

The Religion of Hatred

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Patrick McCarty carries a tan briefcase and wears a navy blazer, starched white shirt, pressed trousers and a vibrant red tie with a fishhook pattern -- a fashionable motif, no doubt, in the small Gulf Coast town of Niceville, Florida. McCarty is dining in a neighborhood eatery not far from his suburban tract home. In keeping with the seaside theme, the restaurant's walls are adorned with fake fish.

McCarty, a former Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh devotee and a self-described psychotherapist, claims to have a doctorate in philosophy from an East Coast university he refuses to name. However, this October day he appears most comfortable speaking in the jargon of a marketing mogul.

What he's selling, McCarty says excitedly, is "like Coca-Cola. As far as positioning, (it's) No.1." But the product is nowhere near as innocuous as a soft drink.

McCarty is the proud peddler of prejudice. He is the current leader of the white supremacist Church of the Creator, "the only racist religion known to mankind right now," as the businessman is wont to boast. McCarty's official title is Pontifex Maximus (Latin for "high priest"), although in keeping with his preference for corporate culture, he favors the lower-keyed title of executive director, because, he says, it makes "the whole thing a bit more acceptable and recognizable."

The COTC espouses a race-based religion known as Creativity, which worships nature -- not a higher God -- and is "dedicated to the survival, expansion and advancement of the white race." It is virulently anti-Semitic, racist and, unlike most white supremacist groups, anti-Christian as well.

Church of the Creator dogma dictates that a racial holy war, or RAHOWA in COTC parlance, must ensue to rid the world of "parasitical Jews" and the so-called "mud races" (people of color). A "Jewish conspiracy," according to the COTC, controls the federal government, international banking and the media.

McCarty took over the COTC in January 1993 and readily concedes that his mission is to make it profitable. Asked if anything is unique about running a business that preaches hatred of Jews and other minorities, he responds: "It's all the same thing. It doesn't really matter. It's just a different commodity. We've had people say that a religion is not a business, but I don't know any that aren't."

Long a bit player in the already marginal world of white supremacists, the Church of the Creator has recruited heavily since the late '80s -- and with some success. McCarty brags of a following in the thousands, including members in all 50 states and in 37 countries, with strong chapters in Germany, South Africa and Sweden. He says the COTC prints between 20,000 and 40,000 copies a month of Racial Loyalty, its tabloid.

Watchdogs of white supremacism say McCarty's numbers are inflated; they estimate the church's following in the hundreds rather than thousands. But the COTC has been especially successful in reaching the most active, impressionable and violent disciples of the hate movement today: young, racist skinheads. In recent years, more than 30 COTC skinhead chapters have popped up in states such as California, New York and Wisconsin.

Numbers, however, don't tell the whole story. Indeed, the group's real strength may lie not in signing up supporters but in the particular power of its message. "They're dangerous in that they influence young kids," explains Danny Welch, director of Klanwatch, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. "The No.1 reason why we go after the COTC," he adds, "is because they instill violence in people through their rhetoric." The COTC membership is so violent that the group has leapfrogged to the top of the list of organizations that Klanwatch tracks -- superseding the Ku Klux Klan in the South, the California-based White Aryan Resistance (WAR) and the Aryan Nations, headquartered in Idaho.

The most obvious sign of the group's higher profile is the growing list of criminal acts committed by its followers. The group has a national prison-based "brotherhood" of about 180, many of whom are doing time for racially motivated crimes, according to Klanwatch. COTC members have been linked to terrorist conspiracies and violence -- including murder -- against minorities both in the United States and abroad.

In July 1992, a Florida jury convicted George Loeb, a COTC minister, of murdering Harold Mansfield, an African American who had served in the Persian Gulf War. Loeb shot Mansfield after a parking-lot altercation. And at least five of the COTC's Canadian members have been arrested on charges ranging from kidnaping to assault.

