

# Science Fiction as Scripture: Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* and the Church of All Worlds<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

'Scripture' is a term used to refer to the sacred writings of religious groups, for example the Bible in Christianity, the *Qur'an* in Islam and the Vedas in Hinduism. The etymology of scripture derives from the Latin *scriptura*, the past participle stem of *scribere*, 'to write'.<sup>2</sup> This may have had particular significance in past societies where only the most important, authoritative narratives were written down; in an age of mass literacy such as the twenty-first century, potentially all writings are scripture. From the mid-twentieth century Western culture experienced a sharp increase in new religious movements (NRMs), some of which were generated within the West, while others were imported from the other cultures, chiefly the East (India, Tibet, and Japan in particular). Most of these new religions possessed scriptures, generally the writings of founders (for example, Sun Myung Moon's *Divine Principle* for the Unification Church, and *Dianetics* and other books by L. Ron Hubbard, within the Church of Scientology). This paper investigates how Robert A. Heinlein's bestselling science fiction novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961, reissued 'uncut' in 1991), became the foundational scripture of the Church of All Worlds (CAW), a Gaia-oriented Pagan religion founded in 1962 by two American college students, Tim Zell (b. 1942) and (Richard) Lance Christie (b. 1944) who met at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, and became fast friends.

The Church of All Worlds, registered as a religion in the United States in 1968 and now a significant presence in the contemporary Pagan revival, takes its name from the fictional church in Heinlein's novel. Tim Zell, now

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<sup>2</sup> Della Thompson (ed.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 1243.

Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, is one of the most influential of contemporary Pagan leaders, and his church has developed a revolutionary programme for the transformation of Western society. CAW core doctrines ('Thou art God'), rituals (water-sharing), and church organizations (nests) are based on those of Heinlein's fictional church. First, *Stranger in a Strange Land* and Robert A. Heinlein's science fiction output will be analysed, and the nature of the fictional Church of All Worlds established through an examination of Heinlein's views on sex and religion. Critical debates will be reviewed, and like interpretations identified. Second, the origins of CAW and its elevation of *Stranger in a Strange Land* to the status of inspired scripture will be traced, revealing that many in the 1960s venerated the novel as a source of spiritual wisdom (including Charles Manson and his infamous Family), but that Zell and Christie took this further in establishing a real-world CAW. Third, the issue of the authenticity of religions that are derived from fictions is investigated,<sup>3</sup> and the Church of All Worlds and Oberon Zell-Ravenheart's vision will be contextualized in the process of 're-enchantment' or 'resacralisation' which scholars have identified as eclipsing the Western tendency towards scientific rationalism and secularization.

### **Robert A. Heinlein and *Stranger in a Strange Land***

Robert Anson Heinlein (1907-1988) was born in Butler, Missouri, in the American midwest Bible Belt. He graduated from Annapolis Naval Academy in 1929 and served in the United States Navy. After being pensioned off in 1934 due to his diagnosis with tuberculosis he worked as "a civilian aeronautical engineer for the Navy Aircrafts Materials Center in Philadelphia".<sup>4</sup> Publishing his first short story in 1939, he left his job to write full-time after World War II ended. He became a prolific author, highly rated within the science fiction community by both fans and critics, as one of the 'Big Three' with Arthur C. Clarke (1917-2008) and Isaac Asimov (1920-1992). He won four Hugo Awards and received the first Grand Master Award from the Science Fiction Writers of America, for lifetime achievement in the genre.<sup>5</sup> Heinlein wrote short stories, adventure fiction for teenagers, and lengthy adult novels with controversial content.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Alberts, 'Virtually Real: Fake Religions and Problems of Authenticity in Religion', *Culture and Religion*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2008), pp. 125-139.

<sup>4</sup> William H. Patterson Jr. and Andrew Thornton, *The Martian Named Smith: Critical Perspectives on Robert A. Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land* (Sacramento: Nitrosyncretic Press, 2001), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> James D. Gifford, *Robert A. Heinlein: A Reader's Companion* (Sacramento: Nitrosyncretic Press, 2001), p. xiii.

His politics and personal life contained contradictions; for example, his second wife, Leslyn Macdonald, was a leftist radical, but Heinlein admired the military, was intensely patriotic and is often criticised for his right-wing and anti-democratic views. Despite this apparently 'conservative' position, he was an avid photographer of nudes and a naturist, and espoused sexual exploration and polyamory in his novels. Further, he is frequently perceived as a sexist due to his many depictions of beautiful, sexually available women, yet he had a particularly close marriage and working partnership with his third wife Virginia Gerstenfeld, which lasted forty years from 1948 until his death, and he often expressed the view that women were superior to men.<sup>6</sup> He was brought up in a state adjoining the racially segregated South yet became a vocal anti-racist. He respected the ideas of his near-contemporary Ayn Rand (1905-1982), was fiercely individualistic and an unbeliever, yet *Stranger in a Strange Land* is deeply imbued with the need for community and endorses a religion (CAW). He was influenced by his Methodist upbringing and his fiction been interpreted as having a 'Calvinist' concern with the Elect by some;<sup>7</sup> however, other critics suggest that his fascination with elites rather reflects his interest in P. D. Ouspensky (arguably the most important student of G. I. Gurdjieff) and the Theosophical Great White Brotherhood.<sup>8</sup>

Heinlein was also friendly with L. Ron Hubbard, a fellow science fiction writer and the founder of the Church of Scientology. Thomas Disch has argued that science fiction and religion are intersecting discourses, where science fiction fans espouse SF as the 'true and only literature', which speaks of extra-terrestrials and intergalactic conflicts (gods, angels, and eschatological visions in traditional religion). He further asserts that *Stranger's* lengthy incubation (Heinlein began to write it in 1948 but it was not published in 1961, possibly because its sexual content was unacceptable to publishers in the 1950s) resulted in Heinlein's critique of religion in the novel containing satire specifically directed at Hubbard and the Church of Scientology, which was founded in 1954.<sup>9</sup> This may partly be true; however, *Stranger in a Strange Land* paints a more complex picture of religion than Disch would allow, and the Fosterite Church, the main target of Heinlein's satire, more closely resembles a Pentecostal megachurch than it does Scientology. These and other contradictions result in critics being deeply divided in their assessment of

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<sup>6</sup> Leon Stover, *Robert A. Heinlein* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> George Edgar Slusser, *Robert A. Heinlein: Stranger in His Own Land* (San Bernardino CA: Borgo Press, 1976). See also Stover, *Robert A. Heinlein*, pp. 87-96.

