

In the following paper I hope to accomplish three things:

**First**, explain why the 9/11 ‘Truth Movement’ should be regarded as a politico-religious cult.

**Second**, sketch out why the cult has arisen, mostly with reference to the US, but not entirely.

**Third**, elaborate briefly on why characterisation as a cult is a label with negative connotations, outlining how Leftists, Greens, Anarchists and those committed to evidence-based research should react to this cult.

Use of the term ‘we’ straight away flags up ours is no disinterested perspective—those of us involved in **9/11 Cultwatch & Notes From the Borderland** magazine have already crossed swords with cult members, and will do so again, perhaps even today. Advance criticism of our presence today, and **9/11 Cultwatch** generally, provides further evidence as to why we were right to set it up and on or near the mark in describing 9/11 cultists as being just that. Our research methodology can be described not as participant but more oppositional observation. Although our personal experience has largely been with UK-based members of the 9/11 ‘Truth’ movement, reactions to our research from US sources leads us to believe our insights are not confined to these shores, and we take full account of non-UK theorists and players in this global enterprise.

## (1) DEFINING THE CULT—INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

I am well aware that not only is one person’s cult often another’s sincerely held belief, but also the term is applied to religious far more than political movements. Equally, there is an extensive literature on cults people other than ourselves may well have greater detailed knowledge of, and in that sense I welcome constructive criticism and referencing, today or subsequently. The methodology adopted here owes an explicit debt to Max Weber’s notion of an ‘ideal type’ whereby we have attempted to make analytical sense of the 9/11 Truth movement, and its diverse strands, albeit in a way that many would disagree with, but which nonetheless, I feel, apprehends some common underpinnings of this group.

Given the concept of an ‘ideal type’ is a heuristic device, and by definition involves choosing which features of the 9/11 truth movement are important and which incidental, a criticism could be legitimately advanced that our labelling, and designation, is arbitrary. To which I have two answers. The first, is (as chronicled elsewhere) our interest in the 9/11 cult, and intuition they are a cult, sprang initially from an unpleasant, unannounced and unsought after encounter with leading UK activists when they mounted an incursion into the 2005 Anarchist Bookfair in London<sup>1</sup>. In other words, we did not begin to look at this group as a result of a pre-ordained theory (or indeed orders from ‘Shill Central’) but because of individual and collective experience. One comrade, with many years activism on the clock, including anti-fascist street politics, described the atmosphere as the most highly charged and disturbing he had ever witnessed: “*even at fascist meetings when opponents gained access you knew in advance it was going to kick off, this came out of the blue and shocked me, especially at an anarchist event*”<sup>2</sup>. The second answer to a priori criticism of the term cult is one that Weber might have made: one thing to distinguish human beings is our capacity for rational thought and reflection—if use of the term cult seems appropriate in what follows, those with rational sensibilities will hopefully accept it has value.

It should not be forgotten, moreover, that as with Weber, we are not suggesting every single characteristic has to apply in order for the movement (or a sub-group within it) to be deemed cult-like. Here, the original tripartite approach of Stanley Payne to defining fascism provides a useful parallel: for a group to be fascist it had to have some features in each level—of negation (what they were against), ideology & programme, and finally organisation and style<sup>3</sup>. Thus, in what follows, do not expect every single 9/11 Truth activist (or group) to be instantly recognisable under each heading—the key is whether the broad thrust grasps enough empirical reality to be useful. As it happens, by the very fact that they expected a hostile reaction, those 9/11 activists attending the 2005 Anarchist Bookfair weren’t necessarily representative of all ‘9/11 Truth’ believers, but their self-selection meant we observed, first hand, the mentality and tactics of core activists, defined not just by being there, but (as we have since found) important nationally, such as Tony Gosling and Anne Machon.

