THE 2007 CHARLES STRONG LECTURE

YODA GOES TO THE VATICAN:
YOUTH SPIRITUALITY AND POPULAR CULTURE

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Popular Culture can no longer be exclusively seen as a source of escapism. It can amuse, entertain, instruct, and relax people, but what if it provides inspiration for religion? The Church of All Worlds, the Church of Satan and Jediism from the Star Wars series are but three examples of new religious groups that have been greatly inspired by popular culture to (re)create a religious message. These are hyper-real religions, that is a simulacrum of a religion partly created out of popular culture which provides inspiration for believers/consumers. These postmodern expressions of religion are likely to be consumed and individualised, and thus have more relevance to the self than to a community and/or congregation. On the other hand, religious fundamentalist groups tend, at times, to resist this synergy between popular culture and religion, and at other times, re-appropriate popular culture to promote their own religion. Although this phenomenon has existed since at least the 1960s, this lecture will discuss the changes that the Internet, with its participatory culture, has brought to hyper-real religions.
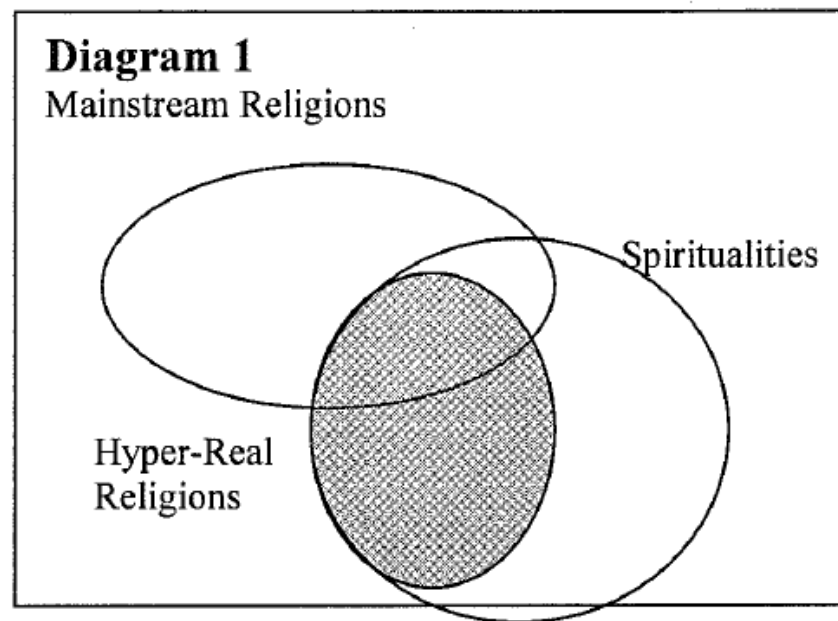
HYPER-REAL RELIGIONS

In Possamai (2005), I described a 21st century style of spirituality for baby boomers, and generations X and Y. Sociologists of religion have recognised the contemporary collage[1] approach of many religious consumers of the 20th century: this approach combines religious/philosophical traditions; e.g. Catholicism with astrology, nature religion with Buddhism, and tarot card readings with Protestantism (Possamai, 2003). However, a new trend which is finally detectable by our tools of social measurement is what I have called hyper-real religions; that is, religions and spirituality that mix elements from religious traditions with popular culture. At a metaphorical level, these social actors are inspired by popular culture to express their spiritualities. At one end of the spectrum we can find groups such as Jediism from the Star Wars movies, Matrixism from the Matrix trilogy, and neo-pagan groups using stories from the *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. At the other end of the spectrum,

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[1] A free-floating, crazy-quilt, collage, hodgepodge patchwork of ideas or views. It includes elements of opposites such as old and new. It defies regularity, logic, or symmetry; it glories in contradiction and confusion.

we see members from mainstream religions, such as Christians, being influenced or inspired by, for example, the *Da Vinci Code* as described in Diagram 1, which illustrates the interest that some people from mainstream religions and spiritualities could have in the hyper-real religious phenomenon.

