

# Religious Justifications for Child Sexual Abuse in Cults and Alternative Religions

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## Abstract<sup>1</sup>

*This article identifies eight religiously colored justifications that pedophiles have used to excuse child sexual abuse in cults and alternative religions operating in the West. These ideologies are a) Western scriptural patriarchalism; b) Western patriarchal incest; c) patriarchalism and polygamous child brides; d) millenarianism; e) antinomianism; f) sex as the means to salvation; g) sex as salvation; and h) levelling all forms of sex as equally fallen. By anchoring abuse within theologically based justifications that are readily available in one or more cultic or alternative religious groups, we gain insight into how sexual exploitation becomes legitimized within societal subgroups. Under leaders' directions, these subgroups receive theologies that enable forms of child sexual abuse to seem normative because they appear to have divine justification or support.*

Among the earliest warnings directed to social scientists about the potential for abuse that lies within religions was that which came in 1991 from the President of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Dr. Donald Capps. A professor of pastoral theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, Capps entitled his presidential address to the society "Religion and Child Abuse: Perfect Together," and the Society published it the following year in its journal (Capps, 1992). He limited his comments to Christianity, and then discussed only physical abuse and several religious ideas that he felt were "inherently tormenting" to children. Even though the presentation reads more like a

minister's sermon than it does an academic tome, the reaction among academics in the audience when he delivered it deeply moved him:

When I completed my address, I looked over at the person who had introduced me, ... and there were tears in her eyes. Then as I came down off the podium, some fifteen or twenty persons came up to me, and, one by one, began giving me brief accounts of how religious practices and ideas had caused them great suffering and anguish as children. Several thanked me for speaking that evening about a subject that touched them in a very personal way. As I had to remind myself later, they were established professors and scholars at a meeting of the society for 'the scientific study of religion.' There was nothing objective—coolly scientific—about their response to what I had said. They spoke from the heart, and I felt their pain as I listened. (Capps, 1995, p. x)

Although criticisms—including a charge of blasphemy—came later, Capps knew that he had hit a nerve. He may not have realized, however, how extensive such abuse may be.

By the time that he wrote a book on "the religious abuse of children" in 1995, many accounts of Catholic clergy abuse had gone public. Capps offered a summation of the explanations for the abuse that he read about in most of the media articles, but then stated forcefully,

Yet in none of these articles on the priests' sexual abuse of children is there any discussion of the powerful association of religion itself and child

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<sup>1</sup> I express my thanks to Jonathan Simmons and Matthew Trodden for their editorial comments. I also thank the editors of *IJCS* for publishing this long manuscript in one issue, instead of spreading it across two.

abuse. Never is there mention of the possibility that religion qua religion is inherently, fundamentally disposed toward the abuse of children, that children are at risk not because someone has made a travesty of religion, but because religion has been faithfully adhered to. What if religion qua religion is inherently disposed toward the abuse of children? What if it is not just a matter of a few bad apples in every basket, or just a matter of institutional policies that might be blamed for contributing to the problem, but that religion qua religion places children at risk of being the subjects of abuse? This is the issue with which this book is fundamentally concerned. (Capps, 1995, p. xi)

It also is the issue with which *this* article is fundamentally concerned, although I look for evidence in very different places than did Capps.

Although I spend very little time examining abuse issues within mainstream faiths, I have been inspired by the growing number of studies concerning clerical abuse in the Catholic Church and elsewhere. At first slowly, reluctantly, but eventually like a torrent, those issues came forward, often by concerned members themselves who feel that the abuses that have occurred within their own denominations are blights upon their respective faiths. What investigative members do not uncover, journalists—and occasionally academics—often do. One thinks, for example, of the important investigative research that journalist Jason Berry and psychotherapist and former priest Richard Sipe have done regarding child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church (Berry, 1992; Berry & Renner, 2004; Sipe, 1990; 1995; 2003). I leave to others, therefore, the exploration of child-abuse issues within major religious faiths.

I choose instead to examine child and teenage sexual-abuse issues in unevenly charted territory—groups variously called sects, cults, and new religious movements. These alternative religions tend to be far newer and smaller than the established religions, and they often center on the unorthodox teachings and personalities of

spiritual leaders who are either still alive or recently deceased. It is a guessing game to estimate how many groups fit this description; but in the early 1990s, psychologist and “cult” researcher Michael Langone concluded that “approximately two to five million Americans have been involved with cultic groups” (Langone, 2001, para. 5). People’s experiences in these groups vary widely, depending upon the period in their groups’ histories in which they were involved, their level and duration of involvement, and their own psychosocial issues within their own biographies. Age and gender also factor into people’s experiences, so two people who underwent similar experiences may have very different interpretations of them. Some experiences, however, are collective, since people find themselves in situations shared by others whose reactions are more or less the same.

In religious settings, people hope that their experiences, and those of their loved ones, will be positive and nurturing, and often they are. No less memorable, however, are people’s experiences of abuse, which also can be collective in nature and suffered through by many. All the examples of child sexual abuse that I discuss in this study are collective ones, not isolated instances of malfeasance that single, unfortunate young people endured. Said differently, children and teens in the same group underwent similar privations, likely for the same reasons. None of those reasons were the children’s fault, even if in a few instances the abuse may have become intergenerational if not intragenerational (see Erooga & Masson [Eds.], 1999).

Not all studies share the opinion that I hold, which is that child sexual abuse is a problem greater in alternative religions than it is in society at large. An American sociologist and psychologist team, for example, undertook a psychological assessment of children in the Children of God/The Family, and in that context wrote the following:

Because of the unfortunate level of abuse in our country, the charge of abuse has a high degree of plausibility with the public and, as such, this charge

is frequently made when someone wishes to attack another's character, such as in divorce proceedings, or among disgruntled students and parents. It is not surprising, therefore, that such charges of child abuse are commonly made against minority religious groups, and charges of child abuse and neglect have been made against New Religious Movements for the past twenty-five years. Even groups such as the Hare Krishnas, who have a theologically based, restrictive approach toward overt sexuality, have been charged by critics over the years with sexual abuse despite the evidence that abuse occurs among devotees at no higher rate, and probably at a much lower rate, than in the general population. (Lilliston & Shepherd, 1994, p. 49)

These researchers offered this opinion the year before a judge in a British court case presented a very different analysis of child sexual abuse in *The Family* during the 1980s and early 1990s. In a lengthy written decision, the judge concluded,

I am totally satisfied that there was widespread sexual abuse of young children and teenagers by adult members of *The Family*, and that this abuse occurred to a significantly greater extent with *The Family* than occurred in society outside it. (Ward, 1995, p. 111)

Moreover, roughly five years after this team specifically mentioned the Hare Krishnas as a new religion that had suffered unwarranted child-abuse charges, the Hare Krishna organization itself “published an unusually candid exposé detailing widespread physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children who were sent to live in the group's boarding schools in the United States and India in the 1970s and 1980s” (Goodstein, 1998, p. A1; see Rochford, 2007, pp. 74–96; Rochford with Heinlein, 1998). Some researchers, therefore, apparently did not see what the critics of various groups knew—that child sexual abuse was indeed a major problem in some “new religions.”

Other studies have examined issues of protected hierarchies and trust that facilitate religious leaders' exploitation of members. Anson Shupe, for example, examined how the trusted hierarchies within religions facilitate abuse, as do types of hierarchical versus congregational power structures in which various groups operate (Shupe, 1995, p. 17). Refining and building upon Shupe's work, Peter Iadicola concluded, “a religious organization most likely to experience clergy malfeasance would have hierarchical internal and external power structures, charismatic leadership, and highly unstable normative doctrine” (Iadicola, 1998, p. 227). Looking at other sociological contributors to child sexual abuse, clinical social worker Doni Whitsett and I reported that “many conditions that facilitate child abuse in cults are structural in nature, having to do with how these groups operate in relation to society and in the context of their own policies and practices” (Whitsett & Kent, 2003, p. 496). The study that I present here, however, takes an approach different from these sociological ones, and I hope that other researchers will revisit this material through the lens of the social sciences.

Rather than focusing primarily upon the social relations among leaders and followers that facilitate child sexual abuse, or upon the (social) psychology of age-inappropriate sexuality, I examine the religiously coloured excuses and doctrines that the perpetrators use to justify their sexual abuses. For reasons of space I limit my discussion to justifications that have appeared in the West (excluding Islam), even if the individuals or groups propounding them trace their origins to non-Western religions from Asia. In varying depth I identify and discuss eight religious-coloured justifications connected to child sexual abuse in Western countries. These ideologies are: a) Western scriptural patriarchy; b) Western patriarchal incest; c) patriarchy and polygamous child brides; d) millenarianism; e) antinomianism; f) sex as the means to salvation; g) sex as salvation; and h) levelling all forms of sex as equally fallen.

I generated these justifications after reading though media accounts, books, and other print sources that I had been collecting for a number of years as I oversaw the operation of a large,

restricted-access research collection on alternative religions within the University of Alberta libraries. While filing documents, I would discover items pertinent to child sexual abuse, which I would then set aside and process separately from the main collection. Moreover, for nearly forty years, I have been buying academic and popular-press books on religions and have acquired a considerable number that discuss various types of abuse within sects, cults, and alternative religious groups. Several years ago, I read through my separated collection of relevant media articles, other print sources, and books, and generated the eight religious justifications for child sexual abuse that shape my presentation here (see Bryman, 2004, p. 389).

