



Order of the Solar Temple

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Published: 16th March 2026

Sarah Harvey and Mariëlle Hesselink. 2026. "Order of the Solar Temple." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 16 March 2026. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/order-of-the-solar-temple

Introduction

The Ordre du Temple Solaire—the Order of the Solar Temple in English (or ‘the Order’ for short), and first called the International Chivalric Order of the Solar Temple—was an esoteric new religious movement in the neo-Templar tradition which was founded in Switzerland in the early 1980s by Joseph Di Mambro (1924–1994) and Luc Jouret (1947–1994) and led by them until the movement’s demise in 1997. Both men had a history of participation in different Templar and Rosicrucian organisations and Jouret was also a speaker on the ‘New Age’ circuit. Soon after its founding, the Order of the Solar Temple established a base in Quebec, Canada, though it remained active in Switzerland and France.

The movement is known for its three episodes of mass suicides and homicides in 1994, 1995, and 1997 which left seventy-four members and former members dead, including both Di Mambro and Jouret. On the night of 4–5 October 1994, forty-eight members and former members died at two locations in Switzerland and five were found dead at Di Mambro’s home in Quebec. Whilst some of these people (the leaders and the inner circle of members) had apparently voluntarily taken their own lives, more had been ‘assisted’ in this process, likely not knowing what was going to happen, and former members had been executed. After the deaths, sixty journalists, government officials, and scholars received a package of four letters (“The Testaments”) which justified the suicides (termed “transits”). The Testaments explain that due to increasing persecution of the group combined with humanity’s general refusal to evolve to the next level of consciousness, the only option for members was to transition to achieve salvation in a higher realm of existence and consciousness. Members believed that they would receive new ‘solar bodies’ in their new home—the star Sirius—and achieve immortality.

The Testaments also include an invitation to those “who are receptive to this last message” to escape the apocalypse and join the Order of the Solar Temple. Sixteen members made the transit in France in December 1995 and a further five in Quebec in March 1997, the latter effectively marking the end of the movement.

This article charts the history of the movement—including the events which contributed to the Order’s sense of persecution—as integral to understanding the suicides/murders. Catherine Wessinger (2000)

describes the Order of the Solar Temple as a fragile millennial group because its sense of persecution and internal weaknesses led to a focus on a cataclysmic, rather than peaceful or progressive, transition from the Age of Pisces to the Age of Aquarius. Jouret emphasised an ecological apocalypse (Palmer 1996) and members came to believe that the contaminated earth should be abandoned in favour of immortality on another planet. The Order of the Solar Temple combined neo-Templar, New Age, and survivalist notions of apocalypticism and millennialism into an eclectic mix of ideas that were centred on fire, death, and the soul as opposed to the body. Leading up to the violent transits, the leaders of the Order started expressing ideas about a large conspiracy being plotted against them and also made comparisons between their perceived experiences of persecution and the Waco siege that had taken place in Texas recently (February–April 1993). Western gnostic traditions, Theosophy, and beliefs in Ascended Masters and reincarnation were all influences on the movement's worldview.

History of the Movement

The Order of the Solar Temple emerged as a neo-Templar group in what Massimo Introvigne calls a broader magical milieu whose members understand themselves to be part of an elite, spiritual ancient wisdom that is in opposition to organised religion (Introvigne 2000, 139).

Neo-Templar movements consider themselves as part of an unbroken tradition of the Knights Templar—a medieval military Catholic order established to protect pilgrims to the Holy Lands and active between the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. The Knights Templar were suppressed by the French king Philip IV in the early fourteenth century and the Pope also disbanded the order at this time. In practical terms, the origins of neo-Templarism can be traced back to the establishment in 1805 of the Order of the Temple by Bernard-Raymond Fabré-Palapat (1773–1838), a French Freemason. Figures like him and, much later, Jacques Breyer (1922–1996) claimed to represent an unbroken succession of the medieval Knights Templar. They established new Templar movements that were characterised by schisms. The Order of the Solar Temple, its history directly tied to Breyer, was a product of this complicated schismatic milieu.

In 1952, Breyer claimed to have an initiatory experience at the Castle of Arginy in France in which he was asked by Ascended Masters to establish a “Templar Renaissance” (Introvigne 2000, 141). This gave birth to the Arginy movement of neo-Templar organisations, which included the Sovereign Order of the Solar Temple, led by Breyer; the Renewed Order of the Temple, led by Raymond Bernard (1923–2006) and Julien Origas (1920–1983), both of whom had been active in the Rosicrucian movement Ancient Mystical Order of the Rosy Cross; and the Golden Way Foundation, led by Joseph Di Mambro.

On 21 March 1981, the leaders of these three organisations met at the premises of the Golden Way Foundation in Geneva, Switzerland, to “swear allegiance to a ‘once and future’ supreme secret Master of the Temple” (Introvigne 2000, 143). This event was significant enough for Di Mambro to give this date as the founding of the Order of the Solar Temple, although it was not officially established until 1984 (Introvigne 2000, 143). The other key figure in the founding of the Order of the Solar Temple was Luc Jouret, who was a member of the Renewed Order of the Temple and who also joined the Golden Way Foundation in 1982. When Origas died in 1983, Jouret initially took over leadership of the Renewed Order of the Temple before his legitimacy was challenged by Origas's family and he left the movement. In 1984, he and Di Mambro together founded a new movement—the Order of the Solar Temple. In an attempt to

dampen bad feeling between the Order of the Solar Temple and the Renewed Order of the Temple, Breyer suggested that the former establish its headquarters in Canada, where there was already some neo-Templar presence, and Di Mambro relocated from Switzerland to Toronto (Introvigne 2000, 146). Despite hopes, however, this decision did not lead to the Order of the Solar Temple accruing many new members. By 1989, Quebec had become a hub for the Order of the Solar Temple, which then counted, according to scholar Jean-François Mayer (2006a [1993]), 442 members in total, with the majority living in Switzerland, France, and Canada, as well as some in Spain, Portugal, and on the French Antilles island Martinique.

