

## The Hearing Voices Movement as Postmodern Religion-Making: Meaning, Power, Sacralization, Identity

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Over the past 40 or 50 years, scholars of religion have frequently attempted to use the tools of social science to analyse, describe, and explain the relevance and persistence of religion in the modern world. With the bold predictions of the secularization thesis as their stimuli, many sociologists and anthropologists preferred to focus on the under-explored, marginalized, or otherwise unexpected expressions of religion within those ostensibly secularizing contexts. Such studies have led to an abundance of theories and accompanying terms: “implicit religion,” “vernacular religion,” “vicarious religion,” “lived religion,” “popular religion,” and “folk religion.” Without choosing any one of these, but owing much to their shared—arguably postmodern—themes of commonplace sacrality and personal empowerment, this paper seeks to explore the possibility of the Hearing Voices Movement (HVM) as an example of religion-making. HVM is a growing force of “voice-hearers” from at least 28 countries who have formed user-led networks for activism and mental health recovery. More importantly, it is argued that HVM blends meaning-making, postmodern notions of identity in relation to power structures, and ritual embodiment, resulting in a striking example of sociologist Hans Mol’s notion of religion as a sacralizing process.

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In 1921, German philosopher Walter Benjamin stated, “One can see in Capitalism a religion, that is to say, Capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religions” (2005, 259). Although influenced by both Marx and Nietzsche, and accordingly given to underestimating the enduring significance of traditional religions, Benjamin’s observation helped establish something of a precedent whereby cultural critics and social-scientists identify and

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elucidate trends, movements, and ideologies that resemble “so-called religions” within a given society. As the twentieth century progressed, similar notions received ever-greater attention. Consider the tomes produced by sociologists, anthropologists, and others within religious studies on topics, quite frequently neologisms coined for this very purpose, related to the discovery of the sacred where one ought to find the secular. Initially delivered by the swirling currents of the 1960s and 1970s counter-culture, post-structuralism, secularization theories, cult research, and a widespread denial of functionalist understandings of religion, these efforts offered the academic study of religion fresh concepts such as “civil religion” (Bellah 1967), “folk religion” (Mensing 1964; Bock 1966), “popular religion” (Isambert 1982), “vernacular religion” (Primiano 1995; Bowman 2012), “lived religion” (Hall 1997; McGuire 2008), and “vicarious religion” (Davie 2007).

Perhaps one of the most recognizable, a few decades later, is “implicit religion.” In his original essay on the subject, one in which he argues for the actuality of a set of socio-cultural phenomena/experiences which constitute humanity’s expressions of “implicit religion,” Edward Bailey concedes that his chosen term may more accurately be said to correspond with instances of meaning-making that are “religious” rather than instances that together form “religion” (1990, 485). This calls to mind Georg Simmel’s distinction between religiosity and religion, the former linked to a sort of primordial social impulse and the latter corresponding with those formal institutions that sometimes follow. Indeed, for both thinkers the emphasis is on the nexus of sociality, humanity’s drive for meaning, and the behaviours and experiences that may be deemed sacred, spiritual, or religious in some sense.

The following pages combine Benjamin’s implicit awareness of both the strikingly religious appearance of some presumably secular movements and the complex web of connections between emotions, existential instabilities, and religious systems with Simmel and Bailey’s astute recognition of religiousness as one possible signpost at the crossroads of meaning-making, experience, and the social person. Utilizing both secondary sources and qualitative data gathered by psychiatrist Marius Romme and his colleagues as well as by members of Durham University’s Wellcome Trust-funded project “Hearing the Voice,” we introduce and consider the Hearing Voices Movement (HVM), a user-led recovery and activism network for individuals who hear voices but either have not required or intentionally reject psychiatric treatment, as one such ostensibly secular

intersection. It will be argued that when common meaning-making and individual identities collide with shared experiences that demand integrative explanations, what emerges is not religion *per se* but religion-making. In other words, this paper explores answers to the question of whether it is simply that some “voice-hearers”—as they prefer to be called—make sense of their experiences in religious terms, or whether it is the case that the process of making sense of their experiences is itself religious. Such circumstances may not always lead to a search for supernatural agency, to be sure, but they may lead to a search for new social territory within the socio-cultural landscape and, therefore, rely on certain mechanisms for legitimation. Following sociologist Hans Mol, this essay refers to that social territory as identity and to its bid for legitimacy as sacralization, a process of religion-making in which myths, rituals, and emotional commitments reinforce and sustain validation, thus meaning, thus identity.

The HVM offers a uniquely manageable and clear example of this sort of intentional meaning-making with identity-construction as an integral correlate of that process. Applying religion-making, or sacralization, as our theoretical framework then intensifies our focus further, illuminating some of the subtleties at work as this socio-political movement grows and provides its members with salient identities. Indeed, as the following analysis shows, the discordant experiences which receive meaning and sacralization for members of the HVM extend beyond the obvious troubling phenomena associated with auditory verbal hallucinations and into postmodern concerns such as the decolonization of the body as well as the validation of biographical experiences by those who resist the interpellation of identity by the dominant discourses of power. In this particular case, for example, voice-hearers are not simply those who in fact experience relatively inexplicable auditory phenomena but rather are those whose sense of identity comes from the agentic and empowering act of embracing those same discordant experiences and, in so doing, decrying the pathologizing tendencies of the mental health field whilst benefitting from a sense of self-narration. For this reason, the HVM perhaps represents a form of postmodern religion-making, in that its myths, rituals, embodied experiences, et cetera receive a particular interpretation by those involved, one in which the major concerns relate to notions of power and perspective.

