The Journal of CESNUR

Volume 10, Issue 6
November–December 2026

The Journal of CESNUR

Director-in-Charge | Direttore responsabile

Marco Respinti

Editor-in-Chief | Direttore

Massimo Introvigne
Center for Studies on New Religions, Turin, Italy

Associate Editor | Vicedirettore

PierLuigi Zoccatelli (†)
Pontifical Salesian University, Turin, Italy

Editorial Board / International Consultants

Milda Ališauskienė
Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania

Eileen Barker
London School of Economics, London, United Kingdom

Luigi Berzano
University of Turin, Turin, Italy

Antoine Faivre (†)
École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, France

Holly Folk
Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington, USA

Liselotte Frisk (†)
Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden

J. Gordon Melton
Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA

Susan Palmer
McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Stefania Palmisano
University of Turin, Turin, Italy

Bernadette Rigal-Cellard
Université Bordeaux Montaigne, Bordeaux, France

Instructions for Authors and submission guidelines can be found on our website at www.cesnur.net.

ISSN: 2532-2990

The Journal of CESNUR is published bi-monthly by CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions), Via Confienza 19, 10121 Torino, Italy.

The Journal of CESNUR

Volume 10, Issue 6, November–December 2026

Contents

Articles

3 Are We the Baddies? Chris Chan, Wahid Azal, and the Challenge of Lolcow Spirituality
Bei Dawei

71 Anti-Cult Narrative and Satanic Moral Panic in Serbia: A Case Study of the "Black Rose" Phenomenon
Aleksandar Matković

87 Media vs. Tantric Movements: Applying Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model
Marie Štěrbová

The Journal of CESNUR

Are We the Baddies? Chris Chan, Wahid Azal, and the Challenge of Lolcow Spirituality

Bei Dawei
Hsuan Chuang University (ret.), Hsinchu, Taiwan
beidawei@mail.ru

ABSTRACT: A "lolcow" is an unfortunate person who is "milked for laughs" on the internet. The prototypical example, Chris Chan (b. 1982), is an autistic, transgender layabout from Ruckersville, Virginia, who has fascinated gawkers and trolls since 2007. In 2021, while in jail for incest with his elderly mother, he declared himself to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Wahid Azal (b. 1971) is a Persian-Australian ranter who renounced the Bahā'ī religion of his upbringing for the rival Bayānī (Azalī-Bābī) tradition, an iteration of which he now heads as a self-recognized divine manifestation. Like Chris Chan, he is "famous on the internet," where he is known primarily for various online vendettas—often against Bahā'īs and (other) ex-Bahā'īs, but more recently against that notorious tool of Western imperialism, CESNUR. Even if neither Chan's Neo Spiritual Christianity (f. 2022) nor Azal's NUR-Fāṭimīya Sufi Order (f. 2002 or 2005) amounts to much, the antics of their founders have attracted noteworthy "audience cults." How to approach such figures raises vexing methodological and ethical questions.

KEY WORDS: Lolcows, Chris Chan, Sonichu, Neo Spiritual Christianity, Wahid Azal, Bayānism, NUR-Fāṭimīya Sufi Order, CESNUR.

Introduction

A "lolcow" is an unfortunate person, usually relatively unknown rather than a celebrity or politician, who is mocked or harassed ("milked for laughs") on the internet—a laughingstock, if you will. The term slightly predates Chris Chan's emergence from obscurity in late 2007, but it is unclear exactly when and where it originated, or to whom it first referred (GoGoNojo 2025).

The phenomenon it describes is older still; picture a ring of students teasing a child with some abnormality (CWCki: "Kick the Autistic"). Before Chris Chan there was "Star Wars Kid" Ghyslain Raza, a chubby high-school student who suffered public ridicule and cyberbullying after becoming the unwitting star of a viral 2003 internet video showcasing his lightsaber skills (although audience

The Journal of CESNUR, Volume 10, Issue 6, November–December 2026, pages 3–70.
© 2026 by CESNUR. All rights reserved.
ISSN: 2532-2990 | www.cesnur.net | DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2026.10.6.1

reaction was mostly positive). Gene Ray (1927–2015), creator of the "Time Cube" website (from 1997), attracted numerous ironic fans, a few of whom contacted him pretending to have embraced his crank cosmology. At one point, an MIT student group even invited Ray to lecture there (Rocks and Austin 2025).

While eccentric outsiders like Emperor Norton (1818–1880) or Henry Darger (1892–1973) have long been around, a lolcow presupposes an internet audience. One discerns traces of the crowd psychology behind the "Kill Barney!" proto-memes of the 1990s (referring to the purple dinosaur star of the children's TV show *Barney and Friends*), as well as the fascination with visceral disgust represented by Goatse (1999), Tubgirl (2000), and other shock sites. In fact, lolcows form part of a wider online ecosystem dedicated to degeneracy as lowbrow entertainment. Chris Chan, for example, was discovered by posters on 4chan and Something Awful.

Although "global village idiots" (O'Farrell 2001) receive regular mockery from other corners of the internet (e.g., YouTube's Flat Earth debunking channels), Chris Chan is the Patient Zero of self-conscious lolcow fandom. Other similar figures emerged over the 2010s (Ulillillia, Cyraxx, Drachenlord, Nikocado Avocado, Daniel Larson, Amberlynn Reid), while lolcow-like features came to be recognized in already-active influencers (Rudyard Lynch, Eisel Mazard). Nevertheless, Chris Chan remains the lolcow *par excellence*, having virtually defined what it means to be a lolcow.

The premier website devoted to monitoring lolcows, Kiwi Farms, was founded in 2013 as "CWCki Forums," a name referencing Chris Chan's initials: Christian (né Christopher, later Christine) Weston Chandler. Site owner Joshua Moon changed the name in 2014 to signal an expanded focus. The CWCki (created in 2008 and pronounced "quickie") is a wiki—not a wiki page, an entire wiki—devoted to Chris. These two sites are the major sources of "Christory," along with Geno Samuel's magisterial YouTube series *Chris Chan: A Comprehensive History* (from 2018). With its first season at 85 episodes, it is already one of the longest biographical documentaries ever made (though ineligible for any of the categories listed in the Guinness World Records), boosted by the fact that its subject is among the most thoroughly documented people in history. One wit describes the series as structured less like *Tiger King* and more like Ken Burns's *The Civil War* (Sperg 2022).

Wahid Azal has long objected to how academics and journalists frame his work, and will probably criticize the present comparative project along similar lines. Nevertheless, he resembles Chris Chan in many important ways: their shared messianic pretensions, grandiose visionary and genealogical claims; a life defined by strange online infatuations, vendettas, and trolling / catfishing episodes; their mostly unsympathetic audiences of voyeurs; contests with not-very-serious rivals (Azal 2024d); performative ritual execrations (CWCki: "Curse-ye-ha-me-ha"); expulsion from numerous forums for bad behavior; a monumental series of self-published, self-absorbed works that posit a numinous fantasy world intersecting ours; and attempts to piggyback on wider socio-political movements of the day (be they autism awareness, LGBT identity, Brony fandom, Antifa, the cult of the Divine Feminine, or the Palestinian cause). Both men have transformed into the opposite of what they once were, and indeed, something they were brought up to revile—Chris Chan into a trans woman, Wahid Azal into a Covenant-breaker. Both have founded religious groups, albeit tiny, mostly virtual ones that would go unnoticed if not for hate-watching.

This religious aspect distinguishes them from most lolcows. Chris Chan orbiter and erstwhile paramour Jacob Sockness claims to be a deity from a fantasy world called Kidasuna, but has not attempted to recruit any followers other than Chris (CWCki: "Jacob Sockness" and "Kidasuna"). Rudyard Lynch has conversed with God, the devil, and Wotan by means of ayahuasca, and mentions organizing a secretive parapolitical or occult fraternity ("human capital group") called the Order of the Crimson Dragon (Whatifalthist 2024). I struggle to think of any more examples.

In the framework proposed by Stark and Bainbridge (1985, 26–35), lolcow-led "cult movements" (insofar as they exist, lolcows being more or less defined by their negative charisma) are dwarfed by their "audience cults." While the attention is overwhelmingly ironic—one speaks of "followers" primarily in the social-media sense, not the religious sense—it still carries religious significance. In each case we find, on one hand, a robust audience cult; and on the other, a kind of scapegoat. In this sense, Chris Chan is not wrong to liken himself to Jesus, albeit as a despised criminal rather than the glorious figure of the resurrection. Meanwhile, Wahid Azal refers to himself as "this Bābī Qalandar," and perceptively states that he is "walking the Path of Blame (*malāmīyah*)" (WahidAzal556 2025b, cf. Azal 2006, 3).

Lolcowism can be studied either from the side of the lolcows themselves, or from the perspective of the audience, as in reception theory. Our story concerns not only a pair of marginal individuals who have somehow achieved a measure of notoriety, but the audience cults (in the case of Chris Chan, we are speaking of a full-blown fan community) that have come to define the lives of these unfortunates. These audience cults are in turn molded by adjacent internet subcultures, such as those of gamers (Kiwi Farms posters cheerfully address one another as niggers, faggots, or retards) or Bahā'ī intellectuals.

It should go without saying that a subject like this comes with trigger warnings for absolutely everything, not least exotic varieties of sexual abuse, or humiliation of the mentally disabled. The world's wisdom traditions admonish us to "Touch not the unclean thing" (2 Cor. 6:17). "Thou shalt not disfigure the soul" (Orange Catholic Bible). "What you contemplate, you imitate" (John Michael Greer). Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957), Guardian of the Bahā'ī Faith, instructs believers to "shun entirely all Covenant-breakers as they are afflicted with what we might try and define as a contagious spiritual disease" (Continental Board of Counselors 1999, par. 7), although the Universal House of Justice recognizes that some "have the unpleasant duty to read such literature" (Hornby 1988, par. 611). Newcomers to Christory will encounter warnings like "Do not google. You will never be the same again" or "Turn back now!"

Yet deep calls to deep, and depravity to depravity. Like the hero of Rudyard Kipling's (1865–1936) poem, "The Prodigal Son" ("The fatted calf is dressed for me / But the husks have greater zest for me..."), here we are among the swine, perhaps half swine ourselves. In that case, a further warning is in order: some of these people can be dangerous. The main page of the CWCki advises viewers not to attempt to contact Chris Chan, or anyone associated with him: "*Observe* Christory. Don't *make* Christory." Kiwi Farms has a parallel saying: "Don't touch the poo." For that matter, it would be unwise to offend the denizens of Kiwi Farms, whose formidable, crowdsourced intelligence amounts to "weaponized autism." Members twice doxxed "final troll" Isabella Loretta Janke, who fancied herself something of a computer security expert. (Changing her name and moving to another US state availed her nothing.) Meanwhile, several informants report receiving threats and/or legal harassment from Wahid Azal, although his bark may be worse than his bite.

Chris Chan and Neo Spiritual Christianity

> But essentially, as going back to the, mmm but all religions, all religions that are, that promote goodness and light power, and everything, are good, it's just the majority of them are the bigger piece of the, just a piece of the bigger, of the bigger ultimate picture. Which is why I, I identify as multi-religious, and I'm open for, uh, the positive interpretations and enlightenments from everybody and everything. Ah! Ugh, pardon me, I'm a little gassy.
>
> –Mrs. Jesus Christine Weston Chandler Sonichu Prime, the One Avatar of All Existence, the CPU Goddess Blue Heart of the Commodore Consoles, and the One Reincarnation of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Himself (CwcvilleGuardian 2023b, 22:30)

> He's not the messiah, he's a very naughty boy.
>
> –Monty Python's *Life of Brian*

Christopher Weston Chandler was born in 1982 in Charlottesville, Virginia (but grew up in Ruckersville and Richmond) to parents Robert Franklin Chandler, Jr. (1927–2011), an electrical engineer for Western Electric and General Electric; and Barbara Ann Weston Chandler (b. 1941), who held a series of secretarial jobs. Both had been married before (Chris has three half-siblings); their ages may have played a role in Chris's condition. From childhood, Chris was identified as "high-functioning autistic," a label he later embraced. ("High-functioning" means that he can do things like talk and feed himself). Early news coverage includes a 1993 newspaper article on his change of name from "Christopher" to "Christian," due to an incident involving an animatronic bear (Green 1993; CWCki: "Christopher's name change"); as well as a 1994 local TV news segment after he won a 1,000-dollar shopping spree at Kay-Bee Toys as the grand prize in a drawing associated with the *Adventures of Sonic the Hedgehog* cartoon (CWCki: "Sonic the Hedgehog Watch & Win Sweepstakes").

The Chandlers fought to have Chris mainstreamed, although he did receive some special education courses. One incident that would prove important later occurred during a high school art class, in connection with an assignment to design the cover for a CD case. Since trademarked characters were disallowed, Chris created Sonichu, a mash-up of Sonic and Pikachu (of Pokémon fame) that would become a sort of totem for him. By 2004, he was rarely seen without a homemade medallion of a cabossed Sonichu (made from Crayola Model Magic) around

his neck. That same year, he began writing and drawing a *Sonichu* webcomic. The fifteen-issue series features Chris as a self-insert and depicts his real-life struggles as anime battles. For example, the villain Count Graduon represents his high school graduation in 2000, which ended Chris's happiest years. The stories are set in CWCville (pronounced "quickville"), a cartoon version of Ruckersville or Charlottesville where Chris is mayor.

From 2000 to 2006, Chris attended Piedmont Virginia Community College (PVCC) and earned an associate's degree in Computer-Aided Drafting and Design (CADD). When his attempts to find a job foundered—Chris has only worked for a few months in his life, mostly at a Wendy's fast-food restaurant (CWCki: "Chris and work" and "Chris's resume")—his father arranged for him to receive Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) payments (CWCki: "Monthly tugboat"). His search for a "boyfriend-free girl" proved similarly fruitless, perhaps because his approach consisted of walking around with a sign (and later, distributing leaflets) advertising this desire (CWCki: "Attraction Sign" and "Love Quest"). Frustrating his efforts were PVCC student affairs dean Mary Lee Walsh and several campus or mall security personnel (CWCki: "Jerkops"), whom Chris turned into villains in his comic.

On his twenty-fifth birthday (24 February 2007), Chris released his first YouTube video—the avuncular "Future Message" in which he counsels a notional audience of high school students to abstain from alcohol and tobacco, "stay straight," and "keep in mind what your true, original gender is." Boys who feel awkward around girls should practice talking to a My Little Pony figure while stroking its mane; girls are told to use a Transformers Autobot toy instead. Later that year, anons on 4chan discovered the *Sonichu* comic, which by then contained sex scenes. Around the same time, Something Awful goons reported sightings of Chris engaged in his "Love Quest." These stories elicited comparisons with Ignatius J. Reilly from *A Confederacy of Dunces*, or "Buffalo Bill" from *The Silence of the Lambs*. Soon the wiki-style satire site *Encyclopedia Dramatica* created a page about Chris. When his attempts to edit or delete it failed, Chris tried to overwhelm the site with personal information about himself, illuminated with original erotic crayon art that can be fairly described as naïve but grotesque (e.g., CWCki: "She Came for CWC" or "Warning—Naughty Women"). Trolling began in earnest.

In this "classic" era, Chris Chan regularly appeared on his YouTube channel in his signature Ralph Lauren polo shirt and Sonichu medallion to rage against some offense, or coo flirtatiously at a supposed female admirer (invariably a catfishing situation). One troll persuaded Chris to photograph himself in his mother's underwear (CWCki: "Lordsillynipples"). Another—an actual woman this time—agreed to go with Chris (who famously hates pickles) on a date to a mall food court, only to allow herself to be stolen away by a confederate wearing a pickle costume (CWCki: "Man in the Pickle Suit" and "Date with Emily"). When another YouTuber began impersonating him, Chris mistook the situation for a serious attempt at identity theft; the dispute escalated into a very uneven singing contest over the rights to his name (CWCki: "Liquid Chris").

Trolls sent unwanted pizzas (and on one occasion, hookers) to the Chandler house, pretended to be business executives intent on licensing Sonichu, tricked Chris into destroying his PlayStation 3, arranged for his father to walk in on him masturbating, and uploaded a video of Chris humping a blowup doll to slutload.com. Perhaps the most disturbing incident came when the troll known as BlueSpike—a thirteen-year-old boy pretending to be one of Chris's virtual girlfriends—made him break apart his Sonichu medallion and shove the pieces up his ass. (An audio recording may be heard on episode 10 of the *Comprehensive History*.) These alternately cruel and amusing episodes have been retrospectively organized into grand Christorical "sagas," illustrated by charts more complex than the textual history of the Bible.

A few people treated Chris with kindness: Tiffany Gowen, the high school classmate who danced with him at their prom; Rochelle "Rocky" Shoemaker, the pastoral counselor who struggled in vain to help Chris, then a member of her United Methodist congregation; game store proprietor Michael Snyder, who asked the court not to give Chris a felony conviction for vehicular assault. (Chris, angry at being banned, deliberately drove his car into Snyder in 2011). Several trolls—including Marvin, the man in the pickle suit—later regretted their actions and helped defend Chris against other, more malevolent trolls.

At some point, Chris came to believe that CWCville (or "Dimension C-197," cf. Dimension C-137 from *Rick and Morty*) was real. Much responsibility for his mental breakdown belongs to a troll cabal called the Idea Guys, who in late 2017 persuaded Chris that Nazis had occupied CWCville—picture cute cartoon animals being herded into rape camps—and were preparing an invasion of our world (or

"Dimension 1218," a number derived from Marvel Comics). To evade Nazi surveillance, Chris tore apart various objects in his house, including a Christmas tree, that he was told contained bugging devices (CWCki: "Nazis").

In 2018, he announced that he had married four cartoon characters, including three OCs (original characters) and the Pokémon Mewtwo, and pantomimed cuddling with their invisible forms (CWCki: "Polyamorous marriage"; see O'Neal 2013 and Hegarty 2019 for other men purporting to marry cartoon characters). These were his only romantic relationships between the 2012 loss of his virginity to a hooker (CWCki: "Mia Hamm") and the events of 2021 (CWCki: "Affair with Mother"). The Idea Guys further convinced Chris that one of his spouses was being tortured in the other world and demanded that he film himself begging on his knees. He complied. (See episode 62 of the *Comprehensive History*). The Idea Guys ultimately extorted thousands of dollars from him, and forced him to make other demeaning videos, including one where he hits himself repeatedly in the face while calling himself a "dirty, dirty whore."

Chris began predicting an imminent "Dimensional Merge" between C-197 and 1218. He clung to this belief long after the Idea Guys were discredited, and still holds it today. Elements of the role-playing video game franchise *Hyperdimension Neptunia*, which features "CPU goddesses" associated with particular video game consoles, were incorporated into Chris's imaginary; this is the source of his claim to be the goddess Blue Heart of the Commodore 64 console.

Amidst this madness, Chris transitioned to female (CWCki: "Chris and gender"). He was cross-dressing by 2011, and from 2014, began qualifying his male identity with "tomgirl" or "lesbian in a male body." In 2016, he legally changed his name to "Christine" and his sex to female on his driver's license. That same year, he attempted to use "binaural beats" to hypnotize himself into growing a vagina (CWCki: "Subliminal Frequency Hypnosis"), then–when this did not work–sliced open his perineum in a drunken attempt at self-surgery (CWCki: "Self-inflicted taint wound").

Some Christorians suspect his female identity of being just another troll-fostered delusion, to be taken no more seriously than his claim to be an electric hedgehog Pokémon. Perhaps his transition was calculated to attract lesbians, on the assumption that they might prove more receptive to his advances than heterosexual women. On the other hand, it would be easy to read his early antipathy towards homosexuality and gender fluidity as expressions of insecurity

on these very points (CWCki: "Homos"); certainly, few heterosexual men would think of staring at a Sailor Moon poster every night in order to stay straight (CWCki: "Sailor Moon Poster of Fail"). Accordingly, diverse pronoun usages can be observed among Christorians. This paper employs masculine pronouns—not out of any particular stance on Chris's self-identity, or transgender issues in general, but in order to avoid confusion when I explain that on 27 June 2021 (and every three days thereafter, for about a month), Chris put on a condom, then inserted his penis into his 79-year-old mother.

Inappropriate aspects of their relationship had long been noted (e.g., CWCki: "PVCC NEW info: on Chris and Barbara spoon eachother!"), and viewers of the *Comprehensive History* will attest to much foreshadowing. Chris told the troll Isabella Janke of the affair on the evening of 27 July, during a four-hour video call on the Signal app (CWCki: "Incest Call"), portions of which were leaked onto Discord servers a few days later. In it, Chris states that his mother made the first move, but admits that "she was partially confused at one point." We learn that "it took a few tries," and that he "approached her with care and caution," then "branched out slow and steady." Subsequent text messages offer further detail:

> And obviously those, out of the eight guys, counting Robertchu [Chris's late father], before me were not hitting her G-Spot as much with their cocks. I had attempted the first night to rub her in there; I found her spot, but it hurt her. But, alternatively, I did find that at cunnilingus, I was good at it with my tongue (CWCki: "Incest Texts").

Was it rape? Many observers surmise that Barbara has dementia (if her glassy-eyed expression was not a performance calculated to elicit online donations) and was therefore unable to consent. On the other hand, it is also possible to suspect her of grooming her special-needs son. Given their respective cognitive impairments, perhaps neither was fully responsible.

After the leaks, the Greene County (Virginia) Sheriff's Office fielded hundreds of calls, some from mandated reporters, and sent deputies to conduct a welfare check on Barbara. Chris was served an Emergency Protective Order banning him from the house and from any contact with his mother. On 1 August, he was arrested at a Richmond hotel (CWCki: "Incest arrest") and jailed. The court appointed Charlottesville attorney David Heilberg to represent him. An article in the (Charlottesville) *Daily Progress* (later quoted by *Newsweek* and other outlets) describes Chris's behavior at his 5 August arraignment:

> Heilberg told the court he would be asking for evaluations of Chandler, who interrupted by stomping her feet and saying loudly that she needed "to get everything back home" [i.e., to retrieve her belongings from the hotel]. She then said loudly, "I won't feel safe proceeding until" she gets the items back (Beigie 2021).

Chris was denied bail. By this time, public awareness of Chris Chan had reached an all-time high. A FOX News segment on *Tucker Carlson Tonight* focused on the transgender angle and the possibility of Chris being assigned to a female jail (Carlson 2021). The hashtags "Chris-Chan" and "CHRIS CHAN DID WHAT" trended on Twitter, briefly overtaking those associated with the then-in-progress Olympics. (See episode 85, 35:20 of the *Comprehensive History*).

Chris remained in custody awaiting trial for one year and seven months—mostly in the Central Virginia Regional Jail (where he was segregated from the general population), but with a notable stint in the Western State Hospital for a competency evaluation. Charged with felony incest, he faced a potential prison sentence of ten years. (Crucially, he was not charged with rape). Plea bargaining is the norm, and as Heilberg must have calculated, no jury would sympathize with Chris; hence the multiple continuances. Heilberg could not have been entirely pleased with his client's seeming willingness to chat about the case with all comers. While incarcerated, Chris wrote long letters to fans in which he explained, for example, that he had sex with his mother by mutual consent, for purposes of healing and soul-bonding "as I had done for and with a chosen few back in Isreal [*sic*] over 2000 years ago" (CWCki: "Jail Letter—19 September 2021").

Perusing his jail-supplied Bible apparently convinced Chris that he was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. This was not his first time claiming divinity (recall "CPU goddess Blue Heart"). Chris's poor grasp of reality cast doubt on his otherwise damning admissions. Alternatively, as Heilberg suggested to the press, perhaps trolls had manipulated him into confessing to incest, or perhaps these conversations amounted to a kind of fantasy role-play (CWCki: "David Heilberg"). Who can say?

Such uncertainties notwithstanding, Heilberg filed a motion for autism disorder deferred disposition, which in Virginia permits a defendant diagnosed with autism or an intellectual disability—either "upon a plea of guilty, or after a plea of not guilty, and the facts found by the court would justify a finding of guilt"—to receive probation, if "the court finds by clear and convincing evidence that the criminal conduct was caused by or had a direct and substantial relationship to the person's

disorder or disability" (Virginia Code § 19.2-303.6). Although autism does not commonly drive people to commit incest with their mothers, it was certainly a contributing factor, and Chris's issues go well beyond mere autism. Perhaps there were behind-the-scenes negotiations. One important consideration was that a felony conviction would have terminated his SSDI payments, likely rendering him homeless upon his release.

Court records were sealed at Heilberg's request, ostensibly to avoid tainting any future jury pool, but also to fend off the circus that is Chris Chan fandom. Probation was granted in March 2023, whereupon Chris relocated to Gateway Homes, a mental health institution in rural Chesterfield County. On 9 August, the incest charge was dismissed, the court presumably being satisfied with his progress. By then, Chris had moved into a five-bedroom house in Big Island (near Lynchburg), having agreed with the owner, Caden Peck, and his Praetor group to share in the proceeds from the online sale of artwork and other items (such as replica Sonichu medallions) produced or licensed by Chris.

In retrospect, the State of Virginia handled the situation well. Now in his forties, Chris has settled into a new life apart from his mother (whom he occasionally sees, presumably under supervision) and is often accompanied by a possibly Finnish woman known as Flutter (after the *My Little Pony* character Fluttershy), who apparently wrote Chris in jail and now frustrates the best efforts of Kiwi Farms to doxx her. Chris has even been spotted in Finland several times. He still regularly appears on YouTube, often playing video games—Chris may have pioneered the Let's Play format back in 2003—and answering Superchat questions, as long as they are "positive." The censorship of certain words (including "mother") has not prevented trolls from creative workarounds: "AdolfHitler donated $2! Chris did the barbussy have any stank?" (CwcvilleGuardian 2023b, 19:44).

Chris now denies the incest allegations. In a 2023 video (CwcvilleGuardian 2023a), he asserts that "I was innocent. There never, ever, ever, ever, *ever* was any sex between Barbara and me, period." He complains that "you all really erroneously misunderstood me." Blame lies with "all the haters and fakers and the toxic sinners" who "tried to manipulate me"—especially Isabella Janke, whose goal was to blackmail him into committing suicide. (This detail is likely true.) While most of his fans are good, a minority who are "the worst" wrote "smut fan-fictions. You've *shipped* me with Barbara! *You shipped me* with that...that Snorlax!" Aside from the uncomplimentary Pokémon reference, Chris

here alludes to his belief that fictional events, once written, become real in some other universe; thus, the writers of such stories unwittingly create horrors. In subsequent livestreams, he clarifies that the incest took place in another dimension (CwcvilleGuardian 2023b, 12:00), specifically that of the *Transformers: Shattered Glass* comics, a parallel universe with "opposite morals and everything," similar to the Mirror Universe from *Star Trek* (CwcvilleGuardian 2023c, 27:00). In our world, Chris "foreknew" that Bella would betray him, and frustrated her scheme by intentionally arranging to be arrested and sent to jail, where he suffered for our sins. "And I meditated and learned everything. I *am* Jesús [here pronounced as in Spanish] Christ reincarnated. I *am* the One Avatar of All Existence [...]" (CwcvilleGuardian 2023a).

Chris grew up attending Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist churches, but was ultimately made to feel unwelcome. (The Baptists expelled him, while the Methodists asked him to take off his My Little Pony unicorn cosplay gear.) Some notion of his early theology may be gleaned from *Sonichu* no. 9 (2009), where God and Jesus, in answer to his prayers, appear in a dream to pair him with his true sweetheart, the trollsona Ivy. Since God seemed to be "giving me the Middle Finger" in real life, around 2013 Chris gravitated to New Age beliefs: crystals, tarot cards, psychic powers, and a view of "God(dess)" as something "within all of us, as energy and direction" (CWCki: "Chris and religion"). His repeated references to the "Akashic Records" may have been inspired by that other great Virginia psychic, Edgar Cayce (1877–1945), if they did not come from some video game.

