

All My Enemies Are Cultists:
*The Social Weaponization of Religious
Categorization As Seen In Plymouth,
Massachusetts*

John Simeon Coady

Senior Thesis

Primary Advisor: Daniel Vaca

Second Reader: Jae Han

Department of Religious Studies

Brown University

Providence, Rhode Island, USA

April 24, 2023

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OUTRODUCTION

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is my favorite part of the paper.

Firstly, a massive thank you to my advisor, Daniel Vaca. Lord knows I'm not easy to work with, and you handled my sporadic process beautifully through the past year. I've been beyond lucky to have you in my corner through all of this. Thank you to the brilliant Chavi Banker and the amazing Jason Protass for their support, joy, and critiques, without which this paper would have no legs to stand on. To Jae Han, thank you for offering your insight to this project and being the professor who made me want to dedicate my college education to Religious Studies in the first place. Thank you to the Pilgrim Hall Museum, for the access to their extensive collection of writings of the Pilgrims. Thank you to the Twelve Tribes community in Plymouth, for welcoming me into their home. So many people have helped me along the way to this end, and to them all, truly, thank you.

I want to thank every single friend who not only helped me get through this paper and my time at Brown, but for making it an absolute blast as well. Thank you to Steven Cervantes, for setting me off on this path and coming with me straight into the belly of the beast. Thank you to Maddie Groff, for always believing in me, especially when I couldn't myself. Thank you to Meg Fay, for always being there for me these past 10 years. Thank you to Cooper Cardone, for being the genius I always wanted to be and for being my brother through everything. Thank you to Taylor Knapp, for being my legitimate first friend at Brown and all that Shake Shack wine. Thank you to the entirety of Donkmobile¹, for making me feel at home wherever I am. Thank you to Brian Sherry, for opening your home to me whenever I need it and making sure I've never felt alone since 4th grade. Thank you to Josie, Rhys, Joey, Big Mike, Anna, Mia, Hoke, Isaac, Katie, Lizzy, Gabe, Fate, Will, Anna, Mia, Peter, Ben, my fellow RELS concentrators, and everyone I'm sure to have missed for making my time in college one I'm sure to look back on fondly.

And finally, thank you to my family. Thank you Dad, for all the sacrifices you've made for us and always being just a phone call away. Thank you Sarah, for inspiring me to pursue this degree and setting a standard of excellence I've been chasing for 21 years. Thank you David, for

¹ The people who need to know what this means know what this means. If you don't, it's not for you.

more than you could possibly imagine, but especially for being my best friend. Thank you Pop, for making me want to be the best man I could be.

Ma, thank you. For all the FaceTimes and listening to me ramble about anything and everything. Thank you for teaching me that we never cry alone. Thank you for making me strong in all the right ways. Thank you for Survivor nights and cinnamon toast, thank you for coming to all of my shows, thank you for that blue manilla folder, thank you. I'll call you tomorrow.

INTRODUCTION

I. Why Am I Writing This?

In my junior fall at Brown University, half-way through my Religious Studies degree, I found myself struggling for the first time in the discipline. “Methods in Religious Studies,” or, lovingly, RELS 1000, is often talked about as the most difficult, arduous class in the department. My experience offered little parity. The sheer amount of complex theory and case study analysis overwhelmed me, especially when coming from an all-Zoom experience the year previous. Nearly all of this theory, remarkably, focused on one single question: what is “religion?” There are only so many times you can explore this question before it breaks you, I swear. This single topic was pulverized every Monday afternoon in our seminar to the point that, when it came time to write our final paper, I wanted to let my frustrated thoughts be known. To my mind, the question of “religion” had become so complex that I proposed a complete adherence to emic categorization. Since many of the troubles for the definition of “religion” stemmed from it being a Western, Protestant concept, I argued that we should treat it as such and not universalize it, akin to a Talal Asad argument I had latched onto in class.

the theoretical search for an essence of religion invites us
to separate it conceptually from the domain of power.²

-Talal Asad, *The Construction of Religion as an
Anthropological Category*

Traditionally identified “religions” outside this environment would then not be classified as “religion,” but as whatever their observers thought fit for themselves. I was frustrated with all the theory, the ivory tower, the ignorance I perceived from Religious Studies as a discipline in

² Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 28.

concerning itself with insular conversations between scholars and not focusing on the lived perspectives of those they write about. I thought I wrote a good paper.

I didn't. Everytime I met with Professor Stephen Bush, he'd warn me about excluding traditions from "religion" as a category. "Saying Hinduism isn't a religion has serious implications." I insisted, however, that my premise was correct. "You just have to devalue 'religion' as a category first," I'd say. I turned the paper in and, in turn, received my first B in college. My frustration seemed to never end.

When the Summer before my senior year arrived, I knew I wanted to explore the importance of colloquial categorization of faith in my thesis paper. I wrote and rewrote this very introduction so many times that Summer, remembering my conversation with Professor Bush each time, rewording the phrase "*it is vital to first remove the inherent value that 'religion' as a category brings to a faith when applied*" over and over again, always dissatisfied with how to communicate this idea concisely and efficiently.

It was at that moment when I knew what my final thesis was about. Maybe it was impossible to explain concisely. Maybe it would take a 78-page thesis to finally explain what I meant. So I wrote it.

This paper will be about "religion." It will be about Plymouth, Massachusetts, founded in 1620, and how "religion" and its subset of innumerable categories was weaponized against the Wampanoag people to dehumanize their entire culture. It will be about how fluid the conceptualization of different faiths has been throughout the history of the community, breaking down the assumption of "objective observation." It will be about the rise of "secularism" and where "religion" fits in our contemporary society. It will be about the honor and respect that word carries, and sometimes the fear and shame. It will be about the pain and destruction that

lack of that word brings as well. It will be about “cults” and “magic” and the violence these words sometimes incite, even if invisible to the untrained eye.

But it will also be about me, my family, and my home. It will be about frustration and confusion, and never knowing the answers or even the right questions to ask. Ultimately, it is about an Atheist trying to make sense of something he’s never truly understood himself. I am a single mind, one student (or scholar, depending on how nice you want to be to me) with some ideas he’d like to share with you. I hope for everyone to be able to read this, not just my advisors and professors and classmates. I’d want my blue-collar Catholic grandfather to be able to read this, if he were still with us. I want “cultists” to read this. I don’t want you to have to have a deep theoretical background to hear me. No need to break out the Hegel or the Geertz.

My name is John Coady, I am a student at Brown University, I grew up in Halifax, Massachusetts, and I have some ideas I’d like to share with you.

II. Terminology

Since this paper will be concerning itself with the nuanced usage of religious terminology, it’s important to lay out some ground rules for how *I* will be applying these terms to avoid any confusion.

When I use religious terminology to refer to the category itself, I will place the term within quotation marks (e.g. the category of “religion,” the connotation of “cult,” etc.) Without the quotation marks, I am using the word for its common colloquial meaning. However you read it is fine with me.

I want to distinguish between Religion and Religious. Religion will refer to the generally widely recognized religions under mainstream Western understanding. Religious will be applied

more broadly, referring to anything that might exhibit behaviors or characteristics that often pertain to religions. Religiosity will be used in the same way.

Faith, for my purposes, will refer to the larger social trend of ritual seen throughout human societies. While I refrain from universalizing “religion,” I will use faith as a more universal phenomenon as a human experience.

Lastly, I will be referring to a “Social Hierarchy” throughout. This is a subconsciously-developed social structure that generates clout and power for some and oppression for others. The hierarchy is entirely dependent on the material circumstances of the community and who is able to exert social influence on the community at large. One could not necessarily purposefully change this hierarchy, and most movements we’ll see seem to uphold whatever hierarchy is in place until the material circumstances shift.

For other terminology that may prove confusing, be sure to check the footnotes. I try to clear up any potentially confusing statements there throughout.

III. Methods

For my methodology, I wanted to rely mainly on primary resources from the Plymouth area, looking at snapshots of historical moments. I want to engage with the colloquial understanding of religious terminology and how the connotations of such change and shift over time. In Chapter One, I will mainly be pulling from documentation written by Pilgrims and other early colonists, gaining insight into their tendencies in religious categorization. In Chapter Two, I will lean on immigration tracking and other indicators of broader trends as we move through the centuries. In Chapter Three, I will primarily be using my own personal experiences in Plymouth, along with news articles from the last few decades.

I will not be engaging thoroughly with past scholarship too much. While I will lean on ideas from past theory that help set the stage for my understanding of the weaponization of religious categorization, I will not be relying on these theorists to explicate my ideas. I often feel religious scholarship is insular in its debates between theorists and I hope for this paper to be more accessible to a wider range of readers. I hope to focus on the trends seen throughout Plymouth's history rather than theories developed by those looking elsewhere.

IV. Overview

In this paper, we will be exploring the social power of religious categorization, and how religious categorization acts as a social tool to uphold the particular social hierarchy that is subconsciously present within a community. By looking at the history of Plymouth, Massachusetts, we will observe how religious categorization has been applied to uphold the social hierarchy found in Plymouth at a specific moment in history.

In Chapter One, we will be looking at the founding of Plymouth in 1620 and the weaponization of the exclusion of Native culture from the category of "religion." We will see how the gatekeeping of "religion" invalidates Native society entirely in the eyes of Western colonists, leading to unmitigated violence from the colonists. We will also see the beginnings of a new social hierarchy in Plymouth, drawing lines between different Christian denominations.

In Chapter Two, we will see how religious categorization is a fluid process, entirely dependent on the material circumstances of the community around it. We'll see Catholics grow from being ostracized to the most influential faith in the town, due not to theological revelations, but shifting demographics and economic circumstances. This observation will break down our

often taken-for-granted objectivity in religious categorization, as we'll see that categorization is dependent on historical context, not on theological observation.

In Chapter Three, we'll see how the rise of Secularism affects the application of religious categorization, and where the lines between the two blur. We'll look at the Catholic sex abuse scandal and how Massachusetts reacted. We will also be looking closely at the term "cult," the most charged piece of categorization in our present moment, through my time visiting the Twelve Tribes in Plymouth. We'll see how the weaponization of categorization we saw clearly in Plymouth's history is still in action today.

Chapter One

No Religion:

How Exclusion from the Category of “Religion” Undermines the Social and Cultural

Positionality of a Community from a Western Perspective

1600-1700

To start our discussion of religious categorization as a social weapon, it is helpful to start broad. In its most basic form, the first decision you must make in religious categorization is whether to view a cultural system as “religion” or not. In our modern, contemporary context, a general colloquial understanding has been developed as to what is and is not religious in nature, the division between religious and *secular*. Secularism is a complex marker as a category for academics, as it hinges entirely on what “religion” excludes from its own categorization, describing distinctly only what is *not* religion. We understand this colloquially to include politics, legal systems, economics, broader culture, and other aspects of society that are not tied to the traditional “world religions”.

However, this was not always the case. “Religion” was adopted into the European lexicon from the Latin word *religio*, perhaps best translated as scrupulousness with a moral obligation. *Religio* was used to describe the rites and rituals of Roman temples, and later used to describe the Christian faith in practice. Soon, it was expanded to act as a sort of genus, identifying different *religio* throughout the world. For all practical purposes, however, “religion” was used to identify

Christianity and all that followed from it, including but not limited to churches, the clergy, prayer, ritual, and traditional dress. What complicates our modern perspective in these observations is the growth of the Roman Catholic Church. While seen without contemporary perspective as a religious entity, it acted tangibly as a political and economic force, crowning kings, setting laws and practices that were enforced, and supplying wealth and power to supposedly secular forces. While these actions may seem out of the realm of the world of “religion” today, these actions were not antithetical before the 16th century.³

In the 16th century, we will see the shift in social perception within European communities where “religion” begins to be separated from its “secular” counterparts. That is not to say, however, that “religion” is devalued as a part of society. Instead, it becomes recognized as a vital piece of a civil society. Jean Jacques Rousseau, an influential 18th century philosopher, wrote on Civil Religion, the concept that religion is, while separate, deeply a part of their civil construction.

“Now, it matters very much to the community that each citizen should have a religion that makes him love his duty; but that religion’s dogmas are no concern of the state’s or of its members’ except insofar as they involve morality and the believer’s duties towards others.”

-Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*⁴

Rousseau here is identifying the Western conception that, for a society to function ideally, religion must be a part of every man’s life. Not only this, but he details a specific type of religion, one that only affects specific aspects of a man’s life, like “moralities” and “duties,” but not a “concern of the state.” Rousseau is, whether consciously or not, cloaking Protestant Christianity in a veil of civil purity. His idea of a civil society is deeply tied to the ideals and

³ For more on the etymology of “religion”, see Brent Nongbri’s *Before Religion*.

⁴ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 72.

philosophies of Protestant Christian thought. Therefore, while separate in distinction, the ideas of civil society and Protestantism are deeply linked.

This valuation placed on “religion” as a concept is the generative piece of the weaponization of religious categorization. Without religion, one could not possibly, in the minds of early modern European perception, take part in civil society, particularly among the more religiously fervent communities. This need for adherence to a particular “religion” pigeonholed expression of faith into what is *recognizable* and *acceptable* by those with social authority.

To showcase just how deep this valuation of “religion” cuts, we can look to the establishment of the Plymouth Bay colony in modern-day Massachusetts as a theater for social hierarchical fabrication. The dedicated faithful of the Puritan Separatists from Scrooby, England hold strong attachment to the valuation of religious categorization, and they invade a land where the simple concept of “religion,” a European word in origin and nature, is unknown. We will see the need for the Puritans to escape a rigid religious hierarchy in England, their plan to establish a new religious ecosystem in Plymouth Bay with them at the top, and how this hierarchy is used to rationalize the violent erasure of Wampanoag culture from the land.

