It Was Never About the Snakes: Synanon, Cult, and the Devil in Religious Studies

Dana Logan

In J.Z. Smith's foundational essay on Jim Jones, Smith argued that calling something a cult—or bad religion—is not what historians of religion do. Historians of religion reveal the "ordinary humanness" of groups that others call cults and show the continuity between what is considered real religion and what is maligned new religion. Similarly, David Chidester showed that to give the Peoples Temple the designation of religion (rather than cult) is a gift of humanization; it is a small step in repairing their dehumanization by the US government and the American public in the wake of the Jonestown tragedy.[1] More recently, Megan Goodwin has argued that any designation of cult is tinged with a heteronormative, racist judgment.[2] Religious studies tells the public, and our students, that "cult" is just another way to refer to a religion you do not like.

In the classroom, however, I experience a dissonance between a need to take the word "cult" away from my students and a need to encourage my students' sense of justice. There has been a recent and necessary cultural acknowledgment that we need to believe survivors of abuse; yet, religious studies tells our students to not believe survivors in podcasts, documentaries, and memoirs who tell us they belonged to a cult. There is a particularly discordant moment in my classroom when my students are reading *Why Waco?* (a book that is now canon in establishing the utility of religious studies), in which the authors argue that people who leave religious groups are especially untrustworthy in their reports. Why, my students wonder, is this different from saying sexual abuse survivors are particularly untrustworthy? There are many reasons to question the utility of the word "cult" for survivors of abuse and for cultural analyses of religion in general, but, for religious studies, to meet our moment we need to do more than banish this word. With absolutely no deference to the sociologists, psychologists, and "cult experts" (lawyers, journalists, and pastors), historians of religion can, and should, define the word "cult" historically. Furthermore, a historicized use of this word links to a key experience of both

Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation, Vol. 33, Issue 3, pp. 283–319, ISSN: 1052-1151, electronic ISSN: 1533-8568. © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

American religion and the American state: being trapped. There are a range of groups that kidnap people, keep them spatially stuck, and, crucially, are *enabled* in all this by the US government through the invocation of religion.

I acknowledge that religions taking their adherents "hostage" is precisely the logic that led to several examples of state violence against small religious groups, and the relevant government agencies used the word "cult" to justify the violence.[3] But I think that scholars of American religion, our students, and the public can hold two truths at the same time. Law enforcement has, in the past, misunderstood, and continues to deliberately misrepresent, religious belonging in nonnormative religions; equally, there *are* religious groups that trap people. Experts in religious history should be especially skilled in assessing and reconsidering that distinction.

The history of Synanon, a drug rehabilitation community that emerged in the 1950s, also reorients the history of cults' relationship to the state. The popular and academic discussion of "cults," with the emphasis on Jonestown and Waco, has framed these groups as definitionally in tension with the government; Synanon, however, has been protected by American laws and promoted by government agencies. The first step in invoking the word "cult" responsibly is, therefore, to stop obsessing over Jonestown and Waco, a debate whose terms were set by the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) and other anti-cult lobbyists.[4] The Peoples Temple and the Branch Davidians, as the anchors of any discussion of the meaning of "cult," obscure something real about the use of the word "cult" in our world (by which I mean the United States since the 1950s): people often use this word to name a particular combination of incarceration, religion, and therapy that leverages nonprofit incorporation and religious freedom protections, that has fundamentally shaped the terms of addiction recovery, and that is difficult to distinguish from a for-profit corporation. This is a type of group for which the terms "new religious movement" (NRM) or "minority religion" hide more than they illuminate because those terms are protective, and some groups —Synanon and Scientology—do not need protecting.[5] "NRM" and "minority religion" are defenses against the definitional violence of anti-cult interest groups, but Scientology, for example, is perfectly capable of protecting itself.[6] While Scientology will always hold more sway in the public imagination because of its Hollywood power, the much more important example is Synanon, a group that is no longer functional but that still lives on in American "treatment centers." Synanon helped to define the term "cult" for Americans, as a religious group that brainwashes its members. When I say that this group was a cult, I am not proposing a new social scientific model for the term, with

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Synanon as the blueprint; I am arguing that outsiders' and insiders' fantasies of "cult" became inextricable from Synanon's attempt to put the fantasy of brainwashing into action.[7]

Synanon, even as it focuses our attention on the crucial relationship between containment and government endorsement, can also distract; tellingly, it can distract us with snakes. The Synanon movement's relationship to the public shifted radically in 1978, when the lawyer Paul Morantz, who was representing the families of people accusing Synanon of abuse, was attacked by a rattlesnake in his mailbox. The snake had been put there by Synanon people at the direction of the group's leader, Chuck Dederich. After almost killing Morantz, the snake became a potent symbol of the group's status as a cult.[8] Much like the iconic images of Jonestown and Rajneeshpuram—Kool-Aid and food poisoning—the image stands in for the group. This single-word invocation reminds me of another critical word in the study of religion: "haagh." In Robert Orsi's classic critique of Dennis Covington's memoir of spiritual kinship with Appalachian snake handlers, Orsi argues that Covington's description of a confrontation between himself and the snake handler Punkin' Brown pivots on Covington's narration of Punkin's vocalization "haagh." This description, he contends, is the moment when Covington's relationship to a religious subject changes. It is the transition to "suspicion, detachment, and doubt" from "compassion, attention, and understanding." This movement is parallel to what happens when we start using the word "cult" instead of "religion." The group becomes defined by the moment of aggression rather than the communal feelings, aspirations, and nonnormative approaches to love and social reformation. Kool-Aid (in fact, not Kool-Aid but a different brand), the food poisoning of the buffet, the rattlesnake—each one collapses everything else about these groups into a moment. Orsi calls this a scholarly act of dehumanization.[9]

Orsi has two intertwined concerns about groups being reduced to a potent symbol: dehumanization and the promotion (without acknowledgment) of one's own sectarian ideas about good religion. I, however, am struck by how the former Synanon member Larry Kornish addresses both of these concerns in his evaluation of Synanon as a cult.[10] In an interview for a website where former Synanon members share stories, the interviewer David asks Kronish, "Was Synanon a cult?" Kronish responds with a series of questions and answers to himself:

> It's all true, none of it is true. The truth is complicated. . . . Did Synanon save my life? Yes. Was it a wonderful place to be? Yes, it saved my life and I do not regret being there. Did

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Synanon betray me and wound me? Yes, it is all true. Was it one thing at one time and one thing at another time? Yeah. That's what makes it so fucking difficult. . . . All these movements that have grown out of Synanon that are still saving people's lives including some of the people who came here like Rod or Bruce or John Stallone? Man, you know, THANK GOD FOR SYNANON. Did Synanon do terrible things? Did it hurt people? Did it injure people? Did it perform criminal acts? YES. Was Synanon an enlightened community that thank God was on the face of the earth, this marvelous thing happened? YES. Was Synanon a cult? YES.[11]

Kronish's theory of cult is ambivalent. He does not use the word "religion," but contrasts something enlightened, something that saves, and that creates real belonging against the word "cult." There is no clear "good" religion that stands against cult; rather, Kronish offers a list of potential human goods. His final pronouncement that Synanon was a cult argues that it was good for him, it was even good for others, and yet, ultimately, it was not good. He is proposing an experience of cult that does not make its adherents, including himself, inhuman. I feel no need to correct Kronish in his use of the word, but I do feel a need to supplement his understanding, to fill out the picture with historical study. Further, I feel a need to follow him onto what Orsi calls the "normative grid," the space in which we evaluate good and bad.[12] Kronish shows, however, that the good/bad we are evaluating is not necessarily good or bad religion; it is a whole host of other goods—care, justice, kinship—that daunt me as a mere historian.

Nonetheless, retreating from these normative considerations has come with a cost: the field of American religious history has not spent enough time talking about why exactly a host of religions were designed—by leaders, middle managers, and participants—to hurt. The history of Synanon is helpful in mapping the peculiar role of post-war resocializing religion within the larger ecosystem of religious and secular institutions that abused people systematically. Synanon's open embrace of religious brainwashing, as an applied fantasy supported by the state, had wide implications for the history of drug rehabilitation in the United States and for the use of the word "cult"; Synanon, however, is only one data point in the historical emergence of state-supported religious abuse and social reprogramming. It is not the first type of organization in American history to use state support to trap people for religious resocialization and it is less an origin point than a necessary data point in a longer history of state-sponsored religious incarceration —a history that must include Native American boarding schools, reform schools for "unmanageable girls," and faith-based correctional facilities.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Importantly, most of the institutions in this category were never described as cults by those who were hurt by them; Synanon is merely one type of the larger category of incarcerating religious organizations.[13] Cults are but one subsection of religious institutions in the United States that have kidnapped people, and religious institutions designed to violently resocialize people are only one subsection of religious institutions that have abused people and have done so with the aid (or lack of intervention) of the US government. All these organizations deserve our normative assessments.

By affirming Larry Kronish's use of the word "cult" in relationship to the history of Synanon, I argue that distinguishing between causes and effects in harm is the ethical dimension of historical work. Affirming people's religious hurt comes with the responsibility of providing a denser web of historical explanation: why did they get hurt, in that way, at that time? Synanon hurt people by experimenting on them religiously and by inspiring decades of state-supported, ritualized abuse in other treatment centers. Cult, as both a temporally specific and normative assessment in this context, means a group that uses state infrastructure to trap people and control them through ritualizing Cold War social scientific principles of resocialization.

