

“RELATIONSHIP IS WHAT LIFE IS”:
THE NEW MESSAGE FROM GOD AS LIVED RELIGION

by

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Thesis directed by Associate Professor Deborah Whitehead

The New Message from God is a unique UFO religion with strong metaphysical practices. Its emphasis on forming relationships as a form of religious action and experience as a platform for spiritual knowing, coupled with the metaphysical hallmarks of correspondence and noetic power, can complicate the social lives of practitioners. I suggest that a lived religion model is both consistent with and an improvement on the preexisting sociological methodologies that have shaped the study of new religious movements, and particularly groups where relationships can exist outside the purview of strict sociological methods. In this thesis, I introduce the New Message from God, its tenets, and its worldview alongside participant observation data to illustrate how relationships with presences can have social significance to believers and movement.

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INTRODUCTION

It is moments before 7:00 on a gloomy December evening when the Sanctuary of the New Message from God erupts into giggles. The cause: out in the foyer someone is fumbling to get a handle on a series of inconvenient cell phone alarms. She tiptoes through the door with a grin and is met by a small group of friendly faces trying to stifle their mirth at her technological mishap. Tuesday night med is about to begin.

Tuesday night meditations at the New Message from God Sanctuary in Boulder, Colorado were my introduction to the local community. Colloquially abbreviated as “Tuesday night med,” or sometimes simply “med,” this is an opportunity for area members to see one another and practice together in the same space.

My interest in the New Message from God, often abbreviated to just “the New Message,” was first sparked by an intriguing August 2017 article in *Westword* about the release of their 2017 book, *The Greater Community: Contact with Intelligent Life in the Universe*, which coincided with the August 2017 solar eclipse.¹ The presentation of this article was simultaneously informative and deeply disappointing; the article presented the eclipse and the publication as connected when in fact the eclipse was merely seized upon as a publicity tool (this information is present, but buried deep in the article), and, to my pedantic chagrin, the word “sect” was used in the headline as a polite euphemism for “cult.” Desperate for less sardonic information, I began to scour the New Message’s website. Fortunately for me, newmessage.org is

¹ Michael Roberts, “Solar Eclipse to Bring God’s Message About Aliens Via Boulder Sect,” *Westword*, published August 21, 2017, <https://www.westword.com/news/solar-eclipse-bringing-message-from-god-about-aliens-9394141>, accessed August 1, 2019.

meticulously managed and bursting with data. A free digital copy of the newly-released *The Greater Community* was available, which I quickly downloaded and eagerly ingested. Their website is clearly designed to make their message available to anyone who stumbles across it; I was easily able to access the New Message's other religious texts, as well as information about the movement itself including its history and current goals.

The story of the New Message from God begins in 1981 when California native Marshall Vian Summers experienced his first profound encounter with the Angelic Assembly, described as the spiritual presence that executes the will of God by watching over life in the universe and providing guidance where appropriate.² Summers, who was raised in a "conservative" Episcopalian family in Berkeley, began his career as a teacher in special education for the blind before this initial experience with the Angelic Assembly steered him toward a more spiritual path.³ Summers claims to have begun receiving direct revelation after several years spent traveling the country and remaining in communication with the Angelic Assembly.⁴ These revelations have been transcribed and compiled into a number of edited volumes. The first of these texts was published in 1990. Summers' travels eventually brought him to Boulder, Colorado, which now serves as home to him and the Sanctuary, which doubles as the global headquarters of the New Message. New revelations continue to be received and published both

² "The Story of Marshall Vian Summers," *The New Message from God*, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.newmessage.org/gods-messenger/who-is-marshall-vian-summers>.

³ Marshall Vian Summers, "The Story of the Messenger," *The New Message from God*, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.newmessage.org/the-message/volume-1/new-messenger/the-story-of-the-messenger>; and "God Discussion Interview with Sheri Lawson," *Marshall Vian Summers*, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.marshallsummers.com/interviews/god-discussion-interview-sheri-lawson/>.

⁴ "The Story of Marshall Vian Summers," *The New Message from God*.

in print and online on the New Message website from the Boulder Sanctuary at the time of this writing. The texts of the New Message are seen as direct communications from the divine. The revelations Summers receives come directly from the Angelic Assembly, who are said to carry out God's will. Therefore, the revelatory oeuvre of the New Message carries with it an irrefutable authority when it comes to dictating the beliefs and practices of the religion. Over time, these communications with the divine allowed a religious movement to begin taking shape on Earth, collectively known as the Worldwide Community, which now aims to spread its message even more widely "in order to fulfill God's intention for bringing it to humanity."⁵ The Worldwide Community numbers conservatively in the thousands, with roughly 2,900 registered with the New Message's online Free School as of 2017.⁶

I got in touch with the Society for the New Message, the collective of longtime Students, as practitioners of the New Message are called, who serve as the organizational backbone of the movement, via the New Message's contact page on their website in October 2017. I expressed interest in joining them for the only regularly-held local event I could find, weekly community meditations at the New Message's Sanctuary in Boulder, citing both my interest in doing research with the group and my deep desire for a form of healthy stress management. I received a

⁵ "About the Worldwide Community," *The New Message from God*, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.newmessage.org/about-the-worldwide-community>.

⁶ The Society for the New Message from God, email to Celetia Liang, October 13, 2017. The Free School of the New Message is an online classroom organized by the Society for the New Message, and teaches an array of courses on New Message cosmology and orthopraxy to Students interested in a more detailed and collaborative religious education. The membership of the New School as given to me was an estimate, and may include members who are registered but not active. However, it also may not reflect the full population of the Worldwide Community, many of whom may not be registered in the Free School for various reasons.

gracious reply from Diane (a pseudonym), inviting me to Tuesday night meditation the coming week and explaining what to expect when I arrive.

Tuesday night meditation is centered around arguably the most important of their many texts, *Steps to Knowledge: The Book of Inner Knowing*, received by Summers in 1989 and first published in 1990. The program of practice in *Steps to Knowledge* is presented as a daily “curriculum.”⁷ Each Step has an affirmation as its title that is expounded upon in the lesson of that day. Students of the New Message are expected to read and reflect on the daily lesson and the prescribed daily practice that follows (I think of it as a homework assignment), usually involving critical reflection and the practice of “Stillness” throughout the day.⁸ Stillness is a state of mind that can be entered through meditation, and is meant to facilitate continued improvement in the individual’s relationship with Knowledge.

On the overcrowded evening bus to my first ever Tuesday night meditation, I speculated wildly on what I would find and who I would meet as I nervously watched the blue dot that represented me on my phone’s GPS map. At this point, though I had skimmed several of the revelations on their website, the only revelatory text I had the chance to read in-depth was *The Greater Community*. The collection of revelations in this book describe an impending event named “the Intervention,” wherein alien forces will come to Earth to take advantage of human

⁷ Marshall Vian Summers, *Steps to Knowledge: The Book of Inner Knowing* (Boulder: New Knowledge Library, [1990] 1999), viii. It is important to note that the introductions to the New Message’s texts are authored by Summers or the Society, and are not presented as revelations.

⁸ A style note: To my knowledge, the word “student” is not capitalized on the New Message website or in any New Knowledge Library publications. It is capitalized from time to time in online communications, such as on the community site chat or in community-wide emails, but this is rare. However, I will be capitalizing it in my writing in order to distinguish it as a proper noun in the context of my work.

ignorance and plunder Earth's natural resources. With its dire tone, *The Greater Community* painted a picture of a UFO religion racing against time to prepare humanity for alien contact. My initial impression of the group was a serious one that I believed must prioritize material action, as I thought was evidenced through things like the expressed concern for humanity and environmental resources in *The Greater Community*, their carefully curated online presence, and the emphasis on volunteering for the New Message as a part of their described orthopraxy.⁹ It was only after I began to attend Tuesday night meditation and familiarize myself with some of the New Message's culture did I realize that material matters, while important to Students' lives and experiences, were far from the focus of the movement's practices. It was here that I first began to understand the *experience* of being a Student. The texts that served as my preliminary research into the movement gave me a great deal of information without the context of real practice or practitioners.

Diane was waiting for me outside the Sanctuary when I arrived. She welcomed me warmly and led me inside. The Sanctuary is a peaceful space with a cozy foyer, a kitchenette in the corner by a door leading to the offices where the local members of the Society do their work, and another door leading into the Sanctuary proper. In the Sanctuary, rows of chairs face a small platform at the head of the room. I had expected cushions on the floor; my prematurely crumbling knees and I were very grateful for the elevated seating. A quick glance around the room told me that many other Students may have similar needs for chairs over cushions, as most

⁹ "The Society," *The New Message from God*, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.newmessage.org/worldwide-community/society>, and "About the Worldwide Community," *The New Message from God*, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.newmessage.org/about-the-worldwide-community>.

of the assembled were in their later years. This was also a surprise to me, for between the UFOs and what I had grown to expect of spirituality in Boulder, I was imagining a more youthful, alternative crowd.

The demographics of the New Message from God may have some correlation with the familiar cultural concepts within the movement's teachings, which may be subsumed under the category of "metaphysical religion," a term I will be borrowing from Catherine Albanese for the remainder of this thesis. Albanese defines metaphysical religiosity as "an American religious mentality" identifiable by a focus "on an individual's experience of 'mind'" and a "theory of correspondence between worlds," thought of "in terms of movement and energy," with a focus on "salvation understood as solace, comfort, therapy, and healing."¹⁰ In other words, metaphysical religion centers religious agency on the "combinative notions of the power of mind and the pervasiveness of correspondences" that can be controlled and deployed—she calls this "magic"—to practical ends.¹¹ She defines the metaphysical mind as being "about consciousness and all that derives from and returns to it—with emphasis ever on the mental awareness by which humans interact creatively with their environments."¹² The prevalence and significance of the human mind in the New Message is continuously upheld despite Knowledge occupying the spot of ultimate importance. Students' mental practice takes the same shape as the generalized aims of the "mental magic" that Albanese describes, though "magic" is not the word the New Message would use to describe their practice. By Albanese's definition, mental magic "can affect

¹⁰ Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 6, 13-15.

¹¹ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 7, 495.

¹² Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 13.

and change the material order, abolishing apparent flaws by realizing its unity with a cosmic Source.”¹³ And, like Albanese describes, “the human world and mind” in New Message cosmology “replicate... a larger... more whole and integrated universe, so that the material world is organically linked to a spiritual one.”¹⁴ The beliefs and practices of the New Message center on these metaphysical concepts of mind and correspondence. These two concepts play a much more central role in the movement’s practices than the UFO aspect, which, while pertinent and certainly exciting, is not the main focus of the New Message.

Methodology

To adequately study the New Message from God and develop any meaningful understanding of the movement, I thought it necessary to approach the movement through a lived religion methodology. The research in this thesis consists mainly of analysis of primary texts and social data collected via participant observation within the local Boulder community of Students. Robert Orsi’s lived religion methodology relies heavily on recognizing both context and subjectivity while analyzing the multifarious ways practitioners navigate their religious lives. In Orsi’s article “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” he writes, “If appropriated and inherited religious idioms do not reflect or mirror the world but make it, then a historiography is required that does not look for religious windows onto wider social or cultural realities.”¹⁵ In other words, a lived religion approach centers the elements of a religious culture not as

¹³ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 7.

¹⁴ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 6.

¹⁵ Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles,” *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, edited by David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 10.

interpretations of the world we share, but the building blocks with which the world is created. Orsi's framework positions relationality as central to religious world-making. Reflecting on his grandmother Giulia's devotion to Saint Gemma Galgani and drawing parallels between their unfortunate circumstances, he concludes that an explanation of his grandmother's devotion in terms of her active interpretation of Saint Gemma's life in relation to her own would "put too much emphasis on agency. It is just as true to say that the inner world of [her] family... was *made by* the meanings embodied, expressed, and available in Gemma."¹⁶ Though Saint Gemma was not actually a participating party in this relationship, the power of her story had a profound impact on the lives of Giulia and her family. Here, Orsi demonstrates how relationships, as people's understandings of themselves blended with their understandings of presence, create the religious worlds in which daily life takes place.

I center my analyses of primary texts on *Steps to Knowledge* and the other published revelations of the New Message. Other primary texts considered are the publicly-directed materials on the New Message's website and other ancillary websites like Marshall Summers' personal website (marshallsummers.com) and the Allies of Humanity site (alliesofhumanity.com), which hosts all of the New Message's *Allies of Humanity* Briefings, a series of transmissions from a group of sympathetic extraterrestrials meant to inform the New Message of the current state of the Greater Community.¹⁷ The textual analysis in this thesis is informed by my fieldwork with the New Message, but does privilege my hermeneutic

¹⁶ Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 144-145.

¹⁷ Both of these websites are run by the New Message from God, and both link to the official newmessage.org website. The Allies of Humanity and their role in the New Message will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

perspective. My fieldwork consisted of participant observation at Tuesday night meditations and various other events I attended with New Message Students: teachings with Marshall, holiday gatherings, and the occasional meal. Subjects were gathered based on convenience sampling. The research was largely observational, and also included unstructured interviews in the form of conversations with interested Students at the events I attended. Subjects were informed beforehand of my role as researcher and the possibility of anecdotes being used as data, and a statement of intent was submitted to the Society of the New Message for review. I obtained oral consent from new subjects. Statements and conversations with Students included in this thesis are paraphrased from field notes and recollections; any names used (aside from Marshall Summers and his family, all of whom are public figures in the New Message) are pseudonyms. The social research was exempted from IRB review for minimal risk involvement. To bolster the “participation” aspect of my participant observation, I made my own attempt to study the Steps as well (though I freely admit to cheating by reading ahead numerous times).

I found myself surprised once again by the first week of *Steps*, which were focused on the imperfections of human (lowercase-K) knowledge. These first Steps centered on establishing that the beginning Student is “without Knowledge,” and encourages practitioners to ask themselves, “What do I really know?”¹⁸ The doctrines of the New Message from God hinge in part on recognizing the limits of human subjectivity. Because this is foregrounded so explicitly in New Message texts, the movement seems a good case study for exploring the role of personal experience and practice beyond the limitations of older approaches to new religious movements that tended to neglect the unique experiences of subjects. The New Message’s multilayered

¹⁸ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 1 and Step 3.

cosmology is a crêpe cake of different levels of knowable reality which lends itself to different interpretations of the same religious reality within the same religious mind. According to the New Message, our world exists in a vast universe of other worlds, collectively referred to as “the Greater Community,” the source of the title of their 2017 book. (This is not to be confused with the Worldwide Community!) This whole universe exists both within and alongside a reality even greater still.