Throughout this study, I define *pedophiles* as age-inappropriate persons who engage in sexual activity with prepubescent children and *ephebophiles* as age-inappropriate individuals who engage in sexual activity with adolescents (see American Psychiatric Association, 2000, Section 302.2 Pedophilia; Jenkins, 1996, pp. 78–79). In most circumstances, it is impossible to determine whether the perpetrators were inspired to commit child sexual abuse by the contents of the doctrines (as I suspect was often the case with Children of God members), or whether they were existing pedophiles or ephebophiles who adopted particular ideologies or doctrines to sanctify their predilections or prior behaviours (as I suspect was the case with Charles Leadbeater and Benjamin Purnell). In any case, by situating abuse within theologically based justifications and excuses that are readily available in one or more religions, we gain insight into how sexual exploitation becomes legitimized within societal subgroups. Under leaders' directions, these subgroups receive theologies that make forms of child sexual abuse seem normative because they have divine justification or support.

### **Western Scriptural Patriarchalism**

Religious doctrine—the statements of faith upon which believers base their practices and rituals—often are a combination of history, mythology, fantasy, and unverifiable ruminations. As a shared characteristic,

however, of the religious doctrine of all major religions, patriarchalism—defined here as males' social, political, economic, and sexual domination over females—cuts across faiths by providing religious sanctifications to most, if not all, major religions for the subservience of women of all ages. Arguably, the patriarchalism in the world's basic scriptures and doctrines reflects, in varying degrees, social conditions at the time of the composition of these resources. Nevertheless, they infuse the contemporary world with images of male domination that occasionally catch the attention of pedophiles or ephebophiles.

### **Wilbert Thomas Sr. and the Christian Alliance Holiness Church**

A dramatic example exists of an African-American preacher who used religiously cloaked patriarchalism and his pastoral position to sexually exploit his female congregants, including teenaged girls. In 1983, the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office in New Jersey indicted Reverend (sometimes called Bishop) Wilbert Thomas, Sr. (b. 1929), along with 12 church members (including his wife) for having participated “in sexual assaults, coercion, aggravated and atrocious assault and battery and criminal restraint” (Indictment, in Pasternack & Torok, 1983).

Thomas had begun his ministry in 1969, and “[h]e attracted followers with his oratorical ability, his talent as a musician and his teachings of togetherness” (Hoffman, 1983, p. 4B). In 1978 or 1979, however, Thomas's church made a fateful turn inward as he separated members from outsiders; increased discipline; gained control over people's marital, financial, and personal decisions (Haferd & Outlaw, 1993, p. 6); and began demanding that members praise him rather than God. Along with preaching racial hatred that included calls for members to arm themselves against whites, Thomas's services included many comments about sexual topics (which, according to a former member, included how “the women of the congregation [were to] sway their hips when they walked so they would be more alluring” [Hoffman, 1983, p. 4B]).

By the mid-1970s, Thomas was apparently pressuring women to give him “spiritual nourishment,” which (in the language of the group) meant sex. Moreover, he was treating some members “like slaves,” working congregants up to 18 hours every day in church-owned businesses, and subjecting men and women to severe beatings (sometimes administered by an internal group of women known as a “Sisterhood” [Hoffman, 1983; Meyer, 1985; Pasternack & Torok, 1983]). During the 1985 trial, one woman testified that the minister’s spouse, Bertha, also sexually assaulted her (Meyer, 1985; *Philadelphia Daily News*, 1985). For his role in the crimes, Reverend Thomas received a 20-year prison sentence, and his wife received a year probationary term for lewdness (Siegel, 1986). Once he was in prison, however, the documented instances of Thomas’s sexual abuse of teenaged girls began as he used the prison telephone to orchestrate, and listen to, sexual encounters involving minors.

Even after Thomas was behind bars, his unique, but secret program of sex education remained in place, carried on by some of his followers. Young women who left the congregation said they were told that learning from other church women how to “express themselves” sexually would help remove sexual anxieties and prepare them to be “more beautiful women” and better bedmates for their spouses.

All said they were instructed to keep these special educational sessions secret. In most instances, they said, the sessions ended with a report by telephone to the bishop [Thomas], detailing the student’s sexual response. In other instances, the bishop listened to the proceedings himself, with the telephone off the hook in the room where the encounters took place. (Haferd & Outlaw, 1993, p. 9)

In one event, Thomas orchestrated a lesbian encounter involving a tenth grader (which he directed via the telephone [Haferd & Outlaw, 1993, pp. 8–9]); and another young woman reported that when she was about thirteen a woman in the church approached her with an aggressive offer to teach her “how to be a

lady” (in Haferd & Outlaw, 1993, p. 9). The girl knew from others that the teachings were sexual in nature and involved touching, so she refused the offer, only to have the same woman “teach” and assault her the next year (Haferd & Outlaw, 1993, p. 9). In yet another instance, Thomas directed a sexual encounter between sisters, one of whom was in the eleventh grade (Haferd & Outlaw, 1993, pp. 9–10). When a church youth worker visited Thomas in prison, he gave her instructions about “preparing some of the [organization’s] youngest girls—under age 11—for sexual initiation” (Haferd & Outlaw, 1993, p. 14). (Thomas and the visiting women also figured out a way that they could give him “spiritual nourishment” while with him “in a large prison reception room with dozens of other prisoners’ families and guards standing around.” Wearing no underwear or bras, the women ““would sit in a certain way across from each other, looking out for the moving cameras,”” as Thomas fondled one of them [Tikiba Kwalume, in Haferd & Outlaw, 1993, p. 14]).

The Wilbert Thomas case may be among the more dramatic instances of adult female followers facilitating a male preacher’s sexual deviances toward young girls. (The general scenario, however, of older women [even mothers] facilitating sexual abuse against younger women is well-known in the child sexual abuse literature [see Matthews, 1993, pp. 70–71].) Examples of these “male coerced offenders” (Matthews, 1993, p. 71) suggest the tremendous power that patriarchal religion holds over some people, and they indicate how abusive systems of religious patriarchy can socialize women to become active participants. In the case of Thomas’s followers who facilitated sexual encounters for him, for years they “were isolated from the outside world and indoctrinated with the belief that their only hope of salvation lay in total submission to control” by the preacher himself (Haferd & Outlaw, 1993, p. 6). Under these circumstances, what is more remarkable than the fact that many women facilitated his deviance is that *any* of his victims were able to escape his manipulative control and speak out against it.

## Western Patriarchal Incest

We gain a better understanding of how some patriarchal religious imagery likely facilitates pedophilia by first identifying how patriarchy facilitates the commission of abuse against women and children in secular society. As the feminist psychiatrist Judith Herman points out,

[a] patriarchal family structure secures to fathers immense powers over their wives and children. Traditionally, these powers include an unrestricted right of physical control, unrestricted sexual rights to wives (hence rape has no legal meaning within marriage), and extensive sexual rights in children.... The only sexual right in their children that fathers do not have in any society is that of personal use. But given all his other powers, a father may easily choose to extend his prerogatives to include the sexual initiation of his children. (Herman with Hirschman, 1981, p. 54)

In essence, patriarchal family arrangements inhibit—if not prevent—women from “observing” or protesting against abuse. In addition, these arrangements “super-empower” men by placing them beyond criticism of spouses and children.

Indeed, instances abound in which women facilitate the very patriarchalism that, in so many ways, burdens them. Here, for example, were women who participated in numerous instances of child abuse, but who did so because they were “partnered with someone who seem[ed] to them to be a very powerful male perpetrator” (Wolfers, 1993, p. 94). That “someone,” however, was the congregational minister rather than a husband or partner. Amidst the very real threats of physical punishment in response to dissension or disobedience, “involvement in child sexual abuse may [have been] an attempt to achieve control by some women in powerless situations” (Wolfers, 1993, p. 94).

Perhaps the most unexpected place to find links between patriarchalism and sexual abuse in Western societies is in traditionally revered religious scriptures, along with some of the key historical figures who created or supposedly

lived according to their teachings. Within, for example, the patriarchalism of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, parental-child incest occurs in the well-known incidents between Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:30–36)—incidents for which the Lord showed no disapproval in the text. The story of Lot and his daughters provides a classic example of a male excuse for incest—drunkenness (Herman with Hirschman, 1981, pp. 36–37). In the biblical account, while Lot was fleeing the wicked city of Sodom with his wife and two unmarried daughters, his wife died. The three remaining family members took refuge in a cave, and on two successive nights Lot’s daughters got him drunk and then had intercourse with him (hoping through pregnancy to continue the family bloodline). Because of alcohol, however, he did not remember the incidents. Elsewhere in these scriptures, the Book of Leviticus (18:1–18) lists numerous prohibitions involving sexual behaviours, yet it fails to specifically mention sexual relations between a father and daughter. As Herman concluded, “the patriarchal God sees fit to pass over father-daughter incest in silence” (Herman with Hirschman, 1981, p. 61).