<sup>8</sup> Patterson and Thornton, *The Martian Named Smith*, p. i.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas M. Disch, *The Dreams our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), pp. 139-150.

Heinlein the man and of his fiction. Heinlein (whether intentionally or not) declined to resolve these divisions, via his reluctance to 'explain' his works in interviews and his refusal of an authorized biography.

*Stranger in a Strange Land* is set in a future in which World War III has occurred, the United States has been partially supplanted by the World Federation, and the moon has been colonized. It is the story of Valentine Michael Smith, the illegitimate child of two adulterous astronauts on an Earth mission to Mars. All the astronauts on the mission perished and Mike is brought up by Martians (including discorporated 'Old Ones'), whose habits and thought-patterns are very different to those of humans (they have no notion of two sexes and sexual attraction, and practice cannibalism, which is used by the living to incorporate the deceased). In Part 1, 'His Maculate Origin', Mike is taken back to Earth by Federation agents, and, weak and oppressed by Earth's heavier gravity, is effectively imprisoned in the Bethesda Medical Centre, Maryland where he meets Gillian (Jill) Boardman, a nurse and the first female he has ever seen. She becomes his 'water-brother' (the act of drinking water together has particular significance on hot, dry Mars) and helps Mike escape to the house of her lover, journalist Ben Caxton, where she gives Mike a bath, continuing the water theme. Part 2, 'His Preposterous Heritage', opens with a news report on the claim that the Reverend Doctor Daniel Digby, the Supreme Bishop of the Church of the New Revelation, also known as the Fosterite Church, had arranged angelic aid for a Federation Senator, Thomas Boone. Heinlein wickedly satirises the 'megachurches' and anticipates the political clout they wield in twenty-first century America; "news services carried it as straight news, the Fosterites having wrecked newspaper offices in the past".<sup>10</sup>

Jill and Ben take Mike to the Poconos Mountains in Pennsylvania, to the house of Jubal Harshaw, who is a 'Heinlein-voice' character, a wise Old Man. Jubal is a millionaire who dictates fiction to his three beautiful secretaries (Dorcas, Miriam, and Anne), and he undertakes to educate Mike, who has psychic powers and superhuman intelligence. Jubal's home is an important model for the Church of All Worlds, which Mike founds later in the novel: people are often naked and untroubled by this fact; sex is freely offered (though the aged Jubal does not participate); and a large swimming pool is a focal point, emphasizing the importance of water. As Jill adjusts to the household's rhythms Jubal tells her, "This is Freedom Hall, my dear. Everybody does as he pleases".<sup>11</sup> Jubal, an agnostic, helps Mike understand

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<sup>10</sup> Robert A. Heinlein, *Stranger in A Strange Land* (London: New English Library, 1987 [1961]), p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> Heinlein, *Stranger*, p. 79.

religion. Mike ‘groks’ (a Martian word meaning to understand so totally as to fuse with that which is understood) that ‘Thou Art God’ (all things participate in divinity, or pantheism).<sup>12</sup> Mike discovers sex and meets various people, including members of the Fosterite Church and the linguist ‘Stinky’ Mahmoud (a Muslim who is the first human on Earth to learn the Martian language). Jubal Harshaw’s great wealth enables him to bargain for Mike’s freedom when Federation agents come seeking to re-imprison Mike.

Part 3, ‘His Eccentric Education’, begins with a lengthy description of a visit to a Fosterite Church service at which Mike meets stripper Dawn Ardent and Digby, the Church’s Supreme Bishop. Mike understands the service to be different to his water-sharing ceremony, and yet a legitimate way to grow closer. He and Jill begin working in a carnival (Mike as Dr Apollo, a magician, which is significant as one of the book’s recurrent themes is the dichotomy between the Apollonian and Dionysian modes), where they meet the tattooed snake lady Patricia Paiwonski, a Fosterite ‘priestess’. The carnival teaches Mike important lessons in showmanship and Jill about sexual liberation in public places (as for her it was previously confined to Jubal’s very private house). These are both important bridges to the Church of All Worlds, as is learning of the ‘inner church’ of the Fosterites (called the ‘reborn’); “the secret church was that Dionysian cult that America had lacked and for which there was an enormous potential market”.<sup>13</sup> Mike realizes that his founding a religion may make people happy, and that possibly all religions are true. Part 4, ‘His Scandalous Career’, starts with Mike studying at Union Theological College, and having a brief stint in the army. Jubal is appalled to discover that Mike has a doctorate in theology and has founded his own religion, the Church of All Worlds. Ben Caxton visits the ‘Nest’ (as Mike terms it) and reports to Jubal; he notes that the Martian language is a high priority, that dedicated followers are learning telekinesis and other paranormal powers from Mike, that the Church is organized in nine circles, there are obvious parallels with Fosterism, and that nudity and free love are practiced. Pat Paiwonski and Dawn Ardent have joined Mike’s church. When Ben decides to join the religion Jubal is left as the last remaining (and somewhat reluctant) sceptic.

In Part 5, ‘His Happy Destiny’, the Martian Old Ones have released Mike from his original mission of spying for them, leaving him free to serve the ‘Terran angels’ and Jubal is increasingly worried by the activities of the CAW. The CAW Temple is burned down and Jubal reunites with Mike in a Florida hotel, where the Nest has temporarily reunited. During this time Jubal’s long period of celibacy ends, as he has sex with Dawn. The compatibility of

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<sup>12</sup> Heinlein, *Stranger*, p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> Heinlein, *Stranger*, p. 268.

