

**Submission
No 256**

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT METHODS AND IMPACTS OF
CULTS AND ORGANISED FRINGE GROUPS**

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Date Received: 31 July 2025

Inquiry Into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups: Submission Response

Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee, Parliament of Victoria

Dr Alex Burns [REDACTED], 31st July 2025

1. I welcome the opportunity to provide a submission response to the Parliament of Victoria's Inquiry Into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups. At the time of submission, I am not affiliated as an academic researcher with any Australian university, think tank, or external body. Although I comment below on the Gurdjieff Work and the Temple of Set as two lawful new religious movement affiliations, I am not authorised to represent either organisation or tradition in an official capacity: I do so in terms of providing a reflective "lived experience" perspective that draws also on my professional work experience and other expertise to address (and in some cases to revisit) what have been long-running and highly debated / contestable issues online in which significant factual mischaracterisation and misrepresentation exists. I comment on the Inquiry's adoption of a viewpoint, pre-framing, agenda-setting and prioritised issues that I relate specifically to the International Cultic Studies Association and its cult survive perspective. I am not an ICSA member (but I do subscribe to their newsletter), and comments that I make are intended only to address the concerns of being in different epistemic communities.

Relevant Background as an Expert Witness

2. My relevant background as an expert witness concerning the Inquiry's scope is as follows.
 1. **Academic Qualifications.** I have studied cults and organised fringe groups as part of my conferred academic qualifications which include a Bachelor of Arts (La Trobe University, 2002); a Master of Science in Strategic Foresight (Swinburne University of Technology, 2005); a Master of Counter-Terrorism Studies (Monash University, 2007), and a PhD in Political Science (Monash University, 2020). My PhD dissertation titled *The Development of Strategic Culture in Terrorist Organisations* is publicly available;¹ as is my 2011-20 part-time candidature documentation with the exception of my confidential Examiner Reports and my Rejoinder response.² Netflix producers for the series *How To Become A Cult Leader* used my PhD dissertation as background research for Episode 5,

¹ Alex Burns (2020). *The Development of Strategic Culture In Terrorist Organisations*. PhD dissertation, Monash University, https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/thesis/The_Development_of_Strategic_Culture_in_Terrorist_Organisations/12154533.

² Alex Burns (2020). PhD candidature documentation (2011-20), Academia.edu, <https://independent.academia.edu/AlexBurns62/PhD-Dissertation>.

on my case study of Japan's new religious movement and terrorist organisation Aum Shinrikyo (Citizen Jones Associate Producer Narag Momdjian, email, 11th January 2022).

Journalism & Website Editor Experience. I was a writer and former site editor for the New York City based Disinformation website (1998-2008); and also covered aspects of this for freelance journalism in Australia's former *21C* (1995-98) and *REvelation* (1994-98) magazines, the former now being a Perth-based film festival.

Religious Background. My religious background is a paternal family whose aunts, uncle and a grandmother were Roman Catholic; being educated in a then Anglican affiliated high school (Bendigo's Girton College now the independent Girton Grammar); and affiliations with the Gurdjieff Work (1989-1998) and the Temple of Set (1996-1998 and 2010-present); and introductory experience with Chan, Rinzai and Soto forms of Zen Buddhism (2012-13 and 2017-18).

I am not authorised to speak for these respective traditions and organisations: what I offer below is a perspective that combines academic research experience; freelance journalism and website editing experience; a 17-year career in university research administration / management; 4 years of casual, sessional university tutoring and facilitation; and "lived experience" perspectives.

Scope and Structure of Submission Response

3. I now proceed as follows. First, I briefly outline how I non-coercively joined a small Gurdjieff Work group and the San Francisco-based Temple of Set. I address how this differs from the cultic studies analysis of recruitment strategies. I then address some possible limits of the Inquiry's scope and its prioritised issues. Second, I address adverse life impacts in terms of coercive control and specifically mental health (psychiatric and clinical psychology / counselling) aspects. Third, I provide an annotated list of further reading: the relevant literature on this is vast, so this selection is illustrative only rather than being definitive—and seeks to provide some resources that may help both the Inquiry and readers from varied backgrounds to be research and solutions-focused.

Recruitment: Two Experiences (Past As Prologue)

4. I became interested in the Gurdjieff Work—a semi-secretive new religious movement that has evolved from the Greek-Armenian spiritual teacher George Gurdjieff (c. 1866-1949); and that is also commonly associated with the Russian philosopher Peter Ouspensky (1878-1947) in 1990.

I first became aware of the Gurdjieff Work via Eric Tamm, biographer of the King Crimson and David Bowie guitarist Robert Fripp, whose first solo album *Exposure* (1979) is in part a New York City-based urban meditation on the difficulties of (cognitive-emotional-movement) self-observation. Fripp was part of a line of transmission associated with

John Godolphin Bennett (1897-1974), who studied with Gurdjieff; investigated Sufi mystics and Java's Subud and its Latihan meditation; and who contributed to systems thinking and environment/sustainability.

From 1990 to 1996, I read much of the Gurdjieff Work literature which had been either reissued by Arkana or that I found in the Borchardt Library collection at La Trobe University, and the Baillieu Library collection at the University of Melbourne. Much of this literature was also available from Melbourne's Theosophical Society branch, in both their Bookshop and in the TS Research Library.

In 1996-97, I briefly joined a Gurdjieff Work group run by Dr Brian and Nina Earl. I contacted the Earls; explained my background; and attended private meetings at no financial cost apart from public transport travel. There was no coercive control or overt recruitment whatsoever. The Earls had studied with Bennett at Sherborne in England in approximately 1972; and thanked Fripp for digitising Bennett's lectures. We discussed Christian, Tibetan Bon, Zoroastrian, and Bektashi and Naqshbandiyya Sufi teachings and symbolism; the "Tibet" and "Holy Planet Purgatory" chapters of Gurdjieff's *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* (1949); learned the Sufi zikr meditation; and tried some basic self-observation exercises (such as being self-aware as you open a door and walk through the doorway) that can now also be found in contemporary interpersonal neuroscience. The group ended due to Dr Brian Earl's ill health. On the group's last night, the Earls showed me their Sherborne photos in what felt like a significant mouth-to-ear (emic) experience of cultural / knowledge transmission. This period of work informed a 1998 dossier that I wrote for the now former Disinformation website on Gurdjieff; and a 2001 student essay that I wrote for Dr Tom Weber's Peace Studies unit whilst completing my Bachelor of Arts studies as a then extended homeless 'at risk' student at La Trobe University.

5. I first learned of the Temple of Set in 1988-89 during the Satanic Panic moral panic when a substitute teacher brought an Evangelical Christian themed video to a mandatory religious studies class at [REDACTED]. The video featured many themes of the Satanic Panic moral panic era: raising concerns about Dungeons and Dragons role-playing games; summarising the Parent's Music Resource Center attempt to censor pop and heavy metal music (and featuring an interview with music PR maven Howard Bloom on his Music In Action initiative); excerpts from the Geraldo 'Satanism In America' tabloid TV special; and footage of Temple of Set founder Lt Col. Dr Michael A. Aquino in footage that I have not subsequently been able to fully authenticate, and which likely has false memory aspects (although I later suspected it might have been a psychological operations related broadcast excerpt with science fiction themes after discussions with the late Chris Cowan, who indicated that the United States Government at the time was exploring a range of late Cold War era strategic communication strategies that targeted foreign audiences and specifically teenagers). In 1991, I obtained a copy of Tim Tate's book *Children For The Devil: Ritual Abuse and Satanic Crime* (London: Methuen, 1991)—Tate experienced cognitive dissonance when comparing the Temple's of Set's metaphysical philosophy literature to the Satanic Panic / Presidio allegations against Dr Aquino. Tate decided that Dr Aquino was guilty; the book was pulped in a separate defamation case in the United Kingdom; and in 1996, I sold my copy to Melbourne's

Theosophical Society Bookshop during a cost of living crisis (“We don’t usually buy these kinds of books,” was the buyer’s reply).

In 1993, I gained access to Gopher and the Usenet at La Trobe University, and discovered Temple of Set documentation, including a Reading List that Dr Aquino had compiled. I was then a student of Emeritus Professor Robert Manne at La Trobe University, and due to parental expectations, was also working full-time in stock dispatch for family friends. I began to investigate the Reading List and the other documentation, which had been shared on Gopher, Usenet groups, and in various Bulletin Boards.

In 1995, I emailed Dr Aquino directly for comments when REVelation’s then publisher Peter Collins and then editor Mark Thornley asked me to write a follow-up to an interview with the counterculture author Robert Anton Wilson. Dr Aquino responded; he sent me his now two-volume *Church of Satan* history which at the time was made only available outside the Temple of Set to academics and investigative journalists; he suggested I consider joining; I joined the then Xepera-l public email list; and then sent a letter to the Temple’s then Executive Director.

I was initially a member of the Temple of Set from June 1996 to approximately April 1998. This coincided with my freelance research career for *REVelation*, *21C*, *Marketing*, and *Desktop* magazines. I corresponded with international members; did a range of Workings (self-directed research projects and self-reflective rituals); dealt with life arisings and a college era first relationship; attended a Sydney based gathering in January 1998 organised by then Priestess Jennifer Hunter; and left the Temple of Set after the combination of a personally significant Working; the breakup of the college era relationship; and an event cascade / strategic inflection point in my freelance publishing career (when REVelation and 21C both ceased publication, both defaulting as counterparties on article payments) led me to lose my rental house; to also experience anniversarial issues concerning my mother’s death on 28th March 1978 in a childhood car accident; which then led to several dissociative fugues; disclosure of my affiliation to my immediate family in which my father experienced a very adverse personal reaction; and then an early onset psychosis, an unsuccessful suicide attempt, and, after a period of paranoid ideation, an extended period of 18 months in 2000-01 in which I was homeless at La Trobe University as an at risk BA student, where I slept each night (apart from when it rained) in the Thomas Cherry Building stairwell basements. I address aspects of this in the Coercive Control and Impacts section below—because much of the adverse action effects here in fact related to long-term dysfunctional blended family-of-origin dynamics.

I rejoined the Temple of Set in 2010 after doing the Grand Initiation in Don Webb’s book *Uncle Setnakt’s Essential Guide to the Left Hand Path*. This was self-initiated, was voluntary and non-coercive, and has involved an annual donation of \$USD100 which I

have claimed on my annual tax return which my accountant has filed with the Australian Taxation Office.

6. The Inquiry's Guidance Note lists a number of tactics and strategies (which in the academic discourse and research literature on military studies and strategic studies are known as "stratagems" or "worldviews") that cults and organised fringe groups are noted to use to recruit members. Some specific (brief) comments:
 - A. Neither of the groups / organisations above used *'love bombing'; front groups; deceptive messaging; peer recruitment; targeting the vulnerable; or manipulating emotions*.
 - B. Any political, religious, sociological or other affiliative group or organisation that has a coherent ideology and an in-group identity will offer its adherents what the Inquiry describes as belonging and purpose. The key here appears to be the emphasis on vulnerable life stages (which I address further below in the Coercive Control and Impacts section below).
 - C. Likewise, all of these groups or organisations offer at least to some extent *promising transformation or salvation*—otherwise what would be the deeper, long-term benefit to the adherent of joining? In terms of potential selection / inclusion criteria for the Inquiry's focus on cults and organised fringe groups, this is insufficiently bounded in its scope terms—because aspects of it can certainly apply to areas that are outside the Inquiry's scope, such as mainstream religions, political parties, identity-based groups, ideologically motivated affiliations, and even socio-economic class, status, and some workplaces.
 - D. Both the Gurdjieff Work and the Temple of Set have some aspects of *controlling time and information*. Whilst there is now much information publicly about them, there is also substantive critique, misinformation, mischaracterisation, and even disinformation. Both do not seek to actively proselytise or to recruit members—in fact there are delays, questions, and suggestions that you either do not need to join, or should not do so whilst in critical life stages of major study or work commitments, or significant personal change (the Inquiry's *vulnerable life stages* criterion). Controlling time and information is likewise crucial to adjacent contexts such as education-based pedagogical delivery of teaching, and security vetting practices for defence, national security, law enforcement, and parliamentary personnel. Information controls in particular are needed for certain kinds and types of information; and for specific contexts and (potentially receptive) audiences: this is part of the microfoundations for fields such as game theory; nuclear strategy; behavioural economics; and hedge fund trading and investment.
 - E. George Gurdjieff and Lt Col. Dr Michael Aquino were *charismatic leaders or influencers* to some people. Yet in both cases this was often due to how they faced and overcame adversity—Gurdjieff ensuring that his students escaped the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the 1917-21 Civil War in Russia for example, or Dr Aquino's academic and military career achievements; and in being willing to directly confront the Satanic Panic moral

panic, despite successful attempts by multiple people to target and to end his professional military career. But the in-person phenomenological / subjective experiences of dealing directly with them in a Teacher-Student or a Mentor-Mentee relationship (Gurdjieff in his pupils' writings; and Dr Aquino in our 1995-2019 email exchanges that occurred up until approximately 3 weeks before his death on 1st September 2019) are very different. They are not reflected in the secondary or the critical literature on either figure.

