

UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN

# Being a Michael Jackson Pilgrim:

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dedicated to a never-ending journey

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Master thesis Religion and the Public Domain, Faculty of Religious Studies

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“Heal the world  
Make it a better place  
For you and for me  
And the entire human race  
There are people dying  
If you care enough for the living  
Make a better place  
For you and for me.”

‘Heal The World’, Michael Jackson (1991)



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## CHAPTER I Introduction

“In a world filled with hate, we must still dare to hope. In a world filled with anger, we must still dare to comfort. In a world filled with despair, we must still dare to dream. And in a world filled with distrust, we must still dare to believe.”

Michael Joseph Jackson

### 1.1 Michael Jackson

The only way to describe Michael Jackson and his life is in terms of superlatives. Michael Joseph Jackson was born on August 29 1958 in Gary, Indiana in a Jehovah’s Witness family. He started his career at the age of six, joining his brothers in The Jackson 5 and began his solo career in 1971. Jackson had already left a great impression on the public as the young band-leader of The Jackson 5, awing the crowd at *The Ed Sullivan Show* as the eleven-year old boy who sang ‘Who’s Loving You?’ with “an impeccable performance of a grown man’s heartfelt remorse over lost love, made the more touching as it emerged from a tiny, adorable innocent.”<sup>1</sup> Yet it was the unprecedented success of his solo career that turned Jackson into one of the most important pop icons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Michael Jackson was able to speak to both a white and black audience and with his Grammy award winning album *Thriller* in 1982, Jackson became the epitome of black crossover success in American and global popular culture.<sup>2</sup> *Thriller*, with its combination of soul and funk, became the best-selling album of all time and in 1983 the hit song ‘Billie Jean’ convinced the music video network MTV to play Jackson’s video’s, a great achievement, since MTV had refused to play black music up till 1982.<sup>3</sup> The narrative-based videos of Jackson introduced the world to another of his wondrous skills: his extraordinary dancing abilities and his talent to merge his music with his bodily expressions. The 1980s and 1990s became the decades of Jackson’s greatest popularity and during this period he earned the title of ‘The King of Pop’, given to him by his good friend Elizabeth Taylor. Until this day Jackson is the most downloaded artist in the history of music and the most awarded and nominated artist of all time.<sup>4</sup>

Jackson not only stood out for his musical and dancing skills, he also came to be known as a great philanthropist. When on tour, he visited hospitals and orphanages in locations throughout the world and

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Warwick, “You Can’t Win, Child, but You Can’t Get Out of the Game”: Michael Jackson’s Transition from Child Star to Superstar’, *Popular Music and Society* 35 (2012) 241-259, 248.

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia J. Martin, ‘The Roots and Routes of Michael Jackson’s Global Identity’, *Culture and Society* 49 (2012) 284-290, 285; Philip Brian Harper, ‘Synesthesia, “Crossover,” and Blacks in Popular Music’, *Social Text* 23 (1989) 102-121, 110.

<sup>3</sup> Ethan Goffman, ‘From the Blues to Hip Hop: How African American Music Changed U.S. Culture and Moved the World’, *ProQuest Discovery Guides* (2010) 1-12, 8; accessible via: [http://www.africanafrican.com/folder12/african%20african%20american2/civil%20rights%20movement/review%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.africanafrican.com/folder12/african%20african%20american2/civil%20rights%20movement/review%20(2).pdf), (accessed March 7, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> MTV, ‘Michael Jackson Is Most Downloaded Artist Of All Time’, <http://www.mtv.co.uk/michael-jackson/news/michael-jackson-is-most-downloaded-artist-of-all-time>, (accessed March 7, 2015); Worldrecordacademy, ‘Most Successful Entertainer of All Time- Michael Jackson sets world record’, [http://www.worldrecordacademy.com/entertainment/most\\_successful\\_entertainer\\_of\\_all\\_time-Michael\\_Jackson\\_sets\\_world\\_record%20\\_90258.htm](http://www.worldrecordacademy.com/entertainment/most_successful_entertainer_of_all_time-Michael_Jackson_sets_world_record%20_90258.htm), (accessed March 7, 2015).

so he became intimately familiar with the effects of social injustice and poverty. He felt touched by the wrongs in the world and according to the Guinness Book of Records Jackson donated an estimated \$300 million to charity during his lifetime. Jackson's experiences with injustice also shaped the messages of his songs. Jackson addressed issues of poverty, racism, social injustice, and environmental degradation in his music, with as great examples songs as 'Heal the World' (1991), 'They Don't Care About Us' (1995), and 'Earth Song' (1995).<sup>5</sup>

The unparalleled popularity of Jackson, based on his success as a performer, went hand in hand with media-attention directed to his eccentric life-style. His changing appearance, his mysterious sexuality, unorthodox behavior and personal relationships with children made him the target of great ridicule, earning him the nickname of 'Wacko Jacko', a name Michael himself despised. In 1993 and in 2005 Jackson was accused of sexual child abuse. Eventually in both cases he was found not guilty.<sup>6</sup> These happenings had a negative effect on his global popularity. In 2009 Jackson proclaimed his coming-back 'This is It' tour. The tour included 50 concerts that were sold out in record time.<sup>7</sup>

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of June on the eve of his come-back tour, Jackson suddenly died of a cardiac arrest on account of an overdose of tranquillizers. The Los Angeles County coroner ruled Jackson's death a homicide and his personal physician Conrad Murray was convicted of involuntary manslaughter.<sup>8</sup> Jackson's unexpected death resulted in a global outpouring of grief. Political sociologist Paul Hollander states that "for several days following Jackson's death all networks began their programs with the news of his passing followed by lengthy reminiscences of his life. It was impossible to turn on the television without getting yet another discussion of his immense and imperishable contributions. His death overshadowed and preempted all other news, domestic and foreign."<sup>9</sup> On July 7<sup>th</sup> a public memorial service was held at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, the place where Jackson had rehearsed for the London concerts the night before his death. The service was broadcast live and attracted a global audience of close to one billion people.<sup>10</sup> During this memorial service the world remembered Jackson and his great accomplishments. According to Hollander the reminiscences of Michael overlooked and in effect purified his dubious private life: "It was not sufficient to worship Jackson as a great entertainer, he had been also transformed into a veritable saint and tragic figure."<sup>11</sup> In the aftermath of Jackson's

<sup>5</sup> Martin, 'The Roots and Routes of Michael Jackson's Global Identity', 284.

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, '1993 child sexual abuse accusations against Michael Jackson', [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1993\\_child\\_sexual\\_abuse\\_accusations\\_against\\_Michael\\_Jackson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1993_child_sexual_abuse_accusations_against_Michael_Jackson), (accessed March 9, 2015); John M. Broder and Nick Madigan, 'Michael Jackson Cleared After 14-Week Child Molesting Trial', <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/14/national/14jackson.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>, (accessed March 9, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Ernst-Jan Pfauth, 'Alle 50 concerten van Michael Jackson uitverkocht', <http://www.nrcnext.nl/blog/2009/03/13/alle-50-concerten-van-michael-jackson-uitverkocht/>, (accessed October 30, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Alan Duke, 'Michael Jackson's death was a homicide, coroner rules', <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/Music/08/28/jackson.autopsy/index.html?iref=24hours>, (accessed March 9, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Paul Hollander, 'Michael Jackson, the Celebrity Cult, and Popular Culture', *Culture and Society* 47 (2010) 147-152, 147.

<sup>10</sup> Nick Allen, 'Michael Jackson memorial service: the biggest celebrity send-off of all time', <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/michael-jackson/5771156/Michael-Jackson-memorial-service-the-biggest-celebrity-send-off-of-all-time.html>, (accessed October 30, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Hollander, 'Michael Jackson, the Celebrity Cult, and Popular Culture', 147.

passing fans began to look for ways to cope with their loss. One of the ways in which fans could both express their dedication and deal with their grief was through 'Michaeling'. 'Michaeling' is the act of making a pilgrimage dedicated to Michael Jackson and his legacy that gives the fan the opportunity to follow his footsteps. This thesis will reflect on the phenomenon of 'Michaeling' and study the practices and experiences of Jackson's fans and pilgrims.

## 1.2 'Michaeling' as a religious experience?

I am a Michael Jackson fan myself. I have been fascinated by his music and lifestyle since I was in primary school and I was touched by his death. Although I have never been to a live concert of Michael Jackson, I have experienced the uniting quality of music at concerts of other artists and festivals. Still, the fierce dedication of Michael Jackson fans surprised me when I saw the amount of virtual grieving spaces and countless websites dedicated to Jackson's legacy. Furthermore, I was astonished when I first read about 'Michaeling'. I was fascinated by what moves and motivates these pilgrims to travel the world to visit places dedicated to Jackson's memory and was wondering what needs these journeys fulfill. Moreover, I found it remarkable that the fans used the label 'pilgrimage' to describe their journeys and wondered in how far this description had a religious connotation for the pilgrims. From this curiosity I formulated the following main question for this research:

'In how far can the phenomenon of Michael Jackson 'pilgrimage' be interpreted as a 'real' pilgrimage and an expression of (implicit) religion arisen as a result of modern post-secular society?'

This study is embedded in the field of (contemporary) religion, media and popular fan culture. The information that is presented in this research is based on literature studies, the investigation of online behavior of Michael Jackson fans, participant observation at the pilgrimage site of Munich, Germany and an analysis of eleven personal accounts of Michael Jackson pilgrims. The nature of my research is qualitative and ethnographic. My main focus will be on the *experience* of Michael Jackson pilgrims and my goal is to create a better understanding of what moves these fans to visit memorial 'pilgrimage' sites and how Michael Jackson influences their daily lives. I will therefore apply an interpretative, post-structuralist approach. Since the phenomena in this research are very subjective and diverse, I will try to stay as close as possible to the lived experiences of the pilgrims themselves. I will do my best to 'let the fans speak for themselves'. The evaluation of my main question will therefore depend greatly on the behavior and customs of the pilgrims. Furthermore, this thesis is connected to the broader discussion of the interplay between religion in popular culture. It is about whether it is possible to find religion in non-religious places.

My research is subdivided into five chapters. The first one being the present one, the introduction. This introductory chapter is concerned with the theoretical framework for my research. I will focus on the nature of religion, the relationship between religion and modernization and the field of religion and popular culture. The second chapter places 'Michaeling' in context. This chapter is about (medieval) Christian pilgrimages and so-called 'secular pilgrimages', a category to which Michael Jackson pilgrimages arguably belong. The third chapter is concerned with the 'virtual behavior' of Michael Jackson fans. It discusses Michael Jackson as an inspirational source for fans and studies a variety of ways in which these fans make use of religious rituals and symbols to express their dedication online. The

fourth chapter focuses on the experience of Michael Jackson pilgrims. This chapter first displays the case study of Munich and closes with an analysis of eleven Michael Jackson pilgrim accounts. The final chapter is the conclusion. In this chapter I will confront my findings with my theoretical framework and conclude in how far the experiences of the Michael Jackson pilgrims can be interpreted as religiously motivated. In the following of the current chapter I will first outline my methodology and explain the research tradition which I draw from. Next, I will outline different approaches to defining religion and the merits and demerits of these approaches for this research. Subsequently, I will study the relationship between religion and modernization and reflect on the field of religion and popular culture.

### 1.3 Methodology and research tradition

The information provided in this introductory chapter and in chapter two is mainly based on literature study within the field of (contemporary) religion, religion and popular culture and studies on confessional and secular pilgrimage. Chapter three displays a small amount of literature study on the subject of the interplay between religion and the Internet. It furthermore presents a selective research into fan behavior on the medium of Facebook and studies several websites and charity causes that have been initiated by fans in honor of Michael Jackson. Chapter four outlines my case study of Munich and presents my analysis of eleven pilgrim accounts. In the weekend of 1-3 May 2015 I visited the city of Munich to observe the Michael Jackson memorial in its context. The analysis of this memorial is based on participant observation, field notes, photographs, the official website of the memorial and an interview with its main founder. I collected the information for the analysis of the eleven pilgrim accounts via two methods; direct interaction with individuals on a one to one basis and direct interaction with individuals in a group setting, namely via the forum of *amazon.com*. The rough data for the analysis of the eleven pilgrim accounts consists of two typed semi-structured in-depth interviews with pilgrims Nena Snezana and Karen Moriarty, extensive e-mail correspondence with pilgrims Jennie, Susan, Charlot, Erica, Monica and Sophie from the period of January 2015 till May 2015 and an exchange of information via postings on the forum of *amazon.com* with pilgrims Nikki98 and J. Leone. I furthermore maintained an e-mail correspondence with Nena and Karen.

All of my respondents were found online. I posted on several websites that are dedicated to Michael Jackson (pilgrimage) about my research and invited fans to share their experiences either on the existing forums or in a private e-mail. Some pilgrims were excited from the start such as Michelle who I met via the website of *mjjjusticeproject.wordpress.com*. Via postings on the forum 'Michael Jackson Los Angeles Pilgrimage' on *amazon.com* I came into contact with Nikki98 and J. Leone. Furthermore, I came into contact with pilgrim Karen Moriarty via the website of the *mjworld.net* where she replied to the blog of Michael Jackson pilgrim Kerry Hennigan. I came across pilgrim Nena Snezana via the website *mjs-legacy.com* during my research into the Michael Jackson memorial in Munich. The last six participants of my research came forth out of what specialist of qualitative research methods Hennie Boeije calls the 'snowball-method'. After I had become acquainted with Michelle, she brought me into contact with her friends and fellow-pilgrims Jennie, Susan and Charlot. Charlot consequently brought me into contact with her friends and fellow-pilgrims Erica, Monica and Sophie.<sup>12</sup> After getting acquainted, I sent Jennie,

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<sup>12</sup> The names Jennie, Susan, Charlot, Erica, Monica and Sophie are pseudonyms. The information I received from these people is based on confidential e-mail correspondence. Karen Moriarty and Nena Snezana are public figures

Susan, Charlot, Erica, Monica and Sophie a questionnaire with the same line of questioning that I applied to my interviews with Nena and Karen. All the pilgrims answered these questions, except for Jennie and Susan who decided to reply in the form of a personal account of their pilgrimage(s). I posted the same questions on the amazon forum. Nikki98 replied to my questions, whilst J. Leone decided to post an overview of her pilgrim-experiences as a response.

The nature of my research is qualitative. I will give a detailed account of how eleven pilgrims experience their pilgrimage(s) and look for regularities and patterns. This contrasts with a quantitative approach that is focused on providing an abstract of a large group to produce laws. My study is furthermore ethnographic because I focus on describing a cultural group. It is a research at the micro-level, which is meant to get an indication of what moves Michael Jackson pilgrims and how Michael Jackson influences their daily lives. I am researching the perspective of the researched Michael Jackson pilgrims, also known as the emic perspective. Furthermore the goal of my research is fundamental, rather than practical. It is my intention to provide knowledge into the lives of Michael Jackson pilgrims and to research whether their journeys and experiences can be called religious. This research has the character of a 'thick description'. The term 'thick description' was made famous by anthropologist Clifford Geertz who advocated an interpretive descriptive method in cultural anthropology. 'Thick description' opposes 'thin description'. Thin description merely describes an occurrence externally, while thick description tries to interpret and understand the motivation that lies behind certain behavior. Geertz champions the method of thick description for doing ethnography. He understands human behavior as symbolic action and culture as a symbolic system. The task of the scholar is to interpret and try to understand behavior. I will follow this interpretive approach. In sum, my research tries to understand the described experiences of eleven pilgrims. It has a descriptive character, but will also look into interpreting and explaining the findings.<sup>13</sup>

Since the rough data for this research consists of written interviews and other texts, I will make use of textual analysis for the examination of my data. Concerning this method, it is important to note that I will apply a post-structuralist approach. According to this approach different cultures can have different understandings of reality and no single representation of reality embodies 'the truth'. This methodology seeks to understand the ways in which these forms of representation take place, the assumptions behind them and the kinds of sense-making about the world that they reveal. No text is the only accurate, true, unbiased, realistic representation of any part of the world; there are always alternative representations that are equally truthful.<sup>14</sup>

Besides my position within the scholarly field, my personal stance as a Michael Jackson fan has greatly influenced this research. By mentioning the fact that I am a Michael Jackson fan, I could gain the trust and take away skepticism of my respondents because it became clear that I was 'on their side'. It turned out that this piece of information was vital to the fans opening up to me and sharing their

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and known names within the Michael Jackson pilgrimage scene, so I will refer to their personal names. The same applies to Michelle who wrote two books about her experiences and also publicly posted on the forum of the *mjjjusticeproject.wordpress.com*. Since the responses of Nikki98 and J. Leone are openly visible on *amazon.com* I will refer to their 'nicknames'.

<sup>13</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: selected essays* (New York 1973) 6-7, 10, 15, 17; Hennie Boeije, *Analyseren in kwalitatief onderzoek* (Hoofddorp 2005) 18, 20-21, 27, 31, 44; Alan McKee, *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide* (London 2003) 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> McKee, 9-10, 17, 29.

experiences, since many of the pilgrims, as will be explained later, have experienced negativity based on their being Michael Jackson pilgrims.

I used the book *Analyseren in kwalitatief onderzoek* by Boeije as a guideline for the structuring of my investigation and subsequently applied the qualitative data analysis & research software ATLAS.ti to the analysis of my rough data. The Rijksuniversiteit Groningen offers a free access to this software and via ATLAS.ti I classified my rough data through 'coding'. During this process I distinguished themes and categories within each pilgrim account. The result of this open coding is a list of codes, which constitutes the discursive framework of the research that covers the research material.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, I organized these codes by means of axial coding. During this phase the codes were reduced to a few overarching categories.

#### 1.4 Defining religion

To be able to study a worldly, popular event such as fandom as a 'religious phenomenon', it is important to take a look at what 'religion' means. Yet, defining religion is not that easy. In fact, it has been one of the greatest quests of scholars of religion. If there is one thing to be learned from their endeavors it is that it is not possible to find the one perfect definition of religion. Religion is a typically human, global phenomenon and its presence differs in every social context. Within a specific social context, the religious experience differs in turn from person to person. Hence the scope of any field devoted to the study of religion depends on how we define it. It will not be my goal to define what religion *is*. I am mostly interested in what religion *does*, how it works and functions.

My field of interest is religion and popular culture. These two categories belong in the eyes of some to two contradictory realms; religion belongs to the sacred, whilst popular culture is often thought of as belonging to the secular, the profane. To be able to trace 'religion' in the 'secular realm' of popular culture, my conception of religion needs to be quite broad. According to sociologist Philip Gorski the flaw in following a broad definition of religion is that, in this view, it is easy to find religion everywhere. The danger arises that it becomes possible for the scholar to predetermine the outcome of the debate, turning the research into a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>16</sup> Of course this is something to take into account and with which one should be familiar. However, whatever the intention of a scholar might be, a definition can never be completely neutral. It is inevitable that one's choice of definition will ultimately color the 'evidence' one finds in 'the field'. The debate concerning the determination of the *essence* of religion will not be centered in this research. I do not believe that such an approach is fruitful for the study of religion in popular culture. Scholar of comparative religion David Chidester expresses this in the following: "If we only relied upon the standard academic definitions of religion, those definitions that have tried to identify the essence of religion, we would certainly be informed by the wisdom of classic scholarship, but we would also still be lost."<sup>17</sup> Since I will be focusing on the experiences and acts of Michael Jackson

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix D for the list of codes.

<sup>16</sup> Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, 'The Post-Secular in Question', in: Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, Johan Torpey and Jonathan VanAntwerpen ed., *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York 2012) 1-22, 7.

<sup>17</sup> David Chidester, 'The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996) 743-765, 758.

pilgrims and fans, a more functional approach to religion will be fitting. However, before I continue with two approaches that I deem suitable for my study, it is important to first look into two scholars who have greatly influenced research in the field of religion and popular culture; Clifford Geertz and Emile Durkheim.

Concerning my functional approach to religion, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz cannot be ignored. Geertz' research looks into what religion does instead of what religion is. According to Geertz religion is the product of culture. He argues that religion and culture are not things in and of themselves. They are systems of meaning that people give to things, to the happenings of everyday life.<sup>18</sup> In his essay 'Religion as a cultural system' Geertz defines religion as: "A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."<sup>19</sup>

Sociologist Emile Durkheim is often seen as a key thinker in formulating a practical definition of religion. Durkheim's definition of religion is based on 'primitive society' and was formulated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet his theory still forms the basis of much contemporary scholarly research on the sociology of religion. Durkheim defined religion as: "A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden. Beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them."<sup>20</sup> In other words, religion is shaped by beliefs and practices that revolve around a sacred focus, which has a unifying effect on the community. According to Durkheim the idea of religion is inseparable from that of the church, this makes clear that Durkheim interpreted religion as an eminently collective thing. According to Durkheim all religions share a common characteristic: a division between the *sacred* and the *profane*. Durkheim defined 'the sacred' very broadly. Not just gods and spirits could be interpreted as sacred, also rocks or trees. In fact Durkheim stated that "anything can be sacred".<sup>21</sup> The sacred is that which is set apart from the profane. It is something that transcends the world of everyday life and is experienced as 'different' and mysterious, the world of the everyday life is considered to be profane.<sup>22</sup> Historian of religion Mircea Eliade further elaborated on the sacred/profane dichotomy of Durkheim. Eliade interprets the sacred and the profane as two modes of being in the world. According to Eliade the sacred and profane are bound to space and time.<sup>23</sup>

The definitions of Geertz and Durkheim are suitable points of reference for the study of Michael Jackson pilgrimage. However, their ideas can be complemented with the approach of two contemporary scholars that have studied the workings of religion in popular culture. In the next part I will briefly look into the opinions of scholar of music technology Rupert Till and scholar of interdenominational sanctity Willem Frijhoff.

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<sup>18</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 89.

<sup>19</sup> Idem, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translation by Joseph Ward Swain (London 1915) 47.

<sup>21</sup> Idem, 37.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York 1967) 58.

<sup>23</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion*, translation by Willard R. Trask (New York 1958) 12, 14, 24.

### 1.5 A working-definition of religion

In his book on popular music and religion, Till queries whether functions formerly served within society by religions are now being addressed by cults of popular music. Till explores what popular music means to those involved and what role it serves in society. He researches the effects of post-modernity on religions and the roles of cults of popular music in this process.<sup>24</sup> In his book *Heiligen, idolen, iconen*, Frijhoff argues that in modern time there is a “transmission of the sacred”.<sup>25</sup> Religious and sacred categories that once belonged solely to the church are now being appropriated by popular culture and used to describe ‘worldly affairs’. Frijhoff suggests that holiness can be recognized in other fields, forms and terms than in those closely connected to the church, for example in the field of entertainment.<sup>26</sup>

The approaches of Till and Frijhoff make it possible to study religion outside of traditionally religious contexts. Their ideas are greatly applicable to the study of forms of contemporary religion that have arisen in the field of religion and popular culture. Before I will continue to explore the interplay between religion and popular culture, I will first address some views of religious studies scholars on contemporary religion and on the influence of modernization on religion. I will here touch upon three issues, namely theories of secularization and post-secularization and the formation of New Spiritualities.

### 1.6 Secularization, Post-secularization and New Spiritualities

Some scholars interpret the event of fan-made pilgrimages and apparent celebrity worship as one of the expressions of a larger phenomenon called post-secularization. Post-secularization is a theory formulated as a reaction to the theory of secularization.<sup>27</sup> The theory of secularization roughly entails the notion that modernization necessarily leads to a decline of (traditional) religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals. The theory of secularization has been heavily criticized by scholars such as Peter Berger, Jose Casanova, Kenneth Thompson and Christopher Partridge to name but a few.<sup>28</sup>

According to sociologist Peter Berger it is precisely the implication that modernization automatically leads to a decline in religion that has turned out to be wrong. Berger once was a firm propagator of the secularization-theory, yet he revised his viewpoint and now states that: “the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today (...) is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more than ever.”<sup>29</sup> Berger acknowledges that modernization has had some secularizing effects, for example the decline of traditional forms of religion such as Christianity cannot be denied, however it has also provoked powerful movements of counter-secularization. Furthermore, secularization on the societal level is not necessarily linked to secularization on the level of individual consciousness.<sup>30</sup> The skepticism concerning the theory of secularization and the enduring presence of

<sup>24</sup> Rupert Till, *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music* (London 2010) ix.

<sup>25</sup> Willem Frijhoff, *Heiligen, idolen, iconen* (Nijmegen 1998) 37.

<sup>26</sup> Idem, 20-21, 51, 80-81.

<sup>27</sup> Linda Woodhead, Paul Heelas and Grace Davie, ‘Introduction’, in: Linda Woodhead, Paul Heelas and Grace Davie ed., *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures* (Hampshire 2003) 1-16, 4.

<sup>28</sup> See for example: Jose Casanova, ‘Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Study’, *The Hedgehog Review* (Spring 2006) 7-22, 8; Philip S. Gorski and Ates Altinordu, ‘After Secularization?’, *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008) 55-85, 57; Kenneth Thompson, ‘Secularization and Sacralization’, in: Jeffrey C. Alexander and Piotr Sztompka ed., *Rethinking Progress: Movements, Forces and Ideas at the end of the Twentieth Century* (London 1990) 161-181.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Berger, ‘The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview’, in: Peter Berger ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington 1999) 1-18, 2-3.

<sup>30</sup> Idem.

religion and spiritualities in the modern world have given rise to the theory of post-secularization. According to this notion certain forms of secularization can exist simultaneously with religion and spirituality in the modern world. In the eyes of scholar of religion and popular culture Christopher Partridge the contemporary world can therefore best be characterized by a confluence of secularization with sacralization.<sup>31</sup>

The concept of the post-secular was made popular by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Habermas emphasizes that in modern societies religions are still sources of meaning and moral norms and he interprets religion as an important moral compass. Habermas' focus is mostly on Western culture and on the Judeo-Christian faith.<sup>32</sup> Theologian Wilhelm Gräb also argues that religion is an experience that is involved in many spheres of everyday life and that religion is especially important for moral and aesthetic dimensions. Like Habermas, Gräb mostly investigates 'the West' with a focus on Christianity. Gräb argues that when one acknowledges that religion is still a deep source for moral conviction and the meaning of life and always has been, modern societies have never been secular societies.<sup>33</sup> Gräb is even convinced that "the complexity of the functionally differentiated and globalized society causes an increasing rather than decreasing need for religion."<sup>34</sup>

Contemporary scholars of religion that research religion in a post-secular context are convinced that religion is not so much disappearing as changing. Many of these academics understand that there is a spiritual need in modern society, but do not expect a revival of the churches in anything like their traditional form; conviction is not limited to religious institutions and communities.<sup>35</sup> Scholar of modern theology Gordon Lynch is one of these scholars and states that: "it is clear that alternative spiritualities are providing social spaces and cultural resources for religious affiliation, identities, and meaning-construction beyond the walls of the church, synagogue, or mosque."<sup>36</sup>

Scholars Linda Woodhead, Paul Heelas and Grace Davie also acknowledge a resurgence of spirituality in the modern world, which they interpret to be less dogmatic, more tolerant and flexible, and better suited to the pursuit of personal inner quests.<sup>37</sup> In her research on the decline of church attendance in the UK Kate Hunt traces a similar phenomenon. Hunt argues that even though churches see a decline in attendance, people living in the modern world are still in need of spirituality. To 'practice' this spirituality, an institution is not necessary: for these 'modern people' sacred space is not limited to traditional religious buildings. Sacred space can be self-created in either the physical or

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<sup>31</sup> Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Volume 1 Alternative Spiritualities* (London 2004) 4.

