

The Revenge of Gunga Din: The Wartime Anti-Cult Scare 1941-1945

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Cults and fringe religions are not among the themes and images that come immediately to mind when we think of the American home front during the Second World War. For most casual observers, "cults" are more directly associated with the post-hippy world of the 1970s, the time of Jonestown and Charles Manson, of "Moonies" and Hare Krishna devotees. Yet a glance at the mass media of the 1940s will show just how potent an issue fringe religions were in this time, to the extent that we can speak of a wartime anti-cult scare just as vivid as that of the seventies. The very diverse targets included Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormon polygamists, radical Pentecostals and "serpent-handlers," Black Muslims, and adherents of many occult and esoteric sects. And unlike during the 1970s, widespread public concern in this earlier period was accompanied both by intense official investigation, and by popular vigilantism. Between 1942 and 1944, a newspaper headline about "Cult Arrests" or "Police Seek Cult Leaders" might refer to any one of twenty groups, and in any part of the country. ¹

Throughout American history, war has often been linked to fringe religious activity. Partly, this reflects the greater social role enjoyed by women while their men-folk are away in the services, since new and fringe religions generally draw greater support from women than men. But other factors might also be at work. Particularly damaging conflicts lend credence to apocalyptic beliefs, and the sects that preach them. War, obviously, also implies death and bereavement. Naturally enough, spiritualism flourished both during and after the civil war and the first world war, as families tried to contact their lost loved ones. In the same eras too, exposés of fraudulent mediums laid the foundations for a long-standing tradition of anti-cult rhetoric. The new geographical horizons opened by warfare can also have an impact on religious attitudes. The very word "cult" acquired its pejorative present meaning precisely in 1898, the time of the Spanish-American war, and the attendant exposure to Asian culture and religion. ²

Repeatedly, we find that racial prejudices and stereotypes underlie anti-cult hostility. The vigorous anti-cult mythology of the 1970s drew heavily on Korea- and Vietnam-inspired images of sinister Orientals brainwashing loyal Americans into mindless obedience. Anti-Black stereotypes also had their impact, since followers of fanatical sects were believed to be slipping into a stereotyped "blackness," abandoning rational religion for degenerate primitivism. In both types of rhetoric - anti-Asian and anti-Black - the suggestion is that white "cultists" are betraying their proper White roles, forsaking Whiteness.

To this extent, it was only predictable that significant anti-cult activity should have occurred during the second world war, with all the nightmares conjured by the Japanese threat. Worse, many of the cults appeared to be linked to sedition or pro-fascist sentiments, so they became obvious targets for patriotic outrage. Yet we are not dealing with a simple story of religious repression, and the critics of the religious fringe were by no means unchallenged. America in this time experienced a searching and innovative debate about government's role in regulating the religious fringe. Many of the issues are familiar today. Though few could object to the notion of religious freedom, how far did toleration extend

to unpopular behaviors justified in the name of religion? Polygamy and pacifism were obvious examples for discussion, as was right of Jehovah's Witnesses to engage in highly provocative public testimony. When was the right to religious freedom outweighed by the interests of public order? And when could government intervene to protect religious believers from their own suicidal foolishness, which was basically the issue in snake-handling trials? Also at issue in the 1940s was a still more basic question. Was there a point at which a religion or cult become so "self-evidently" extreme or bizarre that the police could legitimately suppress it?

Though both press and courts argued these questions at length, generally, the emerging jurisprudence of religious dissidence favored the unpopular minorities. In some instances, notably the I AM occult movement and the Jehovah's Witnesses, protests against repression led to libertarian court decisions of enduring significance. In the long run, the laissez-faire legal principles that now emerged would do much to make possible the religious and social experimentation of the 1960s. In some ways, the anti-cult scare led to some real advances for the cults themselves.

The Kingdom of the Cults

Gauging the influence of fringe religious movements in the 1940s is extremely difficult, because millions of people could (and can) graze cult ideas without formally joining a movement. Thus the religious censuses that were periodically taken up to the 1930s are of little use, because they only tell us about the groups formally organized into churches., The statistics tell us nothing about looser-knit sects like Guy Ballard's esoteric I AM movement , or the very popular mail-order enterprises like Psychiana, that was attracting the business of millions (and Psychiana spawned plenty of imitators). By about 1940, the proportion of Americans who at least dabbled in mystical, occult and New Age ideas was at least as large as it would be today, and overall numbers ran into the millions. Historians tend to neglect this activity, though, perhaps because it so rarely appeared in the principal form of popular culture, namely the cinema. Under the Hays Code, American film-makers could show nothing that openly attacked religion, so there were few exposés of (say) bogus healers and spiritualists.³ At the same time, we find next to nothing about authentic contemporary cult activity within the US. For all the countless productions about the supernatural, all the ghosts, vampires, werewolves and the like, very few "cult" settings come to mind: one of the few examples is the 1943 film The Seventh Victim, about a Satanic cult in modern-day New York city. Cults and fringe groups were extensively described elsewhere - in popular magazines, newspapers, and pulp fiction - but they just do not appear in the celebrated movies that have done so much to shape the popular image of wartime America. Also, the mainstream media were all but blind to whole areas of religious activity, above all, among African-Americans.

In my book Mystics and Messiahs, I sketched the enormous range of occult and New Age activity that could be found in the US between about 1915 and 1945.⁴ While I can cite no reliable statistics for fringe activity in these years, some impressionistic case-studies of individuals will serve to illustrate the breadth and intensity of this subculture, I would offer four studies, namely Jack Parsons, Alfred Ligon, Marie Ogden and Frank Waters. I make no claim that these are in any sense representative, but they do indicate the existence of a world that seems so very different from most stereotypes of the "Good War" years. In fact, they rather appear to have been misplaced time-travelers from the 1970s.

The most influential of this trio would be Jack Parsons, a legendary rocket scientist based in Pasadena, who would be a principal founder of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory.⁵

He was passionately interested in the darker side of the occult, and followed the tradition of the controversial British magus Aleister Crowley, who made extensive use of sexual rituals and mind-altering drugs. In 1935, Parsons established a lodge of Crowley's Ordo Templi Orientis, and through the war years, the Pasadena police regularly had to deal with outlandish-sounding charges of the goings on at the Parsons residence. Had a pregnant woman really jumped nude through a fire nine times? (She probably had, though the police refused to believe it). Had a teenager been repeatedly sodomized during a "Black Mass"? (Probably not). Generally, the police took such accounts lightly, partly because they thought them beyond the bounds of possibility, but more because Parsons was such an important figure in American rocketry research. Articles in popular science magazines made him something of a popular folk-hero. By 1946, Parsons was deeply involved in a massively ambitious ritual that would involve a woman friend giving birth to a mystical being, the Moonchild - something very much like the classical notion of the Antichrist incarnate. And to reiterate, this farrago of sex, drugs and black magic occurred in the mid-1940s.

