

# Quest for the Legitimizing Jesus Deployment of a Contested Symbol by a Non-traditional Religious Movement

J. JEFF FUGITT

**Abstract:** There have always been alternative interpretations of Jesus throughout Christian history. The meaning of such a symbol is never static. However, a general theological consensus had maintained an essentially hegemonic position throughout much of the Christianized world for most of the centuries of the Common Era. Jesus as an authoritative religious symbol has been destabilized by modern scholarship. Popular books and movies that explore and experiment with variant interpretations have proliferated in recent years. This contested but still powerful symbol is reinterpreted and employed by many groups, including a non-Christian religious movement based in Salt Lake City. Even though this group does not employ the traditional meanings associated with Jesus, by constructing alternative interpretations they distinguish their identity boundaries with reference to the dominant culture, create plausibility for a different worldview, and lend legitimacy to their movement.

Events in recent pop-culture have highlighted the fact that Jesus is both a powerful and contested religious symbol in contemporary society. Christians tend to think of their particular faith communities as the proprietors of the true representation of what Jesus did and would do. (W.W.J.D?) Religion scholars tend to think of Jesus - who he **really** was - within the domain of their expertise.<sup>1</sup> The focus of this article is outside the traditional discussions of Jesus within Christianity and within academic circles. It explores the use of religious, social, and symbolic capital<sup>2</sup> associated with Jesus by what might be called non-specialists, specifically within

an emergent religious community called Sumnum.<sup>3</sup> While much more ethnographic work would be required to analyze Sumnum as such, this paper deals primarily with the publicly accessible aspects of Sumnum teaching and practice in order to illuminate the ways in which Jesus is deployed in the broader social marketplace of ideas. Sumnum's appropriation of Jesus illumines social processes that apply to groups generally. Knowledge of this little-studied group also provides additional comparative data for future research.

## INTRODUCTION TO SUMMUM

Summum was founded in 1975 by Claude Rex Nowell. While independent verification of membership is not possible, Summum claims to have over 200,000 members worldwide who have been taught the first level of meditation.<sup>4</sup> Nowell changed his name to Summum Bonum Amon Ra but he commonly goes by Corky. An interest in ancient Egypt is evident throughout Summum teachings and iconography. Their headquarters in Salt Lake City is located in a pyramid. This is where they make their sacred wine, what they call nectar publications. These wines have undergone "transubstantiation" through "psychokinetic technology" to "contain spiritual concepts and information." Once the alcohol reaches the brain "the resonations are released exposing you to the concepts."<sup>5</sup>

One of the unique characteristics of Summum is their mummification business. Ra mummified his cat in 1980 and Summum patented a procedure for body preservation in 1985. By the summer of 2004 Summum had mummified 1,700 animals and thirty humans, although none of these humans were paying customers.<sup>6</sup> Another Summum trademark is their sexual meditation. A guidebook, *Sexual Ecstasy From Ancient Wisdom* was published in 1993.<sup>7</sup> A link to [sexualecstasy.org](http://sexualecstasy.org) is available on the main Summum Web site. It contains Summum teachings about sex and advertises related products for sale.<sup>8</sup>

The Summum Web site is well-designed, attractive, and available in four

languages. It boasts the "Spirit and Sky Top Site for 2005."<sup>9</sup> Typical of religion online, this site contains information pages with the history and philosophy of Summum. There is an online store where various Summum and related items, such as crystals, can be purchased. The book *SUMMUM: Sealed Except to the Open Mind* is available in e-book form at no cost. In the past the print version has been for sale for as little as \$14.95 and as much as \$100. There is a children's section that is hosted by Mummy Bear, whose mythology as a ruler of Atlantis (among other things) is woven into the site. Stuffed Mummy Bears with removable organs have been for sale on the site but these have not been seen recently except in the mummification slide show. Included on the children's pages are mummy jokes, games, a comic strip, poems, songs, and facts about ancient and modern mummification.<sup>10</sup>

The site has a Web radio link, an "online culture center and intellectual charity" called The Temple of Proportions,<sup>11</sup> and a page for Summum Welfare Industries which has a project to "bring computer technology to disadvantaged community members."<sup>12</sup> On "Summum.TV" one can watch live streaming video of class meetings as they occur in the pyramid twice a week. Some archived sessions are also available.<sup>13</sup>

Discussion forums provide interactivity on the site. The "Hall of Wisdom" features "The Apex," "A general discussion board for questions, comments, thoughts about Summum, the philosophy, the nectars, meditation, etc."