<sup>32</sup> Michiel Leezenberg, 'How Ethnocentric is the Concept of the Postsecular?', in: Arie L. Molendijk, Justin Beaumont and Christoph Jedan ed., *Exploring the Postsecular: The Religious, the Political and the Urban* (Leiden 2010) 91-112, 91; Jürgen Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', *New Perspectives Quarterly* 24 (2008) 17-29, 17; Jürgen Habermas, 'Religion in the Public Sphere', *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 (2006) 1-25, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Wilhelm Gräb, 'The Transformation of Religious Culture Within Modern Societies: From Secularization to Postsecularization', in: Arie L. Molendijk, Justin Beaumont and Christoph Jedan ed., *Exploring the Postsecular: The Religious, the Political and the Urban* (Leiden 2010) 113-129, 114.

<sup>34</sup> Idem, 119.

<sup>35</sup> Woodhead, 'Introduction', 6.

<sup>36</sup> Gordon Lynch, 'The Role of Popular Music in the Construction of Alternative Spiritual Identities and Ideologies', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45 (2006) 481-488, 482.

<sup>37</sup> Woodhead, 'Introduction', 1-2.

metaphorical.<sup>38</sup> Partridge interprets the disassociation of people with religious buildings as an expression of the modern shift to the individual: the religious authority has shifted from external authorities to the individual self.<sup>39</sup>

According to Woodhead, Heelas and Davie the acceptance of the mutual existence of religion and secularization opens up a new interpretation of the religious present and future in the West.<sup>40</sup> The focus of Religious Studies should be on new forms of religion and spirituality in which growth and vitality may be evident. One of the fields in which new forms of religion are arising is popular culture. The next part of this chapter will focus on the dialogue between religion and popular culture.

### 1.7 Religion and popular culture

On the basis of contemporary studies of religion and (post)secularization one can conclude that religion and spirituality are not disappearing in the world, yet are taking on different shapes. According to Partridge the emergence of new ways of being religious are often directly influenced by trends in Western (popular) culture.<sup>41</sup> The existence of religion in the context of popular culture was once interpreted as belonging to the fringes of Religious Studies. In recent decades however, the topic of religion and popular culture has seen an upsurge in interest and concern with exemplary scholars as Till, Lynch, Mazur and Partridge. According to Mary Ann Beavis, Scott Daniel Dunbar and Chris Klassen a comprehensive understanding of the impact of religion on the world today must take into account the growing importance of religion in popular culture.<sup>42</sup> According to media studies expert Lynn Schofield Clark popular culture usually refers to “those commercially-produced items specifically associated with leisure, the mass media, and lifestyle choices that people consume.”<sup>43</sup> According to Clark popular culture answers the need of people to identify with- and belong to something, may this be a person or an idea.

Lynch states that “the study of popular culture and religion offers the possibility of deepening our understanding of the meaning and significance of religion and the sacred in relation to cultural life. Moreover it provides an exciting and challenging framework for advanced inter-disciplinary research in theology and the study of religion.”<sup>44</sup> According to Lynch scholars of religion in contemporary society should not underestimate the importance of media for contemporary spirituality and religion. Lynch argues that electronic media form an increasingly important resource for the way in which people ‘do’ religion.<sup>45</sup>

Sociologist Courtney Bender is also an advocate of studying religion outside of traditional confessional contexts. She is critical of religious scholars who “continue to conduct empirical inquiries in

<sup>38</sup> Kate Hunt, ‘Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Do Not Go to Church’, in: Linda Woodhead, Paul Heelas and Grace Davie ed., *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures* (Hampshire 2003) 159-169, 165.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Partridge, ‘The Modern Western World’, in: Christopher Partridge ed., *New Religions, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities with Roots in Modern Western Cultures* (Oxford 2004) 357-418, 360.

<sup>40</sup> Woodhead, ‘Introduction’, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Partridge, ‘The Modern Western World’, 359.

<sup>42</sup> Mary Ann Beavis, Scott Daniel Dunbar and Chris Klassen, ‘The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture: more than old wine in new bottles’, *Religion* 43 (2013) 421-433, 421.

<sup>43</sup> Lynn Schofield Clark, ‘Why study popular culture? Or, How to Build a Case for Your Thesis in a Religious Studies or Theology Department’, in: Gordon Lynch, ed., *Theology and Popular Culture* (Durham 2008) 5-20, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Gordon Lynch, ‘Introduction’, in: Gordon Lynch ed., *Between Sacred and Profane* (London 2007) 1-4, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Lynch, ‘The Role of Popular Music’, 482.

what we might call self-evidently religious communities, practices, objects, texts and traditions.”<sup>46</sup> In a post-secular society such academic choices are not satisfactory, argues Bender. She states that some of the more challenging aspects of modern religion are those elements that seem to thrive outside of the milieus and spaces that are normally deemed religious.<sup>47</sup> The denominations of such religions that exist outside of traditional confessional contexts range from terms as ‘hyper-real religion’ to ‘New Spiritualities’ to ‘lived religion’. In the next part I will shortly focus on these types of religious phenomena that exist outside of an institutional and confessional form. Subsequently, I will study celebrity worship as an example of an expression of religion within popular culture.

### 1.8 From hyper-real religion to implicit religion

Scholars of post-secular religion have invented many different ‘labels’ to describe new forms of spirituality that do not belong to formerly known institutions. One of the main discussions regarding these ‘New Spiritualities’ is about authenticity. The anthropologist Michael Jindra argues that often these types of religions are not recognized as true religions because people fail to recognize religion without its institutional and confessional form.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore he states that religion becomes disguised under various political or cultural forms. Jindra argues that religious practice increasingly takes place in small networks, with features and practices that vary from place to place, but with a commonality often fostered by commercialization.<sup>49</sup> Till agrees with Jindra as he states that “The realm of popular culture is often thought of as secular, but is in fact drenched in meaning, belief, faith, worship and ritual.”<sup>50</sup> Till sees that people increasingly use religious concepts to describe aspects of what was previously regarded as secular culture and he states that belief, meaning, faith and religion are to be found in popular culture as well as in traditional organized religions.<sup>51</sup> With these statements Till touches on the phenomenon which Frijhoff describes as the ‘transgression of the sacred’.

Sociologist Adam Possamai defines phenomena that are thought of as secular, yet have religious connotations as ‘hyper-real religions’. A hyper-real religion is a simulacrum of a religion, created out of, or in symbiosis with popular culture, which provides inspiration for believers/consumers.<sup>52</sup> As examples of hyper-real religion Possamai names the Star Trek movement and Matrixism. However, according to Possamai, the phenomenon can be more broadly applied to anyone who feels religiously inspired by different forms of popular culture. Possamai sees, like Lynch, the Internet as a great instrument in the growth of the phenomenon of hyper-real religions. In fact, Possamai sees cyberspace as the place where people have established the symbiosis between religion and popular culture. Furthermore the anonymity of the Internet gives people the safety of hiding their identity behind a screen.<sup>53</sup>

A scholar who has been influential in the field of religion in popular culture is specialist of

<sup>46</sup> Courtney Bender, ‘Things in their Entanglements’, in: Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey and Jonathan VanAntwerpen ed., *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society* (London 2012) 43-76, 45.

<sup>47</sup> Idem.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Jindra, ‘Star Trek Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon’, *Sociology of Religion* 55 (1994) 27-51, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Idem.

<sup>50</sup> Till, *Religion and Popular Music*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Idem, xi, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Adam Possamai, ‘Introduction’, in: Adam Possamai ed., *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions* (Boston 2012) 1-22, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Possamai, ‘Introduction’, 1.

contemporary religion Edward Bailey. Bailey has formulated the theory of 'implicit religion'. Implicit religion refers to those aspects of ordinary life which seem to contain an inherently religious element within them - whether or not they are expressed in ways that are traditionally described as 'religious'.<sup>54</sup> The concept of implicit religion opens up the possibility for scholars to find religion and the sacred within what might conventionally be seen as the secular, irreligious sphere. The theory of post secular religion offers a broad scope for the research of contemporary religion, one of the fields of interest is 'celebrity worship', which I will touch upon in the following.

### 1.9 Celebrity worship as implicit religion?

This thesis is focused on the experience of Michael Jackson pilgrims. The act of pilgrimage by Michael Jackson fans is not a unique phenomenon. Fan-made pilgrimages are made throughout the world dedicated to diverse 'icons'. Examples of individuals who have arguably become the focus for spiritual devotion include Jim Morrison, Marilyn Monroe, John F. Kennedy, John Lennon and as the most famous example Elvis Presley.<sup>55</sup> Whether or not the journeys of these fans can be interpreted as religious and the adoration of the celebrity in question can be seen as worship is bound to discussion. Still there are many scholars who see strong resemblances between fandom, celebrity worship and religious practices.

Theologian John Drane states that in some ways the similarities between celebrity adoration and the worship of saints are quite obvious. According to Drane, in a way, saints were celebrities. Saints fulfilled much the same function as celebrities do today, and just like medieval pilgrims, fans nowadays travel long distances to visit the tombs of their heroes or come into contact with their relics. Drane states that like saints most celebrities that are 'worshipped' nowadays died in tragic circumstances. Celebrities also often become the object of much myth-making as were saints, especially in relation to whether or not they are really dead at all, or whether they might still live on in some way that is either physical or mystical, or both.<sup>56</sup> Drane believes that celebrity-centric spirituality can be seen as a continuation of the veneration of saints. Moreover he argues that celebrities are almost more appealing, since unlike the saints, today's heroes are not perfect, which makes identification far more easy: "They showed that it is still possible for people who are imperfect to do good. In that sense, they were already spiritual role models while they were alive: their attractiveness has only been enhanced through death."<sup>57</sup>

Partridge also sees a strong correlation between medieval saints and celebrity cults: "pilgrimages, shrines, mythologies, conspiracy theories, religious art and iconography testify to the significance of the transfiguration of celebrities".<sup>58</sup> Partridge states that once celebrities die their lives become mythologized as were the lives of saints. The celebrities are made perfect. When they were alive the star had to endure the joys and pains of human existence, yet, the process of transfiguration transforms the celebrity into a sympathetic saint who can understand the lives of fans and intercede for them. Partridge continues that in this process of transfiguration the celebrities become the objects of

<sup>54</sup> Edward Bailey, 'Implicit Religion What Might That be?', <http://www.equinoxpub.com/journals/index.php/IR/article/view/15481>, (accessed March 9, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> John Drane, 'Celebrity-centric Spirituality', in: Christopher Partridge ed., *New Religions A Guide: New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities* (Oxford 2004) 360-366, 365.

<sup>56</sup> Idem, 360, 365.

<sup>57</sup> Idem, 365.

<sup>58</sup> Christopher Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, the Sacred, and the Profane* (Oxford 2013) 239.

devotion. They are the embodiment of the sacred. Celebrities can receive their own personal symbolism, or fans can 'locate' the celebrity in their own religious discourse, such as Christianity. Partridge states that for the latter the cult of Elvis is a great example, where Elvis badges are mixed with crucifixes and religious terms are applied to him.<sup>59</sup>

Political sociologist Paul Hollander is quite negative about celebrity worship. Hollander argues that celebrity worship is a historically new phenomenon that is closely tied to modernity, individualism and egalitarianism. Hollander sees celebrity worship in the context of America as a sign of the superficiality of American society and laments that the lives and deaths of entertainers are more extensively and prominently covered in the media than major historical or political events.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, Hollander stresses the benefit for the entertainment industry for the deification of celebrities. The use of modern technology and the media make it possible to disseminate images of and information about particular individuals. Hollander argues that without the mass media we would not be aware of the existence of the celebrity nor of his or her attributes to be celebrated.<sup>61</sup> Wolfgang Schöffmann agrees with Hollander as he states that "Television produces 'icons', images that enjoy a ritual veneration (...). The family no longer gathers in the kitchen around the Bible but in the living room around the television set (...). The superstars have seized one of the important functions of religion, that is providing orientation in life and can therefore be considered to be idols."<sup>62</sup> Hollander also acknowledges a genuine public demand for celebrities: "celebrity worship fills a need which in the past, or in other societies, was met in different ways."<sup>63</sup> Hollander interprets the deeper roots of celebrity worship as a response to the wish of people to identify with stars. Moreover celebrity worship is a reflection of a moral and aesthetic relativism and insecurity, argues Hollander. He argues that in contemporary society many people feel uncertain as to what kinds of activities, qualities or accomplishments deserve respect or admiration. Last but not least, Hollander interprets celebrity worship as a response to the decline of community and the growth of social isolation.<sup>64</sup>

Expert of religion and popular culture Jennifer Porter is far less negative and skeptical than Hollander and believes that fan communities generally can be implicitly religious for some fans.<sup>65</sup> Porter argues that "Far from being a pathological symptom of cultural consumption gone wrong, fandom can be seen as an integral vehicle for the articulation and experience of something deeply meaningful as filtered through and symbolized by pop culture." Based on her experience with Star Trek fans, Porter concludes that fan communities are, or at least can be, places that embody a person's and/or community's expression of what it means to be human, to be in community, to be in space and time, to be moral or immoral, to be finite or eternal, to simple be.<sup>66</sup> Media and Culture expert Mark Duffett is less sure that

<sup>59</sup> Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 241.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Hollander, 'Why the Celebrity Cult?', *Symposium: Celebrity in America Today* 47 (2010) 388-391, 388.

<sup>61</sup> Hollander, 'Michael Jackson, the Celebrity Cult, and Popular Culture', 150.

<sup>62</sup> Wolfgang Schöffmann, 'Jesus, Luhmann, Marilyn: Iconoclasm Meets Media Society', in: Stefanie Knauss and Alexander Ornella ed., *Reconfigurations: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Religion in a Post-Secular Society* (Berlin 2007) 73-85, 83.

<sup>63</sup> Hollander, 'Michael Jackson, the Celebrity Cult, and Popular Culture', 150.

<sup>64</sup> Idem, 151; Hollander, 'Why the Celebrity Cult?', 389-391.

<sup>65</sup> Jenifer Porter, 'Implicit Religion in Popular Culture: the Religious Dimensions of Fan Communities', *Implicit Religion* 12 (2009) 271-280, 271.

<sup>66</sup> Porter, 'Implicit Religion in Popular Culture', 271.

features of popular culture can classify as religion. Duffett questions whether acts of adoration are always proof of worship. He stresses that “The premise- that fandom is a religion because it looks like one – is weak because it is impossible to test conclusively in the field.”<sup>67</sup> Moreover Duffett argues that this statement maintains its grip by producing ‘evidence’ that is an artifact of its own perception. Duffett hereby thus warns scholars for the self-fulfilling prophecy that is mentioned by Gorski as one of the dangers as a result of a too broad definition of religion. Duffett sees fandom as a media response and states that scholars who see fandom as religion are “agents making meaning and promoting a particular understanding of a phenomenon that could be seen in other ways.”<sup>68</sup> According to Duffett whether fandom can qualify as a religion does not depend on apparent empirical similarity, but instead upon the speaker’s authority. Duffett therefore argues that the scholar should aim to analyze, contextualize and compare their (fans) own accounts of their experience.<sup>69</sup>

### **1.10 Reflection and preface to the next chapter**

The arguments of Gorski and Duffett are both important for this research. I will follow the approach of Duffett and will focus on the personal accounts of Michael Jackson pilgrims themselves to get an insight in what moves these pilgrims. Moreover, it is important to get a better notion of the historical roots of pilgrimage and what this ritual entails before I will be able to classify the journeys of Michael Jackson pilgrims. In the next chapter I will look into the Christian roots of pilgrimage and furthermore explore its secular twin in order to ‘place’ Michael Jackson pilgrimage in a context.

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<sup>67</sup> Mark Duffett, ‘False Faith or False Comparison? A Critique of the Religious Interpretation of Elvis Fan Culture’, *Popular Music and Society* 26 (2003) 513-522, 513.

<sup>68</sup> Idem, 519.

<sup>69</sup> Idem, 519-520.

## CHAPTER II: Michael Jackson Pilgrimage in Context

“For those who experience Michael as a balm for their soul, the experience is intensely magnified when visiting places where he frequented and his energy is palpable, especially at times when others of like-mind are also gathering together and the exchange of this very high frequency energy is very strong and transformational.”<sup>70</sup>

Nikki98, Michael Jackson pilgrim

### 2.1 Michael Jackson pilgrimage in context

This chapter focuses on the act of pilgrimage. It functions as a theoretical framework for chapter four, in which I examine Michael Jackson pilgrimage and the acts and experiences of Michael Jackson pilgrims in depth. The following section is subdivided into two sections: one concerning pilgrimage in a Christian context and one concerning pilgrimage in a secular context. Because I investigate Michael Jackson pilgrimage in ‘the West’, I will concentrate on the roots of pilgrimage in the Christian tradition, since Christianity has been the predominant religion in western society and has shaped the act and notion of pilgrimage. I will study ‘secular’ pilgrimages, because this is arguably the category of pilgrimage into which Michael Jackson pilgrimage falls. In the first section, I will look into the roots of Christian pilgrimage. In this part my main focus will be on the work of Victor and Edith Turner regarding (medieval) Christian pilgrimage. In the following, I will touch upon the notion of ‘sainthood’ and elaborate on the creation of ‘the sacred’. For this I will look back at chapter one and examine the theories of Durkheim and Eliade more profoundly. Subsequently, I will explore Christian pilgrimage in a contemporary context. My next section will focus on so-called ‘secular pilgrimages’. Here I will investigate what is meant with the term ‘secular pilgrimage’ and focus on the debate about what constitutes an authentic pilgrimage. Subsequently, I will pursue the matter of fan-based pilgrimages in the field of popular music.

The question underlying this chapter is the following: ‘How can the phenomenon of Michael Jackson pilgrimage be understood in reference to (medieval) Christian pilgrimage and secular pilgrimage?’ Before I discuss the phenomenon of pilgrimage in the Christian and secular context, I will reflect shortly on the phenomenon of pilgrimage in general. How can this act roughly be understood and is it possible to find a useful definition?

### 2.2 The phenomenon of pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is often thought of as a phenomenon of the past that belongs to the realm of medieval Christianity. However, the act of pilgrimage survived until the present day and currently enjoys widespread and even increasing popularity.<sup>71</sup> New pilgrimage sites are continuously evolving, both in the

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<sup>70</sup> Amazon, ‘Michael Jackson Los Angeles Pilgrimage’, [http://www.amazon.com/forum/michael%20jackson?\\_encoding=UTF8&cdForum=Fx1105ZOFFEMUQ4&cdPage=3&cdThread=Tx3NAO3NPOZ98TZ](http://www.amazon.com/forum/michael%20jackson?_encoding=UTF8&cdForum=Fx1105ZOFFEMUQ4&cdPage=3&cdThread=Tx3NAO3NPOZ98TZ), (accessed March 18, 2015).

<sup>71</sup> Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy, ‘Tourism and religious journeys’, in: Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy ed., *Tourism, Religion & Spiritual Journeys* (New York 2006) 1-21, 1; Jill Dubisch, ‘Epilogue: The Many Faces of Mary’, in: Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans ed., *Moved by Mary: The Power of*

religious and in the secular sphere. The revival of pilgrimage in modern time has also been noted by scholars and, in response, there has been a growth in academic research on the act of pilgrimage. These studies vary from inquiries on traditional pilgrimages, such as Marian pilgrimages, to non-confessional contexts.<sup>72</sup> Whether it is appropriate to apply the concept of pilgrimage to both journeys in the secular and in the religious domain is a matter of profound debate. One of the heavy critiques of interpreting journeys in the profane realm of popular culture as ‘pilgrimages’ is that the term becomes too broad and subsequently emptied of meaning.<sup>73</sup>

As with the term ‘religion’ there is not one universally accepted definition of ‘pilgrimage’. Anthropologist Simon Coleman is not convinced that the content of any single definition matters very much and does not assume that over time scholars will collectively achieve an “ever more precise and universally applicable set of criteria with which finally to pin down ‘the’ activity of pilgrimage.”<sup>74</sup> However, according to expert of modern, secular pilgrimage Justine Digance, it is still possible to distinguish some standard characteristics concerning pilgrimage, confessional or non-confessional. In her opinion, there are three general features that comprise a pilgrimage: the notion of a quest, a journey and sacred places. Digance applies a broad, flexible definition of pilgrimage as she defines pilgrimage as “journeys redolent with meaning”.<sup>75</sup> Apart from possible critiques of the correctness of such a definition, an approach of this kind offers a workable definition to the research of pilgrimage in non-confessional realms. I will return to this approach and its advantages and disadvantages when discussing ‘secular pilgrimages’ in the second section of this chapter. First, I will concentrate on pilgrimage in a Christian context. I will start with examining the definition of pilgrimage put forward by the Turners, based on their research on medieval Catholic pilgrimages.

### 2.3 The Turners

In the field of pilgrimage research one simply cannot ignore the Turners. Victor and Edith Turner are regarded as the first to represent a broad-ranging, theoretical model for the anthropological interpretation of pilgrimage.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, their work has been greatly influential in the field of pilgrimage research. This section will focus on their ideas concerning the ‘ritual’ of pilgrimage and the

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*Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Surrey 2009) 227-238, 231; See also Simon Coleman and John Eade ed., *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London 2004).

<sup>72</sup> Regarding confessional pilgrimages see for example: John Eade and Michael Sallnow ed., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London 1991); Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans ed., *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Surrey 2009); Simon Coleman and John Eade ed., *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London 2004). Regarding non-confessional pilgrimages see for example: Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy ed., *Tourism, Religion & Spiritual Journeys* (New York 2006); Ian Reader and Tony Walter ed., *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke 1993); Peter Jan Margry ed., *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries Into the Sacred* (Amsterdam 2008).

<sup>73</sup> See for example: Peter Jan Margry, ‘Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?’ in: Peter Jan Margry ed., *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries Into the Sacred* (Amsterdam 2008) 13-46, 19.

<sup>74</sup> Simon Coleman, ‘Do you believe in pilgrimage? Communitas, contestation and beyond’, *Anthropological Theory* 2 (2002) 355-368, 362.

<sup>75</sup> Justine Digance, ‘Religious and Secular Pilgrimage: Journey redolent of meaning’, in: Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy ed., *Tourism, Religion & Spiritual Journeys* (New York 2006) 36-48, 36-43.

<sup>76</sup> Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman, ‘Approaches to the Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism’, in: Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman ed., *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Illinois 2004) 1-23, 3

experience of Christian medieval pilgrims. I will mostly focus on the concepts of *liminality* and *communitas*, which are two key elements in the theory of the Turners.

Turner and Turner interpret pilgrimage as a journey that is set apart from the ordinary. During the act of pilgrimage the pilgrim loses his structured, known identity which is bound to the everyday life.<sup>77</sup> The pilgrim is motivated by his goal to reach a sacred place and this mission lies at the heart of pilgrimage: to arrive at the *axis mundi* of the pilgrim's faith.<sup>78</sup> During the Middle Ages the act of making a pilgrimage was something which almost exclusively was done by men and even for them it was something special for the 'ordinary man': "While monks and mystics could daily make interior salvific journeys, those in the world had to exteriorize theirs in the infrequent adventure of pilgrimage. For the majority, pilgrimage was the great liminal experience of the religious life."<sup>79</sup> The Turners describe pilgrimage as a 'semi-liminoid phenomenon'. With this notion, they refer to the work of anthropologist Arnold van Gennep and his *Les Rites de Passage* (1909). According to Van Gennep every initiation rite basically consists of three phases: separation, transition and incorporation. During the 'transition phase' the initiand is in a so-called *liminal* state. He or she is betwixt and between and exists for a certain amount of time in a social limbo "which has few of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses of cultural states."<sup>80</sup> The Turners adopted Van Gennep's theory and adapted it to the act of pilgrimage. According to the Turners pilgrimage, though having initiatory features, is ultimately not an initiation rite. One of the great differences between pilgrimage and a rite de passage is that a rite de passage is a *liminal* phenomenon, whereas pilgrimage should be interpreted as a *liminoid* act.

There are two distinctions between *liminal* and *liminoid*, one of them being the aspect of obligation. According to Victor Turner, Christian pilgrimage is rooted in voluntariness, while initiation is founded in obligation and duty.<sup>81</sup> The Turners notice that over all medieval Christian pilgrimage was a matter for the individual conscience, the pilgrim *chose* to go on pilgrimage. However, by stressing the voluntary aspect of the pilgrimage, the Turners underplay the amount of pilgrimages that were *involuntary*. One grand exception is the compulsory pilgrimage that was ordered by the church in the Middle Ages as a form of penitential punishment for those who had committed serious civil crimes as well as religious sins.<sup>82</sup> Many pilgrims were motivated by doing penance and sought to relieve their sins and regain purity. For some the pilgrimage was a means to secure physical health, but the Turners stress that the curative aspect of pilgrimage was not thought of as an end in itself. The pilgrimage was mainly an inward spiritual journey and was ultimately meant to strengthen one's own faith. Another difference between *liminal* and *liminoid* is the issue of transformation. The ritual of initiation is an irreversible, one-

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<sup>77</sup> Since the following piece will be mostly about medieval pilgrimage, I will refer to 'the pilgrim' in the masculine form (he, his etc).

<sup>78</sup> Maribel Dietz, *Wandering Monks, Virgins and Pilgrims: Ascetic Travel in the Mediterranean World A.D 300-800* (Pennsylvania 2005) 29; Victor Turner, *Process & Performance & Pilgrimage* (Bali 1979) 153-154.

<sup>79</sup> Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (Columbia 1978) 7.

<sup>80</sup> Turner, *Process & Performance & Pilgrimage*, 16.

<sup>81</sup> Idem, 38, 129.

<sup>82</sup> See for example: Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage* (London 1975) 98; Jan van Heerwaarden, *Between Saint James and Erasmus: Studies in Late-Medieval Religious Life: Devotion and Pilgrimage in the Netherlands* (Leiden 2003) 46. Victor Turner does mention the penitential pilgrimage. See for example: Victor Turner, *Process & Performance & Pilgrimage* (Bali 1979) 129.

way process transforming the state and status of the initiand.<sup>83</sup> Yet, according to Turner and Turner in pilgrimage “there is not an irreversible, singular ritual instrument for effecting a permanent, visible, cultural transformation of the subject”.<sup>84</sup> A pilgrimage does not ensure a major change in religious state nor in secular status.<sup>85</sup>

Still, there is undoubtedly an initiatory quality in pilgrimage and this quality is firstly embodied by the act of movement. In order to start the spiritual journey, the pilgrim has to leave his well-known, fixed life behind to enter into an unknown way of life that is unpredictable and sometimes even dangerous. The *liminoid* character of the pilgrimage is marked by this act of *motion*. Just as the initiand, the pilgrim is betwixt and between during the act of pilgrimage. Furthermore, over the course of the journey there *can* be a form of transformation. Through the act of pilgrimage the pilgrim is given the opportunity to become a better person, as he enters into a new, deeper level of existence than he has known in his accustomed milieu. However, this *possible* transformation is a much less noticeable transformation than the metamorphosis that occurs during rites de passage, since the transformation of the pilgrim is *inward*: it is an invisible initiation of the heart.<sup>86</sup> Though the pilgrimage was mostly about an inward transformation, pilgrims could also show that they had made their pilgrimage by purchasing a ‘pilgrim badge’. This badge often portrayed the saint of the pilgrimage in question and was worn as a visible evidence for the arduous travel.<sup>87</sup>

According to the Turners pilgrimage is by nature an individual good work and not a social enterprise. However the pilgrim may create spontaneous, egalitarian ties with like-minded pilgrims and create together a *communitas*, during the pilgrimage. The term *communitas* can be understood in several ways. Roughly a difference can be made between the palpable *communitas* and the experience of *communitas*. The tangible *communitas* consists of the group of pilgrims that the pilgrim encounters on his journey or at the sacred pilgrimage site. The term *communitas* can also be understood in a more philosophical way, as the feeling of unity between the pilgrims, as they set for the same goal. In this sense *communitas* embodies the overall joyous experience of unification, healing and renewal. In the theory of the Turners the aspect of community and communal feeling is central to pilgrimage. In the experience of *communitas* all are one and differences are accepted or tolerated.<sup>88</sup> Victor Turner even states that “the health and integrality of the individual is indissoluble from the peace and harmony of the community; solitude and society cease to be antithetical.”<sup>89</sup>

The route towards the sacred pilgrimage site was long and dangerous. “The great sanctuaries were separated by hundreds of miles of unmade, ill-marked roads, many of them running through

<sup>83</sup> Turner, *Process & Performance & Pilgrimage*, 129-130.

