CHAPTER 4
DURKHEIM, TOTEMISM, AND THE MANSON FAMILY: THEORIZING ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND VIOLENCE
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ABSTRACT

Purpose – To explain the unswerving loyalty given to Charles Manson by his followers from a religious perspective by drawing on Durkheim’s (1912/1976) theory of religion and Hall’s (2003, 2013) theory of religion and violence.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative analysis of archived multimedia either quoting, or written by, members of the Manson Family. Specifically, a theoretical thematic analysis is used to draw inferences on how members explained their participation in the 1969 murders.

Findings – The Manson Family display a unified belief system premised on the sacredness ascribed to Helter Skelter, forming a moral community at Spahn Ranch. Manson was conceived as the clan’s God, thereby meeting most of Durkheim’s requirements for a religious formation. A main component of their belief system was the inevitability of Helter Skelter, or the upcoming racial revolution; the ultimate war and end of the world. This belief provides one explanation for the Manson murders; that they were carried out as a religious duty to initiate Helter Skelter.

Originality/value – Despite the continued public fascination with the Manson murders, only a few studies have applied a sociotheoretical
framework to explain this event and none have used a religious account from the perspective of those involved. By introducing religion as one plausible framework, this research is not only an extension of Durkheim’s work but also contributes to existing literature on the relationship between religion and violence.

**Keywords:** Charles Manson; religion; homicide; violence; Manson Family

**INTRODUCTION**

Although the Manson Family murders were committed more than 40 years ago, they continue to spark public discussion and fascination as to how one man could exert such power over a group of individuals leading them to engage in behaviors that would have unlikely occurred without his influence (McKie, 2009). Therefore, the primary focus of this chapter is on explaining the unswerving loyalty given to Charles Manson by analyzing the Tate-LaBianca murders from a religious perspective. It will begin with an overview of the mass murders of 1969, followed by a more in-depth analysis of the wider context in which these murders were committed. Durkheim’s (1912/1976) theory of religious formations will then be explored with an emphasis on totemism, drawing explicit connections between his perspective and the Manson Family. Thus, it will be demonstrated how Helter Skelter became the clan’s totem and through totemism the Manson Family became a (pseudo)religion with Manson as their God. However, it is insufficient to conclude that the murders were committed because a religion was formed, hence attention will be given to John Hall’s (2003, 2013) theory of religion and violence. A brief overview will be provided on Hall’s theory with an emphasis on pre-apocalyptic warring sects. It will be demonstrated how the family’s religious beliefs legitimated violent behavior and the murders were committed on the basis of social reconstruction.

These arguments were developed by collecting and analyzing primary documents that had a central focus on the family’s perspective. By analyzing materials that were written by the family allows for the acquisition of deeper insight regarding the thought processes of those involved in the events leading up to, and surrounding, the weekend of the murders. The importance of this research lies in its ability to fill a gap in existing literature. Despite continued public fascination with the Manson murders, few studies (Atchinson & Heide, 2010; Fine, 1982; Geis & Huston, 1970) have been published attempting to apply sociological theory to explain this event. Atchinson and Heide’s (2010) study applies strain theory, social learning theory, and labeling theory to explain the murders and thus has a criminological focus. Geis and Huston (1970) recognize the importance of Durkheim’s work in the murders but their primary focus is on media portrayals and their influence on public perceptions. Fine (1982) adopts a more socio-cultural approach in understanding the murders through traditions of folklore groups. Second, the importance of this research lies in the ability to reframe how
the Manson murders are perceived. Currently, the dominant public perception attributes the murders as resulting from drug-induced actions perpetuated under the influence of a charismatic, manipulative leader who was skilled in the art of brainwashing (Emmons, 1986; Linder, 2014; Stanley, 2004). By introducing religion as one plausible framework for understanding these murders, this research is not only an extension of Durkheim's work but also contributes to existing literature on the relationship between religion and violence.