Chuck and the History of Synanon

In the early history of Synanon, the word "cult" did not appear, either in the experiences of members or in the press. Later, during the group's rise, in the 1950s and 1960s, members and outsiders openly celebrated its ability to brainwash people. The story of how Synanon put the fantasy of brainwashing into practice in post-war America goes like this: Charles E. Dederich (Chuck) was an alcoholic in the late 1940s, barely surviving in Santa Monica, California, reading Emerson, and living off unemployment. He started attending Alcoholics Anonymous and loved it. Dederich recalled his first meeting like this:

> And I suddenly realized that people were making speeches up there, that there were people listening to them, so I leap[t] to my feet and kind of rushed up to the podium and broke into some kind of a religious diatribe. I have the vaguest idea of the content, but it got a terrific hand. And everybody laughed, and so I said, "This is for me."[14]

This kind of self-conscious, attention-loving trickster quality became central to both Dederich's persona and the nascent drug recovery group

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that formed around him. The group originally wanted to call itself the Tender Loving Care Club (but that name had already been incorporated), and they felt that drug users (or "addicts" or "dope fiends," as they called themselves) needed more accountability than AA provided.[15]

From AA, Dederich borrowed the key idea that only addicts could cure other addicts, but, unlike AA, Synanon argued for a residential experience in which addicts separated themselves from their lives for an extended period and cut off ties to friends and family. Most provocatively, the group developed a form of "attack therapy" in which participants verbally abused one another and subjected themselves to punitive rituals. The root of drug abuse, according to Dederich, was a lack of character; it was through a complete submission to the group that character was rebuilt.[16] Treatment was also a home and a job, a model that allowed the organization to function entirely on donations during the 1960s and in which members were not required to pay for treatment. Instead, they scrubbed floors and ran the growing array of businesses that supported the group financially, from gas stations to furniture stores.[17]

Dederich framed Synanon's culture as a corrective to the 1960s counterculture's immaturity and laxity. According to him, the group "points out [addicts'] stupidity in the hope that they will learn how to grow up and function like adults."[18] We often associate communal groups with the countercultural movements of the 1960s, but Synanon formed its communal ideals as a direct repudiation of protests against the Vietnam War and music subcultures such as jazz and rock and roll.[19] Despite this refutation of counterculture, many of its early members came from the jazz scene, and the rituals and language of the group always maintained a kind of jive quality. They even produced their own jazz album.

Much like the jazz scene from which many of their members came, the group was proudly interracial.[20] Dederich embodied this anti-"square" ethos in his marriage to Betty, who was African American, in his constant cussing (Synanon people loved to cuss), and in his whole bodily presentation.[21] Kandy Latson, an early participant in Synanon, described Chuck in very a Synanonese way: "What'd he look like? He weighed about 280 pounds. He had a big belly. He had a big fucking head. I mean a big fucking head. And he never wore shoes. He wore flip flops."[22] The group may have called themselves "dope fiends," but they were not trying to fit in with squares; they were an anti-counterculture counterculture.

We have a rich portrait of Synanon during the 1960s because celebrities, journalists, and social scientists flocked to the group. Social scientists wrote lucid (and celebratory) portraits of its methods, and,

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in 1965, Hollywood producers made a movie starring Eartha Kitt that portrayed the Synanon as a rag-tag group with the secret to drug rehabilitation. The group was then covered in *Life* magazine, whose ringing endorsement declared it "A tunnel back to the human race."[23]

The core of Synanon's approach was "The Game," which was, I will argue, a form of abusive ritual rooted in military experiments of resocialization. In an instance of the Game, a person sat in the middle of a circle (called "the hot seat") while the rest of the group yelled at them, insulted them, and tore them down emotionally. A taste: "You're a low-life creep. You know that? You're a no-class bastard, that's what you are. A no-class bastard. That's all you'll ever be."[24] Fellow members "gamed" (taunted) the person in the hot seat by picking at their deepest insecurities; the gamed person was supposed to eventually feel a break between their internal resistance and the external critiques—what Dederich called "polarized" positions—creating a path to an honest encounter with the self.[25] Looking back at the Game retrospectively in 1978, Bobby Kohl, a young man who had joined the group in 1966 to kick his addiction, reported that group members were "brainwashed to believe that anything Synanon does is right and everyone must do what Synanon demands."[26] Breaking people down until they were subject to group authority was a description of the Game that Dederich agreed with—and openly promoted—in the 1950s and 1960s.

Dederich saw group experience as central to drug rehabilitation. He was generally opposed to one-on-one psychotherapy because it did not come with the accountability of group surveillance.[27] Carrying out manual labor as a group and monitoring each other at all times of the day allowed people to practice submission to the community "norms," which would cure them of an adolescent need for individual rebellion, the character flaw that Dederich argued was at the root of addiction.[28] The restructuring of character required public shame. People who slipped up were often required to wear signs that said "Ask me what I did"; in one case, a resident was required to wear a diaper to demonstrate his infantile behavior. Members could also be punished for not tattling on others for bad behavior and so surveillance became a central function of the group dynamic.[29] The Game, labor, and punishments all served to heal the addict through eroding their individual resistance.

When the group was first described as a cult in the late 1960s, it was in relationship to its shift away from addiction treatment and toward religious utopian ideals. At that time, the Synanon leadership began to propose that they were creating a new type of self through a mini society that could model enlightenment to the rest of the world. Dederich introduced this next phase by introducing a version of the Game that could be performed by anyone. In 1966, Synanon opened its first "game club," a subscription-based club that allowed non-drug

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

addicts to participate in the brutal ritual for which Synanon had become famous. You could participate in these games at dinner parties, at work, or at official buildings owned by Synanon all across the United States.[30] People with no drug addiction found the brutality of the group's methods thrilling, and the success of these paid-for experiences provided a new revenue stream for the organization. It was during this transition that critiques of the group as a cult began. Writing about the possibilities for drug treatment in 1967, Dr. Doug Louria argued that, while Synanon had once been an option in the arsenal of drug treatment, it was now a useless "secret cult."[31] His critique was not about a tricky charismatic leader; it was an allegation of a treatment that did not do what it said it did.

In 1968, the success of the clubs led to a new category of membership in Synanon called "lifestyling," in which non-addicts maintained their jobs outside of the group and lived in their homes but donated either part or all of their income. Alongside the inpatient members who worked for free, this economic model led to a lucrative structure for Synanon, which did not pay taxes because it had been incorporated as a nonprofit.[32] Synanon's wealth peaked in 1969, as it was riding high on this form of dual membership, as well as the continuing influx of donations from fawning corporations who supplied the drug addiction program with free supplies.[33] In 1969 the organization made a radical shift: all lifestylers were asked to either become residential (bringing their children with them and leaving their jobs) or leave the organization. Thousands of lifestylers left.[34]

As Synanon became a residential community for both drug addicts and non-drug addicts, it shifted into a model recognizable to Americans in 1970: a religious or political commune. Unlike many other communes, however, it had a massive fortune that it had amassed through the success of its industries and donations. In order to protect this fortune, Synanon lawyers made the decision to file as a religious organization as a way to shield the group from the IRS oversight.[35] This was a practical decision, but by this point Synanon had fully transitioned to rituals that were self-consciously religious. The most significant decision in this transition to religion was the end of "graduation," the term for an addict's successful recovery when they left. In the new model, nobody ever needed to leave. This shift in the organization's understanding of its mission happened in 1968, well before it filed as a religion with the IRS.[36]

It was not until the early 1970s that Synanon became widely understood as a cult by outsiders and was accused of abuse and brainwashing by members. In 1975 and 1976, the group adopted the practice of shaving their heads (a practice that had previously only been used for punishment), reproduction was banned (men were required to

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have vasectomies and women were asked to have abortions if they were pregnant), and married couples were asked to switch partners.[37] I have sped through these last practices because, when assessing the use of the word "cult," what you focus on matters. It is easy to confuse unorthodox sexual practices and non-heteronormative family structures with abusive religion. But the application of the term "cult" to Synanon—starting in 1971, and continuing into the present—by journalists, former members, and eventually the children who were raised in the community demonstrates these subjects' sense that cults were a kind of bad therapy that used group pressure to brainwash people.[38]

Journalists began to use the terms "cult" and "brainwashing" alongside each other in 1974, when the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) was taken to court over brainwashing accusations, and in 1978 after the mass suicide of the Peoples Temple. In both cases, the language of brainwashing and subservience to a cult leader was loaded with racialized concern over non-Western religion and Black people's susceptibility to a white leader.[39] Concern over Synanon, however, points to an additional historical meaning of "cult" taking form in the late 1960s and early 1970s: cults as a form of ritual abuse and bad medical care. In 1971, before the group had begun their unorthodox marriages or head shaving, the psychologist Bruce L. Maliver wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* about a young woman he had known who died by suicide in 1968 after seeking treatment with a Synanon group. Calling Synanon a cult, Maliver made the argument that the most distressing thing about its form of group therapy was that "encounter groups" were becoming a wildly popular form of alternative therapy far beyond this one organization. Maliver was concerned with the lack of medical training, licensure, and regulation. He used the word "cult" to name a form of psychological treatment that was likely to hurt people.[40]

In Maliver's critique and in the autobiographies of children such as C.A. Wittman, who was raised in Synanon and calls it a cult, "cult" has a meaning that is distinct from (although, of course, adjacent to) the claims against ISKCON and the Peoples Temple. In Wittman's analysis, she describes Synanon ritual as *designed* to hurt. She recounts the experience of being ten years old and participating in the Game with other children. The supervisors "took turns watching over us and encouraging us to keep going. . . . By midnight some of the kids had nodded off, spent, with nothing more to say. . . . Those who dozed were slapped awake. 'Play the game! Play the fucking game!'"[41] The point was to play through demoralization, to feel sleep deprivation, to play past any desire to play: to feel and endure new levels of hurt until one became masterful at hurting others. Importantly, what Maliver and

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Wittman described as cult activity, and what Bobby Kohl described as "brainwashing" in his lawsuit against Synanon, were practices central to the group long before the cult panic around ISKCON and the Peoples Temple.