<sup>84</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 31.

<sup>85</sup> Turner, *Process & Performance & Pilgrimage*, 131.

<sup>86</sup> Idem, 131-132; Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 8, 15.

<sup>87</sup> Jörg Ansorge, ‘Mittelalterliche Pilgerzeichen aus der Handsestadt Wismar’, *Bodendenkmalpflege in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Jahrbuch* 56 (2008) 213-257, 213.

<sup>88</sup> Turner, *Process & Performance & Pilgrimage*, 131, 153-154; Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 8, 31, 191-192; Victor Turner, ‘The Center out There: Pilgrim’s Goal’, *History of Religions* 12 (1973) 191-230, 222; Victor Turner, ‘Liminal to Liminoid, in play flow, and ritual: an essay in comparative symbology’, *The Rice University Studies* 6 (1974) 53-92, 78-80.

<sup>89</sup> Turner, ‘The Center out There: Pilgrim’s Goal’, 218.

unpopulated tracts.”<sup>90</sup> During his journey a pilgrim was exposed to all sorts of perils, varying from natural dangers, epidemics to an encounter with thieves. Yet, it was exactly these encounters that purified the pilgrim of his internalized sin.<sup>91</sup> On the road the pilgrim overcame his worldly evils and the pilgrimage offered him a place in heaven. Towards the ending of the pilgrimage the pilgrim experienced some sort of crescendo of emotions. The pilgrim was more and more exposed to symbolic sacra and religious imagery, which were built up towards the holy finish line. Once the pilgrim had reached the sacred shrine he encountered all sorts of people, selling food, drinks and ‘merchandise’. Moreover the sacred places where not only visited by pilgrims, also tourists visited the places out of mere curiosity.<sup>92</sup>

The Turners describe the pilgrim as being very receptive and easily impressed at the sacred pilgrimage site. The long journey had made him tired and his purified heart made him receptive to the message of the holy icons and objects. The religious images strike him, as they have never done before. The pilgrimage site was believed to be a miraculous place. At this site the pilgrim could experience a strengthening of faith and salvation could be secured. The magic and miracles that happened were believed to emerge from the saint’s shrines and were interpreted as rewards for the pilgrim who had faced the long, perilous journey of pilgrimage.<sup>93</sup> Frijhoff describes the behavior of pilgrims at the sacred site as very exuberant to outsiders and physically unrestrained. He argues that it is part of the pilgrimage experience to perform in a certain way: “the kinesics of pilgrimage correspond in each case to a customary sequence of bodily expressions, mostly executed in a quite routine way - something like a religious habitus.”<sup>94</sup> Heritage consultant Emma Wells also stresses the sensory experience of the pilgrimage as she argues that the pilgrims’ worship at the pilgrimage sacred site was very emotional and physical. The accessibility of the saint would enhance the divine experience and through the sense of touch the pilgrim experienced an ultimate beneficial connection with God.<sup>95</sup> When the pilgrim returned to his ordinary existence he had made a spiritual step forward. He is cleansed from sin and enters his ordinary society a new person.<sup>96</sup>

## 2.4 The cult of the saints

For a place to become a pilgrimage site there has to be something to venerate, something sacred. Regarding medieval pilgrimage, at the core lay the recognition of a saint.<sup>97</sup> According to scholar of medieval studies Anneke Mulder-Bakker a saint is a person who excelled in virtuous behavior. Such virtues can be interpreted as faith, hope, love, wisdom and justice, exercised moderation and perseverance. Sainthood is only ascribed when a person has behaved virtuously during his or her whole

<sup>90</sup> Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage* (London 1975) 175.

<sup>91</sup> John Eade and Sallnow, ‘Introduction’, in: John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow ed., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London 1991) 1-29, 21.

<sup>92</sup> Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, 211, 257.

<sup>93</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 7-8, 10-11.

<sup>94</sup> Willem Frijhoff, ‘The kiss sacred and profane: reflections on a cross-cultural confrontation’, in: Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg ed., *A Cultural History of Gesture: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge 1993) 210-236, 215.

<sup>95</sup> Emma J. Wells, ‘Making ‘Sense’ of the Pilgrimage Experience of the Medieval Church’, International Medieval Congress (Leeds 2010) 122-146, 122, 125, 144-146.

<sup>96</sup> Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*, 15.

<sup>97</sup> Sumption, *Pilgrimage*, 146.

life. Mulder-Bakker states that a person who only occasionally manifested these virtues and moral behavior can make no claim to sainthood. The foundation of a cult after the person's death was subsequently the ultimate indication of sainthood. Mulder-Bakker thus argues that the quality of sanctity is something that is *ascribed* posthumously.<sup>98</sup> According to medievalist Richard Kieckhefer there are two essential elements that underlie sainthood: a person had to demonstrate moral elements and extraordinary manifestations of power. The exemplary moral behavior was in the hands of the saint, yet the miraculous deeds were bestowed by God. According to Kieckhefer what really set apart the saint were these extraordinary manifestations of power such as miracles and visions, which were thought to be signs of God's grace working in him or her. The most common miracles were in the form of 'healings'. The saint was believed to be able to take away diseases during his or her live-time, but also posthumously.<sup>99</sup> Kieckhefer furthermore distinguishes three ways in which one can define a saint; a moral, theological and liturgical way. The moral way offers the broadest definition and states that a saint is a person who is leading or has led a life of heroic virtue. In the theological way, a saint is a person who has gone to heaven, whether that fact is recognized or not. The liturgical way offers the 'narrowest definition' and claims that a saint is a person who, by canonization, is in heaven and therefore is the legitimate object of public veneration.<sup>100</sup>

The cult of the saints originated around 200-500 AD and started with the veneration of martyrs, believers who had died for the Christian faith. According to Kieckhefer at the core of martyrdom was the faithful imitation of the passion and suffering of Christ. In this earliest phase of sainthood, there was no official canonization as "there was little question about the sanctity of a martyr; the Christian community could easily attest that a particular person had remained faithful to Christianity and undertaken a heroic death."<sup>101</sup> Through the following centuries the concept of sainthood could be more broadly applied and could also apply to people who did not die as martyrs, as for example monks. Although the concept of holiness broadened, martyrs and their courageous deaths still evoked the greatest fascination.<sup>102</sup>

It was during the Middle Ages that canonization became the standard procedure and throughout this period the cult of the saints grew increasingly. Simultaneously pilgrimages to the shrines of saints grew in significance from century to century, leading in the eleventh and following centuries to the rise of great shrines that attracted pilgrims from all over Europe.<sup>103</sup> According to medieval historian Jonathan Sumption the saint that would be visited depended on popularity. The tendency of the laity was always to visit the saint whose cult was the most recently established and a minor cult might be forgotten within a few weeks. Sumption argues that the most effective advertisements for a saint were by far his miracles: "Contemporaries followed the posthumous doings of the saints with extreme interest and the news of miraculous happenings could be relied upon to spread without any active assistance from the clergy of the sanctuary."<sup>104</sup> The miracles were made possible by the presence of the saints body, which

<sup>98</sup> Anneke Mulder-Bakker, 'The invention of saintliness: Texts and contexts', in: Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker ed., *The Invention of Saintliness* (London 2002) 3-23, 4.

<sup>99</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, 'Imitators of Christ: Sainthood in the Christian Tradition', in: Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond ed., *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions* (California 1990) 1-42, 12, 20-21.

<sup>100</sup> Idem, 3.

<sup>101</sup> Idem, 3-6.

<sup>102</sup> Idem, 3, 11.

<sup>103</sup> Idem, 3-6.

<sup>104</sup> Idem, 150.

'radiated' sacrality surrounding the saints tomb.<sup>105</sup> A similar power was ascribed to relics: "Because of the grace remaining in the martyr, they were an inestimable treasure for the holy congregation of the faithful."<sup>106</sup> Like the saints, relics were venerated, because the saint had touched these items and thus the relic contained heavenly power. At the pilgrimage site the border between dead and alive, sacred and profane is blurred: the saints functioned as living mediums and were believed to be the direct link between God and humanity, giving the pilgrim a ready access to the holy.<sup>107</sup>

Because the saints were believed to be so accessible the relationship between the pilgrim and saint could be very personal. Moreover, since people presumed that saints could evoke miracles, one of the elements of pilgrimage was to ask a favor of the saint. Most often the request of the pilgrim was physical healing. One of the ways in which a pilgrim could secure his or her wish was through the act of votive offerings. Votive offerings can be understood as a gift-exchange with the sacred: the pilgrim promised certain actions or material things to a saint for his or her intercession with God. The pilgrim often promised to repay the saint when he or she had fulfilled the wish in question or gave a votive object beforehand to gain the saint's favor. The material offerings are called 'ex-voto's'. Ex-voto's ranged from valuable objects to wax images and they often covered the entire surface of a shrine. Most often the offerings were in the form of the lighting of candles, the placing of flowers or pictures before icons, and leaving thank-you notes, money, or other little tokens.<sup>108</sup>

Pilgrimage sites were thus believed to be places that embodied a special power and sacrality. Yet, how should we understand 'the sacred' and in what way is 'the sacred' different from 'the profane'? In the following, I will investigate the creation of the sacred according to Durkheim and Eliade.

## 2.5 Creating the sacred

As we have seen in chapter one Durkheim and Eliade regard the sacred as 'that which is set apart'. Both Durkheim and Eliade refer to two manifestations of the sacred; sacred space and sacred time. In the next part, I will study their theories more thoroughly, after which I will shortly touch upon the ideas of Sarah Hamilton, Andrew Spicer, Justine Digance and Philip Bohlman considering 'the sacred'.

According to Durkheim the sacred and the profane correspond to two forms of life which are antagonistic to each other. As mentioned in chapter one, Durkheim's interpretation of 'the sacred' is very broad; everything can be sacred. Durkheim believes that the sacred is a social construction. Things get their sacredness because people attach this to it: it is not an inherent quality of an object itself. As

<sup>105</sup> Arnold Angenendt, 'Relics and their veneration in the Middle Ages', in: Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker ed., *The Invention of Saintliness* (London 2002) 27-37, 31.

<sup>106</sup> Barbara Drake Boehm, 'Relics and Reliquaries in Medieval Christianity', *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–2015), [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/relic/hd\\_relic.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/relic/hd_relic.htm), (accessed 22 June 2015).

<sup>107</sup> Angenendt, 'Relics and their veneration in the Middle Ages', 29; Mulder-Bakker, 'The invention of saintliness', 4, 9; Derek Krueger, 'The Religion of Relics in Late Antiquity and Byzantium', in: Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann and James Robinson ed., *Treasures of Heaven. Saints, relics and devotion in medieval Europe* (London 2011) 5-18, 6-7; Kieckhefer, 'Imitators of Christ', 5.

<sup>108</sup> C. Lindsey King, 'Pilgrimage, Promises, and Ex-Voto's: Ingredients for Healing in Northeast Brazil', in: Jill Dubisch and Michael Winkelman ed., *Pilgrimage and Healing* (Arizona 2005) 49-68, 49-50; Sarah Blick, 'Ex Votos', in: Larissa J. Taylor, Leigh Ann Craig, John B. Friedman, Kathy Gower, Thomas Izbicki and Rita Tekippe ed., *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage* (Leiden 2010) 198-201, 198-199; Fisheaters, 'Votive Offerings', <http://www.fisheaters.com/votiveofferings.html>, (accessed June 26, 2015).

mentioned above one notion of 'the sacred' of medieval pilgrims was 'that which has touched a saint'. This conception is referred to by Durkheim as 'the contagiousness of the sacred'. However, once an object (or person) has been given the value of sacredness, it has attained the power to make other objects or people sacred. Durkheim moreover argues that the act of performing rituals can 'create' sacrality. In fact, he argues that the performing of rites is essential to the separation of the sacred from the profane.<sup>109</sup>

Because the sacred and the profane are mutually exclusive, religious life and profane life cannot coexist in the same place nor in the same unit of time. Following Durkheim profane time can be understood as ordinary time; time when people go about their daily, worldly life. Sacred time is time that is spent, devoted to the sacred. The sacred and the profane both require different forms of behavior; there is profane behavior that is appropriate in profane place and time, and vice versa. In general, all acts characteristic of the ordinary life, such as hunting and fishing, are temporarily forbidden while those of the religious life are taking place. During sacred time the focus should lay solely on the performing of rituals. Durkheim argues that the building of sanctuaries is one of the means by which people can clearly set apart the sacred from the profane. From this mutually exclusiveness of the sacred and the profane follows that: "A man cannot approach his god intimately while he still bears on him marks of his profane life."<sup>110</sup> That is why before engaging in a religious ceremony or entering a sacred object, one should first submit him- or herself to a sort of preliminary initiation which introduces him or her progressively into the sacred world. After entering the sacred the person has come closer to the sacred. Afterwards, he or she is on a more equal footing with it; he or she is purified and sanctified.<sup>111</sup>

Eliade follows Durkheim and states that the sacred is an existential reality, different from the profane in time as well as in space. In the eyes of Eliade the sacred comes from the divine and shows itself to the people, otherwise called *hierophany*. When something sacred reveals itself in for example an object, this object becomes something else, something outside of the ordinary. Consequently the space where the *hierophany* has taken place is qualitatively different and set apart from the profane. By claiming that the sacred reveals itself, Eliade takes another position than Durkheim, since Durkheim states that people create the sacred by aligning meaning to certain objects. According to Eliade 'man' has the innate desire to communicate with the divine word. The creation of sacred space allows a person to enter this conversation and meet with the eternal. At the sacred space there is a passage between the ordinary world and the transcendent. The *hierophany* has created an opening between the different cosmic levels, of which Eliade distinguishes three: earth, heaven and underworld. The sacred space, whether a house, a statue or a mountain, at that time represents the Center of the World, it is the *axis mundi* and connects heaven and earth.<sup>112</sup>

According to Eliade there is a difference in the experience of space and time for the religious and non-religious person. For a religious person, space and time are not homogeneous, some parts of space and moments in time are *qualitatively* different from others. For a non-religious person however, space and time are homogeneous and neutral; there is a feeling of continual time with a beginning and an end with no divine presence. Profane time is experienced in daily life, during this time acts without religious

<sup>109</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 299, 317, 324.

<sup>110</sup> Idem, 307.

<sup>111</sup> Idem, 306, 308-309.

<sup>112</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11-12, 26, 28, 36-37, 91.

significance take place. Sacred time is liturgical time and is experienced during religious festivals or ceremonies. Sacred time is not bound to historical time, instead it is indefinitely recoverable and indefinitely repeatable. During sacred time there is a feeling of eternity, there is a connection with the heavenly world. By the act of rites a person can pass from profane time to sacred time.<sup>113</sup> An example that clarifies both sacred time and place is that of a church. A church constitutes a break in plane in the profane space. Moreover the service celebrated inside it marks a break in profane temporal duration: "It is no longer today's historical time that is present - the time that is experienced, for example, in the adjacent streets - but the time in which the historical existence of Jesus Christ occurred, the time sanctified by his preaching, by his passion, death, and resurrection."<sup>114</sup>

Based on the accounts of Durkheim and Eliade one can conclude that in creating 'the sacred' human behavior plays a great role. With regard to the act of pilgrimage, experts of early Medieval Europe Sarah Hamilton and Andrew Spicer also argue that behavior, more specifically the performing of rituals, often constitutes an important marker for recognizing the sacred.<sup>115</sup> Digance also stresses the essence of rituals, not only for the consecration of a pilgrimage site, but also to connect the pilgrim with the sanctity of the site. Especially the engagement in devotions and proffering votive offerings can reinforce sanctity. These devotions can be organized, or highly individual.<sup>116</sup> According to ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman music is another important aspect in the creation of the sacred. The 'ritual' of music transforms both time and place in sacred time and place. Moreover music is essential to the experience of the pilgrimage itself, for it is with music that the pilgrim performs the sacred journey, making it both a personal and communal experience. Bohlman uses the chanting of the rosary that generates and enforces a sense of community during pilgrimage as an example for pilgrimages in the Christian context.<sup>117</sup>

## 2.6 Contemporary Christian pilgrimage

Many scholars within the field of pilgrimage studies have been inspired by the works of the Turners, Durkheim and Eliade. Especially the theory of the Turners has proved popular and much subsequent work on pilgrimage, in Christian and non-Christian contexts, has drawn upon the Turnerian paradigm.<sup>118</sup> For a long time the Turners' theory was uncontested, however, in recent pilgrimage research, they have been criticized. The two main criticisms regard the Turners' position on place-focused sacredness and the uniform, egalitarian characteristic of pilgrimage false.

Anthropologist Simon Coleman is critical of the theory of the Turners with regard to their premise that pilgrimages activate egalitarian, harmonious communities. Coleman argues that the Turners' interpretation of pilgrimage "has proved insufficient to describe the often troubled, rivalrous

<sup>113</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 14, 20, 22, 68, 71.

<sup>114</sup> Idem, 72.

<sup>115</sup> Sarah Hamilton and Andrew Spicer, 'Defining the Holy: The Delineation of Sacred Space', in: Sarah Hamilton and Andrew Spicer ed., *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Hampshire 2005) 1-10, 3.

<sup>116</sup> Digance, 'Religious and Secular Pilgrimage', 43-44.

<sup>117</sup> Philip Bohlman, 'The Musical Remapping of the New Europe', *Ethnomusicology* 40 (1996) 375-412, 376, 385.

<sup>118</sup> Simon Coleman, 'Pilgrims and Pilgrimage: Social Anthropology', [http://www.york.ac.uk/projects/pilgrimage/content/soc\\_anth.html](http://www.york.ac.uk/projects/pilgrimage/content/soc_anth.html), (accessed March 18, 2015).

relations among visitors to sacred sites.”<sup>119</sup> Anthropologists John Eade and Michael Sallnow also oppose the *communitas* paradigm of the Turners. Eade and Sallnow argue that *communitas* is just one idealizing discourse about pilgrimage rather than an empirical description of it. In their book *Contesting the Sacred* Eade and Sallnow argue that instead of giving room for equality and harmony, pilgrimages contain a great power dimension. They postulate that pilgrimage must be seen as a realm of *competing* religious and secular discourses. Moreover they argue that at the sacred pilgrimage site differences are only reinforced.<sup>120</sup> Eade and Sallnow also contest Eliade and his notion on the sacred. They criticize Eliade’s view of the sacred being an inherent quality of a shrine or other *hierophany*. They argue that in this way the power of the sacred is seen as “*sui generis*: its power is internally generated and its meanings are largely predetermined.”<sup>121</sup> Eade and Sallnow contest this view and state that “a pilgrimage shrine (...) provides a ritual space for the expression of a diversity of perceptions and meanings which the pilgrims themselves bring to the shrine and impose upon it.”<sup>122</sup>

In the book *Reframing Pilgrimage* John Eade and Simon Coleman formulate a falsification against the place-centered approach to the act of pilgrimage as formulated by the Turners. Coleman and Eade argue that instead of a sacred site, various forms of *movement* are at the core of pilgrimage and the pilgrimage experience.<sup>123</sup> Coleman and Eade examine both motion *to* and movement *at* sacred space and investigate “the ways in which mobile performances can help to construct apparently sacredly charged places.”<sup>124</sup> Coleman and Eade come up with four concepts of movement and use these different forms of movement as a frame to encapsulate and study pilgrimages in different regions and in various religious traditions.<sup>125</sup> According to their study it is through movement that people can switch their identities and become somebody else, or return to the people they used to be.<sup>126</sup>

Based on their research on Marian pilgrimages, Ann-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans find the movement approach of Coleman and Eade fruitful for the investigation of pilgrimage experiences. They argue that the movement *to* and the movement *at* the sacred sites are important aspects to investigate: “These repetitive, collective, multisensory physical movements provide cogency to the relations pilgrims want to establish with the divine, with their fellow travelers, or with their inner

<sup>119</sup> Coleman, ‘Pilgrims and Pilgrimage: Social Anthropology’.

<sup>120</sup> John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, ‘Introduction’, in: John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow ed., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London 1991) 1-29, 5; Coleman, ‘Do you believe in pilgrimage?’, 357; Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans, ‘Introduction: The Power of Marian Pilgrimage’, in: Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans ed., *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Surrey 2009) 1-13, 3-4; Simon Coleman and John Eade, ‘Introduction: reframing pilgrimage’, in: Simon Coleman and John Eade ed., *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London 2004) 1-25, 4.

<sup>121</sup> Eade and Sallnow, ‘Introduction’, 9.

<sup>122</sup> Idem, 10.

<sup>123</sup> Coleman and Eade, ‘Introduction’, 4, 16-17; Simon Coleman, ‘From England’s Nazareth to Sweden’s Jerusalem: Movement, (virtual) landscapes and pilgrimage’, in: Simon Coleman and John Eade ed., *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London 2004) 45-68, 53.

<sup>124</sup> Coleman and Eade, ‘Introduction’, 3.

<sup>125</sup> Namely movement as performative action, as embodied action, as part of a semantic field, and as metaphor. See: Coleman and Eade, ‘Introduction’, 16-17.

<sup>126</sup> John Eade and Mario Katié, ‘Introduction: Crossing the Borders’, in: John Eade and Mario Katié ed., *Pilgrimage, Politics and Place-Making in Eastern Europe: Crossing the Borders* (Surrey 2014) 1-12, 9.

self.”<sup>127</sup> Hermkens et al. moreover stress that besides the physical movement(s) the movement on the emotive level deserves scholarly attention; the experience of an emotional transformation and experiences of healing and relief as well as kinds of feelings of connectedness when experiencing Mary’s presence reveal a lot about pilgrimages. Hermkens et al. furthermore stress a social movement: they argue that pilgrims unite and join with Mary to fight against social inequality, oppression, violence, and occupying forces.<sup>128</sup>

Historian and ethnologist Peter Jan Margry is still convinced of the importance of the sacred site concerning Christian pilgrimage and states that the site takes precedence over the journey. He states that: “the presence of a cult object associated with a specific location gives shape to the sacred, both physically and intangibly. Sanctity is attributed to that object and a fortiori to its environment, a space where the pilgrim expects salvation, healing and solace, or hopes to effect a cure.”<sup>129</sup> Like the Turners, Margry interprets the sacred site as the main goal of the pilgrimage, together with the religious and the *cultus* object. Without these there is no pilgrimage.<sup>130</sup> Anthropologist Jill Dubisch argues that whilst there is often a focal point where the pilgrimage leads to, the power of place is very wide in pilgrimage and is also present in places that are not confined by the pilgrimage sites. The site that is the pilgrimage destination is only one of the locations of the sacred involved in pilgrimage. Moreover the sacred may be taken with the pilgrim once the site itself is left behind. This may be in the form of an alteration in the self – a spiritual renewal, a physical healing – or in the form of objects that are connected with the sacred, such as bottles of holy water. These items physically connect the pilgrim with the pilgrimage site and thus continue an emotional movement.<sup>131</sup>

According to Hermkens et al. the motivation for contemporary pilgrimages dedicated to Mary is a feeling of insecurity and a search for help and empowerment: “Modernizations seem to sharpen the inequalities of gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and age that are played out in the religious field of Marian pilgrimages. For many Catholics, Mary provides the answer to such globally produced problems, and they bond with Mary to gain empowerment and improve their lives.”<sup>132</sup> Just as Eade and Sallnow Hermkens et al. stress the power dimension in contemporary pilgrimage. They state that the notion of the Turners that pilgrimage is a means to bring people with different class statuses together and break down barriers of difference among pilgrims is not always present in Marian pilgrimages. However, they still recognize the importance of *communitas*. Yet, this feeling exists simultaneously with conflicts and power dimensions in pilgrimage, which reflect wider problems of social inequality in the world.<sup>133</sup> Dubisch argues that pilgrimages dedicated to Mary are often undertaken by the marginal and less powerful and represent an affirmation by such pilgrims of their possibility and ability to gain direct access to the sacred.<sup>134</sup> Eade and Sallnow view the dominant motive for going on a pilgrimage as a desire

<sup>127</sup> Hermkens et al., ‘Introduction: The Power of Marian Pilgrimage’, 2.

<sup>128</sup> Idem, 2, 7.

<sup>129</sup> Peter Jan Margry, ‘Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?’, in: Peter Jan Margry ed., *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries into the Sacred* (Amsterdam 2008) 13-46, 24.

<sup>130</sup> Idem, 29.

<sup>131</sup> Dubisch, ‘Epilogue’, 232.

<sup>132</sup> Hermkens et al., ‘Introduction: The Power of Marian Pilgrimage’, 2.

<sup>133</sup> Idem, 3-4.

<sup>134</sup> Dubisch, ‘Epilogue’, 231.

to request some favor of God or the shrine divinity in return for simply having made the journey or for engaging in ancillary devotional exercises.<sup>135</sup>

## 2.7 'Secular pilgrimage'

This part will focus on so-called 'secular pilgrimages'; pilgrimages that are connected with the profane realm, yet show many similarities with their Christian counterparts. As such, secular pilgrimages question the strict dichotomy between the secular and the sacred. Are these 'sacred journeys' worthy of the term pilgrimage? And if so; what qualifies them as a pilgrimage and sets them apart from recreational journeys?

According to pilgrimage in cross-cultural contexts expert Ian Reader pilgrimages need not be limited solely to explicitly religious traditions. Reader observes a broader and common use of the term in popular culture, where pilgrimage is also used to describe visits to profane areas in the fields of sports and entertainment.<sup>136</sup> For example in the context of sports, sporting venues or places associated with sport heroes can become pilgrimage sites, such as the stadium of Manchester United. Another example of a profane context where pilgrimages can take place is the realm of tourism, scholars such as Badone, Roseman, Timothy and Olsen see many parallels between tourism and pilgrimages.<sup>137</sup>

Like Reader, Jennifer Porter is convinced that certain journeys can be legitimately referred to as 'pilgrimages'. In her research on Star Trek 'pilgrims', Porter states the following: "If one can no longer take for granted previous notions about the nature of pilgrimage, and yet pilgrimage remains in some respects an identifiable process, the boundaries of pilgrimage can perhaps be made to encompass journeys previously relegated to other domains."<sup>138</sup> Porter resonates with Edward Baileys' theory of implicit religion. She is convinced that certain aspects that used to belong exclusively to the domain of institutionalized religion, now can be traced in profane spaces, such as in the context of popular culture. To be able to investigate secular pilgrimages, Porter argues that the theory of the Turners retains some theoretical utility concerning their view of *liminality* and *communitas*. However, Porter is convinced that overall, the theory of the Turners is too restricted to be used as a working definition for the research of secular pilgrimage, for it is focused on pilgrimage as a journey in pursuit of perceived theophanies.<sup>139</sup>

If the definition of the Turners will not do, what sort of definition is then appropriate to delimit the act of secular pilgrimages? Earlier in this chapter, I stated that it is not possible to formulate a definition of pilgrimage that can rely on universal acceptance. One can imagine that if this is already troublesome for pilgrimage in a 'traditional' religious context, the endeavor of 'tracing' the act of

<sup>135</sup> Eade and Sallnow, 'Introduction', 24.