Chris has long referred to his old house as the "Sonichu Temple." In 2019, he began calling his fans "Devotees of Chris Chan Sonichu" (DoCCS). For a few months in 2021, a "Golden Church of Sonichu" Discord server was available to Praetor customers who bought a golden medallion (recall the non-fungible token craze). While in jail, Chris named his dispensation "Neo Spiritual Christianity" (no hyphen), and revealed at least 21 commandments, "The Lord Goddess Blue Heart's Prayer," and a symbol consisting of a crucified blue heart between two yellow lightning bolts. There are numerous deities, under a mother goddess called Emanuel or Emanuelle. Chris identifies C-197 with the "new earth" from Revelation 21:1 (CWCki: "Jail Letter–18 January 2022"). His conflict with his trolls assumes cosmic significance as the Dimensional Merge promises a "Collective Shift for the Majority that are Good, and those recoverable,

from Earth 1218 to Earth 1C-211987," while the "Minority who are the Toxic (Darkest) Sinners, Haters, Fakers, and Darkest Demonics [...] shall be left behind on 1218 Earth to burn" (CWCki: "Jail Letter–4 October 2021").

Like some Kansas antipope whose regalia amounts to cosplay, Chris imitates the trappings of his ancestral churchianity; the new religion exists to exalt him, rather than vice versa. Whether he has any genuine believers is difficult to know. His "audience cult" may also be losing momentum, now that the spectacle of Chris Chan has died down, and (barring some new atrocity) the remainder of his story will likely prove anticlimactic. Indeed, the events of 2021 led some to quit the fandom, if not the internet, in disgust. On the other hand, some new adaptation—a Netflix true-crime series, perhaps—may reignite interest in Chris. Already dozens of artists have covered "So Need a Cute Girl" (2003), his revised lyrics to "I Want It That Way," by the Backstreet Boys ("Tell me why I'm stuck as a virgin with rage / Tell me why I so need a cute girl my age"), while Jordan Owen has produced a whole Chris Chan heavy metal concept album, *Nowhere Land* (2022), in a remonstrative vein. Its climax, "Oedipus Prime," is appropriately discordant.

In contrast to his Theban predecessor, Chris is marked by transgressions that lack any positive, heroic element, and do not translate into agonistic spiritual power. The liminal perversity of Greek tragedy, or for that matter the Book of Genesis, paradoxically elevates and ennobles the reader; the almost systematic litanies of taboo-violation serve wider narratives in which order arises out of chaos, and basic values and institutions are established. Chris's true cultural antecedents are degradation-centric films like *Freaks*, *Pink Flamingos*, or *A Serbian Film*, or the reality series *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. Don Lashomb (2021, back cover copy) observes that Chris and Andy Warhol (1928–1987) "are thought of as the oddest of oddities, and yet they represent the course of our society as a whole." A horrifying thought, but for Lashomb, the ubiquity of pop-culture artifacts (which Warhol sought to transform into high art) has reached saturation, as "more recent generations have grown up breathing pop culture as if it were air," and "favorite entertainment franchises are treated akin to religions."

Wahid Azal and the NUR-Fāṭimīya Sufi Order

> [C]entral to the Bayān is the insistence that justice cannot be deferred to history, consensus, or gradual recognition. Ontological truth, once present, demands immediate

> reconfiguration of law, economy, and social life. This is why the Bayān does not frame authority as something inherited, delegated, or bureaucratically administered, but as something that appears and compels by virtue of Presence. Recognition is not a right to be requested, nor a status to be earned through compliance with existing norms; it is a test that divides, here and now, between receptivity and veiling, Affirmation (ithbāt) and negation (nafy), Light (nūr) and infernal fire (nār).
>
> –Wahid Azal, Mirror of the Bayān, and Camphorated Servant of the Truly Real (Azal 2026a, xxxi)

> Yeah, well, you know, that's just, like, your opinion, man.
>
> –*The Big Lebowski*

Nima Hazini–the future Wahid Azal–was born in 1971 in Tehran, to Soheil Hazini (1949–2012), later a structural engineer and real estate developer, and Mitra Hazini (née Manavi, b. 1951). He has two younger sisters and a large extended family on multiple continents. His parents met at a Bahā'ī winter school in Graz in 1967, when Mitra was sixteen and Soheil an eighteen-year-old university student. They married in January 1971; Nima was born in December.

For several years, the family lived in Stuttgart while Soheil pursued graduate studies. They returned to Iran in 1974 but fled the 1979 Islamic Revolution to join relatives in California. Soheil's career caused them to relocate to Denver (1981), Sydney (1982), and the Gold Coast (1983; for this family background, see Azal 2024e and 2025w). Nima remained in Australia through high school, becoming a citizen of that country; however, he hated Australia and resented his father for taking him away from the USA. (The two often quarreled, even more than fathers and their teenage sons normally do.) This, plus the presence of relatives in Albuquerque, helps explain his decision to attend the University of New Mexico (1989–1994), where he studied philosophy and history. Among his professors, he recalls with special fondness John Bussanich, who specializes in ancient Greek and Indian philosophy, and Patricia Risso, a historian of Islam (Azal 2006, 8).

After graduation, Nima enrolled in UCLA's graduate department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures under Suhrawardī (1154–1191) scholar Hossein Ziai (1944–2011), but "mastered out" (one informant contradicts his claim to have been awarded the MA degree) and left for New York City in 1997. "After my experience at UCLA in the '90s," Wahid writes, "I have since come to

believe that a Ph.D. is only a culturally constructed validation specific to a Western context of knowledge production," similar to an *ʾijāza* from a traditional Islamic *madrasa*. "Only a consensus reality privileges one over the other" (Azal 2013). He returned to Australia in 1999.

From childhood, Nima experienced instances of precognition, out-of-the-body travel, miraculous protection, and a mysterious familiarity with Arabic, even before studying the language. "I always knew I was unlike other people," he recalls. This was especially visible in his early religious leanings:

> Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I innately knew that there was something intrinsically wrong with the Bahaism of my family, but could not articulate it completely until my late adolescence and then early university years.
>
> The first time at 11 years old when I saw the portrait of the Primal Point was a surreal experience because it felt like I was looking in a mirror at myself. At this age, I instinctively knew that the true station of the Primal Point was way, way beyond that of the founder of bahaism. [...]
>
> Whilst the bahais of my family excoriated Him, as all bahais do, the first moment I beheld a picture of Subh-i-Azal was a moment of sheer ecstasy as if I was beholding the Face of Mercy itself. I told my father, who scolded me, saying not to mention this to anyone in our family (WahidAzal556 2025a)

An excursus, for the benefit of readers unfamiliar with his allusions: the Hazinis were Bahāʾīs, followers of the religion founded by Mīrzā Ḥusayn ʿAli Nūrī, styled Bahāʾu'llāh (the "Glory of God," 1817–1892), a nineteenth-century Persian aristocrat exiled to the Ottoman Empire. Bahāʾīs regard him as the Manifestation of God for our age, equal to Jesus, Muhammad (570–632), and other religion-founding prophets. The religion's public face—which spread globally during the twentieth century—emphasizes progressive principles like interracial harmony, and expects world peace under a world government. (For entrée to this material, see Cole 1998 and Warburg 2006).

Bahāʾī sacred history begins not with Bahāʾu'llāh but with a predecessor, Siyyid ʿAli Muḥammad Shīrāzī, called the Bāb ("Gate," 1819–1850; cf. the four *Abwāb* of Twelver Shi'ite tradition). This is the "Primal Point" referred to above. As a millenarian figure claiming divine authority, if not outright divinity, the Bāb inspired uprisings in several Persian towns in 1848–1850. They were suppressed; he was executed. (For introductions to the Bābī movement, see MacEoin 2008 and Amanat 1989.) During the 1860s, a schism occurred among the surviving Bābīs. One faction remained loyal to the Bāb's chosen successor, Mīrzā Yahyā Nūrī, styled

Subh-i-Azal ("Morning of Eternity," 1831–1912); they were consequently known as "Azalīs." The other followed Azal's older half-brother Bahā'u'llāh, thus "Bahā'īs." There were mutual execrations, and even murders.

Today, the Bahā'īs remember the Bāb as a sort of John the Baptist to Bahā'u'llāh's Jesus, and Subh-i-Azal as a Judas figure—the first "Covenant breaker" (*nāqiḍ,* pl. *nāqiḍūn*), although neither he nor the Azalīs ever swore fealty to Bahā'u'llāh in the first place (rather the reverse). Bahā'īs are taught to revile, and commanded to shun, Covenant-breakers, i.e., partisans of the losing sides in various succession disputes, whence Soheil's rebuke of young Nima.

Often thought to have disappeared or assimilated, the rump Bābīs / Azalīs played a role in the Persian Constitutional Revolution (MacEoin 1987; Bayat 1991, 68–9; Afary 1996, 47–8 and 197–99) and apparently persist as a loose network of several thousand people, active within certain Sufi lineages (Azal 2024j, 7, 13–4). We are told that they prefer to be called "Bayānīs," from *Bayān* ("elucidation"), i.e., the writings of the Bāb, considered collectively. Another group of Azalīs settled in Famagusta, Cyprus, where Ottoman authorities transferred Subh-i-Azal in 1868, along with his family and followers (Momen 1991).

The majority of Wahid's ancestors were Persian Jews, not Twelver Shi'ites, when they converted to the Bahā'ī religion in the 1880s. (See Amanat 2011 for general background on this group). Wahid places Jewish Bahā'īs at the "top of the ladder" of the "nouveau riche Persian Baha'i aristocracy" (talk.religion.bahai, 25 September 2009). In 1986, at fifteen—the age of spiritual maturity, when Bahā'ī youth are expected to sign a declaration card—Nima formally enrolled himself in the ranks of believers. He twice accompanied his maternal grandparents on pilgrimage to the Bahā'ī shrines in Haifa and Akka, in northern Israel. Along the way, they visited relatives in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. A rabbi, on learning of Nima's Jewish roots, held a bar mitzvah for him at the Wailing Wall. In later years, Wahid would state that "I am not a Jew" (talk.religion.bahai, 29 May 2009; Azal 2006, 16 qualifies this with "other than by ancestral connection"), and indeed, often vilify others as Jews or even "kikes" (talk.religion.bahai, *passim*). But this is to anticipate.

For Nima, the 1990s and early 2000s were a time of intense intellectual and spiritual exploration. At university, he clashed with local Bahā'ī authorities

(talk.religion.bahai, 27 April 2001) and learned to view his religion more critically, although he continued to attend youth conferences. He also visited Hindu and Buddhist groups, only to be struck by their pervasive corruption and abuse (Azal 2024g). At some point he assumed "Sadra" as his middle name, likely honoring the *Ishrāqī* philosopher Mullā Sadrā (1572–1640).

Aside from relatives, the hundreds of influences listed in the "Prolegomenon" of his *Liber Decatriarchia Mystica* include Sufi philosophers (especially ibn al-'Arabī, 1165–1240) and their scholarly interpreters (especially Henry Corbin, 1903–1978); neo-Platonists and Western esoteric figures (Aleister Crowley, 1875–1947, is thanked twice); great Asian philosophers; the prophets and imams recognized by Twelver Shi'ism; famous Kabbalists and scholars of the tradition; religious perennialists (with whom he acknowledges a "love/hate intellectual relationship"); various existentialist, postmodernist, post-structuralist, and post-colonial writers (Frantz Fanon, 1925–1961, will prove particularly important); and then-prominent Bahā'īs and ex-Bahā'īs.

Wahid also salutes several spiritual organizations, including half a dozen Western Sufi orders and an equal number of ceremonial magic groups. Other names include Chabad rebbe Menachem Schneerson (1902–1994), identified as the archetypal return of Isaac Luria (1534–1572)—Wahid was Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291)—and "the Madame [Helena Petrovna] Blavatsky [1831–1891] of our Age, Jennifer Starlight," an Australian trance channeler (Azal 2006, 7 and 16).

Entheogens are a significant theme. Wahid reports that "on my 18th birthday, via psilocybin mushrooms I experienced the totality of Being *at two bows length or nearer* face to Face!" (WahidAzal556 2025a). Qur'an 53:9 gives this as Muhammad's closest proximity to God during the *mi'rāj*; see Azal 2024f for Wahid's exegesis of this versicule. The "Prolegomenon" hails psychedelic pioneers Terence McKenna (1946–2000) and Dennis McKenna, Richard Evans Schultes (1915–2001), Carlos Castaneda (1925–1998) and Don Juan Matus, and Aldous Huxley (1894–1963), *inter alia*; and credits "Jean-Marc Siralbion-Manning, the [Santo] Daimistas and [Dutch-Australian neo-shaman] Vilmar Darpan for launching me on the flight path of Ayahuasca." Note that Wahid denies ever having used or sold any kind of illegal drugs (Azal 2019c, 3:00).

Between 1994 and 1996, the "Talisman" listserv (organized by Bahā'ī scholar John Walbridge and hosted by Indiana University Bloomington) held a snowballing discussion of various controversial Bahā'ī issues, including such proposed reforms as the admission of women onto the Universal House of Justice (the nine-man council that has led the religion since 1963). Many posts cast Bahā'ī authorities, who had long exercised control over the religion's public presentation, as the enemies of open discussion. Although prospective Bahā'ī authors are required to submit their writings on the faith for "review" (pre-publication censorship), no such restrictions applied to the new medium of internet discourse. When conservative Bahā'īs on the list complained of what they saw as attacks on the religion's central tenets, the Bahā'ī hierarchy responded by issuing a series of advisory letters, then threatening prominent participants with expulsion.

Nima was active on Talisman from early 1995, contributing regular compilations of news from Iran, and posing such enthusiastic questions as whether the Buddhist *śūnyatā* "is in any way analogous to the One (the God-beyond-God) of Neoplatonism or the Gottheit of Meister Eckhart [ca. 1260–1328]" (20 Feb. 1996 to Bruce Burrill). While a few posts were more combative, he generally comes across as a polite young man. Walbridge dissolved the online salon shortly after accidentally posting a message meant for an inner, secret discussion list called "Majnun" onto the general Talisman list. Nima resigned from the Bahā'ī religion at the end of 1996, around the same time as Walbridge and other Talisman-connected Bahā'ī intellectuals.

In August 1997, during a visit to Albuquerque, Mahdi Sheikhbahaei (Safi Ali Shah II, d. 2015), head of the Nimatullahi Soefi Order (NISO), initiated Nima into the Ni'matullāhī, Safī'alīshāhī, and Qādirī lineages. An Isfahani *pīr* living in Rotterdam, Sheikhbahaei "was simultaneously a clandestine Bayani," and performed the transmission "specifically in the names of the Bāb, the Letters of the Living [the Bāb's first eighteen disciples], and Subh-i-Azal" (Azal 2024j, 7). Nima received the *dhikr* of *hū rabb* ("He is the Lord"; Azal 2006, 105) and the Sufi name of Wahdat 'Alī Shāh (Azal 2024j, 14). That night, he dreamed of being taken inside the Ka'ba—or rather, its celestial counterpart in the archetypal mirror world of Hūrqalyā—where Fāṭima al-Zāhra ("the resplendent" Fāṭima, a glorified version of Muhammad's daughter) pierced his tongue with her husband 'Alī's legendary forked sword Ḏū-l-Faqār (Azal 2008, 5; Azal 2024j, 14 n17; Magick

2014, 5:00; Azal 2006, 107 places a different dream after his 1997 initiation, and this one "[e]arlier in 1996").

Sheikhbahaei urged Nima to contact other Bayānīs, which he did around 1999–2000 (Azal 2024j, 14 n18). He served as the American Ni'matullāhī-Safī'alīshāhī representative until 1999, establishing a short-lived headquarters in Toms River, New Jersey. With or without permission, he began calling himself a *shaykh* in his own right. He last saw Sheikhbahaei in 1998, at a Sufi festival in the Netherlands. At some point, Nima repudiated his master. He told Harry Leo Duran ("Corax," 1956–2021) that

> It was A BIG, BIG MISTAKE to befriend you and get entangled with you wackos and come to NJ, which I deeply regret. I have not had anything to do with you people for over six months, nor the Nimatullahi / Safialishahi order, and I could not get out of New Jersey and away from that rackett [*sic*] of Sheikhabaei's [*sic*] Nimatullahi / Safialishahi sufism fast enough [...] (talk.religion.bahai, 10 Nov. 1999).
>
> AND YOUR EXAMPLE AND THAT OF THE ENTIRE SUFI COMMUNITY OF THE EAST COAST TOGETHER WITH THOSE IN HOLLAND HAS PROVEN [...] [that] IRREFUTABLY. YOU PEOPLE ARE LOST FLAKES!!!!!!!!!!!!! (talk.religion.bahai, 11 Nov. 1999).

Nima changed his tune a few years later:

> Per his own words the bayah [oath of fealty] I made with Mehdi Sheikhbahaei only extended to the moment of my first fana / annihilation in God which occured [*sic*] a few months prior to my departure from the United States. The repudiation was a prediction made by the Pir himself in July 1997 and something he himself said I would come to, nay have to, do. [...] since January 2000 I have been periodically calling the Pir in Holland and he is appraised [*sic*] of my state and condition and has confirmed it (talk.religion.bahai, 28 Dec. 2002).

Around this time, Nima began claiming to be the archetypal return of the eighteenth Letter of the Living, Quddūs (himself the return of the Prophet Muhammad). In 2000, Perth-based scholar Sepehr Manuchehri "introduced me to the oeuvre and vita of Subh-i-Azal" (Azal 2006, 8, 219–20).

In New York and New Jersey, Nima belonged to a circle of like-minded spiritual seekers whose Sufism was part of a wider interest in Aghori tantra, Western ceremonial magic, and other edgy traditions. Duran's widow Barbara Campbell recalls discovering "skulls in a cauldron when we moved!" She explains that "Harry's roommate Chaz had gotten Harry involved in Santeria and instead of using the skulls he acquired in med school to get back into neurosurgery, he used them in a cauldron which I got rid of" (Campbell 2021 and 2023). Another poster

revealed that Duran had also joined Michael Aquino's (1946–2019) Temple of Set, a Satanist group.

While Wahid now regrets his involvement with these people, he boasts of having read all of Aleister Crowley's writings (talk.religion.bahai, 17 Oct. 2004), and finds in the Bornless Ritual (*Liber Samekh*, sec. C) an answer to his earlier question to Bruce Burrill on Talisman. Crowley, he explains,

> is talking about the God beyond God who is Beyond Good and Evil both, i.e. Ayn Sof / the Void (Sunyata) of Mahayana Buddhism or the Nirguna Parabrahman of the Vedanta (talk.religion.bahai, 18 Oct. 2004).

If the Bāb was Wahid's spiritual father—his Hermes Trismegistus to ibn al-'Arabī's Plato (ca. 428–347 BCE)—and Qurrat al-'Ayn (the Bāb's foremost female disciple, known to the Bahā'īs as "Tāhirih," 1814 or 1817–1852) his spiritual mother (Azal 2006, 4), then Crowley was "the Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsai [1753–1826] of My universal Revelation," referring to the founder of the nineteenth-century Shaykhī movement out of which Bābism arose (talk.religion.bahai, 23 Dec. 2002). *Liber Decatriarchia Mystica* offers more qualified praise of Crowley:

> While I deeply respect and cherish the *oeuvre* of the Great Beast, [...] between Perdurabo and I, at least, there is no question in my mind as to who stands as the true *Ipsissimus* of the Age, and it is certainly not the sage once resident at Boleskine—who for all his genius was one serious mess up (Azal 2006, 339 n92).

Wahid once called Aleister Crowley "a total pussy" compared to the Order of Nine Angles, a neo-Nazi Satanic group (talk.religion.bahai, 11 Jan. 2020). Another poster shared the following:

> I have close friends who are members of various occult paths including a member of the Order of the Nine Angles (O9A) who recently told me that Nima is one of their order and that he is still a Bahai, just not one affiliated with the Haifan Bahai organization. His praxis within the O9A involves an "Insight Role" of complete antagonism and enmity to the Bahais, the adoption of Azali Babism/Bayanism in the fashion of taqiya, and with the object of fomenting as much chaos as possible through innovative methods of theurgy so as to harness the occult powers that are unleashed.
>
> The path of the O9A requires the adept to become totally committed to the "insight role." This is a false identity, or deep-cover persona, that can manifest as the polar opposite of the initiate's personality. This "deep fake" is practically indistinguishable from reality when executed properly and thus the practitioner can plausibly deny any charge to the contrary for those who aren't in the know such as myself.

> As a devout Bahai turned exoterically anti-Bahai, Nima Wahid Azal adapts the Sufi Malamat model (or way of blame) [...] (Edward Finch to Denis Giron and Nathan Abookire, talk.religion.bahai, 22 Jan. 2020).

Wahid now identifies with the Left-Hand Path (*vāmamārga*) in the sense of Shaktism, not Satanism (Azal 2025k, 90, 123 n104; cf. 2026d, 371), which he dismisses as shallow, immature, and a form of counter-initiation (after René Guénon, 1886–1951):

> I've hung out with all kinds of occultists who have been hardcore Satanists, whether in Europe or the United States or even here in Australia. And by and large, I look at these people as being a little bit misled initiatically, because their narratives [...], rather than being a form of rebellion against existing mores, are actually seeking to validate the existing mores and the behavior of the oligarchies and plutocrats of the time (Azal 2022g, 9:25).

Other exemplars of counter-initiation include "New Age fluff bunnies" and, of course, the Bahā'īs (Azal 2006, 25–8).

Despite his resignation from the Bahā'ī religion and his Bayānī/Sufi affiliation, Nima continued to privately believe in Bahā'ī teachings as late as 1999 (Hazini 1999). In December 2000, he could still write that "I have at no time attacked the Central Baha'i Figures" (Hazini 2001). Soon afterward, however, he was claiming to use the writings of Bahā'u'llāh for toilet paper (talk.religion.bahai, 24 December 2002), or comparing the significance of the Bahā'ī founder unfavorably to that of Crowley (talk.religion.bahai, 23 December 2002 and 20 October 2004).

The catalyst for Nima's radicalization may have been a 4 September 2000 fight with several of his Bahā'ī relatives that erupted after a dinner hosted by his maternal grandparents in their thirteenth-floor apartment. In Nima's version, "Mr. W" (his uncle by marriage, Gold Coast property developer Soheil Abedian, founder of the Sunland Group) let slip that he considered unmarried men to be losers, and proceeded to boast of his own accomplishments. Nima "stated that I did not believe that building opulent, decadent and snobbish projects [...] constituted true service to society by any stretch of the imagination." Abedian's son Sahba ("Mr. X") interrupted with "Fuck you [...] you fucking covenant breaker!" Nima responded in kind.

> As I was being insulted like this for merely stating a frank opinion, and unnerved beyond belief by such self-righteous arrogance as Mr. X was now displaying, I got up from my chair to leave, and X also got up. Next Mr. Y jumped from his chair, tackled and pinned me in a

> body/headlock at which point misters W and X began hitting me from both directions [...] During this back and forth altercation, Mr. X exclaimed, "You don't know who I am in this city, you motherfucker, covenant breaker" [...] Mr. W has boasted numerous times in my presence about the power and influence he wields on the Gold Coast more than any other person in the city. He has claimed that he controls various local city council members and politicians, the city mayor, judges, solicitors, the police, several state politicians and lawmakers, the local media, and federal MPs, suggesting that he has ties to organised crime and that on the Gold Coast he is completely untouchable and that anyone who crosses him will be physically and financially destroyed (Hazini 2001).

I am otherwise informed that Nima was in fact the aggressor, and that "Mr. Y" (Karim T. Rafaat, then a UC San Diego medical student, and an accomplished martial artist) was merely restraining him from throwing Sahba off the balcony. The same source doubts the possibility of the alleged mafia connections. It may be relevant that Abedian *père* has since been accused of improper political donations (Crime and Misconduct Commission 2006; note that Bahā'īs are commanded to abstain from partisan politics), as well as deceit in connection with a Dubai bribery case (Lenaghan 2013). Another Sunland executive, Abedian's son-in-law Riaz Rezvani, was accused of assault in an unrelated boardroom incident (Stoltz 2020).

Soon afterward, the 2 December 2000 issue of the *Australian Bahā'ī Bulletin* published a notice stating that several Bahā'īs had some concerns about Nima. He had resigned four years earlier; there was little any Bahā'ī body could do other than advise believers to "leave him to himself" (in Hazini 2001). Nima called the statement "overtly defamatory and libelous," questioned by what right the Bahā'ī administration had surveilled him (internal correspondence establishes that his movements and activities had been tracked since at least 1997), and threatened litigation and a media campaign if his demands for an explanation and retraction were not met. (They were not met). He reflects:

> It is indeed curious that this statement should come in the wake of a violent physical assault against my person three months ago by a member of the LSA [Bahā'ī Local Spiritual Assembly] of the Gold Coast—a member who is a wealthy donor to the AO [Bahā'ī Administrative Order], and seemingly based on his own statements has claimed he has the ear of one or two UHJ [Bahā'ī Universal House of Justice] members and a member of your own NSA [Bahā'ī National Spiritual Assembly]. I believe that the publication of this statement is nothing more than yet another carefully crafted attempt by the AO at a cover-up of corruption and abuses by its close patrons (Hazini 2001).
>
> The Bottom Line, Ron, is that indeed I was being spied on. And, more importantly, I was being spied on by "the Institutions" from within my own extended family, i.e. the Stalinist modus operandi of the baha'i cult throughout. Other than some close family members, who under unguarded circumstances blabbed to others, I had not told very many people

> that I was at the time with the Nimatullahi Sufis. Apparently, per the file copies my contacts in Wilmette sent me, I was being spied upon from Santa Fe New Mexico all the way to Holland and then Australia. That is 3 continents (Oto Ron House, talk.religion.bahai, 6 Dec. 2005).

Wahid has since filed formal human rights complaints with the Queensland Human Rights Commission (Azal 2025f) and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (WahidAzal556 2025c). Citing a 2004–2006 narcotics trafficking case involving three Bahā'īs in Western Australia (talk.religion.bahai, 7 June 2006), he now views the Bahā'ī religion as a global mafia, and Bahā'u'llāh himself as a crime boss (Azal 2019a, 2019b, 2019c).

Wahid states that his "mother, father and sisters aren't Baha'is" anymore (NUR 2009, comment dated 7 May). He further indicates that his parents left the religion under administrative pressure, after refusing to disown him (Azal 2019a, 1:46:00), and has published a photo of a clause in his father's will stating that the testator no longer regards himself as a Bahā'ī and does not desire a Bahā'ī burial (Azal 2020a). My information is that Mitra resigned at some point after Soheil's death, because she did not believe in the religion, and had only remained within it for the sake of family. The sisters remain at least nominal Bahā'īs. Contrary to Wahid's account, I am told that the Bahā'ī administration has handled the situation with restraint, e.g., not requiring any relatives to shun him.

Alert readers will wonder how Nima supported himself, or whether he had another source of funds. His employment history remains mysterious. Stephen R. Friberg told G. Brent Poirier (who told the Talisman list, 20 December 1995) that "Nima sold me six books on Islamic and Sufi philosophy at the bookstore he has so patiently stocked" while Friberg was in New Mexico. I have come across scattered references to Nima quitting unspecified jobs in California and New York. Much like Chris Chan, whose résumé focuses on his unremunerated stewardship of the *Sonichu* characters, Wahid's LinkedIn contains no indication of any work experience except "Director–Library of the Greatest Name" (from 2004), his self-publishing imprint. (Azal 2025u condemns LinkedIn as a "desecration of the human vocation").