and "Q & A with the Mystical Oracle," where participants are invited to "Pose your deepest questions to I AM."<sup>14</sup> In addition to the Hall of Wisdom is "Psyberbation." "'Psy' as in mental, 'Psyber' as in cyber (electronic), 'bation' as in masturbation - 'Psyberbation' is the copulation of mental ideas over an electronic medium."<sup>15</sup>

These forums present useful data for considering the "religion online" versus "online religion" issue. This distinction essentially identifies religion online as a predominantly offline religious group using the Internet to communicate within the group and to outsiders concerning beliefs and activities. Online religion refers more to actual religious practice, such as ritual, being facilitated on the Internet. Online religious groups exist primarily in the Internet realm. Summum data support Young's emphasis upon these two points of a continuum relating to one another in a complementary fashion.<sup>16</sup> On this continuum, Summum is located more in the direction of religion online. This is to be expected since the group was established long before it developed an online presence. The volume of entries, as well as the nature of the discussions, illustrate that these forums alone do not sustain a level or depth of interaction that most observers would consider "community."<sup>17</sup> These facts do not imply that the Web is not significant for Summum in the construction and deployment of religious symbols, however.

The Webcasts provide a glimpse into the lived practices of the Summum community - those participants who

gather face to face on a regular basis. The class sessions in the pyramid, including "chatter" by online participants, involve much that seems to be casual, sometimes frivolous, conversation. However, it should be noted that the sessions are brought into sacred or ritual time by the use of a singing bowl, a tradition borrowed from Buddhist tradition. Class is conducted in a sacred space and participants in the pyramid are drinking the nectar publications. These sacred drinks are available to those who wish to partake from a location other than the pyramid as well. Ra is clearly the authority figure in the gatherings and, as the online testimonials illustrate, for the faithful his teaching has significant weight. More ethnographic research would be required to determine whether the Web site in general or the forums and Webcasts in particular have served to successfully move people from the periphery into the more substantive relationship connoted by "community."<sup>18</sup> Summum's stated goals are specifically not to gather people together but to teach a form of meditation.<sup>19</sup> This may have implications for sustainability of the movement. While other issues warrant further attention, the current research draws upon these practices for the more narrow purpose of considering the use of Jesus in public presentation.

### **SUMMUM, LEGITIMACY, AND JESUS**

One of Ra's primary claims to legitimacy is built upon an encounter with beings he calls Summa Individuals. From them he received "instructions

concerning the underlying principles (Laws of Nature) which establish and maintain the universe."<sup>20</sup> These teachings were published in 1988 in *Summum: Sealed Except to the Open Mind*.<sup>21</sup> Most of the content of this book is the same material that is found in the 1912 Masonic text - *The Kybalion*.<sup>22</sup> The books are built around seven principles: Psychokinesis, correspondence, vibration, opposition, rhythm, cause and effect, and gender. The writings suggest heavy influence from theosophy<sup>23</sup> and those familiar with new age religions will find much that is familiar in Summum.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, a reading of the official Summum text reveals virtually no correspondence with Christianity and no specific reference to it or Jesus. Summum does not identify itself as Christian and data presented in this paper illustrate a Summum identity clearly distinct from Christianity.<sup>25</sup> In fact, hostility is openly displayed in the Webcast discussion groups toward Christianity and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints ("Mormons"), of which Ra is a former member and which, of course, is also headquartered in Salt Lake City.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of their radical distance from orthodox Christian theological perspectives, Jesus has recently become a legitimizing resource for the group. James Lewis writes that, "An important ideological resource for emergent movements, particularly in hostile social environments, is legitimacy."<sup>27</sup> He goes on to describe legitimacy as a "core issue" for these movements.<sup>28</sup> Lewis' book, *Legitimizing New Religions*,

contains numerous examples of alternative Jesus narratives. His comment on the legend of Jesus visiting India is relevant for the current discussion. "Each successive person who perpetuated this legend was attracted to it for the same reason - the Indian Jesus could be deployed to legitimate their own brand of spirituality as well as to undermine the legitimacy of the orthodox interpretation of Christian tradition."<sup>29</sup> Modern scholars have framed the history of the ascendancy of what became orthodox Christian teaching as simply another example of this same process. This is part of the modern destabilization of the symbol that has occurred.