From 1991 onwards, the history of the Order of the Solar Temple came to be marked by a variety of setbacks following some public attention because of anti-cult groups, journalists, and discontented ex-members (Introvigne and Mayer 2002, 172–73). Consequently, Di Mambro and Jouret shut down other organisations and clubs that functioned as ‘outer shells’ to the actual Order. Jouret apparently gained a level of notoriety within Europe since some New Age bookstores refused to allow him to lecture (Introvigne 2006 [1995], 31). High profile ex-members included Di Mambro’s son, Elie, and a woman named Rose-Marie Klaus, who gave numerous interviews to the Canadian press (Wessinger 2000). Klaus and other ex-members called for the return of their donations to the group. In addition, Di Mambro was in ill health at this time, suffering from diabetes and possibly cancer. In the early 1990s, the focal point of the Order became its Canadian centres and commune, which decreased the member count to a “hard core” of around a hundred members in 1992/1993 (Introvigne 2006 [1995], 31).

In 1993, the movement experienced further setbacks when it came under police surveillance in Canada. On 8 March, two members were arrested for attempting to purchase three semiautomatic guns with silencers. This turned out to be part of a sting operation as a few months prior, the police had been informed of an alleged terrorist group called Q-37 planning to kill the Quebec Minister of Interior because of his sympathies to Native American plights; informers had claimed that Q-37 was tied to the Order of the Solar Temple, but in the end no evidence for this, nor for the existence of Q-37, was ever found (although the Order did have some antagonism towards Native Americans, which seems to stem from white supremacist notions within the Renewed Order of the Temple to which it had been tied [Introvigne 2006 (1995), 32–33]). As Di Mambro was in Europe at the time, Jouret was issued with an arrest warrant. He and the two other members were fined and acquitted in court. It was this event, combined with the ex-member and media exposés, which contributed to the group’s sense of persecution and the hastening of their plans to leave the earth.

The ‘Transits’

On 5 October 1994, journalists, government officials, and Jean-François Mayer—the only scholar who had researched the group prior to its dramatic ending—were sent a package from Geneva by member Patrick Vuarnet (1968–1995). In it were four documents or ‘suicide letters’ called “The Testaments” which explained the group’s rationale for a mass suicide/murder (termed a ‘transit’) enabling them to transit to the star Sirius and assume new “solar bodies” (Palmer 1996, 303). The use of the term ‘transition’ as an alternative to the term ‘death,’ signifying the division of soul and body, originates in the Rosicrucian order Ancient Mystical Order of the Rosy Cross (Mayer 2006b, 90n2).

One of the four letters, entitled “To All Those Who Can Still Understand the Voice of Wisdom ... We Address

This Last Message," reads:

The current chaos leads man inescapably to face the failure of his Destiny.

[...]

In view of the present irreversible situation, We, the Servants of the Rose+Croix, strongly reaffirm that we are not a part of this world and that we are perfectly aware of the coordinates of our Origins and our Future.

[...]

We, the Servants of the Rose+Croix, considering the urgency of the present situation, affirm:

- *that we refuse to participate in systems set up by this decadent humanity;*
- *that we have planned, in a full state of consciousness, without any fanaticism, our transit which has nothing to do with suicide in the human sense of the term;*
- *that according to a decree emanating from the Great White Lodge of Sirius,*

we have closed and voluntarily blown up all the sanctuaries of the Secret

Lodges so that they will not be desecrated by impostors or by the ignorant;

- *that, from the Planes where we will work from now on and by a just law of magnetism, we will be in the position of calling back the last Servants capable*

of hearing this last message.

*[...] It is with an unfathomable Love, ineffable joy, and without any regret that we leave this world.
(The Testaments 2006, 177-78)*

One day prior, on 4 October, Di Mambro's villa in Morin Heights, Canada, was burnt down. Five charred bodies were found. Two of the deceased likely ended their own lives while the other three were brutally and ritually murdered: a baby was found dead with a wooden stake in his heart while his parents, who were former members, both received dozens of knife wounds. Swiss police believe Antonio and Nicky Dutoit and their three-month old son were killed as traitors for leaving the movement, revealing its secrets, having a child when Di Mambro ordered them not to, and then "audaciously" naming it Emmanuel when Di Mambro's daughter, believed to be a messianic Avatar, was called Emmanuelle (Palmer 1996, 313). The police in Quebec claimed that the ritualistic manner in which the child was murdered indicated that he was understood by the Order to be the "Antichrist" (Hall and Schuyler 2006, 57-58).