Old discussion forums are peppered with rumors and accusations–seemingly from people who knew him–of flight from debts, multiple bankruptcies, theft, grift, and even extortion. I stress that this is hearsay. A post on talk.religion.bahai quotes U.S.-Australian ex-Bahā'ī (Claudia) Starr Saffa as follows:

> Nima has never held a job except as the janitor for his parents' apartments while collecting Oz study monies [...] His parents were always looking for the rents he was supposed to have collected while manning the apartments (and even brought police with them to collect it while I was there) [...] His two identity bankruptcy [i.e., one under the name of Nima Hazini, and one as Wahid Azal] is another matter. [...] Too bad Harry Duran and others got taken for ten thousand dollars each by him (talk.religion.bahai, 3 March 2009).

Her reference to "Oz study monies" may reflect a brief period in which Nima was enrolled in law courses at the Queensland University of Technology. My source confirms that Nima's father

> did attempt to utilize his help managing a block of apartments for a short period which turned into a disaster and that would be the extent of any involvement he ever had job-wise on the Gold Coast (I mean as in no other jobs whatsoever, family related or otherwise).

From that point on, he lived largely off his parents. Soheil Hazini declared bankruptcy in 2010, after a crash in the Australian real estate market caused by the 2008 global financial crisis, and died two years later. Wahid states that he was "a partner in a family business" and "on the board" (talk.religion.bahai, 12 Jan. 2020). I speculate that he may now be receiving unemployment payments, donations from patrons and disciples, and/or fees for Zoom courses that he teaches. He acknowledges that he numbers "among the poor monetarily" (WahidAzal556 2025a).

As the reader can imagine, Wahid has endured much criticism from his relatives to the effect that he is a loser, a disappointment, a *bacheh soosool* (a spoiled child, a momma's boy), a *doodool tala* (which carries the same semantic range; lit. "golden weenie"), and a Hasan Kachal ("Hasan the Bald," a character from Iranian folklore famous for his laziness). Christorians may be reminded of the 4 Nov. 2009 "Father Call," in which a troll pretending to be the father of one of Chris Chan's virtual sweethearts grills Chris about his intentions:

> YOU? You want to date my daughter? [...] You don't sound like you've grown up. [...] You don't have a job. You're still living with your parents. You're almost thirty years old. This is ridiculous. [...] BE A MAN.

Ten years later, in response to "Get a job," Chris protested that "I am Employed by Emanuelle, this world's GOD [...] And in my job, I have been doing my part in completing the Dimension Merge" (Twitter, 8 June 2019). Wahid, too, answers to a higher spiritual calling.

In 2002, on a train from the Gold Coast to Brisbane, Nima found himself spontaneously writing the Arabic words *hīya Allah nūr al-hayy al-'ishq fī*

al-samawātī wa'l-ard ("She is God, the Light of the Living Love in the Heavens and the earth"). A railway power failure immediately ensued (Azal 2006, 107–8, cf. WahidAzal556 2025a). The NUR-Fāṭimīya Sufi Order is sometimes traced to this revelation (and sometimes to other mystical visions of his), much as Islam may be said to have begun with the angel Gabriel's command to Muhammad, "Read!" (Qur'an 96). The Gold Coast and Brisbane are even named as the new Mecca and Medina (Azal 2022a, 168 n71).

The feminine pronoun is significant: Wahid, following a line of thought from Corbin's *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth* (1977) and Terry Culhane's *I Beheld a Maiden...* (2001), proclaims a Divine Feminine that he identifies with Fāṭima (605–632; Azal 2026d, 814–16, n2) and his putative ancestress Qurrat al-'Ayn, among other holy females. *Effulgences of Wisdom* (Azal 2024i) reflects on various women of biblical and Qur'anic tradition (on the model of ibn al-'Arabī's *Bezels of Wisdom*, which contemplates the male prophets of Islam). Wahid also encouraged Starr Saffa, a frequent poster to his Usenet groups, to write *Tahirih Theology: Female Cosmic Christ Spirit of the Age, Concealed No Longer* (Starr Saffa 2005), but later disavowed that book as "superficial New Age fluff" (Azal 2005). Offended, perhaps, by her spiritual claims for herself, and general disconnect from scholarship on Bābism, he would go on to post numerous insulting, abusive comments about her, along with her phone number.

On 23 Nov. 2002, Nima announced to talk.religion.bahai that he was changing his name, and that "from this day forward I am not Nima Hazini but Nima Saoshyant. Saoshyant is the name of the Zoroastrian end time messiah whom my father at birth very much wished to name me after but was overruled by others." The story resembles one told by Chris Chan's father, who "wanted to name his son Christian when the boy was born" but was "chicken." He substituted "Christopher," only for "Christian" to be restored through divine intervention in the form of an animatronic bear (Green 1993; CWCki: "Leonard Bearstein").

In 2004, Nima started the bayanic.com website and the "Bayan19" Yahoo group, thus publicly announcing his Bayānī affiliation. That same year, he legally changed his name to "Wahid Azal" ("the One Praeternal"; see Azal 2006, 51, 104, 140 n18) in the Queensland registry. "N. Wahid Azal" seems to be an unofficial variant. Also in 2004, the debut of what would have been his first book, *Liber CI* [CLVI?]*: 156, The Book of Truth*, was frustrated when his vanity publisher, William Merriett Pleasant, allegedly pocketed the money without

producing the book (Azal 2006, 7, 298–99; talk.religion.bahai, 27 June 2004, 14 July 2004, 1–2 March 2005, etc.). Wahid suspects Pleasant—a black Bahā'ī from Savannah, Georgia, later disenrolled for his local political activism—of acting under orders from the Bahā'ī administration.

After seven years of "occasionally using entheogens as holy sacraments in my meditative practice as well as in my personal magickal ceremonies," Wahid experimented with a different brew:

> In mid June 2005, I obtained a pure, most potent specimen of Australian Black Wattle Acacia in the Bush. Note that Acacia is accounted as the highest secret of the Order of the Knights Templar [...] and thus that of the 33rd (and highest) degree of modern Freemasonry itself (Azal 2006, 12).

To clarify, the bark of *Acacia* (presumably *A. mearnsii* or *A. decurrens*) provides the N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT), and *Peganum harmala* (Syrian rue) the monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI). Flattery and Schwartz (1989) identify the latter with the Avestan *haoma*, a line of speculation well known to Wahid (Azal 2025gg, 338). The result was a mystical experience in which he beheld Terence McKenna's hyperspatial machine elves, the unfolding of the thousand-petaled lotus of his crown chakra, and "a *Form* appearing as an *Eye* who was also a *Face* appearing as the *Word* who was also a *Pyramid* and a *Pentagram* and the *Ankh* symbol that was a living *mandala* [...]" (Azal 2006, 13–4). For the next seven nights, Wahid received dream revelations from the Báb, Qurrat al-'Ayn, and Subh-i-Azal.

Liber Decatriarchia Mystica goes on to describe a "6 dimensional Hyper-Octahedron, i.e. Metatron's cube" in place of the traditional Tree of Life. The book came together "extremely fast, almost at a lightning speed rate," in language that "obviously reveals an inspired, often hyperbolic metaphysical glossolalia of sorts" (Azal 2006, 17, 19). The treatise is modeled after the *Sefer Yesira*, but—following hints given in ibn al-'Arabī's *Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* and *Book of the Description of the Encompassing Circles*—describes thirteen rather than ten sefirot (hence the title; cf. John Dee's [1527–1608] *De Heptarchia Mystica*) (Azal 2006, 49–50). Much attention is given to *ḥurūfī*-style proofs of Wahid's bona fides, e.g., "Nima" spelled backwards becomes *āmīn* ("trustworthy"), while "Wahid Azal" is numerologically equivalent to *Allah* (Azal 2006, 150, 67).

Despite passing reference to "my prophetic career" (Azal 2006, 21), and his claim to be the archetypal return of Muhammad (Azal 2006, 101), Wahid is not a prophet in the sense that Muhammad, the "Seal of the Prophets," was. The operative metaphor is that of a mirror (a prophet, imam, etc.) reflecting the sun (God). Though shining with the same light, the mirror is not the sun. More than one mirror can reflect the sun. A mirror might even reflect light from another mirror. In *Liber Decatriarchia Mystica*, we read that

> my primary rank and station is that of Mirror to the Essence of the Godhead (*mirát dhát Allah*), which contains all other stations within it but is not specifically the station [held by Muhammad] of prophet legatee (*nabí, nubuwwa*). It is quantum levels beyond it (Azal 2006, 101).

That is, the stations of messenger (*rasūl*), prophet (*nabī*), or recipient of divine inspiration (*muḥaddath*) "are not separate ranks but differentiated vectorial unfoldings of a single *tajallī*" or progressively interior divine self-disclosure, as in Akbarian or Suhrawardian emanationism (Azal 2026l).

Wahid further identifies himself with the main figures of Bābism:

> I am claiming outright, and without the least equivocation, to be the real Promised One of the Bayan, the real *He whom God shall make Manifest* (مَن يُظهره الله [*man yuẓhiruhu'llāh,* a Bābī messianic figure whom Bahā'īs identify with Bahā'u'llāh]) (who is now He Who is Manifest من اظهر الله [*man aizharu'llah*]), come to set accounts straight with those who usurped the creed I established in my previous Manifestation as the Primal Point and in my station as the first Mirror as Subh-i-Azal. In other words, in this time, I am the Speaking Bayan (بيان الناطق [*bayān al-natiq,* cf. the "Speaking Qur'an" of Shi'ism]) and so whosoever seek to know the *Essence of the Seven Letters* [i.e., the Bāb] and the *Pre-Eternal Fruit* [Subh-i-Azal] of His Blessed Tree should seek to know me since I am both of Them as a Single Person (WahidAzal556 2025a; cf. Azal 2006, 98–110, n1)

The Completion of the Arabic Bayān *and the Eight Paths* (Azal 2022a) is proof of Wahid's claims, since no one else (especially not Bahā'u'llāh) has succeeded in completing the Arabic *Bayān*—a specific, unfinished text by the Bāb, intended to contain nineteen chapters of nineteen sections (Azal 2022a, 161 n1).

Wahid distinguishes three phases of the Bayānī revelation. The first two are the eras of the Bāb and himself, while "the third will occur in the future with *She whom God shall make Manifest*: the Return of Fatima" (WahidAzal556 2025a). That is, several centuries hence, Wahid will be succeeded by a woman who is the archetypal return of Muhammad's daughter Fāṭima as well as of Qurrat al-'Ayn (Azal 2025k, 31; 2024h, 12). Future leaders of the NUR-FSO will also be women (Azal 2024i, xxxvi; 2024h, 13). This commitment to matriarchy explains the otherwise

perplexing rule that "[l]esbians are allowed to marry formally in the NUR, but gay men are not" (Azal 2026d, 704; cf. 2022a, 174–75).

While all this is couched in Islamicate Bābī symbolism, a vestigial Bahā'ī influence can be detected in Wahid's more universalizing claim (mimicking Shoghi Effendi's praise for Bahā'u'llāh in chapter six of *God Passes By*) to fulfill the messianic expectations of other world religious traditions:

> I am indeed the promised Saoshyant, the true Kalki Avatar, the true Second Coming of Christ [...], the promised universal Messiah, Manjushri returned as the Maitreya Buddha, the Return of the Inca Sun-King Wirococha, the Return of Pharaoh Akhenaten, the Sixth Sun of the Mayan prophecies [...] et al., come to make the separation between the Light (gnosis) and the Darkness (exoteric religion) permanent (Azal 2006, 108).

On the other hand, "the whole universe is the Manifestation of God, not just a single person. So, yes, I am a Manifestation of God, but so are you" (WahidAzal556 and OfficialDCShepard 2024, 54–6).

Disapproving of "self-styled popular gurus" who "sit cross legged upon some *dais* all day long" and preside over "abusive cults," Wahid resolved to avoid "simply spawning some *ashram*," and instead to make his teachings widely available on the internet. At the same time, he has withheld some secrets with the intention of founding "an entire initiatic *Mystery School*" (Azal 2006, 20–2). His first follower (the "First to Believe") was a tree, possibly the one seen in a photograph on his blog, with a prominent eye-shaped swirl in its bark (Azal 2025i). Since "no human was found worthy enough to occupy that lofty station," the Bāb archetypally returned in the form of this tree (WahidAzal556 2025a).

Just as the Bāb had appointed his eighteen Letters of the Living, so did Wahid name Letters of his own. In 2014, he estimated that "a core group of about five or six people" attended, while "sometimes between ten-twenty people show up" to special ceremonies (Magick 2014, 12:00). This is consistent with observable online activity. There are biweekly gatherings, with some events held in the "Valley of NUR," a bucolic location in Queensland that Wahid describes as "the current terrestrial *axis mundi* and *qiblah*" (WahidAzal556 2025a). The group practices an "*Islamaic* Theurgy" (note the adjective) in which "[p]silocybin mushrooms, Haoma / Ayahuasca, cannabis and DMT are also considered to be sacramental tools for spiritual wayfaring (and only for that purpose)" (WahidAzal556 2025a). *Temples of the Pure Religion of Gnosis* (Azal 2026d) details various laws, prayers, and practices, including some 55 listed holidays.

In 2022, Wahid named Salman S. Sheikh, Mohammad Rahal, and Syeda Nade Ali Gillani as his *khulafā* (representatives) for North America, Central/South America, and the Indian subcontinent, respectively (Azal 2022b, 2022c, and 2022d). Sheikh, a Pakistani-American esoteric writer living in Philadelphia (and one of Wahid's Letters of NUR), often interviews him on YouTube. Other frequent interlocutors include Keyvan Yahya, a Persian-German computational neuroscientist at the Technische Universität Chemnitz; Matt Douglas (aka Matt Barker), an American teacher and digital creator living in Hua Hin, Thailand; Sam C. Burch, an Aboriginal rights activist and creative writing instructor from Brisbane, who has a Ph.D. from the University of Queensland; and Stephan V. Beyer, the Chicago lawyer and author of *Singing to the Plants: A Guide to Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper Amazon* (Beyer 2009), whose doctorates are in psychology and Buddhist Studies.

Perhaps the most prominent adherent to date has been Peter Lamborn Wilson (aka Hakim Bey, 1945–2022), the late Persianist and radical activist. Wahid read his books in college–*TAZ, the Temporary Autonomous Zone: Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Wilson 1991) proved especially influential–and finally met him at a 1995 meeting of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society (MIAS). As for Wilson's erstwhile support for the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA), Wahid writes that he "literally grilled" the anarchist, who "assured me that it was all ultimately a cosplay" aimed at "bringing public opprobrium and blame upon himself as a means so that he would never be erected into some guru," i.e., the path of *malāmīyah*. "He made a bad decision that spectacularly backfired" (Azal 2026j; cf. Azal 2024a). Wahid has sparred with Wikipedia editors over the claim that Wilson joined the NUR-FSO before his death (Azal 2022e and 2025c).

Where the Bahā'īs view themselves as an independent world religion (a stance established by Shoghi Effendi in the early twentieth century), and the Bayānīs remain within the Muslim *ummah* (albeit as *ghulat*, i.e. "exaggerators" who ascribe divinity to some saintly figure), Wahid states that "I am not a Muslim but by personal innovation a Bayání Gnostic Universalist," adding that "Everything of the very best is contained within" this path: "Mazdaeanism, *batíní* Ismá'ílísm, esoteric Twelver Shi'ism, Sufism, Neo-Zoroastrian Illuminationist Platonism, Hermeticism, Qabbalah and Persian Neoplatonism *tout court* all rolled into one" (Azal 2006, 18). Elsewhere, he volunteers the term "post-Islamic," which "is to

Islam what postmodernism is to modernity. It is not outside of it. Rather, as it were, it is at the very center of its interiority and identity" (Azal 2024b, xxvii n1 and 2024j, 19–20). For his followers,

> Islam is not a confessional identity in the FSO. It is an existential facticity, and since we have our own version of the *shar'ia* as revealed and amended by me, that means that mainstream Islamic orthodoxy does not consider us to be Muslims (WahidAzal556 2025a).

However, individual members such as Salman Sheikh do identify as Muslims.

Politics are central to Wahid's message. His earlier posts are relatively centrist:

> There is at this time no better system(s) in existence other than Western liberal democracies and to think there is one is to be either a hopeless utopian dreamer entangled in paradigms of pure fantasy or to delude oneself just as generations of naive idealistic Marxists did with their impratical [*sic*] agendas [...] (Hazini 2001).

Wahid later flirted with Duginism (viz. Time Monk Radio Network 2015), whose anti-Western Eurasianism and mystical Traditionalism must have appealed. Still, he eventually distanced himself and adopted a position on the Green Marxian Left. Major inspirations include Wilson / Bey, Fanon, Shahid King Bolsen, and Kohei Saito. In a crucial gloss, Wahid interprets the Báb's command in the Arabic *Bayán*, "Do not buy or sell the Four Elements" (9th unity, 11th gate), in anti-capitalist terms. *Essays in Bayánī Political Ontology* explains that

> What [Karl] Marx [1818–1883] exposes as alienation, the Bayān identifies as metaphysical imposture. [...] This is because Marxism remains bound to a materialist grammar in which nature appears as raw substrate—external to the worker, appropriable through labor, and historically mediated through class struggle. Even its most ecological variants preserve this assumption, imagining a rational or equitable administration of nature rather than questioning the premise of administration itself. The Bayān does something categorically different. It declares the elements to be *pre-legal ontic trusts*: unknowable, unexchangeable, and anterior to every regime of value. Their sale is not exploitation; it is a metaphysical falsehood, a claim upon being that cannot, in truth, exist. This is why the prohibition is absolute rather than reformist. It does not regulate extraction; it annuls the ontology that makes extraction intelligible (Azal 2026a, 124).
>
> The corporate state operates through risk assessment, procedural legitimacy, and managed dissent. It can negotiate demands. It can absorb critique. It can even tolerate radical rhetoric, provided it remains within the grammar of policy, rights, and future reform. What it cannot process is an ontological refusal that invalidates its foundational assumptions. This is because [the] Bayānic subject does not request rights to air, water, land, or life. He or she denies the state's authority to distribute them as *metaphysical axiom*. He or she does not argue that privatization is harmful; he or she declares it *metaphysically impossible*. [...] In this sense, the Bayān does what neither Marxism nor its ecological descendants can do. Marxism dreams of a redeemed future.

> Degrowth [Communism] imagines a gentler present. The Bayān judges now. It does not await historical maturation, cultural enlightenment, or institutional reform. It names, in law, what accords with being and what does not (Azal 2026a, 126).

The Bahā'ī religion, by contrast, represents exactly the spirit of gradualism and accommodationism that the Bayān rejects. Azal calls it a "counter-revolution" instigated by imperial powers intent on diluting the revolutionary force of the Bābī movement. The *Essays* shows no interest in gradual reform but demands an immediate and thoroughgoing instauration (see the epigraph that begins this section), even though it does not deny the state's objective reality. Chris Chan displays the same impatience and puerility when he famously calls for videos showing the squalid interior of his house to be taken "off the internet now now now now now now!" (CWCki: "THAT IS MY HOUSE").

In his *Completion of the Arabic* Bayān (15th unity, 16th gate), Wahid envisions a "Luminous House of the Treasury" (*bayt'ul-māl al-nūrānīya*) that will guarantee "lifelong health and mental care, shelter, food, education, and material protection" to all NUR-FSO members. After all, "if the world won't adopt Green Democratic-Socialism, we, the NUR, will build a sacralised Green Democratic-Socialist (or Green Communist) order and take it to the world" (Azal 2022a, 185 n172).

The *Completion* also anticipates an imminent "environmental apocalypse" (Azal 2022a, 182 n159). *Liber Decatriarchia Mystica* (Azal 2006, 10) urges "all the truly realized and high living adepts out there [...] of whatever tradition, lineage or spiritual persuasion they may be," as "the last collective beacons of hope and salvation for this planet," to gather into a UN- or EU-style body. Several Brazilian ayahuasca groups as well as the (fourteenth) Dalai Lama are requested to initiate this endeavor, which is to reflect the principle of "theophanocracy" (after Terry Culhane).

In 2010, Wahid met (online) German artist and journalist Roya Jakoby (née Kirsten Bettina Knörzer, 1968–2019). Raised in Munich, Roya earned a master's degree in communications from the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, then spent two years in the New York City art world (under her birth name, she married artist and graphic designer Jan Audun Uretsky, 1960–2016, in 2002) before moving to London, where she worked as a journalist for the *Guardian* (Azal 2021b). In 2011, Wahid traveled there to meet her in person. On his return to Australia, he learned that Roya was pregnant. He joined her in Berlin, just before their

daughter Nuriel was born in March 2012—six weeks after Soheil Hazini's death (at 62) from stage 4 colon cancer. Wahid and Roya married in July. They remained in Berlin for seven years, until Roya's March 2019 death, apparently from a toxic reaction to an anti-lice scalp ointment that she had neglected to wash off before going to sleep. She was 51. Afterward, Wahid returned with Nuriel to Queensland, for fear that the German courts might find him an unfit parent.

The NUR-FSO remembers Roya as "the *first martyr* in the Light," and recognizes her grave in Berlin as a place of pilgrimage (Azal 2026d, 702). That she represents the Divine Feminine for Wahid seems clear—he calls her "Earth Angel," after a term from Corbin's *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, and "Red Mother" (*Śonāmbā*), an epithet of the Indian goddess Durga.

Certain "procedural irregularities" led Wahid to suspect "possible narrative management," i.e., a "cover-up" (Azal 2025o). To begin with, hospital administrators told him that the state would dispose of Roya's body if funeral arrangements were not made promptly. Yet, medical authorities took eight days to issue a death certificate, without which no funerary arrangements could be made. Wahid also notes contradictions between the official cause of death (a diabetic stroke), the toxicology report, and recent bloodwork showing no sign of diabetes. The Berlin district attorney's office (*Staatsanwaltschaft*) refused to release the coroner's report until Wahid escalated to the federal police (*Bundeskriminalamt*), whose investigator asked the provocative question, "Do you suspect the Bahá'ís were involved in Roya's murder?" (Azal 2025y; Wahid does not indicate which of them was the first to bring up the Bahā'īs). *The Wretched of the Corporate State* (Azal 2025hh) uses his treatment by the German bureaucracy as a symbol of structural racism.

As for how Roya could have been murdered while the family was alone in their apartment, Wahid considers that "some kind of weaponized potassium" might have been slipped to her earlier in the day (Azal 2019d, 2). He came to suspect that their anti-fascist activism (Roya had been a friend of Alternative für Deutschland defector Franziska Schreiber) "probably placed both of us on potential watchlists—not only by far-right actors, but also by German intelligence and international players interested in 'ideological containment'" (Azal 2025y). The implication was that the ostensibly anti-racist Bahā'īs had conspired with far-right elements within the German deep state. To Wahid, this also raised questions about Soheil's untimely death in Australia (Azal 2025x).

As "the most prominent public Bayānī voice in the world," he speculates that the Bahā'ī religion, with its global reach and intelligence ties, had an interest in "neutralizing" him—an interest that converged with that of shadowy elements within Western governments (Azal 2025o). For some reason, none of these forces dared assassinate Wahid himself. At one point, he wrote the Bahā'ī Universal House of Justice directly to demand an answer: "yes or no, were you involved in the murder of my wife Kirsten Roya Azal? Did you commission the poisoning of my wife?" (Azal 2021a).

Another shadow emerged in connection with Roya's funeral. When Wahid first met her in London, Roya was enmeshed in a messy custody dispute over her first child, Inji (b. 2006). A 2019 e-mail exchange between Wahid and Inji's father, Pier Galliet (which Wahid later uploaded to the internet; see Azal and Galliet 2019) establishes that Wahid attempted to send word of Roya's death to twelve-year-old Inji via her youth choir. His message was instead forwarded to Galliet, who (overlooking the breach in protocol) offered his condolences and said he was interested in attending Roya's funeral with Inji. In succeeding e-mails, Wahid stressed that Inji was welcome, but Galliet was not. In fact, if Galliet ever set foot in Germany, Wahid knew "people who would not hesitate to nail you and your crooked friends to a wall." Galliet interpreted this as a physical threat and notified authorities.

Wahid's hostility is explained by his view of Galliet as a pedophile "who had molested his own daughter" (Azal 2026j). While Wahid often accuses his enemies of pedophilia, seemingly without reason or evidence, he acquired this particular conviction from Roya, who (as Galliet states) abducted Inji to Hamburg in 2007, only for the German courts to return her to London in 2009. Since Roya "subjected her to persistent abuse," Galliet was awarded full custody in 2010, with Roya "restricted to a weekly fully supervised 2 hour contact session" and required to "undergo 2 years of psychiatric counselling before she could apply to change the aforementioned contact arrangements." Her parental rights were completely terminated due to "allegations in 2011 from a recent ex-fiancee of Inji's mother that she was planning to have me assaulted and Inji abducted again" (Azal and Galliet 2019). Wahid's eulogy for Roya portrays her as a martyr who "suffered for the past 11–12 years as a consequence of wrongs no one should ever have to suffer." Wahid promises to connect half-sisters Nuriel and Inji (a university

student at this writing). He castigates "that accursed demon of perdition" (i.e., Galliet) as well as the "satanic" British family court system (Azal 2020d).

Here and elsewhere, Wahid emphasizes the importance of *tabarra* ("dissociation" from evil), because love means nothing without hate, and a God who is "a happy-clappy fluff-bunny" would be unworthy of worship (Azal 2023). In that spirit, in 2025, in over a dozen blog posts, he publicly broke ties with his mother, Mitra, and one of his sisters, Nika. While relations had been strained for years, the trigger was Mitra's Facebook messages praising Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu, Reza Pahlavi (son of the late shah), and Pauline Hanson (Azal 2025bb and 2025cc). To Wahid, these posts were no mere expressions of political opinion, but "the announcement of a relational rupture." The reader should understand that older Iranian expatriates are often staunchly pro-Israel, partly out of a perception that Iran's theocratic government (which they fled) sides with the Palestinians.

Wahid also suspects a friend of Mitra's of exercising "undue influence" and "coercive control" over her, e.g., by curating her Facebook wall, supposedly on behalf of Chabad (Azal 2025z and 2025dd). In another inspiration for *The Wretched of the Corporate State*, Wahid's complaint to (Social) Services Australia's Fraud and Compliance unit went nowhere when its staff came to identify *him* as the problem.

As for Nika, "[f]or twenty-five years I have watched my sister drift into the orbit of institutions that trade in moral inversion and evil," most recently the UK-based organization Lawyers for Israel. "Nika sold out; I did not. She aligned with the devil; I aligned with God. Final message to my Zionist sister: [...] Fuck Israel" (Azal 2025e). Wahid further anathematizes her in pseudo-Qur'anic verse:

1. Perish the hands of the traitor, *Nika*, for her soul shall be brought low!
2. She preferred delusion to truth; therefore she broke the covenant and sold her fidelity to the Jew! (Azal 2025ee; note the "Covenant-breaker" language).

Wahid's political views (which here receive the imprimatur of divine revelation) could not be called nuanced. A less enlightened person might have tolerated the contrary opinions of relatives, or considered that reasonable people can disagree on such matters, but for Wahid, moderation and compromise are of the devil. Ironically, he criticizes his mother for her "binary moral landscape" that admits of "no middle ground" (Azal 2025v). Elsewhere he calls "intolerance of ambiguity"

and "black-and-white thinking [...] the lifeblood of every totalitarian system, religious or secular" (Azal 2025l, 49).

To address the anti-Semitic elephant in the room, while Wahid sometimes writes as though he were socialized by 4chan, he is also capable of engaging with Judaica at a high level, as he does in his comments on Steven Wasserstrom's (1993 and 2002) hypothesized Islamic neo-Platonic origins for the *Sefer Yesira* (Azal 2020c). The explanation lies in Wahid's distinction between (good) Mizrahi Jews like his ancestors, who once lived alongside Muslims in peace; and (bad) "European AshkeNazi Jews," whose "Semitic and Jewish pedigree is questionable since they are descendents [*sic*] of the Slavo-Turk kingdom of the Khazars" (talk.religion.bahai, 10 April 2015).