One would have needed to venture only a short distance from Pasadena to find another quite different strand of the contemporary New Age. In 1941, Alfred Ligon was one of the countless contemporary "seekers" exploring various metaphysical traditions: he supported his quest through his job as a waiter for the Southern Pacific Railroad. One major influence he encountered was the Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ, a 1907 book purporting to be a channeled account of Jesus' career in Egypt, India, Tibet and the mystic East. The Aquarian Gospel was phenomenally popular, and was probably the single most influential book for America's New Age milieu.⁶ In 1941, Ligon settled in Los Angeles, where he established the Aquarian Book Shop and Aquarian Spiritual Center. Under Ligon and his wife Bernice, the Aquarian became a pivotal force in African-American culture in California and beyond, the spiritual home of countless Black writers and thinkers. (By a horrible irony, the store eventually perished during the Los Angeles riots of 1992). In terms of our images of the era, the picture of a railroad waiter devoting his life to the search for New Age truths is deeply strange - about as odd as America's cutting-edge military devices being designed by a medieval sorcerer born out of his time.

As a third illustration of the forties' New Age, we might take a woman described by Wallace Stegner in his 1942 study of Utah, Mormon Country.⁷ Near Monticello, in one of the remotest corners of the state, Stegner found the "Home of Truth", a communal Theosophical settlement first founded by Marie Ogden in 1933. She envisaged this commune as a nucleus of The Kingdom That is Being Built, on the principles laid down in the Aquarian Gospel. Like the many such occult colonies which then operated in America, the Home had grand aspirations, with its Middle and Inner Portals, its Community Houses and Dormitories. Mrs. Ogden "controls and directs the community with the aid of messages from the spirit world and from Jesus Christ". On the spiritual plane, she would regularly converse with Tibetan lamas. On the mundane level, though, her major influence was perhaps the best known American magus, William Dudley Pelley, who in 1928 had experienced a mystical vision while in the hills of California. From 1933, he had channeled his energies into politics, founding his Silver Shirt Legion, which combined New Age mysticism with violent anti-Semitism. But many of his old less political followers remained focused on their metaphysical quests, and Marie Ogden was one of these. During the 1930s, she attracted her own kind of notoriety over a gruesome scandal in which she had tried to effect the faith-cure of a follower. Though most observers believed the patient to have died, Marie Ogden insisted that the subject was in a kind of suspended animation pending revival in a sanctified higher state. She therefore refused to release the mummified body until the

state was forced to institute legal proceedings. By 1942, her commune was reduced to a few hard core supporters.

Frank Waters and the American Indian

I have also argued that American Indians were a focus of intense esoteric interest in the 1940s, and that this attention was well reflected in popular culture. (The following discussion is adapted from my 2004 book *Dream Catchers*, Oxford University Press). One intriguing pioneer of New Age Indianism was Frank Waters, whose work links the speculations of the 1930s and 1940s to the more modern esoteric movements. He is best known for his *Book of the Hopi* (1963), which exercised a vast influence over the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. All subsequent neo-Indian spirituality owes a vast debt to *Book of the Hopi*, which was as familiar a fixture of student dorm rooms as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* or Jack Kerouac's beatnik odyssey, *On the Road*. In fact, Waters symbolizes a significant trend in American cultural history, namely, the connections among those eras of explosive social and political radicalism that occur periodically. Much of what we associate with the radicalism of the 1960s had older precursors, especially in the second decade of the century and the milieu of the early Taos colony. Another wave of radical cultural and religious experimentation can be seen in the late 1940s. In fact, the connections between this era and the 1960s are strikingly close. It is almost as if currents of thought welled up in the 1940s, went underground through the following decade, and then returned to full view in the mid-1960s.

The Second World War was followed by an era of social and intellectual ferment. This was the era of the Kinsey Report (1948), which did much to foster the sexual revolution; it was a time of rapid progress in civil rights and racial integration; and modern environmentalism also has its roots in these years, with the publication of Marjory Stoneman Douglas's *The Everglades* (1947) and Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* (1949). *On the Road* records a road trip undertaken in 1948–1949, when the Ginsberg-Kerouac circle was already speaking in terms of a "Beat" movement. The UFO scare that began in 1947 would become a major element of later New Age and esoteric speculation. So would the Jungian system of myths and archetypes popularized in Joseph Campbell's 1949 book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell popularized the Native myths discovered and translated by ethnographers like Washington Matthews and Alice Fletcher. He would also describe *Black Elk Speaks* as "the best example . . . in our literature" of a guide to shamanism and the shamanic universe. Robert Graves's *White Goddess*, a key source for later neopagan and feminist spirituality, appeared in 1948.

In such an atmosphere of questioning and experimentation, Indians could not fail to arouse romantic interest, and particularly in spiritual matters. As the United States became more technologically and socially advanced, more involved in the world's problems, the more Americans sought out the traditional and nonscientific spirituality of Native peoples, which offered a refuge from modernity. In 1947, *Travel* remarked that "while watching the ancient rites of the red man, the visitor will be made aware of the fact that despite the world's entry into the atomic age, an ancient culture is still to be found, a culture based upon religious ritual of thanksgiving, prayers for help to gods of rain, abundance and peace."

Appropriately, then, Frank Waters's career was well under way in the 1940s, when he was part of the Taos circle around Mabel Dodge. His major books from that period include the novel *The Man Who Killed The Deer* (1942), and *Masked Gods* (1950), an encyclopedic view of "Navaho and Pueblo Ceremonialism," written in 1947–1948. Waters's works show how easily available quite detailed studies of southwestern cultures had now become. *The Man*

Who Killed The Deer explores the political dilemmas of the Pueblo reservations during the Collier era, and the overwhelming pressures to tribal conformity faced by Indians who sincerely wished to assimilate and Americanize. Throughout the book (which is dedicated to “Mabel and Tony”), Waters gives intricate descriptions of Pueblo religion, its rituals, beliefs, and dances.

Masked Gods powerfully demonstrates the growing integration of Indian thought into the esoteric system. Already in the 1940s, Waters’s work is based on several “New Age” assumptions: American Indians belonged to a common cultural and religious tradition that included the Mesoamerican world of the Mayas and Aztecs; both North American and Mesoamerican cultures grew out of very ancient societies on lost continents; both shared core cultural elements with Asian religious and mystical traditions, especially Buddhism. Native Americans also had access to advanced powers that must be understood in the light of the most modern Western science; and their religious and spiritual traditions reflected the most modern insights of psychology and psychotherapy. None of these ideas was new with Waters—witness the Theosophists, and the pre–First-World-War circles of Mabel Dodge—but it was Waters who most creatively synthesized these ideas and applied them specifically to North American Indians.