Dederich was not alone in his enthusiasm for this form of experimental ritual hurting in the 1960s. At Esalen, as Maliver pointed out, new age practitioners were developing an aggressive group therapy called "encounter groups."[42] In 1960, David Wilkerson, a Pentecostal minister, was creating rehabilitative residential programs for "troubled youth," called Teen Challenge, that relied on toughening up children.[43] These ideas were clearly circulating between hippies, evangelicals, and people trying to treat addiction. But the historian Mark Chatfield has shown that the key principles of the Game were at work even earlier: in World War II, when military psychologists began experimenting on soldiers who had gone AWOL. While imprisoned, the soldiers were divided into two groups, pre-honor and honor. If the soldiers forced one another to "tell the truth" about their moral deficiencies, they were moved into the honor group. This experiment was done behind barbed-wire fences and supervised by armed guards. Chatfield explains that the "approach armed delinquent GIs with psychotherapeutic jargon to discuss their life histories and their deviance from Army regulations, giving them words to express how they were cured of their unpatriotic attitudes, making them fit for duty back on the front lines." The therapeutic form seemed to work best when the soldiers dug into one another's deepest insecurities. The psychiatrists, delighted with the soldiers' ability to remold one another with mutual hurtful attacks, renamed the method "guided group interaction." As Chatfield points out, the doctors and social scientists who pioneered and then disseminated the military's findings from these experiments eventually played a role in establishing the treatment centers for drug rehabilitation that also used Synanon as a model. Clearly Chuck Dederich did not have a monopoly on ideas about how to use what Chatfield calls "nonphysical forms of therapeutic violence."[44] Dederich's unique spin on this form of "nonphysical" violence, however, was to give it the trappings of both science and religion.

Trapped

When *Time* magazine broke the story of the Synanon's transition in 1977 to a religion (and especially their embrace of open marriages, forced vasectomies, and shaved heads), it reported that the group had become a "kooky cult."[45] The focus on these issues by

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

journalists missed the larger story.[46] By the time that Synanon had become a self-described religious movement, its core features had already become the most popular model for drug abuse treatment centers, and Synanon itself was on the decline, having lost most of its members. But Synanon matters for the history of medicine and incarceration because it spawned, in concert with federal drug policy during the neoliberal 1980s, a larger movement of rehab facilities that followed its model.[47] And Synanon matters for religious studies because the group and its offshoots define a historically specific form of religious coercion that is inextricably linked to being resocialized and spatially contained.

Synanon did not incarcerate people until very late in its short history, but its logic of containment was worked out in the 1960s. For most of the organization's history, adults came and left of their own accord.[48] But some people were actually unable to leave, and, importantly for the history of cult as a way of naming a particular form of religious institution during the late twentieth century, the group thought deeply about the utility of religious spatial containment, by which I mean the enforced separation of people both from their families and from the rest of society for the purposes of resocialization via ritual. Synanon first developed its emphasis on spatial containment by arguing that drug addiction could not be cured without cutting off ties to friends and families. As the group thought more universally about its philosophy of life, Dederich used the word "containment," which he said he took from Emerson, to theorize the necessity of containing oneself spatially, so all one's energy could be devoted to the work of the group.[49] Synanon ritualized this idea by practicing intermittent lockdowns called "going on containment," in which nobody was allowed to leave.[50] "Containment" increasingly became the precondition of achieving Synanon's benefits, as both lifestylers and addicts were asked to live permanently on the compound.

Synanon also incarcerated people on behalf of state agencies. As it gained fame for its drug treatment program, police, courts, and social welfare agencies began sending the program both adult addicts and children who got into trouble. Beginning in the early 1960s, parole officers sent their parolees to live at Synanon; in the 1970s, even as the group became more well known as a religious commune than a drug addiction program, social welfare agencies sent minors who had broken the law to live at Synanon for the duration of their sentences. The children were called the "punk squad" and they lived separately from other group members. While at Synanon they were required to live according to the Synanon lifestyle, shaving their heads, gaming, and listening to recordings of others playing the Game.[51] Another

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

important example of this state-backed imprisonment at Synanon is the case that the lawyer Paul Morantz (a famous "anti-cult" advocate) won against the group, in which a woman sued the organization for wrongful imprisonment after a mental health clinic in Venice, California, sent her to Synanon. She accused Synanon of practicing medicine without a license, refusing her access to her husband, and inducing a psychotic episode.[52] Very few of Synanon's members between the 1950s and the 1970s were forced to stay at the compound, but Synanon cultivated a model for imprisoning people in a ritually focused space, away from their family and the rest of society —and crucially at the behest of the state—that would live on in America's conception of rehab and "troubled teen" treatment centers. One of the qualifications I would like to propose for historicizing religious spatial containment is that it is difficult for a religious organization to imprison someone without some level of buy-in from the state.

Compared with the number of people who were incarcerated in Synanon-style rehabs and forced to do Synanon-style programs in prisons between the 1960s and the present, the number of people incarcerated directly by Synanon is quite low. The historian of medicine Claire D. Clark shows that US policy makers adopted Synanon's "treatment center" model in their approach to drug rehabilitation, especially in prisons, using it above methadone treatment and other treatment center models that did not stress punishment and shame. Former Synanon members led many of these programs throughout the 1970s and 1980s.[53] The trajectory of governmental policy has been fundamentally shaped by Synanon's philosophy: addicts, as the organization framed drug users, could not simply stop using drugs to recover; they needed to become different people in order to stay clean. And they certainly did not require medical care. Another core idea that migrated from Synanon into drug rehabs operating today was that labor is central to recovery. This has led to a practice of "hiring out" people in rehab as temporary unpaid workers for corporations such as Shell, Exxon, and Walmart.[54] Finally, Synanon sowed the seeds of the American rehab industry by embracing the idea of spatial containment, a concept that sat very well with the drug policy officials of the era.

In contrast to asylums and prisons (the government's only tool for getting people off drugs in the 1950s), Synanon offered a genuinely more humane option, through its provision of free care. But it was not working outside the mainstream understanding of drug addiction, and this is why its embrace of "containment" resonated with policy makers who favored incarceration. Harry Anslinger, who served as the Commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics from 1930 to 1962,

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

under five different presidents, described "quarantine" as the answer to the post–World War II rise in heroin use.[55] Synanon similarly believed in quarantining addiction; but the group was just as worried about the outside world contaminating its members as about its members contaminating the outside world. Ultimately, Synanon's solution to drug addiction made sense to policy makers who had previously thought that the only answer was jail. Anslinger's ideas and Synanon's ideal of containment found particular resonance in the programs instituted in prisons starting in the early 1960s.[56]

Even Synanon's more esoteric practices—such as the development of highly arcane Emersonian terminology and elaborate rituals—did not discourage drug policy officials from taking the group seriously.[57] In order to understand Synanon's theology in its full context, it is crucial to look to the ideals and practices that the organization shared with social scientists and government officials.[58] Synanon's focus on Emerson, Ouija boards, and describing the true self as an inner wizard could very usefully be put into a genealogy of esotericism; but thinking about the group primarily in those terms would miss its sacralization of midcentury social science. Specifically, by ritualizing Cold War social science, Synanon created a theology and a set of rituals that could be easily adopted by evangelical or secular treatment centers.

Putting Cold War Social Science into Practice

Synanon became a religion by framing antisociality as a moral problem that could be solved through ritual. The group invited people with no drug addiction issues into its community in the late 1960s because it conceived of drug addiction as one among many antisocial impulses. When Synanon opened the game clubs, this is how it pitched its value: everyone had something that made them antisocial and thus everyone could benefit from gaming. It called the people outside treatment "squares," and explained that squares suffered from what Dederich called "character-disorders," which was why they gambled, lied, and struggled in life.[59] As squares became integrated into the community, Synanon developed a much wider definition of the antisocial that could include anyone, on a fluid scale.

The cure to the condition of being antisocial was resocialization (these were the terms Synanon used). Dederich described the "dope fiend" as someone who thinks "anarchistically," and that is why "they wind up being separate and apart from society." But this was also a special avenue of possibility, because, as Dederich said, addicts "usually have few ties and are, therefore, quite easy to organize into

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the autocracy that we have here."[60] The addict always had a revered place within Synanon mythology because they were valued as highly moldable. Squares needed remolding too, but, ironically, their enmeshment in society made it more difficult for them to start from scratch in their resocialization. The goal of Synanon's resocialization was for an individual to become tough, and thus capable of deflecting cultural cues that led to addiction and bad feelings. The group's motto, "Hang Tough," was written on a life preserver at the door to the headquarters.[61] The irony of this formulation—that you needed to be beat down to stop being so weak—was not lost on Dederich, who explained both to participants and to the public that another name for this approach to resocialization was brainwashing.

Brainwashing was on the Cold War American mind during Synanon's rise, and it is a crucial element of the group's history that, instead of deflecting this critique, Dederich and other leaders embraced the term. The usage emerged in the 1950s to describe why a group of American POWs captured during the Korean War became communists. In order to account for this incredible transformation, psychologists working on behalf of the CIA described "brainwashing" as a form of communist political indoctrination that was completely distinct from American liberal, capitalist education.[62] As the historian of Cold War literature Timothy Melley shows, the term's history is a crucial example of the way that fiction becomes fact.