<sup>136</sup> Ian Reader, 'Introduction', in: Ian Reader and Tony Walter ed., *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke 1993) 1-25, 5.

<sup>137</sup> See: Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman ed., *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Illinois 2004); Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen ed., *Tourism, Religion, and Spiritual Journeys* (New York 2006).

<sup>138</sup> Jennifer Porter, 'Pilgrimage and the IDIC Ethic: Exploring Star Trek Convention Attendance as Pilgrimage', in: Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman ed., *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Illinois 2004) 160-179, 161.

<sup>139</sup> Idem.

pilgrimage in non-confessional territory is a mission impossible.<sup>140</sup> At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Justine Digance who defines pilgrimage as ‘journeys redolent with meaning’. Such an approach to pilgrimage allows scholars in the field of contemporary religion and popular culture to encompass secular journeys within the boundaries of pilgrimage, provided such journeys are undertaken in pursuit of ‘sacred’ ideals, states Porter.<sup>141</sup>

Digance takes ‘meaning’ as the defining quality of pilgrimage and with this she touches upon one notion that seems to be essential to the identification of a journey as a ‘pilgrimage’; namely a special motivation or a quest. According to Dubisch a secular pilgrim is a serious traveler. The pilgrim is on a mission and this separates him or her from mere tourists or sightseers. Dubisch notes that the aspects of suffering and transformation are important parts of a pilgrimage. These do not have to be physical, often the greatest suffering and transformation of a pilgrim are emotional and psychological.<sup>142</sup> To be able to state that a journey is a pilgrimage or not, the pilgrim’s own view is mostly important, argues Dubisch. The scholar should listen to what in the eyes of the participant distinguishes his or her journey from other mundane trips. In her fieldwork on motorcycle pilgrimages, Dubisch finds a strong sense of *communitas* and she argues that the experience of living together for a certain amount of time characterizes the experience of pilgrimage. Dubisch states that in the interaction with the community, the pilgrim forms and realizes his or her identity. She sees this as a paradox of individualism: “only through joining a community the individual may most fully realize his or her identity.”<sup>143</sup> Contrary to the view of Dubisch, Ellen Badone and Sharon Roseman are critical of the aspect of *communitas* in secular pilgrimages and they argue that while it may be one element of the pilgrimage experience, it cannot be assumed to exist in all pilgrimages.<sup>144</sup> Reader though, aligns with Dubisch as he argues that secular pilgrimages are very much social experiences. During the pilgrimage the pilgrim comes into contact with like-minded pilgrims and these encounters offer the possibility of sharing emotions and feelings.<sup>145</sup> Dubisch and Reader thus both still find value in the theory of the Turners concerning the aspect of *communitas*. Reader moreover touches upon the Turners’ aspect of *liminality*. He argues that like medieval pilgrimage, a secular pilgrimage is a journey out of ordinary life. The secular pilgrim enters into a different world in search for something new to make him or her whole. In order to find this something new the pilgrim needs to move away from the accustomed patterns of everyday life.<sup>146</sup>

Margry also observes that pilgrimage is becoming less and less an exclusively Catholic phenomenon and that more and more inter-religious and other forms of pilgrimage can be

<sup>140</sup> Katharina Schramm, ‘Pilgrimage tourism in Ghana’, in: Simon Coleman and John Eade ed., *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London 2004) 133-149, 134.

<sup>141</sup> Porter, ‘Pilgrimage and the IDIC Ethic’, 161.

<sup>142</sup> Jill Dubisch, ‘Heartland of America’: memory, motion and the (re)construction of history on a motorcycle pilgrimage’, in: Simon Coleman and John Eade ed., *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London 2004) 105-132, 114-115.

<sup>143</sup> Idem, 124.

<sup>144</sup> Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman, ‘Approaches to the Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism’, in: Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman ed., *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Illinois 2004) 1-23, 4.

<sup>145</sup> Reader, ‘Introduction’, 21.

<sup>146</sup> Idem, 8-9.

distinguished.<sup>147</sup> Margry is however critical of a too free use of the term pilgrimage because he fears a watering down of meaning: “The concept of pilgrimage has been stretched, the word has acquired a new semantic dimension, so that more and more frequently visitors themselves refer to profane practices and events as pilgrimages.”<sup>148</sup> Margry observes that this broadening of the term pilgrimage primarily has its origins in fan culture within the context of pop music, with Graceland as the most famous and most spectacular example.<sup>149</sup>

Margry encourages a more clear distinction between the secular and the religious in pilgrimage studies. He finds the way in which Reader refers to all phenomena related to travel and veneration as ‘pilgrimage’ too short-sighted. Margry is also critical of the equation that scholars like Badone and Roseman make between tourism and pilgrimage. He states that underlying pilgrimage there are often many motivations, including secular motives. For Margry secular motivations such as the beauty of the scenery, tourist aspects and the sociability of the collective journey are not enough to define a journey a pilgrimage. Margry argues that pilgrimage is on the one hand about the inside; namely about ideas, motives and feelings, whereas a great part consists of the outside: the actions and practices of the pilgrim. If one wants to be able to identify a journey as a pilgrimage, one should adopt an interdisciplinary approach and look into both the interior as the exterior aspects of pilgrimage. To distinguish between secular journeys and pilgrimages Margry applies the following definition of pilgrimage: “A journey undertaken by a group or individual based on a religious or spiritual inspiration, to a place that is regarded more sacred or salutary than the environment of everyday life, to seek a transcendental encounter with a specific cult object for the purpose of acquiring spiritual, emotional, or physical healing or benefit.”<sup>150</sup> Although Margry interprets movement as central to pilgrimage, he does not stress the importance of motion as strongly as Coleman and Eade. Margry still sees the *sacred place* as the essence of pilgrimage and this takes precedence over the journey. Margry argues that eventually the pilgrim’s mission is to approach the sacred, to enter it, to experience, to draw near and to touch it. Based on this interpretation of pilgrimage, recreational travel cannot simply be called a ‘pilgrimage’. Still, Margry does allow for the possibility of secular journeys having the same intensity as a pilgrimage. Based on his fieldwork on Jim Morrison fans, Margry admits that for a specific group of fans, the religious factor is in fact present when visiting a site dedicated to Jim Morrison and this dimension distinguishes them from the mere tourists. However, in the experience of Margry, these people are generally not keen to talk about the religious dimensions of their pilgrimage and find it difficult to do so. Margry believes that this hesitance is fueled by the secular context: religious feelings or behavior have no right to exist in this environment which is so secular in other respects.<sup>151</sup>

Concerning secular pilgrimage Margry stresses the significance and the biographical background of the venerated person as a major factor in the development of sacrality at a secular location. This is especially the case when visitors can identify with the difficult social and psychological circumstance of the object of veneration. As Margry states: “Life analogies of this kind (...) provide a frame of reference

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<sup>147</sup> Margry, ‘Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?’, 17.

<sup>148</sup> Idem, 19.

<sup>149</sup> Idem, 18.

<sup>150</sup> Idem, 36.

<sup>151</sup> Idem, 23, 29-31, 33, 35-36.

for accepting the setbacks the visitors themselves have experienced in life.”<sup>152</sup> Moreover the role of the media is unquestioned in the creation of new modern pilgrimage shrines and the recognition of a person as a cult object. A great example here is the cultus for Jim Morrison that was strongly stimulated on a global scale after the movie about The Doors came out: “In which a charismatic and shamanistic portrait of the singer was visualized and canonized.”<sup>153</sup> It seems that the media’s representation of the deceased person seems to be the determining factor for the creation of a sacred pilgrimage site.<sup>154</sup>

Margry interprets the secular pilgrimage as highly individual and with strictly personal intentions. As such, the secular pilgrim mirrors the individualization of contemporary society. Margry sees existential insecurity as the most important motivation for the secular pilgrim. He argues that people have primary existential insecurities and have, still in modern times, the need to be able to call on higher powers. Because of the letting go of the churches or the incompatibility of existing churches and religious movements with modernity, Margry argues that individuals have started to seek new forms of spirituality or new itineraries into the sacred.<sup>155</sup>

## 2.8 Celebrity pilgrimage

According to spiritual tourism expert Alex Norman it seems that “the specter of celebrity is a participant in the phenomena of human travel behaviors called pilgrimage”.<sup>156</sup> Fans are like pilgrims as they make journeys to special sites dedicated to celebrities and at these site perform rituals as a way to bring them closer to their idols. Especially the visitation of the graves of deceased musical icons has grown significantly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At these sites fans gather to commemorate and leave all sorts of ‘offerings’ to their hero. In their book *Stairway to Heaven: The Final Resting Places of Rock’s Legends* scholar J. Reed and photographer Maddy Miller have researched the gravesites of deceased rock icons and photographed their grave tombs. Reed states that “searching out and visiting the graves of rock stars has become a consuming pastime” and “for a growing number of fans the celebrity culture in which we bathe propels many fans to venerate stardom to even greater limits.”<sup>157</sup> Especially on the holidays of the deceased rock stars fans pay a visit to their graves to pay their respects. The pictures in *Stairway to Heaven* show the numerous ‘offerings’ of the fans at the grave sites. These vary from posters, floral displays, notes, mementos to the marks of lipstick kisses.

To be able to investigate and understand a phenomenon such as secular pilgrimages dedicated to pop idols, Frijhoff pleads for a broadening of the term ‘sacredness’. As stated before Frijhoff suggests that sacredness can be recognized in other forms and in other terms than in those closely connected to the church. Frijhoff’s interpretation of sacredness can be categorized as a ‘moral definition.’<sup>158</sup> Frijhoff

<sup>152</sup> Peter Jan Margry, ‘Conclusion’, in: Peter Jan Margry ed., *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World: New Itineraries into the Sacred* (Amsterdam 2008) 323-327, 325-326.

<sup>153</sup> Idem, 326.

<sup>154</sup> Idem, 325-326.

<sup>155</sup> Margry, ‘Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?’, 23, 34.

<sup>156</sup> Alex Norman, ‘Celebrity Push, Celebrity Pull: Understanding the Role of the Notable Person in Pilgrimage’, *Australian Religion Studies Review* 24 (2011) 317-341, 317.

<sup>157</sup> J. Reed, ‘Introduction’, in: J. D. Reed and Maddy Miller ed., *Stairway to Heaven: The Final Resting Places of Rock’s Legends* (New York 2004) 9-13, 12.

<sup>158</sup> See the three types of definition by Richard Kieckhefer on page 22 of this chapter.

argues that a saint is a person who embodies exemplary behavior. In his book *Heiligen, idolen, iconen*, he makes a distinction between saints, idols and icons. Each of these embody a certain type of sacredness, a sacredness that they have made themselves or that has been *attributed* to them. According to the theory of Frijhoff celebrity pilgrimages could be understood as the phenomenon where a certain social group has ascribed sainthood to an exemplary, non-church-related life. Frijhoff argues that like a saint a pop idol can perform specific functions, including in the sphere of spirituality and religiosity.<sup>159</sup>

Contrary to the perception of Margry, scholar Christine King observes a great emphasis on the social in her research on pilgrimages to the grave of Elvis Presley. For these pilgrims the co-visits to Graceland enhance the experience of being part of a community of Elvis fans. Elvis pilgrims see themselves as special, they *are* fundamentalist believers and feel special for being Elvis devotees.<sup>160</sup> The connection between the fan and pop idol is very close, since the idol is directly accessible in an unmediated form to those who visit them.<sup>161</sup> The fan probably comes closer than was ever possible when the pop icon was still alive: "At Graceland, as at any medieval shrine, the object of devotion is physically and spiritually more accessible than was possible in life. At Graceland Elvis belongs to each pilgrim and in him the pilgrim's own life is validated."<sup>162</sup> This accessibility and the unmediated meeting is a crucial aspect of secular pilgrimages, states Reader. He argues that at the secular pilgrimage site there is an encounter between the living and the dead, and as at religious pilgrimage sites, the boundaries between holy and worldly are blurred.<sup>163</sup> Till argues that through the visit of the pilgrim the deceased hero lives symbolically on: "Religious and cult figures are brought into existence and sustained by those who sustain their memory."<sup>164</sup>

According to Till the deceased celebrity has a great overlap with medieval saints: "The dead pop icon becomes much like a saint, especially if they have died due to what appears to be adhering to a rock'n'roll lifestyle. (...) dying is the ultimate way for a popular music star to be enshrined as a popular music icon, saint or deity."<sup>165</sup> Similar to saints, who personify goodness and the most positive or desired elements of human character and abilities, the pop icon functions as the source of inspiration. Moreover the deceased celebrities offer a connection with another realm as was the function of saints in the Middle Ages. Till interprets the act of celebrity worship as a response to the decline of religion. He offers a similar argumentation like Margry does, when he argues that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century pop icons begin to fulfill the roles that used to be fulfilled by inspirational religious figures.<sup>166</sup>

Like Margry, scholar of new religious movements Gregory Reece is a bit hesitant with a too easily made connection between journeys dedicated to celebrities and pilgrimage. With regard to Elvis Presley pilgrims, he argues that religious terms like 'pilgrimage' and 'shrine' are generally not part of the average Graceland visitor's vocabulary. Reece even goes as far as stating that many fans might be offended if religious terminology was used in relation to their visits to the site. Reece argues that fans often do not

<sup>159</sup> Frijhoff, *Heiligen, idolen, iconen*, 20-21, 51, 80-81.

<sup>160</sup> Christine King, 'His truth goes marching on: Elvis Presley and the Pilgrimage to Graceland', in: Ian Reader and Tony Walter ed., *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke 1993) 92-106, 98, 101-104.

<sup>161</sup> Reader, 'Introduction', 21.

<sup>162</sup> King, 'His truth goes marching on', 100.

<sup>163</sup> Reader, 'Introduction', 17, 21.

<sup>164</sup> Till, *Pop Cult*, 106.

<sup>165</sup> Idem, 119.

<sup>166</sup> Idem, 72, 184, 327.

interpret their devotion as 'religious', this is a label put onto it by the media and popular culture. Reece does distinguish a small group of people that do venerate Elvis's estate and visit it every year. However, he wants to make clear that the people who actually *worship* Elvis are often the exception, not the norm.<sup>167</sup>

The media not only play a grand role in the sacralization of a pilgrimage place, the media are also decisive for the identity of the pilgrims. Digance states that for secular pilgrims the 'online-aspect' is crucial. Especially for people who wish to go on a pilgrimage but do not have the means to go. For these people there is the opportunity to make 'cyber-pilgrimages'. Digance states that many cyber-pilgrims routinely undertake certain rituals on the web. Such rituals can be understood as the lighting of virtual candles or logging on only at a certain time of day. The Internet provides a means for the fans to 'do religion' online.<sup>168</sup> Moreover, the Internet can function as a place to meet like-minded people and form an online community. This virtual *communitas* forms an inexhaustible pool of social contact that one can enter at any time from one's own house. Chat-rooms, fora and other websites function as meeting places to share experiences of being a pilgrim. Till notes that the encounters on the Internet "can allow the cult member to be separated from reality" and can "replace their friendships and family and other relationships"<sup>169</sup> One could argue that these virtual meeting spots embody a different realm outside of the ordinary.

## 2.9 Reflection and preface to the next chapter

Based on this chapter, it becomes clear that there is not one universally accepted definition of the act of pilgrimage, neither for pilgrimages in the Christian context, nor for secular pilgrimages. Especially considering secular pilgrimages one needs to be careful not to apply a too broad definition of pilgrimage, which will render every journey a 'pilgrimage'. Still, to be able to study travels in a worldly context as pilgrimages, one needs a workable definition such as the definition of Digance. However, I agree with Porter and Margry that identify a journey as a pilgrimage there has to be a form of 'sacred quest'. In this thesis the most important focus will be on the *experiences* of Michael Jackson fans and pilgrims themselves. I will therefore mostly follow the approach of Dubisch, who argues that the pilgrim's own view is mostly important in the definition of pilgrimage. The Michael pilgrims are the ones that know best what sets their 'pilgrimage' journeys apart from their other journeys, for example in the field of tourism or recreation. In the following chapter, I will reflect on the virtual behavior of Michael Jackson fans. I will investigate in what way Michael Jackson influences the online behavior of his fans and how these fans make use of religious symbols and rituals to express their dedication to Jackson. Furthermore, I will research the interplay between religion and the Internet more profoundly.

<sup>167</sup> Gregory L. Reece, *Elvis Religion: The Cult of The King* (London 2006) 15, 185.

<sup>168</sup> Digance, 'Religious and secular pilgrimage', 44.

<sup>169</sup> Till, *Pop Cult*, 107.

### Chapter III: Virtual Soldiers of Love: the way Michael Jackson fans take action

“(My mission is) to give a beautiful gift back to Michael Jackson for the numerous gifts he gave to us, which added so much to our lives.”

Trisha Franklin, founder of ‘A Million Trees For Michael’<sup>170</sup>

#### 3.1 Online behavior

It is hard to exaggerate the influence of the World Wide Web on the daily lives of ardent Michael Jackson fans. To be able to understand the phenomenon of Michael Jackson ‘pilgrimage’, it is therefore important to understand the (virtual) context of the Michael Jackson fan. This chapter will focus on some expressions of the online *behavior* of Michael Jackson fans. There are countless examples of virtual fan-behavior and the examples I mention in this chapter only cover a fraction of what can be found in total online.<sup>171</sup> However, the examples of behavior I mention in this chapter are based on a purposeful selection to make clear in what way Michael Jackson affects those fans that regard him as a *guideline* for their everyday life. These ‘Virtual Soldiers of Love’ are not only inspired by Michael Jackson, but also feel the need to act on their inspiration and ‘make that change’. I will reflect on the way in which these fans portray Michael Jackson as a supernatural entity and how they make use of religious rituals and symbols to express their dedication. The question that underlies this chapter is the following: ‘In what way do Michael Jackson fans use religious symbols and rituals in their online behavior to express their dedication to Michael Jackson?’

The following section can generally be divided into two parts. First, I will reflect on the relationship between religion and the Internet. I will hereby elaborate on the act of ‘virtual pilgrimage’. In the second part, I will concentrate on the online behavior of Michael Jackson fans. In this part, I will first briefly touch upon some characterizations of ardent Michael Jackson fans, subsequently I will look into ‘Michael-iconography’. With the term ‘Michael-iconography’ I refer to self-edited images of Michael Jackson that fans display on social media. I will particularly zoom in on images that connect Michael Jackson to the supernatural. Secondly, I will focus on two rituals that have a religious connotation and are connected to Michael; namely the ritual of prayer and the ritual of lighting candles. Subsequently, I will refer to a few other websites that connect Michael Jackson with the divine. Finally, I will look into fan-based charitable initiatives that are founded in honor of Michael Jackson. I will here investigate in what way these charities are inspired by Michael Jackson.

#### 3.2 The Internet and religion

In 2004 the Pew Internet and American Life Project presented their findings on their research into faith online among Americans. They concluded that “64% of wired Americans have used the Internet for

<sup>170</sup> Facebook, ‘Info page of A Million Trees For Michael’, [https://www.facebook.com/amilliontreesformichael/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/amilliontreesformichael/info?tab=page_info), (accessed April 17, 2015).

<sup>171</sup> See for example the list of websites named on: Lorette C. Luzajic, ‘The Cult of Michael Jackson’, <https://extrememichaeljackson.wordpress.com/2010/02/04/the-cult-of-michael-jackson>, (accessed May 14, 2015).

spiritual or religious purposes".<sup>172</sup> With this research the Pew Research Center showed that religion was already a common aspect of the Internet at the start of the millennium. In the meantime, the Internet has grown and is taking hold of more and more households globally. This means that religion on the Net has also expanded. The upsurge of online religion has proved a major challenge for scholars of religion. The expansion of virtual religion for example is a difficult issue for theorists that linked secularization with developments in modernity and technology.<sup>173</sup> Online religion moreover opens up discussions about authenticity and forces scholars to rethink their definitions of religion. Are 'virtual religious behaviors and experiences' just as real as their physical equivalents? The rise of the Net and its relationship with religion has led to an increasing interest within academic research. This interest will probably keep growing, considering that the Internet will keep expanding and that the phenomenon of virtual religion is still in its infancy. In the next section, I will touch upon the relationship between the Internet and religion. I will first shortly study the way in which the Internet has affected the nature of religion. Next, I will reflect on the division between 'online religion' and 'religion online'.

As early as 1996, communication expert Stephen O'Leary predicted that the Internet would transform religion in revolutionary ways. O'Leary predicted a paradigm shift within the field of religion as great as the invention of printing and argued that the world should "anticipate that the propositional content and presentational form of religion in the electronic communities of the future will differ as greatly from its contemporary incarnations as the teachings of Jesus differ from the dialectical theology of the medieval Scholastics."<sup>174</sup> O'Leary criticized scholars that stuck to the notion that physical presence is prerequisite to the study of cultural interaction and that fieldwork – in the sense of 'real travel' - is the only source for ethnographic research. He warned his fellow scholars that they should be cautious of a too easy dismissal of online rituals and religious behavior as 'unreal' and insignificant outside of the 'virtual plane'.<sup>175</sup>

In the following years many scholars have joined O'Leary's predictions and also argued that with the rise of the Internet religion changes.<sup>176</sup> Religion and Internet expert Heidi Campbell however argues that the wild predictions of O'Leary did not quite come true. Campbell does not negate the great influence of the Internet on religion, but she slightly nuances O'Leary's prediction, especially concerning his statement that the Internet will change the whole *nature* of religion. Campbell argues that instead of reshaping the nature of religion in the twenty-first century, current research suggests that "the features of religion online closely mirror changes within the practice of religion in contemporary society."<sup>177</sup> Campbell considers that we now live in a post-secular age, where the tendency of people is towards

<sup>172</sup> Stewart M. Hoover, Lynn Schofield Clark and Lee Rainie, 'Faith Online', *The Pew Internet and American Life Project* (2004) 1.

<sup>173</sup> Christopher Helland, 'International Communication Association Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier: Developing Virtual Connections with Sacred Homelands', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12 (2007) 956–976, 956.

<sup>174</sup> Stephen D. O'Leary, 'Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996) 781-808, 793.

<sup>175</sup> *Idem*, 795.

<sup>176</sup> See for example: Rosalind I. J. Hackett, 'Religion and the Internet', *Diogenes* 53 (2006) 67-76; Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, 'Introduction', in: Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan ed., *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York 2004) 1-15.

<sup>177</sup> Heidi A. Campbell, 'Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 (2012) 64-93, 65.

'lived religion'. She continues that "this tendency toward lived religion, where traditional rituals and meanings become malleable and adaptable, is clearly mirrored within many forms of religious engagement online."<sup>178</sup> The Internet provides an ideal platform for people's changed spiritual needs.

According to religious scholar Rosalind Hackett, the Internet provides such a suitable medium for the practice of religion because of its very nature. Hackett argues that the 'liminal space' of the Internet responds to the hectic, modern, work-oriented lifestyles of today's people. It provides new possibilities of spiritual or religious experience and allows people to communicate and to connect in ever-widening networks of mutual interest. Moreover, the practice of religion has been facilitated by computer-mediated communication and cyberspace may even become a significant ritual location, as well as a tool or source of inspiration for offline religious devotions. In addition, Hackett argues that cyber-spirituality offers certain (alienated) social categories more of an attraction and affords less of a stigma than attending a formal place of worship.<sup>179</sup> An example of such a social category are fans, who often encounter misunderstanding. Expert of media and contemporary culture Joli Jensen argues that "the fan is characterized as (at least potentially) an obsessed loner, suffering from a disease of isolation, or a frenzied crowd member, suffering from a disease of contagion. In either case, the fan is seen as being irrational out of control, and prey to a number of external forces."<sup>180</sup> Based on the statement of Jensen one can understand how the Internet can provide a safe environment for fans to form groups of like-minded people. For this sub-group the Web offers the opportunity to connect and provides a solution for social isolation. The closeness that can arise within such online communities is something that should not be underestimated. This is for example made clear in O'Leary's research into online communities: "it was evident that many of the people whose conversations I had been observing on the net-work shared a more intimate connection than I had realized. They constituted (...) a community of people who gathered regularly to worship even though they had never seen each other face to face."<sup>181</sup>

The Internet is a medium that belongs to no one and at the same time to everyone. It is a mirror of all the needs and wishes within a global society, also concerning religion and spirituality: "People are going online to get information about, discuss, and argue about religious beliefs and practices, as well as to share their religious feelings and concerns, post prayer requests, chat, and even conduct and participate in online religious rituals."<sup>182</sup> To be able to study the different forms of online religious behavior sociologist Christopher Helland suggests a separation between 'religion online' and 'online religion'. 'Religion online' is information about religion *on* the Internet, the Internet hereby serves as a tool for the spread of information about religion. With regard to 'online religion' the Internet functions as an environment for the practice of religion. 'Online religion' is religious experience or practice *through* the Internet. Examples of online religion are online prayer, meditation or certain rituals such as the

<sup>178</sup> Campbell, 'Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society', 68.

<sup>179</sup> Rosalind I. J. Hackett, 'Religion and the Internet', *Diogenes* 2 (2006) 67-76, 68, 70.

<sup>180</sup> Joli Jensen, 'Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization', in: Lisa A. Lewis ed., *The Adoring Audience* (London 1992) 9-29, 13.

<sup>181</sup> Stephen D. O'Leary, 'Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996) 781-808, 794.

<sup>182</sup> Helland, 'International Communication', 957.

lighting of candles. The distinction of Helland helps scholars to research religion and the Internet.<sup>183</sup> However, one should note that Helland's distinction is not absolute and his distinctions are ideal types.

E-religion expert Anastasia Karaflogka makes a similar distinction between the Internet as a tool and as environment for religion. Karaflogka makes a distinction between religion *on* cyberspace and religion *in* cyberspace. Religion on cyberspace is the information uploaded by any religion, church, individual or organization, which also exists and can be reached in the off-line world. Religion in cyberspace, which Karaflogka calls *cyberreligion*, is a religious, spiritual or metaphysical expression which is created and exists exclusively in cyberspace, where it enjoys a considerable degree of 'virtual reality'.<sup>184</sup> Karaflogka stresses that the Internet is a powerful tool not only for religions but also for individuals: "Web pages have a double role. They are means of communication, and they are the signatures of particular agents who use powerful pictorial symbols in order to achieve maximum strengthening of their transmitted message."<sup>185</sup>

Even though the use of the Internet for religious purposes has become a common phenomenon, the issue of authenticity still sticks to the subject of 'religion and the Internet'. Cyber pilgrimage expert Connie Hill-Smith notices that "despite the profound and growing impact of the Internet on contemporary 'Western' thought, rationalistic, physically orientated understandings of reality and experience continue to undermine notions that the Internet might mediate religious experiences that are as 'genuine', meaningful, and transformative as offline 'equivalents'."<sup>186</sup> One phenomenon that has endeavored quite some discussion based on the discussion of authenticity is the ritual of 'virtual pilgrimage'.

### 3.3 Virtual pilgrimage

Virtual pilgrimage, also known as cyber pilgrimage, is one form of religious action online. A virtual pilgrimage offers the possibility to 'visit' or perform a pilgrimage to a sacred place without stepping outside of the comfort of one's own house. The 'travel' is therefore mostly characterized as a mental or spiritual journey. However, the participant *can* perform certain acts in his or her house for a better experience of the 'real-life' pilgrimage. There is a conceptual debate about the difference between cyber pilgrimage and virtual pilgrimage. Globally, cyber pilgrimage has a more narrow meaning and is specifically used to describe *pilgrimages* performed online.<sup>187</sup> The term 'virtual pilgrimage' refers to more forms of pilgrimage rituals, besides the pilgrimage itself.<sup>188</sup> Scholars that research the phenomenon of pilgrimage online often have their own preference of terminology, Hill-Smith and Helland for example

<sup>183</sup> Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, 'Introduction', in: Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan ed., *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York 2004) 1-15, 7.