Diagram 1
Mainstream Religions

Spiritualities

Hyper-Real
Religions

These hyper-real religions are a simulacrum[2] of a religion partly created out of popular culture which provides inspiration for believers/consumers. These contemporary expressions of religion are likely to be consumed and individualised, and thus have more relevance to the self than to a community and/or congregation. For example, Jediism is a hyper-real religion created out of the Star Wars series. In 2001, close to 71,000 people in Australia claimed to be part of this new religion (AAP, 2002). Many of them recorded this for fun, however, it has been estimated that 5,000 individuals were serious about this (Agence France-Presses, 2002). Furthermore, approximately 53,000 people in New Zealand and close to 400,000 in the UK identified themselves as belonging to this hyper-real religion; but no figures are available on the 'real' believers/practitioners. Further evidence of hyper-real religion is found when surfing the internet, and various chat rooms and forums. A plethora of religious activities based on the Star Wars mythos indicate that there is more to this phenomenon than just the census. For example, the introduction to the 'Jedi Knight Movement' discussion list states[3]:

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2 As inspired by the work of Jean Baudrillard (1994).

3 http://groups.yahoo.com/groups/Jedi_Knight_Movement/ (25/10/2002).

The Way of Jedi transcends the science fiction series of *Star Wars*. It encompasses many of the same truths and realizations of the major world religions, including Zen Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Catholicism, and Shinto and is both a healing art and a meditative journey that the aspirant can take to improve every aspect of their life.

One of the messages from the same 'Jedi Knight Movement' discussion list states about 'Jediknightism':

Life on planet earth has become much more complex - the churches, although meaning well, many times fall short of the mark of addressing the complexities. The political arena many times disappoint us and fall short of inspiring either ourselves or others to action.

We can read from this statement that the people who embrace this religion are critical of mainstream religions and of political movements. Left without these grand narratives, as presented on the site, they are left with another type of narrative:

Storytelling is an age-old tradition that has followed mankind for millennia - and has been used effectively for transferring ideals, from philosophers to prophets. It is an ideal medium to both entertain and enlighten simultaneously, which is why it is so powerful and its effects so profound when used expertly.

From a glance on this site, it becomes clear that it entails a desire by interested people to develop their spiritual potential outside of mainstream religions, that they are critical of governments and that they can do this in an entertaining fashion.

On 'Jediism: the Jedi Religion'[4], an Internet site dedicated to presenting Jediism as a religion, we can find that this specific view of the *Star Wars* mythos does not base its focus on the myth and fiction as written by the movie director George Lucas, but upon the 'real life' examples of Jediism. As explained:

Jediism is not the same as that which is portrayed within the Star Wars Saga by George Lucas and Lucasfilm LTD. George Lucas' Jedi are fictional characters that exist within a literary and cinematic universe. The Jedi discussed within this website refer to factual people within this world that live or lived their lives according to Jediism, of which we recognize and work together as a community to both cultivate and celebrate. … The history of the path of Jediism traverses through which is well over 5,000 years old. It shares many themes embraced in Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, Stoicism, Catholicism, Taoism, Shinto, Modern Mysticism, the Way of the Shaolin Monks, the Knight's Code of Chivalry and the Samurai warriors. We recognize that many times the answer to mankind's problems comes from within the purified hearts of genuine seekers of truth. Theology, philosophy and religious doctrine can facilitate this process, but we believe that it would

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4 htpp://www.jediism.bigstep.com/ (7/03/03).

be a futile exercise for any belief system to claim to hold all the answers to all the serious questions posed to seekers of truth in the 21st century. Jediism may help facilitate this process, yet we also acknowledge that it is up to the true believer who applies the universal truths inherent with Jediism to find the answers they seek.

The site then lists different resources on meditation for Jediism such as the Force, the Temple Jedi, and the 7 steps guide - which are seven steps towards effective prayer.