Due to practical limitations, my participant observation has occurred only within the Boulder community, whose population is roughly 35 Students by an internal 2017 assessment.¹⁹ My research does include remote members who have visited the New Message’s Sanctuary for holidays and events. I refrain from using online social data I gathered from observing and participating in chats and the like on the private community website in the interest of respecting Students’ right to privacy.

Positionality

When I was first discussing my intention to study the New Message with a couple of Society members, Diane told me that what will make my project unique is that it is not a report but rather a reflection of the New Message through my own experiences. I agreed with her then, as I still do now. Because I have been participating in the New Message’s local community for over a year at the time of this writing, and because new religious movements are still widely viewed as problematic, I recognize that my positionality will be called into question. Even as an outsider, I have admittedly grown quite fond of the local members that I see regularly at Tuesday

¹⁹ The Society for the New Message from God, email to Celetia Liang, 2017.

night meditation, and I find myself quite sympathetic toward certain aspects of the group's teachings and spiritual aims, such as their self-reflexive practices and concerns about violence and environmental degradation. My own attempts at practicing *Steps to Knowledge* also informed my understanding to an extent—when I succeeded for the day, I learned what it might feel like for a Student to live a life suffused with religious intention, and when I would forget about *Steps to Knowledge* for days at a time, I recognized the beliefs and disciplines that I failed to develop. These experiences certainly affected my interactions with the movement's materials and community. I have tried quite consciously to meter my language and the scope of this thesis such that it does not call into question the veracity of the New Message's religious claims, and my decision to focus on the experiences of Students, rather than the origins and leadership of the movement, has been bolstered in part by my affection for the movement.

As I will discuss in chapter 1, sympathetic approaches to new religious movements in academia have only recently become more accepted, and scholars who research these movements are still met with far greater scrutiny than those who study more widely-accepted religions. In my view, this stems from the culturally-ingrained suspicion of new religions. I am not exempt from these influences, for although I am sympathetic to the New Message and other new religions I have studied in the past, I have also found myself wondering about a movement's honesty or criticizing aspects of its practice. When faced with these questions, however, I would be prompted to ask myself: would I be as suspicious or critical of these elements if they were featured in a more recognized religion or presented as an areligious choice? The answer is usually no. I suspect the impulse to take sympathetic treatments of new religious movements as

too “soft” is based on cultural preconceptions of these movements, rather than a genuine concern for the facts.

I have never shaken the feeling that the Society and the community of Boulder Students have expected me to remain a Student of the New Message—I have often had to interrupt conversations to remind informants that I am, in fact, still researching them—and I hope their disappointment will be tempered some when I say this thesis does advocate for the New Message from God. This is not so from a personal, religious standpoint as Diane may have hoped; my participation and practice were not successful in converting me to a full-time Student of the New Message.²⁰ My aim is to present this movement as I see it—a religion worthy of serious academic study and undeserving of the derision with which it has been met by outsiders.

The Thesis

In this thesis, keeping in mind the paucity of scholarship on the New Message, I attempt to lay out the details of my research as accurately as possible. However, given the vast scope of the New Message’s teachings and the comparatively small scope of this thesis, I have necessarily had to omit details of the movement from consideration. I relied on my experiences working with the New Message to form my research questions and to choose the information I have included here. My experiences researching the New Message continually brought up questions of subjectivity, specifically subjective experiences of relationships. This was an area I had thought underemphasized in the sociological studies that jump-started the subfield; while a sociological

²⁰ I also, frankly, lack a robust spiritual imagination and have been quite bad at “doing religion” since childhood.

method heavily emphasizes relationships between individuals within a religious movement, as I will discuss further in Chapter 1, the same attention was not given to relationships involving spiritual beings and the like. Given the wide range of relational possibilities that make up the New Message's worldview, how do relationships function within the experiential epistemology of the New Message?

This thesis will discuss the beliefs, practices, and relationships of the New Message from God, and will argue that a lived religion methodology is essential to understanding the experiences of New Message Students because of its consideration of relationships with presence. The first chapter will introduce key earlier works within new religions studies and the study of UFO religions specifically in order to assess the benefits and drawbacks of the ways movements like the New Message from God have been studied in the disciplines of sociology and religious studies. I will show how the sociological history of the study of new religions has continually informed and reinforced the focus of such inquiries into new religious movements, and how successive works that factor in historical and cultural context have improved upon this sociological model and our subsequent understandings of the actions and motivations of members of new religious movements. I will use this history to argue for the benefits of a lived religion methodology in the study of new religions.

The second chapter will shift to survey the cosmological premises of the New Message from God and analyze how this cosmology circumscribes the ways Students of the New Message can experience and interpret the universe in ways that can differ starkly from more normative worldviews. I will demonstrate through the analysis of primary texts, centering on *Steps to*

Knowledge, the cosmology of the New Message, the relational elements in New Message teachings, and the importance of relationships to religious practice.

The third chapter will build on the previous chapter to analyze how Students of the New Message practice their own relationships via experience and interpretation. This chapter will use social data from my research with the local community of New Message Students to explore the different types of relationships in their lives and the different ways they embody these relationships. I will conclude that the relationships Students of the New Message have with the people and presences in their lives hold an important position in religious practice and can carry a great deal of religious meaning. Using the New Message from God as a case study, I hope to demonstrate in this thesis that although the study of new religious movements, and UFO religions more specifically, have historically focused on sociological patterns and themes of symbolic authority, an updated approach should consider relationships with presence (including extraterrestrial presence) as parts of a religious actor's social network because of the influence of these relationships on their actions.

CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the analysis to follow is informed by work in the study of new religions specifically. The study of new religious movements is controversial as a subfield, not only in the eyes of the uninitiated who may take offense to its subject matter, but also for the scholars within it because of the definitional complexities and methodological disagreements stemming from the origins of the subfield. This chapter will contextualize this work within a larger history of new religions studies. This chapter consists of three main parts. I will first demonstrate the important role that sociology and social theory have played in shaping our academic understanding of new religious movements thus far, paying close attention to Eileen Barker's methodological criticisms of the subfield in its infancy and arguing for the importance of subjective experience in the constructions of social reality. I will then provide a brief history of the study of "UFO religions," arguing that the framework which sets these new religious movements apart as a distinct category has limited utility for the study of these movements. Finally, I will show how an approach to UFO religions that is more analogous to a lived religion methodology offers an alternative that may yield more substantive analysis of the movement in question.

The Scientific Study of New Religious Movements

The study of new religious movements in western academia has had a short but sensational history. It found its first home not in religious studies, but in social scientific fields like psychology and sociology. Amid growing public condemnation and social disquiet, some

scholars turned to the sciences to explore the seeming increase of new religious movements in the 1960s and 1970s. New religions scholar James R. Lewis argues that the relative newness and instability of religious studies as a field at the time was the reason why so much early scholarship on new religious movements came from the discipline of sociology of religion. Lewis notes how the time during which new religious movements began to capture the attention of the public and scholars alike was the same time during which religious studies was trying to cement itself within the realm of “serious” academia, citing the 1963 *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* Supreme Court decision and the acceptance of the American Academy of Religion by the American Council of Learned Societies in 1979.²¹ The hand sociologists had in creating the study of new religious movements has shaped the field significantly, as evidenced by its heavy reliance on the work of Max Weber, whose theories of charismatic authority, routinization of authority, typology of religious orientation, and his methodological principal of *Verstehen*, to name a few, are often deployed in the socially-oriented framework often used to study new religious movements today.

Because many new religious movements at the time shared non-normative traits like communal living and alternative sexual mores, they were widely viewed as aberrant by the public, which captured the attention of the field of psychology. Psychiatrists especially found success working with ex-members and theorizing on the pathology of “cults,” speculating on the motivations and mental clarity of individual founders and members of such groups. The growing

²¹ James R. Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 30-31. Here, he also notes that the AAR’s New Religious Movements Group saw its start in 1982. Currently, that group is hotly debating a name change, again reflecting the troubled early history of the subfield.

involvement of scholars acting as mediators between new religious movements and wider society—as expert witnesses in courthouse proceedings, as medical professionals assisting in “deprogramming” individuals “rescued” from new religions, and, of course, as authors of publications in books and journals—led to the proliferation of the scientifically-rooted high-drama literature of the late twentieth century “cult wars,” during which academics of diverse disciplinary backgrounds debated questions of free will and legitimacy in new religious movements. Many well-known new religions scholars distinguished themselves during this time by exploring new religious movements in ways that attempted to treat them as legitimate religions, earning themselves the label “cult apologists.”

One so-called “cult apologist,” Eileen Barker, may not have been the first sociologist to apply her training to the study of new religious movements, but she is one of the best-known. Her most influential work, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (1984), details her decade-long work with the Unification Church and was a response to a popular scientific approach that Barker critiqued for the way that it “‘medicalizes’ the membership of new religious movements.”²² In particular, Barker criticized the then-prevalent “brainwashing” theories used to explain conversion to new religious movements. She pointed out numerous methodological flaws in a clinical approach to new religious movements, which used solely psychological or psychiatric approaches and inevitably led to skewed conclusions because of flaws in the study

²² Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher Ltd, 1986), 126.

design, such as a conspicuous lack of control groups.²³ She similarly criticized approaches focusing on social conditioning mechanisms in religious conversion. While Barker explored variables such as individuals' differing predispositions to make certain choices based on certain interpretations, she maintained "that the suggestion that the social context is the exclusively important variable in deciding whether or not someone becomes a Moonie just does not stand up to the evidence."²⁴ Barker instead proposed "switching the main focus of attention from individuals to groups" when examining the mechanism of religious conversion in her work with the Unification Church.²⁵ In response to the titular question of "choice or brainwashing?," Barker ultimately concluded that it could not possibly be brainwashing, because accepting the veracity of the brainwashing thesis then "leads to another question: how (once [they have] come into contact with the movement) could anyone *not* become a Moonie" if their mind-control powers are so adept?²⁶ By refuting the then-prevalent thesis that conversion to new religious movements is caused by some mental manipulation or advanced conditioning technique, Barker made it a socially-driven decision. In this way, she advanced the idea that religious choices are not simple cause-and-effect actions which render the religious subject passive, but are instead the result of active dialogical relationships with others.

²³ Barker, *The Making of a Moonie*, 131. She explains the importance of control groups thusly: "We need to know whether the characteristics which we know the Moonie possesses are peculiar to Moonies, or whether he shares these characteristics with people who are not members of the movement."

²⁴ Barker, *The Making of a Moonie*, 189.

²⁵ Barker, *The Making of a Moonie*, 123-124.

²⁶ Barker, *The Making of a Moonie*, 235.

Barker's work skirted around the issue of subjectivity; while she advocated for moving away from "the isolated psyche," her work nonetheless relied on individual experiences, and moreover prioritized subjective accounts of firsthand experiences over the medicalized analyses of these accounts used to bolster psychiatric arguments against new religious movements. In her later methodological commentary, "The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must Be Joking!" Barker makes "an analytical distinction... between primary and secondary constructions of reality," wherein "the former comprise the basic data of social science, [and] the latter are accounts of the former."²⁷ The primary constructions of reality are rooted in subjective experience, or in Barker's words, are "the product of direct and indirect interactions between the members of the movement and, to some extent, between the members and the rest of society."²⁸ Secondary constructions, on the other hand, "are depictions of the movement that are offered in the public arena... *about* the movement."²⁹ This includes constructions presented by the movement, the media, scholars, and others. Barker emphasizes that secondary constructions can affect primary ones. The descriptions of the New Message on their website, for example, are a secondary construction. The experience a new Student of the New Message might have while reading through these descriptions would influence their primary construction of the movement.

Barker believes that the responsible social scientist must be able to "explore and account for the range of different perceptions held by individual actors and to assess the consequences of

²⁷ Barker, "The Scientific Study of Religion" [originally published 1995], reproduced in part in *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*, edited by Lorne L. Dawson (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 7.

²⁸ Barker, "The Scientific Study of Religion," 13.

²⁹ Barker, "The Scientific Study of Religion," 7.

such differences.”³⁰ Here, she acknowledges the important role of perception and perspective in affecting the social functioning of groups like the new religious movements she studies, as “social reality... can exist only insofar as individual human minds are continually... acting as the media through which are processed the cultural ideas and meanings.”³¹ Though she seems to avoid drawing an explicit conclusion from this, Barker’s methodological viewpoint centers the subjective mind of the religious agent as the locus where social reality is made. Barker’s insistence that a social scientist of new religious movements should aim to be “objective” also advocates for scholarship less colored by bias.³²

Barker's framework for studying conversion in the Unification Church moved away from previous questions along the lines of “what are these groups doing to people to make them join?” and reframed it in terms of how potential converts decide whether or not to join based on their interactions with a new religious movement. Her scientific methodology still tended toward reduction, posing new questions like “in what ways do those who join the movement differ from those who do not?”³³ However, by changing the angle from which she approached new religious movements, Barker’s work positioned religious actions as the results of negotiations between people and their social surroundings, demonstrating the importance of accepting subjective experiences as an influencing factor on religious choices.

³⁰ Barker, “The Scientific Study of Religion,” 11.

³¹ Barker, “The Scientific Study of Religion,” 8.

³² Barker, “The Scientific Study of Religion,” 11.

³³ Barker, *The Making of a Moonie*, 234.

