VOICES IN THE WILDERNESS:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE ENDTIME SURVIVORS

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PREFACE

On the first night of the faith outreach we slept in the park. We found big cardboard boxes in a rubbish bin to use as bedding and happened upon four yoga pillows on a nature strip destined for collection. The four of us walked through the fluorescent lit streets, holding our cardboard and pillows. Leon commented that we should try to keep a low profile and not advertise that we were going to sleep in park. I hoisted up the blanket that was dragging behind me. After searching for the best spot, we settled under some trees which blocked out the city lights and cast dark shadows on the ground. I lay awake listening for the sound of approaching feet and shivering from the cold. In the early hours of morning Leon and I decided to go for a walk. We joked about the high-class business people who would appear at 5am for their morning run. As we headed back to our sleeping place, we saw a man walking his dogs. I awkwardly said to hello to him as we passed, he politely said hello back but with a tone of suspicion. We made sure he could no longer see us as we climbed back into the bushes to our sleeping place. To my relief, the second and third nights we found someone who let us stay at their house in appreciation for painting their lounge room. The second night I slept soundly, but on the third night I was woken up to John yelling "get out now!" in the other room. My heard began pounding and I woke up Tyra. "What is happening?" I asked urgently. "Hmm" she said calmly, thinking for a moment. After a few seconds, as though she had found the answer to a puzzle, she said, "oh John's just sleep talking, he does that." She yelled out, "John, stop sleep-talking!" and he replied with "sleep-talking?!" as if even the mere suggestion were ludicrous. On the final night, we were back on the streets and sought out another park, but this time we found a single roomed, clean and lockable public toilet that could fit all four of us. John and I also found a box of burlap sacks to use as blankets. It felt safe. It had a lock on the door, that we all made sure was secured before going to bed. But, as I would later learn, the vigour by which we all checked the handle had loosened the lock. A dim light lit the room, and on many failed attempts at sleeping, I decided to use it to my advantage and write long in-depth fieldnotes of the previous four days. Suddenly, in the most unexpected dark hour of the morning the door handle turned and the heavy door flung open. There stood a young man who was dressed as though he had spent the night in one of the nearby bars – his eyes were wide, his mouth was gaping and his face was aghast with the shock of finding four people laying in the bathroom before him. We gasped in unison. For a moment, I saw the world from his perspective and I wanted to explain that 'it's not what looks like!' But the moment was too short. His head shook slightly and he released the door

handle. We kept eye-contact until the door closed with a crash. I panicked and looked around to see if anyone had woken up, but everyone lay sleeping peacefully beside me. A few minutes later, John sat up and rubbed his eyes. I told him what happened, hoping he would know what to do. He looked serious for a moment but then he began laughing at my reaction. Then, the young man's voice came from outside, "I just want to make sure you're okay," he said weakly. I was relieved that he wasn't calling the police. I laughed too.

INTRODUCTION

This fieldnote excerpt provides a little insight into the strange and wonderful adventures I had in my time with the Endtime Survivors (ETS). Like most ethnographies, I found myself in bizarre situations, doing things I had never imagined myself doing and coming to understand the world in a way which was initially alien to me – albeit from within a city that I too lived in. This is a part of the unique academic angle that has led me to write this thesis. It will explore a Christian group that has mostly passed unnoticed by the academic world, except for a few sporadically dispersed references. Just as this group passes mostly unnoticed as they move around the city streets, so too have they not been studied with the depth of a thesis such as this. This unique group of Christians, who prioritise the teachings of Jesus above all else and base their radical lifestyle upon this foundation, are the subject of this original work. They live in small communities – mostly inhabiting vehicles such as camper vans. They bin-raid for food and spend their days producing *YouTube* videos and distributing DVDS, books, and comics to encourage others to live as they do. No one in the community works for money. Instead they give their time to volunteer work and spreading their message. When someone joins it is expected that they give up all their possessions, money, assets, as well as their careers, jobs and to some extent, their friends and families. The understanding of the world that this group has developed, how they live, how they relate to each other and their core principles, are all dramatically unique. It is for this reason alone that this is a Christian community is worth studying and understanding. But it has not been a simple process to study them.

The community which is the subject of this thesis is enigmatic and hard to track down (despite Sydney being one of their major areas of operation). When I began this project, I had no idea where it would take me. I first met Leon when he was distributing outside a shopping centre near where I lived. I had ventured out that day to get my vision tested for glasses. He stopped as I was leaving and he gave me *Not for Everyone* – a book on interpreting *Bible* prophecy. Later that day, I had to go back to the shopping centre again. This time I stopped him to ask him more questions. He said that if I gave him my email address that he would contact me and that I could ask more questions if I wanted. For the next few months we exchanged many emails. The community were initially wary of my interest in them. Therefore, my methodology had to be adaptive, flexible and creative. I began this thesis as an examination of the texts that they produced. I planned this because I could not foresee if I

would get permission from them to carry out an extensive fieldwork study. Once I began working closely with the members, my methodology became much more ethnographic as they let it be known that I was trusted. After this point they allowed me wide access to the group and for one week allowed me to accompany several members on a street mission.

In light of the changing scope of this thesis, I will pay careful attention to how I conducted my fieldwork and the challenges I faced when I undertook such an involved, implicating and unpredictable ethnographic project. In presenting my analysis of the ETS, I will also give the reader insight into the events, experiences, emotions, and physical discomforts that led me to my conclusions. My examination of the group through my field work will be given specific attention in Chapter 3, but observations, conversations and experiences will appear throughout. This will allow the reader to experience the ETS not as a two-dimensional entity, but as a lived and very real manifestation of a religion, embodied by a group of complex humans living remarkable, if not remarked upon lives, in my hometown. Of course, my interpretation of the community is not final, it is contingent upon the specific circumstances of how I engaged with them, as well as my own demographic, gendered, and embodied background. They have community bases in several countries – as well as Australia – such as the U.K, South America, Philippines and the U.S. My study of the Australian community may not reflect how other communities operate. But, as the first real academic investigation into this group, this thesis will make a significant start for other academics who may wish to start examining this extraordinary movement.

The aim of this thesis is to do three things:

1) I aim to elucidate the methodological processes, concerns and challenges which entails the study of a NRM, such as the ETS. In chapter 1, I will discuss how conducting an ethnography of a small nomadic community required an adaptive, creative and highly participatory – what I will call 'embodied' – approach to deal with the unpredictable nature of fieldwork. I will argue that this approach yielded an extensive understanding of the community, but that there were a number of compromises that came with long periods of participation. I aim to caution the reader with possible ethical considerations that must be made when adopting an anthropological methodology to the field of religious studies. I will highlight how scholars of NRMs must remain aware of the possible negative impacts their scholarship can have on these groups – who are often powerless to contend with the misinformation that may be promulgated about them. By providing an extensive description of my methodology and how

I constructed it throughout my fieldwork, I hope to provide purchase for future ethnographies that seek to study similar groups.

2) My research occurred within a particular context, whereby the ETS have experienced persecution because they have been labelled a 'cult.' Therefore, I aim to describe where this narrative comes from, discuss the failure of the academy to dispel this mythology, and offer an alternative narrative to understand who the ETS are and what they are doing. Chapter 2 provides a brief history of the JCs/ETS, from their early beginnings in the 1970s to the current developments of the movement. I will tell this narrative through the lens of how they have been represented through media representations, journalistic enquiry and by academics – which have often been negative, paranoid or hysterical. They have been falsely accused of kidnapping and abduction, defamed in the news as dangerous and targeted by online "cult-bustor" crusades against them. For this reason, in 2010 they disappeared from the public scene and several members re-emerged more than half a decade later with a new name and a renewed online focus through the production of *YouTube* videos; marking a new era in this movement's history. In a sense, I wish to clear away the old scholarship which has often fallen short, in order to make way for a new approach, interpretation and analysis. I also aim to explicate on the new developments of the movement and adaptions they have made to deal with the cult mythos which surrounds them.

3) In chapter 3, I wish to present to the reader a comprehensive mapping of the ETS. I have sought to provide extensive descriptions of the most significant parts of their theology, how these ideas interact with the material reality of living out these principles and the most salient practises of the community. The most important part of the ETS' theology is what they describe as 'the cornerstone,' – which is the teachings of Jesus. I will explain why the teachings of Jesus hold a paramount position in their worldview and how it relates to other aspects of their theology. I will delve into several other key concepts such as 'sincerity,' 'the Kingdom of God,' 'the root of all evil,' and 'the mark of the beast.' I will discuss the millennialist discourse that underlies these ideas and the paradoxical ways it manifests in community life. I will also discuss the pragmatic aspects of the ETS' lifestyle, namely 'living by faith,' and 'the forsake all principle.' Finally, I will describe several key practises, namely 'faith outreaches,' 'free work,' 'listening times,' and 'distributing.' Within this I will show the reader through fieldnotes how I came to these interpretations, the experiences I had with the community and explore the ambiguities, nuances and complexities of the ETS' life-world.

In achieving these three goals, what I seek to suggest to the reader is that the ETS are a religious group who are demonstrative of the changing nature of religion in 21st century modernity. The old narratives of cults, charismatic leaders and brainwashing have become obsolete. What has taken their place are new thematics that reflect the changing conditions of the western world. The ETS represent the rise of a new online engagement with religion, whereby with the new mediums (such as *YouTube)* small NRMs are able to dispel their message to a massive audience. The online realm allows the potential of de-centralised organisation. Instead of their cohesion being dependent upon the leadership of a community, it may be placed within the online realm through *YouTube* channels, websites and forums. The internet replaces the charismatic leader – it offers a new way for groups to establish organised forms of authority without fully giving themselves over to a full routinisation of rigid positions of authority and hierarchy.

This nomadism, which is manifest in the online and material dimensions of the ETS, allows them to live in a way which they describe as 'outside the system,' whilst participating with it. Unlike religious groups that seek to leave modernity altogether, they immerse themselves within it because they see it part of their mission to continue to spread their message. They remain within this realm of marginality through their maxim to not work for money. Doing so, means that they are able to step outside of the accepted norms of this society and experiment with a way of living that is not dependent upon a modernist rationality. It is a radical and transgressive way to exist in the world and it is on this point that their antagonists are challenged by the most – and what makes them interesting for religious studies scholars. Their continued existence over the previous 40-years, despite collapsing and reconstituting themselves more than once, attests to the ETS' innovative abilities. Their ideals, pragmatic ways of living and organisation as a community are highly adaptive to the emerging challenges in the 21st century. By examining the ETS, scholars may become more familiar with the changing face of religion.

CHAPTER 1: METHODOLOGY, ETHICS AND OVER-IMPLICATION

Introduction

The ethnographic methodology which was chosen for this project drew me into many unfamiliar situations. I salvaged food from a supermarket rubbish bin in the middle of the night. I stood in the shopping mall of a major beach suburb with a cardboard sign saying, 'Free Work.' I painted a stranger's lounge room. I helped distribute DVDs about the-end-of-the world. Throughout this project I was continually asked by friends and family why I felt the need to participate in the community so whole-heartedly. Why was it necessary to go on the faith outreach? Why did I need to sleep in the park with them? Why couldn't I utilise other methods of research? Why couldn't I just observe? The answer is that the ETS' nomadic way of life makes them unpredictable. Therefore, my methodology had to take upon that same modality to keep pace with them. I had to find a way to fit into the flow of community life so that I could perform a sufficient amount of fieldwork. This chapter will discuss the methodological choices I made throughout my fieldwork with the ETS. I will discuss the embodied approach I took to the research, the problems I encountered and the mitigating tactics I employed to deal with these issues.

The ETS are suspicious of living an overly routinised lifestyle. They believe that doing so takes them away from a receptive state of being that is required to listen to and act according to the will of God. They do not hold regular Church services, attend a specific place of worship, and they do not stage highly formalised ritual events. Instead, they are nomadic, their worship can occur in any time or place and their ritual practises are implicit in their daily lives. They also often make decisions according to dreams and visions they have in listening times, so knowing where they would be when in advance was near-impossible. A common comedically spoken phrase I heard in the community was "our plans are so secret, we don't even know what they are." For these reasons, a fieldwork methodology was initially difficult to establish. Furthermore, this challenge was intensified because I had not been equipped with experience in ethnographic methodologies by the Studies in Religion Department at the University of Sydney. I elected to utilise methodologies from anthropology, however this required me to consider what adaptions needed to be made for a religious group. The first section will discuss the issues of adapting to the fluidity of community life, the need for context-dependent methods and the initial challenges of transplanting ethnographic methodologies to a religious studies context.

The ETS have produced a large corpus of material, yet there is much that they do not enunciate in writing. It is only when one enters their world does the full extent of it become comprehensible. The second part of this chapter will explore the embodied approach I took to my fieldwork. I will examine how the body is an inescapable factor in the field, and suggest further, that the researcher's body is the field. The body will be shown to be both limiting and facilitating in studying a small religious community. It is limiting in that the body can prove to be an obstacle in fieldwork situations. For example, on the faith outreach I had to compete with the strains of sleep deprivation whilst attempting to remain observant of and active in what was occurring. In other cases, when entering a new social world, the body must learn to adapt to a new way of behaving, moving and interacting. Becoming a native within an alien world takes time. Yet, the process of learning can reveal the modes of embodiment that are often invisible and taken for granted by those already in the field. Community life is an embodied experience and the only way to learn about the irreducible subtleties of such a realm was to be immersed within it. Finally, I will explore how this embodied approach leads to the challenge of what I will term 'over-implication.' This refers to an experience where the fieldworker becomes overly implicated within the social world of the community. I will identify self-reflexivity as an important tool in counteracting the issue of over-implication.

In the third part of this chapter, I will discuss the process of building an ethical relationship with the social actors within the field. My research occurred in a context where counter-cult antagonism is still a reality for the community. I explore how navigating this fieldwork required a sensitivity of their spiritual worldview, millennialist concerns and previous negative experiences with outsiders who have written on the group. I had to consider privacy, continually negotiate access to the group and adhere to requests to maintain the anonymity of the members. I had to consider the various performed selves of the community, locate the layers between idealistic and actual performances of daily life and be conscious of my own performance of self. What will become clear is that part of this is finding a mutually coherent social position and identity within the social and spiritual dimension of the community. I will note the issues of identity that occur when engaging with a new social role and immersing oneself into the embodiment of the field. Finally, I will discuss an issue specific to studying a religious group. Specifically, the prejudices that are commonly held towards NRMs which are often described as "cults" by the media. At the beginning of this project, I too possessed my own resignations and concerns. I will discuss how allowing these prejudices to break-down allowed for a deeper and more complex understanding of the community.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed account of how I navigated the field. I have provided additional details about my fieldwork and paid careful attention to justifying my methodological choices. My aim is that this thesis may be a helpful guide for a future student of religious studies who is seeking to perform a similar project. However, no amount of reading can prepare one for fieldwork. It is its very nature that it can only be discovered by placing oneself into the field, forming relationships with the social actors within it and participating in the activities, practises and lifestyle of the field – regardless of how unfamiliar and strange it may initially be.

Creativity, Adaptability and Flexibility in a Methodology

Unpredictability

An ethnographic study of the ETS required a methodology that could keep up with the unpredictable nature of the community. They are nomadic, they don't have a central place of meeting, and they don't have a calendar of regular events. Therefore, my fieldwork was *ad-hoc*, unforeseeable and erratic. It went from exchanging emails, to brief lunch visits, to going on a 5-day faith outreach, to a 3-week period where I lived with the community, and to regular visits every Sunday. At the beginning of my project, I wasn't certain how much time I would spend with the community. They often travel around Australia and for long periods my only contact with them was through email. I had to constantly adjust my methodological trajectory as my relationship with them developed. I also found myself in many unexpected situations which effected how I carried out the practical aspects of my fieldwork (e.g taking fieldnotes). I elected to carry out my research as a participant-observer, but the demands of the field required more emphasis on participation. This yielded a unique set of challenges, however it was by this approach I was able to keep pace with the community.

The Art of Fieldwork

Catrien Notermans and Heleen Kommers emphasise that one needs an adaptive methodology that can deal with the unpredictable nature of fieldwork. A Fieldwork methodology is not simply a toolbox of standard qualitative methods, such as participant observation, informal talk and in-depth interviewing. The fieldworker cannot predict the levels of access they will gain, nor how their relationships with the actors in the field will develop. Often, the project demands a new and unforeseen approach.[1] In disembarking on a fieldwork study, the researcher is thrust into confusing situations that require "personality, idiosyncratic

[1] Notermans and Kommers, "Researching Religion," 609.

adjustment and creativity."[2] They note that one needs to be creative, flexible, competent at communication and social skills, and proficient at anticipating what events will be important to write about later on. Throughout my fieldwork process these adaptive tools became paramount – as did the need to remain observant enough to know when an adaption was required. Rather than being a clearly defined set of methods, they argue that ethnography is based upon the "creation and innovation of context-depended methods."[3] In their words, "the art of fieldwork,"[4] is a creative process. Further, they assert that one's methodology is worth noting for the purchase one ethnography may provide on others.

Adapting Methodologies

To carry out my research, I had to utilise and adapt methodologies from anthropology. This was challenging because there is a lack of instruction on ethnography provided by the Studies in Religion department at the University of Sydney. There are some attempts to get students to get involved in participant-observant modes of enquiry, however it is largely under-emphasised. There is no subject specific to ethnographic or anthropological methodologies offered by the department, and there is very little specialisation in the area by academics. Instead, the department generally adheres to a historical-based approach. This disengagement with anthropological discourse is not an uncommon issue within religious studies. James V. Spickard and J. Shawn Landres observe that there is a dissonance between fields such as studies in religion, sociology and anthropology. They argue that religious studies has "missed the ethnographic criticisms of the intervening years."[5] Debates in the field of anthropology, such as its colonialist roots, epistemological validity and political consequences, have gone largely unheeded.[6] What's more, is that there are many issues in transferring anthropological methods to a religious studies context. There are extra considerations to be made regarding a group's spiritual sensibilities and worldview. Along with cultural, social and political consequences of research, the religious studies ethnographer must also consider spiritual consequences. The implications of transplanting these methodologies will be noted throughout this chapter.

An Embodied Approach to Fieldwork

[2] Notermans and Kommers, 609.
[3] Notermans and Kommers, 609.
[4] Notermans and Kommers, 609.
[5] Landres and Spickard, "Introduction: Whither Ethnography?," 10.
[6] Landres and Spickard, 10.