<sup>184</sup> Anastasia Karaflogka, 'Religious Discourse and Cyberspace', *Religion* 32 (2002) 279-291, 284-285.

<sup>185</sup> Idem, 282.

<sup>186</sup> Connie Hill-Smith, 'Cyberpilgrimage: The (Virtual) Reality of Online Pilgrimage Experience', *Religion Compass* 5 (2011) 236-246, 236.

<sup>187</sup> One such example is the virtual pilgrimage that is offered at the Lourdes official website. The website has made it possible for the pilgrim to experience the 'real pilgrimage' with his or her senses, by showing clear visuals of important places in Lourdes such as the Grotto rock or the holy water and playing music similar to that in Lourdes. See: Lourdesvolunteers, 'Virtual Pilgrimage', <http://lourdesvolunteers.org/virtual-pilgrimage/>, (accessed May 7, 2015).

<sup>188</sup> See for an elaboration: Connie Hill-Smith, 'Cyberpilgrimage: The (Virtual) Reality of Online Pilgrimage Experience', *Religion Compass* 5 (2011) 236-246.

prefer the term 'cyber-pilgrimage', whilst scholar and pilgrimage expert Mark MacWilliams refers to 'virtual pilgrimage'. Others use the terms interchangeably.<sup>189</sup> Pilgrimage expert Paul Post chooses the term 'virtual pilgrimage' and applies a very broad definition of this ritual. He argues that 'virtual pilgrimages' can consist of online reconstructions of *real life* pilgrimages, looking up webpages with photographs and text presentation from and about pilgrim sites, following the blogs of pilgrims, and 'walking' certain parts of pilgrimages via Google Street View.<sup>190</sup> Hill-Smith also stresses the diversity of this online ritual, that varies hugely in "scale, complexity, content, design and purpose."<sup>191</sup> In this part, I will use the term 'virtual pilgrimage' and refer herewith to the broad online practices that have to do with pilgrimages.

In the act of virtual pilgrimage the distinction between religion online and online religion is not absolute. Since virtual pilgrimage is a ritual in which one can participate, whilst getting information about a certain religion. Virtual pilgrimages can thus be regarded as both religion online and online religion. Therefore, the distinction made by Karaflogka between 'religion on cyberspace' and 'cyberreligion' is a more fruitful one. The ritual of virtual pilgrimage is namely both initiated by church institutions that also exist in the offline world and initiated by online communities or individuals that do not have a doppelganger in the physical world because they belong for example to cyber religious movements.<sup>192</sup>

One of the returning problems concerning virtual pilgrimages in the academic field is the notion of 'authenticity'. Is a virtual pilgrimage equal to a physical pilgrimage or is it a shadow of 'the real thing'? Virtual pilgrimage blurs traditional pilgrimage terminology. MacWilliams argues that the Turners' popular definition of pilgrimage as 'the center out there' is difficult to apply to virtual pilgrimages. Does the virtual pilgrim enter into a new realm that is distant from his 'known' surroundings when he links to a virtual pilgrimage site? MacWilliams considers that a pilgrimage is as much an act of the mind as it is an act of the body. In this sense a virtual pilgrimage can be as spiritually powerful and meaningful to believers as actual ones.<sup>193</sup> Post agrees with MacWilliams and argues that in a way virtual pilgrimages have a long tradition in the form of spiritual, mental pilgrimages where monks 'traveled' to Jerusalem. Yet, Post argues that no matter how refined the online pilgrimage sites may be, eventually the virtual ritual only becomes a lived ritual when the person behind the computer screen turns it into acts in his daily life.<sup>194</sup> Hill-Smith sees as the source of the authenticity discussion the general attitude within pilgrimage research that pilgrimages continue to be associated primarily with physical journeys, physical suffering and physical destination. In this sense virtual pilgrimages cannot be acknowledged as 'real' pilgrimages nor as meaningful expressions of pilgrimage traditions. However, Hill-Smith warns scholars not to be too quick with their dismissal, since the Internet is an ever growing force.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Paul Post, 'Ritual Criticism: Een actuele verkenning van kritische reflectie ten aanzien van ritueel, met bijzondere aandacht voor e-ritueel en cyberpilgrimage', *Jaarboek voor liturgieonderzoek* 29 (2013) 173-199, 192-193; Linda K. Davidson and David M. Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland: an Encyclopedia, Volume 1* (California 2002) 134.

<sup>190</sup> Post, 'Ritual Criticism', 198.

<sup>191</sup> Hill-Smith, 'Cyberpilgrimage', 243.

<sup>192</sup> Karaflogka, 'Religious Discourse and Cyberspace', 284.

<sup>193</sup> Mark MacWilliams, 'Virtual Pilgrimage to Ireland's Croagh Patrick', in: Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan ed., *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York 2004) 223-238, 223-224.

<sup>194</sup> Post, 'Ritual Criticism', 198.

<sup>195</sup> Hill-Smith, 'Cyberpilgrimage', 236, 243.

MacWilliams agrees with Hill-Smith and argues that virtual pilgrimages are important for understanding new ways of being spiritual in the postmodern world. He argues that the virtual pilgrimage has changed the way people 'do' religion.<sup>196</sup> Helland observes this phenomenon and argues that, legitimate or not, the virtual pilgrimage is a well-known, popular ritual that has attracted the attention of people in different religious traditions.<sup>197</sup>

In the next part, it will become clear that the Internet provides a great space for Michael Jackson fans to express their dedication to Michael. I have chosen to reflect on three types of online action: first, the display of religious Michael-iconography on the medium of Facebook, second, the online rituals of prayer and the lighting of online candles and thirdly fan-based charitable initiatives in honor of Michael Jackson. Before I examine these three examples of virtual behavior, I will briefly look into the way in which Michael Jackson fans portray themselves.

### 3.4 Michael Jackson fans: an army of love

I opened this chapter with the title 'Virtual Soldiers of Love'. The metaphor of 'soldiers' or 'army' is a recurring theme in the vocabulary of Michael Jackson fans. With this term the fans refer to a statement of Michael Jackson himself, who referred to his fans as a global family and his 'army, soldiers of love' in a speech at his 45<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration.<sup>198</sup> The titles 'army of love' and 'global family' imply that Michael Jackson fans are part of a global brotherhood that is fighting for or against something.<sup>199</sup> Usually the reference of soldiers or army is connected to the global endeavor of creating peace and love on earth.<sup>200</sup> The 'battle' for love recurs often in fan comments, who will regularly end or start with: 'it's all for L.O.V.E', a quote that was frequently expressed by Michael Jackson himself.<sup>201</sup> The term 'soldiers of love' is reminiscent of the New Testament, in which the faithful followers of Jesus Christ are presented as

<sup>196</sup> MacWilliams, 'Virtual Pilgrimage to Ireland's Croagh Patrick', 224; MacWilliams, 'Virtual Pilgrimages on the Internet', 319.

<sup>197</sup> See for example the study of Christopher Helland into Hindu virtual pilgrimages: Helland, 'International Communication'. See moreover the virtual hajj and pilgrimage to Santiago: Beliefnet, 'The hajj pilgrimage to Mecca', <http://www.beliefnet.com/religion/islam/hajj/>, (accessed May 12, 2015); Cyberpilgrims.blogspot, 'Cyber Pilgrimage To Santiago', <http://cyberpilgrims.blogspot.nl/>, (accessed May 13, 2015).

<sup>198</sup> Michael Jackson Tribute Project, 'Michael's 45<sup>th</sup> Birthday Party Speech', [http://www.michaeljacksontributeportrait.com/article.php?article\\_id=430](http://www.michaeljacksontributeportrait.com/article.php?article_id=430), (accessed May 7, 2015).

<sup>199</sup> The notion of being part of a global Michael family is made clear by fans when co-fans for example refer to each other as 'sister' or 'brother' and greet their co-fans communally as 'MJ family'. See for example the comment of Elizabeth Michelle Billeaudeau on: Michael Jackson Chosen Voices, 'About', <http://michaeljacksonchosenvoices.com/sample-page/>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>200</sup> See for example: Facebook, 'This Is Michael Jackson's Army And We Are MJs Soldiers Of Love', [https://www.facebook.com/pages/This-Is-Michael-Jacksons-Army-and-We-Are-MJs-Soldiers-Of-Love/151833601502937?sk=info&tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/pages/This-Is-Michael-Jacksons-Army-and-We-Are-MJs-Soldiers-Of-Love/151833601502937?sk=info&tab=page_info), (accessed April 23, 2015); Major Love Prayer, 'Michael Jacksons army of love', <http://www.majorloveprayer.org/2010/11/michael-jacksons-army-of-love-video-is.html>, (accessed April 23, 2015); Michael Jackson's soldiers of love, 'MJ quotes', <http://mjsarmyoflove.npage.de/mj-in-his-own-words/mj-quotes.html>, (accessed June 15, 2015).

<sup>201</sup> See for example: Brigitte Bloemen, Marina Dobler, Miriam Lohr and Sonja Winterholler ed., *It's all about L.O.V.E.* (Norderstedt 2010); Facebook, 'It's all for L.O.V.E – Michael Jackson', <https://www.facebook.com/all.for.Love.MJ>, (accessed April 29, 2015); Twitter, 'It's all for L.O.V.E', [https://twitter.com/be\\_lie\\_vers](https://twitter.com/be_lie_vers), (accessed April 29, 2015); Michael Jackson Tribute, 'Michael Jackson Quotes', <https://love4mj.wordpress.com/michael-jackson-quotes-2/>, (accessed April 29, 2015).

'soldiers'.<sup>202</sup> It is not clear whether Jackson's fans are aware of this. For Michael Jackson the connection must have been obvious, since he grew up in a Jehovah's Witness family.

It seems thus that there is a special bond between Michael Jackson fans. If there is indeed an exclusive connection, the question arises whether this connection is purely based on the shared love for Michael Jackson or whether there is something 'special' about Michael Jackson fans themselves. Are 'devout' Michael fans a certain type of people? One story of five German Michael fans seems to imply this: "We all became Michael Jackson fans in the early 1990's and we became friends through Michael's music in the mid 90's (...) Getting to know each other really changed our lives. It soon grew into something more than just sharing the passion and commitment for Michael Jackson. We realized how similar we were to each other, how we had the same outlook on life, the same interests, the same goals."<sup>203</sup> Unfortunately the fans do not specify these interests or goals, however they do state that "Like no other artist, Michael influenced our lives. The values that he stood for have shaped our outlook on life more than many relatives, teachers or friends have."<sup>204</sup> Michael fan and founder of the nonprofit organization 'A Million trees for Michael' Trisha Franklin argues the same: "There is a special bond between true MJ fans who understood Michael's real message and want to continue on with his work to 'heal the world and make it a better place', those who I always say have 'beautiful MJ hearts'. As Michael always said, 'Love each other because we are all One' and that sure seems to be true with our MJ Family."<sup>205</sup>

American psychologist and Michael Jackson pilgrim Karen Moriarty has written a book about Michael Jackson in which she also dedicates a section to Michael Jackson fans. Moriarty also refers to Michael fans as 'soldiers of love' and states that there is a special connection between Michael Jackson fans throughout the world: "People (MJ fans) from foreign countries freely embrace and hold hands with each other (...) strangers hug each other, exchange their contact numbers and continue these relationships."<sup>206</sup> However, Moriarty also notices a power dimension that can cause conflicts and competition between certain fans: "There are the 'old' fans, those who have followed him since his childhood, throughout his roller-coaster ride of a life; they pride themselves in being as loyal as the family dog. Then there are the 'new' fans, who fell in love with Michael Jackson after his passing. (...) who are the most loyal, most dedicated to Michael Jackson? His old and new fans will occasionally argue the point, but they are united in their unequivocal admiration of him."<sup>207</sup>

The power conflict between 'old' and 'new' fans is not the only friction that Michael Jackson fans encounter. It seems that no matter how many Michael Jackson fans there are, there are equal numbers so-called 'Michael Haters'. Many Michael Jackson fans are subject to incomprehension from either their

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<sup>202</sup> 'Timothy' 2:3, *New Living Translation*.

<sup>203</sup> Lisa Hochmuth, Heike Abter, Carina Zieroth, Jessica Loose and Miriam Lohr, 'A story of a very special friendship', in: Brigitte Bloemen, Marina Dobler, Miriam Lohr and Sonja Winterholler ed., *It's all about L.O.V.E.* (Norderstedt 2010) 106-203, 106.

<sup>204</sup> *Idem*, 202.

<sup>205</sup> Facebook, 'A Million Trees for Michael', <https://www.facebook.com/amilliontreesformichael/posts/10152661542282888>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>206</sup> Karen Moriarty, *Defending a King: His Life & Legacy* (Ponte Vedra Beach 2012), 420.

<sup>207</sup> *Idem*.

surroundings or online.<sup>208</sup> As stated earlier the life of Michael Jackson was characterized by greatness but also by mystery and controversy. Especially Michael's alleged child-abuse has led to an anti-Michael Jackson movement and Michael Haters often ventilate their anger online against Michael Jackson or his fans. Besides 'fighting' for the legacy of Michael Jackson, his innocence and his message of love, ardent Michael Jackson fans thus also have to fight against these 'Haters'. Moreover Michael fans have to defend *themselves* for being Michael Jackson fans. In her monthly *Michael Messages* that are a feature of the website *innermichael.com* reverend Barbara Kaufmann gives Michael fans advice about what to do about 'Haters'. She states that: "Explaining or educating them (Michael Haters) about Michael is worth your effort only ONCE. When that doesn't work, STOP!" Concerning the content of this 'education' Kaufmann gives as example: "I am sorry your life is not what you want it to be. I am sorry that you never got to hear about the real Michael. I'm sorry you were manipulated and lied to. It's really sad. For in being misled, you missed something really important. We are a worldwide family of friends (...) We found that Michael's music has lifted us out of our feelings of depression and despair. His messages have given us hope for a brighter future. His music has taught us how to walk in the world and be better people, and better liked by everyone. (...) If you ever decide to make a change come back and try us again."<sup>209</sup>

Michael Jackson fans not only describe themselves as soldiers of Michael Jackson, they are actually taking action and participate in several acts motivated out of their love for Jackson. In the next part, I will reflect on three types of online action, starting with a description of the display of 'Michael-iconography' on Facebook.

### 3.5 'Michael-iconography'

Social media offer Michael Jackson fans a great platform for the exhibition of Michael Jackson images. Especially Facebook and Twitter are places where innumerable pictures of Michael Jackson are displayed. These pictures vary from photographs of Michael of all ages to self-made drawings of fans. This section will focus on self-edited themed images of Michael Jackson which I call 'Michael-iconography'. These images are characterized by existing photographs of Michael Jackson that fans have adapted to fit certain themes, special events or messages. In this section I will mainly focus on the images that fans display on Facebook that make use of religious symbolism or present Michael Jackson as a supernatural entity. Besides showing some examples of fan-made 'Michael-iconography', I will briefly focus on two artists and fans that have been inspired by Michael Jackson, namely David Nordahl and David LaChapelle.

Before I present a few examples of the spiritual 'Michael-iconography', I will first touch upon the medium of Facebook and Michael Jackson. I have chosen to research the medium of Facebook because it is a convenient, accessible medium. Furthermore, considering the space and goal of my research, I deem the research of one medium enough for the purpose of this chapter. This section is not meant to present the out comings of a quantitative research, but to provide an insight into the influence of Michael Jackson on his fans based on strategic sampling.

<sup>208</sup> See for example the blog message that describes the feud of Michael fans vs Michael haters: MJfacts, 'Inside The Cult Of Michael Jackson', <http://www.mjfacts.com/inside-cult-michael-jackson/>, (accessed May 14, 2015).

<sup>209</sup> Barbara Kaufmann, 'What to do about 'Haters'?', *Inner Michael Messages* (April 23, 2015).

### 3.6 Facebook and Michael Jackson

In November 2009 the social media analytics company Sysomos analyzed nearly 600.000 Facebook Pages to investigate usage patterns. This was the first large-scale study of Facebook Pages, reporting on different aspects of pages including popularity, amount of content posted, number of fans, and categories.<sup>210</sup> At the time of this research Michael Jackson was the most popular page on Facebook with 10 million fans. Michael Jackson had two Facebook pages in the top 10 of Facebook pages which comprised in total more than fourteen million fans. These pages were 'Michael Jackson' and 'R.I.P Michael Jackson (We Miss You)'. Sysomos moreover investigated the medium of YouTube and concluded that worldwide Michael Jackson and health care were the two most talked about topics on YouTube, as measured by tags on uploaded videos.<sup>211</sup> In the meantime Facebook has grown in popularity and the Facebook page of 'Michael Jackson' now comprises more than 75 million fans.<sup>212</sup>

There are innumerable pages dedicated to Michael Jackson on Facebook and some of these pages have a spiritual connotation. When one enters in the reference bar for example the words 'Michael Jackson God' there are more than 70 hits.<sup>213</sup> The three most popular pages are 'MichaelJacksonMessengerGod' which has 6.109 likes, 'Michael Jackson is Our God <3' with 5.166 likes, and 'Michael Jackson Is GOD' which has 4.551 likes.<sup>214</sup> If one types in the words 'angel Michael Jackson' one will get 21 hits.<sup>215</sup> Here the two most popular pages are 'Our Angel Michael Jackson we Love you so much' with 5416 likes and 'Michael Jackson our beautiful angel' with 5066 likes.<sup>216</sup> Interestingly enough the words 'Michael Jackson divine' only give 5 hits, with as most popular pages 'Michael Jackson the Divine', which has 5.623 likes and 'Divine Michael Jackson', with 2.402 likes.<sup>217</sup> Furthermore, there are many Facebook accounts that make reference to Michael's nickname 'The King of Pop'. One example is

<sup>210</sup> Sysomos, 'Inside Facebook Pages', <http://sysomos.com/insidefacebook/>, (accessed May 12, 2015).

<sup>211</sup> MarketingProfs, 'How Consumers, Bloggers Use YouTube', <http://www.marketingprofs.com/charts/2010/3433/how-consumers-bloggers-use-youtube>, (accessed May 12, 2015).

<sup>212</sup> Facebook, 'Michael Jackson', <https://www.facebook.com/michaeljackson>, (accessed May 14, 2015).

<sup>213</sup> Facebook, 'Search Results Michael Jackson God', <https://www.facebook.com/search/results/?init=quick&q=Michael%20Jackson%20is%20GOD&tas=0.2090056473389268>, (accessed May 14, 2015).

<sup>214</sup> Facebook, 'MichaelJacksonMessengerGod', <https://www.facebook.com/MichaelJacksonMessengerofGod?Fref=ts>, (accessed May 14, 2015); Facebook, 'Michael Jackson Is Our God <3', <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Michael-Jackson-Is-Our-God-3/166057224477?fref=ts>, (accessed May 14, 2015); Facebook, 'Michael Jackson Is GOD', <https://www.facebook.com/MichaelJacksonIsGod?fref=ts>, (accessed May 14, 2015).

<sup>215</sup> Facebook, 'Search Results angel Michael Jackson', <https://www.facebook.com/search/results/?init=quick&q=angel%20Michael%20Jackson&tas=0.259337175708543>, (accessed May 18, 2015).

<sup>216</sup> Facebook, 'Our Angel Michael Jackson we Love you so much', <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Our-Angel-Michael-Jackson-we-Love-you-so-much/287006487993439?ref=ts&fref=ts>, (accessed May 12, 2015); Facebook, 'Michael Jackson our beautiful angel', <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Michael-Jackson-our-beautiful-angel/794315577289121?Sk=timeline>, (accessed May 12, 2015).

<sup>217</sup> Facebook, 'Michael Jackson The Divine', <https://www.facebook.com/MichaelJacksonTheDivine?fref=ts>, (accessed May 14, 2015); Facebook, 'Divine Michael Jackson', <https://www.facebook.com/pages/DIVINE-Michael-Jackson/267787909900442?fref=ts>, (accessed May 14, 2015).

the Facebook page 'Michael Jackson The King Of Everything' which has 48.902 likes and a profile picture of Michael Jackson as an angel and Michael Jackson in heaven.<sup>218</sup>

### 3.7 Michael Jackson and the iconography of saints, gods and angels

Most ardent Michael fans exhibit at least a few photographs of Michael Jackson on their Facebook accounts. However, the act of self-editing pictures of Michael Jackson is also a striking feature on the Facebook pages of Michael Jackson fans. This 'Michael-iconography' shows in how far Michael Jackson is connected to and merged into the daily lives of his fans, connecting him to almost everything that occupies them. The most common form of 'Michael-iconography' are images that connect Michael to the holidays. These embody all the festive events throughout the calendar year such as Christmas and Halloween. See for example image 3.1.<sup>219</sup> Another popular theme within 'Michael-iconography' is the 'Heal the World' topic, referring to Michael Jackson's like-named song (1991). The Heal the World theme portrays Michael Jackson in his role as the great humanitarian. The iconography is characterized by Michael Jackson standing next to the earth. Sometimes in a 'prayer-position' (image 3.2), sometimes with his arms wide open.<sup>220</sup>



Left: Image 3.1. Jackson connected to Christmas. Right: Image 3.2. Jackson connected to the 'Heal the World' theme.

During his lifetime Michael Jackson mostly donated to charities connected to nature, children and animals in his mission to 'make the world a better place'. Correspondingly Michael Jackson is often connected to nature, the seasons, and animals on images.<sup>221</sup>

<sup>218</sup> Facebook, 'Michael Jackson The King Of Everything', <https://www.facebook.com/pages/%E0%AE%9C%E0%AE%9C-MICHAEL-JACKSONTHE-KING-OF-EVERYTHING-%E0%AE%9C%E0%AE%9C/197700123600244?sk=timeline>, (accessed May 12, 2015).

<sup>219</sup> Image 3.1: Facebook, 'Cover photo Ilona Szabó', <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=615335598531093&set=a.255203674544289.63130.100001639756291&type=3&theater>, (accessed April 22, 2015). See Appendix A for more examples.

<sup>220</sup> Image 3.2: Facebook, 'Make That Change, For Us, And For Michael', <https://www.facebook.com/160077604191509/photos/pb.160077604191509.-2207520000.1429609230./310800049119263/?type=3&theater>, (accessed April 22, 2015). See Appendix A for more examples.

<sup>221</sup> See Appendix A for examples.

The category of 'Michael-iconography' that I am mostly interested in are images of fans that connect Michael Jackson to the supernatural. It is difficult to make an estimation of the number of fans that exhibit this type of 'Michael-iconography' on Facebook. As stated before, Michael Jackson has more than 75 million fans on Facebook. To be able to 'trace' the amount of fans that connect Michael Jackson to the supernatural, one needs a company like Sysomos to specifically investigate the behavior of Michael Jackson fans on Facebook connected to the display of religious images of Michael Jackson. However, as shown in the above there are several Michael Jackson pages that explicitly make reference to Michael Jackson and the supernatural in their Facebook names. Here, I will focus on six Facebook pages dedicated to Michael Jackson that are explicitly religiously/spiritually affiliated and investigate in what way these pages portray images of Michael Jackson in connection with religious symbolism. The Facebook pages that I will focus on are: 'Michael Jackson Is Our God <3' (5.166 likes), 'MichaelJacksonMessengerGod' (6.120 likes), 'The Anointed Michael Followers' (534 likes), 'Michael's Spirit' (1.200 likes), 'Religion of Love' (137 likes) and 'Our Angel Michael Jackson we Love you so much' (5.416 likes).<sup>222</sup>

All six Facebook pages that I have chosen explicitly refer in some way to the supernatural in relation to Michael Jackson. This may already be in the name of the Facebook page or be stated on the info page of the Facebook account. Not all accounts display their religious motivation, but some do. For example the info page of 'Michael's spirit' states: "This page is a love story...from the hearts, healed, inspired, and loved by Michael. The spirit of his love continues to shine light in dark places and with the grace of God we vow to continue to help and heal the world beginning with ourselves. Michael believed that love could heal the world. So here we begin, believing for an adventure with nothing to be afraid of. We love you Michael and your name is written upon our hearts forever (...) With L.O.V.E."<sup>223</sup> The Facebook page of 'The Anointed Michael Followers' has as its description: "The Anointed MICHAEL Followers Do Not necessarily believe in the concept of a God-head responsible for the manifestation of the Creation and Maintenance of Creation. We believe that the universe however keeps changing due to interactions between matter and energy in the course of time and governed by laws of nature with no necessity of a coordinator/regulator."<sup>224</sup>

All six Facebook pages have posted pictures of Michael Jackson beneath their 'photo tab'. These pictures mostly consist of a mixture of photographs and self-edited images. All of the Facebook pages furthermore display religious 'Michael-iconography'. I will here give a few examples of the different images that the different Facebook accounts demonstrate. Regarding the six accounts, roughly a

<sup>222</sup> Facebook, 'Our Angel Michael Jackson we Love you so much', <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Our-Angel-Michael-Jackson-we-Love-you-so-much/287006487993439?ref=ts&fref=ts>, (accessed May 12, 2015); Facebook, 'Michael Jackson Is Our God <3', <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Michael-Jackson-Is-Our-God-3/166057224477?fref=ts>, (accessed May 12, 2015); Facebook, 'The Anointed Michael Followers', <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Anointed-Michael-Followers/110744661852?fref=ts>, (accessed May 14, 2015); Facebook, 'Michael's Spirit', <https://www.facebook.com/Michaelsweetspirit/timeline>, (accessed May 12, 2015); Facebook, 'MichaelJacksonMessengerofGod', <https://www.facebook.com/MichaelJacksonMessengerofGod?fref=ts>, (accessed May 14, 2015); Facebook, 'Religion of love', <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Religion-of-love/154389964625543?sk=timeline>, (accessed May 12, 2015).

<sup>223</sup> Facebook, 'Info page of Michael's Spirit', <https://www.facebook.com/Michaelsweetspirit/info?tab=pageinfo>, (accessed May 14, 2015).

<sup>224</sup> Facebook, 'Info page of The Anointed Michael Followers', [https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Anointed-Michael-Followers/110744661852?sk=info&tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Anointed-Michael-Followers/110744661852?sk=info&tab=page_info), (accessed May 14, 2015).

separation can be made between images that show Michael Jackson as a supernatural entity with healing powers and images that show Michael Jackson as the one being blessed. One example that shows the healing power of Michael is connected to the theme of 'Heal the World'.



From left to right: Image 3.3. Jackson connected to the 'Heal the World' theme, holding the earth. Image 3.4. Jackson portrayed in a lotus position, meditating above the earth. Image 3.5. Jackson portrayed in a prayer position next to the earth.

