

Naked Witness:

A rhetorical analysis of two contradictory presentations of the women of Strong City

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Naked Witness:**

A rhetorical analysis of two contradictory presentations of the women of Strong City

Julia Campbell-Such

This thesis is a rhetorical analysis of two conflicting descriptions of the women who reside in a small New Mexico religious community called Strong City. The first half of the thesis treats a documentary film that was made about this group, called 'The End of the World Cult,' which presents the Strong City community as an abusive 'Cult,' and the women of that community as the brainwashed victims of a manipulative 'Cult' leader. The second half of this thesis presents a very different picture of these women by analyzing the group's own rhetoric that appeared on their website, Strongcity.info. According to their self-presentation, the women of Strong City do not see themselves as manipulated victims but as responsible agents. The purpose of this analysis is to complicate our understanding of these women and their religious context. My larger aim is to use the example of Strong City to talk about the reality of religious difference. This thesis investigates the possibility of talking about difference in a way that respects disagreements about values without abandoning our own critical, ethical perspective.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This thesis is a rhetorical analysis of two conflicting descriptions of the women who reside in a small New Mexico religious community called Strong City. The first half of the thesis treats a documentary film that was made about this group, called “The End of the World Cult,” which presents the Strong City community as an abusive ‘Cult,’ and the women of that community as the brainwashed victims of a manipulative ‘Cult’ leader. The second half of this thesis, however, presents a very different picture of these women by analyzing the group’s own rhetoric that appeared on their various websites. According to their self-presentation, the women of Strong City do not see themselves as manipulated victims but as responsible agents; the Strong City websites include hundreds of pages of material written by these women in which they describe themselves as powerful religious actors.

The purpose of this analysis, however, is not merely to prove that “The End of the World Cult” was wrong about these religious women, but to complicate our understanding of them and their religious context. My analysis relies on contemporary rhetorical theory, in particular the work of Chaim Perlman and Kenneth Burke, who describe all discourse as value-laden and to some degree rhetorical. I intend to use this analysis, therefore, to demonstrate the contingency of these two stories about Strong City. My larger aim is to use the example of Strong City to talk about the reality of religious difference. This thesis investigates the possibility of talking about difference in a way that respects disagreements about values without abandoning our own critical, ethical perspective.

**Messiah and Pedophile?: the trial and conviction of Wayne Bent.**

In a New Mexico courtroom on December 30, 2008, a 67-year-old minister of the Lord Our Righteousness Church named Wayne Bent was legally designated a sex offender, and sentenced to 18 years in prison.<sup>1</sup> Wayne Bent has held a special leadership position in the Lord Our Righteousness Church (LOR) ever since this small group separated from the official Seventh-Day Adventist Church in the late 1980s. Since the late 1990's, his followers have referred to Bent as Michael Travesser, since they believe he has been anointed by God for a special messianic role. In the year 2000, many of them moved with Travesser to a ranch property in Clayton County, New Mexico. This New Mexico property is owned by the LOR Church and has been run communally by its residents since 2004 or 2005. Though not every congregant resides there, this land and the community it supports, which includes about 50-100 men, women and children, has a special significance to this Church, who call this place Strong City. In 2006, Travesser allowed two underage women who resided at Strong City at the time to remove their clothes and lie down with him alone on his bed in his house. Travesser placed his hand over these girls' hearts, on their bare sternums. In one of the cases, Travesser was also naked in his bed, though covered by blankets.<sup>2</sup> In June of 2008, Wayne Bent was charged with two counts of 'Sexual Misconduct with a Minor', and two counts of 'Contributing to the Delinquency of a Minor' on the basis of these events.

The two victims in Travesser's trial were sisters, one fourteen and the other sixteen at the time these events occurred. The older of the two girls testified for the prosecution that although she had interpreted her experiences with Travesser as voluntary

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<sup>1</sup> Judge Baca suspended 8 years of his sentence, so Bent will only serve 10.

<sup>2</sup> Transcripts of the trial are available at [strongcity2.info](http://strongcity2.info)

and non-sexual at the time they occurred, she now felt as though she had been manipulated by Bent into performing sex acts. Though the girls both testified to having initiated the acts in question, the prosecution argued that they were coerced into initiating them because of Michael's authoritative position at Strong City, a position that he had abused by allowing these girls to take off their clothes in his presence. The prosecution further argued that the act of lying naked with these girls was inherently sexual in nature, and proved that Travesser's claim that he was a religious authority was both fraudulent and irrelevant; by definition, his actions were not religious but sexual. Since the girls were too young to consent, any sexual act with them was criminal.

Travesser, however, pled not guilty on all counts. His lawyer mounted a religious freedom defense, arguing that the events in question *were* religious ceremonies and had no sexual content; Travesser was recognized in his community as the son of God, and many of his female followers of all ages had performed this ritual with him as a sign of the vulnerability of the Church in front of God. The testimony of the younger sister, who asked in court to be called by her religious name, Healed, supported this argument. A reluctant witness for the prosecution, Healed testified that she had initiated the ritual with no prompting from Travesser, and that she continued to see her participation in the act as totally voluntary. She testified that lying naked with Travesser was not sexual, but rather a religious ceremony that had affected her positively. She testified that she continued to believe that Travesser was the son of God, that she did not equate Travesser with the human man Wayne Bent, and that she wished above all to be allowed to return to Strong City. Though he was convicted on both counts of 'Contributing to the Delinquency of a

Minor,’ Travesser was convicted on only one ‘Sexual Misconduct’ count. He was acquitted on the ‘Sexual Misconduct with a Minor’ count relating to Healed.

The trial of Michael Travesser therefore raised a number of important questions about religious freedom and responsibility. In particular, the divergent testimony of the young women at this trial points to the complexity of determining what is abuse in cultural and religious contexts that differ from the mainstream. Because it has affected not only the life of Travesser but also, most importantly for my purposes, the lives of the women of Strong City, this trial and the issues that were raised by it present an instructive and complicated example of the process of confronting religious difference. These courtroom proceedings were precipitated and informed by important discourses that circulated about Strong City in various media before Travesser’s arrest, and so it is these discourses that are the main focus of this work.

**Summary: two conflicting presentations of the women of Strong City.**

In most mainstream media accounts about this trial, Travesser and his followers were portrayed as dangerous religious deviants, a portrayal that linked Strong City to a broader popular discourse about the social danger of ‘Cults.’ The most influential depiction of Strong City as a dangerous ‘Cult’ was a 2008 documentary about the group called “The End of the World Cult,” and this film is the subject of the first half of this work. This film draws on influential ideas about marginal religions developed largely by the secular Anticult movement, which has managed to construct these groups as dangerous and illegitimate in the popular imagination. My analysis of this film in part one of this thesis, therefore, demonstrates the way in which “The End of the World Cult” drew on these broader discourses to present a distorted and partial picture of the women

of Strong City, who were portrayed in this film as the helpless victims of Travesser's charisma. Furthermore, I will show how this presentation of the group was re-iterated and improvised on in subsequent representations of the group, bringing the Strong City group to the attention of mainstream mass-media, government and legal authorities, which significantly affected the lives of these religious women.

To a great extent the picture drawn of Strong City in "The End of the World Cult" came to dominate public perceptions of this group. Other depictions of Strong City tended to be ignored or dismissed, including the group's own, prolific, rhetoric about itself on the Strong City websites. While the Strong City rhetoric clearly expresses its own biases, it does demonstrate that the depiction of this group in "The End of the World Cult" obscures certain important elements about the women of Strong City and their participation in the construction and maintenance of their own religious identities and worldviews. The second half of this thesis, therefore, will examine the internet rhetoric of Strong City in order to complicate our understanding of these women. The rhetoric of Strong City demonstrates that these women are not merely subservient victims who have been coerced into a dangerous and repressive situation. Rather, these women are voluntarily involved in the creation of a symbolic world that reflects their values and addresses their particular concerns as religious individuals. My analysis will demonstrate that the unconventional religious perspective of these women is in fact informed by the more conventional, traditional religious and cultural discourses of Christian apocalypticism and Seventh-day Adventism. This does not mean that their values are exactly the same as these more conventional values. Nor does it mean that these values appeal to me, as a secular writer, or that the particular concerns and goals of these women

are concomitant with my concerns and goals. However, it does mean that these women need to be taken seriously as people who are responsible for the things they do, say, and believe.

What follows, therefore, is a rhetorical analysis of two conflicting descriptions of the women of Strong City. This analysis is a rhetorical analysis because it deals with these two representations as persuasive utterances motivated and informed by particular values and situational constraints,<sup>3</sup> rhetoric that is intended to move its audience in certain directions. I will not, therefore, ever treat these representations as merely neutral descriptions of Strong City, or pretend that these utterances give me access to anything more than a window into how these rhetors want Strong City to be perceived by the outside world. This focus reflects my interest in demonstrating how these rhetorical utterances shaped the Strong City story as it progressed, and I wish to foreground the impact of these rhetorical utterances on the experiences of these religious people. Furthermore, my analysis does not entail a theological or religious judgment. I am not at all interested here in whether or not lying naked with Michael Travesser was God's will. I am also not really interested in whether or not the situation at Strong City was abusive in some objective sense, though I am interested in the way in which discourse shapes our understanding of what constitutes abuse. What I am primarily interested in here is

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<sup>3</sup>In his highly influential work on the rhetorical situation, Lloyd Bitzer identifies three elements to the rhetorical situation, which the rhetor must negotiate in order to be persuasive: the audience, constraints, and, most importantly, an exigence (real or imagined- which amounts to the same thing). Because Bitzer sees the rhetor as fundamentally situated (and not because he denies the capacity of discourse to shape the situation), he argues that 'not the rhetor and not persuasive intent, but the situation is the source and ground of rhetorical activity- and...of rhetorical criticism.' Rhetoric is speech that 'performs some task,' that works to effect real change in the real world. 'In short,' writes Bitzer, 'rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action.' See Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 1-14.

understanding *how* these two interpretations of the women of Strong City were articulated, and *why*.

**Theoretical Approach: a rhetorical analysis.**

My theoretical approach to this material is informed by recent trends in rhetorical theory. Contemporary rhetorical theorists have argued that the domain of rhetoric is the domain of all discourse. They argue that all discourse has important rhetorical elements, regardless of whether that is its primary or explicit intent. Chaim Perelman, for example, has argued that the focus of analytic philosophy on pure logic as the basis of rational thought has led to an artificially limited definition of what constitutes ‘proof.’ If rational thinking was limited to only those things that could be demonstrated by formal logical proofs, he argues, humans would be paralyzed by ambivalence. According to Perelman, human reasoning actually relies on systems of value which provide not objective logical proofs but subjective *justifications* for courses of action.<sup>4</sup>

Effective argumentation, then, never relies purely on logical calculation, which is only one of the tools that human beings use to come to conclusions. Instead, much human reasoning is concerned with calculations of value. These calculations of value, Perelman argues, are what provide justifications, or *good reasons*, to take one course or the other. Human reasoning, therefore, is actually most effective when it mobilizes systems of value. Even arguments that pretend to be neutral investigations into the truth of things (such as much modern philosophy), therefore, are unreasonable unless they appeal to an audience with particular values. Arguments are most persuasive, most

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<sup>4</sup> See Chaim Perelman, “The New Rhetoric: A Theory,” in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, eds. Patricia Bizzler and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: St. Martin’s, 1990).

*reasonable*, when they attend to the values of an audience and provide them with good reasons.

This is why, as rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke argues, we can always find statements of value in “even the most unemotional, scientific nomenclatures.”<sup>5</sup> Burke’s theoretical work stresses the “necessarily *suasive* nature” of all terminologies,<sup>6</sup> treating all language as symbolic action, and the definition of terms as a symbolic act, in the sense that the act of definition “directs the attention” towards certain avenues of meaning rather than others. “Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality,” he writes, “by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality.”<sup>7</sup>

Burke conceives of terminologies as screens through which we view the world. The terminologies we use affect the way we perceive the world, in the sense that they act as both lenses and filters. Burke’s “terministic screens” are not outside of us; they are concepts we actively create, whether “deliberate or spontaneous,” choices we inevitably make when engaged in the production of meaning through language. Often, Burke argues, what we describe as observations about reality are nothing more than the logical “spinning out” of concepts implicit in the definitions we use.<sup>8</sup> The task of Burke’s rhetorical theory, therefore, is in part to identify these screens and then to “track down the kinds of observation implicit in the terminology,”<sup>9</sup> to discover where our attention has been directed to, as well as what it has been directed away from.

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<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1973), 45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

Burke's theory, therefore, treats all language as *motivated* in some respect. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, he writes:

...a rhetorical motive is often present where it is not usually recognized, or thought to belong...there is an intermediate area of expression that is not wholly deliberate, yet not wholly unconscious. It lies midway between aimless utterance and speech directly purposive. For instance, a man who identifies his private ambitions with the good of the community may be partly justified, partly unjustified. He may be using a mere pretext to gain individual advantage at the public expense; yet he may be quite sincere, or even may willingly make sacrifices in behalf of such identification. Here is a rhetorical area not analyzable either as sheer design or as sheer simplicity.<sup>10</sup>

For Burke, persuasion is a fundamental aspect of all communication and socialization. He therefore argues that the classical notion of clear persuasive intent is insufficient to account for the ways in which “members of a group promote social cohesion by acting rhetorically upon themselves and one another.”<sup>11</sup> Since this “acting rhetorically upon” is a process that occurs as a part of all communication, Burke believes that rhetorical analysis provides us an important tool for understanding the relationship between discourse and social relationships.

In my analysis of “The End of the World Cult” and the Strong City websites, therefore, I will be trying to track down what motivates these two utterances, what value systems both inform them and blind them, and what problems they solve in terms of the way in which they shape social relationships and self-conceptions. I will treat both of these utterances, therefore, as arguments that attend to the values of an audience (even if that audience includes the rhetors themselves)<sup>12</sup> in order to persuade them with good

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Burke, “A Rhetoric of Motives,” in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, eds. Patricia Bizzzer and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: St. Martin's, 1990), 1019.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> While reaffirming the traditional assertion that rhetoric by its nature is addressed, Burke writes that “A man can be his own audience, insofar as he, even in his secret thoughts, cultivates certain ideas or images for the effect he hopes they may have upon him...in this respect he is being rhetorical quite as though he were using pleasant imagery to influence an outside audience rather than one within.” (Burke, “A Rhetoric

reasons. I will be primarily concerned with the internal logic of these arguments, as well as their relationship to broader discourses. Are these rhetorical utterances appealing to particular values, and if so, what are these values? Do the arguments make sense when seen in the context of the value systems to which they make their appeal? Do these arguments, in essence, provide good reasons for interpreting the Strong City story in a particular way? Finally, what is the persuasive impact of these arguments? How effective has this rhetoric been, and what are the consequences of this impact in terms of relationships of power? Ultimately, the concern of this study is to investigate what this rhetoric indicates about what the people creating it believe, where these beliefs come from, and how they put these beliefs to work.

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of Motives," 1029.) Furthermore, Burke writes that *rhetoric is only effective when the audience to some degree persuades itself*:

Education ("indoctrination") exerts such pressure upon him from without; he completes the process from within. If he does not somehow act to tell himself (as his own audience) what the various brands of rhetorician have told him, his persuasion is not complete. Only those voices from without are effective which can speak in the language of a voice within.

(Burke. "A Rhetoric of Motives," 1030.)

**PART ONE:**  
**“THE END OF THE WORLD CULT”**

In 2008, British filmmaker Ben Anthony produced a documentary film about Strong City for Channel Four called “The End of the World Cult.”<sup>13</sup> Anthony first visited Strong City in 2006, and in 2007 spent several months inside the community filming and interviewing the residents. Unlike most media representations of unconventional religious groups, which tend to rely on the testimony of hostile ex-members and ‘Cult’ experts, Ben Anthony’s story about Strong City is told almost exclusively through the testimony of the Strong City faithful. Anthony had unrestricted access to the entire New Mexico ranch and its inhabitants during the shoot, and in general the video footage used in the film reflects what must have been, at least initially, an informal, friendly relationship between the filmmaker and his subjects. Interview sequences with group members took place sitting comfortably in their small ‘trailer’ houses, relaxing outside in a swinging porch chair, or leaning up against the bumper of a truck. Slow, panoramic shots of the gorgeous New Mexico landscape punctuate the film; the dusty road leading up to the property gate plays a leading role, as do wide blue skies and gathering thunderclouds.

However, although Ben Anthony presents this film as a neutral, balanced portrayal that reveals the ‘truth’ about Strong City, it is not. Offering a rhetorical analysis of this film, I will show that “The End of the World Cult” is a sensationalized portrayal of the Strong City community that relies on a broadly popular but highly problematic portrayal of marginalized religious movements that I refer to as ‘Cult’ discourse. A crucial aspect of ‘Cult’ discourse is the idea that the unconventional religious beliefs and practices observable in marginalized religions cannot be genuine

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<sup>13</sup> Channel Four, “The End of the World Cult,” Channel Four, accessed February 12, 2010, [www.channel4.com/programmes/the-end-of-the-world-cult](http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-end-of-the-world-cult).

expressions of religiosity. Instead, 'Cult' beliefs and practices must be the product of the calculated self-interest of a charismatic leader who manipulates his followers into doing his will. By representing Strong City according to the logic of this discourse, therefore, Anthony ensures that the specific religious worldview of Strong City is obscured, while the followers of Michael Travesser, in particular his female followers, appear not as religious actors operating from within a particular, coherent belief system, but as manipulated victims who pose a danger to themselves and to society at large.

My argument is that films like Anthony's offer overly simplified perspectives of marginal religions that conceal rather than explain the values and motivations of religious people and promote a simplistic understanding of the religious imagination. "The End of the World Cult," in particular, denies the collaborative nature of the construction of this worldview, and presents a flawed, top-down model of the way in which charisma functions. As a result, the crucial creative role of the women of Strong City in the construction and maintenance of their own worldview is conspicuously absent from this film. We get no sense that anything these women do or say has any significance for the community or for these women's own religious identity and practice. As the second part of this work will demonstrate, however, in their own internet statements and testimony, the women of Strong City suggest that just the opposite is the case. An examination of their rhetoric shows that in fact these women see themselves as powerful cosmic actors and agents of the apocalypse.

As a film broadcast by the mainstream mass-media, however, "The End of the World Cult" speaks from a position of power and influence that the rhetoric of the women of Strong City on their website does not occupy. Because of this, "The End of the

World Cult” was able to supplant the Strong City sites as the main source of information about the group that was available to the general public. Images and information taken directly from this film appeared in subsequent media representations of the group before and during Travesser’s criminal trial, while images and information from the Strong City websites were largely ignored.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, during Travesser’s trial, though no direct references were made to Anthony’s film, the prosecution’s case closely resembled the argument made in “The End of the World Cult:” the prosecution argued that Travesser had manipulated his female followers to serve his own needs.<sup>15</sup> It is my contention that this correlation reflects the ways that media representations of marginal groups can have a real impact on the lives of these religious people, whose self-presentations tend to get lost in the barrage of media discourse about the social threat of ‘Cults.’

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<sup>14</sup>See, for example, National Geographic Channel, “Inside a Cult,” National Geographic Channel, [channel.nationalgeographic.com/series/inside/3401/Photos?#tab-overview](http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/series/inside/3401/Photos?#tab-overview), and the January 16, 2009 episode of the Dr. Phil show: Dr. Phil, “Family Cult part 2,” Dr. Phil, [www.drphil.com/shows/show/1200](http://www.drphil.com/shows/show/1200).

<sup>15</sup> Transcripts of court recordings have been made available online. See Strong City Mirror Site, “Trial Transcripts,” Strong City Mirror Site, accessed August, 2010, [www.strongcity2.info/trial/pros\\_opening.html](http://www.strongcity2.info/trial/pros_opening.html).

## 1

**Authority**

In his documentary film about the group, Ben Anthony describes Strong City as a typical ‘Cult.’ In this chapter I will trace the history of contemporary secular discourse about ‘Cults’ in order to better understand what it means to call a group like Strong City a ‘Cult.’ I will emphasize the way in which discourse about ‘Cults’ has been deployed by the secular Anticult movement in media, scholarship and the courts. In so doing, I aim to demonstrate that this term has lost its usefulness as a descriptor of marginal groups. Rather, the term ‘Cult’ is most productively understood as a polemical term that functions to obscure rather than explain the values and motivations of religious people. In my rhetorical analysis on the topic of authority in “The End of the World Cult,” therefore, I will examine Anthony’s use of the conventions of ‘Cult’ discourse to undermine the legitimacy of the religious worldview of Strong City in this way.

**“Only the Names are Different”: a history of ‘Cult’ discourse.**

Religion scholars Bromley and Shupe write that the category of ‘Cult’ in its current popular usage indicates:

...authoritarian leadership, suppression of rational thought, deceptive recruitment techniques, coercive mind control, a totalistic group structure, isolation from conventional society and former relationships, and exploitation of group members by leaders... the imminent danger is legions of unquestioning followers in the service of unscrupulous leaders...<sup>16</sup>

‘Cults’ certainly have a bad reputation. Scholars of religion frequently cite public opinion polls which indicate that there is a widespread fear of ‘Cults’ in contemporary

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<sup>16</sup> David G. Bromley and Anson Shupe, “Public Reaction Against New Religious Movements” in *Cults and New Religious Movements: a report of the American Psychiatric Association*, ed. Mark Galanter MD (Washington, DC: the American Psychiatric Association, 1989), 310-11.

culture,<sup>17</sup> and that ‘Cult’ leaders are “among the most strongly disliked celebrities of their time.”<sup>18</sup> Identifying a particular group as a ‘Cult’ immediately “conjures up the most scandalous of images,”<sup>19</sup> associating that group with tragedies such as the suicides of Jonestown, Heaven’s Gate and the Solar Temple, the Waco conflagration, and the Aum Shinrikyo Sarin Gas attacks in the Tokyo subway.

A closer look at even these most notorious groups, however, demonstrates that they represent a wide diversity of belief systems, organizational structures, and cultural settings,<sup>20</sup> and in this respect they have little in common besides their involvement in conflict and tragedy. The Jonestown community was a Socialist Christian commune with ties to the African-American Evangelical Church movement of Father Divine. Heaven’s Gate was a group of syncretistic new-age Christian monks that came out of Alien conspiracy culture. The members of Solar Temple were European occultists, the Branch Davidians of Waco were a Texan Seventh-day Adventist splinter, and Aum was a Japanese Buddhist sect. The descriptive borders of what constitutes a ‘Cult’ disintegrate further when we attempt to account for the vast diversity of groups that have been included in this category at one time or another: Scientology, Pentecostals, the Nation of Islam, the Hare Krishna, the Ras Tafari, the Catholic Church, and so on. Many sociologists of religion have argued that the ‘Cult’ terminology, particularly in its popular

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<sup>17</sup> James T. Richardson, “Manufacturing Consent About Koresh” in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. Stuart A. Wright (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 162, for example, cites a 1989 Gallup Poll in which 62 percent of the 1,000 American adults surveyed said they would not like to have religious sects or cults as neighbors.

<sup>18</sup> James A. Beckford, “The Mass Media and New Religious Movements” in *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, eds. Bryan Wilson and Jamie Cresswell (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 104.

<sup>19</sup> Anson Shupe and Jeffrey K. Hadden, “Cops, News Copy, and Public Opinion” in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. Stuart A. Wright (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 180.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Robbins, *Cults, Converts and Charisma: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (London: Sage, 1988), 151.

usage, serves to “create an illusory homogeneity” among groups that are labeled in this way,<sup>21</sup> or, as some put it, to “stereotype”<sup>22</sup> them so that their individual characteristics are obscured. Scholars often argue that use of the word ‘Cult’ functions to link disparate groups, who come to be perceived as equivalent through this labeling process.<sup>23</sup>

The current popular perception of ‘Cults’ as a monolithic category of manipulative and dangerous groups and movements is largely the result of a discourse promulgated by what sociologists of religion call the Anticult movement (ACM or AM). This movement began in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s in response to what seemed to its initiators to be an American social and religious crisis of unprecedented proportions. In the wake of the disintegrating hippy counterculture,<sup>24</sup> it seemed, young people who had rejected the conventional values and organized religion of their parents’ generation were now seeking spiritual fulfillment in an entirely innovative fashion, dropping out of good Universities and abandoning respectable career prospects to move to communes in Northern California or take up with the Hare Krishna in San Francisco’s Haight Ashbury. Robert Wuthnow argues that this was a period of American religious awakening; the activism of the 1960’s, he claims, had reshaped the American concept of freedom in such a way as to fundamentally change the nation’s understanding of religion in the early 1970’s and to open new positive avenues of spiritual seeking for Americans of all ages.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Robbins, *Cults, Converts and Charisma*, 151.

<sup>22</sup> James R. Lewis, *Odd Gods: New Religions & the Cult Controversy* (New York: Prometheus, 2001), 36-39.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 13; cf. Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven’s Gate* (New York and London: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), 4; Bromley and Shupe, “Public Reaction Against New Religious Movements,” 305; David G. Bromley and Anson Shupe, *Strange Gods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), 21 and 24.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis, *Odd Gods*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950’s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 51-84.

In *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History*, however, historian Philip Jenkins argues that “upsurges of activism on the religious fringe” such as the one that occurred in the 1970’s are not historical anomalies but an intrinsic part of the American religious landscape, which has seen a succession of “cult booms” or “cult waves” throughout its history.<sup>26</sup> Each upsurge in religious activity on the fringes, he argues, has been accompanied by a corresponding counter-reaction that describes the upsurge as if it were an unprecedented social danger.<sup>27</sup> Jenkins argues that, already by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a unified rhetoric had developed to account for a diversity of otherwise unconnected groups that were “increasingly treated as a united social phenomenon, even as a distinguishing sign of the age.”<sup>28</sup> While the groups attacked changed with the times, he argues, the rhetoric used to challenge controversial American religious groups remained remarkably consistent throughout the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> Jenkins identifies crescendos of this polemic in the 1870’s, 1920’s, 1940’s, and 1970’s in response to a staggering array of diverse groups. His analysis includes reactions against Theosophy, the Shakers, the Nation of Islam, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Native American Ghost Dancers, Voodoo, Pentacostals, Masons, Facists and many others. By 1900, he argues, the term ‘Cult’ itself began to be used as a catch-all term for “delusions, fanatics, enthusiasts, and imposters” of all kinds.<sup>30</sup> Drawing on racist imagery of Asian and African ‘primitive’ or ‘pagan’ religions prominent in American popular culture at the time, the term increasingly came to signify any kind of excessive devotion; it was at this

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<sup>26</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8-9. In making this argument, Jenkins builds on the work of H. Lawrence Moore in *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*.

<sup>27</sup> Jenkins, 10-11.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

time that the word also came to be applied satirically to a variety of more popular fanaticisms, such as “the ‘Cult’ of Shakespeare” and the “‘Cult’ of Poe,”<sup>31</sup> a satirical usage that seems echoed by phrases we now use, such as the ‘Cult’ of Pilates or the ‘Cult’ of Oprah.

The ‘Cult’ discourse produced by the secular ACM since the 1970’s was therefore not a new response to a new phenomenon, but the latest articulation of a long-standing American discourse about religious difference. As Jenkins argues, the modern ‘Cult’ stereotype is a “complex construction,” drawing on a historical “mélange” of rumors and accusations leveled at one time or another against groups such as Catholics, Masons, Mormons, Fascists, evangelicals, occultists, spiritualists, and others, which merged over time into “one barely differentiated attack.”<sup>32</sup> Other scholars have noticed similarities between 19<sup>th</sup> century American accounts of marginalized religions and more contemporary critiques of ‘Cults.’ Bromley and Shupe, for example, argue that particular conflicts over specific issues such as military service or polygamy with groups such as the Mennonites or the Mormons were often cast as unprecedented threats to the entire social order.<sup>33</sup> Even many groups now accepted into the American religious mainstream were at one time portrayed in a similar fashion to the ‘Cults.’ American anti-Catholic sentiment during the 1830s and 1840s, for example, was expressed in rhetoric strikingly similar to that of the modern ACM. Catholics were described as blind slaves to the irrational and totalitarian authority of the Pope, and Catholicism was portrayed as a foreign yet compelling false belief that threatened the most vulnerable members of

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 25 and throughout.

<sup>33</sup> Bromley and Shupe, *Strange Gods*, 7-11.

society who were prone to fall under its spell.<sup>34</sup> As one religion scholar has noted, therefore, “Anticultism feeds upon, and in turn feeds, a public predisposition to perceive nontraditional religions in a disparaging light.”<sup>35</sup>

Over the past century, therefore, the word ‘Cult’ has increasingly been used to conjure up a wide variety of prejudices about non-traditional religions in order to construct a widespread, unprecedented, and therefore exigent social danger out of a diversity of particular, localized conflicts. Since the 1970’s in particular, public perception of a monolithic ‘Cult’ menace has coalesced gradually out of individual reactions to an otherwise unconnected series of events relating to a diversity of marginalized groups.<sup>36</sup> In the late 60s and early 70s, many Americans began to interpret the religious activity they saw developing around them as new and dangerous. The earliest participants in the ACM did not see this period as a time of great spiritual awakening, as Wuthnow argues some Americans did, but as an urgent threat, not only to the dominant values of American society but to the lives of their own children. The discovery that many of the ‘new’ religions were “high demand” organizations to which their adult children seemed fanatically devoted alarmed affluent, well-educated parents,<sup>37</sup> who soon mobilized against these particular movements by harnessing the terminology of ‘Cults.’ Unrelated but contemporaneous events such as the Manson Family murders and the mass suicide at Jonestown, defined not as independent tragedies but as the results of ‘Cult’ fanaticism, soon became symbols of what might happen to children who fell prey

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<sup>34</sup> Lewis, *Odd Gods*, 27-28.

<sup>35</sup> James R. Lewis, “Self-Fulfilling Stereotypes, the Anticult Movement, and the Waco Confrontation” in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. Stuart A. Wright (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 101.

<sup>36</sup> Bromley and Shupe, *Strange Gods*, 312.

<sup>37</sup> Richardson, James T., “Social Control of New Religions: From ‘Brainwashing’ Claims to Sex Abuse Accusations” in *Children in New Religions*, eds. Susan J. Palmer and Charlotte E. Hardman (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1999) 172-173.

to manipulative ‘Cult’ leaders. What scholars call the ACM, therefore, grew out of the reactions of particular families to their individual members joining specific groups. Gradually, these individuals united to transform their personal struggles with ‘Cults’ into a public issue.<sup>38</sup>

Arguably, the father of the modern ACM was Ted Patrick, America’s first ‘deprogrammer.’<sup>39</sup> In the early 1970’s, Patrick worked as a community ombudsman for California governor Ronald Regan. Having received complaints from his constituents about the “Jesus Freak” organization the Children of God (COG), he became alarmed by the interest his son and nephew both showed in the organization. Patrick began investigating the group and together with other concerned parents founded the lobbying group Free the Children of God (FREECOG), the first of this era’s secular Anticult organizations.<sup>40</sup> FREECOG was unable to convince authorities to do anything to disband COG, however, so Patrick decided to take the matter into his own hands. After discovering that it was difficult to convict on kidnapping charges if the parents of the kidnapped person were involved in the operation, he began to experiment with physically removing members from the Children of God ‘Cult’ with the co-operation of their parents, locking himself up with these individuals in a hotel room or other secluded place, and trying to convince them that their religious beliefs were false and that they had been manipulated into joining the group. The high success rate of these deprogrammings meant that, to satisfy a high demand from parents of members of this and other ‘Cults,’

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<sup>38</sup> Anson Shupe, David Bromley and Susan E. Darnell, “The North-American Anti-Cult Movement: Vicissitudes of Success and Failure,” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 187.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, *Odd Gods*, 32-33.

<sup>40</sup> The secular Anticult movement discussed here is not to be confused with the Christian ‘Countercult’ movement most often associated with Evangelical Christians seeking to combat heretical groups and movements. See the website of Evangelical Ministries to New Religions, at [www.emnr.org](http://www.emnr.org) for an example of a ‘Countercult’ organization.

Patrick was eventually able to take up deprogramming as a full-time job, and the career of deprogrammer was born.<sup>41</sup>

The practice of deprogramming drew legitimacy from a growing field of ‘Cult’ experts, many of whom were clinical psychologists. To account for what appeared to be the irresistible but incomprehensible appeal of the new ‘Cults,’ these professionals developed psychological theories of coercive persuasion, such as “brainwashing” and “mind control.” Initially, therapeutic services were developed to help former ‘Cultists’ recover from their traumas; one of the most prominent institutions geared towards this purpose was the Freedom of Thought Foundation (FTF), founded in 1976.<sup>42</sup> Soon, psychological and legal experts developed advisory relationships with organizations such as CAN and the AFF, acting as therapeutic advisors and as expert witnesses in a variety of legal battles with particular groups.<sup>43</sup> The specific implications of the brainwashing model of persuasion will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, but suffice it here to say that these ‘experts’ lent academic and legal legitimacy to the developing ACM, which during the 1980’s became increasingly institutionalized and professionalized as a result.<sup>44</sup> Scholars of religion have described this phenomenon of the professionalization of Anticult rhetoric as the “medicalization” of religious deviance.<sup>45</sup>

The development of ACM organizations with their ‘Cult’ experts, and the rise of coercive deprogramming as a paid profession, therefore occurred in tandem during the

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<sup>41</sup> Lewis, *Odd Gods*, 32-33.

