

**SPIRITUALITY AND *CULTISM*:**  
**A CASE STUDY OF A NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT –**  
**THE MAGNIFICAT MEAL MOVEMENT**

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**SPIRITUALITY AND *CULTISM*:**

**A CASE STUDY OF A NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT –**

**THE MAGNIFICAT MEAL MOVEMENT**

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## **STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY**

### **DECLARATION**

The views presented in this thesis are the findings of the candidate. All sources employed have been acknowledged.

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**Candidate**

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**Director**

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the distinguishing characteristics of *cultist NRMs*. The Magnificat Meal Movement (MMM) is the particular focus through which this is done. Chapter One is introductory in nature and outlines the task of the different chapters and their development. The spiritual, professional, and academic aspects relevant to the topic are integrated. Chapter Two investigates and evaluates the question of terminology and its classification. Oriented by methodological developments in spirituality and practical theology, this chapter uses an interdisciplinary approach to critically review what scholars in the field are saying. A new definition of *cultist NRMs* is advanced. This necessitates a move away from identifying groups or persons allegedly involved in *cults* in favour of the recognition of patterns of behaviour and human mentalities called *cultist tendencies* or *attitudes* that can be clearly identified and analysed. This new approach has clear pastoral, spiritual and theological advantages.

Chapter Three is contextual in nature. It traces the origins and development of the MMM and its foundress Debra Geileskey in Australia. While this is done in a chronological fashion, the chapter is concerned to identify the underlying religious patterns that come to characterise the MMM. The conflation of the person of Debra with the MMM will be evidenced. Chapter Four examines the history of the MMM in Ireland using the same methodology as in Chapter Three. Patterns of growth and decline will also be traced. Chapter Five takes up the task of critical evaluation and asks the question: is the MMM a *cultist NRM*? Chapter Six draws the conclusions about the MMM together, and identifies it clearly as a *cultist NRM*. Specific recommendations for those involved with NRMs are proposed. Areas for further study and issues that need to be addressed by the Churches and the Irish State in relation to NRMs are identified.



## **ETHICAL STATEMENT**

The ethical conduct of this study in fulfilment of the requirements for an M.A. in theology is based on the Research Ethics of the Code of Ethics and Regulations of the Milltown Institute. Most of those who were interviewed gave permission for their names to be used in the research. Three persons who wished to remain anonymous gave interviews. These were recorded in such a manner as to ensure full confidentiality and security. Letters of the alphabet were employed to protect their anonymity. All gave written consent including those interviewed in Australia in 2003 when I did field work in Helidon, the present location of the MMM. Because of the closed nature of the MMM my attempts to obtain interviews there, especially with the Irish members, were rebuffed. I made one last effort to ensure academic balance by emailing Claire Murphy and Debra in early April 2006 offering to give them access to my research. I received no reply. All the participants gave an informed consent and were made aware of the full list of their rights and ethical rules such as the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

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**The Icon associated with the MMM <sup>1</sup>**



**Debra before the Oratory and icon at the MMM Shrine, Helidon**

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 5.1.4, 123-4.

**Chapter One:**  
**THE JOURNEY**

## 1.1 Introduction

Work on this dissertation represents a spiritual, professional and academic journey that has brought me through the academic study of spirituality into contact with the emerging field of practical theology. It is spiritual in that academic study may serve as a means of integrating elements of meaning and significance in one's life journey; professional, in that practical experience in the field shows that New Religious Movements (NRMs) generally evoke a poorly informed level of response not only from pastoral and spiritual practitioners, but also from the media, government and other agencies; and academic, as an exercise in interdisciplinary critical reflection and analysis, a theoretically based praxis. NRMs represent a complex and multilayered challenge that sometimes leads to very problematic results for loved ones and family members, and experience in the field shows that supporting them represents a significant pastoral and spiritual challenge. Fortunately, the experiences of most people joining new religious movements are less than dramatic. Researching this thesis has been an occasion for critical self-reflection that has informed and strengthened my own professional praxis in the field. The academic aspect of this journey has radically altered my views at theoretical, terminological and interpersonal levels. Issues long left on the back burner have been allowed to surface and have been integrated into this work.

### 1.1.1 My Journey – Spiritual Aspects

My purpose here is to outline the forces that have shaped my own spiritual and religious commitments and brought me to this work. I first became interested in the field of NRMs after my conversion to Christianity through the preaching of Billy Graham at Earl's Court in 1966. He suggested that a good way to grow in one's faith was to preach at Hyde Park Corner. As a result I met Donald Soper with his Christian Socialism, The Christadelphians, and members of the Catholic Evidence Guild, all offering their understanding of faith! At the time Christianity was under serious intellectual scrutiny and for many believers this became a period of anti-intellectual retreat. I worked at a rescue mission in New York in 1968, the year when there were student revolts around the world that led to a renewed period of religious experimentation. I remember in 1969 while the North was in turmoil I found myself at the L'Abri community in Switzerland founded by Francis Schaeffer. Here the narrow limits one experienced in many Churches were cast aside as we looked at the world of philosophy, culture and world religion.

Schaeffer reminds the person on a spiritual quest of a very specific danger, the flight from reason into an upper story or faith realm that evades the challenge of the higher criticism so necessary to modern theology.<sup>2</sup> While a student at St Patrick's College Maynooth I was in Washington DC working for the magazine *Christianity Today* during the Watergate Hearings in 1973. I was on a quest, a search partly brought about by my own difficult origins and partly by my search for integration as a person. I now recognise that I was on a defensive search for absolutes, the true Church, and the truth, anything that would take me away from the world of feelings. I was not aware of this tendency till

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<sup>2</sup> F.A. Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason* (London: IVP, 1968).

much later when I found recovery through a twelve-step programme called ACOA (Adult Children of Alcoholics). ACOA's avoid emotional exposure and use the cognitive world as a shield. The twelve-step programme started by AA is thus a foundational pillar of my own spirituality, one that has helped me understand what motivates people to seek answers to life's difficult questions even in ostensibly strange NRMs. Not surprisingly, I have observed that, while many young people who join NRMs have a very high IQ, they tend to be emotionally tuned out.

I am also a child of South African apartheid. My father was originally from Cobh. The family left Ireland in 1919 when my grandfather got a bullet through his hat from Republicans having served in the trenches with the British Army. My mother and father met in Germany while he served with the Allied Army of Occupation after the Second World War. He was Protestant and she was Roman Catholic, so I am also a child of a mixed marriage that unfortunately did not succeed. I grew up in Johannesburg near where Nelson Mandela was captured, and I experienced the tightening stranglehold of the apartheid regime, the pass laws and people being picked up by Black Marias. I was baptised in the Anglican Church, the Church of Trevor Huddleston and Desmond Tutu.

I was sent to an Anglican boarding school in Bloemfontein, a really strong Afrikaner area in the Orange Free State. I joined the school choir and found a lot of support from a school chaplain who later had to flee South Africa because he opposed the government. Among my most vivid memories is the night of Sharpeville, when armoured cars surrounded the school. My parents divorced when I was eleven, but before we left SA I witnessed the attempted assassination of Hendrik Verwoerd the Prime Minister of the

time at the show grounds in Johannesburg in 1960. Later that year I joined my mother and moved to Cork. Intriguingly, I moved from a society dominated by colour to one dominated by religion. Even then I experienced the dangerously divisive power of both politics and religion.

In Ireland I went to Midleton College, a Church of Ireland school still orientated at that time to the Anglo-Irish connection. None of my companions went to UCC and no one joined the Irish defence forces. The Church of Ireland at the time seemed to me to be a grey institution compared to the High Church riches of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa. Strangely, growing up in this minority Protestant context was a little like being a part of the white minority in South Africa. I can remember being asked for a blue card to attend a dance in a church hall, which was intended to preserve the Protestant ethos in the face of the *Ne Temere* decree. I generally did not identify with that tribal approach and gradually moved outside the Church as institution.

I went back to South Africa in 1965, and immediately identified with the black struggle, becoming a loner in white society. I then moved to London and went to Oak Hill Theological College in 1968 after a two-year period spent in the hotel business. I moved from being a mild monarchist reading the Daily Telegraph to being a Republican believing in the legitimacy of the struggle for a United Ireland. Oak Hill was too Anglican (interesting that the American Anglicans changed their name to Episcopalian after the War of Independence) for an emerging Republican. In retrospect it is easy to see how my own Christian experience and my emerging engagement with NRMs began to converge. One of my first encounters with NRMs was the first visit of the Children of

God to London and of course the whole upsurge of the Hippie movement. The real turning point was the World Student Christian Federation Conference, which took place in 1979 in Cardiff. There I came across the Dialog Center International based in Aarhus, Denmark, under the leadership of Johannes Aagaard of Aarhus University. This was the start of a long relationship, and serves as the root of my growing engagement with and my study of the NRM phenomenon. Such is the world of my shaping, one that helped prepare me for what was to become my life's work with its spiritual, professional and academic outcomes.

I have found that working with NRMs has been an effective challenge to my own faith development. A simple Irish example will suffice. The claim of the Dublin Church of Christ to be the one Church founded by Christ has challenged me to examine yet again the person and message of Jesus Christ. Much the same can be said of the wide variety of NRMs, Christian or otherwise, that I have encountered first hand over these thirty or more years of professional involvement. They have all been occasions of learning and reflection with profound faith implications. More to the point, the MMM which is the subject of this study challenged me to review my own understanding of Mary's role in Christianity. Let me conclude this personal reflection of what has motivated me to engage with the world of NRMs and to undertake this piece of research. It has become glaringly obvious to me that young people in Ireland today, like their cohorts elsewhere in the west; do not experience mainstream religion as a place of sacramental epiphany, but as a Christian Gulag. It is within this context of change that NRMs look to flourish.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> M. Garde, "New Religious Movements: A Wake up Call to the Churches in Ireland" Paper delivered at FIS Conference Westport (April 14, 2000).



With the bankruptcy of Christendom the shape mainstream religion is in is a contextual invitation to alternative and contesting visions, not all of which are either helpful or desirable.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.1.2 Professional Aspect

It is important to state at the outset that this thesis is not a description of the work of Dialogue Ireland, the organisation for which I work as Director. Rather, it is an opportunity to share the journey of faith, the call to live theologically, which is expressed in this vocation and in the dedication this research invites.<sup>5</sup> Professionally I had already been involved in the so-called cult wars since 1973 long before my involvement with Dialogue Ireland and extensive encounters with the NRM world. Over the years I have had contact with many recognised scholars in the field, more particularly Eileen Barker, Massimo Introvigne and Johannes Aagaard, whose influence on my own thinking and practice I hereby acknowledge. The challenge of what has been termed *cultism* and the need for informed response to it are major motivating forces in this work. The eighties were the decade of dramatic change as far as NRMs were concerned. In Ireland, 91% were still attending Mass, but the situation was in flux. The Protestant Churches were declining, but Evangelicals were in confident mood, though they bristled when they were confused with cults. An example is the charismatic group in Ballaghaderreen where a shift in the Evangelical direction took place, to which the western bishops responded with a pastoral letter. It was also the period of moving statues and renewed Marian devotion.

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<sup>4</sup> See for example, M. Frost & A. Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003) 3-16.

<sup>5</sup> See T. A. Veling, *Practical Theology: On Earth as it is in Heaven* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006) 3-22.

The question now is whether Ireland will go the way of Quebec where religious practice declined from 90+% to about 11%. Will this mean that Christianity will return to the gospel stance of being a principled minority; a determined minority. Even fifty years ago Christianity was the dominant shaping force in Irish society and culture in Ireland. This is no longer the case, and the position of the mainstream Churches has been vigorously contested. In the religious and spiritual contexts in Ireland major changes are afoot. The secularisation and post-secularisation debates do nothing to lessen the impact of this process of socio-cultural and socio-religious change. Post-modern and New Age forms of spirituality are common today. All of the World Religions are present in Ireland, variant forms of Christianity are emerging, and large numbers of NRMs have been identified. What we are seeing, then, is not just a process of secularisation; a process of de-traditionalisation and pre-rational romantic remythologisation<sup>6</sup> is also in train. This means a return to the past that refuses a future perspective, and is basically conservative. The problem is not myth as such but how it should be conceived and approached, particularly in terms of religious language definition, symbolism and the question of normalcy and the processes of demythologisation and remythologisation with which myth confronts theology. Can we still speak of Christianity when the Christian basic core, the reaching of eternal salvation, is not shared anymore? Are we witnessing a decomposition of Christianity?<sup>7</sup>

Spirituality and salvation have become subjective and individualistic concerns with little social relevance. The healing dimension of Christ's teaching had been neglected. In

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<sup>6</sup> This refers to a retreat from rational thinking and the literalisation of myth.

<sup>7</sup> H. McLeod, and W. Ustorf, eds., *Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 76-77.

response, the emergence of the New Age movements and the quasi-Catholic houses of prayer became a feature of the nineties. At recent Mind, Body, Spirit festivals it is not unusual to find over 6000 people browsing in a spiritual marketplace. Religion and spirituality have been commodified. Magic, astrology, Reiki, reflexology and various New Age therapies characterise the postmodern response to a neglected dimension of salvation. This embodies the final stage in the New Age manifestation as a commercial reality, and also marks the emergence of the new development in this field, namely the “Next Age.” Groups like Scientology, Landmark, and The School of Philosophy have become rooted in our religious landscape. More recently a number of African Churches have begun to surface. Also here in Ireland, the resurgence of what has been called Celtic spirituality brings to mind D. M. Baillie’s metaphor for some nineteenth century theologians who saw their own faces reflected when they looked down the well of history.<sup>8</sup>

The lack of governmental response to these emerging issues is significant.<sup>9</sup> Some formal response should be forthcoming quite simply because the State is responsible for the welfare of the citizen. Ireland needs an independent agency to monitor the emergence and activities of NRMs. Recent history is replete with reasons why something like this required. The attacks on the Tokyo subway using Sarin gas by Aum Shinri Kyo, Omagh, 9/11, 7/7, Waco, Jonestown and in Uganda are typical examples of the real dangers with which our societies are confronted today by movements which have taken a supra political turn. Ireland needs to attend publicly to such a potential threat. We also need a

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<sup>8</sup> D.M. Baillie, *God was in Christ* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949) 40.

<sup>9</sup> One of the areas I have struggled with in my work with Dialogue Ireland is making the government aware of the issues surrounding cults. So far no practical response has been forthcoming.

proper centre linked to a third level institute to provide academic research, advice and counselling to the public.<sup>10</sup> I believe that in the context of Irish history a democratic agency under democratic control and consistent with article 44 of the Constitution is the way forward.

### 1.1.3 Academic Aspect

Prior to undertaking this study at Milltown two educational experiences shaped my adult faith journey. Firstly, I studied at the Baptist College, Belfast, from 1970 to 1973. I went there as a Southern/South African Republican, and found myself in a mainly loyalist location in the early days of the Provisional IRA campaign. This led to some conflict, but while there I met some Mennonites who helped me to a radical pacifism and to a totally new way of looking at Church-State relations.<sup>11</sup> This clarified the Constantinian shape of Irish Christianity for me. Infant baptism was the key, instead of being a rite of initiation; it has become an inoculation where one just gets enough of the disease to kill of the personal relationship between the disciple and Christ. Conor Cruise-O'Brien has used the metaphor of two tribes of imaginary Jews. This led to a total identification between Catholicism and Irishness and between Protestantism and Britishness. You were born a Catholic or Protestant, and Christianity was a birthright rite!<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Dialogue Ireland has raised these issues with the present government for most of their tenure.

<sup>11</sup> J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972). See for example, M. Garde, Irish Theology in *Mission Focus: Current Issues* Edited by W. R. Shenk, (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1980) 200-11.

<sup>12</sup> The Anabaptists were the first to see that heresy has rights. Freedom of conscience did not first result from the Enlightenment but from the struggle for freedom by the Anabaptists in the Sixteenth Century. There was no Christian country only Christians in the country. See Pope Benedict XVI in conversation with John Allen <http://nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/pt052506.htm> "I am above all Catholic, and I would say that this point is important," he said. "We must always learn that we are Catholic, and thus that one's nationality is inserted, relativised, and also carefully located in the great unity of the Catholic communion."

In 1973 I moved to St Patrick's College, Maynooth where I was the first non-Catholic to study for the BD. The Baptists were evangelical, but anti-ecumenical. I instinctively wanted to hold the evangelical and ecumenical positions together. So my time at Maynooth was again like being a white South African in Africa. It was a time of great stimulation, realising that a lot of our differences were cultural, and like the Lutheran Church in Denmark, which is a Church of the majority, Catholicism is often a cultural rather than a faith community. The Charismatic Renewal has also played a part in the changing face of the religious landscape in Ireland, particularly when it peaked in the late seventies and early eighties. It was full of ecumenical promise, but this soon evaporated. The movement itself gradually split into various rival segments, evangelical, traditional-Marian, and progressive. Today the movement is a pale shadow of what it could have been. Many went on to leave Catholicism for a variety of believing and non-believing destinations. Was this too a symptom of what was happening on a larger scale in western societies? Where were genuine searchers to go?<sup>13</sup>

I became involved with the Charismatic movement while at Maynooth.<sup>14</sup> This movement reached a peak in 1978 at a major International Conference at the RDS. The thinking of this period could be summed up by Cardinal Suenens of Belgium, who spoke about how Ecumenics works best when the Churches get closer to Jesus: then the closer Rome, Canterbury and Geneva would get to each other. Since then I have encountered a number of Charismatics in my work who went onto leave the Catholic Church for higher powered

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<sup>13</sup> See for example, L. J. Francis, *Joining and Leaving Religion: Research Perspectives* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> See for example M. R. Garde, Charismatic Renewal, Politics and the Irish Question in *Essays Catholic and Radical* edited by K. Leech and R. Williams, (London: The Bowerdean Press, 1983) 251-265.

Pentecostalism, and others who became involved with the emerging New Age Movement. The common element was the postmodern move to the trans-rational, which located authority in experience rather than the bible or the authority of the Church. Once experience was raised to this level it could take people in different directions. At the same time the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons began to make headway in Ireland, and the Moonies – the Unification Church – were at the peak of their influence.

The result was a state of confusion, not least at the level of terminology and definition. Are Born Again Christians the same as the Moonies or the Hare Krishna's? Writers in the popular media, both secular and religious, made little effort to distinguish movements of a Christian nature from groups of a New Age perspective or those of Eastern origin. Demonisation and condemnation were the order of the day. There was no accurately grounded differentiation. One of the lessons of the eighties was to develop an understanding of the different types and categories of NRMs.<sup>15</sup> This led to the use of the less loaded term *New Religious Movement* (NRM) instead of the by now pejorative word *cult*. My experiences during those twenty some years were all part of the reason I was determined to study this area academically.

I have also been shaped by the mission of Dialogue Ireland and its grounded conversation with NRMs. That this dialogue was supported by the Catholic, Church of Ireland, Methodist and the Presbyterian Churches was an encouraging sign for a New Ireland. Ireland needs to learn lessons from what happened in Uganda, Waco, Heaven's Gate and the Solar Temple in Switzerland. It is no surprise that the Council of Europe called in

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<sup>15</sup> M. Introigne, *New Religious Movements – Types and Categories* audio tape Dialogue Series 1994.

1999 for support for the type of work we are now doing in Ireland. Since no Government agency has concern for these issues Dialogue Ireland has developed a clear advocacy role in respect to relevant government departments.<sup>16</sup>

#### 1.1.4 The Definitional Problem

The word *cult* became a cause of confusion in both usage and events. Originally, the word did not have a negative connotation, but this changed after Jim Jones murdered his followers in Guyana in 1978. Since then a number of important developments have taken place in the academic study of NRMs. Initially the word *cult* was used in relation to any group outside the mainstream Churches. Then links were made to claims about brainwashing and deprogramming. The most famous case in this regard in Ireland was that of Mary Canning, a schoolteacher from Donegal who joined the Moonies in 1981 while on holiday in California. It is clear she came under undue influence as part of her conversion and when she returned to Ireland she gave an interview to the Independent in which she claimed she was a free agent. Two weeks later, after working with deprogrammers, she announced in the Dáil chamber that she had been brainwashed by the Moonies.

Generally, academics rejected this thesis, but by the end of the decade a popular consensus had emerged that some form of mental coercion did exist, and that undue influence could be brought to bear on people. This view is increasingly accepted following the behaviour of those who bombed the London Underground in July 2005. It

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<sup>16</sup> See services section on home page of Dialogue Ireland <http://www.dialogueireland.org> (accessed May 30, 2006).

was also agreed that exit counselling was a legitimate way to help someone leave a group. Here the emphasis was on those who consented been given alternative information, which they could use in making a decision to leave. A further refinement is that of thought reform. This stresses that exit is only one option: a person is also free to remain. It was further recognised that any group could become the context of a genuine conversion informed by freedom of choice. Another issue clarified during this period was the difference between an authentic religious group and a cult. Earlier it was common to see any group outside the main Churches as a cult. Now we refer to *cultism*. This term names a mentality that can be found anywhere: inside the Churches, NRMs, in political parties and in human potential groups – Tony Quinn’s groups are an Irish example – where boundaries are not respected and where dependence becomes the order of the day. Instead of bringing liberation this type of mentality brings the person under subservient control by the leaders and the group.

This thesis will therefore be concerned to clarify the terminology used to classify the types and categories of groups generally referred to as *cults*, *sects*, and *new religions*. There has been an explosion of terminology in recent years and this has led to a challenging lack of clarity in both scholarly work and the popular media. The preferred term used in this work will be *NRMs*. In stipulating this choice the work of Johannes Aagaard and Helle Meldgaard has been influential. In their view,

[t]he terminology varies. Some call them religions; some call them expressions of Spirituality. We call them new religious movements, thereby simply indicating, that these phenomena are new in the sense of timing, even if they have older roots, religious in their pretensions and practices, movements since most of them have not – yet – settled down as regular religions and institutions. ...The movements are not as new as we might think, but they are new in the sense that they are modern, for they are the children of modernism, even if they appear to promote ‘the old



paths'. Their religiousness is often questioned by their efficient and secular approaches to power and finances... The quality of movements of course depends on their ability to move.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note, however, that the term *cult*, despite academic resistance, continues to play a part in the popular understanding of *NRMs* such that its meaning also needs to be clarified. In this thesis the term *cult* will be stipulated to refer to a tendency or mentality that can be observed in any organisation, rather than a particular form of group structure.<sup>18</sup>

#### 1.1.5 Focus of this Thesis

This thesis will examine the Magnificat Meal Movement (MMM) founded in Australia by Debra Geileskey.<sup>19</sup> The MMM has been chosen for study because of its Irish, Catholic and Marian contours and emphasis. It is also an interesting study in the evolution and impact of the *cultist mentality* in what was originally an expression of traditional Catholic faith and spirituality. The analysis will be grounded principally in the work of John A. Saliba<sup>20</sup> and will view the MMM from a theological, psychological and sociological perspective. Methodologically, the work is also influenced by Kees Waaijman<sup>21</sup> in spirituality and Gerben Heitink in practical theology. Heitink defines practical theology, viewed in terms of a praxis of communicative action, as “the empirically oriented theological theory of the mediation of the Christian faith in the praxis of modern

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<sup>17</sup> J. Aagaard and H. Meldgaard, *New Religious Movements in Europe* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 1997) 5.

<sup>18</sup> This stipulated understanding has been influenced by discussion at the ICSA Conference, Madrid, (July 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Debra has now begun using her maiden name, Burslem since her separation from her husband.

<sup>20</sup> J. A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2003 2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

<sup>21</sup> K. Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, translated by J. Vriend and edited by the Titus Brandsma Instituut. Vol. 8 *Studies in Spirituality* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002).

society.”<sup>22</sup> All of this is played out in real lives. By implication an investigation such as this, with its focus on changing allegiances<sup>23</sup> within an erstwhile Catholic organisation, is characterised by the interplay of empirical, interpretative, and strategic demands. The work of Paul Knitter<sup>24</sup> grounds the open approach I have adopted to interreligious dialogue. A principal source for information about the MMM is the work of former member Wal Maggs.<sup>25</sup> With regard to NRMs in general the work of Michael Langone<sup>26</sup> and Louis Hughes<sup>27</sup> has been particularly helpful.

#### 1.1.6 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis has been structured as follows. Chapter Two will focus on the question of terminology and its clarification. Using an interdisciplinary paradigm this chapter will critically review what scholars in the field are saying. The goal is to surface the best way to describe the *cult*, *sect*, *new religion* and *NRM* phenomenon. Chapter Three will then turn to the chosen movement for this study. It will analyse the history of the MMM from its origins in Melbourne in the late eighties onwards. The founder Debra Geileskey’s (hereafter referred to as Debra) childhood, her subsequent visionary claims, the aims of the MMM, and its subsequent move to Queensland will be surfaced and analysed. The rise and fall of the movement is traced chronologically, and the theological, psychological and sociological developments monitored. Fieldwork in Ireland and Australia was undertaken as part of this research. Interviews with existing and former

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<sup>22</sup> G. Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains* tr. R. Bruinsma (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) 6.

<sup>23</sup> See for example, L. J. Francis, *Joining and Leaving Religion* op.cit.

<sup>24</sup> P. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York, USA: ORBIS books, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> W. Maggs, *Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* (Toowoomba, Australia: Magnificat Meal Movement International, 1998), W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* (Helidon, Australia, 4th Edition 2005).

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.csj.org/infoserv\\_articles/langone\\_michael\\_term\\_cult.htm](http://www.csj.org/infoserv_articles/langone_michael_term_cult.htm) (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> L. Hughes, “Cults and Cultism,” in *The Furrow* 44 (1993) 352- 358.

members were undertaken, and unsuccessful attempts were made to interview Debra during a fieldwork visit to Helidon, Queensland in Australia in June 2003. During this visit the chancellor of the diocese of Toowoomba Brian Sparksman granted an interview on behalf of the bishop. Interviews with other concerned Catholics also took place. Debra had given her last interview in 1999, but subsequent to my unsuccessful attempt to speak to her, after a self-imposed silence there was a brief period of media activity followed again by silence. In a certain sense this chapter is an exercise in narrative theology, at least in terms of an attempt to discern God's action in the lives of those concerned. Narrative reconstruction will help us to reflect on the origins, spirituality and historical development of the MMM. In this context narrative theology is understood as "the sustained reflection of the theologian on the way we react to and appropriate the story of Jesus into our stories."<sup>28</sup>

Chapter Four is concerned with the history of the MMM in Ireland following a visit by Debra in 1994. This history has been reconstructed through fieldwork interviews. An undated leaflet produced by the movement has also been used. Chapter Five is concerned with critical evaluation: Is the MMM a cultist movement? This analysis will use Saliba's theological, psychological and sociological lenses in attempting to answer this question. Relevant elements of spirituality will also be surfaced. Writing in 1994 Michael Downey summarised two aspects of spirituality as a discipline that will also orient this work. The first underscores an awareness that in any spirituality there are levels of reality and meaning not immediately apparent. The second draws attention to the fact that spirituality also signifies a quest for personal integration in the face of forces of fragmentation and

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<sup>28</sup> J. Navone, "Narrative Theology: 'One Approach' " in *Milltown Studies* (1985) 52.

depersonalisation.<sup>29</sup> The reality of these interweaving forces as they operate in the MMM will become evident as the story unfolds. The work will close by drawing conclusions and by making specific recommendations for those involved with NRMs. Areas for further study and issues that need to be addressed by the Churches and the Irish State in relation to NRMs will be identified.

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<sup>29</sup> M. Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist, 1994) 14.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **New Religious Movements, Cults and Sects:**

#### **What do we call them?**

## 2.1 Cults: What's in a Name?

In this chapter, guided by the interdisciplinary nature and concrete social and religious interests of postmodern spirituality and practical theology,<sup>30</sup> the main concern is to clarify the meaning of the word *cult* and decide on the appropriate terminology to use in the analysis of the MMM that follows. This is important for two reasons. The first has to do with the interdisciplinary nature of practical theology; the second is required for reasons of technical and theoretical clarity even though the nature of NRMs as such is a secondary focus of the thesis.

In this context practical theology is understood as a critical conversation between interpretations of faith and practice, and interpretations of the social worlds in which people live and express their faith.<sup>31</sup> As is the case with contemporary spirituality this tends to be done in close dialogue with the social sciences.<sup>32</sup> A review of international literature in English on the theme of this chapter is required, given the paucity of theoretical reflection on this topic in Ireland. This will provide a vocabulary to interpret usage as it applies to occurrences of the phenomenon here in Ireland and abroad. The

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<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the concerns of practical theology and postmodern spirituality see J. Woodward and S. Pattison, eds, *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000); See also R. Lennan, ed, *An Introduction to Catholic Theology* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1998) 164-183.

<sup>31</sup> See B. J. Lee "The Undistancing of the World: A Theological Anthropology" in M. H. Barnes and W. P. Roberts *A Sacramental Life: A Festschrift Honoring Bernard Cooke* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003) 41-55 at 54.

<sup>32</sup> See J. A. Coleman "Practical Theology and Congregational Studies" in Barnes & Roberts, *ibid.* 175-205 at 178. See also D. Tracey "Theologies of Praxis" in M. L. Lamb *Creativity and Method: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1981) 35-51 at 44.

literature review and internet search that follows produced a high level of diversity in the use of terminology, a problem that must be faced. John A. Saliba's interdisciplinary method<sup>33</sup> is used as a specific lens to surface the pertinent literature examined in this chapter.

The term *cult* is difficult to define, given the range of ways it is commonly used to refer to many new religious groups. According to John Saliba the word "is so laden with diverse meanings and replete with emotional content that it might have lost one of the major functions of linguistic designation, that is, to convey accurate and useful information."<sup>34</sup> He suggests that the media, some professional writers, psychiatrists, lawyers, and anti-cult groups especially, have picked on the negative connotations currently attached to the word and have employed it consistently to refer to all those groups they have judged to be deviant, dangerous, corrupt, and pseudoreligious.

In fact, cults or NRMs represent contextually diverse and complex organizations whose significance cannot be gauged without reference to the sociocultural and religious situation pertaining since the Second World War. As a result it has become increasingly difficult to define the nature, characteristics, significance, and implications of NRMs with reference "to a single narrow definition."<sup>35</sup> Saliba argues in favour of abandoning the use of the word "*cult*" altogether because of such definitional difficulties.<sup>36</sup> He also highlights

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<sup>33</sup> J. A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* op.cit.

<sup>34</sup> J. A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* op. cit. 1.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* 2.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

problems with the term *NRM*. Despite these definitional difficulties Saliba acknowledges that the term “*cult*” has a received academic usage. He further recognizes that,

[A]n effort has been made to employ it sparingly. When used, it is applied in a broad and neutral sense to refer to the relatively new religions or fringe religious groups that have sprung up in the West, especially since the 1960s. Such a usage, in spite of its shortcomings, points to two undeniable facts, namely that the new religions stand apart from the society and require special attention.<sup>37</sup>

Saliba then identifies three major interactive definitional conceptualisations of the term that emerge from a survey of current usage. These are respectively theological (or religious), psychological, and sociological. These conceptualisations will now be explored.

## 2.2 Theological Definitions

According to Saliba, theological definitions of the word *cult* are most evident in Christian Evangelical literature.<sup>38</sup> In this usage all cults are defined in terms of their lack of biblical orthodoxy regardless of whether they have any Christian orientation. This narrowly focused definition is simple and easy to understand, but it fails to deal with the particularities of current NRMs. According to Saliba appropriate “criticism of this more narrow definition of a cult points to the urgent need for a more thorough assessment not only of what the new religions teach, but also of the many factors that contribute to their rise and success. Only then can a theological appraisal be safely made.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> J. A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* op. cit. 2.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.* 6-7.



Typical of internet sites representative of this narrow theological position is Anton Hein's "Apologetics Index."<sup>40</sup> This site quotes extensively from the work of Dr. Alan Gomes.<sup>41</sup> According to Hein, Gomes defines *cult* as follows, "Our English word cult comes from the Latin word *cultus*, which is a form of the verb *colere*, meaning 'to worship or give reference to a deity.'" He stresses the religious roots of the term, without reference to sociological or psychological factors. In this usage theological heterodoxy grounded in an absolute, objective and unchanging standard is the definitional key. Hein states that Gomes prefers to speak of a "'Cult' of Christianity" than of a Christian cult. This is an attempt to exempt Christianity from the problem of cultism by the linguistic manoeuvre of inventing a new category in which theological orthodoxy is the sole criterion of analysis.

[A] cult is a group that deviates doctrinally from a "parent" or "host" religion; that is, cults grow out of and deviate from a previously established religion. The expression "Cult of Christianity" makes a clear distinction between Christianity and cults as well as highlighting the derivative nature of cults.<sup>42</sup>

This definitional mode is not informed by the human sciences. It is shaped entirely by a narrow view informed by an exacting biblical theology.

An even narrower vision informs the approach of the Christian Research Institute (CRI), which defines a cult as "a group that denies essential biblical doctrine while claiming to be Christian or in harmony with true Christianity."<sup>43</sup> They include Transcendental

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<sup>40</sup> See A. Hein's Apologetics Index <http://www.gospelcom.apologeticsindex.net/> (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> A. Gomes, *Unmasking The Cults* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1995).

<sup>42</sup> Hein op.cit.

<sup>43</sup> CRI, "Cults and Aberrational Groups" <http://www.equip.org> (accessed April 8, 2003). This site is no longer accessible.

Meditation and Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, which have no connection to Christianity, in this definition. The implication is that, for some unstated reason, all NRMs are considered to be heterodox versions of Christianity. The CRI concludes, “While each of these groups claims it is the one true representative of Jesus Christ, each one denies historic and essential Christian doctrines; therefore, Evangelical Christians do, indeed, consider each of these groups to be a cult of Christianity.”<sup>44</sup> More recently they acknowledge a secular definition that views *cults* in terms of leadership and control.<sup>45</sup> The narrow views of these two sites are indicative of the problems raised by the unclear usage by some Evangelicals of the term *cult*. We shall now examine two Catholic usages.