These foci—the HVM, postmodern anxieties, sacralization, and the religious identity of the voice-hearer—structure our discussion. After introducing the HVM and briefly discussing our understanding of postmodernity’s dual concern with power and perspective, we then summarize Mol’s

concept of sacralization before weaving it all together in an exploration of the HVM as religion-making. Along the way, and on an admittedly meta level, we demonstrate that Mol's theoretical ideas can be harmonized with notions of secularity and postmodernism in addition to suggesting that religious categories are useful for illuminating some instances of the complex interplay of identity, meaning-making, "non-ordinary experiences" (Ammerman 2014, 194, 196), and postmodernism.

## HVM

It is important, then, to introduce our illustrative case, for it is in the details of the HVM's origins and collective contours that one encounters a striking example of identity intertwined with a meaning-system in such a way that both reinforce one another. Expressed differently, the HVM seems to fit Mol's formula of the religious process as "the sacralization of identity" (1976, 1) very well, but at least a basic familiarity with the movement is necessary to make such a suggestion. Indeed, it is noteworthy from the outset that the HVM is a socio-political movement as much as it is a self-help group, as much a specific narrative as it is a repertoire or framework for constructing individual narratives, perhaps even as much a psychotherapeutic approach as it is a collection of formal international organizations. Although the movement is arguably representative of the sort of religiously-inflected meaning-making processes with which this paper is concerned, to say so is not to claim that the HVM is simple or easily reduced to a few individuals with shared experiences.

In fact, the HVM is comprised of approximately 20,000 members in 28 countries, with 180 affiliated groups just in the United Kingdom (Woods 2015, 2386; Luhrmann 2012). The website "intervoiceonline.org" is a primary internet resource for the movement, as is "hearing-voices.org" which, among other things, directs voice-hearers to those local groups across Britain. Of course, the HVM also organizes and hosts national and international conferences. The first ever national conference was organized in Maastricht, Netherlands in 1987—a sort of launching point for the movement. Twenty-two years later, the first World Hearing Voices Congress was also held in Maastricht, and subsequently there have been seven more of these international events in England, Italy, Wales, Australia, Greece, Spain, and France (James 2001, 33). These large conferences certainly underscore the growth and influence of the HVM since 1987, but the local gatherings are of perhaps greater significance for the movement, as it is on this smaller scale that voice-hearers tend to make their first connections

with its characteristic claims about the “reality” and relative normality of hearing voices as well as the backstory to the movement itself.

It is that history of the movement which informs the identity of the voice-hearer, imbuing it with a certain social and political force. This is because the HVM was born from the paradigm-shifting encounter of Dutch psychiatrist Marius Romme with a single patient, Patsy Hage, in the mid-1980s. From 1984 to 1987, Romme met frequently with Hage, using various methods to attempt treatment of her persistent voices. Eventually, it became apparent that Hage’s voice hearing intensified twice a year, coinciding with the dates of traumatic events of her past. Also around this time, Hage read Julian Jaynes’ 1976 *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, a work of creative historical linguistic and psychological musings which posits a pre-conscious period in human history during which thoughts and inner speech were perceived to be from external voices—often the gods. One of the notable implications of Jaynes’ book was that hearing voices was once commonplace, even inspiring. Struck by this notion, and willing to connect her past trauma with her present voices, Hage convinced Romme to take her voices seriously, to begin seeking recovery rather eradication (Romme *et al.* 2009, 260–264).

For his part, Romme was not so much interested in the validity of Jaynes’ thesis but in the effect that it had on Hage’s experiences. Instead of treating the voices as symptoms of psychosis, most likely schizophrenia, Romme was challenged to address the voices as significant phenomena in and of themselves. Perhaps, he and his patient began to think, these voices were reflecting something about or for Hage. They began to discuss the content, frequency, nature, and timing of the voices. By 1987, the evidence, or something like it, was there: Hage’s voices ceased to bother her, and she got married shortly after participating in a television programme alongside Romme and the journal/psychologist Sandra Escher which initiated that first ever hearing voices conference. Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann summarizes the situation well: “What Romme noticed was that attributing meaning to voices had made a difference to someone who was hearing them” (2012). He also noticed that there were hundreds of other voice-hearers, in the Netherlands alone, who could potentially benefit from this approach. Together with Escher, who later became his wife, Romme was made the *de facto* leader of a movement. More importantly, his story of that first patient began, in the words of medical humanities scholar Angela Woods, to “function as a foundation myth, told and retold in multiple contexts and on multiple occasions” (2013, 264). Those who heard voices

but were discontent with standard psychiatric practices and prevailing discourses had found a spokesman, a narrative resource, and—as will become clear—a more resonant identity.

