Religion, Creative Practice and Aestheticisation in Nick Cave's The Red Hand Files

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Abstract: In 2018, Nick Cave launched The Red Hand Files website, where fans ask personal questions and the artist responds. This ongoing dialogue presents a unique iteration of religious visibility at the nexus of religion and the arts. Here, Cave articulates his personal religiosity in the wake of his son's death, detailing the role of creative practice, performance and communication. Cave's personal spirituality engages processes of aestheticisation that awaken experiences of inspiration and mystery. The epistemological orientation of alternative spirituality that values encounters with the ineffable and seeks to be free from static beliefs had previously found its antithesis in organised religion, but more recently, the fervent dogmatism of political correctness has applied its own pressure. As an example of religious aestheticisation within the tradition of alternative spirituality, The Red Hand Files exhibits the continued salience of this worldview despite the countervailing influence of politically correct culture.

Keywords: aestheticisation; creative practice; alternative spirituality; mystical experience; political correctness; subjectivity; mediated communication

1. The New Visibility of Religion

Graham Ward and Michael Hoelzl's 2008 edited volume *The New Visibility of Religion: Studies in Religion and Cultural Hermeneutics* presents a multidisciplinary exploration of religion's visibility, revisiting theories of secularisation and reenchantment, religious violence and metaphysics. Departing from theories of religion that would argue for the reemergence of religion following a period of secularisation, the new visibility of religion model presented by Ward and Hoelzl merely posits "a *new awareness* of religion" (Hoelzl and Ward 2008, p. 2). Where a theory of reemergence defines religion in concrete terms focusing on quantitative measures such as church attendance, the new visibility thesis accepts that "what is being named 'religion' may also have radically changed" (Hoelzl and Ward 2008, pp. 2, 5). Religion is evident in many forms throughout culture, and by adopting a more open framework through which to trace religiosity, a methodological approach arising from its visible multiplicity provides the opportunity to become sensitive to new and evolving phenomena traceable to the core concept of religion. Investigating why particular markers of religiosity have become more visible, and why others have perhaps fallen away, can lead the conversation about religion in new and fruitful directions, avoiding blanket statements about religious change.

The study of the relationship between religion and the arts/popular culture often focuses on the notion of reenchantment. Max Weber's 1905 disenchantment thesis recognised the rising tide of secular rationalism eroding an apparent state of religious enchantment characterised by widespread faith in the church. Reenchantment involves the revival of religion in non-traditional contexts, including the arts and popular culture. Since the late 1980s, the religious studies discipline has been preoccupied with religious exemplars that appear outside of formal religious settings or traditions, influenced in part by the task of making sense of the emergent spiritual traditions of the late 1960s. Representing collisions, counteractions and admixtures of the religious and secular, new religious movements (Lewis 2004),

fictional religion (Cusack 2010) and alternative spirituality (Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000)—to name but a few—present the challenge of extracting the nebulous essence of "religion" wherever it appears. The *Journal of Religion and Film* and the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* are replete with examples of the continued entanglement of the sacred and secular, and methodological approaches are as varied as the phenomena discussed. The fractured nature of "what is being named 'religion'" (Hoelzl and Ward 2008, p. 2) is particularly evident in the study of religion and the arts/popular culture, as traces of religiosity can be discerned in the symbolic language of an artwork, the personal beliefs of a film director, the experience of an audience member, the political critique of religion contained in a piece of music or in the generalised behaviours of fandom, or identity construction. Despite the eclecticism of this area of study, the arts and popular culture provide an avenue from abstract manifestations of the collective "sacred canopy" (Berger 1990) to a deeper indication of religio-cultural change. Here, religion is conceived as the diffuse and predominant belief system of the overall culture. According to an aestheticised view of religion, religions themselves become symbolic resources for individuals to construct their own personal worldview. While this characterisation of religion is central to this discussion, the simultaneous presence of discrete religions within the culture testifies to the fact that aestheticisation provides but a lens through which to view relevant forms of religious behaviour.

Aestheticisation—a central feature of modern religiosity—is discussed at length in Yves de Maeseneer's chapter from *The New Visibility of Religion*. De Maeseneer provides a general definition of the term as:

> an aesthetic, non-committal attitude towards religious traditions . . . Religious experiences are sought after as far as they reinforce the subjective identity. Religion loses its authoritative power, and becomes a function of the self, a self that considers itself as the author of its own life. (De Maeseneer 2008, p. 100)

The notion that the individual has usurped God to become "the author of its own life" captures the subjective experience of seeking, discovering, selecting, creating and rejecting without conscious reference to a superior authority. The individualised and subjectivised nature of modern religious affiliation necessitates looking past the apparent diversity of beliefs and practices to identify underlying structures, values and epistemological orientations. The most important observation here is of the "attitude" involved in the pursuit of religious experiences (De Maeseneer 2008, p. 100). As Christopher Partridge explains, alternative spirituality adopts an epistemological position where personal experience alone provides "immediate and uncontaminated access to truth" and where all else is treated with suspicion (Partridge 2004, p. 75). The "alternative" nature of this spiritual orientation stems from this core position where external sources of authority are mistrusted and individuals seek their own "alternative" path to truth.

Challenging and extending the definition of aestheticisation quoted above, De Maeseneer argues that aesthetic engagement "is in the first place an act of passivity" where the subject is consumed, possessed or overcome by the aesthetic experience (De Maeseneer 2008, pp. 103, 105). Passivity is one of four characteristics that William James employs to define mystical experience, along with ineffability, noesis and transiency (James 2014, pp. 206–7). Despite the occasional nature of mystical experience, its power conveys feelings of inexplicable and profound significance along with "a curious sense of authority for after-time" (James 2014, p. 206). James Elkins explores examples of such experiences in both *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (Elkins 2004a) and *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (Elkins 2004b), detailing the capacity of art to overcome the viewer in a manner that is "essentially religious, even when religion was the farthest thing from the viewer's mind" (Elkins 2004b, p. 149). Where the epistemological preconditions of alternative spirituality are adopted (mistrusting known authorities and continually seeking the alternative in a quest for direct experiences of unmediated truth), the emotive potential of aesthetic experience can reveal the sacred in moments of spontaneous encounter.