On the Facebook page of 'Our Angel Michael we Love you so much' (image 3.3) Michael is shown in space, holding the earth with his eyes closed.<sup>225</sup> There is a heart shaped light that is located at the same place of Michael's own heart that radiates white light through the earth. Herewith is referred to the mission of Michael Jackson to 'Heal the World with L.O.V.E'. At the rim of the picture is stated 'Our Angel Michael Jackson page'. Another picture that can be linked to the same theme is an image on the Facebook page of 'Religion of Love' (image 3.4). This image shows Michael Jackson floating above the earth in a meditating position, wearing a Buddhist monks gown. Michael is situated between the moon and the earth. He is watching over the earth, probably meditating for its well-being. 'Religion of Love' also post another image of this theme. This image shows Michael Jackson in a prayer position next to the earth with a circle of light surrounding his head (image 3.5).<sup>226</sup>

Michael is not only portrayed as watching over the earth. The Facebook page 'Our Angel Michael Jackson we Love you so much' shows an example where Michael is watching over a woman (image 3.6). This image shows a women with her eyes closed, holding a bowl of light that radiates into a circle. Michael stands behind her and rests his hands on her shoulders. Michael is portrayed with angel wings and is somewhat faded into the background.<sup>227</sup> The portrayal of Michael as an angel is a very popular

<sup>225</sup> Image 3.3: Facebook, 'Profile picture of Our Angel Michael we Love you so much', <https://www.facebook.com/287006487993439/photos/a.287009227993165.85535.287006487993439/749746988386051/?type=1&theater>, (accessed May 14, 2015).

<sup>226</sup> Images 3.4 and 3.5: Facebook, 'Photos of Religion of Love', [https://www.facebook.com/pages/Religion-of-love/154389964625543?sk=photos\\_stream](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Religion-of-love/154389964625543?sk=photos_stream), (accessed May 14, 2015).

<sup>227</sup> Image 3.6: Facebook, 'Photos of Our Angel Michael Jackson we Love you so much', [https://www.facebook.com/287006487993439/photos/pb.287006487993439.-2207520000.1431616191./961627120531369/?type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent-ams.xx.fbcdn.net%2Fphotos-xap1%2Fv%2Ft1.0-9%2F10410739\\_961627120531369\\_3742961662970804354\\_n.jpg%3Foh%3Dcadd3368be917ace77e57f445bf25cd7%26oe%3D55C44CD0&size=431%2C599&fbid=961627120531369](https://www.facebook.com/287006487993439/photos/pb.287006487993439.-2207520000.1431616191./961627120531369/?type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent-ams.xx.fbcdn.net%2Fphotos-xap1%2Fv%2Ft1.0-9%2F10410739_961627120531369_3742961662970804354_n.jpg%3Foh%3Dcadd3368be917ace77e57f445bf25cd7%26oe%3D55C44CD0&size=431%2C599&fbid=961627120531369), (accessed May 14, 2015).

theme and all six accounts have several pictures that display Michael as an angel. Two examples are images 3.7 and 3.8, that come from the pages of 'MichaelJacksonMessengerGod' and 'Michael's Spirit'.<sup>228</sup> Image 3.7 shows Michael with his arms wide open. It looks as if he is screaming and a beam of light shoots from his heart. One could also argue that the beam of light is shooting *into* Jackson's heart. With this iconography the picture is reminiscent of the iconography that is used to portray the saint Teresa of Ávila, who had mystical experiences of the presence of Jesus. During one such experience she was visited by an angel that thrust a long spear of gold into her heart, with as most famous example the statue of Bernini in the Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. In this sense the image could be interpreted as Michael being 'hit' by the holy spirit. Image 3.8 portrays Michael in a more humble, calm way as a kneeling angel.



From left to right: Image 3.6. Jackson as an angel behind a woman. Image 3.7. Jackson as an angel portrayed with a beam of light. Image 3.8. Jackson portrayed as a kneeling angel.

The above named pictures show Michael Jackson as an independent entity and source of healing power. However, there are also images that project Michael as the one being watched over or blessed. One example is the portrayal of Michael as blessed by Christ. One such example is image 3.9, that is found on the Facebook page of 'MichaelJacksonMessengerGod'.<sup>229</sup> This image shows Michael with his eyes closed and his arms open. Jesus is standing next to him and lays his hand on Michael's head. The title reads: 'Michael Jackson Messenger of God'. Image 3.10 is found on the Facebook page of 'Michael Jackson is our God <3'. This image portrays Jesus hugging Michael.<sup>230</sup> The title reads: 'You Are Not Alone, I Am Here

<sup>228</sup> Image 3.7: Facebook, 'Photos of MichaelJacksonMessengerGod', [https://www.facebook.com/MichaelJacksonMessengerofGod/photos/pb.406098299450552.-2207520000.1431602455./445085602218488/?type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fcontent-ams.xx.fbcdn.net%2Fphotos-xaf1%2Fv%2Ft1.0-9%2F481855\\_445085602218488\\_1003384965\\_n.jpg%3Foh%3Da96c3909bf0d06e077f7755ad4088aec%26oe%3D55CC313E&size=960%2C853&fbid=445085602218488m](https://www.facebook.com/MichaelJacksonMessengerofGod/photos/pb.406098299450552.-2207520000.1431602455./445085602218488/?type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fcontent-ams.xx.fbcdn.net%2Fphotos-xaf1%2Fv%2Ft1.0-9%2F481855_445085602218488_1003384965_n.jpg%3Foh%3Da96c3909bf0d06e077f7755ad4088aec%26oe%3D55CC313E&size=960%2C853&fbid=445085602218488m), (accessed May 14, 2015); Image 3.8: Facebook, 'Photos of Michael's Spirit', <https://www.facebook.com/Michaelsweetspirit/photos/pb.173932489339031.-2207520000.1436801611./231931970205749/?type=3&theater>, (accessed May 18, 2015).

<sup>229</sup> Image 3.9: Facebook, 'Profile picture of MichaelJacksonMessengerGod', <https://www.facebook.com/MichaelJacksonMessengerofGod/photos/a.406106772783038.100864.40609829945052/466902390036809/?type=1&theater>, (accessed May 14, 2015).

<sup>230</sup> Image 3.10: Facebook, 'Photos of Michael Jackson is our God <3', <https://www.facebook.com/166057224477/photos/pb.166057224477.-2207520000.1431603584./166060189477/?type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fcontent-ams.xx.fbcdn.net%2Fphotos-xpa1%2Fv%2Ft1.0-9%2F19106031660601894772959423n.jpg%3Foh%3Foh%3D>

With You'. With this sentence is referred to the song 'You Are Not Alone' of Michael Jackson (1995). The hug seems to be situated in heaven, since the men are hugging above the clouds. Image 3.11 also suggests that Michael Jackson has entered heaven.<sup>231</sup> This picture is also found on the Facebook page of 'Michael Jackson is Our God <3'. The image shows Michael ascending to Heaven. Besides him two angels lead the way. The gate of heaven is called 'Neverland'.<sup>232</sup>



From left to right: Image 3.9. Jackson blessed by Jesus. Image 3.10. Jackson and Jesus hugging. Image 3.11. Jackson entering the gate of heaven.

According to Rebecca Haughey and Heidi Campbell Michael Jackson serves as a prime example of a celebrity who has been reconstructed by fans to be a modern-day martyr.<sup>233</sup> In their research on messages that Michael Jackson fans posted in the aftermath of Jackson's death on *memories.michaeljackson.com* Haughey and Campbell conclude that "the described reconstructions of the celebrity (Michael Jackson) draw heavily from Christian beliefs in heaven, the revolutionary love of Christ and the infiltration of the Holy Spirit (...) fans draw attention to and celebrate his life, his message, his virtues and his legacy, and thence crown Jackson with saintly titles. Consequently, he emerges as a genuine religious idol, a shining symbol of hope, love, guardianship, destiny and eternity to those who perceive him as such."<sup>234</sup>

The examples I have presented in the above agree with the conclusions of Haughey and Campbell. The majority of the images that are displayed on the six chosen Facebook accounts show Christian symbols. For example Michael is often portrayed in a prayer position with his eyes closed. Moreover, the most popular portrayal of Michael Jackson seems to be of an angel. Furthermore, Michael Jackson is connected to heaven and Jesus. However, the Facebook account 'Religion of Love' connects Michael to a broader spiritual frame. For example image 3.4 portrays Michael Jackson meditating above the earth in a lotus-position, which connects this image more to Buddhism than Christianity. 'Religion of Love' also explicitly claims that their groups is not bound to one particular religion on the info-page. Still,

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[3D1b7412268442b0ac971882a23515e207%26oe%3D55D01949&size=240%2C187&fbid=166060189477](https://www.facebook.com/michaeljacksonisourgod/photos/3D1b7412268442b0ac971882a23515e207%26oe%3D55D01949&size=240%2C187&fbid=166060189477), (accessed May 14, 2015).

<sup>231</sup> Facebook, 'Photos of Michael Jackson is our God <3'.

<sup>232</sup> See for a few examples of 'Michael-iconography' Appendix A.

<sup>233</sup> Rebecca Haughey and Heidi Campbell, 'Modern-day Martyrs: Fans' Online Reconstruction of Celebrities as Divine', in: Marie Gillespie, David Eric John Herbert and Anita Greenhill ed., *Social Media and Religious Change* (Berlin 2013) 103-120, 103.

<sup>234</sup> Idem, 115.

most spiritual images of 'Religion of Love' display Christian symbols. The page of 'The Anointed Michael Followers' explicitly refers to itself as a church.<sup>235</sup> However, they also apply a broad interpretation of faith as they state that: "We believe that Michael Jackson is an Angel trapped inside a human flesh. A Precious Treasure that God (or any high power you choose to believe in) gave us. Michael symbolizes purity, innocence, eternal childhood, unconditional love to animals and children, extraordinary talent, and great inspiration to hundreds and thousands of people around the world (...) Even though we're aware that he's physically human, the wholesome of his existence drives us to believe that he's spiritually divine."<sup>236</sup> It is not always clear whether the fans' intentions are serious or whether they make use of religious imagery/discourse in a way that has no connection to an actual religious affiliation. Especially the Facebook page 'Michael Jackson is our God <3' is a difficult issue, because this account also portrays a lot of pictures with 'funny remarks' that can clearly be interpreted as sarcastic or humorous. The most remarkable observation is how often Michael Jackson is portrayed as- or connected to angels. According to professor of Death Studies Tony Walter angels are manifest in contemporary popular culture.<sup>237</sup> In his research on the online mourning for British celebrity Jade Goody, Walter concludes that there was a prone tendency to connect Goody with angels. Goody was a reality-television personality mostly known for her participation on the Big Brother TV program. Goody was prognosed with cancer and her fight against the illness became a public event. A similar tendency can be found in the 'Michael-iconography'. However, it is not clear why this connection is made.

### 3.8 Michael Jackson as an inspiration for artists

Besides the realm of Facebook, Michael Jackson has inspired quite a few artists as a topic for their art.<sup>238</sup> For this section I have chosen two artists that have used Michael as an inspiration for their art, but also were great fans of him, namely David Nordahl and David LaChapelle. Nordahl and LaChapelle have not only portrayed Michael, but also defended him, sometimes through their art, sometimes in interviews.<sup>239</sup>

In his 2010 exhibition 'American Jesus', LaChapelle presented three near-life size photographs of Michael Jackson, connecting him to the Roman Catholic Church and showing explicit Christian iconography. In an interview about his exhibit LaChapelle comments: "I believe Michael in a sense is an American martyr. Martyrs are persecuted and Michael was persecuted. Michael was innocent and martyrs are innocent."<sup>240</sup> Image 3.12 shows two photographs of 'American Jesus'.<sup>241</sup> The first photograph shows a pieta which is called 'Hold me, Carry me boldly'. The pieta shows "a very fetching young man as Jesus, substituted for the traditional figure of Mary, holding a Jesus-Michael. The martyrs have become

<sup>235</sup> Facebook, 'The Anointed Michael Followers', <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Anointed-Michael-Followers/110744661852?fref=ts>, (accessed May 14, 2015).

<sup>236</sup> Profileengine, 'The Anointed Michael Followers', <http://profileengine.com/groups/profile/425207165/the-anointed-michael-followers?offset=60>, (accessed May 17, 2015).

<sup>237</sup> Tony Walter, 'Angels not souls: popular religion in the online mourning for British celebrity Jade Goody', *Religion* 41 (2011) 29-51, 29.

<sup>238</sup> See for example Jef Koons and Rusel Parish. Moreover see: Michaeljacksonart, 'Home', <http://www.Michaeljacksonart.com/index.php?sessionid=5f302b5ca9d685871e18e3f75ce6a86d>, (accessed May 7, 2015).

<sup>239</sup> See for a few more examples of Nordahl's and LaChapelle's art Appendix A.

<sup>240</sup> Amanda FitsSimons, 'David LaChapelle's New Roll', <http://www.wwd.com/eye/people/david-lachapelles-new-roll-3179421>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>241</sup> Oystermag, 'LaChapelle's American Jesus', <http://www.oystermag.com/lachapelles-american-jesus>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

interchangeable.”<sup>242</sup> The second picture is called ‘Archangel Michael: And No Message Could Have Been Any Clearer’. With this sentence, LaChapelle quotes the hit song of Michael Jackson ‘Man in the Mirror’ (1987). This photograph shows Michael as a saint throwing the devil down to Hell.<sup>243</sup>



Left: Image 3.12. Showing the two photographs of David LaChapelle ‘Hold me, Carry me boldly’ and ‘Archangel Michael: And No Message Could Have Been Any Clearer’ from the ‘American Jesus’ exhibition. Right: Image 3.13. The painting ‘The Knight – a Triptych’ by David Nordahl.

Painter David Nordahl was a good friend of Michael and his patron for the years of 1988-2005. Together, they created paintings and plans for amusement parks and attractions in Las Vegas. Many canvases that Nordahl created encapsulate Jackson's grandiose fantasies and fairy-tale worldview.<sup>244</sup> One of these is ‘The Knight’, a massive Triptych that shows Michael Jackson on all three panels. Michael is crowned and knighted in royal robes. The Center piece conveys a piece of the poem ‘Are You Listening?’ (1992) written by Michael Jackson: “I am the thinker, the thinking, the thought. I am the seeker, the seeking, the sought. I am the dewdrop, the sunshine, the storm. I am the phenomenon, the field, the form. I am the desert, the ocean, the sky. I am the Primeval Self in you and I Michael Jackson.”<sup>245</sup> In interviews Nordahl speaks highly of Michael Jackson and the good in him: “Michael spent a third of a billion dollars on helping children, paying for surgeries, building hospital wings, orphanages, a burn center and on and on and on. The good things he did he would never talk about them.”<sup>246</sup> Moreover Nordahl explains how inspired he was by Michael: “Sitting and talking to Michael I would look into his eyes and I could see for 1,000 miles. He had these most incredible eyes. They come off good on film, but nothing like in person. When you're actually sitting across there looking at him. Those eyes

<sup>242</sup> Layla Pedro, ‘Who’s Bad? The Kitsch Pop Surrealism of David LaChapelle’, [http://davidlachapelle.com/exhibitions/2010-07-13\\_paul-kasmin-gallery/press/idom/](http://davidlachapelle.com/exhibitions/2010-07-13_paul-kasmin-gallery/press/idom/), (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>243</sup> Idem.

<sup>244</sup> Deborah L. Kunish, ‘Friendship & a Paintbrush: Two geniuses in their own right find friendship & a bond through similar backgrounds a shared appreciation of one another’s art’, <http://www.reflectionsonthedance.com/interviewwithdavidnordahl.html>, (accessed April 15, 2015); David Nordahl, ‘Bio’, <http://davidnordahl.com/Bio/index.html>, (accessed April 23, 2015); Usatoday, ‘Jackson Paintings’, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/people/2009-08-20-jackson-paintingsN.htm>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>245</sup> David Nordahl, ‘Gallery’, [http://davidnordahl.com/Michael\\_Jackson\\_Gallery/](http://davidnordahl.com/Michael_Jackson_Gallery/), (accessed April 15, 2015).

<sup>246</sup> Kunish, ‘Friendship & a Paintbrush’.

were unbelievable. There were times it would just stop me in my tracks and there were times I'd be around him where I'd kind of forget who he was and then it would dawn on me....'I'm sitting here next to Michael Jackson.' I never really got over that. There were times he would do these quick little step things and they were like lightening. It was just so quick, so precise and just amazing."<sup>247</sup>

### 3.9 A Prayer for Michael

The second type of 'online action' that I will focus on are the rituals of online prayer and the lighting of virtual candles. I will first study the ritual of online prayer for Michael, with as main case-study The Major Love Prayer (MLP). The MLP is a nonprofit fan website that organizes a monthly global prayer/meditation that takes place at the exact same moment worldwide. The name 'Major Love Prayer' is inspired by the song of Michael Jackson 'Another Part of Me' (1987), in which Jackson sings: "We're sending out a major love". The goal of the MLP is to heal the world with love and positive energy in honor of Michael Jackson.



Image 3.14. The logo of the Major Love Prayer.

The MLP was initiated by a group of fans on forums dedicated to Michael Jackson in September of 2009 to help spread the word and keep it alive. Every 25<sup>th</sup> at exactly 2:00pm Los Angeles time the MLP takes place. The date of the 25<sup>th</sup> is probably a reference to the date of Michael's death: the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 2009. To make sure that every participant starts praying/meditating at exactly two o'clock the MLP has a prayer countdown timer and also displays the correct time for every time zone. The MLP is faith-based, yet not bound to one specific religion or spirituality. The MLP encourages a very broad, spiritual audience: everyone is welcome to join the monthly prayer under the banner "Together We are the World!" With this reference the MLP refers to the like-named song that was written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie in 1985. The international orientation of the MLP is made clear in that the different contents of the website are available in 19 different languages and the website states that since its foundation thousands have joined the prayer across the planet.<sup>248</sup> The flag-counter on the website shows how frequently the website is visited and by which countries. According to this counter the website has been visited 244.282 times by 193 different countries since January 2015. Most visitors are from the United States, which represent 29.976 visitors, the second place is for Germany, which

<sup>247</sup> Kunish, 'Friendship & a Paintbrush'.

<sup>248</sup> Major Love Prayer, 'Home', <http://www.majorloveprayer.org/2014/12/pls-join-us-daily-december-25-for-major.html>, (accessed April 23, 2015); Major Love Prayer, 'How to participate', <http://www.majorloveprayer.org/2009/12/guide-to-monthly-prayer.html>, (accessed April 29, 2015).

represent 10.332 visitors. The Netherlands is at place 13 with 2016 viewers since January 2015.<sup>249</sup> The MLP is furthermore active on Facebook and Twitter amongst other social media. Furthermore, fans can subscribe by e-mail for updates.

To participate in the monthly Major Love Prayer there are a few guidelines that the MLP has set out on their website. Beneath the tab 'How to Participate' one can find instructions for when, where and how the prayer should be executed. These guidelines should be regarded as suggestions, which can be made to fit to any religion or spiritual practice. Ideally, the prayer should take place somewhere where the participant can remain undisturbed for about fifteen minutes. The participant does not have to be online during the prayer. Before the prayer starts, the participant should prepare for about five minutes. During this preparation the participant is advised to sit down in a comfortable position and relax the mind. The mind is relaxed by concentrating on the breath, listening to inspiring music (the examples that are given here are Jackson's songs 'Heal the World' and 'We Are the World'), lighting a candle, and/or saying a special prayer or mantra for Michael, his family or others. Subsequently, the thought should be focused on the collective intention of the monthly prayer, which is to spread love, peace and healing through the world. After the preparation the prayer can begin. The participant should close his or her eyes and focus on the feeling of giving and receiving love. Subsequently, the participant should visualize the thousands of others around the globe who are doing the exact same thing at this moment and ideally try to connect with Michael Jackson, if this is possible. The participant is now part of a "vast web of love all around the world." At this moment the love spreads out across the entire planet and the participant should start visualizing this love as a healing force for the earth. The MLP encourages the participant to stay with this feeling for a few minutes before opening the eyes. After opening the eyes the participant is advised to say "thank you" in his or her mind and heart to "fellow fans and participants, to God/Universe/Creator and to Michael for the love and inspiration that brought us together today. Wish everyone well. Now open your eyes, take a deep breath and know that you are safe and centered within yourself. You are strong, healthy and loved."<sup>250</sup>

Besides hosting the monthly Major Love Prayer, the website of the MLP provides a platform for fans to start their own (prayer) initiatives. One of these examples is the Come Together Over Michael Jackson Global Group Intention Campaign. This group organizes daily prayers that focus each month on a different topic. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of each month a new topic is introduced that will continue to be the center of prayer focus up through the next Major Love Prayer on the 25th. During this month each participant commits to a daily prayer/meditation session that focuses on the same vision and intention, all across the world. This prayer can take place at any time, so is not bound to a fixed time set like the MLP. By committing oneself to this daily prayer the participants "are planting a seed, nurturing it and encouraging its growth with our daily love and care. Then on the 25th we will begin our Major Love Prayer with one massive and joyful broadcast of our shared intention, knowing that this blossom of love is unfolding its petals upon the Earth at this very moment! And it is so!"<sup>251</sup> Image 3.15 shows the focus topic of November 2014, which was "To create peace & cooperation in the Middle East & the World".<sup>252</sup>

<sup>249</sup> Flagcounter, 'Countries', <http://s03.flagcounter.com/countries/sOX6/>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>250</sup> Major Love Prayer, 'How to participate'.

<sup>251</sup> Major Love Prayer, 'Come together over Michael Jackson', <http://www.majorloveprayer.org/2012/04/come-together-over-michael-jackson.html>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>252</sup> Idem.



Left: Image 3.15. The logo of the Come Together Over Michael Jackson Global Group Intention Campaign for the month November 2014; Right: Image 3.16. The logo of Michael's Circle of Love.

The Major Love Prayer is not the only virtual ritual that explicitly connects Michael Jackson to the supernatural. There are more websites and online groups that focus on the relationship between Michael Jackson and the spiritual or focus on the divine nature of Michael Jackson himself. One such example is the earlier mentioned website *innermichael.com*, that was founded by Barbara Kaufmann. Kaufmann is a minister and meta-physician who “celebrates Michael and attempts to decipher his messages and meanings to the world.” Kaufmann furthermore attempts to comfort Michael Jackson fans and inspire them in ‘Michael’ directions.<sup>253</sup> Another example is the online community ‘Michael’s Circle of Love’ (MCOL). MCOL originated in a ‘grief thread’ on the website of The Michael Jackson Fan Club after Jackson’s death. After the forum was closed, the group decided to precede on Facebook.<sup>254</sup> Members of MCOL come from diverse spiritual backgrounds, but share the believe that Michael Jackson is with them as a spiritual guide. MCOL is a very tight community, embarked on the collective goal to spread Michael’s messages of love and healing and attract new, like minded members throughout the world. One of the members states that: “I feel safe with my MCOL family (...) I have been heavily judged and mistreated during my life for being me (...) MCOL has been a place where I can truly be myself. (...) I have been free to share my dreams, sorrows and spiritual growth with a great group of friends who mean the world to me.”<sup>255</sup>

<sup>253</sup> Moriarty, *Defending a King*, 433.

<sup>254</sup> Catherine Gross, ‘Conversing with Michael's Circle of Love’, <http://www.examiner.com/article/conversing-with-michael-s-circle-of-love-interview-three>, (accessed February 24, 2015).

<sup>255</sup> Idem. Besides these two examples, there are other examples that discuss Michael’s divinity and/or his relationship with the supernatural such as forums and other personal initiatives. See for example the blog of Mary Soliel, who feels a spiritual connection with Michael Jackson: Mary Soliel, ‘Michael Jackson’s Spirit is Sending Messages to this World’, <http://marysoliel.hubpages.com/hub/Michael-Jacksons-Spirit-is-Sending-Messages-to-this-World>, (accessed July 5, 2015). Another example is the blog of Bonnie L who researches the divine nature of Michael Jackson through an in-depth study of the Bible and leads an online prayer for Michael: Bonnie L., ‘Michael Jackson Justice’, <http://michaelsguardian.blogspot.nl/>, (accessed July 5, 2015); See furthermore the community Michael Jackson Soul Warrior that comprises fans that recognize Michael Jackson’s divine nature: Michael Jackson Soul Warrior, ‘Dancing the divine’, <http://www.michaeljacksonsoulwarrior.com/dancing-the-divine.html>, (accessed July 5, 2015).

### 3.10 Virtual candles

The act of prayer is not the only online ritual that is connected to Michael Jackson. Another custom that is 'performed' globally is the act of burning virtual candles. Online one can find several websites that offer the possibility of 'lighting a candle' for Michael. The websites that offer this possibility differ in their motivation. The website *michaeljacksoncandle.com* for example wants to give Michael's fans: "a final goodbye to the King of Pop."<sup>256</sup> The same motivation is underlying *lightacandleformichael.net* which was founded "to never forget the greatest entertainer of all time."<sup>257</sup> However, there are also more spiritually oriented websites as for example the website *gratefulness.org/candles*, that encourages a person that is about to light a candle to first "reflect for a moment on your reason for lighting a candle".<sup>258</sup>

*Lightacandleformichael.net* currently displays 10.473 candles.<sup>259</sup> These candles stay indefinitely on the website. Fans can revisit to view their candle or light a new one. Not every website maintains the lit candles forever. On some websites the virtual candle burns for a certain amount of time before the flame extinguishes or the candle disappears. Candles lit on *247candle.com/michael\_jackson/* for instance burn approximately four hours.<sup>260</sup> Some websites are therefore supervised by fans who make sure that there is always at least one candle burning.<sup>261</sup> The phenomenon of lighting a candle for Michael Jackson is not one that is particularly unique for Michael Jackson. Virtual candles can also be lit for other celebrities and beloved ones. For example *acandlefor.com* gives people the option of lighting three candles per day for several celebrities, which 'burn' indefinitely. In this way the website wants to find out which celebrity is most loved. As it turns out Michael Jackson is the number one 'Most Loved Celebrity', with 48.195 candles. Number two is Elvis Presley with 28.480 candles.<sup>262</sup>

### 3.11 Make that change: fan-based charitable and environmental efforts

One astounding feature within the online behavior of Michael Jackson fans is the overwhelming amount of fan-based nonprofit organizations that have been erected in honor of Michael Jackson. The nonprofit organization Michael Jackson Fans For Charity estimated a global total of \$309,120.06 raised by fans inspired by Michael Jackson.<sup>263</sup> These charities collect money for all sorts of causes, but the main causes are the environment, child-aid and animals, which were roughly the pillars of Michael's charitable

<sup>256</sup> Michaeljacksoncandle, 'King of Pop 1958 to 2009 Michael Joseph Jackson', <http://michaeljacksoncandle.com/>, (accessed April 25, 2015).

<sup>257</sup> Lightacandleformichael, 'Light a candle for the greatest entertainer of all time. He will never be forgotten', <http://www.lightacandleformichael.net/>, (accessed April 29, 2015).

<sup>258</sup> Gratefulness, 'Candles', <http://www.gratefulness.org/candles/candles.cfm?l=eng&gi=PM>, (accessed April 25, 2015).

<sup>259</sup> Lightacandleformichael, 'Light a candle for the greatest entertainer of all time. He will never be forgotten', <http://www.lightacandleformichael.net/>, (accessed April 29, 2015).

<sup>260</sup> 247candle, 'Michael Jackson', [http://www.247candle.com/michael\\_jackson/](http://www.247candle.com/michael_jackson/), (accessed April 25, 2015).

<sup>261</sup> Positively Michael, 'Thread: Light your candle for Michael Jackson here', <http://www.positivelymichael.Com/forums/showthread.php?8714-Light-your-candle-for-Michael-Jackson-here/page7>, (accessed November 12, 2014).

<sup>262</sup> Acandlefor, 'Michael Jackson', <http://www.acandlefor.com/celebrity/Michael-Jackson/1.html>, (accessed April, 25, 2015).