Most Summum members have come from some Christian or Latter Day Saint background and many continue to have interaction with family and others who operate within these competing worldviews. In that context, the online discussion forums and offline classes are important for more than sharing information. For online inquirers, participants can experiment with the Summum identity while maintaining virtual anonymity and without the considerable barriers that are involved with showing up at the pyramid in person, even if one is located close enough to do so. As actors become involved, the process of interaction constructs and maintains a distinctive worldview and identity.<sup>30</sup> Though distinctive, Summum necessarily maintains affinity with other groups from which prospective members come. Meaning is substantiated in the day-to-day dialogues. This objectified form of

subjective meaning then acts back upon those who created it, as well as others who encounter it in the broader social context in personal or textual form.<sup>31</sup> Interacting with other participants helps create the plausibility structures discussed by Berger and Luckmann.<sup>32</sup>

Some examples of group interaction will illustrate the Summum identity being forged in contradistinction to Christianity. On the "Apex" discussion forum, one member mentioned going to Catholic Church with his parents to see what it was that he hated so much about it. The first response was from another former Catholic who agreed that "catholicism instills fear and guilt." The next respondent had been a Lutheran. According to him "Lutherans were all about hellfire and d\*\*nation." He said he was lucky to figure out that that was wrong when he was 10. Another participant summed it up. "Born a protestant. Well before I was 10, i had decided not to give a crap about any religious text, but i always believed in jesus and God. Now I continue to come to further realizations."<sup>33</sup>

On "Q & A with the Oracle" the forum co-moderator/"Forum God," i.e. Corky Ra, who posts as "I AM" was questioned about the Messiah. A rather heated exchange ensued when a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints attacked the Oracle's legitimacy in part by appealing to the New Testament. A Summum respondent posted that, "Maybe he calls himself God, Jesus or what ever because we are one consciousness and we're all sons of God capable of doing everything Jesus

could do." Another added, "People need to understand that no one today knows exactly what Jesus said or didn't say. They can only read translations of what was said. Christ is not a person, Christ is a conciseness (sic.) that anyone can obtain thru faith, understanding and wisdom."<sup>34</sup>

During a February 12, 2006 philosophy Webcast from the pyramid, Corky Ra and the other seven or eight participants engaged in rather lengthy discussions about various Christian denominations. Exclusive truth claims by these groups seemed to be a particular point of displeasure for the Summum members. There was talk of groups that demand that you say the name of Jesus in a particular way in order to go to heaven. One participant added that these Christians "gotta say Jesus, shout hallelujah and roll on the ground." After a general disparagement of the notion of heaven as sitting around singing, the Catholic Church was said to be bringing back in the teaching of reincarnation, something that was part of what Constantine had taken out of the Bible when he re-wrote it. Ra said that the part about Constantine re-writing the Bible is taught in university comparative religion classes.<sup>35</sup> Ra expressed amazement that none of these Christian groups were even close to what Jesus **really** said. Ra said that the closest interpretation of Jesus he had ever heard was that of Osho - whose book the group was currently studying. "Osho seems to have really understood what Jesus was saying. Jesus was one of the critical movements in creation in our time." Ra goes on to say that what Jesus "really did say was really interesting, and

pretty simple." "Jesus had some unbelievable things to say but everybody is missin the boat." Ra also comments specifically on the parable of the mustard seed in further discussion. One of Osho's books being studied by the group and promoted on the Summum site is *The Mustard Seed: Commentaries on the Fifth Gospel of St. Thomas*. A long-term member of the group contrasts how the churches look for externals while Jesus, like Eastern religions dealt more with internal reality. He said, "The Bible sort of makes sense in light of Summum - things start making connections." Sources that Ra mentions include "The Last Temptation of Christ" and a CNN special on the two Marys.<sup>36</sup>

On the "Purpose and Mission" page of the Summum Web site, Jesus is one of several religious figures quoted.<sup>37</sup> He is listed along with Gautama Buddha, Lao-tzu, and Patanjali. Less conventional authorities such as Osho and *The Corpus Hermeticum* are there. Albert Einstein is quoted and special attention is given to the character Morpheus from "The Matrix" movie. On other pages "Star Wars" movies are also quoted alongside traditional religious authorities. In other words, Jesus is one among many sources of legitimacy deployed by the group. In a context where no single authority - text, person, institution, etc. - will be accepted above personal subjective meaning, any would-be religious movement must diversify and establish multiple points of legitimacy. When Jesus is quoted or referenced on the Summum Web site or during class sessions, he is typically quoted from the non-canonical *Gospel of*

*Thomas*. Most graphically, as of the writing of this article, the Summum homepage features a picture of a stained glass Jesus. A red-lettered headline reads, "The Teachings of Gnostic Christianity are the Teachings of Summum." Clearly, Summum leadership believes the current "buzz" about alternative Jesus traditions can be employed to their benefit. The Web site goes on to quote the Gospels of Thomas and John, as well as the Epistle to the Romans.<sup>38</sup>