While aestheticisation may appear to involve a "non-committal attitude towards religious traditions" (De Maeseneer 2008, p. 100) because the individual resists permanent commitment

to a specific source of spiritual authority, experiences of passivity challenge the impression that self-authorship is undertaken deliberately and with full conscious control. Matthew Wood explores this dynamic, challenging the concept of "self-spirituality" that suggests total control and mastery, when individuals are actually giving themselves over to a multitude of "non-formative" authorities, and this is especially evident in spiritual practices like channelling, meditation and Reiki, that he classifies as examples of "possession" (Wood 2007). However, owing to the psychologisation of religion (Hanegraaff 1998, p. 197), aesthetic experiences bearing mystical qualities may be subsequently rationalised and adapted to correlate with one's existing worldview. In this way, alternative spirituality sustains both a sense of unhindered self-determinism and a willingness to temporarily relinquish personal authority, succumbing to experiences of power and mystery. Colin Campbell has explored this tendency from a different perspective in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* where he details the intensified adoption of subjective imaginative processes in modernity, paralleling the birth of the novel, the sacralisation of romantic love and the development of consumerism (Campbell 1989). Campbell explains that by exercising "self-determination of emotional experience" (1989, p. 74) the individual becomes "an artist of the imagination" (p. 78), driven by "Longing and a permanent unfocused dissatisfaction" (p. 87) in pursuit of "the fundamental pleasure which 'exists' in life itself" (p. 69). As an integral part of the individual's "dream edifice" (Campbell 1989, p. 93) aesthetic experiences are at once a part of an intricate psychologised and subjectivised value system and able to be successively abandoned as dissatisfaction and doubt overtake the initial pleasure of truth, transposing it into a fresh version of the ideal where it can be longed for once again. As such, the sacralisation of aesthetic experience that is at the heart of alternative spirituality involves a perpetual state of seekership coupled with a deep faith in potentiality, propelling the ideal into the yet-to-be-known.

As will be discussed below, Australian musician, writer and artist Nick Cave's experiences of inspiration are notably similar to James's description of mystical experience, involving the sensation of encounter with an indefinable superior power whose influence is external to the self. Such experiences retain an intense truth-value despite the obscurity or intangibility of the knowledge attained. The fundamental role of the mysterious and the vitality of the sacred are recurrent themes in Cave's blog-style website The Red Hand Files, and the artist often speaks about his own creations as being beyond his ability to completely understand or explain. Ideas are conceived as visitors that come to him and are gathered together, occasionally sparking moments of revelation, where the meaning of the finished work is continually discovered through performance. Both the creative process and the experience of performance become religious experiences that affirm the subjective journey where the artist seeks truth through a direct encounter with the unknown.

As a writer and artist, Cave certainly behaves as if he is "the author of his own life" (De Maeseneer 2008, p. 100). Cave has developed his public persona through imaginative processes of self-creation also practiced more broadly in Western culture as a part of the trend towards aestheticisation. While many may be unconscious of their own role in identity construction, artists and musicians are often keenly aware of these processes. In The Red Hand Files, Cave exhibits a high degree of reflexivity and self-awareness in terms of the constructed nature of his religious position. Christianity, for instance, is granted a special place in Cave's life, but he does not consider himself a Christian. Instead, he is drawn to Christianity "personally, nostalgically and sentimentally" due to his Anglican upbringing and is deeply moved by the Biblical stories, which become a part of the symbolic language of the artist's imaginative universe (Cave 2018, RHF 77). While distancing himself from metaphysical truth claims or specific religious convictions, Cave says that at Christmas he will nonetheless "kneel before the fading vestiges of an outmoded idea called spiritual transcendence and our beautiful and moving attempt to humanise the ecstatic cosmic drama, and I will pray" (Cave 2018, RHF 77). Recalling something of James's *The Will to Believe* (James 1956) Cave undertakes the rituals and mental postures of religious worship for the immediate beauty of the experience, whilst simultaneously rejecting the authority of religion (Cave 2018, RHF 66).

In addition to religious experiences associated with aestheticisation, processes of identity construction typical of alternative spirituality involve the use of a variety of religious resources,

without requiring religious commitment. When attempting to identify visible signs of religion, it is worth remembering that religion, media, society and culture are inextricably mixed and religious signs exist in a state of fluidity (Ornella 2008, p. 133). Recognisably religious symbols may be used for non-religious ends and the secular can come to take on religious significance (Demerath 2000, p. 3). For religion to become a symbolic resource for the artist (and for the individual), it must first be freed from a state of absolute ownership by a superior authority.

Religious resources are central to Cave's creative practice, and while the Christian stories hold special significance, Jerome Rothenberg's anthology of cross-cultural religious poetry, *Technicians of the Sacred*, has also been cited as profoundly influential (Cave 2018, RHF 5, 25). These symbolic resources form a part of imaginative processes that bear religious qualities in and of themselves, yet this does not mean that the original religious meaning of these stories is left unchanged. Rather, the artist engages with both secular and religious material, and the particular aspects that take on a heightened quality of spiritual resonance give rise to subjective patterns of meaning that others may not recognise as being linked to a religious tradition. In The Red Hand Files, Cave says that he holds spiritual beliefs and these are considered to be so because they are animated with spiritual feeling. This complicates the task of identifying visible signs of religiosity because it is not simply a matter of matching up the puzzle pieces where a particular shape is found both in the area being studied and the religious tradition. In the case of alternative spirituality, one is looking for a particular epistemological orientation marked by a desire for unmediated experiences of religious truth, and a subsequent retreat from metaphysical claims as experiences are psychologised and made personal. Bearing this in mind, the reenchantment thesis can be understood as a psychological state rather than a historical fact. Here, the ostensible authority of the individual is exercised both in the movements of disenchantment and reenchantment as a choice to reject or reinvest in a known illusion, where one adopts "the will to believe" on one's own terms (James 1956).