Last July, one of three skinheads suspected of firebombing the NAACP office in Tacoma, Washington, confessed that he was a COTC minister. Also in July, two Orange County residents associated with the COTC -- Jeremy von Rineman, 22, and his then-girlfriend, Jill Marie Scarborough -- were arrested on weapons charges in conjunction with a federal undercover sting that also uncovered a separate skinhead plot to kill Rodney King and to bomb the First African Methodist Episcopal Church. As part of the operation, Joe Allen, working on behalf of the FBI, had infiltrated the Church of the Creator.

Ironically, the COTC's emergence as a big-league player in global racist circles coincides with potentially self-destructive growing pains. The group has been embroiled in leadership struggles and faces financial uncertainty as well as the mounting scrutiny of federal law-enforcement officials and hate-group watchdogs.

Just who are the followers that worship at the Church of the Creator, and why are they preparing for a racial holy war? And does the COTC have the staying power of veteran racist groups like the Klan and WAR? Or will the world's only white-power religion become a victim of its own success?

Jeremiah (Jeremy) Knesal of Auburn, Washington, has a long juvenile record with a racist bent. Knesal, 19, is a recent COTC convert who took its prophecy of a racial holy war very much to heart. In fact, he tried to start one. But after his side trip to a J.C. Penney store in a failed attempt to steal jeans, T-shirts and underwear, the race war that was just beginning was all over.

It was a summer day in Salinas, and Knesal got busted for shoplifting. A routine police search of Knesal's car turned that dime-a-dozen arrest into a large-scale investigation involving the FBI, the U.S. Attorney's Office and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. Inside his 1987 green Volvo were three metal pipe bombs, four loaded rifles, ammunition, racist literature, military-style clothing and wigs. The car also contained a certificate from the Church of the Creator: Knesal was "a member in good standing."

It didn't take long for Knesal to spill the beans. He told an FBI agent, who says Knesal was "very proud" to be a COTC reverend and state director, that he had bombed the NAACP building in Tacoma a week earlier. (No one was hurt in the blast.) Court

documents reveal that Knesal, along with two other white supremacists not connected to the COTC, intended to start a race war on a battleground ranging from Oregon to the U.S.-Canadian border. The trio planned to murder black rap artists Ice-T and Ice Cube and to bomb synagogues and military installations.

In November, Knesal was charged for his role in the NAACP bombing; he is expected to plead guilty at a hearing scheduled for February 9. On December 1, Knesal pleaded guilty to four felony counts on the explosives and firearms charges. He faces a maximum sentence of 35 years in prison and more than \$1 million in fines.

When he was arrested, Knesal perfectly fit the profile of a recent COTC recruit. He favored the skinhead look: shaved head, Doc Martens boots and racist tattoos, which, according to an FBI agent, "cover his body from the neck on down to his ankles and out to his wrists." He was affiliated with more than one racist group, and he was kicked out of two high schools for distributing hate literature.

A worthy warrior in the race war, Knesal is also a confused and troubled teenager. He has a prior conviction for malicious harassment of a Latino. But his father, Gordon Knesal, describes him as a "great kid" who always treated Gordon's fiancée, Adriana Pittaluga, a Latina, with kindness and respect.

The COTC is especially attractive to young people like Knesal, experts say, because the group's dogma offers a reason for their failures.

Today's racist organizations are often less structured and more decentralized than traditional hate groups. Now, the elder statesmen of hate provide a basic framework of beliefs for a younger generation of racists, who are being encouraged to start a worldwide white revolution on their own.

Welcoming the young has proved to be a savvy strategy of the COTC. "It's hard to get a lot of old-line Klansmen to hand out newspapers, but you can get together four or five skinheads, and they'll put out 2,000 pieces of literature in a neighborhood," says Klanwatch chief investigator Joe Roy. Teenagers are also effective at fulfilling racism's ultimate goals. As COTC founder Ben Klassen wrote in 1988, the movement wants to get "rid of" Jews and nonwhite races through "murder, treachery, lying, deceit, mass killing, whatever it takes to win." Unlike seasoned hatemongers, skinheads are impatient for change. "Kids get frustrated, they don't want to wait; they are hands-on people," Roy says.