### The Postmodern: Power and perspective

Locating that new identity in the shared, embodied experience of voice-hearing, however, also means that the HVM firmly situates itself—whether consciously or not—in postmodern preoccupations with empowerment and alternative viewpoints. Indeed, amending and appropriating sociologist Andrew Dawson’s definition of modernity for present purposes (2014, 170), we take postmodernism to consist of, at least in part, a reflexive awareness of—and insistence on—more than one point of view combined with a concern for the power dynamics operative between individuals and both the macro-level social structures and middle-range institutions with which they find themselves engaged. This is not to deny the overlap of postmodernity with sixteenth century Protestant ideals of personhood, seventeenth century philosophies of individual liberty, or any of the myriad other influences on contemporary thought and culture. At the same time, Charles Taylor’s notion of the present era as an “age of authenticity” in which everyone feels pressure to locate, create, and embrace a so-called “authentic” identity (and becomes anxious when this proves elusive) seems apt—especially if his observation is supplemented by a related comment on the active agency now taken-for-granted as individuals seek self-definition (2007, 473—504). With regards to the HVM, the dual focus on power and perspective may be seen in the group’s conscious scepticism of one-size-fits-all mental health diagnoses as well as in a general and unashamed claim of individual empowerment in the face of both the disturbing voices and the sometimes demeaning psychiatric establishment.

Indeed, it is worth noting that “voice-hearer” as an identity is useful for members of the movement, in part, because it represents agency.<sup>1</sup> Consider, for comparison’s sake, religious communities of the past that came to embrace monikers related to a single aspect of their ritual and spiritual lives—e.g., Quakers, Shakers, or (with a bit of reluctance) the more recent Hare Krishnas. Each of those groups received such names from outsiders who simply chose to highlight the most conspicuously unique trait

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1. Keep in mind that those who hear voices are often combatting a very acute sense of discontinuity internally due to the presence of multiple voices and, what is more, they have often felt robbed of agency during the experiences of diagnosis, sectioning, and being forcibly medicated.

and who, in most cases, sought to disparage the new religious movement by exposing eccentricities. For the HVM, “voice-hearer” is a self-designation—indeed, it seems to be an attempt to legitimate their conspicuously unique trait and to validate associated experiences and emotions.

To achieve these ends, the HVM empowers the voice-hearer in at least three overlapping ways: 1) By providing meaning and explanations with which to seize power over the voices themselves, 2) By offering a collectively-legitimated identity based on an inversion of socio-political power structures, and 3) By reclaiming for voice-hearers the authority, opportunity, and psychosocial devices needed to compose their own narratives. These three factors are of considerable import for our understanding of the religion-making process, but they are expressed in a strikingly postmodern manner. As journalist Adam James notes of the movement’s origins, it was “the postmodern era and [its notion of] cultural relativity which [...] cradled the HVM” (2001, 27). It is important to consider briefly how this is so.

*Power, embodiment, and “political charge”*

It is difficult—artificial, even—to separate the element of power over the person from an analysis of discursive or political power at work in the HVM. After all, efforts to make sense of voice hearing involve not only the hearers but also psychiatrists, psychologists, and greater society—to say nothing of friends, family, and the voices themselves. What is more, the desire to construct an “authentic” unifying identity seems particularly fraught when one’s sense of self is almost literally fragmented by subjective psychological experiences characterized by a lack of material rootedness. This is movingly expressed by John Robinson, a voice-hearer who recounts his involvement with the HVM fondly: “Now that I have something valuable in my life [the voices] have faded away. A sense of self has only begun to emerge in the past five or so years. Before that I was just fragments” (Romme *et al.* 2009, 221).

As will be shown later, Mol’s concept of identity entails stable order pitted against potentially destabilizing influences in an interminable balancing act. For voice-hearers, the challenge then is to erect and reinforce a stable identity in the face of two potentially deleterious threats: the voices and the field of psychiatry. It is not surprising then that Lucy Holt and Anna Tickle’s study of the methods used by eight voice-hearers to make sense of their experiences revealed both that “perceptions of the voices as being powerful [...] seemed to restrict the search for meaning” and that

“most participants actively rejected theories that were imposed upon them by other people” (Holt and Tickle 2015, 259). The latter observation is followed by a discussion of the loss of agency experienced by voice-hearers as they take on the “dominant discourses of pathology, mental illness, and Western cultural assumptions of autonomy” (Holt and Tickle 2015, 260; Blackman 2000). Indeed, “some participants actively rejected, misunderstood, or experienced an increased sense of hopelessness when an implicit biological framework was used by professionals” (Holt and Tickle 2015, 260).