## The Children of God

The Children of God’s founder, David Berg (1919–1994), informed his flock of this biblical omission, and, in retrospect, it was a justification for his own likely incestuous activities with many young members of his immediate family (see Kent, 1994, pp. 157–160). In his widely distributed missive of late March 1973 entitled “Revolutionary Sex,” Berg asserted to his followers,

**22. THERE ARE ALSO MANY BIBLICAL EXCEPTIONS TO SO-CALLED INCEST**, or the marriage of certain near relatives. In fact, there would have been no human race if Adam and Eve’s two sons, Cain and Seth, had not married their sisters, because there was no one else to marry! ... And if this shocks you, such **marriages of brothers and sisters, mothers and sons and even fathers and daughters were very common in ancient times and were not even**

**considered incestuous, much less illegal, and were not forbidden for the 2600 years from the creation of Adam until the Law of Moses!** There are so many examples of same from the mating of Adam's sons with his daughters to the marriage of many kings and pharaohs with theirs, including the classic example of Lot and his two daughters who mothered and fathered the two whole nations of Moab and Ammon.... And yet in our modern Western society even the marriage of near cousins is criminal under some government, while even the Mosaic Law did not prohibit the same! So again we find the laws of man in conflict with the laws of God! (Berg, 1973, p. 1338 [original emphasis and capitalization])

Not surprisingly, one of Berg's daughters—Deborah—accused her father of trying to molest her (Davis with Davis, 1984, pp. 9–10, 14, 58), and finally revealed that he had, in fact, succeeded (*Shukan Bunshun*, 1992, pp. 3–6).

Another daughter—Faithy—who remained a loyal follower of her father until after his death, implied in a Children of God publication (subtitled “Faithy's Reaction to Childhood Sex”) that he succeeded in touching her sexually when she was a child:

I like it! It reminded me of how you [her father] used to put me to sleep when I was a little girl, 3 or 4. Daddy did it best! Back rubbin', that is, & front rubbin' too! The others, our various babysitters, just rubbed your back raw & it didn't even feel good, so I would pretend to fall asleep as fast as possible so they'd stop. It felt so good when they stopped! Ha! BUT DADDY JUST MADE ME FEEL GOOD ALL OVER & I didn't know why, but it would really put me to sleep with a sigh! PTL [Praise the Lord]! I don't think it perverted me none [*sic*] at all, but it sure converted me to His Call! So I believe our parents should try it, & help our kids get the natural habit! WE PRAY IT'LL WORK, then Junior [who was a

nephew] won't be a sex jerk! Oh! I could write a book, but this is just a look into my childhood sex! (*Family of Love*, 1988, p. 15)

Note that Faithy seems to have been instructing parents to masturbate their children—an activity that contributed to the eroticized environment in which the children in her organization lived throughout the 1980s.

### **Patriarchalism and Polygamous Child Brides**

Separate from the rare practice of incest among classic figures presented in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament was the more common practice of polygamy among important biblical males. Abram's wife Sarai provided her maid, Hagar, to her husband after she (Sarai) failed to conceive (Gen 16:3); and later Abram took yet another wife in addition to his concubines (Gen. 25:1–6). Isaac's disfavoured son, Esau, had several wives (Gen. 28:9), while his favoured son, Jacob, had two wives (Gen. 29:21–30, 30:3–13; see 1 Chr. 7:14). The famous figure King David had several wives (1 Sam. 25:40–44), but when he was old he slept with “a young maiden” (1 Kg. 1:2) for warmth (with the text specifically stating that “the king knew her not” sexually [1Kg. 1:4]).

In a Western context, the best-known polygamous practitioners remain fundamentalist polygamous Mormons, comprising perhaps 50,000 practitioners concentrated in and around Utah (especially Arizona, Texas, Idaho, and Montana) and in British Columbia, Canada. Leaders of these deviant Mormon groups believe their practice of polygamy is in line with (reputed) revelations received by Mormonism's founder, Joseph Smith, on July 12, 1843. “The revelation pointed out polygynous practices of Old Testament patriarchs and made clear the distinction between marriages for time [i.e., for this life only] and marriages for eternity [i.e., that continue forever into the supposedly heavenly realm]” (Altman & Ginat, 1996, p. 27; see *Doctrine and Covenants* 132, pp. 15–16, 18–20). Specifically in the Mormon collection of reputed revelations to Smith, *Doctrine and Covenants*, God supposedly said to Smith the following:

61. And again, as pertaining to the law of the priesthood—if any man espouse a virgin, and desire to espouse another, and the first give her consent, and if he espouse the second, and they are virgins, and have vowed to no other man, then he is justified; he cannot commit adultery for they are given unto him; for he cannot commit adultery with that that belongeth unto him and to no one else.

62. And if he have ten virgins given him by this law, he cannot commit adultery, for they belongeth to him; therefore he is justified. (*Doctrine and Covenants* 132, pp. 61–62; see Kent, 2011, pp. 166, 187–188 n. 46)

(Some critics, however, deduce that the [reputed] revelation was designed partly to force compliance of Smith’s wife, Emma, with the practice [Altman & Ginat, 1996, p. 27; see *Doctrine and Covenants* 51; Muncy, 1973, p. 130]). In any case, Smith eventually had dozens of “plural wives,” including one 14-year-old (Helen Mar Kimball, daughter of the Mormon Apostle Heber C. Kimball), one 15-year-old, and two 16-year-olds, all when he was between 37 and 38 years old (Ostling & Ostling, 1999, p. 61; Tanner & Tanner, 1996, pp. 4, 6).

Especially because of the reputed revelation’s emphasis on virgins, polygamous Mormon men felt downward age pressure regarding their new brides—a competition to get the young women as brides before someone else did. Indeed, during the period between 1856 and 1857, so many Mormon men were seeking to enter “plural marriage” that one contemporary wrote, “All are trying to get wives..., until there is hardly a girl 14 years old in Utah, but what [*sic*] is married, or just going to be” (Wilford Woodruff, in Van Wagoner, 1989, p. 92).<sup>2</sup> By 1890, however, federal pressure against Mormons led the group’s leader to renounce the

practice officially, but fundamentalists continued (even at the expense of their membership in the main Latter Day Saints organization [Altman & Ginat, 1996:43–48]). Although the extensive scholarship on Mormon-related polygamy avoids using terms such as *child abuse* when describing the actions of its founding figures, recent events have brought to light the propensity that some of their fundamentalist heirs have toward sexually abusing children under their care.

The sheer number and extent of these abuse and molestation incidents raise questions about the role that polygamist ideology and practice has on facilitating if not generating these illegal behaviours (see Kent, 2006, pp. 10–16; 2011, p. 166). As noted, part of what occurs within polygamy is that the competition among males for additional wives drives them to seek younger and younger females, knowing that their male competitors feel similar pressures. In theory, therefore, polygamy need not involve pedophilia; in practice, however, it does so with great frequency.

Behaviours of numerous polygamous men in the southwestern United States demonstrate the intimate connection between pedophilia/ephebophilia and polygamy. Critics (who often were former members) of polygamy realized that the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City provided the perfect opportunity to expose the practice (Woodward, 2002); and since then media around the world, along with the attorneys general offices in Utah and Arizona, have scrutinized it. Governments, media, and former members agreed that among the most egregious aspects of polygamy was the widespread practice of underage polygamous marriages involving girls as young as 12 or 13, with the promise that the state would prosecute adults involved in such arrangements. By 2004, social and legal scrutiny became so extensive against the Hildale, Utah and Colorado City, Arizona Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints communities that their leader, Warren Jeffs, initiated the construction of a new, isolated compound in Eldorado, Texas. Called Yearning for Zion Ranch, some 700 FLDS members whom Jeffs favoured lived there when authorities raided it in 2008. Despite all the

<sup>2</sup>Worth mentioning however, is that, until 1992, 14-year-olds in Utah could marry if they had parental consent. In 1992, Utah lawmakers added the requirement that a juvenile-court judge had to review applications for marriages involving 14- and 15-year-olds. In 1996, “nearly 1,000 teen-agers 14 to 17 years of age were married in Utah, including a 14-year-old girl who slipped a wedding ring on a man of 37 and the marriage of a 15-year-old girl to a groom older than 45” (Burton, 1997, p. 2; also see p. 1).

negative attention and legal threats that underage marriage had brought to the communities back in Utah and Arizona, the FLDS members continued the practice in their new locale.