"Brainwashing" was initially popularized by a journalist, Edward Hunter (who later turned out to be a CIA operative), to explain the communists' special psychological techniques for thought control and reprogramming. He argued that communists used techniques such as overworking and denying people sleep, but also raising children in collectives, rather than in a family. This combination of methods created a Pavlovian response in its victims. Hunter's description combined well-known torture techniques, lifelong participation in collectivism, and mesmerism.[63] It became enshrined in American popular culture, both in anti-communist art such as *The Manchurian Candidate* and in leftist art such as novels by Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Kurt Vonnegut, and Philip K. Dick.[64] It felt particularly resonant to an American public increasingly aware of the very real power of advertising in their lives.[65] Melley's argument is that this fiction "proved so effective that elements of U.S. intelligence believed it and began a furious search for a *real* mind-control weapon. While the search did not produce a miraculous form of total mind control, it did produce a method of coercive interrogation and a program of *simulated* brainwashing designed as a prophylactic against enemy mistreatment." This resulted in the attempt to practice brainwashing in the covert experiment MK-Ultra. "Fifty years later,"

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Melley claims, "this simulation became the *real* basis for interrogating detainees in the War on Terror."[66] Much as the CIA was inspired by the fiction of brainwashing in their refinement of torture techniques, religious leaders in the post-war American landscape were inspired to put this idea into action.[67]

When critics accused Synanon of using brainwashing, the organization argued that drug addicts needed to have their "brains washed out" regularly, much as the body required washing. During one of the studies done of the group in 1965, the sociologist Lewis Yablonsky found that participants used the term to describe positively the process they were undertaking. In order to be cured of addiction, a person's values and norms had to be changed, and this required a wiping out of their brain and a replacement with a new culture.[68] In the late 1970s, the Synanon member Bruce Gilbert's rhythm-and-blues song "Brainwashed," written for a fundraising album, celebrated the term by turning brainwashing into a badge of honor: "till I found a little place to save my soul," he sang, "to get back on track and get under control, and now I'm brainwashed."[69] Synanon took anti-communist panic over communalist automatons and turned it inside out, arguing that, precisely in order for deadbeats to become upstanding Americans, they needed to become communalist automatons. As in the Gilbert song, it was a defensive joke; but it was also a useful way of describing the forceful transformation that the group required of its members.

There is plentiful evidence for Synanon's earnest interest in mimicking the fictional account of brainwashing. The group embraced a Pavlovian behavioralist understanding of change: you had to do before you could believe. Thinking became "the enemy of recovery." As one participant explained:

> Don't start thinking for yourself yet. You know, when you try to think, you attempt to use a muscle that hasn't been developed. You haven't any muscle there yet. . . . It gets so confused and tired. It just relaxes when you put dope in your arm. Don't try to think for a while. Let us do the thinking for you, for a while.[70]

This process was conceived of in aggressive terms. Dederich described the transformation of an addict into a resocialized person as a violent process, but "So is surgery or amputation. The process of cutting out an emotional element which might turn into a deadly gangrene tends to be brutal."[71] Much as brainwashing could flip back and forth between fact and fiction in public discourse, in Synanon the fiction of mind control moved back and forth between a joke and a method.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Synanon's interest in brainwashing was part of a larger embrace of Cold War social science as theory ready to be put into action. Social sciences such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology—often considered the "soft sciences"—received an unprecedented amount of government investment and public interest during the 1950s and 1960s. The idea that individuals could be controlled by social forces, including language and family structures, became a weaponizable form of knowledge.[72] During this era, sociologists were also writing bestsellers, and Synanon people were clearly reading them. The most popular social science book of the time was David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd*, which people understood (its basic argument was actually very misunderstood) as an argument that, in the era of mass culture, people had become "outer directed," and thus vulnerable to the cultural cues of Hollywood, advertising, and group think.[73] Synanon people often used this language of "outer directed" vs. "inner directed" to explain the work that gaming achieved, as a way to desensitize overly outer-directed people. Much like the most popular studies of the era, and, in particular, the Milgram experiments, Synanon described mental vulnerability as a gender problem. One of the most frequent topics of the Game for men was an overreliance on mothers. Men were frequently attacked for being "momma's boys" and "mother lovers," and the policy of cutting off ties with family was often linked back to this relationship.[74] Much like the Milgram experiments, which depicted the American Cold War man as an "organizational man," effeminate and too easily manipulated, Synanon also described outer-directed addicts and squares as needing masculine resocialization.[75]

Synanon used the language of scientific experimentation to describe gaming's efficacy.[76] At the group's headquarters, Dederich had an office called R&D (Research and Development), where new game structures were developed and practiced. One new game, according to a former member, had been tested for five months before being introduced to members.[77] In the 1960s, the novelist Guy Endore came to Synanon and stayed with the group while he wrote a report on its practices. He was smitten with its scientific experimentalism, writing that it was full of

> fresh ideas as to how people should live and function together, a task that required the members to constitute themselves into an experimental laboratory in sociology and psychology, guided by executives who were themselves guinea pigs in the same laboratory, but who had the patience to study something still largely unknown, and the strength to make decisions in the dark, and accept failure when their decisions turned out to be wrong—and meanwhile put up with the

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> accusation of not being qualified professionals. As if one could become a qualified Synanon specialist at any other place than Synanon.[78]

As he pointed out, Synanon was practically a scientific discipline unto itself. Only a Synanon person could fully evaluate its efficacy because every failure was merely an opportunity to experiment again, a process that required participation and embedded observation.

Despite Dederich's renunciation of the actual scientific method, social scientists working at universities found much to appreciate about Synanon. Many of its most ardent supporters came from the fields of sociology and psychology, and their studies of Synanon contributed to the organization's sterling reputation.[79] Its most famous admirer was the psychologist Abraham Maslow, who was impressed by the group's toughness, which he saw as a corrective to psychoanalysis's coddling.[80] In turn, Synanon used celebratory studies by social scientists to make its case directly to Congress about the future of drug rehabilitation.[81] What social scientists loved about Synanon was the way it created a perfect experiment of human behavior with willing participants. The scholar of organizational behavior and Synanon acolyte Barry Sugarman (who had degrees in anthropology and sociology) described Synanon-inspired treatment centers as "a most valuable laboratory where" the scholar could observe socialization in its "most intensified form, uncluttered by other irrelevant processes."[82] This mirrored other famous social science experiments of the Cold War era, in which social experiments were prized for creating high-pressure social dynamics with both knowing and unknowing subjects.[83]

Synanon shared with Cold War social science a fascination with social norms and people's vulnerability to social influence, but it pioneered social experimentation as a form of religion. Dederich was, from the beginning, interested in the power of religious ethics and ritual, an element of AA's practices that he never abandoned.[84] In Yablonsky's study of the group in 1965, he described members achieving a crucial phase of recovery when they began to do their assigned work whether or not they felt "rebellion at being 'told what to do.'" It was during this phase that members were assigned readings from "the great teachers of mankind—Jesus, Lao-tse, Buddha, etc."[85] Once someone had been broken down, they needed to be given a new culture to replace their antisocial framework. Despite Dederich's general lack of interest in Christianity (especially in its evangelical form), much like the Cold Warriors of his day, he reached for "religion" as a default American ethical culture.[86]

Most importantly, Dederich saw ritual as the key to resocialization. In addition to the Game (which the group described

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as its sacrament when it filed for religious exemption), he created new rituals (his own word) such as "the Trip," in which smaller groups were taken on experiences in the woods that included gaming, lack of sleep, saunas, candles, incense, and readings of Emerson's "Self-Reliance," as well as live and taped presentations from the Synanon leadership.[87] Religious ritual accomplished resocialization in ways that nothing else quite could, and, unlike AA, Synanon posited that full-time residency was essential to ritual's function.[88]

In Edward Hunter's description of Maoist education, brainwashing was inexplicable without analogies to religion and ritual.[89] No other word could quite convey the *force* of Maoist persuasion and, since the Cold War, the word has transformed from an atheistic form of indoctrination (or a form of political mind control in leftist fiction) to a particularly vicious form of religious indoctrination.[90] Synanon was at the forefront of this redefinition of the term. Its vision of resocialization was not "atheistic" but, rather, a jumble of religious ethics and rituals from around the world, all fused through an American Emersonian vision of spirituality.[91] But, for Synanon, religion was less of system than a sign: a sign that someone had achieved a lack of resistance to the group's norms. Religion was merely whatever norm members of the group could coerce one another into maintaining, and this model required a constant shifting set of norms in order for members to elicit and demonstrate conformity. This is why the turn to mandatory vasectomies and hair shaving in the 1970s was a continuation of Synanon's fundamental premise. The group's followers and leaders did not necessarily believe anything, except that belief itself could be entirely engineered. This model of religious belonging has become enormously popular far beyond Synanon's own history.

Teen Choice

In the late 1960s, when Synanon was the most famous drug addiction model in the United States, many members left the group but used its methods to create other treatment centers with new branding.[92] The psychiatrist Daniel Casriel created Daytop Village in New York as a residential treatment center modeled on Synanon, but shorn of Synanon's aims to create an alternative society. Daytop was managed by New York's Probation Department and focused on men with felony drug offenses. Its founding directors believed in Synanon's fundamentals: the Game, addicts surveilling other addicts, shaving heads, and breaking down people through humiliation, especially through unpaid work.[93]

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Synanon-inspired treatment centers funded by both public and private money (Daytop, Phoenix, Odyssey House) took critiques of authoritarianism and used them as lessons on how to run an organization. Proudly adopting and inverting the sociologist Erving Goffman's critique of "total institutions" (a term Goffman used to describe the horrors of psychiatric institutions), these treatment centers celebrated their "totalitarian" authority structure. Barry Sugarman, the director of Marathon House, which grew out of Daytop, proudly declared that they "were a 'pressure cooker' to bring about perhaps ten normal years of character development within two years."[94] Teen Challenge, the Pentecostal organization that had started in the 1960s, eventually used methods that, except for the addition of prayer and Bible talk, were indistinguishable from such treatment centers' model of rehabilitation. Using the broadest definition of addiction, Teen Challenge saw it as any life-controlling mental state.[95] In the Christian-teen focused world of rehabilitation, the word "troubled" replaced Dederich's broad use of the word "antisocial."[96]

As the ethnographer Kerwin Kaye argues, the "treatment center" approach to recovery that came out of Synanon and spread through centers such as Daytop now dominates the criminal justice system's approach to addiction, which sends "clients" directly to standalone residential treatment centers, and approximately 45,000 people to therapeutic communities within prisons. Following Synanon's model, through "explicit programmatic focus on the inculcation of normative moral values (called 'right living' within the TC [treatment center] model)," these programs seek "to alter the entire personality structure of the addict."[97] When we are describing the harms of Synanon, the group's role in creating the norms of the current approach to addiction should be part of what we evaluate. One of the dangers of cult discourse, as it exists in popular culture, is that it tends to imagine discrete groups forming around one charismatic leader, leading to utopic hope or tragic ruin, but Synanon helps us think about the word "cult" as a model of community that is eminently replicable. Synanon produced institutions that embraced authoritarian control, with or without charisma, by making the fantasy of brainwashing a central ritual.[98]