- F. The Inquiry's concern about *promising secret or higher knowledge* is likewise fine on the surface, yet difficult and problematic in practice. It is the function of legitimate religious / initiatory Schools and traditions to engage in authentic cultural and knowledge transmission. Some of this knowledge may be *secret* in multiple senses: it may be publicly available yet overlooked, marginalised, or stigmatised; it may be clandestine in terms of potentially being operationally or psychologically dangerous if misunderstood and misapplied by inexperienced adherents or practitioners; it may accidentally parallel or converge with deception / counterdeception matters in terms of national security; it may concern an epistemic community or ontological / epistemological judgments where there is contestability or disagreement; or it may involve working hypotheses, fragmentary knowledge, anomalies, or speculation that requires further research, experimentation, and communal verification.
- G. This knowledge may also be secret due to broader political and societal factors, such as economic cycles and speculative bubbles; contagion, herding and other behavioural economics and anthropological / sociological effects; the growth of noise, misinformation, disinformation, deepfakes, propaganda, and targeted "active measures"; a common form of intellectual property rights called trade secrets; reactionary waves of attempted censorship and social control; and so forth. A dystopian novel that explores many of these issues that the Inquiry may likely be familiar with is George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949) and its recent feminist counterfactual interpretation, Sandra Newman's *Julia* (London: Granta, 2023). In both novels, there is epistemic, meta-ethical, ontological, and social stratification.
- H. Likewise, *creating insider language and symbols* is on the surface fine, yet is also deeply problematic in actual practice. Many of the knowledge areas and groups / organisations above have this—it is what Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Donald MacKenzie, Michael Mann, Charles Tilly, and many other scholars, theorists and practitioners have focused on. Cultural anthropologists in the tradition of Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, Stanley Tambiah, Mary Douglas, and many others have likewise distinguished between 'etic' (outsider) viewpoints of an out-group or an academic scholar, versus those of the 'emic' (insider) in-group practitioner, who engages in what Milton Erickson noted is the utilisation of knowledge. Any of the broad affiliations noted above will create an adherent-based identity that may not be fully understood by others. This is where dialogue, principled/values based negotiation, truth-telling, openness to experience, de-escalating infra- and inter-group conflicts, and so forth are key—the collective lessons of scholars like Erving Goffman, Albert Bandura, Philip Zimbardo, Stanley Milgram, Wilfred Bion, Orrin C. Klapp, Heinz Kohut, Otto Kernberg, Nancy McWilliams, Mark Juergensmeyer, Vamik Volkan, and many others continues to be very relevant here.

Why is some of the Inquiry's selection / inclusion criteria fine on the surface, yet problematic in actual practice? Here, I will draw on my BA (1992-2001); MSc (2002-04); MSc (2005-06); and PhD (2011-20) university studies; my Research Assistant work in the Smart Internet Technology Cooperative Research Centre (2004-07); and my subsequent career in research administration / management and quality assurance (2007-2025) to offer a few comments for the Inquiry's mindful consideration.

7. The Inquiry has chosen to scope much of its specific focus and prioritised issues in terms of a particular epistemic community: the cultic studies tradition exemplified by the Savannah, Georgia (United States) based International Cultic Studies Association (hereafter ICSA). The ICSA's membership includes former members of cult and organised fringe groups; psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and counsellors; academics; and journalists. The ICSA—and similar organisations—provide resources, advance particular interpretations of the Inquiry's specific focus and prioritised issues; and draw on specific historical and contemporary literature, research methods and methodologies, and global networks. The Guidance Note sections on tactics and methods of member recruitment are in effect dot-point summaries of much of this historical literature, which I am familiar with.
8. The Inquiry's helpful website refers to two primary documents: (i) a "1998 report of the Model Criminal Code Law Officers Committee established by the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General";³ and (ii) a journal article by West and Langone (1986) that provides the formal definition of cults that the Inquiry uses.⁴ It would be helpful for future Inquiries to directly link to or provide approved copies of this definitional material.

Here is an Australian Research Council style rejoinder of the Inquiry's reliance on (ii):

This specific document is a combined issues briefing and summary overview of a 1985 conference held from 9th to 11th September 1985. The publicly disclosed conference

³ Model Criminal Law Officer Committee Reports (2009), Standing Committee of Attorney-Generals, Australia, <https://www.ag.gov.au/crime/publications/model-criminal-law-officers-committee-reports>.

⁴ West, Louis Jolyon, & Langone, Michael David (1986). Cultism: A Conference for Scholars and Policy Makers. *Cultic Studies Journal*, 3(1), 117–134, <https://articles1.icsahome.com/articles/cultism--a-conference-for-scholars-policy-makers-csj-3-1>. Professor West and Dr Langone also contributed to the Report of the APA Task Force on Deceptive and Indirect Techniques of Persuasion and Control released in November 1986, highlighting the existence of their active involvement along with Report lead Professor Margaret Thaler Singer in a cohort-based citation network (which is not necessarily illegal yet is useful to identify groups and networks of scholars in particular epistemic communities who advocate for particular legal interpretations and policymaking priorities: <https://culteducation.com/report-of-the-apa-task-force-on-deceptive-and-indirect-techniques-of-persuasion-and-control.html>). Compare this approach for example with the Central Intelligence Agency's late expert on deception and counterdeception in military and intelligence contexts (called MILDEC short for military deception) Barton Whaley in his 2008 released *Detecting Deception: A Bibliography of Counterdeception Across Time, Cultures and Disciplines*, <https://jmw.typepad.com/files/whaleybibliographycounterdeceptionsecondedition.pdf>.

sponsors were the American Family Foundation (which like the Temple of Set above is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organisation thus designated by the United States Internal Revenue Service); the University of California's Neuropsychiatric Institute; and the Johnson Foundation based at Racine, Wisconsin.⁵

This specific document is aligned with the ICSA above, and is noted in the American Psychological Association's PsycNet database. It is published in the ICSA's *Cultic Studies Journal* (1984-2010) which was in part a successor to an earlier American Family Foundation publication, and which the ICSA's *International Journal of Cultic Studies* replaced in 2010. Neither ICSA journals are listed in the academic database Scopus nor Scimago Journal Reports—which Australian public and private university central and Faculty Research Offices use to identify “quality” target journals for peer reviewed academic publications. Both ICSA journals would thus be routinely rejected by most university central Research Offices—and likely by Australian Research Council General and Detailed Assessors (and possibly by the highly qualified Carriage1 and Carriage2 of the ARC's College of Experts).

The Inquiry in its publicly available material also omits some critical context about this 1986 journal article. It occurred during—and it addresses from the ICSA perspective—the “cult wars” between two different yet adjacent epistemic communities: the “cult survivor” group (the ICSA and similar organisations / cultic experts—described by critics as “anti-cult”) and the “new religious movement / studies” group of primarily university affiliated sociologists, anthropologists, and contemplative / religious studies scholars. The co-authors Dr Michael Langone and Professor Louis Jolyon West likewise have had controversies in their respective careers: Dr Langone is associated with (and has now disavowed) a period of “cult deprogramming” which used in part coercive / compellence based methods satirised in Jane Campion's film *Holy Smoke* (1999); West conducted the psychiatric examination of Jack Ruby who murdered Lee Harvey Oswald; worked on the Central Intelligence Agency's MK-Ultra sub-project 43 (a study of interrogation techniques using clinical hypnosis and LSD); accidentally killed an elephant at Tulsa Zoo in 1962; the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute was linked to controversial research proposals on violence control and behaviour modification; and West has recently been linked tangentially to Charles Manson in the Tom O'Neill and Dan Piepenbring book *Chaos: Charles Manson, the CIA and the Secret History of the Sixties* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2009), and the Errol Morris documentary for Netflix called *Chaos: The Manson Murders* (2025).

There are complex, sensitive, and still highly contestable issues here that the Inquiry's brief mention of “brainwashing” (coined by Cold War era journalist Edward Hunter) and “thought reform” (from psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton) also hints at. But Professor West and Dr Langone—despite their very prestigious academic and research careers—cannot be relied upon innocently—part of assessing a research career track record “relative to opportunity” is to acknowledge also that specific fields / disciplines like

⁵ Johnson Foundation (2025), <https://www.johnsonfdn.org/>.

psychiatry and psychology may pass through periods of experimentation and pressures (political, sociological, economic, ideological, institutional, research program oriented, grant funder oriented, methodological, research question / hypothesis, technological, and individual / team / institution oriented) that in retrospect can be challenging to deal with, notably in what in defence, intelligence and national security are called “dual use” contexts (that also involve diffusion that concerns civil-military relations and potential compartmentalised special access programs).

9. The approach I adopted in my 2020 Monash University conferred PhD dissertation *The Development of Strategic Culture in Terrorist Organisations* differs substantially from the Inquiry. It is publicly available material—so you are welcome to either use or to ignore it. Some of the specific differences include:
 - A. In-group beliefs and ideologies are contra the Inquiry’s scope—absolutely critical. However, it is important to distinguish form / structure from content—what the psychologist Milton Rokeach distinguished between open and closed beliefs that rely on absolutistic thinking (subsequently modified by Dr Don Edward Beck, Chris Cowan and Natasha Todorovic-Cowan in their *Clare W. Graves / Spiral Dynamics* work as an open-arrested-closed spectrum of beliefs). Pepperdine College Associate Professor Jason Blakeley a noted Roman Catholic philosopher has likewise developed a very useful contemporary approach to ideas and ideologies in contemporary society.
 - B. I combined Lifton’s thought reform work on Aum Shinrikyo with a range of other perspectives that were informed by my own experiences above, and by my knowledge of other cults, organised fringe groups, and new religious movements. The themes that emerged from this were: (i) a leader-follower dynamic of a decision elite that had asymmetric knowledge as per Nobel laureates George Akerlof and Robert Shiller’s respective work; (ii) a clandestine and compartmentalised aspect in which there were very different goals to the declared / espoused public stance; (iii) an indoctrination process as well as both necessary and sufficient conditions for potential indoctrinability; (iv) the development from initial ideas and ideologies into different organisational sub-systems—of which the religious/initiatory sub-systems which I had directly experienced in the Gurdjieff Work and the Temple of Set above were only part of a “meso” or midrange level organisational architecture; and (v) an identified process of ethical collapse. The problem as I found in my own life and university employment was that this was not the sole domain of cults or organised fringe groups—it in fact applied as a more generalisable *corporate governance problem* that applied to many other contexts, from the universities that I worked in (in research administration / management and student-facing teaching) and the hedge funds that I privately studied; to Royal Commissions and Federal / State Government inquiries into mainstream religions; fraud, white-collar crime, and money laundering—including offshore domiciled tax havens and financial hub jurisdictions; and in terrorism, defence, intelligence, and national security communities, including the AUKUS security compact between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. All of this is beyond the Inquiry’s specific scope.

- C. I found that the Inquiry’s specific scoping and its prioritised matters were both shared and critiqued by a range of Australian and international university academics and independent scholars who I networked with. The Inquiry’s focus on coercive control is laudable—and this as a form of criminalisation applies to our entire Australian society, not just cults or fringe organisation groups. One of the issues with the ICSA-oriented approach is that the “cult wars” contestability noted above reflected broader shifts in primarily United States politics, economics and society which Australian policymakers might adopt uncritically and without a more nuanced understanding. This is also complicated by popular journalistic accounts (which have some insights); by popular media depictions (such as in Joseph Sims-Dennett’s 2024 folk-horror thriller *The Banished*);⁶ and by true crime podcasts that provide specific archetypes and stereotypes of what cults and fringe organised groups are like. The actual phenomenological / subjectivist or “lived experience” reality may differ.
- D. Likewise, the ICSA’s perspective is not accepted by all qualified and highly respected scholars at Australian public universities. In 2019, for my PhD dissertation’s literature review, I wrote specific sections on both the ICSA-oriented and the new religious movement approaches—and was told by my final PhD Supervisor Associate Professor Pete Lentini of Monash University to remove the ICSA-oriented viewpoint because both the literature (largely either self-published or by non-academic trade publishers in the United States) and many of the authors wrote from a primarily anecdotal “lived experience” perspective (as cult survivors) but were often not qualified academic researchers. Does this mean that the ICSA perspective that the Inquiry has scoped and prioritised be dismissed? Not necessarily—in my third section I list a couple of ICSA-oriented authors whose more recent work is well worth consulting and learning from.

