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**Terry and his Temple: a New Boundary Case
for the Study of Religion**

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Introduction

The development of the Temple Operating System¹ is understood to have begun in 2003, but it was not until 2013 that it was released under that name. Its creator, Terry A. Davis, described it as “God’s official temple” and understood himself to be its high priest. He amassed a significant online following in the years prior to his death in 2018 who would interact with him during his live streams and formed online communities in which they continue to discuss his life and work. TempleOS — with its digital location and the ambiguity between Davis’ intention and its reception — constitutes interesting new data for the academic study of religion, and this dissertation aims to investigate how an examination of TempleOS might prove valuable in discourses surrounding the definition of religion and its relationship with computers and the internet.

The first chapter aims to introduce readers to Davis and “the Temple Operating System”. It will begin with an exposition of the technical function and complexity of the Temple Operating System, explaining that it is an operating system rather than an application, and that it would typically be installed in a “virtual machine”. In order to contextualise the interest that it generated in digital-technical communities, an effort will be made to convey its magnitude as a project undertaken by a single programmer. Davis’ biography will then be presented, including details about his personal “offline” life, and his activities on the internet.

The second chapter will explore the tension between Davis’ intention for TempleOS and its reception. Evidence for the inference of Davis’ intention will be drawn from various pages on his website and videos that he uploaded to the internet. Competing streams of reception will then be evidenced by the reactions expressed in comments by “accidental” audiences on YouTube — most of whom would not have encountered Davis before — compared with discussion amongst the much more “intentional”

1. For the sake of simplicity, the Temple Operating System will be used to refer specifically to the operating system created by Terry A. Davis, and “TempleOS” will refer to the broader phenomenon of the operating system, its creator, and the associated online following.

community of r/TempleOS_Official, constituting of participants who had actively sought out a space to discuss Davis and his work.

Finally, the third chapter will highlight the value of TempleOS for boundary work in the definition of religion. It will begin with an exposition of the purpose and function of boundary work as a process demarcating distinct fields of knowledge. The contemporary example of new age spiritualities will then be introduced in order to highlight difficulties that can be encountered with definitional boundaries — in particular, the “world religions paradigm”. The contemporary importance of boundary work will then be reinforced through reference to the example of Carol Cusack’s *Invented Religions*. Her use of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s social-constructionist model of world-building and adoption of a polythetic definition of religion will then be explained, highlighting the possibility for a more fluid conception of “religion”. The chapter will culminate in a presentation of Erik Davis’ argument in *TechGnosis* that modern technology can, and does, embody mystical qualities. Through this, it will be ultimately concluded that TempleOS, in its transgression of the intuitive mechanical–spiritual distinction, constitutes valuable new data which challenges traditional images of computer science as a disenchanting realm of algorithms with no space for spirituality.

I

TempleOS and its Creator

The objective of this chapter is to introduce Terry A. Davis and his creation, the Temple Operating System. It will begin with an explanation of what the Temple Operating System *is* and what it can *do*. Following this, an overview of Davis' biography will be presented with particular reference to the online article *God's Lonely Programmer*.

The operating system

Terry A. Davis first began work developing operating systems in 1990 as an employee of Ticketmaster, and started a project he called "Terry's Protected Mode OS" in 1993 which was renamed over the years and eventually released with the name "TempleOS" in 2013 (T. A. Davis 2008). Operating systems, like Microsoft's Windows or Apple's macOS, provide an interface between physical hardware like a laptop or smartphone, and applications like Microsoft Office or Google Chrome. They do not typically influence what you *do* on your computer but, rather, *how* you do those things. For example, Microsoft's Word application can be installed on both Windows and macOS, differing primarily in details like keyboard shortcuts. The Temple Operating System, on the other hand, lacks the capability to perform functions required by many users in day-to-day use, like internet browsing and sending emails. Davis did not develop the Temple Operating System to be a replacement for other operating systems like Windows, however, but to be installed alongside them. On the "Welcome to TempleOS" page of TempleOS.org as it appeared in 2016¹, Davis (2016h) wrote that 'since this OS is used in addition to Windows or Linux, [...] failure is an option – just use Windows if you can't do something. I cherry-pick what it will and won't do to make it maximally beautiful'. Moreover, on the "Frequently Asked Questions" page, he explained that although "TempleOS will work as the only

operating system on your computer’, ‘it has no networking’ and ‘in your off hours, you will use your other operating system’ (T. A. Davis 2016b). In other words, the Temple Operating System is a closed system without access to the internet, offering only the applications developed and included by Davis: various games, an application for composing music, and an oracle that can be accessed from anywhere in the operating system at the press of a keyboard shortcut which presents the user with randomly chosen words from a dictionary or passages from the Bible.