2. Religious Visibility in The Red Hand Files

We have never been more visible to one another. Online, we present ourselves in various guises, trade in social currency, succumb to or resist the forces of the propagandistic press and reveal ourselves in digital signals emitted to invisible but watchful observers. Our behaviour, preferences, weaknesses, highest hopes and the private utterances of the soul are compulsively divulged into an ever-expanding repository of human traces. In this media age, the individual is exposed, displayed and studied in a manner that is completely unprecedented in human history. The shade of anonymity is merely provided by the scale of human data, where one can be grouped into simplified conglomerates and disappear into the crowd. Forming an integral part of the human story, religion finds its way into the digital realm via institutions great and small and through innumerable self-published perspectives. We see more religion in this age of visibility, yet we see more of everything. As the division between public and private life continues to dissolve through processes of mediatisation and aestheticisation, religion (in all its subjective varieties) remains integral to public life as it changes and evolves.

Cave's website, The Red Hand Files, provides an interesting example of visible religiosity in an online environment. Acting as a portal for direct communication with fans, The Red Hand Files publishes a curated selection of questions posed to the artist, and Cave's replies. Here, Cave invites the audience to share in his inner life, exposing the personal and revealing the significance of his creativity and spirituality. Cave's interactions with fans both on stage and online possess a rare sincerity, born of the unimaginable grief he suffered following the death of his teenage son, Arthur, in 2015. In addition to The Red Hand Files (launched in September 2018), Cave chose to invite the world to witness the aftermath of this harrowing event through Andrew Dominik's 2016 documentary *One More Time With Feeling*. The film depicts the recording of Nick Cave and the Bad Seed's *Skeleton Tree* (2016) and the painful repercussions of loss experienced by the Cave family and their friends. Seeking a renewed and immediate connection with his fans, Cave also embarked on his "In Conversation" world

tour (2018–2019), opening up to his audience in a new way by answering unscripted questions from the crowd.

As an expression of religiosity that takes place through social media, The Red Hand Files embodies the spirit of public confession and performative exposure characteristic of contemporary online life. However, unlike most of the communication that occurs via social media, each entry carries the weight of consideration and care. Russell Cunningham is joined by a chorus of media commentators who have identified The Red Hand Files as a form of public dialogue that transforms the potential of Internet communication to bring about a uniquely intimate and personal exchange (Cunningham 2018). Josh Gray recalls that fans of a previous age coveted the tiniest glimpse of their idols' private life, and were rarely granted the privilege of personal contact or response (Gray 2018). The contemporary media environment, however, exposes the stars and, whether their private lives are consensually revealed or purposefully displayed, online interactions via social media often smack of the whispered advice of marketing and public relations advisors. We now live in a "society of self-disclosure" where it is necessary to reveal the self in order to obtain the trust of others, and people "must constantly be on their guard and employ a high degree of reflexivity to monitor their actions and utterances", as a slight misstep can have permanent repercussions, including the loss of one's career and public standing (Thompson 2005, pp. 38, 42). For Gray, however, Cave's "absolute honesty is not subject to the self-censorship now essential for safely navigating dialogous social media platforms" (Gray 2018, n.p.). As a renowned and successful artist, Cave does not need to use The Red Hand Files as a self-marketing tool and clearly uses the site to connect with others and to engage in personal reflection.

Cunningham characterises The Red Hand Files as deeply "confessional", resembling personal letters through the obvious care devoted to their craft (Cunningham 2018, n.p.). The intimacy of the exchange is established through the basic structure of the site. The site description reads "You can ask me anything. There will be no moderator. This will be between you and me. Let's see what happens. Much love, Nick". The site itself includes blog-style posts, "The Files", and there are two buttons available—"Ask a Question" and "Subscribe"—that perform their simple function without extraneous detail. There is no "About" page or links to social media. Website visitors are not allowed to post personal comments, but their responses can be sent to Cave using the "Ask a Question" button. Selectively responding to questions is one way in which Cave maintains an environment of goodwill, yet he also does this in his style of address. Framing the posts as an exchange between "you" and "me" with the intention of speaking to one another with "much love" is certainly unusual in online spaces and something that may only attract the interest of people who already have a personal connection with the figure offering such conversation.

The Red Hand Files invite the reader into Cave's life, his experiences and artistic practice insofar as he can explain them. His words come across as if they were part of his personal writing practice, a form of reflection and a distillation of ideas divulged in conversation with a sympathetic community. As a website frequented by fans, conversations with Cave are undertaken with the foreknowledge of Arthur Cave's death. The death of Cave's son seems to sacralise this online space, setting the tone for respectful communication and sincere, heartfelt responses. In these entries there is an ethical weight granted to the other that is seldom found in the correspondence of strangers. In bearing witness to the Cave family's grief (albeit in aestheticised form), fans give of themselves in unprecedented moments of personal vulnerability, that is reciprocated in Cave's unguarded replies. Cave speaks about his own grief and publishes lengthy questions from fans that recount personal suffering and loss (Cave 2018, RHF 23, 30, 33, 45, 51, 64, 65, 69, 71, 74, 85). Cave reaches across the distance with his words to forge connections with his silent readers. Cave writes: "to reach out to you, as you reached out to me, could in itself be the answer and, perhaps, a remedy–to say to you, you are not alone, we are here, and that we, a multitude, are thinking of you" (Cave 2018, RHF 61). For Cunningham, Cave's words "spread peace and compassion and love through a medium renowned for its ability to spread division". His words "bring solace in a tumultuous age" and arouse "hope amid despair, inviting us to be still, [and] be present in the moment" (Cunningham 2018, n.p.).