CAW with all religious positions is stressed; there are Muslims, Jews, Christians, atheists and agnostics in the Nest. After long discussions on polyamory and mythology, Mike, who knows that his time on Earth is drawing to a close, prepares to 'discorporate'. This happens in front of a hostile crowd who attack Mike with bricks and a shotgun, accusing him of blasphemy, and then lynch him.<sup>14</sup> Jubal is devastated and attempts suicide by means of a drug overdose, but is revived by members of the Nest, who plans to move to his house permanently. A broth is made of Mike's remains and is shared among the members. A number of Mike's lovers are pregnant or have recently had babies (including Dorcas and Anne). The final comic vignette has Mike appointed archangel and supervisor of Digby and Foster, and the Martians calling off the planned invasion of Earth. Jubal is last seen writing a novel called *A Martian Named Smith*.

*Stranger in a Strange Land* was an immediate success and has never been out of print, but its popularity often puzzled Heinlein, as those who adopted the novel as a 'how to' guide for life were of usually of a very different political stripe from him. Further, *Stranger* has been both lauded and derided by critics, who have often advanced wildly inconsistent interpretations of the novel.

### ***Stranger in A Strange Land*, Heinlein's Take on Sex and Religion, and the Critics**

When *Stranger in a Strange Land* appeared in 1961, its advocacy of sexual liberation and preoccupation with religion appeared to be new interests for Heinlein, who was then chiefly known for science fiction adventure stories for a teenage readership, such as *Rocket Ship Galileo* (1947). Yet this was only true in terms of his fictional output; as Gifford argues, since the 1930s at least, Heinlein had been an adherent of "the philosophies of Bertrand Russell and H. G. Wells that stated that free love would cure many of the world's ills".<sup>15</sup> He also had an open relationship with his second wife, Leslyn Macdonald, during their fifteen-year marriage, which ended in 1947. It is difficult to separate *Stranger's* treatment of sex from its treatment of religion, but for clarity's sake this division will be attempted. Heinlein's portrayal of sex has at its basis the conviction that the Judeo-Christian fixation on purity, celibacy, faithfulness within marriage, and legitimate offspring is ultimately wrong; it inevitably results in sexual jealousy, possessiveness, negative perceptions of those born

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<sup>14</sup> Ronald Lee Cansler, 'Stranger in a Strange Land: Science Fiction as Literature of Creative Imagination, Social Criticism, and Entertainment', *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 5, no. 4 (1972), pp. 944-954.

<sup>15</sup> Gifford, *Robert A. Heinlein*, p. 187.

out of wedlock, and punitive sanctions against women who seek to escape these patriarchal bonds. Many critics are accepting of this position, and Elizabeth Anne Hull explicitly praises Heinlein for asking (rather than answering) questions, the most important of which concern “political power – our responsibilities to one another – and in the realm of personal freedom, particularly sexual freedom”.<sup>16</sup> She goes so far as to suggest that fans read Heinlein’s novels to wrestle with the doctrinaire views expressed by the ‘Heinlein view’ characters such as Jubal Harshaw, which is pleasurable precisely because they can draw their own conclusions about the issues being examined.<sup>17</sup>

Supporting and extending Hull’s interpretation of *Stranger* is the work of Diane Parkin-Speer, which argues that Heinlein’s presentation of sexual freedom and polyamory is genuinely emancipatory for women, because in the extended family model of the Nest, women are not relegated:

to passive status. Michael’s commune is patriarchal, but Martian discipline has a revolutionary effect on women: women desire sex and conceive voluntarily; rape is impossible; there is no fear or guilt; women are ‘invulnerable’... The lack of concern for paternity is another of Heinlein’s unorthodox twists.<sup>18</sup>

Nearly two decades later, Parkin-Speer’s positive assessment of Heinlein’s portrayal of relations between the sexes is further augmented as she credits him with being “almost a feminist”; she notes that child-rearing is shared in the CAW Nest, women are presented as capable of achieving equality in career terms with men, and that the uncertainties facing women in traditional patriarchal marriages (for example, economic hardship and custody arrangements for children after divorce) simply do not exist. Feminist objections aside, she concludes that “women are empowered by the utopian group marriage”.<sup>19</sup>

As will be seen, the 1960s counter-culture that embraced *Stranger*, including Tim Zell and Lance Christie, shared this positive assessment of Heinlein’s portrayal of sexual freedom. This is understandable, in that it challenged the 1950s assumptions of the mainstream Christian patriarchal nuclear family, which was in keeping with 1960s radicalism. However, some

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Anne Hull, ‘Justifying the Ways of God to Man: The Novels of Robert A. Heinlein’, *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, vol. 20 (1979), p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Hull, ‘Justifying the Ways of God to Man’, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> Diane Parkin-Speer, ‘Robert A. Heinlein: The Novelist as Preacher’, *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, vol. 20 (1979), p. 216.

<sup>19</sup> Diane Parkin-Speer, ‘Almost A Feminist’, *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, vol. 36, no. 2 (1995), pp. 113-125.

critics have raised serious doubts about Heinlein's sexual utopia from a number of different viewpoints: Russell Blackford questions the attribution of mystical value to sex "despite the fact that the book is skeptical about the possibilities in any other mystical system";<sup>20</sup> Robert Plank and Warren G. Rochelle both express disquiet about the apparent exclusion of homosexuality from Heinlein's polyamorous world;<sup>21</sup> and Barry Crawford, in an article analyzing Lazarus Long, the immensely long-lived protagonist of a number of Heinlein's novels, chiefly *Methuselah's Children* (1941) and *Time Enough for Love* (1973), argues that Heinlein is "the loudest and boldest advocate of the rogue male in modern science fiction";<sup>22</sup> the implication being that his female characters always occupy a secondary place to these larger-than-life heroic men (in Long's case this is definitely true, as he clones himself to produce daughters, then has sex with them, time travels so that he can have sex with his mother, and creates a body for his computer, which yearns erotically for him, so he can have sex with it/her).