Scoffing at the notion "that reptilian shape-shifting aliens, hidden celestial Archons, the Devil, the Jews, the Illuminati, or similar" are responsible for all the world's ills (Azal 2025k, xxix), Wahid describes a complex global conspiracy dominated not by Jews per se, but by Western capitalists/imperialists—only some of them Jewish—from their base in the City of London, i.e. the Square Mile. (Azal 2015, 6 denounces Wall Street as well.) His writings often refer to "Anglo-Zionist" machinations, a pairing seemingly inspired by the history of Bahā'ī collaboration with these powers. The result is an

> Empire of pedophiles, child rapists and cannibals run by the Sabbatean-Frankist cabal of Lubavitcher (Chabad) demons (*dibbukim*). May this Lubavitcher menace return to the *Sitra Ahra* (hell) where it rightfully belongs and go back into the *Qelippoth* (infernal shells of darkness) and the Tree of Death (*etz ha-mavet*) from where it first emerged. And may the real Jews finally emerge to put this *abomination of desolation* in its place and thereby permanently shut the door to the criminally conspiratorial and heretical Zoharic-Lurianic Gnosticism that has spawned Sabbataeanism, then Frankism and then finally these Lubavitchers constituting the Synagogue of Satan (Azal 2026c).

Note his reference to "the real Jews." Wahid clarifies:

> Now, what we have just said above is in no way, shape, form or manner any kind of endorsement of Antisemitism, since the Sabbatian-Frankists have always been and continue to be, first and foremost, enemies to all actual Jews. For example, their possible active involvement in the Holocaust (as a strategy to attain a certain end) is something that is only now beginning to be discussed among some circles. We also mentioned in the notes the possibility of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* itself being a deliberate Sabbatian-Frankist forgery in order to intentionally cultivate Antisemitism for the specific long-term purpose to that end (Azal 2025k, 95–6).

For all his fine distinctions, Wahid borrows heavily from conspiratorial language and concepts. Although he now condemns Alexander Dugin's "Fourth Political Theory" (Azal 2016), its portrayal of Zionists and Atlanticists as the villains of modern geopolitics offers an intriguing parallel. Prior to his Duginist phase, Wahid described a more ecumenical conspiracy reminiscent of the "Black Lodge" from Theosophical lore:

> As Revealed to me by the Archangel Metatron, behind exoteric religion in the past 2,800 years has stealthily stood in the shadowy corners of power globally a Black Magick power cult and lineage of dark sorcerers, the Black Brotherhood. It is this cult and powerful secret society who has [been], and still is, responsible for supporting and maintaining exoteric religion and its power structures (Azal 2006, 109).

As Wahid explains (Azal 2025aa, 103 n23), his language of a "Sabbatean-Frankist cabal" comes from rabbi/conspiracy theorist Marvin S. Antelman (1933–2013), who was in turn inspired by Gershom Scholem's (1897–1982) then-recent scholarship on Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676) and Jacob Frank (1726–1791), beginning with *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (1971). Zevi, a Smyrniot rabbi turned messianic claimant, interpreted the Lurianic *tikkun olam* ("repairing the world" by liberating the divine sparks from their *qlippoth*) to require the deliberate violation of Jewish law, i.e. "redemption through sin." Frank, a Podolian merchant who claimed to be Zevi's reincarnation, launched a sort of eighteenth-century sequel. Although Sabbateanism is now confined to the few thousand members of Turkey's Dönme minority, and Frankism seems to have died out in the nineteenth century, Scholem argues that their non-literal approach to Torah observance influenced the liberalizing trends of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment. Antelman's *To Eliminate the Opiate* (two volumes, 1974 and 2002) represents these currents as a secret society spreading its corruption through puppet organizations like Soviet Communism or the Bavarian Illuminati. Scholem wrote in his copy of the first volume, "Nonsense based on me!!!!" (see scanned page in Leshem 2020).

As Jewish messianic claimants who embraced antinomianism via the Divine Feminine, Zevi and Frank might seem as though they would appeal to Wahid (Zevi even converted to Bektashi Islam, albeit under compulsion), but no—he objects to the Lurianic Kabbalah on the grounds that God's unicity is incompatible with the concept of *tsimtsum* ("contraction" of the divine to allow a space for the creation of the world) (Azal 2026e). However, from an Akbarian perspective, apparent evil (even conspiracies) must, at some level, accord with the divine will. In any case,

Wahid believes that Sabbatean-Frankism survives as a secretive force within or behind the Catholic Church (to which Frank converted), various Jewish organizations, and global elites in general. Crucially, CESNUR turns out to be a "Sabbatean-Frankist global outreach front" (Azal 2025l, 2, 4, 18, *et passim*).

Wahid's embrace of Antelman is odd, given that the rabbi is an anti-Communist religious Zionist, and Wahid a Marxian anti-Zionist. Like the bit about the Khazars, Frankism appears in anti-Semitic or alt-Right discourse with some regularity—Candace Owens recently mentioned it (Grisar 2024), as did Dugin (2026). Wahid's suspicions of cannibalism and pedophilia seem to reflect "Sabbatian-Frankist sexual inversion rituals, where salvation is achieved through transgression" (Azal 2025l, 64) and "flouting and inverting all law and morality" liberates the divine sparks (Azal 2025k, 90). One wonders how much these projections owe to Wahid's own experience of the Left-Hand Path. Where he once felt a connection to Chabad, he now condemns the movement (whose very name references three sefirot in the Lurianic system), and accuses its members of taking advantage of his mother, in addition to their role in the global conspiracy.

Wahid has long been fascinated by the *Protocols*. Bennett (2025b) screenshots a post of his saying that, even if fake, they nevertheless accurately describe Jewish behavior. It is far from the only example. On the other hand, Wahid's *Protocols of the Elders of Britain* (a multipart series on talk.religion.bahai, from 29 April 2009; not to be confused with the eponymous short story by John Brunner, 1934–1995) alters the text of the *Protocols*, for example, by replacing "Jews" with "Anglo-Saxons," and other such substitutions. This resonates with other comments of his:

> The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* may be a documentary fabrication of the Tsarist secret police at the turn of the last century, but in its slur against the Jews what it reveals is actually true; yet what it says does not exclusively apply to the Jewish elite but rather the British financial elite. What is and has been doing exactly what the fictitious Illuminati has been accused of and what the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* impugns about the Jews in the conspiracy theory literature is none other than the Corporation of London (talk.religion.bahai, 20 Nov. 2011).

Here too Wahid seems to be following *To Eliminate the Opiate* (Antelman 1974, xvii–xix and 2002, ch. 22). Recall also the claim of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln 1982) that the *Protocols* reflect the genuine plans, not of Jews, but of the Priory of Sion (which Wahid admires; see Azal 2006, 6, 85, 155).

For Wahid, the main enemy—the nexus of white racism, neoliberalism, Western imperialism, and so on—manifests through any number of puppet organizations. The Bahā'ī religion represents a "Western soft-power replacement theology," a "Western-approved substitute for Islam" that "preserves the optics and aesthetics of prophetic religion while quietly neutralizing its revolutionary core" (Azal 2025ff). Bahā'u'llāh himself cooperated with British colonial networks; Carnegie- and Rockefeller-funded peace societies helped the religion expand globally. (Compare with Guénon's similar view of Theosophy). Ex-Bahā'īs do not fare much better in his eyes; they are a "controlled opposition for the Haifan Baha'i establishment" (Azal 2026g; cf. 2026h), and an expression of a "racial contract" (after Charles W. Mills, 1951–2021) dedicated to the universalization of white liberal norms (Azal 2026f).

Since a few ex-Bahā'īs have joined the Unitarian Universalists (UUs), Wahid views that rather milquetoast denomination harshly, calling it a CIA front and

> a sophisticated mechanism for managing geopolitical friction with the Middle East. [...] By absorbing ex-Baha'is and reorienting their dissent toward liberal pluralism rather than oppositional theocracy, UU congregations effectively *depoliticize* individuals who might otherwise engage in transnational advocacy that could embarrass either the Haifan administration or its Western backers (Azal 2026i; cf. Azal 2026g).

Wahid is also suspicious of UU interfaith rhetoric:

> What makes this ecumenism colonially inflected is not merely its Western provenance, but its *asymmetrical structure of recognition*. Traditions rooted in law, revelation, metaphysical realism, or sacral authority are tolerated only after being stripped of precisely those features that challenge liberal sovereignty (Azal 2026a, lxiii).

"It is no exaggeration that the white liberal-centrist and his ideology is a species of fascism and white supremacy," says Wahid (Azal 2026b).

Of the dozens of ex-Bahā'ī / Bahā'ī dissident blogs and discussion groups that flourished in the early 2000s, few survive today. The most prominent is the r/exbahai subreddit (f. 2013), which Wahid suspects of being secretly moderated by Bahā'īs. If the NUR-FSO ever publishes his Collected Works, whole volumes will have to be devoted to his feuds with ex-Bahā'īs Dale Husband and D.C. Shepard, *inter alia*. Interestingly, Wahid's complaint that ex-Bahā'īs "want to just basically perpetuate the grievance itself, without resolution" (Azal 2026p, 48:00 ff) agrees with Momen (2007). Wahid is also the primary moderator of, and contributor to, the r/bayan subreddit, with the more substantial items cross-posted to Blogger or Substack. YouTube videos are another

important medium. Some are interviews with Wahid by his disciples; others are from his Zoom courses on Mullā Sadrā, Suhrawardī, ibn al-'Arabī, or the Qur'an.

His Library of the Greatest Name reaches fifteen volumes at this writing (up to Azal 2026n). Most have been uploaded to archive.org and the National Library of Australia website, where they are free to read. Shorter essays are often posted to academia.edu. Wahid was suspended from Facebook in 2025; he responded by calling for the mass abandonment of that platform, while simultaneously petitioning to be reinstated (Azal 2025d, 2025m). Compare with Chris Chan's boycotts of Sega, for coloring Sonic's arms blue instead of peach for the *Sonic Boom* series (CWCki: "Sonic Boom Protests"); and of Hasbro, for rebooting the My Little Pony franchise (CWCki: "My Little Pony Protests").

Wahid practically lives on the internet, and much NUR-FSO activity takes place there. For one illustrative moment, I single out the 2022 episode in which members rallied around Salman Sheikh after his falling out with San Francisco grifter Douglas Duane Dietrich. At the time, Dietrich was associated with Peter Moon, proprietor of the Time Travel Education Center, and co-author with Preston B. Nichols of *The Montauk Project: Experiments in Time* (Nichols and Moon 1992). Sheikh first discovered Dietrich in 2015, and from 2017, sent monthly donations totaling thousands of dollars (Sheikh 2022a, 2022b). "I always did right by them," he recalls. "I honestly believed their mission" (Sheikh 2022c, 1:45). Sheikh and Dietrich each appeared on the other's YouTube channel several times. However, Sheikh grew uncomfortable with Dietrich's racism and plagiarism and withdrew from further collaboration. Then, in the course of a nearly twelve-hour 22 May 2022 YouTube livestream, Dietrich disparaged Sheikh's Sufism and Freemasonry as Satanism-adjacent heresies (Dietrich 2022).

Dietrich (b. 1966 in Taipei) is the son of a US Navy veteran father and a half-Taiwanese, half-Japanese mother. By his own account (Dietrich 2019 and 2020), his mother, as a diplomatic translator for the Japanese Empire, collected a semen sample from Adolf Hitler (1889–1945, but Dietrich says he escaped to a subterranean realm) in 1936 via fellatio, then froze it for thirty years before artificially inseminating herself; thus Dietrich is Hitler's biological son. Contrary to popular perception, Hitler "believed in equal rights for all races" and "would be disgusted with White Supremacists." He fought US and Soviet breeding programs aimed at replacing their populations with "human ape hybrids who would literally work for peanuts." Unfortunately, Hitler's plans for a vampire nation-state

were frustrated by Joseph Stalin's (1878–1953) extermination of this misunderstood minority (except for Dietrich, who is a vampire). Also, Japan won World War II.

Around 1982, US Army intelligence officer Michael Aquino (later the founder of the Temple of Set) recruited Dietrich to work with him at San Francisco's Presidio military base, hoping to convert him to the worship of the Edomite anti-gods. Instead, Dietrich—a civilian research librarian whose job was to incinerate classified records—became a whistleblower, alerting the world to the reality of various *X-Files*-type topics, as well as the prevalence of Satanic ritual abuse at the Presidio. The reader will not be surprised to learn that Steve Outtrim (2016) and Richard K. Cole, Jr. (2026) have found holes in Dietrich's claims, for example, to have worked at the Presidio during the 1980s or served in the US Marine Corps in the 1990s.

Matt Douglas, making a guest appearance on Sheikh's YouTube channel (Sheikh 2022c), agrees that some of Dietrich's assertions are "highly questionable, in particular, his claim about a neutron bomb creating zombies." The idea was that prions released by the bomb would affect the human brain similar to mad cow disease; Douglas points out that in a fusion reaction, gamma rays "are gonna fry you before you get a chance to be turned into a zombie." As for Moon, "immediately when he started talking about time travel, that sent a red flag up." On inspection, Douglas found that Moon's representation of the underlying physics "wasn't something that could be an honest mistake, and in fact involved considerable visual/verbal sleight-of-hand, to get you to buy his bullshit."

Wahid made a video of his own (Azal 2022f) focusing on Dietrich's claim that the text of Qur'an 25:29—which calls Satan "a deserter to man in his hour of need"—somehow relates to H.P. Lovecraft's (1890–1937) fictional monster, Cthulhu. Like Laurence Galian (2003, 394), Dietrich traces *Cthulhu* to the Arabic *khadhulu* ("Betrayer," "Forsaker," or "Abandoner"), and translates the versicule as "*Mankind, Shaitan is Khadhulaa.*" Wahid points out that *khadhulaa* is a verb. Of course, any phonetic similarity is coincidental; *Cthulhu* is more likely inspired by *chthonic*. The same passage in Galian goes on to propose a specious Sumerian etymology. It discusses the Sufi concepts of *tafrid* ("singling out" God as one's focus) and *tajrid* ("divesting" oneself of worldly attachments). Dietrich mentions all of these things too, suggesting that he is following the Galian book.

On his reading, *tafrid* and *tajrid* amount to a kind of goetic *qigong* practice through which the Sufi invites possession by demons. Cthulhu is conceived as a dragon-like "Lord of the Abyss" who challenges the Sufi to abandon everything—even conventional morality—for the sake of crossing this Abyss. (Note the Crowleyan resonances). Wahid rightly dismisses all of this as a romantic Orientalizing misrepresentation of Sufism and Islam, arising from the "conspirituality" subculture (after Ward and Voas 2011).

In an odd twist of fate, the Galian book was originally supposed to be coauthored by Michael McCarron ("Salim Ali"), who once joined Nima and Harry Duran on a trip to the Netherlands to visit Sheikhbahaei. The collaboration ended when McCarron and Galian quarreled over a woman; Duran then forced McCarron to pay nearly USD 5,000, so that Galian could self-publish the manuscript. Peter Lamborn Wilson praised the book as "hip Islam" rather than "square Islam" (Campbell 2021 and 2023).

Sheikh has since hosted other Dietrich defectors on his YouTube channel, including Ani Osaru, Jameson Reese, Daniel Arola, and Penny Bradley. The first two are occultists and conspiracy theorists; Bradley is a survivor of the Secret Space Program.

The paleo-Bayānīs remain uninterested in the NUR-FSO. "O People of the Bayān," Wahid writes in his *Tablet of Invitation to the People of the Bayān*, "We have waited for you longer than the nineteen years that the Primal Point advised Us to wait for you! We will continue to wait for you beyond that" (Azal 2024h, 22). Wahid also hopes to remarry, and requests the assistance of the Bayānī community in finding him a suitable wife (who would have to move to Australia) "so that We may [...] meet our obligation towards the Book of God regarding marriage with a believer; and also so that there may be a new mother for Our Light" (Azal 2024h, 22, 44 n34).

Wahid reports multiple attempts by agents or actors of some sort to destabilize him, and/or insinuate themselves into Bayānī forums. He fumes at "these various trolls and *criminals* online that have been entangled with me for quite a long time, almost two decades now" (but especially after 2016). He warns that "there are many eyes watching them, and everybody is in agreement—including a branch of German law enforcement—that these people are engaging in outright criminal activity" (Azal 2020b, 1:44 ff; 4:20 ff). Compare with Chris Chan's angry threat

to his trolls, should images of his house not be taken down: "I'll send in detectives, I'll send in police, I'll send in everything in my power!" (CWCki: "THAT IS MY HOUSE").

Like Chris Chan, Wahid complains of catfishing attempts and connects the deaths of his wife and father with incidents that occurred in 2023 and 2025. The first featured an unnamed Turkish woman from Izmir who "contacted me via Facebook, feigning romantic interest." Wahid was struck by her resemblance to the image on the "Eve" card of his NUR Tarot deck (painted by Habib Shahbazi; Azal 2024c). Their exchanges lasted 36 days, and "ended abruptly" (Azal 2025o).

The second incident involved one Ronia Ahmad or Ronia Haidar, apparently a Lebanese Alawite, psychotherapist, "Sufi priestess," and "part-time mortician" whose first message (again via Facebook) was, "Your light called to mine through the veil. I feel we've known each other across lifetimes." Soon she was asking Wahid to "Tell me about [Swiss Traditionalist writer Frithjof] Schuon [1907–1998]" (Azal 2025s). "What began as a seemingly earnest spiritual connection," he recalls, "rapidly revealed itself to be a carefully stage-managed infiltration" (Azal 2025a). During their month-long interactions, Ronia "not only defended the Bahá'í faith with unrelenting insistence, but also maneuvered me into an email exchange with individuals affiliated with the European identitarian far-right—some of the same ideological circles implicated in the constellation of actors behind Roya's murder" (Azal 2025o).

Ronia turned out to be a follower of George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866?–1949), whose philosophy and cult Wahid would harshly criticize (e.g. Azal 2025t). The online relationship took a strange turn:

> Suddenly, she mentioned an 'anonymous benefactor' funding her Sufi-Gurdjieffian work. She casually name-dropped a few shady NGOs. She defended cults. She spoke glowingly of the Bahá'ís and a Dr. Vahid at an ER. She then 'accidentally' looped me into an email thread with a white nationalist disguised as a religious pluralist. [...] Her professional profile disappeared. Her email address bounced. Her backstory mutated. Now she wasn't a mortician, she was a grief doula. Not a Sufi, but a 'quantum priestess of the lunar wound'. The house she claimed to live in? Undeliverable. The man she claimed was her father? Possibly fictional (Azal 2025s).

And then Ronia disappeared, her digital footprint carefully scrubbed (Azal 2025r). Wahid now believes she was an intelligence agent (Azal 2025q), possibly working for Mossad (Azal 2025p) and/or CESNUR (Azal 2025a). He has filed complaints with the Australian Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security

(Azal 2025n) and the Queensland Human Rights Commission (on the grounds of religious discrimination and spiritual harassment; Azal 2025h).

Another possibility occurs to me—that Ronia and the Turkish woman were ordinary civilians who had second thoughts about dating Wahid and decided to "ghost" him. Anyway, catfishers generally go after money; it is difficult to imagine what use Wahid would be to any intelligence agency. For comparison, he also thinks that Starr Saffa's "entire friendship with me was phony from start to finish, predicated on keeping an eye on me and appraising [*sic*] [University of Michigan history professor Juan R.I.] Cole, [Kalimát Press publisher Anthony A.] Lee and company as to my activities" (talk.religion.bahai, 9 Dec. 2005). Meanwhile, Dale Husband is an "uncover [*sic*] Baha'i working for the Bahai Internet Agency while pretending to be an atheist and UU member" (WahidAzal556 and OfficialDCShepard 2024, 9). I probably work for the US military (talk.religion.bahai, 18 Feb. 2013), if I am even a single person (Azal 2025gg, 57). Visitors to the r/bayan subreddit can expect to encounter similar suspicion, and will find Wahid vigilant against online infiltration by Bahā'īs, Zionists, Duginists, and other imagined foes.

To anticipate an obvious question, I gather that Nima was sent to psychologists in his youth, and that his issues were then poorly understood. In any case, psychiatric labels have limited explanatory power. As "Turkey Tom" Swanson puts it,

> Some people get the short end of the stick when it comes to genetics, and not all of them deal with it gracefully. Sure, congenital issues can account for some shortcomings, but how many? When does someone cross the line, and, despite their defects, when can they be held accountable for their actions? (Swanson 2023).

Wahid blames others more often than one would expect from a practitioner of *malāmīyah*. In a rare moment of self-awareness, he writes, "I apologize for the intensity that is my personality, but I am what I am, and I have always meant well, in the good and the bad times" (Azal 2006, 7).

Wahid is sensitive to the reductive hazards of a biographical or psychological approach to his scholarship, which, for all its unevenness, sometimes displays real brilliance. A recent example would be his analysis of Jamshid Maʿānī (1936–2009?), an Iranian Bahā'ī who, as a Bahā'ī missionary ("pioneer") among the Dayaks of Borneo in 1962 or 1963, dreamed that Bahā'u'llāh appointed him as the next prophet. Wahid, with obvious sympathy, takes a history-of-ideas approach to

a pair of Maʿānī's pamphlets, which "sit at a strange crossroads between late Bahāʾī universalism, perennialist humanism (in a Huxleyan sense), quasi-mystical cosmology, and an almost technocratic-utopian sociology" (Azal 2026m). Notice that Wahid is able to treat the Bahā'ī element dispassionately. Beyond that, he brings out aspects of Islamicate history and theology (including Bahā'ī lore) that evade others. I am reminded of Donald Harman Akenson's description of St. Paul:

> At first sight, he's the kind of person none of us really wants to meet. He's injured in some way we can't quite define: there's something that makes him uneasy, and he transmits that discomfort to everyone he deals with. [...] He can be trying. People he's attempted to talk to have beaten him up [...] [His] writing is notoriously jagged, full of metaphors that fly right out of the frame of discussion, packed with contradictions of his own arguments and mined with analogies that backfire. That is no real problem, once one realizes that his mind simply does not work like that of most people, and this because he has his own mode of perception (Akenson 2000, 7–8).

Like Paul, Wahid—after his own *enantiodromia*—places himself at the head of a religious movement that may not entirely welcome his leadership or theological innovations. (Following Eisenman 1997, he sides with James, the brother of Jesus, against "the satanic Paulianist Lie"; see Azal 2006, 36 *et passim*; cf. Azal 2025j, 32–3). On the other hand, the NUR-FSO hardly seems poised to convert the ecumene of its day; rather, it resembles some forgotten faction, like the followers of Simon Magus.

Just as saints and heresiarchs have their tropes, so do lolcows. A lolcow ought to be a colorful character, and Wahid is certainly that. However, Chris Chan's story amuses, even when it is wrong to laugh. Wahid, on the other hand, is received as pathetic, annoying, or threatening, but not usually as funny. In that case, can he still count as a lolcow? Other terms such as "horrorcow" have been coined for non-comic lolcows, but none seem applicable here.

Slop Roach (2026) places 26 typical lolcow traits (crowdsourced from his audience) on a tier list, based on their prevalence among identified lolcows. Two traits—"lack of self-awareness" and "delusions of grandeur"—are shared by virtually all lolcows. Nick Crowley (2026) proposes a useful lolcow typology that distinguishes seven levels of severity: (1) unintentional comedy arising from the contrast between the lolcow's self-perception, and perception by others (this means that the lolcow must sincerely lack self-awareness, not be putting on an act like Filthy Frank / Pink Guy); (2) the even more delusional belief that one is the best or smartest in the world, and that everyone else is wrong or lying; (3) a

symbiotic relationship with trolls, whose attention the lolcow craves; (4) a tendency to overshare personal details, especially over the internet; (5) being perpetually online; (6) "main character syndrome"; and (7) an inability to learn from mistakes. Wahid clearly fits (5) and (6), while the other categories are debatable (thus raising the question of whether these seven traits exist on a cumulative scale after all). Although he complains of trolls, I am not convinced that he has any. Rather, he reliably calls negative attention to himself on multiple forums, almost as if he were trying to recruit antagonists with the right kinds of subject interests.

Kiwi Farms, CESNUR, and Me

> Each person must ask what his relationship is to the scapegoat. I am not aware of my own, and I am persuaded that the same holds true for my readers. We only have legitimate enmities. And yet the entire universe swarms with scapegoats.
>
> —René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (1986, 41)

> Are we the baddies?
>
> —Mitchell and Webb

The internet is full of audience cults, some associated with client cults (think of YouTube's scam gurus), and a few with full-blown cult movements. Which of these ought to be considered religious is difficult to say, due to the difficulty of demarcating the category of "religion." For example, the "Final Fantasy House" from the early 2000s was a group of *Final Fantasy VII* fans led by Jennifer Cornet, who lived together in a State College, Pennsylvania, apartment to role-play full-time as characters from that game (Genkicrack 2005; M. 2025). They recruited new participants online. When defectors exposed the group's dysfunction and squalor, remaining members moved across the country and eventually shifted to the *Hannibal* TV series fandom. Like later cohorts of Otherkin / Fictionkin, Cornet described their activities not as role-playing, but as "soul-bonding" with—i.e., recognizing themselves as incarnations of—their characters, who were thought to exist in a parallel universe. If this seems reminiscent of Chris Chan's various delusions, recall that "soul-bonding" was a phrase he used to justify his sexual relations with his mother.

Embodying a character from popular culture does not seem fundamentally different from embodying one from religious lore, a phenomenon well attested cross-culturally. Wahid Azal follows Bābī precedent when he claims to be the archetypal return of various religious figures. Consider also the tulpamancy practiced by certain Bronies (e.g. DeadwingDork 2025; see Mikles and Laycock 2015 and Joffe 2016 for the Tibetan and Theosophical background).

As we depart from models based on what we might call "legacy" religions (on analogy with legacy media)—i.e., religion as an all-encompassing identity group comparable to one's nationality, not a mere hobby or personal interest—we face fundamental questions. What does it mean to study religion, or to support freedom of religion, when the very category blurs into adjacent phenomena? (I submit that religion is usefully understood as a *genre*, with tropes that evolve). And what significance can religious expression have at such granular levels? To be sure, both Chris Chan and Wahid Azal adopt the trappings of the major-league religions they are imitating (as do the Bahā'īs). Yet even mainstream religious groups dissolve into multivocality; no one really thinks that the Archbishop of Canterbury "represents" the whole Anglican Communion anymore.

The micro scale of most lolcow fandoms also makes it difficult for researchers to avoid becoming "part of the story," so to speak, to the extent that scholars or journalists can be distinguished from ordinary fans. After all, we are hardly immune to the underlying psychological forces. Arguably, drawing attention to lolcows—even from an academic motivation—only makes their predicament worse. Indeed, the very concept has been criticized as inherently abusive (e.g., Rauchberg 2025). On the other hand, most lolcows are already internet-famous. Moreover, the phenomenon is clearly significant, perhaps even emblematic of a broader generational maladaptiveness.