UFO Religions

The fact that the New Message from God contains “nontraditional” religious elements, particularly its ufological beliefs, influences the way the movement will be viewed by both scholars and the public alike, both of which have potential to affect the way the New Message exists and functions. Because extraterrestrial life is included within the religious narratives of this movement, it falls under the category of “UFO religions” in the new religious movements subfield. This category is loosely defined: according to Christopher Partridge, a UFO religion refers to any of the “implicitly or explicitly religious worldviews... informed by a belief in the existence of UFOs and the intervention of extraterrestrial life.”³⁴

Although this thesis does not center on the New Message from God as a UFO religion *per se*, the ufology of the movement still merits analysis as it plays a huge role in the beliefs and actions of the movement. Benjamin Zeller, whose work on Heaven’s Gate will be discussed later in this chapter, explains in a 2011 overview of UFO religions that

Both religious people and believers in UFOs make specific postulations about the nature of humanity and its relation to the broader universe. UFO religions combine these two sorts of analogous belief systems, merging ideas about UFOs... into religious frameworks that answer questions about myth, ritual, purpose, and salvation.³⁵

In other words, there is a harmony between the accepted nature of “religion” and the mystery and promise that lies in the possibility of extraterrestrial visitation.

Zeller emphasizes in the conclusion of his article that each UFO religion is different, and the truth of this statement complicates the study of the movements we place in this category.

³⁴ Christopher Partridge, “Introduction,” *UFO Religions*, edited by Christopher Partridge (New York: Routledge Press, 2003), 4.

³⁵ Benjamin Zeller, “At the Nexus of Science and Religion: UFO Religions,” in *Religion Compass*, 5, no. 11 (2011), 666.

Aside from the presence of aliens, the most basic criteria for a UFO religion, the ufology of the New Message is glaringly different from the ufologies of many other, well-studied UFO religions. While the finer details of the many different religious interpretations of popular ufological narratives lie outside the scope of this thesis, many studies benefit from the ascription of UFO religions as a separate category.³⁶ The other function of this category is that it creates a manageable arena in which to explore the history of western ufology. This shared cultural history needs to be recognized in order to understand the preexisting “secular” narratives that support those of UFO religions.

Studies of UFO religions have often approached this religious genre as an attempt to marry religion and science, as Carl Jung first famously argued in his 1958 psychological analysis of the UFO phenomenon, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. In this book, Jung claimed that the widespread phenomenon of contemporary UFO sightings shared soteriological similarities with popular religious ideas at the time, noting how “these space-guests are sometimes idealized figures along the lines of technological angels who are concerned for our welfare,” and drawing from this the notion that these sightings take the place of “‘signs in the heavens,’ superior beings in the kind of space ships devised by our technological fantasy.”³⁷ Jung considered the cultural context of the time—the space race, growing concerns over the stability of the environment and its ability to support the human population, and modern scientific epistemologies—to infer how “we have indeed strayed far from the metaphysical

³⁶ For more on the different religious interpretations of ufological narratives, see the volumes edited by Lewis (2005) and Partridge (2003), which contain essays on many different UFO religions.

³⁷ Carl Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, translated by R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1958] 1979), 13-16.

certainties of the Middle Ages, but not so far that our historical and psychological background is empty of all metaphysical hope. Consciously, however, rationalistic enlightenment predominates, and this abhors all leanings toward the ‘occult.’”³⁸ Therefore, Jung concluded, the proliferation of UFO sightings, in support of and supported by the fast-growing popularity of these “technological angels,” became a new source of mystery and hope for an anxious populace.

Jung’s hypothesis about the religious dimensions of UFO sightings has remained popular within more recent studies on UFO religions. In his 1995 article, “Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena,” John Saliba describes how religious ufologies “secularize religion because they remove the supernatural.... [while they] remythologize it because they introduce an element of mystery and a preternatural force that is beyond our scientific knowledge.”³⁹ Case studies like sociologist Susan Palmer’s longtime work with Raëlism demonstrate the connections these groups make between hot-button topics of their time, such as genetic engineering, cloning, and the possibility of extraterrestrial visitation, and well-known biblical narratives. Palmer’s 2000 article with Bryan Sentes argues in part that “new religious movements arising within the context of the contemporary developed world, whose sources of revelation are extraterrestrial, spontaneously take their space age deities to be merely natural or immanent rather than supernatural or transcendent, precisely because they exist within the horizon of our postmodern condition.”⁴⁰ These early studies on UFO religions also often focused on the justification and

³⁸ Jung, *Flying Saucers*, 22.

³⁹ John A. Saliba, “Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena,” in *The Gods Have Landed*, edited by James R. Lewis (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 35.

⁴⁰ Bryan Sentes and Susan Palmer, “Presumed Immanent: the Raëlians, UFO Religions, and the Postmodern Condition,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 4, no. 1 (October 2000), 87.

legitimization of ufological elements as properly “religious” ones, which, like the broader study of new religions before it, likely had something to do with the need to justify and legitimize the subfield as an area of serious scholastic inquiry. However, analyses like Saliba’s and Sentes and Palmer’s are focused on UFO religions that borrow Christian narratives, or in which the Bible is a main source of authority, and further, they rely on the veracity of the secularization thesis, which postulates that new religious movements and other religious reinterpretations arise in part in response to the ongoing secularization of older, established religious traditions. Furthermore, work on UFO religions that is focused on legitimizing them *as* religions is often dependent on accepting the divinity of extraterrestrials when such a claim is not, in fact, universal among this subset of religious thought. For the New Message, as this thesis will show, extraterrestrials are not gods or deities; they are merely others who are like us, but unlike us.

UFO Religions as Lived Religions

The drive to legitimize UFO religions within the academy has also led to a number of insightful analyses of these movements as specifically metaphysical religions, which has revealed an interesting cultural history behind the phenomenon. Take for example J. Gordon Melton’s “The Contactees: A Survey,” which situates UFO religions within a wider spiritualist lineage. Melton points to Emanuel Swedenborg’s 1758 writings on his visits to neighboring planets and Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky’s ascended masters system in the Theosophical Society, which later influenced Guy Ballard’s “I AM” movement wherein these ascended masters

were placed in the same physical environment as extraterrestrial figures.⁴¹ He also highlights a number of contactee accounts throughout the history of ufological thought that share patterns of telepathic communication, the sharing of metaphysical ideas from the extraterrestrial “contacters,” and, in some cases, astral travel.⁴² He concludes that “the flying saucer movement is in effect a new branch of occult religion. It follows the patterns of occult religious bodies and draws most of its content from general occult teachings.”⁴³ Albanese similarly notes connections between metaphysical religion and religious ufology, describing the popular notion of the 1960s that “the new age... would be ushered in by space brothers or space-age ascended masters.”⁴⁴ Whether we term it occult, or theosophical, or spiritual, or New Age, or metaphysical, these intertwined religious histories clearly have a far greater hand in the creation of religious ufology than is immediately evident, even in the more biblically-driven UFO religions. It is therefore important to analyze UFO religions as they exist within the cultural context of metaphysical religion if we are to understand them beyond the superficial application of aliens to identifiable religious narratives.

Another supporter of UFOs as New Age concepts is James R. Lewis, who highlights the New Age elements present in Heaven’s Gate in his book *Legitimizing New Religions*. UFO religions are not the sole focus of this book, which features case studies on a diverse array of new religious movements. Lewis’ book is portioned into two parts: the first explores the

⁴¹ J. Gordon Melton, “The Contactees: A Survey,” in *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds*, edited by James R. Lewis (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 3-4.

⁴² Melton, “The Contactees,” 5.

⁴³ Melton, “The Contactees,” 10.

⁴⁴ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 499.

experiential claims of new prophets as sources of legitimation alongside the circumstances which made them possible, and the second assesses and criticizes the delegitimization of new religious movements by both scholars and the public. Lewis cites Joachim Wach's theory that religion stems from expressions of religious experience, and in response to popular criticisms of experientially-based approaches to religion says that "one need not be religious—nor need one defend the notion of religious experience as *sui generis*—in order to utilize this theoretical approach."⁴⁵ Lewis never explicitly denies the possibility that profound religious experiences might be *sui generis* phenomena, but as he implies in his quote, he does not himself believe this. The essays in the volume provide case studies on the historical influences from which these religious movements were able to assemble themselves, as Orsi puts it, "by cultural bricolage."⁴⁶ Lewis, who comes from a religious studies background, notes how "sociology...views new religions as arising out of social forces," but "does not consider religious experiences as independent motivating factors for the emergence of new religious forms."⁴⁷ Lewis argues otherwise; while context, history, and culture all influence the creation of these religions, it is the religious experience itself which provides the main impetus for an experiencer to form a religion. So, while Lewis does not discount the role of social forces in the creation of a new religion or the consideration of religious experiences in prior sociological analyses of new religions, he remains dissatisfied with the lack of attention paid to the dialogical relationship between experience and the context in which the experience occurs. In his words, "Religious experiences tend to

⁴⁵ James R. Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions*, 26.

⁴⁶ Orsi, "Everyday Miracles," *Lived Religion in America*, 7.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions*, 31.

legitimate a person's views, whereas a person's religious background provides the intellectual resources for interpreting [their] encounter with the sacred and seeing it as a legitimate experience."⁴⁸

Lewis limits the scope of his book by focusing on the religious experiences of prophets and founders, whose experiences he often deems "profound," and looking primarily at how these experiences were promoted to their audiences. However, while Lewis' analysis focuses specifically on how prophets legitimate *themselves* to their audiences, he concludes that "the personal charisma of the founder is not the glue that holds together alternate views of reality. No matter how charismatic the prophet, [their] message must somehow address the concerns of potential followers in a satisfactory manner."⁴⁹ Therefore, "the plausibility of a particular worldview and its accompanying lifestyle is maintained by the ongoing 'conversation' that takes place among the members of a particular community."⁵⁰ It is the *content* and *interpretation* of an originating experience that ultimately matter to the formation of a religious movement, not the experience in and of itself. A religious movement is almost entirely comprised of members, after all, so the way a religious leader's experience is received by their audience is dependent on how convincing and relevant their proposals are.

Benjamin Zeller's 2014 *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion* also adopts the notion that religious movements are informed by and reflect their believers' experiences while reexamining the key questions about the group that were posed by the movement's original

⁴⁸ Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions*, 27.

⁴⁹ Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions*, 140-141.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions*, 141.

researchers in the 1980s and 1990s. *Heaven's Gate* follows the inner history of the eponymous group leading up to the tragic events that unfolded in March 1997. The foreword of this book was contributed by Robert Balch, famed for “infiltrating” the group with his colleague David Taylor (at a time when sociologists had a far more lax code of conduct to adhere to), who notes Zeller’s “refreshingly different perspective” as a religious studies scholar approaching “Heaven’s Gate through the lens of belief” rather than observable social action.⁵¹ While Lewis centers his analysis on the originating religious experiences of various movements’ leaders, Zeller takes a broader scope, considering the lived experiences of founders *and* members as they worked together to create and negotiate their shared religious reality. He explores the ways the beliefs of Heaven’s Gate evolved over time as the group encountered changes and challenges from without and within, and how these changes impacted the behaviors of the group and its members. This most notably includes the sudden and extreme change in the group’s attitude toward suicide, which they were opposed to until Bonnie Lu Nettles’ untimely death in 1985. At this point Nettles was seen as still “alive” in essence and merely absent from her now-discarded earthly host, and based on this Heaven’s Gate reassessed the way they would have to leave Earth; rather than walking bodily aboard a spacecraft (which would necessitate that one’s body remain alive and functional), Nettles’ ongoing participation in the group from beyond made leaving this piece of biological baggage behind a more salient possibility.

Zeller does consider the very real social factors which influenced the group and its members. He is, however, critical of the assumption that social actions or group psychology are

⁵¹ Robert W. Balch, Foreword to *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion* by Benjamin E. Zeller (New York: NYU Press, 2014), xi-xii.

the crux of what makes this group tick. Opposing the popular idea that factors like charismatic authority or affective familial ties created a limited range of choices for members, Zeller argues that “while members did depend *in a soteriological sense* on their leaders, this sense of dependency was neither absolute nor entirely bound.”⁵² In other words, the members of Heaven’s Gate were not trapped within a bounded context woven of psychiatric pathology or complex social manipulations, but rather were *choosing* to bind themselves to leaders and to the movement based on beliefs formed through interactions and concretized through experience. Zeller shows us how “members chose to commit suicides because they had come to reject the world just as they had long believed that they had to reject their bodies” through negotiating the foundational beliefs of the movement and their experiences in the movement—namely their continued rejection by a world with which they had tried so hard to engage.⁵³ Much of what happens in a new religious movement has to do with social factors, as scholars like Barker and her contemporaries have argued, but Zeller differentiates his work by including and elevating the role of belief and the role of religious presences (here, the postmortem existence of Bonnie Lu Nettles is one such presence that had a powerful influence on the movement’s trajectory) in the group’s functioning.

Zeller’s *Heaven’s Gate* reveals how belief and relationality comprise two principal parts of religious experience. These insights from scholars of new religions and UFO religions can apply to religious experiences outside this category as well. One of the things that first attracted sociologists of religion to the study of new religious movements is the way that new religions, by

⁵² Zeller, *Heaven’s Gate: America’s UFO Religion* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 176.

⁵³ Zeller, *Heaven’s Gate*, 177.

virtue of being new and therefore relatively small, serve as pocket-sized opportunities to study the social dimensions of religious movements on a more manageable scale.⁵⁴ What these studies have revealed, and what religious studies scholars of new religious movements have seized upon, is the intimacy with which practitioners recognize themselves in their religions' narratives.

Conclusion

A lived religion approach, such as the one developed by Orsi, is similar to the sociological methodologies advocated for by Barker and her likeminded contemporaries in several key ways. Firstly, they both understand motivation and meaning as located in relationships, rather than symbols or biology. Secondly, a focus on the membership of a movement, rather than its leaders or orthodoxy, is more effective for understanding how individuals relate to different facets of their religion and how that subsequently drives their actions. Finally, both of these approaches demand that any religious movement studied must be considered relative to its context. As Barker postulated, "The nature of social reality means that the regularities of social science are relative to social space and time in a way that the laws of nature seldom are."⁵⁵ It is therefore necessary to consider the size and shape of that social space as it is conceived of by the members whose interactions and relationships create it.

Zeller's work addresses relationality in similar ways to Orsi by validating the social role of presence in the inner workings of a religious movement. Other lived religion approaches have

⁵⁴ David Feltmate, "Rethinking New Religious Movements beyond a Social Problems Paradigm," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 20, no. 2 (2016): 82-96.

