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## Broadening the Spectrum: The Religious Dimensions of the Rainbow Gatherings

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Broadening the Spectrum: The Religious  
Dimensions of the Rainbow Gatherings

by

Seth M. Walker

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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# Broadening the Spectrum: The Religious Dimensions of the Rainbow Gatherings

Seth M. Walker

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to specifically address the religious dimensions of the Rainbow Gatherings. The fundamental question directing this analysis is: “Are the Rainbow Gatherings religious in character?” This thesis specifically asks whether or not the Rainbow Gatherings satisfy certain identifiable features of religion, and if doing so, do they qualify as a form of religion? I engage this question by analyzing the Rainbow Gatherings in terms of two particular definitions of religion: Clifford Geertz’s “functional” definition and Bryan R. Wilson’s “substantive” definition. This allows me to analyze the Rainbow Gatherings from the perspective of the two major approaches to defining religion. This thesis also explores the broader differences and implications of these two types of definitions in academia, as well as the significance this has for future studies of this sort. Conclusive results indicate that the Gatherings conform to both definitions in some ways, but not in others. The results also designate which of the two definitions the Gatherings satisfy more inclusively. Thus, this analysis not only examines whether or not these gatherings qualify as a form of religion, but also examines how these definitions of religion illuminate features of the Rainbow Gathering, and how this relates to the scholarly distinction of these two types of definitions.

## Introduction

### *Background Information*

National Gatherings of the Rainbow Family of Living Light have occurred annually on national forest land since 1972.<sup>1</sup> These Gatherings are intended to promote shared values and principles of peace, love, nonviolence, and nonhierarchical egalitarianism. Michael I. Niman has studied the Rainbows in great depth. He maintains that “The Rainbow Family of Living Light is an ‘intentional group’ whose members purposefully gather together to enact a supposedly shared ideology.”<sup>2</sup> It consists of furthering world peace through prayer and meditation, along with the creation of a peaceful, cohesive nonhierarchical society that can serve as a model for the reformation of the industrialized world, or “Babylon.”<sup>3</sup> However, left out of Niman’s examination are the religious dimensions of the Rainbow Gatherings. The purpose of this thesis is, in part, to rectify this mistake by specifically examining their religious character. Such an inquiry will allow for a further understanding of their guiding principles and values. In other words, viewing the Gatherings as religion suggests that their principles and values are not driven by politics or economics; thus, the “movement” is not to be understood as a political or economic movement, but as something much different. Moreover, it suggests that their motive for changing the rest of the world is rooted in a type of societal

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<sup>1</sup> Michael I. Niman, preface to *People of the Rainbow: A Nomadic Utopia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), xi

<sup>2</sup> Michael I. Niman, *People of the Rainbow: A Nomadic Utopia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 31.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

reform that displays an understanding that communal balance and harmony, as well as balance and harmony with the Earth, is a motive that occupies a completely different sphere. As a result, these Gatherings can then be understood as filling a much different sentiment in individual Rainbow lives than previously imagined. The fundamental question, then, is: “Are the Rainbow Gatherings religious in character?” This thesis specifically asks whether or not the Rainbow Gatherings satisfy certain identifiable features of religion, and if doing so, do they qualify as a form of religion? I engage this question by analyzing the Rainbow Gatherings in terms of two particular definitions of religion: a “functional” definition and a “substantive” definition. This allows me to analyze the Rainbow Gatherings from the perspective of the two major approaches to defining religion, allowing me to utilize an inclusive definition, as well as an exclusive definition; the former allows for much more phenomena to be classified as religion, while the latter does not. Thus, this analysis not only examines whether or not these gatherings qualify as a form of religion, but also examines how these definitions of religion illuminate features of the Rainbow Gatherings.

### *Methodology*

The definitions I will use in this analysis, to be more closely examined below, are those provided by Clifford Geertz and Bryan R. Wilson. Geertz's definition is functional in nature, and Wilson's is substantive. These definitions were selected because both are offered by highly acclaimed scholars, and have been widely utilized in contemporary studies of religious phenomena, e.g., various cultural events, such as Star Trek conventions and the Burning Man Festival, and systems such as Scientology. Moreover, their definitions, as will be explained, provide adequate examples of the categorical distinction of "functional" and "substantive." This thesis will demonstrate how Wilson's definition (enumerated in a twenty-item list), and how Geertz's definition, both correspond to the Gatherings of the Rainbow Family. However, instances in which the Gatherings do not correspond to either of these two approaches will also be taken into consideration. I outline the basic components of each definition and then use them to examine the Rainbow Gatherings. This methodology allows for the specification of the ways in which Rainbow Gatherings exhibit similarities and differences with the characteristics of religion given in each of these definitional approaches. I exhaust Wilson's twenty items throughout this analysis by examining each one where it appears most relevant, in the context of Geertz's components, thus creating a five-part organizational structure, which, as will be demonstrated, follows Geertz's definition. In other words, as each component of Geertz's definition is analyzed, I will also analyze any items on Wilson's list that are relevant to each component as well.

The outcome of this analysis will place a seemingly week-long vacation on national forest land in the context of a religious phenomenon, broadening the “spectrum” of areas through which this cultural event can be understood and evaluated. Moreover, it will examine the Rainbows in the context of religion by using two types of definitions and will, as a result, evaluate their adequacy when dealing with these types of phenomena. The results of this analysis will indicate the ways in which the Gatherings can be understood as religion, and the ways in which they cannot, from two completely different perspectives. The contrasting approaches will provide not only a difference in perspective, but also an understanding as to how definitions of religion work, and in particular, how they work when applied to instances that are not traditionally understood as being “religious.” That is, this thesis will also demonstrate which type of definition is more inclusive, with particular reference to the two that are specifically used, in an analysis of this sort.

My anticipation is that this analysis will yield data that corresponds to Geertz and Wilson’s understanding of religion; specifically, the data is predicted to correspond more so to Geertz’s definition. Likewise, I also anticipate that the research will yield data that is contrary to both of these approaches. However, it is through these findings that this thesis will be able to provide conclusive results that not only indicate which definition may be more inclusive in this kind of analysis, but whether or not the Gatherings can be understood as religious gatherings in light of this data as well.



## Definitional Differences

### *Functional and Substantive Definitions*

In this section, I will use these two definitions (functional and substantive) to examine religious features of the Rainbow Gatherings. Broadly considered, religious definitions typically fall into two general categories. The first of these categories is “functional,” which defines religion by what it does, e.g., helping people find meaning and cope with circumstances surrounding them. According to Catherine Albanese, “Functional definitions of religion emphasize the effects of religion in actual life. They stress the systems of meaning-making the religion provides and how it helps people deal with the ills, insecurities, and catastrophes of living.”<sup>4</sup> However, while functional definitions may explore how religion makes “systems of meaning,” they are not typically concerned with meaning itself; they are not so much concerned with social meanings, but with how things work. The second type are “substantive,” or “essentialist,” definitions, which define religion as what it is, based on some sort of inherent quality, or “essence,” usually with reference to a higher being or beings. Again, following Albanese, “Substantive definitions of religion focus on the inner core, essence, or nature of religion and define it by this thing-in-itself. They tend to emphasize a relationship with a higher being or beings (God or the Gods) and to be favored by theologians and philosophers.”<sup>5</sup> While Albanese emphasizes the distinction between these two definitions as one that

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<sup>4</sup> Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1981), xxi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

revolves more or less around the presence of a god or gods, a more basic distinction is between the natural and the supernatural.

Steve Bruce also examines the distinction between these two definitions. According to Bruce, functional definitions “identify religion in terms of what it does,” such as providing solutions to problems or providing answers to fundamental questions.<sup>6</sup> Substantive definitions “identify religion in terms of what it is,” such as beliefs or actions that presuppose supernatural existence or power.<sup>7</sup> Neither of these definitions, however, escapes criticism or problems. As Bruce states, “Functional definitions may count as religious things which do not on the face of it look terribly religious and which their adherents regard as secular.”<sup>8</sup> This is a common criticism of scholars who utilize functional definitions in their analyses of phenomena that are not traditionally understood as being religious, such as Star Trek conventions or music festivals. Likewise, substantive definitions encounter problems. Although they may be “closer to the understanding of the average Westerner,” Bruce states, “when we seek to unpack the notion of ‘superhuman’ or ‘supernatural,’ we find difficulties with some non-Western or traditional cultures”; for example, witchcraft or ancestor worship.<sup>9</sup> Put differently, it is difficult to specify the essence of the supernatural since what it is varies historically and cross-culturally. These criticisms are particularly noticeable throughout this thesis, and are examined in much more detail in the conclusion.

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<sup>6</sup> Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 7.