Indeed, the immediate utility of the Temple Operating System can be more helpfully understood in analogy to the use of applications in general, rather than in comparison to other more familiar operating systems. As quoted above, Davis suggested that users could install the Temple Operating System alongside their existing operating system, but it would more often be installed in a “virtual machine” for the sake of convenience. The former would necessitate the user to reboot their computer to access a menu through which they could choose which operating system to load. The latter — employed by Davis as evidenced by many of the videos he published documenting the system — involves the use of a special application within one’s existing operating system to create a digital container in which a second operating system can be installed. In this way the Temple Operating System can be opened, closed, or minimised in a manner equivalent to other applications.

The value of the Temple Operating System *as an operating system*, then, is not in the programs it includes — as they could have been packaged as an application to be installed in Windows or macOS — but in the malleable virtual environment the system offers. The religious mission underwriting Davis’ development of the Temple Operating System will be explained in the following chapter, but it would be remiss to overlook its less ambitious goal of providing a tool for ‘recreational programming’ targeted towards ‘professionals doing hobby projects’, ‘teenagers doing projects’, and ‘non-professional, older-persons projects’ (T. A. Davis 2016h). The Temple Operating System *as an operating system* presents a ‘simple machine where programming [is] the goal, not just a means to an end’ and features ‘a low line count [...] so it is easy to learn the whole thing’ (T. A. Davis 2016d). The value of the Temple Operating System for such a use-case is usefully illustrated in a blog post written by Richard Mitton, ‘a freelancing British software engineer’, titled “A Constructive Look at TempleOS”. In it, he references a video in which Davis ‘shows how to build a small graphical application from scratch’ using a ‘tiny snippet of code’ and proceeds

1. A significant number of pages were removed from TempleOS.org over the course of 2017 — a process which resulted in the simple single-page website present at the time of writing. Although an old version of the website is currently accessible at <https://templeos.holyc.xyz>, a snapshot of Davis’ website as it appeared on June 1st, 2016 — accessed via the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine (<https://archive.org/web>) — will be referenced throughout this dissertation.

to explain that the process to achieve the same result in Microsoft's Windows would be significantly more complicated, requiring many more lines of code (Mitton 2015). Accordingly, 'TempleOS is somewhat of a legend in the operating system community' (Mitton 2015), not only as 'an educational tool for programming experiments' but also as 'a testament to the dedication and passion of one man displaying his technological prowess' (Sanders 2014). In his obituary article in *The Dalles (Oregon) Chronicle*, Davis' single-handed development of the Temple Operating System was likened to 'building a skyscraper by yourself' (Cecil 2018).

Davis' life

The "cult following" of TempleOS has perhaps more to do with Davis himself than his creation, however. The principal source of "offline" biographical information about him is an article titled *God's Lonely Programmer* in VICE Magazine's *Motherboard* publication. In it, Jesse Hicks (2014)—drawing upon 'two months of emails and phone conversations'—first introduces the OS, but spends the majority of the article de-mystifying the background of Davis. According to the article, Davis was born in 1969 in Wisconsin and grew up Catholic. He started using computers in elementary school and went on to complete bachelor's and master's degrees in electrical engineering at Arizona State University. On the blog section of his website, Davis (2017c) wrote that between 1990 and 1996 he was 'as atheist as they come', and is quoted in Hicks' article as saying 'I thought the brain was a computer [...] so I had no need for a soul'. He goes on to say, however, that he is differentiated from other atheists because 'God has talked to me, so I'm basically like an atheist who God has talked to'. Davis describes starting to '[see] people following me around in suits and stuff' in mid-March 1996 and later ends up in a mental hospital for two weeks following a run-in with the police. His mental state stabilises later that year and he moves back in with his parents, proceeding to experience manic episodes every six months for the next six years. The article reports that he hadn't been to the hospital since then, however, with Davis claiming 'for those first few years, I was genuinely pretty crazy in a way. Now I'm not. I'm crazy in a different way maybe', and that although he had 'since been declared schizophrenic' he '[shrugged] off the diagnosis', saying he had 'learned not to freak out'.