This rejection of psychiatric or biological explanation is, quite clearly, more than an intellectual disagreement. Although the HVM is held together somewhat loosely by its postulation of an alternative interpretation of auditory verbal hallucinations wherein the voices are linked to traumatic histories and are, accordingly, communicating something of importance to the hearer—an approach that encourages interaction between the hearer and his or her voices and denies the universal efficacy of pharmaceutical solutions—it also views itself as a sort of necessary disruptor of power structures. The mental health patient, so the narrative goes, is marginalized, stigmatized, and subjugated by the predominant psychiatric models which tend to insist on physical, genetic causes of phenomena like auditory verbal hallucinations. From the voice-hearer’s perspective, this approach is clinical and dehumanizing, replete with technical jargon and, one might suggest, unpalatable in its ostensible reductionism. As one voice-hearer expressed it, receiving the diagnosis of schizophrenia was “disempowering” (Romme *et al.* 2009, 143). Another notable voice-hearer, Ron Coleman, whom we will revisit later, applauded the HVM and its influence on his own recovery by asserting that “the voices no longer belonged to doctors [...] the voices belonged to me” (James 2001, 95). Here, we see the “critical energy,” as Woods puts it, offered by the movement to its members as they subvert mental health authorities and claim the title of “experts by experience” (Woods 2015, 2387; 2013, 265). Luhrmann stresses this same element in noting that the HVM repeats mental health facts, such as the presence of some form of voice hearing among a significant minority of the population, but then “takes this fact and turns it into an attitude” (2012).

As has been mentioned, the focus of that “attitude” is directed at both the hallucinations themselves, which Romme and others suggest often weakens the abusiveness of the voices to such a point that they can be ignored or may even disappear, as well as at psychiatric modes of thought.



That the HVM is explicitly opposed to psychiatry's existing order, and that such a struggle is very much an issue of power, is recognized by journalists and scholars alike—including psychiatrists who oppose the movement (James 2001, 164; Mountain 2010, 544).<sup>2</sup> Ian Parker and his colleagues go so far as to claim that the HVM is an instantiation of postmodernism's "deconstructing" enterprise (1995). Its focus as a collective and its message for individuals is bound up with challenging the status quo, problematizing the category of expert, and engendering the very social legitimation needed to sustain the newly pioneered social territory of the voice-hearer. Expressed somewhat differently, because hearing voices is an unavoidably body-bound experience, and a potentially injurious experience, the HVM must offer something more than yet another alternative therapy, it must offer a salient identity built on—rather than in opposition to—those same experiences which has as its generative stimulus the quintessentially postmodern program of decolonization. In this case, however, the agenda is more accurately to "depathologize" the experience of voice hearing (James 2001, 10), thus dismantling the cultural and intellectual classifications used to identify the mentally ill and rerouting the life-courses of those who would have previously fallen into that category.

This leads Woods to note that the identity offered by the HVM is "politically charged," which becomes clear in relation to its excavation of such previously taken-for-granted assumptions of mental health and aberrant behaviour. In a sense, the HVM, by virtue of its insistence on socio-cultural acceptance of voice hearing outside of existing mental health schemas, actively unearths what Hegel calls the *Sittlichkeit* or Bourdieu calls *doxa*. These are the subterranean currents of morality, sociality, and belief that do not receive widespread reflection until they are exposed by seismic forces. Of course, for Bourdieu, *doxa* is suddenly forced to justify itself in the face of imminent challenge. One might frame this in terms of plausibility whereby the new identity of the voice-hearer threatens the status quo by seemingly offering individuals a higher sense of meaning, or a more effective interpretation of reality. In this way, the HVM not only forces psychiatry and society at large to face their presuppositions concerning, for instance, the normality of hearing voices but it also involves its own

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2. Debbie Mountain, reviewing Romme *et al.*, *Living with Voices: 50 Stories of Recovery* for the journal, *The Psychiatrist*, exhibits the high degree of tension present between the HVM and its opponents. As a psychiatrist, Mountain laments the book's "pessimistic views about psychiatric services and treatments" as well as its "smug and self-congratulatory tone."

members in the hermeneutical storytelling necessary to sustain that political energy.

### *Narrating the self*

Indeed, Woods is justified in claiming that “story-telling is central” to the paradigm-shifting business of the HVM as it reframes debates over schizophrenia, auditory verbal hallucinations, and the validity or acceptability of voice-hearers among us (2013, 266). Of course, insiders recognize this as well. The motto for the 2016 World Hearing Voices Congress betrays this self-understanding: “Making History, Owning Our Stories” (Hearing Voices Network 2016). As might be expected, those within the movement emphasize the life story not so much as an opportunity for creative bricolage but as the fitting substrate for the imperative psychological mining necessary to identify the past events connected with the origin and continued significance of their voices. This is captured well by what Luhrmann calls a manifesto which appeared on the Intervoices website as of 2009: “Hearing voices is related to problems in the life history; to recover from the distress the person has to learn to cope with their voice and the original problems that lay at their roots” (Luhrmann 2012). In that single sentence, one encounters both the fundamental beliefs of the HVM and its reliance on a sort of conversion process. As will be discussed more fully later, the collective narrative of the HVM—in which shared values and beliefs are embedded—and the individual life stories of its members echo something like William James’ religion of the “sick soul” or other notions of religious conversion.