To put the analysis of the third part of this thesis into context, two examples of each type of definition will be provided below, which will allow for a comparison and contrast between the specific definitions used in this analysis and others in the study of religion. As one of the more “classic” definitions of religion, Emile Durkheim’s understanding is functional. According to Durkheim, a religion is “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church.”<sup>10</sup> As can be seen, the basis of Durkheim’s definition is characteristically sociological. What religion *does*, then, is unifies individuals into a collective entity around particular beliefs and practices, thus making religion more of a communal experience than that of an individual one. However, Durkheim’s definition necessarily entails the concern with only “sacred things”; that is, anything that is not sacred is excluded from this understanding of religion.

Karl Marx provides another functional definition of religion. According to Marx, religion is a product of man: “*Man makes religion*, religion does not make man... This state, this society, produce religion” (this is reminiscent of Durkheim’s understanding that individuals create a “Church”).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Marx states, “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the *opium* of the people... Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, religion is

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<sup>10</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press/Macmillan, 1915), 62.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (1844), as cited in Reinhold Niebuhr, *Marx and Engels on Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 41-42.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

preconceived as a societal crutch on which individuals lean when needed. As can be seen, then, religion exists as a human creation, functioning to alleviate the hardships of those in dire situations. For Marx, this is unfortunate because it violates the basic nature of humanity, to be free of illusions.

Another “classic” definition is Rudolf Otto’s substantive definition. For Otto, religion is “the holy,” but more specifically, it is the experience of the “wholly other,” that is, the experience of “the holy.”<sup>13</sup> This experience is defined by Otto as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (the mysterious and awe-inspiring, though fascinating, experience of the non-rational essence of “the holy” – the “numinous”).<sup>14</sup> Otto understands religion as a specific type of phenomenon – one necessitating the experience of the ineffable “holy,” which, as Albanese and Bruce explain above, classifies it as being substantive in nature.

Having already contributed to the examination of the two main types of definitions of religion, Steve Bruce also adds to the dialogue by providing his own, substantive definition. According to Bruce, religion “consists of beliefs, actions, and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose.”<sup>15</sup> Bruce’s definition hardly needs an explication; religion *is* something that presupposes a supernatural dimension, which *is* to be apprehended by means of a belief system, prescribed actions, and institutional organization. Moreover, and important in setting Bruce’s definition apart from others, the supernatural dimension has a “moral purpose”; it does not arbitrarily

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<sup>13</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-16; 31.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce, 7.

exist. However, it could be argued that all meanings are “moral” meanings, in that all meanings evaluate and, therefore, specify right and wrong, and are, therefore, “moral.”

These are only a small sampling of the many definitions of religion. They have been provided so that the forthcoming definitions, which will be used in the analysis that follows, can be understood more thoroughly as examples of definitions from particular categorical distinctions. As mentioned above, the functional definition I am going to be using in my analysis is Clifford Geertz’s, and the substantive definition is Bryan R. Wilson’s.

*Clifford Geertz and Bryan R. Wilson*

Clifford Geertz offers the first of the two approaches taken in this analysis. In Geertz's 1966 essay "Religion as a Cultural System," he outlines his definition of religion. For him, religion is:

(1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>16</sup>

Although there is a noticeable "substantive" aspect of this definition, as the first part of the definition proclaims (religion *is* a "system of symbols"), the basis of Geertz's approach is functional. Religion, for Geertz, does not revolve around a single set of prescribed beliefs and a supernatural order, *per se*. Rather, it "acts" for humanity, to do certain things and provide certain answers (establish moods and motivations, formulate conceptions of order and existence, which are then "clothed" in rituals, or "an aura of factuality"). In other words, it is what religion does rather than its content that matters most to Geertz. Geertz's definition has an explicit relation to Durkheim's as well. He invokes Durkheim's sociological approach; Geertz's revolves around a common "system of symbols" (a "Church," Durkheim would say), which entails the unification of the corresponding culture. Likewise, Marx's definition of religion, as a functional alleviator of pain and oppression, relates to Geertz's understanding of religious moods and motivations.

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<sup>16</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 90.

Bryan R. Wilson's substantive definition is the second of the two definitions used to analyze the Rainbow Gatherings. Wilson does not have a concise definition of religion formulated in the way Geertz does. He does, however, outline the "principal characteristics" of religion by means of a twenty-item probability list, which is based on particular beliefs revolving around a transcendent, supernatural dimension. In other words, the list is not to be understood as universal to all religious systems; the list contains features that are usually characteristic of religion. Wilson describes it as an "enumeration of features and functions which are frequently found in religion, and which are identified as such."<sup>17</sup> However, this list necessitates a dependence upon supernatural "agencies," thereby predicating any functional aspects of this list on a supernatural, or sacred, dimension. His list is as follows:

- (a) belief in an agency (or agencies) which transcend(s) normal sense perception and which may even include an entire postulated order of being;
- (b) belief that such an agency not only affects the natural world and the social order, but operates directly upon it and may even have created it;
- (c) the belief that at some times in the past explicit supernatural intervention in human affairs has occurred;
- (d) supernatural agencies are held to have superintended human history and destiny: when these agencies are anthropomorphically depicted they are usually credited with definite purposes;
- (e) the belief is maintained that man's fortune in this life and in afterlife (or lives) depends on relationships established with, or in accordance with, these transcendental agencies.
- (f) it is often (but not invariably) believed that whilst transcendent agencies may arbitrarily dictate an individual's destiny, the individual may, by behaving in

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<sup>17</sup> Bryan R. Wilson, "Scientology: An Analysis and Comparison of its Religious Systems and Doctrines," appendix two to *Scientology: Theology & Practice of a Contemporary Religion*, by Church of Scientology (California: Bridge Publications, 1998), 116.

prescribed ways, influence his experience either in this life or in future life (lives) or both;

(g) there are prescribed actions for individual, collective or representative performances – namely, rituals;

(h) elements of placatory action persist (even in advanced religions) by which individuals or groups may supplicate for special assistance from supernatural sources;

(i) expressions of devotion, gratitude, obeisance or obedience are offered by, or in some cases, are required of believers, usually in the presence of symbolic representations of the supernatural agency(ies) of the faith;

(j) language, objects, places, edifices, or seasons that are particularly identified with the supernatural become sacralized and may themselves become objects of reverence;

(k) there are regular performances of ritual or exposition, expressions of devotion, celebration, fasting, collective penance, pilgrimage and re-enactments or commemorations of episodes in the earthly life of deities, prophets or great teachers;

(l) occasions of worship and exposition of teachings produce the experience of a sense of community and relationships of goodwill, fellowship and common identity;

(m) moral rules are often enjoined upon believers, although the area of their concern varies: they may be couched in legalistic and ritualistic terms, or they may be canvassed more as conformity with the spirit of a less specific, higher ethic;

(n) seriousness of purpose, sustained commitment and lifelong devotion are normative requirements;

(o) according to their performance, believers accumulate merit or demerit to which a moral economy of reward and punishment is attached. The precise nexus between action and consequence varies from automatic effects from given causes to the belief that personal demerit may be cancelled by devotional and ritual acts, by confession and repentance, or by special intercession from supernatural agents;

(p) there is usually a special class of religious functionaries who serve as custodians of sacred objects, scriptures, and places; specialists in doctrine, ritual and pastoral guidance;



(q) such specialists are usually paid for their services, whether by tribute, reward for specific services, or by instituted stipend;

(r) when specialists devote themselves to the systematization of doctrine, the claim is regularly made that religious knowledge provides solutions for all problems, and explains the meaning and purpose of life, often including purported explanations of the origin and operation of the physical universe and of human psychology;

(s) legitimacy is claimed for religious knowledge and institutions by reference to revelation and tradition: innovation is regularly justified as restoration;

(t) claims to the truth of teaching and efficacy of ritual are not subjected to empirical test, since goals are ultimately transcendent and faith is demanded both for goals and for the arbitrary means recommended for their attainment.<sup>18</sup>

Wilson's list is quite exhaustive, as a definition of religion. However, as he states, these items are simply "probable"; in other words, not every single item on this list must be included in order for a phenomenon to be classified as religion. The first few items make it clear that a supernatural agency is understood as being involved, which is congruent with Otto's experience of "the holy" and Bruce's "supernatural entities." Likewise, a moral dimension, which again reflects Bruce's understanding, is contained within Wilson's list as well. Some items, however, contain various sorts of ritualistic dimensions, which actually relate to Geertz's definition. Moreover, as is the case with item "1," Wilson includes a communal aspect on his list, which is reminiscent of Durkheim's definition. As can be seen, then, Wilson's list, although necessarily substantive, given that the items do revolve around supernatural agencies, actually contains an assortment of items that relate to both functional and substantive definitions of religion. However, as previously stated, this functionality is rooted in a supernatural perspective.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