<sup>42</sup> Shupe, Bromley and Darnell, “The North-American Anti-Cult Movement,” 189.

<sup>43</sup> See for example Margaret Thaler Singer with Janja Lalich, *Cults in Our Midst* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 371, and Thomas Keiser and Jacqueline L. Keiser, *The Anatomy of Illusion: Religious Cults and Destructive Persuasion* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1987), xiv.

<sup>44</sup> Shupe, Bromley and Darnell, “The North-American Anti-Cult Movement,” 195.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Thomas Robbins, “New Religious Movements on the Frontier of Church and State” in *Cults, Culture, and the Law: Perspectives on New Religious Movements*, eds. Thomas Robbins, William C. Shepherd and James McBride (Chico California: Scholars Press, 1985), 14-16, and Bromley and Shupe, *Public Reactions Against New Religious Movements*, 328-329.

1970s,<sup>46</sup> and the particular ideology and economy of what has been called the ‘Anticult’ countermovement<sup>47</sup> developed as a result of this partnership. Dozens of regional groups similar to FREECOG were formed in the 1970’s and eventually these groups coalesced under the umbrella of the Citizens Freedom Foundation (CFF), which changed its name to the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) in 1986 and became the primary public face of the ACM.<sup>48</sup> These organizations acted as loosely knit information and support groups, composed mainly of relatives of ‘Cult’ members. None were formally connected to particular deprogrammers, but, until quite recently, these organizations would often refer concerned relatives of ‘Cult’ members to an increasingly prominent group of entrepreneurial deprogrammers. Together, ACM organizations, experts, and deprogrammers cooperated to constitute ‘Cults’ as an urgent threat which required immediate intervention to rescue the victims and control or eliminate the groups themselves.<sup>49</sup> The ACM, therefore, was an informal structural network and ideological alliance of a variety of secular opponents of ‘Cults.’ The character of the ACM is far from monolithic and has changed over the years in response to factors that will be discussed below. In general, however, participants in this movement see themselves as defenders of personal autonomy, critical thinking, and the traditional family against what they argue is the manipulative, irrational and subversive social danger of ‘Cults.’

Members of the ACM argue that the beliefs, practices, social organization, and historical context of marginal groups are irrelevant to the issue of ‘Cults.’ What is

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<sup>46</sup> Shupe, Bromley and Darnell, “The North-American Anti-Cult Movement,” 189.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 192; the American Family Foundation is a similar organization to CAN, and became the most prominent national ACM organization after CAN was bankrupted by lawsuits filed by the Scientology organization.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 185.

important, they argue, is the way in which ‘Cults’ promote totalistic worldviews that, through manipulation and control, garner excessive devotion from their followers. No matter the content, they argue, ‘Cults’ are all the same. For example, Anticult psychologist Dr. Margaret Singer has argued that ‘Cults’ need not be religious, but “can be formed around any content: politics, religion, commerce, self-improvement techniques, health fads, the stuff of science fiction, psychology, outer-space phenomena, meditation, martial arts, environmental life-styles, and so on.”<sup>50</sup> She further warns the reader that no-one is immune to the dangers of ‘Cults,’ which have spread, disease-like, into every aspect of life:

Do you have any idea how many cultic groups are disguised as legitimate enterprises – as restaurants, self-help groups, business training workshops, prosperity clubs, psychotherapy clinics, martial arts centers, diet plans, campus activities, and political organizations? Rather than withering away, as many people believe, cults and groups using thought-reform processes have grown like mushrooms after a rainstorm... today’s cultic groups have so professionalized their approaches and techniques of persuasion that they are moving well beyond the fringe and into the mainstream. They want you.<sup>51</sup>

In his forward to a book on the Waco tragedy, deprogrammer, BATF consultant, and ‘Cult’ expert Rick Ross repeats the Anticult argument that all ‘Cults’ are fundamentally the same:

America must take a long, hard look at Vernon Howell, later known to the world as David Koresh, because among cult leaders, he is not atypical. It seems they are all the same. As I travel the country and delve into different destructive cults, I meet the same cult leader over and over again. Only the names are different.<sup>52</sup>

Once a group has been labeled a ‘Cult,’ therefore, this description tends to overshadow all other information about the group, including their religious worldview, the rationale behind their practices, and the motivations of their followers.

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<sup>50</sup> Singer, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>52</sup> As cited in Lewis, “Self-Fulfilling Stereotypes, the Anticult Movement, and the Waco Confrontation,” 99.

Despite Anticult emphasis on the overriding importance of the ‘Cult’ category, it is difficult to find agreement among ACM experts on a particular, bounded definition of the term. Most definitions, however, include some kind of dangerous fanaticism as a distinguishing characteristic of ‘Cults.’ Using the language of psychotherapy, Anticult psychologist Thomas Keiser and his wife Jacqueline Keiser argue, for example, that the problem with ‘Cults’ is that the excessive commitment they require undermines the ability of ‘Cult’ members to reason normally and make rational decisions, leaving them with a permanently reduced adaptive capacity.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, in *Bounded Choice*, former political ‘Cult’ member Janja Lalich, who is also Singer’s protégée and co-author of Singer’s *Cults in Our Midst*, compared her involvement in the California Democratic Workers Party to the suicidal dedication of Heaven’s Gate members. She identifies both of these groups as ‘Cults’ not because of any similarity in belief, practice, or even institutional structure, but because of the high level of commitment she argues they required from their followers:

A cult can be either a sharply bounded social group or a diffusely bounded social movement held together through shared commitment to a charismatic leader. It upholds a transcendent ideology (often but not always religious in nature) and requires a high level of personal commitment from its members in words and deeds.<sup>54</sup>

What distinguishes a ‘Cult’ in such definitions, then, is neither its particular worldview, nor its practice, nor even its social organization (which may be “sharply bounded” or “diffuse”), but the high level of dedication it requires from its followers. The high level

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<sup>53</sup> Keiser and Keiser, 109 and throughout. This definition seems to conflict with Singer’s definition of the ‘Cult’ personality, which she argues is the *result* of adaptation to the ‘Cult’ environment. For Singer, it seems, adaptation is the *cause* of the problem with ‘Cults,’ not the *result* as it is for Keiser and Keiser. See Singer, 78-80.

<sup>54</sup> Janja Lalich, *Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 8; cf. Lalich, Janja “Pitfalls in the Sociological Study of Cults,” in *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field*, eds. Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 124.

of personal commitment that ‘Cults’ require, these types of definition suggest, is deleterious in itself to the psychology of the follower, or ‘victim.’

Implicit in these definitions of the term ‘Cult,’ however, is an argument not only about excessive levels of commitment, but about the legitimacy of it. The work of these authors suggests that the dedication and commitment of ‘Cult’ followers would be less problematic if it were redirected towards a more socially acceptable goal. There is a fine and highly subjective distinction between devotion and zealotry. A single-minded commitment to one’s family, for example, does not mean the same thing as a single-minded commitment to a ‘Cult’ leader. An accusation of fanaticism is always a statement about excessive and therefore misguided commitment. Discourse about ‘Cults,’ then, tends to define a ‘Cult’ as a group that encourages an unhealthy degree of single-minded commitment to an *unworthy* object. This fact is clearly illustrated in the work of Keiser and Keiser.<sup>55</sup> Though these authors explicitly frame the ‘Cult’ problem as unrelated to the validity of any particular religious belief or worldview, and focus on the unhealthy psychological dependence of the followers on a duplicitous leader, they quickly slip into arguments about ultimate truth, and the illegitimacy of certain kinds of religious belief:

One’s choices have adaptive consequences. The question of whether Sun Myung Moon or David “Moses” Berg is a true messiah is an empirical question, not a matter of persuasive skill. It is true or it is not true in the grand scheme of things. If it is not true, a believer harbors an illusion, and illusions have a habit of evaporating and leaving their host without adaptive skills in a complex society.<sup>56</sup>

Here, it is not the insincerity of the leader that causes psychological damage, but the illusory nature of the belief itself. Yet, these specifics are cast as irrelevant details in and

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<sup>55</sup> Keiser and Keiser, 50-51.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

of themselves, since it is not these particulars that are the problem, but the fanaticism of a group's followers and their dependent relationship on an abusive leader that causes it to be a 'Cult.' In a somewhat circular fashion, therefore, usage of the 'Cult' category to describe a group like the one at Strong City effectively "directs the attention"<sup>57</sup> away from a discussion of the specific beliefs, practices, and worldviews of a particular group in order to discredit them.

Since any accusation of fanaticism depends on a judgment about the illegitimacy of an object of devotion, the category of 'Cult' has therefore come to imply a strongly held yet *false* belief. While Anticult experts claim that their problem with 'Cults' is not a problem with particular religious beliefs, but with the way in which people have been manipulated into believing them, in fact their attacks on 'Cults' are indirect attacks on the religious values and practices of marginal groups. Cult discourse functions to construct certain religious worldviews as illegitimate and dangerous. Despite the fact that the ACM claims to have a secular agenda, therefore, their use of the term 'Cult' has come to be very similar to the historical Christian usage of the term 'heresy;' ACM usage of the 'Cult' terminology, while posing as neutral, scientific description, is in fact a highly value-laden and normative discourse. As religion scholar Catherine Wessinger sums up:

Today *cult* is a put-down, an insult conveying that a group is despised by the social mainstream. *Cult* has become a word that expresses prejudice against a religious group. It imposes on the group a simplistic stereotype that is assumed to be true. Most Americans are not yet aware of the bigoted stereotype conveyed in the word *cult* as it is applied to religions that people don't understand and don't like. It expresses prejudice and antagonism just as much as racial slurs and insulting words for women and homosexuals. *Cult* represents an oversimplified and bigoted stereotype that is applied to numerous diverse religions... The word *cult* dehumanizes the religion's members and their children.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 45.

<sup>58</sup> Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 4.

### **A Social Fact: 'Cult' discourse in the media, scholarship and the courts.**

The ACM has had a close relationship with the American mass-media, who has helped this movement spread their message about 'Cults'<sup>59</sup> through representations like Anthony's "The End of the World Cult." Because of this media influence, the ACM definition of the term 'Cult' has come to dominate public perceptions of marginal religions. Most people are unlikely to encounter marginal religions except through the mediums of television, movies, internet or the newspaper.<sup>60</sup> But, as James Beckford has argued, these movements seem to only be newsworthy if they are involved in some kind of conflict. Conflict has therefore come to be the "leitmotif" of media narratives about marginal groups. The ACM category of 'Cult,' which emphasizes the controversial aspects of a particular group, is therefore innately interesting to journalists, who "need no other reason for writing about any particular NRM except that it is counted as a cult." Consequently, Beckford argues, journalists may even feel pressure to seek out evidence that a particular group conforms to this label in order to add appeal to their story.<sup>61</sup>

The relationship of the Anticult movement with the North American (and British) media is a symbiotic one; ACM activists will commonly supply journalists with negative material about a particular group, and then use the hostile media depictions that result as further evidence in their crusades against 'Cults.'<sup>62</sup> As self-appointed educators, ACM organizations have provided much of the 'evidence' that media use to construct 'Cult' narratives about particular groups. Under the veneer of scientific legitimacy, the ACM regularly provides media outlets with informational materials, including the testimony of

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<sup>59</sup> Lewis, *Odd Gods*, 57.

<sup>60</sup> Richardson, "Manufacturing Consent About Koresh," 156; cf. Beckford, "The Mass Media and New Religious Movements," 104.

<sup>61</sup> Beckford, "The Mass Media and New Religious Movements," 108-115.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

their qualified psychological experts and of hostile ‘Cult’ apostates who describe their negative experiences in a group. On the whole, the testimony of ACM experts and ex-members has dominated media accounts of marginalized religions, while competing perspectives from sociologists of religion and from the groups themselves have often been virtually ignored.<sup>63</sup> This relationship between the ACM and the media has promoted a public interpretation of ‘Cults’ as a monolithic social menace, and each incidence of conflict that is seen through the terministic screen of ‘Cult’ re-enforces this perception. Media discussions of specific groups quickly slip into warnings about an entire category of dangerous ‘Cults.’<sup>64</sup> In Britain, for example, the vast majority of the media coverage of the Waco tragedy in Texas in 1993 focused on the ‘Cult Menace’ and what could be done to prevent a similar incident from occurring on British soil.<sup>65</sup> Because of the pervasive influence of this media discourse, Anticult ideology has had a significant impact on public perceptions of marginal religions.<sup>66</sup> ‘Cult’ discourse has therefore affected the way in which marginal religions have been treated not only in the sensationalized media, but in scholarly work that has developed in opposition to this discourse, and in the American court system, which has been the battleground on which much of the controversy over ‘Cults’ has been fought.

In the 1970’s, in reaction to the increasing polemical usage of term ‘Cult’ by the ACM and in the culture at large, many scholars of religion began to look for a more neutral term to describe the category of religions they had previously referred to as

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<sup>63</sup> Bromley and Shupe, “Public Reaction Against New Religious Movements,” 323. See also Bromley and Shupe, *Strange Gods*.

<sup>64</sup> James A. Beckford, “The Continuum Between ‘Cults’ and ‘Normal’ Religion,” in *Chercheurs de dieux dans l’espace public*, ed. Pauline Cote (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001), 11-20.

<sup>65</sup> Beckford, “The Mass Media and New Religious Movements,” 108.

<sup>66</sup> Lewis, “Self-Fulfilling Stereotypes,” 100.

‘Cults.’ An apparent flourishing of alternative religions in postwar Japan, where restrictions on religious expression had been lifted, led to the publication in English of a number of books on the ‘new religions’ of Japan.<sup>67</sup> The term ‘new religions’ then began to be used by sociologists in the San Francisco Bay Area to describe what seemed like a similar flourishing of religious expression in the 1960’s and 70’s in California, as described above. Some scholars, perhaps most notably the well-known sociologists of religion Rodney Stark and first William Sims Bainbridge,<sup>68</sup> continued to argue for the sociological usefulness of the term ‘Cult,’ but as religion historian J. Gordon Melton writes “by the end of the [1970’s] decade, the term ‘new religions’ would virtually replace ‘cult’ to describe all of those leftover groups that did not fit easily under the label of either church or sect.”<sup>69</sup> Most sociologists of religion now oppose the descriptive use of the word ‘Cult’ in scholarly work.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> J. Gordon Melton, “An Introduction to New Religions” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 19.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge “Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation” in *The Future of Religion*, Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 429-256. ‘Cult’ in its current popular usage is only somewhat informed by the early work of sociology in its attempt to categorize different kinds of religious organizations. Sociological usage of the term ‘Cult’ was derived from the work of Ernst Troeltsch in *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, whose Church-Sect typology was developed to account for the cycle of dissent and accommodation that has characterized the history of Christian institutional frameworks. The ‘Cult’ type was conceived by Troeltsch as a residual category for mystical Christian groups or movements that did not fit either sociological type of Church or Sect. In *The Scientific Study of Religion*, sociologist J. Milton Yinger later elaborated on Troeltsch’s typology, although he still used the ‘cult’ type primarily to refer to residual groups that did not fit well into other categories, such as many non-Christian religions. The sociological category of ‘Cult’ did not initially imply authoritarian group structure or the calculated manipulation of followers as does the current term. It did, however, describe groups that were unconventional, difficult to categorize, usually focused on a charismatic leader, and outside of the control of normal institutional frameworks.

<sup>69</sup> Melton, “An Introduction to New Religions,” 20.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, the cogent argument of James T. Richardson, “Definitions of Cult: From Sociological-Technical to Popular-Negative” in *Cults in Context: Readings in the Study of New Religious Movements*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson (Toronto: Canadian Scholar’s Press, 1996), 29-38. Also see Lewis, *Odd Gods* and Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*. As early as 1984, Roy Wallis proposed an analytical categorization of new religions as world-affirming, world-accommodating, and world-rejecting as an alternative to the Church-Sect-Cult typology in his chapter “Three Types of New Religious Movements” in Roy Wallis, *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1984), 9-39.

The rise of the Anticult movement and, in particular, the controversy over the legal ramifications of the ACM agenda, led many scholars into the growing field of 'New Religions' in the late 1970's in opposition to what they perceived to be ACM assaults on freedom of religious expression. In the late 1970's and early 1980's Anticult ideology, and particularly the psychological theories of brainwashing, seemed to be gaining currency in the American court system. Throughout the 1980's, for example, deprogrammings were often legally justified by using an expanded definition of Conservatorship legislation. To many religion scholars, this trend seemed a dangerous infringement on the constitutional right to freedom of religious expression, and the interest of many scholars in the 'New Religions' was spurred by this controversy. Melton writes that the brainwashing controversy was the most important factor attracting scholars to the field, and that it was this controversy that "hastened its recognition as a meaningful sub-discipline within both religious studies and the sociology of religion."<sup>71</sup> This focus, he writes, had an important impact on the way in which this discipline has developed. The majority of scholarly work on new religions has been on the minority of these groups that have been involved in conflict, while data involving less controversial groups has been less important in shaping comprehensive understandings of the field.<sup>72</sup> He concludes that the "Anticult controversy has had a unique (and some would say distorting) role in shaping the academic discussions on new religions."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Melton, "An Introduction to New Religions," 20.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 17.

Throughout the 1980's, academic scholarship on marginal religions became embroiled in what has been referred to as the 'Cult Wars.'<sup>74</sup> In response to the relationship between many psychological experts and ACM organizations of various kinds, prominent sociologists of religion such as Eileen Barker, Massimo Introvigne, and others set themselves up in active opposition to the ACM and to the theories of Anticult experts such as Singer and Keiser. Often, they co-operated with civil liberties groups, such as the ACLU and Americans for Separation of Church and State.<sup>75</sup> Several religious organizations, most notably the National Council of Churches, lent their support to this effort as well.<sup>76</sup> These activist 'New Religions' scholars set up their own educational organizations, such as CESNUR and INFORM,<sup>77</sup> to counter the ACM discourse with what they felt was a more balanced account of the 'New Religions.' Scholars working in collaboration with the ACM, like Singer and Keiser, responded to these efforts defensively by accusing these sociologists of being 'cult apologists.' Both sides of the controversy over 'Cults' or 'New Religions' accused each other of doing biased research, of being ideologues, of catering to media stereotypes, and even of accepting monetary compensation for dishonest research publications or for testifying in court cases as experts for one side or the other. Scholars were polarized into two camps, and a scholar's choice of terms, be it 'Cult' or 'New Religion,' became the primary indicator of loyalty

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<sup>74</sup> For a lively discussion of this controversy from the perspective of an important researcher active at the time, see Susan Palmer, "Caught Up in the Cult Wars: Confessions of a Canadian Researcher" in *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field*, eds. Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 99-122.

<sup>75</sup> James T. Richardson, "Legal Dimensions of New Religions" in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 174; cf. Robbins, Thomas, "New Religious Movements on the Frontier of Church and State," 17.

<sup>76</sup> Richardson, "Legal Dimensions of New Religions," 174.

<sup>77</sup> For Eileen Barker's account of how and why she took up this cause, including the story of the founding of INFORM, see Eileen Barker, "The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must Be Joking!" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34 (1995): 287-310.

to one side or the other. Though some attempts were made in the late 1990's to bridge the gap between these two sides of the debate and to develop more collegial relationships between scholars,<sup>78</sup> the field remains a highly controversial and contested one.

'Cult' discourse, therefore, has left its mark in a number of significant ways. Media representations of marginal groups are informed by it and reinforce it, and this has created the idea of a cult menace in the popular imagination.<sup>79</sup> 'Cult' discourse has hence influenced legal battles over the responsibilities of members and former members of these groups, and has as a consequence had a significant impact on the lives of these religious people and the people around them. Members of marginal religions have experienced significant legally-sponsored limitations not only on their ability to freely exercise their religion but on their freedom of movement, and on their freedom of association. Conflicts resulting from attempts to enforce these limitations have in certain cases even led to violent confrontations with authorities, like that at Waco Texas, which cost lives.<sup>80</sup> Finally, 'Cult' discourse has left its mark on the face of scholarship about fringe religions, which has had to devote much valuable attention to combating it. Investigation of the 'Cult' terminology, therefore, supports Kenneth Burke's description of language as symbolic action. Social categories, once constructed, have a force as real

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<sup>78</sup> The most visible result of this effort is Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins eds., *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), a collection of articles from both sides of the 'Cult' debate.

<sup>79</sup> Bromley and Shupe define the idea of a cult scare as a "climate of heightened fear and apprehension, growing out of social conflict, that basic values or institutional arrangements in the society are in imminent danger of subversion." Bromley and Shupe, "Public Reaction Against New Religious Movements," 305.

<sup>80</sup> See Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 56-120. For an interesting account of the way in which dubious allegations of child abuse were directly responsible for the involvement of US Attorney General Janet Reno in attacks on the Branch Davidian community at Waco, see Christopher G. Ellison and John P. Bartkowski, "Babies were being Beaten: Exploring Child Abuse Allegations as Ranch Apocalypse" in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. Stuart A. Wright (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995). The other essays in that volume are also worth reading for a variety of accounts of the symbiotic relationship between the ACM, media, and government authorities.

as any physical one. Despite the problematic nature of this terminology, ‘Cults’ have become a social fact.

**“Any Attempt to Reason with Him Seemed Futile”: Michael Travesser as ‘Cult’ leader in “The End of the World Cult.”**

As we have seen, ‘Cult’ is a highly problematic term. In popular usage, this term has become a polemic that equates particular groups with the notion of a widespread and unprecedented ‘Cult’ crisis. This discourse functions to undermine the legitimacy of a group’s religious beliefs and practices by obscuring their content. Consequently, no group will self-identify as a ‘Cult,’ though frequently groups will refer to their opponents as ‘Cults’ in order to insult them. Often, for example, Travesser refers to the United States government as a ‘Cult’ in his polemic writings.<sup>81</sup> In “The End of the World Cult,” Anthony uses the conventions of this discourse to attack the legitimacy of the beliefs and practices of the Strong City group. It is my argument that, by presenting Travesser and his community as a typical ‘Cult,’ Anthony’s depiction obscures both the coherent religious worldview of the residents of Strong City, as well as the collaborative and dynamic nature of religious authority in this community. The second half of this thesis will serve, in fact, to highlight precisely these factors that are absent from Anthony’s documentary.

From the very beginning Ben Anthony’s film about Strong City explicitly labels Strong City a ‘Cult.’ Not only is this descriptor in the very title of the film, throughout the film Anthony repeatedly designates the group a ‘Cult.’ Moreover, on several occasions in this film the group’s leader, Michael Travesser, is situated in a kind of ‘Cult’ succession which places him in a line that descends from ‘Cult’ leaders that have come

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<sup>81</sup> Travesser, Michael, “The Demonization of America,” Strong City, accessed May 20, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/sc/post/the\\_demonization\\_of\\_america](http://strongcity.info/LOR/sc/post/the_demonization_of_america).

before. For example, five minutes into the film, Ben Anthony's voice-over tells us that "like many cult leaders before him, Michael's former life was a troubled one..."<sup>82</sup> Similarly, near the end of the movie, while ominous music plays in the background and we watch a long close-up of Michael's face, this same voice-over tells us that "like cult leaders before him, Wayne Bent has created his own Universe, regardless of the cost to his followers..."<sup>83</sup> This repetition of the phrase: "like cult leaders before him," frames the content of the film and neatly links Travesser, Strong City, 'Cults,' and generations of trouble.

Anthony does more than call Strong City by the name of 'Cult,' however. He also uses the conventions of 'Cult' discourse to present the authority of Michael Travesser as the defining feature of this group, thus obscuring the collaborative nature of the construction of authority at Strong City as well as the historical situation of the Strong City worldview. In the second half of this thesis, we will explore the important way in which the women of Strong City mobilize traditional apocalyptic discourse to creatively participate in the maintenance of religious authority at Strong City. In "The End of the World Cult," however, Anthony presents Travesser as a typical charismatic 'Cult' leader, whose manipulative, totalitarian, and fundamentally abusive rule at Strong City dominates the situation so completely that nothing his followers say or do has any consequence. For Anthony, Strong City *is* Michael Travesser, a petty despot who plays his followers like pawns in a chess game.

The occasion for the filming of "The End of the World Cult" was the group's preparation for an eschatological event that Travesser had prophetically scheduled for

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<sup>82</sup> Channel Four, "The End of the World Cult," 5:10

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 41:10.

October 31, 2007. Ben Anthony's documentary follows the group as they prepare for this 'doomsday' event, and the story of the film is structured around this (non) event that, according to Anthony's presentation, fails to occur at the end of the film. As tension builds towards this anti-climax, the narrative structure of the film involves the viewer in conflicts that bring the legitimacy of the group's own story about themselves into question. Children are removed from Strong City by government authorities and hints of sexual impropriety develop into struggles over authority between the filmmaker and the 'Cult' leader. Finally, the legitimacy of Travesser himself, and consequently that of his followers' entire belief system, unravels as the drama unfolds and we are led towards the final prophetic failure.

In "The End of the World Cult," the rhetorical construction of Travesser's charismatic authority as irrational and manipulative is accomplished through an increasingly agonistic contrast with what is presented as the rational, transparent authority of the filmmaker. Ben Anthony plays the role of a neutral observer in this film, mediating between outside and inside. He stands on the boundary between the world and the 'Cult,' translating between these two universes, standing in for us, the viewer. Anthony's face is never visible; we only know him by his voice until the final three minutes of the film, when we see his figure in the distance. We hear him question members of the group, however, and we see their reactions to his questions as if they are reacting to us. We hear his educated British accent in voice-over as he narrates, describes, wonders, and contemplates. The viewer seems to see the group through Anthony's eyes, as if we are seeing what he is seeing. Ben Anthony presents himself, therefore, as a curious but unbiased stand-in for the outside world: he is our eyes and

ears; he has our concerns and asks the questions we might ask if we were there.

Throughout the film Ben Anthony depicts himself as a reliable narrator: an intimate yet objective mediator between the world outside and the inside world of the 'Cult.'

Ben Anthony introduces us to the residents of Strong City as if he is introducing us to a group of his close friends. The relationships he develops with Strong City residents seem intimate, even affectionate. Group members seem to welcome their conversations with Ben Anthony as if they are desperate to talk to an outsider for a change. This is exemplified by Ben's presentation of his relationship with Michael's adult son Jeff, who acts as his guide throughout the filming. After "The End of the World Cult" was released, Jeff Bent was highly critical of the way he was portrayed in the film in a number of postings he made on the Strong City website.<sup>84</sup> Yet Anthony depicts Jeff as a sad and lonely figure who welcomes any contact with the outside world. Returning to Strong City after a few weeks away, the film crew is met by a smiling, waving Jeff at the gate. Jeff looks "grayer and thinner" than the last time they saw him, but when Anthony asks him how he's doing, he grins and says: "Very good, good to see you again!" Likewise, as Anthony leaves the compound for the last time, Jeff seems sorry to see him go. Shaking hands with the whole crew, he says sadly, "Well, I'll miss you guys."<sup>85</sup> This tragic presentation of Jeff allows Anthony to present himself as a compassionate, friendly mediator between us, the viewer, and the world of the 'Cult.'

The filmmaker shows us a world into which we would not otherwise be allowed; he is presented in "The End of the World Cult" as having privileged access to the group at Strong City. This privilege is initially granted to him by Michael himself who, the Ben

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<sup>84</sup> Bent, Jeff, "The Poor Jeff Lie," Strong City, accessed May 20, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/post/poor\\_jeff\\_lie](http://strongcity.info/LOR/post/poor_jeff_lie).

<sup>85</sup> Channel Four, "The End of the World Cult," 34:33-35:03.

Anthony voice-over claims, gave him “unique access to film inside his closed community,” as well as an extensive video collection that included a 4-hour long video that detailed every aspect of Michael’s life.<sup>86</sup> This exclusive access to previously unavailable material, Anthony suggests, puts the filmmaker in the position to tell the ‘truth’ about this group and their leader, Michael. During the course of the film, Anthony slowly reveals his ‘truth’ about Strong City, which he tells through a series of ‘secrets’ that Anthony seems to discover and then reveal to us, and that act as dramatic elements in the story of the film.

As each ‘secret’ is unearthed, the initially trusting relationship between the ‘Cult’ leader and the documentary filmmaker noticeably deteriorates as Anthony, and the audience along with him, begin to doubt Michael’s sincerity. In contrast to Ben Anthony, Michael’s character in the film is soon exposed as a selective informant, a secret-keeper whose transparency is no more than pretense. When Anthony confronts Michael about this, their relationship quickly moves from co-operation to conflict. As the film progresses, Michael increasingly confounds and challenges Anthony’s translations, acting as an antagonistic barrier between inside and outside, and appearing to cause conflict between the ‘Cult’ and the world through control and manipulation. Worst of all, he hides dark secrets, the most pernicious of which is the secret of his own identity. Michael may *say* he’s the son of God but, Anthony argues, Michael is not who he says he is, and he knows it.

While Ben Anthony encourages the residents of Strong City to express themselves openly in interviews in which he gently and sympathetically gives them an outsider’s perspective, we are told that, like a typical ‘Cult’ leader, Travesser abusively

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 5:00-5:50.

manipulates and controls the people of his community. In this desert community, Anthony reports, he has isolated his followers from a world that he teaches them to see as evil and doomed. They have no access to information from outside the community, and they are subject to the absolute authority of Michael Travesser, who deconstructs their identities and remakes them according to his will. Over footage of group members at work in the Strong City gardens, Ben Anthony tells us that “all marriages and families are dissolved, members’ names have been changed, they’ve had to give everything they own to Michael.” He reveals that children here do not go to school. He describes their move to Strong City as one in which Michael “uprooted” them and brought them to “this isolated spot” before declaring himself the Messiah. “And now,” says Ben Anthony over footage of the whole group walking behind Michael through the desert, “they seem to be completely under their leaders’ influence.”<sup>87</sup> Like typical ‘Cult’ followers, these religious people are presented as the duped victims of Travesser’s absolute, yet illegitimate, authority over them.

Anthony states that Michael has taught his followers to hate the world and hope for its end. The filmmaker suggests that Michael has not had positive experiences with the outside world and that, consequently, he has set up an oppositional relationship between Strong City and the world outside. Early in the film, over a montage of footage from a video on Michael’s life, we hear Michael’s voice describing the hardships he faced as a young man. After his mother died and he was molested by a homosexual, we hear Michael say, “I began to hate life and to see most human beings as demented and disgusting.”<sup>88</sup> In a later interview, Michael explains to Ben: “My son and I were raised in

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 14:42.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 5:41.

your world, I was educated in your world, I know very well how empty it is. It goes nowhere. All you got is your DVD movies, goin' to the cinema, waging wars, paying your debts..." Michael contrasts this with life inside Strong City, which is "to hear God speak to you, have him fulfill his purposes in you and feel the exhilaration of just talking to angels."<sup>89</sup>

Michael seems to have passed on these oppositional attitudes to his followers. Ben Anthony's first interview is with two young girls, Esther and Danielle. Smiling and holding hands, they express longing for the end of the world. "It's just gonna be awesome," Danielle says, "when we leave this world behind."<sup>90</sup> Ben Anthony puzzles over this, and then gradually reveals that many at Strong City seem to have developed negative ideas about the 'world,' and similarly long to leave it. For example, Ben Anthony interviews another young girl about her recent meeting with her apostate brother. The wide-eyed girl describes her brother as "dark inside" and "cold" and says that hugging him was "like hugging the devil."<sup>91</sup> Under his influence, the rhetoric of this film suggests, Michael's followers have come to hate the outside world and those who inhabit it, even members of their own families.

According to Anthony, the individuals at Strong City have been driven by Michael to hate themselves as well as the world; Michael's controlling machinations have destroyed their self-esteem. In the opening minutes of the film, Ben Anthony says that Michael "told his followers that they must achieve death to self or be lost when the end comes on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, 2007." Over close-up footage of the faces of exhausted-looking group members, he continues, "and time is running out. Cult members spend

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 39:15.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 2:30.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 12:35-13:08.

their days in painful introspection and deep self-loathing.”<sup>92</sup> Even Michael’s son Jeff is a victim of this, having given up everything, even his wife, to his father. During an uncomfortable sequence in which Michael and Jeff’s former wife, Christianna, discuss their consummation with Ben, Jeff is shown silently leaning his head against the wall, looking sad and forlorn.<sup>93</sup> In a post on the Strong City website, Jeff later referred to this sequence in the movie as the ‘Poor Jeff Lie.’<sup>94</sup> As this sequence ends, Ben Anthony muses:

I finally understood why so many can’t wait for the end of the world, and the bodily ascent to heaven that Michael has promised. The last seven years have left many broken; crushed by what Michael has put them through.<sup>95</sup>

As the doomsday date draws near, Anthony worries that Michael might convince his followers to self-destruct. The narrative of the film takes a dramatic turn as the parents of two young members of the group come to Strong City to remove the children because they are “worried about the cult committing mass suicide.”<sup>96</sup> As Ben Anthony returns to the compound the day before the big event, his voice-over can be heard over footage of the dirt road he is driving on at night, “I didn’t know what to expect,” Anthony says, “but it was clear the group would do whatever Michael asked of them. He’d said he didn’t believe in suicide, but other groups have said that in the past and ended up dead.”<sup>97</sup>

Anthony’s description of Travesser’s followers as self-hating and possibly suicidal is worth exploring further, as it accomplishes a significant rhetorical task in this film. First of all, by ‘worrying’ about the group’s safety, Anthony links Strong City to

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 3:34-4:00.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 28:42-30:45.