I would be remiss to not mention the difficulties that surround research regarding the Wampanoag culture. The Massachusetts language, of which the Wampanoag dialect is a part of, pre-European invasion did not have a written component, relying deeply on a rich oral tradition. Beyond this, the English colonists made purposeful attempts to erase Wampanoag perspectives from the histories that were recorded. I hope to establish at least a detailed snapshot of

Wampanoag culture at the immediate introduction of English colonization to contrast the European perspective that we⁵ are likely more familiar with.

I. The Wampanoag - A Careful Balance

Across the southeast shore of what will eventually be labeled Plymouth Bay, a series of separate but interconnected tribes of thousands of indigenous people lived a complex political and spiritual life. This confederacy of tribes, called the Wampanoag, consisted of at least 24 distinct tribes, numbering well in the thousands. Their particular dialect, a subsection of the Massachusetts language, had no determined written language. They shared information through a rich oral tradition, passing down histories, spiritual traditions, and knowledge of the land. The land, in fact, played a deep importance to the culture of the Wampanoag people. While distinct boundaries were drawn between different tribal confederacies, their tribal tradition did not see land as potential personal property. The land was to be lived in, enjoyed, and cared for to the greatest extent possible. The Northeast Woodlands were rich hunting and fishing grounds, as well as a prime location for the growth of maize.

Beyond the bounds of Wampanoag lands, other tribal confederacies maintained complex, and often tense, relationships with the Wampanoag. The Narragansett tribe to the south⁶ had a less amicable relationship with the Wampanoag at the turn of the 17th century, and communication between local sachems⁷ was vital to maintaining positive relationships between the confederacies. Runners, experts in navigating the woodlands, would relay messages between

⁵ You, the reader of an academic paper, and me, the writer of one. We are deep within an academic tradition that stems directly from the Western, Protestant, European perspective that I will critique throughout this paper.

⁶ Now modern-day Rhode Island.

⁷ A sachem is a tribal leader of Northeast American Indian communities.

tribes, dealing with political and interpersonal conflicts between this carefully balanced system in interconnected tribes.

The Wampanoag were people of dedicated faith as well, with much of their philosophy being rooted in the power of the land around them. They placed a certain sacredness in the natural world, with a plethora of stories passed down orally reiterating the wisdom and spirituality found in their local woodlands. There was no central church or dogma, but certain elders of the communities would take on spiritual leadership roles.

Since the turn of the century, sporadic expeditions of English merchants would visit their land. These interactions varied in frequency and nature. Some would come to preach a foreign faith in a language unknown to them (which they would develop a basic understanding of), others would come to hunt and explore the land. A few particular expeditions were violent in nature, often ending in the abduction of Wampanoag to be sold into slavery. A few Wampanoag had even returned from Europe to inform them of the societies found across the ocean. After these initial interactions with the English, a terrible epidemic descended on the tribes. Their numbers dwindled at an alarming rate as the unfamiliar smallpox ravaged their communities.

It is at this moment that the year 1620 arrived. Massassoit, sachem of the Wampanoag, balanced a carefully constructed confederacy of thousands, navigating complex political relationships with other neighboring sachem. Their people were fighting a deadly disease, seemingly brought along by the confounding visits by the men from Europe.

Within the next 50 years, the Wampanoag will be decimated, displaced, massacred, and erased from the land they held so dear. The complexities of Wampanoag culture and histories have been purposely and violently erased by the English colonists in the centuries to come.⁸

⁸ This snapshot of Wampanoag culture was built on the archaeological resources from Plimoth Pawtuxet Museums.

II. “Religion” - By Europeans, For Europeans

In Europe, a remarkably different scene was taking place: the invention of the social phenomenon that is “religion”. I say this to be purposefully controversial (the particular practices of religion were not, of course, consciously invented), but there lies truth in it.⁹ In the midst of the 16th century, France underwent a series of bloody conflicts resulting from the unrest experienced by the Protestant Reformation. The suppression of Protestant practices under Catholic religious, and often political, authorities spurred violent pushback from Protestants seeking to disrupt the Catholic hold on their communities. Over the course of the next hundred or so years, dozens of wars were fought in the name of Protestant Reformation, earning this period the name the “Wars of Religion”. At the time, “religion” as a social concept was not as recognizable from our modern understanding. “Religion” was deeply tied to the politics, economics, legalities, and other aspects of common European life. The general contemporary understanding of law, economics, and politics being “secular” in nature, separate from “religion”, was not necessarily the popular conception. Following the Wars of Religion, however, European philosophy shifted. An estimated 8 million lives were lost following these wars, and, whether consciously or not, European academics began to view “religion” as a category distinctly removed from other aspects of society. This shift in perception is no doubt in part due to the Protestant theology taking the continent by storm. Catholic authorities had maintained a deep political and economic influence over nearly every major Western nation, while Protestant theology highlighted a focus on separating one's own faith from the authorities that dominate their social life (the Catholic Church, Catholic monarchs, etc.)¹⁰

⁹ It is important to not hold “religion” as an objective truth of the human experience. It is a word, and in this paper, we will treat it as such.

¹⁰ Tol, *Wars of Religion*, ” 3.

A new general understanding of "religion" eventually emerged. "Religion" was now something conceptually separate from kingdoms, politics, birthright, and other apparatuses of political power. "Religion" became solely the practice of one's faith in Christ. As such, religion was defined by churches and the communities built around them, with a growing sense of the importance for one to practice how they see fit, devoid of strict Catholic political pressure. For these Europeans, which will soon include the Pilgrims of Plymouth, civilization was multifaceted, consisting of a specific amalgamation of politics, art, culture, economics, and now, "religion".

Religion (saith he) hath been amongst us this 35 years; but the more it is published, the more it is contemned & reproached of many, & Thus not prophanes nor wickednes, but Religion it selfe is a byword, a moking-stock, & a matter of reproach; so that in England at this day the man or woman yet begins to profes Religion, & to serve God, must resolve with him selfe to sustaine mocks & injueries even as though he lived amongst ye enimies of Religion. And this com̄one experience hath confirmed & made too apparen̄te.¹¹

-William Bradford

William Bradford, a spiritual leader of the Puritan Separatist movement in Scrooby, England, writes of the two-fold effects of the shift in perception of "religion." Here, he writes on particular religious sentiments in England at the beginning of the 17th century. The witnessing of widespread violence and conflict surrounding religious tensions had a dual effect on public perception of this newly realized civil pillar. On one end, an increased cynicism surrounding "religion" seems to have developed. In a reaction to violent conflicts and unrest seemingly centered on religious disagreement, many took the position that, without such importance on religious experience, these conflicts could have been curbed. "Religion", Bradford claims, has become a point of mockery for many, with deep political and even *personal* opposition to the

¹¹ Bradford, "Of Plimoth Plantation," Chapter 1, 9.

idea of “religion” itself. On the other hand, however, there is a rejuvenation of religious fervor in some, Bradford included. Push back from authoritative systems in societies often deepens the fervor and dedication of the marginalized opposition, and in Bradford’s case, the push back on Puritan theology by the ruling Anglican Church did just that. Either way, we are seeing a development of “religion” as something being distanced from politics and economics, at least in rhetoric, if not tangibly. The cynical movement wishes to see “religion” removed from political and economic movements while the fervorous movement wishes to bolster their religious expression by removing the influence of the religious authority within their community. While “religion” may have been deeply contested as a concept, one thing remained true: “religion” is a part of civil society, and it is distinct from the rest of society's multi-faceted parts.

As with all facets of society, the need for hierarchy still pervaded. Perhaps more clearly visible in spaces like politics and economics, religion was employed as a tool for establishing social superiority. As much as politics defines the distinctions between those in power and those not, and economics creates rigid and impenetrable class structures, "religion" operates in a similar fashion. Having been intellectually removed from other social influences, religious hierarchy is emboldened by a single anthropological tool: categorization. In order to ensure one's religion bolsters their social standing, their "religion" must be seen as more proper or valid than others. This is easily visible in pre-Reformation Catholic behavior as well. The label of "heresy" was a popular tool in Medieval Europe to discredit deviant communities of Christians, justifying, in Catholic eyes, the persecution and destruction of such congregations. By undermining the rhetorical validity of other practices, the Catholic Church was able to position itself as the primary “religion” in Europe. The Reformation sought to challenge this hierarchy, and this shift manifested in dozens of violent armed conflicts.

III. Colonization - How To Declare War Without Declaring War

“Religion” as a singular aspect of European civilization became a vital tool in the rationale for colonial activities of European powers. Just as these social shifts in Europe were occurring, wealthy governments and private entities alike began searching for new avenues to amass wealth in lands beyond the European peninsula. It is important for us first to understand that defining this time as the “Age of Exploration” is a gross misnomer. Men such as Christopher Columbus and Francisco Magellan did not set out on their journeys out of their own personal curiosity, but instead behind the large funds of influential elites in Europe’s society. This widespread colonial movement was driven by monetary investments from entities that sought returns from colonial expansion. Some would be trading companies, searching for fresh deposits of resources not easily accessible in their European environment and new potential markets to trade in. Others would be governments and monarchs, looking to expand their political influence through the violent seizure of lands, resources, and people, often manifesting in forced enslaved-labor. This movement was pushed by the most influential entities in European society with a singular end of returning on steep economic investments.

Ensuring that these colonial agents remained righteous in the eyes of the European public was vital to the success of the colonial expeditions, since keeping public support guaranteed consistent funding. Europe entered a period where wars were seen as a solely political action, as European society now has clearer social divisions between religion and state. For these nations to forcefully engage with other societies around the world, a certain *rationale* must be employed. In order to avoid the panic that always surrounds a declaration of war, these colonial expansions

had to be theoretically and rhetorically removed from the political sphere of European life. In order to do so, European intellectuals looked to an early form of academic anthropology.

European academia in the 16th century was deeply Euro-centric. While one could certainly point towards ignorance as an explanation for this rigid bias, a more simple explanation exists: European academics made observations on what they were able to observe. Prior to expansive European exploration, the entire conception of what constitutes a civilization was based on European society and history. The definition of politics, law, and religion, therefore, closely resembled the particular monarchies, constitutions, and Christian traditions they existed within.

Here is where we see the most basic form of religious categorization: what *is* and is *not* considered a “religion”. The mere concept of “religion” itself has been developed *by* Europeans *for* Europeans. Observing the Protestant and Catholic cultures that dominate the continent, the definition of “religion” is deeply settled in the rituals, practices, prayers, and scriptures of traditional Christianity. While this particular framing of religion may function well to describe Western European society, issues arise when this social category is universalized to be applicable to all forms of human society.

As European explorers made contact with foreign cultures around the world, they began to make basic anthropological observations to report back to their sponsors. These included identifying the facets of civilization that Europeans would expect to find in a developed culture like their own. When it came particularly to identifying “religion” within these cultures, most explorers were unable to find an equivalent to that seen in European society. Beyond not having any conception of Christ or Christian tradition, the cultural practices which today we recognize as being religious (rituals, traditional dress, prayer, etc.) were not identified by these 16th century

explorers as being a part of “religion”. These aspects instead were tied to the Christian tradition.¹² Pedro Cieza de Leon, a Spanish conquistador, traveled to the Andes with the goal of seizing the riches owned by the Incas.

...observing no religion at all, as we understand it, nor is there any house of worship to be found...
-Pedro Cieza de Leon¹³

Here, we see de Leon being unable to draw connections between the Christian religious experience and the religious activity of Andean natives. While certain aspects of “religion” that contemporary academics recognize existed in Andean culture (ritual, dress, prayer, etc.), de Leon’s conception of “religion” was deeply tied to the particular practices of Catholic dogma. Without a broader understanding of “religion” as a social facet beyond Christian culture, many communities with a distinct practice of faith were labeled as lacking this particular civil construct. Hernan Cortez’s observations of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, however, show a complexity in our understanding of colonial anthropology. By observing and labeling the Andean natives as lacking “religion” with an air of impartial historiography, and therefore claiming *objectively* that there is no developed civilization to be found, de Leon’s invasion and violent seizure of materials and people from the Andes avoided political pushback and remained a righteous, holy mission.

This great city contains many mosques [houses for idols] ... The principal ones house persons of their religious orders ... All these monks dress in black ... from the time they enter the order.
-Hernan Cortez¹⁴

¹² Simply having “ritual” as a part of a cultural system was not enough for religious categorization, as the rituals European Christians observed as such were Christian rituals. Identifying ritual beyond immediately recognizable ritual through the lens of traditional Christian theology was not a part of this early anthropological practice.

¹³ Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” 270.

¹⁴ Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” 272.

In opposition to de Leon, Cortez observes among the Aztecs what he recognizes as “religion”, openly using “religious” to describe their cultural systems. Within his description, he leans on European colloquial words to explain Aztec culture to his European audience.¹⁵ He describes the religious authorities as “monks”, who are a part of “orders.” Without a broader range of religious terminology, Cortez is only able to describe Aztec culture through a strictly Christian lens. This is not to say, though, that Cortez is attempting to bridge the gap between Christian and Aztec religion. His usage of the word “mosque” is deeply intentional. Muslim mosques were the most immediate *other*¹⁶ place of worship recognizable to European Christians. Cortez avoided a Christian term for these places of worship and instead decided to *other* the Aztec faith just as Muslims are *othered*. This creates a fairly distinct binary: Christianity and *everything else*. While Cortez is restricted to familiar terminology to describe foreign practices, he is still able to use familiar terminology to create a cultural distance between his religion and that of the Aztecs.

For purposes of developing a colonial rationale, these anthropological observations offered Europeans an apolitical explanation for the mobilization of military forces against indigenous peoples. Europeans understood that “religion” was a primary piece of a civilized society, much as government and art showed signs of civility. Since European colonists were not able to identify “religion” akin to their own, they could come to their own conclusion that these indigenous communities lacked civilization itself. Not only does this invalidate the practices of faith of these communities, but it invalidates all aspects of their society as “uncivilized,” including their politics. For the colonial rationale, militarized actions against these societies

¹⁵ This translation is the best estimate of our modern understanding of the words themselves. The case and point being that “monk”, “order”, and “mosque” were all translated from the words Cortez would primarily use to describe Christian monks, the orders they belong to, and the Muslim mosque in Africa and the Middle East, respectively.