The Field

'The field,' or the parameters of this project, consists of a community of individuals based in Australia (which will be referred to as 'the community'), a global network of other small bases, and an online realm of *YouTube* channels, forums and websites. This thesis is predominantly based upon my fieldwork with the Australian community.[7] Nevertheless, I have elected to include online and written material produced by ETS members from other bases. By incorporating selected materials from other international bases, I aim to verify the ETS' unified global presence. However, I have not included material produced by all of the existing ETS communities, rather I have selected that which possesses a direct association with the Australian community – specifically the channels and websites that are contributed to by Australian members. I have included material from the *End Time Survivors* (ETS)[8] channel, as well as its corresponding website by the same name,[9] and *A Voice in the Desert* (*AVID*)[10] channel. These two *YouTube* channels were chosen because they have the most subscribers and the *AVID* channel, in particular, is administered predominantly by the Australian community. I have also utilised the old *JesusChristans.com* website, which provided me with chronological and historical information on the group between the 1980s to 2010.[11] Finally, I have utilised a series of fourteen books produced by the JCs. This consists of a corpus of articles on topics such as theology, community practises, leadership, philosophy and ethics, which were written between 1980 and 2003.

The field also refers to an ontological sphere where the researcher and the social actors encounter one another. The field is not a single realm of the 'other' which I enter, collect data and leave again, rather the 'field' is my relationship with the community. Clifford Geertz describes the process of fieldwork as going between an "experience-distant" and "experience-near" perspective. Lingering too long in an experience-distant mode leads to impenetrable jargon, whereas remaining in an experience-near one, is "awash with immediacies" and "entangled within vernacular."[12] He suggests the ethnographer occupy a position somewhere between these two extremes. Kirsten Hastrup evokes a similar image of the between state of the field-researcher. She argues that ethnography is an intersubjective process, where the self

[7] It should be acknowledged there are several other bases around the world who may operate in a very different way to the Australian community. To limit the parameters of the project I chose not to engage with the other communities directly. This limitation means that my understanding of the ETS is shaped by the Australian community, therefore the observations made of this community may not hold true for all.
[8] "End Time Survivors," 2017.
[9] "End Time Survivors," 2017.
[10] "A Voice in the Desert."
[11] "Official Web Page of The Jesus Christians."
[12] Geertz, "'From the Native's Point of View': ON the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," 57.

and other enter into dialogue with one another and "create a world of betweenness."[13] She argues that the fieldworker is not entering an "unmediated world of "others," but the world between ourselves and the others."[14] She states that "the ethnographic dialogue is spoken not from the centre of their world but from the liminal space of the their cultural encounter."[15] Thus, the field not only refers to a pragmatic collection of materials or social networks, but a relational sphere where the fieldworker and the social actor engage with each other.

The Fieldworker

The field may also be conceived as something which is dependent upon the presence of the fieldworker. Hastrup presents a model of the fieldworker as being at the centre of the field. She asserts that "the ethnographer in the field is the locus of a drama which is the source of her anthropological reflection."[16] Landres goes further to argue that that the researcher *is* the field.

> If I am a "watched watcher," part of the representational process, then in certain ways I am part of the stage on which the phenomena I wish to study will play out. Moreover, insofar as I take part in the events that I study, then my own activities ought to come under the anthropological gaze. I am not only the writer, director and producer of my ethnography – I am also an actor in it. In light of the increasing difficulty of determining when the ethnographer is "in the field" and when off site, one can easily argue that the field is wherever the fieldworker happens to be, and from there it is short step to the conclusion that the field is also the anthropologist himself. The field simply cannot exist without the relationship between the ethnographer and the object of study.[17]

The fieldworker-as-the-field means that the fieldworker's body is an inescapable factor, if not a major determinant, in the process of gathering data. For example, on the faith outreach, I encountered the limitations of my body through the sleep deprivation that came after several poorly slept nights. Being physically exhausted affected my ability to take coherent fieldnotes, maintain concentration, and fully participate in the day's activities. The demands made by my body, in this case to sleep, effected how I behaved and how I perceived the world around me.

[13] Hastrup, "Writing Ethnography State of the Art," 118.
[14] Okely, "Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge," 1.
[15] Hastrup, "Writing Ethnography State of the Art," 121.
[16] Hastrup, 117.
[17] Landres, "Being (in) the Field: Defining Ethnography in Southern California and Central Slovakia," 111.

The implicating factor of the fieldworker's body requires ethnography to become "reflexive, gendered, embodied and visual."[18] Sarah Pink explains that ethnography which is 'embodied' means that the fieldworker "learns and knows through her and his whole experienced body."[19] The advantage of this is noted by Paul Stoller, who identifies the body as the main "locus"[20] of learning. He states, "experience is a great teacher; it leads us toward the embodied truths of being."[21] He goes on to argue that embodied learning leads us to "refine our comprehension of the human condition." It gives us access to a realm of knowledge that is inaccessible via an objectivist discourse. Therefore, it is important make note of the fieldworker's embodied experience and the relationships that interplay in the embodied realm. Embodied ethnography also suggests that the field is something which is embodied within the social actors within it. Thus, the embodied field draws together the field as a physical space in which a community meets, the material produced by the ETS, a social network of global communities, the social actors and the fieldworker themselves. The field is a matrix of interrelationships between all these elements.

Finding 'Maximal Grip'

To be a participant-observer requires the fieldworker to adopt a new set of skills that allow them to be a part of the activities of community life. The ETS' social world requires constant participation, interaction and contribution – either in cooking, playing games, helping with chores, or participating in group discussions. There is no room for an idle observer. Judith Okely notes that fieldwork often involves manual labour, responding to new rhythms and patterns, adopting new ways of behaving, and participating in unfamiliar practises. Altogether, it involves having to "change or superimpose new experience upon past embodied knowledge and come to terms with a changing self, embodied in new contexts."[22] Edward Casey describes these ways of being as a "schema" which, "implies not just form or pattern but something much more dynamic: a basic way of doing something, a manner of proceeding, a mode of acting."[23] Casey points out that that the schema can't be learnt through reading a text. He uses the example of learning to swim to assert that it is not a skill that can be acquired solely from consulting a treatise on swimming. He states that, "ultimately, the water I place myself in and the body placed there teach me more than any set of words I read

[18] Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 10.
[19] Pink, 25.
[20] Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*, 13.
[21] Stoller, "Religion and the Truth of Being," 165.
[22] Okely, "Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge," 16.
[23] Casey, "The Ghost of Embodiment: Is the Body a Natural or a Cultural Entity?," 211.

or hear. For they induce the schema by the actual means of which I am to swim."[24] Therefore, to learn the schema of the ETS was to place my body into the field.

This focus on allowing the embodied process of adapting to a new world presented a challenge both in maintaining an observant state of mind and in recording my observations. In my time with the community, I found myself helping with daily chores, painting fences, cooking, and cleaning, playing games, playing musical instruments, and accompanying the community on their morning run. Immersive participation does come at the cost of being able to make extensive and useful fieldnotes. Adopting the schema of a community is all the more intensified by the pressure to not get in the way and cause a disruption to the flow of everyday life. Being able to, or at least attempting to, participate in these activities is necessary for acceptance. Sharing in practise also allows the researcher to spend more time with the community, form deeper relationships through shared experience and most importantly, better understand what it is to live the life of those in the field. Yet, either because of one's inability to learn certain skills or in the physical needs of food and sleep, the body can prove to be an obstacle in adopting these new embodied modes.

Embodied ethnography requires careful attention to the process of adopting new ways of being within the field. The fieldworker's newcomer status allows them to ascertain modes of embodiment that long-term actors in the field are unaware of and take for granted. Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that we are always aiming to interact with the world in the most optimal way or to find a 'maximal grip.' This is "a certain equilibrium between the interior and exterior horizons"[25] Hubert Dreyfus expands on this idea and calls it, "skilful coping" whereby "we refine our skills for coping with things."[26] These skills are not only related to physical activities but can refer to acquiring cultural skills, such as how to behave, what to value, and what actions mean what.[27] The fieldworker must enter a new domain where they are unfamiliar with the logics, morals and customs which regulate that social world. Initially, this may lead to a miscomprehension of it, but the gradual process of acquiring embodied knowledge reveals what there is to be learnt. Dermot Moran states that,

> One of Merleau-Ponty's most useful methods was to examine cases where our normal, assumed relation to the world breaks down. It is failures of the system which reveals most clearly how the system works. These systems, these matrices of habitual

[24] Casey, 211.
[25] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 315–16.
[26] Dreyfus, "The Current Relevance of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodiment," 1.
[27] Dreyfus, 2.

> action through which we approach the world, are not transparent to consciousness and can never be uncovered simply by reflection. We need to study people with malfunctioning systems in order to make manifest the nature of the system, which, when working properly, is invisible.[28]

For example, my lack of experience with praying before every meal made the activity extremely salient. I had to observe the others carefully to learn how to participate in it – being unable to adopt the schema for praying would have been a social malfunction. I noticed that everyone closed their eyes, they bowed their heads, sometimes they would hold hands or sing songs (which I also attempted to learn). For the community, this is an unremarkable activity, but for myself I became keenly aware of the embodied processes associated with this practise. Each new activity I encountered I had to undergo the same process of observation and mimicry, which became a source for insight on the embodied states of being of the community.

Over-Implication

Embodied ethnography leads the fieldworker to become entangled in the community which they study. It became clear that this approach to fieldwork is not a process of detached observation but of deep and inescapable 'over-implication.' Christine Berge states that,

> One can say that the anthropologist is an over-implicated being, a crossroads of contradictory paths, a knot of unformulated desires. Like a… fragile retina, he views the world from a poorly received intimacy. He records speech, gestures, the distribution of elements, and exchanges and contributes to the transformation of values. He sometimes has a heart filled with repentance, a spirit filled with hope, and dirty, tired and trembling hands. Sometimes the anthropologist's body is sickened by this dismemberment… Far from being a history of moral choice, implication is thus already the anthropologist's mode of existence.[29]

Self-reflexivity is a useful tool in remaining aware of how one's presence – cultural background, socialisation, gender, etc. – effects the field. Self-reflexivity is not confined to the writing of ethnography but requires constant awareness.[30] It should be considered whilst writing fieldnotes, in the process of deciding how to frame questions, in behaviour in social settings, in discussion with community members, and in the overall internal processes of

[28] Moran, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty The Phenomenology of Perception," 419.
[29] Berge, "De l'autre Cote Du Miroir. Files of the Author."
[30] Callaway, "Ethnography and Experience: Gender Implications in Fieldwork and Texts," 33.

understanding and interpretation. Remaining self-reflexive is one method to avoid the confusion and entanglement which comes with embodied engagement with the world. It allows the fieldworker to take stock of their place within the field and reflect on how their experience is framing their interpretations and analysis of those within it.

Building an Ethical Relationship

Establishing Contact and Consent

How I came to establish a researcher relationship with the community was a long process which developed over several months. I first met Leon while he was distributing at a train station and for several months I exchanged emails with him. Eventually, I bumped into him again. This time, he invited me to have lunch in his bus. At the same time, it was established that Christopher Hartney, from the Studies of Religion department at the University of Sydney, had interviewed Dave and Cherry McKay in 2010. He kindly set up a meeting with them in his office in June 2017, where we explained the aims of the project and what it involved. They agreed to the project under the conditions that I would not identify any of the members – excluding Dave and Cherry McKay. A week later I had lunch with the community and we discussed the project at length. This allowed for the rest of the community to ask questions and understand what their involvement would be. The faith outreach was discussed as a key period where the majority of my research would take place, but that what I may choose to write on was not limited to this time. Trust and acceptance wasn't instantly given, rather it marked the beginning of a process of negotiation over the access I would have with the community.

Negotiating and Maintaining Trust

The most significant part of negotiating an ethical relationship with the community involved establishing and maintaining trust. Matthew Immergut explains that establishing rapport and maintaining trust is an issue faced by all researchers.[31] He describes this "ongoing trust-building" as something that "becomes stabilised and can slip into the background [but in] moments of group crisis these assumptions of stability and rapport can become quite tenuous, demanding a whole new round of trust-building."[32] There were no significant crisis' during my fieldwork, but the community have experienced significant persecution in the past by those – journalists, "cult-busters," sensationalist news outlets – seeking to construe them as a dangerous cult. There was an air of uncertainty in my initial relationship with them. One

[31] Immergut, "Death at Diamond Mountain," 35.
[32] Immergut, 35.

member admitted that he had been weary of me at the beginning of my fieldwork. It wasn't until I began sending them drafts of what I had written about them did they start to trust I was there for the reasons I said I was. I also encountered instances where after a conversation with a member, they would express regret at telling me something and asked that it be 'off-the-record.' Other instances this was not overtly stated and I had to be receptive to the implicit suggestion that what I was being told may be too sensitive to include.

The way I dealt with these issues was to employ several strategies of accountability. Firstly, I was in constant dialogue with the community throughout the project about what ideas I was considering writing about. This was beneficial because I could troubleshoot my understanding of certain subjects, gain clarity on ambiguous areas and generate deeper discussion on these topics. Secondly, I was actively trying to determine what areas were potentially off-limits, as this was not always explicit. I would either ask if I could mention certain details or observe if their behaviour suggested that they felt uneasy at my presence in certain discussions. Thirdly, I allowed the community to read the thesis before submission and make comments, suggestions and critiques. This may alarm the reader, however it was necessary to put the community at ease. In fact, it was even beneficial to my research. Many of the critiques they offered were insightful and allowed me to gain a better understanding of the complex concepts I was writing on. They also pointed out areas where my understanding of a certain idea was shaped by the specific circumstances I encountered it and different members were able to offer alternative perspectives.

A Place in the Field

An awareness of how social actors see the fieldworker is necessary to navigate the field. Landres asserts that, "no matter whom we say we are, the people we study and live with nonetheless come up with their own impressions and interpretations. Sometimes they share them with us, and often they do not."[33] Yet, fieldworkers also have a degree of agency in establishing what kind of role they will undertake. Spickard states that, "an ethnographer does, however, need a plausible role. Gaining access is a process of negotiating a role that the members of the target community can understand."[34] For a religious community not only must the fieldworker find a place within the social sphere, but it is paramount that they discern how they will fit into the spiritual life of the community. Determining this position aids the researcher in finding ways to relate to the community. For example, a salient identity

[33] Landres and Spickard, "Introduction: Whither Ethnography?," 108.
[34] Spickard, "Chapter 13: Ethnography: Exploring Cultural and Social Scenes," 313.

marker that I was given was that I was an atheist. This had a considerably negative impact, whereby members were initially seemingly self-conscious at talking about God with me. I had to consistently reassure them that I was not uncomfortable with discussions about God and that I was interested in hearing what they had to say. At other instances, this may have worked in my favour, whereby they often took extra care to offer more extensive explanations of spiritual ideas.

Finding one's place in the field requires careful observation of social dynamics, cultural sensibilities and theological discourse. It requires presenting a mode of self that will make the fieldworker appear relatable and acceptable. Spickard asserts that "just "being yourself" is seldom enough."[35] However, my fieldwork experience demonstrated that it is not always possible to present a carefully selected social front. The ETS pride themselves on the fact that their radical lifestyles – which involve living together 24/7 – means they have very close relationships with one another and know one another very well. They appreciate genuineness and dislike any displays of pretention. What's more, as can be noted in the fieldnote at the beginning of this chapter, my fieldwork with the community was intense and it was not always possible to maintain composure. In my case, it was when I was "being myself" and left behind my identity as 'researcher' that I developed better rapport with the community. Allowing the members to get to know me without pretension worked in my favour. I was lucky in that many of the ETS' principles of simple living, their emphasis on community, and their rejection of consumeristic values personally resonated with me. Despite our differences, we could relate to one another through a number of shared values.

Navigating Social Fronts

Part of the challenge of fieldwork is discerning the different representations a group presents to the outside world, to themselves, to other members of the community, and to the researcher studying them. Erving Goffman describes the 'social front' or an individual's performance of self, as a reflection of their "truer self."[36] He states that, "this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be."[37] However, an actor must sometimes employ a "dramatization of works" in situations where the audience may not understand what the performer actually does. They must demonstrate a coherent and simplified front that may not be consistent with the lived reality but conveys the accurate representation of it. The actor

[35] Spickard, 314.
[36] Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 19.
[37] Goffman, 19.

must perform in a way that will "incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society."[38] Goffman is referring to the broader society, but in this case the ETS are exemplifying their own values in their community. Therefore, "the tendency for performers [is] to offer their observers an impression that is idealized in several different ways."[39] The challenge during my fieldwork was locating areas where the 'dramatization' of daily life and practise occurred.

The ETS exist in numerous realms as producers of *YouTube* videos, authors of books, distributors of tracts on the streets, members of a community and the subjects of this thesis. A long period of time in the field allowed me to see the group in a number of different performance modes, including to their families, friends, people to whom they distribute their tracts and each other. I also witnessed them in the quotidian realm, where often little conscious thought is given to representation. However, when discussing what the fieldworker may see in their subject's world, Landre reminds us that, "a great deal of it is aimed directly at us."[40] He states that "they are quite consciously using all the techniques they know to stage a brilliant performance of the identity they wish to claim."[41] This issue will be prevalent in chapter 2, where I will discuss the community's leadership. The question of Dave and Cherry's leadership role was a continually ambiguous area – it was unclear how leadership was structured within the community and how much influence they had. I couldn't accurately discern if what I was told about the leadership was concerted to appear ambiguous or if this was a reflection of the actual situation. On the one hand, they may have presented an ambivalent narrative to uphold an image of being spontaneous, ineffable and without the need for rigid leadership structures. On the other, this may have been a reflection of the true complexity of the leadership situation.

The Fieldworker's Identity Crisis

The fieldworker's identity is never stagnant within the field and the shifts between modes of self – as a researcher, an actor in the field, or an outsider – often come into competition with one another. Meredith Mcguire notes that the confusion caused over these competing modes of self causes "personally painful conflicts." [42] She states that it is an issue experienced by most field-researchers and it is a methodological issue that needs to be given scholarly

[38] Goffman, 35.
[39] Goffman, 35.
[40] Landres, "Being (in) the Field: Defining Ethnography in Southern California and Central Slovakia," 107.
[41] Landres and Spickard, "Introduction: Whither Ethnography?," 107.
[42] Geertz, "As the Other Sees Us: On Reciprocity and Mutual Reflection in the Study of Native American Religions," 201.

attention.[43] Either by conscious or unconscious effort, I took on a new mode of being that allowed me to function within the community. Embodied participation meant that I talked about God, participated in 'listening times,' prayed before meals and joined in *Bible* study. This embodied state was then reified through the relationships with the actors in the field, practise, and shared experience.[44] The more time I spent in this embodied self – the greater division formed between my multiple social identities. Furthermore, a dimension that is unique to an ethnography within a religious studies context is that this modality of identity conflict can occur upon an existential plane. To put it simply, as a nonbeliever it was an unfamiliar experience to be immersed within a world of people who based their lives around their faith in God. With prolonged participation with a community where the existence of God is a given, I began to question my own status as a nonbeliever. I dealt with this challenge by maintaining a self-reflexive mindset, which enabled me to constitute an understanding of my own selfhood within the community and outside of it.