⁵⁵ Barker, "The Scientific Study of Religion," 11.

begun to edge their way into the academy, such as Tona Hangen’s article “Lived Religion Among Mormons” (2015), and Donald Westbrook’s *Among the Scientologists* (2018), both of which explicitly utilize a lived religion methodology in their analyses of better-studied new religions. Studies of both the Church of Scientology and the Church of Latter-Day Saints have tended to focus on the origins, orthodoxies, and historical controversies of these movements, with less attention given to the lay members who make up the foundations of these movements. A lived religion approach addresses what these previous approaches have overlooked: the study of new religions has historically focused on individual members in terms of what has been done *to* them, but has neglected the active roles these members take in their religious world-building.

This chapter has surveyed the history of the sociologically-informed study of new religious movements and the study of UFO religions in order to demonstrate both their important contributions and drawbacks. In particular, the study of UFO religions has excluded how members relate to religious presence, which is particularly problematic when religious presence is considered “natural or immanent” in many of these traditions. The lived religion approach I use in this thesis allows me to consider the full spectrum of relationships represented in the New Message from God, while simultaneously considering the cultural legacy of ufology as part of the context in which the religion’s tenets are accepted by Students. The chapter to follow will describe the cosmology of the New Message, and how it creates new possibilities for Students’ relationships.

CHAPTER TWO

COSMOLOGY

My initial online inquiries into the New Message from God led me to several skeptical refutations of its legitimacy. Most fascinating to me initially were several threads on Reddit discussing the New Message. The New Message made several (perhaps ill-advised) outreach attempts on this platform that garnered a number of critical responses. Take for example the following exchange: under the username mangorange, a New Message Student says that there can be no scientific evidence to prove the spiritual claims of the New Message, as “Scientific evidence has great efficacy when dealing with outer things, but cannot provide any meaningful help when dealing with spiritual, or inner, things.”⁵⁶ In response, Reddit user Omnipotence456 rebuts, “Science makes claims about the actual world. Spirituality makes claims about your worldview/psyche/ego. They aren’t allowed to cross those barriers.”⁵⁷ This response may have seemed reasonable within the generally skeptical population of Reddit, but it does not jive with the construction of the New Message’s reality. Omnipotence456 misinterprets the Student’s observation regarding the limits of scientific knowledge as a statement describing binary categorizations. By the New Message’s internal logic, a response like this stems from human

⁵⁶ Mangorange, comment on “I believe that Marshall Vian Summers is God’s new Messenger for Humanity CMV,” *Reddit*, comment posted September 12, 2013, https://www.reddit.com/r/changemyview/comments/1m996p/i_believe_that_marshall_vian_summers_is_gods_new/cc6zue7/, accessed August 1, 2019.

⁵⁷ Omnipotence456, comment on “I believe that Marshall Vian Summers is God’s new Messenger for Humanity CMV,” *Reddit*, comment posted September 12, 2013, https://www.reddit.com/r/changemyview/comments/1m996p/i_believe_that_marshall_vian_summers_is_gods_new/cc770iw/, accessed August 1, 2019.

misunderstandings of both spirituality and epistemological certainty. Other criticisms I saw were based on even simpler misinterpretations of available information, such as one post which claimed that members of the group “all apparently live in a lodge call [sic] ‘the Encampment,’” likely referring to the New Message’s biannual spiritual conference of the same name, which does take place in a lodge.⁵⁸ However the lodge in question is an ordinary YMCA facility in the Rocky Mountains, which they rent for the week just for this conference; members do not in fact live communally.⁵⁹

Misunderstandings small and large like the ones that peppered the Reddit threads I found—not to mention the Westword article that introduced me to the movement—served as a fresh reminder of how cultural bias affects our ability to take seriously and therefore understand the tenets of religions that are not our own—and how new religious movements in particular bear the brunt of this judgement. In “The Scientific Study of Religion” Eileen Barker advises that “in order to communicate something of the essence of an NRM, social scientists have to ‘interpret’ or ‘translate’ the primary constructions so that their audience can understand what may have been incomprehensible when they were looking at the movement itself.”⁶⁰ This chapter aims to do just this: to translate what I view as the more vital aspects of the New Message’s reality into less esoteric terminology by presenting several themes from the texts of the New Message from

⁵⁸ Author unknown, comment on “I think my friends might be joining a cult, and I need help researching them, strategizing ways to intervene.,” *Reddit*, comment posted October 28, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/2kn3z6/i_think_my_friends_might_be_joining_a_cult_and_i/clmwr97/, accessed August 1, 2019.

⁵⁹ “The Encampment of the New Message,” *The New Message from God*, accessed August 1, 2019, https://www.newmessage.org/th_event/encampment-of-the-new-message.

⁶⁰ Barker, “The Scientific Study of Religion,” 14.

God in order to explore and untangle its vast cosmology and subsequently the beliefs that shape how the New Message interacts with the world.

In order to begin to understand what shapes the experiences of New Message Students, it is necessary to understand the reality in which Students live and practice. By identifying key concepts through a close analysis of *Steps to Knowledge*, which stands as the central text of the New Message, supported by other (non-Step) revelations, I will describe the vast spiritual universe that the New Message codifies and translates into practice. I will first provide an overview of the New Message's teachings to show how Students are taught to view the role of religion and the significance of relationships in their lives. I will follow this with an examination of the soteriological significance of Knowledge to showcase the religious concerns addressed by the New Message. I will then illustrate the social reach of the Steps practice by examining the concept of practice and religious action as service.

Religion, Spirituality, and Relationship

Before we can begin understanding the details of the New Message, it is important to first establish how the New Message understands itself. No religion exists in a vacuum, and the New Message from God is fully aware of this. Many revelations of the New Message preface assertions with qualifiers such as “in a New Message context,” or “in a Greater Community context,” demonstrating an understanding of relativism in terms of the frameworks within which cultural or religious concepts can be interpreted and understood.

The New Message from God positions itself in a syncretic religious lineage which relates it to older, more historically-established religions. Marshall Summers is understood to be the

most recent in a lineage of Messengers of God whose message is updated and tailored to current conditions, just as the messengers who preceded him, including “the Buddha, the Jesus and the Muhammad,” brought then-new messages to their own historical and cultural contexts.⁶¹ This suggests that the New Message from God is at least somewhat reflexively aware of current understandings of “religion” as an ontological concept, historical category, and way of life. A revelation entitled “What is religion?” explores and explains the role of religion in human society. The simple definition is, “In a Greater Community context, the purpose of religion is to enable Knowledge to be discovered and expressed in whatever world religion is being cultivated. Religion, then.... is the means for the discovery and application of Knowledge.”⁶² Here we see that the New Message understands “religion” as a social construction used to further the spiritual goals of the movement, identified as “the discovery and application of Knowledge.” The New Message teaches that other historical religions with so-called “universal” foci like Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity began with this same goal, though delivered through different languages and adapted to different contexts.

A revelation entitled “What is Knowledge?” explains that “In the Greater Community, Knowledge is the essence and substance of all religious experience,” positioning religion as a

⁶¹ Marshall Vian Summers, “The Lineage of the Messenger,” *The New Message from God*, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.newmessage.org/the-message/volume-1/new-messenger/lineage-messenger>. The use of articles preceding the names of these figures is an interesting linguistic quirk of New Message revelations. In a number of revelations, these “the”s are included. However, Jesus and Muhammad are referred to by name, without an article, in all other contexts I have observed, including Summers’ own commentaries on the subject of past messengers.

⁶² Marshall Vian Summers, “What is Religion?” *Greater Community Spirituality* (Boulder: New Knowledge Library, 1995), 239-240.

practical medium for their highly experiential form of spirituality.⁶³ The revelation describes Knowledge as “your connection to everything. . . . Knowledge is the part of your mind that is spiritual and permanent. It is the part of your mind that knows who you are and why you have come here.”⁶⁴ The first sentence of the first chapter in *Greater Community Spirituality* (a revelation entitled “What is God?”) reads, “In the Greater Community, God is Knowledge.”⁶⁵ The revelation continues to explain that Knowledge, as God, is also “experience” and “the communication of profound insight and recognition from one to another, permeating all manifest life.”⁶⁶ This revelation sheds light on the interesting way the New Message understands God—personified in rhetoric, but understood not as a being but as an amorphous concept “so total and complete that any definition would always falter and fail,” yet still capable of being felt and experienced.⁶⁷ As the language suggests, Knowledge is also analogous to essence in New Message ontology, as it is representative of all the truth in the world—the truth of God, the truth of one’s self, the truth of the world underlying what is observable, and the truth of individual meaning and purpose.

The religious foundations of the New Message are vital in bridging the gap between people and Knowledge. *Steps to Knowledge* asserts that “Knowledge must be experienced to be

⁶³ Marshall Vian Summers, “What is Knowledge?” *Greater Community Spirituality* (Boulder: New Knowledge Library, 1995), 35.

⁶⁴ Summers, “What is Knowledge?” 35.

⁶⁵ Summers, “What is God?” *Greater Community Spirituality*, 1.

⁶⁶ Summers, “What is God?” 1.

⁶⁷ Summers, “What is God?” 1.

realized” because it is impossible to understand intellectually, “by a mere idea or assumption.”⁶⁸

To Students of the New Message, religion is the this-worldly platform upon which (true) spirituality is encountered and experienced. Experience is a cornerstone of the New Message as a religion: the practices prescribed in *Steps to Knowledge* are tailored to facilitate the experience of Knowledge, God, and the true nature of the universe. As one revelation in *Relationships and Higher Purpose* claims, “You experience God through discovering and carrying out your purpose for being here.”⁶⁹ Opening oneself up to religious experience through the practice of *Steps to Knowledge* is presented as the only effective road to strengthen Knowledge.

One of the most important kinds of experience in the New Message are relationships. In the New Message, relationship has a deeper, spiritual meaning beyond its colloquial definition. A New Message relationship goes “beyond the normal parameters of human interaction to a state of recognition, union, and achievement with others that meets the greater needs of your soul and your purpose for being here.”⁷⁰ Step 130, titled “Relationships will come to me when I am prepared,” explains, “As you have relationships with one another on a personal level, you also have relationships on the level of Knowledge.”⁷¹ I will borrow the phrase “relationships of Knowledge” from the New Message to help clarify the two types of relationship, both of which are relevant to the lives of practitioners, though relationships of Knowledge clearly have greater

⁶⁸ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 197

⁶⁹ Marshall Vian Summers, *Relationships and Higher Purpose: Finding Your People, Your Purpose, and Your Mission in the World* (Boulder: New Knowledge Library, 2008), 5.

⁷⁰ Summers, *Relationships and Higher Purpose*, v.

⁷¹ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 130.

spiritual significance.⁷² The difference between an ordinary relationship and a relationship of Knowledge is the degree of spiritual “productivity” it generates, so to speak.

Relationships in the New Message can and ideally should be spiritual bonds which further the reclamation of Knowledge in the physical world. Relationship is explicitly linked with Knowledge and God (which the New Message conflates). The revelation “What is God?” describes God as “the experience of total relationship.”⁷³ It would follow then that “the experience of total relationship” is analogous to Knowledge. This demonstrates the strong religious connotations that relationship carries in the New Message.

Though *Steps to Knowledge* does not focus on relationships of Knowledge in a majority of its lessons, the concept nevertheless appears linked with Knowledge in numerous Steps throughout the 365-part volume. Relationship is often mentioned in passing as an unquestioned and intrinsic part of human experience, as in Step 88, which encourages the student to “think of life as an inclusive network of evolving relationships.”⁷⁴ The Steps that delve deeper into its role in religious life describe these relationships of Knowledge as mutually constructive and necessary for spiritual advancement. Part of the New Message’s understanding of relationships—both mundane relationships and deeper relationships of Knowledge—is that all of them are about learning and teaching. Step 259 explains, “You have come to teach. All you have been doing is teaching since you arrived here. Your thoughts and your behavior are the vehicles for teaching....

⁷² Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 263. The phrase I use does appear in this Step, but relationships of Knowledge are referred to simply as “relationships” in New Message texts. Interestingly, this word appears uncapitalized despite its important position in New Message practice.

⁷³ Summers, “What is God?” 1.

⁷⁴ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 88.

Throughout every stage of your life you have taught, for teaching is the natural function of demonstrating life.”⁷⁵ As all life is demonstrated as teaching, it follows that all life is understood through learning. Step 304 reminds the reader to “Remember that you are always a student—every day, every hour and every moment. Therefore, as you become more conscientious, you must select what you will learn. Here you are given a real choice, for you are either a student of Knowledge or you are a student of confusion.”⁷⁶ Any relationship can help one learn and develop their engagement with Knowledge, but a true relationship of Knowledge would be one which mutually furthers the teaching and learning of Knowledge. Because of this, curating one’s relationships and strengthening relationships of Knowledge is an important part of the New Message’s practices.

Relationships are further expounded in *Relationships and Higher Purpose: Finding Your People, Your Purpose, and Your Mission in the World*. Relationships can be incredibly powerful—some kinds more so than others—but the true power of relationship is its facilitation of Knowledge. The chapter on “Your Relationship with Others” explains that “Relationship with others is the environment in which true learning occurs.”⁷⁷ In relating to others, this revelation advises that all interactions or observations of others can and should be a learning experience, or an opportunity to develop one’s Knowledge. This revelation illustrates the difference between a relationship and a relationship of Knowledge thusly: “It is possible for people to spend great periods of time interacting while only fortifying their ideas and judgements about one another.

⁷⁵ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 259.

⁷⁶ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 304.

⁷⁷ Summers, *Relationships and Higher Purpose*, 23.

As a result, there is little or no genuine experience of relationship and love.”⁷⁸ A genuine relationship of Knowledge is more than an interpersonal connection; it is a relationship between essential selves that is ongoing and constructive.

Relationships of Knowledge in the New Message do not only include relationships with other Students or other people. One’s relationship with God and with one’s own self are also included under this umbrella of relationships of Knowledge. It can also include relationships with individuals one has never met face-to-face, such as members of one’s Spiritual Family. The revelation “Your Relationship with Your Spiritual family” explains that “your Spiritual Family is comprised of both the relationships that you have fully reclaimed thus far in your overall evolution in physical life and those relationships you are meant to reclaim now and in the future.”⁷⁹ Relationships are “reclaimed” in the New Message just like Knowledge is “reclaimed,” because these are understood to already exist, and the responsibility of the Student is to solidify these relationships by seeking them out and developing them. Not only are ordinary relationships sources of Knowledge and growth, but certain relationships can also have the potential to hold greater eschatological significance through direct advancement of one’s Spiritual Family, demonstrating the immense spiritual weight relationship can hold in the New Message. Further, these relationships are not all interpersonal ones. As the same revelation explains, “Some members of your Spiritual Family are in this world at this time, some of them are in other [extraterrestrial] worlds and some of them are not in physical reality at all.”⁸⁰ The revelation later

⁷⁸ Summers, *Relationships and Higher Purpose*, 25.