The unofficial "Timeline of TempleOS" written by Issa Rice (2018) offers a useful overview of the known biographical data about Davis, listing 39 entries of biographical information about Davis' "personal" life alongside a near-equal 40 entries about the online activities of Davis between 2001 and 2017. These online activities included his creation — and often the subsequent suspension — of accounts on various platforms, and his notable forum posts, video uploads, and live streams. According to this timeline, Davis' first live stream — a medium through which a "streamer"

broadcasts video live on the internet and hosts a chatroom for viewer interaction — took place on March 16, 2016. That first live stream lasted for an hour and a half and featured Davis working on the development of the Temple Operating System, using it to compose a hymn tune, reading various popular media websites, updating the blog page on his website, and asking God questions like ‘did dinosaurs tangle their necks?’, divining answers through the random words produced by his oracle program (T. A. Davis 2016f, 59:05). Most of his live streams included similar activities to his first, although he would also lapse into extended monologues about conspiracy theories regarding the CIA and contemplation of his place in reality, comparing himself in one notable video titled *Reality* (T. A. Davis 2017a) to the protagonist in *The Truman Show* — a film about a businessman whose entire life has been orchestrated around him as part of a reality TV show. Davis’ monologues became increasingly existential and incoherent following his ejection from the family home by his parents after a fight with his father in September 2017 (T. A. Davis 2017d). Davis lived in a van for approximately one year following this incident until he was hit by a train on August 11, 2018 and died (Cecil 2018).

II

An Analysis of the Intention Behind and Reception of TempleOS

The objective of this chapter is to explore dynamic tension between Davis' intention for TempleOS and its reception in two online audiences — YouTube commentators and participants in r/TempleOS_Official. Davis' technical ambitions for the operating system were covered in the previous chapter. Here, he will be shown to have understood his production of TempleOS as part of a wider desire to reform Christianity. The reception of TempleOS will be shown to be mixed, however, with some expressing sympathy for Davis as a talented programmer who struggled with mental health difficulties while others suggesting that his world-view ought to be taken seriously.

Intention

I am Roman Catholic, and the religion for my kingdom would be Roman Catholic, but the church is dead [...]. Right now the computer industry is sick like Herod, the Roman Church is sick like Herod, the world is sick like Herod, and I'm going to cure it. (Terry A. Davis, *I'm Starting a New Religion* [Internet Archive, 2018])

TempleOS is introduced at the beginning of its charter as 'God's official temple. [...] [A] community focal point where offerings are made and God's oracle is consulted' (T. A. Davis 2016d). The remainder of the document, however, is dedicated to technical details, such as the 'limit of 100,000 lines of code for all time' and 'just one 8x8 fixed-width font'. Further explanation of its religious purpose is located somewhat sporadically on other pages on the TempleOS website, and in videos

uploaded by Davis. In *The 64-Bit Operating System*, for example, Davis (2016e) introduced TempleOS with reference to its oracle feature — which utilises a high-speed stopwatch operated by the user to select random words and bible passages — suggesting that its ‘main purpose is for doing offerings of hymns and art and poems and stuff and then getting a response from God in the oracle’.

On a page titled “New Religion”, and under the heading “Christianity, a Charity or a Church?”, Davis (2016c) wrote that ‘today, Christianity is a secular humanist social club that does charity. A church should primarily love God and do prayers’. Further down, under the heading “The Counter-Renaissance”, Davis described his

dream that obsession with God in the United States will return to the level it was in Europe in 1200 A.D. Europeans built cathedrals and had monasteries that wrote beautifully decorated books. [...] people will strive to make God’s temple beautiful, glorious and as perfect as possible. It will be adored. People will do offerings in God’s temple and God will talk.

On another page titled *The Purpose of Life*, Davis (2016g) commanded ‘You don’t know God. [...] You must talk with God to know Him. [...] Seek the Lord by taking initiative’, and proceeded to explain his rationale as follows:

There’s something obviously different about people in the Bible compared to people today — God talked! Also, the people in the Bible were obsessed with doing offerings all the time. It is required that you do offerings before God will talk. Did the people in the Bible hear voices? Maybe. More likely, they used occult techniques such as an oracle.

Furthermore, Davis (2016a) understood himself to have a role more significant than that of an ordinary software developer, introducing himself on his “Demands” page as ‘high priest of God’s official temple, TempleOS’ with ‘divine authority to command any company in the computer industry to do anything that [he] deem necessary to make God’s temple more beautiful, glorious and perfect’. He understood his obligations in this role to be twofold: he was ‘in charge of the core 100,000 lines of TempleOS code’ and he did ‘continual offerings to keep God entertained’. It appears, then, that Davis wanted to, in some sense, reform Christianity with a renewed focus on communication with God as it is presented in the Old Testament — by giving offerings and consulting an oracle.

