

Church Universal and Triumphant

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Description of the Product

The product of this Honors Thesis in Film Studies will be a short festival-ready documentary film (approximately 20 minutes) that incorporates original field research of Church Universal and Triumphant, Parapsychology, and the historical attempt to unite science, religion, and philosophy. The product will be the result of combining my technical expertise in filmmaking, theory-based knowledge of constructing a successful documentary film, and academic background and research in philosophy and religion. I will not appear in the film and will abstain from including any personal opinions thereof. Rather, the film's aim is to provide a provocative look into the strength and popularity of the New Age Movement through the vehicle of Church Universal and Triumphant in the hopes of generating and promoting honest, rational discourse about religion and philosophy outside of exclusively academic circles.

Introduction

Church Universal and Triumphant was formed by Elizabeth Clare Prophet as a branch of The Summit Lighthouse, an organization founded by Mark L. Prophet in 1958 and inspired by the teachings of The Theosophical Society. It is considered one of the first New Age organizations and, although under new leadership, continues to operate out of its headquarters in Montana. The organization, which had its height in membership in the 1980s and 1990s, has a controversial past (as is common with many New Religious Movements of the 20th century). Several individuals have spoken out publicly against the leadership and teachings of the organization, especially accusing Church Universal and Triumphant of financial fraud and intellectual deceit. This accusation is a common one against affluent religious or spiritual movements formed within the last several hundred years and the accusation has been especially

frequent against recent teachings contained in popular New Age literature. The strength and popularity of what is loosely referred to as the New Age Movement cannot be understated and its influence remains substantial and far-reaching. The community under investigation is expected to appear as a microcosm of the movement overall and serve as a revealing example of how religious traditions are born and sustained.

The aim of this documentary is not to be didactic (or, as Bill Nichols would define the form, expository) as audiences of *The Discovery Channel* and *The History Channel* would expect structurally and stylistically from a documentary film. Rather, this documentary on Church Universal and Triumphant will resemble the even-handed approach of *Jesus Camp* (2006). It will also come on the heels of polarizing films like *Religulous* (2008) and *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* (2008); films that propagandize their position through *ad hominem* attacks on their opponent. *Church Universal and Triumphant* will be predominantly observational in approach while still utilizing participatory-style interviews.

Specific Objective

By documenting Church Universal and Triumphant at the Royal Teton Ranch in Montana, my objective is to introduce and address – however broadly – major questions in the academic study of religion including, but not limited to: the verifiability of a religious/spiritual tradition's truth claims, the genealogy of a religious/spiritual tradition's ideology and the social and political significance of the religious/spiritual tradition in question. Fairly documenting a New Age community on film while simultaneously engaging in a rigorous academic study of the given community (and the New Age Movement at large, which includes New Religious Movements) will allow for an examination of the New Age Movement that is based in the

academic study of religion and therefore more likely to offer its viewer valuable insight into the movement in relation to broader philosophical questions. This short film will document Church Universal and Triumphant in a way that allows for a discussion of the New Age Movement as a whole, with emphasis on its strong appeal to science and esoteric truths.

Rationale

The New Age Movement, in its various manifestations, has historically been widely represented from the perspective of Christian apologetics, New Age adherents themselves, or otherwise casually interested media sources. Unfortunately, due to its young age in comparison with orthodox world traditions, rigorous academic research and theorizing on the New Age Movement has seldom been undertaken and there remains a minimal amount written on the subject relatively speaking. The principal researcher aims to provide a documentary that highlights the significance of the movement by including extensive footage of the chosen community's practices, interviews with members that explicate the community's core beliefs (specifically those that reflect common New Age tenets), interviews with academics or professionals that place the community in historical perspective, and the inclusion of other relevant scientific and philosophical material (e.g. the debate over pseudoscience, interpretations of quantum physics, philosophy of science, and parapsychology).

Instead of approaching the aforementioned content from the vantage point of solely a filmmaker, the content will be approached and constructed filmicly with an 'academic sensibility'. If successful, this will ideally lead to more films produced with an emphasis on clarity and reliable, rigorous research; restoring intellectualism to the medium of the documentary film, specifically those that deal with religious and philosophical issues.

Methods

In March of 2009 I traveled to conduct research at the Special Collections Library of Duke University and The Rhine Center, which is located on Duke University's West Campus. While at the Rhine Center, Dr. Diana Pasulka and I were able to interview Sally Feather Rhine, the daughter of J.B. Rhine, widely considered the pioneering father of Parapsychology research in the United States. Having received an invitation to film the center in the future, I made plans to return to The Rhine Center next fall to interview Sally Feather Rhine for *Church Universal and Triumphant*, using Parapsychology research to shed light on the spiritual practitioner's invested interest in science. Relevant interviews such as this one will serve to place in perspective the focus of the documentary: an annual conference in Corwin Springs, Montana entitled "Freedom Conference" that will take place between June 30th and July 6th of 2009. With the direction of Dr. Lou Buttino, this Honors Thesis will be organized into three acts, forming a cohesive narrative that clearly addresses, as unequivocally as possible, the strength and popularity of the New Age Movement, its main appeal, how it answers pertinent religious and philosophical questions, and the implications this has for the future.

This honors thesis will take place over three semesters: Spring 2009, Summer 2009, and Fall 2009. Spring 2009 will be dedicated to research and planning. Summer I and II will be dedicated to filming on location. Finally, Fall 2009 will be devoted to filming and editing the short documentary. John Moore, a former UNCW graduate currently in graduate school at the University of Texas-Austin, has signed on to serve as an expert in cinematography and camerawork, and current UNCW student Brandon Allen Smith has signed on as the primary audio technician. The documentary will be shot on video with a Panasonic P2 high-definition

camera. Additional equipment currently includes Kino lights for optimum visual quality in interviews, Sennheiser microphones and bounce boards for natural lighting.

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1975: The Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT, known to its members simply as "the Church") was incorporated as a non-profit religious organization. The Summit Lighthouse continued as publisher of the Church's teachings. The Church held a large conference near Mount Shasta in California. Does the Church Universal and Triumphant's doctrine line up with the Bible? That's the question we're looking to answer. Church Universal and Triumphant believe: that there is in each person a higher self and a lower self. The higher self is unchanging, connected to all matter, space, and time. The physical body is the lower changing self. CHURCH UNIVERSAL AND TRIUMPHANT is a modern movement that has its roots in various New Age predecessor groups, such as Theosophy, New Thought, and the Saint Germain Foundation. The movement started its existence in 1958 as Summit Lighthouse, a Washington, D.C.-based group founded by Mark L. Prophet (1918-1973). Summit Lighthouse adopted this concept and articulated it in a spiritual anthropology that posited a tripartite human nature consisting of the I AM presence (the divine spark or God self), the Christ consciousness (an interior mediator between the human and divine planes of existence), and the human soul (a mortal component that could become immortal if ascension was achieved).