⁷⁹ Summers, *Relationships and Higher Purpose*, 41.

⁸⁰ Summers, *Relationships and Higher Purpose*, 41.

states, “You will share thoughts with one another because your minds are joined,” showing how different degrees of relational closeness is not affected by physical distance.⁸¹

Soteriology

For the New Message from God, salvation comes through the fulfillment of individual purpose. The New Message follows a familiar model of salvation through devotion, wherein religious practice will eventually pay off in some significant way. The promise of the New Message is that study and continued practice will lead to Knowledge.

The idea that Knowledge is salvific in the New Message is bound up in the complex intersection of divinity, practice, and the restrictive nature of earthly reality. To fully understand this, it is necessary to take a quick detour into the nature of the world we live in as part of a larger cosmology that informs the New Message’s beliefs. The current reality we live in is defined as a state of Separation. *Steps to Knowledge* only alludes to Separation once by name: Step 23, entitled “I want to be separate to be unique,” claims that “You want to be separate because this defines your self; your self is defined in terms of separation, not in terms of inclusion. Separation is the source of all your pain and confusion of mind.”⁸² Because of the incomplete nature of this existence, the self can only be comprehended through the lens of a discrete subjectivity, and therefore that experience of subjectivity necessarily shapes human motivation. Later Steps do refer to the state of Separation, though not by name. A more detailed explanation of the Separation can be found in the revelation entitled “The Separation,” published

⁸¹ Summers, *Relationships and Higher Purpose*, 44.

⁸² Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 13.

in the New Message's *The One God*. Here, the state of Separation is defined by "living... in physical reality, in time and space," which is unfulfilling and inherently "miserable" without a connection with one's spiritual nature and Knowledge.⁸³ This is in deep contrast with the ineffable "Ancient Home" (also referred to as one's "Source"), described in Step 186 as "a pure experience of life and inclusion."⁸⁴

Because the New Message teaches that intelligent life stems from the Ancient Home, a parallel dimension in which all minds are connected and individuals are not distinct, the experience of being subjective entities here in our world is an unnatural and limiting state.⁸⁵ Knowledge and all its accompanying benefits allow one to better connect with the Ancient Home from which all minds originated. The omnipotence of Knowledge as a "Greater Force for good in the world" is the underlying reason for its ability to save.⁸⁶ The inherent discordance of existing as "a spiritual Being in a physical reality" is the greatest obstacle to human salvation, and this is in large part due to the inability for physical reality and all its symptoms—emotions, society, boundedness, and so forth—to reflect the true reality that surpasses this dimension. The New Message posits that human understanding of our world, then, is not necessarily rooted in "true" reality (in part because it is hidden from human perception, and in part because it surpasses the human ability to comprehend), but is instead an *imagined reality* based upon human fear and

⁸³ Marshall Vian Summers, "The Separation," *The New Message from God*, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.newmessage.org/the-message/volume-1/one-god/the-separation>.

⁸⁴ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 186.

⁸⁵ Summers, "The Separation."

⁸⁶ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 233. The Step further elaborates, "You are part of a Greater force for good, for this force is joined and directed by Knowledge."

idealism. Step 249, entitled “Alone I can do nothing,” explains that “The only thing that can be made alone is fantasy, and in this a great deal has been produced. But even this is shared and fortified as each individual fortifies it within his or her own imagination. Therefore, even illusion is shared and substantiated through relationship.”⁸⁷ This imagined reality is incompatible with Knowledge, as Knowledge would easily disprove the constructs of this reality. Its restrictive and damaging consequences are conveyed through careful diction in *Steps to Knowledge*: “What is hell but life without God and life without Knowledge? [Hell] is life imagined, that is all.”⁸⁸

The root of the constructs which make up our shared imagined reality is the loss of Knowledge in the world. Step 213 teaches, “You do not understand the world. You only entertain judgements about it and then attempt to understand your judgements.”⁸⁹ *Steps to Knowledge* identifies this as the cause of great confusion among humanity. Confusion here is a relatively benign state; Step 221 assures the Student it is “merely a sign that you are realizing the limitations of your own ideas and assumptions.”⁹⁰ This is normal, and no cause for alarm. The successive Step emphasizes that the world at large is confused, as “How can the world be certain when the world is without Knowledge?”⁹¹ Confusion is a natural state arising from the tension between the underlying “true” reality and our fuddled perceptions of reality that shape the way we engage with the world. *Steps to Knowledge* recommends that “You must give [your own

⁸⁷ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 249.

⁸⁸ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 251

⁸⁹ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 213.

⁹⁰ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 221.

⁹¹ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 222.

ideas and assumptions] up to allow Knowledge to become apparent to you.”⁹² Living within this imagined reality of constructs and assumptions is not the correct way of living, in terms of both personal fulfillment and one’s moral responsibility to the world. Only developing a stronger relationship with Knowledge can remove these illusory veils and inspire one to correct action.

Step 276 bears the title “Knowledge is my salvation.” This Step affirms that Knowledge is inherently salvific due to its capacity to illuminate. The Step begins:

Knowledge is your salvation, for it leads you out of your hopeless predicament which is born of attempting to live in fantasy and imagination. It leads you into the brightness and the clarity of reality. It guides your action and your thinking so that both may be effective and lead to true self-realization. Thus, God has given you the greatest possible gift: the means within yourself to correct all error, to resolve all confusion and conflict and to set your life on a true course that is aimed at your true destiny.⁹³

This mirrors the description of “mental magic” provided by Albanese: “the mental powers of imagination and will can affect and change the material order, abolishing apparent flaws by realizing its unity with a cosmic Source.”⁹⁴ Students can change and affect the material order, though it is important to note that this Step, and other references throughout *Steps to Knowledge*, frames salvation not in terms of death and afterlife, but rather as the opportunity to conduct one’s present life with clarity and purpose after you are saved from the “confusion and conflict” which clutter one’s thoughts and motivations. This is not to say that there is no conception of afterlife in the New Message; “The Separation” explains quite clearly that this Separated world is a small part of “that Greater Reality from which you have come and to which you will return.”⁹⁵ If one

⁹² Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 221.

⁹³ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 276.

⁹⁴ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 7.

⁹⁵ Summers, “The Separation.”

fails to fulfill their purpose here in Separation, one runs the risk of returning to try again.⁹⁶ However, this is presented more as an inconvenience compared to the hell-like crisis that is living an illusory life in a Separated world.

So, the New Message posits, reclaiming Knowledge is necessary for both personal happiness and the good of the world. Examining the salvific powers of Knowledge reveals an important underlying premise of the New Message—that Knowledge is analogous to enlightenment, and is therefore a prerequisite to any religiously correct action. This is particularly important to keep in mind when considering the forms that practice takes in the New Message and the way that practice is viewed in the context of the grander universe.

Practice as Service

Religious practice in the New Message most prominently takes the form of individual meditative exercises. The primary practice is the study of *Steps to Knowledge*. Adherence to this program ideally involves studying one Step per day over the course of one year, repeated annually. The introduction to *Steps to Knowledge* does encourage Students to repeat the same Step as needed if they experience difficulty with it, and reassures the practitioner that a lapse in practice is fine as well.⁹⁷ *Steps to Knowledge* is intended to provide guidance and structure, and “offers a new spiritual understanding and preparation that are needed to activate each person’s

⁹⁶ Summers, “The Separation.” The New Message views reincarnation as a fairly complex system, in which “sentient” beings, like humans, can move between this world and the Ancient Home between lives, with the expectation that fulfilling a given mission may end this cycle. Non-sentient beings, like animals, are said to remain in this world.

⁹⁷ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, vii-ix.

spiritual powers and worldly abilities.”⁹⁸ In other words, the program provided in *Steps to Knowledge* is intended to reify, through practice, the spiritual grounds upon which the New Message from God is built.

The purpose of practice in the New Message corresponds with the purpose of the self, and is centered on the idea of the physical self as a vehicle to “express Knowledge.”⁹⁹ Individual purpose is first categorically defined in Step 136, which bears the affirmation “My purpose is to reclaim my Knowledge and to allow it to express itself in the world.”¹⁰⁰ Earlier Steps serve to build a foundation for this more concrete premise. Step 65, for example, begins, “You have come to the world to work. You have come to the world to learn and to contribute,” which mirrors the purpose stated in Step 136, and also ties this purpose with labor and responsibility.¹⁰¹ Consider also Step 61, which assures Students, “Love gives of itself through you when you are ready to be its vehicle of expression. You do not need to try to be loving.... Love within you will express itself, for it is born of Knowledge within you, of which it is a part.”¹⁰² Not only does this stand as a rather uplifting affirmation of the inherent goodness of Knowledge in the hands of humanity, it also illustrates the way Knowledge (and all of its related components such as love) will naturally “express itself” in the correct manner without effort on the part of the Student. The Student’s foremost religious responsibility is to work toward strengthening one’s Knowledge through the prescribed practices in *Steps to Knowledge* and other texts; after this, Knowledge does the rest.

⁹⁸ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, ix.

⁹⁹ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 201.

¹⁰⁰ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 136.

¹⁰¹ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 65.

¹⁰² Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 61.

The simple act of reading and reflecting on your daily Step, for example, can still be a significant contribution to the world.

Step 349 describes religious service *vis-a-vis* Knowledge as the most fulfilling thing one can do. It explains that “Your past has been frustrated... because you have attempted to serve things without foundation and meaning. You have attempted to identify with things without purpose and direction. This has rendered to you the feeling that you have no purpose, meaning or direction.”¹⁰³ Through following the teachings of the New Message, practicing the Steps to Knowledge, and living life such that Knowledge is best able to express itself, a Student of the New Message can serve their divinely-ordained purpose and find happiness. Conversely, “If your purpose is not being served and furthered, you will feel alienated from yourself, and you will fall into the darkness of your own imagination.”¹⁰⁴ A relationship with Knowledge, therefore, assists Students with strengthening their relationship with their self. Knowledge is also cause for more simple happiness. Step 225 teaches that “you must be very serious with yourself as you are learning now to become a vehicle for Knowledge, and you may be very happy and lighthearted that Knowledge is with you.”¹⁰⁵ The New Message values seeming contradictions like this, which reflect the vast array of possibilities in the universe. In their words, “A mind that is serious in its outward direction and lighthearted in its internal delight will be a mind that is fully integrated. This will be a mind where Heaven and Earth touch.”¹⁰⁶ Personal fulfillment or

¹⁰³ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 349.

¹⁰⁴ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 311.

¹⁰⁵ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 225.

¹⁰⁶ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, 225.

salvation is not the only reason to devote oneself to this practice, as service is presented first and foremost as a responsibility to *others*. The spiritual work that New Message Students engage in, then, is not just a journey of personal growth and salvation, but an effort of service for the world at large.

The way individual, internal practice becomes externally-directed “service” is reliant on the influence and power of what the New Message calls “the mental environment.” The mental environment is what it sounds like it would be: a parallel environment to our physical one in which mental energies have a palpable influence over all individuals regardless of their awareness that this environment exists. Just as in Albanese’s description of the metaphysical mind, the mental environment gives the mind a wide reach in a space interconnected with the space in which the body operates. Somewhat paradoxically, the mental environment is considered a part of the “physical” world—it is unobservable through ordinary sensory means, but it does have influence over the material world and exists only in the state of Separation. It provides an avenue for Knowledge to exert its influence over others, for example. Step 113 explains that “Any mind that is more resolved than yours can persuade you and cast an influence upon you.... Minds have relative degrees of influence upon one another, depending upon their concentration and depending upon the kind of influence they exert.”¹⁰⁷ Likewise, Step 203 presents the following as “a fundamental truth”: “Weaker minds are influenced by stronger minds.... Beyond the physical, this does not hold true, but in physical life this is the case. That is why you are engaged now in making your mind strong and learning to respond to

¹⁰⁷ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 113.

Knowledge.”¹⁰⁸ In this case, Knowledge can serve as a self-sustaining tool to strengthen the mind and keep negative mental persuasions at bay. As an individual further develops their relationship with Knowledge, their ability to express Knowledge in an influential way increases as well. Step 318 explains how “as you become the recipient and the representative of Knowledge and as you become the vehicle for Knowledge’s expression in the world, you will have the power to activate and to influence all who need to receive Knowledge within themselves.”¹⁰⁹

The actions of a Student of Knowledge also contribute to their Spiritual Family, described in *Steps to Knowledge* as “your small learning group that have [sic] been working together... in order to cultivate and advance their members so that your group may join with other groups, and so forth.”¹¹⁰ All the smaller Spiritual Families aim to eventually unify into one single Spiritual Family. In this sense, an individual’s practice is an act of service to their Spiritual Family, “for you have come into the world not only to advance yourself and the world but to advance your Spiritual Family.”¹¹¹ A Student’s relationship with their Spiritual Family is one of service.

¹⁰⁸ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 203. “The physical” in this context is in reference to the physical, Separated reality in which we live, in which the self takes the form of a discrete being, as opposed to the more abstractly-formed and -described Ancient Home or Source to which we will return. The mental environment, for example, is thought of as part of the “physical” world, as it assumes discrete individuals and an external environment in which interactions occur, as opposed to the Ancient Home where beings are not separate.

¹⁰⁹ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 318.

¹¹⁰ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 186.

¹¹¹ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 345.