The COTC's largest "hands-on" youth followings have been in Milwaukee and Toronto. At its peak in 1992, the Milwaukee chapter had about 80 active members and an aggressive leader, Mark Wilson (also known as the Reverend Brandon O'Rourke). Several of Wilson's followers are White Berets, members of the COTC's security forces. According to McCarty, the White Berets are an "elite unit" who "protect (COTC) members and their property from harm." Asked whether the White Berets are armed, he laughs and responds: "In ways."

The Canadian group, at one time about 100 strong, is led by George Burdi, who calls himself the Reverend Eric Hawthorne, a 23-year-old bodybuilder and college dropout with a penchant for quoting Nietzsche. In a telephone interview, Burdi says concern over immigration, multiculturalism, unemployment and the environment are all strong drawing cards. "There's a tremendous amount of support" for the COTC message, says Burdi.

The spirit of COTC youth is apparent in the music of Canada's RAHOWA rock band. Burdi, its lead singer, said in an interview for a recent MTV special on hate rock that music is "the best way to reach youth ... (with) our political ideas." On the program,

Burdi is seen introducing bands at a Toronto club packed with over-amped skinheads bouncing off one another. When RAHOWA 's turn comes, he begins to belt out a song that has a familiar tune. To a reworked version of the 1960s Nancy Sinatra hit "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'," Burdi shouts:

These boots are made for stompin',

And that's just what they'll do.

One of these days these boots are gonna

Stomp all over Jews.

The Church of the Creator has its roots in western North Carolina, in the tiny rural town of Otto, just shy of the Georgia border. The community consists of a couple of gas stations, a few craft shops, a home-style restaurant, post office, flea market and country music hall.

For more than a decade, it was also the home of Ben Klassen, founder and driving force behind the Church of the Creator. Klassen, who first registered the COTC in 1973 in Lighthouse Point, Florida, moved to Otto permanently in 1982. There, on his 22-acre property, he built an oddly shaped three-story church, complete with the COTC's white-power insignia.

According to townsfolk, Klassen was intelligent, philosophical and quiet, a polite man who kept to himself. He lived with his wife and daughter in a large but simple A-frame home overlooking his church, in a secluded sub-development.

But if Klassen wasn't active in Otto, his ideas were well-known around town. "I got along with Ben just fine. Now, I sure didn't get along with his beliefs, but I figured he had a right to them," says J.J. Ayers, a neighbor of Klassen's. "He'd get all stirred up about the n-----rs and the Jews -- he hated them. And he made that pretty clear," adds the 79-year-old farmer.

Ben Klassen was born in Ukraine to German-speaking Mennonite parents. His family, described in his books as "early victims of Jewish Communism," lived briefly in Mexico and then moved to Canada, where he earned a degree in electrical engineering and a bachelor of arts. In 1945, Klassen settled in the United States and became a citizen three years later. He had a varied career: He was a farmer, a schoolteacher, a nickel miner, an engineer, a Realtor and a Republican state assemblyman in Florida for a short time. Klassen was also the inventor of one of the first electric can openers and, in later life, an accomplished oil painter. But Klassen's greatest achievement, he believed, was creating a religion for the white race, a group he dubbed "Nature's Finest."

In 1938, when he was 20, he had borrowed "Mein Kampf" from the library. "The book ... was to influence my life more than any other," he wrote later. It took another 30 years, but it was at this young age that "the vague outlines" for his "full-fledged racial religion for the White Volk" began to take shape. That religion would become Creativity: a creed that maintains that one's race is one's religion.

Klassen was not, by most accounts, a charismatic leader. But he was a prolific writer: During his 20 years as head of the COTC, he pumped out racist propaganda at a prodigious rate -- more than 15 books, including the organization's three sacred texts: "The White Man's Bible," "Nature's Eternal Religion" and "Salubrious Living," a guide to healthy habits for white warriors that he co-wrote.