Though Waters ostensibly gives a scholarly account of Pueblo and Navajo rituals, he uses them as a vehicle for his personal mythology. He strays far from the scientific methods of scholarly anthropology: introducing the book, Harvard anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn remarks how often Waters makes him “wince.” In his autobiography, Waters makes no secret of the personal agendas driving his work. His own mystical experiences included a vision of the Mexican metropolis of Teotihuacán as it would have stood a thousand years ago (the visions sound very much like peyote experiences). In trying to make sense of these “periodic deviations from the usual aspects of reality,” Waters immersed himself in Hindu, Tibetan, and Taoist thought, and in the writings of Jung. He read “dozens of such books. All revealing mankind’s ages-old search for the Otherworld under different names, and by different disciplines.”

The most powerful contemporary influence on his work was Russian mystic George I. Gurdjieff, who so often emerges as a prophet of the later New Age. Waters was introduced to Gurdjieff’s thought by Mabel Dodge, who had known the guru since his first American tours in the 1920s. Gurdjieff taught an influential esoteric system designed to awaken humanity to full spiritual consciousness, the next stage of spiritual evolution (Gurdjieff’s system closely recalls that of Richard Bucke, whose idea of Cosmic Consciousness was cited by John Collier). In order to create this fully conscious human being, Gurdjieff stressed the need to integrate mind, body and emotions. Part of his method was an emphasis on sacred dance, on gesture and ritual movement, features which had been lost in Western religion but which evidently survived in Native traditions.

Jung is another powerful influence throughout. Reporting the Deer Dance of Taos Pueblo, Waters sees:

the two deer mothers symbolizing the female imperative, the instinctual forces of the unconsciousness of the earth. And the deer dancers, the men trying to break free from the circle, symbolizing the masculine intellect, the forces of the will of man. So there’s a bi-polar tension here—whoops and yells, scrambles in the snow, as one breaks free and is brought back by the deer watchers, etc. A lot of fun, a drama of what takes place inside of us.

The “mystery play” of the Deer Dance proved the greater psychological sophistication of the Pueblos, their superior psychic integration. In contrast, “we excessively rational white,

Anglo-Americans by our force of will can't break free from the forces of the unconscious, from the realm of instinct embodied within us."

Waters's treatment of Native symbolism is wholly syncretistic. If Navajos or Pueblos accept a dualism of light and darkness, he promptly finds parallels in the Chinese concept of yin and yang, in Jungian thought, or cites Gurdjieff. He delves into esoteric Christianity and the Gnostic gospels, speculates about the mystical teachings of the Essenes and the secret learning that Jesus allegedly acquired in Egypt, India, and elsewhere. He already knows Graves's *White Goddess*, and probably his *King Jesus*.

But by far the most frequent references are to Asian and specifically Buddhist sources. Like many other esoteric theorists of the time, Waters was also fascinated by Tantric theories, and especially by kundalini yoga. According to this tradition, the material system of a human being is paralleled by a spiritual or etheric body, structured around seven chakras, "wheels", centers of spiritual power. At the lowest chakra, located at the base of the spine, there lies a potentially vast source of spiritual energy, kundalini, which is symbolized by a sleeping serpent. Through meditation and mystical exercises, the adept can awaken the serpent, which rises through the higher chakras until it reaches the highest "wheel" at the top of the head. At this explosive moment, when the serpent is fully uncoiled and the highest chakra is energized, the adept experiences total awareness and spiritual illumination. In the English-speaking world, the kundalini system was popularized by the work of Sir John Woodroffe ("Arthur Avalon"), who linked the spiritual body of Tantrism with the physical anatomy as understood by Western medicine. (The highest or Crown Chakra thus correlates to the pineal gland). His 1919 book *The Serpent Power* heavily influenced both Jung and Gurdjieff. Woodroffe's ideas can also be seen in another long-influential text, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, published in 1927 by W. Y. Evans-Wentz (Woodroffe contributed a foreword to the book). Waters would later work personally with Evans-Wentz.

Though superficially these various writers say nothing about Native American matters, for Waters, these Asian insights are critical. He claims extensive similarities between the Native eschatologies he describes "and its parallels found in the *Bardo Thodol*, the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, in the *Secret of the Golden Flower*, the Chinese *Book of Life*, and in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*." The Hopi myth of emergence through successive worlds is compared to the Tibetan myth of the world-mountain, Mount Meru. The tale reflects stages of spiritual and psychological consciousness, so that evolutionary progress through worlds symbolizes personal evolution, as described by mystics like Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. "It is only by such a synthesis of Eastern religious-philosophies and Western sciences with Navaho and Pueblo ceremonialism that we can see clearly the intent and meaning of the latter . . . it is not the purpose here to present the main principles of Mahayana Buddhism beyond an elucidation necessary for fuller understanding of Pueblo and Navaho ceremonialism." (Waters is comforting: one does not need a *total* understanding of Mahayana Buddhism to understand southwestern cultures, just a working knowledge.) All these ideas are integrated into a New Age synthesis that was largely novel in 1950, but which now reads like the commonplaces of a thousand New Age bookstores scattered across the United States. It was Waters above all who made the Ganges flow into the Rio Grande.

Waters is sympathetic to alternative archaeology, to stories of Atlantis and other lost continents. Discussing the origins of the Hopi, he challenges the official version of migration across the Bering Strait to suggest that perhaps, as they claimed, they had always lived in America. Or possibly they came from "a submerging yet unverified but certainly sometime existent continent that lay in the Atlantic." In *The Book of the Hopi*, Waters would suggest that ancient lost continents might correspond to the various bygone Hopi worlds of emergence.

He speaks further of “a legend of continental migrations that stem back into the remote prehistoric past,” and asks, “From what ancient race of world mankind did the Hopi spring?”

Occult and New Age writers then and now commonly present their ideas in pseudoscientific form, suggesting that the mystic forces they portray are based in a science that we have not yet learned to appreciate. Already in 1942, in *The Man Who Killed the Deer*, Waters depicts a group of elderly Pueblo men worshipping in a kiva as precisely analogous to whites operating an electric generator, each in their way manipulating objective forces and power sources:

Calling up through the little round opening in the floor the warmth and power of the sleeping earth-serpent. Calling up from the depths of their own bodies, from the generative organs, the navel center and the heart, their vital life force. . . . And all this infusion of strength and power, grace and will, they loosed as if from the sagittal suture on the crown of the head, covered by the scalp lock—from the corresponding aperture at the top of the kiva. As one, powerful, living flow, they directed it upon the focus of their single concentration.