## Are Rainbow Gatherings Religious Gatherings?

To reiterate the methodology of this thesis, I will use two types of definitions and, specifically, two unique versions of these definitions, to address the question of whether or not the Rainbow Gatherings are religious. Even though this thesis will explore the possibility that the Rainbow Gatherings can be understood as religious gatherings, by means of the two definitions presented above, there is, however, anecdotal evidence unrelated to these definitions that religious elements are present, which will be included in the sections that follow. For instance, there are various camps throughout the Gatherings that are explicitly religious, which indicates a pluralism of religious sensibilities. This suggests, then, that religion is already considered to be an important part of life to the Rainbows, and is included as a dominant factor in their idealized, future societal construct. To further elaborate on what the Rainbow Gatherings are, as was only briefly mentioned in the introduction, the Gatherings are held to promote specific shared values and principles. In addition, they also propose the feasibility of a cooperative utopian community living in harmony with the Earth. They are “governed” by a council that is open to all who wish to participate. There is no voting, in regard to decision-making; all decisions are based on consensus. The Rainbows distinguish themselves and their temporary utopian communities from the outside world by designating this surrounding world as “Babylon.”<sup>19</sup> According to Garrick Beck, one of the founders of the original Rainbow Gathering, “we saw ourselves not so much as innovators as we did

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<sup>19</sup> Niman, xi.

messengers called upon to revive an old form of human congregation and communion.” Originally, the Gathering was referred to as the “World Family Gathering,” reflecting the view that the event was one in which “people of all races, nations and class could come together as one family.” Subsequently, the group became known as the “Rainbow Family,” and thus, the Gathering as the “Rainbow Gathering,” because, as Beck states, “we felt we were part of a spectrum of all races and peoples.”<sup>20</sup> Although there are a number of regional Gatherings held throughout the year, the North American “National Gathering” is held from July 1<sup>st</sup> to July 7<sup>th</sup>, with about a one-month setup, or “Seed Camp,” taking place prior to it, and about a one-month clean-up taking place thereafter. The Gathering comes to a “climax” on July 4<sup>th</sup>, during which everyone participates in a silent meditation for world peace.<sup>21</sup> As the Rainbow Family’s “Mini-Manual” makes clear, “On July 4<sup>th</sup>, from daybreak till high noon, the camp is hushed, hopefully no talking at all...People gather in Main Circle to meditate for World Peace and the Healing of the Earth. This is a time of profound energy.”<sup>22</sup> These understandings and views will be taken into consideration in a critical manner throughout the sections that follow.

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<sup>20</sup> Garrick Beck, “A Gathering For All People: 20 Years of Rainbow,” *High Times*, July 1991, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Niman, 32.

<sup>22</sup> “Rainbow Family of Living Light Mini-Manual,” Rainbow Guide, <http://rainbowguide.info/index.php>, 3.

### *Symbol-System and Agency*

Turning now to the analysis proper, I will evaluate each of the components of Geertz's definition, as well as the relevant items on Wilson's list, in a five-part format, following the division of Geertz's outline of religion. The first aspect of Geertz's definition states that the "symbols" in a given symbol-system can either be objects, acts, events, qualities, or relations that serve "as a vehicle for a conception," i.e., as a catalyst for symbolic representation.<sup>23</sup> The Gathering of the Rainbows can be understood as a symbolic event that expresses such an inherent conception or meaning. Likewise, the various sorts of "symbols" utilized throughout the Gatherings, such as the Council "focal objects" (explored in more depth below), also correspond to this aspect. Geertz further states that these symbol-systems can be understood as "models," because the sets of symbols "'model' relations among entities, processes, or what-have-you in physical, organic, social, or psychological systems by 'paralleling,' 'imitating,' or 'simulating' them." Furthermore, these "models" are twofold in meaning: they provide models "of" and models "for" reality. Models "of" reality are understood as the "synoptic formulations of the character of reality," and models "for" reality are understood as the "templates for producing reality with such a character."<sup>24</sup> In other words, models "of" reality depict reality as it is, while models "for" reality depict reality as it ought to be. As a model "of" reality, the Rainbow Family organizes and constructs the Gathering by means of its worldview; for example, the setup of the various camps and kitchens

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<sup>23</sup> Geertz, 90.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

throughout the Gathering, as well as the way in which certain things like the Trade Circle and Main Council function, reflect Rainbow ideals.<sup>25</sup> The Rainbow Gatherings can be understood as models “of” reality because they are organized around these inherent symbolic forms (the worldview/ideology). As a model “for” reality, the Rainbow Gatherings depict a seemingly utopian environment that Rainbow Family members desire to extend into the world around them; for instance, ideals of unconditional love towards others, world peace, nonviolence, egalitarianism, and the overall reformation of the outside world, or Babylon. Likewise, the Gatherings can be understood as models “for” reality because they are temporal-spatial representations of the desired outcome for the rest of society. However, it would be naïve to consider this type of correlation a rare occurrence; it could also be argued that any cultural phenomenon could be apprehended as a symbol-system, in that culturally imbedded symbols make up the conceptual notion to gather for a particular cause or reason in the first place.

This line of reasoning is congruent with item “a” on Bryan R. Wilson’s list: “belief in an agency (or agencies) which transcend(s) normal sense perception and which may even include an entire postulated order of being.”<sup>26</sup> At one level, this item necessarily falsifies any sort of correlation to the Rainbows; “agency,” in this context more than likely refers to some sort of transcendent entity or being. However, this need not be the only interpretation. A more generous interpretation would view the nature of

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<sup>25</sup> Rainbow “Trade Circles” are akin to a type of “Barter Lane,” at which handmade items are abundant; bartering is the accepted form of exchange at a Gathering – all else is considered “taboo,” as it is seen as challenging the Gathering’s noncommercial nature (see Niman, 71-72). The “Main Council” is often simply referred to as “Council,” and, as was briefly mentioned above, meets to form decisions about various Rainbow matters. However, what is important about the Council, as well as any smaller councils, is the fact that the decisions are made based on consensus – on the behalf of everyone who is participating, which can range drastically (see “The Rainbow Family Council” in Niman, 38-59).

<sup>26</sup> Wilson, 116.

the Rainbow Gathering (i.e., its symbol-system qualia) as a transcendent agency; everything for which the Gathering stands, as a system of symbolic representation, escapes “normal sense perception,” in that it stands for an order of existence and being. This relates to the second item on Wilson’s list as well: “belief that such an agency not only affects the natural world and the social order, but operates directly upon it and may even have created it.”<sup>27</sup> Based on the alternative interpretation of item “a” above, it is easily recognizable that the “transcendent” Rainbow worldview would necessarily affect those under its influence and in awe of it. In other words, if the Rainbow worldview is understood as the transcendent agency involved, then the principles, which correspond to this agency, and which individual Rainbows value and hold dear, are a clear indication of item “b” at work. Moreover, this preceding agency must also be responsible for creating the societal situation of a Rainbow Gathering; without it, there would have not been a basis to do such a thing.

While the “agency” in this context is understood as the Rainbow idealized worldview, the Rainbows do recognize traditional, or conventional, religious elements as well. That said, item “c” on Wilson’s list correlates well with the presence of Rainbow scouts: “the belief that at some times in the past explicit supernatural intervention in human affairs has occurred.”<sup>28</sup> Rainbow scouts are, at times, understood as being guided by “the spirit” when seeking out a new location for the next Gathering (which, historically, is commonly reported among various religious traditions). Niman reports that in 1990 the site that scouts from Minnesota had found did not have “a reliable source of potable drinking water,” but the scouts had, however, “felt ‘the spirit’ had guided them

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

to the proper site.”<sup>29</sup> This also somewhat relates to item “s” as well: “legitimacy is claimed for religious knowledge and institutions by reference to revelation and tradition: innovation is regularly justified as restoration.”<sup>30</sup> While there are not any superceding religious “institutions” directing the Gatherings, paranormal, or supernatural, “knowledge” of where to assemble, geographically, can be correlated to the “revelation” of “the spirit” in guiding the scouts. “Innovation” on the part of the Rainbows (that is, innovating a seemingly better way of life), may not be justified as “restoration,” per se (unless one takes into consideration Niman’s reasoning that Rainbow ideals are based on romanticized Native American ways of life), but as a re-development of society.<sup>31</sup> Similar to both of these items, item “e” states: “the belief is maintained that man’s fortune in this life and in afterlife (or lives) depends on relationships established with, or in accordance with, these transcendental agencies.”<sup>32</sup> While the “afterlife” is not a concern for the Rainbows, the basis of this life is. Establishing good rapport with the Rainbow agency is believed to ensure a successful and meaningful life experience. In other words, Rainbows maintain that by living by their shared values and principles, one will live a truer and more meaningful, as well as happier, life, which serves as part of the basis for their desire to reform the rest of society.