No Wikipedia article exists on Chris Chan. After several attempts to create one in 2009, administrators blocked ("salted") his name from being used as a page title. Steps were also taken to block any mention of him in other articles. For example, the entry for "Kiwi Farms" explains only that the site was "launched as a forum website to troll and harass an individual originally noticed in 2007 on the *Something Awful* forums," and that its earlier name, CWCki Forums, was "based on their initials." The reasoning behind this erasure seems to be that coverage of Chris Chan would be unencyclopedic, attract trolls, and itself constitute a form of cyberbullying (see "Wikipedia: Biographies of Living

Persons," subsection "Avoid Victimization"). Administrator Daniel Rigal calls Chris "an extremely vulnerable, non-notable, private individual who is being hounded by an organization which has already driven people to suicide." (This last point is disputed). According to oversighter Blade of the Northern Lights, "there's zero chance that will ever be an article. This person has been burned quite enough without Wikipedia throwing yet more gasoline and lit matches on what are obviously some deep scars" (Wikipedia: Administrators' Noticeboard / Incident Archive 1074, 4 Aug. 2021).

YouTube, by contrast, abounds with Chris Chan content, but terminated Geno Samuel's original Chris Chan channel in 2018, when he applied to monetize it. YouTube is notoriously cagey about its content standards—witness all the pointless euphemisms for advertiser-unfriendly words like "rape" or "suicide"—but in this case issued "community guidelines" strikes over depictions of bullying. Samuel successfully appealed, although his channel was never returned; the episodes were reuploaded (with edits) to a backup channel (CWCki: "Chris Chan: A Comprehensive History"). In 2026, YouTube issued content strikes against episode 12 of Samuel's revised, remastered edition of the series, resulting in a seven-day suspension. YouTube's AI apparently detected a "slutload.com" watermark in one clip, and a *Playboy* link in a chat log shown onscreen. Two weeks earlier, episode 10—in which BlueSpike forces Chris to violate himself rectally—had been reuploaded without objection. One thinks of the alien songs celebrating the rape of Fr. Sandoz in Mary Doria Russell's science-fiction novel *The Sparrow* (1996).

If creating a Wikipedia page about Chris might qualify as harassment, then what does that say about the present paper, or any academic study of the lolcow phenomenon? And by what principle ought other, possibly similar cases to be decided? For example, Greta Thunberg has Asperger's; does she deserve protection from potentially hostile internet audiences? Does it matter that she actively courts publicity (as does Chris Chan), or that she and her handlers manage it more effectively? What about Jacob Chansley (aka Jacob Angeli), the "QAnon Shaman"—is he fair game? After all, he has been diagnosed with multiple psychiatric disorders. Does hosting articles on such well-known figures make Wikipedia complicit in victimizing the vulnerable? The possibility that random people might be thrust unwillingly into the spotlight sits uncomfortably with

such moralizing. What about "Dog Shit Girl," who went viral in 2005 for refusing to clean up after her dog on the Seoul subway? What about Monica Lewinsky?

Other concerns involve noteworthiness and the availability of reliable sources. For example, Tucker Carlson has reported on Chris, but referred to him as "Chan," as if that were his actual surname. Is prime-time coverage sufficient to establish noteworthiness? Is FOX a reliable source, despite its sloppy errors? To the cynic, the process invites what is known as "Wiki-lawyering." A sufficiently motivated Wikipedian might even compose articles or books—possibly for scholarly journals or presses—for the sake of citing them as reliable sources on Wikipedia. If this seems far-fetched, consider that edit wars over Bābī and Bahā'ī subjects have centered on the question of what counts as a reliable source, e.g., whether a book published by a Bahā'ī press is somehow more legitimate than one from the Library of the Greatest Name.

There is, as yet, no Wikipedia article on "Bayānism" or "Wahid Azal," while "Bábism" and "Báb" (note the acute accents, in conformity with the official Bahā'ī house style) show telltale signs of Bahā'ī bias. Since Wikipedia articles on obscure topics are vulnerable to capture by a determined lobby, it may be that Bahā'ī perspectives prevail less through superior sources than superior numbers. While more attention has focused on paid editing by PR firms and bad-faith edits by governments and politicians, religious groups have also been caught trying to game the system (Wikipedia: "Conflict-of-interest editing on Wikipedia"). Of course, few Wikipedians are truly neutral, especially when it comes to subjects of passionate interest. As an *Atlantic* article put it, "All Wikipedia editors, whether volunteer or paid, come to their keyboards with some kind of bias" (Pinsker 2015). Much the same could be said of academia, where, for example, Bahā'ī loyalists and critics have contested the presentation of that religion (see Momen 2007 and Bei 2011).

Kiwi Farms has attracted much controversy for what is often billed as crowdsourced harassment—similar, perhaps, to China's "human flesh search engine" (*rénròu sōusuǒ,* 人肉搜索) that investigates and doxxes offenders in pursuit of vigilante justice. Although the site formally discourages harassment ("No trolling plans"; "THE KIWI FARMS [...] DOES NOT CONDONE 'SWATTING' OR ANY FORM OF HARASSMENT"), critics view such statements as disingenuous, since the very purpose of Kiwi Farms is to celebrate, if not directly organize, such acts. Its biggest enemies are networked transgender activists—no

strangers to campaigns of abuse directed against their enemies—led by Canadian Communist Twitch streamer Clara "Keffals" Sorrenti. Most news coverage of Kiwi Farms focuses on either the harassment angle or the information-security angle, i.e., the back-and-forth struggles to deplatform or protect the site. A *Wired* article (Cross 2023) goes deeper than most, identifying an "ethical minefield" and "classic rights conflict" that forces adversaries either to advocate broader corporate or governmental censorship, or to content themselves with merely inconveniencing Kiwi Farms users.

If the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) represents Freedom of Speech in this conflict, then CESNUR represents Freedom of Religion—the second of Franklin D. Roosevelt's (1882–1945) Four Freedoms—in the conflict over "cults." This, too, involves a classic rights conflict, with the price of freedom being tolerance for abusive groups. As Rosita Šorytė (2025) points out, Wahid Azal, perhaps counterintuitively, sides with the anti-cult movement. If heretofore, anti-cult groups could be roughly divided into mainstream-religious and secular varieties, then Wahid represents an emerging third wing that Šorytė dubs "New Age" (although he deplores the label). For Wahid, cults are distinguished not only by their lack of genuine spiritual inspiration, but also by the "problem of authoritarianism" (Azal 2025k, 87)—Wahid characterizes himself as anti-authoritarian (Azal 2025k, 9)—in which divine law is reduced to the arbitrary dictates of the leader (Azal 2025k, 59, 66).

The immediate context for his stance is his opposition to the Ahmadi Religion for Peace and Light (AROPL, but Wahid often writes "AROLP" or even "ARLOP"), founded in 2015 by Egyptian-American documentary videographer and putative *mahdī* Abdullah Hashem (b. 1983; not to be confused with the far larger Ahmadiyya movement, founded in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, 1835–1908). To convey some notion of Hashem's teachings (and perhaps, his merits as *mahdī*), when asked for a solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, he proposed a "giant *mubāhala*" (mutual execration) between delegations of Jewish and Muslim leaders, recapitulating the contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:17–40). That is, each side should erect a wooden altar, sacrifice a bull, and call down fire from heaven. "If fire consumes the offering of Israel, in front of the whole world, then everybody should immediately convert to Judaism," or else Islam, in case its altar blazes instead. If nothing happens, then the two sides could consider third religions, or else agree to live together peacefully

in a secular society (The Mahdi Has Appeared 2023, 22:00). Wahid discovered AROPL on Facebook soon after the group's founding, when someone linked to it on a now-defunct Shi'ite *'irfān* list he co-moderated (Azal 2025l, 54), and has since devoted several books to its condemnation.

Wake Up! (Azal 2025k) centers on purely theological objections, although its conclusion, "ARLOP as a Sabbatean-Frankist Black Mass," returns us to familiar territory. The first essay in a follow-up volume, *The Goal of the Unwise* (Azal 2025l)—the title lampoons Hashem's *magnum opus*, *The Goal of the Wise* (2022)—introduces the role of CESNUR. *The Goal of the Wisecrack* is Wahid's response to a serialization of Šorytė's article in CESNUR's online magazine, *Bitter Winter*. He accuses her of "cheap polemic masquerading as scholarship [...] racist Orientalist ridicule [of him], cult-apologist propaganda, and narrative warfare" (Azal 2025aa, 3). *Against the Postmodern Germ* (Azal 2025gg; additional chapter at Azal 2025b) expands the discussion (and the conspiracy) to include cannabis journalist Chris Bennett, whose reportage Wahid perceives to be reliant on, if not commissioned by, CESNUR.

What, in the eyes of Azal, makes AROPL a "cult" in the pejorative sense? To begin with, Hashem is no genuine *mahdī*, but a nihilistic, antinomian tyrant who practices "psychospiritual manipulation" (Azal 2025l, xviii) extending to "sexual abuse, coercive abortions, blood oaths, and *demands for murder*" (Azal 2025aa, 15). Wahid warns that Hashem is poised to become another Jim Jones (1931–1978), David Koresh (1959–1993), or Shoko Asahara (1955–2018; Azal 2025k, xxvii). He registers no surprise at the police raid of AROPL's headquarters in Crewe, Cheshire, on suspicion of human trafficking and sexual offenses (Azal 2026k). Furthermore, he claims that Hashem has illegitimately appropriated a predecessor movement—that of Iraqi seer Ahmed al-Hasan—in much the same way that Bahā'u'llāh usurped the lineage of the Bāb (Azal 2025l, xiv–xv).

Wahid also accuses "this fiend" of plagiarizing "quite a fair bit of material from our publicized writings whilst totally dumbing them down" (Azal 2025k, xv), such as "the claim put into the mouth of Ahmad al-Hasan that each mahdi is tied to a planet" (Azal 2025l, 59), which Wahid believes to have been inspired by his translation of Suhrawardī's *Spiritual Influxes and Sanctifications* (Azal 2025g). According to Azal, Hashem borrows not only from Wahid, but from such disparate sources as the gnostic *Apocryphon of John* and *Va-Avo Hayom el ha-Ayin* (*And I*

Came Today to the Spring), a Sabbatean text attributed to Jonathan Eybeschütz (1690–1764) that supplied Hashem with "motifs of erotic mysticism, messianic self-deification, antinomian inversion of religious law together with apocalyptic Gnostic cosmology" (Azal 2025l, 58–9, 66–7). If Wahid's suspicions of plagiarism seem intrinsically unlikely, and the similarities merely thematic, we are reminded that AROPL benefits from the vast resources of CESNUR (Azal 2025k, 64–5); thus Hashem need not have studied any of this material himself. On the other hand, it is not unthinkable that he read Gershom Scholem as a religion major at Indiana University / Purdue.

Wake Up! castigates the "Western Ivory Tower" for promoting "an extremely kooky NRM cult" (i.e., AROPL) via "a carefully executed perception management campaign" (Azal 2025k, xii). The scholars involved are thought to be motivated by "some kind of research opportunity to fill up the details of their professional CVs" (Azal 2025k, 101). *The Goal of the Unwise* identifies CESNUR as the major offending body, and the Catholic Church as its puppet-masters. After all, CESNUR's co-founder and managing director, Massimo Introvigne, is a former officer of the Alleanza Cattolica, a conservative lay association (Introvigne 2008).

Šorytė—who, by the way, is married to Introvigne—expresses some confusion as to whether CESNUR is supposed to be funding the cults, or vice versa. According to Azal, CESNUR seems to invest in cult start-ups, which are then expected to produce a return on investment, perhaps as the equivalent of offshore shell companies (Azal 2025l, 19, 21–2). At the same time, the cults serve a political function in the imperialist struggle to weaken and divide non-Western societies. This fits the classic modus operandi of the Frankists, who "infiltrate and play all sides of a given equation against the proverbial middle," and were welcomed into the Church as "useful long-term assets to be deployed as cover in its own agendas" (Azal 2025l, 10, 14).

Following anti-cult writer Luigi Corvaglia, *The Goal of the Wisecrack* situates CESNUR within a "machinery of influence" staffed by a "transnational web of lawyers, pseudo-academics, and lobbyists" who weaponize the language of religious freedom to defend cults "useful to Empire" like AROPL and the Bahā'īs, while attacking critics like Wahid (Azal 2025aa, 6, 8, 10), apparently because his critique of reincarnation poses a structural threat to AROPL's theology (Azal 2025aa, 21, 23). *Against the Postmodern Germ* describes how "[y]ounger or peripheral academics—particularly in Islamic Studies—often find CESNUR-linked

venues welcoming, collegial, and comparatively easy to publish in," only to experience pressure to conform to certain ideological norms (Azal 2025gg, 39).

Like many anti-cult writers, Wahid observes that CESNUR and its affiliated scholars have entered cozy relationships with the NRMs they study, when they should pay more attention to "survivor" accounts (Azal 2025gg, 17, 19). He perceives a conflict of interest in CESNUR's dual role as both a research hub and an activist channel (Azal 2025aa, 20), resulting in "hybrid texts that oscillate between scholarship and advocacy" (Azal 2025gg, 18). He also speaks of a "moderation paradigm" and an "academic civility trap" (Azal 2025gg, 38–9) that discourage criticism. These are old controversies, and I acknowledge that the anti-cult position deserves to be taken seriously. At the same time, CESNUR scholars (and NRM researchers more generally; CESNUR is not as dominant in the field as Wahid imagines) are very diverse in their perspectives and approaches. Azal (2025gg, 20) sees CESNUR's pluralism as selective, not extending to rival ideologies. However, critics of the organization have occasionally spoken at its conferences, which are in any case generally open to new participants. (Wahid could have submitted.)

Wahid also complains of a "double epistemic standard" by which his religious epiphanies are treated less respectfully than, say, Hashem's (Azal 2025aa, 93). I recognize the difficulty, and wonder (for example) whether it is arbitrary of me to assume that no sane person thinks that Chris Chan is really Jesus, or to treat Bahā'u'llāh differently from Emperor Norton (who likewise wrote the world leaders of his day, inviting them to accept his supposed station). I cannot pretend to neutrality, but realize that my personal opinions are of limited interest. When some overbold soul lays claim to the dignities due a Jesus or a Muhammad, despite lacking the virtues or accomplishments of these worthies, I generally try to keep a straight face and let the bombast speak for itself, although I am not above the occasional "wisecrack."

Wahid protests CESNUR's practices of "deadnaming, stigmatizing, or ridiculing critics' identities and beliefs" (Azal 2025aa, 94). In particular, he criticizes Šorytė for mentioning the birth name of transgender anti-cultist Be Scofield (Azal 2025aa, 50). However, Wahid not only deadnames ex-Bahā'ī D.C. Shepard, but regularly mocks their (i.e., Shepard's) transgenderism to the point of vulgarity. Wahid further accuses Šorytė of violating journalistic ethics in the use of stereotypes (Azal 2025aa, 53) but ignores these principles himself.

He dismisses her as a polemicist, but resorts to "polemical hyperbole" and "deliberately fiery language" in his own monographs, and even faults her for taking these flourishes seriously (Azal 2025aa, 81). He complains that she quotes him selectively to "maximize strangeness," as when she recounts his dream of "ritual *tongue-piercing* with the Zulfiqar (don't know where she got that from)" (Azal 2025aa, 71). Šorytė distorts nothing; the previous section provides multiple citations for the dream, which Wahid professes not to remember. She supposedly appeals to racist Orientalist tropes by overemphasizing his entheogen use and Crowleyan influences, "even connecting me to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*" (Azal 2025aa, 31 and 76). I discuss all these elements at some length above, and do not think I have exaggerated their importance to his thought. If Šorytė "imputes dangerousness" to Wahid and "suggests police-report implications" (Azal 2025aa, 21–2), then she agrees with many—including his mother.

Wahid objects to being pathologized through the deployment of psychiatric labels like "delusional" or "paranoid" (Azal 2025aa, 55, 77–9). While some of the passages quoted above may seem textbook examples of these symptoms, religious delusion is notoriously difficult to distinguish from ordinary belief, whether culturally commonplace or eccentric. Likewise, paranoia is defined as a *false* belief. (Chris Chan is not paranoid; a vast conspiracy dedicated to his humiliation demonstrably exists). In any case, Wahid's point is that such *ad hominem* attacks avoid the substance of his critique. "The very charge of irrationality and fanaticism hurled at critics mirrors the cultic irrationality CESNUR works to sanitize" (Azal 2025aa, 4).

Against the Postmodern Germ had its genesis in Wahid's observation (Azal 2025gg, 4–35, 37, 40–1, 77–8 n8) that Chris Bennett (2025b) borrows from Bahaipedia (entry for "Jelal Azal"), which in turn relies on Moojan Momen (1991). Bennett, whose reportage normally focuses on marijuana, had questioned Wahid's 2014 claim to have obtained a fatwā from Grand Ayatollah Muhammad-Sadiq Rohani (1926–2022) declaring the use of plant-based psychedelics to be *halāl* (Bennett 2025a). Their exchanges ultimately degenerate into proctological invective (see Bennett 2025c). Wahid also mentions a 2021–2022 disagreement on Facebook over whether the active ingredient in *haoma* was marijuana (Azal 2026p, 2:30).

Bennett states that he "had no knowledge or contact with" CESNUR before researching his articles; however, at some point he corresponded with Introvigne

(Bennett 2025d; Azal 2025gg, 24–5). Wahid takes this as evidence (a "smoking gun") that CESNUR had commissioned Bennett to write the series in the first place. "Long before Bennett ever typed a word about *fatwās*, psychedelics, or my spiritual vocation," he asserts, "CESNUR had already established a template for depicting me," namely my own 2011 paper surveying Bahā'ī and Subud dissent (Azal 2025gg, 25). Although fewer than a hundred words of it were about Wahid, he has clearly never forgotten them, and even burlesques them in *mathnawi* form:

> Old Bei Dawei's paper set the key,
> A prototype of how to frame out me:
> "Paranoid yet erudite," one-man sect,
> A file to flag, to pity, then reject (Azal 2025gg, 366).

As if to confirm his suspicions, Momen—whom Wahid despises for diminishing Azalī history in favor of a Bahā'ī-centric narrative—cites my paper in a 2018 referee report for the journal *Die Welt des Islams*, in which he recommends the rejection of Wahid's article, "The Organizational Hierarchy of the Bābīs during the Period of Subh-i-Azal's Residency in Baghdad (1852–1863)" (in Azal 2025gg, 63 ff n7). This incident "provides incontrovertible evidence that I had already been on CESNUR's radar for several years prior to the review, and possibly even longer" (Azal 2025gg, 70). However, Momen has no discernible connection to CESNUR. As for Bennett,

> No journalist working alone [...] would naturally excavate such a vast, obscure, multi-decade digital footprint [as Wahid's]—unless they be an obsessed stalker or a professional operator, which CESNUR is. Yet this is precisely what CESNUR-affiliated networks are known for (and what Bei Dawei did on CESNUR's behalf in the '00s): assembling dossiers on critics of their favoured groups, maintaining internal memory across decades, and recycling these materials whenever a public opportunity arises to discredit a dissident voice (Azal 2025gg, 356).

I may be able to shed some light on this. Rather than being assigned to the task of opposition research by CESNUR, I came up with the topic entirely on my own, as with the present paper. I doubt CESNUR organizers even knew or cared about Wahid in those days, although I imagine he is well known to its board by now. For that matter, I was not very interested in him either—he was something of an outlier relative to the other ex-Bahā'īs. In retrospect, I acknowledge that my précis could have been improved upon; to begin with, I neglected to note the founding of the NUR-FSO a few years earlier. Whether my paper influenced Bennett or Šorytė, I cannot say, but it is at least plausible that they arrived at their conclusions about Wahid independently.

Wahid theorizes that "once an outlet with CESNUR's audience canonizes an antagonist, future scholarly exchange will be pre-filtered by that persona" (Azal 2025aa, 25). The mechanism by which this takes place is a kind of viral memesis:

> Now, by *postmodern germ* I mean a class of semiotic pathogens that propagate through informational ecologies without stable authorship, ontological grounding, or discursive accountability. These germs operate not as intentional fabrications but as autonomous viral entities—replicators—whose survival depends on their ability to exploit cognitive vulnerabilities, platform architectures, and cultural anxieties (Azal 2025gg, 2).

"Postmodernity" here refers "not to an abstract philosophical movement but to a media ecosystem characterized by rapid replication, superficial referencing, collapsed expertise, and the dissolution of epistemic boundaries" (Azal 2025gg, 7). This applies especially to online discourse:

> In the digital environment, the authority of a narrative is no longer determined by its evidentiary depth but by its *searchability*. The most accessible narrative becomes the most credible [...] This algorithmic sedimentation of bias is one of the core mechanisms of parapolitical disinformation: the technological amplification of inherited narratives whose origins lie in selective historiography (Azal 2025gg, 8).

Wahid goes on to describe a "collapse of *source hierarchies,*" with tertiary sources like wiki pages dominating even academic discussion; "*mediated visibility*," which advantages groups like the Bahā'īs with greater "discursive infrastructure," financial resources, and "institutional amplification"; and "genre drift," e.g., when "polemical narratives cross from academic writing into journalistic prose" (Azal 2025gg, 9). He writes of "*discursive inertia,*" "*affective plausibility*," "*epistemic foreclosure,*" and other such concepts, which boil down to the observation that repetition and gatekeeping allow certain ideas to become the default assumptions.

If all this seems remote from the issue of lolcows, consider that one of Wahid's main criticisms of CESNUR concerns "the oscillation between quasi-academic summaries, sectarian apologetic language, and conversational snark" (Azal 2025gg, 357). Šorytė's "wisecrack" is not any specific joke, but her entire article, which "offers not serious argument but a caricature"; "not innocent wit," but "the tactical deployment of irony and mockery as weapons of epistemic violence," through a "technology of silencing" that "translates serious intellectual, theological, and ethical objections into fodder for a laugh-track" (Azal 2025aa, 3–4).

Of late, Wahid has begun reevaluating CESNUR's work (Azal 2026o, 2026p, and 2026q) and has found much value in its early scholarship (Azal 2026q, 3:00). He even praises Introvigne, whom he had earlier called "the devil incarnate" (Azal 2025aa, 81). Interestingly, CESNUR's liberal Atlanticist ethos is now ascribed to unconscious cultural bias rather than any explicit conspiratorial aims. (The Sabbatean-Frankists go unmentioned.) While we may debate the details, surely few of us would claim to have transcended the limitations of our milieux.

Wahid's observations about online discourse are well taken, even if he exaggerates the role of CESNUR. Like the Swedenborgian and Tibetan afterlives—or even this present life, according to some theologies—the internet is a fluid realm that provides almost anything desired, whether edifying or corrupting. In a sense, whatever we encounter turns out to be a reflection of our own minds. Given this psychological dimension, lolcows take on new significance, perhaps as projections of some deep unconscious collective yearning (as in Jung's Shadow archetype). Even their transgressions assume a numinous quality. This fascination is one of the most difficult aspects of the lolcow phenomenon to convey. At the end of episode 85 of the *Comprehensive History* (i.e., the season finale), Geno Samuel, reflecting on Chris Chan's transformation from "an insignificant and ill-functioning individual into an icon of significance," notes the role of Christorians who feel "compelled to spread the word." At that very moment (109:50), in a departure from his usual filming style, he fixes the camera on himself. I join him in his confession, and hold out hope that these niche interests nevertheless touch on something universal.

References

Afary, Janet. 1996. *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Akenson, Donald Harman. 2000. *Saint Saul: A Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Amanat, Abbas. 1989. *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Amanat, Mehrdad. 2011. *Jewish Identities in Iran: Resistance and Conversion to Islam and the Baha'i Faith*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Antelman, Marvin S. 1974. *To Eliminate the Opiate*, vol. 1. Jerusalem: Zionist Book Club.

Antelman, Marvin S. 2002. *To Eliminate the Opiate*, vol. 2. Jerusalem: Zionist Book Club.

Azal, Wahid. 2005. "Broken Silence: A review of *Tahirih Thealogy: Female Cosmic Christ Spirit of the Age Concealed No Longer* by Starr Saffa, Zeus Publications (Gold Coast: 2005)." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4dYaCv3.

Azal, Wahid. 2006. *Liber Decatriarchia Mystica: Sketchings of the Thirteen Encompassing Spheres of the Tree of Life and Assorted Material*. Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 1. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4huxKng.

Azal, Wahid. 2008. *A Short Treatise in Explication Regarding the Gnosis of the Theophanic Stations of the Calligram of the Greatest Name of God*. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hM71RS.

Azal, Wahid. 2013. "Why I Am Not a Ph.D." April 15. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4y9Fd0a.

Azal, Wahid. 2015. "Elitist Ivory Tower Snobbery, the Imperial Baha'is, and Hamid Dabashi's Great Facebook Tirade of 2015: A Short Essay." September 15. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4ATC2w3.

Azal, Wahid. 2016. "Dugin's Occult Fascism and the Hijacking of Left Anti-Imperialism and Muslim Anti-Salafism." *CounterPunch*, February 10. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4zhDuqn.

Azal, Wahid. 2019a. "The Bahā'ī Mafia: Part 1." Interview by Keyvan Yahya. January 5. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4y9FxMq.

Azal, Wahid. 2019b. "The Bahāʾī Mafia: Part II." Interview by Keyvan Yahya. January 10. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4AMo92B.

Azal, Wahid. 2019c. "Speaking of (baha'i) DRUG DEALERS." February 16. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4i9hDuz.

Azal, Wahid. 2019d. "Back in Australia. Here is Why..." December 14. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4jGgHjo.

Azal, Wahid. 2020a. "Final Section of Soheil Hazini's Last Will and Testament." January 11. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4743866.

Azal, Wahid. 2020b. "Message to the Enemies of the -Fāṭimīya Sufi Order (the People of the Bayān) Pre-Invasion Day 2020." January 25. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4ya1IC6.

Azal, Wahid. 2020c. "The Genesis of the Kabbalah inside the Muslim World." May 16. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4jdeIDf.

Azal, Wahid. 2020d. "Eulogy for Roya: A German Sufi Saint of the 21st Century." June 27. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4i4V2jD.

Azal, Wahid. 2021a. "Email of Wahid Azal to the UHJ." December 2. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4ASyf22.
Azal, Wahid. 2021b. "GoFundMe for Roya's Book of Artwork." December 11. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4rRdCz1.
Azal, Wahid. 2022a. *The Completion of the Arabic* Bayān *and the Eight Paths*. Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 2. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4rMFgx7.
Azal, Wahid. 2022b. "Appointment of the NUR-FSO Khalifa for Central and South America." April 3. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4jBQmmE.
Azal, Wahid. 2022c. "Appointment of the NUR-FSO Khalifa for the Sub-Continent." April 3. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yamDF9.
Azal, Wahid. 2022d. "Appointment of the North American Khalifa of the NUR-FSO." April 4. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3VzVIF1.
Azal, Wahid. 2022e. "RIP Peter Lamborn Wilson (Hakim Bey)." May 24. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3TONxnR.
Azal, Wahid. 2022f. "Shaykh N. Wahid Azal's Response To Douglas Duane Dietrich." May 26. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3TDXvZe.
Azal, Wahid. 2022g. "Why I Can't Take Western LHP Occult Satanism Seriously." June 7. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4dZtTMH.
Azal, Wahid. 2023. "The Spiritual Value of Strategic Hatred." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4j8N75X.
Azal, Wahid. 2024a. "Anarchy, Mysticism, and Shadows: Peter Lamborn Wilson (Bayani)." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3TONKYb.
Azal, Wahid. 2024b. *The Bezel of the Wisdom of Pointhood in the Word of 'Alī Muhammad*. Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 4. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4dkYrIG.
Azal, Wahid. 2024c. *The Book of the Tree of Hermes: An Introduction to the NUR Tarot*. Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 3. Chapters available via https://bit.ly/4huAgdc. Accessed October 5, 2026.
Azal, Wahid. 2024d. "Confession of Paul Schuhl: His 'Bayani' Faith is not Bayani, and the Primal Point is a Liar according to Him." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3VqKjHH.
Azal, Wahid. 2024e. "A Tribute to my Father." January 18. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3Vx2MCr.
Azal, Wahid. 2024f. "On the Meaning of *Ghadīr*." June 26. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4y54g4k.