Life Impacts, Coercive Control and Mental Health Issues

The Inquiry has focused primarily on coercive control in its Guidance Note, notably on cult-oriented behaviours and impacts. I revisit items 4 and 5 above in a Bayesian updating sense to examine—and perhaps to problematise or deepen in terms of the Inquiry’s scope and prioritised issues—how these issues actually play out in real life. I also address mental health issues that are part of on-going therapy with a qualified medical treatment team, which are an ICSA-oriented focus. I make some relevant personal disclosures about my life and specific blended family of origin circumstances—so that appropriately qualified researchers have relevant information to draw on and to reach their own independent assessments about.

10. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

⁶ Phil Hoad (2025). “The Banished Review – Cultish Terrors Lurk In The Australian Outback”, *The Guardian* (29th July), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/jul/29/the-banished-review-cultish-terrors-lurk-in-the-australian-outback>.

[REDACTED]

11. [REDACTED]

12. [REDACTED]

13. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

14. [REDACTED]

15. [REDACTED]

16. I spent much of late 1995 to early 1998 online, conducting interviews for *REvelation*, *21C* and *Marketing* magazine profiles: I certainly could not afford to go to the United States and to meet my interviewees in person. This was the early period of the Dotcom era (1995-2000); it was also a period in which I immersed myself in the Temple of Set's internal literature and its shift to international communication; I dropped out of my BA studies as I worked through my life and trauma issues in my then relationship; and observed and experienced Satanic Panic moral panic era fallout such as the Aquino v. Electriciti.com lawsuit and the Usenet newsgroup hunt for the true identity of Karen 'Curio' Jones ([REDACTED]). Throughout this, I corresponded with Dr Aquino, with author

and special needs teacher Don Webb, and with people who Dr Aquino copied me into emails on, from Jefferson Airplane founder Paul Kantner (who was very interested in Australia's 60,000-year old Indigenous Aboriginal culture) to the University of California Irvine psychologist Emeritus Professor Elizabeth Loftus—a world expert on false memories (when we were all trying to work out who Karen 'Curio' Jones was). My religious / initiatory work involved a shift from my Anglican high schooling to explore Eastern Orthodox Christian sources; mid-1990s cyberculture and internet sociology; and the then proto-science of memetics that concerned Richard Dawkins' memes: culturally transmissible and replicable units of information. This was admittedly obsessive and difficult for my then relationship: I spent months for example learning the basics of quantum physics in order to interview the Cornell University maverick physicist Jack Sarfatti (the real-life basis for the 'Doc' Emmett Brown played by Christopher Lloyd in the Roger Zemeckis film trilogy *Back To The Future*), and interviewed some of the same people that Jon Ronson (*The Men Who Stare At Ghosts*) and Annie Jacobsen (*Phenomena*) would also later profile.

17. In November 1997, I began to experience phenomenological shifts that are well known to analysts in Jungian imaginal psychology, and in the contemporary interpersonal neuroscience work (Allan N. Schore), neurotheology (Andrew Newburg, Michael Persinger), and in specialist treatment of dissociative states. In my application letter to the Temple of Set in 1996, I had explicitly mentioned an interest in both anomalous experiences (Jack Sarfatti; Robert Anton Wilson; Robert Fripp; Philip K. Dick; Terence McKenna) and had studied Esalen Institute related literature on transpersonal psychology; I had also mentioned the specific false memory from my 1978 accident of falling into an abyss of endless, supernal darkness—a black beyond black from the sheer absence of light. Now this repressed material hidden by both a peri-traumatic and a post-traumatic memory barrier began to return from my now constellated unconscious—I had an ecstatic trance state of a Platonic Form of Beauty (what Aleister Crowley called the Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel and which for Roman Catholics can be found in part in the Marian current); after meeting Dr Don Edward Beck and Chris Cowan in a Spiral Dynamics workshop in November 1997, my subconscious asked for the healing knowledge of the Bektashi and Naqshbandiyya Sufis in an AOL ICQ chat with an international Setian; I had for the past year been finding rare books in Melbourne second-hand bookstores; in January 1998, at a Sydney-based Gathering, I delivered a talk on memetics and memes, and then on the final night had a right-brain automatic writing experience; on 27th February 1998, after seeing the "Z'ha'dum" episode of J. Michael Straczynski's *Babylon 5* series, I sat down to write a script and ended up 90 minutes later with *The Book of Oblique Strategies*; and then after experiencing cumulative and combined life stressors (which I had partly foreseen in early 1997 in *21C* magazine meetings with publisher/editor and noted art critic Ashley Crawford), I had several very abreactive dissociative fugues, including ending up in a high security area of Melbourne's Tullamarine Airport (walking from my father's house in [REDACTED] without a phone or any belongings whatsoever) on the 20th anniversary of my mother's death on 28th March 1978.
18. These experiences in the Temple of Set might be interpreted in terms of escalated commitment and psychological control terms. I had also read some of the literature on behaviour modification, clinical hypnosis, and altered states of consciousness between

early 1992 and early 1998 in the La Trobe University Borchardt Library, University of Melbourne Baillieu Library, the RMIT Swanston St Library, and the Monash University Caulfield and Louis Mathiesen Libraries. I had some familiarity with the Satanic Panic moral panic literature on the “recovered memories” debate, and with counterculture literature on trance states, as well as manifestations of it in Neurolinguistic Programming and similar circles. I knew that Dr Michael Aquino had been a United States Army Lieutenant Colonel with early career expertise in psychological operations; we had specifically discussed Alfred H. Paddock’s work; and I had read John Fowles’ books *The Magus: A Revised Version* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977) and *The Aristos* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1964). I also had various unresolved life issues at that point: my first relationship was ending due to my obsessive interests and life stressors including the difficulty of being a freelance journalist; I had a non-completed BA; and so in April 1998, I essentially left the Temple of Set; covering it as a now outsider in 2002 for the former Disinformation website; and returning in 2010. As with Robert Anton Wilson, if you play with Trickster-like initiators—you might be impacted—or at least they might take an interest in you. What you ask for and think you need may not be what you get. This kind of religious/initiatory work has its dangers—notably in the Teacher-Student relationship and the Sorcerer’s Apprentice syndrome of being in a situation that can get rapidly out-of-control—but knowing about it theoretically and then actually experiencing it in your real life context can be a very different and difficult thing to go through.

19. The ICSA-oriented approach that the Inquiry has adopted here might press pause at this point and reach specific conclusions and judgments. My life trajectory from 1990 to early 1998 occurred after the breakup of my blended family-of-origin and bitter divorce fallout that would affect me and my siblings for the rest of our lives. I was interested yet also simultaneously estranged from focusing on my BA studies at La Trobe University—and I got side-tracked by my first intimate relationship; then by family issues of psychological control and loyalty; then by obsessive internet use and escalated commitments in the Temple of Set and in my freelance journalism career; all leading to a cumulative crisis which triggered dissociative fugues and early onset psychosis with prodromal aspects. These in turn can be traced throughout all of my education, back to early developmental periods in my blended and original families of origin, and probably to birth and in utero complications as well. There’s some truth in this—and I prefer as the late sociologist Herbert J. Gans did, to take a more multiperspectival view. To do so, I critique some aspects of what I call the ICSA-oriented approach that the Inquiry has adopted, before returning to relevant aspects of my own life and personal experience.
20. The ICSA-oriented approach that the Inquiry adopts as a pre-framing and also as an agenda-setting device is illustrated in its member Linda Blood, a former Adept of the Temple of Set, who in an interview with the United States Army’s Criminal Investigations Division, claimed that she had been in a sexual relationship with Dr Aquino in the early 1980s (which Dr Aquino denied, as did his wife Lilith Aquino—I was in primary school at the time in [REDACTED] and totally unaware of any of them); and that she is the author of various ICSA related articles about the Temple of Set, and a book called *The New Satanists* (New York: Warner Books, 1994). The publications date is important because this was several years after Dr Aquino had been targeted by the US Army CID in the Presidio investigation, and previously by the San Francisco Police Department, who confirmed to me by physical letter in 1993 that they had upheld a formal complaint by

the Aquinos, and had reassigned then SFPD officers Gary Pamiloff and Sandi Gallant (the latter now remarried) to gambling and vice. Blood's adverse testimony along with several other people who all had respective interpersonal issues with Dr Aquino enabled them to use the US Army CID formal investigation process to mischaracterise him, which then enabled US Army HR to do a soft termination via non-contract renewal. This reverse onus of proof then forced Dr Aquino to sue the Secretary of the United States Army for unfair dismissal / wrongful termination, during which the trial judge sided with the US Army CID and refused to release their 160-page formal investigation (a decision that is usually done to protect investigation sources and methods), which was partially leaked in April 2019 via a successful Freedom of Information Act request made by MuckRock's Michael Best⁷ (prior to Dr Aquino's death on 1st September 2019). Blood's memoir (which draws in part on anthropologist Gini Graham Scott's prior covert and unauthorised / unethical 'emic' study *The Magicians*, reissued in 2022) reflects the ICSA-oriented narrative of ex-members who aligned herself as an advocate and co-author with Dr Langone above, the American Family Foundation, the Cult Awareness Network, and ICSA itself. Dr Aquino's online critics point to a United States District Court PACER record by Senior Judge Samuel Conti dismissing the lawsuit on 13th February 1995;⁸ what his critics tellingly omit is that the Aquinos and Warner Books and Blood settled out of court via a non-disclosure agreement on 31st January 1995.⁹ At the very least Dr Aquino's rejoinder is a model for Australian Research Council grant applicants to follow in terms of its argumentation and clarity—because Blood's *The New Satanists* relies on "abusive ad hominem" and other highly emotive yet non-factual claims: a late entrant to the "Satanic crime" field that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had already investigated and discredited.

21. Blood's book illustrated the adverse psychological climate that still occurred online in March 1998 when I revealed my lawful, non-coercive and private affiliation with the Temple of Set to [REDACTED] in March 1998. He was not overtly religious, but he was so emotionally triggered that he was physically violent with me (which he had also been in the past in not respecting either my physical or private boundaries); and was psychologically and verbally abusive. Whilst he arranged for me to see a colleague who was a clinical psychologist (which I did for two sessions of what were trauma stabilisation work and some existential / psychodynamic work using Jostein Gaarder's book *Sophie's World*), he explained later to me that he was very embarrassed about my early onset psychosis—and thus he directly intervened to prevent me from going into hospital, specialist care, or a step-up / step-down facility that was outside his personal control. He was likely scared—but what he then enacted over the next several months was almost a textbook case of Dr Langone's earlier period of coercive / compellance based cult deprogramming—which included isolation; psychological, behavioural, financial, informational and emotional control (for example, I still had to file a *Desktop*

⁷ United States Army Criminal Investigation Command, Department of the Army (2019). FA19-1981 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Disclosure (19th April), https://cdn.muckrock.com/foia_files/2019/04/26/4-18-19_MR24402_RES.pdf.

⁸ Aquino v Warner Books – PACER transcript (13th February 1995), Internet Archive (27th July 2022), <https://archive.org/details/aquino-v.-warner-books/page/n1/mode/2up>.

⁹ Michael A. Aquino (1995). "Corrections To Passages Concerning Michael Aquino and the Temple of Set in *The New Satanists* by Linda Blood" (2nd February), Balanone.info, <https://web.archive.org/web/20081002004546/http://www.balanone.info/bloodbk.html>.

magazine article with limited to no email, phone and internet access); and which devastatingly extended to ensuring that my first intimate relationship was definitely broken up by repeatedly lying that attempted contact had not occurred. Without proper, independent treatment, I spiralled into early onset psychosis, paranoia, delusional beliefs, and suicidal ideation, which led to an unsuccessful attempt later that year. In turn, this period of non-treatment of my early onset psychosis led to a further period of instability in shared housing and in a further, brief relationship, which then led to 18 months of extended homelessness at La Trobe University.