On the night of 4-5 October, there was another fire in a centre of the Order near Cheiry in the Swiss canton of Fribourg. Twenty-three bodies were found. In one room, the majority of the bodies were draped in silk and arranged like the spokes in a wheel (Hall and Schuyler 2006, 56). Some of the bodies contained gunshot wounds; many others had plastic bags over their heads, which Di Mambro and Jouret had apparently bought together on 4 October (Introvigne 2006 [1995], 34). Of the casualties, twenty died as a result of gunshot injury and three from suffocation, poison, or drug overdose (Hall and Schuyler 2006, 57). The police investigators believe most of the people that died in Cheiry were not planning suicide, instead expecting "the Transit to another planet to take place in a supernatural way, perhaps through the arrival of a spaceship" (Introvigne and Mayer 2002, 173).

Two hours later, at 3am, three chalets caught fire almost simultaneously in Les Granges-Sur-Salvan in the Valais canton of Switzerland. Twenty-five bodies were found, along with the pistol that had been used to kill those found dead in Cheiry. Swiss police soon ascertained that both Di Mambro and Jouret had died in the fires, as had Di Mambro's twelve-year-old daughter, Emmanuelle, and adult son, Elie, who was no longer a member of the movement and was likely executed as a traitor. Aside from Di Mambro, Jouret, and a few others, it is likely that there were more suicides at Salvan than murders, unlike at Cheiry.

The Testaments establish a three-tiered hierarchy, providing an explanation for the different ways in which the members died. The most advanced members (the 'Awakened'), who understood they must leave their earthly bodies in order to reach the next stage in their evolution, died by suicide—but "not a suicide in the human sense of the term" (The Testaments 2006, 178). Then there were members (the 'Immortals') who had not reached this understanding themselves and had to be 'assisted' in their transition. Finally, some members were understood to be traitors; these were murdered in more violent ways. Again, The Testaments justify this: "Those who have breached our Code of Honor are considered traitors. They have suffered and will suffer the punishment they deserve for the ages of the ages" (The Testaments 2006, 178). According to Swiss magistrate André Piller, the deaths could be sorted into fifteen "true suicides"; thirty who had been "helped" with sedatives and gunshots, and seven executed traitors (Palmer 1996, 303-4). Thierry Huguenin, a survivor of the transit, suggested that fifty-four were meant to die—which would have happened, had it not been for his escape—to match the number of medieval Templars that had been burnt at the stake so that an "immediate magical contact" with their spirits could be established (cited in Introvigne 2006 [1995], 36).

The Testaments also made clear that eradicating the members' earthly lives was not this event's sole concern; the erasure of its documents was also intended. Incendiary devices were found at all three locations. However, due to their malfunctioning, much material was preserved against the Order's wishes (Mayer 2014). This includes computer records and videocassettes. Such internal documents highlight the

importance given to the transit. Should it succeed, it was proclaimed in one videocassette, the transit “will guarantee the survival of the universe” (cited in Mayer 2006b, 95). Messages from various spiritual entities had been channelled by Joseph Di Mambro and another member which affirmed its necessity (Introvigne and Mayer 2002, 173).

This violent part of the history of the Order of the Solar Temple would repeat itself twice more. The second transit happened more than a year later on the winter solstice in woods near Grenoble, France; sixteen people died, three of whom were children. Two of these had shot the rest, started a fire that would burn them all, and then shot themselves; the rest of the bodies were again arranged in a circle. Notes were later found in the homes of the deceased that expressed desires to “see another world” (cited in Hall and Schuyler 2006, 84).

The third and final transit took place in Saint-Casimir, Quebec, in 1997, around the time of the spring equinox, where five more people lost their lives, again accompanied by a fire. When a first attempt at suicide failed, once again due to malfunctioning equipment, the three teenaged children of one of the couples expressed their desire to live and were allowed to leave by the adults, who then proceeded to burn down the house with themselves in it. One of the five had arranged the other bodies to form the shape of a cross (Lewis 2004, 296). One of the members who had died during this last transit had been interviewed by the police following the event two years prior, when he expressed that “he might decide to follow the same path some day” (cited in Mayer 2014, 11). This final transit effectively marked the end of the Order of the Solar Temple as all of its “most devoted members” were now dead (Mayer 2014, 6).

Geographical, Political, and Social Context

The origins of the Order of the Solar Temple lie firmly in the neo-Templar milieu in the mid-twentieth century. As Introvigne has written, “In the 1980s, Geneva and Montreal were perhaps the two cities with the greatest number of esoteric groups in the world” (Introvigne 2006 [1995], 29), so it is not altogether surprising that the Order was particularly active there. Both Di Mambro and Jouret were actively involved in a number of organisations, both neo-Templar and Rosicrucian, and Jouret also had strong connections to the New Age scene. They established a number of ‘clubs’ which served as ‘outer shells’ of the Order and which offered talks and events on more mainstream topics such as gardening, nutrition, and health. The Order of the Solar Temple appealed to French-speaking people with Catholic backgrounds who were middle to upper class, having the financial and social means to participate in its clubs. It existed predominantly in French-speaking countries—France, Switzerland, Quebec, and the French Antilles—although it also had a minority of members from Spain and Portugal. It was not active in the United Kingdom or the United States of America.