Azal, Wahid. 2024g. "On the Question of Perennialism / Universalism." July 2. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4znDVQd.

Azal, Wahid. 2024h. *The Tablet of the Invitation to the People of the Bayān*. Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 5. July 5. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/47Cts7n.

Azal, Wahid. 2024i. *The Effulgences of Wisdom: Concerning the Realities of the Mysteries and the Dawning of the Lights of the Divine Women.* Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 6. October 1. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3Vx3aAT.

Azal, Wahid. 2024j. *An Epistle of the Primal Point to Subh-i-Azal Expressive of the Divine Feminine, together with Subh-i-Azal's Commentary on the Light Verse. Studies in the Bayan*, vol. 1 no. 1. Library of the Greatest Name. November 30. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4sa4WUV.

Azal, Wahid. 2025a. "A Pattern Emerges: Coordinated Intimidation in the Wake of Exposure." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4zhpHAi.

Azal, Wahid. 2025b. "CESNUR as Gatekeeper of Neoliberal Pluralist Delusion and Ontological Policing for Western Market Elites." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/47D2LPU.

Azal, Wahid. 2025c. "Cunada of BIA tampering with Peter Lamborn Wilson Wikipedia entry." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yBWfVJ.

Azal, Wahid. 2025d. "The Exodus: A Manifesto for Leaving Facebook." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yvPYuv.

Azal, Wahid. 2025e. "How My Sister Aligned with Pure Evil." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hIeJfL.

Azal, Wahid. 2025f. "Letter to Australian government regulatory body." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hwkkXQ.

Azal, Wahid. 2025g. *Prayers to the Orient of Light: A Translation and Text of Shihābuddīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī's* The Spiritual Influxes and Sanctifications (al-wāridāt wa'l-taqdīsāt). Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 10. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3Uc80Dd.

Azal, Wahid. 2025h. "Spiritual Entrapment and Religious Discrimination: A Personal Statement on the 'R.' Episode." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4zhE5Iv.

Azal, Wahid. 2025i. "Surah of the Eye of the Tree." April 8. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4rN9kJ2.

Azal, Wahid. 2025j. *The Book of Guidance (*kitāb al-hudā*)*. Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 7. April 28. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3WbR0NV.

Azal, Wahid. 2025k. *Wake Up! A Fatwa and Epistle in Refutation of ʻAbdullāh Hāshim, the Father of Lies (*abū'l-kāẓib*)*. Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 8.1. May 17. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4zmWlAC.

Azal, Wahid. 2025l. *The Goal of the Unwise (*ghāyat'ul-ḥumq*). Wake Up! Part 2.* Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 8.2. June 3. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yztSqX.

Azal, Wahid. 2025m. "Two Suspensions, One Pattern: How Meta Silences Dissent to Protect a Digital Cult." June 4. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4y3Q5we.

Azal, Wahid. 2025n. "Statement of Record: IGIS Complaint Acknowledged." July 1. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4rLWk6o.

Azal, Wahid. 2025o. "Who Killed Roya? Notes on a Living Bayani Resistance." July 1. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4i1gpT3.

Azal, Wahid. 2025p. "Coordinated Suppression Incident Timeline and Actors." July 2. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yEIUfo.

Azal, Wahid. 2025q. "The Forensic Unveiling of a Fabricated Persona: A Case Study in Spiritual Entrapment and Digital Sabotage." July 5. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4dkCUjd.

Azal, Wahid. 2025r. "Digital Panic: The Vanishing of Ronia Ahmad." July 6. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4i6aTOY.

Azal, Wahid. 2025s. "The Chronicles of the Female Asshole: A Cautionary Tale in Thirteen Acts (Parody)." July 8. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3VSvuxA.

Azal, Wahid. 2025t. "Shadows of the Work: A Philosophical, Psychological, Theological and Political Critique of G.I. Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way." July 10. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4zn8p4N.

Azal, Wahid. 2025u. "LinkedIn as the Desecration of the Human Vocation." August 8. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4i37mB0.

Azal, Wahid. 2025v. "Ideological Capture and Familial Discourse: An Analysis of a WhatsApp Exchange." August 15. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3WaQDmL.

Azal, Wahid. 2025w. "Funeral of Soheil Hazini (13 February 2012)." Video on the "N. Wahid Azal" YouTube channel. August 19. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/47DwhoN.

Azal, Wahid. 2025x. "Comparative Observations on the Deaths of Soheil Hazini and Roya Azal." August 20. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hEIi1N.

Azal, Wahid. 2025y. "Denied a Death Certificate: The Bureaucratic Trap Following Roya's Death." August 20. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4B94pGT.

Azal, Wahid. 2025z. "Elder Abuse, Coercive Control, and a Rapid Referral to Compliance." August 21. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3TNKgFl.

Azal, Wahid. 2025aa. *The Goal of the Wisecrack: Unmasking Rosita Šorytė's* Bitter Winter *Diatribe*. Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 9. August 25. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4ejogJk.

Azal, Wahid. 2025bb. "Losing a Parent to Trumpism: Ideological Capture and Ambiguous Loss." August 25. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3U5Q1ON.

Azal, Wahid. 2025cc. "When Mothers Become Mouthpieces: The Idiocy of One Nation Propaganda and the Fracturing of Family." September 12. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/47mYnVr.

Azal, Wahid. 2025dd. "Mitra-Muscat You Are Far-Right and Wrong." September 17. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4j7nnqC.

Azal, Wahid. 2025ee. "Surah al-Khiyana: The Chapter of Treachery." October 23. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4j7Mxp3.

Azal, Wahid. 2025ff. "Bahāʾism as a Western Soft-Power Replacement Theology." November 9. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3VOPG3p.

Azal, Wahid. 2025gg. *Against the Postmodern Germ: Essays on Parapolitical Disinformation Architecture and the CESNUR-Bennett*-Cannabis Culture *Controversy*. Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 11. December 9. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yFJPMC.

Azal, Wahid. 2025hh. *The Wretched of the Corporate State: A Fanonian Essay*. Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 12. December 16. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hF1A7m.

Azal, Wahid. 2026a. *Essays in Bayānī Political Ontology*. Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 13. January 19. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4ANUy92.

Azal, Wahid. 2026b. "The Fixated Obsessive-Compulsion of the White Male Liberal-Centrist North American over the Bayān." February 16. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3TrUP0J.

Azal, Wahid. 2026c. "Iran Is Winning the War." March 10. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hII0H8.

Azal, Wahid. 2026d. *Temples of the Pure Religion of Gnosis*. Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 14. March 14. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3Vz0xOT.

Azal, Wahid. 2026e. "A Brief Akbarian-Bayānī Critique of the Lurianic Kabbalah." March 20. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4j8vuDl.

Azal, Wahid. 2026f. "Against the Subtle Contract of Ex-Bahā'ī Identity and the Microphysics of the Racial Order." April 9. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hIGxAC.

Azal, Wahid. 2026g. "The Managed Schism, or, Why r/exbahai Functions as Controlled Opposition for the Haifan Baha'i Establishment." April 18. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4ASKhZh.

Azal, Wahid. 2026h. "You Are Not Only Puppets But Also Useful Idiots." April 20. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4zcaf8o.

Azal, Wahid. 2026i. "The Unenrolled / Ex-Baha'i to Unitarian Universalist Pipeline." April 21. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4ARFnvA.

Azal, Wahid. 2026j. "Put Up or STFU, Faux-Tranny Mendel." April 30. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/474Q4gE.

Azal, Wahid. 2026k. "Ahmadi Religion of Plagiarism and LARPing Raided by UK Police." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4AS8gaO.

Azal, Wahid. 2026l. "The Difference Between *Rasūl*, *Nabī*, and *Muḥaddath*." May 5. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hHPPwL.

Azal, Wahid. 2026m. "Assessing the Teachings of Samā'ullāh (Jamshid Maʿānī)." May 10. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4rLPk9D.

Azal, Wahid. 2026n. *Tafsīr Sūrah al-Baqara: A Phenomenological Commentary on the Surah of the Cow*. Library of the Greatest Name, vol. 15. June 2. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4y98acy.

Azal, Wahid. 2026o. "When Bahā'u'llāh Becomes CESNUR's Typical 'Apostate'." August 17. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4dn3Kam.

Azal, Wahid. 2026p. "Oh, Danny Boy!" With Matt Douglas. August 18. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4xXU8Kx.

Azal, Wahid. 2026q. "Oh, Danny Boy," Part II. With Matt Douglas. August 19. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4j2Pjfn.

Azal, Wahid, and Pier Galliet. 2019. "15–18 March 2019." March 19. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hvuc46.

Baigent, Michael, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. 1982. *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Bayat, Mangol. 1991. *Iran's First Revolution: Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1909*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bei Dawei. 2011. "Bahā'ī and Subud Dissent: Developments in the 2000s." Paper delivered at the CESNUR 2011 conference, Taipei, June 21–23. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4j8z6Fp.

Beigie, Terry. 2021. "Greene woman charged with incest is denied bond." *Daily Progress*, August 5. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4rSzjiv.

Bennett, Chris. 2025a. "The Psychedelic Fatwā." Part 1 (of 3) of the series, "Questions about the 2014 Iranian 'Psychedelic Fatwā' and Wahid Azal." *Cannabis Culture*. November 16. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yD2ybw.

Bennett, Chris. 2025b. "The Strange Case of Wahid Azal: Bayān Messiah or Blaspheming Madman?" Part 2 (of 3) of the series, "Questions about the 2014 Iranian 'Psychedelic Fatwā' and Wahid Azal." *Cannabis Culture*. November 21. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4i5Vazu.

Bennett, Chris. 2025c. "Wahid Azal and Me: The Flavour of our Beef!" Part 3 (of 3) of the series, "Questions about the 2014 Iranian 'Psychedelic Fatwā' and Wahid Azal." *Cannabis Culture*. December 14. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4zcfjcU.

Bennett, Chris. 2025d. "Answering Wahid Azal's More of the Same Bullshit Defence of Ayatollah Rūḥānī's 2024 Psychedelic Fatwā." November 26. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4dHNPDV.

Beyer, Stephan V. 2009. *Singing to the Plants: A Guide to Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper Amazon.* Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Campbell, Barbara Ruth. 2021. "Gamekeepers Thumb—The Bane of Writers." *Librarian's Guide to the Multiverse!* May 20. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yv23QD.

Campbell, Barbara Ruth. 2023. "The Notorious Doc's Many Faces of Evil." *Librarian's Guide to the Multiverse!* July 12. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4zgw5HO.

Carlson, Tucker (presenter). 2021. "Outrage over Jail Plans for Alleged Rapist." News segment on *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, 7 Aug. *FOX News.* Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4rQ5izK.

Cole, Juan R.I. 1998. *Modernity and the Millennium: The Genesis of the Bahā'ī Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Cole, Jr., Richard K. 2026. "Exposing Douglas Dietrich" (blog). Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/47J4K5f.

Continental Board of Counselors (compilers). 1999. "Covenant Breakers, Non-Association with." *Baha'i Library Online*. December 7. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hApYXy.

Corbin, Henry. 1977. *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shī'ite Iran*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Crime and Misconduct Commission. 2006. "Independence, Influence and Integrity in Local Government: A CMC Inquiry into the 2004 Gold Coast City Council Election." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4rRA8bg.

Cross, Katherine Alejandra. 2023. "In the War between Harassment and Censorship, No One Wins." *Wired.* September 22. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4j81TKm.

Crowley, Nick. 2026. "The 7 Levels of Lolcow Traits Explained in Detail." *Interesting Stuff from Around the World.* May 10. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/47045ML.

Culhane, Terry. 2001. *I Beheld a Maiden...: The Bahá'í Faith and the Life of the Spirit.* Los Angeles: Kalimát Press.

CWCki. From 2008. [A crowdsourced, wiki-style Chris Chan encyclopedia.] Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/47BGmCB.

CwcvilleGuardian. 2023a. "Setting the Record straight –there never was any sex involving me in 2021." YouTube video. October 17. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4ebvmiX.

CwcvilleGuardian. 2023b. "Simple Existential Q&A." YouTube video. November 11. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4y9cpEJ.

CwcvilleGuardian. 2023c. "Over the shoulder colouring stream." YouTube video. December 23. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3TDhl6U.

DeadwingDork. 2025. "The 4Chan Pinkie Pie Tulpa Guy." August 17. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hK4RlR.

Dietrich, Douglas Duane. 2019. "Douglas Dietrich, Son of Adolf Hitler, Fighting AGAINST White Male Supremacist Terrorism." May 8. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yJe6tN.

Dietrich, Douglas Duane. 2020. "Douglas Duane Dietrich Biography." January 12. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3W9OhEF.

Dietrich, Douglas Duane (host). 2022. "43rd 'White Night' Memorial Day cum National Armed Forces Day Weekend Critical Omissions, Sunday 05/22/22." May 23. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4y8aVL9.

Dugin, Alexander. 2026. "The Essence of Zionism: A Metaphysical and Historical Analysis." March 6. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hxlBOv.

Eisenman, Robert. 1997. *James the Brother of Jesus: The Key to Unlocking the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls.* New York: Viking.

Flattery, David Stophlet, and Martin Schwartz. 1989. *Haoma and Harmaline: The Botanical Identity of the Indo-Iranian Sacred Hallucinogen "Soma" and Its*

Legacy in Religion, Language, and Middle Eastern Folklore. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Galian, Laurence. 2003. *The Sun at Midnight: The Revealed Mysteries of the Ahlul Bayt Sufis*. New York: Quiddity, Inc.

Genkicrack. 2005. "A Public Warning: FF7 Fandom." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/478OmLh.

Girard, René. 1986. *The Scapegoat*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

GoGoNojo (OP). 2025. "What is the Earliest Documented Use of the Term 'Lolcow'?" Thread on Kiwi Farms website. April 16. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hK6XSL.

Green, Barbara. 1993. "It Took a Talking Bear to Give the Name a Young Boy Loves." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4APCpYr.

Grisar, P.J. 2024. "Candace Owens Has Gone So Conspiratorial, She's Now Citing Forgotten Jewish Heretics." *Forward*. July 30. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4dneupc.

Hazini, Nima. 1999. Post from unspecified forum, archived at Frederick Glaysher's Baha'i Faith and Freedom of Conscience website. July 26. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/47ELy8O.

Hazini, Nima. 2001. Various posts from unspecified forum, archived at Frederick Glaysher's Baha'i Faith and Freedom of Conscience website. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4dq2K5o.

Hegarty, Stephanie. 2019. "Why I 'Married' a Cartoon Character." *BBC*. August 16. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4rOgVqX.

Hornby, Helen Bassett (compiler). 1988. *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4jX1Dyj.

Introvigne, Massimo. 2008. "Twenty Years of CESNUR." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Chicago, November 2. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4y90O90.

Joffe, Ben. 2016. "Paranormalizing the Popular through the Tibetan Tulpa: Or What the Next Dalai Lama, the *X-Files* and Affect Theory (Might) Have in Common." *Savage Minds*. February 13. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4AX2Hs2.

Lashomb, Don. 2021. *Warhol / Chris Chan: The Lifespan of American Pop Culture, or The Suppression of Reality*. n.p.: The Author.

Lenaghan, Nick. 2013. "Dubai Damns Sunland in Corruption Case." (Australia) *Financial Review*, November 23. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hKxlvI.

Leshem, Zvi. 2020. "On Gershom Scholem, Conspiracy Theories and Rabbinical Court Controversies." *The Librarians*. January 29. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://bit.ly/3WoxqOE.

M., David. 2025. "The Terrifying True Tale of the Final Fantasy House." September 16. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/473ofp8.

MacEoin, Denis M. 1987. "Azali Babism." Entry in the *Encyclopædia Iranica*. December 15. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hEqC6w.

MacEoin, Denis M. 2008. *The Messiah of Shiraz: Studies in Early and Middle Babism*. Leiden: Brill.

Magick, Mona. 2014. "The Fatimiya Sufi Order." Interview with Wahid Azal. February 17. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3VrLsic.

Mahdi Has Appeared, The. 2023. "The Mahdi Presents the Ultimate Solution to the Israel-Palestine Conflict." July 28. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hGnkRH.

Mikles, Natasha L., and Joseph P. Laycock. 2015. "Tracking the *Tulpa*: Exploring the 'Tibetan' Origins of a Contemporary Paranormal Idea." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 19(1):87–97.

Momen, Moojan. 1991. "The Cyprus Exiles." *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 5(3) and 6(1). June. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hvE0ev.

Momen, Moojan. 2007. "Marginality and Apostasy in the Bahá'í Community." *Religion* 37(3):187–209.

Nichols, B. Preston, and Peter Moon. 1992. *The Montauk Project: Experiments in Time*. Westbury, NY: Sky Books.

NUR. 2009. "Haifan Baha'is Name Apostates: Moojan Momen's 2007 Article." *Iranian.com*. May 7. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4eiMBPs.

O'Farrell, John. 2001. *Global Village Idiot*. New York: Doubleday.

O'Neal, Sean. 2013. "The Internet Finally Reaches its Apex as Man Marrying *My Little Pony* Character Writes Angry Email to Erotic Pony Artist." March 22. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4rOoSMP.

Outtrim, Steve. 2016. "Debunking Douglas Dietrich." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yBu0q9.

Pinsker, Joe. 2015. "The Covert World of People Trying to Edit Wikipedia—for Pay." *The Atlantic*. August 11. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/3TptlZH.

Rauchberg, Jess. 2025. "Lolcows and the Mediation of Digital Freakshows." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. December 1. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4j6T7fF.

Roach, Slop. 2026. "Every Lolcow Trait Explained and Ranked." August 14. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4dpMZLO.

Rocks, Harold of the, and Literally Austin. 2025. "The Time Cube." *Know Your Meme*. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4rMaTa5.

Samuel, Geno. 2018–2024. *Chris Chan: A Comprehensive History*, season 1. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4j7klCQ.

Sheikh, Salman S. 2022a. "Salman Sheikh's Response to the Con Artist Actor Known as 'Douglas Duane Dietrich.'" March 22. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4jTRzGc.

Sheikh, Salman S. 2022b. "Salman Sheikh and Ani Osaru—Exposing Douglas Duane Dietrich." May 24. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4rQN6Wv.

Sheikh, Salman S. 2022c. "Salman Sheikh and Matt Douglas—Exposing Douglas Duane Dietrich and Peter Moon, Time Travel." May 25. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4xYljF3.

Šorytė, Rosita. 2025. "AROPL and the Rise of New Age Anti-Cultism." *The Journal of CESNUR* 9(5):4–20. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2025.9.5.1.

Sperg, Pointless. 2022. Post no. 214 (28 March 2022), p. 11 of "The Chris Chan Conspiracy Documentary" thread (begun 18 March 2022). Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4rNVmXz.

Stark, Rodney, and William Sims Bainbridge. 1985. *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation.* Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

Starr Saffa. 2005. *Tahirih Theology: Female Cosmic Christ Spirit of the Age, Concealed No Longer.* Gold Coast: Zeus Publications.

Stoltz, Greg. 2020. "Millionaires' Row Stoush Leads to Police Investigation of Alleged Assault." *Courier Mail*. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/47069Er.

Swanson, Tom. 2023. "Cyraxx's Horrifying History (Full Documentary)." December 18. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/473FqH2.

Talisman. 1994–1996. E-mail list. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4j8F2yi.

talk.religion.bahai. 1999–2024. Online forum. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/473GniA.

Time Monk Radio Network (interview). 2015. "Wahid Azal—The Occult War: Chaos vs. Harmony." *The Plane Truth,* ep. 3124. January 14. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4y7wcEN.

WahidAzal556. 2025a. "Answer to ex-Madhyamaka's questions." Reddit post and attached comments. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4hvvRGV.

WahidAzal556. 2025b. "The Final Shock—Or, How I Became Ronia's Ultimate Fourth Way Master (Whether She Likes It or Not)." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4y9DFTU.

WahidAzal556. 2025c. "Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief." Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/47o0zfn.

WahidAzal556 and OfficialDCShepard. 2024. Private Reddit messages exchanged between Wahid Azal and DC Shepard. December 28. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/4ASw1zI.

Warburg, Margit. 2006. *Citizens of the World: A History and Sociology of the Baha'is from a Globalization Perspective.* Leiden: Brill.

Ward, Charlotte, and David Voas. 2011. "The Emergence of Conspirituality." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26(1):103–21.

Wasserstrom, Steven M. 1993. "*Sefer Yesirah* and Early Islam: A Reappraisal." *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3(1):1–30.

Wasserstrom, Steven M. 2002. "Further Thoughts on the Origins of *Sefer Yesirah*." *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 2:201–21.

Whatifalthist. 2024. X tweet. December 26. Accessed October 5, 2026. https://bit.ly/475JBlC.

Wilson, Peter Lamborn. 1991. *TAZ, the Temporary Autonomous Zone: Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.

The Journal of CESNUR

Anti-Cult Narrative and Satanic Moral Panic in Serbia: A Case Study of the "Black Rose" Phenomenon

Aleksandar Matković
Union University, Belgrade, Serbia
al.matkovic@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the characteristics of anti-cult activism and the local features of the satanic moral panic in the Republic of Serbia and its predecessor states, focusing on the construction of the myth surrounding the satanic cult known as the Black Rose (*Crna ruža*). The first part offers a concise comparison between the satanic moral panic in countries under Western cultural influence (primarily in North America and Western Europe) and the anti-cult narrative in Europe's former socialist states. The second part examines in detail the characteristics and genesis of the anti-cult movement and ideology in Serbia and Yugoslavia. The third part presents a case study of the Black Rose phenomenon. Among other findings, it shows that the claims regarding the existence and destructive activities of the Black Rose cult—and the rhetoric accompanying them—are a typical example of anti-cult discourse, while at the same time serving as the main expression of the satanic panic in Serbia and the former Yugoslavia. Beyond distinguishing unsubstantiated claims from those with a factual basis, this study shows that the Black Rose case displays all the key characteristics of the broader satanic panic narrative, alongside specific features shaped by unique historical circumstances and by the religious-political and cultural traits of Serbia during the transitional, post-Yugoslav period. In doing so, it offers an explanation of which social phenomena may have particularly favored the expansion and subsequent decline of both the fear of satanic cults and general anti-cult sentiment in Serbia and the former Yugoslavia.

KEYWORDS: Black Rose, Moral Panic, Satanism, Anti-Cult Movements, Ritual Crimes, New Religious Movements in Serbia.

Western Satanic Panic vs. Anti-Cult Anxiety in European Countries in Transition

Although scholarship has debated it for decades, the concept of moral panic still does not seem sufficiently recognized and accepted by the wider social community. Indeed, the mere mention of this concept can cause confusion or misunderstanding, even among academics and professionals. Anticipated by Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) as early as 1964 (McLuhan 1964), introduced into sociology by Jock Young (1942–2013) in 1971 (Young 1971a, 1971b), and thoroughly developed by Stanley Cohen (1942–2013) a year later (Cohen 1972), the concept of moral panic refers, in short, to an intense feeling of threat and fear in the population regarding an issue that appears to threaten the social order (Jones

The Journal of CESNUR, Volume 10, Issue 6, November–December 2026, pages 71–86.
© 2026 by CESNUR. All rights reserved.
ISSN: 2532-2990 | www.cesnur.net | DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2026.10.6.2

and Jones 1999). Building on Cohen's conception, Kenneth Thompson identifies the following key features of every moral panic: 1. something or someone is defined as a threat to certain general values or interests of the community; 2. the media depict this threat in an easily recognizable, stereotypical, and sensationalist form; 3. public concern rises sharply; 4. the authorities or those who shape public opinion react; 5. the panic subsides or results in social change (Thompson 1998).

The moral panic regarding the assumed widespread prevalence of Satanism and its socially harmful manifestations, popularly known as the satanic panic, originated in North America at the very beginning of the 1980s, from where it soon spread to Western Europe and other culturally close parts of the Western world (deYoung 2000; Jenkins 1992; La Fontaine 1998). Among the key characteristics of this panic were claims about the exceptionally large scale of satanic cults whose members, for ritual purposes, frequently commit some of the gravest criminal offenses, including murder, rape, sadistic injury, abuse and torture, cannibalism, abduction, and a series of other unlawful acts (Ellis 2000; Frankfurter 2006; Introvigne 2016; Jenkins 2004; Richardson, Best and Bromley 1991; Roleff 2002; Victor 1993). As a consequence, considerable attention was devoted to so-called occult crime in both criminological theory and practice (see Hicks 1991; Lanning 1989; Olson-Raymer 1990).

In the rhetoric of the satanic panic, children were described as some of the most frequent victims of so-called satanic ritual abuse (Beck 2015; deYoung 2004; Nathan and Snedeker 1995), while numerous influential individuals from politics, the economy, popular culture, and other prominent social spheres were named as leaders and prominent members of these assumed cults (Hughes 2021; Laycock 2023; Waterhouse 2023). Although it caused serious controversies and prompted significant social debate while it lasted, the satanic panic is considered to have ceased to be part of mainstream scientific and professional discourse in the West by the mid-1990s, subsequently retreating to the margins of social discussion in that part of the world.

By contrast, the emergence and spread of the satanic panic in Europe's former socialist states had significantly different characteristics. These societies spent the 1980s "behind the Iron Curtain" (which, for most of them, meant a highly limited flow of information and news from the West). In the early 1990s, they experienced a radical divergence between state-promoted atheism on the one hand and a newly emerging religious consciousness on the other, along with a general shift from an

identity largely free of national markers to a frequent emphasis on nationally focused rhetoric and nationalist sentiment. As a result, the societies of the former Eastern Bloc, as well as the former Yugoslavia, developed a specific way of perceiving and reacting to moral panic. While in some areas of life and work the understanding of, and social reaction to, the presumed harmful activities of satanic and other cults generally followed the pattern of Western anti-cult activism (see, for example, the criminological publication by Kholopov 2005), in other social spheres we find an influx of new ideas that were not part of the original template of the "Western" satanic panic. The remainder of this paper focuses on the Republic of Serbia's experience with this social phenomenon.

Anti-Cult Panic in Serbia

Although it shares numerous points of contact with the global phenomenon of anti-satanic hysteria, the satanic and, more broadly, anti-cult moral panic in the Republic of Serbia has significant local features. First and foremost, a noticeable delay in the spread of the contemporary satanic panic is apparent in Serbia and its predecessor states. There are many reasons for this. In many instances, Serbia and Yugoslavia have tended to adopt popular social trends later than other countries. This applies especially to the period before the expansion of the internet, when access to information was incomparably more limited and the globalization processes we know today could not yet fully unfold. Furthermore, isolation from the rest of the Western world, particularly from Western Europe and North America, during the dissolution of the SFR Yugoslavia (civil wars, sanctions, economic crisis, hyperinflation, etc.) also helped to keep Serbia largely untouched by the Western wave of satanic panic.

In fairness, Yugoslav society in the 1980s was not entirely without its own local version of this moral panic. As early as 1988, certain media began to speculate about the destructive activities in Zagreb of an alleged cult (*sekta* in Serbian and Croatian: as with other derivatives of the Latin *secta*, the correct English translation is "cult," not "sect," which in English has a different and less negative meaning). The cult was named the Black Rose (*Crna ruža*) and, according to these reports, was driving young people to suicide (Ladišić 1988; Stanivuković 1988). However, this was a distinctly short-lived and narrowly localized episode of social anxiety that died down very quickly, only to gain full momentum in the following

decade, after the collapse of the state. Another element of this early debate about the alleged satanic cult, and at the same time one of the most unusual explanations for the anxiety surrounding it, is the hypothesis (if not a kind of sub-conspiracy theory within the broader conspiracy theory about the Black Rose) according to which the Yugoslav Counterintelligence Service deliberately spread the Black Rose myth for its own operational purposes (Bebek 2019).