### 2.2.1 Cardinal Francis Arinze’s View

Cardinal Francis Arinze offers a Catholic theological definition.<sup>46</sup> The author addresses the definitional difficulty and notes the complexities involved. He attends to factors such as variations in origin, belief, size, means of recruitment, behaviour patterns, and how they respond to other religious groups and society. In consequence, Arinze does not use the term *cult*. Instead, he speaks about *sects* and NRMs. For Arinze, who identifies both positive and negative usages, the word *sect* refers to small groups holding deviating beliefs or practices that break away from a major religious group. He also notes variations in usage. “In Latin America, for example, there is a tendency to apply the term to all non-Catholic groups. In Western Europe the word has a negative connotation, while

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> CRI, “Statement CP0200 What is a Cult?” <http://www.equip.org/free/CP0200.htm> (accessed May 29, 2006).

<sup>46</sup> F. Arinze, “The Challenge of the Sects or New Religious Movements: A Pastoral Approach” in M. Fuss, ed., *Rethinking New Religious Movements* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Research Center on Cultures and Religions, 1998) 769-771.

in Japan the new religions of Shinto or Buddhist origin are freely called sects in a non-derogatory sense.”<sup>47</sup>

Arinze sees the term *NRM* as more neutral when referring to such groups. They are called “new” because they appeared since the Second World War, and because they challenge in some sense the established religious institutions and the prevailing culture. They are religious because they propose to offer a vision of the religious, “or sacred world, or means to reach other objectives such as transcendental knowledge, spiritual illumination or self realization, or because they offer to members their answers to fundamental questions, such as the meaning of life or of one’s place in the universe.”<sup>48</sup>

Arinze further argues that while no universally accepted terminology can be agreed, efforts should be made to adopt a term that is as fair and precise as possible. “Such a term should treat these movements with truth and respect and therefore avoid attributing to all of them in a collective way the more negative aspects to be found only in some of them.”<sup>49</sup> He settles on the term “New Religious Movements” because it is neutral and general enough to include the new movements of Protestant origin, the sects of Christian background, new Oriental or African movements and those of the Gnostic or Esoteric type. In Arinze’s view stand-alone theological approaches are not very helpful, especially those that depict groups strictly through a biblical lens. An openness to a broader range of insights drawn from a variety of disciplines is needed before evaluative positions are taken.

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<sup>47</sup> F. Arinze, “The Challenge of the Sects or New Religious Movements: A Pastoral Approach” op. cit. 770.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* 771.

### 2.2.2 Cardinal Christoph Schönborn's View

A second view is that advanced by Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, O.P. Archbishop of Vienna, Austria. He is concerned with the issue of so-called “Catholic sects” within the Church. Inevitably, this limiting context raises definitional challenges. He writes, “Early on, some of these new groups were labelled as ‘conservative’ or ‘fundamentalist’; now one tries to describe them as ‘sects within the Church’. [...] But the claim that groups approved by and acknowledged by the Church are ‘sects’ within her membership seems disturbing to many Christians.”<sup>50</sup>

Schönborn's initial usage of the term *sect* is essentially theological and ecclesial. Recently he has argued that socio-politically inflected usages add a further dimension, but at the cost of theological and ecclesial precision and clarity. He notes that the term is now used by critics of certain ecclesial movements to brand groups as dangerous since they are unacceptable to the prevailing secular ideology. He describes these groups as elites

sealed off from social reality and frequently in opposition to it; the development of alternative ways of life, often so extreme that they lead to a loss of the sense of reality and to unhealthy exaggerations. Besides following an aim in life that goes against generally accepted conventions, or a spiritual idol with occasionally utopian features, the following inner characteristics are listed: renouncing today's basic values of personal freedom and tolerance; occasionally fighting for fundamentally opposed attitudes; a totalitarian way of life; oppression of the members' consciences; ostracizing outsiders, as well as the tendency to dominate society or aspects of it. If several of these characteristics are recognized in a group, it is called a sect.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> C. Schönborn, “Are There Sects within the Catholic Church” in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (August 13/20, 1997) 3.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

Quoting Gal 1: 6-12, Schönborn claims that his theological view, based on a split from the Church, offers a more apt and precise use of the term.<sup>52</sup>

Schönborn appears to claim that once a group comes under Church authority it becomes inappropriate to speak of cultist or sect-like tendencies. This position already hints at difficulties of translation related to Italian usage of the word *setta*, an issue that will be addressed later. This view claims that canonical recognition insures against any danger of cultist activity; that orthodoxy and submission to legitimate authority protects any such group from cultist involvement, such that it is only if a group becomes schismatic or heterodox that the use of the term *sect* becomes apposite. Friedrich Greiss, the President of FECRIS, (European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sects or Cults), who is closely involved with the cult issue in Austria, and who engaged in dialogue with the Cardinal on these issues, was pleasantly surprised that Cardinal Schönborn had modified his position to acknowledge that cultism can be found within the Church.<sup>53</sup> Quoted in a Catholic newspaper, Cardinal Schönborn was reported as follows: “The distinctive mark for those groups is whether they are open to the whole church and society. From this we can deduce whether “they are cells of renewal or a cult”.<sup>54</sup> Greiss concludes, “By this, the Cardinal implicitly admits that cults can be found within the church.”<sup>55</sup> This is an important point.

### 2.2.3 The Continuing Terminological Debate

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<sup>52</sup> C. Schönborn, “Are There Sects within the Catholic Church” in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (August 13/20, 1997) 3.

<sup>53</sup> Private email communication with the author (August 27, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> Kathpress news web page <http://www.kathpress.at/news/kwn865qylo472prs/kwn-20050826t151505268.htm> (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>55</sup> Private email communication with the author (August 27, 2005).

Judith Tydings makes a considerable contribution by providing a concise summary of the definitional debate.<sup>56</sup> She asserts that lack of precision hampers both popular and academic exchanges regarding NRMs, cults, or sects. Extreme examples, such as the suicides/murders of Jonestown, the Solar Temple, and Heaven's Gate, have added a negative and sinister connotation to the terminology and complicated the discussion. Tydings claims that the subject is stuck in a definitional quagmire characterised by contradictory uses of the basic terminology, cult, sect and NRM. She is particularly interested in the Italian usage of *setta* (sect) and its adoption in official Church documents. She writes,

British writer Gordon Urquhart...explains that the Italian language makes exclusive use of the word "setta" [sect] where English speakers would commonly use the word "cult." He says that the Pope and official Church pronouncements have adopted the Italian term. As a further complication, in Latin America up until Pope John Paul's visit to Mexico and his exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*, (1999) there has been an official Church tendency to use the word "sect" for all groups that are not Catholic (Arinze, 1991), much to the chagrin of Latin American Protestants.<sup>57</sup>

Michael Langone, while avoiding equation of mainstream movements with cults, also draws attention to linguistic and translational problems facing workers in the field.<sup>58</sup> According to Langone, in the U.S. and English-speaking Canada, (Ireland and the UK should be added) the term *cult* translates *sekten*, *secta*, *secte*, *sekta*, *setta*, and related terms in Europe and Latin America. According to Langone, while these terms resemble

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<sup>56</sup> J. Church Tydings, "Shipwrecked in the Spirit: Implications of Some Controversial Catholic Movements," in *Cultic Studies Journal* 16 (1999)2 at 3-6.

<sup>57</sup> J. Church Tydings, op.cit. 3.

<sup>58</sup> M. Langone, ICSA email documentation (June 13, 2005).

*sect* in English, they are in fact better translated as *cult* in common usage.<sup>59</sup> Regarding Cardinal Schönborn's view Langone writes,

[I]f we are to dialogue productively with loyal church members about problems of manipulation and control within their faith communities, we must use terminology that makes sense to them and not beat them over the head with ambiguous terms with which we may feel comfortable but which they reject or define differently. Fortunately, a report of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians (1986) provides terminology that I believe can be useful in dialogue. The report states: Indeed, certain sectarian mentalities and attitudes, i.e., attitudes of intolerance and aggressive proselytizing, do not necessarily constitute a sect, nor do they suffice to characterize a sect. One also finds these attitudes in groups of Christian believers within the churches and ecclesiastical communities.<sup>60</sup>

Note that Langone, having detailed the need for using the word *cult*, cites the Vatican report without translating the transliterated term 'sectarian' from the French *sectarisme* into English as the word *cult* thereby adding to the definitional problem. Tydings agrees,

When groups including groups within the Catholic Church seem tainted by what the Vatican document calls "sectarian mentalities and attitudes" those who belong to or value aspects of such groups understandably defend them when the groups are labelled "cults" or "sects." These groups' defenders, however, may become preoccupied with correcting linguistic errors, thereby overlooking the intended message of a particular criticism (however ineffectively that message may be communicated), namely, that certain practices may sometimes harm some people. This state of affairs may make some Church authorities uncertain about how to meet their pastoral responsibilities toward those who may have been harmed by sectarian mentalities and attitudes, as well as those who value the missions and ideals of the groups that are criticized.<sup>61</sup>

So a 'cultist mentality and attitude' may be found within Church settings. The fact that Church authorities dismiss evidence of cultist tendencies in some groups on the grounds

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians. (1986). "The Vatican Report – Sects or New Religious Movements: A Pastoral Challenge" in *Cultic Studies Journal* 3 (1986), 1, 93-116.

<sup>61</sup> J. Church Tydings, *op.cit.*

that the groups in question have official approval by the Church “is analogous to a physician asserting that a malpractice claim must be false because he is licensed by the state.”<sup>62</sup> The implications of this consensus view of theological terminology for an analysis of the MMM are self-evident. However, the matter is not helped by similar difficulties within psychology.

### 2.3 Psychological Definitions

According to Saliba, while theological definitions rely on normative principles that distinguish orthodox from new but unorthodox religious forms, “the psychological definition has focused on the way the new religious movements recruit and maintain their members and how they affect those who join them.”<sup>63</sup> Two distinct and opposed conceptualisations of what constitutes a cult have emerged in psychological and psychiatric literature. The first and more prevalent view is that ‘cults’ are dangerous groups that can cause severe psychological trauma to those that join them. The second viewpoint interprets NRMs in quite a different, more positive light. NRMs are judged to be helpful organisations that provide an alternative vision to many young adults faced with momentous decisions at turning points in their lives.<sup>64</sup>

#### 2.3.1 The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) View

The ICSA, formerly known as the American Family Foundation (AFF),<sup>65</sup> retains the word *cult*, but with a different definition based on the work of Rosedale and Langone.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *ibid* 38.

<sup>63</sup> J. A. Saliba, *op.cit.* 7.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> AFF became the ICSA in 2005.



These authors have been involved in NRM work for more than twenty years, but neither feels completely comfortable with the term *cult*. They retain its use because they believe it more effectively serves the linked educational and research aims of their Association. One of their more commonly quoted definitions of *cult* was articulated at the 1995 ICSA/UCLA Wingspread Conference on Cultism. Under the rubric *totalist type* cult is defined as a

group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control (e.g., isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressures, information management, suspension of individuality or critical judgement, promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it, etc.), designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community.<sup>67</sup>

Rosedale and Langone's definition implies a spectrum of possible uses of the term *cult*, in which a large grey area separates it from non-cult phenomena. Consequently they are constrained to qualify the term by adding specific descriptors such as "destructive" or "totalist type." It also shows the difficulty of using the word because "it has to be qualified and even then we might get it wrong."<sup>68</sup> They also recognise that different people "attach different and usually imprecise meanings to the term 'cult'".<sup>69</sup> Those who

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<sup>66</sup> ICSA Web page [http://www.csj.org/infoserv\\_articles/langone\\_michael\\_term\\_cult.htm](http://www.csj.org/infoserv_articles/langone_michael_term_cult.htm) (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>67</sup> L. J. West, & M. D. Langone, Cultism: A Conference for Scholars and Policy Makers (*Cultic Studies Journal*, 3, 1986) 117-134.

<sup>68</sup> M. D Langone, [http://www.csj.org/infoserv\\_articles/langone\\_michael\\_term\\_cult.htm](http://www.csj.org/infoserv_articles/langone_michael_term_cult.htm) (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*

have sought information from ICSA have – properly or improperly – applied the word “cult” to a wide variety of phenomena.<sup>70</sup>

A central component of the Association’s mission is to study psychological manipulation and abuse in cultist and other groups. In an article on the ICSA web site the ambiguity of the term is acknowledged. They also recognise that, for better or for worse, *cult* is the term that their inquirers, particularly on internet searches, tend to use.<sup>71</sup> The ICSA thus uses the term *cult* within specific parameters.

The concept “cult,” as with other concepts (e.g., “right wing,” “left wing”), is a theoretical type against which actual groups are compared as best as one can with the information at one’s disposal. The theoretical type should serve as a benchmark, not as an organizing structure that selects only those observations that confirm a stereotype. It is vital that each case be evaluated individually with regard to the group environment and the person(s) interacting within and with that environment.<sup>72</sup>

ICSA policy is to direct inquirers’ attention to potentially harmful practices, rather than to lists or labels.<sup>73</sup> Their consistent concern is with practices that have been associated with harmful effects in some people.<sup>74</sup>

Assume, even if only for the sake of argument, that your loved one were not in a ‘cult’. ‘What if anything about his or her behaviour would trouble you?’ Having identified the elements of the behaviour not found in the cultist group they might then try to determine how, if at all, these behaviours are related to the group environment. ‘A label tends to be superfluous at this point in the analysis.’<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> M.D.Langone, “The Definitional Ambiguities of the Term Cult” [http://www.csj.org/infoserv\\_articles/langone\\_michael\\_term\\_cult\\_definitional\\_ambiguity.htm](http://www.csj.org/infoserv_articles/langone_michael_term_cult_definitional_ambiguity.htm) (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> M. D Langone, *term\_cult* op. cit.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> M. D Langone, “The Definitional Ambiguities of the Term Cult” op.cit.

The ICSA advocate a “nuanced, evidence-based approach to definition and classification.”<sup>76</sup> They do not ignore or criticise evidence indicating that some groups may closely approach the theoretical type, but continue to advocate that these kinds of judgements rest on careful analyses of structure and behaviour within a specific context, rather than superficial classificatory decisions.<sup>77</sup>

In the ICSA view, because it is so embedded in popular culture, the term *cult* has limited utility. Nevertheless those who are professionally engaged in helping people harmed by their involvement in a group cannot avoid using it.

Whatever the term’s limitations, it points us in a meaningful direction. And no other term relevant to group psychological manipulation (e.g., socio-psychological influence, coercive persuasion, undue influence, and exploitative manipulation) has ever been able to capture and sustain public interest, which is the sine qua non of public education. If, however, we cannot realistically avoid the term, let us at least strive to use it judiciously.<sup>78</sup>

A central component of ICSA work is to study psychological manipulation and abuse, especially as it manifests in cultist and other groups. Langone looks at a wide range of groups, religious, political, psychological, commercial, and notes pejorative usages that confirm the complexity of the terminology.

The majority of those who attach the “cult” label to these phenomena share a disapproval of the group or organisation they label. That is why some people have dismissed the term “cult” as a meaningless epithet hurled at a group one doesn’t like. Although this position may appeal to one’s cynical side, it ignores the reality that many common concepts are

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<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

fuzzy. [...] most people most of the time use these fuzzy terms with enough precision to be meaningful and understood by others.<sup>79</sup>

He agrees that “fuzzy terms” leave much to be desired and notes that scientists often develop new terms to avoid the imprecision found in “natural” language. Even where the scientific community advocates the use of technical language, disputes can develop about how to define properly a term in common use. “About twenty years ago, for example, sociologists of religion abandoned the term *cult* in favour of ‘new religious movement’; yet they still debate the meaning and merits of ‘new religious movement.’”<sup>80</sup> As a result even within academic circles terminology is rarely as precise as scientists and academics wish. According to Langone there are three choices with regards to use of imprecise terms:

First, one can act as if a particular term, e.g., “cult,” is more precise than it actually is, thereby inviting misapplication of the concept to which the term refers. Secondly, one may define it so narrowly that it becomes useless in a practical sense. Third, one may strive for a practical level of precision while acknowledging the unavoidable ambiguity of the terminology. Langone suggests that the ICSA has chosen the latter course. “Although we try to focus the meaning of the term, we must, nonetheless, also try to respond constructively to the wide spectrum of phenomena that our inquirers collectively associate with “cult,” however misguided their linguistic usage may sometimes be.”<sup>81</sup> A principle of similarity seems to be at work.

Generally speaking (though certainly not always), the phenomena to which they attach the term “cult” constitute a “conceptual family.” The members of

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<sup>79</sup> M. D Langone, “The Definitional Ambiguities of the Term Cult” op.cit.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*

this family are distinct, and it is inappropriate to give all of them the same “name,” e.g., “cult.” Yet they do have a family resemblance resting on the inquirer’s perception that the group exhibits one or more of these characteristics: It treats people as objects to be manipulated for the benefit of the leader(s). It believes that and behaves as though the group’s supposedly noble ends justify means that most people deem unethical. It harms some persons involved with or affected by the group.<sup>82</sup>

Though some individuals who seek information from the ICSA may associate any one of these characteristics with the concept “cult,” frequently other terms may provide more appropriate descriptors. That is why the ICSA mission sidebar lists “psychological manipulation, psychological abuse, spiritual abuse, brainwashing, mind control, thought reform, abusive Churches, extremism, totalistic groups, authoritarian groups...exit counselling, recovery, and practical suggestions for families, individuals” as areas for which they provide information. That is why central components of their mission are:

[T]o study psychological manipulation and abuse, especially as it manifests in cultic and other groups...to help individuals and families adversely affected by psychologically manipulative groups and to protect society against the harmful implications of group-related manipulation and abuse.”<sup>83</sup>

Saliba critiques the ICSA approach as follows, “[a]lthough the AFF seems to distinguish between cults and new religious movements, the tendency to include all new groups under the negative label of “cult” dominates its literature.”<sup>84</sup> It is important to note that Saliba’s view is not borne out by a close examination of the documentation available on the ICSA website.<sup>85</sup>

### 2.3.2 Marc Galanter’s View

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<sup>82</sup> M. D Langone, “The Definitional Ambiguities of the Term Cult” op.cit.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> J. A. Saliba, op.cit. 8.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.* 40.

Marc Galanter takes a position that places him on the opposite end of the spectrum from the ICSA.<sup>86</sup> He attends to the boundary behaviour of cult members that makes the deepest impression on outsiders. This involves the, “glazed, withdrawn look and trance-like state that some find most unsettling. Although this may appear pathologic, it can help group membership by reducing the possibility of direct exchanges with outsiders – it has an insulating effect.”<sup>87</sup> This trance-like appearance protects the group’s boundary. It is more likely to develop in settings that threaten group integrity, so that an observer who is perceived as an antagonist is more likely to see the behaviour than one who is not. Galanter suggests that this may help explain the puzzling discrepancies among observers’ reports on contemporary cults because of the way they approach the group’s safe boundaries.

According to Galanter, researchers such as John Clark and Margaret Singer who have had a great deal of contact with people leaving sects and have addressed at length the ill effects of membership, are likely to encounter defensive resistance, much in the way of a self fulfilling prophecy. Their writings question the place of these groups in a society that is supposed to protect the right to free and independent thought. “They underscore the emotional constriction and stereotyped behaviour sometimes associated with cult membership, implying that it is equivalent to psychopathology.”<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, other observers like Galanter, have established a positive working relationship with active cult members and tend to look at the more constructive aspects of membership. Not surprisingly this second group has not found the same stereotyped behaviour and emotional constriction that others have. The important implication is that the mode of

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<sup>86</sup> M. Galanter, *Cults, Faith, Healing, and Coercion* (Oxford: OUP, 1989) 113-14.

<sup>87</sup> M. Galanter, *Cults, Faith, Healing, and Coercion* (Oxford: OUP, 1989) 113.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

approach taken by researchers, whether their approach is theological or psychological, impacts research results.

Before concluding this overview of psychological research, a brief word on the psychiatric approach will be helpful. Psychiatric definitions tend to be rare and narrowly focussed on individual patients. Social, religious and spiritual concerns tend not to be addressed. “Their main thrust is to relate involvement in intense religious groups to specific forms of human psychopathology or psychological weakness.”<sup>89</sup>

#### 2.4 Sociological Definitions

The wealth of material available through sociological studies makes precise definition difficult.<sup>90</sup> Four major definitional strands are identified in sociological literature, namely, *Church*, *denomination*, *sect* and *cult*. While *Church* and *denomination* are used to refer to mainline religious organisations, *sect* and *cult* are applied to those relatively small groups that are sociologically marginal and deviant. Sociological definitions of NRMs have proved to be the least popular among those negatively touched by this phenomenon, due to the tendency of sociologists to make no value judgements. To such people this neutrality is perceived as supportive of NRMs and not as academic objectivity. Sociologists do not look at truth claims as in the theological approach, nor do they view the effects on individual people as in the psychological approach. However, even those unhappy with the neutrality of the sociological approach have “to admit that

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<sup>89</sup> J. A. Saliba, op.cit. 10.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.* 10.

[sociologists] have provided the most complete descriptions of many of the new lifestyles as well as penetrating insights into the phenomenon of new religions as a whole.”<sup>91</sup> In general sociological definition tends to such factors as “authoritarian leadership patterns, loyalty and commitment mechanisms, lifestyle characteristics, [and] conformity patterns (including the use of various sanctions in connection with those members who deviate).”<sup>92</sup>

#### 2.4.1 Jeff Hadden’s View

On the University of Virginia web site, which is widely acknowledged to be one of the best internet resources on the study of NRMs in the world, the late Jeff Hadden cautions the loss of the nomenclature of *cults* and *sects* in favour of the term *NRM*, not least out of respect for popular usage.<sup>93</sup> He offered the following observations at the Department of Sociology at University of Virginia, in his course on New Religious Movements:

1. Sociologists have adopted the concept new religious movements (NRMs) as an overarching idea that embraces both cults and sects.
2. The reason: the highly pejorative meanings of the concepts cult and sect in popular culture.
3. The concepts “cult” and “sect” do have precise meaning as they are used by sociologists, and are free of prejudice.
4. However, this meaning is not understood by the general public and, thus, the value neutral analytical content is lost.
5. The expression “New religious movement” is free of pejorative meaning, but not without problems.

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<sup>91</sup> *ibid.* 11.

<sup>92</sup> R. Enroth. “What Is a Cult?” in *A Guide to Cults and New Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter Varsity, 1983) 16.

<sup>93</sup> J. Hadden, “The Concepts ‘Cult’ and ‘Sect’ in Scholarly Research and Public Discourse” <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/cultsect/concult.htm> (accessed May 10, 2006).



6. Most significantly, many NRMs are not new, and some are not even new to a particular culture.<sup>94</sup>

In 1993 David Bromley and Jeff Hadden edited a two-volume work in which they use the terms *cults* and *sects* in the title for two reasons.

First, the concepts do have more or less precise meanings as employed by social scientists. Second, it has become abundantly clear that after nearly two decades, the concept new religious movements have virtually no recognition either in the mass media or the general public. By calling attention to the concepts as they are used by social scientists, we hope to begin the long process of educating the mass media and public regarding the non-pejorative meaning of these words.<sup>95</sup>

Though aware that some scholars of new religions have argued in favour of jettisoning the concepts *cult* and *sect*, they did not yet see good reason to do so. While most people understood Hadden's use of the terms, he received strong protests from members of NRMs who wrote to him with their objections to the use of the word *cult*. He addressed this issue in a brief essay. "In time I came to understand that it is difficult to see one's faith referred to as a cult, even in the context of scholarly inquiry."<sup>96</sup> That the concept *cult* carries a heavy burden of cultural prejudice in public discourse, and the concept *sect* is only a little less pejorative, is not, Hadden suggests, a new development. It is linked to the gaping chasm between popular usage and the language of social scientific inquiry. He

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<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> J. Hadden, *op.cit.*

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*

then goes on to explain why social scientists should not succumb to the easy and politically correct decision to cease using these concepts.

For Hadden these concepts have both fairly precise meaning and important utility for the construction of social science theory. The basic terminology *cult* and *sect*, along with a set of derivative concepts (e.g., *audience cult*, *client cult*, *cult movement*, *sect movement*, etc.) carry clear meanings and tell us a lot about the origins, development and likely futures of groups.

To abandon the concepts “cult” and “sect,” would likely result in an abdication of a good bit of the theoretical insight these concepts have spawned. That popular culture usage of these terms is inappropriate is not a reason to send science back to the drawing board in search of new words to convey the intellectual content of their theories. This, in my view, would be very bad science.<sup>97</sup>

Hadden describes how during the 1970s, in the midst of the high visibility of sects and cults as part of the youth counterculture, many social scientists sought to remove the negative views associated with the use of the term *cult* by substituting the concept *new religious movement* (NRM). He supports the sentiment, but in reality came to the conclusion that, “it is questionable whether it should be used as a surrogate for *cult* simply because *cult* is loaded with negative implications. Such usage, I would assert, is not appropriate for publications that are written for scholarly journals.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> J. Hadden, “Cult Group Controversies: Conceptualizing ‘Cults’ and ‘Sect,’” *op.cit.* See also C. Partridge, *Encyclopedia of New Religions* (Oxford, Lion Publishing, 2004) 16-20.

NRM as an analytical tool has not proven to be nearly as robust as the concepts *cult* and *sect*. Putting aside for a moment the question of whether the concepts *cult* and *sect* are critical for the advancement of science, Hadden was not convinced that *new religious movements* achieved the goals that those who introduced it had in mind.

It doesn't communicate profoundly important information that is carried by the separate concepts. Its introduction invited a proliferation of additional concepts: "new religions," "contemporary new religions," "novel religions," etc., without adding anything to the conceptual clarity. The development of science is not served when every scholar behaves as an entrepreneur with his or her own preferred terms. The use of the concept "new religious movements" in public discourse is problematic for the simple reason that it has not gained currency. Speaking bluntly from personal experience, when I use the concept "new religious movements," the large majority of people I encounter don't know what I'm talking about. I am invariably queried as to what I mean. And, at some point in the course of my explanation, the inquirer unfailingly responds, "oh, you mean you study cults!"<sup>99</sup>

Stephen Hunt further illustrates the terminological complexity.<sup>100</sup> He asserts that the term *cult* has caused endless difficulty especially when it is interchanged with *sect* or other labels.<sup>101</sup> He then goes on to use a variety of characterisations to avoid using the word *cult*, such as *Alternative Religions*, *Cults*, *Sectarianism* and *New Religious Movements*.<sup>102</sup>

Hadden believed that it was necessary to retain the non-pejorative use of the terms *cult* and *sect*, while trying to educate the public about NRMs.<sup>103</sup> Saliba in fact does use the word *cult*, throughout his book, as well as other terms like new religions and the like.

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<sup>99</sup> J. Hadden, op.cit.

<sup>100</sup> S. J. Hunt, *Alternative Religions* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003).

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.* 17.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.* v-vii.

<sup>103</sup> This issue will be addressed at the end of this chapter as a synthesis emerges.

This is what Hadden argued would happen if people do not resolve the terminological problem. Instead of extinguishing the term *cult* there has been a proliferation of new terminology. Nor has Saliba resolved the issue.<sup>104</sup>

#### 2.4.2 The Sociological Views of the ICSA

The ICSA quote Robbins's review of sociological contributions to this study. He identifies four definitional perspectives:

- a. cults as dangerous, authoritarian groups;
- b. cults as culturally innovative or transcultural groups;
- c. cults as loosely structured protoreligions;
- d. Stark and Bainbridge's (1985) subtypology that distinguishes among "audience cults" (members seek to receive information, e.g., through a lecture or tape series) "client cults" (members seek some specific benefit, e.g., psychotherapy, spiritual guidance), and "cult movements" (organizations that demand a high level of commitment from members). The Stark and Bainbridge typology relates to their finding that cult membership increases as church membership decreases.<sup>105</sup>

They also address the views of Rutgers University professor Benjamin Zablocki who holds that sociologists often distinguish *cult* from *Church*, *sect*, and *denomination*. Cults are innovative, fervent groups. In Zablocki's view, if they become accepted into the mainstream, they lose their fervour and become more organized and integrated into the community; they become *Churches*. When people within Churches become dissatisfied and break off into fervent splinter groups, the new groups are called *sects*. As sects become more stolid and integrated into the community, they become *denominations*.

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<sup>104</sup> J. A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* op.cit. 12.

<sup>105</sup> M. D Langone, term\_cult op. cit.

Zablocki defines a cult as “an ideological organization held together by charismatic relationships and demanding total commitment.”<sup>106</sup>

Zablocki’s view is particularly helpful in coming to terms with the MMM. Langone cites Zablocki to the effect that *cults* are at high risk of becoming abusive to members, in part because members’ adulation of charismatic leaders contributes to their becoming corrupted by the power they seek and are accorded. This characteristic is evident in the MMM. However, since this can also happen in bona fide, non-cultist religious groups it also reveals the problem of a narrow definition of the word *cult*.<sup>107</sup> The ICSA tends to expand on Zablocki’s definition by emphasising elements of authoritarian structure, deception, and manipulation and the fact that groups may be psychotherapeutic, political, or commercial, as well as religious. The relevance of Zablocki’s view to an understanding of fervent charismatic groups like the MMM is clear.

#### 2.4.3 Eileen Barker and the Term NRM

The term *NRM* was originally coined by Dr Eileen Barker.<sup>108</sup> Barker makes the point that the use of the term does not imply that a movement is good or bad, that it is true or false, or genuine or fraudulent. She prefers the term *new religious movement* to *cult* precisely because it has acquired negative connotations in everyday parlance, even though *cult* (like *sect*) is sometimes used in a purely technical sense.

The application of the term ‘new religious movement’ does not in itself imply either confirmation or denial of the appropriateness of any particular group’s or movement’s self-definition – whether the claim is that it is a

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<sup>106</sup> M. D Langone, *term\_cult* op. cit.

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> J. Hadden, “Cult Group Controversies: Conceptualizing ‘Cults’ and ‘Sect’,” op.cit.

religion or that it is not a religion, or that it is not new. For purely practical purposes the term should be taken as referring to those groups, movements or organisations that have been called 'alternative religions', 'nonconventional religions', 'cults' or 'contemporary sects'.<sup>109</sup>

Hadden did not accept this as a good enough reason to use the term NRM. Saliba agrees:

Because of the ambiguous and derogatory meaning that the word 'cult' connotes, attempts have been made, largely by sociologists and religionists, to find a better phrase to designate those religious phenomena popularly known as cults. Phrases like 'new religions', 'unconventional', 'fringe', 'alternative', or 'non-traditional' religions, 'intense religious groups', and 'new religious movements' are common. The last phrase (NRMs for short) is used in professional literature, even though it has serious drawbacks.<sup>110</sup>

#### 2.4.4 Massimo Introvigne & Gianni Ambrosio's Views

Italian scholars Massimo Introvigne & Gianni Ambrosio have a different perspective to what has been mainly a North American approach.<sup>111</sup> In a 1990 study in Turin they asked the question, "What is a 'new' religious movement?"

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<sup>109</sup> E. Barker, *New Religious Movements – A Practical Guide* (London: HMSO, 1989) 4-5.

<sup>110</sup> J. A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* op.cit. 11.

<sup>111</sup> J. Aagaard, & H.Meldgaard, *New Religious Movements in Europe* op.cit.

The results showed that neither ‘new religious movements’ nor ‘new religions’ are really part of the general language in Italy. ‘*Culto*’ (cult) normally means a devotion *within* the Catholic Church (e.g. ‘cult of the Sacred Heart’), although scholars sometimes use ‘*nuovi culti*’ (new cults) to designate all or some new religious movements.<sup>112</sup>

Italian usage, according to the authors, tends to limit use of *setta* (sect) to groups of Christian origin like the Jehovah’s Witnesses or the Mormons. The survey, however, confirms that a large majority of the Italian public use the word *sect* to designate both historical Christian sects like the Mormons and new religious movements like the Unification Church or the Church of Scientology. Additionally, the survey shows that 40% of the Italian public normally understand the word *sect* and relate it to some sort of social problem, 25 % understand the term *new religions*, while very few people understand what a question concerning *new religious movements*, or *new cults* means.

‘Sects’ are perceived by 80% of the Italian public as something negative and/or dangerous (hence the scholarly preference for some other word). ...Indeed, a specific feature of Italy seems to be the almost immediate link in the popular perception between the ‘problem of the sects’ and Jehovah’s Witnesses.<sup>113</sup>

It would be interesting to see this research replicated in Ireland.

## 2.5 Summarising the Literature

A study of the literature surfaces various understandings of terminology to describe the

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<sup>112</sup> *ibid.* 42.

<sup>113</sup> J. Aagaard, & H.Meldgaard, *New Religious Movements in Europe* op. cit. 42.

NRM phenomenon. Saliba has a problem with the word *cult* by definition, but feels it is impossible to speak about the subject without using the term in a sparing way.<sup>114</sup> Gomez views the term *cult* in the narrow sense of being heretical.<sup>115</sup> The ICOSA hold that *cult* is the best word to use as it conveys most clearly what it is we are attempting to depict, but also want it used with reservations.<sup>116</sup> Some, like Eileen Barker still favour the use of the term *NRM*.<sup>117</sup> She also calls for the term to be used in a common sense way.<sup>118</sup> Introvigne summarises the issue well. “We should perhaps remark, once again, on the difficulties inherent in a general definition of ‘sects,’ ‘cults and ‘new religions’ independent from a specific country or time.”<sup>119</sup> The particularities of context remain a significant factor.

## 2.6 Cultism

What about Ireland? How is the terminological problem to be resolved? Louis Hughes makes an interesting suggestion.<sup>120</sup> He proposes *cultism* as the best term to describe the cult phenomenon here in Ireland and in the English speaking world. Hughes later clarified his standpoint, since cultism is a defect that can enter into and poison the way any group – religious or non-religious – functions.<sup>121</sup> Hughes shows the range his term addresses:

The *cults* we hear most about are new religious movements. While these are the main focus ... it should be noted that there are also psychological, political, commercial, and New Age and science fiction *cults* that control their members’ lives no less ruthlessly. While concerns are most often

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<sup>114</sup> J. A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* op.cit. 2.

<sup>115</sup> See A. Hein’s Apologetics Index op.cit.

<sup>116</sup> M. D Langone, op. cit.