Academic literature devoted to political (as opposed to religious) cults is so sparse that mention must be made of one text that has influenced me, even if I disagree in places. ‘On The Edge: Political Cults Right and Left’ by Dennis Tourish and Tim Wohlforth<sup>4</sup> is a pioneering and controversial work examining an array of ‘cults; Left and Right, including (interestingly) the La Rouchites,

<sup>1</sup> see home page of <http://www.911cultwatch.org.uk> (accessed 28/8/08)

<sup>2</sup> David Pegg to author 1/11/05

<sup>3</sup> in S Larsen ed ‘Who were the fascists’ University of Oslo 1980 p.20. That Payne later dumbed down his definition under pressure from intellectual charlatans like Roger Eatwell and Roger Griffin is another story, on which see my PhD thesis ‘Creating Political Soldiers? The National Front 1986-90’ London University 2001 (p.7-12, 30-49)

<sup>4</sup> published by M.E. Sharpe Armonk New York 2000.

from whom Webster Griffin Tarpley, a key 9/11 Truth theorist, hails<sup>5</sup>. While I see an application as regards 9/11 to their definition of “destructive cults” as “organisations that remould individuality to conform to the codes and needs of the cult, institute taboos that preclude doubt and criticism, and generate an elitist mentality whereby members see themselves as lone evangelists struggling to bring enlightenment to the hostile forces surrounding them”<sup>6</sup>, their definition of political cults as involving members deifying leaders and seeing themselves as inadequate doesn’t quite hit the mark. For the 9/11 cult has both political and religious elements, yet the deification of cult leaders is not as marked (or monolithic) as you would expect if Tourish and Wohlforth’s paradigm applies exactly to 9/11 Truth<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, their emphasis on authoritarian decision-making<sup>8</sup> only partly applies to the 9/11 cult. The limitations of Tourish and Wohlforth lie in two areas, one avoidable, the other not. Firstly, they at times make excessively harsh statements about cults, such as the claim regarding enemies that members “frequently dream about their ultimate destruction”<sup>9</sup>—far too strong a statement, perhaps deriving more from the author’s own dealings with cults than all (as opposed to some) cults themselves. The second, unavoidable, way in which Tourish & Wohlforth are limited is that the development of the internet has not just spawned cults like 9/11 but influenced their nature. Nonetheless, Tourish & Wohlforth’s formulations have been useful in developing the categorisation below, which are largely drawn from them, albeit modified in places.

## 9/11 CULT CHARACTERISTICS

### 1) Fixated belief system.

There is one central claim common to all believers—that 9/11 is the most important event in recent world history, and that other events only make sense in the light of 9/11. What distinguishes this from the Bush regime’s self-justifying ‘War on Terror’ is the assertion that 9/11 was more or less an ‘inside job’ carried out by sections of the US establishment/global elite themselves. Anybody who dissents from this ‘inside job’ belief is denounced as a ‘truth-denier’ and supporter of the Bush regime, whatever their political views or activities. While for tactical reasons it might be decided to get to 9/11 ‘Truth’ more or less directly, or emphasise it more or less in initial encounters with non-believers, 9/11 is the ‘core’, everything else subordinate.

### 2) Intense activism/aggressive proselytising

While not an exclusive characteristic, the messianic intolerant and myopic zeal displayed by 9/11 Truthers makes them stand out. Aside from the vitriol that abounds in their internet forums (directed at critics and each other), something difficult to measure, although many who have encountered them at public events will know from experience just what I mean.

### 3) Advancing non-falsifiable propositions

The latent message is almost the diametric opposite of what is claimed. While 9/11 cultists incessant cry is for ‘truth’ and ‘evidence’ (which they have often already ‘discovered’ within their paradigm) an open mind is the last thing they have. Any evidence, whether logical, historical or scientific contradicting their premises (conclusions) is airily swept aside or literally ignored. This is something more than incidental cognitive dissonance—cultists have great difficulty properly evaluating and classifying evidence. Which might not matter except for the stated rationale behind the truth movement, their mantra, is the search for ‘evidence’ proving an ‘inside job’. As one US anarchist site stated “no evidence of any kind has been found that gives any evidence that the government planned or organised these conspiracies. No documents have been found. Nobody involved in these alleged conspiracies has stepped forward”<sup>10</sup>. To the cult believer, this mundane statement is intrinsically ludicrous, if not malevolent. I disagree, and concur with commentator Bill Weinberg that the “endemic sloppiness of the self-styled ‘researchers’ is delegitimising the entire project of critiquing the official version. The ostentatiously named ‘Truth movement’ is not clearing the air but muddying the water”<sup>11</sup>.