<sup>263</sup> Michael Jackson Fans For Charity, 'Global Total', <http://www.mjffc.org.uk/globaltotal>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

involvement.<sup>264</sup> In this section, I will focus on four examples of fan-based charitable initiatives, namely ‘Michael Jackson’s LEGACY’, ‘Heal the World for Children’, ‘Michael Jackson Fans For Charity’ and ‘A Million Trees for Michael’. These examples represent only a few of the numerous charitable initiatives founded by Michael Jackson fans, which vary from large-scale international organizations to small individual initiatives.<sup>265</sup> The first three examples represent large, universally oriented professional organizations that are maintained by official teams and make use of several social media to ‘spread their message’. These charities show the immense impact of Michael Jackson as a universal icon and clearly focus on the charitable pillars of Michael Jackson. The last case is an example of a personal, small-scale initiative.



From left to right: Image 3.17. The logo of ‘Michael Jackson’s LEGACY’; Image 3.18. The logo of ‘Heal the World For Children’; Image 3.19. The logo of the ‘Michael Jackson Monthly Giving’ initiated by the MJFFC; Image 3.20. The logo of ‘A Million Trees for Michael’.

Michael Jackson’s Legacy (MJL) was founded in 2011 and is a UK Registered, internationally oriented, charity that helps children and wildlife worldwide in memory of Michael Jackson’s humanitarian legacy.<sup>266</sup> On their website MJL describes Michael as their inspiration for conduct: “Michael Jackson inspired love, hope and compassion worldwide through his music and through his humanitarian work on behalf of the suffering and underprivileged, and we are committed to continuing his legacy of love in his memory and through his example.”<sup>267</sup> The projects of MJL reflect issues that Michael cared deeply about: the welfare of children and animals, the protection of the environment, and the elimination of needless suffering. MJL feels motivated to make the world a better place in the absence of Michael Jackson: “We as individuals do not have the influence that a worldwide superstar can procure, but as individuals, we can ‘make that change’ and collectively, we CAN make a difference.”<sup>268</sup> MJL is not explicitly religious, however their website states that one can help with all sorts of donations, including prayer. Michael

<sup>264</sup> Michael Jackson’s Legacy, ‘Charities He Supported’, <http://michaeljacksonslegacy.org/index.php/michael/charities-he-supported>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>265</sup> See for an overview of fan-based charity initiatives worldwide: Michael Jackson Fans For Charity, ‘Global Total’, <http://www.mjffc.org.uk/globaltotal>, (accessed April 23, 2015). A few other examples of fan initiated charitable projects are: Michael’s Dream Foundation, ‘Home’, <http://www.michaelsdreamfoundation.org/>, (accessed April 29, 2015); Give A Smile Projects, ‘Wilkommen’, <http://www.giveasmile.de/>, (accessed April 17, 2015); Michael Jackson Birthday Charity, ‘About Us’, <http://www.mjbirthdaycharity.blogspot.nl/p/about-us.html>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>266</sup> Michael Jackson’s LEGACY, ‘Home’, <http://michaeljacksonslegacy.org/>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>267</sup> Michael Jackson’s LEGACY, ‘About Us: Mission Statement’, <http://michaeljacksonslegacy.org/index.php/about/mission-statement>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>268</sup> Michael Jackson’s LEGACY, ‘About Us: Mission Statement’.

Jackson's Legacy also 'Likes' the previously mentioned Major Love Prayer on Facebook. MJL is active on Facebook and Twitter and has its own YouTube canal.<sup>269</sup>

Another charitable organization is Heal the World for Children (HTWFC). HTWFC is an independent international children's charity founded in 2009 in memory of Michael Jackson. HTWFC has staff and volunteers in eight countries around the world. The organization is inspired by Michael Jackson's message of love and their mission is "to bring joy, fun and laughter into the lives of sick and underprivileged children."<sup>270</sup> Throughout the year HTWFC holds different events for children such as the Children's Festival, Hospital Visits and Earth Day events in a lot of cities around the world. Their goal is to continue with at least one global project each year. HTWFC is active on Twitter and Facebook and 'Likes' the Facebook page of MJL.<sup>271</sup>

A third example is Michael Jackson Fans For Charity (MJFFC). MJFFC was registered in 2009 in England as a charity.<sup>272</sup> The aim of MJFFC is "to enable millions of Michael Jackson fans around the World, to donate to registered charities as a group of fans, in memory of Michael Jackson (...) It's all for LOVE, all for Michael and ultimately for the whole of the Planet."<sup>273</sup> The main focus of MJFFC is The Michael Jackson Monthly Giving (MJMG), which encourages Michael Jackson fans to donate 1£ per month. MJFFC is run by volunteers and 100% of the donations are given to charity. MJFFC was founded by Jackson fan Steven Hodges, who explains his motivation as follows: "I am just a Michael Jackson fan with ideas and dreams of a better World. Just like many other Michael Jackson fans. It started when I was about 8 years old, not knowing whether if deep down there was something about me that already wanted to help the World, or if over time it was a simple message from a very talented musician... rubbing off."<sup>274</sup> Through the MJMG the MJFFC has been able to donate thousands of pounds to various charities covering 3 areas of focus: Animals, Children and Environment, which they consider to be the main issues of interest of Michael. The MJFFC currently has 10.028 members on Facebook and 593 on Twitter. The MJFFC 'Likes' HTWFC on Facebook.<sup>275</sup>

<sup>269</sup> Michael Jackson's LEGACY, 'About Us: Meet the Team', <http://michaeljacksonslegacy.org/index.php/about/meet-the-team>, (accessed April 23, 2015); Facebook, 'Michael Jackson's LEGACY', <https://www.facebook.com/michaeljacksonslegacy>, (accessed April 29, 2015); Twitter, 'Michael Jackson's LEGACY', <https://twitter.com/MichaelJsLegacy>, (accessed April 23, 2015); YouTube, 'Michael Jackson's LEGACY', <https://www.youtube.com/user/MJsLegacy?Feature=mhee#p/a/u/0/avgpKWZXjtl>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>270</sup> Heal the World For Children, 'About', <http://www.healtheworldforchildren.org/about>, (accessed April 29, 2015).

<sup>271</sup> Idem; Facebook, 'Heal the World For Children', <https://www.facebook.com/htwfc>, (accessed April 29, 2015); Twitter, 'Heal the World For Children', <https://twitter.com/HTWFC>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>272</sup> Michael Jackson Fans For Charity, 'Home', <http://www.mjffc.org.uk/>, (accessed April 23, 2015); Twitter, 'Michael Jackson Fans For Charity', <https://twitter.com/mjffc>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>273</sup> Michael Jackson Fans For Charity, 'About: Overview', <http://www.mjffc.org.uk/aboutus>, (accessed April 29, 2015); Michael Jackson Fans For Charity, 'About: Who we are', <http://www.mjffc.org.uk/about-whoweare>, (accessed April 29, 2015).

<sup>274</sup> Michael Jackson Fans For Charity, 'About: Who we are'.

<sup>275</sup> Michael Jackson Fans For Charity, 'About: Overview'; Michael Jackson Fans For Charity, 'About: MJMG', <http://www.mjffc.org.uk/about-mjmg>, (accessed April 23, 2015); Facebook, 'Michael Jackson Fans For Charity', <https://www.facebook.com/mjfansforcharity>, (accessed April 23, 2015); Twitter, 'Michael Jackson Fans For Charity', <https://twitter.com/mjffc>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

An example of an individual, small-scale fan-based charity is 'A Million Trees for Michael', which was founded by Trisha Franklin in 2009. The foundation currently has 17.785 'Likes' on Facebook.<sup>276</sup> The mission of Franklin is: "To give a beautiful gift back to Michael Jackson for the numerous gifts he gave to us, which added so much to our lives."<sup>277</sup> Franklin wants to plant Michael Jackson Memorial Forests across every continent of the earth. She initiated the nonprofit organization after seeing the 'Earth Song' segment of the movie *This Is It*: "His words touched my heart in a way no words had ever done so and they penetrated deep into my very soul. I knew that I HAD to do something and even before I left the theater that opening night, I came up with the idea of planting trees all over the world in Michael's name and in his honor."<sup>278</sup> Like the MJL, Trisha 'Likes' the Major Love Prayer on Facebook.

### 3.12 Motivated by Michael

The active charitable involvement in honor of Michael Jackson of Michael Jackson fans is remarkable. These fans express that they feel personally motivated by Michael Jackson to 'give something back'. As most inspiring features of Michael Jackson fans often mention his humanitarian work, his humility, his inspiring songs and his persistence in times of adversity. Fan Alex Gernandt states: "(Michael) gave us meaningful songs like 'We are the world', 'Man in the mirror', 'Heal the world', and 'Earth Song'. He personally took care of the sick and vulnerable children around the world, had hospitals built in conflict areas, and donated to cancer research. While doing all of this, he never put himself into the spotlight."<sup>279</sup> Many fans express a feeling of obligation to continue 'the legacy' after the passing of Jackson. This need to act is clearly described by fan Franziska Neurieder who states: "It is through us that he continues to live. Through our words, our deeds, our love. Now WE are truly the ones to make the world a better place (...) We have lost a messenger, not the message, a lover, not love! This world needs his message and we are the ones who will continue to live it. Because We Are The World!"<sup>280</sup> Fan Deborah Ffrench voices a similar stance. She argues that she admires Michael Jackson all the more because of his suffering: "the ways in which the media corrupted and distorted his message of global love and inner change (...) (make) his commitment to that message even more incredible".<sup>281</sup> Ffrench sees it as both her personal task as well as that of the Michael Jackson community to 'teach' about Michael Jackson's legacy. Michael Jackson pilgrim Moriarty explains that because of Michael Jackson's suffering, many fans feel guilty for not having been there for Michael Jackson in his time of need. She argues that by

<sup>276</sup> Facebook, 'Info page of A Million Trees for Michael', [https://www.facebook.com/amilliontreesformichael/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/amilliontreesformichael/info?tab=page_info), (accessed April 17, 2015); Facebook, 'A Million Trees for Michael', [https://www.facebook.com/amilliontreesformichael/timeline?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/amilliontreesformichael/timeline?ref=page_internal), (accessed April 29, 2015).

<sup>277</sup> Facebook, 'Info page of A Million Trees for Michael'.

<sup>278</sup> Facebook, 'Posts of A Million Trees for Michael', <https://www.facebook.com/amilliontreesformichael/posts/10152661542282888>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>279</sup> Alex Gernandt, 'His Message was: Love!', in: Brigitte Bloemen, Marina Dobler, Miriam Lohr and Sonja Winterholler ed., *It's all about L.O.V.E.* (Norderstedt 2010) 23-24, 23.

<sup>280</sup> Franziska Neurieder, 'WE are Michael Jackson', in: Brigitte Bloemen, Marina Dobler, Miriam Lohr and Sonja Winterholler ed., *It's all about L.O.V.E.* (Norderstedt 2010) 433-435, 435. See also the other accounts in the book *It's all about L.O.V.E.* See also: Lorette C. Luzajic ed., *Michael Jackson for the Soul: A Fanthology of Inspiration and Love* (Toronto 2010).

<sup>281</sup> Deborah Ffrench, 'The Message Lives On', in: Lorette C. Luzajic ed., *Michael Jackson for the Soul: A Fanthology of Inspiration and Love* (Toronto 2010) 28-32, 29.

participating in charity events, fans attempt to atone for their negligence.”<sup>282</sup> Whatever the motivation behind their actions may be, it is clear that Michael Jackson fans are actively involved in charity causes that are furthermore explicitly connected to the humanitarian legacy of Michael Jackson. The question arises whether this active participation in charities is something unique for Michael Jackson fans or whether it is a general feature of fandom.

According to communication experts William Brown and Benson Fraser the involvement of fans in charity is a common part of fandom and mainly comes forth out of the wish of the fan to identify with their (deceased) idol. By copying the ‘good deeds’ of their icon, the fans continue a particular legacy.<sup>283</sup> Sociologist Ron Eyerman and professor of technology, environment and society Andrew Jamison argue that with regard to musicians, not only the celebrity itself can be a source of inspiration, also specific songs can motivate fans to undertake action. Concerning their research into social movements and popular music in the 1960s they state that Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs were important figures that inspired fans to develop certain stances concerning civil- or political engagement.<sup>284</sup> Michael Jackson fans seem to fit both descriptions; they are inspired by Michael Jackson as a person and by his music and consequently translate their inspiration in charitable initiatives. All charity cases are directly related to the social activism of Michael Jackson concerning nature, animals and children.

### 3.13 Reflection and preface to the next chapter

This chapter showed in which way Michael Jackson fans feel inspired by Michael Jackson and consequently take action. It demonstrated how these fans make use of the Internet as a tool and an environment to spread their (religious) ideas and share their feelings with like-minded fans. The virtual behavior of the fans demonstrates their clear vision. In their ‘Michael-iconography’ fans display Michael Jackson as either a healing force, connected to his messages of ‘Heal the world’ and love, or display him as the receiver of blessings by Jesus. With the ritual of lighting online candles the fans commemorate Michael Jackson and with their prayers they try to heal the world. Furthermore, all charities that are founded in honor of Michael Jackson dedicate a section of their website to their motivation and their inspiration: Michael Jackson. They all explain what Michael has meant to the world and in what way the charity will continue his legacy. It seems that Michael Jackson was both an inspiration as a human being and as an artist. Not only did Jackson have a clear stance regarding his charitable involvement: environment, animals and children, he also voiced this humanitarian focus in songs such as ‘Heal the World’, ‘We are the World’, ‘Earth Song’, and ‘Man in the Mirror’. With his exemplary life and songs Jackson has given his fans a clear guidance on how to continue his legacy. Now, after his passing, it is up to Michael Jackson’s Soldiers of Love to continue the Legacy and give something back. This chapter functioned to give an insight in the social context of Michael Jackson pilgrims to provide a context for chapter four, in which I will study the phenomenon of ‘Michaeling’.

<sup>282</sup> Karen Moriarty, *Defending a King*, 420-421.

<sup>283</sup> William J. Brown and Benson P. Fraser, ‘Celebrity Identification in Entertainment-Education’, in: Arvind Singhal, Michael J. Cody, Everett M. Rogers and Miguel Sabido ed., *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice* (New Jersey 2004) 97-116, 107.

<sup>284</sup> Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, ‘Social movements and cultural transformation: popular music in the 1960s’, *Media, Culture & Society* 17 (1995) 449-468, 459; Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge 1998) 24.

## Chapter IV: Being a Michael Jackson pilgrim

“Before Michael, I believed in God, but I did not have a personal relationship with God. Now I do. I find it easier to understand other points of view and accept people as they are, because I am confident and secure in my beliefs.”

Erica, Michael Jackson pilgrim

### 4.1 The experience of Michael Jackson pilgrims

This chapter will focus on the *experience* of Michael Jackson pilgrims. The content of the following section is divided into two main parts: a case-study of the Michael Jackson memorial in Munich and an analysis of the accounts of eleven Michael Jackson pilgrims. This chapter is built up as follows. First, I will reflect on the act of ‘Michaeling’. Secondly, I will briefly focus on experience expert for Michael pilgrims: Kerry Hennigan. Thirdly, I will study the Michael pilgrimage site in Munich. I will research the function of the memorial and motivation for its existence, based on my fieldwork at this pilgrimage site and my interview with initiator Nena Snezana. Finally, I will present the analysis of my qualitative research into the experiences of eleven Michael pilgrims. This chapter is structured by the following question: ‘What moves Michael Jackson pilgrims to start ‘Michaeling’ and how does Michael Jackson influence their daily lives?’

### 4.2 ‘Michaeling’

The act of Michael Jackson pilgrimage is referred to by some as ‘Michaeling’.<sup>285</sup> According to Michael Jackson pilgrim and experience expert Kerry Hennigan ‘Michaeling’ entails traveling the country or the world to visit places relevant to Michael Jackson or to attend special events involving his art and legacy.<sup>286</sup> Kaufmann applies a broader definition of ‘Michaeling’, to which she also reckons “the activity of spending hours on YouTube watching Michael Jackson’s performances, listening to his interviews, checking popular sites for the latest news and spending countless hours on fan social forums.”<sup>287</sup> This chapter deals with ‘Michaeling’ in the first sense. That ‘Michaeling’ is a real phenomenon is demonstrated by the recently published book *Travelling with a King*: the first ever travel guide totally dedicated to Michael Jackson. The guide promises to take the pilgrim “on Michael Jackson footsteps. From studios to houses, venues and statues.”<sup>288</sup> The guide was created by two “dedicated and loyal Michael Jackson fans” and was originally released in French, March 2014. Because of its great success, an English variant was brought on the market on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June. The English version will contain two

<sup>285</sup> Kerry Hennigan, ‘Kerry’s Michaeling Holiday’, <http://www.mjworld.net/news/2012/12/19/kerrys-michaeling-holiday/>, (accessed June 8, 2015).

<sup>286</sup> Kerry Hennigan, ‘Being An MJ Pilgrim’, <http://www.mjworld.net/news/2013/10/19/being-an-mj-pilgrim/>, (accessed June 8, 2015).

<sup>287</sup> Barbara Kaufmann, ‘Making That Change’, <http://www.innermichael.com/making-that-change/>, (accessed April 23, 2015).

<sup>288</sup> Sur les pas de Michael Jackson, ‘About the book’, <http://surlespasdemichaeljackson.com/en/the-book/>, (accessed May 23, 2015).

books, divided by continents. The first book of the *Travelling With a King* series contains North, Central and South America and, as bonuses, a few selected places of Europe and Asia.<sup>289</sup>

The phenomenon of ‘Michaeling’ already existed before the *Traveling With a King* series. Pilgrim Kerry Hennigan has been ‘Michaeling’ since 2011 and has posted many of her ‘Michaeling’ experiences online. Kerry is particularly active on Facebook and the website of the Michael Jackson World Network. On the Facebook page for Michael pilgrims Kerry is presented as the experience expert of the online Michaeling community. Kerry seizes every occasion she gets to travel the world as a Michael pilgrim. She describes her pilgrimage as a never-ending journey because of the endless sites, artifacts and statues dedicated to Michael Jackson. According to Kerry, the multiplicity of places the pilgrim can visit is a source of ecstasy as well as agony. Kerry describes a feeling of suffering for the Michael pilgrim because he or she will never be able to visit all the places, due to restrictions of time and or of resources such as money.<sup>290</sup> During a ‘Michaeling’ journey Kerry visits multiple places that are dedicated to Michael, however she advises her fellow pilgrims during their pilgrimages to, time permitting, mix the ‘sacred and the secular’ so that the former doesn’t become totally emotionally overwhelming.<sup>291</sup>

As is made clear by Kerry’s account and the *Traveling With a King* series; there are many places that pilgrims can visit during their pilgrimage. Still, there is a hierarchy in pilgrimage sites connected to Jackson. Jackson’s star of fame, his grave at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, California and Neverland are popular pilgrim places, where, especially on his anniversary, an outpouring of affection is found in the form of notes, flowers and candles. The visits to Michael’s grave and the gifts fans bring, have become so overwhelming, that the Forest Lawn Cemetery now charges a \$3 fee for fans to pay their respects. The cemetery also set rules as to what fans can leave at Jackson’s grave. Only flowers are allowed nowadays. For people who are not able to actually visit these pilgrim sites, there are special online places where one can order flowers that can be put on Forest Lawn.<sup>292</sup>

### 4.3 The Michael Jackson memorial in Munich

After Michael Jackson’s passing, five women felt compelled to build a memorial for Michael in the city of Munich. These women, later branded the ‘Memorial-Fairies’, devoted themselves fully to the commemoration of their idol and pledged to make their memorial place globally known. Six years later, the place has indeed grown into an internationally acknowledged pilgrimage site for Michael Jackson fans. In the following, I will analyze this memorial site and its significance. The rough data for my analysis consists of information provided by the official website of MJ’s LEGACY (the association that initiated the

<sup>289</sup> Sur les pas de Michael Jackson, ‘Travelling With A King: Travel guide about Michael Jackson’, <http://surlespasdemichaeljackson.com/en/>, (accessed May 23, 2015); Sur les pas de Michael Jackson, ‘About the book’.

<sup>290</sup> Kerry Hennigan, ‘Notes’, <https://www.facebook.com/kerry.hennigan/notes>, (accessed June 8, 2015); Hennigan, ‘Being An MJ Pilgrim’; Facebook, ‘Michael Jackson World Network’, <https://www.facebook.com/mjworldnetwork/posts/10151948712097736>, (accessed June 24, 2015).

<sup>291</sup> Hennigan, ‘Being An MJ Pilgrim’.

<sup>292</sup> Celebuzz, ‘Cemetery Charges Fans at Michael Jackson’s Grave’, <http://www.celebuzz.com/cemetery-charges-fans-michael-jacksons-s251331/>, (accessed June 24, 2015); Dailymail, ‘Shocked fans gathered around the world’, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1195652/Michael-Jackson-fans-shock-world-mourns-king-pop.html>, (accessed June 24, 2015); Onerose4mjj, ‘Always with L.O.V.E.’, <http://onerose4mjj.blogspot.nl/2014/03/annual-one-rose-for-michael-j-jackson.html>, (accessed June 24, 2015).

memorial), personal field notes and photographs of the memorial, and an interview with Nena Snezana, founder of MJ's LEGACY association and co-leader of the Memorial-Fairies. In the next part, I will first describe the cultural landscape of the Michael Jackson memorial. Consequently, I will touch upon the memorial as it is presented on the website of MJ's LEGACY. Subsequently, I will describe the function of the memorial based on my own visit during the weekend of 1-3 May 2015. Finally, I will present the meaning and purpose of the memorial for founder Nena Snezana. Overall, this account will have a descriptive and explanatory nature. I will study how the Michael Jackson memorial functions and want to understand the motivation for its existence and comprehend its significance.

#### **4.3.1 A memorial for two: the cultural landscape of the memorial in Munich**

One thing that will immediately strike the visitor of the Michael Jackson memorial in Munich is that the statue of focus is not an image of Michael Jackson. In fact, the statue displays the Franco-Flemish composer Orlando di Lasso, who died 1594 in the city of Munich. The lineage of the Michael Jackson memorial brings us to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1847 the Bavarian king Ludwig I ordered the German sculptor Max von Widmann to create a memorial statue for Orlando di Lasso and the statue was placed on the Odensplatz in 1848. In 1860 the statue was moved to its current site: the Promenadeplatz in the old city-center of Munich. In the Second World War the statue was destroyed, however it was possible to recast the monument. The 'new' memorial was made out of granite and bronze, granite was used for the base and bronze for the image. In total the statue measures 3.20 meters. It has two inscriptions; one on the front side and one on the back side, which state respectively: "Roland de Lattre genannt Orlando di Lasso Tondichter", and "Errichtet von Ludwig I König von Bayern MDCCCII".<sup>293</sup> Furthermore the statue is in good physical condition. The statue is located in front of the luxurious hotel 'the Bayerische Hof' and is easily accessible. One can directly encounter the memorial as it is placed in the center of a small park-area in between two roads. After the passing of Michael Jackson, MJ's LEGACY chose the statue of Di Lasso as the space for their commemoration of Jackson. By filling the statue with their own meaning, the action of MJ's LEGACY is a clear example of cultural appropriation. The five women of MJ's LEGACY appropriated the statue that formerly functioned as a memorial statue for Orlando di Lasso and changed it into a memorial for Michael Jackson to make the monument functional for their cause. In so doing the Bavarian fans changed the function of the bronze figure of Di Lasso into a memorial for two.<sup>294</sup>

#### **4.3.2 Ein Denkmal für Michael: the mission of MJ's LEGACY**

In July 2009 MJ's LEGACY association initiated the Michael Jackson memorial. MJ's LEGACY was set up by Michael Jackson fan and pilgrim Nena Snezana, Lisa Schmidt and a team of three other people. In March 2011 the association was formally registered at the district court of Munich as the first officially recorded

<sup>293</sup> Anneliese Senger Stiftung, 'Standbild Orlando di Lasso, 1849, am Promenadeplatz in München', [http://www.senger-stiftung.de/orlando\\_di\\_lasso.html](http://www.senger-stiftung.de/orlando_di_lasso.html), (accessed June 2, 2015); Richard M. Carp, 'Material Culture', in: Michael Strausberg and Steven Engler ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (New York 2011) 474-490, 482; John Harvey, 'Visual Culture', in: Michael Strausberg and Steven Engler ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (New York 2011) 502-522.

<sup>294</sup> Willem Frijhoff, 'Toeëigening: van bezitsdrang naar betekenisgeving', *Trajecta* 6 (1997) 99-118, 108.

German public association in honor of Michael Jackson.<sup>295</sup> Nena and her team purposefully chose the statue of Orlando di Lasso as their place of commemoration on the basis of three reasons. Firstly, the monument of Di Lasso is positioned right in front of the Bayerische Hof hotel, where Michael Jackson used to stay during his visits to Munich. In fact, the exact suite where Michael always stayed, the 'Palais Montgelas', can be spotted from the statue. The second reason is that Michael and his fans had 'beautiful encounters' both in front of the hotel and through the windows of his suite. Jackson sometimes even invited fans into his suite and in so doing "has left his traces everywhere in and in front of the hotel." The final reason is that Michael Jackson loved Munich very much: "(he) gave many concerts here, visited the Circus Krone, made a short film (Give In To Me) and made a donation for people in need."<sup>296</sup>

Since its foundation, Nena and her team have gathered daily at the Michael Jackson memorial to preserve it and promote it globally. They also started to lovingly keeping up ('pflegen') the memorial and decorate it with ornaments for Michael. This occupation has earned these women the title of 'Memorial-Fairies' ('Denkmal-Feen'). Every day the fairies clean the memorial, bring candles, flowers, decoration-foils, statues, letters and water the plants. Through MJ's LEGACY association and donations the fairies are able to finance the memorial and its maintenance. The fairies intend the memorial to be a place that is welcoming to all. They describe the memorial as "a place of love, laughter, tears and togetherness, where we can commemorate our angel. It's a place where like-minded people meet and share their emotions and their experiences. It gives comfort and strength and it is connecting people of all races and nations."<sup>297</sup> Besides taking care of the memorial MJ's LEGACY organizes several events that are dedicated to Michael Jackson (for example the celebration of his birthday and anniversary of his death). Furthermore, the association has initiated a variety of charitable projects that reflect their goal to help children in need, inspired by the artistic and humanitarian heritage of Michael Jackson. Moreover, the association started a petition for their own, permanent memorial statue of Michael Jackson next to the current memorial place at the Promenadeplatz. This statue will be financed by Michael Jackson fans themselves and will be a gift to the city of Munich.<sup>298</sup>

Michael Jackson and his legacy are the core inspiration and philosophy behind all the activities of MJ's LEGACY. They find Jackson both inspiring as a human being and as an artist and feel indebted to him: "Now it is time to give him something back. It is now upon us, to carry on his message of 'Heal the world and make it a better place..' and do not consign him to oblivion."<sup>299</sup> MJ's LEGACY has many members and promoters besides the Memorial-Fairies, however, these people are less involved and not bound to the daily labor at the memorial. These members support the association financially and during

<sup>295</sup> MJ's LEGACY Association International, 'Welcome', <http://www.mjs-legacy.com/p/welcome.html>, (accessed June 2, 2015).

<sup>296</sup> All quotes come from the document 'Why a Michael Jackson memorial right here?' that is attached to the east side of the Michael Jackson memorial in Munich. See Appendix B page 4.

<sup>297</sup> MJ's LEGACY Association International, 'About us', <http://www.mjs-legacy.com/p/uber-uns.html>, (accessed April 17, 2015). Translation of originally German text by Fardo Eringa.

<sup>298</sup> MJ's LEGACY Association International, 'Welcome'; MJ's LEGACY Association International, 'About us'. See for an overview of the charitable work of MJ's LEGACY: MJ's LEGACY Association International, 'MJ's LEGACY goes CHARITY – Our projects', <http://www.mjs-legacy.com/p/mjs-legacy-goes-charity.html>, (accessed May 2, 2015); Nena Snezana, personal e-mail, (May 5, 2015).