Reception

The most-viewed video included in search results on YouTube for the query “Terry Davis TempleOS” is *TempleOS | Down the Rabbit Hole* (henceforth *DRH*) by Fredrik

Knudsen with 1.6 million views and a running time of one hour and 25 minutes. The next highest view-count is *Internet Insanity: Terry A. Davis* (henceforth *Insanity*) with 761 thousand views and a running time of 17 minutes. Both of these videos were uploaded as episodes of ongoing series — “Down the Rabbit Hole” and “Internet Insanity”, respectively — focussed on controversial or eccentric online personalities to YouTube channels with hundreds of thousands of subscribers. If these two videos are excluded from the first ten videos appearing in the search results for “Terry Davis TempleOS”, the mean view-count for the remaining eight stands at roughly 100 thousand. It can be inferred from this disparity in view count that a significant proportion of the viewers of *DRH* and *Insanity* had not come across Davis before. *Insanity* was uploaded to YouTube in mid-2017 and adopts a damning stance towards Davis’ mental illness, introducing him as ‘a man who had a psychotic break. A talented man, but [one] who encountered mental illness so severe that any legacy he has will be overshadowed by the sideshow that he has become’ (2017). Contrastingly, Knudsen’s (2018) video was uploaded a few months after Davis’ death and takes a more balanced approach, introducing TempleOS as, ‘depending on who is consulted, [...] the outdated product of a deranged mind, the work of a misunderstood genius, or some complicated combination of the two’.

YouTube commentator Hey Trey (2019) aptly summarises the narrative arc of Knudsen’s portrayal of Davis:

i started the video really disliking the guy, thinking to myself what a smug pos [piece of shit]. transitiones [*sic*] into, this guy is crazy and racist, and comedy gold. Then, as the video went on i went from laughing, to absolute total pity and a feeling of total sadness that he was very obviously becoming very unhealthy and mentally unstable.¹

Perhaps resulting from this dramatic narrative arc in Knudsen’s portrayal of Davis, the comments on this video — when sorted by “top comments” to prioritise those given the most “thumbs up” — are overwhelmingly sympathetic towards Davis, with many expressing similar sentiments to Hey Trey.

Sympathetic comments can also be found on *Insanity* — particularly since Davis’ death — but the less sympathetic tone of the video itself results in more varied comments, which I have grouped into four broad themes of sympathy, humour, admiration of talent, and world-view evaluation. Comments referencing Davis’ talent often mention his mental illness. Gaming with Mikey! (2018) wrote ‘The dude built

1. *The Chicago Manual of Style* (2017, 15.51) suggests that blog comments should be referenced in-text with an indication of their date of publishing but should not appear in the bibliography. That style will be adopted here.

an OS from scratch? That's genius level ability. It's just tragic that he's crippled by his mental disability', and Teamugi (2018) wrote 'Schizophrenia aside, this guy has talent. Building an OS from scratch by yourself [...] is extremely impressive'. Many of the humour-oriented comments reference computing — Mayor of Gaming (2018) wrote 'as a programmer, I'm positive that a few of my colleagues are 1 compile error away from becoming this guy'. Similarly, one sees references to popular culture in comments suggesting that Davis' purported world-view was illuminating. For example, Darkwing Dumpling (2018) wrote 'Terry is the one who coded the matrix[.] We need him', and a comment from Heinrich Nornelius Agrippa (2018) reproduces a message received by players in the videogame *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* if they kill an "essential character" in a quest: 'with this character's death, the thread of prophecy is severed. Restore a saved game to restore the weave of fate, or persist in the doomed world you have created'. There are also some sincere comments imploring readers to consider Davis' world-view seriously. братишка (2018), for example, wrote 'if you watch his ramblings long enough, they actually start to make sense. im serious. try it'.

The comments left by viewers on YouTube can be usefully contrasted with threads found on the TempleOS subreddit². Notably, the highest rated post of all time on r/TempleOS_Official is a link to Knudsen's *TempleOS | Down the Rabbit Hole* video, posted by Klyke (2018), and some of the comments on the post highlight the presence of an intentional and sincere community. BiggRanger wrote (on December 22, 2018) 'seems like a pretty well done video [...]. The guy did his homework on this, but still has the feel of an outsider looking in'. Another commenter, GDP10, wrote (on December 24, 2018) 'I don't really like how at some points this video portrays Terry as a madman. It's not really fair. Many of his moments of "insanity" are actually quite lucid and he has sound points. [...] Rest in peace Terry. I know you can finally talk with God face to face'. This comment is of particular interest because it not only explicitly validates Davis' world-view, but it later includes a quote from a different post on r/TempleOS_Official made four months prior and, in a follow-up comment replying to Cu_de_cachorro, GDP10 also references a post made five years prior by Davis (2013) about TempleOS on r/programming. GDP10's first quote discourages the reader from fixating on the perceivable symptoms of Davis' illness but to consider the extent to which it caused him suffering, and the second is an invitation for the members of r/programming to 'tolerate or ignore his condition while exploring what he's spent a lot of time on' (ba-cawk commenting on 21 March, 2013). These quotes, included alongside hyperlinks to their sources and with added bold and italics, are indicative of the extent to which members of r/TempleOS_Official are able to refer

back to often quite obscure content on the internet produced by, or about, Davis, and the care and effort which is frequently employed in doing so.

