



# Secrecy and New Religious Movements: Concealment, Surveillance, and Privacy in a New Age of Information

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## Abstract

New religious movements offer important insights into many larger issues in contemporary culture, not least of which are the issues of religious secrecy and privacy in a new age of information. However, the role of secrecy in new religious movements is neither simple nor homogeneous, but rather extremely diverse and often changing in different social, political, and historical contexts. This article outlines five major forms of religious secrecy and examines one key example of each. To conclude, it suggests that the role of secrecy in these new religions raises profound questions about the delicate balance between religious freedom and national security in a new era of government surveillance and religious violence.

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Terror, the Human Form Divine  
And Secrecy, the Human Dress

– William Blake, *A Divine Image* (1983, p. 120)

One reason I find the study of new religious movements<sup>1</sup> (NRM) so compelling and so important is that these groups often present us with extreme examples of much larger issues in contemporary society. They can therefore serve as a powerful lens or even a kind of cultural magnifying glass that helps us focus on broader questions, tensions, and anxieties in modern culture. In my own research, I have found NRMs especially useful for thinking about the questions of religious secrecy and privacy, that is, the questions of why some religions restrict access to bodies of sacred knowledge or activities and in turn how that secrecy is viewed by the surrounding social and political worlds in which they exist.

The issues of religious secrecy and privacy have, of course, become far more acute in the post-9/11 context and the new US-led ‘war on terror’. In the USA, the UK, and elsewhere, law enforcement agencies have deployed far more powerful methods of surveillance in order to monitor groups – particularly religious groups – that might pose a security threat (Barkun 2006).<sup>2</sup> And in turn, many defenders of civil liberties and freedom of religious expression have argued that these new tactics in the war on terror

have seriously eroded basic rights to privacy and freedom of religious expression (Cole & Dempsey 2002; Urban 2007).

To date, the study of secrecy and new religions – and indeed, the study of religious secrecy in general – remains surprisingly under-developed and poorly theorized. As Wouter Hanegraaff (1998) has argued, many new age and NRMs represent the continuation of much older esoteric traditions, refracted, as it were, through the ‘mirror of secular thought’, and transformed through the encounter with modern science, technology, and psychology. And yet, there has been little effort so far to map out the various forms of esotericism and secrecy within contemporary new religions.

With a few exceptions (Luhmann 1989; Johnson 2006; Urban 2006), much of the literature on secrecy in NRMs has tended to focus on the role of concealment as a form of social and political resistance. That is to say, secrecy has often been seen as either: (i) a kind of survival strategy, protecting a new and alternative religious movement from an oppressive social and political order (Tiryakian 1952; Brown 1991; Harding 2000); or (ii) a tactic of religious violence that allows extremist groups to organize clandestine acts of terrorism, such as Aum Shinrikyo’s sarin gas attacks in Tokyo in 1995 or al-Qaida’s attacks in 2001 (Reader 2000; Bromley 2002; Barkun 2006). Yet, while social and political resistance is indeed one key aspect of religious secrecy, it is by no means the most important or most common form that secrecy assumes among contemporary new religions. Indeed, far from a singular or simple phenomenon, secrecy is in fact a complex, shifting and multi-faceted religious strategy that can be deployed for a wide variety of interests in different social and political contexts.

Derived from the Latin *secernere*, secrecy in its simplest meaning is what ‘separates’ or ‘divides’, that is, what distinguishes those who know from those who do not. As Georg Simmel long ago pointed out (1950), secrecy is therefore an inherently social relationship and one that is essentially triadic. That is to say, secrecy is a relationship between (at least) one who possesses a secret, one to whom it is divulged, and one from whom it is concealed. In this sense, secrecy is inherently bound to relations of power. Indeed, if Michel Foucault (1978) is correct that knowledge and power are everywhere closely related, then secrecy, as the careful control of valued information, lies at the crucial intersection of power/knowledge. We might even say that ‘wherever there is power there is secrecy’ (Taussig 1999, p. 57). But this is a kind of power that can be wielded for a wide array of different social, political, and religious purposes – a power that can be used as much to reinforce the status and privilege of the elite as it can to defend the oppressed or resist the dominant order (Johnson 2006).

In this article, I will outline a brief typology of the major forms of secrecy in NRMs since the late nineteenth century and offer one primary example of each. These include: (i) the advertisement of the secret or ‘secretism’, which we see in movements such as the Theosophical Society; (ii) secrecy as an adornment and a source of symbolic capital, which we see in initiatic

fraternities like Scottish Rite Freemasonry; (iii) secrecy as a form of resistance against the dominant social and political order, which we see in movements like Vodou in Haiti and the USA; (iv) secrecy as a tactic of religious violence and terrorism, of the sort we find in extremist movements like al-Qaida; and (v) secrecy as a dialectical process and feedback-loop between the religious movement and law enforcement, as we see in the conflicts between the Church of Scientology and the US government during the 1960s and 1970s.