¹⁶ “*Other*” is used in this context as purposeful alienation by Cortez of the Aztecs from European familiarity.

could not be political, as the politics of the indigenous communities was entirely invalidated. Instead, colonial movements became an act of “introducing civilization” to lands where there is none, all based on the observation that they lacked a Christian religious system. This would be a consistent rationale across dozens of colonial campaigns, including that of the Puritan Separatists from Scrooby, England.

IV. The Puritans - Escape From and Fabrication of Hierarchy

Ever since the English Reformation and the establishment of the Anglican Church in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church, the Puritan movement has been a staple of the English religious ecosystem. Following the formation of the Anglican Church, the Puritans believed that the removal of Roman Catholic traditions from the culture was not as thorough as it should have been. When King James I rose to the English throne, he announced that many Catholic practices, such as bishops, would remain a part of the Anglican Church. The lack of total divorce from Catholic practices only fed the Puritan religious fervor and drove up the religious tension across the country.

Scrooby, a small village in Nottinghamshire, was home to a congregation of Puritan Separatists, dedicated to the complete removal of Catholic influence on English culture. William Bradford wrote of his time in England before the departure of the Mayflower.

Religion hath been disgraced, the godly greeved, afflicted,
persecuted, and many exiled, sundrie have lost their lives in prison
& otherways. On the other hand, sin hath been countenanced,
ignorance, profannes, & atheisme increased, & the papists
encouraged to hope againe for a day.

-William Bradford¹⁷

¹⁷ Bradford, “Of Plimoth Plantation,” Chapter 1, 9.

Bradford exposes here his personal understanding of “religion”, which mirrors that of the colonial rationale of earlier. Bradford invokes “religion” here in reference to his particular Protestant understanding of Christianity in opposition to Catholic Christianity. Bradford centers “religion” around his own particular faith with no regard to any sort of anthropological or theological analysis. “Religion” operates as a purely subjective marker of social respect, and Bradford positions his particular theology over Catholicism. He references both “atheisme” and the “papists” as being separate from “religion”. Our modern conception of religion keeps Atheism and Catholicism firmly separate, but Bradford willingly ties the two together. It is vital to understand here the ramifications that exclusion from “religion” carries. Bradford does not simply claim that Catholics and Atheists are non-participants in his conception of “religion”, but also that this non-participation is inherently a harmful act, positioning them alongside “sin”, “ignorance”, and “profannes”. The social connotation that follows from one’s categorical exclusion from “religion” is the lynch-pin of the weaponization of categorization. Bradford’s positionality generates immediate tension between him and any other party that may not follow his particular Protestant faith, deepening the religious fervor of the Scrooby congregation.

After pushback from the Anglican Church on the practices and meetings of Separatists congregations, the Scrooby congregation began to develop a plan to relocate from England to land where they would be free to practice religion how they pleased. The plan consisted of two destinations; some of the congregation would relocated to the Dutch Republic, where religious freedom was more readily available, and a group of just over one hundred would board the *Mayflower* and set off for the New World, hoping to establish a colony where the Separatists would be free to practice how they please. William Bradford would be a part of this voyage, and soon after the first winter at Plymouth Bay, would become perennial Governor of the colony.

I would be remiss to not discuss the effects of social religious hierarchy from the perspective of the Puritans, even though they will eventually use the same tools to violently erase Wampanoag culture upon their arrival in Plymouth Bay. The Anglican Church was the cultural center of England, bolstered by political and economic support that offered deep influence on public perception of religious hierarchy. The Anglican Church positioned themselves as the only proper “religion” in the country (much like Bradford does for his Puritan theology), and labeled the Puritan movement as a sort of heresy. The decision to relocate the Separatist congregation to another land devoid of this strict hierarchy allows them, especially at a previously non-European location in Plymouth Bay, to fabricate and position themselves at the top of a *new* religious hierarchy in a new religious ecosystem. With economic and political forces behind Anglican dominance, the only real avenue for a hierarchical shift was this relocation and complete social repositioning.

On November 11th, 1620, anchored off the tip of Cape Cod, the 41 male passengers of the *Mayflower* signed the Mayflower Compact, the first establishment of a government for the soon-to-be Plymouth Bay Colony. The document is short, and contains little clarification about how the colony itself will be run, leaning on phrases such as “just and equal Laws” to broadly describe a functioning society. Most of the document is dedicated to religious rhetoric, describing a type of holy undertaking in the establishment of the colony.

Having undertaken for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian Faith, and honor of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the first Colony in the Northern parts of Virginia; do by these presents solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God and one another, covenant, and combine ourselves together into a civil body politick...¹⁸

-*The Mayflower Compact*

¹⁸ The Pilgrims, *The Mayflower Compact*, 1620.

The Pilgrims are in political and legal agreement that this voyage is for the purpose of the “advancement of the Christian Faith”. While in England we had seen an aversion from tying “religion” to political entities, the fervorous Puritan Separatists sought a new religious hierarchy where they sat atop. From Bradford’s writings, we understand this “Christian Faith” to be particular to their particular Puritan theology. The Pilgrims are entering a land they believe to be devoid of religious hierarchy and hope to establish one from scratch themselves. The particular irony of this situation is that they are, in fact, correct. They are not correct that the indigenous culture already at home in the land is devoid of faith and religious practice, but that the particular European conception of social religious hierarchy is not present in Wampanoag culture. The Pilgrims planned on imposing their rigid social hierarchy upon the Wampanoag people, so that Protestant Christianity would become the marker of a developed civilization.

V. Plymouth Bay Colony - Collision

While the Puritans remained hopeful in their ability to establish a society where they could remain at the top of the social and religious hierarchy, the material circumstances of their arrival did not allow for the immediate establishment of their vision. The Wampanoag people, whom the Pilgrims encountered quickly upon their arrival at Plymouth Bay, had been living on these lands for thousands of years. They arrived in December, and the New England winter descended upon them fast. By the end of this first winter, more than half of the one hundred colonists had succumbed to the elements and the new American diseases they were now exposed to. Come Spring, the Plymouth colony had been decimated, with little hope of establishing any strong settlement. At this time, however, Massasoit, leader of the Wampanoag people, decided to begin communications with the Pilgrims. Relations were deeply amicable to begin, with the

Wamanoag offering knowledge of the land, along with resources and a peace treaty that ensured the colonists immediate safety in the area.

The hierarchy that the Pilgrims wished to establish, with Puritanism firmly atop, could not be accomplished without the political and economic influence experienced by the Anglican Church in England. In these first few years at Plymouth Bay, the Wampanoag tribe remained politically and economically superior to the crippled colony of Plymouth. Bradford detailed some initial encounters with the natives in his journals, including one allegedly alluding to the “First Thanksgiving” of American folklore.

We entertain them familiarly in our houses, and they as friendly bestowing their venison on us. They are a people without any religion or knowledge of God, yet very trusty, quick of apprehension, ripe-witted, just. The men and women go naked, only a skin about their middles.¹⁹

-William Bradford

This passage offers a uniquely clear view into the rationale of Bradford and the colonists in their approach to relations with the Wampanoag. Bradford first explains the transactionality of the relationship, describing the exchange of “entertainment” for “venison”. The colony is in desperate need of the resources required for a firm foundation in the area, and Bradford imagines the simple experience of his culture as an equivalent to this in exchange. Bradford viewed their amicable relationship as transactional, even in a situation where the colonists are clearly receiving more tangible support than the Wampanoag are. To gain an understanding of his perception of them as a culture, we move to the back half of the passage. He does claim that they are “quick”, “trusty”, and “just”, but only as a surprise amendment to the observation that they are “without religion.” By using “yet” as a transition to these positive qualities, we see the deep connotation that Bradford carries towards those outside his Christian faith, with the implication

¹⁹ Bradford, “Of Plimoth Plantation,” Chapter 1, 126.

that, without his later amendment on their character, those without “religion” are slow, untrusty, and unjust.

The Puritans understood their positionality in the social ecosystem of Plymouth Bay. They were in an unfamiliar world and were in no place to attempt to take control of the area, at least not yet. The economic and political influence enjoyed by the Anglican Church in England gave it the ability to maintain a cultural superiority over other practices, but without this same support in Plymouth, the Pilgrims remained crippled. Their one sided transactional relationship²⁰ with the Wampanoag tribe proved fruitful for the colony, allowing more support from England to arrive in the coming years, bolstering the population and stability of the colony to where it was entirely self-sustaining by 1630.

At this point, the Puritan leaders in Plymouth began to turn their focus back to the goal detailed in their *Mayflower Compact*: the advancement of their Christian faith.²¹ John Eliot, a Puritan Missionary residing in Plymouth, began to preach to and convert the Wampanoag people in the 1650s. His translation of the Bible into a newly formed written version of the Massachusetts language, then preached aloud to congregations of Wampanoag, helped usher in a rapid growth of Christian influence on the surrounding indigenous communities.²² The Pilgrims were empowered by their improving economic position in the area and began expanding their political influence in the area, pushing back on many of the treaties that had been observed

²⁰ Tisquantum (Squanto), a Wampanoag man a part of the Pautexet tribe, became the personal advisor to the Pilgrims, teaching them how to survive the New England winters and become self-sustaining. He resided in Plymouth and became close friends with William Bradford. Tisquantum, along with the peace treaty ensuring the colony’s safety, allowed Plymouth to survive and eventually establish itself as a power in the region. For more, see Bradford’s *Of Plimoth Plantation*.

²¹ William Bradford coined them “the pilgrims”, after all.

²² And, in turn, the entire continent. Plymouth was the first permanent English colony in the Americas, and since American history hinges entirely on the domination of English Protestant culture, Plymouth is the site of the beginning of American Religious Studies. The fact that the inception of such is a violent act of erasure should intuitively tell us something about the nature of the Protestant conception of “religion” to begin with.

between the native tribes and the colony. In 1662, after the deaths of sachem²³ Massassoit and his son Wamsutta, a new sachem, named Metacomet, rose to power.

Thomas Church, son of ranger Benjamin Church, a military commander in Plymouth Colony, wrote a thorough history of the ensuing conflict that would be dubbed “King Philip’s War.”²⁴ His account, while regarded by the Pilgrims and future Americans as the most rich primary account of the conflict, does little to address the perspective of the natives. Written as an ode to his father Benjamin, Thomas gives no explanation for the motivation behind the collection of native soldiers and the assaults on colonies by Metacomet. Historical accounts of Wampanoag perspectives are restricted²⁵, and all we are now able to maintain is (1) that Metacomet grew frustrated with the increasingly tense interactions with colonists, a firm shift from the relationship showed between Massasoit and the colonists, (2) Metacomet contacted multiple sachem from the surrounding area about entering into a type of militarized confederacy, and (3) that, upon hearing this, Plymouth militias began to march in search of Metacomet. The war would wage for three years, rendering many colonies in the area destroyed, but ultimately ended in victory for the colonists, Metacomet’s head stuck on a pike at the entrance to Plymouth, and the vast majority of Wampanoag people forcefully removed and displaced from Plymouth Bay.

The superior armaments and defenses of the colonies ensured the eventual victory for Plymouth, but it was also the quick reaction of colonists to engage in conflict that helped undermine indigenous capability in warfare²⁶. It is at this time where we can recall the Wars of Religion in Europe, and the fear that followed in the European public surrounding armed political conflicts. Much like other colonial expeditions that downplayed the civility of

²³ A sachem is a tribal leader in Massachusett culture.

²⁴ “King Philip” is Metacomet’s Anglicized name as sachem.

²⁵ Again, due to the purposeful erasure of Wampanoag perspective from the public consciousness.

²⁶ Myles Standish, the first commander of the Plymouth militia, was often praised for his preemptive striking, including his attacks at Nemasket and Wessagusset, where he ambushed his enemies without initial provocation.

indigenous cultures to validate mobilization of armaments, the Plymouth inhabitants did the same against the Wampanoag. Harkening back to their *Mayflower Compact*, this conflict was reframed as a religious pursuit.

The government observing his extraordinary courage and conduct, and the success from heaven added to it, saw cause to enlarge his commission.²⁷

-Thomas Church

Thomas Church is intentional in invoking “heaven” in relation to recent success on the battlefield. The Puritans were one of the communities that grew in religious fervor surrounding the religious conflicts in England, having been suppressed by the religious authority at the time and having sought a society where they could maintain cultural superiority. In Plymouth, Puritan theology is the single most influential aspect of society on the public consciousness. In a colony that is devoid of the physical security enjoyed back in England, fear of war and conflict would certainly be heightened in the public consciousness. By framing this war as a religious necessity for the colony, the militia can validate increased aggressiveness, ambushes, and brutality, overall escalations of war, without causing detrimental fear and protestation within the colony. Benjamin Church, commander of his brigade of rangers, can ambush the Monponsett tribe, murder dozens and enslave the rest, and be lauded for his dedication and piety. Had this been a conflict between two perceived “civil” communities, like the Wars of Religion in Europe, public detestation would stir the same fear and conflict that helped bring about the flight of the Scrooby congregation.

At the end of the conflict, Plymouth Bay had been transformed physically, socially, and spiritually. The largest communities were no longer interconnected systems of Wampanoag tribes, but instead English settlements focused on expanding deeper into the land. Wampanoag

²⁷ Church, *King Philip's War*, 104.

oral tradition and cultural practices had been violently erased from the canon of the land, and English Protestantism inserted in its place. The Puritan colonists sought to establish a social hierarchy that would bolster their practice of their own theology and, through the violent removal of indigenous culture, they did just that.