The description is pure kundalini yoga, though Waters sees the mobilization of inner power as the generation of literal, objective energies. “Who doubts the great magnetic currents of the earth, or the psychic radiations of man?” As to what Indians might accomplish with these powers, this was “a race that had raised pyramids by ways now unknown to man . . . [who had] developed a civilization whose ancient mysteries still defied the probings of modern minds.”

Pioneers

In part because it was published by an academic press, *Masked Gods* did not reach the mass audience that Waters would find with the *Book of the Hopi*. Even so, he was certainly not alone in his esoteric vision of Indian ways. Illustrating the esoteric appeal of Native culture was Leslie Van Ness Denman, who came from a great San Francisco family. She has recently earned some historical attention because of her influence on her husband, Judge William Denman, in one of the leading religious-freedom cases of the 1940s. This was the trial of Guy and Edna Ballard for allegedly operating their Mighty I AM cult as a cynical money-making racket. Leslie’s influence helped enlighten her husband about the mind-set of New Age believers, and prevented what could have been a devastating legal blow against fringe religions. But she was not a dispassionate observer. Already in the 1940s, she was thoroughly immersed in Indian and pseudo-Indian lore in a way that would be thoroughly familiar today. Every year, in lieu of a Christmas card, she would mail to friends a pamphlet based on tribal lore, with titles such as *A Chant, A Myth, A Prayer: Pai-Ya-Tu-Ma, God Of Dew And The Dawn; Sh’a A-La-K’o Mana: Ritual Of Creation*; or *The Flute Ceremonial, Hotevila And Snake Antelope Ceremonial Of The Hopi Mesas*. In 1957, she edited *The Peyote Ritual*, celebrating the movement and praising its insights. She believed that the peyote worshiper “prays to the great Light to understand the light within himself.”

Doors of Perception

The strongest connection between the older esotericism and the later New Age comes through the use of peyote and the attendant idea of shamanism. Peyote had some limited white use early in the century, and a ceremony is described at length in *The Man Who Killed The Deer*.

Experimentation was inevitable, especially in academic settings. With so many anthropologists studying Indians, some were bound to try the drug, and were so impressed that they spread its use among their colleagues and friends. When Alice Marriott recorded her peyote experiences in the *New Yorker*, she could find no words adequate to describe the effects. It was "Paradise. . . It's like seeing the door to life swing open." The academic link was especially fruitful in the San Francisco Bay area: Berkeley had one of the nation's most prestigious anthropology programs, with many graduate students, in a setting conveniently close to experimental urban subcultures. By the late 1940s, "a small band of white peyote users emerged, and peyote was easily available in San Francisco." In Southern California, one peyote advocate was the astonishing Jack Parsons, whose group by the 1940s was using peyote in occult rituals, which included kundalini techniques.

Drug use as such does not necessarily have any spiritual connotations, but the peyote experiments of the 1940s soon acquired mystical and shamanic dimensions, which users saw in the context of American Indian myth and belief. One evangelist was Jaime De Angulo, who neatly spans the generations between the great anthropologists of the early twentieth century, and the later figures of the counterculture. A brilliant linguist, he worked at Berkeley in the 1920s under Paul Radin and Alfred Kroeber, though Kroeber soon found him irresponsible and erratic. De Angulo spent time in the Dodge-Luhan circle at Taos, where he was close to D. H. Lawrence and Robinson Jeffers, and he protested the suppression of the pagan dances. He acted as Jung's interpreter with his Pueblo informants, and at Berkeley, De Angulo was among the first to teach Jungian psychiatry. From the mid-1930s until his death in 1950, he was a legendary countercultural figure in Northern California, an exponent of shamanism and peyote, and reputedly a member of the Native American Church. De Angulo loved the image of Coyote, the creator-trickster figure, one who traveled between the worlds. In 1949, De Angulo delivered a dazzling series of radio talks, "twenty hours of story, poetry and song broadcast over KPFA radio in Berkeley," which became the basis of his book *Indian Tales*. Through his work, the nascent Beat movement learned the connections between peyote use, shamanic theories, Jungian ideas, and trickster imagery. Gary Snyder described him as "a now legendary departed Spanish shaman and anthropologist [who] was an authentic Coyote medium." De Angulo's disciple Robert Duncan described himself as a poet-shaman.

While we cannot say that such figures were in any sense typical, fictional and literary accounts strongly suggest that mystical ideas had penetrated far beyond the elite, or even the literate classes. Nelson Algren offers a nice portrait of a lower-class occult subculture in his 1949 novel *The Man With the Golden Arm*, which is largely set in the immediate post-war conditions of 1946. Algren offers a realistic account of ethnic (Slavic) working class Chicago. One character desperate for healing visits "Old Doc Dominowski", an "electric blood reverser", a "spine manipulator and ray caster". Old Doc's diplomas proclaim him "a member of the American Association of Medical Hydrology... Furthermore he was a deacon of the Royal Aryan Society for Positive Christianity and as such was privileged to throw in divine healing without extra charge. That went right along with the three dollar treatment for a touch of the astral power and a short lecture in the latent powers possessed by all of us." ⁸ He induces a patient to attend "a meeting of the Royal Aryan Crusaders." For all his pretensions, though, Old Doc is a simple con-man who had learned his racket in prison, and he uses the language of auras and astral powers as a charade to grope his female patients.

As in the true-life cases noted earlier, we are struck by the heavily eclectic nature of this picture, in which chiropractic merges with ideas about mystic auras, astral planes, esoteric Christianity, and populist racial theory. Marie Ogden also practiced "spiritual therapeutics" and claimed to heal cancer. It has been said of William Dudley Pelley, that he dabbled with "so many movements that [he] seemed a fictional creation: Christian Science, atheism, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, New Thought, Spiritualism, Darwinism, the occult, the Great Pyramid, telepathy, sexology, metaphysics, Emersonianism, more of conventional Christianity than he or his enemies recognized, and science of the sort later associated with extra-sensory perception."⁹ This was very much the same package of fringe notions that was being peddled by I AM, which by 1940 was reaching hundreds of thousands of eager followers, and perhaps many more.