Summum methods have the benefit of simultaneously hooking into the Jesus authority while bucking against the Christian establishment. To invoke Max Weber, the routinized charisma of Jesus can only be re-appropriated and exploited to the degree to which the traditionalized and institutionalized authority is broken down. Charisma, in the Weberian system is "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional qualities."<sup>39</sup> Bourdieu replaced Weber's "charisma" with "symbolic capital." "Symbolic capital," he wrote, "is an ordinary property (physical strength, wealth, warlike valor, etc.) which, perceived by social agents endowed with the categories of perception and appreciation permitting them to perceive, know and recognize it, becomes symbolically efficient, like a veritable *magical power*: a property which, because it responds to socially constituted 'collective expectations' and beliefs, exercises a sort of action from a distance, without

physical contact."<sup>40</sup> For Summum this charisma or symbolic capital applies primarily to Corky Ra whose initial claim upon charisma is due to the contact with Summa Individuals and being the conduit of their special knowledge. In keeping with Weber's understanding of charisma as unstable and requiring ongoing proof,<sup>41</sup> later support for Ra's charismatic leadership includes testimonies posted on the Web site describing Ra's feats such as controlling the weather and impregnating seven fully clothed women on one side of the pyramid with the male principle from a man on the opposite side.<sup>42</sup>

Our concern here is more with Jesus, however. More precisely, the issue is Ra's appropriation of authority inherent to the Jesus symbol within the North American context. By reframing Jesus as one among many conduits of the same knowledge as that which Ra himself possesses, he effectively lends whatever legitimacy Jesus has within the community to himself as Jesus' successor. Perhaps more importantly, in the perceptions of those who accept this presentation, that legitimacy and authority is removed from the more traditional interpretations of competing groups. "Genuine charisma rests upon the legitimization of personal heroism or personal revelation. Yet precisely this quality of charisma as an extraordinary, supernatural, divine power transforms it after its routinization, into a suitable source for the legitimate acquisition of sovereign power by the successors of the charismatic hero. Routinized charisma thus continues to work in favor of all those whose power and possession is

guaranteed by that sovereign power, and who thus depend upon the continued existence of such power."<sup>43</sup>

The strategy of simultaneously claiming the authority of Jesus while delegitimizing the Christian community's use of him is repeated in numerous ways throughout the Summum material. An example from the "Summum Philosophy" page reads, "Jesus, Osho, Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed, and thousands of others were all at one time living Masters, portals for GOD. They are now in union with GOD and no longer do they speak as Jesus, Osho, Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed, or as a Master. They have become GOD." Similarly, "Even the teachings of the Gnostic and Early Christians drew their roots from the Summum Principles. Unfortunately these same teachings were lost at the time of Constantine whose iron hand smothered philosophy with its blanket of theology. The loss to the Christian Church was incalculable, for its very essence and spirit was gutted. Its participants were thrown into the abyss of the dark ages."<sup>44</sup> Questions are drawn repeatedly from this material on the tests that are part of the required entry level initiation into Summum.<sup>45</sup> These rather obvious test questions provide another opportunity for interaction and perhaps another example of online religion.

Weber theorized three pure types of legitimate authority. We have looked primarily at the charismatic and traditional grounds. Jesus is but one of numerous examples of traditional authorities tapped into by Summum. As is often the case with social groups,

Summum leapfrogs back past the competing institutions to claim an older, more pure tradition. This is analogous to the modern Pagan fictions of ancient Goddess civilization and eclectic re-imagining and re-appropriation of all sorts of ancient deities.<sup>46</sup> Weber's other type of authority was rational, "resting on a belief in the 'legality' of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands (legal authority)."<sup>47</sup> While it might be preferable to expand upon Weber's categories, in a sense, much of Summum's argumentation and appealing to science (such as quantum physics and string theory) could be placed into this category. In the more literal sense, Summum has pushed the legal authority to the extent of several court battles and ongoing conflicts with various state and local authorities. Most notable among these conflicts are law suits attempting to have Summum teachings placed along-side The Ten Commandments in public settings. The result of the actions was the removal of the monuments.<sup>48</sup>

### **CONTESTED SYMBOL AS LEGITIMIZING RESOURCE**

At first glance it might seem odd that a group so distinct from and in tension with anything that might pass for a traditional Christian worldview would be talking about Jesus at all, even more - using him to bolster their own worldview. A deeper analysis, however, suggests that the tension with the dominant Christian culture is precisely why the use of Jesus is necessary.