<sup>117</sup> E. Barker, *New Religious Movements – A Practical Guide* op.cit. 4 -5.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> J. Aagaard, & H.Meldgaard, *New Religious Movements in Europe* op.cit. 43.

<sup>120</sup> L. Hughes, “Cults and Cultism,” in *The Furrow* 44 (1993) 352- 358.

<sup>121</sup> L. Hughes, Private email communication to author (March 20, 2002).



expressed in connection with new religious movements, problems can also be found within groups claiming association with mainline religions.<sup>122</sup>

For Hughes the definitional point at issue is the abuse of authority, when boundaries are not respected and control is exercised. Used in this way the term is not intended to be offensive, but descriptive of the presence of a specific mentality within a group. It identifies a flaw that can enter into and poison the way any group – religious or non-religious – functions. The issues of cultism can be found anywhere at any time, even in one’s own affiliations. Hughes uses the term *cult* to designate any group, religious or otherwise, which subjects its members or would-be members to a potentially harmful degree of psychological pressure, intimidation, control, or deception. Because of the ambiguity that surrounds the term Hughes proposes that the word *cult* be used in parentheses. He quotes a French government definition to support his contention: “A cult is a totalitarian organization, whether religious or not, the behaviour of which affects human rights and social stability.”<sup>123</sup> The French view is very broad. It is noteworthy that the European research organisation FECRIS uses the French term *sectairisme* in its title. In 2004 when Ireland had the presidency of the European Union FECRIS wrote to Taoiseach Bertie Ahern as follows,

FECRIS is concerned with cults, sects, (the more usual term in French), sometimes called new religious movements. We understand that sectarianism has a different connotation in Ireland connected to the inter-religious conflicts within Christianity.<sup>124</sup>

Not even in Europe is there agreement on terminology. Hughes also disagrees with those in the *anti-cult* movement who divide groups into two categories: *cults* and *non-cults*.

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<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> J. Nokin letter to Taoiseach B. Ahern (January 15, 2005).

Questions have been raised about the prevailing mentality in the Society of Pius X and the Legionaries of Christ. According to Patrick Madrid and Peter Vere the Society of Pius X, by claiming that they were the only authentic upholders of the Catholic tradition and by entering schism, represent the classic sect type behaviour described by Cardinal Schönborn.<sup>125</sup> On the other hand, Jason Berry and Gerald Renner allege *cultist tendencies* in the Legionaries of Christ.<sup>126</sup> Renner and Berry raise important allegations.

(T)he evidence clearly suggests that the Legion is a Roman Catholic sect, built on a cult of personality that is centred on its founder. Maciel has fostered a militant spirituality by emulating fascistic principles he admired in the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. More disturbing, the Legionaries use psychologically coercive techniques common to cults.<sup>127</sup>

If these allegations of harm, control and boundary issues are true, we are confronted with an example of the *cultist mentality* within the Church. In this chapter, guided by the interdisciplinary character of practical theology today, we have reviewed the terminological challenges that face the pastoral theologian analysing *cults*, *sects* and *NRMs*. While the use of the word ‘*cult*’ has an agreed popular resonance, it surfaces serious technical difficulties that are shared with the words *sect* and *sectarian*. This being the case a choice must be made in the present work to avoid any terminology that might add confusion to an already complex situation. Terminology that is precise and clear is necessary for critical, analytical, descriptive and pastoral reasons, even in the absence of agreed definitions. For these important methodological reasons, in what follows the terms

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<sup>125</sup> P. Madrid and P. Vere, *More Catholic than the Pope* (Huntingdon, IN Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2004).

<sup>126</sup> J. Berry and G. Renner, *Vows of Silence* (New York, Free Press, 2004).

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.* 8.

*cultism* and *cultist mentality* will be used in reference to the MMM phenomenon. Pastorally, what is at stake is not denunciation, but the accurate description and evaluation of an actual movement made up of real people, including Irish people, whose belief system derives from the Roman Catholic tradition, and whose trajectory surfaces many of the travails of that Church today.

**Chapter Three:**  
**The History of The MMM**

### 3.1 Origins

This chapter is concerned with the history of the MMM with a specific focus on events in Australia. The Irish connection will be the subject of the next chapter. The concern here is to trace the foundation of the MMM, the life of the foundress, developments in the organisation and the pivotal move to Helidon, the problems that arose there with civil and ecclesiastical authorities, and the subsequent changes in the MMM to this point in time.<sup>128</sup> This will be a work of reconstruction based on field research, witness interviews, and the small pool of published material.

If contextual particularities are significant in shaping specific spiritual and religious responses and reactions then an important question arises: what was the state of spirituality in Australia in which the MMM emerged? David Tacey, then associate professor at La Trobe University in Melbourne, paints a rather depressing picture of an Australia in search of soul and yet defiant of the sacred.<sup>129</sup> Tacey asserts that white Australia “lacks soul, interiority and depth.”<sup>130</sup> He goes on to note that people were awakening to the realisation of widespread spiritual emptiness and that “painful but transformative confrontations with the sacred” were taking place.<sup>131</sup> Tacey also notes the antiauthoritarian tone of Australia and surfaces implications for the Anglican and Roman

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<sup>128</sup> Editorial deadlines set a cut-off date at the end of August 2006.

<sup>129</sup> D. Tacey, *ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* (Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000) 39-92.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.* 42.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.* 43.

Catholic traditions in that country.<sup>132</sup> He suggests that the scene in Australia favours the rise of forms of spirituality characterised by popular mysticism or an existential theology grounded in the Australian refusal to toe the line and a concomitant lack of religious conformity.<sup>133</sup> This national spirit is part of the broader context that made the MMM possible at a time of spiritual awakening in Australia; and it also helps to contextualise the movement's anti-authoritarian and heterodox dynamics. The question remains: to what extent is the MMM's developing orientation part of a larger Australian defection from established religion?<sup>134</sup>

Debra Geileskey founded the Magnificat Meal Movement (MMM) in Melbourne in 1990. According to Fr Vic Farrugia, a priest of Our Lady Help of Christians Church in Brunswick, a Melbourne suburb, Debra encountered the idea for the MMM while attending a Charismatic Renewal group in the parish. He credits Donna Hoyne, a long-time parishioner, with originating the idea.<sup>135</sup> A women's organisation with a similar name and similar origins in the Charismatic Renewal movement,<sup>136</sup> with a similar emphasis on a Magnificat Meal celebrated at least four times a year, and a commitment to Eucharistic devotion had been founded in the USA in 1981.<sup>137</sup> Was Donna Hoyne – more importantly, was Debra – influenced by this American organisation's inspiration and aims? Its website repudiates any such connection with an explicit legal disclaimer: "N.B. Magnificat, A Ministry to Catholic Women, has NO connection with the 'Magnificat

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<sup>132</sup> *ibid.* 70-73.

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.* 73.

<sup>134</sup> D. Tacey, *op. cit.* 189-192.

<sup>135</sup> C. Griffith, art. "But who exactly is Geileskey?" *Melbourne Sunday Mail* (June 27, 1999). See also R. Burke, *The Truth about Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* (Helidon: Privately Published by the author, 1998) 4, "In 1989 the Lord asked Debra to found a Movement of Eucharistic Adoration and to call it the Magnificat Meal Movement. In October 1990 it began and now there are more than 40,000 Magnificat Meal groups in over 60 countries around the world."

<sup>136</sup> <http://www.magnificat-ministry.org/background.html> (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>137</sup> <http://www.magnificat-ministry.org/meal.html> (accessed May 10, 2006).

Meal Movement’, which is based in Australia.”<sup>138</sup> This suggests that the American movement knows about the MMM and rejects the direction it has taken.

### 3.1.1 Review of Literature

Very little has been written on the MMM. Wal Maggs, a former member, has written two books. The first, written when he was still a leading member details the aims of the movement and gives a glowing account of Debra and her ministry.<sup>139</sup> The second book was written a year later when Maggs had left the movement disillusioned.<sup>140</sup> Mercy Lotilla-Ascencio refers to the movement in a book on end time movements that locates Debra’s ministry in an apocalyptic context. She identifies a number of areas descriptive of the MMM including one-world government conspiracies, masonry, the dismissal of the traditionalist view of the Eucharist, and resistance to the doctrine of Mary as Co-Redemptrix by the Church. The author suggests that for Debra only the reception of this dogma by the Church could avert the reign of the anti-Christ and the terrible consequences of rejecting this teaching concerning Our Lady.<sup>141</sup>

A short booklet by Ray Burke offers some useful background information.<sup>142</sup> The other literary sources are newspaper articles from Australia and Ireland. Several journalists, including Amanda Gearing, based in Toowoomba for the *Courier Mail* in Brisbane, Chris Griffith, who writes for the *Melbourne Sunday Mail* and is the main source of our knowledge of Debra’s origins in Melbourne before she came to Helidon, and Frank Thorne, an Australian journalist who wrote a significant piece for *Ireland on Sunday*,

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<sup>138</sup> <http://www.magnificat-ministry.org/legal.html> (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>139</sup> W. Maggs, *Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* (Toowoomba, Australia: Magnificat Meal Movement International, 1998).

<sup>140</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op. cit.

<sup>141</sup> M. Lotilla-Ascencio, *Divine Mercy and Justice of the End Times* (Kolbe Publishing Ltd. Cork 1999).

<sup>142</sup> R. Burke, *The Truth about Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* (Helidon: Privately Published by the author, 1998).

have provided significant information. Other newspaper articles are generally derivative of the work of these journalists. Other sources of information include audio and video tape recordings, interviews by telephone and email, and personal conversations while the researcher was in Australia in 2003.

### 3.1.2 Aims

Maggs attributes eight aims to the Magnificat Meal Movement:

1. To participate in the mission of the Church for the salvation of souls.
2. To promote and encourage Adoration of Jesus Christ, truly present in the Blessed Sacrament.
3. To foster evangelisation and a more widespread opportunity for Adoration of Jesus Christ, by encouraging members to act as missionaries of the Eucharist, to personally promote Adoration and awareness of our God.
4. To promote fidelity to, and to live in conformity with, the authentic teaching authority of Christ as expressed through his Church and his Vicar on earth.
5. To promote and foster devotion to Christ, through the Blessed Virgin Mary, in accordance with the traditions of the Church and the teaching of Chapter Eight of Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium*, and to encourage the daily recitation of the Rosary as recommended by every Pope holding office this century.
6. To encourage First Saturday devotions in reparation for our personal sins and the sins of the world, as approved by Holy Mother Church.
7. To distribute the Icon entitled Mary, Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of all Graces and Advocate. To explain its symbolism and to legitimately participate in efforts, both prayerfully and actively, for the Church to declare, as a Dogma of Faith, that Mary is Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of All Graces and Advocate. By this means we pray that Jesus our King may come to reign in all hearts through the motherly intercession of Mary.”
8. To welcome all persons of good will into the presence and teaching of

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Lord.<sup>143</sup>

According to Maggs, the Eucharist is the first pillar of the movement, understood within a context of loyalty to the papacy, obedience to the local bishop, and the norms of Vatican II.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> W. Maggs, *Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* op.cit. 81.



## 3.2 A Biographical Note

### 3.2.1 The Early Years

In order to understand the rise of the MMM, its developments and disputes, attention must be given to the religious context from which it emerged in Australia. The history of the MMM is tightly interwoven with Debra's story. Debra was born into a traditional working class Catholic family in Melbourne on 17 June 1953. She lived with her parents and three younger sisters in the northern suburb of Reservoir in a house her father, Ken Burslem, built. He also helped in the construction and maintenance of the parish buildings where the family worshipped and where Debra went to school. The eldest child, she was protective towards her younger sisters and was considered ladylike. "She's always been a very devout little thing. But it's not so much she took a real interest in religion. We all went to mass every Sunday at St Gabriel's and we were all pretty devout."<sup>145</sup>

Though Debra's diaries document childhood visions of angels, her father claims that it was well beyond that time that she became "serious about things". Neither he nor the then parish priest, Fr Gerard Sullivan, knew anything of these alleged visions.<sup>146</sup> Debra's major claims of prophecy and visions apparently began in the early 1990s, and recent claims of visions of angels since she was seven, and of the Virgin Mary since the age of seventeen, do not tally with the memories of those who knew her at that time.<sup>147</sup> She also alleges that she used to

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<sup>144</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> C. Griffith, art. "But who exactly is Geileskey?" *op.cit.*

<sup>146</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> *ibid.*

hear a voice speaking to her about her son, one of three children born to her and Gordon Geileskey, whom she married on December 23, 1973 when she was twenty.<sup>148</sup>

Debra attended several Catholic secondary schools and a teachers' college before teaching in the Victoria Catholic primary system, rising to acting principal at St Bernadette's primary school at Ivanhoe West, Melbourne, in the early 1980s. In her diaries written in the 1990s she claims that educational standards increased and "vandalism, delinquency and absenteeism dropped as the Holy Spirit breathed fire into the school" when she was principal. However, disputes, part of an emerging pattern that will become obvious in the course of this research, soon came to pass.

Difficulties arose with Fr Kevin Eaton, the parish priest, about the principal's post. Debra claims that she was ostracized because of her alleged stance. She also claimed a close spiritual association with Fr Eaton. He refutes this. She alleges that the Ivanhoe priest had repeatedly asked her to apply for the principal's position with his assurances of help. However, Fr Eaton has a different recollection. As parish priest he had only a formal association with Debra and remembered her as no more than "an enthusiastic and friendly" teacher. He recalls nothing of her supposed prophetic skills, and her claim of a close spiritual relationship with him was "nonsense."<sup>149</sup>

In the early 1980s Debra left teaching and the Geileskeys joined the Melbourne real estate industry. Financially this was a disaster. By the early 1990s they faced bankruptcy.

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<sup>148</sup> D. Geileskey, *What God might say to me today...in Australia, Diary 5*, (Toowoomba, Australia, 1st Edition 1996) xxi. See also G. Geileskey, Private communication with author, Helidon (June 8, 2003).

<sup>149</sup> C. Griffith, art. "But who exactly is Geileskey?" op.cit.

In an October 1994 Federal Court statement, the Geileskeys declared their assets to be Aus\$20 savings, Aus\$50 cash, and Aus\$3000 household items. In late 1991 Debra turned to Catholic Charismatic Renewal at Our Lady Help of Christians in Brunswick as a way to cope with the business failure.<sup>150</sup> Her interest in Medjugorje also dates to about this time and was to become an important element in the development of the MMM. It also figures in her explanation for her later difficulties with the Bishop of Toowoomba where a situation parallel to that between the Franciscans and the local Bishop is claimed.<sup>151</sup>

A dispute also arose at Our Lady Help of Christians in Brunswick. According to parish priest Fr Vic Farrugia, Debra soon began organising against him inside the congregation, especially once she began announcing visions. Parishioners said Debra had claimed Jesus had appeared to her during prayer sessions at the Carmelite Monastery in Kew, Melbourne. The Carmelites do not recall her visions. Farrugia reported to Chris Griffith that he eventually had to stop Debra giving public prophecies. “They were getting phantasmagorical. Steven Spielberg would have been proud of them. Bit by bit she slowly took over the Saturday arrangements, organising priests and making sure I didn’t appear.” Debra left Our Lady Help of Christians with a final act of defiance after Fr Farrugia told her that locals were to take over organising tasks. According to Mrs. Hoyne, the woman who originated the idea of the MMM, Debra humiliated the priest during a healing mass by standing up and mimicking his actions and words, then walking down

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<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> W. Maggs, Private email communication (February 15, 2003). The parallel is to the problems existing in Medjugorje between the visionaries, the Franciscans and the Bishop of Mostar.

the centre of the church punching the air proclaiming, “I’ve won the battle, I’ve won the battle.”<sup>152</sup>

Debra had an attractive, charismatic personality and made a very good first impression on people. However, many that initially supported her later denied knowledge of her or repudiated her message.<sup>153</sup> After the split with Fr Farrugia, Debra and her followers befriended Fr Thomas de Souza, a member of the Salesian Congregation.<sup>154</sup> The MMM allege he wrote the forewords to Diaries 5,<sup>155</sup> 6,<sup>156</sup> and 7,<sup>157</sup> dated between December 24, 1993 and September 1994. Maggs disagrees,

Those forewords in Debra’s diaries were denied by Fr de Souza – for a very good reason. I saw with my own eyes Debra sticking Fr de Souza’s signature on the bottom of one foreword! Remember I was asked to type out a couple of these diaries and saw the inner workings, although I assumed she had his permission to do what she did. Now I suspect differently.<sup>158</sup>

Diaries 5 and 6 were published in 1994 and Diary 7 in 1995.

Diaries 5 and 6 claim that Fr De Souza had been Debra’s spiritual director for three years.<sup>159</sup> Diary 7 commends Fr De Souza for his spiritual insight and supports the claim that he was her spiritual adviser.<sup>160</sup> Divine intervention is claimed in this regard.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> C. Griffith, art. “But who exactly is Geileskey?” op.cit.

<sup>153</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> Private email communication to author (May 11, 2006) Archbishop Hart of Melbourne confirmed the report by Griffith. All the priests mentioned were retired except for Thomas de Souza who is deceased and Fr Farrugia is still at Our Lady Help of Christians in Brunswick.

<sup>155</sup> D. Geileskey, *What God might say to me today...in Australia, Diary 5* op.cit. 1.

<sup>156</sup> D. Geileskey, *What God might say to me today...in Australia, Diary 6* (Kew, Australia, 1st Edition 1994) 2.

<sup>157</sup> D. Geileskey, *What God might say to me today...in Australia, Diary 7* (Kew, Australia, 1st Edition 1995) 3-5.

<sup>158</sup> W. Maggs, Private email communication, (March 17, 2006).

<sup>159</sup> D. Geileskey, *What God might say to me today...in Australia, Diary 5* op. cit. 1.

D. Geileskey, *What God might say to me today...in Australia, Diary 6* op. cit. 2.

<sup>160</sup> D. Geileskey, *What God might say to me today...in Australia, Diary 7* op. cit. 1.

However, De Souza denies having been her spiritual director but said that while he did attend meetings with her the association lasted only a few weeks and that he did not accept her claims of visions. Former MMM members report that Debra became disenchanted with him when they went on a pilgrimage to Garanbandal in Spain. However, Fr De Souza's glowing recommendation of Ms Geileskey features in her promotional material.<sup>162</sup>

### 3.2.2 The Practices at Toowoomba

Around 1993 Debra and Gordon left Victoria. They settled in Toowoomba, Queensland, and rented a house there. At first MMM meetings were held in Debra's home. Angela Jones, an early supporter, was told about Debra's visions and the private prayer meetings by her brother Terry O'Brien. Angela describes the meal at the centre of the organisation's title. This involved a recipe developed by Debra based on pita bread and cooked apples flavoured with cloves and other ingredients. This event was called Charoseth. The day was spent in fasting and only bread and water along with the pita bread and apples were eaten. Angela, invited to prepare the apples, was a bit sceptical but curiosity got the better of her and she joined her brother Terry and his wife at the prayer meeting. Debra's visionary claims were a strong motivator. "We had heard of shrines like Lourdes and Fatima. How wonderful it would be to have Our Lady speaking

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<sup>161</sup> *ibid.* 2.

<sup>162</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op. cit. 33, 34. D. Geileskey, What God might say to me today...in Australia, Diary 6, op. cit. 152, note 13: "My Spiritual Director Fr. Thomas had once told me...." C. Griffith, art. "But who exactly is Geileskey?" op.cit.

to someone in your own town and you were invited to go to their home?"<sup>163</sup> Terry is still deeply committed to the movement. His wife Dawn was one of the first to leave it.<sup>164</sup>

Michelle and Philip Stewart were very involved from the beginning. They were later to sell their house and together with the Geileskeys purchased the convent in Helidon. Philip is still involved while Michelle is not.<sup>165</sup> Angela Jones remembers being at Debra's place on the day Philip was convinced. The fact that he was a policeman, representing authority, led quite a few others to believe. There was not really a movement at this stage, but rather a very charismatic person, Debra, being introduced into various parishes and holding meetings in private homes. Angela Jones found that these experiences deepened her faith, "I tried to go to Mass each day and come Saturday I would go to a church where Mass was at 8 AM"<sup>166</sup> She observed that whenever Debra attended meetings, which up till then only attracted a few people, changes occurred. "There would only be about a dozen people or so each Saturday." However, when Debra decided to come along and became better known more people turned up for Mass. "First Saturday's really grew and the church was overflowing." People came from far and wide and spent all day at Holy Name Church.<sup>167</sup>

Following these Masses Debra encouraged people to climb Tabletop, a local hill near Toowoomba where the movement had erected a cross. Again the parallel with

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<sup>163</sup> A. Jones, private email communication (April 25, 2003).

<sup>164</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> Michelle was accused by Debra of having an affair with her husband Gordon. G. Lloyd, *Holy War Courier-Mail* (June 6, 1999).

<sup>166</sup> A. Jones, Private email communication *op. cit.*

<sup>167</sup> *ibid.*

Medjugorje is evident.<sup>168</sup> “From the Saturdays things grew and grew. People joined her movement by being commissioned and then wearing a gown of a style chosen by her.”<sup>169</sup> As Eucharistic adoration became the heart of the MMM Debra organised adoration on Thursday nights at St Thomas More’s. Angela Jones went along with her brother. “It was a lovely gathering and very prayerful, holy, inspiring and touching. Debra and Gordon would come most nights along with her following.”<sup>170</sup> Jones missed these Thursday evenings after she left the MMM.<sup>171</sup> The movement only really became a reality when the transfer to Helidon took place.

### 3.2.3 Developments in Queensland

Debra began the movement with prayer groups under the banner of the MMM. From October 1993 to early 1996, First Saturday devotions were held at Holy Name Parish, Toowoomba. Again, Debra claimed that the parish priest Fr Tom Keegan was her spiritual director. He denies this. In an interview with the researcher in 2003, Fr Keegan explained how, having heard Debra speak, he had been very impressed by her and gave her an A\$20 donation.<sup>172</sup> Fr Keegan outlined a subsequent meeting in the presbytery where he attempted to bring the movement under appropriate ecclesiastical control. Debra resisted his efforts to have the financial control of the MMM managed in a transparent manner.<sup>173</sup> This latest dispute provided the occasion for Debra to move to

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<sup>168</sup> Author visited Medjugorje and noted this similarity, (July 1-7, 2005).

<sup>169</sup> A. Jones, Private email communication op. cit.

<sup>170</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> A. Jones, Private email communication op. cit.

<sup>172</sup> Private communication with author. (June 4, 2003).

<sup>173</sup> J. Morris, “Church Woman Curses Priest,” *The Chronicle* (July 1, 1997) 2. “Mrs. Geileskey resisted efforts by Fr Keegan to have the financial control of MMM put in the hands of anyone other than a member of the Geileskey family.”

Helidon.<sup>174</sup> According to John Morris of the *Toowoomba Chronicle*, Debra allegedly put a curse on Fr Keegan's Holy Name Church when the MMM left for Helidon so that members would no longer attend there but move to Helidon with her.<sup>175</sup>

The Geileskeys and the Stewarts purchased a disused Catholic school building called Mary's Mount in Helidon, west of Brisbane. Situated behind the Catholic Church, no clear boundary line was drawn between the two properties because the MMM were considered a Catholic group and therefore part of the parish. Debra moved in at the end of December 1995. The first MMM members, Wal and Beth Maggs, moved to Helidon on the 6<sup>th</sup> February 1996. According to Maggs life in the MMM took the form of an extended family forgetful of the outside world. The MMM was the centre of everything, even taking precedence even over the Church.<sup>176</sup> Debra claimed that she was receiving divine messages and, unlike Medjugorje where the visionaries were only receiving their messages spasmodically, members of the MMM were able to experience these as part of the community. This explains Debra's early success and her attraction for people.<sup>177</sup> They were taken out of the humdrum of ordinary life and connected to mystical experiences on a daily basis "as in the early Church."<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>174</sup>J. Morris, "Church Woman Curses Priest op. cit. "About the time she had a disagreement with Fr Keegan she received a "message" to buy a property at Helidon and take her followers there to establish a world headquarters."

<sup>175</sup> J. Morris, "Church Woman Curses Priest op. cit 2. "Mrs Geileskey allegedly put a curse on Fr Keegan's Holy Name church when the MMM left for Helidon. To attend a recent funeral of a member's relative, the MMM leader turned up with her followers to lift the curse so that they could attend unscathed."

<sup>176</sup> W. Maggs, private email and telephone communications with the author, (February 15, 2003).

<sup>177</sup> A. Jones, private email communication, op. cit. "...and when I reached home I read and read thinking how wonderful to have Our Lady speaking to someone in our town. This usually takes place overseas and we never get to be there let alone know the person or be in the same room as them or be able to speak to them."

<sup>178</sup> R. Burke, *The Truth about Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* op. cit. 10, "I can speak personally about ... the experience of God's presence in Helidon, the Marian Shrine from where the MMM is run. I have been to many of Our Lady's shrines – Lourdes three times, Knock many times, Guadeloupe several times, Medjugorje six times – and have received many wonderful graces at these places. But I can



Over the next three years another forty to fifty families moved into the area to join the Movement. Busloads of overseas devotees began to visit the site of Debra's alleged visions. Helidon became a kind of Marian colony, a community to join rather than a shrine to visit. Many visited especially on the "First Saturdays" and radiated a palpable sense of community and common purpose. This was one of the attractions for Ray Burke, an Irish member who emigrated to Helidon.<sup>179</sup> The Movement was growing rapidly and it attracted Catholics from all over Australia and elsewhere. For those arriving, Helidon was the "city on the hill,"<sup>180</sup> attracting people from the outside.

The MMM brought change to Helidon. This had a profound social and commercial impact on the local population as Debra bought up properties. People felt they were losing their town. According to Frank Thorne,

The tiny hamlet of Helidon is appropriately named. It looks like Hell on earth. The paint is peeling from the shabby shop fronts, now empty and closed down, and the once busy rural haven is reduced to a newsagent's, a post office and one pub. Yet this virtual ghost town, which has all the eerie, feel of a deserted cowboy film set after John Wayne and the Hollywood cameras have moved on, is supposedly the site of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.<sup>181</sup>

The town was commercially strangled. The expertise the Geileskeys developed from their work as estate agents was used to good effect as they encouraged people to purchase houses and give part ownership to the MMM. According to Maggs, "The idea of Debra and Gordon using their commercial experience to buy up the town is valid, and we were

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say with absolute conviction that the Marian Shrine where I have most intensely experienced God's presence and loving embrace is Helidon, and I had this experience of God on each of my six visits."

<sup>179</sup> R. Burke, "Talk on the MMM at Mater Hospital, Dublin – Prayer Meeting," (Audio Tape Recording, 17 May 1997).

<sup>180</sup> Matthew 5:14 *The Holy Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton NIV, 1986) 880.

<sup>181</sup> F. Thorne, "Helidon," *Ireland On Sunday* (July 13, 2003).

all somewhat shocked when this happened.”<sup>182</sup> According to Griffith, the couple made Aus\$540,000 from the sales, and followers bought land in Helidon donating a third to the Geileskeys.<sup>183</sup>

Thorne’s report gives a flavour of what was happening. When asked if any of the MMM members used his shop, one shopkeeper replied: “I’m banned because I sell Penthouse magazine. They don’t come in here. I’ve been ex-communicated. They have to drive to the next town about twelve miles away.” Others commented with wry humour. “If Jesus Christ did suddenly arrive, he wouldn’t find much to eat in Helidon. The local café has closed down and they won’t let anyone rent it.” A local girl wanted to open a hairdressing salon there, but was refused permission. “Debra is a clever woman and very wealthy now thanks to other people’s money – but she has turned this place into a ghost town. Yes, we certainly need a miracle. If Jesus were to turn up, I suppose Helidon would become a Holy Ghost town.”<sup>184</sup>

Maggs notes that people who were members of the MMM had signs identifying their property linking them to the Movement. Thus, the idea a state within a state began. It was if members were like the Hebrews in Egypt who were delivered at Passover by having a sign on their door.<sup>185</sup> A proposal to build a massive Basilica arose soon after Debra’s arrival in Helidon. It was to be the ‘New Jerusalem’ linking all the shrines of the world. It would eclipse all others in the world. Maggs observes,

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<sup>182</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication (January 20, 2005).

<sup>183</sup> C. Griffith, art. Overview of the Cult *Melbourne Sunday Mail* (June 27, 1999).

<sup>184</sup> F. Thorne, “Helidon,” op. cit.

<sup>185</sup> W. Maggs, private communication with author, (June 9, 2003).

The basilica idea was the next explosive issue and again took us by surprise. It was so massive an idea we were gob smacked! Everyone was in amazement and excited. Debra was thinking big, big, big! I was even present at a meeting with two representatives of an architectural company. It seemed this was going to happen for a while. Of course, money poured in.<sup>186</sup>

Maggs was disturbed by these developments and their financial implications. Controversies over hundreds of thousands of dollars given to Debra in donations, some of which were not receipted, and the renewed advertising for more donations and tithing to build this basilica raised questions for him about Debra's authenticity.<sup>187</sup> Journalists Amanda Gearing and Paul Whittaker report that another couple donated Aus\$100,000 towards the basilica, which they now believe will never be built. They gave the money to partly offset a capital gain from the sale of their Brisbane farm after moving to Helidon to join the MMM in 1997. The couple's accountant discovered their donations would not be tax deductible and the couple would be liable to pay further taxes. Gearing and Whittaker comment, "The movement was a financial rip-off but more than that it is a rip-off of souls".<sup>188</sup> Maggs records the lack of planning permission, issues of architecture, and people who allegedly lost money by donating to the basilica project.<sup>189</sup> According to Maggs, the Basilica project ultimately collapsed, "not because Debra didn't like it, but because she loved the money in her hands more! She couldn't part with what she had, and she had no trust in divine providence. Another missed opportunity. And so fell too

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<sup>186</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication, (January 29, 2005).

<sup>187</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op. cit. 102-4 & 140-2.

<sup>188</sup> A. Gearing and P. Whittaker, Donors to sect Basilica Plan want their Cash back *The Courier-Mail* (July 17, 1999) 5.

<sup>189</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op. cit. 24.

all her talk about the ‘New Jerusalem’.”<sup>190</sup> Other problems were also surfacing, and problems with the local Ordinary were hardening.

### 3.3 The Laurentin Episode

Yet another painful dispute arose with theologian René Laurentin and his alleged approval of the MMM. This dispute needs to be reviewed in order to understand a key moment in the hardening of Debra’s already conflicted relationship with the local Bishop. Laurentin first encountered Debra in Lourdes in 1996. His first impressions were favourable.<sup>191</sup> He subsequently visited Helidon later the same year. This was a significant moment for the MMM.<sup>192</sup> According to Maggs, “Debra built up our expectancy that Helidon was to be a ‘world-centre’ of spirituality. The visit of René Laurentin fostered this idea. Looking back, one can see how Debra used and exploited him.”<sup>193</sup>

Ray Burke notes that at the time of Laurentin’s visit the MMM had developed two organisational subsets, the *Slaves of the Eucharist* and the *Missionaries of the Eucharist*, one for women and one for men “in order to live lives of total service to the Eucharist and the Magnificat Movement.”<sup>194</sup> Claims that Laurentin blessed these developments were current at the time. According to Maggs, Laurentin “came to inspect the MMM, not to join it. But bear in mind that he had no conversational English and he is an elderly

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<sup>190</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication, (March 17, 2006).

<sup>191</sup> Translation of Fr René Laurentin’s faxes reports to Claire and Dr Antoine Mansour Re: Debra of Australia (April 1996). See also private email communication (February 27, 2005).

<sup>192</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication, (January 20, 2005).

<sup>194</sup> R. Burke, *The Truth about Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* op. cit 5.

gentleman, but unfortunately was being exploited by Debra for her own agenda.”<sup>195</sup> The likelihood is that Debra used his coming as a means of convincing members that the MMM was authentic despite the growing dispute with the local Bishop.<sup>196</sup> René Laurentin’s recollection of the visit is as follows, “When I visited her in Helidon, I tried to be as open and as understanding as possible. However, I noticed the excesses and the cult-like attitude of her group, which were already raising questions for her husband. I sent him a series of critical responses on this subject.”<sup>197</sup> It is important to note Laurentin’s evaluation of this “cult-like” mentality, confirming the theoretical position discussed in Chapter Two.

René Laurentin also revealed that he was involved in discussions with Gordon and Debra about celibacy and their marriage, which was then under strain. “I had had a very objective dialogue with her and her husband who did not want to accept their legal separation and on other questions as well.”<sup>198</sup> With regard to the celibacy issue Wal Maggs reports,

This living apart was obligatory on all married slaves. It was a great mistake of Debra’s to introduce this. It tended to damage the marriage of married slaves, or put a great strain upon the partners. Debra was inclined to interpret it a little loosely, in the sense that she said an occasional liaison between husband and wife would not destroy their status as ‘Slaves’. But it was a bad idea, even though the married slaves seemed to willingly enter into this arrangement. But the ‘Slave’ status became looked up to, and they were regarded as first class citizens. Hence there was the purely worldly inducement to seek this status. I am a bit vague now about the exact time Debra and Gordon’s marriage began to crumble. But they did eventually fight openly at our Committee meetings – tears flowing and

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<sup>195</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication, (January 29, 2005).

<sup>197</sup> R. Laurentin, private email communication, (February 27, 2005).

<sup>198</sup> R. Laurentin, private email communication (April 15, 2005).

all. But with Gordon it was more than the ‘Slave celibacy’. He lived with a con artist, and he found the lies and trickery too much in the end. Sooner or later, living with Debra would bring about a split – if one had a conscience! Gordon did!<sup>199</sup>

Laurentin’s alleged approval of the MMM and claims that he was present in Helidon as a Vatican expert were also strongly refuted by him. In a letter to Bishop Morris, he wrote:

“I formally refute the false rumour which has been spread that I am making academic investigations about apparitions in the role of expert appointed by the Vatican.”<sup>200</sup>

Bishop Morris had sought clarification from Laurentin and wrote as follows:

I have received from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a letter stating that Fr René Laurentin has received no appointment from the Holy See to investigate Debra Geileskey or supernatural experiences around the world. I would be grateful if you could let your people know that the claims made about Fr Laurentin are not true, and to warn your communities to be very careful in their discernment concerning Debra and the MMM.<sup>201</sup>

Laurentin categorically confirmed this refutation in private correspondence.<sup>202</sup> He also confirms that attempts to mediate the dispute with the Bishop arising from MMM claims failed. The net result was a hardening of Debra’s opposition to him.<sup>203</sup>

### 3.4 The Changing Relationship with the Catholic Church

In 1997, Debra had a parting of the ways with Fr. John Ryan PP<sup>204</sup> of the parish of St. Joseph’s, Helidon.<sup>205</sup> She left the parish, and the MMM continued all its activities thenceforth at the Shrine of Mary, as the old school was now called. Ryan challenged her strongly, and before he died of cancer in 2001, many who had joined the Movement

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<sup>199</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication (April 25, 2005).