It is worth mentioning that Jediism is not a fan community discussing issues from the *Star Wars* movies, but is a global spiritual movement expressing itself via the Internet[5]. There is reference in these chat rooms of a Jedi Temple which represents a cyber place where people can learn about this new spirituality. Although it is present in cyberspace, there were records on some old forums (closed in Oct/Nov 2003 due to hosting problems) of an attempt to raise money to establish such a building in the UK and US. Membership is small for a religion, but significant for a chat room (287 people were registered on the lists on the 18th of January 2004) however, not everyone contributed to a 'serious' discussion on Jedi rituals. On the previous discussion boards, a hierarchy of Jedi ranks could be achieved by members by training in various online courses. A member could progress from a trainee (a person simply required to participate in discussions) to a Jedi Knight (a fully fledged member) , all the way up to High Councillor (a high rank authority recognised by the leaders of the Jedi community). This arrangement was not included as part of the new lists as it was believed that such 'other' progression distracted members from their 'inner' development.

In this case, believers/consumers re-invent old religions such as shamanism, Buddhism, Taoism and even Catholicism to validate the Jedi Religion; which is basically a mixture of old religions remixed with popular culture.

Another spirituality which has popular culture central to its belief system is Matrixism. This hyper-real religion is based on the motion picture trilogy *The Matrix* and is claimed to have a history that goes back nearly one hundred years. Through an exchange of e-mails with the acting secretary of the group, I was told that Matrixism started at the end of July 2004, went off-line for most of 2005 due to what I have been told were threats, and is now back on line at http:/www.geocities.com/matrixism2069.

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5 However, one might wonder if being involved in Jediism is a move forward from belonging to a Star Wars fan community.

Surfing their site, one can discover a link with the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies and the influence on Matrixism from Huxley's *Doors of Perception*. Parallels with the Baha'i Faith are also employed to validate the religious aspect of the trilogy.

These religions based on popular culture is not yet identified in Australian Government data; it is lumped in the 'Inadequately described Religions' ABS category. This category represented 0.31% (around 54,000 people) in the 1996 census, and increased with a growth rate of 551.9% in 2001 to represent 1.88% of the population (around 352,000 which is similar to the number of Buddhists in Australia). With the current growth of spirituality in Australia (Bouma, 2006), and the recent success of The Matrix movies – which has lead to the new religion of Matrixism - I am expecting this figure to rise considerably with the 2006 census. It is important to note that this statistical account is under-representative of this hyper-real religious phenomenon as it can also be extended to, for example, some neo-pagan groups (e.g. some influence of the *Lord of the Rings*) and to believers from mainstream religions (e.g. Catholics being inspired by the *Da Vinci Code*); thus making this phenomenon far from restricted to a specific sub-cultural group or specific generation.

For the purpose of this lecture, I have been able to theorise four ideal-types of hyper-real religious actors that are positioned in regard to the hyper-real phenomenon in Diagram 2. The numbers in this diagram reflect the ideal-positioning of these actors across mainstream religions, hyper-real religions and spiritualities. These ideal-types hyper-real actors are:

Diagram 2

Mainstream Religious Actors

Spiritual Actors

4

3   2

Secular
Actors

4   Hyper-Real
Religious Actors

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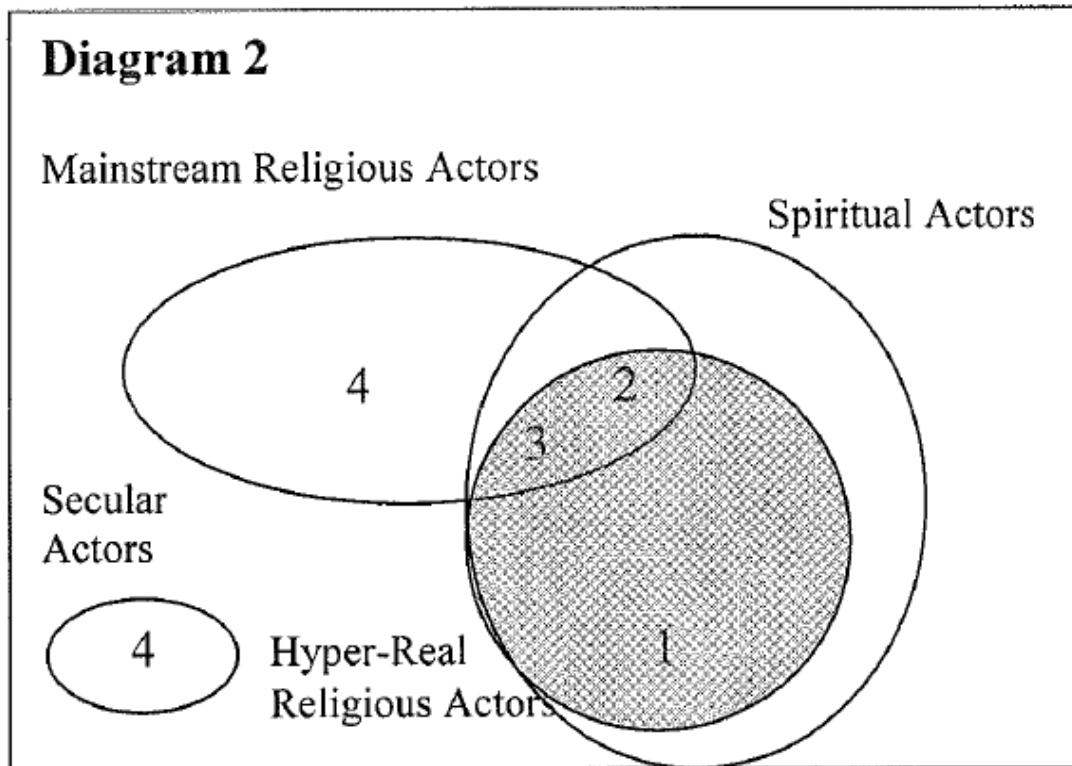
1. *Active consumers of popular culture leading to the practice of hyper-real religions.*