None of these forms of secrecy, of course, is entirely 'new' and can in fact be found in secret societies and esoteric traditions throughout the history of religions (Bolle 1987; Tefft 1992; Herdt 2003). However, in what follows, I will argue that NRMs have developed and deployed these tactics of secrecy in a variety of innovative new ways in a modern context, responding to the changing conditions of modern society, technology, geo-politics, and consumer capitalism. In some cases, NRMs have become attractive alternatives in the marketplace of spiritual options largely because of their promise of rare, highly valued esoteric knowledge. In other cases, NRMs have resorted to secrecy as a kind of survival strategy largely because, as alternatives to the status quo, they have been persecuted and marginalized by mainstream society. And in still other cases, some NRMs have cultivated secrecy as a form of stealth warfare against a social and political order they see as corrupt, degenerate and ready to be destroyed.

To conclude, I will suggest that these examples of secrecy in new religions raise profound questions about the study of religion in an age of global violence and government surveillance. Above all, what is the appropriate stance of the critically respectful scholar, particularly if we are interested in preserving religious freedom and privacy while at the same time looking seriously at the reality of religious violence and terror?

### *The Advertisement of the Secret: 'Secretism' and the Display of Esoteric Knowledge*

For no one, not even the greatest living Adept, would be permitted or could – even if he would – give out promiscuously to a mocking, unbelieving world that which has been so effectually concealed from it for long aeons and ages.

– H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* (1893, p. 1)

One of the fundamental paradoxes in many esoteric traditions is that secret knowledge is never purely 'secret'. In fact, it is very often advertised, at least in partial and incomplete form, to a public audience and offered with the tantalizing promise of much deeper mysteries to come. For a secret is only worth anything if someone knows one has a secret; but it retains its power only so long as not everyone knows the content of the secret. As Beryl Bellman argues in his study of the Poro secret society in Liberia, secrecy is based on a kind of 'do-not-talk prescription' that is contradicted by the fact that 'secrecy is a sociological form constituted by the very procedures whereby secrets are communicated' (1984, p. 144). More recently, in his study of Brazilian Candomblé, Paul C. Johnson has dubbed this sort of

advertisement of esoteric knowledge 'secretism'. The power of secretism lies precisely in the claim to have access to deep foundational knowledge, while at the same time largely refraining from revealing the content of that knowledge. Secretism is in this sense the 'active milling, polishing and promotion of the reputation of secrets,' accompanied, paradoxically, by the 'promiscuous circulation of a secret's inaccessibility' (2002, p. 3).

Among contemporary NRMs, perhaps the clearest illustration of this sort of advertizing and secretism is the Theosophical Society. Founded in New York in 1875 by the enigmatic Russian mystic, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, and her American cohort, Colonel Henry Olcott, the Theosophical Society was a key part of the broader proliferation of new religions, sects, and alternative spiritualities in late nineteenth-century America. Together with Spiritualism, New Thought, the Mormons, Christian Science, and many others, Theosophy was part of a vast thriving marketplace of religious alternatives. As R. Laurence Moore suggests, religion like most other aspects of culture in nineteenth-century America increasingly assumed the 'shape of a commodity', competing with other cultural goods in the expanding cultural marketplace of a rapidly industrialized and commercialized society. Religious leaders meanwhile, 'looked for ways to appeal to all consumers, using the techniques of advertising and publicity employed by other merchants' (1994, p. 6).

A remarkable mixture of a variety of esoteric traditions drawn from both East and West, Theosophy offered a unique and highly attractive new spiritual alternative amid this growing cultural marketplace. Throughout her vast writings, Blavatsky freely mingled elements of Kabbalah and Hermeticism with a somewhat garbled versions of Hinduism and Buddhism, weaving them all together around the ideal of a single esoteric teaching transmitted throughout the ages by a group of mysterious 'Masters' (Ellwood & Partin 1988, pp. 78–9). Theosophy promised to hold the key and innermost secret that unites all these systems, revealing 'the wisdom-religion esoteric in all ages' that was 'preserved among Initiates of every country; among profound seekers after truth' (Blavatsky 1889, pp. 7–8).

Indeed, one of Blavatsky's most popular works was entitled simply *The Secret Doctrine*, a massive, two-volume tome that purported to be a translation of the secret *Book of Dzryan* composed in Tibet in the 'Senzar' language. Although no linguist has ever recorded a Senzar language or any mention of a *Book of Dzryan*, *The Secret Doctrine* is presented as the most ancient and innermost core of all the world's sacred traditions that has now been revealed to a broader public:

[T]he teachings . . . contained in these volumes do not belong to the Hindu, the Zoroastrian, the Chaldaen or the Egyptian religion, nor to Buddhism, Islam, Judaism or Christianity exclusively. The Secret Doctrine is the essence of all these. Sprung from it in their origins, the various religious schemes are now made to merge back into their original element, out of which every mystery and dogma has grown, developed and materialized (1893, pp. xx–xxi).