### 4) Exclusivism

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p.69-82

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p.3

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p.3 Close observers will note this involves a slight change of perspective on my/our part from the definition & analysis section on the 911cultwatch.org.uk web-site: and it is not the only one in this paper. This does not denote inconsistency, but merely (I hope) intellectual development.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p.9

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p.3

<sup>10</sup> <http://infoshop.org/page/Debunking-911> (accessed 29/8/08)

<sup>11</sup> <http://ww4report.com/node/2413> ‘9/11 & the New Pearl Harbour’ (accessed 29/8/08)

An inelegant word denoting the idea that not only is 9/11 the only thing that matters, but the only way to approach that subject is through the prism of cult belief. Alexander Cockburn memorably stated that “*I meet people who start quietly asking me ‘what I think about 9/11?’ What they are actually trying to find out is whether I’m part of the coven. I imagine it was like being a Stoic in the second century AD going for a stroll in the Forum and meeting some fellow asking, with seeming casualness, whether it’s possible to feed 5,000 people on five loaves of bread and a couple of fish*”<sup>12</sup>. Those who ‘believe’ see themselves as uniquely privileged, having found the one world issue key to everything else—all others subordinate. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century just as some reprobates renounced alcohol and Satan to be rehabilitated, any celebrity ‘questioning’ 9/11 is instantly deified, such as actor Charlie Sheen<sup>13</sup>, or ex-Labour Cabinet Minister Michael Meacher MP, in his time known as Tony Benn’s representative on earth, now accorded even more lofty status in 9/11 circles<sup>14</sup>. Conversely, as we shall see, anybody dissenting from the 9/11 cult (or not interested in the issue) is dismissed, whatever their track-record credentials or argument, as (at best) not worth listening to.

## 5) Elitist decision-making

On the surface, it might seem remiss applying this traditional criterion of cult-definition to 9/11 Truth. After all, as our critics have pointed out, there are many local groups and voluntary activists, and dissenting viewpoints. Point taken, however as far as the UK movement is concerned, the apparent diversity and looseness of structure is not what it seems, as ‘insiders’ have divulged. Meg Lee Chin, a London-based activist (and avant-garde musician), has raised disturbing questions about what she terms the ‘Highgate Hub’. Lee Chin has “*never felt comfortable with what appears to be a centralised control of power... Nearly every significant person in the entire UK 911 Truth Movement has passed through one central hub in Highgate at one time or another*”<sup>15</sup>. This refers to the London home of Belinda McKenzie, a woman of seemingly infinite largesse and very hawkish views on Iran<sup>16</sup>, where ex-MI5 officer Annie Machon still resides, as did her former MI5 partner David Shayler. Numerous front campaigns are based there, including ‘Make War History’, a 9/11 off-shoot. An interesting character, McKenzie was a trustee of the charity ‘Iran Aid’ until it was shut down in September 2000 by the Charity Commission because (in their words) “*the charity has persistently failed to provide the Commission with evidence that funds raised to relieve need, hardship and distress have been used for that purpose... After two years investigation Iran Aid has failed to give us verifiable evidence that money donated by the British public was actually spent on charitable work in Iran*”<sup>17</sup>. In the absence of charity records (they were destroyed by ‘persons unknown’) it is no surprise that Charity Commission director of operations Simon Gillespie was moved to comment “*until our intervention in 1998, £5 million or so a year had been pouring into a black hole*”<sup>18</sup>. While a spirited (if unconvincing) defence against Lee Chin’s criticisms was made by Machon among others<sup>19</sup>, another disillusioned insider made a telling point. The (anonymous) insider behind the Truthwatch UK blog said in April of the anticipated June 2008 split of the main UK forum into two (<http://www.911forum.org.uk> and <http://www.truthforum.co.uk>) after quoting leading member Ian Neal stating the ‘Campaign Committee’ took the decision, “*both sides are controlled by a single group and will continue to be. Something we all knew but it’s great to see them admit, even if it is in secret*”<sup>20</sup>. The involvement as leading figures in this campaign of ex-MI5 officers Shayler and Machon is something already remarked upon, not just by us<sup>21</sup>. At the very least, the way both figures were accepted uncritically at the very top of the movement (Machon was Secretary) doesn’t dispel suspicions about the integrity credibility and accountability of those in charge, even before Shayler announced he was the Messiah. On the streets