Algren's account of this fictional fraud is all the more credible because it meshes with so many of the exposés of fringe medicine and quackery in these years. Some alternative medical treatments acquired amazing popular support, notably the controversial polio treatments pioneered by Australian nurse Elizabeth Kenny, who began offering her therapies in the US in 1940. The Kenny treatment had much to recommend it, but her movement rapidly acquired the character of a charismatic leader-cult focused on the Sister herself. She acquired a supernatural reputation as a savior of children, and her public appearances became almost messianic in tone. When she visited Washington in 1944, one newspaper recorded how, "Swept along on a tidal wave of faith, more than a thousand patients of crippled and cured children surged into the room, packed the mezzanine and overflowed into the corridors, even into the lobby while police vainly tried to hold them in check... 'It's like watching a miracle,' a policeman whispered hoarsely." All the condemnations by the medical profession could not prevent desperate people from believing that this woman channeled cures from on high.¹⁰

Algren's pseudo-technical language also closely parallels that found in one of the major news stories of the late 1940s. In 1948, it was revealed that third-party presidential candidate Henry Wallace had been associated in the mid-1930s with occultist Nicholas Roerich, whom Wallace had addressed as "guru." The media paraded the now-familiar range of anti-occult stereotypes. One Chicago newspaper mockingly declared that "If only Wallace the Master Guru becomes president, we shall get in tune with the Infinite, vibrate in the correct plane, outstare the Evil Eye, reform the witches, overcome all malicious spells, and ascend the high road to health and happiness."¹¹ The accounts of Wallace - and of the fictional Doc Dominowski - illustrate just how commonplace occult and esoteric terminology had become during the 1940s.

The Purges

Anti-cult movements are as perennial a feature of the American landscape as fringe and mystical movements themselves, and "cult booms" like those of the 1930s and 1940s are often accompanied by quite active "cult scares". Anti-cult activism was already growing dramatically just before the war. In 1940, for instance, Gerald Bryan published a celebrated exposé of I AM in his book *Psychic Dictatorship in America*, one of the first texts to argue that the cults were so dangerous because they were crypto-fascist.¹² This identification was all the more plausible because of the visible activities of William Dudley Pelley, who in early 1940 made a notorious appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Also in 1940, the media were reporting the first great wave of scandals involving snake-handling churches.

Finally, the Jehovah's Witnesses were causing repeated public disturbances by their insistence on publicly preaching unpopular anti-Catholic sermons, and by refusing to salute the US flag. This last issue led to serious difficulties for the sect in the patriotic atmosphere of the time, as the Supreme Court refused to see their dissidence as a conscientious right. In 1940, the Court upheld a local Pennsylvania ordinance requiring children to salute the flag as a means of inculcating political loyalty. The next three years were bitter ones for the Witnesses, who faced what has been termed “the greatest outbreak of religious intolerance in twentieth century America.”¹³ Much of the worst mob violence occurred in 1940, with instances of shooting, castration, and tarring and feathering. Between 1940 and 1943, a series of further state and federal cases further restricted the Witnesses rights to public preaching.

The flag salute cases of 1940 foreshadowed a growing public intolerance of religious dissent, of activities that in earlier years would have been regarded as or merely silly. Marie Ogden, for instance, might have been viewed as quirky or mildly crazy, but it would have been absurd to view her as a serious threat to national well-being. The year following Pearl Harbor, however, was marked by intense repression of any fringe group regarded as politically suspect. Pelley found himself facing charges of sedition, and the Silver Shirts were suppressed by 1942. Other sects were treated equally harshly. Also accused of sedition was Arthur L. Bell of the California occult sect Mankind United: in December 1942, Bell and sixteen followers were arrested by the FBI for disseminating false information about the US war effort. Psychiana also encountered difficulties, with investigations of its activities by the Treasury Department, Post Office, and the FBI, as well as the American Medical Association, and the group's British-born founder Frank Robinson briefly faced the threat of deportation.¹⁴

Other victims of the purge included the Nation of Islam, who rejected the war as a contest between Whites, and refused to serve in the military. Adding to its suspicious character, the movement had genuinely been courted by Japanese intelligence agents. After Pearl Harbor, an alarmed FBI investigated accounts of the spread of pro-Axis sentiment among Black Americans, and undertook a national survey of Black racial consciousness and dissent, RACON. The RACON findings attest to the influence of fringe and sectarian beliefs among African-Americans. Though little active disloyalty was found, NOI temples were raided in Chicago and elsewhere, and federal sedition charges were pressed against leaders in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Washington DC. Dozens of Muslims were prosecuted for draft evasion, including the movement's leader Elijah Muhammad.¹⁵

With some groups, little explanation was needed for the ferocity of the purge. In the circumstances of the time, any government was likely to act against groups like the Silver Shirts or the Nation of Islam, with their professed sympathies for enemy powers, while some of the sect leaders were suicidally provocative.¹⁶ Arthur L. Bell had claimed that American planes had bombed Pearl Harbor under orders from the “hidden rulers of the world”, a phrase that seems to reflect the anti-Semitism of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Some of the fringe groups that had flourished since the 1920s had some sympathy with racist and anti-Semitic theories: we recall the Aryan Crusaders of Algren's account. Many sect leaders, also, were fascinated by the charismatic authoritarianism that found its highest expression in the European fascist parties, and they admired the fanatical anti-Communism of such groups. The Silver Shirts were unabashedly modeled on Naziism, and the Ballards invited fascist comparisons by their growing use of super-patriotic rhetoric and symbolism. I AM boasted of being “not a religion but a patriotic movement,” aimed at purging the United States of “vicious forces” within its borders, variously identified as black

magicians, Communism, the war menace, and so on. The group spawned an inner circle of Minute Men of Saint-Germain, along with Daughters of Liberty and an Inner Secret Service.

Ballard, Bell and Pelley were not the only cult leaders to look and act like fascist dictators. Even among more respectable sects, we find Frank Buchman, founder of the Oxford Group (later Moral Rearmament). Buchman would long be haunted by his cry that “I thank heaven for a man like Adolf Hitler who built a first line of defense against the Antichrist of Communism! ... Think what it would mean to the world if he surrendered to the control of God. Or Mussolini. Or any dictator. Through such a man God could control a nation overnight and solve every last bewildering problem.” In 1938-39, Buchman launched an international revival campaign demanding Moral Rearmament, amidst rallies and pageantry of a kind that had acquired fascist political connotations. Also troubling was the fact that so many of the New Age groups were based on the West Coast, perilously close to any potential scene of Axis invasion, and Silver Shirt leaders were barred from residing in any West Coast state for the duration of hostilities. Some sects genuinely did appear fascist, and others on the esoteric fringe received a kind of taint by association.