Synanon's model of incarcerating people for antisocial impulses, a definition of addiction that goes far beyond drugs, has migrated into a range of religiously inflected therapeutic centers that focus on spatial containment and that achieve their goals through the support of government agencies, but that have been given little regulation. In the 1980s and 1990s, two parallel forms of drug rehabilitation became the central players in American drug policy:

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the private treatment center industry and drug treatment in prisons. In the 1990s, Bill Clinton advocated for treatment centers in prisons as a way to deal with the drug war and as a justification for his pro-incarceration stance. As it became clear that drug treatment could not keep pace with the surging prison population, drug courts became a way to coerce people into treatment centers outside of prisons.[99] Clinton's director for the Office of National Drug Control Policy was also the president of Phoenix House, one of Synanon's direct descendants, and he argued that federal funding for needle-exchange programs would work against the goal of bringing users into comprehensive residential treatment programs.[100]

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, George W. Bush poured money into the treatment center industry by creating the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives and sending federal funds to faith-based recovery organizations. As the historian Claire D. Clark shows, "By the end of Bush's second term, forty states were reorganizing social services according to a new model called 'recovery-oriented systems of care.'" This money became particularly important for the expansion of Christian treatment centers, such as Teen Challenge, that utilized the model of resocialization. Whether more explicitly Christian, or a complete replication of Synanon's vaguely esoteric rituals, all of these centers rejected the science that came out in the 1990s, reframing drug addiction as a "chronic and relapsing brain disease" that should be managed rather than cured.[101] Instead, Clinton's and then George W. Bush's drug policy followed Synanon's model of recovery: in order to be cured, you needed to have your character completely remolded and you needed to participate in a hierarchical social structure; because this process was unending, once remolded, you worked for the community by leading others through the same process. Spatial containment, whether in a prison or in a center that would not let one leave, was the first step in this model of rehabilitation.

In a 2021 *New Yorker* story about Teen Challenge, a teen whose parents entrusted her into the care of one of these facilities told the reporter that she was forced to wear long skirts, adopt an arcane lingo, not talk to others, and carry a child to term. In these Christian recovery centers, parents sign away their parental rights, and the teens cannot leave, call their parents, or the police. Teen Challenge maintains a cozy relationship with the state of Florida, which protects faith-based rehabs from standard regulation. "Recovery" as a category in the United States is understood as the province of religiously inflected communities rather than medical professionals, and this category derives much of its logic from Synanon's privileging of ritual rehabilitation. In Rachel Aviv's story about Teen Challenge, the young woman sharing her story tells Aviv that she asked fellow residents "Is this a cult?" They

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

responded, "I guess this is kind of a cult."[102] It is the work of this article not only to affirm these suspicions but also to flesh out the history lurking behind that word. I could stop at a different conclusion: that Synanon and Teen Challenge are religious organizations that have tried to turn the fantasy of Cold War social engineering into an applied practice. But, if the diagnosis of cult is the Teen Challenge residents' response to the experience of a religious organization coercively reprogramming them, you can forgive them the confusion.

In this historical context, the teens incarcerated at Teen Challenge use the word "cult" to name a version of forced resocialization that relies on spatial containment. Considering the number of Americans who have had contact with drug treatment centers, with the troubled-teen industry, and with treatment center–style treatment within prisons, it is worth considering how Synanon has shaped the popular understanding of cults just as much as CAN's demonization of the Peoples Temple. Further, it is worth affirming people's use of the word "cult" as a descriptive and normative definition that elicits a specific historical genealogy. Tellingly, when scholars resisted the scientific and legal application of the term "brainwashing," they pointed out that the original context (Maoist prison camps) was quite different from NRMs that people joined and left at will.[103] But no one actually joins Teen Challenge (nor do people who are on probation join treatment centers): you are forced to go there and then kept there until you become a new person. In other words, in this historical and institutional context, brainwashing is not just fake science.[104] It is fake science that has been used as inspiration for institutional practice.

The Normative Grid

We need the word "cult" in the study of religion because, just like the word "religion," it has a history of academic, popular, and state usage. When C.A. Wittman titled her memoir *Synanon Kid: A Memoir of Growing up in the Synanon Cult*, she participated in the historical sedimentation of the word as erotic and violent (this word will sell books!), and also as a way to describe containment and cruel forms of ritual that were designed to rob her of childish vulnerability.[105] Her use of the word "cult" in this context is not just true to her, and it is not just a pejorative aimed at her childhood bullies; it is an accurate historical and normative assessment of the context of her suffering. Her sense of these experiences as something cult-like is discursively and experientially tied to the history of brainwashing as an experiment on trapped people. Charles Dederich's willingness to say all this out loud, and to openly

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theorize social engineering as a something that needed religion to achieve its full potential, contributed to the meaning of the word "cult." His ideas spread because his assessment of the "the antisocial" person as someone deserving of spatial containment and a total reshaping of character seemed friendly to politicians, policy makers, and social scientists of many stripes during the second half of the twentieth century.[106]

Cold War enthusiasm for religion's social engineering powers led to one historically specific and influential meaning of "cult"; but this does not limit our ability to identify other definitions of both "cult" and "resocialization" in the twentieth century. For example, if we connected the history of treatment centers to pre–World War II projects of civilization and reform that fueled state support for penitentiaries, boarding schools, and reform institutions throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Synanon might seem less exceptional. I also suspect that "cult," as a particular, historically specific form of authoritarian religious coercion in the twentieth century, exists outside of Synanon's model.[107]

This article is not a genealogy of the word "cult," but a brief look at that genealogy shows that Synanon's emergence as a cult cannot be separated from the word's pejorative, neutral, and positive connotations. When *Time* magazine said "kooky cult" in the early 1970s, the writers invoked its benign sense, as a fad with serious devotees.[108] They also drew on its long history as a word for bad religion, and specifically a religion led by a tricky charismatic leader. Cult as bad religion gained traction in the 1910s, with critiques of Christian Science as a form of religion that hurt people through medical malpractice. It was also at that time used to describe Black religion, or "Voodoo cults," in Louisiana as erotic and violent.[109] From the 1920s through the 1940s, both social scientists and journalists used "cult" to describe new Black religious communities after the Great Migration, especially in reference to Father Divine, the Moorish Science Temple, and the Nation of Islam. When newspaper articles written by white authors used the term for these Black religions, it was loaded with racist assumptions about irrational Black religiosity, but the African American social scientist Arthur Huff Fauset used "cult" to neutrally describe what he thought of as Black religion that was highly influenced by a new social context.[110]

Journalists used "cult" to describe ISKCON in the 1960s (a use that carried into the "brainwashing" court cases of the 1970s). At midcentury, the press also designated leaders of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints as cult leaders. But in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, the more common use of the word described the political systems of fascism in Europe, the rule of the emperor in

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Japan, and Soviet communism.[111] This period is especially important for the formation of Synanon because, when the group promoted authoritarian resocialization, they understood it as a *political* idea that could be put to religious purposes. Of course, subsequent labeling of Synanon as cult cannot be separated from the cult panic of the 1980s and 1990s, which scholars of NRMs have carefully tracked, dominated by the specter of Jonestown.[112]

This is a very abbreviated and insufficient history of the term "cult," but we need more historicizing that accounts for its meaning not just as a discursive epithet but also as a mode of experience. It is undeniable that the people who look back at their time in Synanon as belonging to a cult are influenced by various cult panics; but they also use the language of bad religion to speak of a religious experience designed to amplify authoritarian power. Historians of religion can track a shifting category between its normative and descriptive valences; we have already done it with words such as "spirituality," "religion," and "ritual," the last being a term that has also historically functioned as a pejorative account of bad religion.[113] Teasing out the historical specificity of the deployment of the word "cult," and how this deployment in turn contributes to peoples' actual cult experiences, is what can differentiate religious studies' engagement with this category from the "cult experts" who run deprogramming businesses and from the sociologists and popular culture critics who are searching for a universal, timeless category of mind control.[114] The religious desire to use social scientific models of reprogramming and political authoritarianism in intimate ritual structures belongs, I am arguing, to a narrow time and place.

But can we plumb this history (a neutral task) without slipping into the normative desire to distinguish bad religion from good religion? The cautions against this move are strong: as critics of cult panics point out, Americans love "cults" (in the form of documentaries and other consumable products related to them) because they perform self-flattering normative work, allowing the layperson and scholar the pleasure of naming unfreedom, and thus affirming their own agency.[115] This caution against the liberal pleasures of using the word "cult" as a way to understand unfreedom follows Robert Orsi's argument that calling out bad religion is an erotic pleasure that distances the other in order to play with the potential for "surrender or repulsion."[116] Religious freedom scholars such as Jolyon Baraka Thomas point out that the inscription of the good/bad religion dichotomy by religious studies scholars is very useful to secular governance because it clarifies what is religion and what is unworthy of the protections dictated by the American understanding of religious freedom (and exported through the American empire to other locations in the world).[117] Calling

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

something bad religion, or a cult, is a way to say that it is not religion at all. In the words of Orsi, you have participated in the "obliteration of the other," as well as their categorical participation in the economy of religious freedom.

Orsi is correct in his diagnosis of the study of religion in the United States as a latent Protestant privileging of the "rational . . . noncoercive . . . nonanthropomorphic" ideal of good religion. The issue, however, is where to go from there. Practically, this raises the question of what the religious studies scholar should do when, as Orsi puts it, "journalists, lawmakers, and fellow citizens" (and students), ask if a religion is bad or fake, and if it should be called something else (a cult?) to account for its badness.[118] One of the things that Charles McCrary's work on critical secular studies has taught me is that a scholar bestowing religion on a subject rarely does what we want most: give them control over their land, prevent them from being incarcerated, or shield them from bullets or bombs.[119] The religious studies scholar's answer to this attentive non-academic audience might be "These people's autonomy or safety should not depend on whether we think they are religious or not."