22. Here is where the ICSA-oriented viewpoint that the Inquiry has adopted—and that Blood has promoted—falls apart. Dr Michael Aquino and the Temple of Set never did anything like this to me: what I experienced in a prodromal sense were cumulative life stressors; the rejection of Zoloft anti-depressants; and how early internet use during the Dotcom era period—when combined with exposure to magical, occult, and new religious subcultures (what the sociologist Colin Campbell in 1972 termed the “cultic milieu” of the “society of seekers”)—could lead to the kinds of adverse experiences that Robert W. Chambers had warned of in *The King In Yellow* (1895); that was central to H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos; Philip K. Dick’s *A Scanner Darkly* (1977); and in Neal Stephenson’s *Snowcrash* (1992). There were dark elements subjectively because—as was perhaps best illustrated in Chris Carter’s original *X-Files* and *Millennium* series, the pre-millennium tension was not all the Cool Britannia ‘rear view mirror’ memories of Prime Minister Tony Blair’s ascendance in the United Kingdom, for example.
23. The ICSA-oriented viewpoint that the Inquiry has adopted usually has a specific narrative. Blood’s own published work on her brief time (1979-80) in the Temple of Set, and then her subsequent critique of what she termed Satanism, Nazism, and Satanic crime also reflects this discourse. This has three structural phases. The first phase is that the ICSA-oriented exponent leads an innocent life yet via chance or specific desires, encounters a cult or an organised fringe group like the Temple of Set. The second phase is a period of escalated commitment and psychological control that involves what now in terms of the Inquiry’s scope would be called coercive control. The third phase is the rescue of the person by a concerned partner, family and friends; a gestalt-shift and revaluation of the first two phases in terms of what Jeffrey Young would call betrayal, subjugation, mistrust/abuse, emotional deprivation, and other schemas, and the reintegration of the now cult survivor in a new community, and in a post-cult identity as an advocate.

This three-fold schema reflects aspects of psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton’s work (notably his criteria for milieu control and doctrine above person); it also fits the “cult wars” debate in the 1970s and the 1980s about brainwashing and mind control; and it also echoes Arnold van Gennep’s three-fold formula of “rites of passage”: separation; liminality (illustrated well in Sofia Coppola’s 2003 film *Lost In Translation*); and incorporation or reintegration. Liminality is perhaps the most well known in which the person is in the betwixt and between of major life and psychological change; whilst incorporation or reintegration back into society is actually the most difficult experientially to achieve. A very important aspect of this—which can be seen in all of Blood’s work—is that the for the new identity to remain coherent in the incorporation or reintegration phase of van Gennep’s ethnographic and unfolding process, any beneficial

or positive aspects of the first and second phases of separation and liminality must be totally disavowed. What instead has occurred here is a transformation from initial naivety (separation); seduction (liminality); and then brave disavowal and the embrace of the post-cult identity (reintegration). I don't doubt that this kind of dynamic occurs—it is well known in the discovery of fraud and white-collar crime as well—except that incorporation and reintegration rarely occurs as the person is often not listened to or is ignored. But—irrespective of Dr Aquino's own rejoinder and confidential legal settlement above with Warner Books and Blood above—there are other, more Ockham's Razor oriented interpretations of the ICSA-oriented viewpoint above.

24. Gini Graham Scott's covert and unethical anthropological-sociological research—and Linda Blood's subsequent elaboration of it—both fail a number of criterial tests.

Publishing Background. Scott's 1976 PhD dissertation conferred by the University of California, Berkeley is not listed at all in Proquest's Dissertations and Theses Global database (in contrast to Dr Michael Aquino's PhD dissertation *The Neutron Bomb* which the University of California Santa Barbara conferred in 1980, and which via prompting from Chris Cowan, Natasha Todorovic-Cowan, and myself, he has made available via Amazon in its 1982 draft book form). The now Dr Scott followed the PhD dissertation to book pathway: it was to her credit published in 1980 as *Cult and Countercult: A Study of a Spiritual Growth Group and a Witchcraft Order* by the Westport, Connecticut and London, England based academic publisher Greenwood Press, which existed in 1967-2023, as an imprint of the Santa Barbara-based ABC-Clío (which at the time of Dr Scott's book was owned by Elsevier). This was a mid-tier academic publisher, but not of the editorial standards of the major dedicated university presses in the United States, which are very rigorous in terms of their pre-publication and editorial reviews. Blood's book *The New Satanists* was published in 1994 by Warner Books—which had published Anton LaVey's *Satanic Bible* (1969) and *Satanic Rituals* (1972), Simon's *Necronomicon* (1976), and Larry Kahaner's *Cults That Kill: Probing The Underworld of Occult Crime* (1988)—and thus from an acquisitions editor perspective (which I was in part for The Disinformation Company Ltd and the former Disinformation website), was essentially a branding line extension and an attempt to resonate with the Satanic Panic moral panic emphasis on teenage Satanic and Occult crime, which by the time of publication in 1994 was in fact rapidly fading, apart from in predominantly Evangelical and Pentecostalist Christian communities, and a small network of "Satanic Ritual Abuse" / "Ritual Abuse" therapists who have functioned as a citation network for their own specific publications.

Different Plausible Interpretations Using Ockham's Razor. Blood joined the Temple of Set in 1979 and was expelled in 1981 for misbehaviour. Scott was likewise a member for six months (in 1981) and was dispelled at an annual Conclave when her covert and unethical research was accidentally discovered. As a rule the Temple of Set now does not comment on or seek to be involved in any way with former members: affiliation is voluntary and non-coercive (and does involve a tax deductible annual donation of \$USD100 which is not meant to be financial exploitation in terms of the Inquiry's criteria in its Guiding Note for coercive control. Both Blood and Scott were in what is now called the two-year period of mutual evaluation—which is meant for the newly affiliated Setian initiate to be exploratory. This mutual evaluation period involves access to the *Crystal*

Tablet of Set—a collection of theory-building documents; non-coercive suggestions for personal life work that is action learning and situated learning pedagogy informed; a now historical Reading List compiled largely by Dr Aquino with contributions by others that can be found in the second volume of his *Temple of Set* history available on Amazon; and administrative documents, including a very important one on Protocol (guidance and clarification on expected standards of behaviour).

Scott joined the Temple of Set under covert and false pretexts to study it and to write her book: this was a post-PhD study that built on her conferred degree and her 1980 published PhD dissertation, but very tellingly, she was not doing this as a Postdoc, a Research-Only academic, or a mixed Teaching & Research academic, and did not to my knowledge have a university affiliation at the time that she was in the Temple of Set for six months. Had she been affiliated, she would have been under Institutional Review Board strict criteria for human research ethics: she thus did not obtain institutional ethics clearance; did not give her human participants any opportunity for informed consent; engaged in basic confidentiality measures that are subsequently discoverable; was not published by a reputable United States university publisher that had blind peer review and other pre-publication checks (*The Magicians* was published in 1983 by Irvington Press; in 1986 by New World Books; and in 2007 was self-published by iUniverse).

Likewise, Blood's book *The New Satanists* (sometimes credited in part to Scott: Blood was certainly familiar with *The Magicians*) was published in 1994—12 to 15 years or so after the events that she allegedly experienced, which Dr Aquino (and the Temple of Set's Dr Stephen Edred Flowers or Edred Thorsson) denied. Apart from the selection of a trade publisher and the Satanic Panic moral panic timing of her book, this is quite a lengthy period of delay in publishing, and it occurred after the McMartin, Presidio, and West Memphis Three cases, which all involved false accusations, anchoring and confirmation biases, and in all three, a "rush to judgment". A close reading of Blood's personal comments in her book suggest that more was actually at play here than her claims of Dr Aquino's coercive control in an intimate relationship (which he has denied): it at least suggests the psychoanalytic informed defence mechanisms of transference, projection and splitting by Blood onto Dr Aquino as an all-evil, charismatic cult leader who Blood portrays as preying on her. A contrarian reading of this is that Blood became obsessive and attempted to be manipulative with someone who was very well aware of interpersonal dynamics from his professional military career—and that this hyperfocus led Blood to not focus on the self-development that is the actual focus of the Temple of Set's religious/initiatory work—where some of the more longer-term aspects only emerge after the initial two-year mutual evaluation period.

Misrepresentations. Both Scott and Blood were in the Temple of Set during a difficult transitional period related to then High Priest Ronald K. Barrett's initiatory philosophy of Xem. Barrett was a New York City occult bookstore owner who attempted to restructure the Temple of Set to reflect his personal interests and his leadership clique. This involved both failed pedagogical innovation that would not meet contemporary assessment standards (a mandatory exam for the Adept initiatory degree) and then an attempted internal takeover. This was prevented and it led to significant changes—including the strengthening by Dr Aquino of institutional Bylaws and the adoption of

political scientist Robert A. Dahl's "polyarchy" approach to having multiple "checks and balances" to prevent any one individual or small clique from taking over the organisation. This is in line also with the United States Internal Revenue Service's 501(c)(3) designation and the specific institutional responsibilities that are involved with this non-profit foundation status (such as the prevention of an organisational endorsement of any United States Presidential candidate or political candidate running for office domestically). Blood in particular misrepresents significant aspects of the Temple of Set's metaphysical philosophy, research and its actual practices in an attempt to align it with Satanic panic moral panic era fallout (largely discredited by the 1994 publication of her rather tabloid book); Dr Aquino's professional military career (which involved expertise in psychological operations which is often focused on by his critics—who don't at all understand what else he did or what is involved in Top Secret security clearances and background vetting); or the drafts of his *Star Wars* fan-fiction story *The Dark Side*, which are now publicly available as *FireForce: A Star Wars Parody* (2016) via Amazon.

Blood's claim that she was naïve, innocent and was seduced by an evil Svengali is not credible here—because Dr Aquino was very upfront with people about the realities and dangers for example of his professional military work (in terms of disavowing civilians of their respective delusions and illusions: a major focus of what is called civil-military affairs which is the specific focus of military senior leadership), and of his repeated observations that the Central Intelligence Agency's MK-Ultra program of behaviour modification led by Dr Sidney Gottlieb, and its military experiments in clinical hypnosis in particular, were deeply unethical and did not work. Blood's mischaracterisation of Dr Aquino—and Dr Stephen Edred Flower and the Temple of Set—as Nazis likewise misrepresents their both public and internal stated positions (the Temple of Set is individualist focused and disavows Nazism as an authoritarian, despotic, totalitarian political ideology); fails to explain their legitimate research interests (for example, Dr Aquino is a BA, MA and PhD qualified political scientist like myself, and as a United States Army expert in irregular warfare / psychological operations and a Special Operations Forces qualified Green Beret, also studied the NSDAP German worldview that led to World War II in order to both understand it from its own respective position rather than Allied Forces propaganda about it, and because this is where a significant amount of data for what later became political psychology emerged from); and fails to consider that as a religious/initiatory organisation, the Temple of Set would examine such extreme "edge cases" in order to grasp the lessons learned, as well as to highlight the very real dangers involved. Blood simply wasn't qualified to understand this at all, and therefore didn't (and subsequently as far as I'm aware, hasn't).

This has consequently evolved into other Satanic Panic moral panic era conspiracy theories (such as John W. Decamp's *The Franklin Coverup* and Mark Phillips and Cathy O'Brien's *Trance Formations in America*, as well as prime bank fraud variants like Guy Lawson's hedge fund fraud book *Octopus* on Samuel Israel III's Bayou Hedge Fund Group) and new religious movement studies that vary in quality (such as Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke's *Black Sun*; Joseph Laycock's *Satanism*; and Spencer Sunshine's *Neo-Nazi Terrorism and Countercultural Fascism: The Origins and Afterlife of James Mason's Siege*). There is a significant difference between religious/initiatory work involving dangerous taboo material; the psychological operations informed study of military

adversaries and their mindsets; and neo-Nazi ideologies or Satanic crime memes, for example. The sub-field of Fascism Studies has also continued to evolve beyond the largely 1960s to 1980s period in which Dr Aquino considered it. Ethical, sensitive research practices are vital—as well as the archival, hermeneutic, psychological and reflective skills to deal with primary source documentation; secondary source analyses such as from field / discipline based academic specialists; and to distinguish this from tertiary source or internet source based noise. It takes years to build up this area studies and history / political psychology expertise: you aren't going to find it on YouTube, TikTok, or on an Artificial General Intelligence tool or Large Language Model like ChatGPT or Claude.ai. Nor are you going to find it in the periodic, reactionary climates of Overton Window closure, censorship, purging, and other ideological based attacks on ethically conducted research that is on taboo, dangerous, stigmatising, politicised, or very sensitive research questions and topics. What instead occurs is a kind of dimensionality reduction in which all of this is dimensionally reduced into being a sound-bite with specific moral, emotional and shrill intensity—which can occur on a variety of fields / disciplines, when underlying political, social, economic, and religious ideologies dramatically shift in terms of what kind of research is allowed to be conducted and why, and what specific conclusions can be drawn or publicly discussed.

25. Having gone through an illustrative case study detour on an aspect of the Temple of Set's early history (and of the ICSA-oriented viewpoint of Linda Blood who built on Gini Graham Scott's covert and unethical anthropological-sociological research which did not have institutional research ethics approval, university affiliation, or a robust academic university publisher), I now want to close this section by returning to my own experiences in the Gurdjieff Work and the Temple of Set, notably in the 1996—98 time period (with the 1990-95 period essentially being exploratory via a range of counterculture exponents), and the adverse personal fallout of 1998-2001 in particular.