Communicating in this environment, Cave shares his personal views on all manner of things, guided by the topics sent to him by his questioners. Religious belief features strongly in The Red Hand Files, and Cave provides specific responses regarding his thoughts on God (Cave 2018, RHF 2, 4, 11, 12, 37, 41), the Bible (Cave 2018, RHF 87), spirits and the afterlife (Cave 2018, RHF 6, 29, 51, 55), the existence of evil (Cave 2018, RHF 28), the call to reduce the suffering of others (Cave 2018, RHF 29, 30, 39) and religious practices including prayer (Cave 2018, RHF 12, 50, 92) and meditation (Cave 2018, RHF 50, 69). Further to this, religious experience is a persistent theme, relating to Cave's creative practice, stage performances and solitary reflections. Cave's religious identity is not strictly associated with a tradition but can be broadly characterised as a form of alternative spirituality. Alternative spirituality does not determine what a person believes, but rather how they believe. First and foremost, the individual mistrusts sources of social and religious authority and actively seeks a personal connection with the divine, balancing pragmatic agnosticism with vital experiences of the sacred.

In The Red Hand Files, Cave defines his spiritual connection with the universe, his personal ethics and creative practice in contradistinction to a political orientation that has proliferated in popular culture and news media in recent years that can be colloquially referred to as "political correctness". While this is a loaded term that raises hackles and produces smug sneers by those who are invested in a dualistic conception of life-as-politics, it nonetheless characterises a particular approach to language, identity and the presentation of the self pertinent to any consideration of religious visibility in the present media environment. In the religious studies discipline, it is well accepted that alternative spirituality emerged as the dominant religious orientation in the late 1960s, evolving into a more diffuse form of subjective religiosity over time, linked with secular culture itself (Hanegraaff 1998; Sutcliffe 2003; Landy and Saler 2009). Cave's reflections in The Red Hand Files demonstrate that political correctness is deeply incompatible with alternative spirituality and the form of aestheticisation that is typically associated with seekership and subjective religion. Given the widespread influence of political correctness in Western culture, it is worth considering how these two worldviews interact when contemplating the future of Western religiosity.

3. Rivers of Light—Creative Practice, Inspiration, Connection and Performance

Cave's vast repertoire of creative works consistently draw upon Christian stories and symbolism, yet Cave's religiosity becomes visible not through the mere presence of recognisable religious references, but indirectly, through creative practice and performance. Cave professes his religious beliefs with a pragmatic self-reflexivity that privileges their psychological function. Alternative spirituality similarly maintains a distance from metaphysical claims, focusing instead on the role that belief plays in enriching one's life. As a religious position that is guided by the intuitive faculties and is revivified through heightened emotional experiences, alternative spirituality gravitates towards that which holds truth and power in the present moment, avoiding the blind adherence to set beliefs and dogmas. Overwhelming and ineffable experiences are balanced with pragmatic scepticism and psychologised self-awareness, and both of these features are intensified when the individual also adopts practices that encourage experiences of a mystical quality. As an artist, Cave's creative practice performs this function, and religious practices such as prayer (Cave 2018, RHF 37, 50, 92) and meditation (Cave 2018, RHF 37, 69, 70) similarly heighten the senses to spiritualised experiences. However, when questioned about the existence of God (Cave 2018, RHF 2, 4, 11, 12, 37, 41, 92), the afterlife (Cave 2018, RHF 6, 29, 39, 51, 55) and the possibility of clairvoyance (Cave 2018, RHF 78, 85), Cave confines his views to the subjective realm, seeking not to speak for others by making absolute truth claims, and admitting that what he believes may be ultimately unreal.

Over the years, Cave's creative practice has involved structured exercises designed to stimulate and refine ideas that eventually become song lyrics or prose. Fans have been invited into this private world of scrawled handwriting and date-stamped notebooks through art exhibitions displaying his personal items and books reproducing them (Barrand and Fox 2007; Cave and Back 2020). Seeking to break down the barrier between himself and his audience, Cave's international "In Conversation" tour

and website The Red Hand Files opened up a direct line of communication between the artist and his fans that has invited a new dynamic in both his writing and his performances. From September 2018 to February 2020, over 20,000 questions had been received (Cave 2018, RHF 84), and almost 100 issues of The Red Hand Files had been published at the time of writing. For Cave, receiving and responding to these questions provides him with a profound sense of human connection, resembling a prayerful exchange between the quiet inner voice and the distant presence of others (Cave 2018, RHF 71).

Each issue of The Red Hand Files includes one or more questions and Cave's response, accompanied by images including personal photographs and artworks. Responses are not straightforward answers to questions in the style of an interview. Rather, tangentially related questions are juxtaposed with evocative imagery as a part of Cave's carefully crafted responses (Cave 2018, RHF 67), that are creative works in themselves. The very first issue of The Red Hand Files establishes the centrality of writing and the creative process that is intertwined with Cave's desire to connect with his fans, in what the questioner refers to as "strong communion" (Cave 2018, RHF 1). Cave identifies his susceptibility to "awe" as being essential to his creativity, and in suffering terrible grief this door had closed upon him (Cave 2018, RHF 1). He explains that "work" (that is, creative practice) "and community" (accessed via performance and various forms of empathetic communication) offered him a pathway back.