VI. A Personal Note - Monponsett Memories

In my research on King Philip's War, I was curious about the role played by my hometown, Halifax, which lies just a few miles East of downtown Plymouth. There's an old museum just past the library, full of old colonial maps and records. On a visit once, I chatted with one of the local history-buffs who always seem to volunteer there. He told me stories about a battle that may have occurred by the Twin Lakes, formally East and West Monponsett Ponds. "If you dig around the leaves up there long enough, you're bound to find a few arrowheads from the fight," they'd tell me. Perusing Thomas Church's account of King Philip's War, I was struck by the mention of the Monponsett, which I had just found out to be a native tribe (even after 20 years of being less than a mile from the ponds that share their namesake). Church describes how Benjamin Church's regiment was tipped off of the tribe's location and, after a successful ambush, murdered, enslaved, and relocated the entire tribe. The arrowheads I was told about were likely never even notched. I opened Google Maps to triangulate, to the best of my ability, the tribe's location based on Church's account. I narrowed it down to a small neighborhood just above East Lake. I had been there before. It is a popular road-side attraction, where the original pair of Captain Myles Standish's granite legs sit just next to the road. A statue had been constructed in his honor in Duxbury, able to be seen from Plymouth's waterfront. In 1922, lightning had struck and destroyed the statue, but the legs survived and were relocated to this exact spot. Atop the site

of a genocidal massacre now sits a piece of trivia seen in *Atlas Obscura* for any middle-class adventurer to stumble upon on their way from Boston to Cape Cod. This is a violent and purposeful erasure of not only native people and culture, but all understanding and potential reframing of their entire history. The Protestant Christian culture sought total domination of the land, and to this day, that remains. Standish's scarred legs stand as a mockery to the indigenous people who called Plymouth Bay home long before it was given that name.

I end on this note to say that, for the rest of this paper, there will be little discussion of the Wampanoag people. I am analyzing the shifting nature of Plymouth's religious hierarchy and ecosystem, and beyond King Philip's War, Wampanoag culture was ultimately erased entirely from this system, excluded from "religion". The colonial rationales that ushered in this genocide remain barriers for the Wampanoag people so long as these sites remain road-side attractions and arrowhead hunting-grounds in the minds of the Protestant public. We will return to them in our analysis of modern day Plymouth, of course, but even if Wampanoag culture is now understood as partaking in "religion" (the accuracy of which is non-evaluable, since categorization is subjective in nature), the violence has already been committed to such a degree that it does little to bolster Wampanoag positionality in Plymouth's Protestant-based religious ecosystem.

In the Winter of 2022, I stopped by Halifax to visit the legs myself. It was a rainy day, but I stepped out to read the plaques across the property. After a few minutes, a man wearing a parka came out to greet me. He was the caretaker of the legs and gave me his spiel about the legs' history. We chatted for a second about Halifax and the legs, and I decided to ask him about the Monponset tribe.

He told me that, every year, the Mashpee Wampanoag community that survives today will come for a torch burning around the statue in *celebration*.

“Celebration?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He said. “It was struck by lightning and it exploded.”



Chapter Two

Wrong Religion:

How The Fluidity of the Social Hierarchy, Due To Shifting Material Circumstances, Morphs

Religious Categorization in Parallel

1700-1990

Under the broad umbrella that is “religion”, countless other particular classifications exist in colloquial conceptions that operate to identify, differentiate, and ultimately evaluate distinct practices of faith. Our modern understanding includes a set of “world religions,”²⁸ of which contain “sects,” or deviations from the base idea of the “religion” in question.²⁹ Dozens of terms, however, carry a significant negative connotation when applied to a community. More archaic terms used in centuries previous like “witchcraft,” “magic,” and “heresy” have been extensively used to label a faith and its practitioners as participating in a sort of religious deviancy, while the more contemporary “cult” operates in a similar way.³⁰

Anyone familiar with Plymouth, MA in the year 2023 would likely find the Plymouth of the Pilgrims to be unfamiliar in its rigid religious hierarchy. The Puritans sought to create an environment where they were not only free from oppression, but also where they could shape what behaviors and beliefs are acceptable by the community. If you’ll recall, they sought a complete removal of the influence of the Roman Catholic dogma. If you take a drive through Plymouth today, you’ll see more Catholic churches than any other denominations. Catholics are

²⁸ Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and dozens of other recognized faiths that are conceptualized as distinctly separate entities from the others. Relations may be drawn, but they all remain divided.

²⁹ The Protestant, Catholic, Congregationalist, and Baptist practices are all examples of recognized Christian “sects.”

³⁰ Which will be the focus of Chapter Three. Patience.

by far the most represented faith in the population, despite the recent growth of secular and anti-Catholic sentiments in the Massachusetts area. More on these specifics later, for our focus right now is this: *how* and *why* did Plymouth's social environment shift so heavily from its founders' vision? The *fluidity* showcased in Plymouth's colloquial categorization of faiths demonstrates the power of the social weaponization of categorization, removed from anthropological observation, becoming a political phenomena first and everything else second. We will look at how not only the public perception of different faiths shifts over the centuries due to a multitude of non-religious factors, but also how the mere categorization and labeling of these faiths seems to fluidly shift along in parallel with the public perception, not due to any theological or anthropological revelation or discovery. The nuances of these categories become even more granular, and identifying the authorities who get to determine the evaluation of a faith is vital to understanding how religious hierarchy shifts within a community.

I. Congregationalism - Tolerance and Flexibility

With the expulsion of Native peoples and culture from Plymouth Bay Colony following the end of King Philip's War, the religious social hierarchy of the colony looked more like a singularity. The Separatist Puritan vision of a Christian land devoid of Catholic influence was realized, to a degree. The Puritan singularity, however, could never be maintained. It is not a stretch to identify Separatist Puritanism as a form of extremist Protestantism. The uprooting of the community from England, spurned by their religious fervor, and the violence that followed from their need to create their ideal religious landscape are characteristics of devotees to an extreme measure. Within this newly formed community, fractures in the dominant Puritan thought almost immediately began to show.

As Separatists who were vehemently opposed to the strong influence of the Catholic Church, Plymouth never established a centralized church or congregation. The centralization of Puritan thought and authority was all but dismantled, ushering in the phenomenon of Congregationalism. Congregationalism, which remains a significant community in today's Plymouth, is a Protestant movement that encourages autonomy for each individual church and congregation in the area. While Puritan ideals would remain influential for a few decades, this dissolution of a central authority opened the window for shifting theology and social values between the individual congregations.

Meanwhile, a few dozen miles north, in Massachusetts Bay Colony (modern day Boston), a clergyman by the name of Roger Williams was ruffling feathers with his unorthodox preachings on religion. Among all of his controversial statements regarding traditional Puritan theology, his idealization of "religious tolerance" proved too drastic for the colony, resulting in his banishment and subsequent founding of Rhode Island as a haven for religious tolerance. Here, we see the early clashes that will lead to a new, more nuanced religious hierarchy in colonized America. The tight-knit community of the Pilgrims, ascribing to an extreme expression of Puritan values, was soon disrupted by the influx of new colonists seeking a different life in the New World. Maintaining complete adherence to the Separatists dogma among the people of Plymouth is a tall order bordering on impossibility.

Fractures in the Pilgrim's initial congregation were inevitable. Previously, in the European theater the Pilgrims are coming from, the top-of-the-pyramid faith enjoyed some political and economic influence, whether it be the economic and social power of the Papacy or the legal strength of the Anglican Church in England. In 1744, the Meeting House at Plymouth, previously the same building as the First Parish, was moved to a new location, physically and

symbolically separating “church and state” in the town permanently. Indeed, Plymouth’s entire governing body would be made of Protestant Christians for decades, but the decentralization of the Puritan church undercut the potential influence a singular authority may have in social positioning.

That is not to say, however, that socio-religious hierarchy dissolved in Plymouth. Instead, we will begin to see a more nuanced approach to religious categorization. Plymouth was founded as, and will remain for its entire evolving history, a Christian town. Save for a single Jewish temple, the only places of worship in the town all derive from Christian-based traditions. The socio-religious hierarchy is completely composed of traditions all labeled under the Christian umbrella/genus. The blatant devaluation of traditions, as seen in decades previous by gatekeeping “religion” from Native traditions, is not employed as willingly against fellow Christians.

The Congregational system of worship and increased capacity for tolerance opened the door for developments of new theologies in the area. With the ratification of the Bill of Rights in 1791, every citizen was legally protected from an established state religion and guaranteed free exercise of their faith.

These circumstances of tolerance, legal free expression, and an individualized congregation system allowed for the first major shift in Plymouth’s socio-religious hierarchy since the destruction of Native influence. In 1801, Rev. James Kendall was chosen as the new preacher, partly for his liberal ideas on faith.³¹ His theology would be the basis for Unitarianism, a Protestant faith that decentralized some Christian traditions and directed focus towards individual faith and expression.³²

³¹ Marks, “Detailed History.”

³² My parents had me dedicated to the First Parish Unitarian Church in Kingston, MA when I was born. They had left the Catholic Church in the nineties.

This movement will have incredible influence on the social hierarchy from religious categorization we've been tracking. To start, it destabilized the rigidity of the hierarchy. Previously, larger, centralized churches, like Catholicism and Anglicanism, can control the specific dogmas being taught across congregations. With each church being given freer mobility to shape their theology for their particular congregation, a single faith controlling the social life of Plymouth became much more difficult. On top of this, the eventual acceptance of religious tolerance as an American ideal helps reduce the violence of placing a faith at the bottom of the hierarchy. Moving forward, complete opposition of a faith as a "religion," or labeling any faith as a "heresy" or any other overtly negative categorization is seen as anti-American.³³ The social hierarchy of religious categorization remains, however different it may function and shift with these new ideals inserted into the community. Tolerance and Congregationalism will allow the American religious identity to shift from its Puritan origins, just as a new wave of immigration will change the material circumstances of the nation and Plymouth in turn.

II. Catholic Acceptance - Shipping Up To Boston

Perhaps the most significant shift in Plymouth's socio-religious climate from its founding to the 21st century is the social status of the Catholic Church. As we know, the Pilgrims' initial religious motive for establishing Plymouth in the first place was to escape an environment that, while not even Catholic-controlled, was too similar to the Catholic tradition for their Puritan beliefs. Bradford named the "papists" alongside atheists when referring to the decline of religious purity. Within the Christian canon of widely recognized sects, the Catholic Church was perhaps the least accepted at Plymouth's inception.

³³ I'd be remiss to not mention that this is, indeed, a broad generalization. Prejudice is alive and well in America today, and has been throughout the nation's history. For our purposes of looking at Plymouth, however, which was and remains a nearly entirely Christian town, the usage and power of "heresy" all but falls away.

Why, then, do we see Plymouth's socio-religious climate in the year 2023 defined by the Catholic Church's strong presence? This social reevaluation process of the Church³⁴ demonstrates a significant aspect of religious categorization: fluidity. A single faith may be categorized and conceptualized by the general public of a society in many different ways over time. This fluidity, however, is not necessarily weaponized actively. Social hierarchy is at the whims of the broad material and political environment of the society in question. As these material circumstances shift, so does the social hierarchy to accommodate. Nearly every colloquially recognized "religion" has, in different social contexts and histories, been seen as a deviant faith, grinding against the preconceived notions in place of what a "religion" looks like.

Religious categorization is often seen as a practice of the social sciences (anthropology, religious studies, etc), but labeling the process of categorization as a science indicates a supposed objectivity, much like the scientific method can be repeated with the same factors and produce identical results. Religious categorization could not be any farther than this. While it is true that religious categorization does follow patterns when labeling religions, this is not a process that is entirely observational. Using our example of the Catholic Church in Plymouth, we see how categorization is not applied due to observations of the aspects of the faith, but instead rooted in the social climate of the town. Catholicism and the Church, from the founding of Plymouth to the influx of Catholic immigrants in the early twentieth century, hardly changes in terms of anthropological and theological observations. The Church remained influential, the general theological orientation remained unchanged, but through shifting *social* factors in Plymouth, the Church became accepted by the mid-twentieth century and the dominant tradition by the end. If the particular theology of Catholicism itself does not change, but the categorization of it does, then categorization must be due to other factors other than simple academic observations.

³⁴ "The Church," with a capital "C," will demarcate the Catholic Church in this paper.

As a colony, Plymouth was not receiving consistent exposure to other cultures and societies. With the violent removal of Native culture from the area, in order for new cultural concepts to enter the social space, alongside cross-colony cultural exchange, members of a different European tradition would have to decide to undertake the cross-Atlantic voyage and reside in Plymouth. Plymouth was both culturally and *physically* isolated, so the introduction of the Church as a significant part of the town's identity took nearly two centuries.

Post-Revolution immigration to Plymouth came primarily from the ships arriving at the ports in Boston. The vast majority of immigrants in the early 19th century were Protestant.³⁵ A large contingency of Irish immigrants, Protestants from Ulster, began taking the voyage to Boston. These immigrants, while often indentured servants, could share their anti-Catholic sentiment with the Congregationalists and were generally welcomed by Plymouth with open arms. The Protestant population in Ulster had been in violent conflict with England for the last fifty years and were quick to follow in the Pilgrims' footsteps of escaping the English socio-religious climate. This opened Massachusetts as a potential haven for Irish immigrants, which helped lead the nineteenth century's most formative immigration phenomenon directly to Plymouth.