The opening lines of *The Secret Doctrine* are the quintessential example of ‘secretism’ or the advertisement of the secret. The author is making certain we know how ancient, profound, and mysterious this text truly is: ‘An archaic Manuscript – a collection of palm leaves made impermeable to water, fire and air, by some specific and unknown process – is before the writer’s eye’ (p. 31). And Blavatsky prefaces this remarkable text by warning that even this translation is only a tiny portion of the vast esoteric knowledge that awaits the committed adept who is willing to delve further in to the secret doctrine. For even this text, ‘though giving out many fundamental tenets from the SECRET DOCTRINE of the EAST, raise[s] but a small corner of the dark veil’ (1893, p. 1). In other words, as deep and amazing as these secret teachings may be, they are only the tip of the iceberg for the true adept who wishes to pursue these mysteries more fully.

Of course, one might rightly ask why this profound esoteric knowledge, kept hidden for so many ages, is now being revealed to a broad public audience. Blavatsky provides the answer in a short text, *The Key to Theosophy*, which tells us that this secret teaching has been revealed today, at least in partial and incomplete form, ‘because the time was found to be ripe, which fact is shown by the determined effort of so many earnest students to reach *the truth*, at whatever cost and wherever it may be concealed. Seeing this, its custodians permitted that some portions at least of that truth should be proclaimed’ (1889, p. 36).

In summary, the Theosophical Society is in many ways the epitome of the strategy of secretism or the advertisement of the secret, offering the promise of profound esoteric knowledge and yet refusing to reveal fully what this secret is exactly about. This strategy was no doubt a large part of Theosophy’s early appeal as a new spiritual alternative amid the growing religious marketplace of the late nineteenth century; but it was also likely a part of the reason for its progressive decline in the twentieth century, as many spiritual seekers seemed to have found that it failed to deliver on its advertised promise of the innermost mysteries of all the world’s religions.

### *The Adornment of Silence: Secrecy, Hierarchy, and Symbolic Capital*

The secret operates as an adorning possession . . . This involves the contradiction that what recedes before the consciousness of others and is hidden from them is emphasized in their consciousness; that one should appear as a noteworthy person through what one conceals.

– Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Secrecy and Secret Societies* (1950, p. 337)

As something that can be advertised, secrecy can also serve as a form of prestige, status, and privilege for the one who knows. In Simmel’s terms, secrecy can act as a kind of ‘adorning possession’; like jewelry, fine clothing, or other adornments, secrecy can enhance and magnify the status of its owner precisely by virtue of what it conceals. Just as the possession of physical adornments tends to ‘lead the eyes of others upon the adorned’, so too,

the possession of secret knowledge 'mixes superiority to others with their envy' (1950, p. 338). Again, this sort of esoteric adornment in itself is nothing particularly new and can be found in most religious traditions; however, the adorning power of secrecy has assumed some fascinating new forms amid the changing social and economic circumstances of the last two centuries.

Arguably, the most elaborate example of this adorning power of secrecy in modern times is the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, which spread first in France in the eighteenth century and then flourished in the USA in the late nineteenth century. America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a remarkable proliferation and a kind of 'general mania' of esoteric brotherhoods, clubs, fraternities, and lodges. Between 1879 and 1925, membership in the lodges rose from 550,000 to over 3 million (Dumenil 1984, p. xii). And the Scottish Rite, with its elaborate hierarchy of 33 degrees and its proliferation of ever-more impressive titles, costumes, jewelry, and regalia, was surely the most heavily 'adorned' of all the Masonic traditions.

As Lynn Dumenil, Mary Ann Clawson, and others have argued, the rapid spread of the Masonic orders in the late nineteenth century was in part a response to rapid social, cultural, and economic changes in America in the decades following the Civil War: 'The period from the 1870s to the 1890s was one of prolonged, intense, bitter class conflict . . . Yet it also witnessed the growth of fraternal orders that attracted a membership of massive proportions' (Clawson, 1984, pp. 6–7). This was a period that saw rapid change on all levels – the growth of an increasingly heterogeneous society, the break-up of small town communities, enormous technological changes, and national corporations that undermined local businesses. Amidst this increasingly pluralistic world, the Masonic lodge offered a model of a harmonious society, free from the increasing chaos of the outside world, where white, native, American males still formed a homogenous and well-governed society. And it offered a source of status, respectability, and prestige for many men who felt deeply threatened by the changes taking place around them: 'The importance of Masonry's commitment to morality and its promise of respectability can be understood in the context of late 19th century Americans' struggle to maintain their traditional ideology in the face of an increasingly disordered world' (Dumenil 1984, p. 88).