As seen above, some individuals actively consume popular culture to create new types of spiritualities (e.g. Jediism and Matrixism) or to enrich existing spiritualities (e.g. neo-paganism). For example, The Church of All Worlds is a neo-pagan group founded in Missouri by Oberon Zell in 1962 and moved to Ukiah, California, in 1967. It was formed in Australia in 1992 by Fiona and Anthorr Nomchong and became the first recognised Goddess and Earth Worshiping religion within this country. This group bases its teaching in part on Robert Heinlein's Science-Fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* which narrates the story of Valentine Michael Smith - a Martian living on earth with god-like powers who taught humankind how to love. The group is not limited to the reading of this novel and even extends its consumption to the *Star Trek* mythos; as one of their members states:

> This whole period (late 1960s) fell under the shadow of the Damoclean Sword of impending nuclear holocaust, and a dominant Christian culture that fully embraced an apocalyptic mythos. For many of us, a powerful antidote to that mythos was found in science fiction, and particularly Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek*, with its Vulcan IDIC: 'Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations'.

CAW [Church of All Worlds] and Green Egg avidly embraced this vision of, as Roddenberry said, 'a future everyone will want to be part of'.[6]

As part of the consumption of Science-Fiction narratives by specific groups, one should not forget the Heaven's Gate group that committed a mass suicide in San Diego in 1997. Its members believed that a UFO was travelling behind the Hale-Bop comet and that by leaving their physical bodies behind, they would reach the extraterrestrial realm. They also watched the *X-Files* and *Star Trek* almost religiously and took fiction seriously. Indeed, as one member expressed a week before the infamous event:

> We watch a lot of *Star Trek*, a lot of *Star Wars*, it's just, to us, it's just like going on a holodeck. We've been training on a holodeck … [and] now it's time to stop. The game's over. It's time to put into practice what we've learned. We take off the virtual reality helmet… go back out of the holodeck to reality to be with, you know, the other members on the craft in the heavens (quoted by Robinson 1997).[7]

Horror stories can also provide a reservoir of cultural content to be religiously consumed. In 1966, in San Francisco, Anton LaVey founded the Church of Satan as a medium for the study of the Black Arts. His assumption of the inherent selfishness and violence of human beings is at the base of its non-Christian teaching. Satan is mistaken to be a long time opponent of God, according to La Vey, and is rather a hidden force in nature that can be tapped into. In *The Satanic Rituals* - which is used by some as a basis for metaphysical growth, LaVey (1972) refers to the metaphysics of H.P. Lovecraft, the writer of weird fiction who wrote most of his tales during the 1920s and 1930s. H.P. Lovecraft developed a pantheon of gods, called the Ancient Ones - e.g. Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth and Nyarlathotep, who are waiting in secrecy before coming back to earth to conquer the human race. In "The Nameless City" (1921), Lovecraft introduced the mad Abdul Alhazred, who had penned the ancient tome *The Necronomicon*. This book claimed to reveal all secrets of the world, especially those of the Ancient Ones. It became a standard prop in all later stories, and many readers believed it actually existed. Lovecraft always claimed that his stories were fictional and that he was a total agnostic. However, LaVey (1972), believing that

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6 http://www.greenegg.org/issues/123/oberonedit123.html (05/01/00).