In 1845, a blight spread rapidly across the potato crop, a vital piece of Irish agriculture. Over the next seven years, until 1852, the Irish potato harvest was decimated, causing a devastating famine that ravaged communities on the island. With the land destroyed, millions of Irish farmers sought to emigrate to a new country. While immigration in the past had been reliant on religious and social movements, this famine physically destroyed the Irish land, and these material circumstances helped cause an incredible influx of immigrants not seen before to the States. Boston, in particular, became a popular destination for these migrants, as the textile

³⁵ Global Boston, "Irish."

industry was booming and there was already an Irish diasporic population from Ulster settled. While the South End of Boston became the primary destination for the Irish, many farmers and other immigrants more used to rural environments relocated to the South Shore, Plymouth included. While they would be joining their Irish counterparts from Ulster, the vast majority of this population was Catholic, causing quick divisions between them and the Protestant Plymouth. They were immediately met with aversion by both the non-Irish and the Protestant Irish community. The fear of the influence of the Church in Plymouth, stemming from sentiments formed from underneath Catholic and Anglican regimes in Europe, was directed towards this influx of Irish migrants.

This influx of immigrants and, more specifically, valuable labor, forced Plymouth's socio-religious climate to shift and accommodate for the presence of Catholics in the town. As the Irish population began to bleed into the South Shore and take up residence in Plymouth, on July 4th 1873, the cornerstone of St. Peter's Church was laid on Court Street.³⁶ This was the first Catholic Church established in Plymouth, with more to be built in the coming century. This moment marked the end of Plymouth's mission-status for the Church and the permanent introduction of the Church into Plymouth's socio-religious environment. That is not to say, however, that anti-Catholic sentiments dissolved immediately. On top of the introduction of a much-disliked theology to the town, laborers in Plymouth began to resent the Irish migrants for gaining vast employment in the workforce, a common xenophobic reaction to rises in immigration within a particular community. With the shift from agriculture to industry as the main source of income for laborers in Massachusetts, gaining employment in these industries was of the utmost importance. The question is: how does this Irish Catholic population evade

³⁶ Mary Queen of Martyrs, "St. Peter's Parish History."

damning social categorization and disrupt the socio-religious hierarchy in place? The answer lies in numbers, resources, and labor.

To start, the sheer volume of Irish migrants in the area made their presence undeniable. Over 4.5 million Irish made the voyage across the Atlantic from 1840 to 1930, mainly concentrating on the East Coast, primarily in New York and Boston. By 1850, nearly 30% of Boston's entire population was made up of Irish immigrants.³⁷ When it comes to smaller fringe religious congregations, social alienation and theological devaluation is easier achieved through a lack of opposition among the populace. With the establishment of the Church in Plymouth, supported by the Diocese located in Boston, which enjoyed dedicated and copious membership from the Irish population in the city, direct opposition to the Church would be met with significant pushback from the sizable Irish population in the area. The resources afforded to the Catholic upstart in Plymouth from the Dioceses³⁸ in the surrounding area helped build a solidified community quickly in the town. Purchasing the land and acquiring materials for a church worthy of the devotion of the Irish in Plymouth was vital to establishing the Church as a mainstay in the town.

On top of these factors, however, was the need for Plymouth's social hierarchy to accept the reality of its social makeup and, in particular, its laborers. The Industrial Revolution in America was under full swing, and these new industries needed an abundant workforce in order to keep pace with competing entities. As these industries boomed alongside the influx of Irish Catholic immigrants, the workforce of Massachusetts and Plymouth in turn became increasingly Catholic rather quickly. For the material and economic health of Plymouth as a community to maintain, social acceptance of the Irish and their Catholic faith became imperative. Through their

³⁷ PBS, "Boston's Immigration Population."

³⁸ Boston and Providence.

importance to the town as an economic factor, Plymouth's socio-religious hierarchy had to accommodate the new Catholic influence.

Ultimately, the Catholic introduction and eventual acceptance into the mainstream in Plymouth's social climate is not due to recategorization through theological or anthropological observations. The Church looked and acted similarly as it did in the 17th and 18th centuries, when Protestants disavowed Catholic doctrine entirely in Plymouth. Perhaps the increase in popularity towards religious tolerance as an American ideal helped welcome Irish Catholic followers into the area, but it was economic and material factors within the community that moved Catholicism to the forefront of Plymouth's society. Perception of a faith is rarely due to academic observations of core tenets or theology, and nearly always at the whims of social and political factors that uphold the social hierarchy. Prior to the Potato Famine and the influx of Irish immigrants, Catholicism was seen as a scorn to the Plymouth-Protestant understanding of the Christian faith. Despite a lack of change in the nature of Catholicism as a faith observationally, the Irish found themselves as a vital part of the economic and political life of Plymouth through numbers and labor. They situated themselves firmly as a powerful demographic in the community and, over time, their faith became the dominant one in the town.

While the Irish Catholic community found themselves rising in the social hierarchy, anti-Catholic and anti-Irish sentiments within Plymouth persisted. Irish pride in their heritage, a type of Irish-American nationalism, became a point of sensitivity to those born in Boston.³⁹ The Irish not only arrived to reside in Boston, but also sought to bring their culture and heritage with them, disrupting the social ecosystem in place. Laborers searching for work often pointed their frustrations at the Irish for taking these jobs, and the Protestant sentiments against the influence of the Church would remain to this day, but my focus is on the broader hierarchy. As explained

³⁹ Murray, *Irish Nationalists*, 14-15.

earlier, the fluidity of categorization is at the heart of generating these hierarchies. While it may be true that, in the mid-19th century, Protestants were alone at the top of the socio-religious hierarchy, this is not a permanent status. It's incorrect to assume that, in order for a group to achieve dominance in the community, they avoid all critique and prejudice.

Because of their rising economic and political importance to Plymouth as a political entity, the Catholic community *usurped*, overtime, the Protestant community from the social hierarchy in Plymouth. It was not religious factors that moved their faith to influence, but their status in other areas of society. While there will be extensive critique of the Church throughout the 20th century, it will remain the most influential religious entity in all of Massachusetts (until it is challenged at the turn of the 21st). If theology was truly the most important piece of understanding and evaluating faiths, then the Protestant aversion from Catholic tenets would have persisted. Instead, we see plainly how these sentiments are controlled by the political and economic circumstances present. While categorization may be a tool used to uphold social hierarchies, the material status of the society is what may shift this hierarchy. The Pilgrims situated themselves atop the hierarchy not with a superior theology, but with superior war-making and forced removal. The Irish-Catholic immigrants arrived in a hostile environment only for shifting industry and the need for economic growth to situate themselves firmly in Plymouth's status-quo. Overtime, the Greater Boston Area, particularly the South Shore, became the heart of Catholic America. It would not be long before Catholic Americans asserted their influence and solidified their place in American culture forever.

In the Spring of 1960, John F. Kennedy, born and raised outside Boston in Brookline, MA, left his position as State Senator and secured the Democratic Presidential Nomination. Kennedy's campaign was historic for many reasons, one of which was his faith. If elected,

Kennedy would be the nation's first Catholic president. This became a point of pressure on the campaign trail for the Bostonian, with many fearing undue influence from the Papacy if he were to take office. In a tightly contested race, propelled by his remarkable 60% voter share in Massachusetts, Kennedy defeated Vice President Richard Nixon nationwide. In Plymouth, however, we see the remnants of the anti-Catholic sentiments passed down from the original Pilgrims. Nixon edged out Kennedy 51% to 49% in the county, situated less than an hour's drive from the State Junior Senator's hometown.⁴⁰ Of course, there are a multitude of political and social factors that contribute to this, but it cannot be denied that the Plymouth-Protestant aversion to a "papist" no doubt influenced these numbers.

After the election, we see the Church enjoy a period of dominance in the state. Many of the irrational fears of a Catholic president were dispelled and the Church enjoyed its acceptance as a mainstream Christian faith in the United States. The Catholic population continued to grow, eventually being the most populated single faith in Plymouth. That is not to say, however, that the Church could protect their status as the area's de facto church. Ever since Roger Williams introduced religious tolerance to the Northeast and the adoption of the Congregationalist system of church-life, socio-religious clout had seemingly lost power as time rolled on. An Irish-Catholic was president and the Papacy hasn't taken control. This breakdown from the tight political-religious systems the Pilgrims sought to escape from invited a new way of life for America and Plymouth alike: a secular life.

III. Secularism - A New Piece or a New Whole?

From the moment of Plymouth's conception, "religion" had been at the center of identity. Founded on the basis of the Pilgrims' own religious identity, from the early divisions into the

⁴⁰ JFK Library, "1960 Presidential Election Results."

Congregational system to the influx and reluctant acceptance of Catholics in the South Shore, what church you were attending is at the heart of *who you are*. Thanks to the broad acceptance of religious tolerance as an American ideal and the legal separation of church and state, the potential for social influence through religious identity was never as great as seen in other European cultures. Over time, the American consciousness pulled away from the religious ideals of the Puritans towards the Democratic ideals of the United States government.

This process was by no means an immediate one. Beyond the 17th century, the American public would be most deeply impassioned by religion in the 1950's. The rise of Communism in Asia and Europe created intense insecurities in American government and media, hoping to solidify American culture and Democracy as the premiere one among major powers. Beyond the political and economic differences between Communism and Capitalism, American politicians and media sought other aspects of the cultures to differentiate themselves. The focus turned towards religion, as the USSR was, while unofficially, adhering to a sort of state atheism. To vilify Communism and its cultural effects, American media began to equate the two, eventually developing the "Godless Communist" stereotype that stuck through the entire Cold War.⁴¹ In parallel, America saw a revitalization of religious fervor in opposition to a perceived atheistic threat.⁴² This revitalization was not due to some sort of religious revelation or new theology, but a reactionary movement to economic and political circumstances, all for the purpose of developing a global social hierarchy: Capitalist Christians over the Godless Communists.

This religiosity, however, would peak as the 50s turned to the 60s, and the government's actions across the globe in the name of combating Communism was met with more and more domestic critique. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960's and the anti-war movement in the

⁴¹ *The Boston Globe*, 23 Oct 1955, 27.

⁴² Grimshaw, *Encountering Religion*, 33.

1970s against military action in Vietnam created broad disillusionment among the public with traditional American ideals. Along with this, the anti-cult movement, beginning in the late 1960s, created a sensationalism among the American media with the dangers of intense religious fervor. In The Boston Globe of 5 Dec 1978, San Gafford wrote a piece about the moral implications of the rise of cults.

The evidence is controversial, and historians may only agree that there have been many periods of intensified cult formation and religious dissent in the past. The last two centuries of the Roman empire provide a well-known example...⁴³

-Sanford Gifford, *The Boston Globe*

The fascination of the rise of morally corrupt “cults” and the righteousness of the USA on the world stage are explored in this piece from a unique perspective. On one hand, “cults” are being dressed as potential empire-collapsing movements, giving them historically-destructive levels of fear. On the other hand, the example given of “cult” formation under Roman rule brings to mind the early movement that gave birth to the Christian faith.

By the turn of the century, we see Secularism come to the forefront of American culture as popular, socially liberal politics come at odds with the social traditions of religious institutions. My mother, Marie Coady, became disillusioned with the Catholic Church herself after its direct opposition to LGBTQ+ rights in the early 90s. Religious identity was too closely tied to particular institutions, making a religious identity and a larger social identity go hand in hand.⁴⁴ Starting in the 1970s, we see a *drastic* growth of those in America identifying with no particular religion, commonly referred to as the “Nones” on polling data. Whether these people identify as Atheist, Agnostic, Spiritual or simply Secular, with numbers reaching around 30%

⁴³ Gifford, *The Boston Globe*, 05 Dec 1978, 23.

⁴⁴ E.g. Catholics and the Church, Protestants and the American Government, etc.

self-identifying as “religiously unaffiliated.”⁴⁵ For the first time in American history, those who do not identify with any religion out number any particular sect within the nation.

What we can see from this initial explosion of religious fervor and the drastic shift towards Secularism is how deeply settled in political and economic circumstances this phenomenon is. The initial increase in fervor was in accordance with the political aspirations of the American government against the Communists, tying social status of religious identity with the global diplomacy of the nation. When support for global diplomacy dwindled, so did the hierarchy of religious categorization. The movement of social hierarchy and, in turn, the application of religious categories remained at the whim of material and external factors that do not traditionally pertain to theological observations. The question is now if the social hierarchy of religious categorization is damaged or destroyed from the rise of “secularism.” I argue that no, it is not damaged or devalued, but it morphs into a new shape.

While “secular” is colloquially understood as the opposite of religion, the two terms are deeply tied to each other. “Secular” denotes anything that is devoid of influence from a religious theology, philosophy, or institution. Therefore, the entire existence of the term “secular” relies on the nature of the category “religion.” This deep parallel makes “secular” a religious way of categorizing something, as it makes an indication only on a particular subject’s relation to religion. Labeling something as “secular” is an act of religious categorization.

So, in this new hierarchy that we entered the 21st century with, looks entirely different to anything seen in America before. For the first time, within a religious context, the category with the most social clout and respect is situated within the “secular” category, which feels paradoxical. How could something that is explicitly “not religious” but the most powerful “religious categorization?” While I am claiming “Secularism” is the category with the most

⁴⁵ Newport, “This Christmas.”

intense social power in contemporary America, it'd be hard to find anyone who calls themselves plainly "secular." Instead, a group of terms have been adopted to explain the identities of the "Nones" in different contexts. Let me be clear that "secular" does not mean "Atheist," quite the contrary, Atheism is still seen today in a negative light comparatively, having never escaped the connotations put upon it from the political talking points of the Cold War.⁴⁶ "Militant Atheists" have also contributed to the crippling of this term. Groups of atheists, mostly through online channels of communication, have continued to loudly spout anti-religion sentiments through the 21st century. While "atheist" today doesn't necessarily lead people back to Communism, it draws the mind to these anti-religion sentiments. Many people instead, who practice no particular faith or observe a higher power, call themselves "agnostic," avoiding the hotness of the term "atheist." Another popular piece of terminology has been "spiritual, but not religious," indicating that the individual has a sense of faith, but does not ascribe to any particular institution. "Secularism," then, does not necessarily refer to a complete divorce from all aspects of "religiosity," but instead from the undue influence of recognized "religions," or the external institutions that constantly affect the social hierarchy of categorization.