Privacy and Anonymity

All the identities of the members of the community, excluding Dave and Cherry McKay, have been omitted. All my fieldnotes are coded with fake names for the members, biographical details have not been stated, and the location of events have been altered or not described. My fieldnotes will remain a private document and no one other than myself has access to them. The limitation of this means that, for the reader, often the voices of the members will seem indistinct, ghost-like, or what Hastrup describes as the "transparent medium of the 'other' culture."[45] This emerges from the colonial criticism in anthropology where a few anonymous voices are selected to act as representatives of the whole – without the acknowledgement that one voice may not reflect the whole strata of those in that society. Conversely, when informant's voices are relayed, "what they speak are not 'cultural truths'; they are circumstantial responses to the ethnographer's presence and questioning."[46] The context by which I discuss conversations or quotes from members will be made clear in the fieldnote excerpts present in Chapter 3. The reader should remember that, whilst I may not always identify the member, a number of different individual's voices who all come from different backgrounds are being drawn upon. One voice does not necessarily represent the opinions of all members.

[43] McGuire, "New-Old Directions in the Study of Religion: Ethnography, Phenomenology and the Human Body," 201.
[44] Okely, "Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge," 2–3.
[45] Hastrup, "Writing Ethnography State of the Art," 121.
[46] Hastrup, 121.

The Challenges in Taking Fieldnotes

The unpredictable nature of the fieldwork not only affected the trajectory of how long I spent in the field, but it also became an issue in how I took fieldnotes. The different situations I found myself in required a different strategy of recording what was happening. I initially chose to not let them see me take fieldnotes. I only saw them for a few hours at a time, therefore it was easy for me to take copious notes afterwards. When I went on the faith outreach this tactic had to change because I would be with them 24/7 for five days. I wouldn't know where we would be, what we would be doing, if I would have the necessary solitude to write fieldnotes, or if I would have light at the end of the day to see what I was writing. Therefore, my fieldnotes of this period had to be unsystematic and sporadic. More extensive notes had to be written after the outreach where I could be alone for several days and write out everything that had occurred. In the periods where I lived with the community, taking fieldnotes became increasingly sporadic and unstructured. What's more, as I was spending several weeks with them it took longer to complete these extensive fieldnotes. This unstructured note-taking method was necessary because it allowed me to remain a part of the 'drama' going on, but it was also challenging to recall events, conversations and comments.

Taking fieldnotes was also a challenge because some community members were made uncomfortable by the sight of me writing notes. Sometimes if they saw me writing during a conversation, they would ask "are you writing this down?" In other instances, they would express remorse at the end of a conversation because they were concerned it would end up in the thesis. Unsurprisingly, it was apparent that my recording of their private worlds was a source of anxiety. The anxiety it caused some members meant that I decided not to ask if I could use recording devices – I did not want to incite anymore apprehension. In periods where I was deeply immured in their everyday lives, I restrained from writing in sight of them. However, due to the constant engagement staying with the community requires, I did not get much time to write. The downside is that many insightful moments may have gone un-recorded and the memory of them may have become distorted or lost completely. Recalling conversations was particularly difficult. Therefore, many of the quotes in this thesis aren't direct infallible quotes but are approximations of what was said that attempt to capture the core idea of what was being conveyed.

Dealing with 'Cult' Prejudice

The influence of the counter-cult movement means that the JCs/ETS continue to be called a dangerous cult by online antagonists, 'cult-busting' websites and media-outlets. Timothy Miller remarks that much of the hysteria around cults does "seem somewhat muted these days."[47] Yet, the 'cult-wars' of the 1970s/80s has not faded from public memory.[48] Much of my time during this project was spent reassuring my family and friends that I wasn't in any danger by being around the community. This is the context in which my study of the ETS occurred and it is important to acknowledge it as factor which influenced my research on the movement. In the early stages of the project I too had to compete with my own inbuilt prejudices. However, as Miller curtly asserts, "talk to someone, and stereotypes and preconceptions tend to break down."[49] As I came to confront these preconceptions about the group, the more I came to realise that the source of my fears was not the ETS themselves but the influence of the counter-cult movement. I came to appreciate that NRMs are complex and possess both light and dark sides. My experience of the ETS was a positive one as they were co-operative, accepting and eager to aid me in my research. The aim of this thesis is to give the reader an understanding of who the ETS are and why they are significant – it is up to the reader remain mindful of their own prejudices and seek to understand them beyond the fear narratives of the counter-cult movement.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to highlight the ways in which the body is inevitably part of the process of fieldwork. Whilst some ethnographers may choose to downplay how much the engagement through the body influences one's understanding of the field, I have chosen to highlight it. Considering so much of the ETS' beliefs are expressed through every day practise, I had to learn about them in the same way. The majority of my learning came from the quotidian aspects of life. I witnessed how their abstract ideals of living by the teachings of Jesus permeated into the most everyday modes of being. I discovered that many activities, ideas and dispositions are rarely written about in their books and it was only from continual presence did I discover these implicit social patterns. I also realised how the pragmatic demands of their lifestyles also shape their ideas. For example, living in close confines on vehicles necessitates the need for conflict resolution processes, sophisticated instruction on how to live together and ways for power and agency to be distributed to all members. Thus, practise and discourse came to be shown to co-construct the other.

[47] Miller, "Are the Cult Wars Over? If so, Who Won?," 38.
[48] Miller, 40–41.
[49] Miller, 40.

This embodied approach entails an ethical responsibility. As a participant in their social world and being someone who seeks to represent them to a broader context, I had a responsibility to develop an ethical relationship with them. This navigation was required for the duration of the project as I discovered new areas that were a source of sensitivity. My developing relationship with the community meant that in the later stages of the project, they began sharing information with me they had deliberately kept from me to avoid it appearing in the thesis. With a stronger foundation of trust, came more access to other aspects of community life. Paradoxically, with the increase trust in our relationship, the requests for particular issues to be 'off-the-record' increased. The challenges of this project were continually unpredictable. My methodology was by no means a perfect process – few ethnographies are – and often I had to deal with challenges on an *ad-hoc* basis. Walking an equilibrium between the sum of these issues was a consistent concern. Rather than this being a disadvantage, this chapter has demonstrated how this can be an advantage to gaining a deeper understanding of a religious community.

The biggest challenge that I did not foresee was the issue of over-implication. Long periods with the community led to challenges in my sense of identity. In the lead up to the faith outreach my main concern was that in spending so much time with the ETS, in a vulnerable and difficult situation where I knew I would be unable to uphold my researcher's façade. I worried that our relationship would be damaged in situations where they caught me 'being myself.' They did get to know me on a deeper level – as I did with them. However, this produced a rather opposite problem. I felt accepted by the members, we formed a friendship and I discovered we had more similarities in our worldview that I had realised. On the final night of the outreach, I fell out of my researcher identity and found myself wrestling with a strong feeling of belonging and the knowledge that I was an outsider. This internal tension over identity continued throughout the fieldwork. The reality is that, despite an individual stepping into the field and calling themselves a researcher or ethnographer or anthropologist, they are still stepping into a social world as a human. They too are bound into the social dynamics, embodied processes and power structures of a social group.

This asks questions of whether these conflicts are avoidable, if so, how? What impact does that have on the researcher and the community? How does this shape the outcomes of an ethnography? In ethnographic writing there are issues that are seldom solvable. It is the job of the researcher to find a way to navigate around these issues, through self-reflection and awareness, to come to a meaningful, reliable and useful understanding of their research. This

thesis is about the ETS, but it is also about the methodology that I used to navigate my study of them. It is told in an honest way, so that the reader may too walk the inglorious passage that must be traversed to reach unchartered territory.

CHAPTER 2: MONEY BURNING, THE KIDNEY CULT AND YOUTUBE CHARISMA

Introduction

The first notable fact about the ETS is that they have gone through many names during their 40-year history. With each name comes a shift in the group's emphasis, its mode of engagement with the outside world and the narratives used by outsiders (mainly exiters and anti-cult groups) to understand them. This chapter does two things. It provides a brief history of the development of the group as they emerge into their identity as the ETS and it reviews the scant academic, journalistic, and "cult-buster" reactions to the group. I will highlight how, (what I will call) the "cult" narrative, has been constructed by various external sources and how this has influenced media, journalistic, online, and even academic, framings of the group. A large majority of these representations have been either negatively biased, derogatory, or simply inadequate or erroneous. Overall, what unites all sources on the ETS is the fact that they are dated. So far, no source, academic or otherwise, has discussed the developments within the group since 2010.

This thesis is the first serious in-depth study of the history and the current developments of the ETS. This thesis rejects the category of "cult" as well as its associated premise that those who have joined are "brainwashed" and that it is organised through coercive practises by a charismatic leader. Instead, I will examine the ETS as a New Religious Movement (NRM), that is described by the founder, Dave McKay, as a "high demand group." The ETS' history can be divided into three prevailing periods. These categories become helpful in the understanding of the current formation of the ETS. The first period covers the period from the 1980s to the 2000s. This period was a time of charity work, social activism and radical public demonstrations such as money-burning, money throwaways, and social work. What is interesting to note about this time is that the group had not yet been labelled as a 'cult.' Instead, they were seen as a group of radical Christian activists and they experienced considerable positive media attention from the boldness of their demonstrations – as well as the humanitarian work they were doing. In the late 1990s, the community changed their name to the Jesus Christians (JCs) and they adopted a new emphasis of printing and distributing their tracts – thus marking the beginning of a new era.

The second period from 1998 to 2010 was a period when outside commentators began to generate a "cult" mythos about the group. This was promulgated by an interaction between

"cult experts" and disgruntled ex-members. Increased media exposure and several false kidnapping and abduction accusations dogged the group from this period. What intensified the public moral panic around the group was the significant number of members who made altruistic kidney donations to strangers. This brought an attention to the JCs that was most unwanted. They found themselves being confronted with the law once again, in relation to the idea that members were being coerced to donate their kidneys. This attention did not result in criminal action but the opposite. By their actions the JCs made a strong contribution towards the laws being changed (in NSW) so that kidney donations could be made by individuals outside the immediate family of the donee. This issue was documented in *The Guardian* (UK edition) by the well-known journalist and author, Jon Ronson and later by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Australian Story*. Both media events contributed to providing sound explanations for the legitimacy of the donations. Yet, they also fuelled negative feedback from critics of both altruistic organ donation and new religions – as a result, the JCs became derogatorily referred to as 'the Kidney Cult.' The kidney donation issue also prompted the first scholarship of the group. This was carried out by the medical community who sought to understand the phenomena of why so many individuals were choosing to donate an organ to a stranger. This scholarship was sorely inadequate due in most part to the influence of the cult narrative that frames each investigation. I will discuss how this scholarship is also encumbered by the cult narrative and that this failing of the academy had a severe impact on the community.

The period of 1998-2010, brought the movement significant harassment from internet 'cult-busters.' This pressure contributed to the disbanding of the Jesus Christians in 2010. Although the JC name was left behind, pockets of the community around the world continued to practise their lifestyle, distribute the same literature, and continue with their own ministries. A few years later the group reconvened, began producing *YouTube* videos, and subsequently received a new-found public interest in their ideas. This time they were anonymous, disparately organised and engaging with the world through the new medium of online video-production. The third period post-2010, represents an absence of both social activism and media controversy, but with significant online interest. What is worth noting about this current iteration of this group is that it is a clear reaction to their past experiences of persecution, threats of violence, actual violence and general harassment. All of this was brought on by the unshakable condemnation of the JCs as nothing but a cult by online "experts." I argue that the ETS represents a new period and atmosphere of activity, marked

by new modes of engagement online, through *YouTube* videos. This is a highly significant period to note, because the developments currently occurring in the community are a reflection of the developments occurring in NRMs in the 21st century.

My aim is to explore questions of how this new online engagement effects the organisation of the community. Key to understanding these themes will be an extended and informed discussion of the role of charisma – and charismatic authority. To fully examine this theme, this thesis will analyse whether or not Dave and Cherry McKay should be considered a charismatic team. This thesis will also investigate other ways charisma may act as a cohesive force in the group – without necessarily being centred upon a single individual but as a force by itself. To conclude, I will suggest that due to this new online engagement, the model of charismatic authority must be adjusted to take into account the developments of technology in western modernity. Overall, I aim to call into question the entire cult model. This chapter will highlight how the old tropes of charismatic leaders, communes, brainwashing and hapless joiners, are no longer coherent in this modern age.

The First Period: Trust God, Not Money

Early Days

Controversy, court cases, charity projects and public demonstrations were the main themes in the early history of ETS. Their history begins with Dave and Cherry McKay moving from the U.S to Australia in the late 1960s. Throughout the 1970s, they began experimenting with directly living out the teachings of Jesus. In the 1980s they developed a small community[50] and began appearing in the news for their charity works and radical public displays of their doctrine in action. Their consistent appearances in the media was in part facilitated by Dave's background as a journalist. He used this training to bring the awareness of their message of the evils of money-worship, social injustice, and to the promotion of the teachings of Jesus, to a broader audience.[51] Not all projects were aimed at gaining media attention and this period is also marked by numerous humanitarian projects. For example, the McKays were involved in the promotion of permaculture techniques, free work campaigns, providing medical aid in India, teaching English, and in the printing of numerous books.[52] As the group emerged around Dave and Cherry, they went by many names which were often given to them by the media, such as the Rappville Christians, Medowie Volunteers, Sydney Christians, the

[50] Ronson, "Blood Sacrifice."
[51] "Early Days."
[52] "JC History 1981 - 1996."

Australians, Nullarbor Walkers, and the Christians.[53] The group did not focus all its efforts in Australia at this time but branched out into India, the U.K, the U.S, New Zealand and Africa.

Through their public demonstrations the media narrative that emerged around them was one of radicalism and social activism. This attention was in part produced by their many confrontations with the law. Yet, they still received praise for their charity works and their public demonstrations were viewed with interest by many. Some of the stunts by the group included "money burning, money throwaways and free work campaigns," as well as graffiti, done to make people "think beyond the materialistic rat race." [54] In 1983, they "super-glued $1 notes to Martin Place, spelling out "trust God, not money." They were then arrested for "defacing the footpath." After refusing to pay the fines, as they put it, "we threw the money away to the general public and went to jail for not paying the fine."[55]

Figure 1: the JCs doing street performances. (Jesus Christians, *More Than Just a Band*.)

Other stunts were used to emphasise their messages, including street theatre. A notable example is when the group dressed in hessian robes, grew their beards long, and chained themselves together at the ankles. They held large scrolls painted with "fire and brimstone" excerpts from Bible and stood in shopping centres in silence.[56] In 1985, several of the youngest members walked 1000km across the Nullarbor Desert without any supplies to prove that God would provide for them. It was one of their biggest and most well-received media events. This potentially life-threatening stunt earned them the name 'The Nullarbor Walkers.'[57]

[53] McKay, Dave, "A Change of Name."
[54] "Early Days."
[55] "JC History 1981 - 1996."
[56] McKay, *Excommunicated*.
[57] "Early Days."

Figure 2: 'The Nullarbor Walkers' (Jesus Christians.)

Humanitarian Work

In India, a series of large-scale charity projects won them much praise, as volunteers from outside the group, other charities and journalists travelled to India to document and participate in the work being done. In the 1980s, several members began travelling to India to teach English and perform humanitarian work, such as cleaning drains in poor areas. In 1986, they were chased out of the village they were based in under the threat of being stoned after a young Hindu girl joined the group.[58] This event foreshadows a theme that would arise several times in the 2000s – of violent opposition by new members' parents who saw the community as a corruptive influence on young minds. At the time, this event remained unremarked by the media and instead, the community became known for their humanitarian work. Their biggest project began in Madras in 1992. Members began cleaning public toilets and performing protests to bring attention to the poor living conditions of the slums. One stunt which attracted nation-wide media interest involved several members taking turns standing waist deep in an open sewer for a week. While they were there they also cleaned a part of the sewer, laid it with a concrete foundation, and built a playground, library, volleyball court and free clinic. They spent several years in Madras doing social work and were praised for what they did by the media. Yet, they also encountered dangerous opposition from the "slum lord" of the area and who, according to the JCs' website, was embarrassed by their work to improve the area.

[58] McKay, "The Great Escape," 40.

Figure 3: Jesus Christians and volunteers cleaning the sewer in Madras, India. (Jesus Christians.)

'The Split'

In 1996, the community left the project in India after the political climate became dangerous and some members of the community became concerned that social work would replace their evangelistic goals. This prompted a turning point in the group's development. They adopted the name Jesus Christians and took a new focus: "We were keen to reduce our involvement in that form of "social work" and to increase our involvement in getting out the printed word."[59] Ruptures in the community also occurred due to a major split in 1998, when many members left the community to form their own groups. The tumultuousness of this period led to a disengagement with outside projects and significant shifts in the community's structural and social dynamics.[60] What is noteworthy is how the events of the early days of the JCs are almost completely deleted from the media narrative of the community that emerges in the late 1990s and develops throughout the 2000s. It's as though with the adoption of a new name, all past associations were left behind and the new group was formed with a completely new media narrative. What is also interesting is that during the late 1990s are the parallels with events that transpire during 2010, which is another significant turning point, a renaming, and a repositioning of the tone of the group. In both instances, significant members left the group, new aims were adopted, as well as a new mode of spreading their message.

The Second Period: The Jesus Christians

Kidnapping Accusations and Becoming a "Cult"

From the late 1990s a new "cult" mythos surrounding the JCs began to be constructed by the media, cult-busting websites, the families of new members, and a series of false kidnapping

[59] "JC History 1981 - 1996."
[60] McKay, Dave, "The Split," 150.

accusations. The first false kidnapping allegation occurred in 1999, when 19-year old Kyri Sheridan went travelling with the community. He was reported missing by his mother Bernadette Sheridan, despite being in contact with her.[61] They were stalked by Bernadette, harassed by police and news reports such as "Mother Slates Police for Not Preventing Her Son Going Off with Religious Cult"[62] appeared as headlines. The JCs became involved in another controversy in 2000, when they were accused of kidnapping16-year old Bobby Kelly. The *Express* newspaper headlined with "Cult Kidnap Boy Aged 16,"[63] and a media frenzy ensued. Susan and Roland Gianstefani were arrested and taken to court for not revealing Bobby's location.


DAILY EXPRESS

PATSY: THE GIRL WHO JUST CAN'T RESIST ROCK STARS

CULT KIDNAP BOY AGED 16

Figure 4: Front page of the Daily Express 14 July, 2000. (Jesus Christians, "Controversies.")