According to a December 2008 Texas Department of Family and Protective Services report after the raid, Child Protective Services found that 12 girls who ranged in age from 12 to 15 were victims of sexual abuse at the [Yearning for Zion] Ranch with the knowledge of their parents. The investigation also found those girls and 262 other children were subjected to neglect under Texas law. In these instances, the parents failed to remove their child from a situation in which the child would be exposed to sexual abuse committed against another child within their families or households:

There were 124 designated perpetrators as a result of this investigation. Designated perpetrators included men who engaged in underage marriages; parents who failed to take reasonable steps to prevent an underage daughter from marrying an older adult male; and parents who placed their child in, or refused to remove their child from, a situation in which the children would be exposed to sexual abuse committed against another child. (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2008, p. 14)

As a result of evidence gathered from the raid, eight men associated with the Texas facility (including Warren Jeffs himself) received convictions for various forms of child sexual abuse.<sup>3</sup> The practice of underage polygamous

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<sup>3</sup> In December 2009, Allan Keate received a 33-year prison sentence for sexually assaulting a child (Waller, 2009). Nearly a year later, Keith Dutson Jr. received a 6-year prison sentence and a \$10,000 fine for sexually assaulting a child (Waller, 2010). In August 2011, FLDS leader Warren Jeffs went to jail for life in reaction to his polygamous marriages to a 12-year-old and a 15-year-old girl (Pilkington, 2011). Later in the month, Michael Emack lost an appeal against his 7-year sentence on sexual assault charges stemming from his marriage to an underage girl (Orellana & Whitehurst, 2011). On November 1, 2011, Leroy Johnson Steed went to prison for 7 years on two counts of bigamy and one count of child sexual assault (Waller, 2011). Less than a week later, a jury gave Fredrick Merrill Jessop a 10-year sentence for marrying a 12-year-old girl to leader Warren Jeffs (Collier, 2011). In April 2012, an appeals court upheld the sexual assault conviction of Raymond Merill Jessop for marrying a 15-year-old girl (Alberty, 2012). The next month (May 2012) a Texas appeals court upheld

marriage simply was too ingrained into their practice of polygamy for them to cease doing it.

### **Millenarianism**

Another scripturally related set of beliefs that has facilitated or sanctified pedophilia is millenarianism—the

belief held by some Christians, on the authority of the Book of Revelation (10), that after his Second Coming Christ would establish a messianic kingdom on earth and would reign over it for a thousand years before the Last Judgement. (Cohn, 1970, p. 15)

Usually, these Christians envision that Christ's return will be associated with a terrible battle that he and his loyal legions will fight against the evil forces of the Antichrist.

Even in the contemporary era, millenarian beliefs can have dire economic and emotional consequences for adherents as people give up their jobs, their homes, their careers, and their savings in anxious expectation of "the end." What also causes concern, however, is the frequent abolition of conventional morality that occurs in some millenarian group environments. Believers set themselves above and outside of society's laws, claiming that they—the "chosen"—have a divine calling that does not operate within normal constraints. When the normal constraints that some millenarian groups ignore include sexual taboos and laws, then children and teens often become predatory targets.

### **John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community**

A clear example of such an abolition of conventional morality—and the resultant sexual-abuse variant called *ephebophilia* (sexual activity with teenagers)—comes from the nineteenth century intentional community named Oneida. It flourished in upstate New York for about forty years (beginning in 1848) and at one time had 300 members (Robertson, 1972, p. xi). Its founder, John Humphrey Noyes,

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the conviction of Abram Harker Jeffs for a first-degree, felony child sexual assault in his marriage to a 14-year-old (Waller, 2012).

argued that Christians, “who were in an advanced state of holiness” and who were acting under his inspired leadership, had a spiritual duty to enter into arrangements of free love (Klaw, 1993, p. 57). By doing so, “he and his followers would hasten the day of resurrection and the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth” (Klaw, 1993, p. 57; see p. 63). Noyes called his doctrine of free love “complex marriage”; and one aspect of it was his self-appointed right of what he called “first husband,” which gave him a monopoly on the practice of sexually initiating the young girls of the commune. Moreover, he and the other men attempted to withhold their semen, in a practice they called *coitis reservatus*.

Contemporary scholarship places some of the initiated girls as young as 12 and 13 years old, and he continued the practice until he was well into his sixties (Klaw, 1993, pp. 3, 237–238, 241–242). One account written around 1880, however, from a woman who had left the Oneida community, said that she knew “at least four women ... who had sexual intercourse at ten years of age, and one case at nine years of age” (in Van De Warker, 1884, p. 789; see p. 793). This informant, who provided her information to a gynecologist who studied many of the commune’s women in 1877, also commented on Noyes’s motivation for his sexual practices. By her account, his motivation for sexual involvement with girls was not religious but instead was the result of his peculiar notions of female sexuality:

The Community, or Mr. Noyes, who represented it, thought that girls usually had, as they termed it, “amative desires,” when quite young, and that they would get bad habits unless these feelings were satisfied in the way of sexual intercourse, and so of course they were looked after and introduced into the social system *certainly* at the age of puberty and in quite a number of instances before. (Van De Warker, 1884, p. 789 [italics in original])

Boys, too, at 13 and 14 years of age, “were put with old women who had passed the change of life, and instructed all about such things before

they had begun to think of it at all” (in Van De Warker, 1884, p. 789). This arrangement for the boys ostensibly was to teach them the practice of “male continence” with women who were too old to get pregnant.

About the group’s sexual system,

“[t]here was a great deal of complaint by the women and girls ... of too frequent demands upon them by the other sex.... I have known of girls no older than sixteen or seventeen years of age being called upon to have intercourse as often as seven times in a week and oftener, perhaps with a feeling or repugnance to all of those whom she was with during the time.” (in Van De Warker, 1884, p. 789)

Although the surrounding community knew the basic practices involved with complex marriage, Noyes and his followers kept his “right” of first husband a secret from outsiders, fearing that he would have been charged with some form of sexual malfeasance (see Klaw, 1993, pp. 65–67, 242). When, in 1879, yet another campaign began to have Noyes arrested for sexual misconduct issues, he fled to Canada (Klaw, 1993, p. 245).

### David Koresh and the Branch Davidians

The better known example of millenarian-sanctified child sexual abuse involved the activities of the late polygamist David Koresh/Vernon Howell, who died (along with nearly eighty followers) in the fiery end of the Waco standoff on April 19, 1993. In 1985, Koresh believed that he had received the Spirit of Christ and had become “a specific messenger who would appear in the last times and reveal all the mysteries of God” (as, he interpreted, was written in Rev. 10:7 [Tabor & Gallagher, 1995, p. 62]). As he continued preaching about his reputed role as God’s messenger at the end of the world, his followers came to understand

themselves to be one family drawn from all the nations of the world but united in their opposition to modern Babylon, which they identified as the dominant political, social, and economic system of the Western world, particularly as

represented by the United Nations led by the United States. (Tabor & Gallagher, 1995, p. 61)

Koresh, meanwhile, asserted that, as God's end-time messenger, he had become "the perfect mate of all the female adherents" (Bromley & Silver, 1995, p. 58), and from his unions with them would appear "a new lineage of God's children from his own seed." This lineage, comprising these children and the "wives" who produced them, would constitute the House of David, and ultimately it would rule the world (Bromley & Silver, 1995, p. 59; Reavis, 1995, p. 285). Among the "wives" he took were a 12-year-old girl and a 14-year-old girl in 1987, and a 13-year-old girl in 1989 (with whom he had a child in 1992 [Thibodeau & Whiteson, 1999, p. 109]). One Davidian who survived the Waco flames was David Thibodeau, and even he concluded, "[o]f all the charges levelled against [Koresh] in the media and by government officials—including child abuse and gun stockpiling—the only case in which he grossly violated the law was the crime of statutory rape." Koresh, he pointed out, "was guilty on multiple charges that could have sent him to prison for a very long time, perhaps for life" (Thibodeau & Whiteson, 1999, pp. 113–114). No indication exists, however, that any of the men or women in the Davidian compound challenged Koresh about the young ages of some of his lovers. For years I have thought that the reason Koresh refused to surrender to authorities was that he feared child sexual-abuse convictions and a lifetime prison sentence for his crimes.

### **Antinomianism**

As occasionally happens in high-intensity religious movements, the behavior of leaders and their followers contributes to a collective sense of *antinomianism*—the rejection of the established morality. Again, the theological phrase that epitomizes antinomianism comes from the *Christian Bible/The New Testament*, in Titus 1:15: "to the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted." This statement contains the essence of antinomian beliefs, which is that no actions can

corrupt those persons whose purity has saved them. Some new religions, and especially their leaders, claim that their enlightenment places them "beyond good and evil." They therefore have permission to do anything, since their purity elevates them beyond taint or corruption. All is permitted, they believe, since nothing stains. Traditional morality is only for the weak and the damned. This concept frequently overlaps with millenarianism (as it did, for example, in the Children of God),<sup>4</sup> but it does not have to be related to beliefs in the end of the world. Group leaders may hold both antinomian and millenarian beliefs simultaneously.

### **The Doukhorbor Sons of Freedom**

In the context of new religions in British Columbia, Canada, antinomianism may have been the justification that a radical Doukhorbor Sons of Freedom leader used to justify his sexual behaviors and teachings. For nearly four decades (from the early 1920s to the early 1960s), this schismatic group was notorious for protesting materialism through nude marches, arson, and bombings against a wide range of Doukhorbor and non-Doukhorbor targets (see Woodcock & Avakumovic, 1968, pp. 308–333). During protest training meetings in 1931 run by Sons of Freedom leader Peter Petrovich Verigin, he

"fondled the breasts of the younger women standing there in the nude, and the one who cringed ... he rudely castigated by telling her that she 'wasn't eligible for the Kingdom of God on earth....'"