As a neo-Templar tradition tracing its legitimacy to both the historical lineage of the Knights Templar and to communications with Ascended Masters, it is perhaps not surprising that Di Mambro and Jouret did not focus on political issues. However, an exception to this is their sense of persecution, particularly after the 1993 police investigation into the Q-37 group and the arrests of Jouret and two members on gun charges. The Testament letter entitled “To Lovers of Justice” poses a series of questions about the 1993 investigation, questioning the motives of the Security Guard of Quebec and of some politicians: “we affirm that the politicians, among them Mr Bourassa and mainly Mr Ryan, are responsible for having financed a

particularly dirty and questionable operation in order to conceal some of their own intrigues,” including Mr Ryan’s participation in the Catholic sect, Opus Dei (The Testaments 2006, 187). This letter also draws parallels between the Order’s own experience and the siege of the Branch Davidians’ complex in Waco, Texas, between February and April 1993. It concludes with a decidedly anti-government sentiment and ideas comparable to the ‘new world order’ conspiracy theory:

It is sufficient to note all the futile, lying, and useless distortions of international authorities concerning current conflicts in the world, in order to convince oneself of the existence of a secret evil organization on a worldwide scale, highly supported financially, and determined to silence or destroy all those who would be likely to interfere with their interests.

Warned a long time ago of the existence of this order, we have managed to frustrate their plans concerning us. Thus, despite everything and beyond appearances, the authentic bearers of an ancestral wisdom have been able to perpetuate the Work. (The Testaments 2006, 187)

Founders, Leaders, Membership

Joseph Di Mambro and Luc Jouret are the two key figures in the founding of the Order of the Solar Temple—not including here Jacques Breyer, the founder of the Arginy neo-Templar movement out of which the Order of the Solar Temple grew. Di Mambro was born in France in 1924, was a jeweller by profession, and was involved in neo-Templar and Rosicrucian groups for all his adult life. He also practised as a spirit medium, channelling messages from Ascended Masters, and as a teacher of esoteric philosophy. He moved to Switzerland in the early 1970s and established numerous clubs and societies, including La Pyramide, where the core group of followers lived communally, and then the Golden Way Foundation.

Jouret was born to Belgian parents in Zaire, Africa, in 1947. He graduated as a medical doctor but soon became interested in New Age and alternative medicines and was influenced by Theosophy during a visit to India. He established himself as a homeopathic doctor based in France and was a successful speaker on this and other New Age topics. Susan Palmer writes that “He organised over 200 conferences in France and Quebec to communicate his broad interests in alternative medicine” (Palmer 1996, 305). Di Mambro and Jouret, as practitioners in the same religious and social milieu, had collaborated in organising workshops since 1976 (Palmer 1996, 305). Jouret, almost twenty-five years younger than Di Mambro, has been described as the young, charismatic frontman and proselytiser of the Order of the Solar Temple whilst Di Mambro remained the real leader.

The Order of the Solar Temple had a complex structure which Introvigne compares to a “Chinese box” system in which organisations were nested within one another (Introvigne 2006 [1995], 29). Around 1981, Jouret had established his own organisation, the Amenta Club, to manage his speaking engagements on the New Age circuit; this later became the Atlanta Club. In 1984, he also established the Archedia Clubs, which were more esoteric in nature, influenced by Breyer’s teachings, and required an initiation ceremony (Introvigne 2006 [1995], 29). His most committed followers, who attended talks, workshops, and the

homeopathic practice organised by the Amenta Club, were invited to join the Archedia Clubs. Mayer writes that in 1987, the time of his study, the core group consisted of three types of people: ex-members of the Renewed Order of the Temple, Jouret's homeopathic patients, and people who had attended Jouret's talks (Mayer 2006a [1993], 13).

After the founding of the Order of the Solar Temple, the most committed members of the 'outer' Archedia Clubs were invited to join the 'inner circle' of the Order. Whilst the clubs had a high turnover of members who could participate on a more ad hoc basis, the Order of the Solar Temple had a more committed membership who undertook initiation, vows of secrecy, and pledges against apostasy, as well as higher financial requirements. In common with other neo-Templar organisations, the Order had a hierarchical structure with three levels of initiation: Brothers of the Court, Chevaliers of the Alliance, and Brothers of Former Times (Hall and Schuyler 2006, 67). In addition, "absolute authority" lay in the hands "of a secret inner group called the Synarchy of the Temple" (Hall and Schuyler 2006, 67). As noted above, only a minority of members knew that the transit involved suicide and murder.

Members were drawn from the middle to upper classes and included successful businesspeople, an orchestral conductor, a mayor, a former Olympic skier, and a former sales manager of the Piaget watch company, amongst others. It also included fifteen executives and managers at Hydro-Québec, the public hydroelectric utility of Quebec where Jouret had been employed as a motivational speaker. Members were thus well-integrated into society and maintained secular employment alongside their participation in an esoteric, secret society.

Beliefs

The beliefs of the Order of the Solar Temple have been described as esoteric and eclectic. They are perhaps characterised by three main strands: 1) neo-Templarism, with influences of Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry; 2) beliefs around Ascended Masters, mostly derived from Theosophy and from Alice Bailey (1880–1949); and 3) New Age ideas, particularly around environmentalism and human health. Palmer has described their eclecticism thus: "Members dabbled in occult subjects ranging from Rosicrucianism to Egyptian thanatology to Luc Jouret's oriental folk medicine and ecological apocalypticism" (Palmer 1996, 41). Hall and Schuyler, on the other hand, have described the Order as having a "quasi-Catholic mystical theology," drawing its "cultural inspiration" from "European Catholicism and its countercultures" (Hall and Schuyler 2006, 62). George Chryssides notes that it is through the Rosicrucian strand that "gnostic Christianity, ancient Egyptian religion, and alchemy blend" in the Order (2006, 126). Central to all three of these traditions—as well as to others, not least some forms of Christianity and Hinduism—is an idea of different 'ages' or dispensations in history. The Order's members believed that the earth was about to move from the Age of Pisces to the Age of Aquarius—they differed from fellow New Agers, however, in seeing this as a fiery apocalypse rather than a peaceful spiritual progression (see the section Prophecy, Revelation, and Millennialism below).