IV. A Personal Note - Marx Talk

Let me be absolutely clear that I do not agree with Marx's assertion that religion is the "opium of the people," but there is a passage from this same text, in this same paragraph, that I read as quite beautiful before he decided to ruin it with those four words. He writes:

"Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions."

⁴⁶. I actually call myself an atheist, half as a way to break down the connotation of the word, and half because I feel it is a true marker of my personal faith.

-Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's
Philosophy of Right*⁴⁷

Now, I know he doesn't mean it in the way that I read it, but I'll use his words for my own purpose, if you'll allow me.

I do consider myself a Marxist historian of sorts. I do believe in the superiority of material circumstances on the flow of history, and I saw no such contradiction in my research on religious categorization. But his conclusion, that the people have become addicted to and blinded by religion, undermines the lived experience of the people he claims to have a voice for.

"Religious suffering is... the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering."

Yes, it is. While we may not all be explicitly religious or spiritual, I believe we all hold faith in something, and express it in innumerable ways. Who is to say Marx does not hold faith in his idea of communism? Is his "communist suffering" not the expression of "real suffering?" One cannot make an evaluation of another's expression of their lived experience and their faith without, in a way, betraying their own faith, whether they see it as faith or not.

I am an Atheist myself, but I don't see others experiencing faith through religion as wrong or misguided. I find my faith in theater and performance. How is that any more proper? Through this last chapter, we saw Plymouth and America itself bend and twist and change religiously through a multitude of material circumstances. Religious expression, like any type of expression, will be context driven, based on the oppressions of the external world around us.

Yes, Marx, religious suffering *is* a protest against real suffering. So, from one "Godless Communist" to another, let them protest.

⁴⁷ Marx, "Critique of Hegel."

Chapter Three

Weird Religion:

The Age of Secularism and How the “Cult” Identification Operates Solely Through Individual

Perception

1990-2023

It was the Spring of 2020, and much of the world had slowed to a complete stop. The Coronavirus had reached global pandemic levels, and every university had sent their students home to complete their work on Zoom, locked away in rooms in their parents’ houses.

After an unfulfilling acting seminar at my desk, I leaned back to scroll through Twitter, as was my only access to the outside world at the time. I knew my day would become exponentially more memorable⁴⁸ when I received a call from Steven Cervantes, a dear friend of mine from our high school years. “Hey, John. I’m on shift at Home Depot right now and I got some, like, papers from a cult. Do you want it?” Yes. Yes I did.

Steven pulled into my driveway, stopping right at the entrance. We met about 15 feet apart, masked up, and exchanged the most awkward pleasantries from life-long friends you’d ever hear. None of us knew how to act those days. He placed the free paper on the pavement and drove home.

I found hundreds of articles highlighting the “child abuse cult” from a simple Google search. The Tribes’ own website offered a deluge of information as well, with perhaps the most

⁴⁸ It was a desperate time... so many of those days have been lost from my memory forever to the pure monotony of the events occurring.

thorough FAQ page I have ever seen, beating out every tech website I'd ever visited. Any question I had the Tribes' answered themselves on their site, and dozens of news articles would answer in very different ways to my same questions. *A cult. In my hometown. I am 19 years old, I have lived here my entire life, when was someone going to tell me a cult lived 20 minutes away from me? I must have driven past their house dozens of times. How could a cult be in Plymouth?* I had become obsessed (remember, it's the pandemic, there's not much else to occupy my mind.) One observation, however, had been nagging at me. Steven said "cult" and I took that at face value, only to be corroborated by the multitude of news articles online that also seem to agree. But how did Steven know? How did those articles know? How did *I* know?

How do we know the Twelve Tribes are a "cult"? I asked Steve a few days later. "Well, they all had on, like, similar clothes, like, flannels and jeans and long hair and beards... they shared a credit card, and, you know, the free paper... but I had heard of them before, my mom used to tell me and my sister about them. They're the local cult." The local cult. Steven's physical observations of them, while all accurate and important, could be applied to a number of faiths we wouldn't dare label a cult (i.e. Mormons). In the end, it was his preconceived notion that they were a "cult" that led him to this conclusion. This was a notion passed down to him generationally, socially. The Twelve Tribes, to those who know of its existence and do not partake in its traditions, is a "cult."

But, again I ask, *why*? In my time at Brown to that point, I had been exposed to how "cult," as a term, is a pejorative, marking a faith with a severe negative connotation that is incredibly socially damning. "New Religious Movement" is the academically accepted term for these types of communities. To this day, however, I have not heard *anyone* seriously call the Twelve Tribes, or Heaven's Gate, or Scientology, or the Manson Family even, as a "new

religious movement” outside of a rigid academic setting. Outside the ivory tower, these things are being called “cults,” whether we deem that academically acceptable or not. My interest in Religious Studies was never to engage insularly with the academics of religion, but instead with the lived perspectives of those who hold religion dear to their own personal lives (something I do not do myself.) I will not be writing this chapter to explain that “cult” is an improper term to use for a faith, while that is absolutely true. Instead, I will be accepting the reality that, while I disagree with the usage, “cult” is applied in sporadic and specific ways and analyze these situations to find the thread that connects them. My concern is not what term Steven *should* use for the Twelve Tribes, but instead *why* he used the terms he did.

In this third and final chapter, we will be taking an intimate look at the religious life of Plymouth, Massachusetts in the year 2020 and beyond. As opposed to the previous chapters, we lack the gift of hindsight, which can make critical analysis difficult and, at times, fragile. We exist in a contemporary world where the popular academic trends of the time hold a sort of “objectivity” in the way that processes of the past don’t anymore.

I. Spotlight - Disaster in Catholic “Mass”

The morning of January 6th, 2002 meant a lot of different things to Catholics in Massachusetts. I can only speak to how my family responded. Let me tell you the story just how it was told to me by my mother, Marie Coady.⁴⁹

The Boston Globe paper arrived on hundreds of thousands of doorsteps across the state with a shocking (and, also, not shocking) headline:

⁴⁹ Thank you, Ma.

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Volume 261
Number 6
\$2.00

Boston Sunday Globe

JANUARY 6, 2002

BREAKFAST FLAKES
Tonight: Cloudy with snow at night, highs 24-32
Tomorrow: Snow ending noon, breezy, highs 22-30
FRI, JAN 11: 2-4
FRI, JAN 11: 2-4

Church allowed abuse by priest for years



This article was prepared by the Globe Spotlight Team: reporters Matt Carroll, Sacha Pfeiffer, and Michael Rezendes; and editor Walter F. Robinson. It was written by Rezendes.

Aware of Geoghan record, archdiocese still shuttled him from parish to parish

First of two parts

Since the mid-1990s, more than 130 people have come forward with horrific childhood tales about how former priest John J. Geoghan allegedly fondled or raped them during a three-decade spore through a half-dozen Greater Boston parishes.

Almost always, his victims were grammar school boys. One was just 4 years old.

Then came last July's disclosure that Cardinal Bernard F. Law knew about Geoghan's problems in 1964, Law's first year in Boston, yet approved his transfer to St. Julia's parish in

Weston. When D. Rogers Jr., the cardinal's attorney, defended the move last summer, saying the archdiocese had medical assurances that each Geoghan reassignment was "appropriate and safe."

But one of Law's bishops thought that the 1964 assignment of Geoghan to St. Julia's was so risky, he wrote the cardinal a letter in protest. And for good reason, the Spotlight Team found: The archdiocese already had substantial evidence of Geoghan's predatory sexual habits. That included his assertion in 1960 that his repeated abuse of seven boys in one extended family was not a "serious" problem, according to an archdiocesan record.

The St. Julia's assignment proved disastrous. Geoghan was put in charge of three youth groups, including altar boys. In 1969, he was forced to go on sick leave after more com-

plaints of sexual abuse, and spent months in two institutions that treat sexually abusive priests. Even so, the archdiocese returned him to St. Julia's, where Geoghan continued to abuse children for another three years.

Now, as Geoghan faces the first of two criminal trials next week, details about his sexual compulsion are likely to be overshadowed by a question that many Catholics find even more troubling: Why did it take a succession of three cardinals and many bishops 34 years to place children out of Geoghan's reach?

Donna Morrissey, a spokeswoman for Law, said the cardinal and other church officials would not respond to questions about Geoghan. Morrissey said the church had no interest in knowing what the Globe's questions would be.



Former priest John J. Geoghan leaving his family home in Scituate in November.

SPOTLIGHT, Page A54

Jack Geoghan, a priest from the greater Boston area, was exposed by a small team of investigative journalists as a child predator, claiming at least 130 victims. Over the course of his three-decade long career, he was reassigned to parishes by Cardinal Bernard F. Law as allegations against him bubbled to the surface in a town. The Church had gone to length to cover up his crimes.⁵⁰

My mother heard from her Walkman. She was pretty tuned into local Boston news, and coincidentally, she was planning on taking her family up from Halifax to Weymouth, back to her childhood home. Paul and Mary, my grandparents, we're devout Catholics, my grandfather pretty intensely. Both my parents grew up in Weymouth, just south of Boston, attending different Roman Catholic churches throughout their childhood. The Church in those days wasn't just faith and prayer, it was community and family, education and expression. Everyone was Catholic in those days, so much so that you knew who the Protestants on your street were. Paul and Mary used to host CCD sessions in their very own kitchen, with kids from around the neighborhood. Both my parents had effectively left the Church since moving out of their parents home. My father, Mark, was never really a man of faith, and with his job in the Coast Guard, didn't really have the time or patience for church. My mother, on the other hand, always felt frustrated by the

⁵⁰ Globe Spotlight Team, *The Boston Globe*, 06 Jan 2002.

Church. The strict “dogma” never appealed to her, and, having grown up with so many gay friends, “I couldn’t ask them to walk into a church I knew hated them.”

Either way, she came into her parents home ready to talk about what she just heard on the radio. “It was hard. That was a hard time for me.” She talks about how frustrating those first conversations were. It seemed like everyone had already known. “They were talking about some priest that they all knew – just like nothing! – like ‘oh, remember Father So-And-So? He molested the father and then the son...’ and they were all sort of nodding. And were not burning buildings down? Like, I don’t understand... No Catholic was surprised. Quote me on that.”⁵¹ The emotions were intense, and it’s hard to understand how one could be aware of a violent system and choose to actively participate in it. I’ll leave it to Paul to try to explain. He remained a dedicated Catholic until his death in 2019, and even seemed to find solace in the aftermath of this revelation in his faith. That day, through bleary eyes, as my mother asked him what he was going to do and why he wasn’t as angry as her, said “That’s my church. That’s my church.”

And that was the case for so many Catholics in Massachusetts. On every level, this was a betrayal. When the Church had become such a vital part of the lives and communities of Catholics across the state, disavowing the faith entirely would be an incredibly difficult process. As we’ve seen, religious identity has a lot to do with one’s social positioning, especially when your entire environment revolves around the churches of your community.

It became very clear to the nation that this was not just a Boston-area issue. The most significant piece of the exposé was the knowledge that the Church had of Geoghan’s continued sexual abuse of minors and the purposeful actions they took to cover it up and save Geoghan’s career. This wasn’t an article about a single evil priest, but instead about the movements of the Catholic Church as an institution to cover these allegations and protect their priests.

⁵¹ I got you, Ma.

Following this revelation, more people across Massachusetts and, for that matter, the world, began to come forward about their experiences being abused by Catholic priests. It became clear that, as an institution, the Catholic Church did not have the best interests of their congregations in mind. While the Church did not see a mass exodus of Catholics from their congregations, the trust and *faith* these people had placed in their church was betrayed on a deep level. For all intents and purposes, this was the end of Catholic dominance of the social hierarchy in Plymouth. Yes, Catholics remain the most populous religion in the town, but the social stranglehold the Church once had on South Shore communities may be permanently lost. It was not the strict theological dogma that the Puritans had feared that lost the community, but instead, an external, material circumstance that caused the disillusionment. The social hierarchy, once again, at the whims of the shifting social environments. The media this time, the Boston Globe Spotlight team, brings forward a piece of journalism that is the impetus for the breakdown of Catholic dominance. With the new power of “secularism,” being a “good Catholic” in Plymouth is no longer the ideal like it once was in the twentieth century.

II. The Twelve Tribes - Our Little Local “Cult”

It’s time to talk about the Twelve Tribes. I knew if I wanted to write about “cults,” I couldn’t pull everything from news articles that tend to sensationalize for readers or purely academic texts that may avoid the lived experience of a “cult” itself. During my research into the Twelve Tribes, I stumbled across the website for the community in Plymouth, which read at the bottom:

“We would love to see you sometime, anytime really, but especially Fridays at 6PM.”⁵²

⁵² Twelve Tribes, “Come and Visit!”

Well, if they want me to come and talk to them, I couldn't see a reason why not. In the spring of 2022, I gave the phone number on the website a call. It was answered by a woman who introduced herself as Berakhah. I introduced myself and told the story about Steve and Home Depot and asked if that Friday would be a good time to visit. Not only was it a good time, she explained, but that day was also their High Sabbath celebration, and they were expecting several visitors. I thanked her and immediately began planning my trip.

On April 22, 2022, I took the commuter rail from Providence Station to South Station in Boston, and from there took another commuter to its very last stop in Kingston, MA, Plymouth's much smaller neighbor. Earlier that morning, I peeled off my black nail polish⁵³ and dressed in the most unassuming beige button-up you'll ever see. Some of my friends at school knew about my trip to the Tribes and were, honestly, horrified. The sensation and fascination around "cults" is intense, they were speaking like I was jumping into a lion's den. I told them "I'm getting there at 6pm for their High Sabbath. I'm going to stay for dinner. If I don't text you by 8:30pm, call me or something, try to reach me. If it looks bad, call the cops." There wasn't a bone in my body, on that train ride, that thought I was in any danger. Maybe I told them that to put their minds at ease, or maybe I wanted to sensationalize it. It feels nice to have people care about what you're doing.⁵⁴

Steven Cervantes, my friend who pointed me towards the Tribes in the first place, pulled up in his white SUV. It was a miracle I convinced him to even drive me to the Tribes' home, so I have no idea what possessed him to agree to come along with me to their Sabbath celebration.