Cave approaches creative processes with structure and discipline, committing himself to the task as a "desk job" (Barrand and Fox 2007, p. 103), establishing a space for spontaneous inspiration to occur. In Issue 9, Cave details his creative process that begins by simply sitting at his desk in readiness (Cave 2018). Here, the artist must overcome psychological barriers and attain a special state of focus in order to become attuned to ideas as they gravitate toward the opened mind. Cave describes the ideal mental state as one characterised by "a certain alertness to possibility" and "active attention" that is encouraged to flow through "stream of consciousness" writing where judgements are set aside (Cave 2018, RHF 9). Echoing film director and Transcendental Meditation proponent David Lynch's notion of ideas being like "fish" that one can "catch" (Lynch 2006), Cave speaks of ideas as if they had an agency of their own. Cave explains: "The idea is especially designed for you in your uniqueness", and one's preparedness to write ensures that "the beautiful idea has awakened and is moving toward you, as it responds to your display of intent" (Cave 2018, RHF 9). Possessed of emotive qualities, the idea and the artist approach each other in a dance of intentionality. Much of this process involves having faith that the idea will come.

Receiving ideas in this way, Cave repeatedly refers to a complex and inexplicable beauty that is perceived by the artist but is not necessarily understood by them. The labour of writing is undertaken with the knowledge that "within this pile of words something mysterious is going on, something beyond the reaches of your understanding" (Cave 2018, RHF 3). As if the artist were rubbing two sticks together, waiting for a spark, Cave describes the moment of inspiration:

> suddenly, without warning, you find you have taken one line of no consequence and attached it to another line of no consequence and a kind of reverberation begins between the two lines, a throbbing—or as I like to call it, a 'shimmering'—it is something you can actually see! And as the two combined lines pulsate, they begin to collect significance impossibly, and at a rapid rate, to load up with meaning, even to call down a melody, and your heart begins to beat as if for the first time in God knows how long, and you come alive, you become an actual person, a functional, competent human being deserving of their place on this earth, because you know, suddenly, more than anything, that you are *on to something* and this shimmering convergence of words is setting off on its journey to change the world. (Cave 2018, RHF 3)

This is a kind of mystical experience that takes on incredible significance as noetic meaning is discerned through the mists of the ineffable (James 2014, pp. 206–7). This sensation of discovery is central to alternative spirituality, where the individual seeks to experience truth in an unmediated and visceral way.

Cave explains his commitment to "open-ended potentiality" and "a state of yearning for something beyond certitude, beyond comprehension", because "this is where true meaning exists" (Cave 2018,

RHF 66). Aware of the religious significance of this epistemological orientation, Cave describes organised religion as offering a place to "doze off in the arms of a mutually decided truth" where such "structured systems of faith are specifically designed to switch off the apparatus of inquiry" (Cave 2018, RHF 66). By contrast, Cave devotes himself to his creative practice in "the spirit of enquiry" and "a condition of longing for some approximation of Godliness" (Cave 2018, RHF 66).

Honouring the special function of encounters with an enchanted universe, Cave maintains his spiritual beliefs while simultaneously dismissing them as being fantastical and unable to be proven. He speaks of the "uncanny clairvoyance" and "secret intelligence" of songs that he has written that later revealed prophetic knowledge of future events (Cave 2018, RHF 78, 85). In the same breath, Cave proposes that "we all have intimations or intuitions, that are holding conversations with the future" but concedes that "the idea that songs are prophetic is the kind of magical thinking which I would normally reject" (Cave 2018, RHF 79). The harmonious coexistence of such contradictory views is possible through the acknowledgement that something may not be true in every circumstance, but that certain ideas have a strong poetic resonance, and feel "right".

Live performances and the act of opening himself to the grief of others has given Cave a deep sense of connection with community. This community is manifest in his vast global fan base that is in turn oriented towards him, yet is also a form of relation that extends universally. Cave describes this connection as follows:

> there is a place that exists beneath the stratum of our actual lived selves—a river of light that can be accessed through the live performances. It is this river of light that flows through us all and binds us together .... when I am on stage I feel a very deep connection with my audience that transcends anything I have felt previously. I experience people on a 'soul' level that for me is extremely powerful. When I look into the audience, I feel I can connect with each of them individually on an acutely personal level. I can see inside them. The more attentive I become, the stronger the feeling. (Cave 2018, RHF 2)

Cave highlights the importance of physical touch and the transfer of energy that occurs between performer and audience that restores sensations of awe and is ultimately a religious experience of "spiritual reciprocity" (Cave 2018, RHF 1, 36). Such transcendent experiences of immediacy allow the sacred to manifest through the profane (Eagleton 2008, p. 96), where the individual can gain spontaneous access to the divine.

Cave describes experiences of "the ecstatic present", "where all memories disappear and the future does not exist". On stage, "the present moment is perpetually the first time. It is a state of blamelessness—a rapturous innocence–freed from what has gone before and what is yet to come" (Cave 2018, RHF 27). This state of attention is deeply meditative and is also a state of mind that has been broadly sacralised in modern Western culture. Issues 69 and 70 of The Red Hand Files discuss Cave's meditation practice and the role that it has played in his life over the last six years (Cave 2018). Using the techniques of Transcendental Meditation and supplementary aids, including Sam Harris's meditation app "Waking Up", Cave speaks of the everyday emotional and psychological benefits that he has experienced, but returns, most importantly, to the role that meditation plays in his creative life (Cave 2018, RHF 9).