The ICSA- oriented viewpoint would likely have a particular overarching narrative or interpretation of my 1990-98 experiences. It might go something like as follows. After a blended family of origin breakup in 1989, I experienced anomie and the search for a new independent identity which involved the 1990s counterculture, and magic/occult communities: sociologist Colin Campbell's 'cultic milieu'. This also informed my emerging professional identity as a freelance journalist and as a writer and site editor in 1998-2008 for the former New York City based Disinformation website founded by creative director Richard Metzger and publisher/current owner Gary Baddeley. This affected my ability to study my BA at La Trobe University—both in terms of time spent online using university internet services, and in terms of the specific content analysis adopted in cinema studies, politics, and philosophy essays. I became estranged from my family; this also affected my first intimate relationship (which occurred during my college era); I became immersed via an escalated commitment and information revelation process in the Gurdjieff Work and the Temple of Set in particular; I spiralled into schizotypal 'ideas of reference', dissociative fugues, and early onset psychosis; and when I did not pursue my father's organised referral to a family friend psychologist for more than two sessions, this period of now untreated early onset psychosis shifted into a paranoid phase in shared housing in 1998-1999 and another brief intimate

relationship, which when this was ended and my shared flat retaliated, led me to being homeless for 18 months, whilst completing my BA as an at risk student, writing for Disinformation and other publications, and doing telemarketing. From this perspective, the Inquiry might well conclude that I was a victim of behavioural, psychological, information, and emotion control.

This would be the standard interpretation in much of the cult survivor literature and in those writers / exit counsellors who have adopted aspects of Robert Jay Lifton, Edgar Schein, and Margaret Thaler Singer's early work on brainwashing, mind control, and thought reform. It was certainly the view of my late father during both my early onset psychosis and for many years afterwards (he disparagingly described the Temple of Set as the "Temple of Shit"). What I went through in April and May 1998 in retrospect had aspects of coercive / compellance based cult deprogramming that involved psychological control (isolation from the intimate relationship I was in which was ending anyway; fear-based tactics; an us-or-them mentality about our family with a Mafia-like omerta code of silence; gaslighting; guilt trips; and fear-based tactics); behavioural control (restrictions on freedom; bullying; and surveillance); information control (limited access to media; no access to the internet; attempting to rewrite my personal and intimate relationship narrative history in a deficit-based and highly disparaging way); emotional exploitation (fears and attempted induced phobias which had occurred also during the prior marriage breakup and divorce fallout); and subsequently for a sibling and myself, financial exploitation (unpaid labour in a failed entrepreneurial venture which did not have a realistic value creation / capture model or even a viable business plan). I had grown up with physical and emotional abuse (including childhood emotional neglect) which also included the cover-up between 1978 and 2019 (a period of 41 years of my 51 year life) of the exact causal circumstances of my mother's death on 28th March 1978 in a motor vehicle accident.

This was the view adopted by some other family members as well, notably those who were unlike my late father, avowedly Roman Catholic in religious orientation. This is significant—because as the 2019 Canadian documentary *Satan Wants You* has subsequently revealed, the roots of the Satanic Panic moral panic in the 1980s lay in Canadian psychiatrist Lawrence Pazder and his patient (and later wife) Michelle Smith and their "recovered memory" book *Michelle Remembers* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1980), which became a bestseller and that granted Pazder and Smith an audience with Pope John Paul II. What the documentary film-makers Sean Horlor and Steve J. Adams discovered is that *Michelle Remembers* was in part financed by \$CAD10,000 from the local Roman Catholic diocese in Victoria, British Columbia in the hope that the book would convince people to join or to rejoin the Roman Catholic Church (which it did). This proselytising goal is also depicted independently in Arkasha Stevenson's reboot *The First Omen* (2024) in which a reactionary depicted Roman Catholic Church has similar goals in bringing the antichrist Damien Thorne to his earthly incarnation. For these family members, although I had gone through some adverse life experiences, they felt that I had joined the Temple of Set as a vulnerable, lonely, insecure, and failed person—and thus was being exploited. All that they had to do was to utter the spell of

brainwashing / thought reform, or even the curse that I was just an “IUD failure”—and the consensus-driven status quo would continue to exist.

This stance ignores a number of relevant material facts about me, and about how I came in June 1996 to formally affiliate with the Temple of Set in particular. In my high school years I had religiosity due to what I now identify phenomenologically as dissociative trance states; emotional imprints; and contagion-based group dynamics. I had no problem with my paternal grandmother’s Roman Catholicism—we went to her local church service—and as a non-Roman Catholic, I did not accept communion. Likewise, with an aunt in 2016 during my paternal grandmother’s funeral, the Roman Catholic liturgy and her own subjective experience of prayers, rituals, and observable trance states were no problem whatsoever. Nor did I rush to join the Temple of Set—I first heard about it in 1989 and joined in 1996 (6 years); left in 1998 and rejoined in 2010 (12 years) and during both of these periods I read a range of public, online, internal, scholarly, investigative journalist, and critic material—as well as having now discussed aspects of it with multiple clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors, and academic researchers. I bought Anton LaVey’s *Satanic Bible* (1969) from La Trobe University’s campus bookshop in 1992 (it is now a thriving IGA food store), but when my father saw it on my bookshelf on a day that he came into the room unannounced (a behavioural marker of coercive control and psychological control), he was in fact more concerned that I had just also purchased a copy of Dr Susan Forward and Chris Buck’s book *Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life* (New York: Bantam, 1989). I did not adopt LaVey’s Satanic imagery nor Scott or Blood’s respective manipulative Svengali or Satanic crime stereotypes. Even when future mentor Howard Bloom released his first book *The Lucifer Principle: A Scientific Exploration Into the Forces of History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1995) which appeared in the front window of La Trobe University’s campus bookshop, I didn’t buy it (sorry Howard!), even when Dr Aquino placed it on his Reading List in the Temple of Set for its discussion of group selection theory in Darwinian informed evolutionary psychology.

In fact I came to the Temple of Set in June 1996 with undiagnosed and untreated Autism Spectrum Disorder (level one severity) which was not formally diagnosed until October 2022 at age 49; Major Depressive Disorder which I definitely had throughout the 1990s; suicidal ideation and fears of poverty in my adolescence; and Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder which was also undiagnosed and untreated, and that in fact worsened along with the early onset psychosis in the period 1998-2001 after I left the Temple of Set and in 2000-01 became extended homeless whilst completing my BA as an at risk student at La Trobe University. The psychological guilt and shame and distrust of others, the low self esteem, and the social isolation and difficulty reintegrating occurred in particular during this 2000-01 time period where, unable to get either Austudy or Centrelink payments, I essentially fell through the cracks. Prior to this, I had economic co-dependence in my first intimate relationship: we both got caught in a poverty trap despite the successes of my freelance journalism career, because this work simply was not enough to live on.

There was no financial exploitation involved (although I did run up credit card bills to access the Temple of Set's Glinda BBS—which prompted a colleague and I to propose in 1997 that an intranet be established). Whilst there were identity changes—what I was moving away from in my affiliations with the Gurdjieff Work and the Temple of Set; my first intimate relationship; and in my freelance journalism career was from my paternal family's deficit-based view of me, to in Michael White's narrative therapy sense, a more self-authored sense—which also occurred throughout my BA studies as I discovered that I both really enjoyed writing and that this was self-soothing and exteriorising for the undiagnosed and untreated Complex PTSD and Major Depressive Disorder, as well as for later Generalised Anxiety Disorder. The mental health and cognitive development challenges were all there: the transition to early adulthood and your first intimate relationship can be very difficult for autistic / neurodiverse people, who have hyperfocus and obsessive interests, problems in expressing emotions and intimacy, challenges with everyday living and finances, and who don't actually discover this until 2022—27 years later. One of the biggest single mistakes of my life in 1996 was that the woman in my first intimate relationship asked me to go to La Trobe University's free, confidential counselling and psychological services. I refused: I was in the Temple of Set; I had read parts of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or DSM-IV (1994); and my father was a both a qualified general and psychiatric nurse, who had co-founded Victoria's first dedicated psychiatric nursing agency—what help did I really need? This was a major metacognitive and self-awareness failure: my blind refusal was one of several major turning points along with mood disorder, financial, psychosocial coping skills, and financial issues that I caused the first intimate relationship to unravel and to end in 1998. Being unable to accept and to let go when the relationship ended; writing obsessive emails with schizotypal ideas of reference; attempting suicide; and not being able to handle my anger and frustration when I misinterpreted a subsequent request for help and understanding as a betrayal. This is Jeffrey Young's mistrust/abuse, emotional deprivation, failure, and betrayal schemas (and probably some ego-inflated grandiosity schema as well).

The ICSA-oriented narrative here would perhaps stress some kind of familial incorporation and reintegration (in terms of van Gennep's three-fold formula of his ethnographic rite of passage). But in my case that didn't happen—and it was probably never going to happen. My late father's relationship was very much hyperfocused on his entrepreneurial dreams and his business success—which only really included me in terms of providing labour for a failed entrepreneurial venture whose promised Golden Age was always on the horizon and never in fact arrived (I never invested in what at least in part turned out to be the affinity fraud of family and friends investors). My paternal family and I simply grew in different life trajectories: being cross-border is difficult; but when your communication with them is largely self-initiated by you and rather one-sided or self-referential, then there is not really a deep relationship there. Nor was this a surprise to me: when I first showed my 1994 published *REvelation* magazine article to my father, he had no idea who the author J.G. Ballard was and didn't care—he was specifically concerned that I had shortened my first name Alexander to Alex and had used (and continue to use) the name Alex Burns for my publications. Likewise, the research administration and postgraduate study trajectory that I went on was noted, but was never really viewed positively by my paternal family: I was told that I was

responsible for all of the bad choices I had made in my life and that I was annoying to deal with—and in fact I was both responsible and had paid the price for these very choices. I had grown up and was in the Bad Sheep or Scapegoat role in my family; others were in the Golden Child role and were far more overtly prosocial and positive. No-one likes to hear about darkness, failure, and on-going struggles or to be aware of dysfunctional family patterns. It's much easier to gaslight, to blame-shift, to ignore, to be silent—and perhaps to split and project these concerns away from the broader intergenerational family system and its longitudinal aspects (such as Brad Klontz's 'money scripts' used in financial therapy to others. In such circumstances, whether you call them cults, fringe organised groups, new religious movements, religious/initiatory organisations, or whatever—they can be helpful to misdirect attention away from the undiscussables.

A significant aspect of this is the “cult wars” and the MK-Ultra (and MK-Artichoke and MK-Bluebird) legacy of brainwashing, mind control, and thought reform / psychological totalism based discourse. Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton is the most sophisticated scholar on this. The combined deception, escalated commitment, cognitive-emotional anchoring, and the bait-and-switch betrayal arc of this body of research and advocacy is musically illustrated in the Queensryche concept album *Operation: Mindcrime* (1988) in which the fallen heroin addict Nikki seeks redemption via the charismatic Dr X with the help of his Jungian “anima possession” figure Mary—until Dr X demands that Nikki kill Mary and a church priest to show his loyalty. Nikki's life and his sanity unravels. The post-Lifton discourse informs Hollywood films; streaming media true crime and cult profile series; journalistic books and cult survivor tell-all memoirs; and occasionally, more substantive scholarly work by sociologists, religious studies exponents, political scientists, and clinical psychologists and psychiatrists. But in a family context, making the deficit-based claim that a member is simply brainwashed is both highly stigmatising and a thought-terminating cliché. Once you throw the mud, it smears, and at least some people will believe it. There is no need to engage with the complex, ethically challenging, and highly contestable literature in sociology, psychiatry and psychology alone—let alone the very varied quality of case studies from covert journalism profiles (which Blood and Scott above both fit—without the investigative skills of Lawrence Wright, Steve Coll, William D. Cohan, James B. Stewart, or Bethany McLean for example). If you make the adverse claim; if you control the pre-framing and the agenda-setting; if you control the entire process; and if you control both the outcomes and the communication to strategic decision-makers (and in circumstances where there is no independent oversight-or there is on paper yet it can be gamed, compromised, politicised or other wise arbitrated), then you can basically do whatever you want.