⁵³ I felt dirty doing this. For full disclosure, I was afraid of them potentially seeing me as LGBTQ+, and I didn't want that getting in the way of them having honest conversations with me. It didn't feel good, disavowing my values like that. I think I forgive myself for it.

⁵⁴ There's a reason I put "Cultists" in the title of this piece. The average person would have to try really hard to sit through a paper about religious categorization. But if it were about "Cultists"? Now *that's* exciting. Is it morally right for me to abuse this sensationalism as I try to deconstruct the phenomenon itself? Probably not, but how else will people engage with academic literature without the promise of intrigue? Good academic work kept within the academic bubble loses the incredible value it has to offer.

He'd always been an anxious guy, and I could not imagine a more anxiety-inducing environment to place him in the middle of. Steve's a good friend though; he'd never let me go in there by myself.

From the second I sat in the passenger seat, we started laying out a detailed game plan for how we were going to handle the evening. I wanted to ease his mind. I was the Religious Studies Concentrator after all and I wanted him to feel safe with me.

"We'll get there a little after six, fashionably late. Our hard-capped exit is 8:30, I've got friends checking in with me then. You give me a signal whenever and we'll leave, no questions asked. If they offer you any food or drink, *do not try it*. I'll taste everything."

"I'll be Steve Asnes tonight, and I go to UMass Amherst. I don't want them to know I'm local."

"They are going to know me. I called ahead to ask if I could visit. They asked a few questions so I have to be me entirely."

"Should we record anything? Like a voice memo in a pocket?"

"No... no. I don't think so? No."

We pulled off by the water to grab some food, since it was seeming like Steve would be missing out on dinner. I got a good look at Steve from across the table. Silver-dyed hair, oversized beanie, piercings, a brightly pink SpongeBob sweatshirt... I don't think Steve is going to be their type of guy. We had our gameplan, though, which felt foolproof (which is good, since we're two fools). It's Plymouth afterall, my home. We belong here as much as them.

That confidence of mine completely evaporated as we started our drive towards the home. Three seconds after we passed by their ornately-painted Yellow Deli downtown, I got a nose bleed. If anything's an omen, I thought, this has to be one. We passed downtown and, in a few minutes, pulled into the driveway of perhaps the most intimidating building I've ever laid my eyes on. There's only so many times you can read "THE RACIST CHILD ABUSING DOOMSDAY CULT" on news article headlines before telling yourself it's sensationalism

becomes useless. The house, more like a mansion, stood atop a hill, maybe a football field away from the road. It was painted a deep, dark purple and green, with massive windows that peered over the trees onto the water. From my research on Google Maps beforehand, I knew that was only the beginning. There was an extension sprouting from the back of the mansion, making it look like a Waco-like complex on the satellite images.⁵⁵ I remember turning to Steven and saying something stupid like, “Yeah, a cult *definitely* lives here.” We took a moment in the car, going over our game plan and patching up a nosebleed. Neither of us knew what the next two-and-a-half hours had in store for us. After a minute, we popped open our doors.

The walk up the hill to the house felt like forever. The first thing we both noticed was how well-kept the land was. Perfectly cut grass with lovely stone-detailing all over. It made sense, with so many people living in one place, to take care of that land. We reached the porch, which was full of deck-chairs and benches. From everything around us, it seemed like this home was full of life, but it was silent. Peeking through the front door window, I saw that the foyer was completely empty. I reached down for a doorbell, which, to my surprise, didn’t exist. I gave the door the heartiest knock I could muster. No answer. “There’s no lock,” Steve said as he pointed to a hole in the door where you’d expect a deadbolt. We waited a beat to see if anyone would show themselves. Eventually, a woman appeared in the hallway at the back of the foyer. She was wearing a long blue skirt and a white shawl-like headdress. I knocked again and, as she saw us, was taken aback by the smile growing on her face.

“Hi! My name’s John Coady, I called earlier about visiting today,
with Berakhah.”

“I’m Steve, I got one of your pamphlets at-

⁵⁵ Referring to the Branch Davidians of Axtell, Texas. Led by David Koresh, they ascribed to a rather similar “doomsday” prophecy to that of the Twelve Tribes. Their movement ended in the infamous Waco Siege, where ATF agents burned the complex and 76 lives (including 28 children) were lost. This was a turning point in the American fascination with “cults.” Military action against a cult like this had never been seen before at this scale, and the siege remains an influential piece of the American folklore of new religious movements.

“Oh, yes, from Home Depot! Come on in!”

She led us into the foyer and directly through the hallway she just entered from. From my minimal understanding of architecture, I could tell this hallway was an extension off the back of the mansion. We passed by the kitchen, which was industrially large. Inside, we saw perhaps a dozen women and young girls cooking what seemed like a feast. They all appeared to be dressed like the first woman (blue skirt, blue shawl). Eventually, we reached the end of the hall, and our visit officially began.

The darkness of the hallway gave way to a sunlit chapel. Massive windows on the roof and the walls let sunrays pour through as it sets in the backyard. The walls were adorned with banners depicting the crest of each of the twelve “Tribes,” just above paintings of Roger Williams, the Pilgrims, and other scenes from Plymouth’s folklore. The real excitement, however, was the people on the floor.

Our estimate of 50 attendees doesn’t do justice how overwhelming those first few seconds at the chapel was. Men, all dressed in blue jeans, flannels, and a rope headband, and women, all adorning blue skirts and shawls, started filing through the crowd towards us, all eager to introduce themselves to their new guests. It quickly became apparent that the members of the Tribes all take on a Hebrew name when they join. Neither Steven nor I, both with zero experience in Hebrew environments, could remember any of the names told to us, save for Berakhah and Caleb (who had the most familiar name to our non-Hebrew background.)⁵⁶ One gentleman met us first and stuck around as others introduced themselves. The first thing he offered was tea.

⁵⁶ There are so many moments where I wish we had brought some recording device, or even a notebook and a pencil. We wanted to play it as safe as safe can be, so we didn’t bring anything besides our silenced phones, wallets, and my pocket New Testament. When the service began, we saw about a dozen people break out notebooks to take notes. To this day I wish I had the inclination to have brought a notebook.

“Please, get some tea! We have stimulating and non-stimulating, but I recommend the stimulating!”

The look Steven shot at me as he said this is burned into my mind, and I will always look back on it and laugh. For some reason, “cults” and “mind-control tea” has always been a stereotype in the American consciousness. Steve knew this, and maybe he had hoped he wouldn’t have to actually decline tea like we had game planned. For me, however, when at the Twelve Tribes, try the stimulating tea. I took a mental image of the label on the jug of tea to research later. It was a mate tea, which just means it’s highly caffeinated, or “stimulating.” “It feels like I just chugged a Yerba,” I remember whispering to Steve later that evening, failing to finish the full Yerba Mate trademark that would have helped me figure out what “stimulating” meant in the moment. As I returned to Steven with the then-mystery tea in my hands, I saw him being barraged by three or four smiling men, urging him to get a cup for himself.

“I’m alright, I’m more of a coffee guy.”

Somehow, this made the barrage stop. Steve and I began to notice a trend with how we were being met. Without fail, every new person to us would lead with, “You two are the ones who got our free-paper at Home Depot, right?” It became clear to both of us that they had prepared for our arrival and wanted to welcome us with open arms. This was a blessing and a curse; they certainly wanted to be kind and make us feel comfortable, but realizing that they had likely *discussed us* beforehand was deeply uncomfortable. Did they do any more research on us? It seems that, with each new conversation and new details that we would share, whoever came up to us next *somehow* seemed to know that piece of information. It became clear to the both of us that we were being listened to, watched, singled out. After a few more introductions from the crowd, they eventually began to take their seats for the celebration. The room was set up like theater-in-the-round, with the center of the floor encircled by chairs. We took our seats in the

back row by the entrance. It was then that we noticed other guests at the service as well. Some couples, some individuals, a few we learned are friends and family of a new member here to see his new life as a member of the Tribes. This put me and Steve at ease, but only just for a moment.

The service started, consisting of contemporary English prayer songs and circle dances spontaneously joined by anyone in attendance. Men, women, and children all sang, danced, and played instruments. If they were a band, I would've said they were incredibly well rehearsed. Everyone knew all of the words, the melodies, and the choreography.

Midway through the songs, I had a moment that struck me to my core, a moment I think I'll remember for the rest of my life. Between songs, it would seem, any man could start singing one of their prayer songs and everyone, including the band, would join in. After one of the songs, however, a young girl, estimated around 4-5 years old, raised her voice, seemingly trying to start her favorite song in the service. She was quickly hushed and scolded by her mother. The girl's father, coming back to his seat from the circle dance he just participated in, stared daggers at her. He took her hand and scolded her under his breath before leading her away down the hallway we had entered from. About 8 minutes later, they returned, and the child was visibly in a worse mood than before. I am not one to make assumptions, and I always try to assume the best and find the good in every situation. Something about that moment, however, I couldn't. Sitting in my chair, surrounded by people I feared would be furious I was an atheist, deep within a religious complex, mystery tea coursing through my body, watching a father scold and pull his young daughter out of the room, knowing he is a part of a self-admitted⁵⁷ abusive parenting style, I

⁵⁷ From the Twelve Tribes FAQ on their website: "Q: Do you spank your children? A: Yes, we do."

couldn't help but feel in my heart that he had hit his child, and I saw it happening and couldn't do anything about it. That was real dread, whether my imagination was true-to-life or not.⁵⁸

That was the worse my confidence would be broken. My preconceived notions that I would walk into this environment and find that it doesn't resemble the "cult" that the media tends to sensationalize were destroyed. Every step of the way, from the house to the clothes, the tea to the "from Home Depot"s, I was on edge in a way I was frustrated with. I kept thinking to myself, "you study this stuff, you know all that sensationalism is blown out of proportion, calm down," but my guards had been broken down by this entirely unfamiliar environment.

As the last song concluded, everyone took their seats as we launched into a Quaker-like service, where anyone was free to stand and preach whatever they wanted. Some cited scripture (mainly Old Testament), some told stories about joining the Tribes and the guests they've brought, and some used it as a space to directly address others. One man arose and apologized to an elderly man in one of the front rows. He spoke vaguely, avoiding details of what it was he was apologizing for, but Steve and I marked this elderly man as demanding a certain amount of respect from the others. We never got to meet him.

One man, probably in his late 60's, adorning a long white beard, rose and spoke about the misplaced importance of a college education. Throughout his speech, he made eye-contact with me and Steven, speaking about how college is merely an exchange of money and offers no real truth or fulfillment. It became clear to both of us that, from their introductions to this speech, they had catered this day towards us with a hope of deepening our interests in the Tribes. It felt like their focus was on us the entire night, like they had a game plan for us, much like we had one for them.

⁵⁸ I am not going to say that this man beat his child for certain. I can only say that, at that moment, I believed that was the case. Perhaps the sensationalism surrounding the Twelve Tribes got to me, or perhaps my instincts were correct. I cannot make that determination, as all I can do is tell you what I saw and how I saw it.

After the service, people started scrambling around, transforming the furniture of the room from a chapel to a dining hall, with big round tables being fully set in a matter of seconds. One man we had met earlier came up to Steven and I beckoned toward us to help. We set a table and he offered us seats with him. He had an eager energy we both likened to being wine drunk (although he wasn't). His energy was pleasant, and we decided to settle for dinner with him.

The father I had seen drag his daughter away during the song arrived at the table as well, with his wife and two daughters. Plates of unleavened bread and steamed mackerel were passed around. Steven decided to eat dinner, having seen that the mystery tea proved to be completely safe. As we began eating, the Man⁵⁹ who invited us started asking us questions about us. Where we're from, where we go to school, how we found out about the Tribes, the whole works. I realized this was my opportunity to ask the questions I'd always wanted answers to. He was interested in us, trying to make us feel comfortable in a space totally unfamiliar to us. He turned to Steven and asked him about college and what he's studying.

“Civil Engineering.”

“What's that?”

“It's like, uh, subways and sustainable urban environments.”

“Interesting.”

I was right, Steve was not their type of guy. I could tell that this Man hadn't been on a lot of public transportation and wasn't very exposed to the concept of civil engineering at all. That wasn't the language he spoke. It was then I realized what my access point to these people was. They view the world through scripture and faith, while Steve sees it through science, logic, and other academic concepts that the Tribes do not necessarily engage with. There was a deep

⁵⁹ I regret not remembering his name. From now on, I will use the capitalized “Man” to refer to this specific person. I apologize for any confusion.

disconnect between Steve's world and theirs. While I'm not faithful myself, my research into ancient Christian theology gave me a foot in the door into conversation with this Man.

First thing I did was tell my favorite piece of folklore from Providence. I noticed the Roger Williams paintings on the wall and told him about Prospect Terrace Park on College Hill, where only dust of Roger Williams is laid to rest in his tomb as a tree root had grown through his casket and absorbed most of his remains. The Man loved this story, fascinated by a tale of one of the Tribes' heroes he hadn't heard before. "It's like mustard seeds," he said.

We talked for an hour about everything. I asked about their faith, and how the translation of "church" and "beehive" are similar in Greek, which is what they root their communal lifestyle in. I asked about the Yellow Deli and their home, and learned that they all work for no pay, pooling all of their funds to support the restaurant and their land. I was shocked, however, when I told them I grew up just down the road in Halifax and was met with tilted heads and confusion.

"Halifax? Where's that?"