Creative practice is not something that can be entirely separated from Cave's general experience, as he explains: "going about my 'normal' life, the residual trails of the words I've been working on still weave around me like dreams" (Cave 2018, RHF 10). In the same way, the vividness of Cave's spiritual experiences spill over into the rest of his life, and the practice of creativity, writing, performance, meditation, prayer and reflection all serve to reawaken his religious worldview. Ultimately, Cave says, "These acts of devotion, and investment in the unknowable, define my life" (Cave 2018, RHF 37). Embodying the spirit of seekership, Cave reflects that God's existence is not necessary to sustain his spirituality because "the search itself is where the action is", and the desire for that "blissful rush of pure meaning" that presents itself in "the Zen-like supremacy of the moment" becomes even stronger

in the contemplation of God's absence (Cave 2018, RHF 37). Alternative spirituality, as a religious position, seeks to pass through successive states of delusion in the rejection of authority and known truths, in order to reach a profound and unmediated encounter with the divine. In the modern West, this process of unmasking what has been hidden involves the transformation or inversion of enshrined beliefs. Here, the revelation of disenchantment comes with a sacred rush of veracity, as humanity beholds an indifferent universe that shines back on us with the ineffable and paradoxical gift of enlightenment.

4. Alternative Spirituality in a Politically Correct Age

A self-described "militant anarchist and activist", "lifelong feminist and transgender person", Alex DiFrancesco, writing for *Longreads*, expressed her "disgust" and initial feelings of "activist rage" over Cave's comments at a press conference on performing in Israel (DiFrancesco 2019, n.p.; Cave 2018, RHF 13). DiFrancesco's judgement, in this moment, was that Cave did not mount a sufficient stand against Israel. Cave's characterisation of women as "mysterious" also caused offence to DiFrancesco and other commentators, like Paula Mejía from *The New Yorker*, who considered his views to be "questionable" and "flawed" (Mejía 2018, n.p.; Cave 2018, RHF 7). DiFrancesco recalls her reaction to Issue 7: "I seethed with rage. I talked to anyone who would listen about how disappointing it really is to see the inner workings of the people who make the art you love" (DiFrancesco 2019, n.p.). DiFrancesco nearly cancelled her subscription to The Red Hand Files in the spirit of a political position that remains "staunch in its refusal to allow others slack" and preoccupied with "strict lines of perfection" (DiFrancesco 2019, n.p.). As an example of political correctness, DiFrancesco's self-description reveals characteristic experiences of "rage" and intense emotion regarding an apparent mismatch between her political views and those of another person. In an unusual twist, DiFrancesco concludes her article by challenging her own knee-jerk reactions, finding the will to overcome her intolerance towards "ideological difference" by continuing to read and engage with The Red Hand Files (DiFrancesco 2019, n.p.). This decision to keep an open mind did not come easily, and DiFrancesco's inner struggle is but a mirror of a deeper ideological struggle that is taking place in Western culture.

From one perspective, political correctness is the choice to speak in consideration of others. However, popular media is riddled with examples such as the above, where the individual quickly becomes incensed when faced with the slightest deviation from their staunchly held ideals. Offended parties tend to "catastrophize" the experience, becoming consumed by intense feelings that they are unable to withstand or that are deemed to be a form of violence against them (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015, p. 50). This article is not concerned with broader definitions of political correctness, or in explaining the political goals of those engaged in the so-called "culture wars". Rather, political correctness is discussed here in light of its visibility in online culture insofar as it relates to processes of aestheticisation. Both alternative spirituality and political correctness refer to the construction of identity and culture. Alternative spirituality conceives of this psychologically (Hanegraaff 1998, p. 197), leading individuals to embark on a life-long journey of self-discovery where their inner revelations do not have metaphysical implications. As Stephen Sutcliffe puts it, "whatever 'spiritual' values are deemed appropriate for the moment" are adopted, and the individual extends "a radical tolerance upholding the rights of others to do the same" (Sutcliffe 2003, p. 11). By contrast, the proponents of political correctness are primarily focused on the extended impacts of individual behaviour, seeing it as their duty to present themselves in a way that "causes no harm" and to protect the vulnerable and disadvantaged by policing the behaviour of others. Words and images are believed to have a tangible effect on social status, and terminology that relates to categories such as race, sexual orientation or gender is thought to impact the people within these categories. Conceived as an ongoing war between the oppressed and their oppressors, particular groups are granted the right to protest their victimisation, while others are characterised as eternally guilty. The proponents of political correctness seek to actively redefine the aesthetic and linguistic forms of expression that are acceptable in society with the ostensible aim of bringing about a just society.

Political correctness, however, also functions as a means of linguistic and behavioural monitoring that calls upon the herd to speak in unison for a common cause, identifying alternative voices as mutinous, dangerous and morally corrupt. Intolerance becomes most distinct when the politically correct attack people for their choice of words whilst ignoring their intended meaning, seeing the proliferation of incorrect language as being harmful in any instance (Strauts and Blanton 2015, p. 33). As previously mentioned, the authority of religion must be relinquished in order for aestheticisation to occur and for the individual to begin to attribute subjective significance to its symbolic resources. Political correctness adopts a stance where original authority should never be relinquished and where it is morally dubious to move beyond the bounds of one's identity. It is for this reason that identity is constructed using a small set of symbolic resources that are deemed acceptable. However, these scout badges of the self (feminist, transgender, of colour) are customarily presented as a social handshake, challenging others to make their own displays of kinship or betrayal (Friedman 2019, pp. 208, 211). In this way, political correctness becomes a means by which to assess a stranger's integrity—quickly and absolutely—using recognisable linguistic cues that remove the necessity for deeper investigation.