<sup>200</sup> W. Morris, Letter to the priests of the Toowoomba Diocese, (April 1, 1997).

<sup>201</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> R. Laurentin, private letter of clarification, (February 9, 2004).

<sup>203</sup> R. Laurentin, private email communication, (February 27, 2005).

<sup>204</sup> See photograph in appendix one.

<sup>205</sup> *ibid.*

returned to the Catholic Church. Maggs asserts that Fr Ryan was the voice of reason. The bishop supported Fr Ryan. Debra saw the danger and left the parish. According to Maggs, she reacted with “nastiness in word and deed” and the gulf between the parties grew apace.<sup>206</sup> Fr Ryan “was crucial to the story. His newspaper articles etc. made a big impression on the movement and on visitors. He was a brave priest who spoke out as he saw it. His taking of the members to court was the beginning of the end for Debra.”<sup>207</sup> This penultimate dispute took on very nasty overtones.<sup>208</sup>

After Maggs left in 1999, real decline set in following his publication of a very coherent analysis of the theology and cultist practices of the MMM in terms understandable to those within the movement. John Ryan supported him in this attempt to engage with people in the movement. Debra’s reaction was to go silent especially after she rejected Catholicity in early 2000.<sup>209</sup>

Bishop Morris had been concerned about the MMM from early 1995 when he appeared on ABC radio’s national “Religion Today” programme. He advised Catholics to be very wary of involvement with the MMM until its authenticity had been tested by the Church. He noted that large numbers were being drawn into the movement and realised that many were concerned about Debra’s visions and revelations. While he had given permission for the MMM to operate in his diocese, he had not given it his approval and was having its statutes assessed by canon lawyers. The Bishop recognised some positive benefits: “In

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<sup>206</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication, (January 29, 2005).

<sup>207</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication, (March 17, 2006).

<sup>208</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication, (March 17, 2006).

<sup>209</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 599.

the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady and ... inviting people back to that devotion in their prayer life.”<sup>210</sup> In 1997 Bishop Morris set up a commission to investigate the MMM and took the findings, along with MMM publications, to Rome. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith supported his view that Catholic people should disassociate themselves from the MMM, saying, “All this constitutes a clear danger to many good people”.<sup>211</sup> Morris wrote a letter to diocesan priests, pointing out that “there is considerable doubt as to whether the Magnificent Meal Movement is a genuine Christian movement” (27 October 1998.)<sup>212</sup>

In April 1999, Debra and 14 MMM members pleaded not guilty in court to disturbing Church services at the parish church in Helidon. When a tape recording implicating Debra in this event was introduced as evidence, she persuaded the members to plead guilty. This was the point at which Maggs decided to leave the movement. “The disturbance of the church service reflected this. It was getting square with the PP. It also was going too far! Doubts began in the minds of some of us. Others were prepared to follow her blind folded, right or wrong!”<sup>213</sup> On August 3, 1999, Bishop Morris, in an open letter in *The Chronicle* stated, “In light of the Vatican statement, I still declare that the Magnificat Meal Movement is not of God. I want to be quite clear that no Magnificat Meal Movement activity has any Church approval.”<sup>214</sup>

On the 9 September 1999, there was a suicide scare at Helidon; Debra had allegedly had

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<sup>210</sup> B. O’Shea, No approval for revelation *The Catholic Leader* (May 4, 1997).

<sup>211</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op. cit. 4, 5.

<sup>212</sup> *ibid.* 4.

<sup>213</sup> W. Maggs, Private email communication, (January 29, 2005).

<sup>214</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op. cit. 5.



a vision of being burnt at the stake by priests like Joan of Arc. There was the expectation that mass suicide was going to take place and massive media frenzy resulted. She played on the date 9/9/99, an inversion of 666, to make it more mysterious. The expectation was that Fr Ryan was the one to set her alight.<sup>215</sup>

The decline in the MMM dates from this time.<sup>216</sup> Debra went silent and gave few interviews. She now attacked the Church and the Eucharist she had advocated for over a decade and moved into schism, even denying the Pope she had claimed was a role model for her. On 25th February 2000, after Debra declared that *Novus Ordo* Masses<sup>217</sup> were invalid, Bishop Morris issued a statement, addressed to priests in the diocese, saying:

This movement has explicitly rejected the current teaching of the Catholic Church regarding the Eucharist. Its members, by their choice, have placed themselves outside the Church: no one else can be blamed for this action. If people choose to remain in the movement, they indicate their acceptance of its current teachings.<sup>218</sup>

Thus the disputatious spirit that forms a thread throughout this story leads the MMM and its foundress out of Catholic communion. Interestingly, while Debra claimed that the Catholic Church had protestantised the Mass, she was entertaining thoughts of joining the Seventh Day Adventists (SDA).<sup>219</sup> She had asked her members to take down all the statues in Mary's Mount. These theological deviations were a step too far for Maggs:

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<sup>215</sup> John Ryan PP Helidon interviewed on *Today with Pat Kenny* RTE Radio 1 Audio Recording: (August 24, 1999).

<sup>216</sup> A Gearing, *The Courier-Mail* (October 23, 1999, 12).

<sup>217</sup> <http://www.answers.com/topic/novus-or-do-missae> (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>218</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op. cit. 5.

<sup>219</sup> *ibid.* 188, 9. See photograph of Debra and K. Morgan, SDA Church Leader in appendix one. K. Morgan, Private telephone communication with author June 9, 2003.

The taking down of all statues and holy pictures was part of her Protestant thinking at this stage. She herself was ready to become Protestant, and jumped the gun too far and soon for the rest of us. We were not ready to do this. Some of us left over this.<sup>220</sup>

Debra seemingly wanted to take the MMM out of the reach of the Catholic Church. She brought lecturers and films in for several weeks. The secret meetings with the SDA went on behind the backs of most of the members. This was highly controversial, and eventually backfired on Debra. The removal of statues and pictures was requested because the SDA would have regarded their use as idolatry. Some of the members were very unhappy about this doctrinal turn and began querying her position. Debra heard of this and rang Maggs from New Zealand. He told her, “We are Catholics! We should have statues and holy pictures. It is part of our Catholic practice.”<sup>221</sup> On her return Debra “blamed the whole fiasco on Gordon her husband and Marion Morgan. Debra had misjudged the feeling of the majority. But it showed how she was really thinking.”<sup>222</sup>

She changed tack again and, in a seemingly ecumenical turn based on a distorted reading of papal policy, called for Catholics to attend the Eastern Rite liturgy. David Quinn, then the Editor of the *Irish Catholic*, identified her erroneous conclusions. She understood the Pope to be encouraging Catholics to attend Eastern Rite masses as opposed to the New Mass. She used this misunderstanding to justify her preference for the Eastern Rite and to give MMM members the impression they were doing the Pope’s will.

The Eastern Rite Mass is extremely similar to the Mass of Eastern Orthodoxy. It is said in Catholic Churches in some parts of Eastern Europe. By drawing attention to the Eastern Rite the Pope is telling

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<sup>220</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication (January 29, 2005).

<sup>221</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>222</sup> *ibid.*

Churches of Eastern Orthodoxy that if unity is achieved once more, they need not give up their form of the Mass. Instead they can follow the example of Eastern Catholicism.<sup>223</sup>

In addition, Debra tried to engage Eastern Rite clergy to say Mass but this was unsuccessful. Debra found that she could not influence these priests in regard to the ordering of the Mass. Having no influence she soon lost interest.<sup>224</sup>

Support then switched to the Society of Pius X and the Tridentine rite. This resulted in most of her members having to travel long distances to attend mass. Mercy Lotilla-Ascencio<sup>225</sup> reported that in the Philippines this led to catastrophic consequences for the MMM. This *volte-face* did not impress the Society of Pius X, who, having studied her diaries concluded that they were thoroughly post-Conciliar and so they would have nothing to do with her. Debra was now liturgically isolated.

### 3.5 Decline

The collapse of Debra's marriage in 1999 and the defection of her husband Gordon Geileskey, and Mrs Michelle Stewart, her most trusted assistant, marked a turning point. Michelle alleged that Debra's visions were a fake, and also reported that Debra's alleged claim to be living exclusively on the Eucharist were untrue as she had observed her eating on a number of occasions.<sup>226</sup> Gordon Geileskey reported that he had smuggled fruit juice to her to supplement her diet of the Eucharist.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> D. Quinn, *The Irish Catholic-Notebook* (Thursday, April 6, 2000).

<sup>224</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication, (January 29, 2005).

<sup>225</sup> M. Lotilla-Ascencio, private telephone communication with author, (May 23, 2004).

<sup>226</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op. cit. 34, 35, 176. A. Gearing, *The Courier-Mail*, (Saturday, June 5, 1999) 4.

<sup>227</sup> *ibid.* 35.

During 2000, the year her divorce came through, Debra travelled extensively in Ireland, the United States, the Philippines, Malaysia, and within Australia, teaching that the *Novus Ordo* Mass was invalid. People expected the MMM to disintegrate around that time, but although many left and the Basilica project fell apart, Debra became orientated to wealth. She bought many properties and built an organisation around herself, which was totally cut off from the outside world. In the first half of 2000 the movement appeared to evolve into a business as Debra and the MMM began merchandising *Herbalife* products.<sup>228</sup>

She and members of the movement are selling Herbalife products and she is promoting home loans at a low interest rate, to raise money for a \$A41m [sic] basilica at her headquarters. She claims she was told that Jesus Christ would return to Earth if the basilica were built.<sup>229</sup>

Members were seen in local shopping centres offering free facials to be carried out in clients' homes. They no longer wore MMM garb. Debra dyed her hair blonde and travelled in a chauffeur-driven silver Mercedes-Benz.<sup>230</sup>

Civil disputes have also arisen. Judy and Hank Deucker had purchased a retirement home a few miles from Helidon and opposite to where Debra moved into a large property some time later. They have been very active in raising issues to do with MMM, the flouting of the law and the impact at local, state and national levels.<sup>231</sup> Their theory is that constant and varied pressure from local, state and federal authorities will break the organisation in the end. "Basically, we want our home back, and if the MMM is broken, many, many others will benefit too."<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Herbalife site <http://www.trimbody.com.au> (accessed May 31, 2006).

<sup>229</sup> Marian Research Institute/Marian Library, University of Dayton, Ohio, <http://www.udayton.edu/mary/news01/20010126.html> (accessed May 31, 2006).

<sup>230</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op. cit. 5.

<sup>231</sup> H. & J. Deucker, private email communication (July 20, 2003).

<sup>232</sup> H. & J. Deucker, private email communication (July 20, 2003).

The Deuckers found that the local council was ineffective in dealing with these issues. “What we are working at is: 1. bringing the organisation to account with local and state law and 2. We want them to have to pay for the same charges as other ratepayers have to, instead of being subsidised by the community at large.”<sup>233</sup> They hold that the infringement of the law particularly with regard to building irregularities should have resulted in substantial council fines.<sup>234</sup> Up to the present time the council refuses to act or simply gives her a mild rebuke rather than deal with her severely. This, according to the Deuckers is, “because of their misunderstanding of her religious status, i.e. the MMM is a sanctioned arm of the Catholic Church.”<sup>235</sup> The Deuckers allege that most people in the area hold this view. “Exposing the fraud should make it possible to remove the status of ‘religion’ that is such a successful front, then goodbye to tax free luxury cars. It must be remembered here that she is the only one with a fine for disrupting a religious service.”<sup>236</sup> Most recently, the Deuckers have reported that “the MMM have gone to ground; that is making everyone happy, people just let them get on with their thing as long as they are not bothered by her carry on.”<sup>237</sup>

### 3.5.1 Debra and the MMM’s Widening Civil Conflict

According to Maggs there is a strong sense that Debra is above the law and lacks any of the characteristics of holiness or spirituality one would associate with a true visionary.<sup>238</sup>

Fieldwork research strongly suggests that she is a shrewd entrepreneur using religion as a

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<sup>233</sup> H. & J. Deucker, private email communication (March 10, 2005).

<sup>234</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> H. Deucker, private email communication (May 3, 2006).

<sup>238</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op. cit. at 107, also 102-110.

cover for personal enrichment. Debra had a powerful effect on ordinary people such that they were willing to sell everything and move to become part of the MMM. The number of priests and people who believed in her initially shows how magnetic she was. Debra developed a new close-knit sense of 'them and us'. Those outside are lost and are without a 'soul'. As if this was not enough, having rejected the authority of the Church, she then went on to reject the state and set up her own entitled *The Commonwealth of Caledonia Australis* (CCA). In the name of this State (CCA) one of her members replaced his car number plate, and another, Christina Marie Delahunty refused to accept the authority of the local police by driving through a roadblock.<sup>239</sup> A year later Delahunty had a change of attitude, which saved her from going to jail. Barrister Scott Lynch, who represented Delahunty at her sentencing, told Toowoomba District Court his client was "now quite contrite". Judge Howell was handed a hand-written apology from Delahunty, expressing her regret for what the Crown had described as "baseless" and "outrageous" allegations levelled at a number of police and Toowoomba magistrates.<sup>240</sup> It is not surprising that Delahunty took this position. In a newsletter published by Debra, it is alleged, "Several police officers accosted and attempted sexual assault of Sr Christina [Delahunty] and have taken her to court by fabricated evidence instead – what a twisted society that accuses the victim to shield the culprits."<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> A. Gates, Woman charged with Range dash *The Chronicle*, Toowoomba, (July 31, 2003). See also A. Gearing, Cult woman held on charge *The Courier-Mail*, (July 31, 2003).

<sup>240</sup> P. Hardwick, Roadblock driver to serve 'time' outside prison walls, *The Chronicle*, (December 11, 2004).

<sup>241</sup> Helidon News email newsletter (June 24, 2004). See photograph of Christina with Debra in appendix one.

In 2002 Debra purchased a former Lutheran Church in Helidon and established her own congregation entitled *The Church of the Commonwealth of Caledonia Australis*. Maggs alleged that, “the former Lutheran Church has now been renamed by Debra as the ‘Basilica of St. David’ and serviced by her new ‘clergy.’”<sup>242</sup> She has since “ordained” some priests and a bishop. It also seems that the funds set aside for the ornate basilica were used for other purposes. The MMM now claim to be “the true remnant of the Catholic Church, and that the old Catholic Church has been rejected by God. This is the nonsense Debra has been telling them for years in her talks and diaries.”<sup>243</sup> Debra has combined her own Church connected to a separatist state to the original multi-million dollar Basilica project.<sup>244</sup>

This author, while engaged in fieldwork in Australia in June 2003, was threatened with an Aus\$5M lawsuit for the infringement of the registration and copyright of Debra’s name and for stalking her. The demands for compensation had totalled Aus\$210M by the time this campaign was terminated in March 2004.<sup>245</sup> An attempt had been made to interview Debra, her assistant Claire Murphy from Ireland, and any Irish members. This request was refused. This fieldwork trip led to the mobilisation of local people and resultant media attention, which had been dormant for some time. Contact with the Australian federal police following the trip indicates that they are now involved with issues connected to the MMM.

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<sup>242</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication (March 8, 2005).

<sup>243</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication (March 8, 2005).

<sup>244</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication (December 17, 2004). See photograph of church in appendix one.

<sup>245</sup> D. Burslem, Correspondence with author, (November 24, 2003, February 2, 26, 2004).

In early 2004 another change occurred. Debra dropped the connection to the CCA. Pseudo-legal documents are no longer sent out from the CCA. Appeal is now made to an Australian precedent claiming that due to the Australia Act (1986) all statute law related to the Crown is void and all who serve the Crown have no legal authority. During April 2004 even these claims have been dropped. Debra now seems to be part of the *Christian Identity Movement* (CIM). Originating in the mid-nineteenth century in the USA, the CIM believe that white people of European stock are the descendants of the “Lost Tribes” of ancient Israel. They also believe that non-whites are “mud peoples” created before Adam and Eve, and that Jews are the Satanic offspring of Eve and the Serpent.<sup>246</sup> New signs stating, “Invitation only” have been erected at MMM headquarters.<sup>247</sup> Debra still travels widely abroad, but these are really private meetings for the few members left. They are not advertised publicly.

### 3.5.2 The Mansour Dossier<sup>248</sup>

At the end of 2004 the Mansours, once enthusiastic members of the MMM,<sup>249</sup> initiated a court case to recover the loan of Aus\$680,000 they had made to Debra to purchase a property.<sup>250</sup> When the property was purchased Debra wrote, “[y]esterday I prayed for you and your...plans after the contract was signed and received the scripture of Ecclesiastes

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<sup>246</sup> R. Kohn, Sunday Radio Programme ABC, Christian Identity Movement (February 29, 2004).

<sup>247</sup> H. Deucker, Email copy of letter to High Court (March 9, 2004).

<sup>248</sup> The Mansours sent the author a dossier of significant documents (May 3, 2006). It includes the retraction letter from Debra (February 2, 2006,) a deposition from Amabilis Commentucci and a variety of private email communications between Debra and various ex-members of the MMM. It also includes letters from banks, documents connected to the CCA, and documents concerning investments in gold bonds.

<sup>249</sup> C. Mansour, Amazing Eucharistic Experiences audio tape LA: *Catholic Focus*, (1997).

<sup>250</sup> US couple launches action against cult leader *The Courier- Mail*, (December 12, 2004).



11.1. 'Invest your money in foreign business and one day in the future you will make a profit.'<sup>251</sup>

This is an interesting translation of, "Cast your bread on the waters, for after many days you will find it again."<sup>252</sup> This is a typical example of Debra's use of scripture. The Mansours were fortunate to have drawn up an agreement signed by both parties; otherwise they would not have been able to reach a settlement.<sup>253</sup> It is interesting to note that when the Mansours requested repayment of the loan Debra unsuccessfully attempted on two occasions to have them send her the original documents. This would have left them without proof of their case.<sup>254</sup>

Debra also accused the Mansours of involvement in pornography and promoting terrorism. They were legally and financially vindicated in early 2006 when Debra retracted all charges and repaid the loan.<sup>255</sup> "We take this opportunity to express our regrets to the Mansours for any distress or embarrassment they have suffered as a result of any false previous reports concerning them which have been disseminated by the Magnificat Meal Movement, its founder or any member thereof."<sup>256</sup>

Allegations have also been made that Debra was ejected from a Moscow conference organised by Archbishop John Bereslavsky having been caught in a compromising

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<sup>251</sup> Facsimile Message from Debra to Mansours (February 12, 2002).

<sup>252</sup> Holy Bible Ecclesiastes 11.1. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973).

<sup>253</sup> Mansour Dossier, International Private Treaty (February 2, 2002).

<sup>254</sup> Mansour Dossier, Email communication from Debra to Mansours (February 6, 2004,) Facsimile Message from Debra to Mansours (June 3, 2004).

<sup>255</sup> Private email communication (April 5, 2006).

<sup>256</sup> Mansour Dossier, Retraction letter from Debra (February 2, 2006).

situation.<sup>257</sup> She was there in November 2003 after she had visited Ireland. Amy Commentucci, like Claire Mansour a onetime devoted member of the MMM, began to have doubts after this incident, but it really came home to her when Debra requested she give her a diamond ring received on her tenth wedding anniversary.<sup>258</sup> Another document in the Mansour dossier suggests that Debra “presented 2 promissory notes in the amounts of \$530,000,000 and \$1,550,000... on or about July 16, 2003” to the Wachovia Bank in New Jersey.<sup>259</sup> “Both notes were determined to be non-negotiable by First Union/Wachovia Bank and were not deposited.”<sup>260</sup> Material in this dossier confirms that Debra was trying to establish a separate state. It includes citizenship forms for the Commonwealth of Caledonia Australis, others for a referendum, and a form to renounce civil citizenship and marriage within both the Catholic Church and the Australian state. These were described as being demonically compromised.<sup>261</sup>

The dossier also includes evidence of the use of financial houses in Vanuatu and in the Caribbean to sell gold and offering share certificates in the CCA.<sup>262</sup> A single mother with three children reported that she was introduced to this investment at her church in West Hollywood by Debra. “I invested \$12,000 to purchase gold ... I was hoping to profit from this investment and sell quickly to help with my children’s education.”<sup>263</sup> She

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<sup>257</sup> Mansour Dossier, Deposition of Amabilis Commentucci (September 30, 2005) Fr Forkin got on the bus and told Debra that the Archbishop had accused her of being a lesbian. He suggested that Debra’s followers leave her and come and join him 31-36.

<sup>258</sup> Mansour Dossier, Deposition of Amabilis Commentucci op. sic. Debra said, “Jesus wants her to give her a diamond ring.” In short, she took my diamond ring. “This is a covenant between us.” Amy was sick at the time, but after the trip to Moscow asked for the ring back. “There is no covenant between us. I don’t believe you anymore. You are not from God.” She asked for the ring back, but having said she would give it back, Amy has not received it back too date 38.

<sup>259</sup> Mansour Dossier, Letter from John J. McManmon To Whom It May Concern (July 1, 2004).

<sup>260</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> Mansour Dossier, Original CCA documents including the Mansours’ citizenship certificates, sent by Federal Express to author by Claire Mansour (May 3, 2006).

<sup>262</sup> Mansour Dossier, Global Bullion Services, Ltd., Letter in file of documents op. cit.

<sup>263</sup> Mansour Dossier, Letter from Leslie M. Vallejo To Whom It May Concern (April 14, 2005).

attempted to make contact with Debra in 2004 and when she had received no response called Claire Murphy, Debra's secretary, in March 2005. Murphy promised to address these issues. Vallejo is "still waiting for a response."<sup>264</sup>

Debra produced postage stamps with CCA as the country of origin containing the O.H.M.S. motif, and successfully used the Australian postal service to get letters with these stamps sent to the USA.<sup>265</sup> Debra also had a business card made in the States on which she claims to be a diplomat and British subject, Her Excellency, Debra-Marie Burslem H.R.H. HM Government of Caledonia Australis, Minister Plenipotentiary.<sup>266</sup> A number of interesting questions arise at this point. Was Debra a well intentioned person who merely went astray in the absence of grounded spiritual accompaniment? Was she deluded and as a result lived out of her delusion? Or was she in fact of set purpose a manipulator of others for her own ends? In the absence of opportunities for an in depth interviews such questions remain difficult to answer. However, the evidence available so far suggests the likelihood of the latter. As this research is being brought to conclusion information is emerging of allegations of fraud, impersonation and treason being investigated by the LAPD, the FBI and the Australian Federal Police as a result of the contents of the Mansour dossier.

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<sup>264</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> Mansour Dossier, Original of postage stamp *op. cit.*

<sup>266</sup> Mansour Dossier, Copy of the card *op. cit.* Letter from Nabil Azzam who met Debra in Las Vegas at a fundraiser where he was handed a copy of the card. "I enquired about the 'Royalty' and other titles mentioned on the card. She commented that she is considered 'Royalty' and she even travels on a Diplomatic passport." To Whom It May Concern (July 13, 2005). The printer of the card, Abdo Jahshan delivered the business cards in question to Debra in Beverly Hills and received by John Tonner. Letter To Whom It May Concern (July 13, 2005). Debra tried to get Claire Mansour to move to Helidon while at the same time approached a very exclusive estate agency to purchase a house next door to her in Beverly Hills. This is confirmed by the director of the company Mauricio S. Umansky. Mansour Dossier, Copy of the card *op. cit.*

Could things have been very different if Debra had received a more sympathetic response from the Catholic Church among whose members the MMM developed and grew? The evidence suggests that the bishop was initially open to discerning dialogue. Debra though rejected appropriate spiritual guidance from the evidence of those who were supposedly giving her that guidance. The move to Toowoomba seems innocent enough; she wanted to make a fresh start following the business failure. However, the move to Helidon seems to have had a more mundane motivation. Was the impetus for the move the call by the church in Toowoomba for financial transparency?

### 3.5.3 Strange Incidents

There is another more curious side to Debra, and this concerns her physical strength and the presence of her minders.<sup>267</sup> This is referred to by several people; not least Wal Maggs who saw her force open a pair of iron doors with what he took to be superhuman strength.<sup>268</sup> An anonymous witness from Ireland who attended one of Debra's meetings in Dun Laoghaire also had a disturbing story to tell. She asked Debra at the end of the talk, "What plans has God got for me?" The mode of reply was unexpected. "Just praise and Glorify God," Debra said, holding the woman's lower jaw in a grip so tight she could not speak. "I could only conclude that if it was from Jesus it would be a gentle grip, but this was not the case so, I could only say it was strength unknown to mankind and not from God, I also felt I was hovering off the ground. When she had finished she turned away from me." The woman then took out a St Benedict Cross and called out to her "Debra do you know that what you just did was not from God?" Debra turned very abruptly towards her, but was restrained by her minders and ushered her out of the hall. "I

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<sup>267</sup> See photo of Debra and minders in appendix one.

<sup>268</sup> W. Maggs, *Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* op.cit. 15, and a private email communication, (March 17, 2006).

had never come across such a level of security associated with a ‘visionary before. I asked the question of myself as to whether this was a new cult.’<sup>269</sup> Judy Bloomfield, a local member of the Catholic community in Helidon once witnessed Debra hitch up her skirt “and run across the road to put a young man, who was already being held by two of her men, in a headlock and force him to the ground.” Judy was saddened because this was the woman who had so many people convinced she was their passport to healing and heaven.<sup>270</sup> Sadly, what had begun as a centre of traditional Catholic spirituality had become an increasingly controversial and bizarre if declining movement in Australia. Only Debra herself could explain how such a change happened. It is now time to review events in Ireland.

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<sup>269</sup> Interviewee A, op. cit.

<sup>270</sup> J. Bloomfield Interview, (June 11, 2003). See photograph of café outside of which the incident took place in appendix one.

**Chapter Four:**  
**THE MMM IN IRELAND**

## 4.1 Beginnings in Ireland

The task in this chapter is to explore the emergence and development of MMM-Ireland and its subsequent decline to near extinction. The story dates to July 1994 when Debra met a group of Irish Pilgrims in Medjugorje.<sup>271</sup> One of them, Margo Doherty from Strabane was chosen to bring the message of the MMM to Ireland. MMM-Ireland was formed in Strabane on February 18, 1995.<sup>272</sup> Debra paid a number of visits to Ireland during that year and in 1996.<sup>273</sup> Attempts to interview former leaders of MMM-Ireland were unsuccessful. Ray Burke played a pivotal role in the establishment of the MMM in Ireland. He taught at Blackrock College, Dublin before moving to Helidon. Fiona Sheehan,<sup>274</sup> who subsequently renounced the MMM,<sup>275</sup> Claire Murphy, and Colm Dunne also played leadership roles.

### 4.1.1 Review of Literature

Published material from MMM-Ireland is essentially non-existent apart from an undated photocopied leaflet, which probably dates from around 1997.<sup>276</sup> Apart from reports by

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<sup>271</sup> MMM Irish Leaflet (ca 1997).

<sup>272</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>274</sup> Author in private communication with Fiona Sheehan at Veritas bookshop during this period.

<sup>275</sup> Private email communication with Fiona Sheehan (September 9, 2003).

<sup>276</sup> Author in private communication with Fiona Sheehan at Veritas bookshop during this period.

David Quinn in the *Irish Catholic* and two national newspaper reports in 2003 no newspaper articles on the MMM in Ireland by Irish journalists have appeared. However, there were four significant radio programmes. Two featured interviews with Debra; the others featured Bridget Treacy and her daughter who were both briefly members,<sup>277</sup> and Marilyn Patton, sister of a woman who brought her dying daughter to Australia in May 2003.<sup>278</sup> Debra also featured in a brief TV news item.<sup>279</sup> Some audio recordings by members of the movement also exist.<sup>280</sup> The author had significant interviews with Fr Aidan Carroll, then at University Church, Stephen's Green, and Colm Fitzpatrick then a member of Fr Carroll's prayer group. Both were close observers of the formation of the MMM in Ireland. Eileen Treacy, who lived in Helidon, also gave an interview, as did several others who wish to remain anonymous.

#### 4.1.2 The Importance of Medjugorje

Research indicates that Medjugorje was a pivotal element in the emergence of MMM-Ireland just as it had been in Australia, through the place itself or prayer groups associated with it. The reconstruction of the story of the founding of MMM-Ireland that follows is grounded in interviews with Fitzpatrick, then a leader in the Medjugorje Youth Prayer Group, Fr Aidan Carroll, who founded the prayer group in 1989, and other former members who remain anonymous. The Medjugorje Youth Prayer Group was composed mainly of young men who had visited Medjugorje and requested Fr Aidan Carroll to help

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<sup>277</sup> *Today with Pat Kenny* RTE Radio 1 Audio tape recording (August 24, 1999).

*Today with Pat Kenny* RTE Radio 1 Audio tape recording (Friday 31, March 2000).

*Liveline* RTE Radio 1, Audio tape recording (May 28, 2003).

<sup>278</sup> *Liveline* RTE Radio 1, Audio recording (May 27, 2003).

<sup>279</sup> M. Cagney on TV3's breakfast programme Ireland AM (Friday 31, March 2000).

<sup>280</sup> R. Burke, Talk on the MMM at Mater Hospital, op. cit. Debra, Mary Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of all Graces and Advocate: Audio tape recording, Belfast (February 19, 1996).



them form a young adult prayer meeting. As the group grew it moved from University Church to Ely Place and then to the Community of Marie Auxiliatrice in Lower Mount Street, where Debra met them in 1996. The weekly meetings were well-organised and involved Eucharistic adoration, singing hymns, the rosary, sharing of Scripture, intercession, and teaching.

An ex-member of the MMM came to hear about the movement through her participation in St Kevin's Taize Youth Mass in Dublin. She met Ray Burke there.<sup>281</sup> Fitzpatrick, who was part of the Medjugorje Youth Prayer Group, identifies Ray Burke as a core group member. Fitzpatrick "first heard about Debra when Fr Aidan Carroll announced from the altar that he had some tapes of a lovely Australian mystic called Debra. This must have been early 1995."<sup>282</sup> It should be noted that Fr Aidan soon discerned the nature of Debra's spirituality and was unfairly branded as persecuting the MMM because of his rejection of Debra's claims.<sup>283</sup> This pattern of conflict and condemnation has been noted in the previous chapter.

#### 4.1.3 First Encounters

Interviewee B graphically describes Debra's first meeting on March 19, 1995 in Dublin.

It is true for me to say that I have never heard anyone speak with such devotion to Jesus truly present in the Blessed Sacrament. Adoration was the theme of her talk to us that night ... The fruits of her talks were good at that time, a number of people I know, including myself, began adoration in their own parishes, and all adoration groups that were set up at that time are still going well. Many people I know, understood for the first time the awesome presence of Jesus truly present in the Blessed Eucharist, and

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<sup>281</sup> Interviewee A, private email communication (July 22, 2003).

<sup>282</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, "My account of the MMM," Private email communication (July 31, 2004).

<sup>283</sup> Private communication with Fiona Sheehan.

began to attend Adoration regularly. She was at that time she told us, fasting on the Holy Eucharist, and she looked beautiful. She was very slim and smiled constantly, she was very gentle, and radiated a real sense of joy.<sup>284</sup>

These groups seemed to have favoured traditional Catholic practices and so provided a fertile ground for Debra's message. Fitzpatrick describes Debra's visit a year later at the same venue. The descriptions could not be more different.<sup>285</sup> Colm went to the Marie Auxiliatrice in Mount Street; where Debra was due to speak, with a priest he knew. "Her supporters were excited."<sup>286</sup> He had not intended going, but was encouraged by a comment by someone he knew who felt that God was speaking to her through Debra's messages. He decided he had better check it out because of his leadership role within the group. When they arrived the crowd was filled with a palpable sense of anticipation because Debra was late in arriving. This seems to have been a pattern.

#### 4.1.4 Late Arrival

Fitzpatrick and interviewee B both comment on Debra's late arrival for meetings.<sup>287</sup> "When I arrived at the Gresham Hotel at 7.00 pm which was the time in the advert there were about 20 people there. At about 7:50 pm a person called Colm Dunne opened the proceedings without even a word of apology for the delay, and Debra then spoke non stop for an hour and ten minutes."<sup>288</sup> Fitzpatrick was influenced by his friend's view of her delay. "He, [his priest friend], also saw through her stalling tactics before entering to

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<sup>284</sup> Interviewee B, Private email communication (July 22, 2003).

<sup>285</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, op. cit.

<sup>286</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>287</sup> The author noticed the same phenomenon five years later.

<sup>288</sup> M. Garde, Report of the Talk by Debra at the Gresham Hotel for David Quinn, Editor of the *Irish Catholic* (31 March 2000).

build up the atmosphere as cult like.”<sup>289</sup> According to interviewee B “[Debra] was due to arrive at 8.00 pm, but did not arrive until 8.45, there was a big crowd assembled, including four priests.”<sup>290</sup> Fitzpatrick’s priest friend became agitated and wanted to leave but Fitzpatrick prevailed on him to stay. It was known that Debra was standing in the room outside the hall, so there was an air of expectancy every time someone entered – the atmosphere was building up. “This was a tactic Debra used to increase the tension before she entered.”<sup>291</sup>

Fitzpatrick goes on to paraphrase how Burke, by then a follower of Debra, opened proceedings: “I do not know about you but I have studied a lot of theology – well when you meet someone like Debra all the theology goes out the window.”<sup>292</sup> It was not an auspicious start. Burke then astonishingly claimed that this was one of thirty three days in the year on which Debra ate normally (the rest of the time living on the Eucharist alone), and that by a special grace any person who shared a meal with her on one of those days would share her place in heaven. “This caused something close to euphoria among some of the people gathered – it caused me consternation.”<sup>293</sup>

The helpers were more insistent than ever that people eat. Fitzpatrick’s reaction was conflicted. He was torn by thoughts of pride and questioning the reduction of his relationship with God to “the bite of a munchie!”<sup>294</sup> He finally took something to eat – though he regretted it almost immediately. The priest with him declined to eat. When

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<sup>289</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, op. cit.