Orsi's offering to a public who desire a good/bad religion distinction is to point out, following J.Z. Smith, that all religions harm, and that religion, as the gift we give our subjects, is the great equalizer. Interestingly, "religion" is not really a gift that any members of Synanon were asking for, even those who loved it.[120] But perhaps the designation of a group as religious—especially those groups that have not received secular governance's prizes, as Synanon did—means something substantive to its adherents. This certainly seems like the least religious studies can do, but it also seems very meager. It is a way in which religious studies plays the game of secular governance, eschewing conversations of how racism, transphobia, and many other prejudices will always beat religious protections.[121] It denies the big questions that, in fact, religious studies might not be expert in at all: what is good care, good racial justice, good sovereignty, good liberation, good governance, good kinship?

Synanon people's meditations on the group's achievements point to these not-necessarily religious ethical goals. In an assessment of Betty Beckham's journey from jail, to the Nation of Islam, to Synanon, where she ultimately met and married Chuck Dederich, Jordan Mylet argues that Betty loved Synanon because, in 1959, it really was a space where, instead of being incarcerated, she was given the opportunity to join a raucous, truly non-coercive, mutual aid society. Mylet and her fellow scholar Carina Ray, both children of Synanon members, argue that the sensationalist accounts of Synanon as a cult have missed the benefits of Synanon's "community as therapy."[122] The conversation I

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

want to have with them begins with the question "Haven't we already seen what Synanon's understanding of community as therapy looks like when applied at scale with no critique of mass incarceration?" Or, even more expansively, "What do you mean by community and what do I mean by community, and what would a better version of that idea look like?" These are the types of questions that an engagement with cult, as both historical experience and normative critique, could initiate. Community is a word that makes religious studies feel comfortable, so I would like to add another normative question that Synanon's cult history raises and that I am not particularly well qualified to answer: "What is good drug addiction treatment?"

Orsi, despite his rejection of the normative grid, is deeply engaged in ethical questions.[123] He has described his own experience of disgust with Catholic sex abuse, abuse which he clarifies *is* Catholic, is central to twentieth-century Catholicism, and fills him with revulsion. He argues that this is not a reinscription of bad/good religion because his disgust is intimate (disgust is a particularly Catholic, or maybe just plain old religious, feeling), but is born out of his love of and proximity to the community that disgusts him. Implicit in Orsi's narration of his own disgust is an argument about Catholic ontology as distinctive, and one that he participates in. He writes, "Disgust lacks the cultivated reserve of the hermeneutics of suspicion that so easily slides into a posture of knowingness, with the accompanying reassurance of the scholar's superiority over religious practitioners."[124]

There is a suggestion here that it is fine to call out harm in a religion if you are also in the community. Maybe Larry Kornish can call Synanon a cult, but I cannot. Orsi's slight to the hermeneutics of suspicion, however, denies a form of empiricism that I would like to promote as the ethical duty of the scholar, whether they be an insider or an outsider: the scholar, suspiciously performing hermeneutics, follows the money, makes a case for who knew what and when, and shows major shifts in policy or practice that might not be visible from the perspective of participants. These facts could be very useful in helping victims of religious abuse uncover the infrastructure of that abuse.[125]

Historians of religion work backward from our laden terms, suspicious that they mean more than we think they mean. One of the words in the present that we can use to work backward for more empirical understanding is "cult," and specific reports from participants are the beginning point, but not the end of that process. Former members of Synanon describe the community as many things at once. "It was in equal portions exhilarating, exciting, fun from 1958 thru 1976 and a tremendous learning trip. Equally terrifying and unpredictable from 1976 to its closing by the IRS in 1990."[126] A

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

former member, David Gerstel, points out the dissonance between his experience as a person who joined voluntarily and that of those who were forced to be there; he does not know what they experienced.[127] The broader historical archive shows that C.A. Wittman's experience of creating a "dissociative independent type of personality . . . to cope with the constant barrage of verbal attacks" was built into the infrastructure of the community. Children being kept from their parents, becoming hardened by gaming, was a theorized and implemented function of the organizational structure. Wittman models precisely the type of empirical work I am advocating when she senses that her memory of the constant shifting set of "demonstrators" (as the children's teachers were called) might be faulty. She goes and checks the archives of Synanon's school and finds out it was worse than she thought: they had mostly put teenagers in charge of the kids.[128] That certainly structured her experience of feeling unsafe. Orsi comes to a similar conclusion about Catholic abuse: that it was theologized and embedded in infrastructure. This is an assessment that can only be reached through empiricism—or maybe empiricism initiated by disgust.[129]

The word "cult" is a heuristic for tracking the specific unfolding of hurt. Affirming people's use of the word begins a search for more information, more historical connections, a better sense of what people hoped that good religion, good care, and good community could have been, and, for the Religious Studies scholar in particular, a willingness to engage in the not-always-religious ethical projects at stake. I affirm that, when C.A. Wittman calls Synanon a cult, she is describing how the organization used the Cold War fantasies of resocialization through torture as a blueprint for ritual life. "Affirm" is a funny word: it is not a creedal "I believe"—but it is an acknowledgment of the contextual truth of another's experience. In the case of the young women trapped by Teen Challenge, affirming means doing the historical legwork inspired by their intuitions about what was happening to them, which, importantly, they do not know themselves. Affirming the word "cult" gets at the broader ideological connections between their experience and other therapeutic organizations that have offered solutions to "anti-social behavior" since World War II, based in social scientific hubris and an interest in religious ritual as a uniquely resocializing tool. This affirmation is another way to make "contact across boundaries," as Orsi instructs.[130] But we are moving across boundaries of difference toward something, and that something will be on a normative grid.

Dana Logan *is an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at UNC Greensboro.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Notes

[1]Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 111; David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 46.

[2]Megan Goodwin, "Bombing American Religion to Save It," *The Revealer*, September 9, 2021.

[3]See especially the claims of law enforcement in the cases relating to MOVE, Koresh's followers at Waco, and the raid on the FLDS compound in Eldorado, Texas. Richard Kent Evans, *MOVE: An American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Megan Goodwin, *Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 101–10.

[4]If the Peoples Temple is a religion, religions kill. If the Peoples Temple is a cult, cults kill. We recognize this definitional power because of J.Z. Smith and David Chidester. By calling Peoples Temple a religion, we are forced to humanize those who died, because, unlike with cults, the rest of us belong to religions too. But, weirdly, Smith and Chidester, following CAN, have also made Jonestown the only example that matters. In their attempt to humanize, they did nothing to historicize Jonestown (one of the most perplexing moves of both scholars is to define the Peoples Temple as a religion by comparing it to ancient, geographically disparate examples of religious suicide, violence, and political consciousness). In Tabor and Gallagher's *Why Waco*, the authors continue to center Jonestown, but they argue that CAN was wrong because Koresh was nothing like Jones, who thought of himself as both God and Christ. The implication of this argument is that the Branch Davidians are not a cult because they are not like the Peoples Temple (which, by this logic, is the actual cult). This focus on both groups can only get us so far, and it is not a feedback loop that the term "new religious movement" frees us from. It is understandable to me why sociologists would use a term such as NRM, but why historians of religion would accept that *some* religions should be compared and analyzed through transhistorical categories such as "new" or "high control" befuddles me. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 110; Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide*, 46; Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco*, 169.

[5]The term "new religious movement" was created by American scholars of religion to promote the interests of non-Shinto, non-Buddhist groups during the American occupation of Japan; it was then exported to the Anglophone academic world. Jolyon Baraka

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Thomas, *Faking Liberties: Religious Freedom in American-Occupied Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 233.

[6]The Washington Post, "Scientologist to Revive Bankrupt Cult Awareness Network," *Las Vegas Review–Journal*, December 2, 1996.

[7]This model of defining cult mirrors Michael Bergunder's argument for the emergence of religion as something more than the fantasy of imperial academic scholarship. Michael Bergunder, "What Is Religion? The Unexplained Subject Matter of Religious Studies," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 26, no. 3 (2014): 272.

[8]Roy J. Harris, "Mightier than the Snake 1979: The Point Reyes Light on Synanon," in *Pulitzer's Gold: A Century of Public Service Journalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 305, 310.

[9]Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 201, 181.

[10]Robert Orsi, "The Study of Religion on the Other Side of Disgust," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (Spring/Summer 2019), accessed June 7, 2022, https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/the-study-of-religion-on-the-other-side-of-disgust/.

[11]"Was Synanon a Cult?", *It's Time for Morning Meeting: Sharing our Synanon Stories*, accessed June 15, 2023, https://synanon.com/2020/08/16/was-synanon-a-cult/.

[12]Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 7.

[13]J.R. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Jennifer Cote, "'Habits of Vice:' The House of the Good Shepherd and Competing Narratives of Female Delinquency in Early Twentieth Century Hartford," *American Catholic Studies* 122, no. 4 (2011): 23–45; Brad Stoddard, *Spiritual Entrepreneurs: Florida's Faith-Based Prisons and the American Carceral State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

[14]For an excellent summation of the group (which is eminently teachable), with vivid audio recordings (some of which are only available in personal collections accessed by the producers), see Reveal's podcast *American Rehab.* I treat historical audio from the podcast as a primary source, and interviews with participants as an oral history. Reveal, "Chapter 3: A Venomous Snake," *American Rehab*, podcast, 2020, accessed October 28, 2024, https://revealnews.org/podcast/american-rehab-chapter-three-a-venomous-snake/.

[15]Art Berman, "Chuck Dederich: Man with the Golden Touch," *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 1967.

[16]Lewis Yablonksy, *The Tunnel Back: Synanon* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 261. I treat this source (as do other scholars such as Kerwin Kaye) as a primary source. It has the unique benefit of

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

being an ethnography of the group in the mid-1960s and a collection of Dederich's statements that Dederich authorized as a form of self-promotion. Yablonsky went on to serve on the board of Synanon and was a fierce advocate for Dederich.