<sup>94</sup> Bent, “The Poor Jeff Lie.”

<sup>95</sup> Channel Four, “The End of the World Cult,” 31:33-32:00.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 27:20.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 34:33-35:03.

the 'Cult' trope of mass suicide. As one sociologist of New Religions has remarked, since the Jonestown tragedy "mass suicide has become a term of general cultural currency, a touchstone for describing the stark danger posed by 'cults.'"<sup>98</sup> No-one at Strong City ever suggests that suicide is an option; this suggestion comes from Anthony himself, but the mere mention of suicide is enough to firmly categorize this group as a dangerous 'Cult.' As noted earlier, this categorization not only makes Anthony's story newsworthy and interesting, it also functions to reinforce the popular idea that 'Cults' are a social menace.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, this presentation contrasts significantly with the self-presentation of the people of Strong City on their website, as a latter part of this thesis will demonstrate.

The apocalyptic worldview of the Strong City group is firmly rooted in Seventh-day Adventism and conventional Christian apocalyptic discourse that conceives of the end of time as creative of a new, better, eternal earth, and of those who hold the secrets of God's truth as perfected Saints, not as worthless servants hoping for escape. Yet Anthony's presentation of this group, which presents the end-times concerns of Strong City as a failure of self-esteem, ignores the historical appeal of apocalyptic worldviews, an appeal that has 'stood the test of time' in the face of repeated disconfirmations.<sup>100</sup> As historian Bernard McGinn argues in *Visions of the End*, apocalypticism is a tradition of discourse firmly rooted in the commonly accepted sacred texts of the Western

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<sup>98</sup> John R. Hall, "Public Narrative and the Apocalyptic Sect – from Jonestown to Mount Carmel" in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. Stuart A. Wright (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 209.

<sup>99</sup> See Beckford, "The Mass Media and New Religious Movements," 115.

<sup>100</sup> Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 17.

tradition.<sup>101</sup> Anthony's description of Strong City as a 'Cult,' however, enables the filmmaker to explain the end-times focus of the women of Strong City not as a legitimate response to historically rooted religious ideas but as submission to the dangerous charismatic leadership of Michael Travesser. Once again, in "The End of the World Cult," the religious worldview of these people is reduced to the illegitimate authority of one man, Michael Travesser, who has "taught his followers to hate themselves and hope for the end."

Anthony begins to build the dramatic tension about halfway through his film when a young girl name Healed is forcibly but, it seems, suddenly, removed from Strong City by her parents who are apostates from the 'Cult.'<sup>102</sup> This event begins the unveiling of Anthony's darkest secret about Strong City, and is presented both as proof that Michael has been keeping secrets from Ben Anthony, and also that Ben Anthony has found him out. As Healed's parents arrive at the community with representatives from the Sherriff's office, Jeff's "edginess" and "reluctance" to talk about why they have come, says Ben Anthony, "made me wonder what the messiah might have to hide." He decides to investigate, but before he can pursue it further Michael voluntarily invites him to look at an article published on the internet by *Vice Magazine* in which a former member accuses Michael of lying naked with several virgins at Strong City. Though Michael offers this information voluntarily to Anthony, the filmmaker does not even consider that Michael is being open and honest with him. "I couldn't help feeling

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<sup>101</sup> Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: apocalyptic traditions in the middle ages* (New York: Columbia, 1998); Many historians of religion have argued for the historical importance of apocalyptic narratives. In his recent book, for example, John R. Hall argues that these narratives have had a profound influence on modernity. See John R. Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

<sup>102</sup> Channel Four, "The End of the World Cult," 11:48.

Michael was showing me this as an exercise in damage limitation,” Ben says, “it seemed he’d been a little more than selective when telling me what had gone on here.” During this conversation between Michael and Ben, tension mounts as Ben accuses Michael of hiding things from him. Michael asserts that he hadn’t spoken to Ben about the virgins because he simply hadn’t asked. Now defensive, Michael claims, “I’m *not* keeping anything from you. I *am* answering your questions.”<sup>103</sup>

In the scenes that follow, Anthony constructs a kind of forensic drama as he determines to unearth the dark secret of Strong City, while Michael appears to struggle to justify himself and limit the damage. As Ben continues to investigate the secret, it gradually becomes apparent that Healed, a minor, was one of the virgins that had lain naked with Michael. Not only this, but at one point God had told Michael to have sex with these young women; finally, though, this turns out to have only been a test of faith, and Michael did not have to follow through. All of this is finally revealed in a climactic interview with Michael, while clouds gather in the skies over Strong City. The ‘facts’ are revealed in Ben Anthony, the revealer’s, voice-over, while only Michael’s justifications for his actions are in his own voice. These justifications are presented in an unsettling way that does not make us feel any more comfortable about what has been going on here. We hear Michael explain, for example, that he was less likely to think lustful thoughts than medical doctors, who “even put their fingers in women’s private parts,” while performing their healing role. The whole scene is cast in an ominous tone, and then, “Just as we finished the interview,” Anthony claims, “the heavens opened.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 16:06-19:00.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 19:40-23-43.

Anthony's investigation has somehow broken through the clouds, causing all the awful truth to pour down on Strong City.

Throughout this melodramatic big reveal, the contents of the revealed secret again become caught up with the question of Michael's identity. Michael's justifications revolve around the issue of who he is, and where he gets his authority. As soon as Michael attempts to prove that his actions were justified, he must make an appeal to his special identity and relationship with God. Anthony uses this opportunity to subtly (or not so subtly) make his own points about Michael's illegitimacy. For example, as we hear Michael's voice claiming "I am the embodiment of God. I am divinity and humanity combined," we see footage of a lizard skittering across the rocks. As we hear the sounds of approaching thunder, Ben Anthony considers that, "If Michael had had sex with an underage girl he might have wound up in prison. It seems God has charted a safe course for his son. Either that, or Michael makes it up as he goes along."<sup>105</sup> While Michael claims his identity justifies what he has done, Anthony flips this justification on its head to show that, because of what he has done, Michael is probably not who he says he is. This is the biggest 'secret' that Anthony reveals in this film. Pitting his authority against that of Michael Travesser, Anthony finally 'proves' that Michael is not telling the truth about who he is. Michael's prophetic claims, Anthony's rhetoric suggests, are nothing but cheap tricks; even Michael does not believe he is the son of God.

This is exemplified by Anthony's treatment of the final doomsday event, on October 31, 2007.<sup>106</sup> For Anthony, Travesser's legitimacy depends on his ability to predict the future, and the legitimacy of the group's entire worldview therefore also

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 43:00-45:20.

hinges on the accuracy of this end-times date. Demonstrating that the world does not end when Travesser says it will, therefore, is the climax of this film's narrative. Michael (a secret-keeper) has not allowed the film crew inside the compound on the big night, so they wait outside the gate in the dark. The entire scene is loaded with generic demonic imagery that could be part of a horror film. It is Halloween, and this fact is emphasized by shots of smashed pumpkins on the highway. Footage of the dark road, yellow in the moonlight, is interrupted "at the stroke of 12," by the sounds of a "strange horn" that blares from speakers near the house, and "ecstatic voices" that draw nearer to the gate. Chaotic footage of blurred lantern lights coming out of the dark accompany these sounds and seem to threaten the viewer as they draw near. "Suddenly," Ben Anthony's voice over tells us, "Michael was leading his followers out of the compound and up the road towards us..." The group gathers around Michael, shouting "Liberty! Liberty!" and Ben Anthony says: "As Michael stood surrounded by his delirious followers, he reminded me of the story of the Emperor's New Clothes." After a few more cheers the group retreats into the dark. This bizarre and threatening ceremony, it seems, has all been a charade intended to mask the disappointing anti-climax of failed prophecy. The world has not ended. Travesser was wrong, and his professed authority is therefore nothing more than a crude trick; Michael is not the son of God, but just a man, and he knows it.

Anthony's narrative, which is structured around this 'doomsday' event, implies that the religious belief-system of Strong City has this prophecy as its defining or organizing principle. In fact, it is highly unusual for any apocalyptic or millennial group to have such a date as the organizing principle of their entire belief-system. One can imagine how fragile such a belief-system might be. In fact, specific timelines for the end

of time are usually only one (albeit important) aspect of apocalyptic belief systems. As historian of religion J. Gordon Melton writes, though outside observers tend focus on these timelines as the most important aspect of millennial groups, these timelines are only meaningful when “set within a complex set of beliefs and interpersonal relationships.”<sup>107</sup> As Melton argues, this is why these groups often do not collapse when these dates disappoint, but instead reinterpret events in light of their worldview. After the repeated failures of William Miller’s end-times prophecy in 1844 and 1845, for example, Millerite Hiram Edson managed to revive the Millerite movement by arguing that though nothing visible had happened on earth, an important event had occurred in heaven on the predicted date. This belief, later elaborated by Ellen White and other ‘Adventist’ leaders, is the basis of the Seventh-day Adventist religion. Likewise, though Travesser’s authority at Strong City is significantly supported by his prophetic skills, as we will see in the second half of this thesis, October 31, 2007 is but one of a number of significant dates for this group. Though the identification and organization of historical epochs is crucial to this group’s sense of cosmic order, their prophetic timeline is complex and cannot be boiled down to one particular ‘doomsday.’ Just as Strong City is not about only one man, Travesser, it is also not only about one date, October 31, 2007.

Because Anthony presents things this way, however, the failure of the October 31<sup>st</sup> prophecy enables him to expose Travesser as an abusive manipulator, a charismatic ‘Cult’ leader who has lied about his special spiritual status in order to selfishly satisfy his own base urges. In a final interview,<sup>108</sup> Ben Anthony finally confronts Michael and the two face off. Ben accuses Michael of isolating his followers and not allowing them to

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<sup>107</sup> J. Gordon Melton, “What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails?” in ed. Jon R. Stone, *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 147.

<sup>108</sup> Channel Four, “The End of the World Cult,” 37:11.

properly experience the world. Laughing, Michael asks “how do you experience the world *properly*?” and argues that the world outside is empty and worthless, in contrast to life inside Strong City “where you do *real* things, and not just things that keep your lusts satisfied for a while.” Ben once again turns Michael’s argument against him: “but doesn’t this group just satisfy *your* own needs, Michael?” Finally, communication between the filmmaker and his subject breaks down completely into a tense silence. The camera slowly zooms in on Michael’s face and we hear Ben Anthony’s voice make his final judgment on Michael’s authority:

Michael was not used to being challenged, and I could see the contempt in his eyes as he tried to stare me down. If he truly believes his own divinity, why has he so crudely manipulated his followers? I found his complete refusal to take any responsibility for what he’s done here chilling... he’s a man who’s lost control of his ego, and any attempt to reason with him seemed futile.<sup>109</sup>

Anthony connects the legitimacy of the entire Strong City worldview to the character of Michael Travesser, which he systematically attacks: his status as the son of God is duplicitous, his charismatic power over his followers is coercive and abusive, and his prophecies do not come true. Anthony’s final dismissal of Travesser as egotistical and manipulative, therefore, ‘proves’ the illegitimacy of the whole Strong City endeavor. Instead of criticizing specific aspects of the Strong City worldview that seem problematic, and trying to understand what motivates beliefs and practices that seem unsettling or deviant, Anthony rejects the worldview of Strong City wholesale by linking this particular group to an ephemeral social category of dangerous, illegitimate ‘Cults’ that are unworthy of serious consideration as legitimate and complex religious worlds. Once Strong City has been labeled a ‘Cult,’ all other aspects of the group, their beliefs, practices, motivations, and context, are rendered irrelevant; the thing that defines Strong

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 40:49.

City, Anthony would have us believe, is that they are a 'Cult,' and 'Cults' are all the same. The following chapter will explore the implications of this depiction of Travesser's authority in "The End of the World Cult" for the way in which the female residents of Strong City are presented in this film.

## SUBMISSION

The previous chapter described the way in which Anthony's presentation of Strong City in "The End of the World Cult" relied on 'Cult' discourse to undermine the religious worldview of this group. An important aspect of 'Cult' discourse is the idea that members of marginal religions are not genuine religious actors, but merely the victims of a duplicitous charismatic leader. The deviant behavior of 'Cult' followers can only be explained, in this discourse, as a non-genuine religiosity that has been forced on the believer from without. In this chapter, I trace the history and development of theories of coercive persuasion in 'Cult' discourse that have been used to remove responsibility from the followers of marginal groups in a number of ways. With a particular focus on the influential 'brainwashing' theory of Anticult psychologist Dr. Margaret Singer, I demonstrate how Anthony's rhetoric is informed by this discourse to present the women and girls of Strong City as dangerous victims. I conclude that Anthony's presentation of these women gives us a distorted picture of the way in which authority functions at Strong City, and fails to recognize the important role these women play in the construction and maintenance of their own religious identities and worldviews.

### **"In Vain I Struggled to Break the Spell": the development of the 'brainwashing' model in 'Cult' discourse.**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American representations of marginalized religious groups often presented members of these groups not as religious actors but as victims who had been manipulated into participating in a deviant group. This was particularly true of female recruits to unconventional religions, who were frequently described as unwitting sexual slaves. Mormon women, for example, were often described as involuntarily

hypnotized and thus manipulated into polygamous relationships they would never voluntarily enter. For example, in 1855 the Mormon apostate Maria Ward accounted for her conversion to the Latter Day Saints in the following way:

... I soon became aware of some unaccountable power exercised over me by my fellow traveler... I became immediately sensible of some unaccountable influence drawing my sympathies toward him. In vain I struggled to break the spell. I was like a fluttering bird before the gaze of a serpent-charmer.<sup>110</sup>

Rhetoric circulated about Catholic nuns during this same time period also constituted these religious women, particularly those who had converted from Protestantism, as prisoners forced to satisfy the sexual needs of Catholic priests and monks. Sometimes this rhetoric led to violent attacks on Catholic institutions in an attempt to rescue these women. In 1834, for example, a mob responding to rumors of the abuse of young women at an Ursuline nunnery in Massachusetts stormed the institution in an attempt to rescue the women who resided there. In the end, the mob unearthed all the bodies in the Catholic cemetery and burned the nunnery down.<sup>111</sup>

The practice of deprogramming, described in a previous section, likely derived from the same impulses that motivated these 19<sup>th</sup> century attacks: an inability to understand or accept unconventional religious beliefs and practices, and an unwillingness to admit that good, normal people could voluntarily decide to participate in them. As noted earlier, the Anticult movement of the 1970's and 1980's was composed mainly of concerned friends and relatives who had a great deal of difficulty understanding why many young people from respectable families were leaving their conventional lives to join marginal religious groups. Many could only explain this behavior in terms of victimization: their loved ones had been duped. The practice of deprogramming,

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<sup>110</sup> Ward as cited in Lewis, *Odd Gods*, 29.

<sup>111</sup> Lewis, *Odd Gods*, 25-27.

therefore, likely developed out of the sincere desire of these concerned friends and relatives to rescue their loved ones from what they saw as manipulative leaders and totalitarian group structures that had somehow tricked vulnerable people into joining.

Initially, a mixed bag of explanations for how ‘Cults’ accomplished this persuasive trickery was offered by the nascent Anticult movement. ‘Cults’ were said to break down the critical reasoning capacity of new recruits by subjecting them to sleep deprivation, forcing them to adopt unusual diets (vegetarianism, for example), or drugging them.<sup>112</sup> Gradually, these theories of manipulation through physiological means developed into a variety of more formal, more respectable, psychological theories. These theories were most commonly referred to as the ‘brainwashing’ or ‘mind control’ models. Though Anticult psychologists never came to a consensus on the details of these theories, in general they tended to agree that, despite the absence of physical constraints, the formally voluntary participation of individuals in groups labeled ‘Cults’ was in actuality non-consensual. These professionals agreed that ‘Cults’ practiced methods of psychological coercion that were as effective as physical constraint or torture.<sup>113</sup>

More than any other factor, theories of coercive persuasion have helped to construct ‘Cults’ in the popular imagination as a widespread and unprecedented social menace that requires immediate remedial action. Coercive persuasion models have served as a typological link between disparate groups, positing that it is not the nature of people’s beliefs, but the way in which they came to hold them, that defines a group as a ‘Cult.’ Opponents of marginal groups who employ this logic are able to argue that they

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<sup>112</sup> Bromley, Shupe and Darnell, 188.

<sup>113</sup> Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins “Conversion and ‘Brainwashing’ in New Religious Movements,” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 241.

are not attacking the content of a belief system (which would be unconstitutional) but the method of its dissemination.<sup>114</sup> Describing the followers of ‘Cults’ as ‘brainwashed’ victims, therefore, has meant that attacks on deviant groups could bypass constitutional proscriptions on religious persecution. Furthermore, ‘brainwashing’ theories have been lent scientific legitimacy by the fact that a number of prominent mental health professionals claimed to draw on Edgar Shein’s work on the treatment of American POWs in the Korean War and Robert Lifton’s work on Chinese thought reform programs. As Anthony and Robbins argue, Anticult models of coercive persuasion have only a limited resemblance to the theories of Shein and Lifton, but the use of these authoritative works effectively linked ‘Cults’ to the Communist enemy in the popular imagination.<sup>115</sup> Coercive persuasion models, therefore, allowed the Anticult movement, initially composed of isolated opponents of particular groups, to develop a more effective, coordinated attack on ‘Cults’ as a category, and to describe ‘Cults’ not as isolated deviant groups, but as a generalized social menace.

The rhetoric of coercive persuasion has also functioned effectively in the courts both to absolve former ‘Cult’ members from legal responsibility, and to excuse the kidnapping of ‘Cult’ members from the ‘Cult’ environment. ‘Brainwashing’ has been used with some efficacy in criminal trials and civil suits as a defense for illegal behavior performed while in a ‘Cult.’ In the Early 1990’s, for example, Richard LeBaron received a reduced sentence of only 5 years for killing a man and his daughter at point-blank range because he argued that at the time of the murders he had been ‘brainwashed’ and

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<sup>114</sup> Bromley, Shupe and Darnell, 187-188.

<sup>115</sup> Anthony and Robbins, 251-253.

therefore could not be held fully legally responsible for his actions.<sup>116</sup> As mentioned earlier, ‘brainwashing’ has also been used as an argument for enacting Conservatorship legislation over young adults. This legislation was initially intended for adults to take control of the finances of their aging senile parents, but these guardianships began to be used by parents to take control of the lives of their children who had become members of ‘Cults,’ on the basis that their participation in a particular group had rendered them incapacitated.<sup>117</sup> In the case of *Katz v. Superior Court*, for example, the court granted conservatorships over five members of the Unification Church for the purpose of deprogramming them.<sup>118</sup>

The success of coercive persuasion models in the courts, while limited, demonstrates the way in which brainwashing theory can function to remove responsibility and agency from the followers of marginalized religious groups. The success of brainwashing claims in the courts began a slow decline in the 1990’s as coercive deprogrammings and the use of conservatorship legislation to justify them began to be fought on civil liberties grounds.<sup>119</sup> Legal troubles with the Church of Scientology have led to the demise of the Cult Awareness Network, and most Anticult organizations now explicitly condemn the old practice of forced deprogramming. However, ‘Cult’ psychologists continue to advance softer versions of the coercive persuasion models

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<sup>116</sup> Lewis, *Odd Gods*, 73.

<sup>117</sup> The ‘Lasher Amendment’ to New York State law, for example, at one time extended conservatorship legislation to people who have become “closely and regularly associated with a group which practices the use of deception in the deprivation or isolation from family or unusually long work schedules” and who “has undergone a sudden and radical change in behavior, lifestyle, habits and attitudes” and whose “judgment has become impaired to the extent that he is unable to understand the need for such care.” Cited in Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 128.

<sup>118</sup> Robbins, “New Religious Movements on the Frontier of Church and State,” 17. The *Katz* case was dismissed on appeal.

<sup>119</sup> Richardson, “Legal Dimensions of New Religions,” 165; cf. Charlotte E. Hardman, “Children in New Religious Movements,” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 397.

developed by early theorists, and to advocate ‘exit counseling,’ a voluntary counseling service for ‘Cult’ members who feel trapped in authoritarian ‘Cult’ environments.<sup>120</sup> These models continue to explain a variety of unconventional beliefs and behavior as fraudulent, and so not worth exploring or trying to understand. Despite the fact that individuals appear to genuinely hold certain beliefs, theories of coercive persuasion construct these beliefs as resulting from something outside of the subject, over which the subject has no control and is therefore not responsible. This has likely been a comfort to the loved ones of ‘Cult’ members,<sup>121</sup> as well as to “Cult” apostates who come to regret their actions in a particular group after leaving.<sup>122</sup>

As noted above, however, sociologists of New Religious Movements have long been highly critical of coercive persuasion models.<sup>123</sup> Opposition to ‘brainwashing’ theories on the grounds that they threatened the constitutional rights of members of marginal religions led many new scholars into the field of New Religions in the first place.<sup>124</sup> One of the first of these important sociological critiques of “brainwashing” was put forth in 1984 by Eileen Barker in her important book, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice of Brainwashing?*<sup>125</sup> Her detailed study of conversion processes in Reverend Moon’s Unification Church found that allegations of ‘brainwashing’ could not be upheld

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<sup>120</sup> See Benjamin Zablocki, “Towards a Demystified and Disinterested Scientific Theory of Brainwashing,” and Stephen A. Kent, “Brainwashing Programs in The Family/Children of God and Scientology” both in Zablocki and Robbins, *Misunderstanding Cults*.

<sup>121</sup> In a 1978 article in the *Daily Mail*, for example, the parents of a member of the Unification Church, who described the conversion process their son David had undergone, are quoted thus: “... we took comfort in realizing that it was not our son... but a diabolical force that had been implanted in his mind... David’s mind, we are convinced, was raped...” cited in Barker, *The Making of a Moonie*, 121.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>123</sup> For two excellent critiques that are more detailed than is possible in this work, see Lorne L. Dawson, “Raising Lazarus: A Methodological Critique of Stephen Kent’s Revival of the Brainwashing Model” and Dick Anthony, “Tactical Ambiguity and Brainwashing Formulations: Science or Pseudo Science” both in Zablocki and Robbins, *Misunderstanding Cults*; cf. Anthony and Robbins “Conversion and ‘Brainwashing’ in New Religious Movements.”

<sup>124</sup> See ch.1 of this work.

<sup>125</sup> See, in particular, Barker, *The Making of a Moonie*, ch.5.

in this community.<sup>126</sup> The evidence of her study suggested that the ‘brainwashing’ and ‘mind control’ techniques this group was accused of using to trap members in the group were strikingly ineffective: fewer than 10% of potential new recruits attending a Moonie recruitment workshop, for example, ever returned.<sup>127</sup> In *The Making of a Moonie*, Barker argued that coercive persuasion models oversimplified the conversion process by ignoring the host of psychological, social, and personal belief factors that influence normal decision-making processes, let alone religious conversion.<sup>128</sup>

Like Barker, Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins have identified in the concepts of ‘brainwashing’ and ‘mind control’ what they view as a flawed and oversimplified “extrinsic model” of religious conversion. These models of persuasion assume that conversion occurs not within the subject but *to* the subject, against their will, without their informed consent. These extrinsic models, they argue, tend to downplay or ignore any internal characteristics of the group or the individual who joins that might suggest the two were a good match.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, while these models of coercive persuasion are usually based on the idea that the followers of ‘Cults’ are victims of a duplicitous charismatic leader, what they fail to recognize is that charisma is not uniquely a characteristic of leaders, but is imputed to a leader by their followers. Charismatic authority, like all authority, depends on its perceived authenticity in the minds of those who recognize it. Charismatic authorities must skillfully respond to the values of their audience in order to achieve legitimacy. As sociologist Martin E. Spencer noted some years ago, charisma is ‘not the property of the person or the situation: the person may

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 232-259.

<sup>129</sup> Anthony and Robbins, 244.

possess gifts, the situation may generate tensions-the charisma itself is the *historical product* of the interaction between the two.’<sup>130</sup>

Despite their flaws, however, theories of coercive persuasion have become lodged in the public imagination as a reasonable ‘scientific’ explanation for deviant behavior. In Jeffrey E. Pfeifer’s famous study on “The Psychological Framing of Cults,” subjects were asked to categorize the experiences of a fictitious student named ‘Bill’ who they were told had dropped out of college to join an unnamed organization, in which he was indoctrinated into an unspecified ideology. When it was revealed that ‘Bill’ had dropped out of college to join the Catholic priesthood or the U.S. Marine Corps, subjects most commonly described his experience as “conversion” or “resocialization,” but when told ‘Bill’ had dropped out of college to join the Unification Church (commonly known as the “Moonies”), subjects were most likely to describe his experience as “brainwashing.”<sup>131</sup> As one observer wrote in the 1970’s, “We do not call all types of personal or psychological influences ‘brainwashing.’ We reserve this term for influences of which we disapprove.”<sup>132</sup>

**“A Cult Personality”: Dr. Margaret Singer’s theory of coercive persuasion.**

Clinical psychologist Dr. Margaret Singer was one of the most important proponents of the ‘brainwashing’ theory in the 1980’s and 1990’s, and though her theories have now been largely discredited they remain influential in popular representations of ‘Cults.’ Singer provided expert testimony about the power of ‘brainwashing’ in the above-mentioned Katz case, as well as many others.<sup>133</sup> When the

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<sup>130</sup> Martin E. Spencer, “What is Charisma?” *The British Journal of Sociology* 24 (1973): 341-354.

<sup>131</sup> Lewis *Odd Gods*, 41.

<sup>132</sup> Cited in Robbins, “New Religious Movements on the Frontier of Church and State,” 167.

<sup>133</sup> Lewis, *Odd Gods*, 90.

Unification Church brought a libel suit against the *Daily Mail* for an article accusing the church of ‘brainwashing.’ Singer’s testimony against the Church likely influenced the jury to rule that the article was not libelous.<sup>134</sup> As Dick Anthony has remarked, “Singer’s testimony in civil suits based on her brainwashing argument may constitute all by itself the most effective tactic of the Anticult movement.”<sup>135</sup> In the late 1980’s, however, Singer fell out with the American Psychological Association.<sup>136</sup> In the *United States v. Fishman* case Singer’s status as an expert witness was rejected as evidence on the basis of an amicus brief submitted by the APA that denied the scientific validity of her theories.<sup>137</sup> However, the similarities between Dr. Singer’s theory of the dangerously artificial ‘Cult’ self and the presentation of women in Ben Anthony’s 2008 documentary film about Strong City indicate that her ideas continue to resonate in the popular imagination, and to inform much contemporary discourse about ‘Cults.’ In her most famous book about the psychological impact of ‘Cults,’ *Cults in Our Midst*, Singer outlines her important and influential argument as a warning call against the immanent and insidious social menace of ‘Cults.’

In *Cults in Our Midst*, Singer describes ‘brainwashing’ as a process that artificially manipulates the entire self in a way that is imperceptible to the subject. In contrast to the Communist thought-reform programs that form the basis of her theory, she writes, the novelty of ‘Cult’ manipulation is that it attacks the subject’s fundamental values and sense of identity. “What’s new – and crucial –,” Singer writes, “is that these

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<sup>134</sup> Barker, *The Making of a Moonie*, 122.

<sup>135</sup> Dick Anthony, “Religious Movements and Brainwashing Litigation: Evaluating Key Testimony” in *In Gods We Trust*, eds. Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Press, 1990), 299.

<sup>136</sup> Lewis, *Odd Gods*, 75.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-91; cf. Bromley, Shupe and Darnell, 194.

programs change attitudes by attacking essential aspects of a person's sense of self, unlike the earlier brainwashing programs that primarily confronted a person's political beliefs."<sup>138</sup> The behavior displayed by an individual under the influence of coercive persuasion, Singer argues, is not a genuine reflection of the character of that individual, but represents a new, socially constructed and therefore artificial 'Cult self' that obscures the 'real' person lying dormant beneath. This obscured 'real' person cannot reasonably be held responsible for the things they say, do, or even believe when under the influence of this artificial 'Cult self':

We might ask ourselves- and surely many former cult members have- how a person can display reprehensible conduct under some conditions, then turn around and resume normal activities under other conditions. The phenomenon has been variously described as doubling or as the formation of a pseudopersonality (or pseudoidentity), a superimposed identity, a cult self, or a cult personality.<sup>139</sup>

Anthony and Robbins have correctly pointed out that extrinsic models of conversion, such as Singer's, are not so dissimilar from normal Christian conversion narratives, in that conversion often involves the emergence of a 'new self.' The difference is that conversion narratives see this new self as the emergent true self, while coercive persuasion models tend to see this new self as false because of its extrinsic source. As Anthony and Robbins put it, "'Conversion' as well as 'brainwashing' are generally seen as involving the emergence (or recovery) of a religious self that is discontinuous with preconversion personal or group identity. However, from a (particular) religious standpoint, this is really a good rather than a bad thing."<sup>140</sup> Indeed, in *Cults in Our Midst*, Singer writes that "As part of the intense influence and change process in many cults, people take on a new social identity, which may or may not be

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<sup>138</sup> Singer, 60.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 78-79.

<sup>140</sup> Anthony and Robbins, 247.

obvious to an outsider. When groups refer to this new identity, they speak of members who are transformed, reborn, enlightened, empowered, rebirthed, or cleared...<sup>141</sup> For Singer, these positive conversion narratives about the new self are nothing more than rhetorical tricks used to conceal the artificial character of a new, manufactured, 'Cult' identity.

Because they subtly manipulate the individual's entire sense of themselves, Singer writes, coercive persuasion techniques give the manipulated individual the illusion that they are actually not being manipulated. The adoption of a 'Cult self' is totally involuntary, imposed by a charismatic leader or by totalitarian group structures that function subtly and invisibly to the subject. Because of their immersion in a particular social context the individual is unaware that the process is occurring. "Brainwashing is not experienced as a fever or a pain might be;" Singer writes, "it is an invisible social adaptation. When you are the subject of it, you are not aware of the intent of the influence processes that are going on, and especially, you are not aware of the changes taking place within you." Victims of coercive persuasion therefore have no part in the creation of this illusory self, and cannot be blamed for anything they do when under its influence. They are totally unaware that it is manufactured and therefore not real, a fact frequently demonstrated by their stubborn claims that the 'Cult self' is, in fact, their true self.

The fact that the subject experiences the new social identity as genuine and real Singer sees as further evidence of their total incapacity. Individuals who are subject to "brainwashing," Singer writes, truly believe that they are remaining in the group by

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<sup>141</sup> Singer, 77.

choice. This, she writes, accounts for the strange way in which people who are brainwashed can stubbornly hold to their bizarre belief systems:

I am not saying that people in cults or groups that use thought-reform processes are just faking it by role-playing, pretending, or acting. Anyone who has met a former friend who's been transformed into a recruiting zealot for a New Age transformational program, for example, knows that something more profound than role-playing is operating as that old friend defends her or his new self and new group, speaking single-mindedly, spouting intense, firmly stated dogma. This is not play-acting. It is far more instinctive and experienced as real.<sup>142</sup>

The fact that people in 'Cults' truly believe in this new self is proof to Singer that they cannot be held responsible for the things they do while in its disguise. "Among the many influences that reinforce the difficulty a cult member has in just getting up and walking out," she writes, "belief is probably the starting point... In the world of cults, belief becomes the glue that binds the person to the group."<sup>143</sup>

Singer's argument is that the 'Cult' self is developed as an adaptation to the stressful demands of the 'Cult' environment. Singer explains that "cult thinking and behaviors are adaptive and not stable," and that therefore the new personality is learned in response to the pressures of the social environment. When the person is no longer subject to these pressures, the adaptive behavior ceases. The self presented by the 'victim' in the social context of the 'Cult' is super-imposed over a trapped 'true' self which can only emerge when removed from its social context. Singer writes that "ordinary persons, with their own ideas and attitudes, can be rapidly turned around in their social identity but later can recover their old selves and more forward... It is the cult environment that produces and keeps in place the cult identity."<sup>144</sup> Singer presents this as a hopeful insight, because it means that, when removed from the social environment of

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 78-79.

the ‘Cult,’ the old self can be restored and healed. “The central fact is this,” she continues, “the social identity learned while a person is in a thought-reform system fades, much as a summer tan does when a person is no longer at the beach.”<sup>145</sup>

However, while Singer argues that the passive and hidden ‘true’ self remains blameless no matter what happens in the ‘Cult,’ the active and present ‘Cult’ self is described by Singer as dangerously fanatical, unpredictable, and, by definition, out of the individual’s control. Thus, the contingent, social self, manifest in the actual language and behavior of a person, is not a genuine human self that deserves the rights and freedoms usually attributed to human beings in our society. On the contrary, this socially constructed self is presented as dangerous to the invisible, ‘true’ self, and to society at large. This constructed ‘Cult’ self is described as a self that should be monitored and controlled, if not destroyed completely so that the ‘true’ self can be restored. Singer’s coercive persuasion model, therefore, removes ethical responsibility from the individual, who is described as a powerless victim, while simultaneously denying personhood to that same individual, who is described as dangerously out of control. Singer presents the ‘victims’ of ‘Cults’ as two people in one body; one invisible innocent and one visible, dangerous lunatic.