Though Klassen didn't know it at the time, his writings would later position the COTC as a front-runner in the new world order of racism. Some of his books are considered classics in today's white-power movement, and *Racial Loyalty* is regarded as "good" hate literature both in the United States and abroad, where such publications are hard to come by; in Germany and Canada, for example, it is illegal. The paper has features like "Cupid's Corner," a matchmaking service for finding the right-white-mate: "White Men and Women, be fruitful and multiply! This planet is all ours!"

Although Klassen claimed that his creation was a religion, he had mixed success convincing government officials of that notion. In 1982, when he built his church in Otto, the organization was granted tax exemption "as a bona fide nonprofit religious organization" from the North Carolina Department of Revenue -- a "fact" Klassen cited repeatedly. What Klassen failed to make public, however, was that the state's approval was contingent on a federal government ruling, and the IRS has no record of an exemption.

But for about seven years, Klassen's Otto property did enjoy tax-exempt status, until Richard Lightner became the Macon County assessor. In 1987, Lightner started an investigation, which concluded in 1989 that the Church of the Creator was not, in fact, a church at all.

In a battle that dragged on for four years, the county finally succeeded in revoking Klassen's tax-exempt property status in November 1991. In an anticlimactic ending, he failed to appear in court.

At the same time the COTC was losing in court, it was winning on the streets. Klassen was beginning to strike a chord with racist skinheads. Many skinheads allied themselves with longtime racist Tom Metzger and his Fallbrook-based WAR, but they were growing disillusioned. In the late '80s, Metzger was embroiled in a lawsuit that revealed he had spent their contributions on such personal items as a hairpiece. They were attracted to Klassen's philosophy and his emphasis on physical training for the race war.

Klassen was also looking for a worthy successor. Metzger says Klassen repeatedly courted him to take the reins, but he declined because "there were some problems. It's a church to start with, and I wouldn't want to be allied with a church." Klassen then made several missteps in choosing the next Pontifex Maximus before picking McCarty out of the blue last January.

McCarty says he learned about the COTC from watching "Geraldo" and was intrigued. On his way back from a business trip to Charlotte in October 1992, McCarty called on Klassen. The by-then beleaguered leader lamented his inability to find a replacement, and McCarty says he cheered up Klassen with his ideas for ensuring the group's economic security. Not long after that, McCarty got the nod.

Along with the COTC's problems, Klassen faced personal difficulties in 1992. His wife of many decades died after a long battle with cancer. In July of that year, he sold most of his compound, including the church and school, to a former leader of the American Nazi Party.

Last summer, Klassen began work on his final project. He had registered a part of his remaining land for a burial plot and was seen clearing it. He went into town to arrange for his gravestone, and on his property he burned shredded documents and took other files to a landfill. On August 7, Klassen quietly committed suicide. His daughter, who had been visiting her father, discovered that he had taken an overdose of sleeping pills. A suicide note -- not made public -- referred to a chapter in "The White Man's Bible." In the book, Klassen wrote: "Suicide (is) not dishonorable. Like the ancient

Romans we believe that under certain circumstances suicide is an honorable way to die, rather than live on in shame, humiliation or captivity."

Speculation surrounding his suicide has swelled in recent months. Some say Klassen feared a lawsuit because of the wave of violent crimes by COTC members. Others say he was despondent over his wife's death. Still others contend that it was a simple matter of his life's work being done.

As his gravestone made clear: HE GAVE THE WHITE PEOPLE OF THE WORLD A POWERFUL RACIAL RELIGION OF THEIR OWN.

Dr. Rick McCarty, as he prefers to be known, runs the COTC out of a small office in Niceville, Florida. The COTC has no place of worship in Niceville, but there are two large warehouses that hold thousands of dollars' worth of merchandise -- books, T-shirts, stickers and other paraphernalia that the COTC sells.

It's clear that during his short tenure McCarty has tried to bring some structure to a loose-knit organization. "Twenty years ago as a small religious movement just starting out we had more money coming in than (sic) going out. Today we have become so huge that our outgoing postage alone, would feed (sic) a small country," reads a letter from McCarty to COTC members, asking them to pay their fair share.