In relation to the postmodern aspect of the movement, however, we need only underscore the interplay of self-narration, meaning-making, and power for the voice-hearers. Wilma Boevink, one such voice-hearer who shared her story at a voice hearing conference in 1996, expresses this web of elements quite clearly: “For a long time, there has been only one version of my life story. According to this version, I had a psychiatric disorder which had landed me in an institution. I had received treatment there and although I was never “cured” I was able to live with the remnants. *This is not my story. I do not believe in it and it is of no use to me* (emphasis added)” (James 2001, 131). Another voice-hearer, Maxwell Steer, believes that most people have voices of creativity and insight but do not recognize them as such because society doesn’t “echo” that interpretation back to them (James 2001, 74–82). Again, with both Boevink and Steer, we witness the postmodern notion of more than one perspective receiving due

attention. Although Boevink wants to denounce the psychiatric perspective, Steer offers a unique vantage in which hearing voices is a matter of collective interpretation. In this view, there would be many more voice-hearers if our societies validated the experiences most people are having in a different way. This is significant, for the identity of the voice-hearer does not simply highlight their belonging to a wider social network, it also draws its viability from that collective legitimation. This can be seen in Holt and Tickle's study in which "shared sense-making" was effected through the use of peer support groups, just as is made explicit in the summary declaration of the 2014 World Hearing Voices Congress: "Our voices have value and acquire meaning when they encounter other voices" (Woods 2015, 2386). Even more poignantly, the more than 100 postcards collected during the 2016 international conference on which respondents wrote what the HVM means to them, include numerous references to "hope" and, in keeping with our postmodern thesis, "empowerment," but one card humbly encapsulates the transition from abstract notions of power and politics to the immediate marriage of meaning and sociality by stating that the HVM means moving "from 'me' to 'every one of us'" (Hearing Voices—Durham 2016).

As the voice-hearer seizes power over his or her own meaning-making processes, identity is both suggested and extended to others. As those who share similar experiences invoke the same label, identity is reinforced. Yet, the lone voice-hearer and the collective voice-hearers enjoy the fruits of meaning-making also—necessarily so—in relation to both the mental health establishment and greater society. Inasmuch as voice-hearer is an assertion of agency and emancipation from the prescribed interpretations of society's experts, it is only a salient identity to the degree that it mobilizes fellow voice-hearers and purports to alter conventional wisdom concerning hallucinatory experiences. This is because meaning is not autogenous, even if personal experience and the subsequent drive for explanation are at times the propellants of the socio-cultural processes by which collectives and individuals negotiate values, truths, and even identities.

### Sacralization

Thus far, of course, our analysis has not required or introduced religious frameworks to make sense of the HVM, its values and truths. However, with this turn to the relationship of the overtly social to the agentic search for meaning, we may now enter the arena of the sacred. Indeed, our attempt to elucidate some of the concrete mechanisms and processes

utilized by members of the HVM to make sense of their lived experiences will benefit from a familiarity with Mol's aforementioned definition of religion and its associated concepts of sacralization and identity. For Mol, the self can be made sacred through a particular form of meaning-making in which identity is supported by the four-fold scaffolding of myth, commitment, ritual, and objectification (1976, 202–261). In this process of sacralization, meaning receives religious inflection.

*“Religious meaning making”*

In his article, “Religious Meaning Making: Positioning Identities Through Stories,” psychologist Joseph Schwab implements the “positioning theory” of Rom Harré and colleagues to execute a discursive analysis of the “ways in which people make sense of their lives through religious or spiritual narratives” (Schwab 2013, 219; Davies and Harré 1990; Harré and Van Langenhove 1999). The study focuses “on talk-in-interaction as the primary means through which identities are performed, coconstructed, and contextually defined” (Schwab 2013, 219–220). Most importantly for the present study, Schwab connects religious narrative with identity-construction and meaning-making by referencing the mid-twentieth century work of developmental psychologist Erik Erikson. The result is Schwab's persuasive claim that autobiographical narratives answer the “who am I?” question by “making sense of past experiences through a navigation of overarching dilemmas [...] [which] include [...] (a) continuity/change, (b) sameness/difference, and (c) agency/nonagency” (2013, 220). In other words, personal histories are sometimes given a religious narrative structure in the process of one's active attempt to navigate between sets of binary “identity dilemmas.” Similar notions of identity as a sort of zero-sum game have been posited by others (see “identity depletion” in Davies 2011, 68–94 and Powell 2017, 17, 28), including an implicit awareness of the link between loss of agency and loss of meaning/identity in the study of voice-hearers conducted by Holt and Tickle cited earlier. That being said, Schwab's account of religious identity-construction bears an even more striking resemblance to Mol's general theory of religion, itself partly based on Erikson's pioneering work on identity.