Political correctness has become notorious for its extreme and highly emotional displays of outrage in response to representations that are deemed to be offensive. The "ambient rage" of political correctness has become prolific in modern media (Schwartz 2016, p. 3), issuing from the mouths of ordinary citizens as often as from entertainers, politicians or corporations. Emotionally invested players effectively seek to "upvote" their ideal version of reality in public forums through continual online engagement and cannot tolerate their opponents gaining any ground. As the criteria for offense become more and more sensitive, an increasing proportion of the population are deemed guilty. In dramatic public spectacles, political correctness is used to destroy perceived enemies through a sustained attack on those aspects of the self that have been made visible (and vulnerable) through modern media. In its most extreme form, political correctness attributes blame for the suffering of category A to the mere existence of category B (Campbell and Manning 2018, pp. 81, 224), dissolving the significance of the individual in a deterministic vision of power. As a deterministic position, political correctness begins with its final diagnosis of social sickness and prescribes its urgent cure. Unless the cure is implemented to its fullest extent, a state of unbearable dysfunction will remain, so that daily life is conceived as a battle to establish and normalise a vision of life that is never adequately realised.

Cave is acutely aware of the environment in which he speaks and its inherent political sensitivities, yet is careful to retain the integrity of his own language, choosing to abstain from uttering the special code words that would place him neatly into a political box. Cave reflects: "it saddens me that something of our individual nature has disappeared into the divide, our unique voices are being worn down and everyone is communicating within the safe and strident anti-wonder of grievance politics" (Cave 2018, RHF 7). Due to its prevalence in contemporary discourse, Cave has returned to the topic of political correctness multiple times in The Red Hand Files, but without specifically using this term. Issue 66 provides a particularly succinct explanation of the epistemological friction that exists between politically correct culture and the subjective religiosity of alternative spirituality. Contrasting organised religion and its monopoly on truth with his personal mystical experiences, Cave aligns political correctness with the former due to "its lack of humility and the paternalistic and doctrinal sureness of its claims" (Cave 2018, RHF 66). Despite positive references to Sam Harris in The Red Hand Files (Cave 2018, RHF 33, 70), Cave expresses a similar distaste for New Atheism (Cave 2018, RHF 66). He does not take issue with their cause, but with their epistemological arrogance (Cave 2018, RHF 66).

From a political standpoint, alternative spirituality has traditionally found favour with the Left while organised religion has been associated with the Right. However, these politico-religious marriages are dissolving and creating complex connections (and disconnections), rendering old assumptions redundant. In light of this, Cave mentions that being "of the generation that believed that free speech was a clear-cut and uncontested virtue", it is amazing and unexpected to find that "within a generation this concept is seen by many as a dog-whistle to the Far Right, and is rapidly being consigned to the Left's ever-expanding ideological junk pile" (Cave 2018, RHF 66). The culture has changed so much

that Cave feels the need to defend concepts as basic as "open debate and conversation" (Cave 2018, RHF 48), and respond to questions from fans about whether it is advisable to date people who do not share their political ideology (Cave 2018, RHF 82).

Cave's art has never been mainstream and an anti-authoritarian ethic has been integral to his work from the beginning. He speaks of the need to maintain freedom of expression and to resist the forces of censorship, whether they arise from well meaning fellow citizens or authoritarian regimes (Cave 2018, RHF 31, 75, 83, 86). In defence of free speech, Cave publishes an offensive question that was sent to him, answering it honestly but expressing his opinion regarding the person's choice of words. Cave's approach differs from politically correct commentary by making fun of the questioner but also offering them the opportunity to return to the conversation by highlighting the responsibility people have to one another, as well as their capacity for forgiveness (Cave 2018, RHF 52).

Cave is equally adverse to retrospective censorship and "cancel culture", where public figures are blacklisted in the present day (for one reason or another), necessitating a total public divorce from all that they have created, said or done (Cave 2018, RHF 48, 86). On this point Cave asks

> ... what songwriter could have predicted thirty years ago that the future would lose its sense of humour, its sense of playfulness, its sense of context, nuance and irony, and fall into the hands of a perpetually pissed off coterie of pearl-clutchers? (Cave 2018, RHF 86)

Holding the view that art and music are co-created with the audience over time, Cave discounts the notion that creative works should be taken away from those who have invested themselves in the process of listening, feeling and imagining (Cave 2018, RHF 48, 56, 86). For Cave, songs are "divinely constituted organisms" that are a product of their times and should be left "unmolested by these strident advocates of the innocuous" who represent "a scornful, self-righteous future [that] turns around with its stone and takes aim" at all past imperfections (Cave 2018, RHF 86). Here, Cave draws on the metaphor of schoolyard bullying as commentators on the contemporary political media landscape, like Jason Hannan, have also done (Hannan 2018).

As Cave has discovered in the public reception of his work, the politically correct are prevented from appreciating the immediacy of beauty because they are preoccupied with categorising everything they see and hear in terms of power relations. In an image reminiscent of Masaccio's "Expulsion from the Garden of Eden" (1425), Susie Cave walks naked with her hands covering her face as her husband points toward a blast of white light streaming from an open window. This spontaneously captured photograph by Dominique Issermann was chosen as the cover image for Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' *Push the Sky Away* (2013) and despite its enigmatic beauty, some could only see this as an example of sexism and exploitation (Cave 2018, RHF 31). The art of comedy is similarly unappreciated as the subtleties of humour are reduced to simplistic data segments, judging content to be good and bad, just as a person's political affiliation identifies them as an enemy or friend. It is perhaps the influence of data-sorting algorithms themselves that have led a highly mediatised culture to rely so heavily on efficient and simplistic means by which to determine value in the face of the overwhelming scope of incoming information. For Cave, the loss of comedy presents as much of a danger to society as the loss of beauty, describing comedians as "canaries in the coal mine of ideas" that "speak truth, not just to power, but to stupidity too, to outrage and self-righteousness", acting as an "antidote to dogmatism and fanaticism" (Cave 2018, RHF 75).