Evidence suggests that Jesus would have little place in Summum discussions were they not situated in a predominantly Christian context. Even within such a context, earlier Summum print and Web material revealed no interest in Jesus. However, comments by current participants reveal interest in Jesus as a source for spiritual understanding. Within this broader emergent interest Jesus also serves in a legitimizing role. Much of the data cited in this paper highlights this aspect. For Jesus to be a symbol worth using as a legitimizing resource for Summum three conditions must obtain. First, there needs to be widespread resonance within the social context. This is clearly the case in America, even outside of the Christian communities of faith that created this resonance. A second necessary element for the appropriation of the Jesus symbol outside the confines of a narrow religious framework is a significant range of ambiguity for meaning. Perhaps more than alternative interpretations by unorthodox religious movements, the academic community has facilitated this unsettled range of meaning in American culture. Finally, Summum must provide an alternative meaning to the symbol, either borrowed or of its own creation.

The widespread resonance for Jesus within North American society is obvious beyond the need of illustration. However, the range of meanings attached to the Jesus symbol has become quite diverse. Again, we should not mistakenly envision a time with a single universal interpretation of Jesus across even the North American context. Nevertheless, it is still the case that a

significant shift has occurred in terms of the range and frequency of publicly articulated beliefs concerning Jesus that depart markedly from traditional norms. Biblical studies in the nineteenth century played a pivotal role in the process of framing Jesus in a different, more historically oriented rather than theological way. Erosion of Christian theological assertions concerning Jesus has continued in more recent times as new historical data, such as the Nag Hammadi texts, have become available. The scholarly presentation of these newer materials through numerous books and other public forums, including university courses, has been instrumental in creating a shift in perception for many people in spite of resistance from more conservative interpreters. Summum use of Jesus has increased with this increased range of interpretation within the social context where Summum is situated. The broader popular context, especially the internet, allows for this expansion of interpretations in a way that the local geographically bounded context would have hindered in the not too distant past. The configuration of social interaction between scholarship and Summum, largely mediated through pop-culture, identifies scholars who lend credence to non-traditional interpretations of Jesus as among "significant others" for Summum in the ongoing process of worldview maintenance.<sup>49</sup>

Seizing upon the authority of religion scholars, many creators of pop-culture have been quite successful with books and movies that consider the implications of this re-imaging of Jesus. As Hoover and Lundby point out, media

institutions condition and determine access to the public sphere. The "cultural commodification practices" of the media industries deeply affect the "marketplace of religious symbols."<sup>50</sup> Concerning the media, Lundby goes on to write, "they play a crucial role in establishing, maintaining, and changing collective representations - concepts, categories, myths, beliefs, symbols - and language."<sup>51</sup>

The cultural context has also become much more religiously pluralistic. For the segment of the population with access to the Internet, it has provided much greater ease of access to vast stocks of information and interpretive models. This has resulted in no shortage of available intellectual resources that offer to shape and subsume Jesus into new frameworks. "A frame," writes Herbert Simmons, "is one among a number of possible ways of seeing something, and a reframing is a way of seeing it differently; in effect changing the meaning."<sup>52</sup> This metaphor of reframing is a useful means of communicating the shift of meaning involved with the Jesus symbol. According to Eyerman and Jamison, a social movement's core identity is located specifically in their newly produced or differently framed knowledge.<sup>53</sup> By that standard, such a point of differentiation on the interpretation of Jesus becomes useful in analyzing the Summum identity.

Douglas Cowan writes, "When a social structure in which relatively open choice is available with respect to the particular construction of reality residents may inhabit without significant

social sanction, specific conceptual mechanisms are required to maintain a reasoned inhabitation in one reality over another."<sup>54</sup> This is surely even more pronounced for minority views such as those of Sumnum. Given the open nature of Jesus interpretation described above, as well as the centrality it has in Christian communities, the way in which Sumnum deploys Jesus in contradistinction from the "Others" provides important insight into movement characteristics, not least of those relating to the issue of identity maintenance.

Through university and church platforms, including book publications, the professional debates over Jesus influence the larger culture. Popular media compounds this influence where most members of the general public encounter it. The Jesus of *The Last Temptation of Christ* contends with the Jesus of *The Passion of the Christ*. *The DaVinci Code* Jesus wrestles with the cosmic figure of the *Left Behind* series. *The Jesus Papers* hit the shelves recently. *The Gospel of Judas* received an avalanche of media attention in connection with the recent release of a National Geographic special on the subject. The text was promptly available online where hyperbole about the significance of this Coptic writing flourished.

The Internet makes the spread and accessibility of information - including unregulated and even blatantly fabricated information - exponentially increased. Cowan suggests in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, "that the Web is becoming an often unrestrained

venue for movement/countermovement propaganda, a mediative space where dominance is measured in terms of the symbolic resources over which one exercises (or appears to exercise) control and the authority granted that exercise by the audience for whom such information is intended."<sup>55</sup> The cafeteria of representations of Jesus simultaneously expands and erodes, broadens and destabilizes Jesus as an authoritative symbol. The manipulation of the image provides actors with an effective means of identity and meaning construction and maintenance.