The Presidio era and post-Presidio afterlife of Dr Michael Aquino (from 12th August 1987 to his death on 1st September 2019—a 32 year time period) reflects this: it became part of the conspiracy narrative for the QAnon, Pizzagate, Project MONARCH (a post MK-Ultra conspiracy theory that has influenced contemporary online influencers), prime bank fraud, and other adverse claims. What many of the above cult survivor advocates, authors, academic researchers, and online influencers do is to create a composite narrative for Dr Aquino as a villain worthy of SPECTRE's Ernst Stavro Blofeld (with a nod

to *Skyfall*'s Raoul Silva) or as a Deep State globalist elite forerunner to Jeffrey Epstein. The arch villain composite has repeatable themes: a 1968-75 collaboration period with Church of Satan founder Anton Szandor LaVey (a 1975 split led Dr Aquino to found the Temple of Set); a 1969-70 tour of Vietnam in the 6th Operational Psychological Battalion; a Vietnam Syndrome discussion paper co-written by then Major Michael Aquino and then Colonel Paul Vallely called *From PSYOP to MindWar: The Psychology of Victory* (1980) that was submitted to but never published in *Military Review* or *Parameters*; and a private ritual called the Wewelsburg Working held on 19th October 1982 in the Hall of the Dead in Wewelsburg Castle's North Tower in Westphalia, Germany (a student and backpacker lodge), that involved an exploration of why religious/initiatory organisations experience regular and recurrent crises—which by non-initiate outsiders and academic scholars is often misinterpreted as support for Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Hitler and even the Holocaust, but instead for which Dr Aquino focused on the disproportionately evolved human intellect (akin to the late James Flynn's environment focused scholarship on human intelligence)—and which in World War II led to the disastrous Operation Barbarossa between Germany and the Soviet Union of Socialist Republics.

I wrote an MA essay in 2005 whilst at Monash University on the Wewelsburg Working and the subsequent post MK-Ultra conspiracy theory Project MONARCH that remains my single most downloaded document from my Academia.edu profile.¹⁰ The student essay (which was not a peer reviewed piece of academic scholarship yet had original research) allegedly came to the attention of a former Professor colleague at the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Education—and raised enough red flags that she self-initiated a personal investigation of both my Temple of Set affiliation and contacted at least one former employer (with the apparent knowledge of our now retired then Faculty Dean), but none of them—nor a now former boss who objected to my affiliation disclosure which was mandatory for Faculty conflict of interest and University external legislative compliance with Foreign Interference (my lawful affiliation was reviewed by the University of Melbourne Chancellery level team for Foreign Interference and was fully cleared as a personal characteristic and a private matter) ever bothered to raise this or to discuss it with me. This led me to panic, and in ensuing mis-communication, a Postdoc research proposal that I had worked on for two months with Associate Professor Pete Lentini at Monash University on onshore / offshore radicalisation was several days later suddenly dis-endorsed and never submitted to the funder the Office of National Intelligence—so the Professor, the now retired Faculty Dean, and my now former boss all had no professional or personal repercussions from this incident whatsoever, whereas I was stigmatised; lost a valuable potential Postdoc project that was vital to Australia's defence, intelligence and national security interests; and then later experienced occupational blocking and closure, with adverse career, personal, financial, housing, health, and other outcomes.

¹⁰ At the time of this submission response to the Inquiry the 2005 student essay called From Wewelsburg to Project Monarch: Anatomy of a Fringe Violence Conspiracy Theory is available here (Academia.edu links can change when institutional affiliations are updated): https://www.academia.edu/68022841/From_Wewelsburg_to_Project_Monarch_Anatomy_of_a_Fringe_Violence_Conspiracy.

This highlights a major flaw for me in the Inquiry's pre-framing and its prioritised issues—it examines cults and fringe organised groups in terms of their adverse impact on individuals, but it doesn't have scope for demonstrable adverse impacts that either conventional, dominant religions have (there were very clear ideologically motivated factors in the Monash University student essay above—which as a courtesy should have been discussed with me, rather than me overhearing this and discovering it by accident); or where such adverse impacts occur when you as a member of a lawful minority religion, cult, or fringe organised group and comply with external legislative requirements (particularly mandatory disclosure for defence, intelligence and national security purposes) and yet this sensitive information is stigmatised, mischaracterised, and then weaponised against you as targeted disinformation—this is very clear weakness in the Foreign Interference disclosure requirements for universities and for any workplaces that may have employees or supervisor/manager-worker based oversight that can be covertly, semi-covertly, or even clandestinely manipulated for adverse impact—this is in part how researchers at the Early Career Academic career level who are very vulnerably anyway may potentially be targeted in order to limit, curtail or to end their careers, or to interfere with specific disclosed research that may be ideologically disagreed with. I'll now never get the opportunity to work in the Postdoc proposed project with this Australian Intelligence Community funder—reinforcing a sense of highly discriminatory and differential treatment—and a failure schema.

As a further example, consider Blood's central claim in her book *The New Satanists* and in subsequent writings that what Setians experience in specific types of ritual were possessive states. This fits with the American Family Association's conservative fundamentalist Christian worldview that that might involve (demonic) possession. When I asked the late ethno-botanist Terence McKenna by phone in 1997 what he felt the Egyptian god Set was, he replied: "It's the Hegelian Overmind, Alex" in deference to the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who Dr Aquino was well familiar with (and interpreted Howard Bloom's first book *The Lucifer Principle* in the context of). Dr Aquino's own stance was deeply informed by his 1974-76 MA studies at the University of California Santa Barbara's prestigious Department of Political Science with the late Professor Rhagavan N. Iyer, who was an avowed Theosophist, a Platonist, and an interpreter of Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha school of non-violent activism. In fact, at the time of Blood's own brief membership, the Temple of Set was rapidly moving away from an emphasis on LaVeyan Satanism, to explore ancient Egyptian philosophy.

By the time of Blood's book in 1994 and my own initial membership in 1996-98, the Temple of Set's internal doctrines and its on-going exploration had little to do with the Satanic Panic moral panic and its tabloid media and 'occult cop' crime-driven stereotypes—which in fact reflected Evangelical, Pentecostalist, and pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic fears. The anthropological, psychiatric / psychological, and neuroscience literature on dissociative states – and of the possessive dissociative subtype in particular – is vast, complex, and nuanced—and to my knowledge Blood did not have the background either in ancient Egyptian soulcraft or Platonic philosophy to

understand this, nor did she appear to develop it in her brief time in the Temple of Set, or afterwards. It's a claim that is kept small and deficit-based in order to delegitimize a target—in ancient Greece this was the rival school of the Sophists (where rhetorically you could just make anything up) compared with the Platonists (who sought the primordial truth of the transcendent Forms).

Or consider a claim made recently by Spencer Sunshine that Dr Aquino was promoting the work of various questionable authors including the revisionist author David Irving. Sunshine takes this from a *Crystal Tablet of Set* Reading List document called 'Category 14: Fascism, Totalitarianism and Magic' that I first came across in 1993 whilst as a La Trobe University undergraduate student of Emeritus Professor Robert Manne, and which has circulated in various forms, including a version in Dr Aquino's second volume of his *Temple of Set* history. Sunshine here either misunderstands this Reading List document; its analytical literature review and scope; its designated research code levels and how they function; why Dr Aquino included the 1978 edition of David Irving's *Hitler's War* (1977) and *The War Path* (1978): the attempt was to try and convey (as with other books on this specific Reading List) how Germany as an Allied Forces adversary perceived itself during World War II and the lead-up to it. Dr Aquino and I discussed a range of topics, from Irving's primary data claims to the Irving v Lipstadt trial to the propaganda and taboo aspects of this specific research, and the politicised battles over specific claims.

This was not a simple Teacher-Student transmission of knowledge—we both reached variant conclusions as mentor and mentee—and I've since looked at historian Richard D. Evans' defence of Deborah Lipstadt in the Irving v Lipstadt trial based on his expert witness submission and subsequent work. Sunshine mistakenly concludes that Dr Aquino promoted Irving's work—because this fits the ideological narrative of Holocaust revisionism. But that wasn't Dr Aquino's stance at all (he knew full well that the Holocaust had occurred and understood the sensitivities having been a United States foreign attache to West Germany in the early to mid 1980s when possible 'limited war' nuclear conflict with East German and Soviet forces was expected. This is why Dr Aquino listed a range of other authors—from Wilhelm Reich and Eric Hoffer, to Ernst Nolte and Peter Viereck (both conservative political scholars), and also included the eugenicist Madison Grant from the United States to show that prior to 1924, a significant powerful cohort of predominantly White Anglo Saxon Protestant thinkers advanced very similar racist positions to what evolved in NSDAP ruled Germany. What books did Dr Aquino specifically suggest to a then young undergraduate student like me to read? At the time, Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941), and when I mentioned I was reading the La Trobe University Borchardt Library copy of Fromm's *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), he replied that he was well-familiar with it. Later, he mentioned William B. Irvine's *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (1988). Dr Aquino was I sensed politically conservative if not somewhat Traditionalist in terms of his focus on classical political philosophy and realist oriented comparative and case study oriented political science that dealt with actionable, real world problems. But you won't find this in Sunshine, Scott, Blood, or even many of the academic authors above—because to do so you both have to sit with and engage with this material and

with such people over a longer period of time—and because this simply is not possible if you are an Early Career Academic (like Scott and Sunshine both were/are) who is attempting to navigate the “publish or perish” dynamics of contemporary university life (I know: as a former 17-year experienced research manager and administrator, I have seen literally hundreds of academic track records “relative to opportunity” that include extensive publications lists and research program statements).

The broad point that I am trying to make here is that a lot of information about so-called cults and fringe group organisations is going to vary in quality and validity—it may be brave whistleblower truth; it may be misinformation or disinformation; or it may be a combination that could potentially (or is being) weaponised. If you take a simplified, dot-point checklist approach for cult behaviours and their impacts on people then you have condensed a now simplified model from a particular epistemic community, vantage point, and sub-literature (in the Inquiry’s scope and prioritised issues case, reflecting an ICSA-oriented viewpoint and definition by authors who are or were affiliated with ICSA and earlier in Professor Louis Jolyon West’s career with the Central Intelligence Agency’s MK-Ultra behavioural modification program). This doesn’t necessarily mean that you need to reject the ICSA-oriented worldview which is also closely aligned with the American Family Association’s conservative fundamentalist Christian ideological stance. Ideally, you should instead try to follow Herbert J. Gans and to take a more multiperspectival view, which is both transdisciplinary and transdiagnostic in intent, focus, analysis, and outcome.

A good model here is the use of structured analytic techniques in the Australian and the United States intelligence communities, such as the Analysis of Competing Hypotheses to explore and to evaluate particular knowledge claims where there are clear differences of (possibly incommensurable) opinion. This is why causal beliefs, ideas and ideologies all do matter—because what I have tried to show in this submission response is that there are some already that are embedded in the Inquiry’s scope, its prioritised issues, its pre-framing and agenda-setting, and its cited literature and the background of its cited experts. Cultivating these skills; applying them to everyone (including myself and this full submission response); working in collaborative teams; having a Red Team focus of divergent or even adversarial perspectives; and assessing the quality, relevance, rigor, and blind-spots of chosen information sources will help you in the future.

26. Let me close this by focusing on some of the actual longitudinal life impacts of my 1990-98 and 2010-present periods with the Gurdjieff Work and the Temple of Set (and with Chan, Soto, and Rinzai forms of Zen Buddhism, which I found to be extremely positive to engage with, and for which there is also an empirical scientific evidence base, so I note this background—it is not really in the Inquiry’s scope or its prioritised issues).

It took me a total of 9 years at La Trobe University to complete a normally 3 year Bachelor of Arts degree. I was not studying full time or even a student throughout this

period—I made likely every mistake possible—including not seeking counselling; not being present to save my first intimate relationship; and being homeless for 18 months in 2000-01. What emerged in 1999 and continued to 2005 was essentially what Dr Michael Langone above might call my cult recovery period. Much of my work for the former Disinformation website was from a “lived experience” and practitioner-based perspective—as it was also for Richard Metzger and Jason Louv, and for Russ Kick, Nick Mamatas, Preston Peet, Roy Christopher, Sara Aronson, and Klint Finley as well in their specific areas of expertise. When Marcus Westbury and Sean Healy (Jean Poole) invited me to speak at This Is Not Art in 1999, I began a period of parasocial fame that was the Dotcom and the early Web 2.0 era for a Generation X cohort of today’s digital platform and social media influencers—captured also in the film *We Live In Public* (2009) about Pseudo.com founder Joel Harris, who hosted Richard Metzger’s Infinity Factory Show, which Metzger kindly interviewed me on in, before he and publisher/current owner Gary Baddeley offered me the Disinformation site editorial gig. I was in part writing to recover myself and to survive—yet some Disinfonauts (as we called our audience) felt that I was using the website as a recruiting ground for the Temple of Set (I wasn’t—I was just trying to write about the early millennium prospects for mindful, positive self-change). The Disinformation contract was offshore “work for hire” at \$USD100 a week, and was essentially a 9-year internship, without a 401k, health coverage, performance-based bonuses, or firm equity. It was a great opportunity but I left money on the table in terms of contract negotiation terms.