**“Yeah! I am Brainwashed!”: the ‘Cult’ personalities of the women of Strong City in “The End of the World Cult.”**

Singer’s coercive persuasion model is not the only one in which arguments about the damage done to the ‘victims’ of ‘Cults’ is complemented by arguments about the threat unquestioning devotees of ‘Cults’ are said to pose to the larger society. Followers of marginal groups are in fact often presented as equally or more dangerous than their

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<sup>145</sup>Ibid.. 79.

leaders, because they are described as unquestioning agents of the leader who blindly follow him or her. Psychologists and advisors to the Anticult American Family Foundation Thomas and Jacqueline Keiser, for example, write that:

Anticult spokesmen warn that obedience to cult leaders poses a threat to mainstream society, since devotees see no authority in laws made by non-cult members. At the command of the leadership, faithful devotees will violate existing laws with impunity. This is a valid concern because authority, for converts, is vested only in group leaders and other members. The potential for abuse is high when individuals give up their autonomy and choose instead to obediently and blindly follow the commands of their leaders.<sup>146</sup>

In the preface to *Bounded Choice*, Singer's protégée Janja Lalich expresses a similar concern about the danger of 'Cult' extremism to the larger society, when she compares the fanaticism of 'Cult' members to that of the September 11<sup>th</sup> bombers. Although these Al-Qaeda operatives were "operating on quite a different level" from regular 'Cults,' Lalich argues the terrorists underwent a psychological process of coercive persuasion that closely resembled the one that 'Cult' members are forced to endure. This process, she argues, can transform any group member from admirable "dedicated believer" to dangerous "deployable agent."<sup>147</sup> Similarly, in Ben Anthony's "The End of the World Cult" the women of Strong City are presented not only as victims, but as dangerous victims who must be monitored and controlled.

"The End of the World Cult" presents Michael's authority as illegitimate but far from trivial. The rhetoric of this film suggests that on the contrary, Michael's authority is dangerous because there are people who submit to it. These people are for the most part women. If, as this film ultimately argues, Michael Travesser is not the Son of God, but only a man pretending, then his female followers are not the chosen brides of God

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<sup>146</sup> Keiser and Keiser, 87.

<sup>147</sup> Lalich, *Bounded Choice*, xvi-xvii.

incarnate, driven by true faith and good conscience into healing and life, as they believe themselves to be. Instead, they are the victims of a sexual predator, tricked and manipulated into dangerous perversion. Like Singer's 'Cult' victims, their deviance is wholly the result of the 'Cult' environment to which they have been subjected. Their true identities, therefore, have been obscured and constrained. As victims, they are presented as ultimately not responsible for the things they believe, say and do while in the 'Cult.' The things these women believe, say and do are presented as non-genuine expressions superimposed over these women's true selves. The 'Cult' personalities that they exhibit in their daily lives are therefore dangerously out of their own control. These women articulate Michael's corruption by their capitulation with his authority; they are his agents, blindly obeying his every whim however dangerous or bizarre.

It is in this film's presentation of the bodies and sexuality of Travesser's women that this concept of misguided and therefore dangerous consent can be most clearly localized. From the opening sequence of "The End of the World Cult," the connection between Michael Travesser's authority and the dangerously yielding bodies of his female followers is made clear. The film opens with sounds of thunder and footage of clouds gathering. A girl's voice is heard speaking: "Oh my daddy, I need you, I need a deeper experience with you than I have ever had before. Come down upon me and fill me with yourself." Over footage of Michael hugging a group of young people, ominous orchestral music plays in the background and we hear Michael's voice making the central claim of his prophet hood: "People who don't receive me will be lost and destroyed; people who accept my testimony will be saved." This is followed by a voice-over by Ben Anthony, who describes his journey up an isolated dirt road in New Mexico to study a

group of people who have moved into the desert because they believe the world is ‘about to end.’ We see Michael holding the face of a young girl, who says, “I love you.”

Michael kisses the girl on the mouth, while Ben Anthony’s voice-over continues: “this is the man who’s led them there... he calls himself: Michael... he says he’s the son of God.”

Michael then tells the young girl: “Remember, I’m responsible for you.”<sup>148</sup>

Anthony presents both Michael’s male and female followers as duped victims, but the trope of the dangerous victim is clearly gendered in this film. Anthony presents Michael’s male followers as sad, lonely figures. As discussed earlier, Michael’s son Jeff is described as “grayer and thinner” and shown sadly leaning his head against the wall during an interview in which Michael and his ex-wife describe their consummation. The only other adult male follower interviewed in the movie is the ex-husband of one of Michael’s two witnesses, who appears as a tragic figure, near tears as he describes his experiences in the group.<sup>149</sup> Anthony also interviews a third male follower: a sweet, nervous young boy named Matthew. In this interview, Matthew appears to put on a happy face, but Anthony remarks that, as the only boy at Strong City he “cuts a lonely figure.”<sup>150</sup> Matthew invites the filmmakers into his bedroom to show them a clay model of the solar system that he has made, and Anthony tells us that, despite this boy’s obvious intelligence, he has never been to school. Ben Anthony asks Matthew if he thinks there is any point in learning about the solar system, since he believes the end is coming soon. Matthew replies that he has thought about that, and that actually “it does seem useless.”<sup>151</sup> These three male members of Strong City are presented as forlorn figures,

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<sup>148</sup> Channel Four, “The End of the World Cult,” 0:00-1:50.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:00-7:30.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:55.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 26:05.

whose victimization is uncomplicated and sad. This contrasts markedly with Anthony's presentation of Michael's female followers, whose victimization takes on a more threatening character.

Early in the film, Ben Anthony discovers that 67-year-old Michael has a unique relationship with two middle-aged women at Strong City who are his Two Witnesses, and who are directly linked to the early development of Michael's prophetic authority. They are introduced during the interview sequence in which Michael is describing the day the Messiah first came in to his body.<sup>152</sup> After describing this event, Michael gestures towards these two women and says, "Certainly, by no instruction from me, two witnesses, these two, uh, left their homes, left their families, and it wasn't at my instruction or behest, it just occurred."<sup>153</sup> During this interview sequence, Michael is seated in an armchair while his two witnesses are shown sitting on the floor at his feet. Several times the camera zooms in on these women's faces, and they stare blankly out at the viewer, almost zombie-like. One such shot takes up a full fifteen seconds.<sup>154</sup> Despite Michael's assertion that these women were in control of their relationship with him from the very start, therefore, Anthony's presentation of these Two Witnesses suggests their relationship with Michael has, on the contrary, rendered them powerless.

These two women are indeed constituted in "The End of the World Cult" as passive, voiceless victims of Travesser's authority, not people at all but empty shells that have fallen under Michael's spell. We never hear these women speak in this film, nor do we even learn their names. As we will see in a later chapter, these two women, whose names are Ami and Anaiah, have written voluminous explications of their experiences

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 5:55-7:00.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 6:23-6:40.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 6:35-6:50.

with Michael on the Strong City website and appear to have a lot to say. However, Ben Anthony does not interview them at all about their experiences or seek any further explanation of why they behaved in the way that they did. Instead, he interviews one of their ex-husbands, who with tears in his eyes explains how difficult it was for him when his wife left him to follow Michael.<sup>155</sup> We can only conclude from Anthony's treatment of these women and their story that whatever explanation they have for their behavior is somehow irrelevant. This suggests that the personalities of these women have been completely erased, and that their relationship with Michael has rendered them incapable of making their own decisions; whatever they say will only parrot Michael's lies. All that Anthony deems it important enough to tell us about these two women, therefore, is that they abandoned their lives in direct response to Michael's claim to authority, and that their identities now depend on submission to that authority.

"But these women are not just devoted witnesses," Ben soon tells us. Their identity as witnesses to Michael's authority depends on their sexual relationship with him, a relationship that has disrupted the social order by breaking up families. "Michael insists," Ben's voice-over continues over more close-ups of the witnesses' unblinking eyes, "God commanded him to start having sex with both of them, and he convinced their husbands, who were still in the cult, he was just following God's orders."<sup>156</sup> The phrasing of this revelation suggests that it was not the women who needed convincing, but their husbands. Michael's previous assertion that these women volunteered to be in this situation now takes on a more ominous tone: unlike the men, these women were quick to submit to Michael's authority, even when that submission meant betraying their

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 7:00-7:35.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 6:43-7:00.

husbands and abandoning their families to follow him. Hence, though they are victims of Michael's charms, their victimization is threatening; their susceptibility to Michael's manipulation has caused all kinds of social subversion and disorder.

Under Michael's influence, these women have disrupted normal marriages to enter into an abnormal one. Using their bodies, they have subverted traditional family structures and hurt the people they are supposed to love the most. Because the things these women do with their bodies are all we know about who they are, this defines their characterization in Ben Anthony's film. As witnesses to Michael's (illegitimate) authority, the sexually-defined identity of these two women is presented as a harmful grotesque of what is normal, a dangerous perversion that threatens the regular social order of things. Ben's interview with one of the Two Witnesses' tearful ex-husbands is followed by ominous music and a shot of Michael sitting with his two witnesses, one of whom turns her head slowly so that she is again staring blankly into the camera.<sup>157</sup> This is directly followed by shots of members of the group working in the garden, while Ben Anthony, as quoted above, tells us that "all marriages and families are dissolved, members' names have been changed, they've had to give everything they own to Michael."<sup>158</sup> The role that these two women play as witnesses to Michael's (il)legitimacy, this sequence suggests, is linked to the disruption of normal social and economic relationships at Strong City, a disruption that threatens to spread outside of the 'Cult' if it is not controlled. The victimization of the women of Strong City, therefore, is presented not merely as a problem for them, but as a larger social danger.

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 7:30.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 7:35.

This theme is repeated in Anthony's uncomfortable characterization of the younger women of Strong City in "The End of the World Cult." As in the case of the Two Witnesses, we see these girls disrupt normal social relations with the things they do with their bodies. Yet, unlike the Two Witnesses, Ben Anthony presents these younger women as fuller characters in the film, indicating their names and dedicating individual interview time to them. They are presented in this film as zealous and committed to Michael, active and uncompromising in their support of his authority at Strong City. They also stake claim to some control over themselves and their own lives. Anthony's film suggests, however, that what these women think of as their own agency is actually a dangerous illusion. While, as Barker suggests, there is no logical connection "between the *nature of the process* by which people come to believe something and the *credibility of the belief itself*,"<sup>159</sup> 'Cult' discourse almost always equates coercive persuasion with deviant beliefs. The bizarre behavior that these girls exhibit (lying naked with an older man, for instance) is presented in this film as evidence that they have been manipulated or "brainwashed." Since they are not behaving as normal girls would, they must have been interfered with somehow.

Unlike the more mature women, who joined the group as adults, Anthony points out that these younger women have been raised in the 'Cult' and know no other way of life. Isolated from the outside world, Anthony argues, they have been so thoroughly conditioned by Michael that they are incapable of making their own decisions.<sup>160</sup> This makes them both especially vulnerable and especially dangerous. In one interview, Michael sits with fourteen-year-old Healed on a swing bench, holding her hand. The

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<sup>159</sup> Barker, *The Making of a Moonie*, 125.

<sup>160</sup> Anthony explicitly suggests this to Travesser near the end of the film. Channel Four, "The End of the World Cult," 38:50.

camera zooms in on this hand-holding several times during the interview, as Healed, smiling and giggling, talks about her mother, who has left the group: “She told me one time that she thought I was brainwashed. And, I thought, yeah! I am brainwashed! Michael has washed my brain of all my own corrupt thoughts!”<sup>161</sup> Healed’s childlike innocence in this interview is uncomfortably juxtaposed with her physical closeness and obvious devotion to the grey-haired, 67-year-old messiah who holds her hand. The relationship between this young girl and this old man is constructed in the film as obviously abnormal, and Healed’s happy blindness to her bizarre situation only emphasizes this point.

Anthony’s presentation of Healed’s devotion to Michael suggests that, along with the Two Witnesses, she too was caught up in the subversion of normal social relations that comes along with submission to Michael’s authority. Healed had stayed in the group even after her parents had left. Ben Anthony’s voice-over tells us that “her parents left the church just six months ago, after they stopped believing Michael was the Son of God. But their daughter remained in the cult, replacing her parents with Michael and his two witnesses.”<sup>162</sup> Though her parents have realized that Michael is not who he says he is Healed continues to willingly be a witness to his false identity and to submit to the authority that is connected with believing Michael is the Son of God. As in the case of the two witnesses, this submission involves a rejection of her old, normal family and its replacement by a new, abnormal one: Michael and his two wives. Healed’s conditioning is so thorough that her parents need to remove her from the compound by force because she refuses to go with them willingly. Just before she is taken away by the Sheriff’s

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<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 37:26.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:48.

office, we see a shot of Healed embracing one of Michael's nameless two witnesses.

Healed smiles and says, "My *true* mother."<sup>163</sup>

After Healed is removed from Strong City by her parents, Ben Anthony discovers that this girl was one of a group called the Seven Virgins, young women who had lain naked with Michael on several occasions. After learning this, the filmmaker interviews two other Virgins, Esther and Danielle, about their experiences with Michael.<sup>164</sup> Though Anthony does not mention it, unlike Healed and her sister, both Esther and Danielle are women over the age of 18, as were the rest of the 'Virgins.' In the interview with Anthony, Esther explains that she had read an internet post Michael had written "about how, um, the only way to like, kinda like come to resolution in your life, is to be naked before God. And I'm like, how are you naked before God?" After considering this post for a while, Esther says God told her it meant she needed to be physically naked in front of Michael: "... it was like, something was in me, and what was in me was, this means really, this means literally, physically, naked. And, it was in me that it meant, with Michael."<sup>165</sup> Although the message was Michael's, the interpretation of this message was Esther's own. Danielle describes a similar experience. Both women went to Michael and *asked* him if they could take off their clothes in front of him; Michael, Esther says, *paused while he listened for God's instructions and then consented.* Esther describes the resulting experience as being "like all of heaven was open to me, somehow I started to see God... for the first time it was like, God loves me, he loves me!.. I felt so secure, I

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 12:00.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 16:40-19:15.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 16:45-17:30.

was like, I never want to leave this place.”<sup>166</sup> Danielle’s experience was similar; “We just weren’t the same after that,” she says.<sup>167</sup>

Anthony’s presentation of these zealous young women suggests that Travesser’s authority is not only illegitimate, it is out of control. Though Esther and Danielle quite literally “asked for it,” their enthusiasm about lying naked with this gray-haired older man is presented as dangerously misguided; their consent is not presented as evidence that these young girls have made their own decisions, but as further evidence of their victimization. These young women have been so thoroughly conditioned to accept Travesser’s authority that they are incapable of making any informed decision. Driven almost to lunacy by this excessive commitment to Michael and his project, these young girls threaten to take things farther than even the prophet himself can handle. The idea to lie naked with Michael was the result of the girls’ own interpretation of Michael’s prophecy. Worse, we are told these girls soon began to beg Michael for a full, physical consummation. As we are shown footage of storm clouds gathering over Strong City, Ben Anthony tells us that, “Desperate to get even closer to God, the virgins pleaded with Michael for a full sexual experience. Healed’s desire was so strong, she wrote that if things didn’t change, she would kill herself.”<sup>168</sup> These girls seem to be recklessly chasing their own victimization, pressuring Michael to fulfill the expectations he himself has created in them. “If Michael had had sex with an underage girl, he might have wound up in prison,”<sup>169</sup> Ben Anthony tells us over more ominous music and footage of Travesser’s

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 18:20.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 19:13.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 22:30.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 23:50.

face watching the storm clouds gather. Embodied and fulfilled in these young women, it seems, Travesser's prophecy has run amok.

In Anthony's rhetoric, the threat these women pose is in their bodies and the powerful but disorganized sexuality that resides there. Conditioned since birth to accept Travesser as the Son of God, these girls harness their bodies and sexuality in submission to and support of Travesser's spiritual authority. Healed, for example, defies her family's rejection of this authority by physically remaining on the land at Strong City. Along with the other virgins, she takes off her clothes and exposes her body as a witness to her false beliefs. Her demand for sex is followed by the equally physical threat of suicide, the destruction of her body. The role of these young girls in this film, therefore, is of bodies that threaten: their nakedness and requests for sex are treated as revealed secrets that demonstrate how dangerous Michael's illegitimate authority is to everyone involved. Throughout the film, Ben Anthony gradually 'exposes' these girls as dangerous lunatics who are capable of anything, whose commitment is so dangerous because it is misplaced, and who use their bodies as powerful weapons in defense of Travesser's illegitimate authority.

By depicting the women of Strong City in this way, Anthony fails to recognize the dynamic and collaborative nature of religious authority at Strong City. As we will see in the second half of this thesis, the women of Strong City do not present themselves as victims. On the contrary, while they do recognize Travesser's charismatic authority and submit to it, they appear from their own writings do so willingly and of their own free will. Furthermore, these women and girls are active participants in the construction and maintenance of this authority, often finding creative space within it to develop their own

identities and agency. In a way that is typical of 'Cult' discourse generally, however, "The End of the World Cult" presents Travesser's charismatic leadership as imposed and therefore illegitimate, a result of calculated manipulation and coercive persuasion that renders his followers mute. This presentation obscures the more complicated and historically contingent motivations of these religious people, hindering our understanding of them and their worldview.

## CONCLUSION TO PART ONE

The previous two chapters have demonstrated the way in which Anthony used ‘Cult’ discourse in “The End of the World Cult” rhetorically to undermine the legitimacy of the religious worldview of Strong City. This presentation of Strong City functioned to obscure the motivations of these religious people, and to explain their difference as non-genuine. In particular, this construction served to frame the women of this community not as legitimate religious actors but as the dangerous victims of Travesser’s charismatic authority. As mentioned earlier, in 2008 Travesser was charged with two counts of ‘criminal sexual contact with a minor,’ and two counts of ‘contributing to the delinquency of a minor.’ A similar argument to the one advanced in “The End of the World Cult” was made in the court case against Travesser: since one of the charges was ‘contributing to the delinquency of a minor,’ the influence Michael had over the women in this group was a significant part of the prosecution’s case. The victims, it was argued, were corrupted by Michael’s authority. I do not wish to suggest that the rhetoric of Ben Anthony’s film directly caused the court case to proceed in this way, but I do wish to argue that this film initiated a growing discourse about Strong City that had real implications for this group.

Anthony’s narrative undercuts our ability to understand the choices and worldviews of the women of Strong City, and this has had serious implications for their legal and civic rights. Beckford writes that mass media information and images about ‘Cults’ tend to be ‘quoted’ frequently in other mediums, re-enforcing themselves as they are repeated and re-cast as ‘news.’<sup>170</sup> This is what happened with Anthony’s film. As the first major media representation of this group, “The End of the World Cult” was the

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<sup>170</sup> Beckford, “The Mass Media and New Religious Movements” 109.

foundation of Strong City's public image, profoundly influencing subsequent representations of the group. Shortly after the British release of "The End of the World Cult," the American National Geographic Channel released a television episode of *Inside* about Strong City which was essentially an edited version of Anthony's film.<sup>171</sup> "Inside a Cult" consisted entirely of images from "The End of the World Cult," re-arranged and supplemented with the testimony of Anticult experts and a prominent hostile ex-member of the Lord Our Righteousness Church named Prudence Welch.<sup>172</sup> These same images from "The End of the World Cult," with the National Geographic logo displayed on them, also appeared on a January, 2009 episode of the *Dr. Phil* show.<sup>173</sup>

In this program, Dr. Phil interviewed Lorraine and Bambi, who were identified as two step-sisters of Esther, the first of the 'Seven Virgins' to lay naked with Travesser. The television producers had followed these sisters as they travelled to Strong City to try and 'rescue' Esther and some others from the 'Cult.' On the program, images from "The End of the World Cult" of Travesser's Two Witnesses staring blankly through the camera were displayed while these two women described the residents of Strong City as "brainwashed,"<sup>174</sup> noting "This is how the Nazis did what they did in WWII: exactly the same kind of mind control."<sup>175</sup> While Lorraine and Bambi did not succeed in convincing their relatives to leave Strong City on the *Dr. Phil* show, soon after the program was aired Lorraine was able to get a Conservatorship order over Esther in order to force her to leave. 25-year-old Esther, who at the time was fasting in protest of Travesser's

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<sup>171</sup> National Geographic Channel, "Inside a Cult."

<sup>172</sup> Prudence Welch has a website online that outlines her critiques of Strong City, available at [www.travesser.info](http://www.travesser.info).

<sup>173</sup> *Dr. Phil*, "Family Cult part 2," *Dr. Phil*, [www.drphil.com/shows/show/1200](http://www.drphil.com/shows/show/1200).

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:40.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:39. Lorraine also repeatedly described her relative's eyes as "dead," and Dr. Phil described Michael Travesser as a "creepy dude in a sheet." Anticult deprogrammer Rick Ross, mentioned in the previous chapter, was also an expert guest on this episode.

conviction, was forcibly removed from Strong City by law enforcement and put under the guardianship of her step-sister, who Esther claims she barely knew and had not seen for 16 years. When she was eventually allowed to return to Strong City, Esther's behavior continued to be closely monitored by her step-sister, who she was legally obliged to call at least once a day. It seems clear, therefore, that Anthony's representation of Strong City did have a direct influence on Lorraine's ability to legally define her adult sister as incapable of making her own decisions.

Critical examination of 'Cult' discourse, particularly as it appears in presentations of marginal religions such as "The End of the World Cult," points to the larger problem of confronting religious difference (and difference in general) in a way that is reasonable, respectful, and fair. In November 2009, Michael Travesser wrote an open letter from prison that was posted on the Strong City website, titled 'I Love Our Little CULTure.' In this letter, Travesser engaged relatively perceptively in his own critique of 'Cult' discourse:

I have been noticing how the media has referred to us as a cult sometimes, as though it had some dangerous implication in the term...My definition of a cult is very close to the dictionary definition. I use "cult" to mean a culture. A cult, or a title of being a cult, if placed upon *our* church, would have to be placed also upon the Roman Catholic church, the Mormon church, the Seventh Day Adventist church, the Jehovah's Witnesses church, the Pentecostal churches and thousands of others...Everyone has beliefs that someone else would call strange. Some UFO congregations are called cults. Even the United States of America has to be described as a secular cult, because of its culture. Now just think of it...It all depends on your definition of what the word "cult" means.

The TV media is a cult also... The natural world is not better than a cult. They have movies like "The End of the World Cult" and other nonsense they make up.

In the dictionary, a cult is merely a peculiar sect. The sect is differentiated by its particular beliefs and practices. Some of the people in our country think we are strange because of the seven women, or the seven virgins, or the way I prayed for healing. They think we are

strange because of me being a “messiah” – meaning having an anointing from God. But why don’t these souls look at their own lives, before they look at ours? Why don’t they stand in front of the mirror and see their own cult? It is because they are used to the strangeness and consider it normal.<sup>176</sup>

Travesser’s critique is perceptive in that it indicates the significance of ‘Cults’ in the culture at large. One person’s ‘Cult’ is another person’s ‘religion.’ The problem of ‘Cults’ is therefore tied to the larger problem of religious tolerance. Marginal religious groups, like Strong City, often offer extreme examples of religious difference that test the limits of our tolerance. It is easy to respect differences that don’t impinge on our own fundamental values, and harder to respect choices that seem not just different but wrong, such as the decision of an underage girl to lie naked next to a 67-year old man. Denying the contingency of our own values and presenting alternative visions of reality as *automatically illegitimate* is a comfortable way to avoid dealing with real difference and disagreement; however, it is an approach that denies the uncomfortable reality that difference will not go away just because we ignore it. Media representations not just of marginal religious groups but of all unconventional people that present difference as a lie, and people who disagree with our values as manipulated victims, actually do disservice to the values they are ostensibly trying to defend. By denying that disagreements about values are real and legitimate, we give up the ability to engage difference critically and fairly and often end up doing violence to those we intend to protect, as in the case of Esther’s forcible removal from Strong City. Ben Anthony’s representation of the women of Strong City in “The End of the World Cult” is an example of this unfortunate process at work.

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<sup>176</sup> Travesser, Michael, “I Love Our Little CULTure,” Strong City, [strongcity.info/index.php/blog/entry/i\\_love\\_our\\_little\\_culture](http://strongcity.info/index.php/blog/entry/i_love_our_little_culture), accessed March 30, 2010.

**PART TWO**  
**STRONG CITY**

When Ben Anthony ‘discovered’ Strong City, the group was already a significant presence on the web. The Lord Our Righteousness Church, the formal name of the Church at Strong City, had been on the internet in some form since at least 1994, when Travesser’s ‘internet news’ site, the WINDS was first published. Since then, the group had proliferated on the web from a home site at Strongcity.com, later moved to Strongcity.info. These sites linked and unlinked at various times to a number of supplementary sites, such as WINDS.com and Shillum.com. Movies produced by the group were also posted on their various sites as well as on youtube.com, and many young people in the group had pages on blogspot.com. In 2008, the group’s main website at Strongcity.info was an attractive, accessible resource for the group’s rhetoric about itself. Texts followed by comments sections were laid out cleanly in simple fonts against a white background, accented by professional-looking photographs of the ranch property and its inhabitants. The residents of Strong City appeared in these photographs as modestly dressed white Americans, the women (who are a majority at Strong City) in long hair and skirts, the men bearded. Sometimes more sensational images were used to illustrate posts on the site, such as Photoshop images of cities collapsing into chasms in the earth, or Satan’s head superimposed on an American Flag. For the most part, however, the website had a professional atmosphere similar to what one might expect from a mainstream, well-funded religious group.

The following two chapters will provide a rhetorical analysis of the material on these pages in order to situate this material in the Christian apocalyptic tradition of Seventh-day Adventism. My aim is to demonstrate the way that members of Strong City legitimated their unconventional religious practices and perspectives through reference to

conventional cultural and religious resources. Just as I have demonstrated that Anthony told the story of Strong City through the lens of ‘Cult’ discourse, here I will illustrate that on the Strong City pages this same community presents itself through the lens of Seventh-day Adventism and Christian scriptures, with quite different results.

Out of the thousands of pages of material that has been published on Strongcity.com and Strongcity.info in the past ten years, much of which is now only available in web archives, this analysis will rely primarily on a few important documents. These documents summarize arguments that were repeated often enough in the daily posts on the Strong City pages to warrant a special treatment. The first is Travesser’s ‘Commentary on the Song of Solomon’ which he published on the internet in 2000. The second is Travesser’s “The Finished Work,” published on Strongcity.com in 2001, which is an explanation of the meaning of Travesser’s messiahship and his connection to his Two Witnesses. The third and most important document that informs this analysis is ‘The Vision Pages,’ a work published in 2006 on the Shillum website and linked to Strongcity.info, written mostly by the women in the group. These major documents will be supplemented and enhanced by material from the daily posts made on the group’s websites from 2001 to the present day in order to flesh out the argument that members of the group at Strong City made on the internet about how their community should be judged by the outside world.

A key goal of my analysis is to demonstrate that the religious worldview of Strong City, as it appears on the web, is a result of the collaboration of a number of religious people. It is not, as Anthony suggests in “The End of the World Cult,” merely the work of one charismatic man. Though Travesser’s personality often dominates these

internet fora, this analysis will show that other members of the Strong City group, particularly the women, also participated actively in the construction of religious meaning on these pages. While much of the material posted on the Strong City sites was written by Travesser himself, at least half was authored by various other important women and men at Strong City. Travesser's Two Witnesses, Ami and Anaiah, and all of the younger women involved in the 'Seven Virgins' rituals, including Esther, Danielle, Healed, and others, posted voluminous testimonies and hermeneutics on these websites. All of these participants, including Michael, quoted each other in their posts and posted discussion in the comment section that follows each post, so that the overall effect was of a community discussion forum.

For nearly a decade, the residents of Strong City have used the internet to reveal and interpret the cosmic drama they believe is unfolding around them every day, a drama in which the women of Strong City play a crucial role. As I will demonstrate, on these internet pages the residents of this religious community collaborate to argue that Strong City has been set up by God as a startling living parable, intended to awaken the world and guide us into a valley of decision. The ability to discern Truth from Lie, they argue, determines the fate of the world. By judging the Truth as it is manifest in the strange actions of the women of Strong City, one judges God and, consequently, his or herself. For the women who participated in these discussions, their role in the apocalyptic drama that defines this community serves them in constituting and establishing their own religious identities. Analyzing their posts, I show that the witnesses and virgins understand their religious actions (lying naked with Michael for instance, but also their speech on the web) in symbolic terms. Their actions arouse God, who will respond to the

world's acceptance or rejection of Strong City. Facilitating this moment of decision, they are catalysts able to evoke God's judgment and sentencing of the world. In short, these women do not appear here as the "victims" that Antony's drama would have us believe them to be, but as religious agents who believe they have the power to initiate the end of all history.

The goal of my analysis here is not to apologize for, or downplay, any bizarre or antisocial elements of this community and its worldview. Instead, I want to understand the members of this community, particularly its female members, as social agents who are participants in a particular discursive context that enables them to be persuaded by this apocalyptic rhetoric. I am not interested in determining the merits of their religious perspective, but I am interested in explaining its appeal for those who choose to be a part of this community. Given that I write in an academic context, it is certainly unlikely that my readers (or I) would support many of the decisions that these women have made, but this point of difference should not be used to dismiss the members of Strong City as irrational, crazy, or brainwashed. On the other hand, this approach also recognizes that people are responsible for the choices they make, and difference cannot be used simply as an apologetic tactic to legitimate whatever practices this group might undertake. Rather, I hope that this type of analysis makes clear the need for a more neutral space in which we can engage religious difference responsibly, and self-reflectively—a point that I will return to in my conclusion to the thesis.

## 3

**TELLING THE TRUTH**

Though Strong City is a marginal and unconventional group, the rhetoric of the Lord Our Righteousness Church at Strong City is informed and legitimated through reference to broader, fairly conventional and traditional religious discourses. In this chapter, I use the topic of truth-telling to discuss the three most formative influences on the internet rhetoric of the women of Strong City: Christian apocalypticism, Seventh-day Adventism, and the particular history of the LOR Church at Strong City as it is understood by the people of that community. First, I introduce the way in which the rhetoric of Strong City draws on the apocalyptic tradition of Christianity and biblical scriptures to construct Truth-telling as a crucial end-times act. I then discuss the relationship of witnessing to the eschatology of Seventh-day Adventism, a belief-system that still strongly influences the apocalyptic worldview of Strong City even though they have separated from the official Seventh-day Adventist Church. Finally, I give an overview of the history of this community as it is presented by the people of Strong City themselves on the internet, in order demonstrate the importance of their own story and its telling to these people's religious worldview. This discussion will serve to ground the rhetoric of Strong City in its discursive situation, before engaging the rhetoric of the women of Strong City more closely in the final chapter of this thesis.

**“God is Not Running for Election in the Earth”: the sacred character of Truth and the valorization of persecution in Christian apocalypticism.**

The Christian tradition of apocalyptic discourse is key to understanding the religious perspective of members of the Strong City community, and helps us to better represent them as participants in a broader and pervasive Christian speculation about the

“end times.” As historian Bernard McGinn argues in *Visions of the End*, the apocalyptic worldview has evolved as a tradition within the Christian tradition. Apocalypticism is a dynamic and flexible discourse, which is based in biblical scripture and has developed over time in reaction to new prophetic characters, revelations, and interpretations.<sup>177</sup> This discourse is profoundly caught up not only with end-times speculations, but also with the idea of revelation and the cosmic, transformative power of truth-telling. In the *Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, Bernard McGinn’s definition of the apocalyptic worldview thus includes both the eschatological and revelatory aspects of this worldview, describing it as ‘the belief that God has revealed the imminent end of the ongoing struggle between good and evil in history.’<sup>178</sup>

One of the most fruitful of recent attempts to explain apocalypticism as a historical phenomenon, building on the work of McGinn, is Stephen O’Leary’s analysis of apocalyptic rhetoric in *Arguing the Apocalypse*. O’Leary’s perspective is intended as a corrective against the popular conception of ‘doomsday cults’ such as Strong City as inherently irrational, volatile, and potentially dangerous. “Most analyses,” he writes, “have located the power and rhetorical effectiveness of [apocalyptic] discourse primarily in its imagery of the grotesque and fantastic; few have acknowledged the logical structure of apocalypticism and its contributions to social knowledge.”<sup>179</sup> O’Leary argues for the need to take apocalyptic thought seriously, as a rational, persuasive argument<sup>180</sup> whose

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<sup>177</sup> McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 1-36.