To the New Message, small actions hold much greater significance than grand gestures. Take for example Step 331, which affirms “What is small expresses that which is great.”¹¹² *Steps to Knowledge* tells the reader, “You have come to serve the world in its present needs,” but the forms this service takes should not be attempts to “fix” the world as we see it.¹¹³ This aspect of New Message orthopraxy is rooted in the idea that this temporary world is an illusory one—not in terms of physical “realness,” but in the way we perceive our reality and create value and meaning within it. As such, actions aimed toward social or environmental causes, for example, are not necessarily bad, but are likely misguided because the values which drive these actions stem from “what *you* think or hope for or want for yourself or your world” (emphasis added) rather than from Knowledge.¹¹⁴ Instead, the impulses a Student might feel to work toward good should be focused toward being a Student of Knowledge, helping and connecting with other individuals, and allowing “Knowledge to express itself” while carrying out the day-to-day activities necessitated by physical life in modern society.¹¹⁵

The New Message considers it axiomatic that “You can only practice,” because “Life is practice.”¹¹⁶ In the text of Step 80 where this declaration is found, the word “practice” is understood as the actions one carries out in the service of *something*; whether that something be conscious or unconscious, important or trivial, right or wrong, it is still practice. With this definition in mind, it follows that “you will practice regardless of whether you have a

¹¹² Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 331.

¹¹³ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 92.

¹¹⁴ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 3.

¹¹⁵ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 37.

¹¹⁶ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 80.

curriculum... Therefore, We [the Angelic Assembly] give the curriculum which you may now practice. It will replace the practices that have confused and belittled you.”¹¹⁷ This Step reaffirms the importance of orthopraxy, meaning in this case following the Steps to Knowledge and living a life as much in line with the New Message’s suggestions as one can. I use the word “orthopraxy” loosely here, as the only true barrier to belonging is the practice of the Steps.

In the ideal life of a New Message Student, practice is seamlessly woven into everyday activity. Practice takes the form of the intentional study of one’s Step of the day, but also includes more innocuous actions and behaviors. The mere act of living with Knowledge in this Separated world is religious action because of the influence it has in the mental environment, and the wider benefit to one’s Spiritual Family. A Student of the New Message strives toward a life which is at once wholly spiritual and wholly mundane—a life in which every action is actuated by Knowledge. According to the New Message, individuals have no choice whether or not they practice. Where they can make a consequential choice is *what* they practice. *Steps to Knowledge* puts it quite succinctly: “You can only practice. Therefore, practice for good.”¹¹⁸

Conclusion

The New Message is a religion which encourages interpretation, not just of its texts, but of its reality. The movement’s texts lay the cosmological foundations against which Students can compare and assess their personal experiences. Because experience is such an important part of developing one’s relationship with Knowledge in this Separated world, the experiences of

¹¹⁷ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 80.

¹¹⁸ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 80.

Students, and Students' interpretations of these experiences, are what drive their actions. The reality inhabited by Students of the New Message is not the same as the reality of those who are comfortably acclimated to the norms of the modern day. As a 1980s pop sensation once sang, we are living in a material world. Students of the New Message, however, live in a metaphysical world, in which material matters are not the only things to be concerned with, material appearances are often deceiving, and mental actions have far greater consequences than material ones. This can result in misunderstandings like the ones we saw at the beginning of this chapter.

The threads I found on Reddit were full of criticisms much less measured than those I shared at the beginning of this chapter. Most were polemical in nature, though the occasional attempt to refute the New Message on its own grounds slipped through. These attempts, though, were also based on fundamental misunderstandings of the New Message's postulates. Many commenters shared the impression that the New Message must also follow biblical narratives, attempting to use Bible passages to disprove the veracity of the movement.¹¹⁹ The commenters on Reddit were unable or unwilling to accept the incongruity between the way they understand the world and the way the New Message does. While modern scholars of new religions do not exhibit the same rancor toward the movements that serve as their subjects as these Reddit users did, they do share a certain rationalized outlook on the world that can contradict those of the religions they study.

¹¹⁹ For example, JustAnotherFD, comment on "My name is Marshall Vian Summers and I am a spiritual leader. I proclaim to be the Messenger of God for this time and the times to come. Ask me anything.," *Reddit*, comment posted on September 5, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/IAMa/comments/51azb5/my_name_is_marshall_vian_summers_and_i_am_a/d7alrj1/, accessed August 1, 2019.

The New Message eschews the humanmade dichotomies that position things like joy and solemnity, stillness and action, separation and connection, or the sacred and profane as contradictory constructions, and therefore can appear to be filled with contradictions. Without considering this perspective, it does little good to try to puzzle out the processes by which Students come to believe. As Orsi points out in “Everyday Miracles,” “our current critical vocabulary encodes such dualism, reifies discrete segments of experience, and erects boundaries that do not exist in the real world and that belie the protean nature of religious creativity.”¹²⁰ To look at a community of believers in its full context is to consider not only the history, culture, and environment in which it and its members exist, but the culture and the relationships they create and actualize through practice. The following chapter will touch on just this: the culture and community that Students of the New Message have made for themselves, and the ways they experience and comprehend their relationships in a highly relational universe.

¹²⁰ Orsi, “Everyday Miracles,” 11.

CHAPTER THREE

PRAXIS

The key role that relationships play in the experiential practices of the New Message poses an interesting conundrum for a researcher interested in the social cause-and-effect approach to studying religious communities. As the previous chapter revealed, various relational possibilities exist in the New Message's complex cosmological matrix of possibilities, which can differ from our normative understandings of social relationships. Students aim to strengthen and further relationships of Knowledge with other people and otherworldly presences in their Spiritual Families; this is seen as religious action as it furthers the eschatological goals of the movement.

This chapter will examine various modes of practice in the New Message, and argue that a Student's relationships with the presences in their life should be considered social, rather than merely conceptual or rhetorical, because of Students' understandings of presence as real and the social effects these presences have. To this end, I will use evidence from my interactions and observations within the New Message, building on the cosmological premises established in the previous chapter. This chapter will demonstrate the variety of possible relationships that can and do exist in the New Message, and the different social implications of each. I will first examine the relationships between Students in the Boulder community and beyond through a brief history of Tuesday night meditation to illustrate how the community of Students work together to create religious space. I will then explore the various ways relationships of Knowledge are understood

to demonstrate how these relationships, both near and very far, are embodied by Students through their practices.

Tuesday Night Med

Tuesday night meditation began as a local gathering. Students in the area would congregate in the Boulder-based Sanctuary once a week and “enter Stillness” together for thirty minutes. Because meditation began at the same time every week, remote members could also meditate concurrently, regardless of distance and time zone. When I first began to attend, these meditations loosely followed the same structure week by week. A Student would volunteer to lead meditation in advance. They would sit on the platform at the front of the Sanctuary facing the gathering of Students. Beside them on this platform stands an end table displaying a copy of *Steps to Knowledge* and a candle that is lit every Tuesday evening. The volunteer would welcome the assembled Students, lead the room in “surrounding and protecting themselves with the love and grace of God,” and then read a Step aloud. Conventionally, the Student would read the Step they were practicing for the day. Often, but not every time, the Student would include some of their own thoughts and interpretations of the Step and its significance in their life and religious journey. All those present would then be prompted to remind themselves of their own Steps of the day, and then meditation would begin. Following the thirty minute period of Stillness, gratitude would be sent to the Messenger and his family before meditation concluded with a synchronized benediction of “Nasi Novare Coram” (explained below).

The material culture visible in the New Message’s Sanctuary reveals the relative insignificance of the material to New Message practice. The display on the end table mirrors the

other items that adorn the Sanctuary and adjoining offices of the New Message. Most prominently exhibited are various published New Knowledge Library books in various languages, and gifts from more artistically-inclined Students in commemoration of Marshall Summers. I see this decor as an elevation of the eponymous message of the New Message—a celebration of the media through which it is transmitted. That the only two annual holidays celebrated by the New Message are the Messenger’s Vigil in commemoration of Marshall Summers’ birthday (a lighthearted four-day affair with a lot of singing), and the twenty-day Steps Vigil mirroring the twenty days Summers spent receiving *Steps to Knowledge*, only adds further support to this hypothesis. Centering *Steps to Knowledge* at the front of the Sanctuary also reaffirms this specific text’s central position in the movement’s practice. Tuesday night med itself engages numerous metaphysical elements of the New Message, focusing on the various practices prescribed in *Steps to Knowledge* like Stillness, the sharing of Knowledge between people, the manipulation of the mental environment, and of course the daily Steps practice itself.

Nowadays Tuesday night meditation follows a similar pattern, but has adopted a more official veneer. Still a Student-led endeavor, Tuesday night med now follows a somewhat more formalized, or perhaps one could say ritualized, structure. The most perceptible change is that each meditation is now livestreamed onto the New Message’s community website so that remote members can join in the material environment (visually and aurally, at least) as well as the mental environment. This also allows them to be present for the reading of the Step that precedes meditation, and the additional revelation read aloud after. During the thirty minute period of Stillness, the camera pans away from the Student leading the week’s meditation to rest on the end table that houses the text and candle. The broadcast, which originally began in response to a

need for community solidarity during a health scare Marshall Summers experienced in 2018, is likely a major factor in the decisions that formalized the script used for leading Tuesday night meditation.¹²¹

One other notable addition to Tuesday night med since its overhaul is that now, the livestreamed meditations no longer end with transmissions of love and gratitude to Marshall Summers and a recited “Nasi Novare Coram.” Now, after sending these aforementioned energies to Summers and his family, the assembled crowd in the Sanctuary and online are instructed to send strength or another appropriate quality to someone in their lives who they feel should have it. Only then is meditation concluded, and the livestream disconnected.

The practice of sending qualities may be a recent addition to Tuesday night med, but it is a practice that is described in *Steps to Knowledge* as “an active form of prayer.”¹²² The practice is first prescribed in Step 121, “Today I am free to give.” The text instructs:

In each of your two practices, with your eyes closed, bring to mind individuals and give to them what you know they need. Do not try to solve their problems for them. Do not try to strengthen a preferred outcome, for you cannot usually know the right outcome for any other person. But you can always give strength of character and strengthen their faculties of mind. This will give you your own sense of purpose and will reassert these qualities within yourself, for you must possess them to give them, and in giving them you realize that they are in your possession already.¹²³

The way others are brought into practice here is just one example of how individual practice is understood as social action in the New Message. Through practice, one betters their relationship with Knowledge. This Knowledge will allow one to improve themselves in small and big ways.

¹²¹ Marshall Summers is now doing quite well.

¹²² Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 122.

¹²³ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 121.

The Student is then empowered to give gifts of these improvements to others. This is one of several ways that relationships of Knowledge can be developed and experienced. Note also how giving is seen as reciprocal here, as the New Message teaches that to give of yourself reaffirms and strengthens your connection with what you give.

Practice is inherently a social action for the New Message regardless of the intentional sending of gifts. Practice is a shared experience, “for every mind that attempts to engage itself with Knowledge strengthens all other minds in doing so as well. In this, you cast your influence upon the world. In this, all others who seek to serve a true purpose cast their influence upon you.”¹²⁴ Take for example Step 232, which begins,

For your calling to emerge in your life, it is not merely your own development that is essential, but the development of others with whom you will be directly engaged. Because your purpose in life involves your engagement with others, it is not a singular pursuit.... In reality, there is no individual who is completely separate from other individuals because individuality has meaning only in terms of expressing that which binds and joins all life.¹²⁵

Here, “that which binds and joins all life” refers to relationships of Knowledge; later in this Step the reader is advised that in practice, “Because your application strengthens one another, you are already in relationship; you are already influencing one another.”¹²⁶ When people around the world (and throughout the universe) engage with Knowledge through their practice, they are practicing together. In turn, they are able to bolster the power of each other’s practice. Thus, the ostensibly individual practices of meditation and studying *Steps to Knowledge* are revealed to be social activities that connect the individual Student with a wider and often unseen community of

¹²⁴ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 212.

¹²⁵ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 232.

¹²⁶ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 232.

believers and practitioners. The social aspect of the New Message's practice is evident through the forms practice takes, and made possible by the interconnected reciprocity of the New Message's universe.

A downside to the formalization and broadcast of Tuesday night med, in my view as researcher and relative newcomer at least, is that the more intimate and personal element of the gathering wherein the meditation leader would share their reflections on their Step has more or less ended. Occasionally, the meditation leader will speak further on their experiences after the livestream has been disconnected; often the assembled group will remain in Stillness with each other for some time after meditation has formally concluded, and this would be the time to share personal stories if the urge should arise. There are other avenues for Students to share their lives and experiences with each other across distance, of course—the community website being the foremost space in which these connections are made—but Tuesday night med does remain a comfortably local space for this kind of interpretation to occur.

When meditation leaders do share a bit of themselves at Tuesday night med, it is often unscripted and highly emotional. On one particularly emotional evening, Beth, a longtime Student of the New Message, reflected on the relationships she had developed within the Worldwide Community of the New Message. Her best friend, Deidra, was among those assembled. Beth singled her out, thanking her for her friendship. “I have no doubt that you are a part of my Spiritual Family,” she said, dabbing at her cheeks with a tissue. Deidra nodded at her, tears in her own eyes. Sharing experiences at Tuesday night meditation is a form of practice that is supported by the New Message, though to my knowledge it is not explicitly prescribed in any revelation. The introduction to *Steps to Knowledge* “[recommends] that you find others with

whom you can share your practice and experience. This maximizes your opportunity for learning.”¹²⁷ These thoughts are expressed in a space where it is taken for granted that others are listening, actively, in a way influenced by Knowledge. The rest of us in the audience observed without interruption. I am sure others were moved, as I was, by Beth’s emotion and the certainty with which she communicated her experiences. Even as passive observers, Students in the audience reaffirm how their relationships can be experienced and understood. In a way, this expression of experience and others like it help create the cultural idioms of the New Message. As the gathering began to disband, the thank-yous Beth received for leading meditation were particularly tender.

Although Beth does have many close friends in the community, several of whom she also acknowledged that day, she does not experience their relationships with the same spiritual gravity as her friendship with Deidra. Observing her warm interactions with so many local Students, one would be hard-pressed to identify which of them, if any, is significant enough to stand out to her as a possible member of her Spiritual Family. Only Beth’s and Deidra’s experiences of their relationship carry this weight, and only through their interpretations of this experience can they alone come to the conclusion that they are part of one another’s Spiritual Family.