<sup>290</sup> Interviewee B, op. cit.

<sup>291</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, op. cit.

<sup>292</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>293</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>294</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, op. cit.

Debra arrived she asked for anyone who had not eaten to own up. The priest did not. He later commented, “I’m not under obedience to her of all people.” Then there was an almost ritual moment when Debra herself partook of food, so as to “seal the deal by taking food with them.”<sup>295</sup> Debra made much of Ray Burke in front of everyone and focused attention on him.<sup>296</sup> Fitzpatrick notes, “She implied he had deep insight and was spiritually streets ahead of everyone else there.”<sup>297</sup> Fitzpatrick left soon after that with the priest. He felt Debra was staring at him to unsettle him: He came away with a lot of questions about Debra’s ministry and his priest friend told him that he also had very serious reservations about the movement and Debra. The question arises: Was what they observed a ritual meal?

#### 4.1.5 Developments

Debra subsequently paid a number of visits to Ireland between 1995 and 2004 and wanted to show how special this country was to her. The leaflet produced by MMM-Ireland claims that “[t]he Lord had giving [Debra] special messages for Ireland. He had chosen the Irish to pave the way for His coming again just as His Mother paved the way for him.”<sup>298</sup> For example, Debra came to Ireland in late 1996 despite having had two heart attacks. The theme of priesthood played a significant role in her thinking. She seems to combine traditionalist and conspiracy theories around it. On the one hand she says the Irish have had a loyal priesthood. On the other hand an impression is given that all is not well.<sup>299</sup> Debra was seen as the key to understanding what has happened, what is happening and what will happen. Her talks attracted large crowds and a network of

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<sup>295</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>296</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>297</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>298</sup> MMM Irish Leaflet *op. cit.*

<sup>299</sup> MMM Irish Leaflet *op. cit.*

Adoration groups in Dublin and around the country developed. People found her ministry uplifting. Debra's thesis as expounded in Dublin, Letterkenny, and Belfast was that devotion to the Sacred Heart or fighting against abortion was for a past age. Now it was time to be part of the MMM and become involved with its style of Adoration and veneration of Our Lady. Every thing else was a waste of time. She was also convinced that the Pope would declare in favour of the doctrine of Co-Redemption by 1998.<sup>300</sup>

Ray Burke played a central role in this process. He based much of his support of the MMM around his becoming a *Slave of the Eucharist*, and associated René Laurentin with it. Burke asserted that Laurentin had been to a number of shrines, but had never come across a place like Helidon or a person like Debra.<sup>301</sup> Fitzpatrick notes Burke's commitment: "I soon became aware that Ray Burke was 'following' her too – hardly a surprise since he seemed to follow a large number of so-called visionaries who claimed to be getting messages from God."<sup>302</sup> Maggs also highlights Burke's importance,

Ray Burke is a very interesting person in the movement. He was fascinated with Debra as 'seer' and 'prophet'. Many times I saw him hanging around Debra whenever she appeared ... He hung on her every word. Yet Debra told me that he bored her! But he exemplifies how some in the cult have become hers body and soul and probably will never leave her.<sup>303</sup>

By early 1996 a group were meeting every Tuesday in the Marie Auxiliatrice in Mount Street where the prayer group met and participated in Eucharistic adoration. This they did under the banner of the MMM. It is not clear how much Fr Carroll the spiritual director

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<sup>300</sup> Debra, Mary Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of all Graces and Advocate: Audio tape recording, Belfast (February 19, 1996).

<sup>301</sup> R. Burke, Talk on the MMM at Mater Hospital op. cit.

<sup>302</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, op. cit.

<sup>303</sup> W. Maggs, Private email communication (January 29, 2005).

knew about this or whether a group that went for food together afterwards were celebrating a Magnificat meal.<sup>304</sup> Before Fr Dermot Forkin came along, Burke had been in leadership. When Fr Aidan Carroll met Ray first, “he was teaching RE in the CBS secondary school in James’s St. He subsequently transferred to Blackrock College. He did tell me that the staff there had told him not to be teaching about miracles *all the time*.”<sup>305</sup>

Fr Dermot Forkin then a newly ordained Spiritan priest joined the prayer group. Fr Carroll was suffering from fatigue at the time. “I thought he might be a help to relieve me a bit. Being younger I felt he would bring some fresh air to the group. So for a time I only came to the group about once a month.”<sup>306</sup> During this period Burke and Forkin attempted to direct the group in the direction of the MMM without Fr Carroll’s knowledge. Forkin subsequently joined the MMM and remained in Helidon till late 2004 when he returned to Ireland.<sup>307</sup> His current status vis-a-vis the MMM is unclear. A woman who met him on a bus challenged him about being in a cult, but he stood his ground.<sup>308</sup> Forkin is no longer a member of the Order.<sup>309</sup> He married in 2005.<sup>310</sup>

Fitzpatrick had ongoing rows with Burke about endorsing the MMM while Forkin was all in favour. Fitzpatrick was troubled in principle about approving of alleged visionaries, since the results of mistakes could be serious.<sup>311</sup> He states,

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<sup>304</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, op. cit.

<sup>305</sup> Fr A. Carroll, private communication with the author (September 1, 2005).

<sup>306</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, op. cit.

<sup>307</sup> Fr. F. O’Driscoll, Private telephone communication with author (February 13, 2005).

<sup>308</sup> Dialogue Ireland Briefing 4, (March 9, 2005).

<sup>309</sup> P. Palmer, Spiritan Provincial, private communication with author (July 25, 2005).

<sup>310</sup> W. Maggs, private communication with the author (June 6, 2005).

<sup>311</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, op. cit.

“Burke stubbornly insisted he found it easy to discern the genuine apparitions from the false ones. His criterion came across as simplistic – he believed that if an alleged visionary talked about love it was genuine ... I tried to point out to him that it would be easy for Satan to talk about love and besides he had no verification he had been right about any so called apparitions he thought were genuine. He accused me of being too critical and we got nowhere.”<sup>312</sup>

Fitzpatrick took his leadership responsibilities within the prayer group seriously. He asked his priest friend to telephone Fr Carroll the next day. Carroll realised how serious the threat to the prayer group was and consulted with Fitzpatrick about who was involved. He was angry that the MMM influence in the group had developed behind his back. Many of those who had partaken of the meal with Debra on Friday became aware of the implications of what they had done the next day. They recognised they had made a grave error. On the following Monday Fitzpatrick went to Convent to talk to Sr Alma who was in charge of the groups using the chapel. “She had been disturbed by the meeting the previous Friday. This was better than I could have hoped and I strengthened her discernment and resolve, and convinced her to kick them out the next day. She said she would let them have a final Tuesday, but that she would not let them back.”<sup>313</sup>

The core group, which reported to Fr Carroll, was the next step for Fitzpatrick. It was made up of himself, Burke and one other person. Fitzpatrick briefed this other person and an ex-leader, Maureen O’Dwyer, the next day. He agreed with them that when the issue came up at the next core group meeting they would let Burke talk as long as he liked, would not respond but would vote 2-1 to terminate their relationship with the MMM. It

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<sup>312</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, op. cit.

<sup>313</sup> *ibid.*

never came to a vote, yet the MMM was officially removed from their circle. Fr Carroll immediately rang Burke.

I told him I was unaware of what was happening and told him it would have to stop. After some dialogue it was abundantly clear to me that his mind was fixed. (It did not help that at this juncture, some senior Spiritans were involved in the MMM as well.) I can still remember clearly one remark made as the conversation came to an end. “Father, I am going to put my whole life on this.” That was not a surprise to me, because Ray put his whole soul into anything he really believed in. I told him he could no longer be a member, even less a leader of the group. As far as I recall he didn’t come to us anymore.<sup>314</sup>

Burke chose to stay with the MMM.<sup>315</sup>

#### 4.1.6 Growth

At this stage MMM-Ireland was growing vigorously. Debra was a regular visitor. The small reversal of losing the meeting at Marie Auxiliatrice Hostel was made up for by meetings at other venues like the International Mercy Centre on Baggot Street, the Disciples of the Divine Master at White’s Cross, Kimmage Manor, The Boylan Centre in Dun Laoghaire and the Dominican Priory, Tallaght.<sup>316</sup> Colm Fitzpatrick describes how Colm Dunne who had long since departed from the prayer group and who later went on to become a leader of the MMM became involved,

Dunne, now married in the MMM, first heard about the movement from Maureen and myself in the Banker’s club. His reaction was strange – we clearly told him of the weird aspects to the movement – all he would comment was “You’d think Ray would have checked it out”. He stuck to this comment all evening – no matter what information he was given. Both Maureen and I thought his

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<sup>314</sup> Fr A. Carroll, private communication with the author (September 1, 2005).

<sup>315</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, op. cit.

<sup>316</sup> MMM poster (ca 1996).



reaction strange at the time – without having an inclination of its tragic consequences for him later.<sup>317</sup>

Fiona Sheehan worked at Veritas, a Catholic bookshop in Dublin, and was a strong advocate for the MMM. Most of the core members of the MMM had no connection to the Medjugorje Prayer Group. Gradually the dialogue between the Ray Burke and his former friends from the Medjugorje Prayer Group broke down. Attempts to raise questions were treated as persecution, and old friendships were lost. Fitzpatrick tried to talk people out of the MMM. “I had some success with one or two – it became impossible to talk to Colm Dunne about it; it was impossible to talk to Ray about it from the start.”<sup>318</sup>

#### 4.1.7 The End of Dialogue

Maureen O’Dwyer, a person who did much to raise questions at the time when the MMM was at its peak in Ireland, received a significant letter from Burke in 1997.<sup>319</sup> Burke wrote,

It has come to my knowledge that you have been attacking the Magnificat Meal Movement and so I am taking the liberty of writing to you about the Movement. I do this since I am the person in Ireland who knows Debra best, having interviewed her over many days at Christmas and Easter and having witnessed many of her supernatural experiences.<sup>320</sup>

He continues: “I am writing to you as an old friend and I hope this letter will not damage this friendship. Please forgive the bluntness of some of my statements.” For Burke the truth is more important than friendship. One senses that the point of no return has been reached and this is the final expression of it: “I know that it is more important to be

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<sup>317</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, op. cit.

<sup>318</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, op. cit.

<sup>319</sup> R. Burke letter to M.O’Dwyer (June 8, 1997).

<sup>320</sup> *ibid.*

faithful to the truth than to worry about the opinions of others or the loss of their friendship.”<sup>321</sup> Burke continues, “In making judgements about mystics and their messages, as I am sure you already know the first criterion we should follow is that given by Our Lord Himself – the fruits.”<sup>322</sup> He argues that Debra’s fruit is impressive, by linking it to numerical growth rather than spiritual maturity. He cites the growth of the MMM over six years (1990-1996) to at least 38,000 groups worldwide. What, he asks, could generate such incredible fruit so quickly in these “end times”? “A housewife from Australia? Impossible. The devil?”<sup>323</sup> God or the Devil represent Burke’s touchstone. The Devil does not want Eucharistic adoration; therefore the Movement must be divine in origin. He does not advert to the third classical discernment category: the possibility of human manipulation. He consequently makes a leap of faith that deadens his critical faculties. Burke used Fr René Laurentin because he believed what Debra had said about Laurentin’s involvement.

A second criterion the Church offers us in making discernment on mystics and their messages is orthodoxy. Do you think that Fr. René Laurentin would have publicly joined the Magnificat Meal Movement – by becoming a Missionary of the Eucharist in front of a large crowd – if there were doctrinal problems in Debra’s messages? He is not a man to be easily fooled or deceived after so many years researching and studying visionaries and apparitions all over the world. Anyone who has read any of his over 150 books will know what a painstaking and extremely prudent and cautious researcher he is.<sup>324</sup>

He then proceeds to question the Bishop of Toowoomba’s inquisition of Debra and concludes with a point that would have had significance for Maureen O’Dwyer as a supporter of Medjugorje:

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<sup>321</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>322</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>323</sup> R. Burke letter to M.O’Dwyer *op. cit.*

<sup>324</sup> R. Burke letter to M.O’Dwyer *op. cit.*

Hasn't the history of Medjugorje and its bishop taught you to be even a little bit cautious in this regard? And don't forget that it was Vicka's message from Our Lady correcting the Bishop of Mostar that so infuriated the bishop and led him to persecute Medjugorje with such vehemence and intensity. I hope these thoughts will lead you to reflect a bit on what you are attacking when you attack Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement. Already a number of people have been surprised to learn that you are attacking the largest united body of Eucharistic adoration in the Catholic Church today.<sup>325</sup>

This letter and the reply from Maureen O'Dwyer gives a good insight into the thinking of the MMM at the time.<sup>326</sup> O'Dwyer points out that she has been aware that, "you and another member of the Magnificat Meal Movement have denounced me publicly and also a priest of the Dublin diocese, Fr Carroll."<sup>327</sup> She distinguishes between attacking the MMM and expressing reservations about the Movement. She did this in an appropriate manner by conveying her views to Burke's spiritual director, Fr Dermot Forkin.

I love Eucharistic Adoration but I find it difficult to believe that if I spend an hour adoring Jesus and you spend the same hour adoring Jesus, but under the name Magnificat Meal Movement, that Jesus will magnify your blessings a hundred fold more than the blessings He will give me.<sup>328</sup>

Another former member wrote in similar vein: "I went to these meetings on a Tuesday night in Lower Mount Street Youth Hostel where it was on each week. While there we were told that "to sit one hour in the Magnificat Meal Holy Hour, you have magnified one hour, ten times. (How can one hour be magnified ten times?)"<sup>329</sup> Tom Rochford another friend of Burke's wrote: "I can see very positive aspects in relation to its

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<sup>325</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>326</sup> M. O'Dwyer's reply to Burke (June 11, 1997).

<sup>327</sup> M. O'Dwyer's reply to Burke *op. cit.*

<sup>328</sup> M. O'Dwyer's reply to Burke *op. cit.*

<sup>329</sup> Interviewee A, *op. cit.*

commitment to Eucharistic Adoration but am unable to accept the claim that an hour under the title of the MMM is a hundred times more blessed than an hour in which the title is omitted.”<sup>330</sup> O’Dwyer also had grave reservations about the content of the messages and found it difficult to believe that Jesus would publicly identify and condemn bishops and priests in this way. “I also have difficulty believing that it is too late for devotions to the Sacred Heart and the Immaculate Heart as has been stated by Debra Geileskey in a talk given in Belfast.”<sup>331</sup> The impression seems to have been given that unless one is a member of the Magnificat Meal Movement one could not be saved. O’Dwyer also wrote to Bishop William Morris of Toowoomba and passed on his reply to Fr Forkin She asked him to ensure that all members of the Movement actually got a copy. “Fr Dermot told me himself that he is delighted that people care enough, and are concerned enough, to ask questions and I have no doubt that Jesus would not mind either.”

O’Dwyer also expressed grave reservations concerning Debra’s diaries.<sup>332</sup> She challenged Burke over misinformation. In conclusion she writes:

Ray, you are a teacher. I understand that Debra is also a teacher even though she and you often describe her as a mere housewife. I believe that housewives are very capable people and, regardless, of what position or profession we hold, we all have a responsibility to seek the truth and in seeking the truth people have to ask questions. You are all adults and are fully entitled to make up your own minds if you wish to join a Movement such as the MMM. That being said, if people have difficulties or concerns with a Movement or a group such as the MMM, they are fully entitled to express their fears. In fact, I believe that people have a duty to do so.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> T. Rochford, letter to R. Burke (June 28, 1997).

<sup>331</sup> M. O’Dwyer’s reply to Burke op. cit.

<sup>332</sup> These will be considered in the next chapter.

<sup>333</sup> M. O’Dwyer’s reply to Burke op. cit.

Finally she asks him to read out this letter at the meeting at which he denounced her. “I will be circulating copies of your letter and my reply to Fr Dermot and to other friends both in the MMM and outside the Movement. I know God will bless and look after you as you believe what you are doing is in good faith, and please accept that I, too, am acting in good faith.”<sup>334</sup>

In a letter to Ray Burke, also written in June 1997, Tom Rochford raised almost identical issues and responds to by now predictable claims that he was spreading false rumours about Debra and the MMM. He indicates some contradictions in a talk Debra gave in 1999: “we cannot look to the bishops now,” “God is not going to continue to use them” ... “Again, we must no longer look to the seers, the visionaries or the priests if we are to save the Church”. “Rochford says that openness he had to her claims evaporated totally when he heard her state in public that, “she was glad to state that her local bishop did not endorse her messages.”<sup>335</sup> He concludes with an insightful observation,

I do predict that the logical conclusion to all of Debra’s activity is that the MMM will be the exit door through which she will lead a large body of very sincere and prayerful outside the church. I do believe that most of the people who are members of the MMM are people who were already involved in Eucharistic Adoration. These would appear to be the group’s target for membership.<sup>336</sup>

The growth of the MMM continued, but a marked change of direction took place as a number of people like Burke moved to Australia. Claire Murphy from Bandon also sold her house and moved to Helidon. Others visited Helidon and began to have second thoughts. Interviewee B reported:

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<sup>334</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>335</sup> T. Rochford, letter to R. Burke *op. cit.*

<sup>336</sup> *ibid.*

As time went on I became a little uneasy with some of the developments in the movement. I was invited to Helidon by a friend, to help her discern, if being involved in the movement was correct and in line with the teachings of our Catholic Church. I accepted my friend's invitation, and arrived in Helidon in June 98. We were made most welcome.<sup>337</sup>

This person did not claim great insight: "I do not have any gifts of discernment. I am a leader in Prayer Groups, which have the approval of the Local Bishop, and are guided by a priest at all times. Obedience to the teaching of Our Holy Father is the Criteria for discernment."<sup>338</sup> However she was disappointed to find such obvious breaches of canon law in the following areas: "The Blessed Eucharist was being reserved at the Convent, with no permission from the Local Bishop. This one fact would leave me with no option but to move away from such a movement."<sup>339</sup> She continues: "Holy Mass was being offered without permission," and the strong emphasis on Adoration of the Eucharist, which had been the attraction to begin with, became focused on "Debra, and the messages ... I was a bit disappointed and on return to Ireland met with the leaders and explained what I felt was evident. This movement was no longer obedient to the teachings of our Church."<sup>340</sup> The evidence pointing to a heterodox turn continued to mount.

#### 4.1.8 Decline

John Ryan, the parish priest of Helidon, was on the *Today with Pat Kenny* radio programme on 24 August 1999.<sup>341</sup> A suicide scare had emerged which claimed that Debra was going to be burnt at the stake. (This was alluded to in the last chapter). Pat

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<sup>337</sup> Interviewee B op. cit.

<sup>338</sup> Interviewee B, private email communication (July 22, 2003).

<sup>339</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>340</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>341</sup> *Today with Pat Kenny* RTE Radio 1 Audio tape recording (August 24, 1999).

Kenny asked John Ryan if he believed in Debra's visions. Ryan's response was that he did not. She claimed that the bishop was going to move him and God was going to judge him. John Ryan was clear and direct and believed that Catholics were being totally deceived. Kenny then talked to Bridget Treacy from Waterford. She is one of the few Irish ex-members who is willing to speak up in public about the MMM. Most others feel that they were tricked and do not want to reveal their identity. She, like John Ryan, felt that the God Debra was now proclaiming was vengeful. She had condemned her former husband to hell, and libelled him publicly as having had a number of affairs including one with a Slave of the Eucharist.

At the end of 1996 Treacy had met Debra in Dublin and was attracted at first to her emphasis on Adoration of the Eucharist, so much so that she decided to go to Australia in 1997 and visited Helidon. She did this on two further occasions, but came to the conclusion that Debra was not all she appeared. She did find a great prayer life there, and she believed that most of the people there were genuine. She found that Debra was always asking for money, and that most people were afraid of her. But Treacy was not afraid to confront her about issues.

I told her to go to the priest and ask for forgiveness and to be in obedience to the church. There was no point in prayer without obedience to the priests and the bishop. I do not believe in her visions, and I believe pride has got in. Most of her friends who were involved have pulled away. This is not the way Jesus would have reacted.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> *Today with Pat Kenny* RTE Radio 1 Audio tape recording (August 24, 1999).

She explained that the Slaves of the Eucharist had taken a vow of celibacy, as had the married people involved. “This is not natural and no wonder there are questions about Gordon going off with another slave.”<sup>343</sup>

Concluding, John Ryan mentioned how many youths aged between eighteen and twenty-two had come to Helidon. “Now they did not think anymore, their personalities had become cramped and many were not physically well. He regarded them as being brainwashed and that they had handed their lives over to Debra.”<sup>344</sup>

#### 4.1.9 The Beginning of the End

The following year (2000) Debra was back in Ireland speaking in various venues including the Gresham Hotel. The day before she was to speak the front page of the Irish Catholic had a statement in large headlines from the Archbishop of Dublin. “Dr Connell warns against Marian group.” “The Archdiocese of Dublin has warned Catholics to stay away from the movement whose founder is currently in Ireland on a speaking tour. However, in a statement the archdiocese of Dublin said it supported the position of the Bishop of Toowoomba.”<sup>345</sup> There was also a leading editorial piece by David Quinn in which he reiterates the point made by Bishop Morris, that the MMM, is “not of God”. He also goes on to draw attention to an issue that was now coming to the fore, namely Debra’s rejection of the New Order of the Mass. This challenge was of a greater magnitude than the question of the authenticity of her messages. Quinn writes, “One of the tests of a visionary’s claims is whether or not they are in accord with the teachings of

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<sup>343</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>344</sup> *Today with Pat Kenny* RTE Radio 1 Audio tape recording (August 24, 1999).

<sup>345</sup> D. Quinn, *The Irish Catholic* (March 30, 2000).



the Church.” Whatever criticisms she makes of the New Mass, it certainly is not invalid. “By making such a claim Mrs Geileskey places her movement outside the Church and for this reason Catholics should be very wary of it.”<sup>346</sup>

This explains how Debra responded to the media with such equivocation the next day, Friday 31 March 2000. Her first appearance was on TV 3’s breakfast programme *Ireland AM* with Mark Cagney<sup>347</sup> and then on the radio programme *Today with Pat Kenny*.<sup>348</sup> She was very evasive in both interviews, and claimed she did not know what “politically correct” or “adherent meant”, which is interesting for someone who trained as a teacher. It was with some irony that in her talk in the evening she referred to herself as being “unpolitically correct.”<sup>349</sup>

Kenny asked Debra how she heard God and she replied that it was just like hearing him in the studio.<sup>350</sup> She advanced the thesis that being traditionalist is difficult in Australia, unlike in Ireland. Kenny asked whether they disrupted Masses and Debra found it difficult to answer directly.<sup>351</sup> He tried to get her to be clear about the causes of disputes between her movement and the Church. “Are you proponents of the Latin Mass for instance?”<sup>352</sup> Debra replied, “You know I may look old, but I am not old enough to know much Latin, so I don’t go to many Latin Masses, because I don’t understand them.”<sup>353</sup> Louis Hughes OP then joined the discussion. First he commented positively on the

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<sup>346</sup> D. Quinn, *The Irish Catholic* op. cit.

<sup>347</sup> Dialogue Ireland report on MMM meeting (Friday 31, March 2000).

<sup>348</sup> *Today with Pat Kenny* (Friday 31, March 2000).

<sup>349</sup> Dialogue Ireland report op. cit.

<sup>350</sup> *Today with Pat Kenny* (Friday 31, March 2000).

<sup>351</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>352</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>353</sup> *ibid.*

eneration of the Eucharist found in the MMM. He suggested that it was the key to understanding the interest of those in Ireland who got involved. Hughes said that Debra had not commented on the prophetic elements in her teaching, which had frightened off many who were formerly interested. Kenny asked for an example. Hughes spoke of a leaflet produced by Debra called *The True Mass*. “The time has now come to flee from the whore of Babylon where blasphemous masses are conducted. This means no participation in local masses where priests practise the abomination masses the bishops are insisting on now.”<sup>354</sup> Hughes added “I do not find that viewpoint very traditional Catholic or ecumenical to tell the truth.”<sup>355</sup>

Again Debra was asked a straight question and tried to deflect it by saying she received this message when she was in a context where the mass was not being said in the right way. Again Kenny asked her to spell out her position and made the point “that the ordinary Mass in Germany, Australia, England or Ireland is the same.”<sup>356</sup> Caught contradicting herself she refused to give a direct answer. She replied that along with the Pope that she wanted people to go to the Eastern Catholic and Roman Masses.<sup>357</sup> Asked “Does that mean that if I go to the ordinary Catholic Mass in my parish it is an abomination?”<sup>358</sup> She replied, “In all honesty I have no idea, I don’t go to your church, I just arrived from New York yesterday.”<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> *Today with Pat Kenny RTE* (Friday 31, March 2000).

<sup>355</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>356</sup> *Today with Pat Kenny RTE* (Friday 31, March 2000).

<sup>357</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>358</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>359</sup> *ibid.*

Kenny then asked if there was a misunderstanding and asked Louis Hughes for his opinion. “No, the particular leaflet I am referring to is attacking the whole post Vatican II Mass and in particular Pope Paul VI. This is not a Mass, but Paul’s sin. Debra’s position in fact is opposed across the board to the entire reforms of the Second Vatican Council.”<sup>360</sup> Kenny asked Debra if this was the case and she adroitly asked him, which of these points he was referring to. He outlined the points again. “You are opposed to the reforms of Vatican II and you believe the Mass of Paul VI is a sin?”<sup>361</sup> She replied: “I am not opposed to the reforms of Vatican II, but am opposed to anyone who leads us after Vatican II to positions that are their own interpretations of Vatican II, but are not in accord with the traditions of the Church’s teachings.”<sup>362</sup> Hughes interjected, “the person we would usually look to as a custodian of that tradition would be the Holy Father, and in this case Pope Paul VI, the predecessor of John Paul.”<sup>363</sup> Kenny then asked Debra, “Do you believe Paul VI led people into error?”<sup>364</sup> She replied,

I am not a theologian so people will have to look into studying that themselves. All I know is that last week when Pope John Paul II was in Jerusalem he said we should look to the Eastern traditional situation to renew the Church. We follow the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church.”<sup>365</sup>

Kenny asked Hughes for his response:

There is a certain lack of consistency and it contradicts the tenor of her leaflet. What Debra is now advocating is that if you are a baptised Catholic you should participate in the Eastern rite and stop going to your parish church wherever you are and seek out the Eastern rite and you will

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<sup>360</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>361</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>362</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>363</sup> *Today with Pat Kenny RTE* (Friday 31, March 2000).

<sup>364</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>365</sup> *ibid.*

find there the mass that was there before the second Vatican Council. That is the clear implication of the leaflet.<sup>366</sup>

Kenny asked her if that was right and she replied that the Church promotes the traditional Mass and the Eastern rite is part of that. “This priest Fr Hughes has obviously made his own presumption about it.”<sup>367</sup> “No” he interjected “I am reading from your own document.”<sup>368</sup> Kenny then asked whether “this group can do any harm?”<sup>369</sup> Hughes replied, “Families have brought to the attention of Dialogue Ireland very similar traits that can be found in other disturbing New Religious Movements namely, alienation from the family, certain lack of communication and personality change that would not be for the better.”<sup>370</sup> Hughes suggested that there seemed to be a certain amount of fear involved. The incident where Debra claimed she was going to be burnt at the stake was understood in Australia as a suicide attempt by the whole MMM community like what happened in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978. This resulted in a media frenzy as Debra exploited the situation for her own purposes. This naturally added to the concerns many Irish families already had about their family members.<sup>371</sup> Debra responded by addressing the issue of suicide first by blaming her ex-husband for the reports. She then came back to the issue of the Eucharist, which Hughes had raised. She claimed that it was all based on misunderstanding of what they were doing, simply praying the rosary and adoring the Eucharist. Hughes replied, “I would be very happy if that was all there was to it – praying the rosary and Adoration of the Eucharist. On that we can completely agree, but sadly,

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<sup>366</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>367</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>368</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>369</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>370</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>371</sup> *Today with Pat Kenny* (August 24, 1999).

unfortunately many Catholics have to disassociate themselves from this movement because of the other agendas.”<sup>372</sup>

The Gresham Hotel, Dublin, meeting on that same evening was significant in that it marked the end of her public appearances in Ireland.<sup>373</sup> “As you entered the Gresham Hotel you saw the notice: *Two Pillars for 2000 in Association with the Magnificat Meal Movement*. Note the change of name, perhaps in response to Desmond Connell’s statement.”<sup>374</sup>

On TV and Radio Debra came over with a sickly innocence, as if she was a bit naïve. The starting point for the evening was that John Paul II or as she referred to him, “JP2 is our Pope.” She did not use her usual strategy of attacking the local clergy, but piggybacked on the Pope to show her loyalty to him, and that the faithful are just not getting the full picture! Her second point was that true salvation can only be ours if we have the right Eucharistic practice and know the blessed mother. She made reference to a statement made by the Pope on May 2 1999 in which he is supposed to have warned the faithful to be aware of false bishops and clergy leading the church astray. She made a lot of references to the fact that we are in the end time.<sup>375</sup>

She claimed that the Pope was brought up in the Eastern Rite, and that he had said, “that the only hope for the Church lay in the Eastern and Melkite rite.” Fr Andrew Pyka, parish priest of Our Lady of Victories, Sallynoggin, is Polish and works among the Polish community in Dublin. He confirmed that the Pope did not grow up within the context of the Eastern Rite thus rendering Debra’s view unsustainable.<sup>376</sup> She then attacked those

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<sup>372</sup> *Today with Pat Kenny* (Friday 31, March 2000).

<sup>373</sup> Dialogue Ireland report op. cit.

<sup>374</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>375</sup> Dialogue Ireland report op. cit.

<sup>376</sup> A. Pyka, private telephone communication (April 15, 2005).

‘deranged people’ who oppose her. She lambasted anyone spending money on a holiday or making an improvement to his or her home.<sup>377</sup>

The following week David Quinn published an interview with Debra in the *Irish Catholic*. He put it to her that other self-professed visionaries, among them St Bernadette of Lourdes, agreed to examination so as to test the authenticity of their claims. She replied that Bishop Morris had put no such request to her. “Would she volunteer to have herself tested?”<sup>378</sup> “I won’t presume upon the bishop. I don’t talk about things that are in the future.”<sup>379</sup> He asked her about her relationship with Bishop Morris. Debra replied, “He won’t communicate with me.”<sup>380</sup> The facts are that Debra did not submit to the bishop and the issue was not in the future, but in the past as she had already received a negative judgement from Rome.

## 4.2 The MMM in Ireland 2000-2006

### 4.2.1 The Underground “Catholic” Church

The meetings in 2000 marked the end of Debra’s public ministry in Ireland; private or low-key meetings became the order of the day. The reason for this was that while Debra was extremely convincing when she focussed on adoration, as soon as she rejected the mass her membership here plummeted. Leo Durity used to send out a newsletter on her behalf to Irish members, which had a massive database.<sup>381</sup> Following Archbishop Connell’s statement and her appearance on the *Today with Pat Kenny* programme her

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<sup>377</sup> Dialogue Ireland report op. cit.

<sup>378</sup> D. Quinn, *The Irish Catholic* (April 6, 2000).

<sup>379</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>380</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>381</sup> L. Durity, private telephone communication (July 4, 2003).

support evaporated. No record of a visit in 2001 was found, but Debra came to Ireland in October 2002 from Israel with the Mansours. She had a meeting in Galway in the hostel owned by the Morgans who are members of the MMM.<sup>382</sup> Interestingly, Debra also got her new assistant, Claire Murphy from Bandon, to contact the researcher with a view to interviewing him concerning this research.<sup>383</sup>

#### 4.2.2 *Liveline* with Joe Duffy

2003 was the year that Debra became well known in Ireland. This was partly due to the fact that a deeply committed member, Pauline Hanly whose daughter, Nora aged fifteen, suffering from terminal leukaemia, was brought all the way to Helidon. Nora had been found unsuitable for a bone marrow transplant and doctors told the family she had only a short time to live. The sudden departure from the rural town of Roosky in Co. Roscommon prompted Pauline's sister Marilyn Patton to go public on the dangers of the MMM.

Nora needed three units of blood each week. The doctor didn't realise where she was going. They give her three units of blood and that lasts one week. She's deteriorating. She needs blood. I'm concerned for my niece – for my sick child. And I'm concerned the other two won't return to Ireland because they're in the clutch of Debra. The girl's distraught father, Patsy Hanly, emailed photos of his daughter to Australia in a desperate bid to find out if Nora is safe and well. He said he would fly to Australia immediately if he thought he would be able to see his daughter but he fears his wife is so controlled that he would not be allowed to see Nora. At least six other members of the cult have died after they ceased taking

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<sup>382</sup> Private telephone communication to the Morgans by author (November 2, 2002).