A more recent post by MicroPeanor (2019) highlights both the depth and religiosity of discussion had on r/TempleOS_Official. The title asks “Is TOS a hidden, misunderstood, technological gem or more of a fun little thing to tinker with?” and the body of the post indicates the author’s specific interest in TempleOS’ technical value:

I think when TOS [TempleOS] first came around people were focused on the wrong aspects of it. [...] The creator had [...] over saturated his work with god [...]. People looking into it now [have] a different outlook on it [it] seems. They’re finding that it is potentially useful and far more advanced than people originally thought.

The comments include discussion of TempleOS’ technical merit and religious content with roughly equal weighting. The two most highly rated comments directly answer the question asked by MicroPeanor in the post’s title — the second doing so in six paragraphs with five hyperlinks — but the third answers ‘Both. Terry was a fascinating guy too. Most of yall are probably atheists but I think he did follow God’s will in a weird sort of way’ (redditpostingM223540 on 21 February 2019). MicroPeanor’s response (on the same day) to this comment draws a parallel between Davis and biblical figures who were treated with scepticism:

Nah actually not atheist. Although I don’t follow one specific religion. I feel many different religions have something to offer, so taking a bit of moral guidelines from the ones I more closely agree with is what I do. [...] He very well could have been following God’s will. There a a [sic] crap load of stories in the Bible where god talks to or through someone and everyone around them doubts them. I can’t say he was or wasn’t being talked to, but he sure thought he was doing the right thing.

A_Plagiarize_Zest also responded (on 1 March, 2019) to redditpostingM223540, writing ‘I think hes [Davis is] correct in thinking God is the random synchronicity of the universe’ and draws on anecdotal evidence to support his view:

2. Subreddits are community pages formed around topics of interest on Reddit.com and are denoted by the “r/” prefix — the TempleOS subreddit, for example, is named r/TempleOS_Official. Reddit’s homepage features posts from some of the most popular subreddits by default — r/books, for example — and the “default subreddit” /all is a compilation of the most popular posts from a wide variety of subreddits measured by subtracting their “downvotes” from their “upvotes”, but posts on the vast majority of the roughly 1.2 million subreddits are only seen by those who visit them directly. For scale, r/science, a default subreddit to which all new accounts are subscribed, has roughly 18 million subscribers, r/soccer 850 thousand, and r/TempleOS_Official 1,800.

‘Sometimes he would get response from god that were hilarious or perfectly fit. One time he was saying how depressed he was and so he “asked god” what he should do, and the random generator responded with “plant trees” [...]. I think terry was really talkin to god. I cant tell you how many times Ive been researchin something on youtube, or gone down some rabbit hole, and then Ill go on 4chan or watch some podcast and the exact same shit I randomly started researchin gets discussed on the podcast. Its like god sayin, “you’re on to somethin.”

Furthermore, when Hastaroth (the following day) dismissed the latter anecdotal evidence as ‘Nothing special or magical [...]. It’s called the Baader-Meinhof effect’, A_Plagiarize_Zest responded (the same day) with three substantial paragraphs dismissing Baader and Meinhof as ‘typical “intellectuals” that base intelligence off of how well they can subvert the human race with bullshit philosophy and bullshit science’. Other comments blend the technical with the religious. WPLibrar2 wrote (on 2 March, 2019):

The entire OS is one of the best system existing simply because as a temple it is meant to be a technological masterpiece and a giant offering, increasing the accuracy of talking to god simply by that. This is literally how all religions, abrahamatic [sic] and pagan and all temples, worked in history. And god the way he did that generator.. I have never seen something as spirited as this one. What I mean is that through the whole system supporting the generator, he put the actual concept of god into a simple machine. TempleOS is the only system having something called “spirit”.

There is a definite sense, then, of competing streams in the reception of TempleOS. Audiences on YouTube, for many of whom it would have been their first encounter with Davis, reacted to the story of Davis’ life and work with admiration and sympathy. Members of the r/TempleOS_Official community, however, displayed great sincerity in their efforts to properly format their posts, even including hyperlinks to related posts from months before.

III

Boundary Work

This final chapter hopes to position TempleOS as a valuable boundary case for the definition of religion. First, the process of boundary work will be introduced, followed by a brief exposition of a contemporary case of boundary trouble in the study of religion — new age spiritualities. The definitional work performed by Carol Cusack in the context of “invented religions” will then be presented, including a brief summary of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s social-constructionist model of world-building and the difference between essentialist and polythetic definitions of religion. Finally, with extensive reference to Erik Davis’ *TechGnosis*, TempleOS’ value as a boundary case will be elucidated through an explanation of its transgression of the intuitive mechanical–spiritual binary.