They did not do so because they feared Bobby would be subject to "cult deprogramming" programs if he returned.[64] In 2005, the Gianstefanis were again at the centre of the accusations in Kenya, where they were accused of abducting Betty Njoroge, and her 7-year old son who had joined the community. The charges were dropped when it became clear that no abduction had taken place. However, during this controversy Roland was arrested and contracted tuberculosis from the poor living conditions of the prison within which he was interred.[65]

The "cult" narrative had gained momentum because each incident was used to validate subsequent accusations and persecution, even though the former accusations were dismissed by the courts. During the Bobby Kelly incident, Bernadette Sheridan was interviewed by

[61] "The Kyri Saga."
[62] "Mother Slates Police For Not Preventing Her Son Going Off With Religious Cult."
[63] Hendry, "Cult Kidnap Boy Aged 16."
[64] "Cult Kidnap Boy."
[65] "Kenyan Kidnapping Charges."

journalists to confirm the group's deviancy.[66] Similarly during the Kenyan abduction trials the Bobby Kelly story was used as proof of the group's "history of kidnapping."[67] In 2006, this culminated in a violent attack on a JC member perpetrated by the family of a new member, Joseph Johnson. The JC website reports one of the motivations for the attack was because the family had read about the JCs online and their tendencies to kidnap.[68] Johnson was an adult when he joined the group, although he had just left school. The JCs later held a mock-trial after the police failed to charge Johnson's family for the assault on their member. To emphasise the injustice of the situation, the trial concluded with several JC members volunteering to take the punishment meted out to the family. This was a few lashes of the whip. 'The Whipping Trial,' as it was called, was covered by Fox News, who, rather than emphasising the crime committed by the Johnson family, empathised with the family's "loss" of their promising son and on the peculiar corporal punishment.[69]

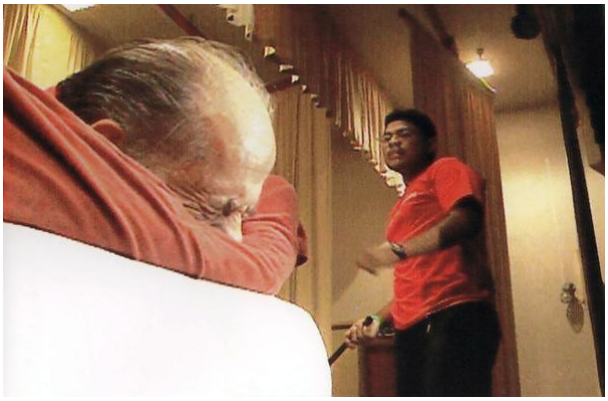

Figure 5: Footage from Fox News report of the 'The Whipping Trial.' (Francisco, "Fox 11 Undercover Report - The Whipping Trial.")

By 2007, the "cult" narrative had reached its peak when the JCs appeared on a British talk show, *the Jeremy Kyle Show*, in an episode entitled, 'Dangerous Cults, or Religious Communities?' Here the JCs were directly compared to the People's Temple and the Children of God, thus confirming their place within the public imagination as a dangerous and violent cult.[70]

[66] Hendry, "Cult Kidnap Boy Aged 16."
[67] "Controversies."
[68] Johnson, "Joe's Story - A Murderous Attack."
[69] Francisco, "Fox 11 Undercover Report - The Whipping Trial."
[70] "The Jeremy Kyle Show."

Altruistic Kidney Donations

Paralleling these events was the move by a significant number of JC members to carry out altruistic and unrelated kidney donations, earning them the label 'the Kidney Cult.' Journalist Jon Ronson documented the donations in an article in *the Guardian* entitled, "Blood Sacrifice" in 2002,[71] and a subsequent television documentary, *Kidneys for Jesus* in 2003.[72] Ronson did not instantly condemn the group as a dangerous cult and was supportive of the idea of altruistic organ donation. However, Ronson's relationship with the JCs broke down because they felt he had misrepresented several aspects of the group and also the donation process. Compounding this was Ronson's increasing concerns about Dave's influence over the JC members and even on himself. He states in *Kidneys for Jesus:*

> I entered Dave's world a year ago, believing that the anti-cult groups were the crazy ones…but now I thought of Dave that way. Why? Because I really don't like him…I allowed myself to be influenced by Dave, and now that I was out of it I began to dislike him irrationally.[73]

Ronson provides a more comprehensive insight into the group, nonetheless his position as a well-known journalist and author may have influenced how he construed the group. In the end, Ronson frames the group through the lens of Dave's leadership position, thus evoking well-worn tropes of coercive charismatic leaders, and as a result, confirming the cult narrative.

In the late 2000s, Ronson's contribution prompted a new shift in the media's cult narrative. Instead of kidnapping and abducting youths, an emphasis on coercion and pressure by a controlling cult leader to perform inexplicable actions became the more prevalent narrative. In 2008, *Australian Story* covered the kidney controversy by focusing on the journey of Ashwyn Falkingham who was going to Canada to donate his kidney to a woman he met online. This led to an influx of coverage on the group and provoking headlines such as: "Man Brainwashed by Kidney Cult" and "'Kidney Cult' Enticed Son, Couple Says." The main interviewees, Ash's mother and stepfather described researching the JCs and finding Jon Ronson's documentary, the Bobby Kelly story and the 'Whipping Trial.' Interestingly, a shot is shown of Ash's mother and partner on the computer, reading out articles on the internet. "Hermetic sect accused of brainwashing children," the stepfather reads out on one website.

[71] Ronson, "Blood Sacrifice."
[72] Ronson, *Kidneys for Jesus*.
[73] Ronson.

Ash's mother goes on to claim that Ash has been "brainwashed" to donate a kidney, that the JCs are a cult and that Dave is their "guru,"[74] This returned to the theme of Dave McKay as a coercive cult leader, emphasised by Ronson and perpetuated by *Australian Story*. It was a theme that would then appear in a range of academic scholarship that was to follow the kidney scandal.

An Academic Review: The Influence of the Counter-Cult Movement

Comparisons to the Quakers and the Children of God

The first shortcoming of most academic sources on the JCs is the way they over-emphasise the group's association with the Children of God (CoG). Dave McKay was briefly a member of the CoG for less than a year in the 1970s, however Cherry never joined. Dave left because he disagreed with their ideas on sexuality and their practise of 'flirty fishing.' Some of the influences from the CoG include their radicalism, nomadic lifestyles, practises of producing and distributing tracts, millennialist emphasis and the rejection of institutional Christianity. On the CESNUR page for the JCs, the group is described as emerging from a "schism" from the CoG. This is incorrect. The CESNUR website compares their "breakaway" from the CoG in the same light as the splinter group, Orizzonti Nuovi (New Horizons). This is in reality, a pointless comparison.[75] Eileen Barker, in discussing the developments of the CoG as they mutate into the 'Family International,' also views the JCs through a similar paradigm of defection from the CoG. Again this is incorrect. Like the CESNUR page, she compares them to New Horizons and identifies the JCs as "another schism."[76] The JCs connection with the CoG is a misleading trope that has developed from this original scholarship. To identify them as an offshoot or schism because of Dave's brief involvement well before he developed any kind of group remains inaccurate.[77] This scholarship makes the valid observation that there are several similarities between the JCs and the CoG's missionary activities. Nevertheless, these rather prestigious NRM sources suggests that the JCs were a group of CoG members who defected. Dave McKay was the only member to join and leave the CoG, and a comprehensive movement led by the Mckays wasn't established until the 1980s.

[74] "Ash's Anatomy."
[75] "Schisms of The Family: The Jesus Christians and the New Horizons."
[76] Barker, "From the Children of God to the Family International," 414–15.
[77] Forthcoming. Hartney, "Poverty Christianity, Practical Christianity, Radical Christianity: The Example of the Jesus Christians," 10.

Christopher Hartney argues that the more significant association than the CoG connections, was the Quakers.[78] In fact, the influence of the Australian Quakers was prominent enough for the JCs to print a book entitled, *The Quaker Connection*.[79] In 1999, Dave and Cherry McKay joined the Society of Friends in Sydney, Australia, after being rejected by most churches they associated with. For a time, they found acceptance and fellowship with them. In an article entitled 'Musings on Quakerism,' they note the similarities in beliefs the JCs share with The Friends and the tolerance they have experienced in circumstances of disagreement. They identify similarities in the Quakers' core principles, the privileging of the teachings of Jesus as the 'Word of God,' and the absence of paid clergy. The Quakers are also consistent with the ETS' "emphasis on sincerity (personal faith) as God's criteria for entrance into his kingdom (rather than religious affiliation or theological statements),"[80] In practise, the Quakers' meetings (which involve a long period of silence) are akin to the ETS' practise of 'listening times,' where they sit together, 'listen' to God, and then discuss their interpretations in a group.[81] There were stark differences between the ETS and the Quaker viewpoint and Dave was disfellowshipped for reasons unspecified by the Quakers. Although the Sydney community refused to speak with Hartney on this matter, Dave's defellowshipping took place just after the kidney controversies and in light of the whipping trial.[82] The move to oust Dave seemed to have been provoked in the first instance by his wearing a "donate a kidney" t-shirt to Quaker meetings, but this remains unconfirmed.[83]

The JCs' Kidney Donations in Scholarship

Beyond the work done by CESNUR and Barker noted above, the scholarship that emerged after the JCs' kidney donations was clearly influenced by the general cult narrative. Annabelle Mooney identifies the term "cult" a pejorative label used by anti-cultists and some academics for religious groups which considered counter-cultural or subversive to predominant societal values. Despite the term lacking a coherent definition, she categorizes 'deviance,' 'destruction' and psychological manipulation – more popularly described as 'brainwashing' or 'mind control' – as recurring themes in its usage. Deviance refers to the transgression from a dominant religion, however it implies a negative connotation. It is assumed that deviance leads to psychological, physical and financial abuse and manipulation

[78] Forthcoming. Hartney, 10.
[79] McKay, *The Quaker Connection*.
[80] McKay, "Musings on Quakerism," 9.
[81] McKay, 10.
[82] Personal Communication with Hartney, 2018
[83] Forthcoming. Hartney, "Poverty Christianity, Practical Christianity, Radical Christianity: The Example of the Jesus Christians."

of the cult's members, thus making a cult destructive. She states that "deviance becomes not just difference but malicious manipulation of 'innocence', presumably for and by some greater 'evil'."[84] Psychological manipulation is identified as the vehicle by which the cult is able to impose these abuses on an individual. It is also the designated reason why an individual would choose to join and remain a part of the cult. The actions of a cult are perceived to be so deviant and extreme that "such practises could only be committed by ('normal' or 'rational') people under some kind of duress or mesmerism."[85] This last point is highly relevant to understanding the reactions of suspicion by the medical academic community when presented with JC members who were offering to altruistically donate their kidneys.

Some academics make neutral reference to the JCs, such as P. Bruzzone.[86] But many other academic sources frame the donations through a paradigm of cults, mind control and charismatic coercive leadership with the assumption those associated with the JCs, by the very fact of their association must lack individual agency. An article in the *Transplantation Reviews* appeared after 6 JC members attempted to donate their kidneys at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, the U.S. The authors of the article, a member of the Boston Scientific Patient Safety Advisory Board, Paul S. Mueller, and representatives from the Mayo Clinic's Division of General Internal Medicine, C. Christopher Hook and the Department of Medical Social Services, Ellen J. Case, were assigned to review whether it was ethical to accept the JCs' offer to donate. They rejected the JCs' offer and concluded that the JC members, "expressed financial, spiritual, and social dependence on their community leader who, in turn, advocated kidney donation on religious grounds, thereby heightening the probability of coercion."[87] The issue of coercion in organ donation is raised again in 2010, by Sandu Frunză et al, who use the JCs as a case study. Promisingly they provide more depth on the motivations of the JCs and aims to "overcome the stereotypes attached to the "cult" label." Nevertheless, the cult narrative is reaffirmed when they note that they are "not necessarily denying [that] the "cult" label,"[88] is applicable to the JCs and express concerns over "the

[84] Mooney, "'Cults,'" 158.
[85] Mooney, 158.
[86] Bruzzone, "Religious Aspects of Organ Transplantation," 1067.
[87] Mueller, Case, and Hook, "Responding to Offers of Altruistic Living Unrelated Kidney Donation by Group Associations," 204.
[88] Frunză et al., "Altruistic Living Unrelated Organ Donation at the Crossroads of Ethics and Religion. A Case Study," 12.

possibly manipulative character of their donation, and the extent to which it was a result of the influence of the group's guru."[89]

The Role of the Counter-Cult Movement

The role of the counter-cult movement is an instrumental factor in the construction of the cult narrative surrounding the JCs. Grahame Baldwin runs a cult-monitoring organisation, Catalyst, and charges for 'exit counselling,' for people leaving NRMs.[90] The JCs report that he was the one who instructed Bernadette Sheridan to report Kyri missing to the police as a tactic to separate him from the JCs.[91] Baldwin was also involved in the Bobby Kelly controversy, by advising Bobby's grandmother to go to the police, and allegedly, was the one who orchestrated the media frenzy which ensued. He also appeared as an "expert" guest on the *Jeremy Kyle* episode with the JCs. Similarly, the internet-based counter-cult organisation, the Cult Education Institute (CEI) run by Rick Alan Ross, also played a key role in stirring anxieties against the group. CEI promotes its database of groups that this site deems to be "cults." On this site the JCs have been given a dedicated page. It lists a long litany of news stories connected to them.[92] A news article on the Kyri Sheridan incident of 1999, is the first link they provide, indicating that this was the first incident to put the JCs on the cult-buster's map. CEI also hosts two large "Group Information Archives" dedicated to the JCs, which contains a large dossier of private information on the JCs gathered by anit-cultists.[93]

The significance of this thesis is that it is the first academic analysis to actively critique and reject the assumptions, prejudices and simplifications caused by the cult narrative. Dawson observes that "much of the recent public debate over cults has ignored or avoided a substantial and growing body of academic literature on the belief, practises, failings and significance of cults."[94] The media coverage of NRMs is so rooted in controversy, that historical, social or religious contexts are rarely taken into account.[95] Richardson argues that the use of terms such as 'brainwashing' and 'mind-control' are "a powerful social weapon for many partisans in the "cult controversy," wars that are used to label a group nothing but "evil."[96] Melton explicates how the term 'brainwashing' gained traction as a powerful means

[89] Frunză et al., 7.
[90] Chryssides, *Exploring New Religious Movements*, 350.
[91] "The Kyri Saga."
[92] "The Jesus Christians Founded by David McKay."
[93] "'Jesus Christians,' 'Cult', Dave McKay, the 'Truth Believers'"; "Jesus Christians, the Truth Believers, Dave McKay, VISUAL ARCHIVE."
[94] Dawson, "Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why: Twenty Years of Research and What Have We Learnt?," 117.
[95] Dawson, 117.
[96] Richardson, "A Critique of 'Brainwashing' Claims About New Religious Movements," 161.

to justify de-programming practises on NRM 'joiners.' Deprogrammers were employed – for a high fee – by the families of the offspring of the joiner to forcefully detain (even kidnap) the joiner and in many cases use violence to pressure them to renounce their beliefs and return to a 'normal' life. To accompany the cult narrative is the stereotype applied to joiners as being "young, gullible, idealistic people duped by cunning cult recruiters."[97] Moreover, it is assumed that it is the role of the imagined moral community or "us" to "rescue" them from the "other."[98] This is particularly played out in the media narrative, but also in the academic narrative related to the kidney donations. For example, in the Mayo clinic's assessment, when they were presented with JC members hoping to donate at their medical facilities, they asserted that it is "the clinician's duty [is] to act on behalf of the potential donor and prevent harm."[99] Therefore, preventing the donations from taking place.

The Third Period: A Voice in the Desert

Jesus Christians No Longer: "Imploding" in 2010

The culmination of harassment and persecution came to a head in 2010, when the JCs announced that they were disbanding and disappeared from the public scene. The ETS report that anti-cultists began posting "sightings" of Dave and Cherry, causing security concerns in the general community. In addition, the large dossier of media reports, testimonies by disgruntled family members, cult-busting webpages, and Ronson's writings/documentary, that had now accumulated on the internet was repelling new members and contacts. Also, as was shown in the previous examples, the stories on the internet caused panic for the families of new members. One member noted to me that they were trying to acknowledge the criticisms that the anti-cultists were making, but that the more they responded the more it seemed to feed the issue. She said that they asked themselves, "why don't we just stop?" that "we had always followed the teaching about forsaking all, so why not forsake the Jesus Christians?" Since their implosion in 2010, no scholarship has been written on the group and for the most part they no longer appear in the media. This thesis is the first academic analysis to discuss the group from 2010 onwards.

The events of 2010 shaped the future trajectory of the group and marks another significant turning point in the community's history. The decision to disband caused significant

[97] Dawson, "Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why: Twenty Years of Research and What Have We Learnt?," 117.
[98] Gallagher, "'Cults' and 'New Religious Movements,'" 209.
[99] Mueller, Case, and Hook, "Responding to Offers of Altruistic Living Unrelated Kidney Donation by Group Associations," 203.

restructures so that each 'team,' spread across the world, became independently organised bodies. Moves for autonomy between bases, such as dividing up assets, had already been made years prior in 2005. The imploding involved ceasing communication with relatives, friends and contacts. This was because the community believed that information was being leaked to anti-cultists through their contacts. They believed that they had to cut off all supply of information that was getting to the anti-cultists to escape the harassment from them. Many members dispersed, and each body was instructed to form their own independent ministry. The aim was to try to "disappear," so they could escape from the harassment of the anti-cultists and the media. Dave describes this period of disbanding as "real and fake at the same time." It was fake in that, there were still JC communities still operating. It was real in one particular sense, because they no longer identified as JCs, there were significant organisational restructures, their modes of engagement with the 'outside' world changed dramatically and different bases around the world developed different emphasis.