## CONCLUSION

With the possible exception of the cross, a derivative sub-symbol of Jesus, there is arguably no more influential public religious symbol in North American life than Jesus. Christian and non-Christian religious communities, as well as non-religious groups, continue to draw from this cultural/religious resource to legitimize and promote their agendas. These attempts meet with success in the broader culture, in part, due to the social reception aptitude that has been cultivated by the ongoing debates among scholars and clerics. This scholarly discourse reaches into the broader social context through the often-caricatured form of pop culture representation. In this unstable field of meaning new alternative interpretations have a greater potential for acceptance and less likelihood of sanction.

Symbols that provide interpretive meaning to life continue to be contested, constructed and deployed. As has been pointed out, people act on their

perceptions of reality (regardless of the correlation between the reality itself and the perception). This makes the shaping of public religious symbols far more significant than simply an academic or entertainment exercise. Since the cultural contexts giving rise to the interpretative process are socially constructed, the forces that influence the public discourse about religious symbols play an important role in shaping society. Therefore, as major contributors to and shapers of the social repertoire of symbols of authority, scholars and the media matter.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The "quest for the historical Jesus" has a long history. See for example Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, with an introduction by James M. Robinson, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Collier, 1968). The most recent incarnation of scholarly debate over Jesus involves the Jesus Seminar and those responding to them.

<sup>2</sup>In Pierre Bourdieu, see *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), and *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). On page 47 of *Practical Reason* Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as "any property (any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural or social) when it is perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception which cause them to know it and to recognize it, to give it value." ... "More precisely, symbolic capital is the form taken by any species of capital whenever it is perceived through categories of perception that are the product of the embodiment of divisions or of oppositions inscribed in the structure of the distribution of this species of capital." This oppositional aspect has significance for the Summum/Christian tension with the Jesus symbol. In J.A. Beckford see *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

<sup>3</sup>For purposes of this study, the "truth" or "reality" of various claims is not the issue. The concern is, rather, with what passes for knowledge in various social groups. It is this perceived reality that is the basis for action by the groups involved. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 13-14, 19ff and Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 2-5.

<sup>4</sup>Amen Ra in personal e-mail to author, 7 March 2004.

<sup>5</sup>"The Summum Nectar Publications," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation*, <<http://www.summum.us/nectars/publications.shtml>>, retrieved 12 August 2006.

<sup>6</sup>Amen Ra in personal e-mail to author, 28 May 2004, "Summum: Modern Mummification," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation*, <<http://www.summum.org/mummification.shtml>>, retrieved 11 August 2006 and Christine Quigley, *Modern Mummies: The Preservation of the Human Body in the Twentieth Century* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, 1998), 134-137. Body preparation includes the removal, cleaning, and return of organs. The body is chemically treated and coated with polyurethane and fiberglass. It can then be placed in a standard casket or an Egyptian style metal case. Different options exist for placement in vaults and mausoleums. Costs vary, but human mummification begins at \$67,000. Sarcophagi can exceed \$500,000. Ra confirmed news reports in 2004 that 1,400 people had agreed to sign over insurance policies worth at least \$74,000 each to be mummified.

<sup>7</sup>Summum Bonum Amen Ra, *Sexual Ecstasy From Ancient Wisdom: The joys of permanent sexual ecstasy* (Salt Lake City: SUMMUM PRESS, 1993).

<sup>8</sup><<http://www.sexualecstasy.org>>, last visited 10 August 2005.

<sup>9</sup>*SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us>>, retrieved 31 May 2006. This award no longer appears on the Homepage.

<sup>10</sup>*SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.kids.summum.us>>, last visited 9 August 2006.

<sup>11</sup>"The Temple of Proportions," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/top/>>, last visited 9 August 2006.

<sup>12</sup>"Summum Welfare Industries," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/swi/>>, retrieved 9 August 2006.

<sup>13</sup>"Summum.TV," <<http://www.summum.tv/>>, last visited 17 August 2006.

<sup>14</sup>"Online Discussion Venues," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/discussion/>>, retrieved 9 August 2006. This forum is typically titled "Q & A with the Oracle."