<sup>383</sup> Email from researcher (October, 12 2002,) "I would like to interview Debra and 3 Irish members about their involvement with the MMM as a significant movement in the area of Eucharistic and Marian devotion." Email from Claire Murphy, (November 2, 2002,) "Dr Antoine Mansour and Mrs Claire Mansour will be accompanying Sr. Debra myself and team to Our Blest Mother's Shrine of Knock. If you should wish to meet, interview or be interviewed then there is an opening in this location." Because of time constraints this meeting unfortunately did not take place.

medication for serious illnesses when Debra encouraged them to swap to herbal remedies she sells, according to former members of the cult.<sup>384</sup>

Her father did not know whether she was going there permanently and was thus placed in an invidious position. Patton who used to be very close to her sister gave an interview to Joe Duffy on *Liveline* on May 28, 2003.<sup>385</sup> She explained how they were so close, but since her sister had got involved with the MMM they had no communication. This interview produced a threat of legal action against *Liveline* from Debra, and in due course the programme received an invoice demanding payment for using her name, which was copyrighted. The following day Debra gave a full interview to Joe Duffy.<sup>386</sup> According to an Australian news report

Her reasons were probably two-fold: she wanted to assure Irish Catholics of the safety of a terminally ill teenager taken to her Helidon headquarters by her mother without her father's knowledge. The cult leader probably could not pass up the opportunity to advertise the fifteenth anniversary of the Magnificat Meal Movement, which will be celebrated today to coincide with her own fiftieth birthday.<sup>387</sup>

In a wide-ranging live interview Debra revealed the worldview she had created around herself and her followers and detailed some of the secretive inside workings of her movement. She claimed to have Vatican advisers and to be a multi-millionaire who had no need to ask for money. "With all the generosity of my friends I don't need to ask for a thing. But I would say (I'm) probably worth much more (than a few million) and any trouble I get, they send in more money."<sup>388</sup> She also portrayed herself as being a spiritual epicentre where priests and bishops from around the world sought counsel and where the sick came for healing. "With the large numbers (of people) that are here all the time –

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<sup>384</sup> A. Gearing, MMM feature *Courier-Mail* (15 June 2003).

<sup>385</sup> *Liveline* RTE Radio 1, Audio recording (May 28, 2003).

<sup>386</sup> *Liveline* RTE Radio 1, Audio recording (May 29, 2003).

<sup>387</sup> A. Gearing, MMM feature *Courier-Mail* (15 June 2003).

<sup>388</sup> *Liveline* (May 29, 2003).



priests coming backwards and forwards all the time – it’s very hard to really stop and have much communication with (a terminally ill girl) but I have said ‘hello’ and spoken to (the family) and we’ve prayed with the daughter.” She continued, “Our biggest financial supporters and donors and the most beautiful support from priests has always come from Ireland. We’ve always had very strong Irish support and I don’t think we’d have been able to function financially without them.” She explained that they were a Traditional Catholic movement and part of the parish of Helidon. She claimed there were plenty of Irish priests over there who supported her, and Joe informed her that Dermot Forkin’s order was about to remove him from their ranks as they had formed the opinion that her movement was contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church.”<sup>389</sup> Debra was then asked about her support in Ireland, and replied, “That her greatest financial support comes from Ireland.”<sup>390</sup> Joe then asked about the activities in the “compound”, to which he insistently referred throughout the interview. Joe then introduced Fr Tom Keegan, the Irish priest she had worked with from Toowoomba, and asked a few questions. Debra responded “God Bless you Father,”<sup>391</sup> but he reminded her that the last time they were in proximity she had put a curse on him when he asked her to leave his parish. He went on to assert that “she is lying to Joe.”<sup>392</sup> Listeners would have been surprised, or even shocked, to hear a Catholic priest from Australia call her a bitch, a liar, a deceiver of the faithful and to accuse her of putting a curse on him and his parish. He wouldn’t even have agreed to be interviewed if he had known Debra was to be speaking on the same

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<sup>389</sup> *Liveline* (May 29, 2003).

<sup>390</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>391</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>392</sup> *ibid.*

programme. “A bloomin’ b-i-t-c-h like Debra,”<sup>393</sup> he remonstrated. “She’s been telling you lies for the past few minutes. I would strongly advise the Irish people to break off any relations with Debra and the MMM.”<sup>394</sup> There is no connection between her group and the parish in Helidon Fr Keegan explained, contradicting Debra’s earlier claim.

Joe then spoke to Pauline Hanly who did not seem to have any problem in bringing her critically ill daughter to Australia.<sup>395</sup> She was vague about her relationship to the MMM, and finally broke off communication when Fr Keegan asked her if she had been to Mass yet since her arrival. Unfortunately her daughter Nora had to return to Ireland urgently and her father Patsy only got to see her for a few days before she died.<sup>396</sup>

Debra was also asked about her Mercedes Benz cars, but as usual deflected the question.

A later Australian news report revealed this.

Cult leader Debra Geileskey ... is believed to have \$3.5 million in property assets and a fleet of Mercedes-Benz cars. The former school teacher whose Magnificat Meal Movement headquarters are based at Helidon, 80 km west of Brisbane, also owns four Mercedes-Benz with matching number plates. Land title searches show she owns or part owns at least 20 properties, including homes, farms, offices, shops and units.<sup>397</sup>

Finally Joe asked the priest for his advice for the Irish people. He said, “It is a bogus organisation and no longer Catholic. Irish Catholics beware of cults, keep away from them.”<sup>398</sup> The implication of the programme was that Debra had made up the claims that she was in touch with the Vatican, and had many bishops and priests secretly coming to

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<sup>393</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>394</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>395</sup> T. Felle, “Cancer teen home from Aussie cult” *Evening Herald* (June 13, 2003).

<sup>396</sup> I. Hurley, “Death” *Evening Herald* (July 7, 2003). The MMM was at the centre of controversy recently when leukaemia sufferer Nora Hanly (15) was taken to the cult's camp in Australia by her mother Pauline. Mother and daughter returned to Ireland last month and Nora died at home in Kilrooskey, Co Roscommon last Thursday. She was buried at the weekend.

<sup>397</sup> D. Murray and A. Gearing, “Profitable visions” *Courier-Mail* (June 14, 2003).

<sup>398</sup> *Liveline* (May 29, 2003).

her.<sup>399</sup> Fr Keegan's intervention was tough, but it gave a vital insight into how this group had been able to win so many people over, as he was initially impressed himself.

An unintended result of the interview on *Liveline* was that I was able to bring a recording of the programme to Australia and to give a live interview from Australia to *Liveline* the following week.<sup>400</sup> This resulted in the local media revisiting the MMM. After the so-called suicide scare the group had gone underground and little reporting took place. I was unable to interview Debra or any of the Irish members; in fact I became the subject of a stalking allegation. Shortly after I returned to Ireland the news broke that a relation of the former Taoiseach had joined the movement.

A nephew of Charles Haughey shocked friends and family by selling his home and taking his family to join the movement. Niall Haughey – the son of the former Taoiseach's brother Sean – travelled with his wife Maria and their three young children to the camp in Helidon. Haughey, (42) closed down his insurance business and family home in Co. Tipperary before making the move in March.<sup>401</sup>

The author, who had been in Australia at the time, was interviewed by the *Evening Herald*,

They bitterly resisted his efforts to contact those inside the compound for an interview. I asked at the gates for an interview and said I would return on an hourly basis. It's like a compound. You are not allowed just walk in there. There are locked gates and security guards on a 24-hour basis. I did receive a letter from Debra in response to my requests for an interview saying that she would not see me, but she would pray for my research.<sup>402</sup> When I was continuing to deliver my letters into the compound, I saw her and she was only around five yards away from me. Her chauffeur told me that I could not take a photo of her. I did however take a shot of her Mercedes car – it's one of four in the compound. At another stage during

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<sup>399</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>400</sup> *Liveline* RTE Radio 1, Audio recording (June 5, 2003).

<sup>401</sup> L. Nolan, Haughey nephew sells home to join bizarre Australian cult *Sunday Irish Independent* (June 29, 2003). F. Thorne, "MMM" *Ireland On Sunday* (July 13 2003).

<sup>402</sup> Debra, private letter to author (June 6, 2003).

my trip over there, I happened to be at the local shopping centre and she was also there. It was a pure coincidence. I was informed that she had called the police to complain that I was stalking her. But I had not taken any pictures of her or made any attempt to actually talk to her on that occasion. He described Debra (50) as “dark-haired, plump middle-aged woman.”<sup>403</sup>

#### 4.2.3 Another Underground Visit

A former member of the MMM was invited to Salthill, Galway in October 2003 to attend a seminar led by Debra at the Tara Hostel owned by major MMM supporters in Ireland, the Morgans. Reporting on this private meeting he noted that the place was up for sale.<sup>404</sup> This was confirmed through a telephone call. It also emerged at the meeting that Debra was claiming that Bishop Magee of Cloyne “had been behind the murder of the previous pope and should be got rid of.”<sup>405</sup> She also claimed that her alleged advisers in the Vatican had delegated her to go on a special mission to Russia to represent the Pope, especially to the Orthodox. More importantly from a Catholic perspective she also informed attendees that anyone who participated in the new mass was not saved and did not have a soul.<sup>406</sup>

This former member (interviewee C) was so shocked at Debra’s appearance that he could not believe it was the same woman he had met in 1996. “She was overweight, and had very puffy features.”<sup>407</sup> I explained that I was less than five yards from her in June of that year and that is how she looks now. According to interviewee C, a trademark of Debra’s

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<sup>403</sup> I. Hurley, “Death,” op. cit.

<sup>404</sup> Witness C, Interviewee (October 28, 2003).

<sup>405</sup> Witness C, Interviewee op. cit.

<sup>406</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>407</sup> Witness C, Interviewee op. cit.

was the wearing of sunglasses at all times. Another hallmark was that no photographs were to be taken of her. He made an interesting comment about the fact that they do not hold first Saturdays for devotion any longer, but garden parties. “It has become party time, and the holiness once associated with the devotions had gone out the window.” He was very angry and wanted to call the police to stop them brainwashing these people. He mentioned that other than Debra the other members were just skin and bones. Fr Dermot Forkin celebrated the Mass using a mixture of Latin and English.<sup>408</sup>

At the meeting in Salthill Debra advocated Fatima Devotions and argued that the Church was hiding the Secrets of Fatima.<sup>409</sup> She explained that the conversion of Russia was the key to the victory of Catholicism, and that she was going to Russia to promote that. Attendees were also informed that the Morgans and the Gaffneys, some of her main supporters in Ireland, were selling up and going to Helidon since the end was near. Debra’s group then flew to Moscow to be a part of a Conference at the Mother of God Centre. The next day they were ejected from the conference.<sup>410</sup>

#### 4.2.4 Demands from Debra

This review of the history of MMM-Ireland would not be complete without mentioning that Debra threatened me with an Au\$5m stalking demand. It seems that she had patented her name and demanded Aus\$5m every time it was used publicly without permission. During the rest of 2003 and the first quarter of 2004 I received demands totalling \$210 million for using her name.<sup>411</sup> These demands were sent by a Mr Clampett, but I have heard nothing further about them. Others who received such demands were

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<sup>408</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>409</sup> Debra and C. Murphy, “Do penance, not Pleasure!” (Audio tape recording, October 2003).

<sup>410</sup> C. Mansour, private telephone communication with author (September 16, 2004).

<sup>411</sup> Letters were received by the author between (June 25, 2003 and February 26, 2004).

encouraged when the Australian Prime Minister's Office in Canberra rejected the legality of the putative state Debra was issuing demands from.

The Australian Government does not recognise the purported 'Commonwealth of Caledonia Australis' and therefore its Australian members are subject to the laws of Australia. While it is not appropriate for the Prime Minister to comment on private legal matters, I am able to relate to you the following general legal principles. Copyright is part of the law of intellectual property. It is not possible in Australian law for a person to copyright his or her own name. Copyright is a type of property that is founded on a person's creative skill or labour and is designed to prevent unauthorised use of others of work whose original form was an idea or information expressed by the creator. While the specific circumstances of a given situation must be considered, generally speaking none of the other forms of intellectual property will allow a person's natural name to be protected.<sup>412</sup>

#### 4.2.5 Departures and Arrivals

Many former members of the MMM began to speak, but generally off the record. In June 2004 a priest who had been with Debra suddenly arrived in Galway.

Some good news. I had a phone call this morning from Fr Frank McCabe. You can imagine my surprise. It was a very clear line. He was phoning from Galway! He was very confused as he said he was in Claregalway but was in fact in Salthill. Anyway, that is better than Australia. I confirmed this afternoon that he is physically in Claregalway. He sounded okay but the men there tell me he is not well physically. Of course at eighty-six years of age and being through what he has been through that is to be expected.<sup>413</sup>

In early 2004, the Haugheys' returned from Australia and Larissa Nolan from the *Sunday Independent* reported,

After 10 months with the cult – which has a number of Irish members due to its base in Catholicism – Niall Haughey and his family returned in January. He has since been living with his father at the family home in

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<sup>412</sup> J. Frydenberg, Senior Adviser to Australian PM, Private letter to W. Maggs (September 28, 2003).

<sup>413</sup> Email communication from F. O'Driscoll Subject: Fr Frank McCabe – MMM (Date: Sat, 26 Jun 2004 19:50:16) DI Briefing 5 (July 1, 2004).

Clontarf, Dublin, and it is believed his wife Maria and their three children are living with her parents.<sup>414</sup>

However, towards the end of that year more Irish families moved over permanently to Australia. Debra was back in Ireland for a month long visit in August and September 2004 accompanied by her personal assistant Claire Murphy; both of whom “had travelled first class and were bedecked in gold.”<sup>415</sup> It seems that Murphy has no intention of leaving the MMM. In fact she is even more with the group as Debra has given her a Mercedes-Benz car to use.<sup>416</sup> Murphy came home to her family in Bandon in Co. Cork, spending over a month in the area. Her mother Nellie Murphy had the feeling she was being observed by others while Claire was with her.<sup>417</sup> Just a few days before her departure for Australia while she was in another part of Ireland her mother asked her on the phone about a certain John Tonner, about whom she had been told. Claire got a terrible shock and phoned her brother to tell him that she had been married to Tonner since 2001. She thought her mother knew more than she did and she began a process of trying to prove how happily married she was for years. Mrs Murphy had the feeling that her “husband” was one of those following her when Claire was in town. John Tonner was the chauffeur I met with Debra in Helidon in 2003 at the security gate of the movement.<sup>418</sup> Claire Murphy had accused me of stalking her. It is surprising that her husband never confronted me if they were indeed married when I was in Australia? It subsequently became clear that the Mansours had heard directly from Debra that this

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<sup>414</sup> L. Nolan, “Haughey home after bizarre cult experience Down Under” *Sunday Independent* (Apr. 18, 2004).

<sup>415</sup> E. and L. Murphy in conversation with the author (Friday November 26, 2004).

<sup>416</sup> N. Murphy, Private telephone communication with author (October 28, 2003).

<sup>417</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>418</sup> Later on the only day I was in Toowoomba I saw them together in a shopping centre. See the Mercedes car Debra got into in appendix one.

marriage was for purposes of avoiding immigration controls and was in any case held in a registry office, hardly a fitting venue for a “traditional Catholic.”<sup>419</sup>

### 4.3 Conclusion

In these two chapters we have traced the chronological rise, decline and descent of a potentially noble aspiration as it played out in Australia and Ireland. The work of reconstruction was not easy and there are probably gaps and lacunae that only time will repair. Yet the events recorded here chronicle a spiritual drama, the interplay between divine aspirations and the subtle temptations that lead to spiritual demise. This historical reconstruction shows that an original and authentic orientation to the process of divine–human transformation, a formal object in the study of Christian spirituality according to Kees Waaijmann, lost its way, and a prayerful–contemplative dimension that originally showed promise, failed to fulfil the pledge of transformative truth.<sup>420</sup> The failure to move beyond the self interest and will to power of the foundress, the malfunction of ecclesial obedience, and the lack of self-diminution all contributed to I-centredness instead of the will of God and the in working of divine reality.<sup>421</sup> The MMM, instead of piloting a communal ownership of its resources for its divine mission, became a mythological animal predictably devouring its young.

The particularities of spirituality or spiritual movements do not appear in a vacuum, they manifest against a contextual horizon. By tracing the aims, origins and developments of the movement this horizon has been identified. Increasingly it became impossible to

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<sup>419</sup> C. Mansour, Private telephone communication (September 17, 2004).

<sup>420</sup> K. Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, op.cit. 599.

<sup>421</sup> *ibid.* 648.



distinguish the activities of the MMM from the personality and goals of Debra herself as the MMM reacted to the issues of the period in which it first developed and then declined.<sup>422</sup> The biographical evidence seems to suggest that a legitimate charismatic and spiritual impulse went astray. Moving from being an expanding spiritual alliance with a genuine devotion to the Eucharist, it has developed into a clearly *cultist NRM* with distinct dominator characteristics. The relational moment with its covenantal–partnership characteristics grounded in the imago-Dei motif is betrayed.<sup>423</sup> The ensuing refusal to submit to legitimate authority both in spiritual discernment and in financial terms has had predictable consequences. The rejection of the *Novus Ordo* Mass moved the MMM into open schism. The loss of Catholicity and the attempt to create an alternative reality, first with the Protestant Seventh Day Adventists, and then with both the Tridentine and Eastern Rites, has cast the movement adrift from its own spiritual origins. The result is an ungrounded spirituality that has abandoned its traditional devotional roots. The implications for dedication to God, the implications for liturgy and the inner fervency that characterises it, are sadly self-evident.<sup>424</sup>

People who were the most committed Catholics have left the Church they grew up in. Many are cut off from their families, and former friends. Many are ensnared and the future for the Irish members who have not moved to Australia is not clear. Here in Ireland there are many living in the shadows following their experience within this organisation. Some express relief and thanks for having escaped from its control; yet others appear to be in denial. This was a highly spiritual movement with a deep devotion

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<sup>422</sup> *ibid.* 651.

<sup>423</sup> K. Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, *op.cit* 446-454.

<sup>424</sup> *ibid.* 345-346.

to the Eucharist, which responded to a felt need in a cohort of Irish Catholics, and there was rapid growth as many flocked to this charismatic woman, Debra. There was intensity, a sense of belonging and an attraction to go to a small town in Australia where great things were allegedly happening. Even though the movement did not have Episcopal approval it had an attractiveness about it that drew many. Some found that gradually they began to pay a heavy price for involvement both spiritually and materially.

The real turning point and moment of discernment in Ireland was the public rejection of the New Order of the Mass by Debra. She seemed to surrender her spiritual power when she refused to accept legitimate authority and at the same time seemed to give in to material temptation. This resulted in serious allegations of spiritual abuse, fraud and the loss of freedom for many individuals and families. It is difficult to discuss her theology, as it seemed to be tailored to the moment or the audience, to more mundane concerns than authentic spirituality.

In the next chapter the theological, psychological and sociological disciplines will be employed to examine the conventional pieties and amateur theological elements of the MMM. Further, the MMM will be examined through the lenses of *cultism* and *cultist tendencies* to see how the MMM should be classified. However, the evidence already suggests that Debra, like a chameleon, changed her views to suit her context. Is the MMM in some sense a complex mix of audience cult for some, a client cult for others, and a cultist movement for the core membership?

**Chapter Five:**

**THE MMM A *CULTIST* NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT?**

## 5.1 Introduction

The reconstruction of the history of the MMM in the previous two chapters indicates that it shows some key characteristics of audience cults (people who come to listen to talks, receive newsletters and audio and video tapes) and client cults (where some of the practices associated with therapy and counselling are used). This chapter is concerned with a question of evaluation: to what extent were cultist techniques employed within the MMM? Is the MMM a *cultist movement* in the full sense? Saliba's interdisciplinary use of theology,<sup>425</sup> psychology<sup>426</sup> and sociology<sup>427</sup> will ground this evaluative process.<sup>428</sup> The criteria identified in Chapter One will now be applied more critically to the MMM, and material identified in Chapters Two and Three will be used to chart the evolution of the *cultist mentality* in the Movement. Magg's journey from enthusiastic participant in the MMM in 1998 to his emergence as an "ex-cult" member in 1999 will serve as the primary case study.<sup>429</sup> His published works provide a comprehensive account of the MMM in 1998 and 1999 and its progression from Catholic Movement to *cultist NRM*.<sup>430</sup> Another source for this chapter is Fr Daniel Couture of the Society of St Pius X. His account is found in that Society's *Newsletter of the District of Asia*.<sup>431</sup>

### 5.1.1 Theology: Conventional Pieties and Enthusiastic Spirituality

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<sup>425</sup> J. A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* op.cit. 2-11, 203-239.

<sup>426</sup> J. A. Saliba, 7-10, 75-126.

<sup>427</sup> J. A. Saliba, 10-11, 127-164.

<sup>428</sup> J. A. Saliba, 165-202.

<sup>429</sup> W. Maggs, *Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* op.cit ,W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit.

<sup>430</sup> Further interviews with Maggs in 2002-2006 and further documentation from him provide a more complete picture.

<sup>431</sup> D. Couture, "The Magnificat Meal Movement - an Assessment," *Newsletter of the District of Asia Society of St Pius X* (Jan-Jun 2001).

This first section will evaluate the theological and spiritual concepts, practices and pieties characteristic of the MMM. Debra's spirituality will be examined. Traditionalism will be critically surfaced. The core Eucharistic and Marian pieties will be evaluated and the question of unorthodox categories of thought and practice will be explored.

### 5.1.2 Debra's Spirituality

Debra's claims of childhood visions already alluded to in Chapter Three seem to have had a shaping and moulding influence on her emerging spirituality. They form the basis of her claims of spiritual authority in the movement. She had a charismatic personality and ability to project her message in a way that won many members to the MMM as noted by Maggs when he was a member. Maggs paints a powerful word picture of this aspect of Debra's personality.

The wonderful thing, of course, in Debra's case is that she has grown up, as it were, in such a climate of spiritual phenomena. She has not been overwhelmed by these prodigies, although she often prefers to hide them. They did not come on her all at once. From the age of seven she has seen angels. From the age of seventeen she has had visions of Mary, the Mother of God. It was this growing familiarity with the supernatural that prepared her for the later awe-inspiring array of messages and visions as found in the Diaries. She was not totally overwhelmed by the experience of speaking with God and speaking with Him in such intimacy. Yet even with such training, after visions recently of the Mother of God, Debra was obviously in a state of heightened emotion and joy. She spoke to those assembled in the Oratory at the Shrine at the time, after the Mother of God had appeared, and I recall how she was beaming with such happiness when asked to recount what Our Lady had told her. She dwelt rather on the beautiful smile of the Mother of God and said how she wished we could all see that smile, how we would remember it always, and how it would strengthen us in times of trials.<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> W. Maggs, *Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* op.cit 13-14. See photograph of Debra in the Oratory in appendix one.

The contesting of these visionary claims and the spiritual authority implied quickly arose.<sup>433</sup> Those close to Debra did not perceive the unfolding of her spiritual experience.<sup>434</sup> The failure of the real estate business which led her into the charismatic movement is seen as a suggestive crisis point<sup>435</sup> It is in the aftermath of this failure that visions come to the fore and are recorded in her diaries, which purport to trace these developments.<sup>436</sup> According to Maggs, while Debra's diaries contain some beautiful reflections they have little to do with the actual events as they occurred.<sup>437</sup> Be that as it may they do represent her version of events and are germane to the debate.<sup>438</sup> What is of particular interest here is the fact that having taken over the concept of the Magnificat Meal Movement, she then moved her fledgling organisation to Toowoomba, an area where she was unknown and could not be readily identified.<sup>439</sup> The implications are not far to seek.

#### 5.1.2.1 Signs and Wonders: Healings and Thaumaturgical Powers

It is important to note that the traditional basis for spiritual authority claims in the pre-Reformation Church, especially for those outside the clerical or male monastic state, is grounded in spiritual experience. Dreams and visions, extraordinary charisms, signs and wonders and the like are used as evidence of significant spiritual experience and divine

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<sup>433</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 123.

<sup>434</sup> C. Griffith, art. "But who exactly is Geileskey?" op.cit.

<sup>435</sup> C. Griffith, art. "But who exactly is Geileskey?" op.cit.

<sup>436</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>437</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 122.

<sup>438</sup> D. Geileskey, *What God might say to me today...in Australia, Diary 5* op.cit.

D. Geileskey, *What God might say to me today...in Australia, Diary 6* op.cit. D. Geileskey, *What God might say to me today...in Australia, Diary 7* op.cit. D. Geileskey, *What God might say to me today...in Australia, Diary 8* (Kew, Australia, 1st Edition 1996).

<sup>439</sup> C. Griffith, art. "But who exactly is Geileskey?" op.cit.

inspiration. Echoes of this tradition are visible in Wal Magg's treatment of Debra's visionary and healing experiences and claims. The case of the young Irish girl suffering from terminal leukaemia is a rather poignant example.<sup>440</sup> Unfortunately, the story does not end well. Local social workers had to intervene and arrange blood transfusions. Sadly, the young girl died soon after returning to Ireland.<sup>441</sup>

#### 5.1.2.2 Biblical and Prophetic Piety

At the start of her work Debra showed a deep love of scripture and had an ability to make it come alive to her members. Maggs' initial evaluation of this is positive. "There is the growth in love of the Sacred Scripture. Members are introduced to the Bible and develop a real love for Sacred Scripture. This is considered by spiritual writers as a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit in people's lives."<sup>442</sup> He continues,

Debra has not been trained in public speaking, yet she exhibits an incredible and most satisfying flow of language and use of Sacred Scripture. When you listen to her she seems sometimes to have handed herself over to *Another*, who then speaks through her. On some occasions, too, she has spoken on matters, directly theological and scriptural, and her knowledge is uncanny. Where does she get this knowledge? You find yourself asking. The answer, I believe, is that the knowledge is directly infused by God.<sup>443</sup>

He subsequently came to a very different conclusion.

Debra's use of scripture bears close examination. Remember she used scripture in a polemical way: taken out of context, and skewed her way, to convince her followers of her peculiar point of view. She emotionalised scripture. In her diaries her use of scripture is very fundamentalist, with her interpretation of passages more Protestant than Catholic. It could be argued that her contact with the charismatic renewal gave her a false sense

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<sup>440</sup> *Liveline* RTE Radio 1, Audio recording (May 28, 2003).

<sup>441</sup> A. Gearing, MMM feature *Courier-Mail* (15 June 2003).

<sup>442</sup> W. Maggs, *Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* op.cit. 2-3.

<sup>443</sup> *ibid.* 12-13.

of freedom in the use of scripture, at least according to the Catholic viewpoint.<sup>444</sup>

Maggs concluded that Debra was a ‘renegade’ from the beginning, using scripture to further her own ends.<sup>445</sup>

According to Maggs, Debra did not seem to manifest a prophetic gift earlier in her life.<sup>446</sup>

Her diaries purport to make prophetic predictions that speak to our current context.

Maggs rejects this by illustrating twenty categories of false prophecies with examples.<sup>447</sup>

One example that concerns Australia will suffice,

Debra predicted that Australia would be invaded from the north. In Diary 8, 19th May 1996, Debra said she had this message from Jesus. “*O Australia, you have already been invaded from the north. Your northern foe is on your soil and still your people do nothing, but live in a false peace.*” She continued this message, with Jesus saying that, “*the freemasons of the Antichrist New World Order know this and plan to crush the spirit of your land (i.e. Australia) under the obscenity of an atrocious war of great animalistic abuse.*”<sup>448</sup>

As Debra’s secular activity increased her prophetic gift seemed to diminish. This period, characterised by the purchase of cars and real estate, also marks the movement’s gradual isolation. Unfortunately, there were young people growing up in the community, children of the first enthusiastic converts, who knew nothing other than the MMM and were cut off from the Catholic sacraments in eclectic rites developed outside of orthodox Catholic doctrine and practice.<sup>449</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> W. Maggs, Private email communication (October 1, 2003).

<sup>445</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>446</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 123.

<sup>447</sup> *ibid.* 135-145.

<sup>448</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 135-6.

<sup>449</sup> *ibid.* 85.



### 5.1.3 Traditionalism

Traditionalism, which serves as an originating devotional context, serves as a principal lens for evaluating the MMM. According to William Dinges,<sup>450</sup>

While the confrontation between traditionalist Catholics and the Magisterium has often been portrayed ...as a nostalgic campaign to save the “old Mass,”... the nature of the conflict is in fact both more complex and profound, challenging both the meaning and validity of the Second Vatican Council itself and, ultimately, the power and authority to define Catholic identity and lay claim to the “true Church.”

Debra supported and enthusiastically encouraged the traditional devotions, which were displaced by the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. According to Dinges, “Catholicism’s troubled encounter with modernity has spawned movements and ideological orientations closely paralleling those associated with Protestant fundamentalist reactions to the modern world.”<sup>451</sup> The MMM appears to be an example of this reactive phenomenon.

Unlike others who wanted to retain the Latin Mass,<sup>452</sup> Debra at first situated her views about Adoration of the Eucharist and Veneration of Our Lady within the reforms of Vatican II. She was initially seen as part of the renewal movement combining charismatic tendencies and traditional devotions with a folksy housewife’s spirituality. In the early days the MMM could be seen to represent a fundamentalist *tendency* and was genuinely trying to conserve Catholic tradition. According to Dinges, it is necessary to distinguish between

a fundamentalist *orientation* – which may be a latent ethos in any

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<sup>450</sup> W.Dinges, Roman Catholic Traditionalism in the United States, in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, edited by M. E. Marty and R. S. Appleby (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991) 66-101.

<sup>451</sup> W.Dinges, Roman Catholic Traditionalism in the United States op.cit. 66.

<sup>452</sup> *ibid.* 67.

religious tradition – and a separatist fundamentalist *movement*. Fundamentalist orientations do not mean, ipso facto, fundamentalist movements. It is the latter, not the former, that have the more serious sociocultural implications both in the area of public policy and within the development of specific religious traditions themselves.<sup>453</sup>

Dinges is of the view that traditionalist and conservative Catholics share many ideological affinities especially “a cognitive defiance of many aspects of modernity, fears of internal threat and subversion, the tendency to view liberal or progressive Catholics as modernists working to destroy the faith.” He continues,

Both conservative and traditionalist Catholics also favour right-wing political agendas, ethical rigorism, and the maintenance of strict boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Conservatism, however, is a valuable and necessary component in all religion. ... Authentic conservatism resists fads and too-quick adoption. It seeks to conserve the Church’s historical discipline and orthodoxy. It does so, however, while respecting the Church’s necessity to change and adapt.<sup>454</sup>

However, as the MMM turned in on itself it began to demonstrate potentially fundamentalist traits, certainly aspects of the anti-authoritarian turn of Australian religion at the time. According to Dinges, traditionalism as a fundamentalist phenomenon “is a more radicalized orientation.” It petrifies doctrines, disciplines, and modes of religious identity “while seeking to monopolize the entire religious economy.”<sup>455</sup> Such a developmental process is observable in the evolution of the MMM.

Catholic traditionalism did not begin as a discrete movement, but emerged out of, not independently from, conservative Catholic discontent. Traditionalists should not, therefore, be seen as a fringe element of antiquarian malcontents but rather as a “hard” expression of religious orientations that were already present in the Catholic right. Fundamentalism may thus be more properly viewed as a highly radicalized and deviant form of conservatism rather than as a genetically distinct religious orientation – suggesting the aptness of Harry Emerson Fosdick’s observation that fundamentalists are really “mad

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<sup>453</sup> W.Dinges, *Roman Catholic Traditionalism in the United States* op.cit. 99-100.

<sup>454</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>455</sup> W.Dinges, *Roman Catholic Traditionalism in the United States* op.cit. 100.

conservatives.”<sup>456</sup>

The history of the MMM offers a contextual example of such a process. Not surprisingly, following a rejection of her works by Rome, Debra increasingly distanced herself from the Church and the local bishop.<sup>457</sup> Her position is accurately described by Dinges again, “[w]ithin this elitist–exclusivistic framework a doctrine of double-election is at work: Catholicism is the one true religion; traditionalists are the only true Catholics.”<sup>458</sup> In relation to the MMM this trait becomes rapidly evident.

#### 5.1.4 Eucharistic and Marian Devotion

While the MMM was from the beginning a conservative movement, it was also open to Protestants and members of other religious traditions. In fact one of Debra’s diaries has a foreword by an Anglican,<sup>459</sup> and a quotation from the Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsay.<sup>460</sup> Her diaries are suffused with the ecumenical spirit of Vatican II while she makes use of a variety of Protestant translations of the bible.<sup>461</sup> It seems that Debra showed no interest in the traditionalist agenda until she ran into difficulties with Church authorities. Her diaries up to 1999 are so filled with this spirit that her abrupt change of direction makes it difficult to reconcile her rejectionist stance with her earlier writings. Fr Couture of the Society of Pius X gives numerous examples of these contradictions after

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<sup>456</sup> *ibid.*101.

<sup>457</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 5.

<sup>458</sup> W.Dinges, *Roman Catholic Traditionalism in the United States* op.cit. 95.

<sup>459</sup> D. Geileskey, *What God might say to me today...in Australia Diary 5* op.cit. 4.

<sup>460</sup> *ibid.*2.

<sup>461</sup> D. Geileskey, *What God might say to me today...in Australia Diary 8* op.cit. 302.

she sent her members to receive communion from the Tridentine rite.<sup>462</sup> His conclusion is remarkably astute in identifying Debra's 'Protestant' turn,

More could be found and said regarding the MMM. Suffice it to say that, with the study made so far, there are enough proofs to conclude that the Magnificat Meal Movement cannot come from God. Moreover it certainly leads to Protestantism by its Protestant approach to the Bible, to the Holy Eucharist, and by by-passing the submission to the Holy Catholic Church.<sup>463</sup>

Debra turned against the Church of whose Eucharistic sacrament she claimed to be the chief defender. This change of direction represents a form of resistance, but it may also represent an idiosyncratic turn towards another form of standardisation and uniformity. According to Thomas Grenham the tendency towards standardisation and uniformity has a history in the Church dating back to the Council of Trent.<sup>464</sup> "Such standardisation of Catholic Christian theology and practices was meant to safeguard its own ecclesial identity against the advancing Protestant reform movement."<sup>465</sup> In effect, Debra uses a Church process to resist the Church. Again, echoes of the prevailing Australian anti-authoritarianism in things spiritual seem to be present.<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> D. Couture, "The Magnificat Meal Movement - an Assessment," *Newsletter of the District of Asia Society of St Pius X* (Jan-Jun 2001) 1.

<sup>463</sup> *ibid.* 22.

<sup>464</sup> T. G. Grenham, *The Unknown God: Religious and Theological Interculturation* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005) 32.

<sup>465</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>466</sup> See Wu Bao, An analysis of Anti-Authoritarianism of Australians-

[http://asc.ruc.edu.cn/EN/abstract/research\\_wb.htm](http://asc.ruc.edu.cn/EN/abstract/research_wb.htm) (accessed September 15, 2006).

See also Rachael Kohn, *The Spirit of Things: Reenchanted Australia: A Conversation with David Tacey*

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/spirit/stories/s101767.htm> (accessed September 15, 2006).