<sup>178</sup> Bernard McGinn, John J. Collins and Stephen J. Stein eds., *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, (New York and London: Continuum, 2003), ix.

<sup>179</sup> O’Leary, 20.

<sup>180</sup> L. Gregory Bloomquist, who also writes on the rhetoric of apocalypticism, is in sympathy with O’Leary’s approach. Bloomquist quotes O’Leary at length in his “Methodological Criteria for Apocalyptic Rhetoric,” and suggests it is a “sociorhetorical analysis that will be the most helpful” in an analysis of Apocalyptic discourse. See L. Gregory Bloomquist, “Methodological Criteria for Apocalyptic Rhetoric: A Suggestion for the Expanded Use of Sociorhetorical Analysis” in *Vision and Persuasion: Rhetorical*

“discourse functions as a symbolic theodicy, a mythical and rhetorical solution intended to ‘solve’ the problem of evil through its discursive construction of temporality.”<sup>181</sup>

O’Leary argues that evil is the ‘Ultimate Exigence’ of apocalyptic rhetoric, the meta-situation to which it responds.<sup>182</sup>

The problem of evil, O’Leary claims, is a rhetorical one as opposed to a purely logical or dialectic one. Theodicies attempt to resolve the apparent contradiction that arises when we consider that although God is good, omnipotent and omniscient, evil exists. O’Leary argues, however, that this is less a formal logical contradiction than an ethical one: “An omnipotent, omniscient being would have no *morally sufficient* reason for allowing instances of suffering,”<sup>183</sup> he writes. The crucial task of a theodicy that defines evil as unjust suffering, then, is to come up with a ‘morally sufficient’ reason for a good God to allow suffering to exist; to justify suffering. The problem of evil, O’Leary claims, can be discursively (and therefore satisfactorily) resolved if such a ‘morally sufficient’ reason can be found and persuasively argued. In the rhetoric of apocalypticism, suffering is made up for in time; the ‘morally sufficient’ reason for God to allow suffering now is that those who suffer now will be rewarded later. The end of the world will also signify the end of evil: the destruction of God’s enemies will mean victory for the good, and the historical working out of God’s plan will vindicate the members of his elect community. Biblical passages that predict persecution for God’s elect as a sign of the end-times, such as Matthew 24:9, provide support for the idea that suffering and persecution in the present signify a later reward.

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*Dimensions of Apocalyptic Discourse*, eds. Greg Carey and L. Gregory Bloomquist, (Missouri: Chalice Press, 1999), 184.

<sup>181</sup> O’Leary, 20.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

A tendency to valorize suffering and persecution, therefore, seems to come naturally out of the logic of apocalyptic theodicy. However, this does not mean that apocalyptic rhetoric necessarily has its roots in objective social or economic deprivation, marginality or oppression. Several scholars have argued that the features of apocalyptic rhetoric that valorize suffering and persecution indicate that apocalypticism is a politically rebellious worldview that appeals to the socially or economically disenfranchised. Norman Cohn, for instance, famously argued that apocalypticism is a worldview of the oppressed, a rhetoric of liberation for victims of economic deprivation and political persecution.<sup>184</sup> A number of sociological studies of apocalyptic groups, however, have largely discredited his claim, suggesting in fact that the apocalyptic hope may arise among any social or economic group in any political climate. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century Millerite movement, for example (which I will discuss further below) represented an ordinary cross-section of the American population, just as the contemporary audience of the dispensationalist Hal Lindsey's books and broadcast, or that of the wildly popular *Left Behind* series of novels, are not particularly disenfranchised, marginalized or oppressed by any objective standard.<sup>185</sup> O'Leary elaborates on the wide-spread appeal of apocalyptic rhetoric, "The audience of those receptive to prophecy and its interpreters has included emperors, peasants, merchants, farmers and factory workers, the educated and the uneducated alike from Isaac Newton to Ronald Reagan."<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium : revolutionary messianism in medieval and Reformation Europe and its bearing on modern totalitarian movements, revised and expanded edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>185</sup> Greg Carey, "Introduction: Apocalyptic Discourse, Apocalyptic Rhetoric," in *Vision and Persuasion: Rhetorical Dimensions of Apocalyptic Discourse*, eds. Greg Carey and L. Gregory Bloomquist, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>186</sup> O'Leary, 9.

Apocalyptic rhetoric cannot reasonably be said to always derive from oppressed populations.<sup>187</sup> Nor is Michael Barkun's contention in *Disaster and the Millennium*, that this rhetoric is always a response to disaster, convincing.<sup>188</sup> As McGinn writes, "crisis is more in the eye of the apocalypticist than in the mind of the historian."<sup>189</sup> However, the apocalyptic argument does tend to frame the present as a time of suffering and persecution. O'Leary continues:

Dissatisfaction with the present and fear of the future are not simply existential facts that the discourse must address; analysis of the discourse itself reveals that much effort is often expended at developing the sense of dissatisfaction and fear.<sup>190</sup>

Any opposition, persecution, or disagreement that may arise is therefore interpreted in apocalyptic argument as supporting evidence for the truth of the worldview that is being opposed. The emphasis on suffering and persecution common in apocalyptic rhetoric, therefore, points not so much to a revolutionary impulse as it does to the "crisis orientation"<sup>191</sup> of apocalyptic rhetoric itself, a rhetorical tradition which tends to describe suffering and persecution as the best guarantee for the promise of future bliss.

When rejection and persecution of the faithful are prophesied, and part of God's plan, speaking the Truth can be rhetorically effective even when no-one is convinced. In apocalyptic rhetoric, proselytizing is not simply an effort to convert everyone who hears the message. Rather, as O'Leary writes, "Argument becomes only secondarily an instrument for achieving conviction and belief; it is primarily ritual, a fulfillment of prophecy, a symbolic enactment that constitutes its own proof even (and perhaps

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<sup>187</sup> Carey, 7. McGinn also notes that models such as Cohn's neglect those manifestations of apocalypticism that have been used to support traditional power; see McGinn, *Visions of the End*, 29-30.

<sup>188</sup> O'Leary, 9.

<sup>189</sup> Bernard McGinn, *Apocalypticism in the Western Tradition* (Brookfield, Vermont: Variorum, 1994), 16.

<sup>190</sup> O'Leary, 11-12.

<sup>191</sup> McGinn, *Apocalypticism in the Western Tradition*, 16.

especially) when it fails to convince... when the situation is defined in this fashion, the function of evangelical argument may well be to tell the Truth in order to provide one's opponents with a chance to reject the Truth- and so to seal their damnation.'<sup>192</sup> If the purpose of Truth-telling is to delineate the lines of battle between good and evil, and to force individuals to take a side, then rejection of the Truth accomplishes this goal just as effectively as acceptance. This kind of apocalyptic rhetoric, therefore, 'works' just as well when people disagree with the argument that is being made as it does when they agree. The goal of this rhetoric, in other words, is to persuade people to take a side, and to leave no-one in a neutral position.

In these scenarios, the telling of the story of the end is not just a story about the end: it is the end itself. Jacques Derrida most poetically expressed this sacred, transformative quality of Truth revealed in the apocalyptic worldview:

Not only the truth as the revealed truth of a secret on the end or the secret of the end. Truth itself is the end, the destruction, and that truth unveils itself is the advent of the end. Truth is the end and the instance of the Last Judgment...And that is why there would not be any truth of the apocalypse that is not the truth of truth.<sup>193</sup>

Spreading God's word has a definite, concrete eschatological function in the apocalyptic scenario. The New Testament is replete with passages that can be and have been mobilized rhetorically over the centuries to connect the spreading of God's word over the earth to the end of the world. Matthew's Great Commission, for example, predicts: 'this gospel of the Kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the earth as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come' (Matt.24:14). The eschatological function of spreading God's word, however, is most strikingly demonstrated by the language of Revelation 19, in which the Rider on the White Horse, an end-times harbinger who is

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<sup>192</sup> O'Leary, 88.

<sup>193</sup> From Jacques Derrida's "Apocalyptic Tone," as cited in Bloomquist, 201.

called the ‘Word of God,’ is described as having a sword coming out of his mouth with which he ‘strikes down the nations’ (Rev. 19:13-15). On the Strong City pages, this image is frequently evoked to argue that God’s word is neither conservative nor benign: it is a dangerous, transformative Truth whose power is unleashed on the physical world by its telling.<sup>194</sup>

In apocalyptic worldviews, the way in which people react to revelation is what determines their own destiny. Though the course of events may be set by God, individuals still have the freedom to react and determine their own personal fate.<sup>195</sup> Since the ability to correctly identify God’s Truth is what separates the saved from the damned in the context of this larger Christian apocalyptic discourse, any rhetoric that demonstrates an ability to interpret signs and symbols correctly is highly valued. Apocalyptic rhetoric is legitimated primarily through the coherent interpretation of scripture and the ability to relate biblical passages to contemporary events. As O’Leary writes, in apocalyptic rhetoric hermeneutics often provides the crucial, rational link between the mythic and the mundane:

...it is through argument and interpretation that the symbolic content of any myth is appropriated by a given audience. Examining the discourse of most modern apocalyptic evangelists, one finds that their claims are founded on the charismatic authority of one who interprets canonical scripture. Analyses that fail to recognize the distinction between prophetic and interpretive discourse therefore miss the principal strategy at work in modern apocalyptic; a focus on interpretation is necessary for an understanding of how the discourse

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<sup>194</sup> For instance, as Michael Travesser wrote in October, 2008:

God has made me to cause fires over the entire course of my work for Him. Should I now take His sword out of my mouth and close my eyes to please the court? Should God be set aside, so that injustice might prevail?... God is not always polite, but He does always tell the truth, and sometimes with a fire.

Travesser, “The 12<sup>th</sup> Day,” Strong City, accessed October 22, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/sc/post/The\\_12<sup>th</sup>\\_Day](http://strongcity.info/LOR/sc/post/The_12th_Day).

<sup>195</sup> John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

operates rhetorically by linking the ‘rational’ with the ‘oracular’ voice.<sup>196</sup>

O’Leary’s point here is that, while apocalyptic rhetoric draws on the mythological and the fantastic, it also relies on rational, coherent interpretations to make sense of this material. While apocalyptic imagery may often seem bizarre and irrational to outsiders, the rhetoric of apocalypticism provides a rational interpretive model so that to insiders even the more fantastical images seem reasonable.

While charismatic authority is common in apocalyptic groups, therefore, often this charisma is based not in the personal charm of an individual, but in the audience’s perception that a particular leader has superior interpretive skills. This is especially true of rhetoric in the Adventist tradition, out of which the LOR Church developed. In the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Millerite movement that is the basis of this tradition, William Miller’s charismatic authority was based entirely in his skillful calculations of end-times prophecies in biblical texts. David Koresh, of the Davidian branch of the Adventist tradition, was known to conduct all-night bible study sessions in which he interpreted the entire Bible in light of a particular passage in the book of Revelation. A follower of Koresh once said that she was devoted to her leader because “David Koresh has a beautiful message, like a silver thread running through the scripture...”<sup>197</sup>

Paired with the importance of revealing the Truth in apocalyptic rhetoric, therefore, is the importance of its correct interpretation. As I will demonstrate in the final chapter of this thesis, the rhetoric on the Strong City pages is designed both to reveal and correctly interpret the living parable the LOR Church believes is currently being acted

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<sup>196</sup> O’Leary, 13.

<sup>197</sup> Eugene Gallagher, Eugene, “Prophecy is Life and Death” in *Millennialism, Persecution and Violence: Historical Cases*, ed. Catherine Lowman Wessinger (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

out in their New Mexico community. As such, this rhetoric is intended to bring the world into a valley of decision, not to vie for converts. Though the explicit audience of the Strong City rhetoric is the entire world, all of whom can access their message over the internet, as Travesser writes, ‘God is not running for election in the earth. He does not care one whit whether men vote for Him or not.’<sup>198</sup> The people of Strong City claim that they do not expect the whole world to hear and understand; only those with the right kind of soul will really ‘get’ the message. The whole world, however, will be judged by how they interpret Strong City. Whoever hears the message and decides to believe or not believe in this particular truth, they argue, seals his or her fate, and sets the apocalyptic wheels into motion.

**“The World Contains the Catalyst of its Own Destruction”: truth-telling in the eschatology of Seventh-day Adventism.**

In 1967, Wayne Bent, at the time a Baptist Minister, had a conversion experience in which he heard God say: “You will always tell the Truth.”<sup>199</sup> Soon afterwards, Bent left the Baptist Church and was ordained as a Seventh-day Adventist Minister, remaining in that Church for twenty years.<sup>200</sup> In 1987, Bent and his first wife, along with several other Adventist families, formally separated from the Adventist Church, creating their own sectarian congregation called the Lord Our Righteousness Church.<sup>201</sup> However, like

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<sup>198</sup> Travesser, Michael, “The Finished Work,” Strong City, accessed February 21, 2009, [web.archive.org/web/20011224112702/michael.strongcity.com/michael/the\\_finished\\_work](http://web.archive.org/web/20011224112702/michael.strongcity.com/michael/the_finished_work).

<sup>199</sup> Travesser, Michael, “Wayne Bent’s Testimony Before the Court,” Strong City, accessed February 23, 2009, [strongcity.info/index.php/blog/entry/wayne\\_bent's\\_testimony/](http://strongcity.info/index.php/blog/entry/wayne_bent's_testimony/).

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> The particular reasons for this schism are not specified on the Strong City pages, but The Lord Our Righteousness Church identifies itself as a ‘sectarian’ group and reports that much of their ‘persecution’ is a result of their sectarian status. In October, 2008, for example, Travesser wrote that “God opened to me the other night just why the State is coming against me. He awakened me late in the night and for several hours showed me the details of all of this. He told me it was because we are a ‘separatist’ church.” Travesser, Michael, “The 12<sup>th</sup> Day.”

other Adventist separatist groups,<sup>202</sup> the LOR Church's rejection of Seventh-day Adventism seems to have been directed primarily at the institution of the Church rather than at Adventism as a worldview. Though the residents of Strong City frequently criticize the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA) in their writings for its lack of rigor or spiritual depth, and argue that the SDA Church is a hypocritical institution that does not practice what it preaches,<sup>203</sup> they continue to live according to Adventist principles and to practice Adventist rituals. Residents of Strong City keep the Saturday Sabbath, for example, and stay away from alcohol, drugs, and red meat as Adventists do.<sup>204</sup> The Strong City rhetoric also makes frequent use of quotes from Ellen White and other Adventist writers alongside of Christian scripture to interpret the meaning of events in their land.<sup>205</sup> The LOR Church, therefore, has its roots in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Even more importantly for our purposes, the internet rhetoric of Strong City is to a large extent an improvisation and elaboration on Adventist themes about the nature of

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<sup>202</sup> See Ronald Lawson, "The Persistence of Apocalypticism Within a Denominationalizing Sect: The Apocalyptic Fringe Groups of Seventh-day Adventism," in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, eds. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (New York: Routledge, 1997), 218.

<sup>203</sup> On September 11, 2007, for example, Travesser wrote:

I left the Seventh-day Adventist church for only one reason: The people did not want the Life of Christ, and the policies of the religious authorities were downright against that Life. That was purely and simply it. Instead, the church was now based on a pseudo righteousness, basically revealing itself in being "nice" and staying in the church, but no one wanted pure honesty, integrity at all times, and clarity. They did not actually want God to live in them, directing all of their thoughts and actions. The whole city of Adventism wanted to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, and when they died, they wanted to go to their heavenly petting zoo, and they had a right there because they belonged to the church that had meetings on Saturday.

Michael Travesser, "The Prophecy and the Travesser Story," Strong City, accessed May 10, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/sc/post/The\\_Prophecy\\_and\\_the\\_Travesser\\_Story/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/sc/post/The_Prophecy_and_the_Travesser_Story/).

<sup>204</sup> Travesser, "The Trial and My Resolution," and elsewhere.

<sup>205</sup> See, for example, Travesser, "The Trial and My Resolution," Strong City, accessed February 23, 2009, [strongcity.info/index.php/blog/entry/my\\_trial\\_and\\_my\\_resolution/](http://strongcity.info/index.php/blog/entry/my_trial_and_my_resolution/), in which Travesser quotes Ellen White's writings to demonstrate that Christ was reviled in his time.

revelation. As I will elaborate below, for Seventh-day Adventists revealing the Truth (by being witnesses to it) brings not just believers but the whole world out of ignorance and in to a valley of decision, clearly dividing the Saints from the sinners; telling the truth is a physical act that changes the physical world. The rhetoric of Strong City is strongly influenced by Bent's first experience of talking to God, in which Seventh-day Adventism and Truth-telling were intertwined. Just as Ben Anthony used the available materials of the 'Cult' discourse to present Strong City in "The End of the World Cult," the people of Strong City harness the specific apocalyptic discourse of Seventh-day Adventist eschatology to tell the story of Strong City to the world on the internet. Before turning to an analysis of the internet posts on Strongcity.info, therefore, I offer some explanation of the unique eschatology of Seventh-day Adventism that informs their logic.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was born out of the failure of Millerism, an enthusiastic movement that swept across the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. William Miller's end-times predictions, which relied on rational calculations based on biblical sources, became popular during the American Christian Evangelical revivals of the 1830's. Miller's reading of the book of Daniel interpreted the 2300 days referred to in Daniel 8:14 as the time that would elapse before "the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state" as 2300 years that would elapse before Christ returned to earth. Combining this calculation with readings of Revelation and other biblical texts, Miller predicted that Christ's Second Coming would occur between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. The promotion of Miller's ideas by the preacher Joshua Himes turned Millerism into a massive popular movement. However, the fact that Christ did not physically materialize within the predicted dates, or even on future dates after subsequent

re-calculations, led most Millerites to lose faith in Miller's hermeneutic method and the movement, which had numbered at least in the tens of thousands at its peak,<sup>206</sup> began to peter out. This frustrated apocalyptic hope is referred to as the 'Great Disappointment.'

In the wake of these events, however, a few Millerites did not abandon the belief system they had adopted, but instead struggled to resolve the cognitive dissonance caused by the Great Disappointment. This small group of Millerites developed the basic tenets of what would later become Seventh-day Adventism out of a crucial reinterpretation of Miller's prophecy advanced by Millerite Hiram Edson shortly after the final disappointment of 1845. According to Edson, the "cleansing of the sanctuary" of Daniel 8:14 referred not to Christ's second coming on earth, as Millerites had argued, but to his entrance into a *heavenly* sanctuary. It was in this sanctuary that the sins of God's people would be investigated in preparation for the end of the world. Though Christ had not come to earth, a significant eschatological event had therefore occurred on October 22, 1844; on that date what Adventists now refer to as the "investigative judgment" of saints and sinners had begun in heaven. Only after this heavenly judgment was complete would Christ come again to finally damn the sinners and raise the saints.<sup>207</sup>

Millerites Joseph Bates, James White and, most importantly Ellen Harmon (later Ellen White) adopted Edson's ideas about the second coming and organized around them. Eventually, they developed a significant following due largely to the charismatic experiences of Ellen White, whose interpretations of her strange seizures and visions lent charismatic authority to Edson's ideas. In 1842, Ellen White described her first ecstatic

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<sup>206</sup> Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

vision as “Wave after wave of glory” that “rolled over me, until my body grew stiff...”<sup>208</sup> Ellen White did not see herself, nor was she perceived as, an empty prophetic vehicle. As important as White’s visions to the Adventist community was her interpretation of those visions in her many writings.<sup>209</sup> Furthermore, historian of Adventism Jonathan Butler writes that White ‘equated her personal independence with her prophetic role.’<sup>210</sup> White’s writings now have nearly scriptural importance for Seventh-day Adventists and White is revered as both an important prophet and an important religious thinker and leader.

However, historically there has been some inconsistency in Adventist attitudes about the religious role of women. Women in the SDA Church seem to have had a powerful and important, yet carefully delineated, religious role to play, a sentiment that was expressed in an article published in the *Adventist Review* in the 1950’s:

The power of woman in shaping the destinies of men and of nations has always been greater than that of man. We have always expected women to live purer and better lives than men. As long as women are what they should be, even if men go wrong, there is hope for the future; but when women go wrong there is nothing to hope for. The world will then go from bad to worse, until, as in Noah’s day, conditions will become hopeless.<sup>211</sup>

Because the SDA Church was founded on the prophecy and charismatic leadership of a woman, Ellen White, many early Adventist publications focused on developing scriptural support for her prophetic role against traditional interpretations of Paul’s proscription

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<sup>208</sup> Malcolm Bull, *Seeking a Sanctuary: seventh-day Adventism and the American dream* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 22.

<sup>209</sup> Ellen White wrote dozens of books, the most influential among them being *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*, published in 1888, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, published in 1890, and *The Desire of Ages*, published in 1898, as well as the multi-volume *Spiritual Prophecy* and *Spiritual Gifts* series, published in the 1870’s. She also wrote countless articles interpreting her prophecy and providing other guidance to the Adventist community in the *Adventist Review* and *Signs of the Times*.

<sup>210</sup> Jonathan Butler, “Prophecy, Gender and Culture: Ellen Gould Harmon [White] and the Roots of Seventh-day Adventism,” *Religion and American Culture*, 1:1 (1991): 16.

<sup>211</sup> Cited in Laura L. Vance, “Denominationalism and Changing Gender Ideals in the *Adventist Review*: An Examination of Weber’s Theory of Religion of the Disprivileged Classes,” *Nova Religio* 1:1 (1997): 61.

against women speaking in Church in 1 Corinthians (14:34).<sup>212</sup> Many arguments were in fact made in early Adventist publications in favor of a leadership role for women.<sup>213</sup> Yet, though the issue has been studied by Adventist commissions and raised at several Adventist General Conference Sessions,<sup>214</sup> women still cannot be ordained as pastors in the contemporary SDA Church. As one Adventist scholar has written, the Seventh-day Adventist Church “has had a rather strange ambivalence toward women in ministry.”<sup>215</sup> On the one hand, the worldview of Adventism seems officially invested in preserving a separate structural sphere for women, while on the other it also seems to provide plenty of rhetorical resources for women to think of themselves as powerful religious actors, prophets, interpreters of prophecy, and leaders:<sup>216</sup> in some contemporary congregations, it seems, Adventists have begun to ordain women pastors without denominational approval.<sup>217</sup>

Under the leadership of Ellen White, some early Adventists began to celebrate the Sabbath not on Sunday as other Christians did, but on Saturday, the seventh day of the week. This group called themselves the “Seventh-day Adventists.” This practice was

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<sup>212</sup> Vance, 55-56.

<sup>213</sup> Roger L. Dudley, “How Seventh-Day Adventist Lay Members View Women Pastors,” *Review of Religious Research* 38:2 (1996): 134.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> In “How Seventh-day Adventist Lay Members View Women Pastors,” Dudley argues that resistance to women’s ordination comes primarily from the increasing numerical prominence in the SDA World Church of Adventist congregations in the ‘third world,’ an argument that depends on the premise that ‘third world’ congregations have less progressive attitudes than those of the ‘first world.’ In “Denominationalism and Changing Gender Ideals in the *Adventist Review*,” Vance argues that Adventist attitudes towards women have changed in relation to the increased accommodation of the SDA Church to the larger society, an argument that depends on the premise that marginal religions are more likely than mainstream ones to challenge traditional gender roles and provide greater autonomy and power for women. I find neither of these explanations satisfactory, since I believe they both rely on flawed premises. Nevertheless, it does seem clear that there is a certain ambiguity to Adventist ideas about women’s religious role.

<sup>217</sup> Dudley, 134; cf. Vance, 65.

based on an interpretation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Angel's message in Revelation 14,<sup>218</sup> in which the angel warns that those who worship the beast and bear the mark of the beast will soon be destroyed. This 3<sup>rd</sup> Angel then calls for the endurance of the Saints "who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus." Seventh-day Adventists identified the observance of the Sabbath on Sunday as the 'mark of the beast' referred to repeatedly in the book of Revelations, the visible sign that Christians had chosen to obey the dictates of the Antichrist rather than God's law.<sup>219</sup> According to Seventh-day Adventists, celebrating the Sabbath on Saturday singled them out as the only Christians who kept God's commandment to observe the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week.<sup>220</sup> These Adventists therefore saw themselves as the Saints referred to in Revelation 14:12. Their endurance was a witness to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Angel's message, a warning to the world that those who did not heed this message would be marked for destruction. Seventh-day Adventists saw keeping the Saturday Sabbath, therefore, as a message to the world, a prophetic warning that brought on the apocalypse by clearly demarcating those who were with God from those who were not.

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<sup>218</sup> Revelation 14:9-12 reads:

Then another angel, a third, followed them, crying with a loud voice, 'Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their forehead or on their hands, they will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name. Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus.'

<sup>219</sup> Kenneth Newport, "The Heavenly Millennium of Seventh-day Adventism," in *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco*, ed. Stephen Hunt (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 137-138.

<sup>220</sup> Though Adventists believe their Sabbath to be unique, the Seventh-Day Baptists also celebrate the Sabbath on Saturday, though they are not related to the Seventh-day Adventists. Travesser was a Baptist, but not a Seventh-Day Baptist, previous to his conversion to Adventism.

A growing feeling that they were a persecuted minority was somewhat legitimated by the treatment Millerites and, later, early Seventh-day Adventists, did receive from contemporary American society. Contemporary Media accounts of the Millerite movement presented them as crazy, anti-social and self-destructive,<sup>221</sup> and the early SDA church was accused of the ill-treatment of minors.<sup>222</sup> Adventist doctrine, developed in this oppositional context, began to more clearly define America as a demonic force. By the 1850's Adventists had already begun to equate America with the Second Beast of Revelation 13.<sup>223</sup> This beast has two horns, like a lamb, but the voice of a Dragon. Adventist thinkers began to argue that the two horns symbolized the American principles of civil and religious liberty. The dragon voice symbolized the betrayal of those principles, as evidenced by slavery and other social ills, a betrayal that would culminate finally in the oppression of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, vehicle of God's truth on earth. Adventists were particularly disturbed by the campaign to extend Sunday 'blue laws' which required observance of the Sabbath on Sunday.<sup>224</sup> These laws were seen as fulfillment of the persecution prophecy of the two-horned beast in Revelation, and therefore as a sign of the times,<sup>225</sup> that the Second Coming was at hand.

As bearers of the third Angel's message, these Sabbatarians saw themselves as "radically alone, a tiny remnant pitted against the dominant forces of society."<sup>226</sup> For almost a decade, this small Millerite remnant believed only those who had experienced

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<sup>221</sup> Bull., 5.

<sup>222</sup> Bull., 10-11.

<sup>223</sup> Douglas Morgan, "Adventism, Apocalyptic, and the Cause of Liberty," *Church History*, 63:2 (1994): 237.

<sup>224</sup> Ronald Lawson, "Tensions, Religious Freedom, and the Courts: The Seventh-day Adventist Experience," in *Religion and Social Policy*, ed. Paula D. Nesbitt (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2001), 75.

<sup>225</sup> The SDA Church has published a newspaper called *Signs of the Times* since 1874.

<sup>226</sup> Morgan, "Adventism, Apocalyptic, and the Cause of Liberty," 237.

the trauma of the Great Disappointment were capable of being saved. For everyone else, these ‘Adventists’ argued, the door to salvation was shut. Early Adventist conversion efforts focused only on this tiny, disappointed group, though this initial ‘Shut-Door’ doctrine gradually gave way to a more inclusive, missionary impulse under the guidance of Ellen White.<sup>227</sup> Ellen White urged Adventists to speak out against American injustices, such as slavery, in the cause of civil liberty. Adventists became particularly concerned with the cause of religious freedom. “We are not doing the will of God,” White said, “if we sit in quietude, doing nothing to preserve liberty of conscience.”<sup>228</sup> As Adventists were developing a sense of themselves as a faithful and persecuted remnant in a doomed world, they also began to take a more activist stance against hypocrisy in the American system.

An apparent tension exists, therefore, between the apocalyptic eschatology of Seventh-day Adventism, which suggests that this world is sinful and doomed, and the active involvement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in improving this world. While Adventists seem to have at times experienced some difficulty maintaining an urgent expectation of Christ’s second coming,<sup>229</sup> the Adventist belief system continues to be

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<sup>227</sup> The early Adventist movement, therefore, seems to contradict the popular thesis of Festinger et al. in Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956) that prophetic failure in Millennial groups is overcome by increased proselytizing, since the first reaction of Adventists to the Great Disappointment was to close ranks and regroup under a revised interpretation of the second coming. The case of Seventh-day Adventism rather supports Melton’s thesis in “What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails,” discussed above, that when prophecy ‘fails,’ groups commonly react by arguing that the human interpreters of the prophecy have failed, not the prophecy itself. This they usually do by spiritualizing beliefs (as did Hiram Edson) and reaffirming social bonds (as the ‘Shut door’ policy did for early Adventists). Melton’s thesis has been supported by several other authors doing studies of prophetic failures in millennial groups. See, for example, Susan J. Palmer and Natalie Finn, “Coping with Apocalypse in Canada: Experiences of Endtime in La Mission de l’Esprit Saint and the Institute of Applied Metaphysics,” in *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy*, ed. Jon R. Stone (New York and London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>228</sup> Ellen G. White, “Our Duty in the Present and the Coming Crisis,” *Review* 64 (1887), as cited in Morgan, 240.

<sup>229</sup> Lawson, “The Persistence of Apocalypticism Within a Denominationalizing Sect.” 213.

focused on eschatology and Millennial expectation, as evidenced by the ‘Fundamental Beliefs’ section on the SDA website:

**25. Second Coming of Christ:**

The second coming of Christ is the blessed hope of the church, the grand climax of the gospel. The Saviour's coming will be literal, personal, visible, and worldwide. When He returns, the righteous dead will be resurrected, and together with the righteous living will be glorified and taken to heaven, but the unrighteous will die. The almost complete fulfillment of most lines of prophecy, together with the present condition of the world, indicates that Christ's coming is imminent. The time of that event has not been revealed, and we are therefore exhorted to be ready at all times. (Titus 2:13; Heb. 9:28; John 14:1-3; Acts 1:9-11; Matt. 24:14; Rev. 1:7; Matt. 24:43, 44; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:51-54; 2 Thess. 1:7-10; 2:8; Rev. 14:14-20; 19:11-21; Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; 1 Thess. 5:1-6.)

Despite this emphasis on apocalyptic expectation in the Adventist belief system, over the past century the Seventh-day Adventist Church has progressively become more comfortable with involving itself in the larger society. It is now a major World Christian Denomination, with a sophisticated, international institutional structure that includes over 64,000 Churches with over fifteen million members worldwide,<sup>230</sup> more members than the Latter-Day Saints or the Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>231</sup> The institutional structure of Seventh-day Adventism also employs over two-hundred thousand people, and operates hundreds of hospitals and Clinics, thousands of primary and secondary schools, and several major Universities worldwide. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency International (ADRA) provides development aid in 125 countries with a budget of over four hundred million dollars.<sup>232</sup> As religion historian Ronald Lawson notes, the decision of the Church to trademark its name in 1981 is a striking symbol of the extent to which

<sup>230</sup> The Seventh-day Adventist Church, "Seventh-day Adventist World Church Statistics," The Seventh-day Adventist Church, accessed February 12, 2010, [www.adventist.org/world\\_church/facts\\_and\\_figures/](http://www.adventist.org/world_church/facts_and_figures/).

<sup>231</sup> Bull, xiii.

<sup>232</sup> The Seventh-day Adventist Church, "Seventh-day Adventist World Church Statistics."

the Seventh-day Adventist Church has come to participate in worldly things, even while maintaining a theological opposition to them.<sup>233</sup>

In fact, even Adventist eschatology does not seem to conceive of the created world as inherently evil nor irredeemable. For Adventists, much of God's work, as well as Satan's, takes place in the physical world. Celebrating the Sabbath on Saturday is a visible, physical enactment of God's Truth in the world, and the material world is described as the battleground for the fight between God and Satan.<sup>234</sup> The Seventh-day Adventist Millennium does not take place on earth, but in heaven.<sup>235</sup> However, for Adventists this Millennium is conceived as a time in which the Saints spend time getting to know God in preparation to return to a perfect, restored earth. Adventists see God's eternal Kingdom, initiated after this heavenly Millennium, as a worldly kingdom that will exist eternally and harmoniously on earth. The redeemed in this scenario are "clothed with immortality" but still fully human, with material bodies, their flesh restored to immortality as the earth is restored to its perfect edenic state.<sup>236</sup> As we will see in the next chapter, the idea that the material world, including the human body, has no inherent moral character, but is a tool used for both evil and good is an Adventist theme on which

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<sup>233</sup> Lawson, "Tensions, Religious Freedom and the Courts," 89.

<sup>234</sup> The Seventh-day Adventist Church, "What Adventists Believe," The Seventh-day Adventist Church, accessed February 12, 2010, [www.adventist.org/What\\_Adventists\\_Believe/](http://www.adventist.org/What_Adventists_Believe/).