A central belief of the Order of the Solar Temple was that the Ascended Masters of the Great White Brotherhood reside as souls on the star Sirius, but periodically manifest in corporeal bodies on earth in order to assist with the spiritual evolution of humankind. Breyer and Di Mambro both claimed to be in contact with the Ascended Masters.

Neither the races nor human Evolution are the fruit of chance. They are ruled by an Occult Brotherhood made up of thirty-three Masters (The Elder Brothers of the Rose+Croix), as well as a few Adepts gathered in small and discreet brotherhoods. Having completed their human evolution, their entity uses borrowed bodies to manifest in this world and to accomplish the Divine Purpose. (The Testaments 2006, 180)

Belief in reincarnation was also important in the movement. Di Mambro and Jouret both claimed to be reincarnations of various spiritual figures throughout history. In addition, Di Mambro claimed to be able to identify the previous reincarnations of members of the Order, and the marriages of members were sometimes rearranged on this basis into 'cosmic marriages,' often with a significant age gap between the two individuals. Palmer notes that ideas of reincarnation also led to favouritism and jealousy amongst members: "Joseph Di Mambro would tell a member that he (the member) was the reincarnation of one of the Apostles of Jesus. The very next day he would say, 'I was mistaken, it is not you, it is him', indicating another member" (Palmer 1996, 307). Di Mambro did not, then, make claims of infallibility.

Underlying the belief in reincarnation was the gnostic belief that the true 'self' is the discarnate soul rather than the incarnate body. The soul is able to transmigrate to different human or spiritual bodies. Chryssides notes this as one of the key beliefs underlying the transits: "If humans could end up as spiritual beings on Sirius, this set a precedent for present-day earthly mortals: transition was a realistic possibility" (Chryssides 2006, 130).

Prophecy, Revelation, Millennialism

Introvigne has emphasised the lack of apocalyptic notions within the magical milieu to which the Order of the Solar Temple belonged: the worldview of new magical movements usually "seems much more preoccupied with the individual 'ascension' of each initiate to a higher state of existence or awareness than with the future of the world at large" (Introvigne 2000, 140). However, it is evident that the Order was preoccupied with various notions and beliefs related to apocalypticism, death, millennialism, and even messianism.

Eclectic Millennialisms

Scholars have identified an eclectic mix of different forms of 'millennialisms' within the Order of the Solar Temple including: survivalism; a New Age-tinged environmental apocalypticism; neo-Templar ideas of a cosmic '*renovatio*'; and what Hall and Schuyler have dubbed an "apocalypticism of persecution" (Hall and Schuyler 2006, 76; Introvigne 2006 [1995], 30). Ideas about the end of the world had been introduced to neo-Templarism by Breyer in 1959. In his book *Arcanes Solaires, ou les Secrets du Temple Solaire*, Breyer asserted that the world as we know it would end after our current age of Christianity and the earth would be transformed. He suggested three possible dates for this earthly apocalypse but emphasised that the exact date was subservient to "an appropriate spiritual preparation" (quoted in Introvigne 2000, 147). The latter sentiment, however, later shifted with the Order, as its neo-Templar apocalypticism took the shape of a complete *renovatio* (renewal) of the world, which was set to happen in 1994 as revealed by the Ascended Masters of the Grand Lodge of Agartha (Introvigne 2006 [1995], 30). As it was imagined that this

renovatio would be effected through a fire destroying Earth, light, fire and death are understood to have been prime symbols for the Order (Chryssides 2006, 120; Labelle 2006, 156; Lewis 2006, 38).

Introvigne (2000, 147), among others, has suggested that this doctrine of renewal was subsequently combined with Jouret's New Age ideas. Jouret's lectures often revolved around environmentalism. As a homeopath, he claimed that "just as disease is a sign of some underlying sickness in the body, pollution is the external manifestation of a sickness within planet Earth" and that the prevalence of natural disasters was pointing to an impending ecological disaster (cited in Walliss 2006, 107). The Testaments state that the Order of the Solar Temple "refuse to participate in the assassination of our bearer the Earth" (The Testaments 2006, 182). Typical of New Age beliefs, Jouret claimed that "Nature gives us obvious signs that there is a transmutation of the world going on. [...] We are making a leap in what I call macro-evolution" (cited in Mayer 2006b, 93).

Another combining of esoteric and New Age ideas is seen in the Order's ideas around degeneration. Jouret spoke of the "pathetic state" that humanity was in, and how "humanity's brutishness is all the more tragic as it is occurring at the moment in evolution when new abilities can awaken, when man should transform himself and make a leap" (cited in Mayer 2006a, 15). Such ideas combined with a certain traditionalism or conservatism that is often prevalent in occult or esoteric currents, where concerns revolve around the "deterioration of the world and the disappearance of traditional values" (Mayer 2006a [1993], 11). This resounds in The Testaments, which stated that "the refusal of an accelerated mutation process gives rise to the degeneration of all religious, familial, social, political, economic, and law-enforcement values" (The Testaments 2006, 181).