However, item “d,” which states, “supernatural agencies are held to have superintended human history and destiny: when these agencies are anthropomorphically depicted they are usually credited with definite purposes,” does not really apply to the

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<sup>29</sup> Niman, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Wilson., 117.

<sup>31</sup> For more on romanticized Native American culture in the context of the Rainbows, see “Fakelore” in Niman, 131-147.

<sup>32</sup> Wilson., 116.

context of the Rainbow Gatherings.<sup>33</sup> The “agency” involved (from the perspective of it being the Rainbow worldview) is not understood as having an intended historical precondition for humanity in the sense that a traditional “god,” or group of “gods” may. This is a clear indication of the way in which the “agency” aspect of Wilson’s list exists as a falsifier in the context of the Rainbows; it is relatively clear that the “supernatural agencies” mentioned in this item probably refer to actual beings. Although, it could be argued that individual Rainbows represent the anthropomorphic representation of this “agency.” While this may not be the case for Wilson, it can certainly function for the Rainbows in this way. Item “f” is similar to “d” in regard to destiny: “it is often (but not invariably) believed that whilst transcendent agencies may arbitrarily dictate an individual’s destiny, the individual may, by behaving in prescribed ways, influence his experience either in this life or in future life (lives) or both.”<sup>34</sup> The Rainbow agency does not actually “dictate” one’s destiny. It may influence the way he or she might live, but it certainly does not dictate destiny; however, destiny, in this instance, corresponds to a lifestyle that is incongruent with Babylon. Likewise, behaving in “prescribed ways” does not have an explicit effect on one’s destiny either; one may live a fuller, or more pleasant, life as a result, thereby influencing the “experience,” but it has nothing to do with destiny.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



### *Moods, Motivations, and Devotion*

The second aspect of Geertz's definition of religion concerns the moods and motivations that these "models" arouse. According to Geertz, these motivations are "chronic inclination[s] to perform certain sorts of acts and experience certain sorts of feeling in certain sorts of situations." In other words, motivations are what impel one to act in a particular way or to have a particular emotional state; they are not acts or feelings in and of themselves.<sup>35</sup> Rainbow motivations can easily be characterized as the peaceful, loving, and nonviolent tendencies and inclinations that each Rainbow embodies. Moreover, these motivations are what drive the Rainbows' efforts to reform the rest of society, thus reflecting how critical they are in this context. As for moods, Geertz states that they refer to those emotional states that are brought about by particular motivations; they range from "exultation to melancholy, from self-confidence to self-pity, from an incorrigible playfulness to a bland listlessness."<sup>36</sup> In the context of the Rainbows, the corresponding moods would pertain to any sort of emotional state that each member would be inclined to feel, under circumstances relating to his or her general order of existence (i.e., his or her state of being) within the Gathering. Although, not everyone at a Gathering may be experiencing a peaceful, loving, or similar emotional state; some may just be there to "hang out," have fun, or "get high." In the case of a phenomenon known as the A-Camp, those "Rainbows" are the realization of the exact opposite of these kinds of motivations. As an abridged version of "Alcohol Camp," the A-Camp, paradoxically,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 97.

manifests excessive drinking and violence – activities that are strictly taboo at a Gathering. They are “usually located on the outer perimeter of the Gathering site,” and individuals there “drink alcohol freely and usually to excess,” resulting in a dichotomization of the Gathering “proper” and the A-Camp.<sup>37</sup> However, these differences in motivation do not necessarily negate this aspect of Geertz as being fulfilled. Rather, it can be seen as an example of a ritual inversion of an ideal community within the context of the Rainbow Gatherings, demonstrating what is right through the presentation of what is wrong. As Niman reports, “Rainbows view ‘A’ Campers as being ‘almost home.’”<sup>38</sup> And as one Rainbow states, “I think [‘A’ Camp] needs to be approached as if there’s no question that you’re my brother, that you’re my sister, and we love you.”<sup>39</sup> While alcohol and hard narcotics are strictly taboo, marijuana is often referred to as a sacramental element, or “sacred herb.”<sup>40</sup> According to Beck, “For many of us (though by no means all of us), marijuana is used as a sacramental medicine to bring us closer to the natural Living Spirit and to help us heal our bodies, hearts, and minds. Similarly, at a Gathering one may find peyote meetings or sacred mushroom ceremonies that carry on the traditions of the tribal peoples who have been using these substances for centuries.”<sup>41</sup>

Item “i” on Wilson’s list is mostly dissimilar to this aspect, but there are some exceptions: “expressions of devotion, gratitude, obeisance or obedience are offered by, or in some cases, are required of believers, usually in the presence of symbolic

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<sup>37</sup> Niman, 125.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Catherine Walsh, “Perspectives,” *America*, July 29, 1995-August 5, 1995 in the Academic Search Premier, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9508070356&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>41</sup> Beck, 60.

representations of the supernatural agency(ies) of the faith.”<sup>42</sup> Although the “symbolic representations” do exist, it does not appear that the symbols actually necessitate devotion, except with the “focal objects” passed around a Council circle. This is a common feature of Rainbow Councils and is used in order to designate the current speaker; Rainbow Councils are typically formed in a circular pattern. The object has traditionally been a feather, but it has also taken on the form of a bowl, stone, and even a shoe. “Focused listening is key to all Council procedures,” Niman states. Interrupting the current speaker warrants cries of “respect the feather” from those around the circle. Conversely, when those listening are in agreement with the speaker, it is not uncommon to hear “ho!” shouted in acceptance.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the Council “pays respect” to the speaker, regardless of what his or her “class status would be outside in Babylon.”<sup>44</sup>

In the context of the perspective of a Rainbow agency, expressions of devotion and gratitude can be understood as the resulting moods from the motivations inspired by this agency; however, there are not any particular moods that are “required.” The “symbolic representations” of the Rainbow agency can be argued to correspond to “peace signs” and “hearts,” or artistic depictions of “rainbows,” as well as others. Even certain types of apparel can be understood as such as well. One of the most basic changes in apparel that can be found at Gatherings is tie-dye. According to Robert Sardiello, it is recognized among many as “a very popular form of expression within the hippie

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<sup>42</sup> Wilson, 116.

<sup>43</sup> Niman, 42.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 41.

subculture.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, in regard to Dead Heads, who are commonly found at the Gatherings, “it is a representation of their membership within a community that shares a particular set of values encoded in a mythic model.”<sup>46</sup> That is to say, the tie-dye can come to represent the values and principles for which they stand.

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Sardiello, “Secular Rituals in Popular Culture: A Case for Grateful Dead Concerts and Dead Head Identity,” in *Adolescents and Their Music: If It’s Too Loud, You’re Too Old*, ed. by Jonathon S. Epstein (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), 126.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

### *Conceptions of Reality and Religious Functionaries*

Geertz's third aspect, which deals with how these moods and motivations assist one in forming conceptions of reality, explains how "religious" activities and feelings differ from other sorts of activities and feelings. A *religious* conception "springs" from a conception "of all-pervading vitality," i.e., religious conceptions "spring" from those moods and motivations that affect all aspects of life.<sup>47</sup> The Rainbow worldview, or agency, as outlined earlier, as well as its formation, relates to this aspect. In conjunction with the principles of peace, love, and nonviolence already mentioned, according to the Rainbow Family's 1977 "Declaration of Interdependence," the Rainbows understand their purpose as that of bringing forth an "alternative system of spirit, supply, law, organization and trade, and so become the new humans of the Lord of Love's Plan for Earth," which is yet another explicit religious element within their construct of reality.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, they seek to "end forever the disharmonies and injustice among nations, peoples, and governments," further affirming a utopian ideology.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, as outlined in the "Declaration," the Rainbows,

recognize the essential unity of all beings, the oneness and connectedness that is so much a part of fabric of life...We rely on cooperation, respect, goodwill, and equal rights to exist[,] create[,] and recreate...We affirm the common desire for wholeness in relationships...we will educate ourselves in wisdom, knowledge and charity, and will allow all people to do as they please, given their actions are not

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<sup>47</sup> Geertz, 98.

<sup>48</sup> This "Lord of Love" should not be confused with a universal Rainbow recognition of some sort of anthropological god or transcendent agent; it is simply an instance of vague religious rhetoric.