<sup>235</sup> See, for example, The Seventh-day Adventist Church, "What Adventists Believe":

**27. Millennium and the End of Sin:**

The millennium is the thousand-year reign of Christ with His saints in heaven between the first and second resurrections. During this time the wicked dead will be judged; the earth will be utterly desolate, without living human inhabitants, but occupied by Satan and his angels. At its close Christ with His saints and the Holy City will descend from heaven to earth. The unrighteous dead will then be resurrected, and with Satan and his angels will surround the city; but fire from God will consume them and cleanse the earth. The universe will thus be freed of sin and sinners forever. (Rev. 20; 1 Cor. 6:2, 3; Jer. 4:23-26; Rev. 21:1-5; Mal. 4:1; Eze. 28:18, 19).

<sup>236</sup> Bull, 90.

the Strong City rhetors have radically improvised and expanded in their ideas about the nature of the physical world.

Scholars of Seventh-day Adventism have offered various explanations for the apparent anomaly of Seventh-day Adventist attitudes to the physical world.<sup>237</sup> Ronald Lawson, for example, argues based on Troeltsch's church-sect theory that Seventh-day Adventist eschatology has become less urgently apocalyptic as the Seventh-day Adventist Church has grown from a sect to a church and been forced to accommodate to the larger society.<sup>238</sup> Lawson writes that "urgently apocalyptic 'independent ministries' on the fringes of Adventism have multiplied in recent years" and that the public visibility of these sectarian groups has caused the institutional SDA great concern.<sup>239</sup> He further argues that these ministries arise primarily out of the frustration of new converts who are disappointed to find that the eschatological teachings that attracted them to the Church in the first place are less emphasized in regular Adventist life than they had hoped. These groups, therefore, continue to identify with the worldview of Adventism, to which they were converted, while they criticize the activities of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as an institution.<sup>240</sup> The sectarian impulse within Seventh-day Adventism, Lawson writes, demonstrates how far the Church has developed away from the ideas that generated it.

As historian Kenneth Newport notes, however, this kind of "developmental" explanation of Seventh-day Adventism is not entirely satisfying, as there is little evidence that the urgency of Seventh-day Adventist apocalyptic beliefs has waned at all in any general sense, though this may be the case among some Seventh-day Adventist

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<sup>237</sup> Newport, 142-148.

<sup>238</sup> Lawson, "The Persistence of Apocalypticism within a Denominationalizing Sect," 208.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

academics.<sup>241</sup> Furthermore, though there does seem to be evidence that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is concerned about splinter groups, particularly the more visible ones such as the Branch Davidians, Newport asserts that the actual number of Seventh-day Adventist splinter groups has been ‘surprisingly small.’<sup>242</sup> Newport argues that the example of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, in fact, challenges conventional theories about millennial movements, such as the typology of ‘postmillennialism’ and ‘premillennialism.’<sup>243</sup> Following this typology, ‘postmillennial’ Christians argue, based on chapter 20 of the book of Revelation, that Christ’s second coming will only occur after the Millennium, referred to in Revelation as a golden age of Christian dominance. Generally, this argument therefore is said to imply an activist stance towards the Millennium; it is up to Christians to create and usher in this golden age on earth. In contrast, ‘premillennial’ Christians are theoretically supposed to believe that Christ’s second coming is the event that will usher in the Millennium (hence, he comes before the Millennium), and so this implies a more pessimistic, or passive, attitude in which it is the task of humans not to try to improve a doomed world, but to simply await Christ’s arrival and herald it when it is near. Newport writes that the SDA Church is a premillennial movement in which “It is the faithful’s task to sound the trumpet alarm, not to waste time and energy seeking to patch up a world that has already passed the point of no return and is spiraling headlong into the apocalyptic abyss.” Nevertheless, he continues, this

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<sup>241</sup> Newport, 143.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>243</sup> The typology of ‘pre-millennial’ and ‘post-millennial,’ while widely used in scholarship on apocalyptic groups, has been challenged by a number of scholars who argue that the idea of the Millennium is over-emphasized by these labels. One promising suggestion for an alternative typology of ‘Catastrophic’ and ‘Progressive’ groups is put forth by Catherine Wessinger in Catherine Lowman Wessinger ed., *Millennialism, Persecution and Violence: Historical Cases*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000) as well as in other works by this same author.

movement also behaves as though it is a postmillennial movement by trying to “patch up” the same world that it sees as doomed.<sup>244</sup>

Newport’s observation is informed by Malcolm Bull’s work on Seventh-day Adventism. Bull has argued that *both* the labels ‘premillennial’ and ‘postmillennial’ are applicable to Seventh-day Adventists because Christ comes again twice in this eschatology: first, he comes to earth to kill the wicked (who lie dormant but are not destroyed) before the Millennium that takes place in heaven, and then he comes to permanently destroy the wicked and return the Saints to a restored earth.<sup>245</sup> An important aspect of this scenario is that the community of the Saints that is installed by Christ in the New Jerusalem on earth is the same community that has been preparing for eternal life since before the Millennium. The character of these individuals as it is being developed in the present time carries over into eternity.<sup>246</sup> “The emphasis in Seventh-day Adventism upon education, the building up of character and the instilling of discipline and self control (which includes abstinence from certain foods, drinks and drugs) is not really an attempt to clean up this world, but evidence that training for the next has begun,” he explains.<sup>247</sup> Bull further argues that the proliferation of Adventist institutions indicates a desire to create a parallel society in which Adventists go to Adventist schools, get treated by Adventist doctors, even work for an Adventist employer, all the while preparing themselves for the age to come.<sup>248</sup>

Bull’s thesis is compatible with the eschatological importance of the missionary impulse to Seventh-day Adventists. Early in the history of the SDA Church, when the

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<sup>244</sup> Newport, 132.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>246</sup> Bull, 90.

<sup>247</sup> Newport, 146.

<sup>248</sup> Bull, 9.

'shut door' doctrine was replaced by the 'open door,' Ellen White connected a doctrine of apocalyptic delay to an expansion of the eschatological role of witnessing in Adventist thought. The Second Coming must be delayed, she argued, until all of the earth had a chance to hear the Truth of Seventh-day Adventism. In 1854, she stated that salvation was available not only to veterans of the Great Disappointment, but to all "those who have *not heard and have not rejected* the doctrine of the Second Advent."<sup>249</sup> Bringing the message to all who had ears to hear became the guiding purpose of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Adventists began to see their role as one of holding back the winds of God's wrath (Rev.7:1-3) for enough time for the message to be spread, so that the whole world could hear and either accept *or reject* the Truth.<sup>250</sup> Through their activist endeavors, in particular their effective opposition to the Sunday 'blue laws,' Adventists began, somewhat paradoxically, "trying to delay the end, in order to preach that the end was soon."<sup>251</sup>

Seventh-day Adventists continue to see their Church as a remnant with a special apocalyptic role, one of witnessing.<sup>252</sup> It is up to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, they believe, to usher in the Millennium by proclaiming the Truth about the judgment and the immanent coming of Christ. As Bull writes:

...the timing of the Second Advent is understood to be in the control of the movement called upon to await it. The saints must be perfect in readiness for heaven; the gospel must be preached throughout the globe. The world contains the catalyst of its own destruction: the Adventist church.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Bull, 41.

<sup>250</sup> Morgan, 240.

<sup>251</sup> Butler as cited in Morgan, 240. Some scholars of apocalyptic rhetoric argue that doctrines of delay are crucial to the success of these narrative arguments. For a discussion of Apocalyptic argument as narrative, see Cathey Gutierrez, "The Millennium and Narrative Closure" in *War in Heaven/Heaven on Earth: Theories of the Apocalyptic*, eds. Stephen D. O'Leary and Glen S. McGhee (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2005).

<sup>252</sup> The Seventh-day Adventist Church, "What Adventists Believe."

<sup>253</sup> Bull, 68.

For Adventists, their very existence is a witness to God's truth. Adventists see their community as Truth revealed and Truth mobilized. The people of Strong City see their community this way also, as will be explored further in the next chapter.

The involvement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in efforts to improve and transform the present world is a way of making sure the ground is properly prepared for Christ's Second Coming. As Bull writes, this perspective indicates that "the Second Coming, although scheduled for some unknown time in the future, defines the shape of the present. It is retroactive, creating social divisions within the world that it will end."<sup>254</sup> Perfecting the community of the Saints, like celebrating the Sabbath on Saturday, is a witness to the world that, through the nature of its reception, determines the fate of all individuals who either join the perfect community or unite against it. The delineation of these social boundaries, which separate Adventists from the rest of society, aligns the world with the cosmic situation. In the cosmic battle between good and evil, neutrality is not an option. Adventist involvement in the world therefore functions to prepare the ground for the Second Coming of Christ on two fronts: it perfects the community of the Saints and it firmly identifies God's enemies. As bearers of God's Truth, therefore, Adventists see themselves as crucial end-times actors, without whom even God's plan cannot come to fruition.

The idea that God's plan for history depends on a partnership such as this is characteristic of Seventh-day Adventist apocalypticism. This idea has important theological implications; the idea that human actions will delay or hasten the end times can be read to imply that God's power is somehow dependant on people, and therefore

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

limited. Though it is not an explicit tenet of the Adventist faith, which continues to assert the omnipotence and omniscience of God the Father, the theme of a limited God is often hinted at in Adventist thought. Bull argues that “Compared to the sublime immutability of Calvin’s deity, Adventism’s God has always worked with numerous restrictions on his freedom of action.”<sup>255</sup> William Miller’s emphasis on the inescapably logical underpinnings of prophecy in scripture suggested from the beginning of this tradition that God was at least subject to his own rational rules and obliged to carry out his promises as laid out in the Bible, and Ellen White’s doctrine of delay suggested that God’s promises were at least somewhat conditional, and required human readiness for their fulfillment.<sup>256</sup> In the 1980’s Richard Rice, a prominent Adventist theologian and professor of Religion at the Adventist Loma Linda University developed the ‘Open’ theory of God, which argued that “what God does and how he behaves is wholly dependent on the decisions that free individuals are allowed to make.”<sup>257</sup> Though Adventist publishers refused to publish this work, Rice kept his position at the University. Bull argues that this lack of censure suggests a “bias” or a tendency in Adventist theology towards this “open” view of a God whose power is connected to his relationship with people and the decisions they make. The idea that God depends in this way on his relationship to his people is an important one for the women of Strong City, who conceive of themselves as responsible for arousing God to end-times action, a point to which I will return in my analysis of their rhetoric.

**“You Will Always Tell the Truth”: the history of Strong City on the internet.**

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

Drawing on broader discourses of Christian apocalypticism and Seventh-day Adventism, the rhetoric of Strong City has always been concerned with the idea that telling the Truth has a powerful, eschatological impact. On the Strong City pages, the term ‘apocalypse’ explicitly refers both to a revelation of previously hidden truths and to the effect that the accomplishment of this revelation has on the world.<sup>258</sup> As it does in Seventh-day Adventism and Christian apocalypticism in general, in the religious worldview of Strong City telling the Truth changes the physical world, re-arranging it to match a cosmic order. Telling their Truth on the internet, therefore, is a ritualistic performance for the people of Strong City. This ritual is performed largely through the narrative recounting of daily events at Strong City which members of this group feel have cosmic significance. The history of this community, then, cannot clearly be separated from their telling of it on the internet. What follows is a summary of the history of this group as it is told on the Strong City pages by Travesser and the women of Strong City both. This is not offered here as an objective account of the ‘facts’ of what happened at

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<sup>258</sup> On April 10, 2008, Travesser wrote:

The word “apocalypse” has a very clear meaning. it means:  
KJV - revelation, be revealed, to lighten, manifestation, coming, appearing.

1) laying bare, making naked

2) a disclosure of truth, instruction

2a) concerning things before unknown

2b) used of events by which things or states or persons hitherto withdrawn from view are made visible to all

3) manifestation, appearance.

The biblical time of the apocalypse, and the fulfillment of the prophecy was October 31, 2007. It was the “day of judgment.” Ben also used the word, “doomsday” which means “the final day of judgment.” The Bible also uses “end of the world” to mean, “end of the age.” On October 31st, 2007, it was not only the end of the age, but the day (year) of final judgment, and the time of the revelation.

Travesser, Michael, “The Apocalypse is Come,” Strong City, accessed May 20, 2008. [strongcity.info/LOR/P40/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/P40/).

Strong City, but as a demonstration of the way in which these rhetors use the narrative recounting of their own history as a Truth-telling ritual.

In 1994, Wayne Bent, former Seventh-day Adventist minister, published an internet news site called WINDS, on which he began to reveal a prophecy about the imminent end of the world.<sup>259</sup> This website was linked to a network of other libertarian and right-wing anti-government websites. At the end of the 1990's, Travesser reports that he and a small congregation of followers that had come with him out of the Seventh-day Adventist Church began to follow astrological signs that seemed to indicate that they should move out into the wilderness in preparation for a significant event. In April of 2000, Travesser writes, this small group, called the Lord Our Righteousness Church (LOR), finally settled at Travesser ranch, near Albuquerque New Mexico, and called the land 'Strong City.'<sup>260</sup> Soon after this move, Michael wrote that God began to reveal to him that the mysterious event they had been preparing for was a marriage of the Church to God. In May, he reports that he began reading the Song of Songs at God's instruction, and by June of that year he had published a commentary on this work at Strongcity.com.<sup>261</sup> The publication of this commentary on the internet marked the beginning of the most important work of Strong City, the 'Covenant of the Marriage of the Lamb,' in which the Church began to prepare itself to marry God.<sup>262</sup>

In July of 2000, Travesser writes, "Messiah" was "spoken into" Wayne Bent and he became Michael Travesser. In "The Finished Work," Travesser describes hearing the

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<sup>259</sup> Travesser, Michael "The Sanctuary in the Heavens," Strong City, accessed June 27, 2008, [web.archive.org/web/20011020223657/michael.strongcity.com/michael/faith.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20011020223657/michael.strongcity.com/michael/faith.html).

<sup>260</sup> Travesser, Michael, "Entering the Balances," Strong City, accessed February 21, 2009, [web.archive.org/web/20011224112702/michael.strongcity.com/michael/ten\\_virgins.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20011224112702/michael.strongcity.com/michael/ten_virgins.html).

<sup>261</sup> Travesser, "The Finished Work."

<sup>262</sup> The Lord Our Righteousness Church, "Seventy Weeks Prophecy of Daniel Nine," Strong City, accessed May 20, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/sc/post/Seventy\\_weeks\\_prophecy\\_of\\_daniel\\_nine/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/sc/post/Seventy_weeks_prophecy_of_daniel_nine/).

voice of God say to him audibly: “You are Messiah.”<sup>263</sup> Almost immediately after this change was announced, he continues, two women from the congregation, Anaiah and Ami, left their husbands and families to come and live with Michael. In a companion piece linked to “The Finished Work,” called “Experiencing “The Finished Work”,” Anaiah and Ami corroborated Michael’s story.<sup>264</sup> The husbands of these women report that they willingly gave up their wives to “marry” Michael.<sup>265</sup> In October of that year, both Anaiah and Ami described having sexual intercourse with Michael in a period the Church refers to as the ‘Consummation of the Marriage of the Lamb.’<sup>266</sup> Michael published “The Finished Work” on the internet after this consummation had taken place, a document that detailed the events that had occurred at Strong City up until that point and that explained the role of the Two Witnesses. Soon afterwards, Anaiah and Ami collaborated to post its companion, “Experiencing “The Finished Work”” on the same site. Anaiah and Ami continue to be referred to as Michael’s Two Witnesses, and as his wives, on the Strong City website up until the present day.

In 2004, Michael writes that the LOR Church entered a period they refer to as the “Midst of the Week.”<sup>267</sup> During this time, Michael writes, “intercession (the intervention of Christ in limiting the effects to themselves of their evil) ceased for the nations of the earth. They would now be allowed to carry out their plans to subjugate the peoples of the world.”<sup>268</sup> During 2004-2005, a ‘New Government’ was reportedly established at Strong City, in which all private property was given over to a common fund. At this point also

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<sup>263</sup> Travesser, “The Finished Work.”

<sup>264</sup> This document is unfortunately no longer available on the internet, though frequent mention is made of it in other writings cited here.

<sup>265</sup> Salem’s testimony appears in Travesser, “The Vision Pages: Page Ten, Beginning of Judgment,” Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_ten](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_ten).

<sup>266</sup> Travesser, “The Finished Work.”

<sup>267</sup> Travesser, “The Prophecy and the Travesser Story.”

<sup>268</sup> The Lord Our Righteousness Church, “Seventy-Weeks Prophecy of Daniel Nine.”

most of the marriages at Strong City seem to have been dissolved, as they interfered with the goal of marrying God only. The Church continued to publish regularly on the internet during this time. In May of 2006, Travesser writes that this intermediary period ceased when God told him to begin preparation of a special website, which he called *Shillum*.<sup>269</sup> This website was intended to perform a special work for God, but Michael claims that he did not yet know what shape this work would take except that it would involve God's final judgment on the world.

In July of 2006, Michael writes that he had a vision, which he says he disclosed to no-one, that two virgins would come and ask him if they could be naked and vulnerable with him. When this occurred, it would be the sign that the *Shillum* site could be put on the internet, and the *Shillum* work of final judgment would begin. In the "Vision Pages," a young woman from the congregation named Esther writes that, after God told her on July 12<sup>th</sup> that she needed to be more vulnerable, she got the idea to go to Michael's house and talk to him. While she was there, she writes that it suddenly came to her to ask Travesser if she could take off all of her clothes in front of him. Travesser agreed, and Esther writes that this was a transformative, healing experience for her.<sup>270</sup> Another young woman named Danielle writes that the day after Esther did this she did the same, and felt equally transformed.<sup>271</sup> Michael writes that after these two women came to him, he met with all of the young people in the congregation (male and female) and told them that God would choose seven of them for a special purpose, to be his messengers. The

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<sup>269</sup> Travesser, "The Vision Pages: Page One," Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_one/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_one/).

<sup>270</sup> Esther, "The Vision Pages: Page Four, Esther's Testimony," Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_four/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_four/).

<sup>271</sup> Danielle, "The Vision Pages: Page Five, Danielle's Testimony," Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_five/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_five/).

women of Strong City write that he then told them to go home and ask God if they were one of the seven.<sup>272</sup> On the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, 2006, the *Shillum* website was put up on the internet. The “Vision Pages” were posted on this website, which was linked to Strongcity.info.

According to various posts on “The Vision Pages,” the publication of the *Shillum* website marked the end of God’s mercy and the beginning of a time of judgment. The precise shape of this Vision, however, remained unclear. Through the summer, the seven messengers gradually identified themselves, and each posted their testimony about lying naked with Travesser on the *Shillum* site: Esther, Danielle, Moriah, Liberty, Eleana (Healed), Hannah, and Willow. These seven messengers were meant to participate in a ceremony described as “pouring out the plagues,”<sup>273</sup> in which they dressed in white and gold and poured water from gold bowls at a site in Strong City called the Alter Rock. Due to a variety of spiritual blocks and complications among some members of the congregation, which were alluded to but never clearly explained in the “Vision Pages,” the plague- pouring ceremony took some time to complete. During this same period, Michael began to reveal another aspect of the *Shillum* Vision which is referred to on the “Vision Pages” as the “Consummation of Judgment.” A number of women and girls in the congregation report having already performed the healing ritual where they lay on Michael’s bed naked while he held them or put his hand over their hearts. Some of them report having lain ‘skin to skin’ with Michael as well.<sup>274</sup> On July 31<sup>st</sup> and August 2<sup>nd</sup>,

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<sup>272</sup> Moriah, “The Vision Pages: Page Two, Moriah’s Testimony,” Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_two/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_two/); cf. Esther, “The Vision Pages: Page Four, Esther’s Testimony.”

<sup>273</sup> For example, by Moriah in “The Vision Pages: Page Two, Moriah’s Testimony.”

<sup>274</sup> It is unclear from the primary material what this phrase means exactly; it seems likely that it indicates that both Michael and the girls were naked during this ceremony. Since several consummations with

2006, Lakeisha (aka Eleana, aka Healed) writes that she and her sister Ashlee Sayer, the girls mentioned in the indictment against Wayne Bent, lay naked with Michael.<sup>275</sup> These dates are consistent with those mentioned in Bent's trial. An eighth person also reports lying naked with Michael during this time: Christianna, who had been married to Michael's son Jeff.<sup>276</sup>

In the late summer of 2006, some of the women reported on the "Vision Pages" that they began to feel strongly that they wanted to consummate (have sex) with Michael, and privately they began to ask Michael for this. Lakeisha Sayer (Healed) was one of those who requested this, as did Esther.<sup>277</sup> Both they and Travesser emphasize in their posts that the leader was resistant, but when he refused the idea of consummating with these young girls, Travesser writes that he felt God leaving him. According to Travesser, this experience of God's absence was so devastating that he finally told God that he would consent to have sex with these women; just as he did so, however, God relieved him of his burden and told him his consent was enough. No literal consummation would have to occur with these seven.<sup>278</sup> In the "Vision Pages" after this was announced, several of the Seven described their profound disappointment and expressed a continued desire to consummate with Travesser.<sup>279</sup> Travesser writes that the exact shape of God's plan remained unclear, so on September 9<sup>th</sup> Michael writes that he sent out an email to

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Michael are described as having taken place after lying skin to skin, however, it is clear that this phrase does not refer to sexual intercourse.

<sup>275</sup> Healed (aka Eleana), "The Vision Pages: Page Eight, Eleana's Testimony," Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_eight/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_eight/).

<sup>276</sup> Christianna, "The Vision Pages: Page Six, Christianna's Testimony," Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_six/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_six/).

<sup>277</sup> Healed (aka Eleana), "The Vision Pages: Page Eight;" Esther, "The Vision Pages: Page Fourteen, The Vision of Love by Esther Kira," Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_fourteen/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_fourteen/).

<sup>278</sup> Travesser, "The Vision Pages: Page Three, the Conclusion," Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_three/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_three/).

<sup>279</sup> For example, Healed (aka Eleana), "The Vision Pages: Page Eight;" Esther, "The Vision Pages: Page Fourteen, The Vision of Love by Esther Kira."

the entire congregation asking them to tell him what the ‘Consummation of Judgment’ should look like. He received a variety of replies, and on September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006, Michael sent out an email to the congregation telling them that every member of the congregation must have sexual intercourse with him.<sup>280</sup> However, it is clear from the dates on the “Vision Pages” posts that, at this point, only the Two Witnesses, Anaiah and Ami, were having literal sexual intercourse with Michael.

In October of that year, the congregation celebrated the Day of Atonement on the Jewish calendar, an event which Michael writes marked the opening of the “temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven.” After this testimony was revealed to the world, he says, the plagues could finally be poured out.<sup>281</sup> This pouring out of the plagues would initiate the final judgment during which each soul would either be atoned to God or not. At the end of October, the congregation celebrated the beginning of the Jubilee year, the final year of Michael’s prophecy which would end in Judgment Day: October 31, 2007. During this time, the most prominent women of Strong City continued to post their testimony in the “Vision Pages” on the *Shillum* website, which amounted to hundreds of pages detailing their feelings and interpretations about the events that were taking place.

According to these “Vision Pages,” the plagues began to be poured out in this Jubilee year, from October 31, 2006, to October 31, 2007. On November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006, Michael had sex with Christianna, his son Jeff’s former wife.<sup>282</sup> Michael’s writes that his consummation with Christianna allowed the first plague to be poured out by Moriah, and

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<sup>280</sup> Moriah, “The Vision Pages: Page Two, Moriah’s Testimony.”

<sup>281</sup> Travesser, “The Vision Pages: Page Three, the Conclusion.”

<sup>282</sup> Christianna, “The Vision Pages: Page Eleven by Christianna,” accessed June 12, 2008, Strong City, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_eleven/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_eleven/).

Christianna also refers to this in her testimony about these events on the “Vision Pages.” Almost a year later, in October of 2007, three more women write that they had sex with Michael and now consider themselves to be his wives: Bethabara (aka Jubilee), Esther, and Danielle (aka Bernice).<sup>283</sup> On October 31, 2007, the ceremony described in Ben Anthony’s film took place on the ranch, ending the prophecy and commencing a year-long judgment day. Shortly after this, Moriah writes that she consummated with Michael, and the second plague was poured out.<sup>284</sup> At the time of his arrest, therefore, Michael had had sexual intercourse with seven women in the congregation, all of whom now hold a special position as his wives and witnesses: Ami, Anaiah, Christianna, Bethabara (Jubilee), Esther, Danielle, and Moriah. All of these women were of legal age, and none of them were involved in any of the criminal charges against Bent.

In May of 2008, Wayne Bent was arrested and charged with two counts of “sexual misconduct with a minor” and two counts of “contributing to the delinquency of a minor,” an event copiously reported on the Strongcity.info site. The Strong City website announced that the congregation was fasting in protest. In his absence, Travesser’s daily posts were taken over by his son, Jeff. On July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008, however, the group entered what they called a “word fast” during which they removed all traces of the group from the internet. All of the Strong City websites were taken down, along with all blog posts and YouTube videos published by anyone in the group. This “word fast” continued for 100 days, until October 10, 2008. The group then came back online in October, and their site remained up until October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2008, at which point it was again

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<sup>283</sup> Esther, “The Vision Pages: Page Fourteen, The Vision of Love by Esther Kira;” Danielle (aka Bernice), “The Vision Pages: Page Fifteen;” Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_fifteen/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_fifteen/).

<sup>284</sup> Moriah (aka Security). “The Vision Pages: Page Twelve, The Sacrifice of Love by Security;” Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_twelve/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_twelve/).

removed until after Wayne Bent's trial was over, and he was in prison. Despite Travesser's continued absence from the community, the Strongcity.info site has been steadily up and running, at the time of writing, for over a year, though many previously archived documents are no longer available there.<sup>285</sup> Travesser regularly writes letters from his prison cell that are then posted on the site. On a couple of occasions, he has also had telephone conversations with Ami or Anaiah that have been recorded and the audio files posted on the site. Primarily, the site seems to now be run by Jeff, and most of the material published there relates to Travesser's conviction, which is presented as a great injustice comparable to Christ's crucifixion.

As should be clear from the above summary, the residents of Strong City closely associate their internet activity with their cosmic role as God's witnesses and bearers of his message. The internet presence of Strong City is a ritual in which truth-telling has played a constitutive and transformative role. These rhetors, including Travesser but also, and importantly for my purposes, the women of Strong City, present themselves and their telling as crucial and world-altering; according to them, what happens in Strong City happens to the whole world through the telling of the story. The internet is part of the Strong City religion. While scholars of Religion who work with online materials have distinguished between "*religion online*," in which religious groups offer descriptive information and services on the internet and "*online religion*,"<sup>286</sup> in which groups perform religious rituals and otherwise practice religion in the environment of cyber-

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<sup>285</sup> The official Strong City website is currently available at [strongcity.info](http://strongcity.info). A mirror site has also been set up by outsiders sympathetic to Travesser's legal cause at [strongcity2.info](http://strongcity2.info), which fills in many of the gaps in the archive of the group's own site and offers transcripts of Travesser's trial.

<sup>286</sup> Douglas E. Cowan and Jeffrey K. Hadden, "Virtually Religious: New Religious Movements and the World Wide Web" in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 120.

space, therefore, Strong City seems to fall into both of these categories. The Strong City pages are information and ritual, narrative and performance, description and persuasion. These websites are presented as vehicles for the people of Strong City to mobilize the Truth of their story by telling it.

As I will demonstrate more fully in what follows, the people of Strong City see their own rhetoric as a crucial revelation of meaning, an earth-shattering interpretive act that gives cosmic significance to what might otherwise seem to be ordinary events. The story of this tiny community is presented in these internet pages as having ultimate importance; the characters and events that make up Strong City are presented as transformative Truth mobilized, and the web pages that describe this story are presented as an integral part of this mobilization. According to the rhetoric of Strong City, exposure to this argument has consequences for the reader's eternal soul. As Travesser wrote on Jan. 18, 2008 "I feel the Day of Judgment has arrived. We are in it, and this Internet page is part of it on one level. We will see more and more of the final things as the hours and days progress, but the old order is finished."<sup>287</sup> In April of the same year he continued this thought: "As the war of the worlds continues, the Battle of Armageddon, it is fair to warn the readers of this page that every single decision you now make will be an eternal one. The very fact that you declare that you now see, will forever decide your fate for good or for evil."<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Travesser, Michael, "Who Was Jesus Christ?", Strong City, accessed April 20, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/sc/post/who\\_was\\_jesus\\_christ/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/sc/post/who_was_jesus_christ/).

<sup>288</sup> Travesser, Michael, "A Warning," Strong City, accessed April 20, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/sc/post/a\\_warning/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/sc/post/a_warning/).

## GOD IN THE WORLD

The rhetoric of Strong City, as it appears on the internet, presents a coherent worldview that addresses the unique situation of the people of this community, their religious beliefs, hopes and values. This worldview has grown in complexity over the decade or so that it has been presented on the Strong City websites, but it has remained remarkably consistent over the years, developing improvisations on the same basic themes that informed it from the beginning. Here I examine the internet rhetoric of Strong city more closely, and critically, in order to demonstrate more precisely how these religious actors—particularly the women involved—draw on the broader religious discourses outlined in the previous chapter to construct their own religious identities and social roles. I will focus on several important themes that recur on the Strong City pages, and have been elaborated consistently to explain the sexualized religious role of the women of this community. The goal of this analysis will be to emphasize the collaborative nature of this rhetorical narrative, as well as the authoritative nature of the self-presentation of the women of Strong City. What will clearly emerge is a picture of these women not as socially dangerous victims, as Anthony presented them, but as powerful and creative religious actors.

### ***“REAL, ACTUAL, FACTUAL, PHYSICAL...”*: attitudes towards the material world in the rhetoric of Strong City.**

At the core of the Strong City worldview is the idea that God is present in the world, in the person of Michael Travesser, and that cosmic truths are being played out in history by real people with physical bodies. As it has done through the history of Christian theology and rhetoric, the idea of ‘God in the flesh’ creates an interesting

paradox which must work itself out in the arguments made on the Strong City pages. The rhetoric of Strong City presents a strongly dualistic worldview that pits ‘flesh’ against ‘spirit’ and the ‘earth’s view’ against ‘heaven’s view.’ Yet, as God’s revelatory instrument, the physical world cannot be reasonably portrayed in this rhetoric as an inherently malevolent force, and so it is not. Instead, the physical world is described on these pages as a powerful but morally neutral *tool*. In fact, the physical geography of Strong City, the bodies of the people that reside there, and the timeline of the events that have occurred in that place are all presented as vehicles for the Truth that is being revealed. Often, on the Strong City pages, the status of bodies and places and times as ‘actual, factual,’ (real, physical) historical data is what gives them much of their spiritual and rhetorical force.

The people of Strong City believe that God’s people, male and female, must enter into a real, literal, physically intimate relationship with God in order to be saved. The idea that God wants an intimate, personal relationship with the faithful, usually described as a close friendship, is familiar from conventional Seventh-day Adventist thought.<sup>289</sup> The Strong City rhetoric, however, indicates that the LOR Church wants more than a platonic relationship with God. The women of Strong City envision for themselves and

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<sup>289</sup> In the section of the SDA website titled “What Adventists Believe,” for example, we can find the following statement:

**God's greatest desire is for you to see a clear picture of His character. When you see Him clearly, you will find His love irresistible...In the heart of God is a place you can experience as home. God loves you, and wants to spend time with you personally, one on one, as two close friends...**Because you and God are friends, you will spend time together as friends do. Each morning you'll share a hello and a hug and discuss how you can face the day's events together. Throughout the day you'll talk with Him about how you feel. You'll laugh with Him at funny things and ache with Him over sadness and hurts. Its pleasant being God's friend, able to snuggle comfortably into the safety of your relationship. You can always trust Him to treat you well, because He loves you.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church, “What Adventists Believe.”

the rest of the congregation a relationship with God that has the intimacy and passion of romantic love. On the "Vision Pages," Anaiah, one of Travesser's Two Witnesses, strongly urges the residents of Strong City to go beyond an easy, comfortable relationship with God:

Up until this time, the congregation has been content to hold hands with God and feel Him close to her, to have Him kiss her on the lips, as long as it doesn't get too long and drawn out and she begins to feel deep things that she didn't feel before. *But she hasn't wanted Him to do "that sexual stuff" with her. She's "not comfortable" with the "physical." She likes having her nice, safe little devotions with God in the morning before she begins her day, where something she has read makes her feel good about her relationship with God, and she gets up from her "time with God" content and fully satisfied with God saying some sweet things to her that made her heart feel "drawn out" so to speak, but she has been TOTALLY OUT OF TOUCH with what Father and Michael have been FEELING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*<sup>290</sup>

In this passage and others, Anaiah expresses a desire to have God come so close that the believer can physically feel him and see him. One of the younger women in the congregation, Esther, also writes that she was continually drawn to come physically close to God, in the person of Michael Travesser:

...my heart ached. I could hardly bear the weight of love that was in it. This deep, intense love was for the Son and the Father. I felt like in my great love I had a great drawing. I was continually drawing down the presence of Father to my heart. I needed Him in a way so far greater than I had ever needed Him before. My heart was being opened to receive even more of what Father was desiring to give. The drawing to Michael that was in me was increased. The desire to be consummated with the Son was greater than it had ever been.<sup>291</sup>

For the women of Strong City, physical intimacy with Travesser represents a way to come physically close to God.