Similar to the events in 1998, the implosion and reorganisation of 2010 meant the parting from several long-term members, including Susan and Roland Gianstefani and Ross Parry, who had played a significant role in the formation of the JCs. There remains a great deal of contention over how these members came to be ex-members and although I have interviewed both sides on the issue, I do not feel the major points of the exit can be easily resolved. The Gianstefanis and Parry state they left the group, because they felt that the disbanding in 2010 was dishonest. They state that, because they disagreed, the community "excommunicated" them and cut off contact with them. The community states that these members had already become detached and that the breakdown in communication occurred with the decision to disband and cut off all ties from any "contacts." These members were considered among those who needed to be jettisoned. The group also maintain, that these members weren't cut-off suddenly and without cause, and there were many other mitigating factors that led to the breakdown in the relationship. Considering these events occurred nearly a decade ago, these are two perspectives are both imbued with their own biases, selectivity, and distortions. However, the story both these accounts tell is that the years around 2010 were a tumultuous period that led to the breakaway of several long-term formative members. This greatly impacted the community and those who found themselves as outsiders.[100]

[100] I have been in contact with these ex-members, who kindly gave me much information about their time in the group and I am grateful for the time they took to tell me their story. They are highly vocal online about "exposing" the ETS for being connected to the JCs, as well as other negative events that occurred while they were members. Like most social groups, there are some dark elements to the JCs' history and they too have left a wake of ex-members who harbour strong negative feelings towards them. I do not omit these events because I wish to mute these voices to create a solely positive image of the ETS, but because a proper examination that

Making YouTube Videos

The different bases of the new organisation began experimenting with making *YouTube* videos as a way of disseminating their message. The base in South America pioneered the use of making *YouTube* videos with the first channel being created in 2015.[101] It was called the *Endtime Survivors* channel. A related website was also created in 2016, by the base in the U.K. Some videos are animations, with a voice-over and others involve one of the many anonymous presenters whose faces are digitally distorted or are concealed with a mask. The only named presenter is "Brother Dave," and it was through this forum, that Dave McKay began experimenting with delivering online sermons. Non-members were also allowed to post videos, thus creating a somewhat decentralised node for those who shared similar views on *Bible* prophecy.[102] The most popular channel at present, *A Voice in the Desert (AVID)* was created in 2017, by the Australian base. It predominantly features sermons, accompanied by animated illustrations, on a broad range of Christian topics. It is delivered by Dave, but with a digitally distorted voice in an attempt to conceal his identity. He is simply referred to as 'Voice.' In June 2018, *A Voice in the Desert (AVID)* channel garnered the most interest with over 45, 000 subscribers.[103]

They had previously engaged a large audience in the online realm through their website *JesusChristians.com*, however their new engagement with a *YouTube* platform generated a whole new level of online activity. Making *YouTube* videos has become the main medium through which the group preaches their message to a broader audience. This emphasis is causing changes in how the group engage with the public. The hope is to get all members involved in the video-making process. It allows for a large reach to a wide audience with a generally unified message. The production system, however, also facilitates the autonomy of each base. It also brings the potential broadening of creative possibilities through new projects. For example, one Sunday I asked the community if they were considering any new projects and they mentioned the prospect of making a 'day in the life of…' type of documentary about their community's lifestyle. As they are becoming more skilled with video-production, they are experimenting with new techniques to convey their message. With the emergence of these various new websites and *YouTube* channels of which there are many more than I have mentioned here, the group now have a significantly larger global outreach

considers all complexities of these events with sensitivity and care, is too large a project that lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

[101] "Cómo Vivir Por Fe."

[102] "End Time Survivors," 2017.

[103] "A Voice in the Desert."

as compared to previous years. Consequently, it has caused a flood of enquires and within a year, Dave reports, the numbers in the group have doubled from 2016. Each base has continued to make videos and the videos are consistently growing in popularity.

A Narrative of Ambiguity and Spontaneous Emergence

The desire for the ETS to reinstate themselves as a newly organised group was an ongoing tension within the group during my fieldwork project. Nowhere was it more dramatically pronounced than the JC's *Wikipedia* Page, which is regularly updated with new information. In 2017, when I presented a conference paper on the *Endtime Survivors,* I stated in this research that this group was led by Dave and Cherry and, as with most academic conferences, my abstract was posted online.[104] A day later the abstract was referenced and quoted on the *Wikipedia* page to verify that the ETS was the new name of the JCs.[105] I later learnt that this change was done by ex-members, who relentlessly edit and re-edit the page. That same day mention of the ETS on the *Wikipedia* page was removed by current members, who I learnt also edit and re-edit the page. What ensued in the following weeks was a conflict of narratives and representation between former and current members, as well as other anonymous users, adding, rewriting, and deleting information. The *Wikipedia* 'talk' page also came alive with debate, and various users accusing one another of bias.[106] Ironically, most of the Wiki users who were part of this debate were all either current or former members. The current members' primary aim was to affirm that the JCs had dispersed and that the ETS was a different organisation. The former members' aim was to state that the ETS were simply the same JCs with a new name.

To simply nominate the ETS as the JCs with a new name isn't an accurate description of what is taking place. Firstly, the name 'Endtime Survivors,' comes from one of the *YouTube* channels. This channel takes contributions from most of the bases. However, Endtime Survivors is not the name that the Australian community uses for themselves. In fact, they specifically don't have a name for themselves. This is the name I have ascribed to an overall movement of disparately organised bodies, a group that might be best described as a social network of relationships that has emerged out of the death of the JCs. They are unified by a core ethos developed by the JCs and Dave and Cherry McKay remain key characters. Secondly, there is a disparateness between the various bases in the U.K, U.S, Australia and

[104] "Conference Program."
[105] "Jesus Christians."
[106] "Talk:Jesus Christians."

South America. As these bases have their own *YouTube* channels and websites, divergences are beginning to emerge between them. In some cases, the differences are a mere matter of emphasis. For example, the U.K base has a greater emphasis on *Bible* prophecy because the leading members in the U.K have a personal interest in it. In other cases, these differences are becoming increasingly broader, such as the South American base which is starting to produce its own new discourse which focuses on understanding what truth is held by churches. This contrasts with the Australian community's outright rejection of all churches.

There are also many issues associated with the ETS being considered a totally new entity. Many JC members are now ETS members, much of the same material is distributed, and they still live by the same principles. Dave and Cherry McKay are also highly vocal and influential members of the community. No community is necessarily delineated as the core channel or home-base, however, the most popular channel, *AVID* mainly consists of sermons written by Dave, who remains based in Australia. In an email from Dave McKay after I had asked him how he would describe his role in the movement, and whether the JCs were just the ETS renamed, he wrote back, stating "in some ways, it will be papers like this that actually define some of the boundaries, etc. which are unclear at the moment, due to our own lack of clarity. Are we the Jesus Christians? Are we Endtime Survivors? Am I a/the leader of any or all of the various entities?"[107] This answer is not about Dave trying to be elusive, but a clear demonstration of the ambiguous nature of the organisation of the community. The ETS are either within a transitional stage of their re-formation, or the narrative upheld by the group to purport an image of spontaneous creation and organisation is actually the most valid way of now considering this movement.

This ambivalence was a perpetual confusion throughout my fieldwork because the workings of the leadership occur primarily online between the bases. I was not privy to observing the mechanisms of leadership for the global community. What I observed in their history and their current projects is that the community is motivated to construct a particular character of itself that remains ambiguous, indefinable and un-structured. I also questioned numerous members on the issue and noted several key themes that emerged. Firstly, the community's aim is to remain out of the spotlight. This allows them to detach themselves from harassment that went with the JC name and so deprive their "enemies" of clear target to attack. Secondly, they want to remain anonymous so as to get the public to think about the message not the messenger. Thirdly, they have always been emphatic about not forming a human church or

[107] McKay, "Re: The Missing Cornerstone and Dispensationalism." 23.

institution, because doing this will prevent them from acting according to the will of God.[108] Each base is connected yet, they run autonomously and engage with one another through loosely organised democratic formations. In my questioning about their leadership there was a degree of ambivalence over how these formations were organised. They mentioned names such as "the hub," or "the circle," but then, Dave facetiously commented that "we throw them out every year anyway and come up with a new one." The answer to the ETS' leadership may be that it fluctuates between the ideals of ambiguity and the inevitable stratification of leadership structures.

Extensions of the "Cult" Narrative: Charismatic Leadership?

The Charismatic Leadership Question

A key piece to the puzzle of the leadership question, is the role of Dave and Cherry. Specifically, whether they fit into a model of charismatic leadership. Changes in leadership, I was told, was the key differences between the JCs and the ETS. Leon explained that Dave used to be a "hands-on" leader but now, due to his maturing age and the growth of the movement, he is now more of an "advisory" and "hands-off" leader. Conversely, according to ex-members these denials of leadership were planned as a part of the 2010 reorganisation. One ex-member states that the reason, or at least part of it, for the events of 2010, was because:

> The impression he wants to give the public is that he is no longer in charge. For a long time, members were taught to HIDE the true reality of Dave being an authoritarian leader, or the leader at all. We were told pretend that he was NOT running everything from behind the scenes.[109]

Dave has been described by ex-members as a "covert narcissist" and "extremely duplicitous,"[110] and the CEI website describes him as "notorious for the total control that he exercises over his followers."[111] He is also mentioned in Jon Ronson's, *The Psychopath Test*.[112] This representation is an extension of the cult narrative, where the supposed charismatic leader harmfully controls all aspects of the community and its members.[113]

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[108] McKay, "System Worship." 55.
[109] Parry, "Graduates?"
[110] Wrest, Australian Story: Interview with Malcolm Wrest.
[111] DaAdmin, "Dave McKay and His 'Kidney Cult' Now on YouTube."
[112] Ronson, *The Psychopath Test*.
[113] Gallagher, "'Cults' and 'New Religious Movements,'" 213.

Nevertheless, it is worth considering whether Dave's leadership role is downplayed to promulgate the ETS' narrative of ambiguity and spontaneous emergence.

Dave and Cherry appear to possess an influential role in the movement, yet in my observations of community life, they do not fully fit into a prevailing academic criterion for charismatic leadership. Max Weber's charismatic leader has "supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities…regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary."[114] Lorne L. Dawson explains that the charismatic leader gains power by a careful impression management. They must maintain an equilibrium between reinforcing their power through seemingly personal relationships with their followers and maintaining a level of magic and mystery. This is maintained by limiting access to the leader to the inner circle or a few specially chosen individuals. A magnetic aura is, thus, created around them because they are seen as an embodiment of the group ideals.[115] Dave and Cherry weren't treated with reverence, only respect, and there was no special framing or mystery around them. I witnessed many instances where members openly disagreed with Dave and it was apparent that Dave and Cherry aren't financially more "well-off" than the rest of community; what funds they do come by are shared equally amongst members and these two leaders "live the message" like everyone else in the movement. Members by no means view them as holding extraordinary superhuman qualities, and there is a great deal of normalcy in how they are treated. Within the bounds of community life, Dave and Cherry do not possess a charismatic framing. Though, that is not to say that there is no room for 'charisma' in the community nor that charismatic authority is absent.

Prophets of Cosmic Meaning

Dave and Cherry do, however, fulfil other aspects considered part of the charismatic criteria. They were the founders of the group, they were the ones to produce most of the writings and formulated the radical lifestyle of the ETS. Their interpretations of the *Bible* are a unique attribute, as well as the practises that have developed from this prioritization of the Four Gospels. In this sense, the McKays may best be compared to the 'prophet' model of charismatic authority. Ted Daniel states that charismatic leaders are "poets of cosmic meaning," who appear "during the darkest periods of social crisis." That the prophet's significance comes from the fact that "they and their messages address a deep abyss of need" and that "they bring messages from God about the road to salvation." These prophets show

[114] Wallis, "Millennialism and Charisma," 106.
[115] Dawson, "Crises of Charismatic Legitimacy and Violent Behavior in New Religious Movements."

the way to a revised and divergent way of making sense of the world.[116] Mitchell describes the innovative ability of the charismatic to "propose fundamental, paradigmatic reconfigurations of knowledge with profound and far-reaching potential." That these reconfigurations are so newly formed that "their proposals are often extraordinary…unheard of…[and] strange to all rules and tradition"[117] Therefore, charisma does have some place in understanding how the ETS were formed and maintain cohesion without strict organisational structures.

The leadership of the ETS, is ambiguous, because whilst charisma appears to the binding force of the community, Dave and Cherry appear be to only possess a few potent markers of the charismatic leader. To continue in Weber's theory of authority, this would suggest that the community has 'routinised' their authority, which is the transference of charismatic authority into rational-legal and traditional forms.[118] Rodney Stark points out that, "Weber regarded charismatic authority as suited only for 'the process of origination'" and that it cannot be sustained forever. Eventually, a new basis of authority will be required, that "the capacity to reveal new truths may be associated with the leadership role – the charisma of the prophet is replaced by charisma of office." He goes on to state that, "in Weber's terms… doctrine is stabilised sufficiently to sustain a changeover from prophetic to administrative leadership."[119] Yet, this does not fit the community either. In their core aims to not become a "system" of rigid hierarchies, dogma and ritual, the ETS members are emphatic about avoiding any form of administrative office and in a way this holds the development of the group at a very particular charismatic level. For the ETS, 'routinisation' would be contradictory to their core aims. The spontaneity, unpredictability and instability of charismatic authority and cohesion is a vital part of their community life and practise.

The Online Charisma of 'Voice'

This contradiction may be mitigated with an altered model of charismatic leadership that takes into account the changing shape of religion in the rapidly developing technology of the 21st century. Charisma does not necessarily need to be placed in an individual but as an intersubjectively generated experience that emerges from relationships and shared practise. In Marc Galanter's discussion of charismatic groups, rather than placing charisma as solely focused or sourced from the leader, transcendental power can be placed within a "mission" or

[116] Daniels, "Intoduction," 11.
[117] Mitchell, "Survivalism and Rational Times," 153.
[118] Oakes, "Charisma," 28.
[119] Stark, "Why New Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model," 264.

"shared system of beliefs."[120] Charles Lindholm notes that there has been a divide in understanding charisma polarised by Durkheim's focus on collective effervescence and Weber's formula for charismatic leadership.

> Weber's theory has significant differences from Émile Durkheim's portrait of the orgiastic effervescence of the collective gathered around the totemic object that symbolizes the sacred power of the clan. Durkheim's interest was in the group dynamic fueling the cycle from the profane, mundane world of the weak, selfish, and ephemeral individual to the sacred moral universe of the eternal collective. In his paradigm, the leader is nothing but an empty symbol, a human totem…that serves only to focus the energy of the surrounding group, so it can be released in ecstatic performance. In contrast, for Weber the leader is a magician whose emotional appeal and healing powers are the source for group unity.[121]

Lindholm explains what Durkheim and Weber can agree upon is that there is an ecstatic atmosphere that is generated by participation in "charismatic performance," [122] which releases participants from their mundane existence. This atmosphere is generated communally and is not necessarily dependent or centralised upon one individual.

To apply this to the ETS, charisma can lie in the shared practises of their lifestyle, through their actions of distributing, prayer, living on buses, sharing a meal, listening, bin-raiding, or *Bible* study. Whilst none of these activities are an intense ritual, imbued within all these activities is the teachings of Jesus – which is the cornerstone for all their beliefs, practises, relationships and experiences. Lindholm describes the experience of charisma as "a central, sacralized, heightened, and embodied emotional force binds the collective together, blurring the separate identities of the participants in rapturous unity." This emphasises the participation of the followers in the charismatic experience, that charisma is an experience created by the collective, as a whole. This sense of equal unity between members is an important part of their spiritual worldview. They do not believe that any individual should be held in higher status than others because the teachings of Jesus is their only true authority. Therefore, they actively foster equality among all members and are deeply suspicious of hierarchy. For example, they do not believe in using titles such as sir, doctor, professor,

[120] Galanter, "The Charismatic Group," 2.
[121] Lindholm, "Introduction: Charisma in Theory and Practice," 11.
[122] Lindholm, 111.

leader, etc. and do not believe in providing certain members with more resources than others. Decisions are made collectively and all things are shared amongst the community.

This, however, does not preclude the possibility for charismatic authority being centralised from one source. The potential for the *YouTube* channels is that it can act as a conduit for this form of collective charisma that is not centred upon a single personality. It can also be used as a platform for an individual to create a charismatic aura around them. This medium also allows for charisma to be transferred from the individual to a 'charisma of office.' The *AVID* channel, in particular, is a site for these potentials. In the later stages of my fieldwork, other community members began to record their own sermons as 'Voice.' Whilst Dave does not fit a charismatic leadership model in the "real-world" perhaps, he does obtain charisma in the online world. It was once suggested by my supervisor, Christopher Hartney, that 'Voice' may have a charismatic quality for those members in other countries. That the 'inner circle' was made up of those in the Australian community. This online mode of engagement allows for the creation of a charismatic aura, through the mystery, exclusivity and ambiguity innate in the 'Voice' persona. Carefully selected graphics, music and script writing, all create the conditions for 'Voice' to be raised on a pedestal of exemplariness. In addition, because 'Voice' is espousing all the key ideas of the group, this persona embodies all of their ideals – but 'Voice' is a persona that can be adorned by any member. Voice is the charismatic leader that is not dependent upon the personality of an individual. It is one means by which the ETS are able to prevent rigid hierarchies of authority from forming. This way they can maintain their charismatic fluidity and prevent the process of routinisation, without the community falling into collapse when certain individuals pass on.

Conclusion

The complexity surrounding the ETS has led to a large corpus of misinformation on the group that lingers eternally in the online realm. Their structure and leadership has evolved through many years and has adapted according to the challenges encountered in each period. These adaptations have led to the unique character of the group. As a result, they often defy the well-worn paradigms and models generally used for NRMs. Yet, their complex, radical and transgressive lifestyles have led to onlookers to seek simplification through easily applied "cult" labels. In situations where the ETS were unfathomable and inexplicable, the cult narrative has acted as an easy model to explain why individuals would give up promising careers, sell all they own, give away all their money to spend their days living on vehicles and distributing tracts. The altruistic kidney donations stunned critics to the point that they

concluded the only reason someone would donate their kidney to a stranger with no expectation of return, is coercive leadership. What the cult mythos fails to appreciate is that those who have joined have done so willingly and are motivated beyond the catch-cries of brainwashing, mind-control and coercive leadership.

The cult narrative has been perpetuated by the media, ex-members, families, journalists and academics. It has been used by those who deem them threatening to stir the imagined moral community to oppose them. What this chapter has hopefully achieved is to demonstrate to the reader the implicit influence of the cult narrative which has framed the interpretation of those who have written and produced material on them. I have aimed to explicate how a powerful cult narrative provides clear demarcations between 'us' and 'them' and can be used as a weapon against NRMs that are deemed challenging. What is also apparent is how this myth is both damaging, dangerous and must be challenged by scholars, rather than perpetuated by them. In the case of the ETS, the academy has thus far failed to dispel this dangerous mythology – hopefully this thesis will be the first step to redressing the issue.

Their new iteration, the ETS, represents a new period which is still yet to be fully realised. New developments were consistently happening throughout my fieldwork and are likely to continue. The most prominent concern in the community is the questions of leadership and, subsequently the trajectory of the movement. The reality is that Dave and Cherry are in their 70s and are very conscious that they are reaching the end of their lives. The ETS' future trajectory is ambiguous, from the perspective of the researcher and the group themselves. They are in a transitional realm, whereby they are reformulating themselves in anticipation for either the death or retirement of Dave and Cherry. The question of the extent of their leadership, what transitions are being made and the trajectory for the future, remains an open one. The dwindling influence of Dave and Cherry, new leaders primed to take their place and their new online engagement which creates a de-centralised realm, are all likely to be the main challenges which will shape the movement.

One might suggest that the ETS must develop routinised forms of authority, in order to survive the death of their leaders. One might say that for the ETS' to survive their ideals of remaining fluid, unstructured and ambiguous must be replaced with administrative office, leadership positions and hierarchy. However, the new ways that the online realm is shaping NRMs, like the ETS, suggests that perhaps the fate of the community is not as predictable as it once was. The internet has drastically changed how new religions organise themselves and

share their messages to the world. The old tropes of charisma, communes and kool-aid are outdated. NRMs are functioning differently to several decades ago and new paradigms need to be created to take into account the factors of new technologies. The ETS may just be a prime example of the changing nature of religion in western modernity, therefore I suggest that the academy should observe the ETS' developments over the coming years – doing so may provide a projection into the future of how religion will continue to develop in the 21st century.