Overview of Tate-LaBianca Murders

On August 9, 1969, acting on the orders given by Charles Manson, three members of the “Family” – Charles Tex Watson, Patricia Krenwinkle, and Susan Atkins – brutally murdered actress Sharon Tate and her unborn baby, three of her houseguests as well as a friend of her caretaker (Emmons, 1986). Collectively, they were stabbed over 100 times while one victim was shot four times at close range (Linder, 2014). The word “PIG” was written in blood on the front door of the posh Bel-Air home (Emmons, 1986). The following night, Leslie Van Houten and Charles Manson accompanied Watson, Krenwinkle, and Atkins to a residence in the Los Feliz district of Los Angeles. Manson entered the home, bound and gagged Leno and Rosemary LaBianca, then left. He instructed the others to not be as “messy” as they were the previous night and also not to let on that they were going to kill the LaBiancas (Emmons, 1986). The Family members obliged and Leno was stabbed 26 times, some of the wounds inflicted with a carving fork, while Rosemary sustained 41 stab wounds (Emmons, 1986, pp. 8–9). Moreover, the word “war” was carved into Leno LaBianca’s stomach post mortem. Similar to the Tate murders, “death to pigs” and “rise” were written in blood on the walls and “Helter Skelter” on the refrigerator (Emmons, 1986).

These were neither the first, nor the last, murders committed by members of the Manson Family. On July 31, 1969, Robert Beausoleil and Susan Atkins stabbed Gary Hinman repeatedly and then inscribed the words “political piggy” in blood on the wall alongside smudges of a panther paw print (Emmons, 1986, p. 8). The ninth victim, Donald (Shorty) Shea was an employee at Spahn Ranch and often expressed disagreement with Manson's philosophy. Shortly after the Tate-LaBianca murders, the police raided the Ranch and Manson believed this was due to Shea snitching (Emmons, 1986). Rumors emerged that Shea was completely dismembered and buried; however, when the body was finally discovered all limbs were intact (Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974; Emmons, 1986).

Manson and the previously mentioned co-defendants were all indicted on first-degree murder charges and convicted on January 25, 1971 (Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974). Prior to sentencing, the three women confessed their role in the murders, testifying they acted on their own accord and Manson was not aware of the murders until after they occurred (Caldwell, 1971). Despite these confessions, Manson and his co-defendants were sentenced to death but this was substituted with life imprisonment when California abolished the death penalty (Linder, 2014).
Context

The context in which these murders occurred cannot be ignored. In the 1960s there was a strong counterculture forming, especially in San Francisco, emphasizing an overall disengagement from capitalist culture, the outlaw persona, exoticism, the new age of sexuality, spirituality, “escaping to the now,” and the natural persona (Zimmerman, 2008). The outlaw persona was fundamental in establishing the counterculture primarily due to its potential for disregarding or breaking the law (Zimmerman, 2008). Any laws that restricted individual freedom and did not conform comfortably within the countercultural movement were disregarded in their entirety (Zimmerman, 2008).

Arguably, one of the better-known tenets of the 1960s counterculture was an overarching emphasis on the exotic – immersing oneself in a radically different lifestyle than was endorsed by the mainstream culture (Zimmerman, 2008). “Everyday activities, such as drug taking, listening to music, dancing, and sex, were transformed into ‘mystical’ quests, secular experiences into sacred adventures” (Zimmerman, 2008, p. 58). A related element of the counterculture was an emphasis on the new age persona valuing spirituality, non-Western philosophies, and sexual freedom (Zimmerman, 2008). These components were intensely interrelated – sexual freedom could produce or increase one’s spirituality or spiritual and philosophical ideologies could be used in pursuit of sexual hedonism (Zimmerman, 2008). This persona can be summarized as an ideology promoting “free love” (Zimmerman, 2008).

Finally, the natural persona was associated with having the freedom to be whatever you want to be (Zimmerman, 2008). Similar to the mainstream, a number of items were found in the counterculture – sex, food, drugs, clothing, shelter, etc. – but the difference was in how these items were used, regarded, and evaluated (Zimmerman, 2008). “What was important for the counterculture was to distinguish itself and its brand of freedom from that of the mainstream. Nature was the key to making that distinction” (Zimmerman, 2008, p. 93). Therefore, importance was placed on “natural” materials – handcrafted items, noncommercial ideas, and home-grown music and musicians (Zimmerman, 2008). It should, therefore, be kept in mind that the natural persona did not explicitly require a literal return to nature; rather it involved a consumption of “natural signifiers in its attempts to appear free of that which seemed commercial” (Zimmerman, 2008, p. 95). All of these elements of the counterculture were embedded within wider sociopolitical movements emphasizing antiwar protests, liberation of the suppressed, and skepticism surrounding consumer capitalism (McKay, 2005; Zimmerman, 2008).