Perhaps the most important figure in the development of Freemasonry in the late nineteenth century was Albert Pike (1809–1891) – a man widely revered as the 'Moses' of American Freemasonry (Brown 1997). Pike's interest in esotericism and secret brotherhoods began in the years following the Civil War. A Brigadier General in the Confederate Army, Pike became involved in a humiliating scandal when the Indians serving under his command killed and mutilated the bodies of Union soldiers. Stripped of his wealth and property, Pike turned to the mysteries of ancient religions, the Vedas, Kabbalah, Gnosticism, and the most elaborate forms of Freemasonry. Like many white males in the South after the war, Pike also spoke sympathetically of racist secret societies like the newly formed KKK, and even

suggested the need for a much larger esoteric organization for white males to resist the Negro suffrage movement. As he wrote in a letter to the *Memphis Daily Appeal* in 1868,

The disenfranchised people of the South, robbed of all the guarantees of the Constitution . . . can find no protection for property, liberty or life except in secret association. . . . If it were in our power . . . we would unite every white man in the South, who is opposed to Negro suffrage, into one great Order of Southern Brotherhood, with an organization complete, active, vigorous, in which a few should execute the concentrated will of all, and whose very existence should be concealed from all but its members (Brown 1997, p. 439).

Although Pike was never himself a member of the Klan, he does seem to have sought another sort of 'refuge' and 'secret association' in the most elaborate of Masonic orders, the Scottish Rite. Just 3 years later, in 1871, Pike published his monumental work, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry*, arguably the most important Masonic text of the nineteenth century. From the outset, Pike makes it clear that secrecy is not just part of, but is integral to, the craft of Freemasonry; indeed, secrecy is for Pike an 'adorning' possession, both metaphorically and quite literally: 'Knowledge is the most genuine and real of human treasures; for it is Light and Ignorance darkness. Secrecy is indispensable to a Mason of whatever degree. It is the first . . . lesson taught to the Entered Apprentice' (1871, p. 107); and the greatest commandment of the initiate is 'I will always hail, ever conceal and never reveal' (1871, p. 63). In the 861 pages of his text, Pike leads the initiate through ever-more complex layers of mathematical and geometric symbolism, Kabbalistic references and alchemical imagery, to the 32nd grade of 'Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret'. Like a series of Chinese boxes, the secrets become increasingly mysterious, as lower-level initiates are 'intentionally misled by false interpretations' and the adept discovers ever-deeper levels of esoteric interpretation at each grade (1871, p. 819). And the ultimate secret – the ineffable 'Grant Arcanum', a 'secret whose revelation would overturn Earth and Heaven' – is described as the highest, most precious 'adornment' of all: 'This secret is the Royalty of the Sages, Crown of the Initiate,' which 'makes him master of gold and the light' (1871, p. 101).

Yet, secrecy and esoteric knowledge here are clearly also 'adornments' in the most literal sense. By the late nineteenth century, the Scottish Rite had adopted an astonishing array of costumes, robes, crowns, scepters, and jewelry to signify the various grades of initiation and the corresponding levels of esoteric knowledge (Ames 1996; Urban 2001b). Titles, too, proliferated in ever-increasing levels of grandeur and adornment to accompany the ever-more elaborate medals and costumes of the highest grades: Grand Inspector, Inquisitor Commander, the Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret, and finally the 33rd degree Sovereign Grand Commander.

Secrecy in this sense might be thought of as not just a kind of adornment, but also as a kind of 'symbolic capital', in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of the term

(1981; Urban 2001a). As the careful concealment of information, secrecy serves to transform ordinary knowledge into a kind of scarce resource, a good that is rare and worthy of being sought after. And, like the possession of jewelry, fine clothing, or other adornments, the possession of this scarce resource in turn bestows a kind of symbolic power or 'capital' upon its owner. Like capital in general, moreover, the symbolic capital of esoteric knowledge tends to grow in value, accumulating power and prestige as one rises through the upper degrees of the Scottish Rite, uncovering ever-deeper layers of hidden knowledge. As Kenneth Ames observes, this hierarchical accumulation of secret knowledge was also a kind of social hierarchy, through which the Mason could advance in social status, prestige, and distinction:

Hierarchy was . . . vital to the Masonic system. Initiates with enough time and money could advance through twenty-nine degrees to become thirty-second degree Masons. The fixed, immutable hierarchy of the Masonic orders offered a security and stability missing in the larger society. . . . At least in the Masonic lodge, upward mobility was always possible (1996, p. 23).

In summary, the Masonic orders in general and the more elaborate forms like the Scottish Rite in particular offered a source of status, symbolic capital, and social 'adornment' to many white American males, precisely at a time when that status was increasingly challenged by a rapidly changing social and economic context. The lodge offered a kind of 'spiritual oasis' in an increasingly heterogeneous world, where white, Protestant males could retain – and indeed, enhance and embellish – their traditional status and privilege in an ever-ascending hierarchy of esoteric degrees, secrets, and regalia (Dumenil 1984). As Mark Carnes suggests, 'Preoccupied with issues of a status in a changing society, these ambitious . . . men did not throw the doors of the lodges open to all comers but conceived of the order as a means of validating their own attainments' (1989, pp. 22–3; Urban 2001b). Despite its rhetoric of 'liberty, fraternity, equality', the secret adornments of Freemasonry for the most part helped to reinforce, legitimate, and often enhance the traditional power of white males in the face of rapid social change that did not always favor white males.