Thomas F. Gieryn (1983, 781), writing in an article addressing the demarcation of science from non-science, aptly observes that although demarcation ‘is routinely accomplished in practical, everyday settings’ such as school curricula, philosophers and sociologists of science have long struggled with the challenge of identifying ‘unique and essential characteristics’ which distinguish it definitively from non-science. He goes on to recognise boundary work as part of a ‘rhetorical style [...] sometimes hoping to enlarge the material and symbolic resources of scientists or to defend professional autonomy’ (782). In the case of religion, to be classified one way or the other can similarly be a matter of real importance to organisations and individuals and is often negotiated on their behalf. Talal Asad (2011, 39) summarises this power in the past and present thus: ‘in the past, colonial administrations used definitions of religion to classify, control, and regulate the practices and identities of subjects. Today, liberal democracy is required to pronounce on the legal status of such definitions and thus to spell out civil immunities and obligations’, and he notes

that ‘academic expertise is often invoked in the process of arriving at legal decisions about religious matters’.

A contemporary example of this can be found in Steven Sutcliffe’s *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*. Sutcliffe writes that ‘the “world religions” paradigm is embedded in the basic fabric of our thinking about religion’ and that — through its authorisation of the reproduction of ‘only a limited set of approved religion entities’ — it causes ‘structural disadvantage’ for ‘local, small-scale, diffuse, informal, situational, hybrid and syncretic’ religious formations (Sutcliffe 2014, 22, 25). Moreover, ‘The taxonomy is further reinforced by its recognition and approval on the part of many religious organizations, which can derive practical advantage in the form of enhanced social capital and related benefits in so far as they are able to position their own traditions in “world” terms’ (23). The more entrenched the “world religion” model becomes, the more difficult it becomes to ‘conceptualize a different paradigm of classification of the data for “religion”’ (25).

Carol Cusack grapples with a similar challenge in *Invented Religions*. She recognises a pattern in the “world religions” that their origin is either — in the case of Judaism, Christianity and Islam — associated with divine revelation or — in the case of Hinduism — ‘so far in the past that individual founders are unknown but venerability is assured’ (Cusack 2010, 1). In a similar vein, she observes in the case of new religions that scripture is usually said to originate from an authoritative external source like God, and the associated teachings are argued to be ‘not really “new” but rather a contemporary strand of ancient wisdom’ (1). Invented religions — as defined by Cusack — reject this “web of conventions”, however, through their unapologetic affirmation of human origin. Their beliefs might be structured around the content of a novel, as in the case of the Church of All Worlds (53), or perhaps they emerged as a product of late-night discussion in 24-hour bowling alleys, in the case of Discordianism (28). In spite of this ‘deeply provocative’ rejection, however, Cusack suggests that invented religions ‘can be seen to be functionally similar, if not identical, to traditional religions’ when examined through the lens of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s social-constructionist model of world-building, and she further reinforces the possibility of their religious status through the adoption of a polythetic definition of religion. These will be explained in turn.

Berger and Luckmann (1967, 79) wrote in *The Social Construction of Reality* that ‘Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product’. Berger later applied that dialectic model of society to religion in *The Social Reality of Religion*, and it is the summary he gives of the theory in the latter book which will be reproduced here. The dialectic model of society suggests that ‘the two statements, that society is the product of man [*sic*] and that man is the product of society, are not

contradictory' (Berger 1969, 3). Put another way, Berger (3) observes that although 'there can be no social reality apart from man', 'it is within society, and as a result of social processes, that the individual becomes a person, that he attains and holds onto an identity, and that he carries out the various projects that constitute his life'.

This dialectic relationship between humans and society is said to operate through a three-step process of 'externalization, objectivation, and internalization' (3–4). Externalization is the moment in which humans create society through the 'ongoing outpouring' of physical and mental activity into the world (4). The human origin of externalization's product is obscured in the moment of objectivation, however, resulting in its objective appearance (4). Finally, it is through internalization that the external reality of society influences humans, resulting in the socialisation of the individual 'to *be* a designated person and to *inhabit* a designated world' and thus providing a 'meaningful order, or *nomos*' (16, 19; emphasis in original). The role played by religion in this world-building process is that of "cosmization", that is, 'the identification of [the] humanly meaningful world [*nomos*] with the world as such, [...] reflecting it or being derived from it in its fundamental structures' (28). In other words, religion is a process through which humans come to take society for granted as part of "the nature of things" — the cosmos — in order to stabilise their socially-constructed reality (25). In this way, 'human order is projected into the totality of being' and 'the entire universe [is conceived of] as being humanly significant' (28).