DURKHEIM’S THEORY OF RELIGION: TOTEMISM

In an attempt to explain the unswerving loyalty given to Manson by his followers, Durkheim’s (1912/1976) theory on the origins of religion will be used to show how a religion formed among the family. This section will begin by reviewing Durkheim’s theory, with an emphasis on totemism, followed by a subsection making explicit connections between his theory and the Manson Family.
The bulk of Durkheim’s work is centered on the analysis of nonmaterial social facts, emphasizing the importance of morality, collective conscience, collective representations, and social currents (Ritzer, 1992). Religion has been conceived as the ultimate nonmaterial social fact and has a “dynamogenic” quality, which is the capacity to not only inhibit the actions of individuals but also to elevate them above their conventional powers and capabilities (Jones, 1986; Ritzer, 1992). As follows, the ultimate goal for Durkheim was to decipher the origins of religion in modern society. He concludes that society is the source of religion through designating certain things as sacred – things set apart and forbidden – and others as profane (Durkheim, 1912/1976). There is nothing inherently religious or sacred about these “things” but their power is determined by the opinion conferred on them by members of society (Durkheim, 1912/1976). Differentiating between the sacred and profane is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition in the formation of religion. There must also be three other conditions: (1) development of religious beliefs as an expression of the nature of sacred things relative to the profane; (2) a collection of religious rites outlining how one should conduct oneself in the presence of the sacred; and (3) the presence of a Church, or an overarching moral community (Durkheim, 1912/1976).

Based on the sacred profane dichotomy, Durkheim defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things – things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church” (Durkheim, 1912/1976, p. 47). He conceptualized the sacred through totems, which are merely symbols, a tangible expression of something else (Durkheim, 1912/1976). A totem is recognized as either the outward and visible form of the totemic principle or the symbol of a particular society, also known as a clan (Durkheim, 1912/1976). Oftentimes the totem of a clan is either an animal or plant, yet a totem can also be an object or individual (Durkheim, 1912/1976). Durkheim (1912/1976) identified a clan as a composition of individuals who are united by a bond of kinship. The clan is recognized as a single family, regardless of whether they are blood relatives, because they have achieved unity through a collective endorsement of the sacred totem (Durkheim, 1912/1976). Therefore, the clan has ascribed sacredness to a totem, giving it a symbolic representation that is meaningful to them. In this way, the totem has a religious character and becomes inseparable from the clan itself (Durkheim, 1912/1976). This argument alludes to society being the source of religion. Accordingly:

[...] the god of the clan, the totemic principle, can be none other than the clan itself, but the clan transfigured and imagined in the physical form of the plant or animal that serves as totem. (Durkheim, 1912/1976, p. 206)

Totemism, or religion more generally, therefore emerges from a collective morality of beliefs. For the clan to successfully unite into a religion, however, there must be collective effervescence, which occurs when “a collectivity is able to achieve a new and heightened level of collective exaltation that in turn can lead to great changes in the structure of society” (Ritzer, 1992, p. 199). This implies that one clan’s symbolic representation of a totem has been institutionalized and endorsed within the wider society.
Subsequent to defining religion and carefully outlining the primacy of totems in religion, Durkheim (1912/1976, p. 206) defined a God as:

[...] a being that man conceives of as superior to himself in some respects and one on whom he believes he depends [...] the faithful believe they are bound to certain ways of acting that the nature of the sacred principle they are dealing with has imposed upon them.

This ties back to the dynamogenic quality of religion. According to Durkheim (1912/1976, p. 207):

When we obey someone out of respect for the moral authority we have accorded to him, we do not follow his instructions because they seem wise but because a certain psychic energy intrinsic to the idea we have of that person [which] bends our will and turns it in the direction indicated [...] We are then moved not by the advantages or disadvantages of the conduct that is recommended to us or demanded of us but by the way we conceive of the one who recommends or demands that conduct.

Therefore, the totemic principle, or god of the clan, can inhibit an individual’s behavior as the faithful are subject to “restraints, privations, and sacrifices determined by the sacred principle” (Durkheim, 1912/1976, p. 206). The faithful can also be elevated beyond their routine actions and behaviors in pursuit of the sacred.

This behavior can also be connected to what Durkheim calls the demon of oratorical inspiration. When one is speaking to a group and has achieved spiritual union with them, their language becomes ostentatious, which would be considered unacceptable in regular circumstances. Their gestures take on a dominating quality, and their thought “becomes impatient of limits and slips easily into every kind of extreme” (Durkheim, 1912/1976, p. 210). The hallmark of the demon of oratorical inspiration is a feeling of being influenced by a moral force greater than oneself, of which they are the sole interpreter (Durkheim, 1912/1976). In this way, the speaker may be deified by the group and perceived of as greater than oneself.