### *Hidden Transcripts: Secrecy and Social Resistance*

Silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance.

– Michel Foucault (1978, p. 101)

But secrecy is by no means always a matter of advertisement, adornment, or displaying one's possession of secret knowledge. On the contrary, it is just as often a matter of camouflage, of concealing one's knowledge and practices from those who might threaten and/or be threatened by them. Secrecy is in fact a key strategy of social and political resistance to, dissent from, and critique of the dominant social and political order. As new and alternative



spiritual options, NRMs are very often forced to adopt the tactics of concealment simply as a kind of survival strategy or weapon of the weak.

African diasporic religions like Vodou, Santeria, and Candomblé offer particularly striking examples of this use of secrecy as a form of social and political resistance. As Johnson observes, these African-derived religions do indeed contain elements of elitism and hierarchy, but they also cultivated the tactics of secrecy as a means of preserving cultural and religious identity in the face of domination, oppression, and exploitation in a new, largely white-dominated world: secrecy can thus provide ‘a “hidden transcript,” a buffer and counter against the juggernauts of colonization, slavery, modernity, globalization and the market economy’ (2006, p. 425).

In the Vodou tradition, secrecy was from the outset a necessary sort of survival strategy, from the days of slavery down to the spread of Vodou to the USA. As Karen McCarthy Brown observes in her study of Vodou in Brooklyn,

Secrecy has long been part of the practice of Vodou. A great deal of discretion was surely required during the days of slavery, and since then both the Haitian government and the Catholic church have intermittently opposed Vodou. During several periods of religious repression in Haitian history, sometimes accompanied by violent ‘anti-superstition’ campaigns, Vodou was forced underground (1991, p. 378).

And this practice of secrecy, this ability to maintain ‘two discrete worlds’, would continue as Vodou made its way to the USA and faced new forms of prejudice in urban spaces like New York City.

One of the most striking examples of this use of secrecy was the case of Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant who was mistakenly arrested and then severely beaten by New York City police in August 1997. Shortly after he was released from the hospital, Louima was introduced to Mama Lola, a respected Haitian Vodou priestess and healer living in Brooklyn. Mama Lola set out to change his luck by making *wanga*, or healing charms, and so change the public perception of Louima’s case. However, if secrecy is a key part of Vodou practice in general, it was even more crucial in this particularly sensitive case, which generated a great deal of media attention and public scrutiny. As Mama Lola put it, ‘people take everything in the wrong way. And they just blah, blah, blah. . . . So, in this world, you have to be careful’ (Brown 2003, p. 236). Indeed, the Haitian community was very careful to conceal Louima’s involvement in Vodou and in fact worked hard to present him as a pious, upstanding Christian citizen:

Practically every time Louima was in front of television camera he was accompanied by a Protestant minister said to be his uncle. This was a politically astute move if not an absolutely honest one. For Haitians, conversion to Protestantism automatically entails a total rejection of the Vodou spirits (Brown 2003, p. 237).

Even as Mama Lola was secretly ‘making *wanga*’ to heal Louima and change his fortune, the community was careful to present a more acceptable Christian face to the journalists, the police, and the American public.

In summary, the practice of Vodou in modern New York City, as in many points in Vodou's history, involves the careful maintenance of two distinct realities, a secret religious reality in tune with the spirits, and a public, socially acceptable reality for the dominant culture and legal system.

*The Terror of Secrecy: Rebellion, Revolution, and Terrorism*

O divine art of subtlety and secrecy! Through you we learn to be invisible, through you inaudible; and hence we can hold the enemy's fate in our hands.  
 – Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* [sixth century BCE (2005, VI.9)]

As a hidden transcript, however, secrecy can be deployed not just as a tool of resistance, but also as a violent weapon, in the form of insurgency, revolution, or terrorism. Secrecy is, among other things, the art of masking and camouflage, the assumption of a second skin, which, at least since the time of Sun Tzu, has been recognized as one of the most effective tactics of war. In this sense, as Elias Canetti famously put it, 'Secrecy lies at the very core of power. The act of lying in wait for prey is essentially secret. Hiding . . . and betraying itself by no movement, the lurking creature disappears entirely, covering itself with secrecy as if by a second skin' (1962, p. 290).