*Sacralization and identity: A process*

Even so, it is important to begin our summary of Mol's theoretical framework by highlighting one instance of significant disagreement between Mol and Schwab. The latter takes religion to be a sort of static *a priori*,

retained by individuals and only subsequently made meaningful as they explain it to others (Schwab 2013, 221). Whilst such a view rightfully forefronts the social nature of religion, and deftly navigates the pitfalls of both substantive and functional definitions of religion, it only manages these virtues by avoiding critical analysis of the category altogether, simply assuming that religion is a personal possession which predates the process of religious narration. For Mol, religion essentially *is* religious narration. In his terms, “religion is the sacralization of identity” (1976, 1) and is, therefore, a dynamic process or activity rather than a static cultural object. This is crucial to our own conception of the HVM as postmodern religion-making, for we take Mol’s theory to be instructive in any analysis of the overlap between religion and meaning-making due to its emphasis on the incessant nature of religious meaning-making as individuals and groups face those “identity dilemmas” noted by Schwab.

Indeed, the relationship of meaning-making to what one might call non-ordinary experiences is precisely the same as the relationship of Mol’s sacralization to identity. Meaning-making is perhaps the more general term for human attempts to make sense of, and derive purpose and order from, uniquely human experiences. The more specific process of sacralization, then, is “the process of safeguarding and reinforcing a complex of orderly interpretations of reality, rules, and legitimations” by attaching myths, commitments, and rituals in such a way that the “systems of meaning and motivation [are wrapped] in ‘don’t touch’ sentiments” (Mol 1976, 202). When existential change—be it social differentiation or auditory hallucination—threatens to deplete or destroy one’s sense of self, sacralization seeks to integrate such forces into a meaningful system, thus bolstering identity and ensuring a more robust defence against future threats. In Mol’s words, “If the human muddle and mess can be related to order, then the muddle and mess are ‘relativized’” (1983, 28).

For this reason, Mol prefers to sketch his identity theory in terms of a dialectic between order and change, or between identity and differentiation. He suggests that “order is bound up with security” and, thus, identity is understood as a “stable niche that man occupies in a potentially chaotic environment which he is therefore prepared vigorously to defend” (1976, 8, 65). It is in this sense that we argue that the identity of the voice-hearer is essentially the claiming of new social territory. Such territory will be defended as long as the identity remains relevant and useful, and sacralizing the identity goes some way toward ensuring just that. To summarize, then, identity is a sense of stable order which—by being

reinforced through mechanisms such as myths, rituals, and emotional commitments—comes to be sacred to the individual and/or group. Yet, as Mol is keen to argue, sacralization functions not so much to remove identity from harm's way but to strengthen identity by absorbing and making sense of harm. Sacralization is, so to speak, the balancing act between the stagnation of too much order and the *anomie* or social displacement of too much change. Strikingly, as a balancing *act*, sacralization is a reimagining of religion as a process. Of course, much more could be said of that process, as of Mol's theoretical system more generally—particularly of his fourth sacralizing mechanism: objectification. However, we must continue on to our final section, exploring the ways in which the HVM combines postmodern concerns with elements of Mol's sacralization in an arguably unique form of religion-making.

### The Voice-Hearers: Power, place, and religious meaning

Recall that by “religion-making,” we intend something like meaning-making achieved by the construction and implementation of sacred apparatuses such as myth and ritual. As voice-hearers seek an explanation of, and integrative meaning for, their voices, they necessarily reject existing systems whilst formulating new ones. Earlier the socio-cultural space available for such competing narratives was attributed to a general postmodern concern for the equal validity of multiple perspectives. Here, we wish to bring that observation in line with Mol's concept of sacralization—all in an attempt to illuminate some particular details of the HVM.

This is relatively easily done, for sacralization contains an inherent sense of opposition as it uncovers *doxa* and reinforces identity in relation to alternatives all whilst circumscribing legitimate territory of the new identity. On the one hand, Mol's dialectic obviously relies on conflict between stable identity and external disruptive forces. However, on the other hand, as it relates specifically to voice-hearers, the effort to establish a sacred sphere around voice hearing necessitates both positive and negative self-definitions. Positively, these individuals are rooted in a new mental health paradigm with noticeable growth in both actual membership and in terms of societal attention directed toward the movement. Negatively, the voice-hearer is one who has made claims about what he or she is not—pointing to biological models of psychiatry as well as to Hollywood depictions of schizophrenia and other cultural stereotypes to underscore a personal and collective past that has been discarded in favour of something more profound.

At times, first-hand accounts affirm these, and other, aspects of Mol's theoretical ideas quite directly, as in voice-hearer Debra Lampshire from New Zealand who echoes Mol's definition of identity in her account of involvement with the HVM: "I have found my niche [...] I have found where I belong" (Romme *et al.* 2009, 133). Similarly, voice-hearer Jacqui Dillon describes the various self-help practices that she has used since encountering the HVM as giving her "a sense of order and structure in what often felt like a chaotic environment" (Romme *et al.* 2009, 191). Together, these two statements repeat Mol's definition of identity almost verbatim. What is more, they juxtapose the present identity of voice-hearer with some less satisfying previous life or worldview. Anthropologist Douglas Davies refers to this as "super-plausibility," a common feature of religions as they "pinpoint the flaws in the human condition and posit modes of redress" (Davies 2002, 153). The old defective thoughts and ways of being are superseded by the more plausible meaning system on offer.