See also Legislative Assembly for ACT: 2003 Week 3 Hansard 972.

<http://www.hansard.act.gov.au/HANSARD/2003/week03/972.htm> (accessed September 20, 2006).

In effect Debra appears to be using a similar process to advance the interests of the MMM in her stand against the Church.<sup>467</sup>

Rather than the open approach of her earlier period, her presentation of the faith is now “packaged within one cultural form,”<sup>468</sup> but one of her own choosing. She joins those who claim that Vatican II was influenced by Protestants and had undermined the Council of Trent while engaging in a Protestant turn. This places her dalliance with Adventism in an interesting light. Something similar may be said about the turn towards Eastern Orthodox liturgy. Dinges makes the succinct point that “[i]ronically, the prohibition of the Tridentine Mass after 1971 also transformed the core symbol of Catholic corporate unity and mystery into a sign of dissent and resistance not only to the reforms of the Council, but to the Church’s own authority structure.”<sup>469</sup> According to Maggs this change of direction is clearly present in Debra’s latest position that only Masses celebrated according to the Tridentine rite and Eastern rites are valid. He explains,

Debra invites us to find out the facts. Thus, according to Debra, Masses which follow the *Novus Ordo* of Paul VI are invalid. In a command sentence she says: “Obey the TRUE CATHOLIC CHURCH and stop going to *Novus Ordo* Masses.”<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> See Wu Bao, An analysis of Anti-Authoritarianism of Australians-

[http://asc.ruc.edu.cn/EN/abstract/research\\_wb.htm](http://asc.ruc.edu.cn/EN/abstract/research_wb.htm) (accessed September 15, 2006).

See also Rachael Kohn, The Spirit of Things: Reenchanted Australia: A Conversation with David Tacey <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/spirit/stories/s101767.htm> (accessed September 15, 2006).

See also Legislative Assembly for ACT: 2003 Week 3 Hansard 972.

<http://www.hansard.act.gov.au/HANSARD/2003/week03/972.htm> (accessed September 20, 2006).

<sup>468</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>469</sup> W. Dinges, Roman Catholic Traditionalism in the United States *op.cit.* 95.

<sup>470</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* *op.cit.* 64.

She seems to be of the view that the Antichrist had taken over the Church, substituted the true Mass with “the horrible sacrilege” of “man himself, exalted, and replacing Me at My altars.”<sup>471</sup>

According to Maggs, the Catholic Mass is a humanly created counterfeit served by priests who were apostates:

[t]he Church will be saved by the MMM, ‘an adoring and obedient remnant’, which we assume is the *true Catholic Church* referred to above. After this, it appears, will come the Antichrist’s reign ‘and the fire of My wrath will fall from heaven’. We would be justified in concluding from this, that Debra believes that her own private reading list and her private revelation (supposed message from Our Lady of (September 9, 1999) overrules the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, and the Instructions of Paul VI on modern reforms to the Mass. She believes, in other words...that her opinion is superior to Church Councils and papal pronouncements.<sup>472</sup>

Note the claim that the MMM is the movement to save the Church. In effect, the Tridentine rite becomes the dividing line between the MMM and an unfaithful Church.

What Dinges writes about this phenomenon is apt:

Holding to the Tridentine rite or accepting the *Novus Ordo* was the dividing line between themselves and the “apostate” Church...who affiliated with the religion of the beast... The controversy over the new Mass in particular came to play an analogous role to the *evolution* controversy in Protestant fundamentalism; for traditionalist Catholics, the *Novus Ordo* Mass became the pre-eminent symbol of modernist inroads into the Church and a concrete and powerful issue around which to mobilize an anticonciliar movement.<sup>473</sup>

The MMM’s rejection of the New Order of the Mass was based on the view that the Catholic Church was influenced by Protestantism and Masonry. However, Dinges

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<sup>471</sup> *ibid.* 64-5.

<sup>472</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 65.

<sup>473</sup> W.Dinges, *Roman Catholic Traditionalism in the United States*, op.cit. 84-85.

identifies the widespread use of such claims in the traditionalist repertoire.<sup>474</sup> At the same time, Debra's involvement with the Seventh Day Adventists represents an incongruent tangential stance.<sup>475</sup>

Fr Couture also identifies the contradiction Louis Hughes had raised with Debra in an interview with Pat Kenny.<sup>476</sup> According to Couture, on June 19<sup>th</sup> 1999, the Blessed Mother allegedly gave Debra the following message,

O grieved is my heart when the Body of Christ was torn from the Sacred Mass at the command of the 'Novus Ordo.' Adore the truly consecrated Sacred Sacrament. Too many adore the Bread unconsecrated due to the horrible sin of so many priests and false priests. Heaven can remain silent about this atrocious sin against the Mass no longer. This is not a Mass but Paul's sin. And my Divine Son's Body is not present. I am crying for my betrayed and starving children.<sup>477</sup>

Couture makes the point that in 1999, "all of a sudden, the followers of the MMM are told that the *Novus Ordo* is invalid. There is a big problem now."<sup>478</sup> Couture has outlined pages of material that establish that the MMM had been quite happy using the *Novus Ordo* Mass prior to 1999. Furthermore,

Ray Burke who wrote the booklet *Debra and the Eucharist*, says on its first page that the first Magnificat Meal Movement group of adoration was started in Melbourne, Australia, in October 1990. And in six years, it had 38,000 groups in seventy countries!<sup>479</sup>

The same Ray Burke who was later to be ordained a bishop by Debra wrote in very supportive terms about the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the New Mass, and quotes

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<sup>474</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 188-9.

<sup>475</sup> W.Dinges, *Roman Catholic Traditionalism in the United States*, op.cit. 90.

<sup>476</sup> *Today with Pat Kenny* RTE op.cit. (Friday 31, March 2000).

<sup>477</sup> D. Couture, "The Magnificat Meal Movement – an Assessment," op.cit.18.

<sup>478</sup> D. Couture, "The Magnificat Meal Movement – an Assessment," op.cit.18.

<sup>479</sup> *ibid.*

Paul VI favourably in a book he published in 1996.<sup>480</sup> This is ironic in light of the following quotation by Couture,

These are groups who were very active around the Holy Eucharist. Now, all of a sudden, the Message of June 19th 1999 says that “Heaven can remain silent about this atrocious sin against the Mass no longer. This is not a Mass but Paul’s sin.” By referring to Pope Paul VI directly, it is referring to 1969, and not to some abuse that would have taken place in the last few years. “And my Divine Son’s Body is not present...” “But My remnant Movement will bring forth a small obedient flock who will not adore the horrible sacrilege of man himself on my altars.”<sup>481</sup>

Couture logically points out that the whole Eucharistic life based on the New Mass and the New Liturgy is completely shattered. But the messages themselves said to go and adore. Couture notes, “[w]hen confronted with this objection, some followers of Debra told me that the New Mass was now invalid because Heaven had finally decided so in another message (which I don’t have).” Where, he asks, is the Catholic Doctrine on the sacraments in all this? It all becomes very arbitrary.<sup>482</sup> Against the background of this debate it is interesting to note the significance of a visionary locution that Debra allegedly received as early as 1987, prior to the founding of the MMM and twelve years before the turn away from the new liturgy.

There will be a time very soon...when...they will at that time remove Me from My Tabernacle and Thrones... The Mass will be altered and in many places terminated, leaving echoing barns with wordy ceremonies in the place of My Sanctuaries”. Meanwhile, the MMM will be founded “across all nations to rectify the neglect of Me as fully God, alive with you in the Eucharist.”<sup>483</sup>

Is this an unconscious precognition or hint of things to come?

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<sup>480</sup> D. Burke, *The Two Pillars* (Cork: Kolbe Ltd., 1996) 141, 143.

<sup>481</sup> D. Couture, “The Magnificat Meal Movement - an Assessment op.cit. 18.

<sup>482</sup> D. Couture, “The Magnificat Meal Movement - an Assessment op.cit. 18.

<sup>483</sup> *ibid.*



Within what used to be called the maximalist / minimalist debate concerning Mary in relation to salvation Debra is strongly on the side of the maximalists. According to René Laurentin, in the former the “BVM is an intermediary set up between Christ and ourselves, to pass on for us what we send to him and back to us in return the graces given by Christ. Mary is made into an instrumental cause in the strict sense and into a universal instrumental cause.”<sup>484</sup> The minimalist view, “tends to reduce the part of Mary purely and simply to one of intercession.”<sup>485</sup>

Despite Debra’s strong Protestant biblical orientation, which should have led her to a minimalist position, Debra evinced extremely maximalist categories of Mary, which viewed Our Lady as visiting those who rejected her view of the doctrine of Co-Redemption with end time judgements. One of the problems with maximalism is the ease with which the orthodoxy/heterodoxy boundary is crossed. Debra clearly falls into this trap. It is as if Mary becomes the ‘fourth’ member of the Trinity and takes on or parallels Jesus’ role of end time judge. Debra’s position compares unfavourably with the process of reflection evident in the ecumenical dialogue reported in the ARCIC documents and especially *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*. This document affirms that there can be “but one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, and reject any interpretation of the role of Mary which obscures this affirmation.”<sup>486</sup> It concludes that, “Christian understanding of Mary is inseparably linked with the doctrines of Christ and the Church.”<sup>487</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> R. Laurentin, *Mary's place in the Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 1965) 60.

<sup>485</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>486</sup> Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) [http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/arcic/doc/e\\_arcic\\_mary.html](http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/arcic/doc/e_arcic_mary.html) (accessed May 10, 2006) 30.

<sup>487</sup> *ibid.*

Furthermore, “[w]e agree in recognising the grace and unique vocation of Mary, Mother of God Incarnate (Theotókos).”<sup>488</sup>

This is totally in line with *Lumen Gentium* 60-62, On the Blessed Virgin and the Church

There is but one Mediator as we know from the words of the apostle, “for there is one God and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself redemption for all”. The maternal duty of Mary toward men in no wise obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows His power. For all the salvific influence of the Blessed Virgin on men originates, not from some inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure.<sup>489</sup>

Pope Paul VI published an Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis Cultus* (1974), soon after the Council. His intention was to face the “unanticipated decline in devotion to Mary, to remove doubts about the Council’s intentions and to foster appropriate Marian devotion.”<sup>490</sup> It was the renewal of Mariological reflection at Vatican II that led to the accusations of Protestant infiltration and the extreme of maximalism of the traditionalists. Laurentin sums up the balance that was struck at Vatican II. He states that “the ‘central peak’ of Marian devotion will be found somewhere between the opposite extremes of Mariocentricity and Mariophobia. It will be Christocentric, according to the constant tradition of the Church.”<sup>491</sup> These words of Pope Paul VI sum up the focus of the document,

The development, desired by us, of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary is an indication of the Church’s genuine piety. This devotion...is rightly called “Christian,” because it takes its origin and effectiveness from

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<sup>488</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>489</sup> LG 60 [http://www.vatican.net/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.net/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html) (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>490</sup> Anglican - Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) [http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/arcic/doc/e\\_arcic\\_mary.html](http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/arcic/doc/e_arcic_mary.html) (accessed May 10, 2006) 43.

<sup>491</sup> R. Laurentin, *Mary's place in the Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 1965) 106.

Christ, finds its complete expression in Christ, and leads through Christ in the Spirit to the Father.<sup>492</sup>

Edward Schillebeeckx who significantly, like Laurentin, was an influential writer on Mary before the Council<sup>493</sup> was present at it. Nearly forty years later he reflected on the Council and on what he saw as a concise Mariology in the final chapter of the Constitution on the Church which represented a “middle way” between Mariological minimalism and maximalism<sup>494</sup> He describes the context, in which the Council met,

On the advice of many theologians the majority of the council fathers wanted to have a mariological ‘moratorium’, a kind of cooling-off process. ... People said that Marian theology was being overdone by more and more ‘mariologists’ who wanted a kind of independent Marian dogmatics. The desire of some bishops to see a new dogma proclaimed by this council relating to Mary as Co-Redemptrix in the ‘objective redemption’ by Christ had the opposite effect on many council fathers. ...The conservative–theological, extreme positions strengthened the anti-maximalist attitude of the majority of the Catholic council fathers.<sup>495</sup>

This has important implications for the issue of Co-Redemption Debra was promoting. Schillebeeckx explains that contrasts in Mariological views continued to the end of the council. “The council forthrightly rejected the new title, ‘Mary, mother of the Church,’ which had been introduced surreptitiously, but on the other hand did speak of Mary’s ‘spiritual motherhood of all believers,’”<sup>496</sup>

Generally traditionalists see Paul VI as being what used to be called a “minimalist”, but at the Council, according to Schillebeeckx, “the Pope, evidently unconcerned and

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<sup>492</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1974) 4.

<sup>493</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Mary Mother of the Redemption* (London: Sheed & Ward 1964).

<sup>494</sup> E. Schillebeeckx & C. Halkes, “Mariology: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow” in *Mary – Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1993) 12.

<sup>495</sup> E. Schillebeeckx & C. Halkes, op.cit. 12-13.

<sup>496</sup> E. Schillebeeckx & C. Halkes, op.cit.15.

unhampered by any theological constraints,”<sup>497</sup> “felt called on to satisfy the minority or what used to be called the ‘maximalist’ position in the council in the final gathering of the third session of the council by making Mary ‘mother of the Church’ on his own personal, and thus non-Conciliar, authority.”<sup>498</sup> He concludes,

It ultimately becomes clear from an analysis of the eighth chapter of *Lumen Gentium* that – although all parties wanted to avoid both minimalism and maximalism in matters of Mariology – two types of Marian theology continued to stand side by side at the council.<sup>499</sup>

These were a Church or Church-theological Mariology, the standpoint of the majority who saw Mary as our sister, an eminent and model member of the Church’s community of faith. The second, or minority, standpoint of Christological Mariology puts Mary alongside Jesus to such a degree that she, the mother of Jesus, who as Christ is head of his redeemed Church, is herself also called Mother of the Church. Do the stigmata in the hands of Mary in the MMM icon reveal this standpoint?

One might see Debra’s position as an instance of this characterisation in the ARCIC report,

Mary came widely to be viewed as an intermediary between God and humanity, and even as a worker of miracles with powers that verged on the divine.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>497</sup> *ibid.* 16.

<sup>498</sup> *ibid.* 15.

<sup>499</sup> *ibid.* 15-16.

<sup>500</sup> Anglican - Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) [http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/arcic/doc/e\\_arcic\\_mary04.html#D](http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/arcic/doc/e_arcic_mary04.html#D) (accessed May 10, 2006) 43.

An example of this is found in the foreword of one time Debra follower Mercy Lotilla-Asencio's book, which is filled with dire predictions from a variety of sources, but particularly Debra,

Although some of these messages have not been approved by the Church Authority yet, they are not contrary to Church teachings. My deepest gratitude too goes to the Australian authentic visionary-prophet Debra, whom I have met and whose amazing dialogue with the Lord written in her diary-books 'What Might God Say To Me Today' has revealed the "sifting means" –Eucharistic Adoration and devotion to Mary – to gather His remnants for the New World in a New Era of Peace. The urgency of the Lord's messages to Debra regarding the proximity of the occurrences of those foretold events has stirred me to a frenzy of finishing this book and speak about what we must do to prepare ourselves.<sup>501</sup>

Fr Couture sees this tendency as an illusion. He writes,

This curiosity is a deformation of spirit, which casts the soul into illusion and trouble, and turns it away from humility through vain complacency in extraordinary ways. Sad to say in our day not only seers but large numbers of ordinary lay people are violating these rules by their curiosity and avidity for hearing 'What Our Lady said.' ... Jesus Christ established a visible Church and said to the apostles, and through them to their successors, the bishops, 'He who hears you, hears Me.' If Catholics try to replace that Magisterium with oracles, they will be inviting Satan to run their lives.<sup>502</sup>

J. Hitchcock gives a concise categorisation of the worldview operative in these devotional contexts,

Belief in Marian apparitions demonstrates the firm commitment, which most conservative Catholics have to a supernatural view of reality. It is a tenet of their faith that God can and does intervene directly in human affairs and can and does do so through the mother of Jesus. ... Given their view that the world is going through a period of exceptional infidelity, in which religious doubt and contempt for traditional morality are blatant, many conservative Catholics find the apocalyptic aspects of such devotions intellectually and emotionally satisfying, as indicating that God has allowed things to deteriorate radically as a prelude to chastising the

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<sup>501</sup> M. Lotilla-Asencio, *Divine Mercy and Justice of the End Times* op.cit. Foreword ii.

<sup>502</sup> D. Couture, "The Magnificat Meal Movement – an Assessment" op.cit. 2.

world.<sup>503</sup>

This is well demonstrated by Lotilla-Ascencio's claims that Mary's new title would be fiercely contested by the unholy,

The Lord says to Debra, this title of Mother Mary, which is a summary of all her titles-Mary, Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of All Graces and Advocate is fiercely being contended by those who lack discernment on the role of Mary in these End Times ... It is quite obvious that Pope John Paul II desires to proclaim this last title of Mary as a dogma soon because he has given many teachings in recent times about Our Lady's role in salvation as Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix and Advocate.<sup>504</sup>

Allegedly, on November 7, 1996, Jesus told Debra about the importance of this title. His desire is that the Church would give Mary this title for it will give her authority to save Christianity: "My Mother as Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix and Advocate, is the Queen of this battle to save Christianity ... My Mother has interceded in this title of magnificent excellence for her Magnificat Meal warriors to receive this revelation of truth"<sup>505</sup>...

Once again visions become the basis for theological and doctrinal authority in the MMM. The failure of Pope John Paul II to endorse this doctrine became a further reason for Debra to move outside the Catholic Church. In a statement of 1 July, 1997 Bishop Morris commented among other things on the issue of Co-Redemption,

On June 22 the Catholic Weekly reporting from the 'Osservatore Romano' stated that a Commission was set up by the Vatican at the request of Pope John Paul II to investigate petitions sent to him from certain circles asking that Mary be formally proclaimed as "Mediatrix" (Mediator), "Coredemtrix" (Co-redeemer) and "Advocate". The Commission unanimously agreed that the Roman Catholic Church should not solemnly define new teachings about the Virgin Mary. The Commission's main

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<sup>503</sup> J. Hitchcock, Catholic activist Conservatism in the United States, in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, edited by M. E. Marty and R. S. Appleby (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991) 121.

<sup>504</sup> M. Lotilla-Ascencio, op.cit. 108-9.

<sup>505</sup> ibid. 108-9.

objectives were that the titles as proposed are ambiguous, and that the Second Vatican Council, although initially asked to make the same solemn proclamation chose not to do so after study, prayer and discussion. It completely avoided referring to Mary as Co-redeemer and made only a very sober use of the titles Mediator and Advocate. The Bishops of the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II in his speeches and letters have preferred to describe Mary as “Cooperator” in Christ’s work of redemption. Mary does have a role of Maternal Mediation on behalf of all believers but this is subordinate to the absolute and universal role of Christ. The Magnificat Meal Movement continually misleads its followers by saying that these titles are going to be defined by the Pope in the very near future.<sup>506</sup>

Dinges again offers an insight into this traditionalist view, particularly at the level of folk or popular piety. Such revelations and supernatural messages, often interwoven with biblical forebodings over the Great Apostasy foretold by Saint Paul (2 Thess. 2.3), references to the coming “chastisement,” and the era of the Antichrist, have provided traditionalist Catholics with a transcendent verification of the link between postconciliar turmoil and punishments foretold by Mary.<sup>507</sup>

Again, the development of its own specific Marian icon is of great significance to the Movement, and the emphasis in the MMM on Mary as Co-Redemptrix is clearly related to its emergence.<sup>508</sup> According to Ray Burke,

As predicted by our Lord, on her birthday, 17 June 1993, Debra received a present of a miraculous icon of our Lady as Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of all Graces and Advocate. Our Lord told her to have the image copied and circulated and millions of these have spread throughout the world leading to many conversions and healings.<sup>509</sup>

Regarding this icon interviewee A notes an interesting facial similarity between Debra and that of Our Lady:

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<sup>506</sup> <http://www.twb.catholic.org.au/mmm.htm> (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>507</sup> W.Dinges, op.cit. 90-91.

<sup>508</sup> W. Maggs, op.cit. Chapter 3: The Icon God’s gift to this age 24-28. A copy of this icon is found on page viii.

<sup>509</sup> R. Burke, *The Truth about Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* op.cit. 5.

I asked for a photograph of Debra to put beside the Icon. I became very suspicious of the group as none of them offered to give me a photograph of Debra. Finally I got one from one of her newsletters and put it beside the Icon and to my horror I found that it matched perfectly. What people were venerating was Debra and not Our Blessed Lady.<sup>510</sup>

Another interviewee, Colm Fitzpatrick raises an aesthetic point,

One other comment I would make is that they have an icon, allegedly of Our Lady, which they venerate – they continually exclaim how lovely the icon is. I think it is ghastly – so does everyone I know who is not in the movement. I find the divergence of taste remarkable.<sup>511</sup>

Interviewee B came to similar conclusions.<sup>512</sup> Certainly, the basis of this picture seems quite idiosyncratic. Was this symbol of a ‘maximalist’ Marian position a sign of true devotion or an instrument of mentality change within the MMM? Whatever about the face, the fact that Mary’s hands in this icon are depicted with the stigmata and the heart is depicted as so severely wounded raises a significant question: is the depicted merging of roles with the crucified Lord intended to favour the Co-Redemptrix claim, or is it evidence of the movement’s heterodox direction?

### 5.1.5 Heterodoxy

The idea that Debra and the MMM’s views could be read as even implicitly heretical would not have occurred to people in the early days. Wal Maggs encapsulates this sentiment very concisely, “[a]nother good sign (of the authenticity) is the spirit of obedience to the authentic teachings of the Church, to the messages received by Debra

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<sup>510</sup> Interviewee A, op.cit.

<sup>511</sup> C. Fitzpatrick, op.cit.

<sup>512</sup> Interviewee B, op.cit.



from the Lord, especially in regard to fervent love for the Eucharist and devotion to the Mother of God.”<sup>513</sup> This was not to last.

The heterodox nature of the MMM took some time to emerge. Its reactive approach to authority became clear in the attitude adopted to private revelation. Writing after he left the movement Maggs, basing his criticism on a reading of Canon 823 § 1 and AAS 58, 1186 asserts that Debra’s writings are out of step with Canon law. “Debra Geileskey, having misunderstood the true meaning of the Paul VI decision, continues to ignore the right of the local bishop to examine her works on private revelation before publication. Her works certainly ‘touch upon matters of faith and morals.’ Very much so.”<sup>514</sup>

Debra and the members of the MMM claimed they were the true inheritors of the Catholic tradition in Helidon. The bishop was allegedly in error and was in league with Masons and others who were diluting the Catholic faith. Debra later went on to have her own priests and a bishop ordained – married men – as reported by Wal Maggs,

She has appointed her own ‘bishop’. Ray Burke, a married man, is supposedly the new bishop of the MMM. Then she moved to create three new ‘priests’ (Philip Stewart, Luke Adams and Nicholas Birrell) ... The question arises at once: How did these members of the new clergy obtain ‘ordination’? Claire Mansour, a former member, and for a long time a close friend of Ms Burslem and a great benefactor, makes this comment: *You should know that Debra claims to be a prophet. She told me before that she has the right to ordain, and this is apparently what she did.*<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>513</sup> W. Maggs, *Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* op.cit. 3.

<sup>514</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 22.

<sup>515</sup> *ibid.* 174.

The MMM's use of the sacrament of marriage was a further sign of her drift into heterodoxy. Not alone did she administer marriage through her own Church, the Church of the Commonwealth of Caledonia Australis or the Biblical Church, she also linked marriage registration to her separatist state and issued her own marriage certificates. This represents a rejection of the role of the Catholic Church in the sacrament of marriage and a rejection of the civil registration of the marriages as far as the Australian state was concerned.<sup>516</sup> Is this yet another instance of Australian anti-authoritarianism or is it something more sinister given the influence of Seventh Day Adventism, Sabbatarianism,<sup>517</sup> and Millenarianism.<sup>518</sup>

What does Debra's affiliation of the MMM with the Commonwealth of Caledonia Australis, an obscure secessionist movement denying the authority of the Government of Australia,<sup>519</sup> actually signify? Why was Debra concerned to link the MMM with British Israelism, which is a complex set of theories, not necessarily compatible with each other, that have in common only the idea that the British are the direct lineal descendants of the lost tribes of Israel?<sup>520</sup> Debra was also influenced by the conspiracy theories connected to the New World Order and the notion of a World Religion and used them to bring her members more tightly under her control.<sup>521</sup>

Once I gave Debra a copy of an article on the attempts by some in the UN to establish a One-World Religion. Debra immediately seized on this and

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<sup>516</sup> *ibid* 163-65.

<sup>517</sup> *ibid.* 92-93.

<sup>518</sup> *ibid.* 85-88, 151-2.

<sup>519</sup> Commonwealth of Caledonia Australis

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commonwealth\\_of\\_Caledonia\\_Australis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commonwealth_of_Caledonia_Australis) (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>520</sup> British Israelism [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British\\_Israelism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Israelism) (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>521</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication (October 1, 2003).

it became a matter almost of life and death, as we delved into it as a group, and extracted every last bit of intellectual juice we could from it.<sup>522</sup>

In a statement of 1 July, 1997 Bishop Morris commented further,

Unfortunately because of the half-truths, the inconsistencies and in some instances the lack of orthodoxy concerning aspects of statements made and practices performed, the Magnificat Meal Movement places itself outside the Catholic Church. The Magnificat Meal Movement has no standing within the Catholic Diocese of Toowoomba or within the Universal Catholic Church.<sup>523</sup>

All of these factors and others surfaced elsewhere in this work suggest a critical fluidity or lack of clarity around the boundaries and the perceptions of Debra's Catholic identity.

## 5.2 Psychological Dimensions of *Cultism* within the MMM

Psychologically two views have been adopted in response to NRMs, one which views them as harmful, the other which sees them sometimes as potentially therapeutic. Saliba observes,

Psychological studies on new religious movements are not conducive to sweeping generalizations about the beneficial or deleterious effects they might have on the mental and emotional well-being of their members. They lead inevitably to unpopular conclusions. Membership in new religions is at best, ambivalent and ambiguous; it can contribute to one's mental spiritual health and social stability, serve as a meaningful (and temporary) stage in one's life, expose and exacerbate one's innermost problems, or be the direct cause of pathological and self-destructive behaviour.<sup>524</sup>

All these elements are surfaced in the research into the MMM.

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<sup>522</sup> W. Maggs, private email communication (February 15, 2003).

<sup>523</sup> <http://www.twb.catholic.org.au/mmm.htm> (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>524</sup> J. A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* op.cit. 116-17.

### 5.2.1 Conversion – Entry and Exit

Wal Maggs describes his conversion to the MMM emotionally as follows,

I met Debra fleetingly, outside a Brisbane parish church, early in 1994. Immediately something happened inside me that I couldn't explain. I had met visionaries briefly at Medjugorje and had felt nothing. But when I met Debra on that occasion and subsequently, I felt a sense of "awe", a sense of personal littleness, an emotional confusion, even tears. It was as though the Holy Spirit was invading me, moving me, changing me. It was beyond rational explanation. I prided myself, I suppose, on being in control of my emotions and thinking. But, even on the phone when talking to Debra, that control seemed to lessen and the Spirit was moving me. It was a feeling of conversion. Other members have expressed similar experiences, some far more dramatic, akin to Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus. On reflection now, after four years, I put my own experiences down to Debra's special role as prophet and God's calling of me to become part of the Movement.<sup>525</sup>

Maggs contrasts this with the situation after his departure. He reviews his emotional response and sees his involvement as an accident of having a photocopier and the fact that Debra had lavished attention on him probably because of his usefulness.<sup>526</sup> Maggs reverts to his more critical persona in the book he wrote after leaving the MMM where he clearly asserts Debra's emotional impact and its effects, "Ms Burslem's influence over members of the MMM is powerful and all-embracing. Her personality is strong and charismatic. Members tend to surrender their discernment and judgment to her."<sup>527</sup>

Both those in the movement and ex-members found Debra a fascinating personality, she seemed so unusual. This possibly explains why they were attracted to her in the first place. "Most have never met in the flesh anyone quite like her before. She comes across as someone supremely self-confident in her role as supposed 'prophet'. She appears to have no doubt about her role. It is this certainty that gives others the confidence to trust

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<sup>525</sup> W. Maggs, *Debra and the Magnificat Meal Movement* op.cit. 9.

<sup>526</sup> W. Maggs, Private email communication (February 15, 2003).

<sup>527</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 9.

her.”<sup>528</sup> For their part, her followers were trying to deepen their spiritual lives. Suddenly this supposed seer stood before them, a prophet, a person able to show with great assurance a simple way of life filled with prayer. Any doubts they had gradually faded away as they plunged deeper and deeper into the prayer life that Debra claimed God had laid out for them. According to Maggs, “[t]hey followed their hearts.”<sup>529</sup> He then describes the outcome,

After a while they find themselves taking the next step: surrendering their discernment and personal judgment to this new leader. They become, in effect, like children. Ms Burslem becomes more than a leader; she takes on the role of mother. The members feel a comfortable sense of security as they surrender their discernment. All they have to do thereafter is follow the guidance of the prophet and all will be well. After all, they believe, she is being led by God. Thus in some instances the houses members purchase are selected by Debra after consulting Our Lady.<sup>530</sup>

Debra would be asked to pray for individuals who were sick and would even prescribe the “type of medical or dental treatment to embrace or avoid.”<sup>531</sup> She would even produce a personal message from God to guide members through a major decision in their lives.” Her influence ranged across a wide spectrum, from the prayers at the Shrine to the houses they lived in, to having a rainwater tank or well on their property, to the choice of a husband or wife.”<sup>532</sup>

According to former Irish member Eileen Treacy, aspects of her maturation that were lacking seemed to find a framework in Helidon. She got into shape, stopped partying and found a direction in life. She describes how a woman who was a prostitute was able to

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<sup>528</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 9.

<sup>529</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>530</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>531</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>532</sup> *ibid.*

change and to find a new life path. She was amazed at how Debra could lose so much weight. Helidon provided firm boundaries and a prayerful way of life. Initially Eileen wanted to stay in Australia, but an inarticulate sense of the darker side of things told her it was time to come home. She found the MMM profoundly transformative initially, but gradually became aware of its potential to control her life.<sup>533</sup> Her mother Bridget too was at first enthusiastic, but gradually began to notice irregularities in Debra's behaviour. Instead of the gentle welcoming person there was the woman who would interrupt Eucharistic adoration and claim a vision of Mary thus drawing the focus onto herself. Debra began to lord it over people, put them down, and Bridget came to the conclusion that Debra was only interested in her because she had a hotel in Waterford.<sup>534</sup>

Michael Langone describes the following stages of conversion, “[p]rospective converts perceive the leader as having some special ability or charisma (s/he reads minds; s/he heals people) that triggers a powerful inner experience (e.g., of the leader's spiritual ‘presence’), which in turn causes them to reconsider their assumptions about the world, self, and others.”<sup>535</sup> Convinced members help neophytes to correctly interpret their experiences. In this way prospective members come to accept, at least provisionally, a movement's fundamental assumptions, what Langone calls the “ruling propositions” on which the group is based – e.g. that Debra is a modern-day prophet and visionary. The leader and/or group thus come to have a high level of credibility and authority for the prospective convert. They yield to these pressures, whether mild or strong, and reach a point at which they implicitly if not explicitly declare, “I believe!” The initial declaration

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<sup>533</sup> E. Treacy, private conversation with author (February 27, 2006).

<sup>534</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>535</sup> M. D. Langone, Inner Experience and Conversion, AFF Conference Paper (June 2002).

is usually directed at the ruling propositions, e.g., “Debra is a prophet.” They are now converts and their beliefs and behaviours are re-constellated according to the movement’s vision and obedience to the leader then emerges.<sup>536</sup>

According to Langone erstwhile members exit when converts

become aware of inconsistencies, contradictions, abuses, or failed predictions within the group or organization. Normal cognitive dissonance processes combined with group pressures cause the member to search for rationalizations to explain away these disturbing discrepancies. So many disturbing discrepancies accumulate that, as one ex-member put it, the shelf of rationalization on which they were placed collapses. Members once again begin to reconsider fundamental assumptions; only this time they reconsider the assumptions, the ruling propositions, of the group to which they had claimed allegiance, sometimes for many years.<sup>537</sup>

My interviews with ex-members indicate that they were so affected that they did not even want to give their names. I came away from conversations feeling as if the core of their being had been somehow violated. Any benefits they may have experienced were overwhelmed by the exit experience and the realisation of the spiritual abuse they had experienced. They proclaimed the MMM from the rooftops, now they wished to forget all about Debra and get on with their lives. The MMM represents a space where people at first found a spiritual home, and then later to painfully discover its limitations.<sup>538</sup>

The young people living in the MMM enclave are likely quite normal, knowing nothing other than the MMM. They will be quite well adjusted as long as they do not have to leave the group. On the other hand, some long term members have been sent out to drive

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<sup>536</sup> M. D. Langone, *Inner Experience and Conversion*, op.cit.

<sup>537</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>538</sup> This material is based on interviews with a discrete group of former members. Unfortunately while they were willing to talk they were not willing to be identified.

through road blocks,<sup>539</sup> refuse to recognise the state in court,<sup>540</sup> get married without the blessing of the Catholic sacraments<sup>541</sup> only to find Debra change her mind and leave them stranded emotionally, or literally on the side of the road.<sup>542</sup>

### 5.3 The Sociological Dimensions of *Cultism*

According to Saliba, “The sociological study of the new religions differs from the psychological approach in that it looks on them as social movements, affecting not just individuals but society as a whole.”<sup>543</sup> He strongly supports the “sociological approach to the new religions”<sup>544</sup> as it “is based on well established academic principles and, in spite of some weaknesses, has many advantages.”<sup>545</sup>

The sociological approach to the new religious movements provides, first of all, a solid and reliable method for determining and accurately recording their beliefs, rituals, and activities. Second, it places their emergence in wider religious and cultural context, thus broadening understanding of the phenomenon. Third, it draws attention to some of their social functions, thus showing how entrance into a new religion can have positive consequences.<sup>546</sup>

According to Saliba the sociological horizon focuses on the MMM as a marginal subculture potentially in conflict with society at large. The internal dynamics that makes it a viable social unit, its economic and leadership structures, the type of charismatic leadership that provides divine legitimacy for its beliefs and practices, and the levels and types of commitment demanded of devotees are all essential elements in the sociological analysis. This includes the social correlates that go with membership and

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<sup>539</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 162.