As such, secrecy has long been one of the most effective weapons deployed by religious movements who adopt a stance of physical resistance, rebellion, or terrorism against the dominant social and political order. What is particularly new and quite remarkable about modern forms of religious terrorism, however, is that they have often adapted the most sophisticated new forms of technology in order to organize and orchestrate their violence. The al-Qaida terrorist network, for example, not only made effective use of secrecy in order to mount a devastating attack on the most powerful nation on earth using little more than ordinary box-cutters as weapons (Lincoln 2003), it also made extremely effective use of new information technologies in order to plan, finance, and carry out the attack. Indeed, even as it calls for the return to a restored caliphate, al-Qaida is also strikingly modern in its use of email, satellite television, and electronic transfers of funds in order to operate secretly and mobilize its resources. We might even say that extremist networks like al-Qaida are quite 'postmodern' in their highly decentralized structure that are largely disconnected in physical space and yet have a truly global and transnational reach (Lincoln 2003, p. 75). And through the power of new information technologies, they have created a kind of 'virtual *umma*' that circulates through the invisible networks of cyberspace:

Once entrenched in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, al-Qaida managed its international operations with ever increasing sophistication and audacity. Directives were encrypted in a quaint corporate language – terror was 'commercial activity', bin Laden was dubbed 'the contractor' . . . but at the same time made use of the Allied Forces' cryptographic system used in World War Two. Al-Qaida . . . was

from the start a modern virtual organization, or more properly a modern network with a decentralized cell structure (Boal et al. 2005, p. 152; see Napoleoni 2005).

New technologies, in summary, create the possibility for a far more powerful new kind of secrecy. By-passing the surveillance and control of the state, extremist religious groups can form new kinds of imagined communities and disseminate information in a way that is at once global in reach and very difficult to track. Now linked through the Internet, list-serves, chat rooms, and text messaging, they can effectively 'circumvent state censorship across the Middle East' (Boal et al. 2005, p. 153).

Finally, the technological and geo-political changes of the last few decades have also created new possibilities for violence on a much larger scale than previously imagined. In an era when black market weapons traders circle the globe and more or less anyone can manufacture fertilizer bombs or even sarin gas, massive violence is now relatively easy to produce (Juergensmeyer 2001). At the same time, as weapons have become more sophisticated, they have also become much easier to conceal (as suit-case bombs, as plastic explosive belts, etc.), making possible a whole new kind of secret terror. Indeed, 'the ever-increasing *miniaturization*, *portability*, and *invisibility* of explosive and bio-terror materials' has meant that the state has effectively lost its monopoly on the means of violence (Boal et al., 2005, p. 56).

In summary, while the use of religious secrecy in the service of terror is hardly new, it has assumed frightening new and more destructive forms in the new world order – forms made possible by new information technologies and new technologies of violence.

### *The Dialectics of Secrecy: Surveillance, Espionage, and Counter-Espionage*

Do you have a secret you are afraid I'll find out?  
– Church of Scientology 'Security Check' (Wallis 1976, p. 149)

In most cases, however, secrecy is best understood neither as simply a means of reinforcing a given social and political arrangement nor as simply a means of resisting and revolting against it; rather, secrecy is often a far more complex dialectical process or even a kind of feedback-loop at play between the religious community and the larger social-political order. Particularly in the case of NRMs, secrecy tends to generate fear, suspicion, and anxiety from the powers that be, which in turn leads to new methods of surveillance by government agencies, and in turn to new tactics of secrecy and concealment by the religious organization (Tefft 1992; Urban 2006).

Perhaps the most striking example of secrecy as this sort of dialectical process is the Church of Scientology and its relations with the US government between the 1960s and 1980s. Founded by the popular science fiction writer, L. Ron Hubbard, in 1954, the Church of Scientology has become one of the most successful and yet most controversial new religions in the USA. While attracting many high-profile celebrity spokespersons, such

as Tom Cruise, John Travolta, and Kirstie Alley, the movement has also been widely attacked by the media and anti-cult groups and government agencies as a dangerous ‘cult of greed’ (Behar 1991). And a large part of the reason for the controversy surrounding Scientology has been precisely the secrecy that has surrounded the movement from its origins.

With its intense preoccupation with secrecy, Scientology needs to be understood in the broader context of Cold War America and the larger obsession with secrecy, surveillance, and information-control during the 1950s and 1960s (Urban 2006). Hubbard himself presented Scientology as a kind of Cold War religion, as the solution to the threat of nuclear war (1986); and he wrote numerous letters to J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, naming various individuals as Communist sympathizers and even offering his techniques as a means to combat Communism (Wallis 1976; Miller 1987; Urban 2006).

The structure of the movement also became increasingly secretive and organized around hierarchical access to ever-more complex esoteric information. Hubbard’s early movement had focused on the goal of achieving the state of ‘Clear’ – a kind of optimal mental and physical well-being; yet, he eventually added a series of increasingly esoteric levels beyond the Clear state called Operating Thetan (OT), in which one gains deeper knowledge about one’s true spiritual nature (Thetan) and the universe: ‘The belief system of the movement became increasingly esoteric, and a “hierarchy of sanctification” emerged. Members could locate themselves on levels of initiation into the movement’s mysteries’ (Wallis 1976, p. 125). Because of the intense secrecy that surrounds them, little is known about these fifteen higher grades of OT – though a few tantalizing bits have been leaked through various court cases and testimonies of ex-Scientologists [the most infamous is the narrative revealed at OT level III, which tells the story of the intergalactic Emperor Xenu on planet Teegeek (Earth) 75 million years ago, which was viciously ridiculed on an episode of *South Park*]. The levels of OT also became increasingly expensive, many costing tens of thousands of dollars, such that a Scientologist hoping to reach level OT VIII would have to invest several hundred thousands of dollars into the Church of Scientology (Behar 1991; Urban 2006).