Apocalypticism, Death, and Messianism

Significantly, however, the Order's millennial belief in an impending Age of Aquarius that would replace the Age of Pisces at first manifested itself as a preoccupation with survival instead of death. In 1986, the group published a two-volume book on how to "survive beyond the year 2000" (*Survive à l'An 2000*), which prepares the reader to survive chemical, nuclear, and bacteriological warfare (Walliss 2006, 107). An important part of Breyer's suggestion that the Order move to Canada was that Europe especially was in danger of apocalyptic catastrophe and Canada might be able to provide an ark of salvation, which led the Order to establish a survival farm near Toronto because of its auspicious geomagnetic position (Introvigne 2000, 147; Walliss 2006, 107).

Scholars such as Henrik Bogdan (2006) have emphasised the centrality of the notion of death within the group, especially in rituals. Indeed, during an initiatory ritual entitled the "Ceremony of the 4 Elements," the following words were spoken:

But always remember

that Death is an illusion.

In fact,

It is only another aspect of Life.

[...]

And since nothing is more uncertain

than the hour of Death ...

prepare yourself each day to be FREE

to leave this Earth

and to continue

on a parallel Invisible plane,

free from all human and terrestrial chains which keeps [sic.] you prisoner of yourself.

[...]

always remain worthy

of wearing this Sacred Robe whatever may happen,

even if your physical life is in danger, for you will soon learn

that physical life is of no importance. (Cited in Bogdan 2006, 150-51)

As Bogdan writes, the transits made it “clear that this was not to be interpreted metaphorically, but literally” (Bogdan 2006, 151).

Beyond notions of reincarnation in which “those at the core of the OTS believed that they were an elect group of people who incarnated periodically on Earth to play key roles in the evolution of humanity” (Walliss 2006, 107), there were also more explicitly messianic elements to the Order. Emmanuelle (who was the daughter of Di Mambro and member Dominique Bellaton, who was deemed by him to be the reincarnation of Queen Hatshepsut) was alleged to have been born from immaculate conception and was known as the ‘arch-child’ or ‘avatar’ that would play a key role in heralding the New Age. She died at the age of twelve in the first transit (Palmer 2006, 47-48). According to Marc Labelle, other manifestations of messianism in the Order included declarations made by Jouret and Di Mambro about being the Lamb of God and God the Father respectively (Labelle 2006, 159).

Another element of the Order’s millennialist inclinations are their references to other groups that were in the news at the time as ‘violent cults’. In *The Testaments*, a comparison is made between the police surveillance following the sting operation around an attempted gun purchase and “that which took place in the USA”—a reference to the Waco siege in 1993 (The Testaments 2006, 185). Gaining media attention might have been part of the Order’s incentive to leave this world: on a cassette tape salvaged by the police after the fires and dated to spring 1994, Jouret complained that “we have been anticipated by Waco,” and Di Mambro replied that in fact “it would have been preferable to leave six months before them.” But, at any rate, “what we would do will be more spectacular” (reported in Introvigne 2000, 156). As Introvigne concludes, “it seems that that the media have become so important that ‘making headlines’ is the only way for a suicidal movement to find a confirmation that, far from being marginal, it has an important role in this world” (Introvigne 2000, 156). Mayer echoes this assessment: if the Order of the Solar Temple did not harbour a desire to be seen and acknowledged by the outside world, “why would they have cared to prepare mailings to a number of media organizations before their death? Why would they have tried to explain what they did and why? Why would they have wanted to leave behind their own legend?” (Mayer 2006b, 102).

The comparison made in the Order of the Solar Temple documents between Waco and their own run-ins with police and the law points to what Hall and Schuyler called an “apocalypticism of persecution” (Hall and Schuyler 2006, 76). *The Testaments* are paradoxical in that they present two contradictory versions of why the Order chose to leave Earth: one in which they freely chose to do so—“with an unfathomable Love, ineffable joy, and without any regret that we leave this world”—and another where they “have been prematurely put to sleep because of incomprehension, libel, blackmail of all kinds, police pressure, the hateful slander of a degenerate humanity whose absurd and senseless attacks, ever increasing, are now dangerous and destructive to that which remains to be saved” (The Testaments 2006, 178, 180). The latter view points to an explicitly conspiracist tone that resonates with “a growing paranoia during the last few months” within the group (Mayer 2006b, 99).

This paranoia seems to have run through the Order of the Solar Temple in its final stages; when Di Mambro's wife Jocelyn struggled to get a passport in 1994 because of police investigations, she wrote that:

We don't know when they might close the trap on us ... a few days? A few weeks? We are being followed and spied upon in our every move. All the cars are equipped with tracing and listening devices. All of their most sophisticated techniques are being used on us. While in our house, beware of surveillance cameras, lasers and infra-red. Our file is the hottest on the planet, the most important of the last ten years, if not the century. (Jocelyn Di Mambro cited in Walliss 2006, 109)

As the leaders of the Order understood it, "the game is afoot, and the concentration of hate against us will supply the energy needed for our departure" (cited in Introvigne and Mayer 2002, 173).