In sum, religion is a product of a unified system of beliefs regarding what is deemed sacred to a moral community. Sacredness is determined by the meaning ascribed to totems, which is inseparable from the clan itself. A god, or totemic principle, is a being conceived of as superior to the clan, upon which the clan depends. Actions or behaviors are carried out by faithful members in the name of the totemic principle regardless of the potential consequences of engaging in that conduct. Based on these definitions, it will be argued that Helter Skelter was constructed as the clan’s totem and through totemism the Manson Family evolved into a religious sect. Due to the opinion conferred on Manson by his followers, it will then be argued that he was virtually deified. The following section provides a brief overview of the methodological approach taken.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In mapping out connections between Durkheim’s theory of religion and the details of the Manson Family murders, multimedia files were collected and analyzed qualitatively. Media files were not selected randomly, rather, the inclusion
criteria required that the documents quoted members of the family or were written by them. This selection strategy, although not entirely free of media construction biases, allows for inferences to be drawn based on statements made by the Family, rather than perceptions about them.

In selecting primary documents, two search engines were used: ProQuest and Google. The former is powered through the University of Guelph library and provides archived newspapers dating back to the 19th century; two historical newspaper databases are included within: New York Times and the Globe and Mail. These two news sources were relied upon exclusively in collecting newspaper articles that covered the criminal trials. Using the search term “Charles Manson,” 2,163 results were generated from the New York Times and 1,105 from the Globe and Mail. Of these, 83 news articles were selected for analysis (30 published in the Globe and Mail and 53 from the New York Times). In addition to news articles, two books were included in the analysis: Manson in His Own Words (Emmons, 1986) and Child of Satan, Child of God (Atkins & Slosser, 2005). Finally, Google was used to find videotaped interviews with any member of the Manson Family, resulting in the collection of 33 YouTube videos. These videos were then transcribed prior to data analysis.

A theoretical thematic analysis was executed on the sample of media files, following a step-wise process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Accordingly, based on Durkheim’s theory of religion, a number of codes were developed a priori (i.e., perceptions of Manson as a deity, messiah, god, or Jesus Christ, perceptions of sacredness, the belief system of the Family, etc.). These initial codes were subsequently collated to identify broader themes – the sacredness ascribed to Helter Skelter, the unified belief system, rites of conduct, Manson as the totemic principle, and the presence of a moral community – each of which are discussed, in turn, below.

CHARLES MANSON AND THE FAMILY

Sacredness Ascribed to Helter Skelter

To reiterate Durkheim’s position, a necessary condition in the formation of a religion is the clan’s designation of an object, animal, or individual as sacred. Within the Manson Family, sacredness was ascribed to The Beatles White Album, more specifically, the song titled Helter Skelter. Manson was infatuated with the songs of this album and their “messages” to the point where he repeatedly played the album (Atkins & Slosser, 2005; Waldron, 1970b). Manson believed the Beatles were speaking to him, that he had some sort of apocalyptic connection with them (Atkins & Slosser, 2005). Aligned with his philosophy of an impending revolution, Helter Skelter became the code name for it and witnesses have testified that Manson became obsessed with lecturing his followers on the immediacy of Helter Skelter (Waldron, 1970a, 1970b). There was nothing inherently sacred about this album but it was given a symbolic representation. Manson perceived the lyrics as instructions for his Family on how to prepare for the upcoming racial revolution. Most of his followers believed in
Helter Skelter, which was conceived as the end of the world, and they believed it was “coming down fast” (Atkins & Slosser, 2005). This viewpoint was not questioned. According to Susan Atkins, “the whole thing was done to instil fear in the establishment and cause paranoia. Also to show the black man how to take over the white man. This would be the start of ‘Helter Skelter,’” which was conceptualized as the last war on the face of the earth (Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974, p. 217). “It would instil fear into the ‘pigs’ and to bring on judgment day which is here now for all” (Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974, pp. 217–218). The symbolic representation accorded to Helter Skelter is unique to the Manson clan and is reflective of their belief system at the time.

It will now be demonstrated how the ascription of sacredness to Helter Skelter solidified the belief system of the Family and also influenced how they behaved in relation to it.