Turning to the treatment of religion in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, both readers and critics have struggled to find a satisfactory interpretation of the novel, because (unlike the issue of sexual liberation, which he embraced and practiced in life) Heinlein rejected Christianity and frequently spoke of his dissatisfaction with all religion and those who took refuge behind religious authorities. Interestingly, he was similarly dismissive of secular creeds such as atheism, scientific humanism, and agnosticism, although for different reasons. He considered these non-religious worldviews to be intellectually bankrupt; his assessment of religion is equally harsh:

All the other religions, elsewhere and in the past, are just as silly, and the very notion of 'worship' is intellectually on all fours with a jungle savage's appeasing of Mumbo Jumbo. (In passing I note that Christianity is a polytheism, not a monotheism as claimed – the

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<sup>20</sup> Russell Blackford, 'The Nest of the Discorporator, Or Rereading *Stranger in a Strange Land*', in *Contrary Modes: Proceedings of the World Science Fiction Conference, Melbourne, Australia, 1985*, eds Russell Blackford, Jenny Blackford, Lucy Sussex, and Norman Talbot (Melbourne: Ebony Books, 1985), p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Plank, 'Omnipotent Cannibals in *Stranger in a Strange Land*', in *Robert A. Heinlein*, eds Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg (New York: Taplinger, 1978), pp. 83-106; Warren G. Rochelle, 'Dual Attractions: The Rhetoric of Bisexuality in Robert A. Heinlein's Fiction', *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, no. 76, (1999), pp. 48-62.

<sup>22</sup> Barry Crawford, 'The Science Fiction of the House of Saul: From Frankenstein's Monster to Lazarus Long', in *Immortal Engines: Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, eds George Slusser, Gary Westfahl, and Eric S. Rabkin (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 145-157.

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rabbis are right on that point -and that its most holy ceremony is ritualistic cannibalism, right out of the smoky caves of our dim past. They ought to lynch me).<sup>23</sup>

Yet the religious concerns of *Stranger* are apparent even in the novel's title, which references Exodus chapter 2, verse 22: "And she [Zipporah] bare him [Moses] a son, and he called his name Gershom: for he said, I have been a stranger in a strange land".<sup>24</sup>

The novel was originally to be called *A Martian Named Smith*. Valentine Michael Smith bears the name of both the patron saint of romantic love and the mighty archangel (and 'Michael' means 'who is like God'), and he dies in a Christ-like manner. *Stranger* presents religion through two churches, Bishop Digby's Fosterite Church of the New Revelation and Mike's Church of All Worlds. Although it is clear that the Fosterites are intended to be perceived as a 'lower' religious body, and CAW as a 'higher' religious body (Dionysian and Apollonian respectively), many critics are disturbed by the fact that the two churches appear indistinguishable. When Mike attends a Fosterite service, he is completely absorbed by it:

It was so Martian in flavor that he felt both homesick and warmly at home. No detail was Martian, all was wildly different, yet he grokked a growing-closer as real as water-ceremony, in numbers and intensity that he had never met outside his own nest.<sup>25</sup>

The ability of the Fosterite Church to incorporate oppositional beliefs and practices is revealed to Mike and Jill when they meet Patty Paiwonski and become aware of the antinomian 'inner church' within Fosterism, that does not subscribe to the Christian restrictions on sensuality and 'sin'. Interpreters are unsure whether Heinlein's positive portrayal of Mike and his church is intended as a parody; the other possibility is that the novel's difficult-to-pin-down genre (which is variously argued to be novel, satire, anatomy, myth, and parable) means that the meaning of the CAW has to be decided by individual readers, depending on what they think the genre of *Stranger* is.<sup>26</sup>

Critical assessments of Heinlein's presentation of religion have often focused on the fact that he divides the world into the 'Elect' and the 'Others'. Mike's superhuman abilities mean that when he or his water-brothers are threatened, he just disincorporates perceived enemies by the power of his mind. In a lesser being, this would be murder, but Mike is a Nietzschean superman,

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<sup>23</sup> Robert A. Heinlein, *Grumbles from the Grave*, ed. Virginia Heinlein (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), p. 229.

<sup>24</sup> Exodus 2, verse 22, *King James Version*, at <http://bible.cc/exodus/2-22.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Heinlein, *Stranger*, p. 230.

<sup>26</sup> Patterson and Thornton, *The Martian Named Smith*, pp. 26-27 (on *Stranger* as satire), pp. 49-53 (on *Stranger* as myth).

who explains the decision-making process of a Martian Old One as follows: “He knows. He groks. He acts”.<sup>27</sup> Critics including Slusser and Stover have argued that this reflects the Calvinist underpinning of the Methodism of Heinlein’s upbringing, in which those predestined to be ‘saved’ are distinguished from the damned. Much evidence has been assembled to support this view; the one problem with it is courteously acknowledged by Stover, “Heinlein resisted it during my visit with him”.<sup>28</sup> It has been noted that Heinlein was reluctant to interpret his works for his readers, but nothing suggests that he chose to mislead them. His rejection of the ‘Calvinist’ interpretation forces the critic to look elsewhere for an explanation. Patterson and Thornton argue that Heinlein’s Elect better fits an esoteric or Theosophical brotherhood:

His elect have all gone through a special process, an initiation, acquiring hidden knowledge, and they associate together in secret or semi-secret societies working for the betterment of humankind. This is not an accidental or incidental figure. Heinlein is here referencing a very ancient tradition... Heinlein’s ‘Competent Men’... are illuminated. They are enlightened.<sup>29</sup>

To clarify Heinlein’s religious intentions in the novel, Patterson and Thornton assemble a complex three-column chart, with the first column representing the ‘religious idea’, the second column giving the CAW doctrine, and the third column providing the historical ‘religious source’ for the teaching.

For example, the Sanskrit phrase *tat tvam asi* (‘thou art that’ [Brahman]) is matched to ‘thou art God’ of CAW, noting that Hinduism is the source of this notion (*tat tvam asi* is found in the *Chandogya Upanishad*).<sup>30</sup> Much of their chart is mechanical and many ideas appear to be only tangentially linked to CAW doctrines as they appear in *Stranger in a Strange Land*. However, this exercise proves vital in locating the source of Heinlein’s Elect and definitively associating the fictional CAW with occult and esoteric religion, rather than Christianity. All twelve ‘Theological Comparisons’ they investigate are found in the writings of P. D. Ouspensky (1878-1947), the earliest significant disciple of the Greek-Armenian mystic G. I Gurdjieff (1866?-1949), particularly the *Tertium Organum* (1912, rev. ed. 1932) and *A New Model of the Universe* (1931). Careful scholarship has established that Heinlein was deeply interested in Ouspensky (who was the first to publish any ‘Gurdjieffian’ teachings), and

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Tim Blackmore, ‘Talking With ‘Strangers’: Interrogating the Many Texts that Became Robert A. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land*’, *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, vol. 36, no. 2 (1995), pp. pp. 136-150.