<sup>540</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>541</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 164.

<sup>542</sup> *ibid.* 167-69.

<sup>543</sup> J. A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* op.cit. 127.

<sup>544</sup> J. A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* op.cit. 158.

<sup>545</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>546</sup> *ibid.* 157.



the cultural factors that influence recruitment. The conflicts that exist between the MMM and the mainline religious tradition and the effects of such conflicts on both are also significant.<sup>547</sup> The evidence for these factors as they apply to the MMM has already been adduced. The reality of a major transformation of the MMM from Catholic prayer group/movement to what it eventually became is clear. A question of motivation remains. How did Debra move from a position of great love of the sacraments to seeing them as an “abomination”?<sup>548</sup> Bryan Wilson’s work may shed some light on this question and we shall examine it in some detail in order to apply his thought to Debra and the MMM.

Wilson is of the view that NRMs are “deviant responses to the world” that occur in a variety of different ways.<sup>549</sup>

Wilson identifies seven possible approaches,

- (1) conversionist
- (2) revolutionist (or transformative),
- (3) introversionist,
- (4) manipulationist (or magical),
- (5) thaumaturgical (or miraculous),
- (6) reformist,
- (7) utopian.<sup>550</sup>

### 5.3.1 Conversionist

The history of the MMM reveals the formation of an evangelising movement. The promotional journeys undertaken by Debra are typical of this approach. In the early days the MMM made good use of media like videos and audio tapes to promote the values of

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<sup>547</sup> J. A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* op.cit. 127-8.

<sup>548</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* (Helidon, Australia: 4th Edition 2005) 64-5.

<sup>549</sup> J. A. Saliba, op.cit. 140.

<sup>550</sup> *ibid.*

the MMM and Debra's visions. She also sold her diaries. Initially the internet was used, though the web site was discontinued.<sup>551</sup> This use of the internet is typical of many new cults.<sup>552</sup>

### 5.3.2 Revolutionist (or Transformative)

Debra had the capacity to present the traditionalist position in a revolutionary manner. She came over as contemporary yet was involved with the traditional devotions related to the adoration of the Eucharist and veneration of Mary. She baptised people in swimming pools,<sup>553</sup> was a one-time supporter of Vatican II, and claimed direct access to God without going through hierarchical structures. She subsequently rejected the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, moved towards abandoning religious statues, and played with links to the Seventh Day Adventists.<sup>554</sup>

### 5.3.3 Introversionist

After Debra's husband left her and after the events surrounding her claims that she was to be burnt at the stake in 1999, as well as the numerological games she played with this date, Debra became a recluse. The internet site was closed and instead of seeking new

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<sup>551</sup> While references to this web site exist in links it seems to have closed sometime in 2002. See <http://www.iol.ie/~magnific/> (accessed May 10, 2006) and <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s300768.htm> (accessed May 10, 2006). There are several sites giving information about the MMM (accessed Mar 10, 2006). <http://www.answers.com/topic/magnificat-meal-movement> (accessed May 10, 2006). Gives the official position of the Diocese of Toowoomba and the bishops of Queensland <http://www.twb.catholic.org.au/mmm.htm> (accessed May 10, 2006), gives the official position of the Society of Pius X <http://www.sspxasia.com/Newsletters/2001/Jan-Mar/magnificat-meal-movement.htm> (accessed May 10, 2006). <http://www.unitypublishing.com/Apparitions/ClaireMonsour.htm> (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>552</sup> J. A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* op.cit. 141.

<sup>553</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 83.

<sup>554</sup> *ibid.* 80.

converts, Debra favoured marriage and childbirth as the way of growing the organisation. A place of pilgrimage became a secure compound.

#### 5.3.4 Manipulationist (or Magical)

Evidence for this characteristic is widespread and is well documented by Maggs who catches its essence with the phrase, “Our Lady moves into real estate.”<sup>555</sup> Families who were moving into Helidon were persuaded to consult Debra in relation to the purchase of property, because Our Lady herself was choosing each person’s house for them. According to Maggs, this fitted in well with Debra’s plans, for her husband was the estate agent who handled the sales and made the commission. “This scheme meant that families were given little choice – if they followed Our Lady’s lead – in the choice of homes they were to buy.”<sup>556</sup> Maggs quotes from a letter by Debra to a member in 1998:

Regarding your request for help about moving to Helidon, I offer Isaiah 63: 14 – “As cattle are led into a valley so the Lord gave his people rest. He led his people and brought honour to his name. “The Lord is leading your heart and way to Helidon. ... I have seen a house with your face on it.”<sup>557</sup>

#### 5.3.5 Thaumaturgical (or Miraculous) and Reformist

Many examples of these two categories of Wilson’s typology have been surfaced in the text. A founder member of the MMM, a Mr. Mack, not only describes Debra as a clever saleswoman capable of selling both a Movement and property to its members, he further notes the mode of attack on a priest critic of an alleged miraculous multiplication of hosts. The priest discovered that some of the “miraculous” hosts were stale and

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<sup>555</sup> *ibid.* 44.

<sup>556</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>557</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 44.

challenged Debra. He was accused of being a paedophile and demonised.<sup>558</sup> Debra's reformist tendencies are also highlighted throughout the text, not only in her rejection of the *Novus Ordo* Mass, but more specifically in her claim to have the power to bypass the authority of the Church and ordain her own clergy.

### 5.3.6 Utopian

Evidence for this characteristic is also clear. Debra's negotiations with the Seventh Day Adventists and what followed may point in this direction. However, self-evident indicators include the establishment of the Church Caledonia Australis, and her attempts to create a new utopian state in the Commonwealth of Caledonia Australis outside of Australian law.

### 5.3.7 The Wilson Typology: Further Considerations

Wilson is careful to avoid making theological judgments on the belief systems of NRMs. His set of distinctives, most of which can with some modifications be applied to NRMs, is a good illustration of how sociologists describe their main features. Wilson considers sects and NRMs to be religious entities that live in tension with traditional religion and society. He enumerates eight features of *cultism*:

- (1) exclusivity,
- (2) monopoly of truth,
- (3) a lay organization,
- (4) rejection of the religious division of labour,
- (5) voluntariness,
- (6) the expulsion of members who do not follow prescribed standards,
- (7) the demand of total allegiance,

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<sup>558</sup> <http://www.unitypublishing.com/Apparitions/ClaireMonsour.htm> (accessed May 10, 2006).

(8) protest against traditional religion and society.<sup>559</sup>

All these features can be readily applied to the MMM. According to Saliba, two other characteristics flow from those listed by Wilson. First is the tendency to set clear boundaries that mark members as the chosen elite.<sup>560</sup> This is clear in the MMM. “These members are defined by self-consciousness and conscientious commitments and not by cultural heritage or tradition.”<sup>561</sup> The move away from the New Mass, rejection of the magisterium, and the setting up a new Church with its own clergy, and the attempt to set up a new state typify the MMM in this regard. The latter has surfaced in a number of cases involving the MMM where persons have denied the authority of the Courts and Police on the basis of citizenship of the Commonwealth of Caledonia Australis. Australian Federal Court Justice Goldberg labelled the attempt to establish this new state outside of Australian law as a “delusion” and “wrong”.<sup>562</sup>

Secondly, Saliba also identifies quests for truth and/or for religious experience that lead members to dedicate themselves to the goals and ideals of the new religion.<sup>563</sup> Here it is not so much a new religion but the claim to be the only example of the old one. “And they legitimize their claims with reference to a sacred authority, often embedded in a charismatic leader who monopolizes the right to dictate the movement’s doctrine and to prescribe its lifestyle.”<sup>564</sup> All that needs to be written is Debra.

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<sup>559</sup> J. A. Saliba, op.cit. 142.

<sup>560</sup> *ibid.* 143.

<sup>561</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>562</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commonwealth\\_of\\_Caledonia\\_Australis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commonwealth_of_Caledonia_Australis) (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>563</sup> J. A. Saliba, op.cit. 143.

<sup>564</sup> *ibid.*

### 5.3.8 The Lewis View

James R. Lewis offers another set of useful indicators, most of which are also identifiable in the MMM.<sup>565</sup>

1. The organization is willing to place itself above the law.
2. The leadership dictates important personal details of followers' lives, such as whom to marry, what to study in college, etc.
3. The leader sets forth ethical guidelines members must follow but from which the leader is exempt.
4. The group is preparing to fight a literal, physical Armageddon against other human beings. (This does not apply to the MMM).
5. The leader regularly makes public assertions that he or she knows are false and/or the group has a policy of routinely deceiving outsiders.
6. The organisation is isolated or partially isolated from the larger society.<sup>566</sup>

According to Lewis, these five traits are about as close as one can get to valid, objective criteria for judging whether or not a given NRM is going – or has gone – “bad”. “With the exception of placing the group’s actions above the law, none of these characteristics, taken by itself, is necessarily cause for alarm. On the other hand, a group possessing more than one or two of the above traits might well bear closer scrutiny.”<sup>567</sup> He suggests that, as a corollary to this line of analysis, NRMs “possessing none of the above traits are, from a public policy standpoint, almost certainly harmless.”<sup>568</sup> However, they remain challenges to mainstream religion.

### 5.4. Movement-Sect-*Cultist* NRM

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<sup>565</sup> J. R. Lewis, *Odd Gods: New Religions and the Cult Controversy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books 2001) 55.

<sup>566</sup> *ibid.* 55-56.

<sup>567</sup> *ibid.* 55.

<sup>568</sup> J. R. Lewis, *Odd Gods: New Religions and the Cult Controversy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books 2001) 55.

The communal dimension is characteristic of contemporary NRMs.<sup>569</sup> The sense of community-belonging is very much part of the early attraction of the MMM while it was still within the Catholic Church. This gave way to a certain inflexibility when the group rejected the authority of the Church. Bishop Morris is unequivocal, “The Magnificat Meal Movement uses traditional Catholic practices to entrap people into a sect or cult that is not Catholic.”<sup>570</sup> In this sense, a sect may imply either a separation or a reaction. In the case of the MMM both are present. However, the question of definition remains.

Sects have been defined by behavioural patterns indicating radical separation from the surrounding society and usually based on a cause-effect dynamic. This view is now contested. It is now recognised that any religious belief system can be reconstructed in a sectarian manner. Steve Bruce argues that the causal sequence has been inverted. He argues that central to the understanding of sectarian religion is a particular epistemological claim: “that there is only one saving truth and that we have it! Without that core belief, neither the characteristics of strictness nor of the mode of commitment would be possible.”<sup>571</sup> Bruce argues that “far from being initially desired for its group-reinforcing functions, separation from the wider society was often reluctantly adopted by the sect only after it had failed to persuade the rest of the world to accept its standards.”<sup>572</sup>

In this view the separation process is an accidental by product of holding genuinely

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<sup>569</sup> J. A. Saliba, op.cit. 143.

<sup>570</sup> <http://www.twb.catholic.org.au/mmm.htm> (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>571</sup> S. Bruce, *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999) 143.

<sup>572</sup> *ibid.*

deviant beliefs or beliefs that were once commonplace but that became deviant because of changes in the wider civil or religious worldview. Bruce further argues that starting with beliefs rather than patterns of behaviour is definitional misleading. “[B]y recognizing that what most sectarians believe was once close to the dominant views of their societies (and their behaviour was once pretty normal too and hence requires no elaborate functional explanations), we can see a less theoretically elaborate but more sensible relationship between strict religion and resilience.”<sup>573</sup> In effect world views and belief systems are sustained by social interactions and dialogue. Interpretations are shared and discussed and readily gloss ideological coatings. “When this is done in groups, reinforcement takes place.”<sup>574</sup>

Dinges largely shares this view. Turning to Troeltsch’s understanding of the role of synthesis in main stream religion he writes,

As Troeltsch and others have observed, Catholicism has historically expressed itself through a synthesis of culture and intelligence – in spite of the predominance of its Greco-Roman cultural heritage. Through its “church-like” proclivities it has sought to come to terms with different intellectual and spiritual needs of different constituencies situated differently within social structures throughout its history, the Church has struggled to develop a powerful and credible synthesis of culture and the Gospel that can support and enhance both culture and religion. In so doing, Catholicism has struggled with the tensions inherent in maintaining the integrity and prophetic stance of the tradition while simultaneously developing it. Traditionalism exaggerates the sect-like patterns and doctrinal complex that became a more prominent feature of Catholicism’s institutional life during its troubled engagement with contemporary culture and thus reduces the Church to a sectarian aspect of the broader culture.<sup>575</sup>

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<sup>573</sup> S. Bruce, op. cit. 143.

<sup>574</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>575</sup> W.Dinges, op.cit. 100-101.



The MMM represents just such a traditionalist exaggeration, and it is this tendency that surfaces the horizon of interpretation of the cultist mentality, a mentality that emerges, partly at least, in response to complex historical and contextual activators.

In this chapter the MMM has been critically evaluated through a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives. It has been identified as an initially genuine attempt to foster devotion to the Eucharist and to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. However, the lenses used show the evolution of a dynamic movement first into a schismatic body, which subsequently morphed into a *cultist NRM* as the initially hidden cultist mentality worked its way to the surface. The dénouement is still unclear. Some fear that the MMM will end in an “End Time Tragedy,”<sup>576</sup> with a massive explosion like Waco, or the mass murder/suicide of the Marian *Ten Commandments of God* group in Uganda on St Patrick’s Day, 2000.<sup>577</sup> More likely is a gradual dissolution, or to quote John Keats in his ‘Ode to the Nightingale’,

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies.<sup>578</sup>

Or to quote TS Elliot in ‘The Hollow Men’,

This is the way the world ends  
  
Not with a bang but a whimper.<sup>579</sup>

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<sup>576</sup> W. Maggs, *An End Time Tragedy* op.cit. 169-71,176,178.

<sup>577</sup> <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/mrtcg.html> (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>578</sup> [www.john-keats.com/gedichte/ode\\_to\\_a\\_nightingale.htm](http://www.john-keats.com/gedichte/ode_to_a_nightingale.htm) (accessed May 10, 2006).

<sup>579</sup> <http://www.plzi.com/tekstia/others/hollowmen.htm> (accessed May 10, 2006).

The basis for this suggestion lies in the fact that Debra herself no longer lives within the community compound, and her activity has become more circumscribed. The diocese of Toowoomba, supported by all the dioceses of the State of Queensland, is anxious to see the return of the MMM to full communion. It is fitting that this chapter end with their prayer for the homecoming of the MMM,

PRAYER FOR MEMBERS OF THE MAGNIFICAT MEAL MOVEMENT

All powerful and ever present God, we pray for the return of the members of the Magnificat Meal Movement to full communion with your Church. May the example of Mary, whose obedience, faith, hope and burning charity made her Mother of the Church, inspire them to follow in her footsteps, united with the Apostles and their successors. We ask this through Christ Your Son. Amen.<sup>580</sup>

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<sup>580</sup> <http://www.twb.catholic.org.au/mmm.htm> (accessed May 10, 2006).

**Chapter Six:**  
**CONCLUSIONS**

## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with drawing practical conclusions and identifying some key themes for future research. Through an in-depth analysis of the MMM, current technical nomenclature has been critiqued. This has argued in favour of a move away from reference to *cults* however well defined to one that favours the identification of a *cultist tendency* and/or *attitude* that can affect individuals, families, political parties, independence movements, businesses, and social groups. This identification of a mentality or tendency can now be applied to other religious, philosophical or human potential movements found in Ireland and elsewhere. Such tendencies can be found in churches, mosques, sects, and *cultist NRMs* as well as other ideologically driven groups to which people give allegiance.

At the same time the thesis recognises that the term *cult* cannot be dispensed with totally in academic circles. Eileen Barker's newer term *NRM* also raises difficulties; and the fact also remains that the term *cult* has a negative connotation in customary usage. Popular usage also suggests that the newer term *NRM* is not able to communicate the degree of meaning that *cult* conveys. In consequence, this thesis integrates the term *NRM* with the term *cult* to coin the term *cultist NRM* in the first instance to describe the MMM and this usage has been adopted in the title of the dissertation. Integration in this sense is based on bridging similarities such that the advantages of each term illuminate the other to create a stronger more complete descriptive terminology. On this basis it is contended that the new term may be applied to all similar groups and movements. The validity of this claim

will only be fully demonstrated by further research and analysis. Given that language evolves and is defined by usage, academics are challenged to refine their understanding and develop new and clearer modes of expression without bypassing and confusing their popular audience. The advantage of this integrating of *cult* and *NRM* in *cultist NRM* lies in its ability to transcend the negative implications of *cult* and the near incomprehension and related cognate difficulties of *NRM* which have been surfaced in this work. Such difficulties call for a more precisely descriptive and inclusive nomenclature and this is what this thesis has attempted with the term *cultist NRM*.

The evaluative conclusions concerning the MMM drawn in Chapter Five were themselves based on the theoretical work of Chapter Two and the historical contextualisations of Chapters Three and Four. It is to be noted that the typical Church focus on cults, sects and New Age emphasises a structural approach focused on names, entities and groups specifically in terms of their relationship to the Church. There are technical problems with such an approach because it fails to evaluate the importance of the tendencies, attitudes, and worldviews that characterise such movements and organisations. May groups in seemingly good standing with the Church be described as cults? It is the conclusion of this thesis that the omission of reference to tendencies, mentalities and worldviews makes answering such a question well nigh impossible. This diverts attention from the main point that even in the midst of the most genuine of religious organisations or groups such tendencies, mentalities and worldviews are to be found.<sup>581</sup>

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<sup>581</sup> The case of an influential figure like Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the founder of the Legionaries of Christ is instructive in this regard. He was asked by the Vatican to observe a series of restrictions on his

The example of Colm O’Gorman and the abuse scandals in Ireland springs to mind. How could his religiously observant family have ever imagined that Sean Fortune, then a priest in good standing, could ever have done what he did to their son? Herein lies the core of the question in this and in other forms of spiritual and religious deviancy. At the heart of most such phenomena lies the reality of deviant or heterodox tendencies, mentalities and worldviews, and this thesis argues that *cultist NRMs* are best identified in these terms. It is to be noted that those who joined Debra were drawn from the most loyal elements within Catholicism; yet they found the capacity within themselves to give up all and transfer to Australia because of Debra’s influence and attraction. This research suggests that at first it was the visions, then the sense of community, and then the appearance of being more orthodox than the Pope that attracted her followers. The fact that others were similarly attracted was supportive of a change of allegiance, even if this dynamic was not initially evident. More specifically in a Catholic context, this research shows that it was the claim that she was the only one who was truly Catholic, along with the intangible elements and desires found in the make up of a follower, that became the magnet. Of their very nature desires point to the experience of lack.

The implications of all this suggest strongly that the lessons of *cultism* – and abusive uses of religious power – require an investigation into the nature of the tendencies, worldviews and attitudes of the individuals, organisations, and movements in which they arise. Such discernment by definition requires a solid theoretical and informed base. This thesis has

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ministry. This capped a decade-long on-again, off-again investigation of accusations of sexual abuse. Such behaviour is often indicative of a cultist mentality. See <http://nationalcatholicreporter.org/update/bn051806.htm> (accessed May 25, 2006).

identified and made use of such an informed theoretical base in its critical evaluation of the MMM and its heterodox development. The work of John Saliba proved essential to this critique. He offers an interdisciplinary approach grounded in the three core disciplines of theology, sociology and psychology. This thesis suggests that spirituality is the specific theological discipline where such interdisciplinary collaboration has been received as definitive of method and approach. This dissertation represents an effort to respond positively to this challenge in both its method and its approach.

### 6.1.1 Christian Responses

The purpose of this concluding chapter is to surface the particular responses that identification of the cultist mentality as a phenomenon that can be present in a wide variety of religious and philosophical movements suggests. The news media and documentaries of various kinds evidence the presence of fundamentalisms, religious and political, as a global social reality with implications for Ireland's civil and ecclesiastical health and well being. It is important the churches in their theologies and practices face the challenge posed by culture and world denying religious fundamentalisms particularly those capable of justifying violent attacks on those who are different. Practical Theology is especially well placed to confront these challenges which need to be understood as complex multi-dimensional and multi-local realities requiring interdisciplinary study.

The similarities with sectarianism that has been part of the Irish psyche for long years suggest how dangerous such forces can be in the absence of a spirituality of respect and dialogue. Due to its sectarian history Ireland has not yet developed a strong academic

tradition in the study of religion, and indeed Churches and denominations have favoured a confessional approach to the study of theology and religion.

This thesis argues that such a situation must change and that appropriate academic and ecclesial steps be taken to resolve this state of affairs. Dialogue Ireland<sup>582</sup> is an Irish example of a way to respond ecumenically to the challenge presented by non mainstream, NRMs, and similar groups. Non Christian religious pluralism is a recent phenomenon in Ireland and poses new challenges to both civil and ecclesiastical authorities. The findings of this thesis suggest that an institute or chair in world religions and the challenges of religious pluralism would represent an important way forward. Something akin to the Irish school of Ecumenics may offer a model for handling these new challenges in a country already experiencing rapid socio-cultural and socio-economic change. At this point it is difficult to see how appropriate funding for such work may be brought on line. These issues are of interest to both the Churches and the state and a paradigm of shared funding respectful of academic freedom and respect for difference needs to be achieved.

The situation becomes more sensitive when *cultist* tendencies or mentalities are identified within Church related organisations or movements. Again, apologists, defenders and lobbyists for *cultist NRMs* make the work of critical research more complex and difficult in terms of factual evaluation. Such difficulties have been experienced in the research and writing of this thesis. It is to be hoped that the Churches in Ireland would find a way to

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<sup>582</sup> Dialogue Ireland was set up in 1992 in co-operation with the churches to research and dialogue with all non mainstream forms of religiosity in Ireland. This includes contacts with NRMs and other fringe or fundamentalist groups. It is also concerned about the presence of the cultist mentality in mainstream organisations. Help has also been given to individuals and families who have been negatively touched by this phenomenon. The organisation also has an educational outreach to second level schools. Since 2001 DI has been legally established as an independent Trust under Irish law.



address this concern. There has been little theological reflection in Ireland on the issues associated with *cultist NRMs*, other than in journals and three books published in 1985, 1994 and one in 1997 including a chapter by the author.<sup>583</sup> The area has not attracted significant critical postgraduate level research in church-based academic contexts. This is a problem that needs to be addressed by the relevant authorities. These factors point to a degree of naivety about the realities of this domain, resulting from a paucity of quality information, and an ensuing lack of appropriate discernment in such contexts.<sup>584</sup>

### 6.1.2 The Emerging Challenge of Fundamentalism

According to Carr and Saha, fundamentalism represents a new coinage that expresses a concern for orthodoxy strongly categorised by a juridical bias. In the United States for example some colleges, universities and seminaries found it useful to require strict adherence to the fundamentals for everything from student admissions to faculty tenure and promotion.<sup>585</sup> Currently the term defines a range of movements whether religious or socio-political or both in all regions of the world, “which aim to impose specific traditions- whether religious, national, or ethnic, on societies thought to be in danger of straying from the fundamentals that hold them together.”<sup>586</sup> What defines such movements as fundamentalist is a seeking by adherents, “to raise themselves and their

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<sup>583</sup> See Irish Theological Commission, *New Age of the Spirit* (Dublin: Veritas, 1994.) and M. Tierney, *The Church and New Religious Groups* (Dublin: Veritas, 1985). See *New Religious Movements in the Republic of Ireland* by M. Garde in J. Aagaard and H. Meldgaard, *New Religious Movements in Europe* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 1997) 92-98.

<sup>584</sup> See the fatwa issued by the HQ for the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) founded by the Egyptian preacher, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. This calls for “martyrdom operations” by “Palestinian factions to resist the Zionist occupation, even if the victims include some civilians.” This fatwa, which was researched and sanctioned by Qaradawi, instructs Muslims that the suicide bomb “is a weapon the likes of which the enemy cannot obtain.” J. Cusack and M. Dooley, Theologian of Terror held Radical Islamic Council Session here *Sunday Independent* (March 6, 2005).

<sup>585</sup> S. C., Saha and T. K., Carr, eds., *Religious Fundamentalism in Developing Countries* (Westport CT, Greenwood Press, 2001) 1.

<sup>586</sup> *ibid.*

beliefs above the political by appealing explicitly to some one or other supreme authority, moral code, or philosophy that cannot be questioned.”<sup>587</sup> Marty and Appleby use the root metaphor “fight” to express the core reality of fundamentalists’ movements today: as in fighting for, fighting with, fighting against and fighting under.<sup>588</sup>

However there is little consensus about using the term without qualification, yet a more appropriate term is yet to be found. What the word suggests is that something is happening on a global scale in which social and political correlations are attached to a movement’s super political emphasis and its religious slogans.<sup>589</sup> Carr and Saha also note that as mainstream religious organisations are losing membership conservative and fundamentalist churches, mosques and synagogues appear to be growing.<sup>590</sup> Recent reports from the UK in the aftermath of the 7/7 bombings seem to corroborate this point. Carr and Saha suggest that “fundamentalism is a reactionary gesture in a world that is moving too fast toward conformity and unity; a world that demands tolerance for the sake of ‘the new world order.’ As a counter message to such a world, fundamentalism offers its adherents the consolation of a stable discreet identity-which includes certain individuating markers as lifestyle management strategies and will – interpret mythologies-over against the din of competing versions.<sup>591</sup> Within the holistic integration of religion and politics that characterises Islam such forces take on a more significant role.<sup>592</sup>

From a theological perspective it is worth noting Roy Bhaskar's argument that the basic problem with fundamentalism is that it seeks to start from scratch. It tends to combine a

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<sup>587</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>588</sup> *Op.cit. Fundamentalisms Observed*, edited by M. E. Marty and R. S. ix-x.

<sup>589</sup> S. C., Saha and T. K., Carr, eds., *Religious Fundamentalism in Developing Countries* (Westport CT, Greenwood Press, 2001) 2.

<sup>590</sup> *ibid.* 3.

<sup>591</sup> S. C., Saha, and T. K., Carr, eds., *Religious Fundamentalism in Developing Countries* (Westport CT, Greenwood Press, 2001) 4.

<sup>592</sup> S. S. Islam, The Politics of Islam in Bangladesh in S. C., Saha and T. K., Carr, eds., *op. cit* 167-8.

positivist epistemology in which the believer has direct and unmediated knowledge of God with a hermeneutical naïveté in which God's will is assumed to be transparent, non-negotiable and closed to interpretation.<sup>593</sup> This sits well with Andrew Wright's more philosophical position. He argues that fundamentalism has more to do with the absolutist manner in which ultimate beliefs are held and acted upon than with their material content. For Wright this absolutism raises the question of pathological traits.<sup>594</sup> Evidence in support of this claim is easily documented in the news media.

Due to the general religious and cultural conditions pertaining at the time of Irish independence, and the homogenous Catholic nature of Irish society until recently, the conditions for the study of world religions pertaining in more pluralist democracies did not exist. Not surprisingly, this paucity of academic reflection appears to have influenced the political class who do not see the relevance of this issue for policies in regard to education, justice, and children's rights. Lessons also need to be learnt in regard to the cultist, fundamentalist and spiritual abuse of children. There is an urgent need for the Church and child advocacy organisations to attend to their responsibilities in such contexts in a transparent and accountable fashion. Dealing with cultist and fundamentalist abuse is one step in a wider prophetic task of identifying dangerous mentalities and their impacts on the lives of people and on the Church as such.<sup>595</sup>

These and related questions are politically as well as religiously pertinent and require political as well as religious responses. For example, six years ago *Dialogue Ireland*

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<sup>593</sup> R. Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*, (London: Verso, 1993) 76.

<sup>594</sup> A. Wright, *Spirituality and Education*, (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001) 30-31.

<sup>595</sup> See for example J. Berry and G. Renner, *Vows of Silence* (New York, Free Press, 2004).

attempted to draw the Taoiseach's attention to the fact that Ireland is one of the few countries in Europe that have not had a parliamentary report on the presence of NRMs in the country. Nor has Ireland responded to the Council of Europe's call to member countries to respond to the challenge posed by NRMs and set up observatory groups or research centres.<sup>596</sup> Some form of NRM research and education which is consistent with our Constitution is needed. This present study of the MMM further highlights this gap.

The recent arrival of cultist Islamists as well as the growing presence of other Christian and non-Christian *cultist NRMs* in our midst underlines this point. Some form of State response to such new movements in Ireland seems required. For example, what sort of approach is being taken to support moderate Islam and work for integration into Irish society? The role of the world religions is increasing in importance in Ireland, and yet there is as yet no chair funded for such studies in this country. Milltown represents an obvious venue for such a chair and its related functions. Some of these issues, especially those to do with extremist groups, are also of particular relevance to the security of the State.<sup>597</sup> An early response to *cultist NRMs* by the Churches and civil society is urgent. In the meantime, the lack of an informed response means that many people are being affected, and may well represent collusion with and empowerment of such groups.

### 6.1.3 The Theological Implications

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<http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/AdoptedText/ta99/erec1412.htm#1> (accessed May 25, 2006). Report on the Cultist NRM situation in Europe with one of the notable exceptions being Ireland by H de Cordes, President of CIAOSN Belgium, *Cultic/Sectarian Deviations in Europe : Policies that Differ* unpublished paper in private email communication (September 7, 2005).

<sup>597</sup> Dialogue Ireland submission to the Minister of Justice December 2005.

The Vatican organised an Extraordinary Consistory that met in Rome, 4-7 April 1991, a year after the founding of the MMM. It was called to discuss two pastoral issues: abortion and the NRM phenomenon. The discussion on NRMs was based on Cardinal Arinze's *General Report*. Only the shortened version has been published in English. This Report was based on work done by a high-powered international group of leading scholars of NRMs, both Catholic and non-Catholic. As well as the important contribution on relevant terminology already discussed in Chapter Two the Report also introduces two typologies based entirely on doctrinal considerations. It is this doctrinal typology that is of interest as we conclude this dissertation. These distinguish between NRMs of Christian origin and NRMs of Protestant origin. The former tend to share basic theological doctrines with the mainline Churches, while the latter refer to NRMs that disagree on basic ecclesiology. Where does the MMM fall when these theological and doctrinal distinctions are considered? Clearly, its key images and symbols come from the Catholic tradition and they claim to be Christian. However, the Report highlights four forms of this typology, Adventist, Restorationist, Metaphysical, and Prophetic-Messianic. Three of these have relevance for understanding the MMM as not just a *cultist NRM* but a *cultist NRM of Christian origin*. Debra had contact with the Seventh Day Adventists and toyed with this orientation, almost joining them at one stage. It also surfaces in her interest in eschatology and the end of the world. The MMM is more clearly Restorationist in its efforts to develop a purer, more primitive form of Christianity. It is most clearly Prophetic-Messianic with its vision of an imminent end to the world and its view of Debra as a visionary seer and end-time prophet. The specific formulation of this is clearly Marian where Debra sees Mary as the end-time Judge and conflates her with Jesus in the messianic role. The dynamic in all of this has been

essentially centrifugal, away from the centre. Even though NRMs tend to move to the centre and join the mainstream. However, the possibility of change must be borne in mind. It is important that Catholics know the theological and doctrinal basis of the MMM at this point in time. Ex-members are in need of continuing pastoral understanding and support, and genuine members need to be confronted by the truth: the MMM was once mainstream Catholic. It is no longer so.<sup>598</sup>

This in-depth study of the MMM has not only contributed to our understanding of the cultist phenomenon, it has also provided the tools needed to understand the nature and development of a *cultist NRM* specifically a *cultist NRM of Christian orientation*. We have traced the MMM's evolution and identified the tipping point that leads from orthodoxy to heterodoxy, from genuine spiritual impulse to deviant Christian group. The study has provided essential tools for such study and sharpened our critical ability to detect the tendencies, mindsets, and attitudes which the *cultist NRM* phenomenon represents. How easy it is for a seemingly genuine search for the kingdom of God to be translated into a self-serving acquisitive and grasping financial empire which exploits and manipulates people's spiritual and eschatological destiny. The implications for Church, State and the Academy are self-evident.

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<sup>598</sup> For a full discussion of this doctrinal typology see M. Introvigne "Christian New Religious Movements: A Roman Catholic Perspective" in E. Barker and M. Warburg, *New Religions and New Religiosity* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2001) 243-261. See also M. Introvigne, *New Religious Movements – Types and Categories* op. cit.

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## **VIDEOGRAPHY**



None of the videos could be dated due to the fact that titles were not found on the recordings collected. Dates have been accessed by deduction or other evidence.

MMM: A Movement of Eucharistic Adoration. Promotional video. Scenes from Holy Name Church, Toowoomba. The presence of Fr Tom Keegan indicates a date prior to the move to Helidon. Clare Birchley very active in the production.

Channel 7 Brisbane: *Today Tonight* programme from 1999 by Chris Allen in the aftermath of Gordon leaving Debra and her former close associate Michelle Stewart claiming that Debra told her all her visionary claims were false.

SBS documentary series "*Australia By Numbers*": *Two Roads to Helidon*. Directed by Anthony Mullins and Chris Kneen in 1999 following the suicide scare.

MMM promotional video for the Basilica Foundation. It attempts to raise funds for the project, (1999/2000). Addresses in Australia and the USA. Clare Birchley again active in the production.

WIN TV: *Compass*, from (June 2001). Interviews with Wal and Beth Maggs, Colm Dunne and Ray Burke. Interviews by Geoff Wood and Ian Walker.

TV 3 TV AM *Breakfast Show* with Mark Cagney. Debra's last public visit to Ireland. Interviewed on (March 31, 2000).

WIN NEWS: Mike Garde interviewed about his attempt to interview Irish members of the MMM by Kylie Barron in (June 2003).

Archbishop John Bereslavsky at Marian Conference in (November 2003). Debra was ejected.