<sup>15</sup>"Online Discussion Venues," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/discussion/>>, retrieved 9 August 2006. This Yahoo! group requires membership for access. Begun in 2001, in April of 2004 Psyberbation listed sixty-one members. There had been sixty-nine posts over the previous four months. In August 2006 there were ninety-four members with sixty-four posts in the previous four months. "Psyberbation," *Yahoo! Groups*, <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Psyberbation/>>, retrieved 24 April 2004 and 11 August 2006. A forum on mummification was formerly available. This forum was never observed to be in use and it has since been deleted from the site. In April 2004, the three forums other than "Psyberbation" showed 154 members collectively. In August 2006 there were 36 members. At that time "The Apex" showed two topics with seven posts from April 18 to July 12, 2006. On the "Q & A with the Oracle" nineteen topics had eighty-one posts between February 12 and July 23, 2006. These two forums had entries by sixteen separate identities. The February 12 post had been viewed 231 times by August 9 and the July 23 post had been viewed 80 times. Other "Q & A with the Oracle" post viewings ranged from 73 to 349, with a mean of 249. "Hall of Wisdom Index," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/cgi-bin/yabb/YABB.cgi>>, retrieved 9 August 2006.

<sup>16</sup>Glenn Young, "Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion In Internet Christianity" in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, Eds. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (New York: Routledge, 2004), 93ff, Douglas E. Cowan, *Cyberhinge: Modern Pagans on the Internet* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 18ff and Christopher Helland, "Online Religion/Religion Online and Virtual Communitas" in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, Eds. J.K. Hadden and D.E. Cowan, (London:

JAI Press/Elsevier Science, 2000), 205ff and J. K. Hadden and D.E. Cowan, "The Promised Land or Electronic Chaos? Toward Understanding Religion on the Internet" in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, Eds. J.K. Hadden and D.E. Cowan, (London: JAI Press/Elsevier Science, 2000), 3ff. There is often a clear difference between the Summum insiders and outsiders who venture into the discussion forums. One of the more frequent uses of the forums is newcomer questions about Summum. Proselytizing by non-Summum participants has been observed. Disagreements are sometimes sharp, to the point of occasional hostility. One newcomer, Xiouslaidyn referred to Ra in a 2005 forum post as "freaking INSANE" and goes on to write, "I pretty much crap all over the Summum Philosophy." (Emphasis in the original.) "Hall of Wisdom -The existence of psi?" *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/CGI/yabb/YaBB.cgi?board=apex;action=display;num=11165695...>>, 10 June 2005 retrieved 11 July 2005. Shortly after that discussion, a lengthy controversy pitted Meat\_and\_Potatoes against Thoth the forum co-moderator who began editing unflattering remarks into the posts of the participants. Xiouslaidyn, who had been one of the most active participants, stopped posting at that point. Whataboutbob85, apparently having more history with Summum, initially defended Thoth. At one point he wrote to Meat\_and\_Potatoes, "If you don't like what is happening on this board, feel free to leave. Nobody would miss you anyway." "Hall of Wisdom - Thoth," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/CGI/yabb/YaBB.cgi?board=apex;action=display;num=1119070177>>, 19 June 2005 retrieved 12 July 2005. Meat\_and\_Potatoes persisted for a while, however, and eventually whataboutbob85 was calling Thoth the "worst moderator on any board I have ever seen." "Hall of Wisdom - Thoth," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/CGI/yabb/YaBB.cgi?board=apex;action=display;num=11190701...>>, 27 June 2005 retrieved 11 July 2005. Not surprisingly, of these participants, only Thoth was still involved in the forum in 2006.

<sup>17</sup>Lorne L. Dawson, "Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community" in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, Eds. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (New York: Routledge, 2004), 75ff

<sup>18</sup>Lorne L. Dawson and Jenna Henneby, "New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space" in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, Eds. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (New York: Routledge, 2004), 151ff.

<sup>19</sup>Amen Ra in personal e-mail to author, 15 July 2005.

<sup>20</sup>"Welcome to Summum," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation*, <<http://www.summum.us/about/welcome.shtml>>, retrieved 3 February 2004.

<sup>21</sup>Summum Bonum Amen Ra, *SUMMUM: Sealed Except to the Open Mind* (Salt Lake City: SUMMUM PRESS, 1988).

<sup>22</sup>*The Kybalion: A Study of The Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece* (by Three Initiates) (Chicago: The Yogi Publication Society Masonic Temple Chicago, 1912 and 1940).

<sup>23</sup>Among Helena P. Blavatsky works see *Isis Unveiled: Secret of the Ancient Wisdom Tradition, Madame Blavatsky's First Work*, abridgment by Michael Gomes (Wheaton and Chennai, India: Quest Books, 1997) or *An Abridgment of the Secret Doctrine*, Elizabeth Preston and Christmas Humphreys eds. (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1966). Also, L.W. Rogers, *Elementary Theosophy* (Wheaton, Madras, London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1968), C.W. Leadbeater, *A Textbook of Theosophy* (Adyar, India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1979), Viva Emmons, *The Roots of Peace* (Wheaton, Madras, London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1969), and Anna Kennedy Winner, *The Basic Ideas of Occult Wisdom* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1973).