<sup>28</sup> Stover, *Robert A. Heinlein*, p. 94.

<sup>29</sup> Patterson and Thornton, *The Martian Named Smith*, p. i.

<sup>30</sup> Patterson and Thornton, *The Martian Named Smith*, p. 93.

that ideas from the Gurdjieff 'Work' are found in many of Heinlein's writings.<sup>31</sup>

There is another puzzle inherent in this identification of a 'Gurdjieffian' stratum in *Stranger*, however. Gurdjieff's teachings can easily be understood as a mythology, a spiritual path, and even as a religion, and Heinlein was vehemently opposed to these things.<sup>32</sup> Why, then, would he utilize these teachings in *Stranger in a Strange Land*? In summary, Gurdjieff's teachings (sometimes called the Fourth Way) claim that humans have three centres of consciousness (body, intellect and emotions):

Gurdjieff calls the strange creatures roaming the earth 'three-brained beings', existentially constituted of three in-born and relatively independently functioning centers whose energies are not automatically blended into one another by nature but require conscious and intentional effort on the part of the human individual throughout her/his earthly lifetime in order to harmoniously develop the organism into a truly individual, indivisible, being.<sup>33</sup>

The majority of humans live their lives in a state of waking sleep. They do not possess souls and are destined to become food for the moon. However, intentional effort may result in the development of a soul (and thus the possibility of immortality). The most important work on the self is to increase awareness and awaken from sleep. In addition to his writings and lectures, Gurdjieff taught his followers through music and dance, and the 'Movements' (such as the 'Stop Exercise'), were in part designed to facilitate awareness, and annul time by forcing the person to be in the present.<sup>34</sup> Finally, Gurdjieff's tradition is passed on through personal initiation and transmission of teachings

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<sup>31</sup> Andrew Thornton, 'Mythos and Logos: The Influence of P. D. Ouspensky in the Fiction of Robert A. Heinlein', in three parts, *The Heinlein Journal*, issues 1, 2 and 3 (1997-9), at [www.heinleinarchives.net/upload/index.php? a=viewProd&productId=1022](http://www.heinleinarchives.net/upload/index.php?a=viewProd&productId=1022). Accessed 25/12/09; William Braun, 'Transcending the Limits of Time', *Inner Edge* (1999), at <http://integral-inquiry.com/docs/649/transcending.pdf>. Accessed 25/12/09.

<sup>32</sup> See G. I. Gurdjieff's three part work *All and Everything*: this consists of *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1973) which is a lengthy, complex mythology and cosmology; *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1974) which is a spiritual autobiography; and *Life is Real Only Then, When 'I Am'*, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1981) which is incomplete and contains, among other things, transcripts of lectures.

<sup>33</sup> Mohammed Tamdgidi, 'Freire Meets Gurdjieff and Rumi: Toward the Pedagogy of Oppressed and Oppressive Selves', *The Discourse of Sociological Practice*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2004), p. 173.

<sup>34</sup> See P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1949), and P. D. Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way* (Westminster, Maryland: Random House Inc., 1971).

(rather than via an institutional 'church' or theological college); thus Gurdjieffians constitute an Elect like those of Heinlein's novels.

The Gurdjieffian world-view can therefore be seen to be compatible with Heinlein's philosophy. Further, Gurdjieff's mythological-cosmological masterpiece *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* is actually a story about interplanetary travel in a spaceship, accompanied by lengthy expository disquisitions by Beelzebub to the young Hassein, and in *Stranger* the reader is treated to the aged Jubal's lengthy educational lectures to Mike, a Martian-educated human youth, and functional 'grandson'. Excursuses such as the tale of the Martian destruction of the missing Fifth Planet of Sol strengthen the resemblance between *Stranger* and Gurdjieff's writings. The legacy of Gurdjieff is particularly strong among artists and musicians, dancers and writers, and it is not necessary to claim that Heinlein was a Gurdjieffian, merely that he knew Ouspensky's writings which popularized Gurdjieffian teachings, and that there are compatibilities between Heinlein's and Gurdjieff's world-views.

### **Elevating *Stranger in a Strange Land* to the Status of Scripture**

Before examining the way that Tim Zell and Lance Christie instigated a religion based on *Stranger*, it is important to realize that the novel was venerated by many in the 1960s, and that often Heinlein was regarded as an inspirational spiritual leader. The 1960s was a decade in which America was wracked by intergenerational conflict. The Christian-based family values of the conservative 1950s were called into question and street protests demanded gay rights, black rights, liberation of women and an end to the Vietnam War. The values of the 'Beat Generation' of the 1950s, exemplified by writers Jack Kerouac (*On The Road*, 1951) and Allen Ginsburg ('Howl', 1956), which included sexual experimentation, the rejection of wage-slavery, anarchist notions of freedom, Buddhism and other Eastern spiritualities, drugs, and altered states of consciousness, moved from the fringes of youth culture to the mainstream.<sup>35</sup> Disaffected youth, or 'hippies', espoused the values of the counter-culture; lack of competition, absence of sexual jealousy and possessiveness, opposition to discrimination, peacefulness, anti-racism, concern for community, and the quest for spiritual awakening.<sup>36</sup> The hippies found much that they believed to be missing in mainstream society in fiction; *The Lord of the Rings* provided one model of the questing individual seeking

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<sup>35</sup> See A. Robert Lee, *The Beat Generation Writers* (London and Chicago: Pluto Press, 1996), *passim*.

<sup>36</sup> Patterson and Thornton, *The Martian Named Smith*, pp. 166-167.

wisdom (Gandalf),<sup>37</sup> and heroism and the conflict between good and evil, which was set in an imaginative ‘secondary world’ with an environmental message and otherworldly beings including elves, dwarves and hobbits.