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.counterpunch.org/cockburn09092006.html> ‘The 9/11 Conspiracy Nuts’ September 2006 (accessed 29/8/08)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.prisonplanet.com/articles/march2006/200306charliesheen.htm> ‘Actor Charlie Sheen Questions Official 9/11 Story’ (Prison Planet 20/3/06, accessed 29/8/08). Perhaps nobody’s told them (or him) that ‘The West Wing’ is a fictional not documentary strand.

<sup>14</sup> his foreword to David Ray Griffin’s ‘The New Pearl Harbour’ Arris Publishing Adlestrop 2004 2<sup>nd</sup> edition illustrates Meacher’s shaky grasp of evidence. After quoting the Project for a New American Century document stating that in the absence of a “new Pearl Harbour” the process of the US becoming a “dominant force” would be a long one, Meacher states “*there is no need for conspiracy theories when they themselves state their aspirations*”. Rather, there is need of credible evidence to link this statement, to actual events—though like other cultists Meacher doesn’t deem this necessary. I do.

<sup>15</sup> <http://truthwatchsource.wordpress.com/2008/05/12> (reproduction of Meg Lee Chin email dated 25/11/07 on ‘TruthWatch UK’ blog 12/5/08 (accessed 29/8/08))

<sup>16</sup> See her letter to *The Independent* ‘Our brutal friends’ 24/12/98

<sup>17</sup> Charity Commission statement ‘Iran Aid to Close Down’ (October 2000)

<sup>18</sup> quoted in *The Times* 15/9/2000 (Tom Baldwin)

<sup>19</sup> <http://truthwatchsource.wordpress.com/2008/05/12> (as above)

<sup>20</sup> <http://truthwatchuk.wordpress.com/2008/04/07uks-largest-truther-refuge-to-close> 7/4/08 posting (accessed 29/8/08)

<sup>21</sup> ‘The Cuckoos Change Nests—Machon & Shayler Target British and Irish 9/11 Campaigners’ Paul Stott & Heidi Svenson in *Notes From the Borderland* magazine issue 7 2007 p.13-17

demonstrating outside the US Embassy in September 2006 for example, Northern activist Mick Meaney observed Machon corraling activists like sheep (or perhaps sheeple?)<sup>22</sup>.

## 6) Use of specialist jargon to dismiss critics/heretics

The 9/11 cult has a rich variety of thought-terminating clichés, mostly transatlantic in origin. A ‘shill’ is anybody they disagree with, who is thereby an implied spook (actual spooks, as Machon/Shayler have shown, are no problem). Then there is ‘limited hang-out’ to describe people who agree on some facts but don’t buy the whole belief package. Webster Griffin Tarpley has a whole vocabulary of his own, involving ‘moles’ ‘patsies’, ‘Venetians’ and such like. ‘Sheeple’ is a very revealing and derogatory term used to describe people who either disagree or are as yet unaware of the scintillating vista that is 9/11 truth. An absolutely crucial phrase is ‘Gatekeeper’, who are handily divided into Right and Left Gatekeepers<sup>23</sup>. Left Gatekeeper in Chief is the somewhat surprising figure of Noam Chomsky—life long and eloquent critic of US foreign policy, who regards the US itself as a terrorist state. For cultist Barrie Zwicker, expressing a widely-held view, Chomsky is “*a de facto defender of the state’s most egregious outrages and their covert agency engines...[who]...systematically engages in deceptive discourse*”<sup>24</sup>. Perhaps reflecting an even poorer calibre of adherent in the UK compared to the US, the chief UK contribution to attacking Leftist critics seems to be a litany of psychiatric abuse: Keith Parkin and Tony Gosling pepper their language with references to insanity/asylums/delusions/lunatic rantings/mental illness and so on<sup>25</sup>. On 9/11 internet forums there is an Orwellian practice whereby dissenters are not only penned into a ‘critics corner’, moderators also attach arbitrary and derogatory labels to their avatars to warn browsers not to take them seriously, such as ‘relentless limpet shill’ (for my colleague Paul Stott). The virtual equivalent of the bell round the neck of a medieval leper—in this case, the cultists fear the contagion of rational argument.