This, again, corresponds well with Mol, who speaks of the transition from an old identity to a new identity as "conversion." Undoubtedly influenced by William James' discussion of the religion of the "sick soul" or the "twice born" as a religious orientation demanding salvation and conversion from the wicked ways of the past (James 2004, 203, 119–229), Mol argues that "conversion is the means by which a new perspective becomes emotionally anchored in the personality [...] The convert [...] strengthens his [or her] new assumptive world by repeating over and over again how evil, or disconsolate, or inadequate he [or she] was before the conversion took place" (Mol 1976, 50–51). Of course, myths offer convenient and efficient means for sanctioning such transitions and repeating such notions, and the HVM appears not to have eschewed this useful element of religion-making.

### *Myth and testimony*

In discussing the junction of psychotherapeutic paradigm shifting, identity conversions, and myth construction, we should not forget that Claude Lévi-Strauss—in *Structural Anthropology*—explicitly connects psychoanalytic treatment with "conversions" in which an individual, having been deemed a "patient," emerges as one "cured." He goes further, as well, suggesting that this conversion process is no different than the shaman's magical healings because in both instances "the value of the system is no longer [...] based upon real cures from which certain individuals can benefit, but on the sense of security that the group receives from the myth underlying the cure and from the popular system upon which the group's uni-

verse is reconstructed” (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 183). This is directly relevant to the HVM in that Lévi-Strauss insightfully illuminates the connection between *Myth and Meaning* (1978) by recognizing that one’s successful conversion to a new identity relies less on the possibility of an empirically-validated solution and more on the collectively-validated articulation of the problem. To revisit the words of Walter Benjamin with which this essay began, the answers offered by a religion are less important than the “worries, anguish, and disquiet” given pride of place in their myths. In some sense, it would seem that myths tell of identity conversions, and those conversions reinforce myths.

For the HVM and its members, this is manifest in a number of ways. For example, it is somewhat remarkable, in the light of Lévi-Strauss’ comparison of psychoanalysis and shamans, that one journalist actually compares the HVM to the “indigenous healers” of “Africa, Asia, and South America” who were vilified by colonial Europeans (James 2001, 46); the implication of this being that voice-hearers represent an oppressed minority who offer alternative explanations and methods of recovery. Perhaps, in some sense, the movement is postmodern and, quite literally, post-colonial.

Even more to the point, however, is Woods’ earlier remark about Patsy Hage’s biography functioning as a “foundation myth” for the group. As myth, Hage’s story need not correspond with some empirical reality, it need only offer a meaningful system in which values and life orientations may be embedded and transferred, added to and borrowed from. At the most basic level, Hage’s story provides historical rootedness for the HVM. It began with the inspired mettle of this single individual in the mid-1980s who read Jaynes’ book and challenged her psychiatrist to view auditory verbal hallucinations in a different light. As a living component of the movement, however, the myth of Patsy Hage communicates specific values, such as a general disapproval of biological psychiatric explanations of voice hearing and a rejection of the stigma associated with pathology. Additionally, the myth offers and perpetuates a conversion formula in which one enters as a frightened and voiceless mental health patient and leaves an empowered voice-hearer. Eleanor Longden, who now gives frequent public talks on her experiences of voice hearing, describes her recovery as a “transition from ‘schizophrenic’ to ‘voice-hearer’” (Woods 2013, 266). Likewise, voice-hearer Peter Reynolds says, “I don’t class myself as a schizophrenic—I class myself as a voice hearer” (Romme *et al.* 2009, 276). Even one scathing review of Romme’s pro-HVM book *Living with Voices* laments how the book “presents people as ‘voice hearers’—an engulfing



role which undermines the identity that many strive to recover” (Mountain 2010, 544).

Of course, for those who faithfully narrate themselves into the myth, there is little interest in “striving to recover” the old identity. Indeed, Hage’s story seems to be quite useful in that it not only intimates a conversion formula but also includes a sort of exemplar in the person of Marius Romme. As the representative psychiatric expert in the narrative, Romme is the first convert. He emerges as a near Pauline figure who “sees the light,” albeit in a metaphorical sense, and goes on to serve as learned leader of the movement. Cool-headed but convinced, Romme takes the message of the HVM to those within the psychiatric establishment—a “Hebrew of the Hebrews” so to speak.

Ron Coleman, a nearly larger-than-life figure within the HVM, also illustrates the way in which the Hage myth engenders resolute faith in its message and potential conversions which voice-hearers would not want to reverse. Coleman heard voices for eight years and used a number of medications to try to stop them. As he tells it, one day he then just woke up and thought “That is enough. I do not want to take medicine anymore” (Romme *et al.* 2009, 285). It was a revelatory experience for Coleman, who now reports having fully recovered from the voices. If Romme is the first convert, a sort of religious virtuoso in this narrative, Coleman is the later charismatic evangelist who spreads the myth near and far with passion and conviction. He sells books and videos, and gives public talks promoting the “accepting voices” approach. Coleman does much of the work of “emotionally anchoring” the myth in the lives of his audience.