In "The Finished Work," published on Strongcity.com in 2001, Travesser wrote that his religious mission is to bring the Church into this physical, intimate relationship with God. Having emptied himself completely and devoted his whole personhood to God,

<sup>290</sup> Travesser, Anaiah, "The Vision Pages: Page Eleven by Christianna, Addendum by Anaiah", Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_eleven/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_eleven/).

<sup>291</sup> Esther, "The Visions Pages: Page Fourteen, the Journey of Love by Esther Kira."

Travesser describes himself as the first person to have literally married God, a marriage that resulted in a transformation of his entire physical personhood. Travesser claims that this experience transformed him into half-man, half-God. Travesser does not claim to be Jesus, but he does explain himself as a ‘Christ’ (anointed one) in the sense that he is a special Son of God who has been anointed for a particular task: the marriage of the Church to God. God, Travesser argues, wants to marry everyone, but most people reject God and marry the world instead. The purpose of the union between God and Man in Michael Travesser, therefore, is to marry God to his people in a real, physical, tangible way. Using fairly conventional biblical language, in particular a passage from Revelation 19, Travesser calls this marriage between God and the Church (who he equates with the “woman in the wilderness” of Revelation 12), the “Marriage of the Lamb.”<sup>292</sup>

The idea of the Church as the Bride of Christ is, of course, an extremely conventional Christian idea. However, this concept is usually understood symbolically or spiritually; marriage is conceived as analogy for a relationship between God and his people that is otherwise ineffable. For the people of Strong City, this marriage cannot be merely symbolic but must be enacted in the physical world in order to be fully real. The rhetoric of Strong City, therefore, presents an interesting perspective on the physical world. The strict distinction these rhetors make between flesh and not-flesh, and between ‘of this world’ and ‘of the spirit,’ does not depend on the physicality of acts but on the perspective of the actor. This somewhat unconventional distinction is reflected in the rhetoric of the women of Strong City, but it is made explicit in Travesser’s early commentary on the Biblical text the Song of Songs, posted on the internet in 2000.

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<sup>292</sup> Concepts developed later in the Strong City project, such as the ‘Consummation of the Marriage of the Lamb,’ the ‘Marriage Feast’ and the ‘Consummation of Judgment’ all are derived from this basic idea of the Marriage of the Lamb.’

In his commentary, Travesser writes that God directed him specifically to examine the Song of Songs, yet he found himself struggling against the text, which includes much imagery of longing and sexual seduction. He writes, "How could one kiss a woman on the mouth, as stated in the Song, and it not be flesh? In my mind, lips were flesh. Laying one's head on the breast of another, as was portrayed in the Song, was flesh."<sup>293</sup> Travesser finally resolves this tension in the Song by re-defining "flesh" to mean "motivated by Evil" rather than "physical." "Humans have a difficult time separating the flesh from the spirit," Travesser writes in his commentary, "especially in those areas which are cross-imaged. That is -- the same image or representation may be used for either the flesh or the spirit." By "cross-imaged," Travesser does not mean that eroticism in the Song is only a metaphor for spiritual devotion. Instead, he argues that the same physical act can be either of the spirit or of the flesh, of God or of Satan. Satan, Travesser continues, has "keenly devised plans to amalgamate the flesh and the spirit so completely, that humans dare not go to the depth of experience of exaltation and vulnerability for fear of sinning the sins of the flesh." People fear their bodies, because they have the potential for evil, but this does not mean that bodies are by their nature evil. According to Travesser, therefore, when he uses the term "flesh," he "is not referring to physical feelings." "Something is of the flesh," he writes, "when the flesh is the barometer and the source of one's motivations."

Travesser writes that this is particularly the case with love and sex. "Love" is supposed to describe the relationship between God and his people, he argues, but Satan has connected love with procreation, and this connection has muddied the real meaning

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<sup>293</sup> Travesser, Michael, "The Song of Solomon", Strong City, accessed June 27, 2008, [web.archive.org/web/20011224112702/michael.strongcity.com/michael/the\\_song\\_of\\_solomon](http://web.archive.org/web/20011224112702/michael.strongcity.com/michael/the_song_of_solomon).

of love.<sup>294</sup> In contrast to many Christians, therefore, who see procreative sex within the bounds of human marriage as the only acceptable kind of sexual intercourse, Travesser argues that procreative sex is for the beasts. No children seem to have been the result of any of the spiritual, ritualistic unions between Travesser and the women of Strong City. God wants a different kind of love, Travesser argues, and a different kind of sex, that is intended not to create new separate people but to unite souls with God through physical intercourse.<sup>295</sup> On the "Vision Pages," Travesser wrote:

God made sex so we might know this. It is His grand illustration of Himself...  
 ... The feeling of God's sexuality is not just a hot sensation in the lower regions of the body. It involves a nakedness of soul, a yielding of heart, and a sweet connection that makes two souls, one. The soul would have a trusting openness and naked connection with God.  
 ... GOD MADE SEX. Let Him show you what it means.<sup>296</sup>

As we saw in the previous chapter, the idea that the physical world is not necessarily bad, that it can be a powerful tool for doing God's work, is consistent with the Seventh-day Adventist belief-system to which Travesser was converted in 1967 (though Adventists certainly do not practice any religious rituals that involve nakedness or sexual

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<sup>294</sup>In the "Song of Solomon," Travesser writes:

The devil's trick about in-love is that he has associated it with breeding. Breeding and in-love have nothing whatever to do with each other. When a bull breeds with a cow, would that be considered love? The world and Satan have coined the term "making love" to describe breeding. "Making love" has nothing to do with breeding. The devil lied again and humans fell for the bait.

Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> This upsetting of conventional ideas of marriage to replace them with new ideas of a more profound relationship with God is not unique to Travesser, however, but has historical precedence in a variety of apocalyptic groups such as that of Munster, Jonestown, Waco, and others. As Adventist historian Jonathan Butler writes:

The millenarian expression of some form of sexual revolution not only assaults old rules by reiterating a primordial golden period, when seemingly no rules were necessary, but it also bonds the marginal community with new rules of love conveyed at the most intense level of intimacy.

Butler, 18.

<sup>296</sup> Note by Travesser in Christianna, "The Vision Pages: Page Eleven by Christianna," Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_eleven/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_eleven/).

intercourse.)<sup>297</sup> This idea is often repeated in the rhetoric of the women of Strong City. As I will demonstrate below, these women consistently and vociferously deny that there is anything of the ‘flesh’ or the ‘earth’ in their experiences of lying naked with Travesser, or having sex with him. Commonly, they associate ‘flesh,’ the ‘natural self,’ or ‘earth’s view’ with evil and Satan, and the concepts of ‘spirit,’ or ‘heaven’s view’ with God and the good. The reader is frequently exhorted on the Strong City pages to give up their ‘earth view’ of things, to stop following the ‘flesh,’ or to reject their ‘natural self.’ On the other hand, these women also argue equally forcefully that the physicality of these acts is what gives them their transformative power. While these women manage to preserve the idea of evil ‘flesh’ and an evil ‘earth’ in their rhetoric, therefore, they also manage to use the power of the real, physical, historical world with its human bodies and feelings to make the Strong City worldview tangible. The rhetoric of the women of Strong City does distinguish clearly between human love and spiritual love, between things of the “flesh” and things of the “spirit.” However, like Travesser, the distinction they make is one of motivation, not of abstraction.

In the “Vision Pages,” a long document published on the Strong City site in 2006 and elaborated over the next two years, the women of Strong City have consistently argued that there is nothing of the flesh involved in their experiences with Travesser, who is never equated with the man Wayne Bent. In her testimony on the “Vision Pages,” for example, one of the Seven Virgins named Moriah argues that: “Michael is not flesh, and there was no flesh or human need in this.” As evidence of this, she describes her initial

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<sup>297</sup> Kissing on the lips, however, is normal among Seventh-Day Adventists. On several occasions in The End of the World Cult, Anthony shows video of Michael kissing young girls in the congregation on the lips, as though this has some sexual connotation. In fact, it is a commonplace not only in this Church but in more mainstream SDA congregations to practice this ritual of the ‘holy kiss.’ Everyone at Strong City kisses on the lips, not just Travesser.

feelings of repulsion towards Travesser as a man, who she says she was not in love with in a human sense:

...some of the seven had asked Michael for an intimate, sexual union with him... To think of such a thing was very terrifying and repulsive to me, and I prayed that Father would take this cup from me. I could not imagine having that kind of an experience with Michael, for I had no sexual or romantic desires in that direction at all. I felt that I would have to be in-love with him in order to desire that, and human in-love was not anywhere in the picture at all in my connection with Michael. Waves of repulsion would wash over me when I would think of having to do this... Michael said that Father would never have me do anything unless it was coming out of the depths of my soul. He said Father would never have me go against myself.<sup>298</sup>

Moriah continues, "Father's intimacy is pure, clean, holy, and untainted with anything of earth." Another of the virgins, Danielle, writes:

My experience of being naked with Michael, was not at all an earthly one. Michael is not a man, and He does not operate out of the lusts of the flesh as men do. His only desire was to pour His love and healing into me from Father... I can truly testify that I laid with the Son of God Himself, and not a mere man...<sup>299</sup>

However, the rhetoric of the women Strong City is also replete with language that seems to imply a positive evaluation of the physical world and physical bodies, and an idea that physical things are somehow more 'real' than certain other kinds of things. For example, Moriah, who is quoted above strongly denying that her experiences with Michael were 'of the earth,' goes on to say that the value of the ritual in which she lay naked with Michael was precisely in its physicality:

Being vulnerable, in a very literal way like that, did more for me than anything "spiritual" that had ever happened inside of me. Being physically naked gave me something real to lay hold on—something I could look back on and remember. It caused me to understand what it really is to give myself over to Father. It is a literal giving over. It is not "spiritually speaking." I literally gave myself over to Michael by laying naked on his bed, trusting him with my body and with my whole being. For myself, I had to be physically naked in order to receive this gift. I could not have gotten it in any other way. Being "spiritually speaking"

<sup>298</sup> Moriah, "The Vision Pages: Page Two, Moriah's Testimony."

<sup>299</sup> Danielle, "The Vision Pages: Page Five, Danielle's Testimony."

naked would not have given me the precious healing and vulnerable trust that I received.<sup>300</sup>

Anaiah, who is an important role model for the younger women at Strong City, is often strikingly explicit about the importance of physical enactments, using highly sexual imagery in her posts in order to emphasize that sex, for her, is not mere metaphor. One passage written by her in the “Vision Pages” is particularly illustrative of this:

Did she [the Church] expect to be consummated with God WITHOUT having to have sexual intercourse with Him, where she craved Him coming into her most private places? Where one touch of His hand in her most intimate parts causes everything in her to respond to Him, and she is aroused with drawn out desire for Him to touch her more? Did she expect to be consummated to God without craving His invasion into her privacy, her most private parts? *Your physical body is a visible picture of your heart and mind and every private place that makes up who you are.* Your feelings tell what you are desiring with your heart and mind.

Father, and Michael, have been INTENSELY DESIRING to have **SEXUAL INTERCOURSE** with **HER!!!!!!!!!!!!** Father, and Michael, have been INTENSELY DESIRING TO HAVE SEXUAL INTERCOURSE WITH EVERY MEMBER OF THE CONGREGATION!!!!!!!!!! **They want to have sexual intercourse with YOU** — *NOT business intercourse, NOT religious intercourse, NOT friendship intercourse, where you hold hands and feel God close, but REAL, ACTUAL, FACTUAL, PHYSICAL, SEXUAL INTERCOURSE*, where **YOU ARE FULLY AROUSED, and you CRAVE SEXUAL INTERCOURSE WITH GOD, SO STRONGLY THAT YOU FEEL IT PHYSICALLY**; where you **MUST HAVE** God take ALL of HIS clothing off, and you **CAN'T WAIT** to take off all of yours...<sup>301</sup>

The women of Strong City, therefore, conceive of God as literally, physically present in Michael Travesser. As Danielle wrote on the “Vision Pages”:

Father came down upon me and I felt His presence so strongly with me. He began to open up things to me. He showed me Who Michael REALLY is—the actual Son of God: I was thinking about the Son of God being HERE, right now, in our very own midst. It was awesome.<sup>302</sup>

For these women, Travesser is not merely a symbol of God, he is God in the flesh:

tangible, visible and accessible. The women of Strong City describe being naked with

<sup>300</sup> Moriah, “The Vision Pages: Page Two, Moriah’s Testimony.”

<sup>301</sup> Travesser, Anaiah, “The Vision Pages: Page Eleven by Christianna, Addendum by Anaiah.”

<sup>302</sup> Danielle, “The Vision Pages: Page Five, Danielle’s Testimony.”

Michael as being naked and vulnerable before God, being sexually intimate with Michael as being intimate with God, and being married to Michael as being married to God.

**A “Living Parable”: Strong City as enacted symbolic drama.**

However bizarre it may seem to outsiders, when the women of Strong City have sex with Michael or lie naked next to him they therefore conceive of themselves as living symbols playing cosmic roles on the real-life stage of history. The Marriage of the Lamb is a kind of ritual, a highly symbolized dramatic enactment of cosmic types in the physical world. As ‘signposts’<sup>303</sup> for the congregation (and for all of God’s Saints wherever they may be), the female actors in this drama conceive of themselves as flexible physical symbols of God’s relationship with his people. While “The End of the World Cult” presented the bodies of the Strong City women as locations of social danger, on the Strong City pages they are depicted as role models that guide the rest of humanity with the light of Truth. However, the way in which these living symbols perform their cosmic roles is also intentionally strange and disturbing. It is intended to jar, to upset the complacency of those who watch. This, it is argued, will disrupt the ordinary workings of the world. By revealing themselves and their ‘strange acts’ to the world over the internet, these women intend to force the people of the world to judge these acts as either ‘of the spirit’ or ‘of the flesh’ and in so doing, reveal if they are on God’s side or Satan’s. Travesser’s relationship with the women of his community is therefore presented in the Strong City pages as a dynamic and transformative “living parable.”<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> “The two witnesses forsook all that they had. The two witnesses hated their earth for the love of Messiah. They forsook all that they had to come to Him. So it is that they will be the first fruits... The forsaking of husbands, children, homes and any other interest is represented by the two witnesses. They are signposts as to what the soul must yield in order to be married to God.” Travesser, “The Finished Work.”

<sup>304</sup> In a 2008 post, Michael wrote: “These two women were anointed by the Father Himself for this work as I was. This living parable in the land was unfolded to clearly show what it takes to follow the Father in

Although this marriage parable is presented as a union between the entire LOR Church and God, no men at Strong City have participated in any rituals in which they lie naked, have sex with, or marry Michael in the literal sense. These roles are reserved for the women of Strong City. Though the men of Strong City (a minority) do conceive of themselves as married to Michael, they seem to be discouraged from participating in these literal enactments of the marriage. No explicit explanation is ever given for this on the Strong City website, though Michael does write on the “Vision Pages” that “Sex... was intended for a man and a woman, so it would point to Christ and His church. He did not intend homosexuality, to point to God loving Himself and excluding His church...” While recognizing that Travesser’s sexual preference may have something to do with this gender imbalance, we can also conclude that the heteronormative framework that governs the Strong City reading of marital imagery in texts like the Song of Songs, where Christ is understood as “bridegroom” courting his female beloved, may also render women’s intimate contact with Michael a more potent, and even suitable, enactment of the marriage ceremony than men’s.

One man in the congregation named Allasso, however, does describe his experience of the Consummation event in language that is similar to the language the women have used to explain their attraction to Michael. For example, Moriah recounts her experience of being one of the Seven Virgins or Seven Messengers thus:

I experienced a greater intensity of need. I kept praying that Father would cause me to come to know Michael more fully. The strong desire upon my heart was to go ALL the way with Father. I wanted to receive all He had to give. I asked Him to enlarge me, to break me open, to take me to the depths. My constant felt need was for MORE. My desire was to have Michael's heart—to be connected intimately with him. I asked

Father to show me Who Michael really was. I wanted to see Him and know Him.<sup>305</sup>

Allasso's sentiments in a letter he wrote to Michael that was published on the *Shillum* site seemed to echo quite closely those of Moriah's, even if his actions did not:

I feel drawn out to feel what is on your heart, so that I may bear it with you. I want to bear the consummation WITH you. I want to FEEL it with you. I realized today that what Father is doing is very special, in that He is allowing me to go through this with you, rather than trying to take hold of something that has already occurred. I am given a first hand opportunity to experience this consummation with you. And this is what He is doing for all who will. I want to go through it WITH you, and not simply some event that someone else experiences that I try to "take hold of". Not so I get something from it; it is just simply what I want. I want you in me, and me in you.  
 ...This is my heart, and I testify it is truly my heart. I love you, Michael, how my heart is drawn out for you.  
 Allasso<sup>306</sup>

While, according to the Strong City pages, the men of Strong City never participated in physical rituals with Michael, men like Allasso did therefore participate in the rhetoric of longing and intimacy that characterizes the Strong City pages.

The Strong City rhetoric, then, is as gendered as is the rhetoric of "The End of the World Cult." Women's roles seem to be highly valued in this community because they are roles men cannot fulfill. The rhetoric of both Travesser and the women who are intimate with him most frequently present women's role as that of the nurturer who comforts and yields to her husband. Male and female in this rhetoric are understood not as equals, but as a set of complementary pairs. As Moriah writes in a later post on the "Vision Pages":

I was anointed to show, in vivid detail, the strong heart drawing of the Woman to her Husband. The heart and soul of the Bride was gifted to me. In my person was portrayed the tender encompassing, the soft and gentle nurturing, and the quiet, yielded purpose which characterizes the heavenly Bride. My consummation clearly revealed how it is that a "woman shall compass a man." The Bible in the Syrian language uses a word for "compass" which means "to caress, make love to." This was

<sup>305</sup> Moriah, "The Vision Pages: Page Two, Moriah's Testimony."

<sup>306</sup> Travesser, "The Vision Pages: Page One."

what occurred on the night of the consummation. With my whole being, I encompassed and drew my Husband into me.<sup>307</sup>

Women are presented as inherently different from men in this rhetoric, occupying the somewhat limited, traditional positions of wife and mother. The position of the wife, in particular, is often presented as submissive, though this submission is presented as a positive yielding to God's will.

Despite this, women are also always depicted as powerful speakers in the Strong City rhetoric, a somewhat ambiguous presentation of the role of women at Strong City that is reminiscent of that in Seventh-day Adventism more generally, as discussed in the previous chapter. For example, though Travesser's presentation of Anaiah and Ami, his 'Two Witnesses,' involves these two women giving up everything they had to follow Travesser, his description of their cosmic role contrasts markedly with Ben Anthony's depiction of these two women as unnamed, voiceless victims in "The End of the World Cult." In "The Finished Work," Michael equates Anaiah and Ami with the Two Witnesses mentioned in Revelation 11,<sup>308</sup> who are described as powerful, dangerous speakers. In Revelation, God gives these Two Witnesses authority to prophesy for 1260 days, an authority that includes the ability to pour fire from their mouths to kill their enemies, to turn water into blood, and to spread plagues over the earth. These two witnesses are a "torment to the inhabitants of the earth" (Rev.11:3-13) and their testimony represents the "second woe" (Rev.11:14). In his rhetoric, Travesser commonly links this passage from Revelation, in which the Two Witnesses are described as "two olive tress" and "two lampstands" (Rev.11:4), to others involving oil, olive trees, and lamps in order to represent Anaiah and Ami as powerful vehicles through which the

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<sup>307</sup> Moriah, (aka Security), "The Vision Pages: Page Twelve, The Sacrifice of Love by Security."

<sup>308</sup> Travesser, "The Finished Work."

Truth flows.<sup>309</sup> Travesser consistently presents these women as pivotal characters in the Strong City drama, sometimes arguing that their cosmic role is even more important than his own:

The witnesses of Christ did far more to shed His light into the world than He did. And the two witnesses will be far more effective in sharing their experience of the Most Holy Place than Michael.<sup>310</sup>

Indeed, Ami and Anaiah, who say not one word in Anthony's film, have written hundreds of pages on the Strong City websites, some of which has already been quoted above. The testimony of these two women, however, is as much about who they are and what they do as it is something they say. Anaiah and Ami are described as scriptures made flesh.<sup>311</sup> These women argue that they have actually, physically been in God's bed, and they believe that this has caused them to become living, visible symbols of the Truth

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<sup>309</sup> In the following passage from "The Finished Work," for example, Travesser calls to mind Chapter four of the Book of Zechariah, which describes a vision involving a lampstand and two olive trees, and the parable of the Bridesmaids in the gospel of Matthew, in which only the wise virgins took oil with them to the wedding so that they would be ready to light their lamps when the bridegroom called them to come into his bedchamber:

Here, again, are the two trees that stand before the Lord of the whole earth. They pour their oil, their marriage testimony, out upon the lamps who receive this oil... The people are to receive their holy oil from those who stand immediately in the presence of the God of the whole earth. They are present for the marriage of the Lamb. The other lamps take their oil from them, having faith in their marriage and experiencing their testimony. The imagery is clear. Michael and the Father are in the secret marriage chamber and the two angels there with them. Now the two angels pour out their oil to those who are lamps...

<sup>310</sup> Travesser, "The Finished Work."

<sup>311</sup> In "The Finished Work," Michael identifies the idea of 'two witnesses' as a recurring scriptural trope. He argues that the scriptures frequently mention 'two witnesses.' Jesus, he writes, recognized the testimonial importance of the number two, as he 'sent out His disciples two by two.' (Mark 6:7) Travesser also claims that 'It is written: "In the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established."' Furthermore, he says, two witnesses are present in the Most Holy Place in the Sanctuary in Heaven. Only God, the Son, the Two Witnesses, and the Testimony are contained in the Most Holy Place, which Michael equates with the Bridal Chamber. As the bedchamber is the most holy place in marriage, so is God's Most Holy Place the place where he is intimate with his bride: the Church. As Travesser writes, 'The Father, the Son, the two witnesses and the testimony are the only things in there. The two witnesses bear testimony of the relationship between the Father and the Son. They touch their wings over the ark of this testimony. This ark is also called the Ark of the Covenant. It is the Ark of the marriage. It is the testimony of the marriage of the Lamb.' The cosmic role these two angels play in the Sanctuary of the heavenly bedchamber, as witnesses to and bearers of the covenantal marriage between God and his people, is reflected in the symbolic function of Michael's two witnesses on earth.

about being married to God. As such, even their most random, mundane acts at Strong City often come to be loaded with meaning. In 2001, for example, in a co-authored post, Anaiah and Ami related an incident in which one of them hugged Michael so tightly that one of his ribs broke. The Two Witnesses describe this event as a sign from God, the meaning of which was only revealed to them over the course of a couple of days. Finally, they conclude that the event related to the biblical story of Adam and Eve, and the Christian idea that Christ is a second Adam that redeems humanity just as the first Adam condemned us:

In the beginning, the first Adam's rib was taken out by God, so He could form Adam's wife. This symbolized that she had been taken from him, and made from him, and was a very part of him, though she was not in him. What the Father brought to me was, now at the end of all things, the rib of the last Adam - the Lord from Heaven - and the bride of Revelation 12 that has been created from it, is really, truly, IN HIM, not outside of Him. The Father ordained that Messiah's rib be broken to show us where the bride of His Son really is, as she is being broken - - SHE IS IN HIM. Eve was taken from Adam, and now she is being put back into Him. As the Father broke His Son in Safford, emptying Him out completely and permanently, conforming Him completely to the image of His Father, so the bride is IN Messiah, as she is being broken and conformed to the image of the Son.<sup>312</sup>

The women of this community, therefore, describe their experiences as actors in the living parable of Strong City as profoundly intimate and transformative. Eleana (aka Healed), the young woman involved in Travesser's court case and featured in Ben Anthony's film, describes lying naked with Michael as a healing experience:

When Michael held me skin to skin with Him, I felt His heart for me in a deeper way than ever before. I saw Him as my Husband, REALLY, not pretend. I don't mean an earthy husband. I mean the Son of God, Messiah. It was very sweet. I saw His acceptance of me, and His love for me. I have always thought in my past that I was not accepted or loved, and when I laid skin to skin with Michael I saw His acceptance of me. I saw that He wanted me and that He cared about me. I saw the Son of God face-to-face, and I melted in His embrace... it healed me of my past. When I was little, I had been molested by a man. This had affected my view of men, and my view of Father, and I had only been

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<sup>312</sup> The Two Witnesses, "Messiah's Rib," Strong City, accessed June 14, 2008, [web.archive.org/web/20011222171835/michael.strongcity.com/Michael/rib.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20011222171835/michael.strongcity.com/Michael/rib.html).

able to see a distorted picture of Father because of what I had experienced. Now, Father was giving me to lay skin to skin with a Man, the Son of Man, and He did not molest me, and it was my healing of my past and my personal earth view. Father gave me to lie skin to skin with His Son so He could give me His view of me. Instead of using me, He honors, loves, and accepts me for who I am. He sees no spot in me, and He finds no fault with me.<sup>313</sup>

Eleana describes her experiences with Michael as so life-changing that they led her to find a new name for herself: Healed. Women at Strong City frequently changed their names after similar experiences. Danielle, featured in Anthony's film, also describes changes to her physical appearance occurring after she lay naked with Michael:

After I laid naked with Michael, many things changed for me. I felt like I had been transported into a new world. I felt a peace and a sweetness within me and a confidence that isn't natural for me to feel. My face also showed the definite change which had occurred within my heart. My face looked more at rest and not so troubled like it had previously.<sup>314</sup>

The personal transformations experienced by the women of Strong City are frequently presented as positively transforming their social relationships as well. Esther, for example, describes an instance in which both she and Danielle got naked with Michael at the same time:

Danielle and I had been very separate from each other in the past. Walls had been between us and our relationship had been uncomfortable. Since the calling of the Seven the walls had been being brought down and now Father was connecting us in a very close and intimate way. Michael was the connection between us as we lay there on either side of Him. The Son was the thing that was bringing us together.<sup>315</sup>

Personal healing also spread to families and friends. Esther further testifies that lying naked with Michael enabled her to spiritually transform her mother by putting her hand

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<sup>313</sup> Healed (aka Eleana), "The Vision Pages: Page Eight, Eleana's Testimony."

<sup>314</sup> Danielle, "The Vision Pages: Page Five, Danielle's Testimony."

<sup>315</sup> Esther, "The Vision Pages: Page Four, Esther's Testimony."

over her heart.<sup>316</sup> Moriah, who we have already met, describes a similar experience with her sister Tema:

I could feel what was in me going into her. I naturally would have felt a shrinking in my heart from crying in front of her, but Father had made me vulnerable, and it was affecting every area of my life. Because I had been vulnerable with Michael and received healing, I was able to let myself enter into Tema's pain, and bring healing to her. It was a precious experience.<sup>317</sup>

These personal and social transformations are always connected in the Strong City rhetoric to God's larger plan, however, and even the most intimate moments are filled with cosmic significance. Personal, social and cosmic meaning became inseparable as they intersected in these feeling bodies. In the "Vision Pages," the girls frequently made this connection between the personal, social, and universal, as did Danielle in the following passage, in which she interpreted a message she heard God speak to her:

You, Danielle, are the symbol of this virgin church being made into union with her heavenly Husband. *Your Consummation is this whole land's Consummation, and your family's Consummation, too.* You are the symbol of the great things that I have done and am still doing.

~Father~

Father telling me that I was a symbol of the land, really connected to my heart in a special way. For a long time, I had felt that I was a symbol of the Church. I was born in the year 1987, and that is the same year our church began. It has meant a lot to my heart and now it was taking on a deeper reality for me.<sup>318</sup>

Never absent from the "Vision Pages" testimonies of personal transformation and healing is the powerful eschatological significance of these intimate experiences with Michael, and the excitement and hope for what is soon to come to fruition as a result of these unions. After describing her personal healing, as quoted above, Eleana continues:

The consummation of Judgment is the land's healing of all their corrupt earth views. It is Michael the Son of God, not 64 year old Wayne Bent, entering the Seven Messengers and filing them with His judgment, His fury, His wrath, transforming them into Him so they can pour out His fury upon the earth. It is not about a 64 year old man

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Moriah, "The Vision Pages: Page Two."

<sup>318</sup> Danielle, "The Vision Pages: Page Five."

having sex with seven virgins. It makes sense why this would be the Consummation of Judgment, Michael entering the Seven Messengers before their work, Him putting His fury into them, so they can pour it out. It is about the Son of God entering the Seven and becoming them. It seems the Seven can't pour out the plagues until He does. It makes so much sense. It is a marriage in judgment. It is the consummation with the Seven Angels who pour out the seven last plagues. The consummation and marriage in judgment, it is a marriage, and what happens in a marriage?<sup>319</sup>

While it is ultimately a healing experience, participating in the Strong City parable is not presented as easy. Ami, one of the Two Witnesses, describes her decision to consummate the Marriage of the Lamb with Michael as both a blessing and a sacrifice. After she asked Travesser to make love to her, she writes that he made sure she knew what she was getting into:

"Do you realize what it would mean if I were to take you up there to my bed?" I didn't.  
 He went on to describe what would happen if he made love to me. He said the church would hate me, my children would hate me, and all would be lost. He said these things to help me to count the cost of being true to myself. The very worst picture was painted for me that could be painted. Then he said, "Now let me ask you a question. Knowing these things, would you still be with me in my bed?"...  
 "If you knew the church would hate you and your children would hate you and all would be lost, would you still be with me in my green bed if I asked you to?"  
 "If **You** asked me, yes."  
 Faithful never asked.  
 I felt driven to follow what I had to follow, and do what I was being compelled to do, even at the cost of everything I loved. I know now that I was being brought face to face with what ultimately everyone must face who will be married to the Son. The early Christians, in order to save themselves, had to throw a little incense to the goddess Diana. All I had to do to save myself was to throw a little incense to myself and lie. The early Christians lost their lives for being true, and so did I.<sup>320</sup>

Esther echoes Ami's sentiments in the "Vision Pages." She writes:

The stripping away of the earth and the overthrowing of our lives was for the purpose of creating a need, an open wound, into which He could pour the oil of His Messiah.<sup>321</sup>

<sup>319</sup> Healed (aka Eleana), "The Vision Pages: Page Eight."

<sup>320</sup> Travesser, Ami ("Taken"), "The Excruciating Answer," Strong City Archives, accessed June 14, 2008, [web.archive.org/web/20011222164130/michael.strongcity.com/michael/surprise.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20011222164130/michael.strongcity.com/michael/surprise.html).

<sup>321</sup> Esther, "The Vision Pages: Page Four."

In this rhetoric, doubt and hardship are therefore constructed as a trial that believers must overcome before they can be saved and healed. The difficulties that believers face are hence presented as a test of faith that separates the uncommitted and self-interested from the true Saints.

According to the Strong City rhetoric, God has set up a test so that, by judging his work, people may judge themselves; only those who see the Truth about Strong City, that it is God's work, will be saved. The message is revealed in the most unattractive guise possible, as adultery and sin, so that only a select few, the Saints who are truly open to the message, will recognize it for what it is. Strong City is set up as a scandal that, when revealed to the world, causes outrage and indignation in those who have the 'earth view,' allowing them to be clearly identified and differentiated from those with 'heaven's view.' The people of Strong City often refer to themselves as 'scandalon', or stumbling blocks,<sup>322</sup> comparable to Christ whose controversial behavior and undignified death served to separate the liars from the faithful flock.<sup>323</sup> There is therefore no room for neutrality in the Strong City rhetoric, only those who are on God's side and those who are not. Since persecution and rejection are prophesied, these rhetors find no need to engage opposing views. Criticism or opposition is for the most part interpreted in this rhetoric as a lie or trap set by Satan.

**“The Woman is in Charge”: the power of human beings to move the hand of God in the Strong City rhetoric.**

<sup>322</sup> For example, Travesser writes: “We have now been taken through a wedding which to the professed Christians is a stumblingblock, and to the non-Christians foolishness.” Travesser, “The Finished Work.”

<sup>323</sup> Ellen White was actually quite critical of this type of rhetoric and less willing to invite persecution and opposition. In an 1874 letter cited in Butler, “Prophecy, Gender and Culture,” she wrote that certain of her colleagues who thought “religion consisted of great excitement and noise... would irritate unbelievers [and] arouse hatred against themselves and the doctrines they taught. Then they would rejoice that they suffered persecution” and this left “a fearful stain... upon the cause of God which would cleave to the name Adventist like leprosy.” Butler, “Prophecy, Gender and Culture,” 22.