In conclusion ... he ordered everyone to go to bed, wives and husbands in mixed order.... As to the leader himself, he made a couple of teen-age girls accompany him to his own quarters to

<sup>4</sup> The Children of God's leader David Berg paraphrased the biblical verse in Titus while presenting to group members his aberrant views on sexuality, especially adult/child and child/child sexuality, but he had enough sense to realize that authorities likely would arrest him and his followers if they caught them acting upon their beliefs. After, for example, a wide-ranging interpretation of different issues related to sexuality, Berg cautioned, "11. **BUT AS THE APOSTLE PAUL SAID, 'ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL TO US, BUT NOT ALL ARE EXPEDIENT'**" (Berg, 1973, p. 1334; see p. 1350 [capitalization and boldface in original; see also David and Davidito, 1979, p. 6239]).

enjoy the ‘Kingdom of God’ he had just created.” (Doukhobor document, in Holt, 1964, p. 71)

Apparently, in Petrovich’s vision of the Kingdom of God, sexual boundaries normally in place between adults and teens simply dissolved, at least for him.

### **Benjamin Purnell and the House of David**

Far better documented are the sexual assaults against young women committed by the early twentieth century leader of the House of David, whose name was Benjamin Purnell (March 27, 1861 to December 16, 1927). Beginning in 1903, this Anglo-American millennialist group was centred in Benton Harbor, Michigan (with additional properties elsewhere). Purnell positioned the group in a long tradition of prophecy stretching back through the English prophetess Joanna Southcott and into the 1780s and 1790s (Fogarty, 1981, pp. 6–41). His immediate prophetic predecessor, Michael Keyfor Mills (1857–1923), received a 5-year sentence in 1894 for adultery and statutory rape, the latter conviction stemming from his behaviours with a 14-year-old girl (Fogarty, 1981, p. 38; see Orrmont, 1961, p. 98). Purnell would repeat similar sexual violations of girls and women, with the first official complaint by a woman appearing in 1906 and numerous others continuing until his trial for fraud, gross immoralities, instructing perjury, and obstructing justice in 1927 (Fogarty, 1981, pp. 72–120 *passim*; see also Orrmont, 1961, pp. 91–110).

Purnell’s theology spoke about how the elect rulers of the earth had to gather to fulfill the unsealed scriptural mysteries that he would explain to them. He claimed to be “the Ishi-husband (the Christ or creator husband), the seventh messenger who had come to open the seventh seal [in Revelations] and prepare the ingathering place for the Israelites” (Fogarty, 1981, p. 51). He also asserted that he was the Shiloh—a name often assigned to the Messiah (p. 51).

To cleanse the curse of Adam’s original sin from the blood of believers, they had to practice what Purnell called the “virgin law,” which was “total

abstinence from sexual activity” (Fogarty, 1981, p. 53). Privately, however, Purnell exempted himself from this law, believing himself to be above it. One complainant against him in 1906 indicated that he exempted himself by making claims that, from our vantage-point, represent classic antinomian arguments:

...in his teachings and preachings, he represents he is the Son of Man, by that meaning he is the personal representative of God here on earth; that his body is cleansed, by that meaning he can do no wrong and that his body will never die, but that at a given time he, among the selected few amounting in all to one hundred and forty four thousand (144,000) shall live on forever. (Helen Kraft Deposition, March 9, 1906, in Fogarty, 1981, p. 74)

The promise of immortality, of living on forever, was a powerful inducement to many of his followers, which may help to explain why so many of them facilitated his sexual indulgences (in direct violation of his own “virgin law”) for decades (see, for example, Fogarty, 1981, pp. 117, 118).

Statements made by both another complainant and a member indicate that Purnell used additional biblical imagery to further justify his antinomianism, which always exempted him from the sexual prohibitions of both his followers and of society at large. In 1914, for example, two women charged that Purnell had forcibly violated them, and one of the women (whose alleged violations took place when she was about fifteen) stated in an affidavit,

Benjamin talked to us and told us he was just like Jesus and had the right to have intercourse with us girls. He took me into another room and there were two girls in another bed. I protested but he told me he could come to my room where other girls were and I have had intercourse with him and have seen him have intercourse with other girls many times in the same room. The fact is well known among the women of the colony. (Lena McFarlane Affidavit, July 30, 1914; in Fogarty, 1981, p. 95)

A member of the group (in 1914) explained his sexual behaviour by stating

He would quote scriptures and told us that the flaming sword spoken of in the scriptures held by the Angel as barring Adam and Eve had been taken away so far as he was concerned and he was purified and had the right to have intercourse with any girl in the colony. (Augusta Holliday Affidavit, July 30, 1914, in Fogarty, 1981, pp. 96–97)

He exercised that supposed right on a regular basis. As another member indicated, ““he was the son [*sic*] of Man and it was our duty to have sexual intercourse with him in order to be in the inner court—that every woman must be passed by the king”” (Edith Clark Affidavit, July 30, 1914, in Fogarty, 1981, p. 96).

Even a medical doctor during the period indicated, after having examined some girls from the House of David, ““that Benjamin had ‘been tampering with them’” (in Fogarty, 1981, p. 89). Reportedly, he had intercourse with some of the 20 girls whom he accompanied on a sailing trip in 1909, just as he did when he and others visited Chicago on a missionary trip (Fogarty, 1981, p. 85). In one instance, the group hid a daughter from her mother, and even moved her out of state, in an attempt “to prevent her from telling her mother about Purnell’s advances toward her” (Fogarty, 1981, p. 90).

To gain sexual access to girls when he was at his residence, he arranged the girls’ sleeping quarters so that they could enter his house without the rest of the group seeing their movements. In 1915 alone, he made these arrangements for 28 girls. Some of the girls with whom he had sex were quite young. One former member indicated that “he had relations with all women in the colony ‘over the age of twelve’” (Lena McFarlane Affidavit July 30, 1914, in Fogarty, 1981, p. 97). Likewise, during his 1927 trial, “Ruth Bamford and Estelle Mills testified that Purnell had forcibly raped them. Bamford was ten when the alleged rape took place, and one of his favorite women, Edith Meldrim, was in the room at the time” (Fogarty, 1981, p. 118). He controlled access to his bedroom by “the ingenious device of a secret

door...” (Fogarty, 1981, p. 100). Indeed, when authorities were looking for Purnell between 1923 and 1926, the fugitive seems to have remained hidden in his bedroom, still receiving a flow of young women (see Fogarty, 1981, pp. 112–115).

Alas, Purnell got away with his abuse. Slightly more than a month after the judge ordered Purnell and his bigamist wife (Mary) out of the colony at the end of the 1927 trial, but before this order took effect, he died (Fogarty, 1981, p. 120). The state was unable, therefore, to act on the charges of rape that were pending against him (Orrmont, 1961, p. 109).

### Swami Muktananda

Belief that a religious teacher’s (presumed) perfection places him or her “beyond good and evil” helps to explain why so many people knew about the heterosexual encounters committed by the late Swami Muktananda (d. 1982) yet did not speak up about them. An article in *Co-Evolution Quarterly* first brought the issue of Muktananda’s sexual behaviour to light, and at the same time raised additional issues involving intimidation of critics, guns, exploitation of devotees’ labour, and his organization’s secrecy around money. As the article’s author William Rodarmor stated succinctly,

In his teachings, Muktananda put a lot of emphasis on sex—most of it negative. Curbing the sex drive released the kundalini energy that led to enlightenment, he said. The swami himself claimed to be completely celibate. Members of the guru’s inner circle, however, say Muktananda regularly had sex with his female devotees. Michael Dinga, an Oakland contractor who was head of construction for the ashram and a trustee of the foundation, said the guru’s sexual exploits were common knowledge in the ashram. “It was supposed to be Muktananda’s big secret,” said Dinga, “but since many of the girls were in their early to middle teens, it was hard to keep it secret.” (Rodarmor, 1983, p. 105)

Indeed, “Muktananda’s big secret” had been blown in 1981, when a devotee (Swami Abhayananda/Stan Trout) wrote an open letter to him in which he referred to an incident in which the supposedly celibate master had taken a “teenage girl ... into your apartments, had asked her to disrobe, and had taken liberties with her on the pretext of examining her virginity” (Trout, 1981, p. 1). Perhaps referring to the same incident, Michael Dinga and his wife, Chandra, learned that the guru was molesting a 13-year-old girl, probably by “probing around in her” (C. Dinga, in Rodarmor, 1983, p. 107). Apparently, however, there were other victims who were about the same age (Trout, 1999, p. 4). In some instances, Muktananda used the excuse to the women that he was performing tantric sex with them, but other times he made no pretence at all (see Rodarmor, 1983, p. 105).