Relationships with Presence

The reality of presence complicates the ways we can understand Students’ experiences of their relationships. The reality of religious presence has only recently been acknowledged in the

¹²⁷ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, viii.

academic study of religion; as Orsi argues, presence has long been erased from modern religion, and especially the academic study of it. In *History and Presence*, he describes the denial or regulation of presence, in Catholicism particularly, as a modern form of control—as a centralization of authority within the church that requires the lay masses to turn to the church as a conduit of presence. As the Catholic church saw it, “the precincts of presence needed to be guarded against the faithful who were endlessly resourceful in breaching them.... Vatican officials... feared and mistrusted these figures in their relationships with ordinary people, especially when ordinary people claimed to have direct sensory encounters with them.”¹²⁸

The history of this religious tension in premodern and modern Europe sets the stage for the modern conception of “religion,” including what beliefs are normative, which are sectarian, and which are animistic “superstition.” Orsi argues that “expunging ‘superstition’ from ‘religion’ was so crucial to the making of modernity and ‘modern religion,’” including what religions should qualify under the purview of the scientific study of religion.¹²⁹ The tension between the supposed absence of Protestantism and the presence inherent in Catholicism also encapsulated both Catholic and Protestant missions into other cultures with different forms of religious expression, and necessitated a negotiation of what presence means when it comes to defining religion. As such, “emergent understandings of ‘religion’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would not only be free of presence; they would offer a safeguard against it.”¹³⁰ Orsi’s claim is that the exclusion of presence from modern understandings of “religion” was born in

¹²⁸ Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 29.

¹²⁹ Orsi, *History and Presence*, 27.

¹³⁰ Orsi, *History and Presence*, 32.

part from the growing rift between Protestant and Catholic modes of worship. Protestant missionaries in particular saw so-called “indigenous religions” in other lands as similar to Catholic religiosity, which only furthered the division between “modern religion” and the “superstition” Protestants saw all around them both in Catholicism and in farther-flung religious cultures. The growing divide between Western European Catholics and the emerging Protestant sects of this time led to an epistemological shift that removed presence as *real* in the academic study of religion, instead rendering it as imagined or symbolic. The reason the sociology of religion has so often brushed past any consideration of the real presence of deific figures in studies like Barker’s *The Making of a Moonie* is because the notion has long since been removed from academic consideration. Orsi explains, “Presence in this sense contravened ordinary human experience. It was inconsistent with new scientific knowledge in various fields of inquiry. It was inconsistent with modern epistemologies. It erased the distance between heaven and earth.”¹³¹

The New Message from God bridges this gap between heaven and earth. Its metaphysical cosmology and metaphysical practices bring its Students into direct relationships with the otherworldly, and its ufological elements incorporate relationships between earth and the literal heavens and other worlds. A study of this movement must therefore consider relationships with presence, and Students’ negotiations of these relationships, as central elements that shape this religious community. Looking at religious lives and the experiences that constitute them in relational terms, as Orsi describes, is an incredibly helpful way to explore religions like the New

¹³¹ Orsi, *History and Presence*, 31.

Message because its metaphysical cosmology presupposes an interconnected universe wherein individual religious experiences occur within “a mind where Heaven and Earth touch.”¹³²

From the scholar’s perspective, the only observable relationships are the ones we can see taking place locally, on Earth, in physical form. Relationships among individuals, between people and animals, and within communities have been studied by social scientists, extending to concepts as abstract as the relationships between people and the state and other such relationships of power and authority. However, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the relationships that are formed within the New Message can extend to “other worlds” (meaning other planetary societies elsewhere in the universe) or into different dimensions of existence entirely. Why have important relationships like these in the study of new religious movements been reduced to asides like Eileen Barker’s sidelined observation that “some Moonies... believe that they had to join because God guided them into the movement or that it was their duty to follow the Messiah”?¹³³

One night after Tuesday night med I stayed to chat with Henry, a local Student who is involved in community organization within Boulder. He inquired about the progress of my research, and in our conversation I expressed the opinion that the New Message was “very chill.” He chuckled and said, “I never thought of us as ‘chill’ before.” I clarified: all the Students I had met so far seem like very “chill” individuals, but the New Message as a religion and community does carry a palpable sense of urgency. He smiles and nods. “‘Urgency’ is a good word for it.”

¹³² Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 225.

¹³³ Barker, *The Making of a Moonie*, 123.

The value Students find in the New Message as a religion comes from the inherent goodness of Knowledge, but the urgency that the Students feel toward their practice and their lives comes from the forthcoming extraterrestrial Intervention. Students' reasons for responding to the New Message are much like those in Barker's anecdote above. Students come to the New Message because they answered God's call, in whatever way it happened for them, and through the New Message they learned of their two most important duties—first to serve their Ancient Home by engaging with Knowledge, and secondly to serve their current home by playing their part in preparing for the Intervention.

Preparation is the foundational component that makes the New Message from God a new religious *movement*. Its importance is foregrounded in both the prescriptive texts of the New Message and the lived experiences of practitioners. Preparation is situated as a universal religious act within the universally-positioned New Message. Step 170 of *Steps to Knowledge* describes preparation as an “ancient rite.”¹³⁴ This roots preparation in a distant historical authority, suggesting that it preexists all so-called world religions. The underlying spirituality of the New Message positions preparation as one of the most important actions a Student can undertake, because preparation is a form of service. Students of the New Message from God are keenly aware of the impending Intervention and the importance of preparation, and their attitudes toward their religion reflect this sense of urgency. While the orthopraxy of the New Message—service through practice and the “reclamation of Knowledge”—is held as fundamentally moral regardless of the context in which practice is carried out, the looming Intervention stands as a

¹³⁴ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 170.

more pressing motivation for that practice. In other words, Knowledge is why you should practice, but the Intervention is why you should practice *now*.

A Student named Sen once described her perspective on the vast array of topics covered by the New Message to me at a Thanksgiving potluck I was invited to while still new to the community. As an immigrant from mainland China, she hails from an areligious background. Therefore, the appeals to love and obey an omnipotent God did not resonate as urgently with her as did the more concretely-defined events described in the *Allies of Humanity* briefings, a three-part series of “transmissions” sent from the Allies of Humanity to Marshall Summers. Described in one revelation entitled “Who are the Allies of Humanity?” in *The Greater Community*, the Allies of Humanity work to help us earthlings better understand the nature and activities of the Intervention. While these elements are necessarily religious, as they make up a key component of New Message religious thought, these events and these beings are only sacred insofar as the average person is sacred. The New Message from God strongly emphasizes that while all intelligent races in the universe hold the capacity for Knowledge, they should never be confused for salvific or saintly figures, the alien races that represent the Intervention even less so; while the Allies of Humanity feel a similar sacred calling to serve the world (or universe as the case may be) as do the Students of the New Message, the revelations of *The Greater Community* strongly suggest that the Intervention is carried out by stellar populations who have lost their own connections with Knowledge, harmed their planets and societies the same way humanity has begun to harm the Earth, and now must rely on conquest to secure necessary resources for themselves.

To Students of the New Message, extraterrestrial entities are not a distant, centralized authority offering salvation (a popular concept that they vehemently refute—after all, salvation can only come through Knowledge). The New Message’s ufological narratives, their focus on human spirituality, and the ways extraterrestrial life is incorporated in New Message cosmology differ from the archetypal UFO religion discussed in the first chapter whose extraterrestrial deities are creators or moral arbiters of some type. What makes the ufology of the New Message from God unique is the presentation of these “modern myths” (to borrow Jung’s words) as an areligious phenomenon. Otherworldly societies are parallel to ours; they differ only in their pace of development and the path this development has taken them along. The existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life is only relevant to humanity in that we interact with them in various ways. The complex networks that exist in this universe reveal key social assumptions held by New Message Students that contrast with the ways earlier scholarship on UFO religions presupposes a difference between social fact and religious myth.

In the context of the New Message and in wider (“secular”) ufological discourse, extraterrestrials are considered just as real as you or I, and their worlds as real as the one we live in on Earth. However, with no verified empirical proof of their existence, and their position in modern folklore, these extraterrestrial figures are relegated to the realm of the animistic by scholars who study these religions’ histories and narratives. It is a simple task to draw parallels between extraterrestrials in glistening spaceships and old tales of gods in their lofty homes above the clouds, furthering the ease with which these beings are set aside as symbolic, or as modern science-fiction veneers covering old “superstitious” impulses. Moving beyond the conception of

these metaphysical and extraterrestrial beings as symbolic conduits of power and authority is vital for understanding the way New Message Students understand the world they live in.

The Greater Community concerns the Intervention and humanity's emergence into the Greater Community of Worlds, the name given to the interplanetary society brought together by their spacefaring capabilities. We are told that in order to withstand the Intervention, "you must be self-sufficient, you must be united and you must be extremely discreet."¹³⁵ In response to the Intervention, the revelations of the New Message insist that practice and the discovery of Knowledge is key to preventing our otherwise inevitable overthrow by these antagonistic forces—another salvific function of Knowledge. Though at first blush the series of practices laid out in *Steps to Knowledge* seems to have little to do with extraterrestrial life, *The Greater Community* provides a deeper explanation as to why Knowledge is so important to the preservation of global human life. The revelations in *The Greater Community* assert that the greatest terrestrial (and therefore controllable) threat to humanity is humanity itself—the harmful paths along which global society has developed, the fracturing of human unity, and the continued degradation of Earth's natural bounty need to be rectified. To combat these modern ills, it is necessary to strive toward a more spiritual state of being, and so humanity must work to gain Knowledge and resolve the stated problems before the Intervention begins in earnest. As one revelation states, "The great hope for humanity lies in the mysterious power of Knowledge that the Creator has given to each person."¹³⁶ Moreover, this responsibility foisted upon each individual is seen as a *sacred* duty; as the revelation "What Is Your Preparation For?" explains, "God has sent *you* to

¹³⁵ Marshall Vian Summers, *The Greater Community: Contact with Intelligent Life in the Universe* (Boulder: New Knowledge Library, 2017), 110.

¹³⁶ Summers, *The Greater Community*, 115.

take care of everything. Do not sit back and think that the Divine will come and save you. You have come to help save the world, to give humanity a future and to give your race a greater opportunity.”¹³⁷ The way to ensure this future for humanity is to prepare.

The relationships between Students and Allies or Students and the forces of the Intervention are not direct, interpersonal relationships. They are, however, a space in which religious truth and religious meaning are realized. The New Message centers human agency as a powerful force in the physical universe, and these various alien groups interact with humanity in various ways. Therefore, it follows that the actions of humans in response to these extraterrestrial incursions will have consequences for both the planet and the wider universe. The Intervention, for example, is occurring as we speak. It will not be some violent, *War of the Worlds*-style invasion; rather, “It is relying completely on human belief and acquiescence. It is relying upon its influence over human tendencies and human weakness. In the face of human strength, it has little efficacy.”¹³⁸ Much of the resistance to the Intervention, now and in the future, must take place in the mental environment, “which you will need to understand... if you are to interact with other races successfully.”¹³⁹ Although these extraterrestrial races are physically quite distant, their influence within the mental environment, which Students are aware of and engaged in, is known and felt. The Allies of Humanity, on the other hand, are in an even more direct relationship with the New Message from God. The *Allies of Humanity* series is said to have been transmitted directly from the Allies to Marshall Summers via a method not unlike telepathy. Though

¹³⁷ Summers, “What is Your Preparation For?” *Greater Community Spirituality* (Boulder: New Knowledge Library, 1998), 135.

¹³⁸ Summers, *The Greater Community*, 91.

¹³⁹ Summers, *The Greater Community*, 114.

Summers is technically the sole recipient of this direct communication, the message is intended for all of humanity.¹⁴⁰ Because Students of the New Message share a greater connection with spiritual things than the average human by virtue of responding to the New Message, they also enter into a relationship with the Allies by accepting and responding to their message. The knowledge that some of these alien individuals may very well be members of their Spiritual Family brings an added religious gravitas to the relationship.

These relationships with extraterrestrial entities may not be particularly close, but they are eminently transformative. The impact that these relationships have on Students as they practice and learn is where the significance of these presences are located. By positioning themselves as agentic subjects within the New Message's larger cosmology, Students are empowered to negotiate their roles in this spiritual project. To Sen, for instance, the *Allies* texts were what concretized her belief in the New Message. It was not merely the content of their message that had such a profound impact on her life, but the fact that the message was given specifically to her social group, and by extension, to her. This directly invites Sen, and other Students, to engage with these figures, holding the knowledge that these observers are socially "objective" based on their social (and physical) distance, but also spiritually congenious, with similar values. This results in a relationship not unlike that described in Georg Simmel's *The Stranger*. The social role of the stranger, represented in Simmel's example by the traveling trader or European Jew, or in the case of the New Message by a cadre of visiting extraterrestrials, is one which is socially distant yet familiar, and whose viewpoint is "objective" by virtue of their

¹⁴⁰ I imagine three telepathic manila envelopes, each addressed to "Humanity; c/o Marshall Vian Summers."

position as stranger. Simmel describes it as “a particular structure composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement.”¹⁴¹ Thus the Allies, while not in direct contact with Students, inform the intersubjective creation of community and movement in the New Message in the role of the stranger by acting as objective arbiters whose judgements have already been passed directly to the New Message through Summers.

Preparation is aided by yet another vital nonhuman relationship, with the Spiritual Teachers who assist Students from afar. Step 216, for example, assures the Student that “the Spiritual Presence in your life is ever with you, ever available to you and ever reminding you to look beyond your own judgements. It is forever providing for you the support, the assistance and the guidance necessary to minimize the wrong application of your mind and to strengthen the right application of your mind to allow Knowledge to arise within you.”¹⁴² This Spiritual Presence may not be as captivating to the external observer as aliens in UFOs, but to Students their relationships with this presence are more tangible and more important. Consider “Nasi Novare Coram,” the title and topic of Step 296, which is translated to “The presence of the Teachers of God is with me.”¹⁴³ The New Message uses this phrase frequently. It is used at the end of Tuesday night med, and also used to signal the end of a period of stillness at other gatherings such as broadcasts or Vigils. Nasi Novare Coram, sometimes abbreviated as “NNC,” is also used often as a valediction at the end of written correspondence. The frequent deployment

¹⁴¹ Georg Simmel, “The Stranger,” *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* translated by Kurt Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), 404.

¹⁴² Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 216.