CHAPTER 3: LIFESTYLE, PRACTISES AND BELIEFS

Introduction

This chapter provides a map of the most prevalent thematics that I encountered in the 12 months of fieldwork I spent with the Australian ETS community. The ETS have a sophisticated vocabulary of the key concepts, practises and dispositions which regulate their spiritual and community lives. Once this was mastered I was able to gain a comprehension of the strongest modalities which shape their engagement with the world. Furthermore, spending time with the community also allowed me to see how practise often shapes their theological discourses. I saw how practical factors – living in vehicles, having to print literature, engaging with bureaucracy – are intertwined with the concepts that will be discussed in this chapter. The ETS are pragmatic people. Most members aren't interested in theological debates, discourse or philosophy – rather they are interested in the practical application of the teachings of Jesus. That is not to say that the community does not engage with theology. They have regular *Bible* studies and their *YouTube* content is often dense with theological discourse. However, in the quotidian of community life, they are mostly concerned with ensuring that what they are *doing* is consistent with the teachings of Jesus. They seek to embody their ideals in every aspect of their life.

The first section discusses the key principles of the ETS. I will discuss how the teachings of Jesus are considered to be the 'cornerstone' of all beliefs and practises. They believe that the teachings of Jesus are the infallible 'Word of God,' therefore they must be prioritised above all other Bible scripture. In living out the teachings of Jesus they hope to be a part of the 'Kingdom of God.' This is something that exists in the future tense – that which will supersede the world after the 'Great Tribulation' – but, it is also an other-worldly realm that can be accessed now. Those who are seeking the truth are identified as 'Sincere' and will be accepted into the Kingdom of God. 'Sincerity' is a complex characteristic ascribed to individuals whom they deem to be genuinely 'hungering and thirsting for the truth.' A sincere person can be from any religion (they can even be an atheist), as long as they are searching for the truth which is found in the teachings of Jesus. The ETS are highly emphatic about rejecting the love of money for that is the 'Root of all Evil.' The *Book of Revelation* factors strongly in their worldview. They believe that out of the love of money, 'The Mark of the Beast' will emerge in the form of human microchipping. The mark of the beast signals that

the end-times are nearing. This concern for the nearing end-times is a powerful modality that lies beneath the surface of community life.

The second section delves into two concepts, 'Living by Faith' and 'Forsaking All,' which regulates the ETS' lifestyle. Living by faith refers to the disposition of relying upon God's provision for what one needs. It is a principle that permeates through all practicalities of their everyday livelihoods. They believe that in times of need one does not need to rely on money – one only needs to rely upon God to provide. Living by faith is the answer to the question of how they survive living 'outside the system.' It is a lifestyle that combines ideas of freegansim, nomadism, simplicity and minimalism, with an idealised image of how the first disciples and early Christians lived. 'Forsaking All' is the act of giving up one's possessions, money, job, family, career aspirations, etc. to become a true Christian. To become a member of the community, an individual must forsake all. Further, they do not forsake all once when they join the community, instead it is a continual practise of leaving behind things that are not necessary. This could refer to possessions they don't need, or it could refer to emotions, attachments or attitudes.

The third section is closely related to lifestyle but include the ETS' key activities. The 'Faith Outreach,' is the most intense activity that culminates all of their principles and practises together. It is a period where one gives oneself over to God's provision. Participants take only a few necessities and go onto the streets to witness to the public. They engage in activities such as 'free work' which involves offering a stranger their assistance from a few hours to a few days. For example, on the outreach I attended we cleaned a women's kitchen and painted a man's loungeroom. 'Listening Times' is the activity of discerning God's will. This term refers to the practise of sitting quietly for a few minutes and waiting for God to speak to you. This can be done as a group or alone. It is also accompanied by other practises such as discussing what visions one saw, interpreting dreams and counselling with other members about these interpretations. 'Distributing' is a key witnessing activity where they hand out tracts to the public. They spend most of their days distributing, as it is their way of preaching the gospel to a large sum of people. Distributing involves handing out books, DVDs or pamphlets, but it is also a means to invite a member of the public into a conversation about God or the teachings of Jesus.

Dispersed amongst this chapter are fieldnote excerpts which aim to transport the reader to significant moments of learning, sensorial environments, and meaningful experiences.

Comprehending their community life was an accumulative project and it required much guidance from the community. More than once did I believe that I fully understood an idea or a practise only to find out that my interpretation was either wrong or too narrow. They will reflect the circumstances by which I came to understand certain ideas and will act as reference points to verify my observations. I have also included a significant amount of primary source material from their literature, *YouTube* videos and websites. This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive map of the ETS life-world. It seeks to demonstrate to the reader that their key concepts and practises are deeply intertwined. The process of the formation of this group does not begin with an idea and the practise then follows. Rather, these two aspects have mutually constructed one another.

Several individuals will be mentioned in this section. This is a summary of who these members are. Leon is the first member that I met, and he is a long-term member. John is also a long-term member. John and Leon were living on the same bus when I began my fieldwork. Tyra is a member who was joining the community when I first met her. Leon, John and Tyra were the members who I went on a faith outreach with. Mitchell is a member who joined the community in the later stages of my fieldwork. Nicholas and Stephanie are long-term members, who I met after going on the faith outreach.

The Cornerstone

The Teachings of Jesus

The ETS' utmost guiding principle is their prioritisation of the teachings of Jesus – as communicated in the Four Gospels – above all other *Bible* scripture. The ETS are utterly emphatic that they follow the teachings of Jesus. They also claim that this is what differentiates them from all churches – they are "actually" following what Jesus taught.

> *One morning, I noticed one member was sitting memorising a pile of 'prayer cards.' These were crudely cut cardboard flashcards that had a teaching on the front and the bible reference on the back. After dinner we would all partake in an activity where one person would read out the teaching on the card and the rest of us would have to guess the Bible reference. With subtle import, he picked out three cards and gave them to me and said, "this is our John 3:16." The card said, "you must forsake all" and on the back, "In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples. Luke 14:33." He then pulled out two more that he said were also key verses. The first one said, "Sell what you have" and on the back "Luke*

11, 12, 14, 18." The second one said, "you can't work for God and money" and the back, "Matthew 6, Luke 16."

In a video from the *AVID* channel entitled 'the Secret Name of Jesus,' Voice tells us that Revelation 19:13 refers to Jesus; "he is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God."[123] What Jesus taught is the ultimate truth because he speaks the 'Word of God.' The ETS' Christology is unique in this respect because they see the teachings of Jesus as the 'Cornerstone' to all else. "Every other stone must line up with the cornerstone. If the apostles or the prophets are quoted in opposition to Jesus, we must follow Jesus in preference to them."[124] They do not reject nor ignore the rest of *The Bible*, rather they suggest it is inferior to the truth as revealed by what Jesus taught. Furthermore, the *Book of Revelation* features heavily in their literature because it is interpreted closely in relation with the teachings of Jesus – they consider it to be the 'Revelation of Jesus Christ.'

They affirm that no church or Christian group can claim to be following the teachings of Jesus. They use the term 'churchies' or 'Churchianity' to refer to individuals who possess a self-righteous mindset and aggressively defend the dogma of their own church, however not all people who go to church are 'churchies.' According to the ETS, churchies create convenient doctrines which ignore what Jesus taught and worship a 'false Christ.' They are focused on serving the dogmas of the church, instead of God, and doing so means they are blinded to the truth as revealed by Jesus. On article states, "a person with real faith will seek to change in conformity to the truth, rather than hide behind religious idols, dogmas, and traditions."[125] The most recurrent offense by churches is the rejection Jesus' core teaching – that is to forsake all and reject working for money. Dave would often say that if you stopped a churchie in the street and asked them to list ten things that Jesus taught his followers to do, that they wouldn't be able to do it. He felt that many of the people contacting him were too often overly concerned with "peripheral issues." These included theological debates over water baptism, circumcision and homosexuality. He would say that people just needed to read what Jesus taught and start by following the teachings there. He would often exclaim that "it's all there in the teachings of Jesus!"

Sincerity

[123] A Voice in the Desert, "The Secret Name of Jesus."
[124] McKay, "Jesus: Key Versus." 126.
[125] McKay, "Faith and Sincerity," 102.

Sincerity is a complex characteristic attributed to those who "hunger and thirst for the truth." The first time I heard about the concept of sincerity was on the second visit to Leon and John's bus.

> *I sat across Leon and John at their self-made plastic table which bent unsteadily when too much weight was put on it. Not sure where to put my arms, I shifted uncomfortably as I attempted to understand what it meant to be sincere. They said if you haven't rejected God and truth then you are sincere. I said that I probably wasn't sincere because I had been a Catholic but became an atheist. They said that I may not have encountered the real God through the church. They suggested that I had not yet been shown the truth. I pressed them to explain what it was like to discover the truth, but they were reluctant and didn't give me a clear answer. I wondered if I had asked the wrong question, whether it was one that really could be answered or if they were giving me an answer that I simply couldn't understand.*

In the initial stages of fieldwork, the concept of sincerity was ambiguous and difficult to understand. When I saw the community again after that visit, I asked Dave for more explanation on the topic.

> *As we sat at a park table, Dave compared sincerity to the planks of wood lining the table. They were all separate but were paralleled with one another. The planks represented each religion and he said that society has since divided people up according to these planks of wood. But the 'Kingdom of Heaven' supersedes them all. He traced his hands across the planks of wood, demonstrating that you could be from a different religion but still head in the same direction, or "walk in the light." I still didn't understand. He changed his analogy. He described it as a mountain. There are many paths up the mountain, but they are all leading to the same point. I wondered what this truth was; what lay at the top of the mountain?*

More pieces of the puzzle came in discussions between members about which people they encountered who seemed sincere. They would sometimes say, "I really think that person was sincere," or in other cases that they were "probably not" sincere. They were never certain about this quality, as they believe it is something only God knows. I also found it to be a dynamic and flexible concept and members had varied interpretations of it. I heard one member say that he didn't think sincerity was a stagnant and constant quality. Rather, it is a quality that is earnt. For this member, sincerity is something we moved in and out of. He

compared it to swimming, where sometimes one's head bobs at the top of the water and other times it goes under the water.

To be sincere is to be seeking out the ultimate truth which God revealed to humanity through Jesus. Seeking the truth and "knowing Him and being totally conformed to His will" [126] is the aim of the sincere person. Sincerity lingers towards universalism, whereby a sincere person does not have to be Christian, or to have read the *Bible* and they can come from a different religion or be non-religious. An article entitled, 'Faith and Sincerity,' it states that, "real faith in God will eventually unite all sincere people in the world, regardless of their various religious affiliations"[127] Truth is accessible to all, even for those who may not ever encounter this truth through the *Bible*. This was sometimes described in the community as "walking in the light that you have." Even if they never know what the teachings of Jesus are, if they sought after truth then they will be granted salvation. A sincere person who possesses "real faith will respond positively to the light. It will seek out the light. It will want to know the truth."[128] The teachings of Jesus are the 'Word of God' – those teachings are the manifestation of the most ultimate truth. Therefore, as is noted in the article, 'Another Cornerstone,' "a really sincere person will be drawn to the teachings of Jesus."[129] It is interesting to note, that these ideas are highly similiar to the Quakers. This demonstrates that the ETS do not totally reject all churches but seek to find what 'grains of truth' which lie in each of them. I was often reminded that many sincere individuals exist within the churches.

Sincerity is not a stagnant concept that is confined to a single definition. Sincerity is a powerful tool that could both be inclusive of a wide range of individuals from different religions – as well as those who considered themselves non-religious or atheist/agnostic. On the other hand, it's vagueness in its application allowed flexibility in who it was applied to, thus making it a tool of exclusion as well. Sincerity was difficult to understand because of its vague applicability. How to discern a sincere person was an unspoken schema possessed by the long-term members. It is an ambiguous quality that is only seen by one who has already been considered sincere themselves by the community. In this way, sincerity is a concept that has the mutability to be both universal and highly specific in its applicability. It can be inclusive of people from the most diverse cultures and religions, but exclusive to all those who have rejected the truth of Jesus' revelation to humanity. It could be a quality that existed

[126] McKay, 102.
[127] McKay, 103.
[128] McKay, 102.
[129] McKay, "Another Cornerstone," 174.

in an individual's actions or it could also be an internal state or a 'seeker mentality' they possess despite their action. Those who are sincere are those who exemplify some the values of the group, yet it is unclear which values. This term is deliberately flexible, ineffable and ambiguous – it is a tool by which to stretch to include some and exclude others.

The Kingdom of God

Sincere individuals will eventually enter the 'Kingdom of God,' or the 'Kingdom of Heaven.' This concept refers to what will take over the world after the apocalyptic events of the *Book of Revelation* play out. It also refers to an other-worldly, ever-present realm that exists beyond the human domain – but can be accessed in the present by living out the teachings of Jesus. In an article entitled, 'The Coming Kingdom,' the Kingdom of God is described as:

> This mysterious "kingdom of heaven" does "not come with observation" (Luke 17:20); it is not "of this world" (John 18:36); it is not ruled by "carnal weapons" (II Corinthians 10:4); in fact, by human political standards, it is not a kingdom at all. Instead, it is a relationship between the human race and our Creator. It consists of attitudes and spiritual forces at work in the lives of those who are humble, loving, and sincere in their faith toward God. All of these forces come from the Spirit of the One who Created us, which, in some mysterious way, is also the Spirit of the One who died on the cross in Israel some 2,000 years ago. In other words, God's kingdom IS the Spirit of Jesus. The kingdom of heaven is the REVELATION of Jesus. The kingdom of heaven is what Jesus came to demonstrate, at the same time that it is something yet to come when he returns.[130]

The Kingdom of God may also describe the force that permeates the community relationship. Community is important for the ETS and their relationships with one another are vital in living out the teachings of Jesus. They consider their community organisation as reminiscent of the early Christians. The Kingdom of God can also refer to an unseen global community. This 'invisible' kingdom is the culmination of sincere individuals who may not know one another but who are connected through their relationship with God. In the end-times, those who are sincere will be united together in preparation for 'the Great Tribulation,' and they will become a part of the coming Kingdom.

The Root of all Evil

[130] End Time Survivors, "The Coming Kingdom."

One of the most important teachings of Jesus, according to the ETS, is that the love of money is the 'Root of All Evil.' To serve God, one must reject the worship, reliance and fetishization of money. In 'How to Resist Conditioning for The Cashless Society,' they state that "the Bible tells us that the love of money, whether physical or electronic, is responsible for all the evils and injustices in the world."[131] For them, the way money is treated in society is "idol worship" and they identify it as the cause of the ills in the society around them. Inequality, environmental degradation, corruption, human rights abuse, etc. are all the result of the love of money.[132] They often refer to Matthew 6:24, which states, "no one can serve two masters: for either they will love the one and hate the other; or else they will hold to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."[133] This choice is particularly important during the end-times because those who choose Mammon (money or materialism) over God will be subject to God's wrath. Their rejection of money must be examined through a millennialist frame whereby money is not only the source of the evil in the world today, but it is also what will prevent people from salvation in the end-times. It is also from money that the 'Mark of the Beast' will emerge – it will be the tool by which the Devil will gain power in the world.

The radical lifestyle of the ETS derives particularly from the rejection of money. No one in the community has paid employment, they don't work for money and when someone joins they are expected to give up their work and career aspirations. What money they do have is shared amongst the community and the expenditure of money is communally decided upon. They live in vehicles because of the reduced cost, they bin-raid supermarket bins for food, and they will perform their own vehicle mechanical and other general maintenance work where they can.

> *The community is highly skilled at frugality and know of many strategies to get free items, free food and 'wrought the system.' They are collectors of vouchers, give-aways and bargains. Some conversations involved ways the members had found cheap ways to do things. For example, Leon had come across free gym passes, which was exciting for the opportunity to access showers. As most of their food is obtained through bin-raiding supermarket rubbish bins, there was often excited talk about things they had found in the past. Dave commented one day that it seemed that everyone in the community was obsessed with food. In my fieldwork, it wouldn't be an*

[131] End Time Survivors, "How To Resist Conditioning For The Cashless Society."
[132] "The Root of All Evil."
[133] End Time Survivors, "How To Resist Conditioning For The Cashless Society."

> *exaggeration to say that most visits I had with the community involved the consumption of food combined with discussion on what they had found in the bin that week. These usually concluded with comments on the absurdity of consumer behaviour, how wasteful our society is and how it's unbelievable what gets thrown away. These conversations always took place with a comical tone. The members would then self-consciously comment to me that their freegan practises probably sounded disgusting to someone like me who is "in the system."*

They ETS do not totally live without money and I was often assured that this was not a compromise of their ideals. They can use money because it is the love of money which is the source of evil, not the money itself. There are some aspects to their lifestyle, such as buying petrol for their vehicles, which they can't escape. To pay for these inescapable costs they collect donations when they distribute tracts. Also, when a new person joins the community their money is added to the community's joint account. However, they believe that one day when the mark of the beast emerges, and it becomes necessary to cease the use of money, they will be forced to find a new way to live. This compels them to spend short periods, which they call 'faith outreaches,' where they practise surviving without money. They seek to condition themselves to be reliant on God and not money in preparation for a cashless society which will be regulated by microchips implanted into the hand.

The Mark of the Beast

The ETS' understanding of the mark of the beast comes from Revelations 13: 16-17:

> And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads. And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name."[134]

The ETS believe this will emerge in the last days and will be the tool by which a world leader (the Devil) will "be able to control the whole world."[135] They believe that the mark will be RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) microchip technology which gets inserted into the hand. Eventually, the move to a cashless society will be complete and the microchip will become the ubiquitous way to make financial transactions – as well as a means of identification, storing data, and monitoring. Gradually, each person will be pressured into getting the microchip in order to remain a participant of society. It will be the temptation of

[134] Revelation 13: 16-17
[135] McKay, Dave, "Don't Take the Mark."

money that will compel people to take the mark but by taking the mark one is choosing money over God. Those who do not take it risk persecution for not conforming. When the mark begins to be "rolled out," this is also a signifier of the oncoming Great Tribulation that will involve persecution, violence and destruction suffered by the world and specifically, the true followers of Jesus.

The ETS avoid using money – unless it is out of necessity. They are always conscious that they will eventually have to find a new way to survive without using money at all, as well as, without access to medical treatment, services, education, etc. "When the Mark of the Beast comes in…" was a common beginning to a sentence. It was a concern that perpetually sat in the community's psyche. The ETS' preparation for the time when the mark becomes ubiquitous in society is to disengage from the use of money, but also from "precursors to the mark."[136] These are technologies that condition society in preparation for the introduction of microchips, such as credit cards, transport cards and other types of microchipped cards.