As for the FR Yugoslavia, the first successor to the SFR Yugoslavia, the period of its founding (in 1992) and early existence coincided with the decline of satanic panic propaganda in Western Europe and America. However, in line with the tendency toward delayed adoption of social trends mentioned above (which was common throughout Eastern Europe at that time), the satanic moral panic reached its greatest expansion in Yugoslavia precisely then. The initial trigger for this expansion was, by all accounts, a series of incidents with fatal outcomes occurring close together in time, namely several murders and suicides that were tentatively linked to the activities of destructive religious cults (for example, see Luković 1998, 2000). Following these tragic events, public attention visibly shifted toward crime with occult elements and toward the presumed destructive activities of "religious cults," understood as an all-encompassing, stigmatizing category that includes practically all new religious movements, but also some churches and religious communities that, globally, are not considered new or alternative religions at all. In this process of stigmatization and "Satanization" (whether real or metaphorical), all the typical features of the global anti-cult moral panic could be observed.

A regularity that applies by analogy is the pattern typical of all societies going through crises and transitional periods. In countries undergoing comprehensive social change, the resulting turbulence is, as a rule, reflected on the religious plane as well. Under such conditions, one part of the population tends to show a heightened interest in the spiritual sphere, while another part of the believers shows a decline in religious enthusiasm. In this process, some of the latter, together with a segment of the population that had until then held atheistic convictions, embrace new, alternative religious teachings or other related alternative ideas about spirituality. These conditions create exceptionally fertile ground for the local expansion of religious organizations and spiritual practices that had previously not been widespread in that society.

The crisis that followed the dissolution of the SFR Yugoslavia created fertile ground for the growth of spirituality, which was directed primarily toward the majority Serbian Orthodox Church and toward the other religious groups defined by the Constitution as traditional religious communities. At the same time, conditions also ripened for other forms of spirituality, both in organized religious associations and in individual attraction to different spiritual teachings and systems. In this environment, a spiritual rivalry escalated between "traditional" and "new" religious teachings, accompanied by a tendency to discredit new or alternative religious ideas, both out of genuine conviction about their assumed harmfulness and for quite different, pragmatic motives.

This form of religious intolerance was not limited to non-traditional religious communities but was also directed at larger and more established ones (the Catholic Church, the Islamic Religious Community, etc.), frequently combining national and religious sentiments to discriminate against ethno-religious minorities and to win new believers (Đorđević 1999; Matković 2021a, 2021b). Thus, a distinctive local model of religious moral panic took shape in Serbia. While resting on the general premises of the anti-cult narrative, this model relied heavily on religious-national sentiments stirred up by the civil war. In this process, the "Satanization" of churches and religious communities was applied arbitrarily and indiscriminately, leading, among other things, to the stigmatization of certain churches recognized as traditional under the legal system of the Republic of Serbia. These features therefore emerge as key characteristics of the local spread of the satanic moral panic in the country.

Another important feature of the religious moral panic in Serbia concerns the object of this social anxiety. As shown above, the Western stereotype of the satanic panic relied primarily on allegations of ritual child abuse and on the conspiracy theory of a hereditary, intergenerational, and international conspiracy of Satanists occupying influential positions in society (Frankfurter 2006; Richardson, Best and Bromley 1991; Sakheim and Devine 1992; Victor 1993; Wright 2005). In Serbia and its predecessor states, by contrast, the main concern is the general danger posed by the activities of religious cults, "cult" being, as already noted, the central concept in the discourse of this local moral panic.

On this basis, it can be argued that the main form of the satanic (and, more generally, religious) moral panic in Serbia has the features of a more generalized anti-cult propaganda and activism. This phenomenon thus occupies a somewhat

different position from the claims of the Western satanic panic; its content diverges significantly from foreign hypotheses about satanic ritual abuse, which is a more specific and, in many respects, central component of the global phenomenon. Furthermore, unlike the Western allegations of ritual abuse, the narrative of the domestic satanic panic is dominated by claims of incitement to suicide, which the Black Rose and other hypothetical satanic cults allegedly commit against their followers.

Finally, it is essential to highlight the characteristic that gives the satanic moral panic in Serbia its greatest local uniqueness and distinctive stamp. This is the combination of current socio-political processes with belief in an international satanic conspiracy; such speculations were, as a rule, put forward by laypeople lacking appropriate professional qualifications and expertise. As a result of this ideological combination, a belief emerged in certain social circles in an international political-occultist conspiracy against the Republic of Serbia, orchestrated by Satanists in the top political positions of the most powerful Western nations (especially the USA). The political narrative of an irrational conspiracy of the powerful against Serbia and the Serbian people is thus merged with the equally irrational elements of the anti-satanic narrative, creating a highly specific, if not unique, whole. Consequently, the satanic moral panic in Serbia also takes on the features of a *sui generis* phenomenon.

Case Study: Allegations Concerning the "Black Rose" Cult

The most striking example of the satanic moral panic in Serbia is the myth of the existence and highly destructive activities of a religious cult called the Black Rose. The Black Rose is the name of the presumed main satanic organization in Serbia, to whose operations—and alleged members—numerous crimes have been attributed for decades. The allegations surrounding the Black Rose include most of the standard accusations that form an integral part of the global satanic moral panic. These include: the existence of a worldwide satanic network of which the Black Rose is a part; its highly destructive nature, well-organized structure, and hierarchy; a large membership ready to commit some of the gravest criminal offenses; and the involvement of influential public figures, among others.

All of this makes claims about the Black Rose's existence and malevolent influence the most characteristic local manifestation of this moral panic.

However, as noted earlier, certain specific features can be observed, relating primarily to the destructive and self-destructive activities attributed to its members.

As already mentioned, the first allegations about the existence of the Black Rose date back to the SFR Yugoslavia of the late 1980s, in the Zagreb area, and ran parallel to the development of the "Darkers" (*darkeri*) subculture among Zagreb youth at that time (more precisely, to the media's discovery of its existence). For clarity, this was the local name for a youth subculture associated with the post-punk and gothic rock music scene. Based on the available data, we take the view that the actual beginning of the anti-satanic hysteria in Yugoslavia can be dated to the media exploitation of this subject in several Yugoslav print outlets during 1988. However, the first anxious and negative articles about the "Darkers" appeared at the end of the previous year (Ladišić 1988). The basis for the satanic panic was anxiety about the growing numbers of the "Darkers" subculture and, in particular, about several suicides of Zagreb teenagers who were speculated (with or without basis) to have belonged to the "Darkers" movement (see Ladišić 1988; Miškulin 2019; Stanivuković 1988; Tomić 1990).

The fact that this subculture, the musical genre around which it formed, and its followers were still a novelty within the mainstream culture of the Yugoslav state, and that they were recognizable by a specific ideological outlook, image, and lifestyle, was exploited to create a stigmatizing environment and to spread through the media unverified or deliberately false information about the true nature of this youth movement. In this context, social anxiety peaked with the claims about the existence of the satanic cult called the Black Rose, which was allegedly responsible for driving young people to suicide. During this period, a series of sensationalist (and, as later proven, deliberately fabricated) media reports appeared which, to increase circulation, viewership, or listenership, presented the supposed social danger posed to Yugoslavia by this satanic organization. In the same wave of moral panic, various public figures were accused of belonging to the group, which further increased interest in the subject. All of this led to a palpable rise in social anxiety and to an atmosphere of persecution and lynching, to which teenagers—members of the "Darkers" movement—and other people accused of taking part in these occult activities were exposed. To calm the situation, the police issued an official statement denying the existence of a destructive organization with these characteristics. In line with the general pattern of a moral panic (Cohen

1972; Thompson 1998), interest in the topic declined over time, and the Black Rose story was set aside (Drach 2013; Miškulin 2019).

The same topic resurfaced in the newly formed FR Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Typical newspaper articles described young people gathering in cemeteries in certain towns of Vojvodina, in the north of the country, allegedly accompanied by various forms of socially deviant behavior; this phenomenon was (again without valid verification) attributed to the activities of the Black Rose. In 1993, after incidents in two barracks of the Army of Yugoslavia, the Black Rose story was widely exploited. These were two separate but closely timed cases of mass murders of soldiers committed by young men doing their compulsory military service, who then took their own lives; certain media later declared them, without any valid factual basis, to be members of the Black Rose cult (Švarm 1996). This exploitation of the Black Rose bogeyman continued throughout the 1990s. These allegations were frequently combined with various speculations about presumed criminal activity linked to religious cults in general.

During the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, in line with the model of religious destabilization under wartime and other crisis conditions described above, the story of the satanic cult called the Black Rose gained powerful new momentum. This was probably also helped by the global rise in anti-cult anxiety that marked that year and the approaching turn of the millennium, particularly regarding the activities of millenarian religious communities and various doomsday cults.

The next major escalation of satanic moral panic began in 2002, after two teenagers from Belgrade, students at the same gymnasium, committed suicide in quick succession (A. A. 2002; NIN 2003). Following the legacy of previous waves of satanic panic in Serbia and its predecessor states, the media's aggressive promotion of shocking and usually entirely unsubstantiated allegations received new impetus during this and the following period. In 2003–2004, the media intensively covered damage to tombstones in several cities across Serbia and other acts of vandalism committed by juvenile delinquents, which were also frequently interpreted as the work of the Black Rose or other satanic cults.

In the years that followed, several murders marked by particular cruelty or by the irrationality of their execution (as a rule, owing to the insanity of perpetrators who had a mental illness) were heavily presented in the media as "cultic crimes," and their perpetrators were tentatively labeled "Satanists"—most often, precisely,

members of the Black Rose. Importantly, this discourse shifted to some extent from the media into the judiciary. Indeed, in several court cases, the reasoning of the judgment contained statements explicitly describing the offenses charged against the defendants as ritual crimes, "cultic rituals," or the result of "cult influence" or "satanic inspiration," without any factual basis for such claims (see, for example, case files K. 201/07; 5K. 21/16; K. 24/19). As a general regularity, it can be observed that, to this day, the local manifestation of this moral panic shows a relatively steady tendency in which various extreme incidents (most frequently homicides and suicides) are, according to a well-worn, formulaic pattern, attributed shockingly, sensationally, and without adequate factual support to the activities of satanic cults, and in particular to the Black Rose.

Despite decades of intense social anti-cult propaganda, the existence and operation of an organization called the Black Rose with the stated characteristics has not been proven to this day. Here the fundamental pattern of the global satanic moral panic can be recognized: the absence of evidence for the alleged (most often highly shocking and logically hard to conceive) criminal activities. At the same time, it should be noted that, hypothetically speaking, an organization, or rather an informal group of people gathered under the name Black Rose, could quite conceivably have existed for a certain period before or, even more likely, after the local outbreak of this social anxiety in the late 1980s. However, this circumstance should not, by itself, be interpreted as confirming the accusations unless there is correspondence between the actual group (or groups) and the actions of its members on the one hand, and the allegations made on the other.

Furthermore, once intense social anxiety had emerged, it is entirely realistic to assume that some individuals (primarily young people) may have reacted to the claims of the moral panic in a counterproductive way, taking them precisely as an incentive to form some association, for which the stigmatized—and thus, for young people, particularly attractive—name Black Rose may have been chosen. This could explain the statements of certain young people (assuming, of course, that their claims are true) who on specific occasions declared that they belonged to a community of that name. The discrepancy between their descriptions of the activities of such communities (most often groups of young people united by shared youth interests) and the allegations of criminal activity made against the Black Rose religious cult in anti-cult propaganda is highly conspicuous. In any case, as in the global satanic panic described above, a feedback effect of

emphasizing unsubstantiated allegations of this kind can easily be imagined in Serbia as well; this phenomenon can be explained scientifically through the mechanism of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1949), the looping effect (Hacking 1995), and the phenomenon of ostension (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983).

In short, spreading accusations and urban legends about the Black Rose, instead of suppressing destructive activity for which there is no real confirmation in practice, may produce exactly the opposite result: the emergence of groups and individuals ready to engage in certain legal or illegal activities precisely under the notorious—and therefore alluring—name of the Black Rose, or under the general banner of satanic religious-ideological beliefs. However, even if one or more organizations oriented toward committing certain crimes associated with Satanism did objectively exist, we believe it is unrealistic to expect large-scale operations, a high level of danger to protected social interests, a high degree of organization and structure, or a long existence. The main arguments in support of this view are: the difficulty of concealing serious criminal offenses (especially if they are numerous); the fact that the members of such organizations, according to the parameters described above, would most likely be young people lacking sufficient life experience, with little family and social independence and with limited material resources, capabilities, and scope for action; the frequent shifts of interest and the turbulent, pubertal and post-pubertal changes in attitudes and principles common in this population group; and the like.

Moreover, this is consistent with data presented by members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, according to which satanic delinquent groups in our country are highly local and autochthonous, with no organizational network or central administration coordinating multiple connected communities (Luković 1998, 2000). Hence, the stereotype of a traditional, or rather very long-standing, well-organized, mass, internationally integrated, locally networked and widespread, highly destructive satanic organization called the Black Rose must be characterized as a local form of the unsubstantiated allegations of the satanic moral panic.

An interesting circumstance is the regularity observed in the relationship between the expansion of certain youth and music subcultures on the one hand, and the rise and fall of the narrative about the Black Rose and other satanic cults on the other. Specifically, with regard to heavy metal and its extreme subgenres, during the period of significant popularity of the first wave of extreme metal in

Yugoslavia (which ended in the early 1990s), a certain number of typical offenses with occult elements were recorded (vandalism in cemeteries, satanic graffiti, certain sacrilegious acts against churches, etc.). With the decline in the popularity of metal during the rest of the 1990s, the number of such occult offenses also decreased. However, when its popularity revived around 2000, the number of typical "occult offenses" rose again. Conversely, with a renewed decline of this musical genre (primarily its extreme subgenres), which occurred roughly at the end of the first decade of the 2000s, the number of criminal offenses and misdemeanors with occult features appears to have fallen again (Matković 2016, 2025).

The same regularity is confirmed by identifying the period in which crime with occult elements was most widespread in Serbia. A comparison of cases analyzed in earlier research shows that a large share of criminal acts against religious buildings, religious monuments, and tombstones occurred in the first half of the 2000s (Matković 2016). This period coincides precisely with the local rise in the popularity of black metal, the most radical form of the extreme metal counterculture, some of whose internationally prominent members were associated with identical criminal acts (Introvigne 2016; Matković 2022, 2024; Patterson 2013). If we consider that so-called "satanic dabblers"—that is, teenage Satanists and pseudo-Satanists—are, as a rule, the main group identified as members of alleged destructive cults and, at the same time, used to prove the truth of the satanic panic's claims (Emerson and Syron 1995; Fine and Victor 1994; Langone and Blood 1990; Lowney 2002; Simandl and Naysmith 1988), it is easy to assume that the rise and fall of the moral panic narrative about the Black Rose may have been closely connected with the rise and decline of extreme metal and related subcultures among local youth.

More recently, the frequency of allegations about the Black Rose's activities has declined, along with fewer direct links between specific crimes and the cult's alleged operations. Moreover, the anti-cult narrative occasionally suggests that the Black Rose is no longer active, or at least not active in physical reality, having moved its operations into cyberspace. On the one hand, these trends could reflect an objective awareness of changing social circumstances, specifically the decline in popularity of certain, mostly teenage, groups and subcultural movements whose members are traditionally stigmatized as members of religious cults and are consequently typical targets of accusations of belonging to the Black Rose.

Similarly, growing public awareness (see, for example, the following internet discussions: Reddit 2021, 2023, 2025) of the extreme dubiousness, or even complete impossibility, of a destructive criminal cult operating undetected for decades may also have contributed significantly to the decline of this local form of the satanic panic. On the other hand, one cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the reshaping of the satanic panic narrative in Serbia was influenced to some extent by several studies that explained the phenomenon of religious moral panic in detail on scientific grounds and demystified the real nature of the story of the Black Rose and related presumed satanic cults (Matković 2016, 2021a, 2021b, 2025). In any case, whichever reasons prevail, this shift should be welcomed as a sign that the moral panic narrative is being successfully abandoned, so that fabricated claims and groundless accusations are avoided and attention can be focused on actual crime, as well as on real social problems in the field of freedom of conscience and religion, their abuse, and their violation.

References

Note: This paper draws in part on revised and updated sections of the author's previous research published in "Krivično-pravni aspekti okultnih ritualnih aktivnosti" (Criminal Law Aspects of Occult Ritual Activities, PhD diss., Union University Law School Belgrade, 2016); *Okultizam, kriminalitet i pravo* (Occultism, Criminality and Law, Novi Sad: Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre / Faculty for European Legal and Political Studies, 2021); and *Novi religijski pokreti, kriminalitet i socijalne devijacije: od prestupništva do stigmatizacije* (New Religious Movements, Criminality and Social Deviations: From Offending to Stigmatization, Novi Sad: CNZD, 2025).

A. A. 2002. "Za samoubistva nisu krive isključivo sekte" (Cults Are Not Exclusively to Blame for Suicides). *Blic online*, June 3. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://bit.ly/4sfOimt.

Bebek, Valerija. 2019. "Histerija Crne ruže odjekuje i danas: 'Cijela priča s darkerima u Zagrebu pala je na plodno tlo puno crnje organizacije gdje je izmišljena priča o sekti koja nagovara mlade na samoubojstvo'" (The Hysteria of the Black Rose Echoes Even Today: 'The Whole Story with Darkers in Zagreb Fell on Fertile Ground of a Much Darker Organization Where a Story about a Cult Persuading Youth to Commit Suicide Was Invented'). *100posto*, February 9. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://bit.ly/4Bc2mS9.

Beck, Richard. 2015. *We Believe the Children: A Moral Panic in the 1980s*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Cohen, Stanley. 1972. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.

Dégh, Linda, and Andrew Vázsonyi. 1983. "Does the Word 'Dog' Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling." *Journal of Folklore Research* 20(1):5–34.

deYoung, Mary. 2000. "'The Devil Goes Abroad': The Export of the Ritual Abuse Moral Panic." In *British Criminology Conference: Selected Proceedings, Vol. 3*, edited by George Mair and Roger Tarling (online). London: British Society of Criminology. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://bit.ly/4zj0yFT.

deYoung, Mary. 2004. *The Day Care Ritual Abuse Moral Panic*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Đorđević, Dragoljub B. 1999. "Antikultni pokret – mogući izraz religiozne netolerancije" (The Anti-Cult Movement: A Possible Expression of Religious Intolerance). *Facta Universitatis – Series: Philosophy and Sociology* 2(6/2):258–66.

Drach, Saša. 2013. "Crna ruža: Kratka, ružna epizoda u vremenu kada je bilo divno odrastati" (Black Rose: A Short, Ugly Episode in a Time When It Was Wonderful to Grow Up). *Jutarnji list*, December 14. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://bit.ly/3TMUYMr.

Ellis, Bill. 2000. *Raising the Devil: Satanism, New Religions, and the Media*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

Emerson, Shirley, and Yolande Syron. 1995. "Adolescent Satanism: Rebellion Masquerading as Religion." *Counseling and Values* 39(2):145–59.

Fine, Gary Alan, and Jeffrey S. Victor. 1994. "Satanic Tourism: Adolescent Dabblers and Identity Work." *The Phi Delta Kappan* 76(1):70–72.

Frankfurter, David. 2006. *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hacking, Ian. 1995. "The Looping Effects of Human Kinds." In *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate*, edited by Dan Sperber, David Premack, and Ann James Premack, 351–83. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Hicks, Robert D. 1991. *In Pursuit of Satan: The Police and the Occult*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.

Hughes, Sarah A. 2021. *American Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970–2000*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Introvigne, Massimo. 2016. *Satanism: A Social History*. Leiden: Brill.

Jenkins, Philip. 1992. *Intimate Enemies: Moral Panics in Contemporary Great Britain*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Jenkins, Philip. 2004. "Satanism and Ritual Abuse." In *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, edited by James R. Lewis, 221–42. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jones, Marsha, and Emma Jones. 1999. *Mass Media*. London: Macmillan Press.

Kholopov, Alexey V. 2005. *Методика расследования ритуальных убийств* (Methodology of Ritual Murder Investigation). St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg Judicial Institute of the Prosecutor General's Office of the Russian Federation.

La Fontaine, Jean S. 1998. *Speak of the Devil: Tales of Satanic Abuse in Contemporary England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ladišić, T. 1988. "Dark – igra sjena: Što se sve pisalo u novinama i na koji način?" (Dark, a Game of Shadows: What Was Written in the Newspapers and in What Manner?). *Polet*. Reproduced in *Index.hr*, May 7, 2021. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://bit.ly/4dR3pgq.

Langone, Michael D., and Linda O. Blood. 1990. *Satanism and Occult-Related Violence: What You Should Know*. Weston, MA: American Family Foundation.

Lanning, Kenneth V. 1989. *Satanic, Occult, Ritualistic Crime: A Law Enforcement Perspective*. Quantico, VA: Behavioral Science Instruction and Research Unit, FBI Academy.

Laycock, Joseph P. 2023. *Satanism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lowney, Kathleen. 2002. "Teen Satanists Are Rebelling Against the Dominant Culture." In *Satanism*, edited by Tamara Roleff, 67–91. San Diego: Greenhaven Press.

Luković, Zoran. 1998. *Verske sekte – priručnik za samoodbranu* (Religious Cults: A Handbook for Self-Defense). Second edition. Belgrade: Pravoslavna misionarska škola pri hramu Sv. Aleksandra Nevskog.

Luković, Zoran. 2000. *Verske sekte – priručnik za samoodbranu* (Religious Cults: A Handbook for Self-Defense). Third edition. Belgrade: Draganić.

Matković, Aleksandar. 2016. "Krivično-pravni aspekti okultnih ritualnih aktivnosti" (Criminal Law Aspects of Occult Ritual Activities). PhD diss., Union University Law School Belgrade.

Matković, Aleksandar. 2021a. *Okultizam, kriminalitet i pravo* (Occultism, Criminality and Law). Novi Sad: Novosadski humanitarni centar / Fakultet za evropske pravno-političke studije.

Matković, Aleksandar. 2021b. "Religious Moral Panic and Its Social Consequences." *Kultura polisa* 45:143–56.

Matković, Aleksandar. 2022. *Umetnost, socijalna devijantnost i pravo: teorijski okviri i studije* (Art, Social Deviance and Law: Theoretical Frameworks and Studies). Novi Sad: Prometej.

Matković, Aleksandar. 2024. *Od artističkog do devijantnog* (From the Artistic to the Deviant). Belgrade/Novi Sad: Orion Art / Prometej.

Matković, Aleksandar. 2025. *Novi religijski pokreti, kriminalitet i socijalne devijacije: od prestupništva do stigmatizacije* (New Religious Movements, Criminality and Social Deviations: From Offending to Stigmatization). Novi Sad: CNZD.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Merton, Robert K. 1949. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: The Free Press.

Miškulin, Ivica. 2019. "Legenda o Crnoj ruži: Povjesničar istražio niz tajanstvenih samoubojstava krajem 80-ih" (The Legend of the Black Rose: A Historian Investigated a Series of Mysterious Suicides in the Late 80s). *Večernji list*, January 20. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://bit.ly/4sdB7m2.

Nathan, Debbie, and Michael Snedeker. 1995. *Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt*. New York: Basic Books.

NIN. 2003. "Sekte – duhovna droga" (Cults: Spiritual Drug). August 1. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yI4dfi.

Olson-Raymer, Gayle. 1990. *Occult Crime: A Law Enforcement Primer. Research Update, Vol. 1, No. 6*. Sacramento, CA: California Office of Criminal Justice Planning.

Patterson, Dayal. 2013. *Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult*. Port Townsend, WA: Feral House.

Reddit. 2021. "Crna Ruža i ostale sekte u Srbiji" (Black Rose and Other Cults in Serbia). *r/serbia*. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://bit.ly/4i7KAa9.

Reddit. 2023. "Postojanje Crne ruže" (The Existence of the Black Rose). *r/serbia*. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://bit.ly/4dKRBfM.

Reddit. 2025. "Sekta Crna Ruža. Poznaje li netko žrtve, ili je sam bio žrtva ili općenito ima neke, javnosti nedostupne, informacije o ovoj sekti?" (The Black Rose Cult. Does Anyone Know the Victims, Was a Victim Themselves, or Generally Has Some Information on This Cult Unavailable to the Public?). *r/AskSerbia*. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://bit.ly/4iwNR40.

Richardson, James T., Joel Best, and David G. Bromley, eds. 1991. *The Satanism Scare*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Roleff, Tamara, ed. 2002. *Satanism*. San Diego: Greenhaven Press.

Sakheim, David K., and Susan E. Devine, eds. 1992. *Out of Darkness: Exploring Satanism and Ritual Abuse*. New York: Lexington Books.

Simandl, Robert, and Bette Naysmith. 1988. "Dabbling Their Way to Ritual Crime." *Cult Awareness Network News* August:4.

Stanivuković, P. 1988. "Samoubistva koja su uznemirila Zagreb – 'Crnu ružu izmislila crkva?'" (Suicides That Disturbed Zagreb – 'Was the Black Rose Invented by the Church?'). *TV Novosti*. Available at *Cult of Ghoul* (blog), January 29, 2012. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yuO0tG.

Švarm, Filip. 1996. "Hajke i linčevi – pukovnik ima kome pisati" (Manhunts and Lynchings: The Colonel Has Someone to Write To). *AIM Press*, October 31. Accessed October 20, 2026. https://bit.ly/3TMW1Mn.

Thompson, Kenneth. 1998. *Moral Panics*. London: Routledge.

Tomić, Celestin. 1990. "Vjera Crkve i satanizam" (The Faith of the Church and Satanism). *Crkva u svijetu* 25(3):193–203.

Victor, Jeffrey S. 1993. *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend*. Chicago: Open Court.

Waterhouse, Rosie. 2023. *Satanic Panic: A Modern Myth*. London: The Author.

Wright, Stuart A. 2005. "Satanic Cults, Ritual Abuse, and Moral Panic: Deconstructing a Modern Witch-Hunt." In *Witchcraft and Magic: Contemporary North America*, edited by Helen A. Berger, 120–36. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Young, Jock. 1971a. "The Role of the Police as Amplifiers of Deviancy, Negotiators of Reality and Translators of Fantasy." In *Images of Deviance*, edited by Stanley Cohen, 27–61. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Young, Jock. 1971b. *The Drugtakers: The Social Meaning of Drug Use*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.

Court Records of the Republic of Serbia:

District Court in Sremska Mitrovica. 2007. Case No. K. 201/07.

Higher Court in Zrenjanin. 2016. Case No. 5K. 21/16.

Basic Court in Obrenovac. 2019. Case No. K. 24/19.

The Journal of CESNUR

Media vs. Tantric Movements: Applying Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model

Marie Štěrbová
Independent Researcher, Czech Republic
aurigeorgsdottir@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Tantric movements almost invariably face hostile media coverage. Their philosophy is often misunderstood or misrepresented, while their members remain largely unheard and suffer discrimination. Yet the journalists who produce content about tantric groups believe in the objectivity and impartiality of their work. This paper, whose author is herself a student at a tantric school that is part of the MISA network, seeks the causes of this discrepancy between how the media treat tantric groups and how the media believe they fulfill their social role of informing the public. It answers the question by applying the propaganda model developed by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky. From this perspective, the media appear as institutions that propagate a mainstream doctrine and manufacture the consent of the masses to government policies, by presenting "us" as the right and just ones and the "other" as deviant and dangerous. In this clash of ideologies, tantric groups are identified as enemies, because transgression of social and ethical norms is a fundamental aspect of tantra, and the media treat them accordingly. The propaganda model is applied to the media coverage of the Osho movement, POYRA, and MISA.