In late 2018 Cave reflected that "the world had become ... more puritanical, less playful, and more hypersensitive" (Cave 2018, RHF 5). In early 2020, as the covid-19 pandemic unfolds, Cave is hopeful that this universal struggle will reveal the triviality of some of our recent cultural preoccupations as we confront "the old version of ourselves and our world—insular, self-interested and tribalistic" and come to appreciate "the connectedness and commonality of all humans, everywhere" (Cave 2018, RHF 89). It is easy to read between the lines and see Cave's critique of political correctness in his most recent posts, yet he speaks with an air of compassion, inviting people to recognise the intrinsic value of their fellow human beings. Cave reflects: "What deranged and divided us a month ago seems,

at best, an embarrassment from an idle and privileged time", but in isolation we are made to face ourselves and to contemplate the value of all that has been placed at risk (Cave 2018, RHF 90, 92). The extended cultural impact of the covid-19 pandemic is not yet known, but it is difficult to imagine the spontaneous evaporation of political correctness when so many benefit from their investment in this ideological position; from media outlets that profit from the ongoing spectacle to communities that have established themselves around shared activist values, and groups whose social capital has increased through their willingness to present themselves as the perpetual victims of an unjust society.

The significance that Cave draws from the covid-19 crisis aligns with his existing orientation towards mysticism, intensifying the contrast between this epistemological orientation and those who cling to their rigid beliefs. As Cave puts it, "Our sudden dislocation has thrown us into a mystery that exists at the edge of tears and revelation, for none of us knows what tomorrow will bring", and in this state we are "Released from our certitude" and made humble (Cave 2018, RHF 92). Cave feels himself "within the virus' awesome power", where "all we are sure of now is our defencelessness" (Cave 2018, RHF 92). Contemplating the virus with awe summons the feeling of being at the precipice of a confronting revelation of ultimate truth. Here, the devastating majesty of nature brings about the simultaneous sensation of divine power and poignant feelings of tragedy regarding the loss of illusion. In a religious context, this can be conceived in terms of the loss of God, yet in the present situation, the illusion relates to the life we were living up until this point.

Like alternative spirituality itself, Cave's thoughts are introspective, personal and universalised. Feelings of passivity underscore the urgency of an encounter with an abstract and all-powerful force that "chastens" the individual (Cave 2018, RHF 92). This experience is a lesson for us all and has the capacity to bring about a radical inner awakening that—in being experienced by others—contributes to universal change. Political correctness, however, does not share the same belief that truth is directly revealed to the individual through experiences of the sacred, nor does it entertain the idea that the universe guides human beings through difficult life lessons. Instead, life is conceived as a game of survival of the fittest where activism is required to correct the balance. As race and ethnicity have entered discussions about the origin and reach of the virus, it is likely that the spectacles of outrage will continue. Rather than shocking people into an alternative mode of thought, it is possible that this crisis will intensify feelings of injustice among the politically correct as the squeeze on resources highlights human vulnerability and isolation measures encourage their deeper absorption in the power games unfolding on their screens.

5. Conclusions

Aestheticisation is a common feature of subjective religiosity and modern identity construction, discussed here as an integral part of alternative spirituality, yet changes in the media environment over the past decade have altered the ways in which people engage with the symbolic resources available to them. The rise of political correctness has had wide-ranging impacts on the practice of aestheticisation, interceding in processes where the universe and everything within it were previously available as resources of self-creation. Living in what Thompson calls the "society of self-disclosure", the components of a person's identity are no longer considered private and are subject to public judgement (Thompson 2005, p. 38). In De Maeseneer's discussion of aestheticisation, the mystical experience of passivity consumes the self, inverting the popular characterisation of aesthetic experience as that of consumption (De Maeseneer 2008, p. 105). This tension of opposites is best reconciled by conceptualising aestheticisation as a process of discovery where all things have the capacity to speak to the self. The experience of discovery can take on various forms, from the mundane newness of everyday thoughts to spiritual revelations. As aestheticisation involves the use of symbolic resources (including religious ones) that are disconnected from their original author or appointed gatekeepers, they become what the individual discovers in them. In Cave's creative practice, the experience of discovery manifests when an idea awakens in his mind, when "shimmering" begins on the page and when life unfolds with meanings that were not previously realised (Cave 2018, RHF 3).

Political correctness, in its present form, is both an ideological position and a product of mediated life. However valiant or misguided the values of its advocates may be, the impact of politically correct commentary is evident, as Cave points out, in the eradication of nuance, humour, subversion and beauty, as language is simplified into a set of unambiguous social access codes. Bridling language in this way, the particularities of the individual are lost, and people become synonymous with their appointed categories. It is impossible to adopt a worldview such as this and to engage in the form of aestheticisation that has traditionally been associated with alternative spirituality. While political correctness has been described as utopian in its values (Peterson 2018, pp. 209–10), the associated deterministic assessment of power relations ensures that the patriarchy is and always will be the patriarchy, and social justice is never "just" enough. Arising from the 1960s counterculture, alternative spirituality similarly conceives of social justice as an ideal, yet this abstract state of being is also understood as the natural outcome of self-awakening. As two worldviews that have found their natural home on the Left, political correctness and alternative spirituality share this space in silent tension. While buoyed by the passion of activism, political correctness is nonetheless a faithless position that cannot acknowledge or truly believe that change is possible. Moreover, the powers that it wrestles with are human alone. Alternative spirituality, by contrast, still speaks to the ineffable mystery of existence and is driven onward by a persistent faith in potentiality. It is a religious position that may stand on the shore of pragmatic disenchantment, but is ultimately willing to let the waters of the holy sweep it out to sea.

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