Another model of quest and counter-cultural values, with similar appeal, was found in *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The water-sharing ceremony functioned both as a sign of intimacy and community, and a reminder of the need to cherish the natural world. Mike’s sacrifice demonstrated the need for a commitment to the values of freedom and truth. The providential nature of that model is clear from Theodore Roszak’s answer to the malaise of post-industrial Western culture:

You make up a community of those you love and respect, where there can be enduring friendships, children and, by mutual aid, three meals a day scraped together by honorable and enjoyable labor. Nobody knows quite how it is to be done. There are not many reliable models... It will take a deal of improvisation, using whatever examples one can find at hand.<sup>38</sup>

The power of *Stranger* as a model for the counter-culture is exhibited by the fact that a large number of counter-cultural groups adopted it as a model. Psychedelic drug guru Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters, a communal group which made a legendary trip across America in 1964 (chronicled in Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*) viewed themselves as Heinlein’s ‘stranger’, adopted water-sharing, called their communal house ‘the nest’, and used ‘grok’ as a term for understanding.<sup>39</sup> College students across America spoke to their teachers of the life-changing significance of *Stranger in a Strange Land*. This was contrary to Heinlein’s own desires; but as Scott MacFarlane argues, “it doesn’t matter that the author could not foresee the cultural influence of his novel. Once an author creates a text, except for royalties, it belongs to the world”.<sup>40</sup> H. Bruce Franklin lists multiple testimonies, which he likens to “narratives of religious conversion”. These include comments such as: “The book showed me that I was not alone”; “We didn’t know what we were supposed to do and we needed somebody to show us. So I identify with Michael”; and the novel showed how to achieve

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<sup>37</sup> Robert S. Ellwood, ‘Polytheism: Establishment or Liberation Religion?’ *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 42, no. 2 (1974), p. 349.

<sup>38</sup> Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counterculture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 203.

<sup>39</sup> Robert G. Pielke, ‘Grokking the Stranger’, in *Philosophers Look at Science Fiction*, eds N. D. Smith and F. D. Miller Jr (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982), p. 163.

<sup>40</sup> Scott MacFarlane, *The Hippie Narrative: A Literary Perspective on the Counterculture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), p. 97.

“community without losing individuality”.<sup>41</sup> Many wrote letters to Heinlein, who wryly remarked on his surprise at being addressed as “Dear Father Jubal”.<sup>42</sup> As the 1960s advanced, Heinlein reluctantly became aware of the mushrooming of new religions throughout America, and of the inspirational role he played for some of these movements. In a 1966 letter to his friend and agent Lurton Blassingame, Heinlein wrote:

I recently learned that it [*Stranger*] was considered the ‘New Testament’ - and compulsory reading - of a far-out cult called ‘Kerista’. (Kee-rist!) I don’t know exactly what ‘Kerista’ is, but its L.A. chapter offered me a \$100 fee to speak (I turned them down.) And just this past week I was amazed to discover a full-page and very laudatory review of *Stranger* in (swelp me!) a slick nudist magazine - with the review featured on the cover... and there is an organization in the mountain states called ‘Serendipity, Inc.’, which has as its serious purpose the granting of scholarships - but which has taken over ‘water sharing’ and other phrases from the book as lodge slogans, sorta. [The letter continues with more examples, including a critical magazine entitled *Grok*].<sup>43</sup>

The final group that allegedly used *Stranger* as ‘scripture’ that will be considered here is the Manson Family, the people who gathered around the charismatic murderer Charles Manson. In July and August 1969, the Family carried out a series of murders including that of the actress Sharon Tate, the pregnant wife of film director Roman Polanski. Manson’s fascination with the pop-cultural *zeitgeist* of the 1960s is well known; prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi wrote a book about the Manson murders, which detailed his fascination with the music of the Beatles, his acquaintance with Beach Boy Dennis Wilson, his desire to create popular music, and his fascination with the film industry.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Manson was a polyamorist who lived with up to eighteen women at one point, and is said to have named his first illegitimate child Valentine Michael Smith and nicknamed one of his parole officers ‘Jubal’. During the Manson trial in 1970 *Time* magazine published an article that argued that *Stranger* was one of the foundational texts of Manson’s murderous vision. This is not true, despite the fact that Manson had read and admired Heinlein’s

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<sup>41</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, *Robert A. Heinlein: America as Science Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 128.

<sup>42</sup> David N. Samuelson, ‘*Stranger* in the Sixties: Model or Mirror?’ in *Critical Encounters: Writers and Themes in Science Fiction*, ed. Dick Riley (New York: Ungar, 1978), p. 146.

<sup>43</sup> Heinlein, *Grumbles From the Grave*, p. 236.

<sup>44</sup> Vincent Bugliosi, *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974).

novel.<sup>45</sup> It appears that he failed to appreciate its final message; true, Mike may have incorporated enemies (this might have inspired Manson to murder), but he also died voluntarily at the hands of a violent mob, rather than use his powers to survive.

### **The Church of All Worlds, Heinlein, and *Stranger in a Strange Land***

Tim Zell and Lance Christie were drawn to *Stranger in a Strange Land* and the fictional Church of All Worlds for a number of reasons. Like Heinlein, they read and admired Ayn Rand and found her depiction of artists and creative geniuses who struggled against the bureaucracy and blandness of modern life attractive.<sup>46</sup> Another, later, influence was Robert Rimmer's novel *The Rebellion of Yale Marratt* (1964). The CAW in *Stranger* spoke to Zell and Christie of sexual freedom and liberation from constraints. They were also influenced by psychologist Abraham Maslow's notion that certain people were 'self-actualizers', more aware and experimental than others. Zell and Christie shared water in April 1962 and formed a water-brotherhood called Atl. Margot Adler, an early commentator on CAW, notes that:

The name Atl was said to come from an Aztec word for water that also had the esoteric meaning of 'home of our ancestors'. The closeness of Atl to words like Atlas, Atlantic, and Atlantis was also noted. Water was seen as an appropriate symbol of life, since the first organisms came into existence in water and water is essential to life.<sup>47</sup>

Atl, which never had more than one hundred members, was a loosely structured group that was politically radical, but not in any identifiable left-wing or right-wing way, and dedicated to realizing human potential. Lance Christie wrote that Atl worked toward "a world where the children of Man walk in the hills like Gods".<sup>48</sup> In 1968 Tim Zell took the Atl vision further and established the Church of All Worlds formally as a religion, a move that not all Atl members approved of.