**Unified Belief System and Rites of Conduct**

Although the Manson Family membership shifted constantly, it generally consisted of 12 permanent female members and six males who lived communally, partaking in heavy drug use and sexual promiscuity (Roberts, 1969). Charles Manson slowly recruited members into the Family; these recruits were typically from middle-class backgrounds who desired to break free from the conventional establishment (Roberts, 1970).

Once Manson succeeded in making recruits, he tried to eradicate their “hang-ups” about conventional society. By “hang-ups” he essentially meant anything he did not like, and their removal was not a very difficult process. He was dealing with lonely, insecure people in need of a father figure. What he did, in effect, was to tear down that ego and substitute himself, thus achieving enormous control over his followers. They became empty vessels for whatever he poured in. As Susan Atkins said bleakly: ‘I never questioned what Charlie said. I just did it’ [Emphasis added]. (Roberts, 1970, p. 180)

Through eradicating their “hang-ups” Manson was fundamentally reprogramming his followers. He believed that everyone had been “programmed” by societal institutions and it was his job to reprogram them to give up individual egos in pursuit of his philosophy (IRF4905, 2014; MichaelsBackporch, 2011c). In doing so, the beliefs held by Manson became unified and widely endorsed by the Family.

Originally, Manson’s philosophy was premised on not recognizing good or evil, right or wrong, death, time or pain, and prioritized living in the “now”; he embraced the natural while condemning the evils of urban life and corrupt power structures (Roberts, 1970; Waldron, 1970b). Since Manson believed man constructed time, none of the family members wore watches nor did they talk about their past or celebrate birthdays (Helter Skelter Forum, 2010a). All the activities at the ranch were designed so that Manson’s followers would take on his will, he preached oneness to his followers and would say, “each man is a god. I am god, and you are god” (Roberts, 1969, p. 84). To further foster this sense of oneness, according to Krenwinkle, Manson would stop members at any point throughout the day and begin a mirroring exercise, where they would
repeat his gestures and expressions (Helter Skelter Forum, 2010a). To illustrate
the unified belief system, many of Manson’s followers were quoted saying, “I
am Charlie and Charlie is me” (Roberts, 1970, p. 180). Another member of the
Family, Sandra Good, stated in an interview, “He’s whatever a person wants to
make of him. He’s a mirror… a reflection of yourself” (The Manson Family
Today, 2006a). To provide another example, during the trial a few of Manson’s
followers were outside the courthouse in support of him, their heads shaved
the same as his, and claimed, “whenever we move, we move together. We are
one thought” (MichaelsBackporch, 2011a). Similarly, when Manson carved an
“X” in his forehead, so too did many of his devoted followers (IRF4905, 2014;
MichaelsBackporch, 2011b).

In the months preceding the murders, however, his philosophy began to revolve
around the idea of an impending revolution, or a racial holocaust, where Black
people would emerge triumphant (Kneeland, 1970). Manson would continually
talk about how Helter Skelter was the basis of what they wanted to do in terms of
chaos (MichaelsBackporch, 2011d). To quote Leslie Van Houten:

[Manson] said that it was the blacks turn, that the white had been on top for too long, and
all they did was put harm on other people, that we’re not like them. (The Manson Family
Today, 2008a)

As a collective, the Family endorsed and inherently believed Manson’s phi-
losophy to be true; many believed that “Helter Skelter” was “coming down fast”
(Atkins & Slosser, 2005). Tex Watson admitted to believing that the world was
going to come to an end the very next day, and to him, that provided enough
justification to carry out the murders at Manson’s command (The Manson
Family Today, 2006b). According to Atkins, Manson would consistently preach
about the impending Helter Skelter and upon its arrival they would need to
flee into the desert, to the bottomless pit, where they would eventually emerge
once the Blacks realized they need help in running the world (Atkins & Slosser,
2005). When Manson said they needed supplies for their retreat into the desert,
some of his followers were arrested for stealing cars which were converted into
dune buggies to increase operating efficiency in the desert terrain (Atkins &
Slosser, 2005).

With respect to Durkheim’s conditions in forming a religion, there must also
be a collection of rites outlining how members of a clan are to conduct them-
selves in the presence of the sacred. This was evident among the Family. They
did not question the sacredness ascribed to Helter Skelter. Rather, they exhib-
ited a concerted effort to prepare for it; the Family collected guns, cars, and
other material possessions and would regularly search the desert looking for a
hole that would lead to the bottomless pit (Atkins & Slosser, 2005). The afore-
mentioned quotes provide evidence of a unified belief system and also rules for
conducting themselves in the presence of the sacred, however, it should also be
noted that it was Manson’s beliefs that became unified and endorsed among the
Family. With this in mind, it will now be illustrated that Manson’s philosophy
was accepted unquestionably due to the opinion conferred onto him by his
followers.
Manson as the Totemic Principle of the Clan

According to Durkheim (1912/1976, p. 206), a God is:

a being that man conceives of as superior to himself in some respects and one on whom he believes he depends [...] the faithful believe they are bound to certain ways of acting that the nature of the sacred principle they are dealing with has imposed upon them.