It turns out that, from my estimation, 90% of the community in Plymouth was *not local*. Most of the members had joined the Tribes at a different community, this Man in South Carolina and the other family in Michigan (although the mother grew up in Bridgewater, MA). When a community is in need of help or extra labor, members of the community are told that they must relocate to another community. Told by who, I never asked. This implicates, however, an intense power structure in the Tribes, where some individuals have the authority to relocate entire families, devoid of their own income or assets, to uproot themselves and move to a location that is entirely out of their control. Besides the one elderly man Steven and I had assumed was in a place of power, we were unable to determine for sure the structure in the Plymouth community. Some individuals (men) were more inclined to speak and lead than others, but nothing seemed

strictly prescribed. These two observations, of a clear intense authority on one hand and seemingly non hierarchical environment in the chapel made me question the genuineness of the *equality* I was seeing in the chapel.

As we neared the end of the conversation, I could tell that I wasn't the only one trying to get something out of it.

"So, what do you both plan on doing after school?"

The Man began questioning our college education and our post-graduate plans. I could tell he was directing us towards a conclusion that included spending more time with them at their home. He turned to me and asked me about my own faith. I had mentioned that I study religion and knew a lot of scripture, so he had of course assumed I was a man of faith. At this point, at the end of our visit, I felt comfortable enough to reveal what I thought I'd keep absolutely secret.

"I'm an atheist, actually... But that doesn't mean I'm not faithful. I believe faith is a universal emotion or experience. I just find it in different things than you. I find it with friends, family, art, real human connection, like this dinner, right here. We all have faith, mine just looks a little different."

Yes, my heart was racing, but I think he appreciated my answer. Maybe he was intimidated by it. At the moment, I wasn't sure. I checked my phone, which read 8:20 PM. I gave Steve the signal and we started giving our farewells. The Man and the Father offered to walk us out, and we accepted. On the way down the driveway, the Man ran back into the house to fetch something. We made small talk waiting for the Man to return. When he arrived, he was carrying the napkin that was set for my dinner. It was white with green birds on it. At some point during dinner, I had mentioned how I loved the design.

"I want you to have this. Come back anytime."

And with that, Steve and I got back in our car at exactly 8:30 PM. On the hour-long drive back to Providence, we recorded a voice memo of our thoughts. Our adrenaline was high. We didn't really know what to make of the last two and a half hours.

While I only became more critical of the Tribes after my visit, I did find the beauty of the community that people found a lot of peace in. During the Quaker-like service, a tattooed man stood up and addressed the room. He was new as of three-weeks ago, and he talked about growing up in a broken home and finding his family in the Tribes. He thanked his friend, one of the guests seated near me and Steve, for coming to see his new home. Another woman, the mother from Bridgewater at our dinner table, talked about her time at college. She was studying Child Psychology at Bridgewater State University. During her freshman year, she fell into a drug addiction that threatened to destroy her. Joining the Tribes gave her the ability to focus on what truly mattered to her. She mentioned how, in the house, she didn't need to worry about money, politics, or drugs. All she had to do was focus on her family and her children. Life outside the Tribes, for her, proved too much, and she found her peace with the Tribes. Communal living offers people an escape from the anxieties and dread that broad social life can induce, curating an environment where every resident has complete trust in the other. This surety in life can offer genuine peace to individuals facing debilitating traumas.

That being said, critiques of the Twelve Tribes were only validated by my visit. On top of confirming they work for no wage and forfeit all of their assets to the Tribes, learning about the relocation of members to other communities highlighted a drastic loss of agency for the community members. Their only connection in their life after joining the Tribes is their tie to the community. It was clear how little they interact with Plymouth county when they furrowed their brows at my mention of Halifax. The Man arrived here from South Carolina, had been there for

around 9 months, and had no other connection to the area other than the Tribes' community. If he were to be relocated again (which he likely has been already), he'd simply replace his connection with the Plymouth community with that of his newly assigned community. If he ever decided to leave, though, he'd be without any income, any assets, and any connection to a community that isn't a part of the Tribes. The residents are isolated in their community, and the constant relocation forces them to stay that way. Individual agency in this environment has all but evaporated. On top of this, the reported problematic aspects of their theology were never exactly *disproven* by my experience there.

I came into my visit ready to find something that wasn't what people were calling it. Instead, all of those preconceived notions were only supported. I didn't find a totally evil community, not by any means, but I did find myself coming away with the idea that *yes, this might be a cult*. Maybe I'm not free from subjective observation either, despite how many papers I write critiquing it.

III. "Cult" Applications - Anything Can Be A Cult If You Hate It Enough

In contemporary Plymouth, and America at large, perhaps the most charged label you could place upon a group is "cult." By no means, however, is it a new term. For centuries, "cult" had been used to indicate a small group of devote followers of a particular faith. The Latin definition of "cult" seems to be applied much more broadly than we see today, indicating any type of devoted worship or passion.⁶⁰ We see it used to describe groups of worshipers dedicated to particular local deities and movements, carrying a sense of smaller size than something like *religio*. While "cult" remains similar in its description of the dynamic of a particular group rather than a larger set of theologies, the steep negative connotation that we see its application

⁶⁰ See Nongbri, *Before Religion*.

carry today. Simply pulling from Merriam-Webster dictionary, we can see just how important this negative connotation is to our understanding of the word:

“CULT : a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious (see SPURIOUS)
also : its body of adherents”⁶¹
-Merriam-Webster

The simple definition of “cult” is entirely reliant on how a religion is “regarded,” wholly dependent on the perception of the faith by those not a part of it. Because of this, contemporary religious scholarship uses the phrase “new religious movements” to classify smaller, newer, more localized movements that are met with suspicion or caution by the general public. “Cult” cannot be a valid academic category because of this deep reliance on subjective personal perception.

Why, then, do we see this term applied so broadly in colloquial environments? Through the 20th century, we saw a myriad of new religion movements come to the forefront of American media coverage, and not for the right reasons. Between the mass suicide incited by Jim Jones and The Peoples’ Temple, the deadly “Waco Siege” on the Branch Davidians, and the suicides by the Heaven’s Gate congregation, the American public was constantly receiving horrifying news of dangerous “cults” destroying the lives around them. The intensely violent nature of these tragedies made the idea of a “cult” a point of fascination for the American public.

These acts of violence will be what sticks in the head of the public when “cult” is applied, more so than any aspect of a group’s unique theology. Instead of the theologies of these groups gaining national attention, the focus of the rise of “cults” was on the nature of their communities: a charismatic, abusive leader, the removal of agency for members, a blind faith in the dogma, and, of course, acts of intense violence. For an example, we can look to one of the most infamous “cults” in American folklore, the Manson Family. Charles Manson led a community of young

⁶¹ Merriam-Webster, “cult.”

women, often underaged, in the 1960s. He developed an identity of a messianic-like figure, using language borrowed from scripture and Beatles lyrics to develop a unique sense of faith. In 1969, with the hopes of inspiring a race war, Manson sent his followers to the home of Sharon Tate to murder all the inhabitants, leaving six dead. In the aftermath of the arrests, the Manson family was labeled a “cult,” despite their never being overtly religious in a theology or dogma.⁶² It was the acts of the community and the dynamics of their structure that led to the application of “cult.”

Turning our focus towards the Twelve Tribes, we can see how the sensationalism “cult” in 20th century media led to this community being labeled as such. To start, in 1984, the Twelve Tribes were living in a much larger communal setting as a single community in Vermont. This ended when the Vermont State Police, in response to claims of child abuse in the community, raided the compound and seized 112 children from the community. The case eventually fell apart, the children were returned to their families, and the Tribes split apart into many more, smaller communities across the globe. Any police action of this size is sure to catch the attention of the media, and as the anti cult movement moved forwards, the Twelve Tribes were seen as such. Today in Plymouth, the Tribes exhibit all the behaviors one would akin to a cult: a charismatic leader in Elbert Eugene Spriggs, who died in 2021, a communal compound, unfamiliar dress, a unique and intense theology, the removal of agency between members, and reports of violence.

For the sake of argument, I am going to draw parallels between the Twelve Tribes and another religious group found in Plymouth. This other group has a strict set of rituals and dogma, of which adherence is important to the acceptance of members into the community. They have unique religious dress, sets of robes that help indicate status within the church. They follow an incredibly influential leader, who enjoys incredible wealth and his own personal militarized

⁶² Deflem, *Homicide and Violent Crime*, 67.

bodyguards. He claims to speak directly with God and often creates new dogma himself. On top of all of this, they have, for decades, sexually abused children in the community which they systematically tried to cover up. This other group is the Catholic Church.⁶³ While some who have become disillusioned with the Church in Plymouth may call it a “cult,” for the most part, you’d have a hard time finding anyone who legitimately sees the Church as a “cult.” The question is: why? If these observations of the Church are true and exhibit behaviors parallel with those of widely recognized “cults,” what factors could be protecting the Catholic Church from the “cult” categorization? The answer lies in the social hierarchy, as it always does. On one hand, the Twelve Tribes are a group of a few dozen individuals with no broad social influence in Plymouth, as they are neither locals to the town nor are they interacting with the larger Plymouth area once in the community. Their largest institution is the Yellow Deli, a restaurant downtown. The Catholic Church, however, enjoys substantial wealth, significant membership from the Plymouth population, and social influence developed over the centuries. Religious categorization will act to reinforce the social hierarchy of the given community, and, despite potential parallels between the two, the smaller, less influential, and socially deviant Twelve Tribes are the “cult” and Catholicism is the mainstream religion.

In our modern context, we can see how the reliance on action and community dynamics lead to the application of “cult” over any theological observation. “Cult,” it seems, is being applied to more than just religions. The inherent need for social hierarchy through classification remains, even if religious categorization may not hold the weight it once did in Puritan Plymouth. Any group of impassioned individuals that one takes opposition with can easily be demeaned by the application of the word. Particularly in today’s America, with the rise of

⁶³ Please do not think I am calling the Catholic Church a “cult.” As explained earlier, “cult” is not a proper label for any faith, as the connotation is the primary operator in it’s application. I simply hope to demonstrate the biased application of the word “cult” despite similar observations of these faiths.

Alt-Right politics through a “cult of personality” of Donald Trump, “cult” has found its way into our politics. Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, in the wake of the home invasion that left her husband hospitalized, said this about the Alt-Right movement:

“A strong Republican Party has done great things for our country.
And they should take pride in that instead of yielding to a cult — to a
thug, actually, the way I see it.”⁶⁴

-Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi

The populist emergence of Donald Trump, through his Make America Great Again movement, has shades of the charismatic, oppressive leadership seen in the infamous “cults” of the 20th century. While religion and politics, particularly in America, can never quite be separated, it is certainly a reach to say that Trump is imposing a particular theology on his followers. I also doubt that Pelosi intended to indicate that Trump is developing a new religious movement. She pivots in her statement to call him a “thug,” revealing her intentions. She wanted to make a statement against the leadership of Trump, first akin to a cult leader, and then to a criminal. Here we see the “cult” being applied solely for the intensely negative connotation it carries, almost entirely devoid of the theological roots that it is derived from. We also see “cult” applied much more broadly in an ironic way, humorous way, where sports fans and theater troupes are poked at for strange rituals or behaviors. The need for a particular theology is not present in these ironic examples, again indicating the importance of connotation.

⁶⁴ Bennett, “Nancy Pelosi.”

OUTRODUCTION

I. Future Scholarship

Let's recall why I started the task of writing this piece in the first place. There's been a movement in the last century of religious studies scholarship to determine a universally applicable definition for "religion," as there tends to be an insecurity surrounding an academic field that can't even define what it concerns itself with. Talal Asad, however, offers a theory which seems to be supported by my findings in Plymouth:

the theoretical search for an essence of religion invites us
to separate it conceptually from the domain of power.⁶⁵
-Talal Asad, *The Construction of Religion as an
Anthropological Category*

Asad's concern with "power" is at the heart of the weaponization of religious categorization. He understands that the mere process of universalizing "religion" ignores the deep social power dynamics that influence the application of religious categories within a society. If a definition were to be wholly accepted, then it would have to be perfectly applicable in all scenarios, regardless of historical contexts.

We have seen, however, through Plymouth's history, that the application of religious categories is deeply rooted in the social hierarchy of the relevant historical context. Due entirely to the specific material circumstances of Plymouth at any given time, the social hierarchy morphs and transforms to reflect these circumstances. The application of religious category then, in turn, is done through the filter of the hierarchy, reinforcing the material structure of the relevant context. Since religious categorization is done so to uphold the social hierarchy, and since that social hierarchy is reliant on the material context of the moment in question, the

⁶⁵ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 28.

process of religious categorization is unique to the specific material circumstances of a single society at a single moment in time.

The mere assumption that a universally applicable definition, or a set of universally applicable rules for religious categorization, disregards the deeply rooted connection categorization has in the power structures in place within a society. To rely on a sort of implicit objectivity in the process of categorization is even more misguided. These categories carry deep-seeded connotations with them, and not only applying them but applying them with feigned objectivity in an academic environment perpetuates the social hierarchy and potentially oppressive sentiments towards marginalized faiths.

Colloquial understandings of words, to my mind, are what religious studies scholars should primarily be concerning themselves with. The field should not be concerned with some unseen, unreal, uncorrupted essence of “religion,” but instead how “religion” is lived and experienced by the actual individuals that make up the society in question. Religious studies should first be concerned with the lived experience of those who actively partake in religious behavior rather than a history of theory cloaked in unfounded objectivity.

Religious categorization, from the very beginning of the history of American religion, carries social value that can directly affect someone’s own positionality in society. Whether it’s “religion” being a vital piece of “civil society,” or being a “papist” or a “good Catholic,” being a “godless Atheist” or a “cultist,” one’s perceived religious positionality has deep affects on their entire social positioning, dependant on a specific set of material circumstances. It would be misguided to ignore the social evaluations that categorization brings, and it is the work of religious scholars to make this phenomenon clear and expose the socio-religious processes that perpetuate an oppressive hierarchy.

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