I’ve had several major relationships during my Temple of Set membership. I’ve worked full-time in what I have found over time to be a devaluing environment where further university degrees (an MSc, an MA, a PhD, and multiple Graduate Certificates) that I have self-funded and pursued have not been viewed positively by the people who I have worked for. Over time, the relationships revealed different life trajectories, values, goals, and daily priorities. I thank all of the women concerned and I wish them all well. Their view of these periods would differ from me—and would be assuredly further complicated by my autism and other medical conditions above. It’s very hard to be in an intimate relationship with someone who has these life issues. It’s difficult enough to work with the at times austere traditions of the Gurdjieff Work and the Temple of Set—there can be a gap between your interoceptive awareness, your will, the options and possibilities of life change, and the actual conditions that you face—where recurring issues will arise; others may misunderstand you; and you will discover how unimportant you may feel when confronted with adverse life difficulties, mistakes, chance, hazard, and maybe occasionally some sheer amazing luck as well.

I continue to work through my long-term medical conditions. This has been notably very humiliating in a university employer work context. I have been terminated in various ways and have been told that I can be difficult to work with. Specific life issues are often framed by others in the most adverse and deficit-based ways possible—even if medical information is disclosed and my very empathetic medical treatment team is involved directly with senior decision-makers, managers, HR, and Workplace Relations Teams (WRT). I know that in at least one case this has involved the investigation of my employer disclosed lawful religious affiliation—although this was also reviewed and fully cleared

as a protected characteristic under Australian employment law by a Foreign Interference compliance team. HR and WRT personnel felt differently; and felt no need whatsoever to consult medically qualified practitioners or my medical treatment team—they made predetermined decisions via processes for which I have had adverse actions; and serious harm that has been caused to both myself and to others. When you combine this with the education problems above; the multiple relationship ends; and the work issues—it involves a substantial amount of lost income when compared to people who finished their degrees on time; were supported in their formative life stages and relationships (maybe getting married and even starting a family); or at least experiencing some form of more focused career success. What I feel now is Jeffrey Young's failure schema: an aching sense of loss. I know that I have overcome adversity; that I have made a contribution; that I have done some at least personally significant work; and that I have a small legacy in midlife to leave. But others certainly don't see me in that way—and it is these people who have far more positional, financial, and institutional power than I have—or may likely ever have. So: I have to let go of certain things that due to events notably in the past two years—will now never come to pass. These things in ancient Egyptian soulcraft are called Ka (singular) or Kaw (plural)—what Fred Polak called 'images of the future'. When they counterfactually don't come true, they are 'dead kaw': frozen images of the Is To Be that will never Come Into Being—that are what the late cultural critic Mark Fisher elegiacally called "lost futures".

Why then should I have undertaken this path since 1989 to the present (a 36 year time period)? Why sacrifice all of this—and why live in the shadow of something like the Satanic Panic moral panic's Presidio case for 36 years of my 51 year life (or 69% of my total lifespan on Earth to date)? The key lies in the on-going construction of the Self; its phenomenologically subjective experiences; what it learns, interacts with, and has the opportunity dialectically to both change and via openness to experience to also be changed; and to leave a legacy: memories; artifacts; teaching; and most importantly of all, the daily ritual of pet adoration time, dog walks, and dog belly rubs. This may come across to some as 'claims of divine authority' or 'promises of exclusive salvation' (the Guidance Note section on emotional/spiritual exploitation) in the simple sense that if you work with a particular religious/initiatory School or tradition that has cultural and knowledge oriented transmission—you will likely and plausibly will experience different life results to if you work with something else. There are commonalities and metapatterns—but I am not yet convinced of the perennial or even the integral claim that everything ends up in basically one unfolding spectrum or holarchy of developmental outcomes.

These are just some of my life context; and some of what I have experienced. Nor is my contextualising of growing up in a dysfunctional blended family of origin meant simply to air the family's dirty laundry or to betray it. Others will disagree (and will continue to do so). It's hard for example concerning [REDACTED] to have watched him deal with life barriers of Alcohol Use Disorder and Gambling Use Disorder that as early as 2001 (and as late as 2017) I told him pragmatically wasn't going to work out the way that he mistakenly thought it would. That's what delusional self-beliefs and self-referential overconfidence can do—it is why reality-testing and iterative, developmental release of

minimum viable projects (Eric Ries' *The Lean Startup*) is so important. So are confidential processes like non-EAP long-term clinical psychotherapy which are best done with qualified medical professionals, and as distinct from religious/initiatory work.

There are many other stories to tell. I usually also obsessively footnote or endnote my text. I predictably ran out of time here—so what you will get instead below is the final third section: an illustrative, selective annotated bibliography. It is a small selection of relevant material that I have encountered and worked with: I hope it helps. Most of all, if you work through the Inquiry's scope and its prioritised issues via my analysis and reflective experiences above—then you may see some of the possible “failure mode” conditions in which things may fall (or will) fall apart. This is Black Hat or Red Team thinking: most people I have worked with have absolutely hated it. It might help you to reach “for better” outcomes, recommendations, and strategic advice to policymakers and to other strategic communities. And for the members of cults and fringe organised groups who read this it may be a useful comparator in terms of your own journey, your strengths and weaknesses, and what you have both gained and perhaps have also had to give up or to leave behind. What you discover may be yours alone.

Annotated Bibliography

Argumentation Schemes by Douglas Walton, Chris Reed, and Fabrizio Macagno (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). One way to deal with any potential emerging threat (such as an out-of-control or volatile cult or fringe organised group) is via shifting the dialogue from what Plato in *The Republic* distinguished between Eikasia (illusion); Pistis (faith and emotion-based belief); and Dianoia (logical, reasoned, factual thought). The late Douglas Walton's argumentation work at the University of Waterloo was one research program for this and is very influential in law and legal studies circles: all of his books are very highly recommended. There is a vast literature on argumentation logics: I also recommend Alec Fisher's *The Logic of Real Arguments* (2nd ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Philippe Besnand and Anthony Hunter's *Elements of Argumentation* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008). Dr Aquino addressed the Platonic dialectic between Dianoia and Noesis (the direct apprehension of transcendent Forms, such as the Good, the Beautiful and the True) via his MA mentor Raghavan N. Iyer's book *Parapolitics: Toward the City of Man* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1979), whose now United States publisher Concord Press has made an Adobe Acrobat PDF copy available for [free download](#) for personal use, and whose transcendent approach is summarised [here](#). When he taught political science and political philosophy students at San Francisco's private Golden Gate University in 1980-86, one of Dr Aquino's textbooks used the realist political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli (most famous for *The Prince*) to study a range of then historical and contemporary leaders: James E. Combs and Dan Nimmo's *A Primer of Politics* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1984). Dr Aquino's reflective pedagogical teaching approach was rooted in part in the comparative,

historical, and the contemporary teaching of political philosophy and theory: see Andrew Heywood and Clayton Chin's *Political Theory: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), which is summarised in his 2018 publicly available "academic format" Curriculum Vitae.¹¹

Blind Trust: Large Groups and Their Leaders in Times of Crisis and Terror by Vamik Volkan (Charlottesville, VA: Pitchstone Publishing, 2004). Volkan's innovative research program involves intensive applied psychiatric work with the perpetrators and victims of genocide; collective violence; and narcissistic personality leaders. This book—as well as Volkan's other substantive contributions—highlights one of the pathways for how a cult or a fringe organised group may gain leverage and social influence, and may potentially be the catalysts for catastrophic adverse events. This can be a major challenge to social cohesion based frameworks. On the social psychology of hatred involved, see Robert J. Sternberg's edited collection *The Psychology of Hate* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2005). For a transdisciplinary background in the causal modelling that might be involved, see John Gerring's *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Approach* (2nd ed). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) and Judea Pearl's *Causality: Models, Reasoning and Inference* (2nd ed.). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults by Janja Lalich (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2020). Lalich's work and new framework here is one of the most nuanced and sophisticated of the ICSA-oriented viewpoint above. I would also add Alexandra Stein's excellent *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems* (2nd ed.). (New York: Routledge, 2021) as likewise being very important. Both of these books illustrate that contemporary cult survivor and advocacy work can like any research program make significant original contributions, including drawing on the importance of John Bowlby's pioneering work in attachment theory, which is deeply relevant to my own life and trauma recovery experiences.

Brainwashed: A New History of Thought Control by Daniel Pick (London: Profile Books, 2022). This book monograph is the result of a Wellcome Trust historical project into the history and impact of brainwashing, mind control, thought reform, and psychological totalitarianism. In particular, Pick as a psychoanalyst and an historian highlights the nuances of 're-education' in contemporary life contexts—going beyond the traditional cult and organised fringe group model. A related recent book is Rebecca Lemov's *The Instability of Truth: Brainwashing, Mind Control and Hyper-Persuasion* (New York: W.W Norton & Co, 2025).

Bully In Sight: How To Predict, Resist, Challenge and Combat Workplace Bullying by Tim Field by Tim Field (London: Success Unlimited, 1996). If you are going to focus on the

¹¹ Dr Michael A. Aquino (2018). Curriculum Vitae, Barony of Rachane, <https://www.rachane.org/docs/AquinoVitae.pdf>.

actions and behaviours of cults and organised fringe groups, then it helps to have approach that focuses on describing specifically and observationally what is actually happening. This book on workplace bullying offers examples of how different forms of coercive and compellence based psychological abuse can be factually and experientially described—cutting through DARVO responses (Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender).

The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture and Deviance at NASA by Diane Vaughan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Vaughan's important organisational and sociological study established the new influential paradigm of 'organisational deviance' in terms of leadership and moral, ethical failures. Vaughan's work is often contrasted with Charles Perrow's *Normal Accidents: Living With High-Risk Technologies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) which developed a parallel research program on complexity and risk. A related area is the corporate collapse, fraud, and white-collar crime perspective of Marianne M. Jennings' *The Seven Signs of Ethical Collapse: How to Spot Moral Meltdowns and Companies . . . Before It's Too Late* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2006). All of this body of work could be applied to cults and organised fringe groups—and to those who monitor and may need to intervene with them. The fate of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians at Waco in 1993—and the subsequent influence on Oklahoma City Bomber Timothy McVeigh is cautionary. This involves what intelligence agencies call analytic failure / misperception: the late political scientist Robert Jervis had a very influential research program on this in international relations, and his post-mortem analysis book *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010) is a model exemplar work here, filled with methodological and tradecraft insights. Cultivating meta-ethical and moral sensitivities concerning evil is very important: the Roman Catholic philosopher John Kekes has two key and very nuanced analytic case study works in *The Roots of Evil* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006) and *Facing Evil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990). For an overview of the related areas of altruism, aggression, evil, and bystanders, see Ervin Staub's *The Psychology of Good and Evil: Why Children, Adults and Groups Help and Harm Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Coercion: Why We Listen To What 'They' Say by Douglas Rushkoff (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999). The Inquiry has scoped its focus and prioritised issues in terms of cults and organised fringe groups. As outlined above this is an ICSA-oriented viewpoint—and there are others. In this book—and in subsequent books (such as *Program Or Be Programmed*) and various PBS *Frontline* specials and his on-going Team Human series, Rushkoff shows how the fears that we project and split (two psychoanalytic informed psychological defence mechanisms) onto cults and organised fringe groups can in fact be found in the economic and the ideological bases of mass society (the neoliberal political economy) and in the various sorting mechanisms of our lives (the broader literature on social stratification and "life chances" illustrated by the United States prestigious funder the Russell Sage Foundation). A fun book to read in order to uncover the arbitrage, rent-seeking, and the asymmetric knowledge based dynamics of society. If that interests you, do a search for the Nobel laureate economist George Akerlof's

academic article ‘The Market For Lemons’ (1970): yes, Akerlof won the Nobel Prize in Economics for this single article, which created the related important sub-field called information economics.

Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism by Robert Chapman (London: Pluto Press, 2023). Who counts as ‘fringe’ or ‘different’ and why? This book offers a critical analysis of the recent development of cognitive capitalism, disability rights, the neurodiversity movement, and the revival of eugenics in its various contemporary forms. For an accessible overview of the history and revival of eugenics, see Adam Rutherford’s *Control: The Dark History And Troubling Present of Eugenics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2022). For how eugenics has gained a new audience in the Dissident Right, see Quinn Slobodian’s political economy informed analysis *Hayek’s Bastards: The Neoliberal Roots of the Populist Right* (London: Allen Lane, 2025). For actual contemporary eugenicist thought, the late Richard Lynn and his anthropology, human intelligence, and evolutionary psychologist student Edward Dutton’s work can be found online for comparative historical, theory-building / theory-testing, and worldview analysis (in order to understand its ideologically motivated dimensions and its rhetorical appeal).

