Rollo. “The First Church of Pirate Bay.” *The New Yorker*, January 12, 2012.
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-first-church-of-pirate-bay>.
- Roszak, Theodore. *The Cult of Information: A Neo-luddite Treatise on High Tech, Artificial Intelligence and the True Art of Thinking*. Berkley: Univ. of California Press, 1994.
- . *From Satori to Silicon Valley: San Francisco and the American Counterculture*. San Francisco, CA: Don’t Call It Frisco Press, 1986.

- . *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969.
- Russia Today. "'Ctrl+C me, my brothers.'" *RT International*. April 23, 2012. <https://www.rt.com/news/online-piracy-religion-us-698/>.
- . "File-sharing Church's First Marriage: Noble Peers Encouraged to Mix DNA." *RT News*, May 8, 2012. <https://www.rt.com/news/church-kopimism-first-wedding-762/>.
- Sassen, Saskia, and Robert Latham. *Digital Formations: IT and New Architectures in the Global Realm*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Schmidt, Eric Leigh. *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- . *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.
- Schnall, Marianne. "Interview With Futurist Jason Silva, Host of Brain Games." *Huffington Post*, December 6, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/marianne-schnall/interview-with-futurist-j_b_7093382.html.
- Schorey, Shannon Trosper. "LRH4ALL: The Negotiation of Information in the Church of Scientology and the Open Source Scientology Movement." In *Handbook of Scientology*, edited by James R. Lewis, 241-259. Leiden: Brill, 2017.
- . "Media, Technology, and New Religious Movements: A Review of the Field." In *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, edited by James R. Lewis and Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen, 264-277. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Sconce, Jeffrey. *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Shanahan, Murray. *The Technological Singularity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.
- Silva, Jason. "Artificial Intelligence." *Shots of Awe*. October 22, 2013. Video, 1:59. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gq3_G3_wylo.
- . "Cellphone Wormholes." *Shots of Awe*. October 14, 2014. Video, 2:27. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4jYxmUJJvI>.
- . "Digital Shamans." *Shots of Awe*. August 27, 2013. Video, 2:45. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfJVOM5vIHl>.
- . "Drugs as Tools For Spirituality." *Shots of Awe*. January 13, 2013. Video, 3:39. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCsDiOy66FY>.
- . "The End of Suffering." *Shots of Awe*. August 12, 2014. Video, 1:51. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQYroNcfXRQ>.

- . “Entering Godmode.” *Shots of Awe*. March 17 2015, Video, 2:29. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fB-48RCOdA>.
- . “Psychedelic Technology.” *Shots of Awe*. September 3, 2013. Video, 2:12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YddWybgvszs>.
- . “Reality of the Virtual.” *Shots of Awe*. April 1, 2014. Video, 2:25. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xnz_Uc5sWOI.
- . “Secular Religiosity to Experience the Transcendent.” *Shots of Awe*. August 20, 2013. Video, 2:35. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLz9cxCeULM>.
- . “Technologies of Ecstasy.” *Shots of Awe*. February 11, 2014. Video, 1:58. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRFM15CLxg>.
- . “We Are the Gods Now.” *Shots of Awe*. September 28-30, 2012. Video, 37:01. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cF2VrefjIjk>.
- . “Welcome to Shots of Awe.” *Shots of Awe*. May 22, 2013. Video, 0:46. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmJVcRoROKI>.
- . “What is the Internet of Things?” *Shots of Awe*. November 4, 2014. Video, 2:29. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wL34vK-On3o>.
- . “What is Poetry?” *Shots of Awe*. June 17, 2014. video, 1:32, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_CsInWru-8.
- . “The World is Made of Language.” *Shots of Awe*. February 3, 2015. Video, 1:49. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3V7DC5ywsU4>.

Stolow, Jeremy. *Deus In Machina*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.

Smith, Jonathan Z. “God save this honourable court: religion and civic discourse.” In *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, 375-390. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004.

Styers, Randall. *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Sumiala, Johanna. "Circulations." In *Keywords in Religion, Media, and Culture*, edited by David Morgan, 44-55. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Tagliabue, John. "In Sweden, Taking File Sharing to Heart. And to Church." *The New York Times*, July 25, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/26/world/europe/in-sweden-taking-file-sharing-to-heart-and-to-church.html>.

The Holy Bible, King James Version. New York: American Bible Society, 1999.

- The Mentor. "Conscience of a Hacker." *Phrack Magazine*, January 1986.
<http://www.phrack.org/issues.html?issue=7&id=3>.
- MormonLeaks. "The MormonLeaks Team Launches FaithLeaks and the Truth and Transparency Foundation." Accessed October 25, 2018.
<https://mormonleaks.io/newsroom/2017/11/07/the-mormonleaks-team-launches-faithleaks-and-the-truth-and-transparency-foundation/>.
- Thomas, Douglas. *Hacker Culture*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Turner, Fred. *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006.
- Urban, Hugh. *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- . "Fair Game: Secrecy, Security, and the Church of Scientology in Cold War America." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 2 (June 2006): 356-389.
 doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfj084.
- . "The Rundown Truth: Scientology Changes Strategy in War with Media." *Religion Dispatches*. March 18, 2010. Accessed October 6, 2017. <http://religiondispatches.org/the-rundown-truth-scientology-changes-strategy-in-war-with-media/>.
- . "Secrecy and New Religious Movements: Concealment, Surveillance, and Privacy in a New Age of Information." *Religion Compass*, November 2007, 66-83.
 doi:10.1111/j.1749-8171.2007.00052.x.
- V for Vendetta. DVD. Directed by James McTeigue. Warner Bros., 2005.
- Wagner, Rachel. *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Watts, Alan. "Psychedelics and Religious Experience," *California Law Review* 56, no. 1 (1968): 74-85.
- Wenger, Tisa Joy. *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.
- Wiener, Norbert. *God and Golem: A Comment on Certain Points Where Cybernetics Impinges on Religion*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1964.
- . *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*. New York: Doubleday Press, 1954.
- Wilson, Andrew F. "On the Outskirts of the New Global Village: Computer-Mediated Prophecy and the Digital Afterlife." In *Network Apocalypse: Visions of the End in an Age of*

- Internet Media*, edited by Robert Glenn Howard, 20-22. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011.
- Winner, Langdon. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" In *Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*, 19-39. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986.
- . "Mythinformation," in *Whale and the Reactor: A Search of Limits in an Age of High Technology*, 98-120. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986
- . "Technologies as Forms of Life." In *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology*, edited by David M. Kaplan, 103-114. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004.
- Wright, Lawrence. "The Apostate: Paul Haggis vs. the Church of Scientology." *The New Yorker*, February 14, 2011.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/14/theapostatelawrence-wright>.
- Wuthnow, Robert. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998.
- Zandbergen, Dorien. "Silicon Valley New Edge: The Co-Constitution of the Digital and the Sacred." In *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.