Of course, the voices themselves actively participate in reinforcing the religious tone of the experiences as the voice-hearer sacralizes their new-found sense of meaning. Ami Rohnitz initially interpreted her voices as “spiritual experiences” that were “stimulating” to her. When the voices ceased to inspire and began to be more troubling, Rohnitz attended a public lecture on the HVM which set in motion a series of events that led to the end of her voices. However, even the final voice she ever hears calls to mind western notions of the divine as it said to her in a deep tone, “you have heard enough” (Romme *et al.* 2009, 107). Although this is likely a simple result of limited cultural expressions, religious terminology is also sometimes used by voice-hearers to describe the HVM itself. Gavin Young, for example, says that the HVM gave him the “keys to the kingdom” and that it helped him “develop a set of coping tools which [he] believes to be [his] salvation” (Romme *et al.* 2009, 170).

In the midst of highlighting these conversions and their seeming connections to the myth of the HVM, all as a function of meaning-making for those who hear voices, it is important to comment on the rest of Hage's biography. Shortly after appearing on television to discuss her experience and to invite other Dutch voice-hearers to contact Romme, Hage nearly disappeared. Her absence from the nascent stages of the HVM likely augmented the myth with a useful sense of mystery and thus broad application, but that was not the end of her story. Unfortunately, after 16 years, the voices returned. Yet, the movement was underway with a mass of believers and the momentum produced by their collective engagement. Once again, the empirical strength of the myth's solution proved much less significant to the sacralizing of the identity it conferred than the manner in which it framed the problem. Hage's relapse, if we may use the term, did not derail the HVM. The myth was already in place; the identity of voice-hearer was therefore already being validated, made sacred by the "recurrent narration" (Mol 1976, 260) of the story and the collective legitimation that that tends to accompany.

#### *Ritual and emotional commitment*

In keeping with Mol's notion of sacralization, one would also expect to see ritual activity and any number of emotional commitments being reiterated by those rites. This seems to be precisely the case with the telling and retelling of not only that origin myth but also of the personal histories of the converts. As Woods contends, "Sharing stories is a *ritual* feature both of local hearing voices groups and larger international congresses; the exchange of narratives functioning variously as a form of testimony, healing, empowerment and the forging of individual and group identity (emphasis added)" (2013, 267). Indeed, the local meetings which often meet multiple times per month and the near-annual international congresses seem to serve as both calendrical rites—in Catherin Bell's sense of rituals that "give socially meaningful definitions to the passage of time" (1997, 102)—as well as sacred spaces. As markers of time, the gatherings permit voice-hearers to plot out their own timelines from the point of conversion to the present, an ever-widening gap that hopefully correlates with ever-diminishing disturbances from the voices. As sacred spaces, these ritual meetings offer a fitting environment within which the values and myths of the movement may be regularly verbalized and enacted.

For Mol, of course, ritual *is* "the repetitive enactment of human systems of meaning" in which non-rational commitments have "anchored

the emotions” (1976, 216, 233). Thus, it is also in this repetitive social gathering and collectively-legitimizing swapping of “testimonies” that voice-hearers are afforded the opportunity emotionally to seek and find “hope” and “meaning,” two of the most common responses listed on the aforementioned postcards about what the HVM means to its members. As voice-hearers engage in active meaning-making practices, the sacredness of identity comes as these emotions and ritualized activities combine with a powerful myth and a sense of reclaimed authority to conceive of the subjective experience of voice hearing as central to the unity of self, rather than as the single greatest impediment to that same end.

### Conclusion

All in all, it could be argued that the HVM is quite successful in its ability to challenge predominant psychiatric discourses surrounding schizophrenia whilst conferring a meaningful identity on its members because it has these inbuilt mechanisms. Bailey, for his part, believes that the concept of “implicit religion” can be taken to be “implying a secular kind of religion” and may be a useful tool for finding religious aspects of the secular, for “as modern society evolves into postmodern culture, religiosity in its “historical” forms becomes an increasingly restricted tool for understanding human behaviour” (1998, 73, 80). Bailey’s view seems to concur with and, in at least a basic sense, informs the preceding exploration of the HVM as an instance of religion-making. However, it is our contention that Mol’s theory of religious identity offers a more fruitful lens for locating and analysing so-called secular religiousness, a notion first suggested in a 1999 issue of the journal *Implicit Religion* (Davies 1999, 18). Indeed, whilst we cannot go so far as to agree with Mol that “any sacralized ideology is a religion” (1976, 59), at least not in the terms he lays out, his concept of sacralization does seem quite useful for explorations of postmodern movements because those movements are so self-consciously in the business of identity construction and conferral—even if they are less self-consciously religious than the more traditional communities on which Mol sharpened his theoretical scalpel.

In the light of Mol’s ideas, we see the HVM mobilizing voice-hearers around a shared set of values/experiences and buttressing their identities against past, present, and future threats by shrouding them in a sense of sacred place and purpose. Accordingly, qualitative interviews suggest that the means by which this is achieved entails, at least in part, the construction and perpetual ritual vivification of a myth which simultaneously

gives meaning and receives meaning. Perhaps as the HVM engages in that interminable process of sacralization—with attendant postmodern motives of empowerment—it might be said to be participating in a special case of religion-making.

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