> *On the fourth day of the faith outreach we left the house of Ibrahim after spending the previous day painting his lounge room. He was catching the ferry to work in the city and suggested we could travel with him. We approached the wharf and Ib began to buy the tickets. At the same time, John pulled Leon aside to have a private conversation. When they returned, they expressed their concern to Tyra and I that the ferry tickets possessed a microchip within them. However, Ibrahim had already bought the tickets and they thought it best to get on the ferry as planned. On the way, John asked me if I thought there were microchips in paper tickets, I said I wasn't sure. When we got to our destination and said goodbye to Ibrahim, the true impact of this act became apparent to me. The use of the microchipped tickets upset John and Leon for the rest of the day. Occasionally Leon would note how it he had enjoyed their time with Ibrahim, but it had been tainted by the ferry ticket incident.*

[136] End Time Survivors, "5 Tips on How to Survive the Last Days Without the Mark of the Beast."

Figure 7: DVD cover for the ETS film, *The Mark,* which we distributed during the faith outreach. (photograph, 2018)

Listen Learn Live

The opening slogan of many *Endtime Survivors YouTube* channel is, "hi I'm training to be an Endtime Survivor. I want to listen and learn so I can live in the last days." The channel's aesthetic of dramatic music and flames, as well as, their overtly apocalyptic name evokes both *Bible* prophecy and the prepper movement. One of the tracts commonly distributed in 2017/2018 was a DVD that was a documentary called *The Mark*. This documentary explores microchip technology, the apathy by the churches regarding the mark, and ways to break free of the coming "system." Also, being distributed during my fieldwork was *Not for Everyone*, a book written by Dave on interpreting the *Book of Revelations*. This was this book that Leon distributed to me the first time I met him. Other apocalyptic literature consists of a fictional series of three books – *Survivors, Listening* and *Destroyers* – that consists of three parallel narratives of the cosmic drama. As well as books and videos the ETS have also produced several rap songs, such as 'Don't Take the Mark'[137] and 'Mark of the Beast.'[138] Furthermore, I witnessed many discussions about what the community will do "once the mark is rolled out" – how they will collect donations, where they will find food and where they will live.

[137] Niall Killeney Taylor, "Mark Of The Beast (Christian Rap Video)."
[138] *The Mark/The Law*.

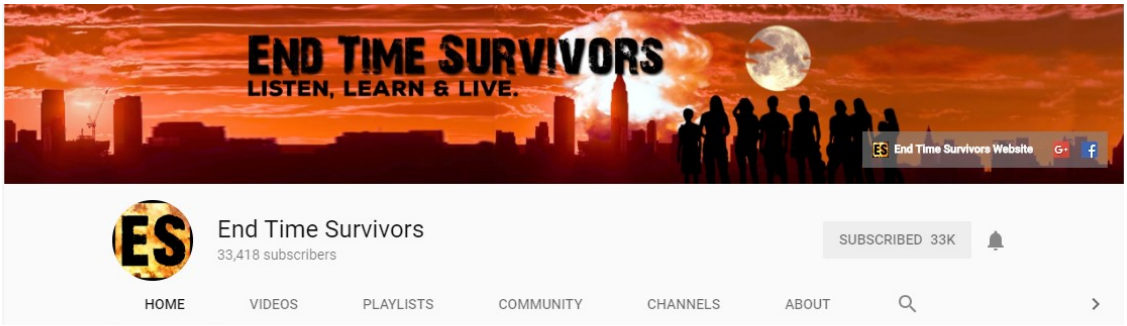

Figure 8: The Endtime Survivors' YouTube Channel. ("End Time Survivors," 2017.)

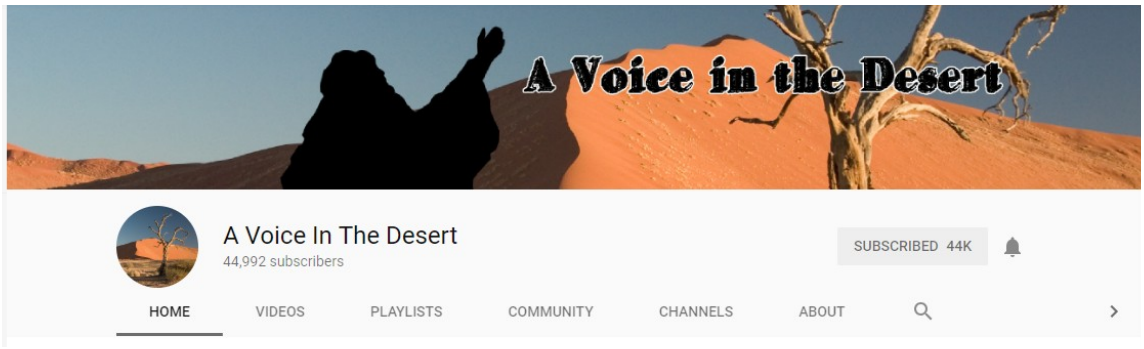

Figure 9: *A Voice in the Desert YouTube* Channel – the dark figure represents 'Voice.'. ("A Voice in the Desert." 2018)

The *AVID* channel, in contrast, is less overtly emphatic about the end times. The aesthetic of the channel consists of a desert and a silhouette of an individual in robes which refers to the character 'Voice.' When the channel began, 'Voice' referred to Dave, but as the channel has developed other 'Voices' have contributed to the channel. The content on the channel appears to be more directed at issues in the 'here and now,' of how to live out the teachings of Jesus in the present moment. There is an undertone of millennialist concern and many videos on the subject, but it is less pronounced. This contrast between their channels reflects the contrast in the community between both fervour and disinterest in the apocalypse. In the beginning of the fieldwork, I came to understand the ETS as having emphatic millennialist concerns. However, in the later stages of my fieldwork it was established by the community that they felt I was over-emphasising the millennialist aspect. They suggested that it was a more peripheral concern and that living out the teachings of Jesus, regardless of end-time fears, was more important. This was baffling considering the significant proportion of millennialist-themed literature, production and discussion that I encountered.

This paradox may be understood in several ways. Firstly, different members have different levels of concern for the end times. It was noted to me that the base in the U.K, which mainly

administers the *Endtime Survivors* Channel, had members who were more interested in *Bible* prophecy. When I asked Tyra if she was attracted to the millennialist aspect of the group, she said that she had little interest in it and was attracted to the community for different reasons. Secondly, millennialist themes are prominent in the material the group distributes to the public (online or in the street) because it is a popular topic. However, this is causing issues because, as they reported to me, they are attracting too many preppers and people who are overly-emphatic about learning how to survive in the end-times. The ETS don't agree with the "survivor mentality" of preppers. They are disinterested in prepper practises of building bunkers, stockpiling food or accumulating survival skills because they see this behaviour as consumeristic, greedy, isolationist and selfish. Instead, they believe that God will provide everything they need. They believe that they need to remain connected to society in order to carry out their witnessing work. Finally, the ETS are more concerned about the end-times than they realise themselves or wished to convey to me. For the ETS, millennialism is bound up in the teachings of Jesus. They live out the teachings of Jesus, partially because doing so will allow them to be part of the coming Kingdom of God – to do this they must live by faith, escape the 'system,' reject the love of money, reject the mark and preach the gospel.

Lifestyle

Figure 10: The kitchen inside one of the community's buses. ("Kitchen in a Bus," 2018)

Living by Faith

'Living by faith' is the term used to describe the alternative to being reliant on money and 'the system – which is the general phrase used to refer to mainstream society. They believe that if they put their time, energy and resources into working for God, or doing things for others out of love, then they need only to be reliant on God to provide what they need. It is an ongoing practise, disposition, modality and lifestyle. It is the ETS' answer to how they will

survive once the mark becomes unavoidable.[139] Living by faith is also a salient theme of faith outreaches – which takes living by faith to the extreme. Going on an outreach involves having faith that God will provide food, shelter, and safety. On the faith outreach it also means being reliant on God to lead the group to locations, situations or circumstances that will facilitate their mission to witness to others.

> *The first instance of "God's provision" on the faith outreach occurred as John and Tyra were walking to meet me on the first day. They found several unopened bottles of water sitting on the side of the footpath. Later that day, we found a fresh bag of groceries against a wall with no signs that anyone was returning to it. On the final night of the outreach, we went searching for cardboard to sleep on, and found a box of burlap sacks that we could use as blankets. All of these things were understood to be God's provision.*

This principle dictates most aspects of their lives and it involves a great deal of resilience. In learning to trust God, they also learn how to do without many comforts. In moments of lacking, they interpret this to mean that God is purposefully not providing something because He wants them to learn how to adapt to the item's absence. Yet, sometimes exceptions are made when they have no choice but to use money. In times where they are unable to access an item or service, they take the opportunity to find a creative solution. All members develop the skills for adapting to new and challenging situations.

> *When I first visited Leon and John's bus it was winter, so the first thing I noticed was that it was warm in the bus. The heat emanated from a large bubbling pot perched upon a small rusty gas stove. The bench on which the gas stove sat, as well as everything else in the bus, appeared to be a collection of debris once destined for rubbish collection. The makeshift table consisted of a plastic board attached to a metal beam. The seats were old and faded but an assortment of small cushions had been placed on them. Crudely cut pieces of fabric were used as curtains across the bunkbeds and planks of wood of various colours had been assembled to create small shelves. What possessions they did own were gathered from bins, found, given to them by someone who had forsook all, or acquired through happenstance. I heard stories of members making their homes in different places from apartments, to huts built above an Indian sewer, to shipping containers and even an urban cave constructed*

[139] "How to Walk on Water."

for a storm drain. I also heard about members in other countries who lived in hostels and one individual who was living on the streets with no more than a backpack.

They are aware that their lifestyles will need to continually adapt as new technologies begin to impede on their lifestyle. For example, a recently emerging problem is that when they ask for donations in exchange for the tracts, people are less and less likely to be carrying cash. Many accounts of times of God's provision circulate the community and are retold as reassurance that in times of need, God will provide. These stories ranged from amusing anecdotes of food appearing at auspicious times, to stories where members escaped death due to a series of coincidental events.[140] Their ability to adapt, to trust God, and "do without" are a necessity for their survival.

Figure 11: Several of the community's camper-vans parked at a park. ("Row of Buses," 2018)

Forsaking All

"At what point do you think you became a Christian?" was a question raised one Sunday afternoon. Rather than being a general term, the ETS believe that a true Christian is someone who follows the teachings of Jesus. Stephanie suggested that for her, it was forsaking all that was the demarcation. The moment the new member completed forsaking all was when they became a true Christian.

To live by faith, one must first enact the 'Forsake All Principle.' Forsaking all extends to all aspects of life: you must sell or give away your possessions (some items are shared amongst the community); quit your job; give up career aspirations; unenroll from educational institutions; give your money/assets to charity or give it to the community's shared account; leave your family; and detach yourself from all other social commitments. Forsaking all does

[140] McKay, "The Great Escape."

not only refer to material attachments, rather "the principle teaches that in all areas of human experience, it pays to let go of our attachment to things, whether they be material possessions, hopes, relationships, fears or whatever."[141] Forsaking all involves giving up one's own motivations, intentions and desires. This allows them to adopt a receptive state of being so that God may guide them to do His will. Previous identity markers of career, family, hobbies, education or religion are forsaken, so they may adopt their new identity as a Christian and community member. What's more is that forsaking all is not done only once, it is a mentality that the members continually call upon to avoid becoming attached to worldly possessions.

Forsaking all does not always happen straight away and it is a long process for the potential member. I witnessed two individuals join the community and both of their joining experiences were unique. The common practise in the community when they are contacted by a potential member is to invite them on a 'trial week.' This is a period of time – which can be longer than a week – where the potential member can live with the community as if they were a member. They attempt to use their own possessions as little as possible, engage in *Bible* studies and will accompany members while they distribute.

> *Tyra forsook all over a series of months. After several months, she still not had forsaken all her possessions and she was left alone by the community for a few days to complete the process. Mitchell joined the community within several weeks of going to live with them. He forsook the majority of his possessions before he arrived to live with the community. he arrived with only clothes, a phone and a laptop. He completed the forsaking all with the community. Both members experienced a forsake all ceremony which marked the beginning of their new lives. How the ceremony is performed may vary. For these two members' forsaking ceremony, they changed into a new set of clothes which is given to them by another member. Afterwards, they had a small party for the new member. A unique aspect to Mitchell's ceremony, was that he lay out what possessions he had left at several of the member's feet. Several weeks later, I pointed out to several members that it was interesting that the forsaking ceremony seemed to be a common ritual. This was odd considering the community often spoke about not performing any rituals because they are weary of rituals. Nicholas shrugged and said, "we need to do something to mark their beginning as a member of the community."*

[141] McKay, "The Forsake All Principle." 78.

Someone who goes to live with the community is considered a 'visitor,' and only when one forsakes all are they marked as a member of the community. Forsaking all is an important way to demonstrate one's commitment to the community and the teachings of Jesus. It is an ongoing disposition adopted by members, as well as a modality which is intensified when the members go on outreach.

Practises

The Faith Outreach

A 'Faith Outreach, 'Survival Outreach,' or simply, 'Outreach,' is a period of time where members will choose to not use any money, leave their homes, take only a few possessions, and attempt to develop new ways of engaging with the world. There is little literature written about going on outreach because it is seen as a period which escapes category, definition and structure. It is a liminal period designated for creativity, spontaneity and innovation. Members will go on a faith outreach once a year, or every few years. The multi-faceted function of the outreach allows them to reify their identities, morals and faith. It is a period of possibility, where the members leave behind their usual ways of engaging with the world and they are given the chance to develop new skills, ways of witnessing and innovative ways to survive.

> *On the final night of the outreach, I sat up on the concrete bathroom floor as Leon and Tyra slept beside me. I sat straightening, stretching and slouching my back – anxiously waiting for the night to end. There was just enough dim light to write and I decided to create a list of the reasons the members gave me as to why they went on faith outreaches. When John was awake I asked him what reasons he would give. He said it was about "putting Jesus' teachings into practise" and "teaching ourselves to live without money now before the Mark comes in." Other reasons I was told throughout the 5-days was that they were practising listening to God and putting faith in God to direct them. On more than one occasion, Leon described the aim of an outreach as a means "to stop things from becoming a system."*

Going on outreach is a period where the ETS' principles culminate in an intensely embodied experience. It draws together many teachings on forsaking all, living by faith, the mark of the beast and preaching the gospel to the masses. For long-term members it is a chance to recommit to the forsake all principle by leaving behind their possessions for a brief period. It calls for members to practise putting their faith in God's provision. By electing to not use any

money at all, they can experiment with what life will be like once the shift to a cashless society is complete. In an article on faith outreaches, it states that their primary aim is to "go and preach in all the world." It also states that their aim is to "find the lost sheep. Don't wait for God to bring them to you. Leave the comforts of the 'fold' and get out there on the streets to find them."[142] Most activities on the faith outreach were directed towards witnessing. For example, John and Leon brought a large bunch of DVDs to distribute. Once they were depleted, the members practised witnessing through conversations with members of the public.

Figure 12: Our 'free work' signs propped up at the train station during the faith outreach. (Newtown Station, 2018)

There are no set of formalised rules for faith outreaches. The conditions of the outreach are set beforehand by those going on it. The parameters are set according to the circumstances of what is possible and how difficult they want to make it. This means that each faith outreach is unique.

> *On the day before the faith outreach, I spent the day with Tyra, John and Leon to prepare for the coming week. It was here that I met Tyra for the first time. John and Leon briefed us on what we should expect and what to do in certain scenarios. Leon and John told us stories about outreaches that community members had been on previously. They told us about an outreach that several members went on while they were in Kenya. They said that because they were westerners, it would have been too easy to find people who were willing to let them stay in their homes and give them food. In light of this, the group chose to do the outreach in a jungle outside the urban*

[142] Mckay, *Leftovers* Is referring to Luke 15: 4-7 and Matthew 18:11-14 .

area. Another story they told us was when several members did a faith outreach in London. One member received a guidance from God to walk to a particular place in the city. When they arrived, they saw chalk on the river-bed of the Thames. They then climbed down, retrieved the chalk and spent the outreach writing chalk messages all over the city. The most amusing faith outreach story was when a couple of members were doing free work and a young university student approached them. She asked if they could help her with an art project. They agreed and spent the next few hours gluing shredded pieces of paper back together – they were never told why.

That Sunday we also discussed the parameters of our own outreach. It was decided that we would only bin-raid as a last resort, we would be able to do free work, and whilst we couldn't use money, we would allow others to use money if they wanted to buy us food. They also decided that they would bring DVDs that could be used to trade for food, but we couldn't ask for money in exchange. We also discussed how many items we could bring. Leon said that I could choose to bring what I wanted and that I didn't have to stick to any of their parameters. I decided to take a small back pack and allowed myself a few luxuries such as a water bottle, a change of underwear and a toothbrush (I also had to bring a fieldnote book and several pens). When I met with the members on the first day of the outreach and I saw that they had one bag between the three of them, I felt excessive in having a whole backpack to myself.

One function of the faith outreaches, that is often unspoken is that they are a powerful team-building activity. Faith outreaches encourage members to practise their interpersonal skills which is required when living as a community. Going on outreach puts one in a vulnerable situation and this tended to make us want stick together. Especially, on the nights where we slept in the park. It was then that I found myself not wanting to stray far from the group. The continual time spent together means that we came to know one another very well. The members were clear that if there was any tension between anyone that it would be dealt with through the grievance system. This involves having a private conversation with the person you are having an issue with. We were told to be honest about how we were feeling and to be conscious of one another's needs.

On our faith outreach we had several grievances. These occurred mostly on the final day when everyone was feeling exhausted. Within an afternoon, John and I had a fight, Tyra nearly started crying at something someone had said, and two grievance

discussions were had on the short walk back to the bus. It was an uncomfortable afternoon and I felt uneasy at the fragile atmosphere. To my surprise, as soon as we arrived back at the bus, it was as though all the tension melted away. Everyone was happy again, the complaints were forgotten, and we merrily ate dinner together. For the duration of my fieldwork, the strongest relationships I had were with the three members I went on outreach with.

My experience on the outreach helped me to understand the implicit function of this activity. It is a team-spirit building exercise that encourages strong bonds through shared hardship. It allows members to learn about one another and how to navigate one another's flaws. Specific to myself, the members came to know me a lot better than my 'research persona.' At the end of the outreach, Leon was saying "I keep forgetting that you aren't one of us," and "it's as if you're one of us."

Free Work

One of the main activities that took up a significant portion of the outreach was 'free work.' Free work is the concept of doing a job for someone without the expectation of anything in return. It may include, but is not limited to, gardening, maintenance work, construction, or cleaning.