The Fissured Workplace: Why Work Became So Bad For So Many And What Can Be Done To Improve It by David Weil (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). Cults and fringe organised groups can use cell-like structures with compartmentalised, siloes, a reliance on asymmetric information, and the attempted use of clandestine and deception based information and organisational structures. In the contemporary world, these same organisational issues will either be directly copied from employers, or will also under certain specific circumstances will arise in them. This is an important account that influenced the Obama and Biden administrations in the United States. For an even more up-to-date analysis using Stafford Beer’s Viable Systems Model approach, see Dan Davies’ *The Unaccountability Machine: Why Big Systems Make Terrible Decisions—And How The World Lost Its Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025). Also see Elizabeth Anderson’s *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (And Why We Don’t Talk About It)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus To Pornography by Roger Shattuck (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1996). Cults and organised groups may in part be fringe due to their core and cumulative knowledge base not reflecting the dominant group-oriented beliefs, norms, and practices of a contemporary society—their leaders thus may be norm entrepreneurs. Shattuck situates the development and the contestability of forbidden knowledge in pre-Enlightenment, Enlightenment, and contemporary conservative philosophical thought. An invaluable appendix (pp. 327-342) explores six key different kinds of forbidden knowledge.

Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products by Nir Eyal with Ryan Hoover (London: Penguin, 2019). Eyal's book has become the Silicon Valley bible for creating digital platforms and other technologies that are highly addictive and habit-forming: trigger, action, variable reward, and investment. This behavioural ecology both informs how digital platforms now use surveillance—as exemplified in Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight For A Human Future At The New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019), as well as entrepreneurial new venture creation, as illustrated in Peter Thiel with Blake Master's *Zero To One: Notes on Startups or How To Build The Future* (London: Virgin Books, 2014).

The Ideological Brain: A Radical Science of Susceptible Minds by Leor Zmigrod (London: Penguin, 2025). The Inquiry has scoped its focus to not include the analysis of ideas or of ideologies—but rather to focus on tactics, methods and behaviours of cults and organised fringe groups—and their impacts on individuals. This reflects assumptions of the behaviourist and the cognitive behavioural traditions that informed cult survivors in the 1970s and 1980s during its “cult wars” with new religious movement exponents. However, behaviours are usually externally visible social cues or signals, and the rank ordered selection and deployment of tactics and methods (either as a specific, sequenced, repertoire, or as an effects-based or outcome-based approach) requires a formative basis in ideas and ideologies. Whilst there is a vast literature that addresses this knowledge and research gap in the Inquiry's scope, this is an accessible contemporary overview with a neuroscience focus. Roman Catholic philosopher Jason Blakely's recent book *Lost In Ideology: Interpreting Modern Political Life* (Newcastle, England: Agenda Publishing, 2024) is also excellent, as are all of his previous books.

Intensive Psychotherapy For Persistent Dissociative Processes: The Fear Of Feeling Real by Richard A. Chefetz (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2015). Cult survivors (and sometimes their often medically qualified psychiatrist or clinical psychologist co-authors) may mention dissociation as a common phenomenological experience in cult and fringe organised group behaviour, activities, and methods. There are separate specific sub-literatures on this in fields / disciplines like anthropology, psychiatry, psychology, religious studies, sociology, political psychology, and contemporary neuroscience. Chefetz's book is invaluable for actually focusing on dissociation experiences in a clinical therapeutic and recovery-oriented viewpoint. It is part of the W.W. Norton & Co series on Interpersonal Neuroscience that has featured the pioneering work of Allan N. Schore, Louis Cozzolini, and that is perhaps most well known via Bessel van der Kolk (*The Body Keeps The Score*). This is what the Lawrence Pazder and Michelle Smith book *Michelle Remembers* (1980) could have been like if Pazder had been a competent, ethical psychotherapist—as is exemplified in the very confronting yet careful chapter 7 on Anya ('Incest, Sexual Addiction, and Dissociative Processes', pp. 218-256). For specialist perspectives that are relevant to cult and fringe organised groups, see the Andrew Moscovitz, Martin J. Dorahy, and Ingo Schafer edited collection *Psychosis, Trauma and Dissociation: Evolving Perspectives on Psychopathology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019). For a field / discipline overview, see Martin J. Dorahy, Steven N. Gold and John A. O'Neil's edited collection *Dissociation and the Dissociative Disorders* (New York: Routledge, 2022). For a discussion of

dissociation specific covert and clandestine research in MK-Ultra and its predecessors MK-Artichoke and MK-Bluebird, see *The CIA Doctors* by Colin A. Ross (Richardson, TX: Manitou Communications, 2006)—whilst scholars like Professor Louis Jolyon West have made important and substantive original contributions over their careers, there are some significant challenges and ethical problems as well which remain debated in psychiatry.

The King in Yellow by Robert W. Chambers (New York: F. Tennyson Neely, 1895). An obscure collection of weird fiction written during the Decadent years by an author who would influence H.P. Lovecraft, Anton LaVey, Jacques Vallee, Stephen King, and *True Detective* series one (2014). Chambers foresaw the resurgence of eugenics / dysgenics; memes; misinformation, disinformation, and deepfakes; and unreliable narrators of our contemporary era, notably in the first story 'The Repairer of Reputations'. A book about how subjectivist ideas can shape the objective world—and the psychological danger that this can involve (including delusional, schizotypal, and self-referential ideas).

Losing Reality: On Cults, Cultism, and the Mindset of Political and Religious Zealotry by Robert Jay Lifton (New York and London: The New Press, 2019). The psychiatrist Lifton is a member of the Wellfleet psychohistorical school and the creator of the thought reform or psychological totalism school of thought concerning brainwashing, mind control, and undue / social influence. This small book is a career-spanning overview of his career and his substantive original research contributions, from Prisoners of War in the Korean War and the NSDAP German doctors to Japan's Aum Shinrikyo and contemporary fears about what is now called existential risk (such as global warming and nuclear conflict based catastrophes).

MindWar by Michael A. Aquino (2nd ed). (San Francisco: Barony of Rachane, 2016). This book discusses psychological controls (PSYCONs) in the context of a new research agenda for the doctrinal renewal of strategic level Irregular Warfare (Special Operations Forces; Psychological Operations; and Civil Affairs) that involved the JFK Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg (now Fort Liberty). Dr Aquino involved me as a civilian in draft discussions in 2013 and 2016—I contributed some cited books on international relations theory and MBA syllabus negotiation in the Harvard Negotiation Project's values/principles based approach (as distinct from the far less effective position-based bargaining school of negotiation), which is exemplified in the *Getting To Yes* series of books, and also in Max Bazerman's affiliated research program (such as in 2025's *Negotiation: The Game Has Changed*). This book was designed specifically for military decision-makers who understand both the operational rules of engagement and who have had ethical training, such as in just war theory. It is not recommended for civilian use, where it is far more likely to be misused, and would likely cause serious harm. For his Respondent view of the Satanic Panic moral panic era Presidio case, see Dr Aquino's book monograph length rejoinder *Extreme Prejudice: The Presidio 'Satanic Abuse' Scam* (San Francisco: Barony of Rachane, 2014) whose 108-page summary of two investigations (by the San Francisco Police Department and the United States Criminal

Investigation Division) is supported by 384 pages of primary source documentation—reflecting Dr Aquino’s PhD dissertation in political science, and his Top Secret / Secure Compartmentalised Information / Special Access Program security vetted designation, and extensive training in strategic intelligence and structured analytic techniques. This is not the complete information: there are various tangents that Dr Aquino provided me with further case / topic focused rejoinders on. At the very least, this would be useful for Australian Research Council applicants who want to understand how to write a persuasive rejoinder, and for those targeted in HR, Formal Investigation Team, and Workplace Relation Teams contexts about how very easily these can be politicised, gamed, derailed, and shaped in order to get the conclusions demanded or the predetermined outcomes which are desired. Bonus points if you can work out where the title *Extreme Prejudice* comes from—and why (it’s not what civilians who have never faced actual war-time combat think it is—in such Clausewitzian friction and fog of war conditions, the non-combatant reliance on hierarchical chains of command and “just following orders” often actually breaks down, notably when dealing with adversaries who are using irregular, insurgent, or unconventional warfare tactics in order to achieve victory).

On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons From The Twentieth Century by Timothy Snyder (London: The Bodley Head, 2017). Snyder is a historian who is a member of the Committee on Conscience of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. In this small book Snyder explains in very clear language how to be brave, have courage, and how to confront what clinical psychologists now call “overcontrol” dynamics that occur in cults, organised fringe groups, neo-authoritarian families, and usually in cliques within organisations and institutions who misuse their status and their positional power. All of Snyder’s other books are very highly recommended.

Project Beta: The Story of Paul Bennewitz, National Security and the Creation of a Modern UFO Myth by Greg Bishop (New York: Paraview Pocket Books, 2005). As Jacques Vallee and others have discovered, some cults and organised fringe groups intersect with the interests of military intelligence and national security agencies—in terms of covert, clandestine, and experimental research and development (such as of next generation warfighting and weapons systems); and of the cover stories and the unexpected social contagion dynamics (see *The King in Yellow* by Robert W. Chambers above) that can occur as “small world” (Duncan Watts) based network effects and spillovers. In counterintelligence what this book describes is called the “wilderness of mirrors”. It will show you that active measures and disinformation did not begin in 2016 and that there are many fascinating analytic case studies that involve cults, organised fringe groups, and independent researchers.

Sex, God and the Brain: How Sexual Pleasure Gave Birth To Religion And A Whole Lot More by Andrew Newberg MD (Nashville, TN: Turner Publishing Co, 2024). Newberg (along with Michael Persinger) is associated with the neurotheology school which interprets cultic, organised fringe group, and religious phenomena via contemporary

neuroscience. In this book, Newberg uses PET scans to understand the link between specific altered states of consciousness (orgasmic sexual ecstasy and intimacy); subjective and transcultural religious experiences; and the neurophysiology and the neuropsychiatry involved as empirical scientific causal mechanisms.

Taproots: Underlying Principles of Milton Erickson's Therapy and Hypnosis by William Hudson O'Hanlon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1987). After I left the Temple of Set in 1998 and was recovering from early onset psychosis, my late father arranged for me to see a family friend who was a clinical psychologist. At the end of our second and last session he said to me: "Do you think that the Temple of Set uses hypnosis?" Whilst there are various different kinds of clinical and forensic hypnosis, Milton Erickson is one of the most influential, and he has also influenced the Neurolinguistic Programming community via John Grinder and Richard Bandler's specific work on the Milton Model. O'Hanlon's short book is a model of how to identify the tactics, methods, behaviours and actions that a cult or an organised fringe group might use: it discusses 6 generic patterns; how Erickson's strategic psychotherapy, trance inductions, and clinical hypnosis all actually worked; and provides a guide to Ericksonian resources (which of course have now rapidly expanded beyond those listed here). This small book addresses one way to approach how to analyse method and methodology.

The Trading Game: A Confession by Gary Stevenson (London: Penguin Lane, 2024). The charismatic personalities that help to define the ICSA-oriented viewpoint on cults and fringe organised groups are often found in religious, political, and even entrepreneurship oriented examples. But charismatic personalities are found amongst online influencers as well—and they are able both to build a digital platform profile (such as on YouTube) and a normative values-driven change agenda. One such figure is Gary Stevenson—a former interest rate trader at Citibank (2008-2014) who graduated from the London School of Economics; who now runs the popular YouTube channel Gary's Economics; and who campaigns for a wealth tax to ensure redistribution that addresses income inequality. What Stevenson teaches here is a skill called identifying and executing arbitrages (mis-pricings) which in a financialisation sense is what many cults and organised fringe groups attempt to do with their respective members.

Systems of Psychotherapy: A Transtheoretical Analysis by James O. Prochaska & John C. Norcoss (8th ed.). (Stamford CT: Cengage Learning, 2014). What I'm trying to develop—and that I hint at throughout this submission response—is a transdisciplinary and transdiagnostic approach to different religious, political, philosophical, economic, sociological, and technological milieux. This book illustrates such a transtheoretical and systems-informed approach in terms of different schools of thought in clinical psychotherapy.

When Genius Failed: The Rise and Fall of Long-Term Capital Management by Roger Lowenstein (London: Fourth Estate, 2002). In August 1998, Russia suddenly and

unexpectedly defaulted on its debt. This catalyst event “blew up” the hedge fund Long-Term Capital Management, which featured elite portfolio managers, execution traders, and Nobel laureate economists. Whilst the dynamics of a cult or an organised fringe group and their pathways into ethical collapse are now well known (often, the same groups and leaders are included in most popular accounts), this pattern can—and will—occur in other life contexts and field / disciplines as well (where it may be understood even more clearly because it does not involve strange people with weird beliefs). This is a now very famous case study of hubris, greed, arbitrage, and what happens when you get risk management practices very wrong. For a comparator with the later Amaranth hedge fund, see Barbara F Dreyfuss’ *Hedge Hogs: The Cowboy Traders Behind Wall Street’s Largest Hedge Fund Disaster* (New York: Random House, 2013).