Other movements, however, were hit hard on grounds that had nothing obvious to do with issues of national loyalty or subversion. One group was the dissident or fundamentalist Mormons who maintained the practice of polygamy in remote sections of the west. From 1935, state courts began the criminal prosecutions of Mormon polygamists, but official activism became much more intensive in the war years.¹⁷ In 1943, one family was arrested after they had transported a fifteen year old girl across the Utah-Nevada state line to become a plural wife. This action was held to violate the Mann Act, a law normally applied in cases of commercial prostitution and white-slaving. Such scattered arrests marked the beginning of a crescendo that culminated with mass raids on the core fundamentalist settlement of Short Creek, on the Utah/Arizona border. Significantly, state agencies worked in close cooperation with the FBI, almost as if the religious dissidence of Short Creek made it as threatening as a nest of spies or saboteurs. In March 1944, a multi-agency raid netted 46 Mormon dissidents, while the government prosecuted their publication Truth merely for its advocacy of the practice of plural marriage. Dozens of dissidents served prison sentences on related charges, and a number were still incarcerated at the end of the decade.

Also attacked were the snake-handling sects that had spread during the 1930s, and which came to public attention through sensational and very hostile media reports during 1940. After several reported deaths, states responded forcefully: Kentucky banned snake-handling in 1940, Georgia the following year. An intense wave of official repression followed between 1944 and 1947, when Virginia churches were raided by police, who killed the snakes kept by the believers.

Other groups too suffered on non-political grounds. Though I AM had a fascist tone, the charges it now faced were phrased in alarmingly broad religious terms. In the late 1930s, the movement had become a major money-spinner, as it played to enthusiastic audiences across the nation, with a series of crusades focussing on particular cities and regions. The movement dubiously claimed a million followers, but there were at least tens of thousands prepared to support a sizable merchandising operation which included books, records, pins, rings, posters, and portraits of the Masters, including the legendary magus, the Comte de Saint-Germain, and Guy Ballard himself. I AM rings sold for \$12, photographs of Ballard for \$2.50, a Chart of the Magic Presence for \$12, and \$1.25 bought a special binder in which to store the flood of continuing I AM edicts. New Age Cold

Cream was also available.¹⁸ By such dubious means, I AM allegedly took in \$3 million during its first decade of existence.

In 1940, a federal grand jury in Los Angeles indicted 24 of I AM's leaders for mail fraud, on the grounds that the Ballards were falsely claiming to heal the sick and communicate with the spirit world, and that they "well knew" these claims were bogus. The group's final provocation was using the mails to sell paintings of Jesus and St Germain, supposedly taken from life. The group may have been wholly disreputable, but in effect, I AM leaders were tried and convicted for distributing false religious teachings, and this in turn raised the knotty question of what was "true" religious doctrine. And how was such a fact to be judged? Guy Ballard's claims to revelation were no more intrinsically unlikely than those of any other prophet through the ages. Also, how reasonable was it to apply the "well knew" principle just to the fringe? Might a future government prosecute a liberal Presbyterian cleric for teaching a creed in which he had no faith?

The Ballard case was appealed to the Supreme Court, which in 1944 upheld the exclusion of any testimony concerning the truthfulness of the Ballards' claims.¹⁹ An often-quoted dissent by Justice Robert Jackson presents the classic libertarian view of the relationship between church and state, even such obnoxious churches as I AM. Jackson "could see in [the Ballards'] teachings nothing but humbug, untainted by any trace of truth. But that does not dispose of the constitutional question whether misrepresentation of religious experience or belief is prosecutable; it rather emphasizes the danger of such prosecutions." Cults could do financial harm to "over-credulous people," who sometimes received "mental and spiritual poison" in consequence, but even so, "the price of freedom of religion or of speech or of the press is that we must put up with, and even pay for, a good deal of rubbish." If religious motives were to be examined, "such inquiries may discomfort orthodox as well as unconventional religious teachers, for even the most regular of them are sometimes accused of taking their orthodoxy with a pinch of salt." In short, "I would... have done with this business of judicially examining other people's faiths." Jackson's words are rightly quoted as a milestone in the defense of religious freedom, but we should note that the prosecutions effectively destroyed I AM as a mass movement.

Explaining Repression

To understand the generalized nature of anti-cult hostility, it is helpful to recall the schizophrenic attitudes to fringe movements which Americans possessed at that time, and which in some measure they still demonstrate. The division is neatly illustrated by two of the most popular movies that would have been in people's memories at the outbreak of war. On the one hand, images of "Oriental" fanaticism, primitivism and violence are epitomized by the 1939 film Gunga Din, with its portrait of the lethal death-cult of Kali worshippers. In total contrast to this, we see the world of Shangri-La, the Edenic world of all-knowing, all-wise, Tibetan lamas offered in Frank Capra's romantic classic Lost Horizon (1937). American images of the religious fringe have often floated between these two stereotypes, and shift easily from one to the other, depending on which incidents or individuals are currently in the headlines.

Events of the late 1930s brought what I have called the Gunga Din image very much to the fore. Americans now experienced a powerful and sustained fear of covert foreign intervention through what had recently become known as the fifth column, a fear partly stimulated by the US government. If such overseas agitators were to operate on American soil, it was more than likely that they would use religion as a cloak: after all, two of the best known potential subversives were spiritual leaders, namely Father Charles Coughlin, and

Pelley himself.²⁰ As the government and media attacked these figures and the dangerous religious fringe groups through which they acted, they were consciously drawing on the old-established stereotypes of religious fanaticism summarized by Gunga Din. In this view, cultists were blindly and irrationally obedient to pathological leaders with messiah complexes, ready to commit whatever violent or deviant acts they might demand, and however much their orders conflicted with traditional loyalties to flag and family. For example, I AM prohibited sex except for procreation, and recommended against bringing children into a world so close to its end. "Husband, wife, mother, or some other relative living in a fanatical Mighty I AM family has actually been kept in another part of the house and denied former privileges because he or she would not embrace the Ballard doctrines."²¹ Conversely, Mormon polygamists were believed to keep women enslaved, often after they had been virtually kidnapped as young teenagers. The sexual attitudes were quite different from I AM, but they were equally aberrant from accepted American norms. By 1940, therefore, it is not surprising that the anti-cult stereotype was so pervasive, or that the whole notion of Psychic Dictatorship gained such credence.

Reinforcing these images was the barrage of anti-Japanese propaganda from 1941 onwards. Anti-Japanese rhetoric presented the "typical Oriental" as a slavish follower of a messianic god-emperor, so that both cultists and Japanese were depicted as seeking a society as regimented and anti-human as an ant-colony. Another common theme in anti-cult and anti-Japanese propaganda was that of atavism or primitivism. We are familiar with the notorious wartime posters depicting Japanese as little better than monkeys, obviously much lower forms in the ladder of human existence.²² This theme too emerges quite powerfully in the common indictment of cults in the 1940s. Cult followers were said to be forsaking reason and independent thinking when they joined fanatical movements, and in many cases, they were accepting the unquestioning obedience that supposedly characterized the lower races. How could a mid-westerner like Henry Wallace have been so obsequious to his autocratic "guru"? Free people did not act thus. The domestic religious campaigns in the war years were exploring potent xenophobic and racial themes.