<sup>49</sup> "Declaration of Interdependence," Rainbow Guide, <http://rainbowguide.info/index.php>.

harmful to other living beings. So we do take all responsibility for the transformation of the old.<sup>50</sup>

Although, since this conception of reality is dependent upon the motivations, in the case of the A-Camp (and those just “hanging out,” etc.), this “religious conception” is necessarily skewed; the “Declaration” even explicitly makes this clear by asserting that Rainbow actions “are not harmful to other living beings,” which is certainly not the case with the “A-Campers.”

To elaborate on the “intentional group” aspect mentioned earlier, the Rainbow Family “prides itself” on “providing a model for peaceful coexistence among different peoples,” which, as noted above, is a utopian ideal.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the Rainbows maintain a “nonsanctioned” organization within the Gatherings called Shanti Sena, which is Sanskrit for “peacekeeper” or “peace center.” The name comes from the peaceful “army” that Gandhi had envisioned. Supposedly, every Rainbow is Shanti Sena. When there is a problem, one does not necessarily have to call on Shanti Sena – one becomes Shanti Sena. However, the development of the organization relates to the fact that some Rainbows are “more Shanti Sena than others.” However, it also challenges the Rainbows’ nonhierarchical foundation. Shanti Sena is sometimes referred to as a “police” or “security” force, but this characterization can have aggressive, or even hostile, connotations. What is stressed, however, is their nonviolent method of reasoning with people and showing them love.<sup>52</sup> This reflects the overall Rainbow worldview of

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Niman, 115.

<sup>52</sup> Niman, 118-119; Lewis MacAdams, “A Gathering of the Tribes,” *Rolling Stone*, December 23, 1993-January 6, 1994 in the Academic Search Premier, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9401117769&site=ehost-live>.

confronting “violence and hate” with “peace and love.”<sup>53</sup> According to Catherine Walsh, the goal of the Rainbow Family Gathering “is to be a family, an all-inclusive tribe.” Cries of “Welcome home, brother” and “Welcome home, sister” are commonly heard as people enter the Gatherings. As Walsh reports, the Rainbow Family “is about the conscious and positive evolution of humankind. It’s about wor[l]d peace and healing our poor, damaged Mother Earth. It’s about making us into better people. It happens like a miracle – it’s just love, all these wounded, strange, crazy people learning how to love one another.”<sup>54</sup> Interestingly enough, and certainly relevant to the current analysis, Walsh’s report is very much in line with the goals of many traditional religious understandings. However, it is noticeable that Shanti Sena can become an example of how this “religious conception” can easily get skewed; it even abandons one of the Rainbows’ core principles: nonhierarchical egalitarianism.

Reflecting the ideas of liminality and *communitas* put forth by anthropologist Victor Turner, there are not any “leaders” at the Rainbow Councils. Everyone is considered to be equal: “With no one *in* power, no one is *out* of power,” Niman states.<sup>55</sup> This same principle applies to the Gatherings at large as well, thereby further indicating how ritualistic activities signify what is *real* for the Rainbows and their ideology. However, there are certain individuals appointed, by consensus, for their “levelheadedness,” in order to monitor the proceedings and interrupt whoever has the feather if need be. These “vibeswatchers,” as they are called, “monitor the tenor of the

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<sup>53</sup> Niman, 115.

<sup>54</sup> Walsh.

<sup>55</sup> Niman, 205.

Council, intervening to keep it calm, while discouraging anger, aggression, or other manifestations of ‘bad vibes.’”<sup>56</sup>

Geertz also suggests that no matter how “primitive,” one of the main tasks of a religious system is to deal with chaotic phenomena.<sup>57</sup> The Rainbow Family’s response to Babylon relates directly to this notion; chaos can be understood as creeping into the Gatherings from the outside world, creating underlying hierarchical structures by means of Shanti Sena and the “vibeswatchers.” The hope that the Rainbow Family maintains in reforming the values and principles of the rest of the world reflects a response to perceived chaotic phenomena. As Niman states, “Rainbow Gatherings represent an effort to realize a utopian libertarian-anarchist vision. They serve as trial runs for a new society based on cooperation and nonhierarchical organization rather than on competition and hegemony.”<sup>58</sup> It is important to note, however, that this “vision” is not chaotic in the sense that some might associate with the term “anarchy.” Rather, it simply refers to a lack of governmental presence.

A particular instance relating to the dealing of chaotic phenomena is the “Om Circle.” The “Om Circle” is a circle of people holding hands, formed around a person who is perceived as being a threat and/or agitated. Once the circle is formed, the sacred Hindu syllable “OM” is hummed and chanted. The purpose of the ritual is to defuse any potential crisis;<sup>59</sup> the nature of the syllable carries an explicit religious essence as well, given the fact that it is derived from a traditional form of religious practice. Although these circles may seem coercive, they are nonviolent and are based upon principles of

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>57</sup> Geertz, 100.

<sup>58</sup> Niman, 60.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 117.



love; one could argue that it is an instance of “tough love,” so to speak.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, before each meal and meeting at a Gathering, including the Main Council, “everybody present circles, joins hands and OMMMMMMs or observes a moment of silence.”<sup>61</sup> The pronunciation of the syllable is rooted in an effort to harmonize any scattered energy.<sup>62</sup> In other words, the ritual facilitates the goal of making the Gathering *real*; it is a clear example of Rainbow praxis.

The “intentional group” aspect, along with the Shanti Sena and the “Declaration of Interdependence” mentioned above, have remarkable similarities to item “m” on Wilson’s list: “moral rules are often enjoined upon believers, although the area of their concern varies: they may be couched in legalistic and ritualistic terms, or they may be canvassed more as conformity with the spirit of a less specific, higher ethic.”<sup>63</sup> Also, the conceptual understanding of Rainbow “Raps,” which are not limited to, written and oral guidelines, diatribes about certain phenomena relevant to a Gathering, and “introductions” or descriptions of certain Rainbow matters and “policies,” draws considerable parallels between this item and the Rainbows. Items “p,” “q,” and “r” are all interestingly relevant to this aspect of the Rainbows as well. Item “p” states: “there is usually a special class of religious functionaries who serve as custodians of sacred objects, scriptures, and places; specialists in doctrine, ritual and pastoral guidance.”<sup>64</sup> While the Rainbows pride themselves on being nonhierarchical and egalitarian, there are, nevertheless, unofficial Rainbow “elders,” that is, “a special class of religious

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>61</sup> MacAdams.

<sup>62</sup> Niman, 26.

<sup>63</sup> Wilson, 116.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 117.

functionaries,” who have much knowledge about the Rainbow Gatherings and have attended for several years, if not since the very first one. In other words, there are Rainbows who have much sway in the preceding decisions that are made about upcoming Gatherings, such as the official location and setup of the area. As Niman reports, these “elders” are effectively a “ruling class whose existence Family members often deny.”<sup>65</sup> Likewise, these “elders” are looked to for advice on various matters throughout the Gathering and during Council meetings, such as Rainbow “doctrine” and ritualistic activities. They also serve as “custodians” of “scriptures” (although, the “scripture,” in the case of the Rainbows, is not a written document). The telling of the Rainbow “Hipstory” at each Gathering is typically done by one of these “elders.” Niman describes this annual story as “a collective Rainbow Family oral history recited at each year’s North American Gathering.”<sup>66</sup>

Item “q,” however, which directly relates to “p,” does not correspond in this context at all: “such specialists are usually paid for their services, whether by tribute, reward for specific services, or by instituted stipend.”<sup>67</sup> This is not the case with the Rainbow “elders,” especially given the fact that the “official” position on the matter is that no individuals are held in higher regard than others. Likewise, item “r” does not correspond, although there are some exceptions: “when specialists devote themselves to the systematization of doctrine, the claim is regularly made that religious knowledge provides solutions for all problems, and explains the meaning and purpose of life, often including purported explanations of the origin and operation of the physical universe and

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<sup>65</sup> Niman, 40.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>67</sup> Wilson, 117.

of human psychology.”<sup>68</sup> There is not a systematic “doctrine,” per se, at the Rainbow Gatherings, which indicates that this item does not successfully correspond to the Rainbows. Instead, everything is always open to change and re-development; the voting that takes place at Rainbow Councils is the arena for these types of decisions. However, coming close to representing “doctrine,” the “religious knowledge,” that is, the knowledge of the Rainbow agency, is understood to be *the* way one should want to live, which is believed to result in diminished societal problems. One’s “purpose of life” is also explained away by Rainbow principles. However, the “origin and operation of the physical universe,” rests on a matter of interpretation: if the “physical universe,” in this instance, is understood as the site of the physical Gathering, then its origin and mode of operation are certainly explained by means of the “Hipstory” and Rainbow worldview. These explanations, thus, make a statement about “human psychology” as well, in that it is societal constructs, formed by humanity, that the Gatherings seek to reform.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

### *Ritual*

The fourth aspect of Geertz's definition, that the conceptions are clothed with an "aura of factuality," deals with the way in which these conceptions describe the actual nature of the world. The religious perspective, Geertz states, "moves beyond the realities of everyday life to wider ones which correct and complete them." According to Geertz, this is accomplished through ritual, that is, "consecrated behavior." It is in "ceremonial form" that the various "moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in men and the general conceptions of the order of existence which they formulate for men meet and reinforce one another." For instance, testimonies from individual Rainbows, such as Marilyn Dream Peace's confession that the Gathering is "my once a year church...It's a very spiritual experience for me," depict this directly.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, when Felipe Chavez experienced his first Gathering, as a drunk "on the streets of Santa Cruz, Calif[ornia]," he later reported that it was "a vital healing process for me in regaining my spirit."<sup>70</sup> However, in the context of the current analysis, not all Rainbows may view the elements, or symbols, of a Gathering as sacred, which results in the correlation of this aspect being significantly flawed. Yet, Geertz further states, "In a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world."<sup>71</sup> For those participants of the ritual, the performance is understood as an actual enactment, materialization, and realization of a belief. Thus, rituals are

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<sup>69</sup> Niman, 86.