<sup>24</sup>Fruitful comparisons would include The Aetherius Society and the Raelians, for example.

<sup>25</sup>One of the few scholarly references to Summum is J. Gordon Melton's *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, Seventh Edition (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomas Gale, 2003), 2586. Unfortunately, Melton places Summum under "Unclassified Christian Churches." I believe this is a mis-classification.

<sup>26</sup>One example of the tension with the dominant culture that Summum seems to foster is a large sign in front of the pyramid that boldly proclaims the belief that God is a masturbator. In the Summum cosmogony this is the source of creation - the Big Bang. "The Divine Metaphor," *Sexual Ecstasy from Ancient Wisdom* <<http://www.sexualecstasy.org/divinemasturbation.php>>, accessed 29 April 2004 and Stefene Russell, "Honesty Says God is a Masturbator: The Secrets of Summum," *Pif*, <<http://www.pifmagazine.com/SID/497/>>, last visited 12 August 2006.

<sup>27</sup>James R. Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 11.

<sup>28</sup>Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions*, 11.

<sup>29</sup>Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions*, 74.

<sup>30</sup>Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, 2-5 and Art Linderman, *Making Sense of Religion in Television* in Hoover and Lundby *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, 271.

<sup>31</sup>Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

<sup>32</sup>Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, especially 85ff.

<sup>33</sup>"Hall of Wisdom - church," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/CGI/yabb/YaBB.cgi?board=apex;action=display;nu=1110193282>>, 7 March - 21 May 2005 retrieved 12 July 2005.

Quest for the Legitimizing Jesus

<sup>34</sup>"Hall of Wisdom - Messiah," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/CGI/yabb/YaBB.cgi?board=oracle;action=display;num=1107269...>>, 29 March - 24 May 2005 retrieved 12 July 2005.

<sup>35</sup>For a review on the chronology of Biblical formation see Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: its origin, development, and significance* Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>36</sup>"Saturday Night: Into The Depths," <<http://www.summum.tv/>>, 12 February 2006 last visited 17 August 2006.

<sup>37</sup>"Purpose and Mission," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/about/purpose.shtml>>, last visited 17 August 2006.

<sup>38</sup>*SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us>>, retrieved 9 August 2006.

<sup>39</sup>Max Weber, *Max Weber On Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Papers*, Ed. S.N. Eisenstadt (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 48.

<sup>40</sup>Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, 102. See also note #3.

<sup>41</sup>Weber, *Max Weber On Charisma and Institution Building*, 22.

<sup>42</sup>"Witness to a Miracle," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/potpourri/miracles>>, retrieved 24 April 2004.

<sup>43</sup>Weber, *Max Weber On Charisma and Institution Building*, 39-40.

<sup>44</sup>"Summum Philosophy," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/philosophy/philosophy.shtml>>, retrieved 22 March 2006.

<sup>45</sup>"The Summum Philosophy," *SUMMUM: The Millennium of Reconciliation* <<http://www.summum.us/activities/studyguide/>>, last visited 17 August 2006.

<sup>46</sup>Paul Thomas, "Re-Imagining Inanna: The Gendered Reappropriation of the Ancient Goddess in Modern Goddess Worship" in *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 6 (May 2004), 53- 69. Also Cowan, *Cyberhenge*, 3.

<sup>47</sup>Weber, *Max Weber On Charisma and Institution Building*, 46.

<sup>48</sup>Examples include "Summum v. Callaghan," 28 November 1997 <<http://www.kscourts.org/ca10/cases/1997/11/96-4191.htm>>, accessed 24 April 2004 and "Summum v. City of Ogden," 19 July 2002 <<http://www.kscourts.org/ca10/cases/2002/07/01-4022.htm>>, accessed 24 April 2004.

<sup>49</sup>Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, 121ff., 137-40.

<sup>50</sup>Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, Eds. *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997), 5.

<sup>51</sup>Lundby, "The Web of Collective Representations" in *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, 146.

<sup>52</sup>Herbert W. Simmons with Joanne Morreale and Bruce Gronbeck, *Persuasion in Society* (Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 120.

<sup>53</sup>Eyerman and Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 45-65.

<sup>54</sup>Douglas E. Cowan, *Bearing False Witness? An Introduction to the Christian Countercult* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2003), 6.

<sup>55</sup>Douglas E. Cowan, "Contested Spaces: Movement, Countermovement, and E-Space Propaganda" in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, Eds. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (New York: Routledge, 2004), 258.