During the early morning of the second day of the faith outreach, we fished cardboard out of the rubbish bin, sliced it into strips and borrowed texters from the reluctant staff at the local library. We made signs that said, 'Free Work,' and discussed using slogan such as, "Freely Receive, Freely Give," "what would the world look like if we all worked for love?" "is it possible to live without money?" "Greed Breeds Mean deeds," and "Welcome to the gift economy." On the back or side of our signs we wrote, "will do any Job for free for 1 day, as long as it's not unethical or illegal." We took our signs to the busy street mall and stood on either side of the walkway. As people walked past we asked if they needed any small job done and that we would do it "totally for free," "no strings attached," and "as long as it is legal." People looked at us with suspicion. I spotted one woman who halted in hesitation, locking eyes with her I gestured her to come over. After explaining what we were doing she asked if we could clean her kitchen. We agreed and walked with her to her home. After several hours of cleaning the floor, wiping the surfaces and

attempting to fix her window blinds, she was grateful and gave us lunch to take with us.

The second person we met, named Ibrahim, ended up letting us stay at his house for two nights. He did so in appreciation for painting his lounge room and was very trusting of having several strangers stay in his house. In fact, he was so trusting that at night he went to sleep at a neighbour's house and in the morning, he went to work and left us alone in his flat all day. Interestingly, I observed that John and Leon refrained from talking about anything religious with Ibrahim. I asked them why and they said that they were just 'relating' to Ibrahim rather than witnessing. They decided that he had "too much faith in the system" – this meant that they didn't feel he would be receptive to their message of living according to the teachings of Jesus.

In both these instances the goal wasn't so much to witness to these people, but to do something kind for them. Free work can be done as part of a faith outreach or it can be an activity in itself. In the context of the outreach, there is an implicit hope that doing so will lead to food or a place to stay. John and Leon warned us that sometimes that people didn't give anything in return. They also made it very clear that the reason why we were doing free work was to do something out of altruism – we shouldn't be motivated by the hope of return.

Listening Times

An important part of the faith outreach, and more broadly the ETS' lives, is the practise of 'listening times.' This involves sitting quietly for a few minutes and waiting for visions, ideas or guidance to be given to them by God. After this time, the members will take turns sharing what they 'got' with one another, as well as their interpretations. Other members then share their interpretations of each other's visions. Often, they attempt to find consistency between what they experienced, but sometimes some visions may be interpreted on their own. If a consistent message is found between members, then they understand this to be confirmation that it is a guidance from God.

On the third morning of the faith outreach we sat in the park together and had listening times. We had been doing listening times every day of the outreach and it was still a practise which I struggled to participate in. I asked John how he knew what images were from God and he said it was because they were usually random and unrelated to his immediate surroundings. I couldn't help the thought that any image or words I might experience was just my imagination, but I still wanted to

participate in it. After long minutes of my shifting uncomfortably on the grass attempting to convince myself to keep my eyes closed. I opened my eyes and watched the branches of the tree above and imagined an arrow forming out of the branches. When I shared this, I was surprised to find that the other members thought it was interesting. They asked which way the arrow was heading, but I hadn't really noticed a direction. I pointed in a vague direction which I thought the image was going but I wasn't sure it really had been going in any direction. Leon said that I seemed to be pointing in the general direction he felt like God was telling them to go. He said it confirmed an urge he had gotten to head towards the centre of the city

There was no particular pressure to have a vision during listening times. Sometimes members would say they didn't get anything, or that what they experienced was a personal message. Listening is often employed in times of indecision or strife, or it can be performed whenever the community or a member wishes. It is a practise which is akin to the Quakers' meeting for worship. The ETS believe that all individuals have access to God and can discern His will through listening or other discernment practises.

Discerning God's will entails a series of strategies that must be employed in tandem with one another to get an accurate interpretation. In an article entitled, 'Eight Ways God Talks to People—Go Ahead; Try Them!' they list eight methods of discernment. 1) They must look to the teachings of Jesus. 2) They must examine their conscience. 3) They can obtain "advice from Godly people" or people who are "trustworthy spiritual guides." In the community this was also described as 'Counsel.' 4) They can receive direct revelations which can be in the form of dreams, visions and prophecies. These are often attained through listening times. 5) If they find themselves in a particular set of circumstances this can be interpreted to be set up by God. 6) Coincidences can also be auspicious indicators. 7) If the members have a desire to do something, or what the members called a 'burden,' this can be interpreted as inspired by God 8) Finally, miracles or 'signs' are strong signifiers of God's will.[143] One must draw upon several of these methods in order to accurately discern God's will. The members warned us that using only one method without verifying it with others may lead to misunderstandings.

On the first morning that we stayed at Ibrahim's house, we had listening times. John reported that had a vision of a snake slithering across the room and into the tv set. He also saw a barber shop pole in the middle of an ice desert, like that which appears in cartoon pictures of the North Pole. He interpreted it to mean that Ibrahim's place

[143] "Eight Ways God Talks to People—GO AHEAD; TRY THEM!"

was a spiritual desert and that it wasn't likely they were going to convince Ibrahim to not have faith in the system. Later that day, John went out briefly to buy groceries for dinner (Ibrahim gave us the money to buy the groceries). When he returned he reported that the store that sat the front of Ibrahim's flat was a barber shop that had a swirly barber shop pole out the front. Tyra and Leon, arrived later, and excitedly made a similar report. Neither of us had seen the barber shop pole prior because we had arrived at Ibrahim's home when it was already dark.

For the members, realising that a barber shop pole sat at the front of Ibrahim's home, confirmed John's vision and thus, his interpretation that Ibrahim was a 'spiritual dead zone.' It also encouraged the decision to move on from Ibrahim after the second night. Visions received during listening times are powerful determinant that have significant impact on the decisions made by the community. What is interesting to note about listening times is that it must be verified either through group consensus or external factors. Therefore, no particular individuals are considered to hold special authority over anyone else – everyone can engage in listening and God can speak through anyone.

Distributing

Distributing is the practise of handing out tracts or DVDs, books and pamphlets written and created by the community. It is one of the ETS' primary activities, as it helps achieve their broader aim of witnessing to as many people as they can. Yet, they are not only concerned with handing out as many tracts as possible. Rather, "the real aim of going out distributing is to meet new people, in the hope of inspiring them to become end time survivors too."[144] It is about finding the right people who will watch/read the material and making a connection with that person in order to "inspire" them to search for more information. The aim of distributing is not in convincing someone to watch or read something – it is about putting oneself out there so that they may meet the one individual in the crowd who is already likely to accept the message they are spreading. In an article, 'How to Inspire Others' they state, "it's true that you will have to sift through hundreds of goats each day while you wait patiently for a sheep to come along."[145] Distributing is important is because it fulfils one of their core teachings which is "preaching the word" and inspiring others to be a follower of Jesus. Usually when they go distributing they ask for a "few cents" to help with printing and they have a quota of tracts they aim to get out each day. Members are consistently encouraged to become better at

[144] "How To Inspire Others."
[145] "How To Inspire Others."

distributing and if they exceed their quota they may receive a reward such as a food item that they would not able to find whilst bin-raiding (such as ice-cream).

On the faith outreach, distributing these DVDs was one of the main means by which we interacted with the public. The four of us would stand on a busy street corner or in a mall, all within eye-sight of each other.

> *Leon had many types of greetings that he used to catch the attention of a passer-by. He would comment on their clothing, ask for a high-five or say things like, "can I give you this?" and "hey you're a dude, I'm a dude, let's chat!". If the person stopped, he begins his spiel by telling them what the films are about. He explains that the reason for handing them out is because "some friends and I are doing a short experiment where we are trying to live without money for a week." He would then tell the person that they could have the DVD but that "we ask for you to make a donation of anything except money." Often the person smiles in recognition, looks confused or narrows their eyes in suspicion. They ask what kinds of things they can give. Leon would reply "you can give anything, but lot of people give us a food or drink item." It sometimes became a running joke that the examples he gave of what people could trade were selected according to what we needed most. In most cases we hoped that we would get food.*

Some people were very generous and would go to the nearest supermarket and buy us food or drink. Other instances people didn't have anything to give. However, if they showed signs of attempting to find something to give in return, or had a long enough conversation with the member, the members would give them the DVD. The point of asking for something in exchange is to make the person feel like the tract is worth something. John and Leon explained that when people trade something it makes them less inclined to instantly throw it away. Sometimes people would stop for a long conversation and they would ask more questions about where the tracts came from and who the ETS were. These conversations were openings for the members to introduce ideas such as not working for money, the evils of greed, and living by the teachings of Jesus. However, unless the person asked often the members wouldn't mention that what they were distributing was religious. Leon said that he held off from "using the G-word," unless he got into a deeper conversation with someone. They know that doing so would instantly repel a lot of people.

I attempted to distribute for a few hours on the first day, but I found it extremely difficult. The DVDs we were distributing contained two films produced by the ETS, *The Mark* and *The Law*, as well as several music videos. As I noted earlier, *The Mark* is a documentary about the mark of the beast. *The Law* is about alternative modes of punishment. It references events such as 'the Whipping Trial.' This is where members took on the punishment of Joseph Johnson's family who attacked one of the JC members in 2006.[146] I found the experience of distributing, as if I were a member, as highly uncomfortable. Instead, I decided to observe others distributing. Nevertheless, I was still able to participate in distributing, because on a faith outreach, all activities are group activities.

> *We would spend hours hanging around the same spot sometimes with very few people stopping to take the DVDs or talk, or with many people passing by and stopping. In the moments in between distributing we would chat to each other, make jokes and comment on the people we saw. In one instance, one member started comically dancing to the busker that had set up near us. I came to notice a pattern where with every few rejections we would all engage in these small interactions with each other. I understood it as a way of decompressing the feelings of rejection, by looking over to someone who they could be certain would return the smile. In this way, we kept ourselves in a good mood. Having someone nearby became a source of reassurance in times where a member of the public was particularly abrasive in their rejection. When someone did stop to talk, this awareness of one another was necessary to signal to each other to come over and join the conversation. Leon, in particular, felt it was better when we supported one another when witnessing to a stranger.*

Distributing on the faith outreach with Tyra who was still learning about the community during that time, demonstrated the practise to be one that also functioned to generate group cohesion. Perhaps if all the people on the outreach were well seasoned members, distributing would not have entailed such group involvement. However, because Tyra and myself were cast in the role of student, John and Leon were highly active in teaching us. We always remained as a group and John and Leon were always nearby to offer help and advice.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to convey how the most quotidian practises such as living on buses, bin-raiding, or handing out tracts, is deeply bound up within their core goal to live out

[146] Francisco, "Fox 11 Undercover Report - The Whipping Trial."

the teachings of Jesus. It cannot be stressed enough that this is the cornerstone to the ETS' purpose, meaning and practise. I was consistently reminded of this and its re-occurrence can be noted throughout their literature. This guiding principle leads them to forsake all, live by faith and spend their days preaching the gospel. It permeates through their ideas of the Kingdom of God, sincerity, the mark of the beast and the root of all evil. That said, the material reality of this principle makes its own demands. They must confront the actualities of modern life and continually adapt to the rapid changes of the 21st century.

They are a pragmatic group, they are disinterested in lofty theological discussion and see their plight as a simple concept. Often, they would say that they were simply following the teachings of Jesus. For an outsider observing this world, it is far from simple. After a year of fieldwork and research, they still surprised me and I could never run out of questions to ask. My experience on outreach raised innumerable issues – not all of which can be covered in this thesis. For example, it would be interesting to note that they do not believe in baptism of any kind, as they believe that one is baptised by the words of one speaking the gospel to them. I could have also discussed their sexual ethics, that they believe in living celibate lifestyles and discourage having children. I could have also explored their millennialist concerns further and provided the reader with a description of their eschatology. Amongst this, I could have included many self-indulgent ambling fieldnotes of amusing and exciting stories out on the road. Nevertheless, the ethnographer's inevitable task is to highlight some voices, ideas and practises and mute others. I have presented the key ideas of the community which permeate throughout the smaller issues and act as the foundation from which all other concepts are built.

Their adherence to their principles to reject the love of money, to live by faith, forsake all and rely on God's provision, are challenging to the ideals of western modernity. Many, perhaps even the reader, have critiqued them for being "off-loaders" or burdens on society. Some consider their use of society's waste to live as a contradiction to their ideals and are confronted by the supposedly extreme action of selling all one owns and moving onto a bus to live with a community. However, the ETS are not living within a modernist logic. They are not bound to the same normative conventions lived unquestioningly by those who the ETS call 'people in the system.' They consider themselves as contributors of good to society. They do not consider their living by faith practises as reliance on the society they reject. They believe they would survive without it because they are reliant upon God. Finally, their

decision to join is not an extreme action. For the member joining it is the fulfilment of a deep and abiding conviction to follow the teachings of Jesus.

The purpose of this chapter is to give the reader a comprehensive understanding of the ETS. The ETS live a marginal lifestyle – they nomads within the urban sprawl, who are often passed with little recognition. Whilst in other periods and places they have occupied apartments and storm-water drains, the Australian community live solely in vehicles. Every Sunday, as the evening drew near and the park began to close its gates, a discussion would take place of who would be going where that week. Unable to stay in one place for than a couple of nights, they must be continuously moving to new areas and seeking out well populated places to distribute. They live in the margins of society, yet they are out on the street distributing six days a week. Their embodiment is one that is nomadic, adaptive and fluid. Their core principles and practises imbue within them an innovative spirit, which provides them with the ability to continue to evolve according to the circumstances they find themselves in. This chapter has attempted to create a picture of the ETS' lifestyle which will help the reader to see them not as an NRM that exists solely in an academic paper, but as a lived group of people who the reader may have even passed in the street. It has aimed to show how my methodology, approach and rejection of previous cult paradigms enabled me to perform deeply engaging fieldwork which yielded many insights I might not have gained otherwise.

CONCLUSION

What this thesis has attempted to do is to provide the reader with a comprehensive account of who the ETS are, what I did in order to thoroughly analyse them and how I came to construct a comprehensive map of my findings. My fieldwork with the ETS was an ever-evolving process – even up to the point of finishing this thesis new developments were occurring every week. One of the most significant changes came at the beginning of 2018, when Dave commented to me that he had a dream which he interpreted as a signal that he would retire in September. In June 2018, *AVID* released a video announcing that the original 'Voice' (Dave) was reducing his involvement in the channel and allowing new 'Voices' to take charge. Over the process of my fieldwork, Dave's anonymity as 'Voice' slowly dwindled as ex-members and cult-busters rallied to make their own *YouTube* videos 'revealing' Dave's identity. Throughout my fieldwork, the ETS' connection to the JCs gradually became a well-known fact on the internet. As has come to be expected, these new antagonists drew on the typical themes of misinformation, such as kidnapped children, selling kidneys and a coercive charismatic leader – which I signalled as core themes of the cult narrative in the second chapter of this thesis.

The ETS may have experienced a brief period where their new websites and *YouTube* channels went unnoticed by online cult-busters, but as their connection the JCs became more well-known, so did the re-emergence of the same issues of harassment which plagued the community in the decade prior to their rebranding. The cult-wars may be over for some, but for a small group such as the ETS, the prejudice that the cult label brings continues to be a problem. The ETS experience very real prejudice daily – either from online critics or on the street whilst distributing. The online realm offers a new platform for the propagation of prejudice towards NRMs and, despite the group's attempts to escape the cult mythos, the internet continues to perpetuate it. Additionally, there are areas of the academy that have yet to catch up with the most recent debates regarding the term 'cult' – as well as its bedfellows of brainwashing, mind control, 'victim' joiners and psychopathic charismatic leaders.

The initial negotiations to perform this study were tentative because, for the community, allowing me to research the group was a risky activity. One challenge of which I had to remain constantly aware was the manner in which I construed the ETS, would have significant consequences for the community elsewhere. In light of this, one of the motives of this thesis has been to provide insight and illumination on the ETS, in order to dispel the

mythos which surrounds them. This means that I have chosen to study the ETS in a way that does not begin with the presumption that they are a dangerous, manipulative and coercive 'cult.' Overcoming this initial prejudice within myself had to be done before I could seriously begin to understand the complexities of the ETS. The embodied approach I adopted throughout my fieldwork forced me to examine the ETS beyond the superficial narratives provided by journalists, cult-busters and sensationalist media. For one who seeks to perform a study on an NRM, similar to the ETS, they too must overcome these internalised assumptions. However, for many individuals (even in the academy) these prejudices remain unchallenged. What is often forgotten is that this mentality, whilst it may seem trivial in some circles, has severe real-world repercussions 'on-the-ground.' Scholarship which dispels this cult mythos is highly important. Thus, I hope this thesis' contribution is that it removes some of the fearful ambivalence that surrounds the ETS.

The ETS is a unique group which has found a powerfully efficient way to survive in the current conditions of modernity and still preserve a very serious and considered connection to the Gospels. Despite the antagonisms they have faced and continue to face, the ETS are able to thrive because of their ability to remain fluid, adaptive, and innovative. The JCs/ETS have had an eventful 40-year history which attests to their resilience as a community: They have been wrongfully imprisoned in various countries, threatened with violence, physically assaulted, arrested, taken to court, infected with life-threatening illnesses from cleaning sewers in India, been chased by villagers who sought to stone them, and harassed by stalkers. Despite these obstacles, the JCs/ETS have continued to adhere to their core values, to preach the gospel and maintain strong community cohesion. Even in 2010, when the persecution they were experiencing overwhelmed the community, their dispersion did not lead to total annihilation. Rather, they entered into a period of gestation before rising again with a new powerful way to share their message. Through their use of the online realm, they are now rapidly growing faster than they have ever done before.

The cult model can no longer account for groups such as the ETS who are responding to the ever-changing conditions of western modernity. The old tropes about charismatic leaders are no longer coherent in a world where individuals from all over the globe can interact through decentralised online mediums such as forums, social network, email and *YouTube*. A charismatic force centred upon one personality is no longer necessary to maintain an unroutinised but cohesive group of individuals together. The ETS are nomads – both online and in the material world. Their lack of attachments to worldly possessions, church buildings,

strict ritualistic regimes and rigid hierarchies, allows them to collapse and reconstitute themselves without losing connection to their core aims. Their past and present global presence in places such as the U.S, the U.K, Phillipines, Mexico, India, Kenya and Australia, attests to this ability to root themselves in most contexts and learn how to thrive within them.

The ETS are unique because they actively disembark from the human realms of politics, economies, hierarchies, and cultures to engage with a realm that is beyond human comprehension. Their adherence to the teachings of Jesus – which they consider to be an absolute truth which underlies all things – and their belief that they are all part of an invisible Kingdom of God allows them to enter these states of collapse and reform. They possess a potent ability to detach from the logics of modernity – specifically those regarding consumerism and capitalism – and question the assumptions which underly it. Their nomadic lifestyle then allows them to reconstitute a way to live within it – all the while staying true to their core ethos to follow the teachings of Jesus. The ETS are innovative because of the way they can step outside of normative ways of being, and live in a way that is transgressive, radical and deeply challenging (for some). Just as the ETS are able offer an alternative way of understanding the world and innovate new ways of interacting within it, NRM scholars should seek to do the same. New models are needed to understand these groups, the rapid developments of the last decade need to be considered, and new trajectories need to be drawn regarding the role of religion in the 21st century. The place to begin is to look at groups such as the ETS – and this thesis has hopefully begun this project.

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