<sup>70</sup> MacAdams.

<sup>71</sup> Geertz, 112.

“models of” what the participants believe, as well as “models *for* the believing of it.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, through ritual performance (the Gathering itself, as well as sub-rituals within the Gathering), the participants “attain their faith as they portray it”;<sup>73</sup> “faith,” in this instance, corresponds to the Rainbow idealized worldview (or “agency”). The Rainbows live as they imagine the world could be.

The Rainbow Gatherings contain an assortment of ritualistic activities, ranging from the “Welcome home” ritual of greeting newcomers to the Gathering and the July 4<sup>th</sup> meditation, to the specifics of the Main Council and the various drum circles that form throughout the camps. In fact, the Gathering itself can be understood as being ritualistic as well; the entire act of driving out to the Gathering correlates to a ritualistic transition or pilgrimage. “Rainbow Gatherings are usually accessible only after an extended hike on a forest trail or closed road,” Niman states. Furthermore, and resonating a type of Eliadean “threshold,” “The surrounding woodlands form a natural barrier, separating Rainbows from Babylon. The Rainbow entrance ‘gate’...forms a distinct boundary, demarcating entry to Rainbow’s experimental world.” The “gate” in this instance is a distinct chaotic marking; the A-Camp serves as a chaotic entrance gate into a utopian ideal. Likewise, and as was mentioned above, it is believed that the “spirit” guides the Rainbow scouts in selecting the location for future Gatherings.<sup>74</sup> As Niman explains, “The Family provides a portal through which people can pass into a new life, a life first tasted at a Gathering,” which is further reminiscent of a type of “threshold.”<sup>75</sup> Rainbows also generally take on

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 113-114.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Niman, 63.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 212.

“spirit names,” such as Starwatcher, Mother Nature, Snake Mountain Bear, Hawk, Crow, and Sunflower, which, as Niman states, marks “a major transition in their lives.”<sup>76</sup>

Another common feature of the Councils is what the Rainbows refer to as “Heartsongs” – the sharing of emotions and feelings, which is believed to “create a bond that strengthens people’s ability to cooperate in creating consensus.” Thus, the Councils usually commence with “Heartsongs” before moving on to matters of business. As Niman explains, “Heartsongs are often compelling stories or tormenting problems, coaxed out into the open by the supportive environment nurtured in the Council circle.”<sup>77</sup> This “confessional” ritualistic aspect of the Rainbow Councils facilitates the understanding that it is a “sacred, healing space.”<sup>78</sup> This ritual also assists in making the worldview *real* by allowing for growth and healing, whether it is physical, psychological, emotional, or religious.

The ritual of the drum circle is a particularly intense activity at the Gatherings as well. The circles help establish communion between those involved, as well as assist in the expression of religious sensibilities. According to Mark Seaman, owner of Earth Rhythms and facilitator of the “Livin’ in the Rhythm” and “Global Village” workshops in West Reading, Pennsylvania, “drumming pulls a group together, giving a sense of community and connectedness.” Additionally, he states, “Drums penetrate people at a deeper level. Drumming produces a sense of connectedness and community, integrating body, mind and spirit.” Ed Mikenas, the facilitator of the Lynchburg Day program, suggests that “with drumming, a group of people go from chaos and noise to an orderly

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 44.

sense of feeling all the same,” which is reminiscent of the transitional phase of liminality and *communitas* outlined by Turner and the reasoning that rituals help in further making the world “as imagined” *real*.<sup>79</sup> Aside from these unifying aspects of drumming, there exists an underlying association that connects it to various sorts of shamanism, which is another explicit religious element. According to anthropologist, and founder of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, Michael Harner, “The much more common method to enter the shaman’s altered state of consciousness was monotonous percussive sound, achieved especially through drumming.”<sup>80</sup> Social anthropologist Rodney Needham states, “All over the world it is found that percussion, by any means whatever that will produce it, permits or accompanies communication with the other world.”<sup>81</sup> Moreover, in addition to these shamanistic elements, Niman reports that there are Rastafarian elements that particularly exist in drum circles at the Gatherings. According to a Rastafarian Rainbow named “Remi,”

I came to the Rainbow Gathering to focus my energy on being grateful to my brothers and sisters and to be free and play drum in a Root Man style...it’s a heartbeat rhythm that we use because it symbolizes the heartbeat of life to bring all I and I together...So we come forth to a Gathering for two reasons mainly. One: To have a little bit of oneness and unity with my drum like a prayer. To come forth together and to pray with this drum here. And second: to unify with my brothers and sisters...We use drum as I and I weapons. We mash down the walls of oppression...So our drum rhythms are designed to call souls that [have], been [*sic*] slightly misguided or led astray by the false preachers.<sup>82</sup>

As can be seen in the above quotation, the ritual of the drum circle also succeeds in making the worldview and ideology of the Gathering *real*; the drumming “mash[es]

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<sup>79</sup> Michael Winkelman, “Complementary Therapy For Addiction: ‘Drumming Out Drugs,’” *American Journal of Public Health* 93, no. 4 (2003): 648.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Harner, “A Different Drummer,” *Natural History*, March 1997 in the Academic Search Premier, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9704226820&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>81</sup> Rodney Needham, “Percussion and Transition,” *Man* 2, no. 4 (1967): 607.

<sup>82</sup> Niman, 104-105.

down the walls of oppression,” that is, societal Babylonian constructs, and the drum rhythms “are designed to call souls that [have], been [*sic*] slightly misguided or led astray by the false preachers,” i.e., they are designed to call together those individuals who have indulged in a way of life that is incongruent with Rainbow principles and values.

However, whether a sense of Turnerian community is being established, or shamanistic and Rastafarian sensibilities evoked, the drum circles at the Rainbow Gatherings allow participants and onlookers to ritualistically lose themselves and connect to each other in a particularly potent way.

Several of the items on Wilson’s list also correspond to the ritual dimension of the Rainbow Gatherings. For instance, item “g” states: “there are prescribed actions for individual, collective or representative performances – namely, rituals.”<sup>83</sup> As can be seen in the above analysis, this is certainly applicable in the context of the Rainbows. Item “k” brings to mind the drum circles described above as well: “there are regular performances of ritual or exposition, expressions of devotion, celebration, fasting, collective penance, pilgrimage and re-enactments or commemorations of episodes in the earthly life of deities, prophets or great teachers.”<sup>84</sup> These “regular performances” correspond directly to the drums circles that form throughout the camps. Likewise, various forms of celebration and the expression of religious pluralism all occur by means of individual and collective artistic expression; the variously themed camps also depict iconography relating to traditional deities and great teachers. These camps, such as “Krishna Camp,” “Jesus Camp,” and “Yoga Healing Arts Camp,” explicitly depict these elements. As mentioned above, the entire act of entering into a Gathering can be

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<sup>83</sup> Wilson, 116.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.



understood as a type of pilgrimage as well, furthering adding to the correlative ability of this item. Item “l” also supports these similarities: “occasions of worship and exposition of teachings produce the experience of a sense of community and relationships of goodwill, fellowship and common identity.”<sup>85</sup> These “occasions of worship” are the ritualistic activities persistent throughout the Rainbow Gatherings, including the aforementioned drum circles, as well as the July 4<sup>th</sup> meditation, Councils, and Heartsongs. All of these help further the bond of communal brotherhood among all of the participants, producing a “sense of community” and “relationships of goodwill, fellowship and common identity.”