Practices

The complicated "Chinese box" (Introvigne 2006 [1995]) system of the Order's organisational structure necessitates distinguishing between the group's 'inner' and 'outer' activities. Writing in 1989 about the Lausanne Club, one of its outer organisations, Mayer noted a lack of typical 'spiritual' activities such as meditation in favour of a focus on "nutrition and organized cooking classes, workshops" (Mayer 2006a, 11). However, for the inner group, the Order of the Solar Temple, ritual was key—to the extent that Chryssides has noted the possibility that "the group thrived on ceremony without any strong doctrinal underpinning" (Chryssides 2006, 117). Bogdan writes, "The practice of rituals appears to have been the core activity of the Solar Temple" (Bogdan 2006, 144). He goes on, quoting from Palmer, "These rituals seem to have been highly elaborate and suggestive, and the experience of the rituals was often enhanced by the use of operatic music and visual effects, and possibly by hallucinogenic drugs" (Bogdan 2006, 144, citing Palmer 1996, 306). Material elements of the ritual include the robes worn by participants, swords carried, a Templar cross, candles and incense, and a red rose in a vase, continuing a Rosicrucian practice.

Bogdan states that two kinds of rituals were central within the group: magical/mystical rituals and rituals of initiation. Magical/mystical rituals often took place on the occasion of the full moon and were held in secret underground sanctuaries that the group had constructed at their properties in both Switzerland and Quebec. These sanctuaries were concealed by false walls and secret passages. The rituals allegedly involved sex magick practices as well as meditations and visualisations (Bogdan 2006, 145). They were frequently opened with Di Mambro citing Alice Bailey's "Great Invocation," which begins, "Let the Forces of Light bring illumination to mankind" (Bailey cited in Chryssides 2006, 124).

Initiation rituals drew heavily on Freemasonry and followed the Masonic initiation structure, which includes entering the lodge (a term also used in the Order), answering questions, circumambulating the lodge symbolising an ordeal, pledging an oath of secrecy, and being admitted into the lodge, often with an external marker such as a visible token, new name, or handshake (Bogdan 2006, 135). Death, through the transits, was another initiation ceremony through which the member could move to a higher state of consciousness: "Through death the members were initiated into disincarnate Masters and thus became the link between the world of men and God" (Bogdan 2006, 153).

Themes of purification run through both forms of rituals and, as Palmer (1996) has argued, this theme is central within the Order of the Solar Temple overall. Rituals included purification of the body through washing and fasting, but, more importantly, of the “soul and heart” (Bogdan 2006, 152). In day-to-day life, purity was maintained through in-group and out-group boundaries. For instance, members would not sit on the chairs of non-members for fear that their energy would be contaminated, and members’ children were not permitted to play with the children of non-members (Palmer 1996, 310). Members were not allowed to touch Emmanuelle, Di Mambro’s daughter, and she had to wear a helmet and gloves during her early years “to protect the purity of her aura” (Palmer 1996, 310). Furthermore, the use of fire in the transits had a purificatory role in which it was planned that the destruction of materials and artefacts belonging to the Order would prevent them being polluted by the hands of ordinary humans.

For both forms of ritual, the ritual experience was enhanced through sophisticated modern technologies, including holograms, lasers, and sound and lighting effects. These were used to “create illusions of the Masters of the White Brotherhood, lightning storms, divine music and gold dust” (Palmer 1996, 306). Costly devices that projected sophisticated holograms were used by Di Mambro to create “apparitions” of the Masters of the White Brotherhood (Labelle 2006, 157). Di Mambro’s illusions were only known to be such by him and a few select others so that they could “bolster Joseph Di Mambro’s charismatic claims and the belief in the tutelary presence of the White Brotherhood” (Palmer 1996, 306). As James R. Lewis wrote, “Leaders of many religions have utilized questionable legitimization strategies. OTS’ holographic fabrications, however, put Di Mambro in a class by himself” (Lewis 2004, 313). In 1990, however, Di Mambro’s son, Elie, “discovered that the various supernatural apparitions that appeared during OTS rituals were in fact faked through the use of lasers, slides, and light and sound effects operated by a member called Antonio Dutoit” and would expose this secret to other members (Walliss 2006, 112). It is likely that this action contributed to the brutal murder of Dutoit as a traitor for allowing Elie to discover this secret (Palmer 1996, 313).

Sources and Evidence

The Order of the Solar Temple is arguably quite well covered in the New Religious Movement Studies and Cultic Studies literature (particularly in studies of millennial movements or ‘cults’ and violence), and numerous experts on new religious movements have written articles or chapters on the Order of the Solar Temple, including Susan Palmer (1996), Catherine Wessinger (2000), and George Chryssides (2006). Those who have written slightly more extensively on the movement include Massimo Introvigne (2000, 2002, 2006 [1995], 2021) and Henrik Bogdan (2006, 2011), the latter focusing on the transits as rituals. Jean-François Mayer was the only scholar of religion to have published on the group prior to the first deaths in 1994. In 1987, he conducted a piece of fieldwork with Luc Jouret’s Archedia Clubs for which he attended numerous meetings and was also able to interview Jouret at a time when Jouret’s message was focused on humanity’s spiritual evolution to the Age of Aquarius. Because of this, Mayer was the only scholar to receive the package containing The Testaments in 1994. He was also a resident in Fribourg, Switzerland, where one of the transits took place, and was asked by the presiding judge to “take part in the investigation as an expert.” This “involved both sorting and examining documents on the one hand, and being present at key interviews with people interrogated by police officers, on the other hand” (Mayer 2014: 38). Mayer can therefore be considered a prominent expert on the movement.