Based on this definition, it will be illustrated in this section that Manson was conferred with a god-like grandeur by the clan. His deification was not immediate, but rather attributable to a number of social processes. Subsequent to recruiting Family members, Manson would usually begin by having sex with the female members, simultaneously convincing the plain that they were beautiful (Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974). Male members would be taken on an LSD trip:

[...] ostensibly “to open his mind.” Then, while he was in a highly suggestible state, he would talk about love, how you had to surrender yourself to it, how only by ceasing to exist as an individual ego could you become one with all things. (Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974, p. 235)

Once the recruit was under the influence, Manson would offer any of his girls to pleasure him and once they accepted they were obligated to him in some way, shape, or form (Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974).

Oftentimes, Manson would compare himself to Jesus Christ and other times, when the group was high on LSD, he would re-enact the crucifixion, with his followers pretending to nail him on a cross (IRF4905, 2014). Aligned with this display, there would often be bizarre tests of devotion. Manson would ask his followers to stand against a tree and he would throw a hatchet at them, asking, “Do you trust me? Will you die for me? Will you be me?” (Helter Skelter Forum, 2010b; IRF4905, 2014). Members obliged without hesitation (Helter Skelter Forum, 2010b). This is illustrative of the dynamogenic quality of religion. Manson was obeyed out of the moral authority that was accorded to him; his instructions followed due to the opinion conferred onto him by his followers. According to Krenwinkle, when questioned on why she committed the Tate-LaBianca slayings, she replied “I was following Charlie’s orders because they were Charlie’s orders” (Helter Skelter Forum, 2010b). Moreover, Manson would exert power displays with the group by preaching to them atop a large rock; no other members ever sat or stood on that rock, but rather circled it embracing his words (Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974). He would preach that each member was independent but in reality they were dependent upon him.

He said that he couldn’t tell anyone else what to do, that they should “do what love tells you,” but he also told them, “I am your love,” and his wants became theirs. (Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974, p. 225)

In a documentary (1991), Van Houten admitted that in 1971 she felt that Manson was Jesus Christ and Helter Skelter was necessary (The Manson Family Today, 2008a). Atkins and Slosser (2005) also acknowledged that when Manson grew out his hair and beard he looked like Jesus and she felt that he very well could be. Similarly, another of Manson’s girls was quoted, “I felt he was the
messiah come again: you know, the second coming of Christ, I thought he was another Jesus Christ” (Robinson, 1970, p. 21).

These perceptions can also be connected to what Durkheim calls the demon of oratorical inspiration. Manson genuinely felt tuned in with God and messages were relayed to him through the Beatles music; he was the sole interpreter. One night, while listening to the *White Album*, Manson proclaimed, “They’re speaking to me” (Atkins & Slosser, 2005). This furthered the groups belief that he was godly – they felt as if they were tuned into God through Charlie and the primary message was survival above all else (Atkins & Slosser, 2005). Other family members testified to this: Manson believed he was the vehicle chosen to bring about Helter Skelter (Waldron, 1970a). In sum, the opinion conferred onto Manson by his followers resulted in him being virtually deified and placed in a position of superiority relative to his Family.

**Presence of an Overarching Moral Community**

The final condition necessary in the formation of a religion is the presence of a Church, or an overarching moral community (Durkheim, 1912/1976). This is necessary to renew the clan’s common faith through public demonstrations of their beliefs. Durkheim (1912/1976) believed that without this, emotional ties to the religion would dissipate. Although there was no “Church” attendance within the Family, because they lived communally on Spahn’s Ranch there was a constant demonstration of their faith. As mentioned previously, activities at the Ranch were centered upon taking on Manson’s will and preparing for Helter Skelter. Emotions were continuously strengthened through regular exposure to Manson’s philosophy. It initially appears as though the Manson clan had achieved collective effervescence from their attempts to develop an internally coherent religious narrative. However, their symbolic representation of Helter Skelter did not become institutionalized or embraced by the wider culture, leading to its demise.