7 As Robinson (1997) comments, these members have envisioned death as the ultimate Trekkie trip to the final frontier.

'fantasy plays an important part in any religious curriculum', developed some rituals for his Church of Satan based on this fictional mythology. The following is a ceremony extract:

> N'kgnath ki'q Az-Athoth r'jyarh wh'fagh zhasa phr-tga nyena phragn'glu.
> *Translation: Let us do honor to Azathoth, without whose laughter this world should not be.*

More specifically to neo-paganism, the literature labelled 'Fantasy'(Harvey 2000; 2006; Luhmann 1994) and 'medieval romances'(Rose 2006) seems to express and explore neo-pagan issues. J.R.R. Tolkiens's *Lord of the Rings*, Marion Bradley's *The Mist of Avalon*, Brian Bates's *The Way of Wyrd*, Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* corpus, and even Gibson's cyber-punk *Neuromancer* and Wagner's operas, are all parts of a cultural reservoir which contribute to neo-pagan thinking. While there is no 'biblical' text of reference in neo-paganism, the construction of the pagan self entails reading works of fiction. These fantasy books describe a pagan world and consequently contribute to the pagan experience of the reader (Harvey 2006).

In Ellwood (2004), we discover how some people involved in the 'craft' use popular culture as a method of practicing magic. In this text, the author explains how he uses the character of Buffy the Vampire Slayer as a god-form of protection, equality, and magic. Instead of using magic and incantation in the name of one god as often practised in religions comprising a large pantheon of gods, certain neo-pagans use icons of popular culture instead of more traditional gods. The importance behind these magical practices/rituals is to focus one's energy on the characteristic of this god/pop icon. For example, as the author explains:

> Let me give you a quick example. You may want to go on a diet, but know under ordinary circumstances you'd have trouble keeping to it. You can use the magick of working with a pop culture entity to help you. Who do you use? Were I to go on a diet I'd use the pop culture entity Jared, who represents the Subway franchise. You'll see him a lot on US television and each time he's showing the benefits of a successful diet. So what you do is create a god-form out of Jared. Observe the commercials, take notes on attributes you'd want your Jared god-form to have and then on the first night of the diet and each night after invoke the Jared god-form to help you keep to the diet. Now on a humorous aside you may find yourself having an inexplicable craving for Subway subs, but so be it. As long as you are dieting and reaching your target weight it doesn't matter. What does matter is that you invest Jared with your belief that he will keep you dieting. Use chants, images, and whatever else as needed. (Ellwood 2004, 187)

The need for a pop icon, according to this testimony, should only be for the time that one person needs it. After this, the practitioner should move to another pop icon. The danger if this is not acted upon, is that the person might start believing too much in the icon, instead of using it for a specific purpose.

2. *Focussed consumers of popular culture leading to a sharing of characteristics with hyper-real religions.*

Some consumers are already part of established mainstream religions and use popular culture to strengthen their belief system. As explained in Possamai (2005), a case in point is *ChristianGoth.Com,* which a virtual place for Christian Goths and other Christians. It does not aim at converting regular Goths to Christianity, but at proving to pastors and anyone else that not all Goths are Satanists or witches. This site even quotes Isaiah 9:2: 'the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined". As one ChristianGoth claims:

> Once I received the Christ, I never lost my culture. They were certain things that had to go, certain things that didn't glorify God. But I still loved Siouxsie and Bauhaus [popular Goth bands] along with my new found faith in the Lord Jesus. I found that contrary to popular 'Christian' opinion, I could still wear lace and velvet (and, God forbid- eyeliner?).[8]

Some heavy/black metal bands view themselves as Christians. The popular group, *Demon Hunter*, has appeared on the soundtrack of the movie *Resident Evil 2.* It straddles between being a 'Christian band' and a group of Christians in a secular band, even if it is on a Christian recording contract.[9] Another band is *Mortification*, which is based in Australia.[10] This Christian style of music is sometimes referred to as 'White Metal' or 'Unblack Metal'.