In extreme cases, cultists were said to engage in bloodthirsty rituals that clearly signified their abandonment of rational ways of thought. By the late 1930s, it was commonly believed that Satanic sects and human sacrifice rings were operating in the United States, and some self-proclaimed experts were suggesting that unsolved serial murders might be the work of such ritual killers. The idea was popularized through pulp fiction, and crime novels. In 1939, Raymond Chandler's The Big Sleep features a joking reference that seems to fit much better into the Satanism scare of the 1980s than the New Deal years. When asked to explain a bloody crime scene, detective Philip Marlowe suggests sardonically that maybe "Geiger was running a cult and made blood sacrifices in front of that totem pole." In his 1947 novel The Scarf, Robert Bloch depicts a sensationalistic California journalist urging a colleague to write a book on a recent serial murder case: "People like to read about it. Look at the way those true detective magazines sell. Sex crimes. Blood. Everybody wants to know... Ever hear about the ritual murders we had out here? The devil worshippers? They cut up a kid."²³

This idea of racial degeneracy was even applied to the Pentecostals who formed so large a part of the anti-cult critique in these years, the despised "Holy Rollers", and the even more notorious snake handlers. The fact that these groups received so much attention from the late 1930s can partly be seen as an outcome of social changes during the New Deal years. Before the early twentieth century, it was relatively easy for unpopular religious groups to find remote corners of the nation in which to settle, but the vastly expanded state

machinery constructed to respond to the Depression made it difficult to evade the new network of social welfare agencies. The polygamists came to public attention only when welfare authorities drew attention to their very atypical household structures, and similar means brought Southern Pentecostals and fundamentalists into an unwanted public spotlight. Once discovered, though, media and government responded as if these fringe religious believers represented some radically new cult.

Once "discovered", though, Holy Rollers and snake handlers attracted the worst stereotypes of racial primitivism. They were condemned in large measure because they were poor whites who had so thoroughly adopted Black styles of worship and belief that they were in peril of permanently losing their privileged racial status. By their ecstatic shouts and bodily convulsions, their "fits, jerks, barks and rolling frenzies", white believers were succumbing to what W. J. Cash would term a "primitivism" or "hysteria... infected by the example of the Negro's Voodooism."²⁴ During the 1930s, the news media occasionally suggested that Pentecostal groups in remote rural corners of the nation might even be engaged in forms of ritual human sacrifice.

Atavistic themes reappeared during the repeated investigations and persecutions of snake-handlers in the mid-1940s. *Life* magazine offered a harrowing photo spread of the group's services, with captions describing the "cultists," "hysterical saints," led by their "self-appointed, unordained parson." When these "illiterate" believers spoke in tongues, the magazine reported this as "a frenetic gibberish to which the cultists resort." *Newsweek* similarly portrayed a "weird cult" of "fanatical, jerking, cultists."²⁵ The snake, in fact, served as a key symbol of atavism. Much of the writing on Voodoo in these years presented it as a survival of primitive African worship centered around the worship of the serpent. In 1937, the *Literary Digest* agreed "in the turpentine camps of Georgia, the cotton fields of Texas, and the cypress swamps of Louisiana, good old fashioned snake-worship with all its half-crazed rites is known to exist. Chickens, goats and cows are offered up at rough jungle altars."²⁶ It was only natural then, that the allegedly primitive worship of the Pentecostals should culminate in ceremonies involving a kind of snake worship, in the form of serpent handling.

To some extent, the religious fringe suffered collateral damage from the central themes of American political propaganda before and during the war. The nation defined its values in terms of democracy, individualism, reason, progress, and representative government, and highlighted these features by emphasizing the differences from the barbarities of the dictatorships: we are what they are not. The problem was that the small and esoteric religious movements - the cults, for short - could also be portrayed as violating these crucial American tenets, and were pilloried accordingly. Once war was declared, the cults were declared fair game for the new American security state, which had to observe few restraints in its crusade against internal subversion. And little distinction was drawn between groups that plausibly might be actively disloyal, and those that were merely unpopular or inconvenient.

Away From Repression

Yet as we have seen, the record of official repression was by no means uniform: the outcome of the *Ballard* case proves that. The previous year, a new Supreme Court case reversed the flag salute decision, and a series of cases struck down local ordinances designed to curb Jehovah's Witness street preaching. In 1948, a divided Court even agreed that police could not prevent the Witnesses from using loudspeakers to spread their controversial views. The pro-Witness decisions were of far-reaching legal significance, as

marking the first time that the Supreme Court asserted the need for the states to defend first amendment protections. Perhaps unwittingly, these cases laid the groundwork for many later controversies over political protest. As Martin Marty remarks, “ironically, it was the anti-national Jehovah’s Witnesses who did most to nationalize religious freedom cases.”²⁷

By 1944, attitudes towards the cults were becoming much more relaxed, and the nightmare Gunga Din image was fading, becoming almost laughably implausible. Global circumstances certainly contributed to this change. By this point in the war, clearly, the Allies were on the offensive, and the chance of foreign invasion had disappeared. With the military background so changed, other concerns could now come to the fore, especially a distaste for anything that smacked of contemporary European totalitarianism or religious persecution. The more the media discovered atrocities against European Jews, the more repugnant it became to persecute unpopular religious groups within the United States.

In addition, other cultural forces help explain the decline of repression. While the general public might sympathize with the suppression of particular cults or leaders, there is no evidence of a diminished interest in supernatural or occult beliefs as such. On the analogy of other wars and times of natural disaster, it would be surprising if there was not an increasing interest in ideas like omens, spiritualism, dreams, ghost sightings, and communication with the dead. Ghosts, spirits, angels and witches were a common feature of popular culture throughout the war, and were often shown in a favorable or humorous light. Major films in this tradition included The Devil and Daniel Webster (1941), Here Comes Mr Jordan (1941) I Married a Witch (1942), Heaven Can Wait (1943), Blithe Spirit (1945) and It’s a Wonderful Life (1946). Often, distinguished or notorious ghosts from earlier eras were made to make a political point about current affairs, most obviously in Dalton Trumbo’s The Remarkable Andrew (1942).