## 6) Proliferation of unsubstantiated beliefs

As shown in Paul Stott’s companion paper, the distemper of anti-semitism/anti-Jewish ravings is tolerated within the 9/11 cult, indeed flourishes<sup>26</sup>, and not just on this side of the Atlantic<sup>27</sup>. The cumulative effect of a poor attitude towards evidence, a lack of knowledge of history, and the hot-house atmosphere within the cult, is that bizarre beliefs incubate and proliferate. Hence the fantasies about holographic planes, pods, drone missiles and passengers murdered en masse and buried in places unknown without trace or even one witness.

## 7) Prioritisation of the internet/virtual reality above non-virtual forms of knowledge and experience

As befits a cult of the televisual/digital age, a key component of this cult seems to be elevating visual images and other internet phenomena above logic, traditional rules of evidence and human experience. It is no accident that the most influential film propagating 9/11 cult ideology--‘Loose Change’--actually started off life as a fictional entertainment feature, which the makers decided, as they were putting it together, was ‘true’ and therefore decided to re-label a documentary. Not as a result of profound historical research, but intuition. The idea You-Tube clips are serious evidence is no accident, but seems integral—and as we have found in discussions with cult adherents, something not on the internet isn’t considered real. Conversely, a profusion of internet links substitutes for argument. In seeing the internet as crucial to cult propagation, I slightly differ from the intriguing hypothesis put forward by Steve Clarke. Using a Lakatosian research paradigm, Clarke argues, with reference to the ‘Controlled Demolition’ argument, that the internet has slowed down the development of conspiracy theories<sup>28</sup>, because it inhibits exponents (such as David Ray Griffin and Steven Jones) from formulating explicitly testable hypotheses and research claims that can then form the basis of research projects. While Clarke’s broad thrust about the illogicality and inconsistency and half-baked nature of these theories is correct, he credits 9/11 believers with a consistency and ultimate perspective that is far too charitable. Having ploughed through their material, I don’t think most of them are interested in testable hypotheses: they luxuriate in their cocoon of self-righteous certainty and contempt for others. That the internet is so important to the 9/11 cult reflects a broader phenomenon of how social reality is constructed and experienced that all of us who remember a world PI (pre-internet) are still coming to grips with. But important nonetheless.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.rinf.com/columnists/news/report-nine-eleven-weekend-of-truth> (September 2006, accessed 29/8/08)

<sup>23</sup> on which see <http://911review.com/denial/gatekeepers.html> (accessed 29/8/08).

<sup>24</sup> ‘Towers of Deception’ New Society Publishers British Columbia 2006 p.224. There are significant *lacunae* in the way Chomsky approaches 9/11 (which I will cover elsewhere), but condemnatory abuse from Zwicker indicates he is not capable of grasping them or anything else involving nuanced analysis.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Successful Anarchist Bookfair Marred by Police Attack’ Indymedia thread 24/10/05 (accessed 30/8/08)

<sup>26</sup> See for example David Shayler interview in the *New Statesman* 11/9/06

<sup>27</sup> ‘9/11 & the New Pearl Harbour’ 1/9/06 [ww4report.com/node/2413](http://ww4report.com/node/2413) (accessed 30/8/08)

<sup>28</sup> Steve Clarke ‘Conspiracy Theories and the Internet: Controlled Demolition and Arrested Development’ *Episteme* Vol. 4 issue 2 2007 p.167-180 (Edinburgh)