In an arrangement reminiscent of the sleeping quarters for the girls whom Benjamin Purnell abused in the House of David facility, Muktananda’s ashram “had a secret passageway from his house to the young girl’s dormitory.... Whoever he was carrying on with, he had switched to that dorm.’ The guru often visited while they were undressing” (in Rodarmor, 1983, p. 106). Although Muktananda never provided a public theology to rationalize the secret passageway and his actions in the young girls’ dorm, various assault victims and inner-circle members developed justifications in their own minds for what he did. When one woman found herself alone one night in his bedroom and he ordered her to disrobe, she complied, since, “over the years, I learned [that] you never say no to anything that he asked you to do ...” (in Rodarmor, 1983, p. 106). Others rationalized, “he wasn’t really penetrating his victims..., [o]r he wasn’t ejaculating—an important distinction to some, since retaining the semen is supposed to be a way of conserving the kundalini energy” (Rodarmor, 1983, pp. 106–107). But one former member identified the antinomian justification that many of his devotees used to explain away discrepancies between the swami’s words and deeds:

“For years we thought that every discrepancy was because he lived outside the laws of morality. He could

do anything he wanted. That in itself is the biggest danger of having a perfect master lead any kind of group—there’s no safeguard.” (Richard Grimes, in Rodarmor, 1983, p. 107)

While Muktananda’s actions suggest that he considered himself to have been “outside the laws of morality,” they also suggest that, at least for a while, many of his followers certainly considered that he was (Trout, 1983).

### **Sex as the Means to Salvation: Sex Magick and Erotic Rituals<sup>5</sup>**

In the examples I have discussed thus far, religion either facilitated or sanctified sexual contact between adults and children or adults and teens. Aspects of certain theologies, or pivotal leaders within theological traditions, seemed to allow (and at times require) intergenerational sexual contact. Neither the theologies nor the leaders, however, prescribed the details about what that sexual contact was to entail. Beyond granting permission for (usually male) adults to become sexually involved with children, these theologies or the religious leaders who followed them did not indicate exactly the kind(s) of sex that was(were) supposed to occur. In instances, however, when sex becomes the vehicle through which practitioners supposedly gain spiritual insight, then the exact form of adult/child sexual contact is spelled out.

One theological framework that occasionally has been very precise about prescribing adult/child sexual contact is *sex magick*—a general term to mean “the use of (usually intense) sexuality to burst through conventional morality in the quest for spiritual insight.” Various tantra-related Eastern traditions best exemplify this tradition (Shaw, 1994), but forms of sex magick also have appeared in the West, sometimes at the expense of children’s welfare. The most extensively documented instance of a religious leader using

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<sup>5</sup> I do not include a discussion of the crazy-wisdom tradition, only because I do not have documentation of child sexual abuse in this theological context. This method of supposedly religious instruction revolves around the completely unpredictable and disorienting directions and instruction of the religious leader. Because crazy wisdom involves the complete disempowerment of members at the mercy of the supposedly spiritual master, it would not be surprising if violations of children occur in many instances. Of the crazy-wisdom tradition, see Feuerstein, 1991.

claims about sex magick instruction to sanctify his pedophilia occurred early in the twentieth century around the Theosophical Society leader Charles Leadbeater (1847–1934).

### **Charles Leadbeater, Ralph Nicholas Chubb, and Aleister Crowley**

Leadbeater's practice of sex magick involved homosexual abuses, but this tradition is by no means limited to homoerotic activities.

Leadbeater was a major figure in the Theosophical Society, and after his death,

[t]he legacy left behind him included a large quantity of books, pamphlets and journal articles, several organizations which regarded him as a virtually infallible psychic and agent of the Inner Government of the World, enthusiastic disciples in almost every country, and enemies still eager to denounce him throughout the world. (Tillett, 1982, p. 256)

Many of those enemies harboured anger over his sexual activities with young males, and they had good reason to be upset. In a word, Leadbeater was a *pederast*, and he used the Theosophical Society to gain access to boys so that he could engage them in various forms of sex magick (see Washington, 1995, p. 121).

Remarkable, perhaps, about Leadbeater's pederasty was that he was able to sanctify it under the guise of spiritual training. Apparently, Leadbeater taught a sexual technique to an inner circle of initiates who claimed that

the energy aroused in masturbation can be used as a form of occult power, a great release of energy which can, first, elevate the consciousness of the individual to a state of ecstasy, and second, direct a great rush of psychic force towards the Logos for His use in occult work. (Tillett, 1982, p. 281; see Lutyens, 1990, p. 6; 1997, pp. 15, 16)

Leadbeater reserved this highly secret teaching to select disciples, who were instructed that they were justified in lying about it to the uninitiated because of its highly occult importance (Tillett, 1982, pp. 281–282). On rare occasions, the

inner circle of initiated students even engaged in mutual masturbation, which, Leadbeater claimed, sent out “especially powerful emanations” (Tillett, 1982, p. 282).

By insisting that masturbation had a highly occult and hidden significance, Leadbeater was able to connect with two currents of ideas that circulated at the turn of the century. First, a number of poets in that period advocated “boy love,” and one of them by the name of Ralph Nicholas Chubb (1892–1960) “endeavoured ‘to raise paederasty to a form of religious devotion’” (in Tillett, 1982, p. 283; Smith, 1987, pp. 75–88). Chubb demonstrated a pattern in his poems and artwork that Leadbeater utilized in his theology. Chubb's “spiritualization of paederasty absolve[d] him from the guilt which ma[de] him hate society and turn into a recluse. His [was] no longer a common human weakness, for he ha[d] felt the cleansing fire of divinity” (Smith, 1987, p. 85; see Tillett, 1982, p. 283). Religion, therefore, became a tool that Chubb used to sanctify his deviance, and Leadbeater and others used similar theological claims to justify behaviour that was unacceptable to the norms of society.

The second current of thought into which Leadbeater's pederasty fit involved some occult and magical circles that directly “employed sexual activities in a ritual context” (Tillett, 1982, p. 283). This sex magick tradition argued that humans' hidden powers lay beneath a barrier that could be broken through by heterosexual, homosexual, or autosexual stimulation (Tillett, 1982, pp. 283–284). During a period that overlapped with Leadbeater, similar beliefs about the power of sex drove the practises of the polygamist, misogynist, and (if one believes his critics) Satanist Aleister Crowley, whose influence in Western occultism remains strong. For Crowley, sex of any kind held the possibility of breaking into the instinctual, and evidence exists that, in 1923, he repeatedly had sex with a “youth who had become his servant and a partner in sex magic[k] activities” (King, 1977, p. 146; see Kent, 1993, pp. 357–358).

## Work of Great Mercy—the Mariavites

In a very different theological tradition—schismatic Catholicism—a set of rituals emerged during the early twentieth century in an excommunicated Polish group that bore similarities to the sex magick tradition. This group, called the Work of Great Mercy, or simply the Mariavites, venerated a nun (Mother Kozłowska) whose most devout follower, Father Kowalski, elevated her to the level of sainthood even before her death in 1921 (Peterkiewicz, 1975, p. 55). The Catholic Church excommunicated the Mariavite order in 1906, but by 1923 the Mariavite order had

67 parishes (and a number of affiliations), 77 churches, 15 chapels in private homes, 44 cloisters for women, 25 primary schools, 1 secondary school..., 4 boarding schools for orphans, 45 kindergartens, 13 homes for old people and invalids, 4 medical units, 10 kitchens for the poor, 32 workshops, 7 bakeries, 3 savings-and-loan associations, 3 fire brigades, 22 farms, [and] 25 vegetable fruit gardens. (Peterkiewicz, 1975, p. 56)

Among the 42,000 adherents to the group in 1923 were three bishops, 30 priests, 244 convent sisters, and 57 convent brothers (Peterkiewicz, 1975, p. 56). Under the leadership of Kowalski (who had become the Mariavite archbishop), however, a number of innovative rituals and practices emerged involving sex that led to his conviction on sexual abuse charges.

A mother complained to authorities about Kowalski “depraving her daughter,” and the resulting investigation led to charges against him under a penal-code section that criminalized sexual acts with “children under fourteen, or between fourteen and sixteen, or with persons over sixteen if they were raped, or forced in any way to have intercourse with the accused” (Peterkiewicz, 1975, pp. 101, 102–103). At the conclusion of the trial, “[h]e was found guilty of sexual offences against girls under age ... and other women at the Mariavite cloister” (Peterkiewicz, 1975, p. 113). The verdict mentioned five girls by name, one of whom was 7 years old (Peterkiewicz, 1975, p. 103 no. 1).

Several of Kowalski’s sexually ritualized practices led to this conviction, including his polygamy (he had at least six wives—all nuns in the order [Peterkiewicz, 1975, pp. 59, 100]) and his “right” to have first sexual access to the wives of Mariavite priests, ostensibly so that those priests could be united with God because of their wives’ contact with him (Peterkiewicz, 1975, pp. 103, 108). Most important, however, was Kowalski’s development of a secret ritual that, he claimed, joined the upper-level initiates with Christ.