In addition to the basic elements found in *Stranger* (water-sharing, nests, a nine-circle structure, polyamory, the acceptance of all religious paths,

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<sup>45</sup> Stover, *Robert A. Heinlein*, p. 57. Patterson and Thornton, *The Martian Named Smith*, pp. 168-171. See also Erik Davis, 'The Remains of the Deities: Reading the Return of Paganism', *Voice Literary Supplement* (1993), at [www.techgnosis.com/neopaganism.html](http://www.techgnosis.com/neopaganism.html), accessed 25/12/09.

<sup>46</sup> J. Neil Schulman, *The Robert A. Heinlein Interview and Other Heinleiniana* (Mill Valley, CA: Pulpless.com, 1999), p. 114.

<sup>47</sup> Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 291.

<sup>48</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 292.

and the use of words and phrases including ‘grok’, ‘Thou art God’, and ‘never thirst’), Zell grafted on the Pagan worship of the Earth as Gaia, the great goddess, and a distinctive environmental theology:

The Church of All Worlds is evolving a vitalistic religious philosophy which subscribes to and develops the ‘Organic World Picture’. We perceive that the 22 billion year process of evolution of life on Earth may be recognised as the developmental process of maturation of a single vast living entity; the planetary biosphere itself... We perceived the human race to be the ‘nerve cells’ of this planetary Being – [what] Teilhard de Chardin termed the Noosphere. And further, we equate identity of our great living Biosphere (which we refer to as ‘Terrebia’) with the ancient archetypal image of the Great Goddess: Mother Earth; Mother Nature.<sup>49</sup>

It is not surprising that Heinlein never became a member or an advocate of CAW, given his attitude to religion. However, Tim Zell was one of those young people in the 1960s who entered into correspondence with Heinlein, and through letters Heinlein had some input into the realization of Zell’s religious vision.<sup>50</sup> He became a subscriber to *Green Egg*, CAW’s ground-breaking Pagan newsletter. Margot Adler, assessing the importance of the Church of All Worlds, argues that:

CAW was not the first Neo-Pagan group in the United States... But CAW helped a large number of distinct groups to realize that they shared a common purpose, and this gave the phenomenon a new significance. Until then, each group had existed on its own, coming into contact with others only at rare events like the Renaissance fairs in California or science fiction conventions. CAW and Tim Zell, by using terms like *Pagan* and *Neo-Pagan* in referring to the emerging collectivity of new earth religions, linked these groups, and *Green Egg* created a communications network among them.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Lance Christie, ‘Neo-Paganism: An Alternative Reality’, in *Green Egg Omelette: An Anthology of Art and Articles from the Legendary Pagan Journal*, ed. Oberon Zell-Ravenheart (Franklin Lakes: New Page Books, 2009), pp. 120-121.

<sup>50</sup> Heinlein communicated some important insights about *Stranger* to Tim Zell in this correspondence. He distinguished himself from Ayn Rand and Robert Rimmer, another author admired by Zell and Christie, stating that “I think they give answers, rather than asking questions”. He saw himself as definitely engaged in asking questions, rather than providing answers. Further, he confirmed that the 1961 shorter published version of *Stranger* was entirely sufficient: “I did not leave out anything of any importance; I simply trimmed all possible excess verbiage”. Thanks are due to Oberon Zell-Ravenheart for supplying this correspondence between himself and Robert A. Heinlein.

<sup>51</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down The Moon*, p. 295.

After meeting other Pagans, including members of Feraferia and Wicca, CAW began incorporating ceremonial magic and other ritual workings into its communal spiritual life.

In the 1970s CAW and Atl moved further apart, with Tim Zell and his second wife Morning Glory (born Diana Moore, 1948) taking a very public approach to the spread of their new religion. The relationship of emerging Paganism with the science fiction world continued, with Zell participating in and winning prizes at the Costume Ball of the World Science Fiction Convention in Los Angeles (1972) and at Discon (with Morning Glory) in Washington in 1974 (continuing the religion's connection with the science-fiction world). Atlans had, according to Adler, been inclined towards atheism and were suspicious of CAW's increasing use of ceremonial magic (which some Atl members regarded as occult superstition). However, Lance Christie, the moving spirit behind Atl, embraced the environmental aspects of the Pagan revival and wrote for *Green Egg*. In 1979 Tim Zell experienced a vision quest and changed his name to Otter G'Zell, and he and Morning Glory left Missouri for California. They bred unicorns (actually one-horned goats), quested for unicorns, taught Pagan seminars, and started the Ecosophical Research Association (ERA). With fellow Pagan and bard Gwydion Pendderwen they established the Holy Order of Mother Earth (HOME) and conducted rituals on Pendderwen's neighbouring property, Annwfn (Welsh for the otherworld).<sup>52</sup>

In the 1990s CAW began to reorganise under the leadership of priestess Anodea Judith, and since 2000 has undergone an impressive renaissance. Oberon Zell-Ravenheart (as Tim Zell is presently known), now an elder of the worldwide Pagan community, instituted a magical education system, the Grey School of Wizardry, in 2004. This, too, follows on from a popular cultural trend, the vast success of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels.<sup>53</sup> This series of seven children's novels became a publishing phenomenon, and featured an alternate Britain in which children born with magical powers were educated at the wizarding school Hogwart's, studying Potions, Spells, and Defence Against the Dark Arts, among other subjects.<sup>54</sup> Zell-Ravenheart, whose keen sense of fun and theatrical streak have not diminished over the years, has not discouraged the suggestion that he is the 'original' of Rowling's headmaster

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<sup>52</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, 'Preface: A Brief Personal History of HOME', in *Creating Circles & Ceremonies: Rituals for All Seasons and Reasons*, Oberon Zell-Ravenheart and Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books, 2006), p. ix.

<sup>53</sup> The series began with J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997) and concluded with *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth D. Schafer, *Exploring Harry Potter* (London: Ebury Press, 2000), Chapter 4, "Setting", pp. 72-89.