There are Christian role-playing support and advocacy groups such as the Christian Gamers Guild[11]. These groups promote Christian role playing groups without rejecting science fiction and/or fantasy narratives. One person sums up quite well this tendency among Christians to use newest forms of popular culture for their faith:

> Christians have too long allowed non-Christians to dominate the imaginal world of role-playing, which was originally inspired by Christian men like

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[8] http://www.fehq.org/public/gothchrist.htm (23/08/2004).
[9] http://www.demonhunter/net (23/08/2004).
[10] http://hem.passagen.se/bransell/mortification.html (23/08/2004).
[11] http://www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/2964/ (23/08/2004).

J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, not to mention Dante, John Bunyan, and John Milton. I think it's time to be a creative force in role-playing and other forms of gaming for the true author of all creativity and imagination, Almighty God Himself.

There are also other cases of people who are not involved in a sub-culture, who follow a mainstream religion, and who nevertheless mix their spirituality with more mainstream popular culture (Clark, 2003).

3. *Casual consumers of popular culture leading to a sharing of characteristics with hyper-real religions.*

With the growth of spirituality in Australia (Bouma, 2006), more and more people find inspiration from popular culture for their spirituality. If this analogy is permitted, hyper-real actors of the first type would be like Catholics attending church regularly, whereas actors of the third type would be like Catholics who believe without belonging. They might, for example, find inspiration in the *Da Vinci Code* and feel more spiritual thanks to this work of popular culture, but they do not necessarily actively engage in (hyper) religious practices. Taking into account this ideal-type, we can assume that the hyper-real religious phenomenon is more extended than what could be initially thought.

For example, one Generation X respondent mentioned that he had a catholic upbringing and watched the Star Wars series when he was young. Years later, when he became a young adult and re-watched the series, he realised how much these works of fiction influenced his current view on spirituality, even more than Catholicism; however this is far from making of him a Jediist.

4. *Religious and secular actors opposed to the consumption of popular culture leading to the practice of, or to the sharing of characteristics with, hyper-real religions.*

In this category, members of a religious or secular group would be against the hyper-real religious phenomenon. Within this type, some would be more active against this type of consumption.

This is seen, for example, in a Christian Forum, also accessed in Australia, with texts such as: 'Though not as overtly and sympathetically occultic as the Harry Potter

series, Tolkien's fantasies are *unscriptural* and present a very dangerous message'[12]. On a promotional Internet Site[13] for a video against Harry Potter, *Harry Potter: Witchcraft Repackaged. Making Evil Look Innocent*, we are told that sorcery is being introduced in schools disguised as children's fantasy literature. The video/DVD is aimed at explaining to parents how to teach children that spell-casting is forbidden territory. The site then lists a few accounts from children such as "I feel like I'm inside Harry's world. If I went to wizard school I'd study everything: spells, counterspells, and defence against the dark arts (Carolyn, age 10)" or "It would be great to be a wizard because you could control situations and things like teacher (Jeffrey, age 11)". It then concludes by stating: "Stop and Think: what will these children do when invited to visit an occult website, or even a local [neo-pagan] coven?". Specifically in Australia, the library of a private high school in Queensland banned the books.

Fundamentalist/literalist Christian groups are more than just a marketing niche for global popular culture, e.g. Walt Disney promoting its adaptation of C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as a "Passion of the Christ for kids" in a attempt to secure worldwide Christian support for the film (Hastings & Laurence, 2005). They are also a pressure group against certain forms of popular culture (e.g. Imax cinemas refusing to show movies that suggest that Earth's origins do not conform with biblical description such as James Cameron's *Volcanoes of the Deep Sea* (McKie, 2005)) and against the use of non-Christian popular culture for religious practice. For example, the Anglican Church in Sydney showed a trailer in 250 cinemas to tell cinema-goers about their website, which challenges the theories in the *Da Vinci Code* (described as 'Harry Potter for adults"), and the movie was banned from being seen in a cinema on the Central Coast because of the way it depicts the Catholic Church. As detailed above, these pressure groups demonise hyper-real religious actions on the Internet and at church, and one might wonder if they are working towards setting off the type of full-blown moral panic which turns minority groups into scapegoats to negatively perceived social changes.