Another item on Wilson’s list that corresponds to the Rainbow Gatherings is “t”: “claims to the truth of teaching and efficacy of ritual are not subjected to empirical test, since goals are ultimately transcendent and faith is demanded both for goals and for the arbitrary means recommended for their attainment.”<sup>86</sup> In other words, the goals of the ritual performances and activities are not tested on the basis of their validity to impart a common identity among individual Rainbows, or their success in conveying Rainbow ideals and principles. In terms of the alternative interpretation of Wilson’s definition, the Rainbow “agency” is ultimately transcendent, and individual Rainbows trust that their actions and way of life are situated in a manner that will realize and meet this worldview. However, there are a few items on Wilson’s list that do not correspond easily with the Rainbows. For instance, item “o” states: “according to their performance, believers accumulate merit or demerit to which a moral economy of reward and punishment is attached. The precise nexus between action and consequence varies from automatic

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 117.

effects from given causes to the belief that personal demerit may be cancelled by devotional and ritual acts, by confession and repentance, or by special intercession from supernatural agents.”<sup>87</sup> Rainbow ritual performances do not yield merit or demerit – every ritual act is tied to individual and communal expression of the self, and thus, the Rainbow ideals. As a result, there is no dependence upon supernatural agents for the cancellation of any demerit; the demerit does not exist in the first place. However, intervention on behalf of the Shanti Sena or “vibeswatchers,” in the event that someone, or a group of Rainbows, is acting in a manner unbecoming of a Rainbow, provides a possible means to correlate this item with actions taken place at Gatherings.

Items “h” and “j” do not correspond easily to the Rainbows either. According to item “h,” “elements of placatory action persist (even in advanced religions) by which individuals or groups may supplicate for special assistance from supernatural sources.”<sup>88</sup> From the perspective that the Rainbow worldview occupies the role of a Rainbow agency, this item simply does not have any relevance. There are no rituals that beg the Rainbow worldview for assistance in any matters – the worldview and ideology may be turned to for advice, motivation, etc., but it is not “asked” for anything. Likewise, item “j,” which states, “language, objects, places, edifices, or seasons that are particularly identified with the supernatural become sacralized and may themselves become objects of reverence,” is difficult to apply to the Gatherings as well.<sup>89</sup> While Rainbow language does exist, so to speak – mostly in the form of certain types of terminology – as well as certain objects, such as the Council feather, these items and usages do not themselves

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

become revered (although, in the case of Council “focal objects,” a temporary supernatural charge, so to speak, does seem to exist while in use). However, the actual geographical location of the Gathering has the potential to be sacralized, especially given the scenario that “the spirit” is referred to, at times.

### *Reality and Seriousness of Purpose*

Lastly, Geertz's fifth aspect of religion further develops his fourth; these "moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic," because one participates in them *religiously*, as well as "common-sensically." That is, within a ritual context, one participates in a metaphysical reality, and in a "common-sensical" context (or an ordinary, everyday context), one participates in a reality dependent upon the metaphysical, religious perspective.<sup>90</sup> The "metaphysical" reality, in this instance, would correspond to the Rainbow worldview. Thus, when one enters into a ritual context (i.e., a religious context) where religious conceptions are defined, and then returns to the "common-sensical" world, one is subsequently *changed*; the "common-sensical world" is now seen as "the partial form of a wider reality which corrects and completes it." The moods and motivations, then, which are caused by religious practices, seem "supremely practical," because they are "the only sensible ones to adopt given the way things 'really' are."<sup>91</sup>

In the context of the Rainbow Gatherings, it is common for ritualistic participation to subsequently mold an individual's involvement, so to speak, in Babylon thereafter. As Niman states,

After experiencing the Rainbow world, many people go on to commit themselves to projects such as those run by the Farm [in Tennessee], Greenpeace, or Sea Shepherd...Others find Buddhism, Christianity, or reconstructed Native American spirituality. Others, experiencing less radical changes in their lives, might return home after a Gathering to plant a garden, clean up a vacant lot, organize a block club, or introduce themselves to their neighbors.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Geertz, 121.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>92</sup> Niman, 212.

However, not every Rainbow may feel this inclination after a Gathering, or that the Gatherings are part of “a wider reality which corrects and completes it,” thus indicating another way in which the Gatherings are not religious, in the context of Geertz’s definition in this analysis.

Likewise, item “n” on Wilson’s list has particular relevance here as well:

“seriousness of purpose, sustained commitment and lifelong devotion are normative requirements.”<sup>93</sup> Seriously committed Rainbows all should, and would be expected to, have lifelong devotion to the Rainbow worldview, which has a functional ability as an “agency.” As indicated in the above quotation, the extension of Rainbow behavior in the rest of society certainly appears in individual lives thereafter, and can be understood as a desirable occurrence.

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<sup>93</sup> Wilson, 116.

## Conclusion

This thesis addressed the religious character of the Rainbow Gatherings. The fundamental question directing this thesis has been: “Are the Rainbow Gatherings religious in character?” This thesis specifically asked whether or not the Rainbow Gatherings satisfy certain identifiable features of religion, and if doing so, do they qualify as a form of religion? I engaged this question by analyzing the Rainbow Gatherings in terms of two particular definitions of religion: a “functional” definition and a “substantive” definition. This allowed me to analyze the Rainbow Gatherings from the perspective of the two major approaches to defining religion, which allowed me to utilize a more inclusive approach, as well as a more exclusive approach. Thus, this analysis not only examined whether or not these Gatherings qualify as a form of religion, but also examined how these definitions of religion illuminate features of the Rainbow Gatherings. The outcome of this analysis has placed a seemingly week-long vacation on national forest land in the context of a religious phenomenon, broadening the “spectrum” of areas through which this cultural event can be understood and evaluated. The contrasting definitions provide not only a difference in perspective, but also an understanding of how definitions of religion work, and in particular, how they work when applied to instances that are not traditionally understood as being “religious.”

To recapitulate, the definitions that I used in this analysis are Clifford Geertz’s and Bryan R. Wilson’s. Geertz’s definition provided me with the functional approach, and Wilson’s the substantive. The thesis demonstrated how the Gatherings of the

Rainbow Family, in some instances, conform to these definitions, and in other instances, how they do not. This was achieved by outlining the basic components of each definition, followed by using them to examine the Rainbow Gatherings. This methodology allowed for the specification of the ways in which Rainbow Gatherings exhibit similarities and differences with the characteristics of religion specified by each of these definitional approaches. I exhausted Wilson's twenty items throughout this analysis by examining each one where it appears most relevant, in the context of Geertz's components. Thus, I created a five-part organizational structure, which reflects Geertz's definition. My anticipation was that this analysis would yield data corresponding to Geertz and Wilson's understandings of religion. In some instances, the data corresponded more strongly to one over the other, which was indicated within the analysis; for example, the various rituals and the Rainbow worldview as a symbol-system. Likewise, I also anticipated that the research would yield data contrary to both of these approaches, which was indicated as well – specifically, the transcendental, supernatural dimension. As a result, this analysis has indicated the ways in which the Gatherings can, and the ways in which the Gatherings cannot, be understood as religious gatherings.

There are a number of ways in which the Rainbow Gatherings manifest identifiable features of religion, based on the two definitions used. Even though Geertz's much more inclusive approach resulted in many more corresponding similarities with the Gatherings than did Wilson's, there are some areas in which the features do not conform to Geertz. The main ways in which the Gatherings function as religion consist of the symbolic representations that formulate the Rainbows' worldview, their motives for

gathering together, the ritualistic performance of actions that correspond to their conception of how reality ought to be, and the carrying of their values and principles on into the rest of society. For example, the Rainbow worldview, understood as a system of symbols acting to establish certain values and emotional states in the Rainbows, corresponds strongly to the first aspect of Geertz's definition. Likewise, the various "focal objects," which certainly occupy a symbolic role, equally correspond. Rainbow values and principles are necessarily interconnected to the Rainbow worldview as well; this was discerned in the analysis as paralleling a Geertzian motivation. As indicated above, the ritual transition of entering into a Gathering, along with the various rituals that take place within, succeed in making the values and principles (or moods and motivating factors) *real* for the Rainbows. Additionally, the seriousness expressed by various Rainbows, who allow these moods and motivations to permeate the rest of their lives outside in Babylon, is evident by the reported instances in which this takes place. However, any of these correspondences could be easily rebuked, given the fact that any number of individual Rainbows might not view their presence and experience at a Gathering the same way as others (presumably, the majority) do around them. Likewise, phenomena such as the A-Camp demonstrate instances in which these values and principles are particularly challenged and skewed.