The first initiation involved Kowalski giving the women a “deep kiss” (i.e., inserting his tongue into their mouths)—an act that he apparently did forcefully in a number of instances (Peterkiewicz, 1975, pp. 103, 104, 105, 106). Women who successfully passed through the first initiation next exposed their left breasts to him, which he fondled. The third initiation “meant a full sexual union in a kneeling position” (Peterkiewicz, 1975, p. 104). After this third initiation, some women became part of an erotic liturgy that provided them

with a clear framework as well as with ecstatic stimuli. The sequence of such a ritual would follow that of the Mass, culminating in consecration and communion. The sofa-bed on which the [“sainted” nun who inspired the organization] died would serve as a kind of bed-altar. The sexual organs would act as the instruments of dual energy, charging the flesh with the manifestation of the spirit. The priest’s phallus would have a consecrating power and the female organ, like the chalice, would receive it during communion.... The participants were probably very serious about their gestures and acts, especially if they venerated Kowalski’s presence in the sacrament as was alleged by some witnesses. (Peterkiewicz, 1975, pp. 116–117)

In an account by a female who claimed to have been “admitted to the highest rank of ‘understanding’ within the secret inner circle” (Peterkiewicz, 1975, p. 116), one of Kowalski’s wives actively encouraged a young girl “to

submit to his wishes” (p. 116; see p. 106). Even after Kowalski’s conviction, many of the Mariavites remained completely loyal to him.

### **George Feigley and the Neo-American Church**

A contemporary example of child sexual abuse occurring within a sex magick context involves the Neo-American Church, which seems to have been active in the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania area for at least two decades. Founded in 1971 by George Feigley, the Neo-American Church was based upon sexuality. According to an affidavit from the early 1990s, the group believed “in a wide variety of heterosexual and homosexual practices and masturbation. ‘It is their belief that you are closer to God when experiencing sexual climax and that you should initiate children into sexual gratification’” (Affidavit, in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1994). In late 1994, while serving time in state prison for sexually abusing three minors who were members of his group in 1975, Feigley received another conviction “for conspiracy to commit involuntary deviate sexual intercourse,” which had involved using the prison telephone to give “commands to his wife and another man on work release to have sex with a 14-year-old girl” (Goldwert & Whitcraft, 2008, para. 7–8). Apparently the girl was in training to become a high priestess in the group (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1994), and (roughly paralleling other cases) her mother was a group member who apparently was complicitous around her daughter’s phone-sex incident. After serving his 33-year prison sentence, Feigley (at 68 years of age) returned to Harrisburg in 2008, amidst community protests over his unmonitored living arrangements (Goldwert & Whitcraft, 2008).

### **Kenneth James McMurray and Deviant Wicca**

In the case of the Neo-American Church, we do not know the extent to which minors who had been involved in sexual activities may have thought that they were spiritually advancing through their activities. Constructing a theology, however, which makes such claims helps to explain some level of involvement on the part of many youthful targets. Such a theological construction occurred in the case of

Kenneth James McMurray, 28, who (in Guelph, Ontario, Canada) pleaded guilty to five counts of sexual assault in mid-September, 1999. Two years earlier, McMurray formed what he claimed was a Wiccan group that involved three stages of rituals which, when performed, would better people’s spiritual condition. These rituals were what McMurray called “the Mandatory Requirements” (or simply “M R”), and he tested the members on each. The first stage involved masturbation; the second stage involved oral sex; and the third stage involved anal intercourse. Although it seems that McMurray’s group never grew above a half-dozen teens, the youngest male was 14 when he joined. In a bizarre twist, an additional motivation McMurray gave to his small flock was that they were going to help abused teens, so they would be better able to relate to them if they themselves experienced similar sexual acts (Tracey & Kirsch, 1999).

The McMurray case and others provide examples of how pedophiles and/or ephebophiles can concoct religiously based theologies as means both to draw victims into their influence and provide explanations of their behaviour to their young prey. In these instances, young girls or boys become convinced that sex with adults leads to a higher, spiritual purpose. Adults spin the tales, and young people get enmeshed by them. Religion can play a prominent role in these seductions, as occurred in a peculiar case in Los Angeles in 1995.

### **Barry A. Briskman and Religion From Outer Space**

In this instance, a pedophile named Barry A. Briskman (59), received a 20-year sentence for molesting two 13-year-old girls, which was in addition to a 10-year sentence he was serving in Nevada for using the same religious scam on a 12-year-old runaway. He targeted girls from broken homes, so he fed on their likely need for attention and low self-esteem. In the religious tale that he wove,

Briskman claimed to be an alien from the planet Cablell [*sic*], recruiting a “team” of girls with superior beauty and intelligence for a female-dominated

utopian society led by a Queen Hiteria, who was based atop the Tropicana hotel in Las Vegas. But, first, he told the victims, they had to double their IQs and break down the “sub-cons,” or subconscious intelligence barriers. “It began with strip poker to break down our sub-cons,” one victim recalled. Later, she said, they had intercourse so that he could inject the Earth girls with “IRFs,” immunities to ward off space diseases. After each encounter, Briskman convincingly dialed “Andy,” the Cablellian computer model Andrak 4000. The computer issued readouts of the girls’ sub-con and IRF levels. Once they had acquired 100 IRFs, Biskman told them, they would be ready for space travel. (O’Neill, 1995, para. 4–7)

At first one might be incredulous that anyone, even young teens, could fall for such a fantasy, but it becomes easier to understand when one hears part of the victim-impact statement that one of the girls gave: “I never had a father in my life. I trusted him as a father figure, and he betrayed that trust” (O’Neill, 1995, para. 16). The themes of violated trust appear in many accounts of pedophilia abuse, but such abuses that take place in religious contexts make it especially difficult for victims to see assaults for what they are.

### **Sex as Salvation**

Somewhat similar to sex magick theologies is a theological position that sufficiently elevates sex so that it becomes the equivalent of salvation itself. Nothing is valued so greatly; everything is valued in relation to it. For practitioners of this alleged form of salvation, sex is not the means through which to obtain cosmic awareness; it is that awareness itself. Quantity—the amount of sex that a believer has—may become as important as, or even more important than, quality. Marriages, and even age, may be impediments in the quest for salvational sex as practitioners claim a responsibility to initiate young and old alike in the reputed inspiration that sex brings. The highly sexualized theology developed by the Children of God’s founder David Berg best

epitomizes this orientation toward salvation. Berg’s descriptions, for example, concerning the erotic nature of heaven place his theology firmly within the tradition of sex itself, assuming a salvational role for adherents. In, for example, a speculative piece that Berg wrote about to his disciples about his own death, he described having sex with a young woman who had died some years earlier. He then informed his followers that

I HAD KNOWN THAT THERE WOULD BE SEX IN HEAVEN, but I had never dreamed that it was going to be as wonderful as this, as thrilling & exciting & rapturous & continuous!—No exhaustion, no tiring, no surfeiting, no impotence, no failures, no dissatisfactions! All was pure joy & love & endless fulfilment, hallelujah! Thank You, Jesus! Praise the Lord! ([Berg], 1985, pp. 198, 233 [capitals in original])

In comparison, another alternative religious example comes to mind that had more or less deified sex itself—the Community Chapel and Bible Training Center in the American Northwest.

### **Community Chapel and Bible Training Center**

An eroticized, religious environment that seemed to foster instances of child or teen sexual abuse apparently as a form of salvation existed in the Community Chapel and Bible Training Center in Washington state during the 1980s. The group emerged out of Bible-study classes that Donald Barnett began in 1967, which he soon incorporated into a church on November 2nd of that year (Overland, 1988b, p. A7). Barnett taught that the world was about to end, but that members of his Community Chapel church were going to be “the bride of Christ” whose mission in those final days was to win the world for Jesus (Overland, 1988b, p. A7). Consequently, he placed great emphasis on members “purifying themselves.” By the 1970s, Barnett taught that God helped members purify themselves by providing “movements” of various sorts—which included falling down under the “power of the Holy Spirit” and

supposedly casting out demons that had taken over people (Overland, 1988a, p. A6). In 1983, a new “movement of God” that Barnett introduced was spiritual dancing, which initially involved people dancing by themselves to music played in the church, but evolved into dancing and other physical contacts (“spiritual connections”) usually with members of the opposite sex who were not one’s spouses (Overland, 1988a, p. A6). These physical contacts took place as people stared into the eyes of their spiritual connections in order to reputedly experience Jesus. These activities led (in many cases) to sexual encounters that strained, and broke up, marriages, with as many as 80 couples getting divorced (Overland, 1988a; 1988b). Parents spent increasingly long amounts of time with their spiritual connections at the expense of their spouses and kids, and many of the children showed signs of stress (Overland, 1988c, p. A1).

The children were stressed not only because they saw what was going on with their parents, but also because some of them were getting drawn into the “spiritual connections” activities. Children spent endless, unsupervised hours at the church as their parents danced, stared at, and caressed their reputedly spiritual partners. One former member recalled, “...until closing time was enforced..., it was not uncommon to see children at the church until 4 or 5 a.m., curled up asleep in a pew or playing outside in the dark on the back lawn” (Rothschild, 1988, p. A4). If, however, the children stayed for the services, adults pressured them to join in the dancing (p. A4). Even at the Community Chapel school in 1985, the teachers encouraged the children to dance with one another and with them. As one of the former teachers reported, “...[i]n daily dance sessions during school hours, ‘the children were told to mimic their parents, to find someone they were attracted to and to dance with each other. Even down into the kindergarten, these little children were said to have connections’” (in Rothschild, 1988, p. A4). Some adults became attracted to the children, and some “spiritual connections” grew between them (including with teachers and married partners). Other “connections” formed between child-partners themselves (Overland, 1988c, p.