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[12] http://forums.christianity.com/html/p681045 (23/08/2004).
[13] http:///www.chick.com/catalog/videos/0127.asp (04/08/2004).

THE INTERNET AND THE PARTICIPATORY CULTURE[14]

As detailed above, case studies of hyper-real religions are not a specific phenomenon of the 21st century. The earliest case found appeared in Western societies in the 1950s. However, with the case studies that introduced this lecture, such as those from the Church of Satan and other Neo-Pagan groups, popular culture is secondary to the spiritual work. These 20th century hyper-real religions have their spirituality somewhat defined independently from popular culture, which is used as a source of secondary inspiration. There are no Lovecraft or Discworld spiritualities; however there is now a Star Wars and a Matrix spirituality. Indeed, in Jediism, the Star Wars works of popular culture are used as a direct source of inspiration.

How to explain what appears to be a shift from using popular culture as a source of inspiration (that is secondary source of inspiration) to having popular culture appropriated as the spiritual work in itself (that is primary source of inspiration)? Based on my exploration of the case studies in the literature and on the Internet, my assumption is that the catalyst for such a process is the Internet. There are certainly other social factors that would have caused this shift but without more research, this lecture will remain silent on them.

The use of the Internet by religious people and groups can be traced back to the 1980s. Since that time, the way religion is discussed and practiced on the web has gone through recurrent transformations. Karaflogka studied the various typologies of religious activities but has seen her conceptualisations changing over time following changes on the web itself. These changes are due to the fact that cyberspace is no longer the preserve of the computer specialist and it now supports an inclusive (at least for those who can access the hardware) social space. She also distinguishes what she calls religion *on* cyberspace and religion *in* cyberspace.

> What I call 'religion *on* cyberspace' is the information uploaded by any religion, church, individual or organisation, which also exists and can be reached in the off-line world. In this sense the Internet is used as a tool. 'Religion *in* cyberspace', which I call cyberreligion, is a religious, spiritual or metaphysical expression which is created and exists exclusively in cyberspace, where it enjoys a considerable degree of 'virtual reality'. (Karaflogka 2002, 285)

Employing this distinction, it can be argued that when religions started on the Internet, they tended to be religions *on* cyberspace. However, with the

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[14] This section has greatly been inspired from a forthcoming publication (Possamai 2008, forthcoming).

democratisation of access to the Internet and the use of its full potential, religions *in* cyberspace are emerging. These cyberreligions, or what Karaflogka terms 'New Cyberreligious Movements', are a recent phenomenon and, even if they mainly exist and function online, they can nevertheless mobilise a large part of the population.

Hyper-real religions using popular culture as a primary source of reference such as Jediism are part of these cyberreligions and are case studies of the growth of these New Cyberreligious Movements. There are thus sources in the sociology of religion that explain the presence of these hyper-real religions on the Internet but nothing on the reason as to why or how popular culture is now being used as a primary source of reference for hyper-real religion on the Internet.

The research literature on Media studies might provide an element of explanation. Jenkins (2003) studied the participatory phenomenon of the Star Wars culture, and although he did not address Jediism, strong similarities can be drawn from his research with that on hyper-real religion. Jenkins discovered on the Internet that Star Wars fans emulate/parody some of the Star Wars stories and create their own work (e.g. home made movies, pictures and stories). For example, a database on the Internet for fan film production has close to 300 amateur-produced Star Wars films. These works are no longer photocopied and/or recorded from tape to tape, sent via (snail)mail, and thus only accessible to a few dozen people, but are put on the Web to be reached by the 'logged-in' world. This allows for this alternative media productions to become more visible in mainstream culture. This opens a door to a type of creativity which is an alternative to dominant media content. These artists/fans create their own stories which could be interpreted by some as questioning the hegemonic representation of their culture. To reflect this process amplified by the Internet and its online circulation, Jenkins uses the term 'participatory culture':

> Patterns of media consumption have been profoundly altered by a succession of new media technologies which enable average citizens to participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation, and recirculation of media content. Participatory culture refers to the new style of consumerism that emerges in this environment.