KEYWORDS: Tantra, Media and New Religious Movements, Osho, POYRA, MISA, Gregorian Bivolaru, Media Ethics, Noam Chomsky.

Introduction

New religious movements practicing tantra are a favorite target of journalists, since they tend to supply the media with attractive stories of alleged—or possibly real—sexual or psychological abuse, forced and unpaid labor, money laundering, and human trafficking. With a certain degree of imagination, one may say that tantric new religious movements are like a supermarket for journalists: every time they go there, they find plenty of topics they can turn into a story. Or the other way around: whenever they do not know what to write about, they can pick a tantric new religious movement at random, and they will have enough material for a series of articles. It is an easy and always accessible source of sensational and shocking news.

The Journal of CESNUR, Volume 10, Issue 6, November–December 2026, pages 87–102.
© 2026 by CESNUR. All rights reserved.
ISSN: 2532-2990 | www.cesnur.net | DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2026.10.6.3

Yet those who are members of such a movement, or who study religions and matters of faith, or who simply like to think critically, may perceive a sense of injustice and unfairness when they read or watch the stories appearing in the media, and many questions arise. How is it possible that, almost without exception, when members or leaders of a tantric group are accused of an offense or a crime, journalists automatically apply a presumption of guilt instead of the presumption of innocence embedded in the code of journalistic ethics? Why are journalists not at all open to admitting a version of the story other than the one in which the tantric movement is guilty? Why does journalistic objectivity reach its limits in such situations? Why are tantric movements always portrayed in the media as "cults," and why is their lifestyle presented as deviant?

We can summarize these and similar questions into a single one: what happens to journalistic professionalism when it comes to reporting on tantric groups?

In search of answers, I will apply the propaganda model developed by Edward S. Herman (1925–2017) and Noam Chomsky. Within the structure of this model, the authors describe several concepts that, in my opinion, are also valid for interpreting and understanding the behavior of the media vis-à-vis tantric groups.

As case studies, I use the media coverage of issues related to POYRA, the movement founded in the Czech Republic by Jaroslav Dobeš, known as Guru Jára (and later YahRa); the Osho movement; and MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, founded in Romania by Gregorian Bivolaru.

The Propaganda Model

The American linguist, philosopher, and social critic Noam Chomsky developed the propaganda model as an alternative explanation of the position and role of the media in society, and as a tool for understanding the mechanisms of media production. The propaganda model is a counter-theory to liberal theories that regard the media as independent institutions.

Chomsky presented the propaganda model in the book *Manufacturing Consent*, co-authored with Edward S. Herman, first published in 1988 and since republished several times. For Herman and Chomsky, the relationship between the media, the ruling power, and economic interests is a complex one. While the media maintain the appearance of being free institutions, certain structural mechanisms

are in reality at work that ensure their conformity with the dominant ideology and the dominant economic interests.

According to Chomsky, the media play a key role in supporting the powerful societal interests that control and finance them. This supportive role consists in advancing the important agendas and principles of these powerful groups (owners, advertisers, and those who provide content for the news, or the "experts" used as news sources). In turn, control over the media is exercised by shaping and constraining media policy, which is achieved "by the selection of right-thinking personnel and by the editors' and working journalists' internalization of priorities and definitions of newsworthiness that conform to the institution's policy" (Herman and Chomsky 2002, xi).

Chomsky, as a political theorist, was interested in the connection between the media and the US government, namely in how the media report on government policies. He and Herman examined the news coverage of several major wars the United States waged in the second half of the twentieth century and compared it with the way journalists reported on other wars in which presumably "enemy" states, such as the USSR, were engaged.

In their surveys, Herman and Chomsky discovered an interesting aspect. The very same action, even a drastic one costing thousands of human lives (for instance, heavy bombing of a populated rural area), was framed as acceptable—as a necessary sacrifice for the greater good of the world, or as legitimate defense—if carried out by the US Army, and condemned as genocide, mass murder, or an atrocity if committed by a state hostile to the United States. Such differing reporting reveals an ideological conflict, or a tendency to present one ideology as right and the other as wrong. Two almost identical actions are described by journalists in different terms and framed as different, and the presence of these differences points to an underlying ideological conflict.

In the following sections, I select some of Herman and Chomsky's concepts and apply them to the media image of tantric groups. It should be noted that Herman and Chomsky studied the structure and performance of the media, not the effects of media production on the public. Their theory is nonetheless valid for explaining how the media behave when they create a particular narrative carrying a particular message.

Ideology

Herman and Chomsky do not believe that the media are impartial, neutral, and independent. In the theory they advance, media messages circulate a certain ideology and integrate the audience into it, "manufacturing consent" of the population to economic, social, and political policies. In their words:

> The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society (Herman and Chomsky 2002, 1).

The authors also note that, even though journalists firmly believe their work is neither influenced nor controlled by anyone and that they exercise the freedom of the press in full objectivity,

> the same underlying power sources that own the media and fund them as advertisers, that serve as primary definers of the news, and that produce flak and proper-thinking experts, also play a key role in fixing basic principles and the dominant ideologies (Herman and Chomsky 2002, xi).

Interestingly, dissent and anti-institutional criticism are allowed to a certain extent, so that "while their presence shows that the system is not monolithic, they are not large enough to interfere unduly with the domination of the official agenda" (Herman and Chomsky 2002, xii).

Ideology is not propagated by being formally imposed. Only in totalitarian regimes do we encounter explicit rules for journalists that are codified, applied, and enforced: it is desirable to write about this topic, it is desirable to show the leaders in a positive light, and so on. According to Herman and Chomsky, the persistence of an ideology is secured by subtler means, through the internalization of its values. As Chomsky writes:

> Those who occupy managerial positions in the media, or gain status within them as commentators, belong to the same privileged elites, and might be expected to share the perceptions, aspirations, and attitudes of their associates, reflecting their own class interests as well. Journalists entering the system are unlikely to make their way unless they conform to these ideological pressures, generally by internalizing the values; it is not easy to say one thing and believe another, and those who fail to conform will tend to be weeded out by familiar mechanisms (Chomsky 1999, 19).

Chomsky adds that

> to confront power is costly and difficult; high standards of evidence and argument are imposed, and critical analysis is naturally not welcomed by those who are in a position to

> react vigorously and to determine the array of rewards and punishments. Conformity to a "patriotic agenda," in contrast, imposes no such costs (Chomsky 1999, 19).

The ideology Herman and Chomsky discuss is unspoken, unexpressed, and invisible, because it lies at the very foundation of the way media personnel think. Journalists never identify it as such, but it can be inferred from verbal cues and discourse. While for Herman and Chomsky the dominant ideology was anti-communism, in the context of this paper we can understand ideology in a very general sense, as a set of life values and moral principles.

When analyzing media discourse on tantric groups, we encounter strong and intense disapproval whenever the tantric group is organized, has a leader, practices certain secret techniques, and engages in erotic activities between individuals outside a traditional couple relationship. The media reacted in this way, for example, to the tantra-practicing group established in the United States by Pierre Bernard (1875–1955), nicknamed by the American press "the Loving Guru." Similar media strategies were later applied to Osho Rajneesh (1931–1990), and, in recent times, to YahRa and POYRA, and to MISA.

When tantra is practiced individually rather than in a large organized group, and is kept away from spiritual purposes, the media present it in a favorable light, as an exotic therapeutic approach that helps people improve their sexual satisfaction and connect with themselves. An example is the BBC Reel video of April 30, 2020, on the tantra teacher Christina Low, entitled "The Tantra Teacher Giving Millennials 'Orgasms' in Singapore" (BBC Reel 2020). Christina Low uses breathing techniques, without any intimate physical interaction with her clients. Similarly, in *Brainz Magazine* we find an interview from June 30, 2025, with Stacie Steinbock, who received "an advanced certification from the only government-accredited Tantra program in the world," and who also downplays the religious nature of tantra, focusing instead on "healing, pleasure, and deep connection" (*Brainz Magazine* 2025).

Practicing tantra is also considered acceptable (or cool, or attractive) for celebrities who do not mention how or where they learned it, as in the cases of Sting, Raquel Welch, or Mae West.

The varying attitude of the media was also noticed by Joseph Laycock (2009) in his paper on the marketing of yoga to the American public. Laycock writes about the already mentioned Pierre Bernard, who, after facing accusations of abduction and being accused by the press of running a "love cult," abandoned his original

esoteric strategy of exotic mystique and shifted to an exoteric strategy of demystifying yoga and tantra, teaching them as preventive medicine rather than as religious practice:

> New religious movements tend to meet less resistance in America when they resemble Bernard's exoteric strategy. By contrast, groups that follow Bernard's first strategy, featuring initiatory knowledge, charismatic leaders with miraculous abilities, and prescribed forms of dress and behavior are typically regarded with suspicion (Laycock 2009, 1; see Laycock 2013).

If tantra is taught by a tantric master or expert in an organized group, including secret initiations, journalists express doubts and disapproval. Their objections are of two kinds.

The first is that no mentally sane person would engage in such tantric practices without being manipulated into them. This conviction was expressed, for example, by Rowan Deacon, director of the Apple TV series *Twisted Yoga*, in an interview with Nick Vivarelli for *Variety*, published on March 5, 2026:

> The key thing that drew me to the project is: what were the mechanics? What was the system? What was the kind of boiling frog syndrome that meant that these worldly, educated, interesting people had got themselves involved in a set of ideologies and beliefs that ultimately, perhaps, didn't serve them (Vivarelli 2026).

The second is that the idea of reaching spiritual evolution through eroticism is a lie: tantra teachers are fakes, who only seek power over naive people, their money, and sexual pleasure through exploitation.

The ideology promoted by the media thus appears to be one of secularism, even atheism. The ideology identified as dangerous—the "tantric" ideology, if there has ever been one—rests on disobedience to official institutions, which are replaced in their normative role by the spiritual teacher, or even directly by God. It can be argued, at this point, that the conflict of ideologies is in this case a conflict of authority. In a secular or atheistic society, the key themes and values are personal well-being and the harmony of a religion-free society, ensured by one's submission to political authority. The main values of a tantric practitioner, by contrast, are his or her pleasure and the Divine, speaking through the voice of the guru. As a transgressor of norms, the tantric practitioner is feared by the authority governing worldly affairs, because he or she is uncontrollable and unpredictable, and in this ideological war the authority seeks to bring him or her under control.

Defining the Enemy

For any ideology, the universe is divided between Us and the Other. What "We" do is always good and well intended, even though we may sometimes fail, while what the Other does is always evil. In Herman and Chomsky's findings, the dichotomy was between anti-communists and communists. Whatever the anti-communists did, however brutal or unjust, was presented as an achievement and the right thing to do, or at least as an unwise action taken with the best interests at heart. The actions of the communist side, by contrast, were portrayed in the darkest colors, as deliberate evil and proof of thoroughly malevolent intentions.

Tantric practitioners have always had a reputation, if not as enemies of mainstream society, certainly as outsiders. The nature of tantra is, and has always been, secretive (Timalsina 2011, 274). Tantric practices in India differ greatly from those in Europe and America: in India they are not necessarily sexual, while Western forms focus predominantly on the sexual element (Urban 2009, 2024). Western forms of tantra are also characterized by increasing secularization, brought about by commercialization and the capitalist Western environment (Timalsina 2011; Urban 2022). Still, tantra in its Western forms maintains, or even further develops, its "counter-cultural and anti-social aspect" (Timalsina 2011, 281), with transgression of norms at its core. Thus,

> although there are numerous incompatibilities between the experiments with Tantra in India and the West, the fundamental social character that Tantrics are "outsiders" or intruders upon the pure domain of religion and transgressors of norms, is consistent (Timalsina 2011, 282).

It is easy to understand that tantric practitioners, notorious transgressors of norms, automatically become enemy figures for any dominant ideology within which they find themselves. Another element in defining the enemy is generalization: the inherent conviction that all members of the "enemy" side are the same. Just as all the "commies" of old were the same, so are all tantric practitioners.

We find this generalized image of depraved tantric practitioners, for example, in media coverage of Osho and his movement. Since the subject of this paper is the media image of tantric groups, I leave aside the discussion of the alleged crimes and examine only how the media handle the situation.

Journalists have presented many stories of alleged victims of the Osho movement, including in the Netflix series *Wild Wild Country* (Way and Way 2018). Articles and films use the same narrative model: a victim's testimony. The alleged victims, who benefit from a presumption of sincerity, describe their life in Osho's community. For example, we read in anti-cult activist Anke Richter's interview with Sarito "Ma Prem" Carroll in *1News*, entitled "Survivor of Infamous Osho Cult Speaks on Sexual Abuse She Endured from Age 10" and published on September 14, 2025:

> Open relationships were the norm. Young women got sterilised because the master didn't want children, claiming they would hinder spiritual development. [...] Carroll estimates that 80 % of the approximately 40 teenagers on the ranch were sleeping with adults. She knows of one girl who was with 70 men before the age of 16. Another with 150 (Richter 2025).

As Chomsky notes, "charges against official enemies barely require substantiation" (Chomsky 1999, 20). The words of the victims are taken a priori as true and then generalized and applied to all members of the movement. In this herd, there are only black sheep.

Once the public enemy has been identified, the next logical step is to detect and destroy him. In this holy war in the name of moral purity, journalists eagerly take on the role of protectors of public safety, abandoning their role as impartial observers and forgetting the ethical rules of religious tolerance and the presumption of innocence. Hence we find TV series, series of news articles, and podcast series that not only target tantric groups, with journalists often going undercover in such groups and presenting shocking revelations, but also track down their members and destroy their public image by any means.

In the Czech Republic, two members of POYRA recently lost their jobs (one was a high school teacher, the other a university teacher) after a media outlet (*CNN Prima News*) informed their superiors of their ideological affiliation. The initiative came entirely from the media, since the teachers were not under any criminal investigation and their students had never complained about them.

Calling a tantric movement a cult is a ready-made and fully effective way of discrediting the group, with no further explanation needed or demanded by the public.

Sometimes journalists even pose as experts on cults. We can observe this trend in the interviews with Rowan Deacon and Suzanne Lavery, makers of the Apple TV

series *Twisted Yoga*, who are presented as qualified to give opinions on the case of MISA and Gregorian Bivolaru.

In an interview with Scott Fishman for *TV Insider* on March 10, 2026, Rowan Deacon says:

> We need to check the files and files and find if it was true, and it had been true because the Romania part nobody had pulled it together in the longform. So we're having to do a lot of first-hand research to understand that. [...] Of course, he [Gregorian Bivolaru] denies the allegations which the film sets out. In terms of where it's going next, one hopes there will be a trial, but the schools are all still opening and functioning (Fishman 2026).

In the Czech context, the journalist Valerie Fišrová of *CNN Prima News* infiltrated POYRA and acted as a member for one year. After she published articles about her experiences, other media quoted her as a specialist on POYRA, or even invited her for interviews, such as the one with Marek Pausz on *CNN Prima News* on May 4, 2025 (*CNN Prima News* 2025).

Unworthy Victims

Herman and Chomsky introduce the notion of "unworthy victims" to show how the media sustain official narratives and side with the government in its conflicts with internal or external actors: "A propaganda system will consistently portray people abused in enemy states as *worthy* victims, whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be *unworthy*" (Herman and Chomsky 2002, 37). The distinction manifests itself in the extent and degree of attention and indignation. Unworthy victims are either ignored or reported on only briefly, without sympathy, compassion, or much attention. Worthy victims, on the contrary, are depicted as martyrs and heroes, and their suffering is widely publicized.

We can say that members of tantric groups who have been subjected to brutal police operations or to media crusades receive no sympathy and almost no space in the media. The public knows nothing about them, or, if it does, they are presented as deserving such treatment because of their deviant beliefs. From the perspective of the dominant ideology, a tantric group has only two kinds of members: the indoctrinated, who keep the organization running, and those who have awakened from their indoctrination and are now on a quest to save their fellow members.

One example is that of the victims of the French police raids against MISA in November 2023, which led to the arrest of its founder, Gregorian Bivolaru. There is no chance to hear in the mainstream media the voices of those who were arrested and interrogated, speaking about their harsh treatment by police officers and their experiences in French detention. These testimonies were made available not by the mainstream media but in isolated interviews with human rights activists, such as the reports written in 2024 by Willy Fautré for Human Rights Without Frontiers (e.g., Fautré 2024). The media consistently tell the story of victims who were so thoroughly manipulated that they did not even want to press charges against their alleged abusers. On the other hand, the media are silent about the fact that these "victims" filed complaints against the French police. Their suffering in French cells and their trauma are not "worthy," because they have been indoctrinated into a deviant ideology and, as such, do not merit sympathy.

Another example of unworthy victims are the two members of POYRA who lost their jobs after the media tracked them down and disclosed their private activities to their employers. Even these victims of a media campaign—entirely innocent people who suffered the loss of their jobs, of their economic security, and of their dignity—are treated without any care or sympathy.

According to the propaganda model, if an enemy state does the very same thing, the victims will be "worthy" of media attention and glorified, and the enemy state will be depicted as intolerant, cruel, and a violator of basic human rights.

If we look for media coverage of religious persecution, we find passionate articles about the Russian government discriminating against faiths other than Orthodox Christianity. In *Time* magazine, we find an emotional story by Peter Pomerantsev, published on April 20, 2024, which opens with a detailed description of the torture that Azat Azatyan suffered at the hands of Russian forces in occupied southern Ukraine because of his Baptist faith. The account of his inhuman treatment is followed by a list of other Protestant denominations facing persecution (Pomerantsev 2024).

In this case, indignation is powerfully expressed, with the purpose of showing the "enemy" country as thoroughly evil. Yet if two people in Central Europe lose their jobs because of their faith, as members of what has been labeled a "cult," the media celebrate it as a step toward greater public safety.

Another example of this double standard is an article by Christopher Giles and Julia Luft on *BBC News*, published on May 15, 2026, and entitled "Brutal Raid on Woman's Birthday Party Highlights Rise of Russian Vigilante Group" (Giles and Luft 2026).

The main victim, Katya, was celebrating her thirtieth birthday and organized a party in a nightclub for the occasion. The venue was stormed by masked members of the Russian vigilante group Russkaya Obshina (Russian Community), who began to attack Katya's friends physically and verbally, calling them "faggots and lesbians." Russkaya Obshina was allegedly searching for evidence of "LGBT propaganda," which is illegal in Russia. Katya, "well-known in her home city of Arkhangelsk for hosting parties for an alternative crowd," was later convicted of offending the feelings of believers and sentenced to 200 hours of community service because of a red neon light in the shape of a cross in the nightclub.

Here, the journalists sympathize with Katya. They describe how an intolerant member of Russkaya Obshina told her that "she did not conform with traditional values and there was 'something wrong with her,'" and Katya herself explains how "she now lives in fear because coverage of her case in the local media, and on Russkaya Obshina's social channels, has led to widespread online harassment." The aim of Russkaya Obshina, we are told, is to forcefully remove "Western liberalism, and promote traditional family-orientated values."

When the French police raided the houses where MISA yogis were living, there was also "something wrong" with the yogis. The difference is that the French police, unlike Russkaya Obshina, were deemed to be right.

To some extent, it can be said that, from the victims' perspective, the two situations were similar. Both the MISA yogis and Katya and her friends were in places they legally owned or rented, they were minding their own private business, and they were suddenly raided by police or police-like forces, attacked, harassed, interrogated, and eventually punished for simply having a different lifestyle. Yet in the MISA case the police are shown as doing the right thing, guided solely by good and lawful intentions in the best interest of the public and protecting society from a sinister "yoga organized crime group," while in the second case the police are shown as intruding into the private sphere, violating people's human rights, and imposing totalitarian values.

We can also compare the images and descriptions used. To this day, the media circulate video footage of the 2004 Romanian police raid on MISA ashrams, showing heavily armed police officers breaking down doors and defenseless yogis lying on the floor under threatening guns. The interpretation is always that of justified police force used against suspected human traffickers, a glorification of state power taking action against criminals, even though subsequent investigations did not confirm any of the suspicions and the yogis were ultimately awarded financial compensation for their traumatic experience (which, once again, the media do not mention). In Katya's case, the same picture appears, with a person lying on the floor with bound hands, and the caption reads: "Law enforcement (pictured holding a guest on the floor) joined the raid on Katya's party." In the Russian case, the BBC depicts the raid as brutal, unjustified, excessive, and abusive.

The Bounds of the Expressible

Apart from the assumptions silently taken for granted, an ideology can also be identified through what cannot be thought or expressed. If some of these inexpressible ideas are eventually expressed, they meet with a powerful public or professional backlash and with indignation, and their author is accused of being an apologist for criminals. As Chomsky writes,

> the system protects itself with indignation against a challenge to the right of deceit in the service of power, and the very idea of subjecting the ideological system to rational inquiry elicits incomprehension or outrage, though it is often masked in other terms (Chomsky 1999, 20).

In the case of political propaganda, Herman and Chomsky give the example of the impossibility of ever stating that the United States "invaded" a country, even when this is objectively what happened. Instead, journalists use expressions such as "protecting peace," "supporting fragile democracies," or even "defending itself" (Herman and Chomsky 2002).

When the media report on tantric groups, there are several ideas that are never expressed, because they simply seem absurd or impossible to journalistic minds. The first is that tantra practitioners can achieve genuine spiritual results and reach union with the Divine through tantra. The second is that erotic interaction is a valid gateway to the sacred, just like a mass, a sermon, a prayer, a meditation, a

pilgrimage, a song of worship, or any other spiritual or religious practice in the world. The third is that women who take part in erotic initiations with a "guru" can do so of their own free will, fully responsible for their actions, and not necessarily because they have been indoctrinated or manipulated.

In media narratives, consensual participation in tantric initiations or activities involving a teacher or a therapist and including erotic elements is inconceivable. In media discourse, women who complain of having been sexually abused by a tantric leader are automatically considered to have been raped. Any other interpretation is rejected, and whoever suggests it is accused of diminishing the victims' suffering, of siding with the perpetrators, or of lacking common sense. If someone points out that, after all, it is for the courts to decide whether women who complained of sexual abuse consented freely or not, and that their conscious consent is perfectly plausible, the reaction is that "it is impossible," followed by accusations of being an apologist for rapists. As Chomsky writes,

> a challenge to the underlying patriotic assumption is virtually unthinkable within the mainstream and, if permitted expression, would be dismissed as a variety of ideological fanaticism, an absurdity, even if backed by overwhelming evidence (Chomsky 1999, 21).

This also explains why members of tantric groups are excluded from media debates by default: for the media, they embody ideological fanaticism and absurdity, even when they offer overwhelming evidence.

Conclusion

As we have seen, media content on tantric groups tends to follow the principles of the propaganda model advanced by Herman and Chomsky: defining and fighting the ideological enemy; supporting the dominant ideology by classifying the victims of its own side as unworthy, in contrast to the worthy victims of enemy states; and avoiding what is inconceivable and inexpressible. According to Chomsky, it would be naive to expect anything else: "the very structure of the media is designed to induce conformity to established doctrine" (Chomsky 1999, 21).

The dominant ideology that emerges from media discourse on tantra is one of traditional values, atheism, and secularism, with traces of puritanism. The media protect it by identifying and stigmatizing any dissent. It can also be argued that the conflict between these ideologies is a conflict of authority and power, in which a secular system seeks to keep tantric practitioners under scrutiny. Given the

transgression of norms inherent in tantra, tantric groups will always appear as a threat to established power, because of their otherness and because their values differ from the secular and atheistic values of the majority.

It can therefore be said that, when reporting on tantric groups, journalists are ideologically motivated. Their ideology is the everyday common-sense ideology of modern society, which has expelled faith and God beyond the borders of the thinkable, and does not know how to relate to those who still believe in the Divine and even believe that they can meet it face to face in this life, through erotic union.

This modern secular ideology is so deeply ingrained that it becomes invisible, even to journalists themselves. Chomsky expresses this masterfully:

> Journalists often meet a high standard of professionalism in their work, exhibiting courage, integrity, and enterprise, including many of those who report for media that adhere closely to the predictions of the propaganda model. There is no contradiction here. What is at issue is not the honesty of the opinions expressed or the integrity of those who seek the facts but rather the choice of topics and highlighting of issues, the range of opinion permitted expression, the unquestioned premises that guide reporting and commentary, and the general framework imposed for the presentation of a certain view of the world (Chomsky 1999, 23–4).

It is worth noting that, unlike LGBTQ+ sexual orientations, which have become socially accepted as part of "who the person was born," membership in a tantric group is perceived as a mental condition or the result of indoctrination. If being "a tantric" could be classified as an innate sexual orientation, perhaps tantric practitioners would enjoy greater freedom and acceptance.

References

BBC Reel. 2020. "The Tantra Teacher Giving Millennials 'Orgasms' in Singapore." April 30. Accessed October 28, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yTKp8I.

Brainz Magazine. 2025. "Healing and Empowerment through Tantra–Interview with Stacie Steinbock, MEd, ABS." June 30. Accessed October 28, 2026. https://bit.ly/4z0xUIC.

Chomsky, Noam. 1999. *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*. Second edition. London: Pluto Press and The Electric Book Company.

CNN Prima News. 2025. "V sektě gurua Járy je možné pořád stoupat, říká reportérka. Popsala, jak sama riskovala" (In Guru Jára's Cult One Can

Keep Rising, Says Reporter: She Described the Risks She Took). May 4. Accessed October 28, 2026. https://bit.ly/4yWXoX4.

Fautré, Willy. 2024. "Abuses to Counter Alleged Abuses: A French Story." *European Federation for Freedom of Belief*, August 19. Accessed October 28, 2026. https://bit.ly/47UOwGA.

Fishman, Scott. 2026. "'Twisted Yoga': How 'Bachelor' Contestant & More Women Were Lured into Sex Cult." *TV Insider*, March 10. Accessed October 28, 2026. https://bit.ly/4zq1M23.

Giles, Christopher, and Julia Luft. 2026. "Brutal Raid on Woman's Birthday Party Highlights Rise of Russian Vigilante Group." *BBC News*, May 15. Accessed October 28, 2026. https://bit.ly/4zqn8MP.

Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. 2002. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Updated ed. New York: Pantheon Books.

Laycock, Joseph. 2009. "Nice Little Things Like That: Oom the Omnipotent and the Marketing of Yoga to the American Public." Paper presented at Engaging Particularities VII, Boston College.

Laycock, Joseph. 2013. "Yoga for the New Woman and the New Man: The Role of Pierre Bernard and Blanche DeVries in the Creation of Modern Postural Yoga." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 23(1):101–36.

Pomerantsev, Peter. 2024. "Russia's War Against Evangelicals." *Time*, April 20. Accessed October 28, 2026. https://bit.ly/4sF0qxQ.

Richter, Anke. 2025. "Survivor of Infamous Osho Cult Speaks on Sexual Abuse She Endured from Age 10." *INews*, September 14. Accessed October 28, 2026. https://bit.ly/4sEUF36.

Timalsina, Sthaneshwar. 2011. "Encountering the Other: Tantra in the Cross-Cultural Context." *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 4(3):274–89. DOI: 10.1093/jhs/hir033.

Urban, Hugh B. 2009. *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris.

Urban, Hugh B. 2022. "Dark Webs: Tantra, Black Magic, and Cyberspace." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 26:237–52. DOI: 10.1007/s11407-022-09318-x.

Urban, Hugh B. 2024. *The Path of Desire: Living Tantra in Northeast India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Vivarelli, Nick. 2026. "'Twisted Yoga' Director Discusses New Apple TV Docuseries: 'So Much of It Is About Sexuality and Sex as a Road to Spiritual Enlightenment'—Trailer." *Variety*, March 5. Accessed October 28, 2026. https://bit.ly/4zfTBod.

Way, Maclain, and Chapman Way, dirs. 2018. *Wild Wild Country*. Documentary series. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix.



The Journal of CESNUR