Mayer's 1987 fieldwork was published in 1993 in a small French bulletin on religious movements, *Mouvements Religieux*. It was also republished as a chapter in James R. Lewis's edited collection, *The Order of the Solar Temple: The Temple of Death*, published in 2006. The latter remains the seminal academic book on the movement. As Lewis states in the introduction, the present collection "brings together some of the best research on the Solar Temple—a selection of articles previously published in English, translations of French articles, a set of original papers, and a selection of Solar Temple documents—to produce the first book-length study of the group in English" (Lewis 2006, 3). We have drawn heavily upon all the chapters in this book in writing this entry.

Critical Scholarly Debates, Gaps, and Unresolved Questions

Whilst there is academic consensus that the Order of the Solar Temple is best considered a neo-Templar movement, there is also debate as to which major traditions fed into it—whether it was predominantly quasi-Catholic or if it was more influenced by Gnosticism, Theosophy, or New Age movements. The Order of the Solar Temple seems to have drawn on so many different spiritual traditions that it seems possible to claim almost anything as an influence. However, as Chryssides suggests, the line needs to be drawn somewhere. He writes, "One writer goes as far as to classify the OTS as an 'eastern cult,' stating that 'The Order of the Solar Temple is based on Hinduism and 'Reincarnation' (Dominguez 2004)" (Chryssides 2006, 129, referring to Dominguez's online encyclopaedia entry, 'Eastern Cults'). However, Chryssides refutes this, arguing that the apparent 'Eastern' ideas are actually drawn from Theosophy. There has also been some debate as to whether the Order of the Solar Temple should be considered a religious movement at all. Bogdan states:

Are we dealing with a doomsday cult, a sect, a new religious movement, a new magical movement, a suicide cult (Lewis 2005), a magical-esoteric religion (Palmer 1996: 303), a Rosicrucian and/or neo-Templar organization (Introvigne 1995: 267), a secret society (Palmer 1996: 304), a magic and gnostic movement (Mayer 1999: 223), or an esoteric new religious movement (Introvigne 2000: 138)? (Bogan 2006, 134)

Obviously, many of these categories are not exclusive of one another and it is possible to see the Order within many of them.

There is also debate as to the extent to which the transits can be attributed solely to the millennial beliefs of the Order of the Solar Temple. Wessinger termed the Order as a "fragile millennial group" because of the "conviction that they were persecuted, combined with internal stresses" (Wessinger 2000, 229). She has asserted that if it were not for these two factors, "the Solar Temple members could just as easily have responded to favorable circumstances by continuing their work to bring about the Age of Aquarius" (Wessinger 2000, 299). In his 2004 chapter, "The Solar Temple 'Transits': Beyond the Millennialist Hypothesis," Lewis puts more emphasis on the ill health of Di Mambro than on millennial ideas in contributing to the transits. He suggests that "millennialism and external provocation are not as central for understanding suicide groups as previous analysts have suggested" (Lewis 2004, 295). Instead, the Leader's failing health is central (Lewis 2004, 310–11).

The question that arguably preoccupied the media, and hence the public, was who was responsible for the second and third transits? Whilst it was generally accepted that the leaders had died in the first transits and that they had included a few suicides of the inner circle and the murder of those in the outer circle and ex-members, there was a conviction that someone must have led the second transit in particular. Media attention fell on member Michel Tabachnik, a Swiss orchestra conductor who had been involved in Di Mambro's groups since the late 1970s, before the founding of the Order of the Solar Temple. He had moved away from the group sometime in the early 1990s but had then reconnected in 1994, participated in rituals, written texts for the group, and given several lectures shortly before the transits. Although he was interviewed by police after the first transits, he was released without charge. After the 1995 transits, however, questioning intensified, and in 2000 he was put on trial for playing a role in, or having knowledge of, the transits, which he vehemently denied. He was acquitted in 2001 and then again in 2006 after the case was taken to the appeal court (Mayer 2014). Introvigne (2021) has argued that the second transit was most likely organised by three members who all died in the transit: Christiane Bonet (1945–1995), a Swiss psychotherapist, and two French policemen, Jean-Pierre Lardanchet (1959–1995) and Patrick Rostan (1966–1995). Unsurprisingly, conspiracy theories also abound, claiming that there were external agents involved in all of the deaths. David Cohen and David Carr Brown produced documentaries like "Death of the Solar Temple" (aired on Channel 4 on British television in 1996) and others in which they allege conspiracy theories like Grace Kelly having been killed by the Order of the Solar Temple.

Finally, it is worth noting that the tragedy of the Order of the Solar Temple contributed to the rise of the modern 'anti-cult' movement in Europe. Introvigne and Mayer write,

Although active from the early 1970s, the European anticult movement had received minimal public support. After 1994, parliamentary commissions were appointed to investigate the danger of cults, and they produced, particularly throughout French-speaking Europe, official reports that essentially mirrored the views of the anticult movement. Although later reports were somewhat more moderate (Introvigne 1999a; Richardson and Introvigne 1999), documents produced in France (Assemblée Nationale 1996, 1999), Belgium (Chambre des Représentants de Belgique 1997), and the Canton of Geneva (Audit sur les dérives sectaires 1997) maintained a strict anticult position. It is significant that in addition to Quebec, the largest numbers of victims in the 1994 tragedy were located in France (where an official "Mission to Fight Cults" was established in 1998), Belgium, and the Canton of Geneva. (Introvigne and Mayer 2002, 170).

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