More often than not, a number of items on Wilson's list were not relevant to the analysis. The main problem is that there is no explicit supernatural dimension present at the Rainbow Gatherings. Wilson's supernatural "agency(ies)" underlies the majority of the items on his list. Although the possible interpretation and application of a Rainbow worldview being akin to a transcendent "agency" helps in establishing parallels between



the Gatherings and Wilson's list, the interpretation is generous, at best. An interpretation such as this is most likely not what Wilson had in mind (as noted, certain items even make this explicitly clear). Aside from the supernatural dimension, as well as the hierarchical order of religious functionaries, Wilson's list does include items that accurately correspond to the Gatherings; for instance, the ritualistic dimensions and the commitment to purpose. The collective ritual performances that Wilson cites are directly related to Rainbow activities and interaction. Likewise, the moral rules that are necessarily linked to this ritualistic dimension have an evident correspondence to Rainbow "Raps." Furthermore, the commitment to purpose expressed by Wilson has a direct connection with the fifth aspect of Geertz's definition (the manner in which the underlying moods and motivations are made realistic). However, it is discernable that many substantive definitions of religion include an implicit (if not explicit) supernatural reality and a hierarchical institutional structure. In other words, given the emphasis and concern with meaning and the realm of the supernatural, a hierarchical organizational configuration is almost always present; for example, orders of priests, or something similar, and in the case of Wilson's own understanding, "religious functionaries." As a result, and in conjunction with the lack of an explicit supernatural realm, this appears to indicate that the Gatherings do not qualify as religion, in the context of substantive definitions. This inquiry also raises an important issue that will be addressed shortly.

It is understandable, then, that the Gatherings satisfy criteria in both definitions, but also do not satisfy certain criteria in various instances, as indicated above and throughout this thesis. What this further indicates is that definitions of religion work in many different ways and on many different levels. Some work in ways that others do

not, and those, in turn, work in ways that differ from others as well; broadly explained, as noted in Bruce, functional definitions define religion in terms of what it does and substantive definitions in terms of what it is.<sup>94</sup> The general reliance upon a transcendent, or supernatural, agency or meaning that is characteristic of substantive definitions typically restricts the range of religion to a relatively narrow field. Conversely, the examination of the functional aspects of definitions of religion are much more inclusive, and focus on aspects that are not necessarily explored by their substantive counterparts. The dialogue and interplay between both types, then, has provided insight into the ways in which they can be used to analyze cultural phenomena of this sort. As anticipated, Geertz's definition is noticeably the most inclusive in this type of analysis. However, Wilson's features allow for a certain amount of insight as well, which is certainly something to keep in mind for future analyses involving substantive definitions: the connection between the Rainbow worldview (ideology/symbol-system) and transcendent agency(ies).

The problem with Wilson's definition is that he is too vague about what he means by "supernatural agency," which is precisely what allowed me to provide the alternative interpretation. If he specified that by "supernatural agency" he meant "deity," then the alternative approach would have been forcibly left out of the analysis completely. An explicit specification such as this would have made it clear that this transcendent order could not refer to an abstract worldview or symbolic conception of reality. This would have resulted in the Gatherings almost completely being excluded from conforming to Wilson's definition, since many of the corresponding items implicitly rely on this vague

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<sup>94</sup> Bruce, 6.

understanding. Alternatively, if Wilson did not mean for this “supernatural agency” to strictly represent a type of “deity” or “deities,” then he should have said so and kept his definition less vague. Since he did not do either of these two things, his definition is left open to interpretation, no matter how generous that interpretation may be; the first item on his list particularly allows for this type of alternative approach (an agency that may include “an entire postulated order of being”).

While the alternative interpretation of Wilson was noted as being, perhaps, a bit of a stretch, this connection has the potential to be more agreeable in the context of a different definition – one that does not include a supernatural dimension, or is at least more explicit about what is meant by that element. This has the potential to yield a different outcome in the context of different substantive definitions. As can be seen, even under the classification of the same type of definition, various approaches and understandings can yield assorted elements and concepts when attempting to both define religion and claim a cultural phenomenon to be a religion; every definition will necessarily yield different outcomes.

There are also certain scholarly implications involved in this study. Not only have the religious elements of the Rainbow Gatherings gone unexamined, thereby necessitating a study such as this, but certain aspects of the Gatherings, such as the way in which certain counter-cultural phenomena are interpreted in a drastically different manner, call for a closer examination by scholars both of religion and contemporary culture. More importantly, however, the possibility that this week-long excursion into national forest land may be religious is of importance to scholars of religion for its potential to broaden the “spectrum” of the Gatherings to include a religious dimension – a

dimension that may have otherwise gone unnoticed or remained insufficiently examined. The expansion of the academic field of religion through this study is not limited to a simple process of categorization; namely, the simple notation of yet another example of a cultural phenomenon that is traditionally thought of as non-religious, yet is identifiably religious in certain contexts. This analysis has further demonstrated a central issue in the academic study of religion: the relevance and merit for utilizing one or the other of these types of definitions.

If the Rainbow Gatherings are classified as religion, then it allows for a further understanding of their guiding principles and values. It suggests, then, that their principles and values are not informed by politics, economics, or the mass media, but by something quite different. As a result, these Gatherings can now be understood as filling a much different sentiment in individual Rainbow lives than previously imagined. As mentioned above, and shown throughout this thesis, the Gatherings conform more so to Geertz's definition than they do Wilson's. Although they do have some parallels with Wilson's, these are not critical enough to maintain a strong correspondence. However, a major criticism with functional definitions, such as Geertz's, is that potentially any cultural phenomena can be classified as religion under these circumstances. The question of whether or not defining religion functionally is of any merit is then necessarily raised. Although, this question can hardly be answered with any definitive, or authoritative, proclamation, as functionalists and essentialists both hold their own methodologies and disciplines as the better of the two. However, there is also a counter side to this question, which not only bolsters the necessity of taking this line of inquiry into consideration, but

demonstrates much more important implications as well: substantive definitions may be too exclusive.

To reiterate, the main challenge in this analysis for Wilson's definition is that a supernatural agent is of central importance, and it is simply not present at the Gatherings. Since this is such a critical feature of Wilson's definition, then the correspondence is significantly lacking. What this reveals, then, is that from the perspective of Wilson, the Rainbow Gatherings cannot necessarily be defined as religion, since a transcendental, supernatural agency is so critical; without the alternative, albeit generous, interpretation I provided throughout the analysis for this agency, the Rainbow Gatherings barely correspond to just half of Wilson's twenty items. As mentioned several times throughout this thesis, substantive definitions are much more exclusive than functional definitions, but the question repeats itself: Since substantive definitions necessarily restrict what can be classified as religion, should scholars use them? In other words, are they worth using, since they are so limiting? However, this question is not limited to cultural phenomena that have yet to be defined, or not, as religion. There are many traditional religious systems that do not specifically have a supernatural or transcendental realm; one must be careful to not equate the "superhuman" with the "supernatural." For example, certain forms of Buddhism and Taoism and nature-based religions would fail to meet this criterion. This line of inquiry necessarily raises the question, then, of whether or not scholars are willing to eliminate traditionally held religious systems that do not contain a transcendent element. If not, then they must be willing to allow for the classification of nontraditional religious systems as religion, and reenter into the dialogue with functionalists. If so, then they must be prepared to lose a valuable vantage point to

analyze these types of religious systems, as well as cultural phenomena such as the Rainbow Gatherings.

The limiting nature of substantive definitions, however, does have the potential to provide scholars with a more clear and direct way to recognize religious phenomena. If phenomena are only classified as religion if they contain some sort of supernatural, transcendent deity or deities, then there would be much less debate, if at all, over whether or not a phenomenon or system of thought was religious. However, as indicated, this would result in the re-classification of certain traditional religious systems as being nonreligious; they would simply become philosophical systems and ways of living.

The alternative criticism, as indicated, is that functional definitions are much too inclusive. As Bruce points out, adherents to whatever it is that may be under investigation might not even understand what they are doing as religion, regardless of scholarly examinations; the Rainbows certainly fall under this categorization. So, the question remains: Does one restrict definitions of religion to a particular formulaic rendering, and thus, potentially re-classify any traditions that do not fit this criteria, or does one allow for a much more inclusive approach and categorization of religious phenomena? While there are strengths and weaknesses for both of these positions (not to mention the politico-social sphere regarding tax purposes and other similar aspects that factor into religious categorizations), the most critical implications are that scholarly lenses of investigation would either be lost or gained.

This thesis, then, can be further understood to have not simply analyzed the Rainbow Gatherings in the context of two specific types of definitions of religion. It has resulted in a direct engagement with the issues surrounding the utilization of these two

types of definitions, in a broader sense. Thus, the Gatherings of the Rainbow Family have further functioned throughout this thesis as an example and meeting point for dialogue about the merit and implications of different definitions of religion. The implications and issues raised are undoubtedly worth further investigation and examination, as they play a major role in the academic study of religion.

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