In summary, connections were drawn between the Manson Family and Durkheim’s theory of religious formation. According to this theory, in order for a religion to form, a clan must ascribe sacredness to an object, animal, or individual, which subsequently determines the conduct of its members. There must also be a unified system of beliefs and rules of conduct within the group as well as the presence of a church or overarching moral community. Within this section, it has been demonstrated that the Family ascribed sacredness to The Beatles *White Album*, more specifically, the song titled *Helter Skelter*. Devoted members of the family never questioned this totem and their beliefs were reflective of Manson’s, resulting in a unified belief system. Moreover, it has been shown how Manson was virtually deified by members of the clan and there was a definite presence of an overarching moral community. Since collective effervescence was not attained, however, it can only be inferred that a pseudo-religion formed among the Family. Their symbolic representation of Helter Skelter was not widely endorsed yet they were still able to form an internally coherent narrative among themselves, resulting in a religious formation.
It has been shown how a pseudoreligion formed among the Manson Family, the remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to demonstrating a connection between religious affiliation and violence using John Hall’s theory (2003, 2013).

In speculating on religion and violence, Hall (2013, p. 7) proposes “a phenomenological and cultural approach that theorizes multiple kinds of relationships between religion and violence according to structural situations.” In some circumstances, religion itself structures the sacred meaning of action, “thereby not only legitimating violence but also actually shaping its character as well as the patterns of social organization and the processes in which violence occurs” (Hall, 2013, p. 7). Building off of Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Hall (2013) notes that the sacred and profane are socially and culturally constructed and based on these constructions lies the possibility of violence occurring as a sacred duty. Hall (2013, p. 7) concludes that it is “not religious traditions but religious formations and their contextual circumstances [that] shape their potential instantiations with violence.” This statement initially appears contradictory to Durkheim’s theory; however, it can be argued that it merely compliments his work, adding insight into the associative link between religion and violence.

One kind of relationship between religion and violence concerns utopian “apocalyptic” movements where a sacred course of action is developed in preparation of “the end of the world as we know it” (Hall, 2013, p. 6). Within the apocalyptic orientation, Hall further differentiated between pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic counterhegemonic conflicts. The former involves sects preparing for the apocalypse, whereas the latter involves sects who believe they have somehow escaped or survived it (Hall, 2003). These sects can either be peaceful or violent depending upon group orientation. Of relevance to this chapter is pre-apocalyptic warring sects who view “themselves as agents of apocalyptic history battling to defeat the forces of evil” (Hall, 2003, p. 372). Hall (2003, p. 372) has described this group as:

A band of true believers, who become certified as charismatic warriors through a process of rebirth, acts alone or in concert with a wider underground network of sympathizers and similar bands. These warriors engage in the moment-to-moment coordination of guerilla-style action in pursuit of strategic, symbolic, and terrorist missions [...] [T]he successful execution of actions related to missions and contingency plans depends on interpersonal trust, the development of high proficiency at various technical and strategic skills, and acts of commitment and bravery which place mission ahead of personal survival.

These warring sects arise within the context of a wider countercultural movement, frequently in relation to social conditions perceived as a threat to the existing social order (Hall, 2003). Violence is thus pursued as the basis for social reconstruction (Hall, 2003). A religious component is always evident within these sects but is often confounded with broader “nationalist, anticolonial, and revolutionary class movements” (Hall, 2003, p. 372).

In the remaining section of this chapter it will be argued that the Manson Family originally came together as a countercultural group who evolved into an apocalyptic movement. The religion that formed legitimized violent behavior and
also structured “the ‘sacred’ meaning of action” (Hall, 2013, p. 374). It should first be mentioned, however, that this argument alludes to motive. Throughout the criminal proceedings, prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi was striving to develop a motive for the murders (Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974). He decided that they were motivated by the group’s belief in Helter Skelter. From this point of view, Bugliosi was merely interested in the defendants’ mens rea. From a sociological perspective, however:

[...] motive acquires its analytic character as a public product rather than as a private “state,” and must be understood grammatically (as part of the meaning of an action) rather than as a factual report on some contingent, antecedent event. (Blum & McHugh, 1971, p. 101)

Grammar of motives is used whenever an event is to be interpreted within a collection of owned experiences, what Blum and McHugh (1971) call a biography. Actors conceive themselves as having particular pasts, which routinely inform the observer about behavioral possibilities (Blum & McHugh, 1971). In other words, motive is a sociological procedure for describing how individuals show themselves as persons. Therefore, the murderous event should be interpreted against Manson’s collection of owned experiences and this will give you the motive. Helter Skelter was aligned with his past experiences of distrust with institutions and racist tendencies while providing the means to accomplish an organized and concerted cure to what he (and others around him) perceived as a problem.