Religion, understood through this framework as a vehicle for cosmization, 'is, to a large extent, about narrative and the success of the story' and, in Cusack's mind, the stories offered by invented religions function in much the same way as those offered by the "world religions" (Cusack 2010, 4). To suggest, then, that invented religions are not *really* religions, would be to claim that they lack some essential quality held by the apparently functionally similar world religions which benefit from undisputed religious status. Cusack traces this line of reasoning back to essentialist definitions of religion which are underpinned by reasoning convincingly reproduced by Sam Gill (1994, 968):

To study Christianity [...] is simply to study things Christian. Perhaps it seemed logical to extend this principle to the general academic study of religion by arguing that the academic study of religion is the study of data that are distinctively and uniquely religious. A definition of the essence of religion would function for the academic study of religion, it might be supposed, something like doctrine or a statement of faith.

The trouble with such a definition is not only its exclusivity but the obscurity of its mechanism. To investigate the nature of religion requires analysis of religions, and

religions are identified by recognition of their religious essence. In Gill's (1968) words, 'the unreachable goal towards which the study is directed, that is to understand what religion is, is required as a precondition to the study'. In order to avoid such an impasse — and the aforementioned exclusivity — Cusack adopts a polythetic definition.

Polythetic definitions operate on the assumption that 'no single distinguishing feature, or no specific conjunction of distinguishing features, can universally be found in what, on various grounds, we may wish to identify as "religions"' (Saler 1993, 158). Instead, a "family resemblance" model, 'preeminently associated with Ludwig Wittgenstein' (159), is employed which unites religions 'based on a set of characteristics, only some of which a system must have in order to be counted as a religion' (Wilson 1998, 158). Cusack (2010, 20) gives an exemplary list of nine characteristics commonly found among religions including 'belief in supernatural beings, [and] notions of sacredness and profanity', suggesting that if all were present then 'it is probable that what is being observed is a religion', but if only some were present then 'further evidence of the movement's religious nature might be required'. In this manner, a spectrum is formed with 'no sure or stable border where religion ends and nonreligion begins' (Saler 1999, 396). Boundary cases like TempleOS, with challenging mixtures of religious and non-religious characteristics, can then be analysed in order to clarify what religion "looks like".

TempleOS' value as a boundary case can be seen in its encapsulated rejection of a number of intuitive binary distinctions. It challenges the online–offline distinction, for example, through its combination of presence on the internet in the TempleOS.org website and forums of discussion, and significant orientation toward the focal-point of Davis' personal "offline" condition and day-to-day life. As highlighted in the competing streams of reception in the previous chapter, TempleOS also problematises the sacred–secular binary, with a significant portion of its audience perceiving and evaluating it as an impressive feat in software engineering while others suggest that its oracle offers legitimate divination and that Davis' purported world-view elucidated profound truths. The boundary transgression that will be considered at length for the remainder of this chapter, however, is that of the mechanical and spiritual.

Erik Davis' (1998, 2–3) *TechGnosis* explores this juxtaposition of the mechanical and spiritual in depth, going no further than the introduction without recognising the intuitive juxtaposition of technology and the mystical:

Common sense tells us that mysticism has no more in common with technology than the twilight cry of wild swans has with the clatter of Rock'em Sock'em Robots. [...] According to this narrative, technology has helped

disenchant the world, forcing the ancestral symbolic networks of the old to give way to the crisp, secular game plans of economic development, skeptical inquiry, and material progress.

He aims with his book to present a different view of modern technology, suggesting that it ‘embodies an image of the soul, or rather a host of images: redemptive, demonic, magical, transcendent, hypnotic, alive’ (E. Davis 1998, 9), the possibility of which is aptly captured in science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke’s (1973, 21) Third Law that ‘any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic’. Davis provides two explanations of Clarke’s Third Law, the first being sceptical and negative, and the second being mystical and positive.

Recognising Clarke as ‘a rationalist (if an often mystical one)’, Erik Davis first puts forward his negative explanation, that ‘what [Clarke] seems to mean is that, in sociocultural terms, advanced technologies *appear* to be magical’ (180; emphasis in original) and goes on to highlight the degree to which this law applies particularly to digital technology with the image of a broken-down car:

Twenty years ago, you had half a chance of fixing your car; these days, with computer chips and miniature sensors scattered through the vehicle [...] you need some serious tech just to hack the nature of a glitch. The logic of technology has become invisible — literally, occult. Without the code, you’re mystified. And nobody has all the codes anymore.

A useful connection might be drawn here with TempleOS’ use of a high-speed stopwatch in its oracle for divination. A simplified version of the program might work with a list of ten words and a counter incrementing once per second from the number one to the number ten; when a button is pressed, the counter’s current state would be used to select the corresponding word from the numbered list. If the numbered list of words and the state of the counter were visible, the user could quite easily time their pressing of the button to select a word of their choosing. Through complexifying and obscuring the counter, however, an apparently random result can be achieved through a totally predictable, mechanical operation. In both the case of the stopwatch and the digital components of the car, the logic of the technology is invisible in the sense that it is sufficiently complex and obscured that the fine details of its function are imperceivable without the use of a digital tool for inspection.