McCarty concedes that there is "probably a lot of violence" within the group, that many of its members own guns and other weapons, and that some could be dangerous. "They're not a majority," he says. Pressed on whether the COTC's rhetoric encourages violence among the young, McCarty replies with a laugh: "Saying yes to a question like that would probably get you sued later on. So I'd have to answer no to that."

McCarty's main motivation seems to be to turn the COTC into a thriving venture. He has trademarked the COTC's name, emblem and rallying cry, RAHOWA. He calls the COTC's symbols powerful marketing tools that must be protected. Recently, he cottoned onto a lucrative new moneymaker. "I did some tape cassettes. Basically, all I did was take a chapter out of Klassen's books and read it on the tape and sold it for 10 bucks," he says triumphantly. "Kids love that stuff."

Joe Roy and Danny Welch, the Klanwatch investigators, work out of the Southern Poverty Law Center's modern offices in downtown Montgomery. Inside the building, bankers' boxes filled with files on the COTC are piling up. Roy and Welch are keeping a close eye on the Church of the Creator. The law center, known for its novel civil court challenges against white supremacists, announced in August that it was investigating the COTC to determine whether there was a case to be made for a federal lawsuit against the group.

Klanwatch and the law center keep tabs on hate groups such as the COTC with the hope of one day putting them out of business. In recent years, the center has had some success with an inventive legal strategy. They go after the hate theorists for the violent acts of the followers. Using that tactic, in 1990, the center won a \$12.5 million judgment against Metzger and WAR group in a case involving skinheads in Portland, Oregon, who beat to death an Ethiopian student.

For now, the law center is mum about its exact plans for a lawsuit against the COTC. Their investigation, Roy and Welch will tell you, is continuing and may take as long as three years to complete. Pressure on the COTC is also coming from law-enforcement agencies. The long list of COTC-related arrests has hit some of the group's VIPs. Canada's George Burdi, for example, has two court dates scheduled for

May. Pending court dates are having a chilling impact on individual chapters, which are often held together only by a thin leadership thread.

Klassen's suicide, too, may have hurt the COTC's chances for survival, and not just because the founder's free flow of money has dried up. McCarty's emphasis on business over zeal appears to be creating internal conflicts. For example, Klanwatch reports that early last year disgruntled Milwaukee members were plotting against the new leader. All of this is good news to Welch and Roy. "If there's one thing that we've learned," Welch says, it is that "if there's no leadership -- and in this field McCarty is untested -- it will kill the movement. Leadership is everything."

Still, few are content to wait and see whether the Church of the Creator will self-destruct. The case for vigilance was made clear by the law-center founder, Morris Dees, in an op-ed piece he wrote for the New York Times. "Until recently, skinhead violence was random and impulsive, mostly street crime targeting the nearest minority person. But their international counterparts have waged terrorist campaigns against immigrants and other minorities for two years," wrote Dees, in a reference to widespread neo-Nazi violence in reunified Germany. "It may only be a matter of time before another race war scheme is hatched by American white supremacists."

No matter what's done in an effort to stop racist organizations -- whether it's community pressure, jail time or civil suits -- the ideas promulgated by groups such as the Church of the Creator never go away. McCarty is banking on that fact.

As a true believer in the wonders of the marketplace, if nothing else, McCarty says he sees a future in capitalizing on Klassen's death. "You know, most religions don't get off the ground until their founder dies," he says. "That's been when they really take off. I see the COTC as a religion that's not quite there yet. It needs a soul."

"But a lot of times a founder of a religion leaves an open window when they die. You can make mythical heroes out of them when they're gone."

Caption: PHOTO (3)

(1) Rick McCarty poses before the Post Office flag in Niceville, Florida / BY ELIZABETH HEFELFINGER/SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE, (2) Members of the Church of the Creator demonstrate at the city hall in Auburn, New York / BY BILL WARREN/THE ITHACA JOURNAL/SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE, (3) The late Ben Klassen, founder of the Church of the Creator, in front of the House of Worship he built in North Carolina / BY BOB SCOTT/SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

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Page: 5/Z1

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