The Manson Family as a Warring Sect

The primary tenet of Hall’s (2003, 2013) argument is that religious violence is situational and how the resulting violence is structured depends on contextual circumstances unique to the religious group. Within this section it will be demonstrated that the Manson Family came together as a countercultural movement yet evolved into a warring sect. The religion that formed legitimized violent behavior and also structured “the ‘sacred’ meaning of action” (Hall, 2013, p. 374). To contextualize the Tate-LaBianca murders, reference must be made to the broader social forces permeating the group in the late 1960s.

The Manson Family originally came together as a countercultural group – they believed in the notion of “dropping out” or disengaging from the mainstream and they adopted many of the previously mentioned personas (i.e., the outlaw, the new age, and the natural persona). Additionally, the 1960s were marked by a period of civic activism in an effort to liberate the suppressed; Black people, homosexuals, and women were demanding equality (McKay, 2005). This furthered Manson’s paranoia of a racial revolution. While listening to the *White Album*, Manson would make connections between the lyrics and Revelations 9 from the Bible. From this he argued that Armageddon was at hand and news reporting on Black riots and Black militancy groups, such as the Black Panthers, furthered this belief (Helter Skelter Forum, 2010b). As previously demonstrated, the Family believed that “Helter Skelter was coming down fast” and eventually realized they would have to be the ones to initiate the revolution (Atkins & Slosser, 2005). Given that *Helter Skelter* was conceived as sacred, the ensuing murders were legitimized as
a necessary religious duty. The brutality of the murders can also be understood within this framework. In order to spark a war between races, the murders had to be “witchy” and “memorable” to capture the attention of society (Helter Skelter Forum, 2010c, 2010d). In so doing, they were made to look like the Blacks had committed them, the “establishment” would then come down on their race and, in retaliation, Black people would rise and the revolution would begin (Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974; Helter Skelter Forum, 2010c, 2010d).

It will now be argued that the Manson Family evolved into a pre-apocalyptic warring sect. According to Hall (2003), a warring sect is composed of agents who have experienced rebirth in pursuit of a symbolic mission. The success of these sects is dependent upon interpersonal trust, the development of strategies and skills that foster commitment, resulting in a pursuit of the mission at the expense of personal survival (Hall, 2003). The emergence of these groups is often a response to a perceived external threat and violence is pursued as a basis for social reconstruction (Hall, 2003). Each of the Family members had experienced a process of rebirth from their original identities through Manson eradicating their “hang-ups,” essentially replacing individual egos with his philosophy (Roberts, 1970). In the development of a unified belief system, a strong sense of interpersonal trust was fostered among group members. When Manson’s philosophy became centered upon the immediacy of Helter Skelter, he began to focus his energy on preparing the group for the revolution. They began collecting supplies for their survival and were taught how to use guns (Atkins & Slosser, 2005). They were continually asked if they were willing to die for him; whether they were willing to die in pursuit of heaven on earth (Helter Skelter Forum, 2010c). Leslie Van Houten provides support for these inferences:

I felt that because [Krenwinkle] had gone [to the Tate murders the previous night], I felt that what we were doing was a mission that needed to be done. I felt that if they went again, I wanted to go, I wanted to be a soldier and surrender myself for what I believed in [Emphasis added] (MichaelsBackporch, 2012)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated that a pseudoreligion formed among the Manson Family through (1) ascribing sacredness to Helter Skelter, (2) by developing a unified system of beliefs and corresponding rules of conduct, and (3) the presence of an overarching moral community. Charles Manson had become the clan’s totemic principle, or god, by the opinion conferred onto him by his followers. Once this religion developed and solidified it then structured the subsequent violence committed by the Family. By giving their unswerving loyalty to Manson, he was conferred with the power to give orders that would be obeyed out of a respect for his moral authority. His instructions to kill were not questioned and the consequences of his orders were not considered. The religion that formed among the Family also structured the course of subsequent violence. Embedded within the group’s orientation, the sacredness ascribed to Helter Skelter allowed for the creation of a warring sect whose
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mission was to combat the evil forces of the establishment and prevent the demise of the White race.

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REFERENCES