A4; Rothschild, 1988, p. A4). Apparently, information about these activities involving children reached Child Protective Services, since at least one of its staff met with Community Chapel officials in 1986 “to discuss the connection philosophy and spell out guidelines for reporting child abuse.” Law enforcement authorities who also attended the meeting “made it clear [that] it was unacceptable for adults to French kiss children, a practice that had been condoned” by the church (p. A4). Before Barnett’s influence waned, however, two church members were convicted of child abuse and three Community Chapel officials were convicted for failing to report suspected child abuse to authorities (Simon, 1988, p. A22).

### **Levelling All Forms of Sex As Equally Fallen**

In this scenario, leaders or followers or both value asceticism, and scorn or condemn all forms of sex as evil, fallen, or signs of spiritual weakness. Sex in whatever form is a perversion of purity, so sex with children is no worse than sex with a consenting adult or marriage partner. All forms of it involve one giving into one’s supposedly base desires with no concessions about or understanding of normal human development. An extreme example of a group holding such destructive views of human sexuality would be the Russian Skoptsy, whose name meant “the castrated ones” or “self-castrators” (Engelstein, 1999, p. 2). This group appeared in the closing decades of the 1700s and survived until its destruction during Stalin’s reign of terror. Although the Skoptsy practiced literal bodily removals of sexual areas, the denial and condemnation of the erotic parts of the body took a psychological form in the beliefs of the Krishna splinter group leader, Keith Ham/Swami Bhaktipada (1937–2011).

### **Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada**

In contrast to the Children of God’s veneration of sex, the Hare Krishnas saw sex only as a means for procreation, which in turn would bring children into Krishna consciousness (see Daner, 1976, p. 61). Devotees had to be married to other devotees before they were allowed to have sex, and then they were restricted to once a month on days best suited for conception. Prior

to the act itself, couples had to chant 50 rounds on their prayer beads (Daner, 1976, p. 57). The Krishna movement's ideal figure was a man who, toward the end of his life, renounces sex and becomes a celibate swami or *sannyasi* (renunciant). Only people who were devotees in the organization were allowed to be married, and in an attempt to ensure that men did not seek sex outside of marriage, the Krishna community in New Vrindaban, West Virginia allowed girls during the 1970s to marry when they were as young as 13 years old (Rochford with Heinlein, 1998, p. 25; St. John, 1988, p. 3). Amidst a theology that was deeply patriarchal, male celibacy remained the behaviour that Krishna theology held as the most godly.

Repeated problems occurred, therefore, when Krishna devotees failed to live up to the theological ideal (not to mention the concession to marriage). The manner in which at least one prominent (and eventually expelled) Krishna leader responded to information about alleged sexual failings by some members reveals how a theology that denigrates sex even between consenting adults can become one that is unable to identify degrees of sexual impropriety.

The guru in question, Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, oversaw what at the time was the jewel of the North American Krishna movement—the community of New Vrindhaban. Here the movement was building its palatial monuments to Krishna, but a series of murders, assaults, and fraud investigations suggested that serious problems existed among both community members and leaders. When one mother (Susan Hebel) learned from her 13-year-old son that a schoolteacher had molested him and others, she stormed into Kirtanananda's office and relayed the information to him. A critical book on the Krishnas reconstructed the conversation as follows, beginning with the distraught mother's angry lament:

'I feel so betrayed... All these years, I've given up my children. I sent them to the [school] when they turned five, trusting that they would be loved and taken care of and would become devotees. I never imagined that anyone would molest them.'

'You stupid woman,' Kirtanananda interrupted. 'You don't have any right to say that. Sex is sex. How much sex have *you* had?'

'Kirtanananda, you can't equate sex between a husband and wife and teachers molesting defenseless little boys,' Susan said.

'Sex is sex,' Kirtanananda said once again. Besides, [the teacher] has rectified himself. He got married.' (in Hubner & Gruson, 1988, p. 344; also see Hubner, 1987, p. 11; St. John, 1988, p. 3)

It appears, therefore, that Kirtanananda held an indiscriminate view that all sex was equally fallen, so that any sex was a sign of spiritual weakness. Moreover, he seems to have assumed that the impulses behind homosexual pedophilia would be met within the confines of a constricted, heterosexual Krishna marriage. For her part, Hebel and her husband were so unsatisfied with Kirtanananda's response to their son's plight that they complained to civil authorities. The resulting investigation led to the guilty plea of the assistant schoolmaster (Fredrick Di Francisco) to third-degree sexual assault of the boy when the victim was between 7 and 12 years old (Fitzgerald, 1988). The case stands as just one of many child sexual-abuse convictions of adults in or associated with the Krishna movement and its offshoots. Worth mentioning, too, is the fact that a former member testified in a 1991 case (involving racketeering and fraud charges against Bhaktipada) that the guru had fondled him (when he was around sixteen) four times in 1986 (Formanek, 1991, p. 1).

### **Conclusion: The Implication of Child Sexual Abuse in Alternative Religions**

Documenting the variety and depth of child sexual abuse in alternative religions is important for a number of reasons, not the least of which is because very little of this information has entered the wider discussion among academics and policy makers concerning child sexual abuse in general. A review, for example, of articles in the respected journal, *Child Abuse and Neglect*

from 1990 to 2012 (volumes 14 to 36) failed to find a single article about child abuse of any kind in alternative religions or cults. A 1993 article about female sexual abusers insisted on the importance of examining the phenomenon *outside* of the contexts of cults and incestuous families, but it did not provide any references to analyses of female abusers within cults themselves (Young, 1993, pp. 103, 109, 111). Anson Shupe mentioned one of the ministers that I discuss, Wilbert Thomas, Sr., in three of his books on ministerial malfeasance (1995, p. 64; 2007, p. 36; 2008, pp. 23–24); but he did not discuss the underlying religious patriarchy that he and others used to justify his actions. One useful perspective from existing child sexual-abuse literature that holds great promise for the study of such violations within cults is the examination of the abusing groups themselves as subcultures with vulnerabilities to abuse and coping mechanisms to prevent it (see Fontes [Ed.], 1995). Two authors, Catherine Taylor and Lisa Aronson Fontes, already have applied this perspective to an examination of child sexual abuse within Seventh Day Adventism (Taylor & Fontes, 1995); but researchers could adopt the same perspective to other nonmainstream religions.

When we consider cult sexual-abuse stories collectively, they reveal complex worlds of deceit and exploitation perpetrated under the justification of various transcendent themes. These themes, many of which I identify in this article, deserve inclusion in the wider analyses of the motivations and justifications that abusers use to excuse their actions. Existing scholarship, for example, about the “explanatory statements” that perpetrators use as “an excuse syntax” for their violations involves five options, while this article would expand that number. Research by Nathan Pollock and Judith Hashmall reported that the excuses 86 child molesters gave clustered around five assertions:

- (1) denial of fact, ‘Nothing happened’;
- (2) denial of responsibility, ‘Something happened but it wasn’t my idea’;
- (3) denial of sexual intent, ‘Something happened and it was my idea, but it wasn’t sexual’;
- (4) denial of wrongfulness, ‘Something happened and

it was sexual but it wasn’t wrong’; and (5) denial of self-determination, ‘Something happened and it was my idea and it was sexual and it was wrong but there were extenuating factors.’ (Pollock & Hashmall, 1991, p. 57)

Noteworthy about these five excuses is that they bear some similarity to well-established research in the sociology of deviance concerning five common “neutralization” claims that deviants use to justify their actions. These frequently used claims involve a) the denial of responsibility; b) the denial of injury; c) the denial of the victim; d) the condemnation of the condemners; and e) the appeal to higher loyalties (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Without going through a detailed comparative analysis of the two lists, noteworthy for purposes here is that none of the perpetrators whom Pollock and Hashmall interviewed appeared to have used religious justifications—what Sykes and Matza likely would have called appeals to higher loyalties—for their actions. Pollock and Hashmall provided a diagram that linked together the excuse justifications that they heard (Pollock & Hashmall, 1991, p. 57), and I offer something similar in the following diagram to show the alternatives for those using the religious justifications that I identified. Asking religiously based perpetrators the designated question yields the potential suggested alternatives:

“WHY DID YOU SEXUALLY ASSAULT THE VICTIM?”

Because

|  
|  
*Patriarchalism* includes God’s granting sexual domination over women

|  
both

/ \  
/ \  
/ \  
young and age appropriate

/ \  
/ \  
/ \  
*incest* ←→ *polygamy*

\ /  
because

/ \  
/ \  
/ \  
*millenarianism* or *antinomianism* allows us to do anything  
either compels us or /  
obligates us to “love” /  
differently /

\ /  
either because

/ \  
/ \  
*sex is the means* or *sex is salvation*  
*to salvation* /

\ /  
or

|  
|  
*all sex is equally fallen*

At core, however, are the child violations, which religious assertions and beliefs never can justify.

By no means is the approach that I take in this article, which is an examination of the religious justifications that perpetrators use to sanctify their deviance, sufficient for understanding abuse in closed, cultic environments.

Researchers must combine it with an examination of the social structural realities in which cults and their leaders apply these rationales and excuses. Outlining these social structural realities that facilitate cultic child sexual abuse remains a future project.

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