In part because of its growing wealth and influence, Scientology came under increasing and often aggressive scrutiny by various branches of the US government in the 1960s and 1970s. Already in 1963, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) began to investigate the Church of Scientology and finally raided its center in Washington, DC, on the grounds that Scientology was making false claims about the benefits of its E-meters. Moving in with unmarked vans, a squad of FDA agents and US marshals confiscated more than 3 ton of materials, books, paper, and E-meters (Miller 1987, p. 247). In 1967, the IRS then began to investigate Scientology, stripping it of its tax exempt status and claiming that it owed several million dollars in unpaid taxes. And by the early 1970s, the FBI had sent secret operatives into virtually every branch of the Church of Scientology, while at the same

time pressuring members into supplying the agency with confidential information (Garrison 1980, pp. 65–6; Melton 2005; Urban 2006).

In response to this increasingly aggressive government surveillance, Scientology began to undertake its own elaborate tactics of counter-espionage and covert operations that almost rivaled those of the FBI. Indeed, in its obsession with secrecy and information-control, Scientology was almost a kind of strange mirror image of the FBI itself. As Ted Gunderson, former head of the FBI's Los Angeles office, put it, 'the church has one of the most effective intelligence agencies in the US, rivaling even that of the FBI' (Behar 1991). Thus, in late 1960s, in order to respond in kind to his political and journalistic enemies, Hubbard introduced a principle known as 'fair game'. Someone who was labeled fair game is an individual who was identified as a threat to the Church of Scientology and could therefore be harassed, threatened, or punished using any and all means possible – indeed, 'tricked, sued or lied to or destroyed' (Hubbard 1966, 1968). At the same time, Hubbard also began using a process known as 'Security Checks' on members of the church itself in order to weed out any potential subversives within the organization. Members were hooked up to Hubbard's electro-psychometer, a device that operates much like a lie detector, and asked a series of sensitive questions about their loyalty to the Church of Scientology and possible connections to Communism (Wallis 1976, p. 149).

Finally, the Church of Scientology undertook efforts to infiltrate government agencies themselves in order to engage in covert operations. The most remarkable of these began in 1975, when the Church of Scientology planted hidden microphones and undercover agents within the offices of the IRS itself in order to obtain and photocopy all of the service's vast files on Scientology (Garrison 1980, p. 100; Melton 2005). In summary, the Church of Scientology and the US government became entangled in an extremely complex, often quite bizarre game of secrecy, surveillance, paranoia, and counter-espionage that is in many ways the epitome of the larger obsession with secrecy in Cold War America.

Even today in the post-Cold War era, however, Scientology's war of information-control and secrecy continues. Not only has it engaged in massive legal battles with numerous journalists, former members, and anti-cult groups (Behar 1991), as well as with government agencies in Germany, Australia, Russia, and elsewhere (Kent 1999); now the Church of Scientology is engaged in a new kind of information war in cyberspace, where countless websites have popped up claiming to reveal the innermost secrets of Scientology. The Church of Scientology has in fact established its own Religious Technology Center, which has waged a massive assault against the many Internet users distributing Scientology materials throughout the globe using the power of digital communications. Since 1993, Scientology has filed at least seven major lawsuits and numerous minor cases against individuals who have spread the Church of Scientology's confidential materials on the Internet (Melton 2005; Urban 2006).

In summary, the dialectic of secrecy and surveillance has taken on yet another surprising form in the digital age. With movements like Scientology, the NRM can become not just the 'surveilled' but often the 'surveiller' in a whole new kind of information warfare and knowledge control.

*Secrecy and the Study of Religion in A New Age of Information: The Science of the Hidden*

As Bachelard neatly put it, 'there is no science but that of the hidden.' The sociologist is better or worse equipped to discover what is hidden depending on . . . the degree of interest he has in uncovering what is censored or repressed in the social world.

– Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (1993, p. 10)

Even from this brief overview, we can see that the role of secrecy in NRMs is neither simple nor singular, but in fact highly varied, complex, and shifting even within a single movement. Lying as it does at the crucial intersection of knowledge and power, secrecy can be used for a remarkable array of different social, political, and religious ends, from advertisement to resistance, from adornment to terrorism. Yet in all its forms, secrecy tends to assume new and particularly acute forms in many NRMs, as they struggle to adapt, survive, and maneuver as alternative spiritual options amid the larger cultural and religious landscape.

To conclude, I would like to suggest that NRMs are especially important for us to reflect upon at this particular historical moment, in the midst of a new international war on terror and growing concerns about religious freedom and privacy.<sup>3</sup> They force us to think critically about the need to protect religious freedoms while at the same time dealing seriously with the reality of religiously inspired violence.