¹⁴³ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, Step 296. The Step explains that this phrase is “born of an ancient language that has not originated in any world,” and is meant to resonate with one’s Knowledge, as it connects oneself to their Ancient Home.

of this invocation speaks to the importance of this presence in the New Message. These Spiritual Teachers, as they are also often called, comprise a small part of one's Spiritual Family, so their presence is felt on a deeper level than intellectual and their connection with Students is more than just incidental.

While the New Message does not observably imbue material objects with real presence the way Orsi describes weeping statues and saints' bones within the Catholic imaginary, the presences of angels, Teachers, and other spiritual mentors are still keenly felt. These relationships are even closer than those with the Allies and Interveners, because while extraterrestrials represent a sort of "stranger" relationship, *a la* Simmel, and hold the potential to be more, all relationships with Spiritual Teachers are relationships of Knowledge that are experienced in the "Being" or "Spirit"—the essential self, in other words.¹⁴⁴ The New Message presents a tripartite understanding of the self, wherein "the body serves the mind, and the mind serves the Spirit."¹⁴⁵ Here, Knowledge and the relationships that extend from it are experienced in the Spirit, recognized in the mind, and manifest in the body. To borrow from Orsi, "The materialization of religious worlds includes a process that... [renders] the invisible visible by constituting it as an experience in a body... so that the experiencing body itself becomes the bearer of presence."¹⁴⁶ In the New Message, these practices of embodiment are more noetic—they take place in the mental environment, necessarily supported by individual, practicing bodies. In other words, the presence of these Spiritual Teachers exists in the relationships between Students and the vast

¹⁴⁴ Summers, *Relationships and Higher Purpose*, 14-15.

¹⁴⁵ Summers, *Relationships and Higher Purpose*, 15.

¹⁴⁶ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 74.

universe that surrounds them.

Interpreting Relationships

Like all relationships of Knowledge, these relationships are subjectively experienced, personal, and immensely heartfelt. Patricia Summers, Marshall Summers' wife and matriarch of the New Message from God, has a story she likes to tell at some events. She met Marshall years before the New Message took the form it has now, and not long after their meeting a jarring voice spoke to her: "Remember him, he will only cross your path." In her retellings, without this presence in her ear, the trajectories of her life and Marshall's may have permanently diverged at this point. Instead, she stayed. I watch her face crease with the profoundly felt memory of this voice as she relays this story. This experience was more than a fleeting occurrence to Patricia Summers—it was a real interaction, an instance of divine guidance into Knowledge, the truth of which has only been affirmed and reaffirmed by her ongoing experiences.

Orsi's *Between Heaven and Earth* argues that Catholic saints, brought to life through narrative and belief, can enter into dialogue with believers in their own ways. His first chapter describes how the American Catholic culture that his uncle Sal spent his life enrobed in equipped him with the community's shared "cultural idioms" that function as a means of discursive understanding: "through them, [Sal] could find comfort, consolation, and meaning for himself."¹⁴⁷ Orsi argues that "the crafting of that discourse [should be] understood as a *practice* situated in the social circumstances of the various communities at the time and not simply as a

¹⁴⁷ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 42.

reflection of perennial Catholic theology” (emphasis added).¹⁴⁸ In the New Message, the presences in Students’ lives shape their reality and create understanding in the same way that Blessed Margaret of Castello does for Sal in Orsi’s account. As Students of the New Message find meaning in their encounters with these presences, they are practicing their religion—correctly even, as fortifying relationships of Knowledge and interpreting experience are both a part of New Message orthopraxy—in a way that informs their future actions.

When Students enter into direct relationship with these presences, these relationships become more intimate and tangible. Most of these presences are not experienced as a verbal message as in Patricia Summers’ case. They are instead flashes of inspiration, intuition that turns out to be right, or feelings of support or security from an unseen source. These experiences are understood to be intended specifically for the experiencer in the New Message. This not only validates the direction of their past practice, but also gives Students additional direction in their future practice.

Students of the New Message embody their religion through their understanding and interpretation of religious experiences. Just as Orsi describes early religious training in Catholic youth, “Religious... presence here is not things but practice.”¹⁴⁹ Students of the New Message do not only practice through Stillness, the Steps, and the other exercises or suggestions in the group’s many revelations to facilitate engagement with Knowledge; they also practice through

¹⁴⁸ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 42.

¹⁴⁹ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 75-76. Orsi’s analysis differs from mine here in the very obvious fact that Students of the New Message are not children. The New Message, in fact, does not recommend raising children as Students of Knowledge. Rather, they should be raised in an environment which fosters Knowledge, and once older should be allowed to properly pursue Studenthood when they are ready. Orsi’s Catholic children and Students of Knowledge are similar in that both are understood to be at the earliest stages of religious study and practice.

the course of their everyday lives when they remind themselves of their Studenthood, experience presence in various ways, or hold Knowledge near as they traverse the mundane. Daily life is the medium through which Knowledge is experienced and learned.

Students' own experiences of the world are highlighted as authoritative in the New Message, and these experiences are interpreted in light of the divine authority of the New Message's texts. At the 2018 Steps Vigil I met Elaine, an ethnically Chinese Student from Canada who had a way of infusing fun in all of her expressions and mannerisms. She made the trip to Boulder in a decade-old car, and had reached Fort Collins by the time it broke down. The group of local Chinese ladies who were the most eager to welcome me when I first began attending Tuesday night med were now helping her figure out how to get back to her Airbnb in Gunbarrel. "I think Celetia lives in Gunbarrel," one of them said, "she might know where it is." Summoned by the sound of my name, I verified this. Elaine showed me the address of her Airbnb on her phone. "That's right across the street from me!" I exclaimed. "I'll totally give you a ride." What providence that this worked out the way it did, we all agreed, exchanging a flurry of jokes about the Great Coordination.¹⁵⁰ Elaine and I giggled our way out to my car. We swapped immigration stories on the short drive—she had moved to Canada nearly fifteen years prior. It was there that she discovered the literature of the New Message from God. "I do feel like my life has led me here," she told me. "And I think you too! Coming to Boulder to study

¹⁵⁰ "The Great Coordination" refers to what is essentially God's plan for the universe being put into motion by various other beings including the Angelic Assembly and Students of the New Message. I was quite pleased with myself for holding my own in this referenced exchange. Incidentally, the Great Coordination is another experience "that you must feel, deeply—this Presence, and this abiding sense that your life is really for something greater." Summers, "The Great Coordination," *The New Message from God*, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.newmessage.org/the-message/other-revelations/the-great-coordination>.

religion, and now you have found the New Message through that. The universe works in mysterious ways.”

That the universe is a mystery is not merely an aphorism in the way Elaine means it. To the New Message, life is indeed mysterious; how can it not be when we are capable of understanding so little? The New Message encourages the interpretation of life’s mystery (keeping in mind the limits of human understanding, of course), as Step 36 suggests: “Truly your life is a mystery and, yes, truly it requires that you explore it if you wish to comprehend its purpose, its meaning and its true direction.”¹⁵¹ The New Message’s tenet about interpreting life’s journey in search of truth adds another layer of authority to individual experience. These are messages from God, after all, but here God encourages the Student to see for themselves.

Conclusion

Because the New Message from God centers so much of its religious practice around the primacy of experience, the continued experience of a life suffused with spiritual significance is a necessary social factor in the continuation of the movement. The profundity of Students’ relationships with certain friends and peers and the relationships with presence that occur outside the physical are key social experiences that inform and reaffirm their continued actions in service of Knowledge.

To the Students of the New Message, these presences involve real angels and real aliens. They carry real danger and real assistance not just to the Students who interact with them, but to all of humanity and ultimately all life. As Orsi notes, “To understand any experience, including

¹⁵¹ Summers, *Steps to Knowledge*, 36.

an experience of real presence, involves relationality, conversation, doubt, and ambiguity.”¹⁵²

The dialogical relationships shared among Students, Teachers, Allies, Angels, and Interveners constitute a necessarily complex social web within which meaning and purpose can be found, made possible through the practices of *Steps to Knowledge* and one’s own life experiences.

In the same conversation with Henry that I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I also expressed my interest in writing about relationship. “Have you ever experienced relationship?” he asked me, referring of course to the Knowledge-based variety. I stammered out some statement about how yes I have had close relationships with many friends, and I can talk with them about anything and everything, so maybe; but also no, probably not, actually. Henry seemed politely unenthused by my answer. He was correct in his skepticism, of course; I could not possibly experience a relationship the way the Students of the New Message do: as something inherently spiritual and perhaps, by some external definitions, magical. The reality I occupy is fundamentally different from theirs, for despite my most earnest attempts at practice, I could never say for certain if I felt the presence of my Spiritual Teachers or the feeling of profound certainty that would accompany engagement with Knowledge. When I compare myself against the community I have spent over a year with, however, what is brought to the fore is not my own failings at being a Student of Knowledge, but their successes at the same task.

¹⁵² Orsi, *History and Presence*, 63.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have argued for the efficacy of a lived religion approach to a study of the social dimensions of belief and practice in the New Message from God. There are some who may believe that nonhuman presences and metaphysical realities are constructions that are irrelevant to the day-to-day lives of religious believers, like Orsi's colleague whom he quotes in *Between Heaven and Earth* as saying, "It seems to me that your interpretation has to begin with the recognition, at least to yourself, that imaginary beings do not change men's work schedules or military orders or help women find places to work or to live. This isn't the way the world works."¹⁵³ I disagree with Orsi's (diplomatically unnamed) colleague; this may not be the way *our* world works, as hypercritical modern scholars trained in a post-Enlightenment context where the unseen is considered unreal, but as Orsi shows, it is how the world worked for many in the past, and it is how the world works now for Students of the New Message and others who hold similar worldviews. Brushing aside religious belief as symbolic or delusional adds nothing to our understanding of religious life. Are Students of the New Message delusional, as their online detractors claim? If they are delusional, does it matter? After all, the proof here is in the pudding; whether any or all of the New Message's claims are false, the movement's teachings have still resonated with people all over the world of different ages, nationalities, and religious backgrounds. They are operating in their reality the only way they believe they can.

There is a noticeable divide between academic knowledge and the capital-K Knowledge of the New Message from God, so can we really "communicate something of the essence" of the

¹⁵³ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 150.

New Message, to borrow from Barker, when we analyze the religion through ways of knowing that overlook some of its most vital aspects? A lived religion approach like Orsi's, which accepts and addresses the centrality of presence in the lives of religious actors, allows the scholar to identify the religious significance that is born of these relationships and that guides everyday actions. With this thesis, I hope to have contributed to the study of so-called UFO religions and new religious movements, and the field of religious studies more broadly, by introducing a never-before studied new religious movement that offers unique insights into American metaphysical religion and religious ufology. I have argued that the unique position extraterrestrial life occupies in the wide-ranging social networks of Students complicates the generalities drawn about UFO religions in previous scholarship. In addition, the New Message from God shares many practices and cosmological details in common with the metaphysical currents that Albanese has argued permeate the American religious landscape, and these religious elements hold far greater significance for the movement than do their ufological narratives. I have argued that the significance of relationships in the religious lives of New Message Students, coupled with their experiences of presence, requires a lived religion methodology that accounts for the reality of these presences and their centrality to Students' practice. In this way, I hope this thesis also serves to further the argument that a consideration of presences and practitioners' relationships with them can reveal real, socially-driven effects on their religious actions.

Chapter 1 showed how the study of new religions developed a focus on internal belief that arose precisely because the focus on social action in previous scholarship was not adequately addressing the motivations of religious actors. More recent works like Zeller's *Heaven's Gate* and Westbrook's *Among the Scientologists: History, Theology, and Praxis* are insightful

additions to our understanding of several well-studied and controversial new religious movements, the merits of which can be attributed to their use of a lived religion model.¹⁵⁴

In Chapter 2, I demonstrated the way the social activities and behaviors of New Message Students are dependent on the possibilities generated by the cosmological makeup of their reality. I showed how the metaphysical universe that provides the backdrop for Students' daily lives is filled with possibilities of interaction far beyond what we outsiders understand as "objective" reality. I also illustrated how the concept of spiritual relationships fits into the practices of the New Message from God. When we dismiss these different channels of communication and relationality as myth or fantasy, this limits our ability to analyze relationships as motivating factors for religious action.

The third and final chapter of this thesis analyzed the forms relationships with presence take in the New Message from God. The experience of relationships of Knowledge with people and presence is central to the New Message. In this chapter, I illustrated how these experiences help Students understand where religious significance lies in their lives and concretizes their belief by practicing relationships—with friends and loved ones, other Students, Spiritual Teachers, and more. These practices contribute to the world-making of New Message Students.

As I showed in the first chapter, the study of new religious movements has in the past focused on social factors as a way of explaining how new religious movements came to be. Such approaches can have a great deal of value in sociological inquiries, such as the study of microculture in social movements, but as I argued in chapter three, they leave out important

¹⁵⁴ Zeller does not refer to his method explicitly as lived religion, though as discussed earlier, I see several similarities between his approach and Orsi's, but Westbrook does.

figures within these social networks. Even if we accept the argument that religion is not a *sui generis* phenomenon, that is, if we approach religion under the assumption that it is merely a combination of social factors no different from any areligious combination of social factors, it is still important to account for the influence of sacrality, divinity, or other such suprahuman sources of power and authority in the shaping of social roles and responsibilities in these movements.

It occurred to me during the course of this project that the way I view my relationships with the local community of the New Message from God is very similar to the ways Students of the New Message analyze their relationships. If my friendships with the Students I met are as one-sided as a part of me believes, it does not lessen the value that I have ascribed to them. If these Students' relationships with Knowledge and presence are as one-sided as skeptical outsiders believe, it does not lessen the value that this spirituality has brought to their lives.

There is plenty more work to be done in this area, both regarding the New Message from God as a subject of study and regarding the social significance of religious presences in the lives of religious believers. The New Message from God prides itself on the vast range of topics covered and concerns addressed within its revelations, and this thesis could cover only a fraction of this material. Further studies might address things like the recommended "Four Pillars" of the New Message that Students practice, their use of online resources to build community, or the creative syntax used in the (original, English-language) revelations to convey religious meaning; all topics that tempted me but did not make it into this thesis. A lived religion approach is vital for understanding the social impact of presence, as the influences of these real presences are

visible only through the experiences of religious believers and the sociocultural and cosmological contexts in which they live and practice.

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