This point can also be usefully extended to explain the importance that Terry A. Davis placed on having written the HolyC compiler himself. A compiler is a program which ‘translates a whole program, called the source code, at once into machine language before the program is executed’ (Szymanski et al. 1988, 323). Machine language is ‘the only programming language that the computer can understand’, but

'is made up entirely of 1s and 0s' (Szymanski et al. 1988, 321). A compiler is useful, then, because it enables programmers to write source code in high-level languages — like Terry A. Davis' adaptation of the C programming language, HolyC — which 'closely resemble human language' (323). In a phone call received at 10:49 a.m. during a live stream on February 6, 2017, Terry A. Davis forcefully expressed his opinion that 'the difference between an amateur and a professional is you write your own compiler, OK? I have a 20,000-line divine-intellect compiler' (T. A. Davis 2017b, 31:44). One of Terry A. Davis' intended purposes for TempleOS was "recreational programming", involving the reading, writing, and compiling of source code. Thus, although the source code of a program is typically invisible to its users, in the context of TempleOS the further degree of obscurity provided by the compiler is meaningful. Programs written in source code only become functional once they have been compiled into machine code, and although the TempleOS' compiler is available for anybody to use, Terry A. Davis was the programmer who developed it. In other words, it is his compiler which performs the "magical" process of translating the inert source code into the powerful machine language — the visible into the invisible. Terry A. Davis, as "the high-priest of God's official temple", holds a unique insight into the "occult" process performed by the compiler.

Reinforcing this connection between computers and magic, the anthropologist T. M. Luhmann (1989, 106), writing about modern witchcraft in England, observes that 'perhaps one or two out of every ten magicians [she] met had something to do with computers'. Indeed, some particularly relevant evidence for this can be found in the signature appended by Richard Mitton to his earlier-mentioned blog post "A Constructive Look at TempleOS" in which he identifies himself as a 'software engineer and travelling wizard' (Mitton 2015). In an effort to explain this observation, Luhmann suggests that 'both magic and computer science involve creating a world defined by chosen rules, and playing within their limits' and that 'both in magic and in computer science words and symbols have a power which most secular, modern endeavors deny them' (Luhmann 1989, 106). This observation is explicitly drawn upon by Erik Davis (1998, 181), who goes on to suggest that the world-building power of both magic and computer science appeals for its production of 'the illusion of leading the mind ever closer to its longed-for mastery of matter' and supposes that if we accept 'that appearances compose our world as much as truths, then the ceaseless emergence of advanced technologies that define life on the flying crest of the twenty-first century may paradoxically draw us into a silicon wizard world'.

In this manner, Erik Davis recognises similarity both in appearance and in function between computers and magic. He suggests that computers, by virtue of their technological complexity, resemble magic in the invisibility of their operation and that both can serve as tools — for the programmer and magician, respectively — which

work to build worlds. Referring back to Cusack, Berger, and polythetic definition, we might find in the “occult” qualities of computers and magic the religious family characteristics of awe and faith. Furthermore, although Erik Davis suggested that the motivation behind world building efforts is a ‘longed-for mastery of matter’, and Berger’s conception of world building was as an effort to project human order into the cosmos, both can be identified in TempleOS’ oracle. The oracle can be understood as, for Davis, at once a source of evidence that the world is, in Berger’s terms, humanly significant, and a material project constructed in a pragmatic effort to access that evidence. TempleOS, in this way, powerfully evidences Erik Davis’ argument that computers, in spite of their origin in scientifically-driven advances in technology, need not be understood in opposition to the mystical.

Final Thoughts

TempleOS is a potent illustration of the fertility of digital space for religious formations. This dissertation has introduced Terry A. Davis, his creation, and their following as an invitation for boundary work addressing the intersection of religion with new technology.

Terry A. Davis, as a self-described ‘atheist who God has talked to’, encapsulates in his biography and in the avowed aims of the Temple Operating System a transgression of the sacred–secular binary (T. A. Davis 2017c). Similarly, The Temple Operating System exhibits concurrently the characteristics of transparent mechanism — through the accessibility of its source code — and thorough spirituality — through its omnipresent oracle function, available in any location in the operating system at the press of a key. Indeed, the community surrounding Terry A. Davis and his creation show a sincere reverence toward Terry A. Davis both as a technically gifted programmer and as a mystical pioneer, and the functioning of magic and programming alike in human efforts of world-building has been shown, through Erik Davis’ *TechGnosis*, to support the possibility of a wider dovetailing of the mystical with the digital.

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