It can be argued that participatory culture also encompasses hyper-real religionists. They have now the ability to discuss their spiritual works on the Internet and share them with others; something that would have been difficult to accomplish to such an extent with the use of a photocopier. Indeed, the Internet allows people to use it as a

vehicle for sharing with the world their construction of self (e.g. through photographs and biography). Some of them include their view on spirituality (Smith, 1999). This can attract other people towards these idiosyncratic spiritualties in a way that was not possible in pre-Internet times. And indeed, this form of support was not available at the beginning of the second part of the 20th century which saw popular culture used at a secondary level for hyper-real religions. As already explained, the Church of All Worlds, the Church of Satan, and Neo-Paganism, use popular culture as an adjuvant to their religion. With some hyper-real religions of the 21st century that are part of participatory culture, popular culture becomes the main hero, that is, the religion itself. Jediism and Matrixism have become a spirituality in themselves, contrary to the stories of Lovecraft and Robert Heinlein which are a source of inspiration for another spirituality. Of course, one should not negate the fact that some people might have attempted in the past to use popular culture as a primary source of inspiration; however, I have not found any trace of this in my research. Perhaps participatory culture on the Internet will allow these hyper-real religions to emerge in the near future.

I thus would like to argue that with the advent of the Internet and the boom of participatory culture, hyper-real religions might have allowed popular culture, from being secondary to one's spiritual work, to become central.

A GENERATIONAL PHENOMENON?

When asked about the 2001 census in regards to Jediism, the U.K. Director of reporting and analysis at the Office for National Statistics, John Pullinger said: "Whatever the motive, the Jedi campaign may have worked in favour of the Census exercise. Census agencies worldwide report difficulties encouraging those in their late teens and twenties to complete their forms. We suspect that the Jedi response was most common in precisely this age group. The campaign may well have encouraged people to complete their forms and help us get the best possible overall response"[15]

We might thus expect from this comment that hyper-real religions could be seen as a youth spirituality. However, we have discovered above with the cases of the Church of All Worlds and the Church of Satan that were created in the 1960s, that these are groups that have attracted baby boomers. Further, in a recent article in *Men's*

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[15] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=297&Pos=3&ColRank=2&Rank=800 (15/07/2003).

Style (Oct. 2005, 36), a reference is made to the Jediist Ki-Do Jiinasu who is a 46-year-old judge's clerk who lives with his wife and two sons in the suburbs of Buffalo, New York.

My assumption is that, in comparison with baby boomers, there is a majority of generations X and Y favouring this religion/spirituality. However, we still have baby boomers who are involved in this phenomenon.

Perhaps a way to move forward with this argument is to be inspired by recent research on youth culture. For example, Bennett and Kahn-Harris (2004), realising that some generations of 'youth' have reached adulthood and yet refuse to 'grow up', put the argument forward that 'youth', in certain contexts, might have to be taken as an ideological category or as a 'state of mind' rather than an age category. In case hyper-real religions are seen as a youth spirituality, youth will have to be understood in this context as an ideological category.

When checking statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics[16], one realises that during the 12 months prior to November 2000, 50% of all adults in Australia accessed the Internet. When analysing the distribution according to age group, we discover that 74% of the 18-24 age group have accessed the internet compared to 64% for the 25-39 age group, 52% for the 40-54 age group and 19% for the 55 or over age group. It is clear from these findings that the younger a person is, the more likely they will be on the Internet.

Taking into account the discussion from the previous section on the role of the internet in the field of religion, one might wonder, if baby boomers had access to the internet in their youth, what would have happened to hyper-real religions?

The issue then might not be about calling this a youth spirituality but to describe it rather as a spiritualty that flourishes the best on the Internet which is accessed in greater numbers by the youth. Rather than calling hyper-real religions a youth spirituality, I would be more inclined to call it a spirituality mostly used by Generations X and Y.

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[16] http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/8147.0/ (3/08/2007)

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