Albus Dumbledore. He has authored several text-books for the Grey School of Wizardry, including *Companion for the Apprentice Wizard* and *Grimoire for the Apprentice Wizard*.<sup>55</sup> He has also published a volume of selections from *Green Egg* and a book of rituals (with Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart). Each of these volumes contains essays by Zell-Ravenheart detailing aspects of the history of CAW, and he continues to affirm the importance of *Stranger in a Strange Land* to the religion:

Four of the five practices... [‘Thou are God/ess’, sharing water, nests and sexual freedom] derive directly from *Stranger in a Strange Land*, the 1961 science fiction by Robert Heinlein in which the name ‘Church of All Worlds’ first appears. Some members of the CAW Tradition glow with pride over this fact, while others are embarrassed and do not wish to be identified with the book. There is no question that many aspects of the book are increasingly outdated. What will never be outdated, however, is the Church of All World’s embrace of the mythology of the future and of science and technology as sources of wisdom as valid as the sacred traditions of old. The CAW Tradition honours the ancient past and looks, with equal reverence, to the future.<sup>56</sup>

Zell-Ravenheart is now in his late sixties, and in 2008 underwent successful surgery for cancer. His vitality appears undiminished and the resurgence of CAW (including the 2007 revival of *Green Egg* as an internet publication) seems likely to continue.

## Conclusion

While it is irrefutable that the Church of All Worlds is now a vibrant and influential part of the Pagan revival, and that revived Paganism provides an authentic spiritual path in the contemporary West, scholars have often remain sceptical about the value of religions that were recently founded (for example, the Church of Scientology in 1954) and even more so in the case of those religions that openly admit to being based on fictions.<sup>57</sup> Compared to traditional religions such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Taoism and

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<sup>55</sup> Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, *Companion for the Apprentice Wizard* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books, 2006); and Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, *Grimoire for the Apprentice Wizard* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books, 2004). Other titles include: Ash “LeopardDancer” DeKirk, *Dragonlore* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books, 2006); and Susan “Moonwriter” Pesznecker, *Gargoyles* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books, 2007).

<sup>56</sup> Liza Gabriel, Morning Glory and Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, ‘Appendix A: The Church of All Worlds Tradition’, in Zell-Ravenheart and Zell-Ravenheart, *Creating Circles and Ceremonies*, p. 268.

<sup>57</sup> See David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California, 2005), *passim*.

Christianity, each founded at least two millennia ago, contemporary new religions are often found wanting. Yet these comparisons are fundamentally unfair. Oberon Zell-Ravenheart's vision of the transformation of the world is ambitious: he envisages a revolutionary sexual culture based on polyamory; an ambitious Pagan education system based on Rowling's Hogwarts model; a newly conceived view of history as 'Religious Epochs' (we are now in the Gaian Epoch, with Zell-Ravenheart and scientist James Lovelock as prophets); an equal relationship between humans and nature; and a vigorous Pagan culture asserting the unity of religions, whether Native American, Celtic, African, Taoist or even Christian. Whether this vision comes to pass is unimportant. The Church of All Worlds is only just over forty years old, and forty years after the death of Jesus, Buddha, Zoroaster or Lao Tzu it would have been impossible to predict the degree of global penetration that each creed would achieve, or even to read a scripture produced by most of the groups of disciples.

This paper has already quoted Scott MacFarlane's observation that 'it doesn't matter that the author could not foresee the cultural influence of his novel. Once an author creates a text, except for royalties, it belongs to the world'. Robert A. Heinlein wrote *Stranger in a Strange Land* over a thirteen-year period and the novel is permeated with ideas that he valued and subscribed to (self-reliance, sexual freedom, the Elect who are superior to the masses, philosophical discussions of art and politics, and much more). Heinlein did not anticipate the rapturous reception that *Stranger* would receive, and when groups as different as the Merry Pranksters, the Manson Family and the Church of All Worlds made use of the novel, it ceased to be 'his' and became theirs. The turbulent 1960s, in which secularization, individualism and a move away from traditional values (including adherence to Christianity) accelerated, was fertile ground for Heinlein's novel. In a paper comparing the fictions of Heinlein, Frank Herbert and Roger Zelazny, Julia List argues that Heinlein adapts:

the figure of the messiah to fit within a non-theistic philosophical framework and provide an alternative value system for the modern world that does not rely on reference to a personal, omnipotent deity... 'salvation' is translated into success in the temporal world, in which hard work and an emphasis on family and friendship (rather than guidance from God) become the keys to combating flaws in human nature. This fundamentally alters the soteriological function of the messianic protagonist, which... [is] restricted to a Promethean provision of knowledge and skills rather than revealing a path to salvation through faith... Even at

their most agnostic, these influential texts reflect the ecumenical mood of the 1960s, basing their pluralism on a respect for the benefits that religious practice can provide, despite their skepticism about its theological basis.<sup>58</sup>

The contemporary Pagan revival shares this scepticism about the theological basis of religious belief and embraces the benefits of practice.<sup>59</sup> The process of secularization, which was assumed to be the dominant model of religion in Western culture, was supposed to result in the death of religion, or at least its eclipse as a major source of authority, has of late been replaced by the 'resacralisation' thesis, which argues that the decline of Christianity has resulted in the proliferation of new religious forms.<sup>60</sup> From that point of view, the process that resulted in the formation of CAW may not have displeased Heinlein. In a letter he wrote that in *Stranger in a Strange Land* "I don't offer a solution because there isn't one... That pantheistic, mystical 'Thou art God!' chorus that runs through the book is not offered as a creed but as an existentialist assumption of personal responsibility, devoid of all godding".<sup>61</sup> In the 1960s Heinlein's creative fantasy fired the religious imagination of Tim Zell and Lance Christie. The real-world CAW is a testimony to the power of narrative; Heinlein's story struck a chord with a generation that had lost faith in the Christian narrative and were looking for a new story. That the story was a fiction is of little significance; the veracity of the stories at the origin of Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism or Zoroastrianism remains in doubt. The vitality and energy of the CAW are the proof of the pudding; that re-enchantment is possible, that magic can happen.

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<sup>58</sup> Julia List, "'Call Me a Protestant': Liberal Christianity, Individualism and the Messiah in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Dune* and *Lord of Light*", *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2009), p. 44.

<sup>59</sup> See Vivianne Crowley, *Wicca: The Old Religion in the New Age* (London; Thorsons, 1996).

<sup>60</sup> Yves Lambert, 'Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?' *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 60, no. 3 (1999), pp. 303-333.

<sup>61</sup> Heinlein, *Grumbles From the Grave*, p. 229.