In many ways, the study of NRMs today seems caught between two extremes, which are perhaps best illustrated by the cases of the Branch Davidian disaster at Waco in 1993 and the Aum Shinrikyo gas attacks in Tokyo in 1995. On the one hand, many scholars like Catherine Wessinger, James Tabor, and Eugene Gallagher have made a powerful argument in defense of religious freedom and privacy for NRMs. The US government's botched raid of the Branch Davidian compound and its disastrous handling of the standoff, they argue, is a stark example of what happens when law enforcement agencies fail to understand NRMs as legitimate religions and overstep the limits of the state: 'If the purpose of the First Amendment is to protect religions from the state, rather than the state from religion, there is no constitutional basis for enlisting the power of the state in the campaign against so-called cults' (Tabor & Gallagher 1995, p. 184). Yet, on the other hand, the case of Aum Shinrikyo would seem to present the opposite problem. In the Aum case, the movement was able to manufacture chemical weapons in large part because of the Japanese government's more hands-off policy in dealing with religious movements:

Aum Shinrikyo had free rein . . . to develop weapons of mass destruction due to lack of scrutiny by law enforcement agents. In reaction to government abuses prior to and during World War II, Japanese law enforcement agencies did not typically investigate religious organizations or conduct covert intelligence gathering by undercover work or wiretapping (Wessinger 2000, p. 150; see Metraux 2002).

This difficult question of balancing respect for religious freedom and the need to deal with religious violence has only become more acute in the wake of 9/11. In the USA, for example, the federal government has introduced extremely invasive new policies and methods of surveillance, such as the USA PATRIOT Act and the NSA's secret program of warrantless wiretapping, which has been used to spy on tens of thousands if not millions of US citizens (Urban 2007, pp. 80–7). In many cases, we now know, this surveillance has been directed specifically at religious groups, including not only Muslim organizations but even Christian peace activists (Barkun 2006, Urban 2007, p. 81).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, we seem to have entered a new kind of Cold War era of secrecy and paranoia in the wake of 9/11, with a new kind of 'McCarthy-era philosophy' (Cole & Dempsey 2002, p. 153). As Gilbert Herdt observes,

Just as we thought secrecy was about to disappear from the national consciousness, . . . the events of September 11 2001 shattered the present. . . . [T]he U.S. government deployed new and virtually unprecedented measures of secrecy . . . Secrecy refuses to go away and may become more contested than ever in the life of civil societies (2003, p. xiii).

Thus, the task for the study of new religions today, I would argue, is not simply to provide critical analyses of religious movements, examining the role, implications, and potential dangers of secrecy in these traditions; no less importantly, I think, we also have the task of critically examining government policies and techniques used by law enforcement agencies – above all when those policies begin to trample civil liberties or target religious and political minorities. If we have learned anything from the cases of Scientology or the Branch Davidians, it is that aggressive and invasive assaults on religious movements are often quite counter productive and tend to create an escalating cycle of suspicion, secrecy, paranoia, and violence. And if we have learned anything in the wake of 9/11 and the US-led war on terror, it is that the paranoia generated by religious violence can all too easily be abused in order to justify extreme, reckless, and often illegal measures (such as warrantless spying, pre-emptive war, secret prisons and torture).

But ultimately, regardless of how we respond to these questions, new religions continue to be extremely important magnifying glasses onto larger issues in the study of religion. Indeed, they highlight not simply the role of secrecy and concealment, but perhaps more importantly the role of the critically respectful scholar of religion in a new era of religious violence and government surveillance.

*Short Biography*

Hugh B. Urban is a professor in the Department of Comparative Studies and the Associate Director of the Center for the Study of Religions at Ohio State University. He is primarily interested in the role of secrecy in religion, particularly in relation to questions of knowledge and power. His primary areas of research include South Asian traditions and contemporary NRMs. He is the author of books including: *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religions* (2003), *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (2006), and *The Secrets of the Kingdom: Religion and Concealment in the Bush Administration* (2007).

*Notes*

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am largely following Robert S. Ellwood and Harry B. Partin's characterization of NRMs as groups that have arisen within the last 150 years and offer teachings not directly derived from mainstream interpretations of Jewish or Christian sources (1988, p. 6).

<sup>2</sup> For example, from September 2001 until the end of 2003, the FBI monitored over 100 Islamic sites in the Washington, DC, area for radiation, all the while denying that it was targeting Muslims (Sheridan 2005, p. B01; see Barkun 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Privacy and secrecy have been defined and distinguished in a number of ways. Here, I follow Richard Posner who argues that secrecy and privacy are not fundamentally different but closely related; for Posner, secrecy is one form of privacy, the other being solitude. Whereas solitude involves the individual separating him or herself from others, secrecy is a communicative relationship from which others are excluded (2004, p. 88; see Barkun 2006).

<sup>4</sup> In 2005, NBC News found that the Pentagon had targeted not just Muslim groups but also peace activists, anti-war protesters, and even a Quaker Meeting House in Florida (Urban 2007, p. 81).

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