TABLE ONE GHOST AND SUPERNATURAL FILMS 1940s

1937

Topper (also sequels, *Topper Takes a Trip*, 1939, and *Topper Returns*, 1941)

1939

On Borrowed Time

1940

Our Town

Turnabout

Beyond Tomorrow

The Ghost Breakers

1941

Spellbound not to be confused with the 1945 Hitchcock film

Here Comes Mr. Jordan

The Devil and Daniel Webster

1942

I Married A Witch

The Horn Blows at Midnight
Cat People
The Remarkable Andrew
Thunder Rock

1943

Heaven Can Wait
A Guy Named Joe
Cabin in the Sky

1944

The Canterville Ghost
The Uninvited
Halfway House
Curse of the Cat People
It Happened Tomorrow

1945

Blithe Spirit
The Picture of Dorian Gray
Dead of Night
A Place of One's Own

1946

Stairway to Heaven
It's a Wonderful Life
Angel on my Shoulder

1947

Ghost and Mrs. Muir
Nightmare Alley

1948

The Night Has a Thousand Eyes
Portrait of Jennie

Obviously, there was a powerful and sympathetic public interest in the supernatural, and no sense that the subject itself should be taboo.²⁸ In this case, the American public seems rather more liberal in religious matters in the 1940s than in the 1980s, when evangelical enthusiasts were campaigning so hard against institutions like Halloween, and were denouncing supernatural themes in popular fiction..

Furthermore, since anti-cult sentiment was grounded in racial and ethnic stereotypes, then the hostility could not but decline as those stereotypes lost their force, and they did so quite rapidly in the domestic political atmosphere of the mid-1940s. The portrayal of African-Americans is a case in point. Through the 1920s and 1930s, mainstream cultural images of Blacks were by and large very demeaning, and between about 1928 and 1938, the most grotesque and murderous images of Voodoo were a staple of popular culture. During the war years, depictions of Blacks improved enormously, notably in the cinema.

Treatments of Voodoo became less popular or, when they did appear, they were sometimes intelligent and thoughtful accounts like the 1943 film I Walked with a Zombie, or like the books of Robert Tallant. By the end of the war, civil rights issues had become central to liberal thinking, and this change had its impact in anti-cult rhetoric. If "acting Black" was no longer thought disreputable in itself, no longer implied bloody savagery, then it was scarcely useful to apply the concept to white groups, while using the language of "jungle primitivism" would discredit the speaker as a racist. Holy Rollers might still be despicable, but they were less often discussed in terms of Voodoo and the jungle.

In the same way, an indiscriminate anti-Asian polemic was hard to sustain when China was a key American ally, and when wartime Hollywood was at pains to present Chinese and Chinese-American people in the best possible light. We think for instance of productions like the 1944 film The Keys of the Kingdom, a story of Catholic missions in China that still managed to present Chinese people and traditional culture in a highly sympathetic light. Other Asian peoples like the Filipinos were equally idealized, especially as those islands once more became a theater of war in 1944. Even if the Japanese were still portrayed as subhuman, this concept could not be extended to become the generic Yellow Peril of bygone years: there were good Asians and bad Asians. By this time, "yellow peril" imagery was as unfit for mainstream political discourse as was "jungle Voodooism".

Also, the benevolent Lost Horizon/ Shangri-La image of Asian religion never entirely vanished, and actually grew during the mid-1940s as Americans took a sympathetic interest in the emerging Indian nationalist cause. For liberal New Dealers, Indian independence and anti-colonialism were fundamental beliefs, so that making a pro-imperial film like Gunga Din would have been unthinkable after, say, 1943. More typical of the new mood was the film The Razor's Edge (released 1946), in which a traumatized world war one veteran finds spiritual peace in India and Nepal through the teachings of a Hindu mystic. This treatment would have had an enormous appeal for an audience largely composed of more recent veterans and their families, and the film did very well in both box-office and critical terms. The stage was being set for a powerful revival of the Shangri-La model of mysticism that would burgeon over the next two decades - the age of the Beats and Zen, of the popularization of Buddhism, and the wave of Hindu and Hindu-influenced sects that would become such a feature of American life.²⁹ By the latter part of the war, therefore, anti-cult passions were cooling enough to make intolerance suspect, and to permit a much greater public openness to the religious fringe.

Looking at the experience of the cults and fringe religions in the 1940s, I believe three main points emerge.

The first is that, however we term it, "fringe" religious belief and activity was far more prevalent in these years than would be suggested by most accounts. One reason we are not seeing the fringe is that social scientists paid little attention to it at the time, except as a subset of abnormal psychology, and subsequent historians have not generally looked for it.³⁰ Yet mystical and esoteric beliefs were very common, often among people whose formal religious affiliations might have been with mainstream denominations. Recent surveys have suggested a strikingly high rate of esoteric and mystical beliefs among members of mainstream churches like the Lutherans, even extending to ideas like karma and reincarnation. A taste for the heterodox is especially marked in matters of spiritual healing and alternative medicine. We do not have comparable evidence for the 1940s because as I remarked, nobody thought to ask the believers about such arcane matters. Yet

we might be surprised if we could elucidate the content of what ordinary believers actually thought, especially in western states with a powerful esoteric tradition.

Secondly, following for this, events during the second world war do not appear radically different from patterns that can be observed in American history before or since. Cults and anti-cult movements both flourished in (say) 1942 as they had in 1870 or 1915, and would again in 1980. Strikingly, too, both types of movement (cults and anti-cults) look very much the same from one decade to the next. Certainly the religious fringe changes over time, as new movements and ideas gain or lose in popularity - for instance, flying saucers only appear in the cult thought-world following the first reports of their existence in 1947. But largely, the American esoteric world in 1880 or 1980 would have been quite comprehensible to a seeker of the Good War era. Equally, the anti-cult arguments advanced in Psychic Dictatorship in America were not radically different from what might have been presented in earlier or later periods. Gerald Bryan's 1940 title was actually reused in 1995 for a denunciation of modern day cults and conspiracies.³¹

But it is not exactly true to proclaim that there is nothing new under the sun. Though the rhetoric directed against fringe religions is fairly constant, courts and governments have made some progress over time in learning to respond to them. When applying conscription during the second world war, the US government largely avoided the horrible errors it had made during the previous war in the treatment of pacifist sects like the Amish and Mennonites, and the conscientious objector system worked quite well. The main storm centers in the 1940s were the unpopular sects that lay far beyond the familiar religious consensus, and some states tried to use draconian means to root these out. However, the experience of the Jehovah's Witnesses and Ballard clarified and expanded the scope of religious dissidence, in ways that would shape and moderate official behavior during the Vietnam era. As so often in American history, new and fringe religious movements perform their greatest service to society when they raise troublesome questions about the proper limits of authority.

FOOTNOTES

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16. Richard W. Steele, Free speech in the good war (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999). The account of the purges is taken from Jenkins, Mystics and Messiahs, 149-64.
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