Strong City presents itself to the world, therefore, as a living parable whose correct interpretation is a matter of life or death. The rhetoric on the Strong City webpages is an explanation of what God's living symbols mean that guides the faithful through a difficult test of their ability to perceive the Truth. According to this argument, arriving at the correct interpretation of the Strong City parable transforms individuals, social relationships, and the entire cosmos. The rhetoric of the Strong City pages is most comprehensible, then, when understood as rhetoric designed not to persuade everyone, but to test the discernment of its audience in order to find out who will allow themselves to be transformed by it and who won't. As is the tendency of apocalyptic rhetoric, the interpretation of signs and symbols in Strong City is as important as their revelation. The women of Strong City play an important part in this hermeneutic work, demonstrating that, like Ellen White, they are not mere passive vehicles for God's (or Travesser's) work but active agents in the construction not only of their own religious identity but of the religious worldview of the community to which they belong.

According to the rhetoric of Strong City, the ability to correctly interpret the living parable being acted out by their community is what separates 'heaven's view' from the 'earth view' and determines what counts as 'of the spirit' as opposed to 'of the flesh.' How people judge God's living symbols determines their own judgment before God; the quality of their discernment determines whether they are on God's side or Satan's, because their own pre-occupations are reflected back at them from the mirror these symbols hold up. Our true motivations are made plain, these rhetors argue, in how we interpret things. On the "Vision Pages," for example, Esther offers this interpretation of

the Consummation of Judgment, in which Michael had sex with some of the younger women in the congregation:

As I went to bed and started praying about these things, I prayed, '...that the people Look and Live.' After I prayed it I was struck with the power of it. The Consummation is the serpent upon the pole that each person must look upon. The very emblem that they have perverted is now the symbol that is placed before them to look upon and live. The thing that has seemed their means of death is now their only means of life. They must look it square in the face, must open their hearts entirely to it in order to live. 'Look and Live.' The alternative is shield your eyes, look away and die."<sup>324</sup>

According to Esther, the correct interpretation of Michael's various consummations with his female followers is a matter of life and death.

The marriage of the Church (the woman) to God (Michael) is also inseparable from the eschatology of this group. Michael's apocalyptic prophecy relies on the vision of the Angel Gabriel in chapter 9 of the book of Daniel, in which the Angel tells Daniel that "Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place" (Dan. 9:24). Using the Jewish idea of Jubilee cycles, Michael argues that the seventy weeks referred to in this passage are actually "weeks of years," periods of 7 years that then add up to 490 years. This is the amount of time, he claims, that God has given to humanity to prepare for the final judgment at the end of time. This final 490 years of history, Michael argues, begins at the moment Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the Church at Wittenburg and began the Protestant Reformation. Since the end of the 21-day period of the Consummation of the Marriage of the Lamb was completed "exactly 483 years to the day after the beginning of the Reformation," this event marked the entrance of the world

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<sup>324</sup> Esther, "The Vision Pages: Page Four."

into the final “week of years” of history, which, as Ben Anthony accurately reports in his film, *Travesser* set to be completed on October 31, 2007.

However, this 2007 date is only one important date among many for Strong City. This group has been developing a coherent and complex prophetic rhetoric about Marriage and Judgment for over a decade, and along the way a number of important dates have come and gone. For example, on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2000, the Covenant of The Marriage of the Lamb, in which the residents of Strong City believe God became engaged to marry the Church, officially began. In October of that year, the marriage itself occurred, and was consummated (Michael had sex with his Two Witnesses). This period ended on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2000, a date which seems to have had a similar importance to the October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2007 date. On this date one period ended and another, in which Michael is said to have begun his work “as the Archangel—the Son of God—that was to bring deliverance to the people of God,” began. On April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2004, another important end date occurred, on which, Michael writes “the sacrifice and oblation ceased, meaning that intercession (the intervention of Christ in limiting the effects to themselves of their evil) ceased for the nations of the earth. They would now be allowed to carry out their plans to subjugate the peoples of the world.” On July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2006, the Shillum site was put on the internet, an event which the people of Strong City described as the beginning of God’s final judgment.

Since they made no specific predictions about it on the Strong City websites, it is difficult to know exactly what the people of Strong City expected to occur on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2007. After the fact, however, none expressed any disappointment about what did occur. On the internet, Michael describe this date in retrospect as the end of the prophecy

(not of the world), in which the Church celebrated its “Liberty,” and as the beginning of the Jubilee Year, or the “last trump.” This at least explains the shouts and trumpet blasts Anthony describes occurring in the compound that night. According to rhetoric on the Strong City pages, in the world this date marked the beginning of the collapse of the international monetary system, which they equated with the drying of the Euphrates in Revelation 16. Most importantly, Travesser argued, this date initiated a year-long Judgment Day which, he argues, was precipitated by Anthony’s movie about the group which “thrust the truth into the public eye.” This Day of Judgment, he writes, meant the end of sin for the members of the Church, who no longer needed to repent because Christ had appeared not on the clouds but “IN” them on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2007.<sup>325</sup>

This post-facto evaluation of the October 31<sup>st</sup> date is consistent with the tendency of all Strong City hermeneutics, not only those associated with particular dates, to develop more fully in retrospect. The arguments made on the Strong City pages are a hermeneutic whose meaning is constructed (or, as the rhetoric suggests, revealed) over time and in response to the things that happen (or, as the rhetoric suggests, in response to God’s acts in the land). This is not something that the residents of Strong City hide; it is an explicit part of the Strong City argument. In their internet posts, the people of Strong City often publicly puzzle over the meaning of God’s “strange acts” until they come up with a reasonable translation that coheres with their worldview and is consistent with the previous acts in the drama. Before his understanding of the Consummation of Judgment became clear, for example, Michael “had considered long and hard why the Father would want me to have intimate sexual relations with seven virgins. It was a mystery to me.”<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Travesser, “The Apocalypse is Come.”

<sup>326</sup> Travesser, “The Finished Work.”

In “The Finished Work,” he wrote “None of these things were known beforehand, for if it were known, it could be planned for and acted out through human reasoning and activity. Instead, these things concerning the marriage were brought to pass first, and then their deep significance revealed after the fact.”<sup>327</sup>

This is not a rigid, deterministic play, therefore, in which actors perform pre-assigned cosmic roles, but a flexible interpretive framework that allows these actors to improvise and reason through their role in the drama as it unfolds. In their 2001 post about breaking one of Travesser’s ribs, the Two Witnesses wrote that the meaning of this event, like all of the others in the Strong City parable, only became gradually apparent after the fact:

That particular incident wasn’t unlike all the events that the Father arranged during the consummation, and the ones leading up to it; where He simply gave each of us what He wanted us to do at the moment, quite apart from our knowing where that particular instruction was going, or what its purpose was, till afterwards. As I look back, it has been the sweetest way the Father could arrange, to keep those of us that were participating, in the absolute assurance that this was all the Father’s doing completely.

Even at the present, what the Father gives each of the witnesses for Michael, and what He gives Michael for us, is a wonder to us, because, even though we are participants in it, we are keen observers of what the Father is giving and bringing about. As for the two witnesses, we personally have to lay hold of these physically occurring events in a literal and a saving way in the depths of our souls, for our own real marriage with the Father. We are watching this drama unfold, and having to lay hold of it, like anyone else.<sup>328</sup>

There is, therefore, significant creative room in this symbolic framework for the women of this community to build their own interpretations of the Strong City parable. The best example of this kind of hermeneutic improvisation is the testimony of Christianna, the woman who was married to Michael’s son, Jeff, and left him to marry Michael. In the “Vision Pages,” Christianna writes that initially, though all of Strong

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<sup>327</sup>Travesser, “The Finished Work.”

<sup>328</sup>The Two Witnesses, “Messiah’s Rib.”

City was to be married to God only, she still felt in her heart as if she were married to her earthly husband Jeff. In a pre-production interview that she and Jeff gave to the BBC for the “End of the World Cult” movie, Jeff made it clear that he was not married to her, but only to God. Christianna writes that his comments surprised her, and she began to feel strongly the contradiction between her theological stance of being married to God only, and the “wifely feelings” she still had for Jeff. Soon after this, Christianna writes that she began to have visions and feelings about being intimate with Michael the way that the Seven Messengers were. In the “Vision Pages,” she describes the conversation she had about this desire with Michael:

When I got to Michael's, I first shared with Him my altar hill experience I had had, and the different things I had been given to pray for while up there. I then told Him I saw something intimate happening with Him and the Seven Angels. Then, I started crying and brought the bomb out and asked Him if He would marry me too, be intimate with me too, and not leave me desolate. He seemed perplexed as to why I would want this, since I had told Him that I loved Jeff. My only response was that I was desperate to be married to God. He told me that this would be harder for Him, to be intimate with me than Eleana (a minor), because of me being married to his son. I think we decided that it all looked pretty bad, but that didn't change my heart's desire.<sup>329</sup>

Christianna writes that her strong desire to be intimate with Michael, which she identified as coming from God, preceded her understanding of the meaning of that intimacy. As the apparent conflict between God’s personal instructions to her and the already established interpretation of the Vision involving the other girls became clear, Christianna reports that she fell into confusion and doubt. The Vision required Seven Messengers, and she was an eighth:

That morning I went for a walk and re-listened to Sabbath's talk. I was suddenly struck with the earth view of what a "foolish thing" I had done by asking Michael to marry and be intimate with me, too. This was all about the Seven Virgins and there was no mention of an eighth person anywhere. I felt so stupid I could hardly function.<sup>330</sup>

<sup>329</sup> Christianna, “The Vision Pages: Page Six, Christianna’s Testimony.”

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

Christianna writes that she lived in conflict for many months, before coming across some scriptures that allowed her to find a place for herself in the prophecy:

Toward the end of August, I found myself curious about the sacrifices that were to be offered during the Feast of Tabernacles, so I did some reading on the feast. It was very interesting, what I found, so I e-mailed it to Michael. Basically it said that all the offerings are made by fire (a fiery experience) and there are **EIGHT** of them all together during the feast.<sup>331</sup>

Combining this scripture with a section of psalm 45, Christianna wrote a letter to Michael in which she offered this interpretation of her role as one of those who were meant to be physically intimate with him. In so doing, Christianna developed a coherent theory about her place in the cosmic drama which she was able to present to Michael and the other residents of Strong City as an argument for the active participation of the entire Church in shaping God's work:

I felt Father's call to go to Michael's. When I got there, someone else was there praying underneath the tree...It came to me that it was one of the Seven, and she was praying with all of her heart to be married to God, too...It came to me that the person under the tree was "moving the arm of God." I realized that if I was going to marry the King's Son, I would have to move God's arm too.<sup>332</sup>

Christianna's testimony is consistent with the tendency of the women of Strong City to see themselves as active participants in the cosmic drama, with privileged access to a hermeneutic model that gives them a certain responsibility to influence God's actions. Though their role is that of living symbols, therefore, the women of Strong City are not presented in these pages as passive vehicles for God's work. Rather, they have a duty to participate in the art of this work, which God won't do unless they are willing. They must 'move God's arm' to do his own will. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this belief is consistent with the tendency of some Adventist thinkers to see God's actions

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

as dependant on his relationship with human beings. As Christianna argues in the “Vision Pages,” God sets the stage for the Strong City drama, but it is up to the actors themselves to respond to God’s will with their own creative vision:

... The picture that I have gotten clearly since this first visit with Michael, is, the church could make this vision look however they wanted... There was not a picture set in concrete by God on how the vision had to look. The vision could have been made into anything the church desired to make it into. That part of the vision wasn't set. The foundation had been set with the Seven, but the rest was left up to the Woman in the Wilderness[the Church]. What would she make it look like? Well, she could only make it look like her heart. If she was busy and had other interests, the vision would fall by the wayside. The whole body wouldn't catch the vision. If her heart was burning only for God, she would find her way into the green bed and be intimate with God. There have been no limits, like "Only Seven can be in love with Michael and no one else can." ... There was not one specific way things had to be, but rather it was, "How will WE make the vision?" That is left to the Woman in the Wilderness, the Bride. She creates the vision of the love affair between Her and God. She sets the mood.<sup>333</sup>

A similar idea is developed in the Strong City rhetoric through the physically enacted symbolism of a romantic love relationship with God. The Strong City rhetors, particularly the women, often argue that they are responsible for arousing God to act. Frequently, the word ‘drawing’ is used on the Strong City pages to refer to the feeling of being compelled by faith to do something. The love of God draws the faithful out of themselves and towards God’s spirit. Often, the language of sexual arousal is used to explain this feeling of being drawn to God, but in the “Vision Pages” the women of Strong City turn this language around, so that it is them who must arouse God and draw him out. As Moriah writes:

The evening of November 9, the Father came down on me with a strong and intense drawing. I had experienced a drawing very often, especially during the previous eleven months, but this time when the Father came down, I felt such a quiet, deep sweetness like never before. Most of the other times, the Father was drawing me to His heart, but this time *I* was drawing *Him*. I was experiencing the Spirit of the Bride wooing her Husband to come to her.... Michael saw this experience as a symbol of how we will leave the earth. It will be this quiet, gentle

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<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

insistence that cannot be denied, which will draw the Father out to fulfill our desire.<sup>334</sup>

Anaiah, quoted several times at length earlier in this chapter, often uses vivid sexual imagery to express a similar idea that God must be aroused by his Bride. The idea of ‘coming’ in the following passage seems to have a primary meaning of ‘appearing’ or ‘arriving’ while it also quite clearly suggests ejaculation during sexual intercourse:

When YOU are fully aroused with the intense desire which feels like you are physically drawing God into yourself, when your whole body is ALIVE with RESPONSIVENESS to His every intimate touch, and all your feelings are intensely on the stretch and focused on this one thing, THAT AROUSES GOD. God is aroused by your arousal. YOUR STRONGLY FELT AROUSAL is what actually begins arousing His desire to come into you. You are delighted with His responsiveness to your arousal. He is exceedingly precious to you. Every part of Him delights you. His LIFE BLOOD rushes in and enlarges the part of Him where His Seed is going to go out of Him, and *come* in you. This intimate part of Him DELIGHTS YOU, this private part of Him that has always been hidden to you until now. You are strongly drawn to encompass it and take it into yourself. You take Him into yourself. A flood of love pours out of your heart for the tender privilege of being this intimate with the Most High, the Faithful One, the God of the whole universe, and the Lover of your body, soul and spirit are becoming stronger, focused, purposed, firmer, fully directed upward. The language of His soul is, "Hold fast 'til I *come*," and the language of your soul is, "I cannot let You go except You bless me (*come* in me)." You crave His *coming* — the *coming* of His Seed into you, new life *coming suddenly* from His most intimate parts and *coming* into you. "I MUST have Your words *come* in my mouth. I MUST have Your thoughts *come* in my mind. I must have your will *come* in my will. I MUST have Your feelings *come* in my feelings. You MUST be the ONLY ONE Who *comes* in me. I MUST have Your deeds *come* in my physical body."

... When the greatest longing of His pure heart reaches its climax of intense desire, He *comes* in you... — and the longing that has been hidden deep within you, from your birth, is brought up to its climax of intense desire, and you *come* with Him! "When Christ, *Who* is our life, appears (comes, openly), then **you also** appear with Him (**come with Him**, openly) in glory. Colossians 3:4.<sup>335</sup>

<sup>334</sup> Moriah (aka Security), "The Vision Pages: Page Twelve, The Sacrifice of Love by Security."

<sup>335</sup> Travesser. Anaiah, "The Vision Pages: Page Eleven."

Anaiah's description of the proper relationship with God as intercourse between lovers suggests that her concept of faith is of an exchange between God and the individual person, whose love of God and faith in his plan draws God's love out.

Faith is commonly presented by the women of Strong City as a two-way street, a relationship that binds, like, of course, a marriage. Christianna refers to this as 'reciprocal faith.'

The Father took me through an experience recently that opened up to me in such a detailed way, exactly how His own love provides the faith with which He draws us — and we draw Him. Webster's 1828 Dictionary says of faith — "to draw towards anything, to conciliate — bring together; To bind, draw or lead, as a cable or rope. As a rope — to draw and thus to bind or make fast." This experience showed me in real life how the Father Himself creates the rope or cord of faith — that reciprocating faith — that is our interconnection with Him.<sup>336</sup>

God's love arouses those with Heaven's View, whose loving response draws God out into the world to do his work through them. As Christianna continues:

All at once I saw clearly as if a veil had been taken away for me. It was the darkness that had been eclipsing the beauty of the way we were designed to interact with the Father — this alternate wooing and response, the growing desire and then the fulfillment, asking for more faith to draw Him with more intensely. Every word from the Father, every song, every promise of His purpose, etc. had increased my strength of desire — for the Father's desire to be brought about. And the stronger my desire, the stronger became my power to prevail WITH God in His purposes. He prevailed by strengthening His desires in me, and I prevailed WITH Him as I laid hold of His words at face value and wooed Him with my trust in them.<sup>337</sup>

This idea is not limited to Christianna, though she is its most explicit exponent. The women of Strong City frequently assert that, though God makes the possibilities, it is they themselves who are responsible for the relationship they ultimately have with God, and for the shape it will take.

In her testimony on the "Vision Pages," for example, Eleana (Healed) writes:

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<sup>336</sup>Christianna, "The Vision Pages: Page Ten, The Beginning of Judgment, Christianna's Testimony," Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_ten/](http://strongcity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_ten/).

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

The last few days I have been desiring Father to give me the conclusion to all that has happened for the past few months, to give me deliverance from myself. I realized that I can choose to step into Father's deliverance for me and stop wondering when it will come. I can step into it no matter how I feel. I saw that I don't have to feel what I feel. I saw that I just make what I feel up, and I feel the way I do because I want to feel that way. It is very simple. I can step into His resolution and stop living in and believing that I am not resolved. I can live in Father's reality, NOW, this very moment, not in the future. And "I DO".<sup>338</sup>

Danielle also writes that during the whole process, she felt an urgent responsibility to help move the arm of God:

If there was anything I could do to move heaven, I wanted to do it. I knew it would purely be an act from the throne of Heaven, but I also knew that it was my place to participate in working with Heaven. It was a two-sided event.<sup>339</sup>

For these women, the response to the call of God is therefore as important, if not more important, than the call itself. As Christianna concludes in the "Vision Pages:" "The woman's in charge. That's how it is with the end of the world. The woman's in charge. Father's not going to do anything without her."

Though they present themselves using the highly gendered symbolism of traditional marriage, in which male and female are not conceived of as equals so much as complements, these women have nonetheless developed a clear, coherent, and thoughtful narrative about their power and responsibility in this somewhat circumscribed role. The possibilities of self-construction for these women are, to a certain extent, limited by conventional ideas of the feminine and of heterosexual marriage, but as we have seen, the rhetoric that they have helped to create also leaves much room for them to establish themselves as authoritative religious figures with the power to move even the hand of God. While these women may not challenge patriarchal norms or participate in the

<sup>338</sup> Healed (aka Eleana), "The Vision Pages: Page Nine, Eleana's Testimony continued," Strong City, accessed June 12, 2008, [stroncity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the\\_vision\\_page\\_nine/](http://stroncity.info/LOR/shillum/vision/the_vision_page_nine/).

<sup>339</sup> Danielle (aka Bernice), "The Vision Pages: Page Fifteen."

feminist project, neither do they conceive of themselves as submissive victims that merely parrot the beliefs of their spiritual husband, Michael Travesser. Rather, they present themselves as powerful cosmic actors, hermeneutic authorities whose acts and testimonies, in their own way, do subvert social norms in order to arouse God and draw him out of his chambers to judge the world.

## CONCLUSION TO PART TWO

In the conclusion to part one of this thesis, I demonstrated the impact of the ‘End of the World Cult’ movie by tracing its reception in other media and its re-iteration in the New Mexico courts in both the trial and conviction of Wayne Bent and the enactment of Conservatorship legislation against Esther by her apostate sister. The Strong City version of this story, while less influential than Anthony’s mass-media presentation, has however also had some impact. Many of the arguments made on the Strong City pages were also re-iterated in the courtroom during Travesser’s trial, most interestingly by Healed, who emphasized in her testimony that the act of lying naked with Travesser was entirely non-sexual in nature, a religious ceremony that she had initiated without any prompting from him. Healed testified that she obeyed only the authority of God, and that while she considered herself to be married to the spirit of God that was present in Michael Travesser, she did not consider herself to be married to the man Wayne Bent. In an official letter to the District Attorney in June of 2008, Healed strongly denied that she was a victim of abuse and asserted her right to practice her religion:

Dear Donald Gallegos:

I was informed that people think I am a victim of some violent crime committed by the above-named defendant, Michael. I am unaware of ANY crime committed by him OR that I am a victim of. I was sent a “Victim Impact Statement,” but I am NOT a victim, and I will not sign them or any paper saying that I am...Michael NEVER molested me or touched me sexually in any way, nor did he use authority to coerce me.

...So why do you hypocrites not believe me? I am nearly seventeen! I know what I am talking about and what has occurred....Your world is what is unsafe. Murders, rapes, molestations, adultery, “minors” getting pregnant out of wed-lock and some of them have their babies killed, which is called an abortion...all these things happen in your world everyday, but have NEVER occurred in Strong City, and you want me in your world? Hello is anyone home? You are absolutely out of your mind and have gone mad to take me out of a place where NONE of those things exist and stick me in your world cult where those things thrive...What happened to freedom of religion? Why can’t I, another human being just like you, be free to do as the God of heaven is leading me?...I would like to make clear to you right now that

I am NOT a victim of Michael, and I will NOT play the roll of a victim whatsoever.

...I am NOT the State's property, and I do not owe them any obligations. I am God's property, the One who made me, and I want to be free to study, believe, and live as I desire. God gave me a conscience, and I have the right to follow where He is leading me...AND I want the State to return to me my journal that they stole from me...<sup>340</sup>

Healed's testimony that she was not abused, and her persistent refusal to be seen as a victim, seemed to have some effect on the jury. The jury rendered a guilty verdict on the 'sexual misconduct' count relating to Healed's sister Ashlee, who testified that she no longer believed that Michael was the Son of God and now was angry at him for manipulating her into the ritual. However, though Healed's experiences with Michael were more intimate than those of her sister (Michael was naked when Healed lay naked with him, but clothed when her sister did), Michael was acquitted on the count relating to Healed. I see this as evidence that the jury listened to these girls' very different stories about their experiences with Travesser, and that the testimony of these young women about who they were and what they believed did matter, even if it didn't carry as much weight as Anthony's 'Cult' rhetoric did. The different verdicts reflected not so much the 'facts' of the case as the different attitudes of these two different girls.

In conclusion, my analysis of the Strong City rhetoric has not been intended to solve the problem of Strong City by coming to a judgment about whether or not what occurred there was abuse. Rather, this analysis has been intended to complicate our view of this community by presenting alternate perspectives. In no way do I wish to justify or disguise the behavior of Michael Travesser, who allowed two minor girls to take off their clothes and lie on his bed and who has had sexual intercourse with numerous women in

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<sup>340</sup> Healed, "Letter to District Attorney Donald Gallegos," Mark Horner, [beyond90seconds.com/healed\\_062508\\_letter001.pdf](http://beyond90seconds.com/healed_062508_letter001.pdf).

his community, many of whom were married to other men. I do not wish, either, to advocate for the Strong City worldview, which is intentionally anti-social in some ways, and does construct all opposition as illegitimate in much the same way as Anthony's rhetoric does. On the other hand, there is much to admire about the women of Strong City and the way in which the worldview of this group challenges the conventional social order while providing alternative ways of being, infusing the mundane with meaning and the chaos of daily life with order and purpose.

From the perspective of my analysis, the Strong City community cannot be evaluated as either entirely 'good' or entirely 'bad.' Neither can the positive aspects of this group be clearly separated from the problems, since they both arise from the same impulses and are constructed from the same discursive resources. My conclusions about this group are therefore in sympathy with the ideas of religion scholar Robert Orsi, who writes:

There has long been a tendency... to divide religions up into good ones, in which the self finds the resources to live a purposeful life in an orderly social world to the making of which the good religion has contributed, and bad ones, which deprive the individual of will and autonomy and self-control either by the imposition of authority or by excessive emotional stimulation. But religious imaginings and practices do not grid quite as neatly on the pragmatic axis... The very same religious idioms do tremendous violence in society and culture and bring pain to individuals and families all the while that they ground and shape the self, structure kinship bonds, serve as sources for alternate imaginings of the social world, and so on.<sup>341</sup>

By acknowledging that the people of Strong City have arrived at their strange, sometimes troubling beliefs in the normal way that people come to believe things, we are beginning to come to terms with some of the real and difficult implications of true religious

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<sup>341</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *Between heaven and earth : the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2005), 171.

difference, which require that we recognize the contingency and power of our own belief-systems as well as that of others.

## CONCLUSION

In part one of this thesis, I offered a rhetorical analysis of the documentary film about Strong City, called “The End of the World Cult.” My analysis demonstrated the way in which this film drew on a broader discourse about ‘Cults’ and ‘brainwashing’ to depict the women of Strong City as victims not responsible for the own actions, words, or even for their own beliefs. The rhetoric of “The End of the World Cult” accomplished this by obscuring the collaborative nature of worldview construction at Strong City, ignoring the particular historical and discursive context of this group by presenting it as identical to all other ‘Cults,’ and by misunderstanding the way that charismatic leadership functions. Furthermore, Anthony’s highly gendered presentation of Strong City used the fact that these people were women to emphasize their supposed helplessness and weakness in the face of Travesser’s overwhelming charisma. As we saw in the conclusion to part one, the presentation of Strong City in this documentary film had an important real-world impact on this marginal religious community, and particularly on the lives of the women who lived at Strong City.

In part two, I offered a rhetorical analysis of the rhetoric of the women of Strong City themselves as a corrective to and complication of Anthony’s depiction. My analysis in this second section demonstrated that the unconventional beliefs and practices of Strong City are deeply rooted in the Christian tradition of apocalyptic discourse, in particular in the unique way that this tradition has been expressed in the Seventh-day Adventist Church out of which Strong City was born. Furthermore, my analysis of the rhetoric of the women of Strong City revealed the active participation of these women in the creation of religious meaning at Strong City, particularly in terms of their own sense of themselves as powerful religious actors, living symbols of God’s marriage to his

people on earth. Though the rhetoric of these women is certainly problematic in a number of respects, in no-way does it show these women to be powerless victims. On the contrary, the rhetoric of the women of Strong City shows these women to be fully conscious of what they are doing, and voluntarily committed to the religious identities they have created for themselves. This rhetoric suggests that these women hold themselves responsible for their actions, words, and beliefs, and that we should hold them responsible for these things also, not despite their religious context but because of it.

In conclusion, my analysis of the rhetoric of Strong City points to the need for an approach to religious difference and disagreement that takes the particularities of individual people, groups, and situations seriously. The worldviews of religious people need to be taken into account and not dismissed or trivialized, as these specifics are of ultimate importance to the people that believe in them. Likewise, the contingency of our own worldview needs to be recognized as well. The rhetorical approach foregrounds the contingent nature of all belief; in light of this approach, we can no longer pretend that there is any neutral perspective or discourse that is not informed by particular values and social context, and that does not reflect relations of power.<sup>342</sup> What is good in one context may not be good in another, and it is important to recognize that our attempts to ‘save’ victims of abuse may do more harm than good if we do not treat those ‘victims’ as responsible, rational individuals. This is not to say that we should use religious difference to excuse instances of abuse, only that we need to be careful that our definition of what constitutes abuse reflects genuine concern for the victim rather than a desire to control others and force them to conform to normative standards. This is indeed easier

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<sup>342</sup> Here, in particular, contemporary rhetorical theory is indebted to the work of Michel Foucault on the relationship between discourse and power.

said than done, but if we are serious about religious freedom then it is clearly a worthwhile effort.

The value of studying marginal religions, in fact, is that it tests the limits of our ‘religious tolerance.’ Confronting real difference (not just superficial difference that can be explained away as concealing some universal human experience) tests our ability to responsibly disagree, and to recognize that respectful disagreement, though difficult and often uncomfortable, is possible. Again, the work of Orsi is instructive here. Orsi argues that the study of beliefs and practices that make us uncomfortable brings us to the limits of our religious tolerance, which can be a productive place to be. If we, as scholars, can manage to resist the urge to artificially resolve difference or turn away from it, we may achieve an active relationship with people who are different that is neither apologetic nor dismissive. As Orsi writes:

The challenge then becomes to set one’s own world, one’s own particular reality, now understood as one world among many possible other worlds, in relation to this other reality and to learn how to view the two in relation to each other, moving back and forth between two alternative ways of organizing and experiencing reality. The point is not to make the other world radically and irrevocably other, but to render one’s own world other to oneself as prelude to a new understanding of the two worlds in relationship to one another.<sup>343</sup>

This relational understanding of difference can be accomplished if we recognize not only the contingency of our own worldview and that of others, but the high worth of that contingency. This is of supreme importance to my argument, and returns us to the work of rhetorical theorist Chaim Perelman. As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Perelman argues that it is precisely because discourse is value-laden that human beings are able to make decisions and act. Values do not obscure reason, they are a fundamental part of human reasoning. The fact that our values and the values of others

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<sup>343</sup> Orsi, 201-202.

are embedded in the particularities of context, therefore, does not mean that these values are inauthentic, as discourse about ‘Cults’ tends to suggest. Rather, our values develop to suit the particular demands of our situation, and our situation is in turn shaped by them. It is because our values and those of others are historically and socially constructed that they are real, and relevant. People who disagree with us, therefore, *really disagree*, and this is something we all need to come to terms with.

**Epilogue: a tale of two sisters.**

In June, 2009, after Travesser had been convicted and incarcerated, Alex Hannaford of *The Sunday Times* wrote a follow-up article on Strong City.<sup>344</sup> In it, he reports visiting the land, much of which he says has been sold off. He describes the existing community as just barely scraping by, as if “there is something missing.”

Interviewing Jeff Bent, Hannaford writes:

When I was here last, Strong City was a thriving community. There’s a sign in their church that reads “Welcome Home Children”, but there are no children any more. The soil is dry and the wind howls through the valley. “We’re not self-sufficient any more,” Jeff tells me. “Life here is over.”

Hannaford’s picture of life at Strong City today is grim, though he does admit that he found the LOR Church to be surviving still, and continuing to support Travesser in his legal battle. Before visiting the compound, Hannaford visited Esther, the woman for whom the Conservatorship was ordered after her half-sister appeared on the *Dr. Phil* show. He found Esther living in a house in Las Lunas, where she moved in order to be closer to the correctional facility where Bent is housed. In an interview, Esther insisted that Travesser was innocent, and that “the core issue is religious freedom.” When

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<sup>344</sup> Hannaford, Alex, “Wayne Bent: The cult of the man they call messiah,” Times Online, [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article6487876.ece?token=null&offset=0&page=1](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article6487876.ece?token=null&offset=0&page=1), last accessed August 15, 2010.

Hannaford asked her if she would have continued her fast until the death if God had told her to, she answered that she would have, but that God had not told her to do that.

Hannaford also interviewed another young woman, Willow, who had also lain naked with Travesser.<sup>345</sup> Both her and her father continue to believe in the Strong City project.

Willow's father John told Hannaford: "I respect God's voice to my daughter and I trust it," and "I've also known Michael for 21 years and I trust him. It was definitely unconventional, but Jesus Christ was very unconventional in every sense."

Hannaford also visited the two sisters involved in Travesser's trial, Ashlee and Lakeisha Sayer (aka Healed). 18-year-old Ashlee he found living with her boyfriend in Oklahoma, working at a branch of Subway sandwiches and trying to complete a high-school diploma. According to her parents, she hardly speaks to her sister anymore. 17-year-old Lakeisha (Healed), who at the time was still prohibited by law to return to Strong City, was found living with and taking care of an older woman with dementia in a nearby farmhouse owned by a cowboy named Slim. Hannaford reports that she remained devoted to Travesser, and still went by her spiritual name, Healed, even though she had been away from Strong City for over a year. When Hannaford asked her if she had ever asked Travesser to have sex with her, she replied that she had asked, but they had never consummated the relationship. "If it was God's will for me, it would have happened," she said, "It wouldn't have mattered what the consequences would have been. But God never opened it up. He never directed Michael or I. He didn't connect us." When Hannaford asked her if she understood why she was taken away from Strong City and why charges were brought against Bent, she responded, "It seems like the public is really

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<sup>345</sup> Willow, also a minor when she lay naked with Travesser, was removed from Strong City in 2008 before Travesser's arrest, while authorities were building their case against the leader. She was returned shortly thereafter, and no charges relating to her could be made to stick.

against us and wants to disrupt our lives,” she continued, “I think they were sticking their noses into something that wasn’t their business. It’s like, can’t you guys go do something else? There’s not a problem. Go investigate a real crime. I’m not being abused, I told you a thousand times.”

Hannaford, however, still did not believe her, and his conclusion to this otherwise balanced article rehearsed the ‘brainwashing’ thesis still so prominent in discourse about marginal religions. He concludes his article thus:

It’s true — the people up at Strong City are physically free to walk out of those metal gates at the bottom of the ranch. Some live nearby and go to the shops when they want. Even Lakeisha [Healed] says she may stay on at Slim’s ranch, caring for the old woman. But mentally, I don’t think any of them are free at all, because they are all utterly in thrall to one man: Wayne Bent, the person they call Messiah.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

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