[17]Claire D. Clark, *The Recovery Revolution: The Battle Over Addiction Treatment in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 30.

[18]Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*, 23.

[19]Kerwin Kaye, *Enforcing Freedom: Drug Courts, Therapeutic Communities, and the Intimacies of the State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 86.

[20]Rod Janzen, *The Rise and Fall of Synanon: A Californian Utopia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 100.

[21]Robert Cross, "'Dammit, We're Trying to Save Your Life!'" *Chicago Tribune*, April 10, 1969.

[22]Reveal, "Chapter 2: Miracle on the Beach," *American Rehab*, podcast, 2020, accessed October 28, 2024, https://revealnews.org/podcast/american-rehab-chapter-two-miracle-on-the-beach/.

[23]"Eartha Kitt Jumps at Chance to Play Cured Drug Addict Who Escaped from Web of Crime and Vice to Help Others: Film Tells Sensational Story of 'Synanon House,' Where 'Incurable' Junkies Find Hope," *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 8, 1964; "A Tunnel Back into the Human Race," *LIFE Magazine*, March 9, 1962.

[24]Speaker 38, in Reveal, "Chapter 2: Miracle on the Beach."

[25]Janzen, *The Rise and Fall of Synanon*, 14.

[26]Robert Lindsey, "Police Are Ordered to Turn Over Synanon Tapes to Court on Coast: A New Religious Posture Morantz Filed Suit of His Own," *New York Times*, December 19, 1978.

[27]Janzen, *The Rise and Fall of Synanon*, 17.

[28]Kaye, *Enforcing Freedom*, 88.

[29]Barry Sugarman, "The Therapeutic Community and School," *Interchange* 1, no. 2 (1970): 83.

[30]Gertrude Samuels, "For Squares: Open House at Synanon," *New York Times*, September 6, 1970.

[31]Donald B. Louria, "Cool Talk About Hot Drugs: Cool Talk About Hot Drugs (Cont.)," *New York Times* Magazine, August 6, 1967.

[32]Berman, "Chuck Dederich," B62.

[33]Unrestrained by taxes or wages, by the mid-1970s Synanon was doing over $5 million a year in sales. That is about $24 million a year today. Meanwhile, donations kept rolling in. See Reveal, "Chapter 3: A Venomous Snake."

[34]Janzen, *The Rise and Fall of Synanon*, 44.

[35]Recordings of Synanon lawyers show that this was a highly strategic decision: "I also thought that the religions, once they get to a

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

certain point in this country, have enormous survival value. When people come along and say, 'You can't keep sitting around in rooms and calling each other motherfuckers,' and you say, 'That's my religion,' they say, 'Okay, I understand that.'" "One of the reasons that we're pushing this thing right now because we may want to shut off our books from inspection by government agencies and people that we don't like. That would make it a bit more difficult for the IRS to impose taxes upon us. Then we may be able to set up certain walls around Synanon, which make it more difficult to work with us." Reveal, "Chapter 3: A Venomous Snake."

[36]David U. Gerstel, Paradise, *Incorporated: Synanon* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 45.

[37]Janzen, *The Rise and Fall of Synanon*, 126–27, 141, 145.

[38]C.A. Wittman, *Synanon Kid: A Memoir of Growing Up in the Synanon Cult* (self-pub., CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017); Mikel Jollett, *Hollywood Park: A Memoir* (New York: Celadon Books, 2020).

[39]Hugh B. Urban, *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements: Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 214–15; Joan Beck, "Guyana Tragedy Raises Urgent Questions About Cults," *Detroit Free Press*, November 27, 1978, 15A.

[40]This critique includes a rich description of encounter groups at Esalen and various nonprofits associated with the Human Potential Movement in the late 1960s. Bruce L. Maliver, "Encounter Groupers up against the Wall," *New York Times*, January 3, 1971.

[41]Witmann, *Synanon Kid*, 238–39.

[42]Regina E. Holloman, "Ritual Opening and Individual Transformation: Rites of Passage at Esalen," *American Anthropologist* 76, no. 2 (1974): 265–80.

[43]George R. Carson, "Teen Challenge and the Development of Social Concern Ministries in the Assemblies of God" (Ph.D. diss., Saint Louis University, 2002), 128.

[44]Mark M. Chatfield, "'This Hurts You Badder than Punchin": The Troubled Teen Industry and Therapeutic Violence in Group Rehabilitation Programs since World War II," forthcoming in *The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs*, 7–8, 4, 3.

[45]"Nation: Life at Synanon Is Swinging," *TIME Magazine*, December 26, 1977.

[46]Janzen, who studies American religion, was eager to connect the group to other religious groups that share extreme discipline, such as the Bruderhof. To his list of religions who shared Synanon's practices and beliefs I could add the Shakers, who also separated children from their parents and required the end of childbearing. See Janzen, *The Rise*

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and Fall of Synanon; Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

[47]Kaye, *Enforcing Freedom*, 83.

[48]Janzen, *The Rise and Fall of Synanon*, 54–5.

[49]Yablonsky, *The Tunnel Back*, 232.

[50]Gerstel's memoir of his time as a Synanon resident is particularly useful because he tries to reconstruct what was appealing about the community to him initially. He also describes the texture of experience in both work and gaming. Gerstel, *Paradise, Incorporated*, 120.

[51]Eileen M. Gates and Philip C. Bourdette, "The Synanon Alternative to the Criminal Justice System," *Journal of Drug Issues* 5 (1975): 238–39.

[52]Narda Zacchino, "Judge Orders Synanon to Pay Couple $300,000: Couple's Suit Against Synanon," *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 1978.

[53]Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*, 78.

[54]Shoshana Walter, "At Hundreds of Rehabs, Recovery Means Work without Pay," *Reveal*, July 7, 2020, accessed June 7, 2022, https://revealnews.org/article/at-hundreds-of-rehabs-recovery-means-work-without-pay/.

[55]Reveal, "Chapter 2: Miracle on the Beach."

[56]Yablonsky, *The Tunnel Back*, 337.

[57]This is a sympathy that was not extended to other mid-1960s new religious groups such as ISKCON, and this difference is certainly about race. Urban, *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements*, 201–19.

[58]The tendency I am resisting here is to describe Synanon as an NRM and focus on its most obviously religious components, despite the fact that it shared many of the key features of esoteric religious movements in the twentieth century. As Hugh Urban's work on Theosophists and the Church of Scientology demonstrates, many groups described as NRMs share a tradition that has its own history and theology. L.R. Hubbard's interest in secrecy, for example, shared with Madame Blavatsky's movement an understanding of truth as a thing that can only be accessed through tiered ascendence, and which required an intermediary of special mediums (such as herself or Hubbard). Hugh B. Urban, *Secrecy: Silence, Power, and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

[59]Gates and Bourdette, "The Synanon Alternative," 234.

[60]Yablonsky, *The Tunnel Back*, 77.

[61]Gertrude Samuel, "Where Junkies Learn to Hang Tough," *New York Times*, May 9, 1965.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

[62]Timothy Melley, Secrecy, *Fiction, and the National Security State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 47.

[63]Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws, *The Effect of Red China Communes on the United States: Hearing before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Eighty-Sixth Congress, First Session: Testimony of Edward Hunter* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959), 20–24.

[64]Melley, *Secrecy, Fiction*, 55.

[65]Daniel Horowitz, *Consuming Pleasures: Intellectuals and Popular Culture in the Postwar World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 123.

[66]Melley, *Secrecy, Fiction*, 61, 51.

[67]John Lardas Modern shows how the idea of telepathy, which similarly received government research funding, was central to L.R. Hubbard's hopes for the mind in Scientology. John Lardas Modern, *Neuromatic: Or, A Particular History of Religion and the Brain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 271.

[68]Yablonksky, *The Tunnel Back*, 102.

[69]Bruce Gilbert, "Brainwashed," audio recording, accessed June 6, 2022, https://soundcloud.com/synanon-music/sets/the-synanon-music-of-bruce.

[70]Kaye, *Enforcing Freedom*, 27.

[71]Yablonksky, *The Tunnel Back*, 381.

[72]M. Susan Lindee, *Rational Fog: Science and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 162.

[73]Horowitz, *Consuming Pleasures*, 126.

[74]Yablonsky, *The Tunnel Back*, 56, 141.

[75]Lindee, *Rational Fog*, 173.

[76]Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*, 37.

[77]William Olin, *Escape From Utopia: My Ten Years in Synanon* (Santa Cruz, CA: Unity Press, 1980), 90.

[78]Guy Endore, *Synanon* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967), 12–13.

[79]Olin, *Escape From Utopia*, 14.

[80]Abraham H. Maslow, "Synanon and Eupsychia," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 7, no. 1 (1967): 28.

[81]Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*, 35.

[82]Sugarman, "The Therapeutic Community," 78.

[83]See, for example, the Cornell Peru experiment that treated a native community as a laboratory for modernization. Lindee, *Rational Fog*, 167.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

[84]Reveal, "Chapter 2: Miracle on the Beach."

[85]Yablonksy, *The Tunnel Back*, 57.

[86]K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 155.

[87]Janzen, *The Rise and Fall of Synanon*, 68–69.

[88]I see a sharp distinction here between AA and Synanon's use of ritual, despite both defining addiction treatment in the post–World War II landscape. There is a significant difference between creating a ritual structure using containment as the precondition of resocialization and AA's model of coming and going. After thinking within Synanon's construct, AA's foundational emphasis on living in two worlds—one's pre-existing context and the context of recovery—is astounding. In contrast to Synanon and Cold War fantasies of resocialization, AA developed a ritual framework that allowed for a transient kinship between people struggling with addiction and mutual aid that did not require control over one another or much bureaucratic infrastructure. I acknowledge that AA has also been incorporated into court-mandated care and thus now participates in the world of forced rehabilitation; but AA, unlike Synanon, theorized ritual as a thing you do with strangers who gather and then disperse with minimal communal disciplinary functions. For a history of AA, see Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Educational Services, 1979).

[89]Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Testimony of Edward Hunter*, 20.

[90]Megan Goodwin, "Unpacking the Bunker: Sex, Abuse, and Apocalypticism in 'Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt,'" *CrossCurrents* 68, no. 2 (June 2018): 244.

[91]Synanon's invocation of Emerson along a host of other religious leaders and texts is very much in line with the tradition of American Spirituality that comes directly from Emerson and his ilk. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 228.

[92]Reveal, "Chapter 4: Cowboy Conman," *American Rehab*, 2020, accessed October 28, 2024, https://revealnews.org/podcast/american-rehab-chapter-4-cowboy-conman/.

[93]Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*, 78.

[94]Sugarman, "The Therapeutic Community," 78.

[95]Rachel Aviv, "The Shadow Penal System for Struggling Kids," *New Yorker*, October 18, 2021, 32.

[96]Louise Story, "A Business Built on the Troubles of Teenagers; Schools Are Popping Up to Deal with Drug and Behavior Issues," *New York Times*, August 17, 2005.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

[97]Kaye, *Enforcing Freedom*, 87.

[98]This is, for example, what the authors of *The Cult of We* mean by the cult of WeWork. They mean that the company's growth was based on an overvaluation of Adam Neumann's charisma. Eliot Brown and Maureen Farrell, *The Cult of We: WeWork, Adam Neumann, and the Great Startup Delusion* (New York: Crown, 2021), 391. In terms of Synanon specifically, I disagree with Jordan Mylet's argument that ritualized containment was not a central idea within Synanon and was only a later declension of its principles. Jordan Mylet, "How to Treat an Addict: Institutional Confinement, Mutual Aid, and Self Realization in Postwar Los Angeles," *Australia New Zealand American Studies Association* 40, no. 2 (December 2021): 5–48.

[99]Kaye, *Enforcing Freedom*, 83–86; Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*, 171, 177, 181.

[100]Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*, 196.

[101]Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*, 200, 188.

[102]Aviv, "The Shadow Penal System," 35, 32.

[103]Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, "The Limits of 'Coercive Persuasion' as an Explanation for Conversion to Authoritarian Sects," *Political Psychology* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 27.

[104]For a discussion of how brainwashing became medicalized and its fundamental logical fallacies, see Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, "Deprogramming, Brainwashing and the Medicalization of Deviant Religious Groups," *Social Problems* 29, no. 3 (1982): 283–97.

[105]Witmann, *Synanon Kid*, 238–39.

[106]Dederich's deification of "the social" has much in common with what John Lardas Modern calls "the neuromatic," or a conception of the brain as the ultimate sacred force. Modern, *Neuromatic*, 55.

[107]For an example of another cult experience that is distinctive from the Synanon model of therapeutic containment and resocialization away from the family, one might look at the 2023 documentary *Shiny Happy People* on Bill Gothard's teachings, in which people who grew up in Christian Reconstructionist homes describe Gothard as turning "every father into a cult leader." There is a useful history to be written about patriarchal authoritarianism as a fantasy of communist and fascist coercive power put into praxis by white American evangelical leaders. For the strategic implementation of authoritarian patriarchy in post–World War II American white evangelicalism, see Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020).

[108]Philip Deslippe shows that this non-pejorative use was at work in the 1990s, but it was also true throughout the twentieth century. Philip Deslippe, "Past the Pejorative: Understanding the

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Word 'Cult' through Its Use in American Newspapers during the Nineties," *Implicit Religion* 24, no. 2 (2021): 195–217. See also Sheilah Graham, "Hollywood Today: Garbo Cancels Order for Three Evening Gowns Because 'No One Wants to Take Me Out Now'—Gary Cooper Grouching Because Walter Brennan Steals 'The Westerner,'" *Hartford Courant*, January 30, 1940; Irma Phorylles, "Give Me Your Hand," *Seventeen*, May 1945; Jesse Walker, "The Big Controversy over 'Blues For Mr. Charlie,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, June 6, 1964.

[109]"Former Adherent's Objections to Eddyism," *The Interior* 41, no. 2071 (February 3, 1910): 137–38; Alexandra Prince, "'Driven Insane by Eddyism': Christian Science, Popular Psychopathology, and a Turn-of-the-Century Contest over Faith and Madness," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 31, no. 3 (2021): 379–418; Ahmad Green-Hayes, "'A Very Queer Case': Clementine Barnabet and the Erotics of a Sensationalized Voodoo Religion," *Nova Religio* 26, no. 4 (2023), 66.

[110]"Divine Would Pacify 'The Fighting 69th,'" *Detroit Free Press*, January 20, 1940; Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 10–13.

[111]Urban, *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements*, 203; "Foe of Polygamy," *Detroit Free Press*, September 29, 1944; Will Herberg, "Basic Features of Fascism," *Workers Age*, February 10, 1940; Jesse F. Steiner, "Shall We Bomb Hirohito's Palace? Yes, Says One Who Knows the Japanese; It Is the Seat and Symbol of Japanese Militarism," *New York Times*, March 11, 1945; "Hirohito Survival Crucial to Japan: Cult of Shintoism, Doctrinal Base of Society, Centers in Person of Emperor Forms of Nature Worship Prerogatives of Emperor," *New York Times*, August 11, 1945; Welles Hangen, "Stalin Cult Lingers in Minds of Russians: Aim of the New Leaders to Deflate Old Dictator Will Take Time," *New York Times*, March 4, 1956.

[112]Edward Graham-Hyde, "From Bad to Worse: The Evolving Nature of 'Cult' Rhetoric in the Wake of Covid-19 and QAnon," *Implicit Religion* 24, no. 2 (2021): 136.

[113]On the historical emergence of spirituality as both a normative and a descriptive category, see John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 119–81. On the historical emergence of "religion" as a normative and descriptive category in the US, see Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). On the emergence of "sincerely held belief" as a normative and descriptive category, see Charles McCrary, *Sincerely Held: American Secularism and Its Believers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2022). On ritual as a term for bad religion, see Phillipe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). For ritual as a category that both is produced by good/bad religion dichotomy and exists as a mode of experience, see Dana Logan, *Awkward Rituals: Sensations of Governance in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

[114]In *Cultish*, the popular book that shows "cultishness" is defined by insider language, Amanda Montell shows that culty language is a particular tick of lifestyle brands such as SoulCycle, and that anyone could find themselves vulnerable to this mode of belonging. The current embrace of the word outside of religious contexts as a form of immanent critique can have the odd effect of making capitalism's evils feel timeless, much like the image of primitive religion that the word "cult" invokes. Amanda Montell, *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2021).

[115]Goodwin, *Abusing Religion*, 7, 14. A recent issue of *Implicit Religion* also warns against using cult as an analytic because of its tendency to reinscribe good religion/bad religion assumptions: Aled Thomas and Edward Graham-Hyde, "Introduction: The Return of the 'Cult,'" *Implicit Religion* 24, no. 2 (2021): 129–34.

[116]Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 182.

[117]Thomas, *Faking Liberties*, 225.

[118]Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 188, 179.

[119]One of James Tabor and Eugene Gallaghar's central arguments in *Why Waco?* is that giving the Branch Davidians the authority of real religion would, in fact, have shielded them from violence. This might be true in that case, but, in the case of MOVE or the Nation of Islam, this assessment sidesteps the question of what it would take to root out the white supremacist reactions to these groups.

[120]In recollections by members who recall it fondly, I have found none that describe it as religious.

[121]Charles McCrary, *Sincerely Held: American Secularism and Its Believers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 206–35.

[122]Carina Ray and Jordan Mylet, "A Forgotten Approach to Drug Addiction Recovery May Yield Results Today," *The Washington Post (Online)*, January 9, 2022, accessed October 28, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/01/09/forgotten-approach-drug-addiction-recovery-may-yield-results-today/.

[123]Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 7.

[124]Orsi, "The Study of Religion."

[125]The posture of suspicion is not superior; it is curious and diligent. Empiricism is a posture of "surprise me!"—an openness to the ironic twists and turns that have led to normalized notions of self, other,

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and the social. This work is often normative in the sense of working towards justice. For example, in the critical history of mass incarceration, empirical studies work towards the ethical goal of prison abolition. Heather Ann Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History," *Journal of American History* 97, no. 3 (December 2010): 703–34.

[126]"Splitting: One Perspective," *It's Time for Morning Meeting: Sharing our Synanon Stories*, accessed June 15, 2023, https://synanon.com/2021/09/11/splitting-part-1/.

[127]David Gerstel, "Remembering Chris Benton," *It's Time for Morning Meeting: Sharing our Synanon Stories*, accessed June 15, 2023, https://synanon.com/2023/01/29/remembering-chris-benton/.

[128]Wittman, *Synanon Kid*, 97.

[129]Robert Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 218–19, 233.

[130]Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 203.

ABSTRACT *Against historians of religion who have argued that "cult" is just a term for a religion that people do not like, this article argues that "cult" has historical definitions in addition to its normative dimensions. The term's meaning as a group that "brainwashes" stems in part from the post–World War II rise of groups that blend religion and recovery, and which are promoted by the American judicial system and federal dollars. Synanon, a group that originated the American model of a drug treatment center, allows us a unique entry point into this reassessment. Synanon argued that addiction, as just one of many "life-controlling issues," required mutual discipline and containment. The article affirms members' and critics' description of the group as a cult that incarcerated its members and designed rituals to hurt them. Because of Synanon's unique relationship to state-sponsored drug rehab, these conditions are not unique to the group. Further, the author's affirmation of her subjects' language cannot be separated from the normative valence of "cult." Counter to the arguments of scholars such as J.Z. Smith, David Chidester, and Robert Orsi, scholars need to do more than describe when religions hurt people. We can also, through historical work, name when religion is designed to abuse, incarcerate, and experiment on people.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2024.3 Published online by Cambridge University Press