<sup>299</sup> MJ's LEGACY Association International, 'Welcome'. Translation of originally German text by Fardo Eringa.

special events. To become a member of MJ's LEGACY one has to fill in an application form and transfer a membership fee of €50.-. Members can participate in votings and meetings of the association and receive a few gifts, such as a personal candle at the Michael Jackson memorial in Munich and privileges concerning event-registrations.<sup>300</sup>

MJ's LEGACY voices its gratitude for the wide understanding and tolerance of the city of Munich for their activities and memorial. However, there are also people who are less enthusiastic about the memorial. This is for example displayed on the website of *direktzu.muenchen.de* where citizens of Munich can send 'open requests' to their mayor. On this page Christian Götzer asks: "Dear mayor, I would like to know how long the memorial at the Promenadeplatz will remain to function as a Michael Jackson memorial place? I find it not nice and think, that by all means by now it is time to re-establish the original situation."<sup>301</sup> The website offers the possibility for people to respond, which has been done by some Michael Jackson fans. One of them says: "I am a Michael Jackson fan and I travel with a part of our fan clubs regularly to Munich to honor Michael Jackson and his memorial. We have experienced beautiful things at this place, together with MJ. (...) Please, hear our heart and don't take away this final place for the fans, where we can grieve together and commemorate him."<sup>302</sup>

#### 4.3.3 Personal visit to the memorial in Munich

In the weekend of 1-3 May 2015 I visited the city of Munich to observe the Michael Jackson memorial in its context. In the next part, I will present the results of my participant observation. First, I will give a description of the memorial at the time of my visit. I will provide an overview of the different ornaments that are attached to the memorial and augment my descriptions with a few photographs. Consequently, I will describe the people that approached the memorial during my stay at the statue for the time span of 11.00-18.00. I will describe the different reactions and motivations of these people and augment these with a few personal comments.

#### 4.3.4 Description of the Michael Jackson memorial

The memorial of Michael Jackson is still recognizable as the statue of Orlando di Lasso. However, the foundation of the monument is plastered with pictures of Michael Jackson and crammed with 'offerings' of fans in the form of photo's, candles, flowers, notes and statuettes (image 4.1). It is obvious that the statue is taken care of; the various ornaments are neatly arranged and all the flowers are fresh. In the left corner of one of the steps of the supporting base a broom is stored above two bottles of water behind a small bush. These are the cleaning-attributes of the fairies (image 4.2). On the same step in the right corner lie two plastic boxes that contain information in German and English about 'the most common questions about Michael Jackson and their answers' (image 4.3). The documents are intended to rectify information that has been spread by the media out of "sensationalism and pure greed for profit". The motivation of the document states: "with this letter, we – as a group composed of teachers,

<sup>300</sup> MJ's LEGACY Association International, 'Membership', <http://www.mjs-legacy.com/p/membership.html>, (accessed June 2, 2015); Nena Snezana, personal e-mail, (May 5, 2015).

<sup>301</sup> Direktzu.muenchen, 'direktzu Christian Ude Oberbürgermeister der Landeshauptstadt München', <http://direktzu.muenchen.de/ude/messages/denkmal-promenadeplatz-31433>, (accessed June 2, 2015). Translation of originally German text by Fardo Eringa.

<sup>302</sup> Idem.

academics, university students and students and people from the fine arts field – would like to present to you the real intention of Michael Jackson’s life (...) For the sake of justice and clarity, we are committed to provide truthful information to all of you – information which has been ignored and purposely withheld from the general public for tactical reasons for many years”.<sup>303</sup> The documents contain four pages that answer ten questions, that comprise topics ranging from Michael’s changing skin-color to his alleged child molestation.



Image 4.1. Left: The Michael Jackson Memorial in Munich. Right: The four great quarters of the plinth of the memorial.

The four great quarters of the plinth of the memorial are plastered with photographs of Michael through all ages and the images are plasticized to protect them against weathery conditions (image 4.1). Along the pictures a tread of light is fixed, that is connected to batteries, so the memorial can be lit in the evening. The sole of the statue offers space for fans to leave personal messages or attributes dedicated to Michael.

<sup>303</sup> Document, ‘Michael Joseph Jackson (1958-2009) Philanthropist, Humanist, Pacifist’. See Appendix B pages 5-8.



Image 4.2. The broom and water bottles of the fairies.



Image 4.3. The information documents.

The fans' contributions can roughly be divided into; flowers/plants, candles, notes, statues and listed photographs (of Michael) with or without messages. Most candles are reminiscent of devotional candles in the catholic tradition (image 4.4), the candles are adapted with pictures of Michael and personal messages. Another eye-catching feature is the predominance of angel-shaped statues (images 4.5-4.7, 4.11). The handwritten notes and statues with personal messages reveal most about the intentions of the fans. I will show a few examples of such contributions.

The main themes of the personal messages are grief/loss: "Michael, we miss you", or love: "Michael, I love you more". The theme of love is also recurrent in the many heart-shaped items that are attached to the memorial (images 4.4-4.6, 4.8-4.11). Besides these two themes, there are contributions with a religious connotation, such as candles and angel-shaped statues. One example is a statuette of a book that is held by an angel (image 4.7) that reads: "(...) When we mourn a person, others look forward to meeting him again behind our horizon".<sup>304</sup> Image 4.8 embodies the themes of love and loss and reads: "Michael I miss you so much, I love you, yours truly above everything and always loving Ingrid".<sup>305</sup> Image 4.9 shows a plaster image that displays two hands in a prayer position and states: "Michael, your faith gives me strength" (image 4.9). A rather special contribution is displayed on image 4.10. This image shows a hand-written message on a heart-shaped piece of paper: "Michael, please bring back my love to me – I know you can make any wish come true! "little" Marina".

All the flowers, statues, candles and personal notes are reminiscent of votive offerings. Just as pilgrimage shrines, the memorial is crammed with the gifts of its visitors. In the case of the memorial for Jackson, the offerings mainly seem to function as a way of giving thanks. Many texts express the love of the fans or the expression of thanking Michael for his messages of love and peace. It is not sure in how far the contributions of the fans are motivated by a spiritual connection with Jackson, but the different offerings could certainly be interpreted as expressions of gratitude. The contribution of 'little Marina' is a special one that also touches upon the reciprocal relationship between the pilgrim and the saint. Like pilgrims in the Christian tradition, Maria is asking a favor of Jackson, a favor which she believes he is able to grant. This is a clear example of an ex-voto, where the note is given in anticipation of a particular wish.

<sup>304</sup> Translation of originally German text by Fardo Eringa.

<sup>305</sup> Translation of originally German text by Fardo Eringa.



Image 4.4. Close-up of the sole.



Image 4.5. Close-up of the sole.



Image 4.6. Close-up of the sole.



Image 4.7. Close-up of the sole.



Image 4.8. Close-up of the sole.



Image 4.9. Close-up of the sole.



Image 4.10. Close-up of the sole.

Image 4.11. Close-up of the sole.

#### 4.3.5 Visitors of the memorial

When I approached the memorial on the Saturday morning the first thing that I noticed was that the site was crammed with people that surrounded a guide who elaborated on the memorial. The memorial is surrounded by benches, so I decided to sit down on the bench nearest to the memorial to first get an overall picture of the memorial and its scenery and observe a few visitors. Within the first half hour of my stay another three tour groups visited the memorial, amongst others the Munich City Tour. The memorial very much seemed to be a touristic attraction. The tour groups differed in size, sometimes consisting of at least twenty people, sometimes only comprising three. I later found out that every day between 10.30 and 12.00 tour groups visit the memorial.<sup>306</sup> Before my arrival, I had feared that I would encounter no visitors; it became clear that I had to adjust my expectations. After the tours decreased, the memorial was still almost never without visitors. The memorial is situated in a very crowded place, in a small park between two busy roads with many cars, tram-lines and passengers. Almost everyone that passed by stopped for a moment to shortly look at the memorial. However, most people already left after a minute or two. Some read the explanatory notes or took an 'informational document' out of one of the boxes. Many people took a few photo's. I decided to approach people who would remain for a larger amount of time at the memorial and attentively read the different notes and took pictures. I asked these people why they were at the memorial and what their opinion was of the memorial. Based on my findings, I can discern four types of attitudes toward the memorial, which can be roughly divided into 'positive stance' and 'negative stance'. The first attitude is 'not taking it seriously', the second one is 'irritation', the third one is 'intrigue' and the last attitude is 'appreciation'. I will clarify these four attitudes with a few examples of people I talked to at the memorial.

Most people find the memorial funny and do not take it seriously. Many people point to the statue and start laughing out loud. One German lady in her seventies says: "I find it very funny. I find it loud, over the top and simply very funny." It seems that some people are even agitated and annoyed by the public display of affection for Michael Jackson. Some people shake their head while passing by or make skimping remarks. A group of three German students in their twenties, two boys and one girl, pause for a while by the memorial. One of the boys comments: "I find it tacky. We do not understand

<sup>306</sup> Interview with Nena Snezana, (May 2, 2015). Translation of originally German conversation by Fardo Eringa.

why after so long, people still take care of this and bring flowers. They have never met him or if they did there was always a distance!” The comment of the student touches upon another common response, namely a feeling of disbelief and intrigue. Many people find it difficult to understand the motivations of the fans. This is expressed by two German men in their sixties. They stumbled coincidentally upon the memorial and are not Michael Jackson fans. They are mainly surprised that this memorial exists in Munich and are questioning whether it is a joke or not. Both men think that the memorial shows a lot of resemblances with a religious altar. Two British girls in their twenties also are surprised by the memorial. They read about it in their tourist book *111 places in Munich that you shouldn't miss*. Both girls are Michael Jackson fans, however they cannot understand why people would initiate such a memorial, nor why someone would specifically travel to visit this place.

During the day the above named reactions were by far the most dominant ones. However, there was also a small group of people that voiced a feeling of appreciation. In total I have met seven people that were very pleased with the existence of the memorial. One not-German woman, between her sixties and seventies says: “I find it nice to see that people are so dedicated to Michael.” She stood for a long time besides the memorial, looked attentively at the messages and walked several times around the statue. Unfortunately, when I asked her why she was at the statue she responded hesitantly and detached and looked a bit suspicious. The same happened with a German man in his sixties. He states that he specially came to this place and makes a lot of photos. It is his first visit. He comments: “This is especially for my friend, Michael Jackson, I think it is really beautiful. This is for someone who was a guest in my city. He stayed in the Bayerische Hof. Now I would like to return to making photo's.” He does not want to elaborate more on his experiences and wants to be left alone. Another example is a German man in his early thirties. He attentively reads the different messages and looks at the photos. He passed coincidentally and finds it very nice to see the dedication and care of Michael Jackson fans. The memorial reminds him of his father who died when he was fourteen years old. This statue gives him a moment to reflect on this happening and commemorate his father. A group of two German women and one German man take a lot of photos of the memorial including of themselves in front of the memorial in ‘Michael-positions’. They find it great that the memorial is there and they intentionally came here to visit the place. They are all Michael Jackson fans and find it very special that all the flowers are fresh and that it is all so ordered and well taken care of.

One special visitor is a German student of about twenty years old. The girl in question approaches the memorial, makes many pictures and reads the different notes. Then takes a seat on one of the benches and looks at the memorial. She calls herself a ‘real’ fan and she likes all the attention that is given to the memorial. She has come here intentionally for her peace because she did not feel very well. The girl is saddened by people who make fun of the memorial and argues that this rests on a misinterpretation: “If people really look into it and look at the pictures, they will understand it.” She would love to get involved in the taking care of the memorial to “open people's eyes and teach them about Michael's message”. She also would love to leave something behind on the memorial. However, she is still looking for the right pictures. What has discouraged her has been vandalism that was done to the statue recently. However, she will deposit something soon. Because “it is all worth it, even if it stays there only for two weeks”. The girl explains that now she is at the memorial she feels relieved and better. She stays there for about one hour.

During my stay a woman in between her forties and fifties starts cleaning the information boxes. She explains that the motivation behind the ‘information-documents’ is to defend the truth. For her that is also the main goal of the memorial: “The memorial is beautiful, the pictures, the fresh flowers, the candles, however eventually for me it is about providing information and rectify the ‘lies of the media’.” The woman explains that it is important to fight for Michael and share his message. It is her mission to see him freed from blame. She finds the memorial a comforting place, but does not like to visit when it is too crowded. She visits the place preferably alone so she can really take in the memorial. At these times she experiences heavy emotions. However, at special times such as Jackson’s birthday or death, she likes to visit the memorial with friends and share the experience. She is not one of the fairies, but she does know them. She explains that besides the fairies there are many different groups that take care of the memorial. Everyone comes at their own convenience.

#### **4.3.6 A conversation with Nena Snezana**

Nena Snezana is the founder of MJ’s LEGACY and one of the guides of the Memorial-Fairies. Nena is very much committed to the Michael memorial and is at the memorial site almost every day. Nena was willing to meet with me at the memorial site to elaborate on the meaning of the memorial for her personally and for Michael Jackson fans in general. Moreover, she explained the achievements and future goals of MJ’s LEGACY.

For Nena the memorial site is ‘magical’ because it radiates the spirit of Michael Jackson. Nena argues that his spirit is so clearly present because Michael stayed so many times at the Bayerische Hof hotel, which is only a few meters removed from the memorial. Consequently, there are strong memories bound to the site in question. Nena experiences the memorial as the ultimate opportunity to pay Michael the respect that he deserves and to publicly display how much he is loved. Furthermore, Nena’s primal motivation is to thank Michael Jackson, which she does by preserving the memorial and organizing charitable events through MJ’s LEGACY in honor of Michael. Nena argues that the memorial mainly functions as a social place. It is a location where people can gather and where information about Michael can be shared. For Nena the memorial offers the opportunity to rectify false information and allegations about Michael. Every Friday for five years now the association organizes a meeting at the memorial which is referred to as the ‘public’s regular table’ (‘offener Stammtisch’). Everyone is welcome to join without obligation, also people who are not a member of the association. Nena has experienced that many deep friendships have developed through these meetings. She furthermore states that a lot of the projects that are organized by MJ’s LEGACY were inspired by these meetings. Nena is very proud of the accomplishments and charitable initiatives of the association. Currently the association has spent over €19.000.- on child aid, which is always done *explicitly* in honor of Michael Jackson. Nena states that by doing this the association carries out what Michael Jackson demonstrated to his fans: “Michael was an example. His messages such as ‘Heal the World’, ‘We are the World’ or ‘Man in the Mirror’ were not just songs: they are really messages to us, to act accordingly and to change the world.” Nena argues that the current generation of Michael Jackson fans has a great responsibility, not only to internalize the message of Michael but also to ‘set things straight’. Nena argues that at a place such as the memorial, where fans gather, it is their responsibility not only to honor Michael Jackson publicly but also to defend him.

Nena explains that the city of Munich has been very tolerant and open regarding the memorial. Moreover the Bayerische Hof hotel has been a great help for MJ's LEGACY. The manager of the hotel is a Michael Jackson fan herself and she provides the association with free rooms where the members can organize meetings for their charity events. Nena's biggest wish is to establish a personal, permanent statue of Michael Jackson next to the current memorial. However, the city of Munich currently rejects their proposal because the association already has a Michael memorial. Nena does not agree: "For us, even though this is a wonderful memorial, it is not a *real* memorial place that will have a permanent stay and will still be here a hundred years from now." Nena describes the maintenance of the memorial as "insanely time-consuming": "We are here every day and it takes about two to four hours per day to order the different pieces, to sweep, mop, light candles, water the flowers or free them from rain, we have to laminate the images and so on." The acts that Nena describes and the precision and dedication with which these are performed is reminiscent of the way monks work.

The establishment of a 'real memorial', a statue that will survive at least a few centuries, would guarantee that Michael Jackson is still remembered even when the association does not exist anymore and when there is nobody left to preserve the current memorial. This is very important for the association because it is their goal to keep the memory and legacy of Michael Jackson alive to make sure that future generations will still be able to experience him. Nena hopes that one day the pressure of their petition, containing signatures, will convince the city of Munich to accept their proposal. Moreover, she argues that the current memorial has already existed for six years permanently. For Nena, this proves that the memorial is not a trend, but rightly an institution that has integrated in the cityscape of Munich.

According to Nena there are two types of fans: 'good' fans that support the association and fans that are jealous and disturb the work of the association. These fans sometimes go as far as molesting the memorial or taking ornaments with them. Nena describes this as a great problem for the association: "For outsiders these fans are not recognizable as being different than us, but they embody evil. They have a fan-side, but also an evil, jealous side." Nena thinks that these jealous fans cannot accept what the association has accomplished and has done publicly: "We are so open about it and even have attracted media-attention. Those are things that make these fans go mad. But without labor there can be no recognition. These fans have had the same opportunities as we to do something good for Michael Jackson and to receive praise therefore (...) one should ignore these evil people and do not lose courage and the vision of what one wants to achieve. But this is often very hard."

In the past six years Nena has met all sorts of fans from all over the world and she concludes that the memorial space is at its core a social place where "there is contact and movement". She thinks that this is exactly what a memorial place should be like and hopes that the place inspires people to come up with new ideas to create something good in honor of Michael Jackson. Nena finds it important to be visible and accessible for visitors, that is why there is a member of the association every day at the memorial. She is excited to be able to chat at this place about Michael: "I believe that this is something that pleases Michael very much. That here we have a place that unites people, a place where people can chat." Nena estimates that every day several thousands of people visit the memorial. Some just pass by, others really encounter the memorial and take photographs. Many people hear about the memorial through Travel Guides. There are also many travel groups that visit the place with a guide in groups of 30/40 people. The memorial is very important because it is a place where Michael fans can gather and

meet like-minded people. Nena states: “I personally have no opponents, but many do. That is why this memorial is very important because many people unfortunately do not have an understanding family or friends. At this place they are not declared ‘crazy’. Here there are people that feel the same way and people can express their emotions and love for Michael Jackson freely and openly. At the memorial everyone is equal and there is no competition.” Nena argues that unfortunately many people do not understand the experience of Michael fans that visit the memorial: “people will say: ‘why would someone cry over a person that he did not know personally, or at least not very closely’.” Moreover, Nena thinks that increasing understanding becomes more difficult over the years: “six years is a long time and many people have said ‘ok, at the beginning I understood, but now it’s time that everything turns back to normal again’. Unfortunately people do not understand this mourning.”

Nena describes the many different approaches to the memorial. She explains that there are always critical people who find the memorial kitsch. According to Nena these people have not internalized the meaning of the memorial and do not understand why it is so important to publicly honor Michael Jackson. She argues that the memorial is meant as a remembrance place and therefore needs to be publicly accessible to everyone, also to give Michael Jackson the recognition he deserves and thank him: “He gave us his music and this is an enrichment for us all. So we need to have a central point to honor him.” Nena states that at the memorial everything can happen because it touches everyone. Some people dance, others cry bitterly. Nena says that many people caress the images and the memorial: “there are older people that cannot see very well and walk with crutches that come closer and closer and almost press their faces to the memorial, caress it and say: ‘he was really very good’.” Nena’s co-chief of the Memorial-Fairies says that since she nurses the memorial for Michael she is not ill any more. At the memorial she has no pain and does not need any medication. Unfortunately it is not clear what the illness of Nena’s co-chief entails. Nena argues that: “The memorial has a very strong positive energy and radiates so much love that it really works as a curative. It is a cure for the soul and that is said by many, many people.”<sup>307</sup>

#### **4.4 Being a Michael Jackson pilgrim: an analysis of eleven pilgrim experiences**

In the last couple of months I have found eleven participants who have been willing to elaborate on their experiences as Michael Jackson pilgrims. In the next section, I will present the results of my qualitative research into their pilgrimage experiences and the way in which Michael Jackson influences their personal lives. Before I discuss my findings, I will first set out how I gathered my research data.

#### **4.5 Accountability for data-collection**

Coming into contact with Michael Jackson pilgrims proved to be more of a challenge than I expected. As I stated in the introduction, all of my respondents were found online. Some pilgrims were excited from the start such as Michelle, Nikki98 and J. Leone. When I posted on the amazon forum, the forum had not been used in four years (the last post dated from July 25<sup>th</sup> 2011), however within a quarter of an hour Nikki98 responded and a few hours later J. Leone responded. Both were happy to share their experiences through the forum. Karen Moriarty was also very willing to contribute. Nena Snezana kept her distance, but was willing from the start to provide me with information. Besides these responses, the

<sup>307</sup> Interview with Nena Snezana, (May 2, 2015). Translation of originally German conversation by Fardo Eringa.

reply to my request was slim. It dawned on me that even though many fans shared openly about their pilgrimage experiences *online*, when personally approached, they were cautious as to participating in my research. Moreover, there were pilgrims who agreed to contribute 'in private' to my research, but withdrew at the last moment. The subject thus turned out to be more sensitive than I had foreseen. Michelle clearly voices this in an e-mail: "I know others (pilgrims), but many are skeptical...since there are some out there trying to belittle Michael and His followers". I was therefore very happy that after having become acquainted with Michelle and Charlot, they introduced me to some of their friends. After a few introductory e-mails back and forth the openness of the respondents was remarkable. All the respondents were very excited about my research and that the phenomenon of 'Michael Jackson pilgrimage' was taken seriously. This also became very clear in my contact with Nena Snezana. At first our contact via e-mail was quite rigid. Nena responded curtly and was cautious when it came to setting a meeting for our interview. Until the last day it was not certain whether she 'would be able to make it'. It became clear that for Nena it was important to see whether I was a real fan or not. Furthermore, there was a language barrier; Nena does not speak English. When she found out that I had not come to make fun of the memorial and that the interview could take place in German, she was relieved. Moreover, Nena had lived under the impression that I was a man and this had also influenced her. During and after our meeting however, Nena totally opened up and in later e-mail conversations she replied quickly and profusely. At the pilgrimage site the conversations took place mostly in German and some in English. This language barrier might have resulted in the somewhat defensive attitude and distance of some of the visitors at the memorial.

#### 4.6 An analysis of eleven pilgrim experiences

This part will present the results and conclusions of the analysis of the data which I analyzed in ATLAS.ti. It is the result after unraveling and structuring the eleven different pilgrim accounts. I have distinguished five categories. Before I discuss these, I will first briefly look into the biographies of the eleven pilgrims.

All respondents are female between the age of 45-65. Only of respondents J. Leone and Nikki98 the age is unknown. The age of the respondents makes them contemporaries of Michael Jackson, who by now would have been 57. Most respondents come from the US (8), Susan and Erica come from Canada and Nena lives in Germany, but is originally from Serbia. That all the respondents are female is not so striking when one considers that the field of popular music (fandom) is often connected to women. Scholar of popular culture and gender Diana Railton argues that pop music and culture have been linked mainly to women because pop music is characterized as bound to performance and physicality: "It is not only the performers that are involved in the physicality of pop, however. A constant image of fans of this type of music is of a girl or young woman, screaming, out of control, totally absorbed in the bodily experience."<sup>308</sup> In music ethnographical research pop music is often set apart from rock music. Pop music is connected to the female realm and bound to emotion and physicality, rock music is connected to the male realm and interpreted as more 'serious' and intellectual. Often the involvement with fandom and especially male entertainers are connected to teenage girls. However, this is not the case with the respondents of this research, which are contemporaries of Michael Jackson. In her research into adult female fans of '80s star Duran Duran, scholar Tonya Anderson concludes that the female respondents

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<sup>308</sup> Diana Railton, 'Gender and Sexuality', *Popular Music* 20 (2001) 321-331, 328.

still experience an euphoric empowerment from performing the same 'fannish' activities they did as teens. She concludes that the reason for their behavior can be explained because it approximates a 'reclaimed youth' for adults who are approaching midlife.<sup>309</sup> Whether these theories apply to the case-study of Michael Jackson pilgrims will be made clear in the next part.

In the next part, I will compare the various experiences of the pilgrims based on the following categories: Motivation for becoming a fan/pilgrim (1), Experience of pilgrimage(s) (2), Influence of Michael Jackson on personal life (3), Michael and the spiritual (4), Part of a community (5). I will describe the similarities and differences between the different accounts and augment these with quotes. The different categories will be dealt with consecutively.

#### 4.6.1 Motivation for becoming a fan/pilgrim (1)

It seems that the event of Jackson's passing has strengthened all the fans in their love for Michael Jackson. Many of the pilgrims already were a fan of Jackson from a young age, some only superficial, such as Nikki98: "I was a fan in the 80's then lost touch until Michael's passing", others more vividly, like Michelle: "I was about 6.5 years old...around 1969...the first time I saw His face. As soon as I heard my first song, I became a fan." Most pilgrims that already were a fan from a young age, can clearly recall the moment that they became a fan. For example pilgrims Monica and Sophie vividly remember this moment. For Monica it was the instant she saw Michael Jackson on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. For Sophie it was in 1992 after watching the HBO telecast of Michael's *Dangerous Concert* performance in Bucharest: "Something in Michael's performance that night, especially the song 'Will You Be There' arrested my interest and led to an insatiable curiosity about him that has not subsided since that evening." The experience that Nikki98 describes of being a fan, but losing touch until Jackson's passing is something which more pilgrims have experienced. For example pilgrim Susan experienced Jackson's death as an eye-opening moment: "it wasn't until after Michael's passing in 2009, following the release of the documentary *This Is It*, that I got my first glimpse of Michael, the person, and was profoundly affected. It was at this time that I began to study Him in depth." Clearly the passing of Jackson is experienced as a decisive moment in the lives of the pilgrims and all pilgrims describe this event as life-changing. Moreover, the experience of profuse grief after Jackson's death is a recurring theme in the accounts of the pilgrims. Such is clearly voiced by Monica: "(...) all I could do was cry. (...) I couldn't eat or sleep and I couldn't understand why I was feeling that way. I had never had that kind of reaction to a celebrity dying."

A special case are the people that were not Michael Jackson fans before his passing. For them, Jackson's death was an awakening and these fans express a feeling of surprise and confusion regarding their heavy emotions/response after Jackson's death. This experience is described by pilgrims Erica, Karen and J. Leone. Karen states: "After he died I was really devastated and I was surprised because (...) I never would have called myself a fan or anything. When he died I just felt so pained, it felt very personal to me (...) I just grieved very deeply. And I would cry every day." Erica literally refers to the death of Michael as "an awakening": "When he passed, I felt that I had lost my best friend, although I had never

<sup>309</sup> Tonya Anderson, 'Still kissing their posters goodnight: Female fandom and the politics of popular music', *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 9 (2012) 239-264, 239.

known him at all. I had no idea why I felt this way. (...) I was physically changed, my heart opened and I was in love with all people, animals, the earth and especially Michael.”

The majority of the pilgrims state that both Michael Jackson and Michael Jackson fans are special. The reasons mentioned for Jackson’s specialness are his humbleness, his messages of love and healing the world and his charitable work. Furthermore, all pilgrims see Jackson as an entertainer that is unsurpassed in both artistic accomplishments and philanthropy. Michelle: “I saw Him once go down on one knee to help a fan put on a shoe that she had lost running up on stage! (...) Can you name another entertainer, or anyone that ever did this?” J. Leone: “Michael was always there when called upon to help. He donated the money he made on the *Victory* and *Dangerous* tours to charity. What other famous person has ever done that - give up their entire salary for charity?” According to Nikki98, what makes Michael Jackson fans so special is their “fierce devotion, not just to the artist, but to the man.” Karen believes that Michael Jackson fans have a certain sensitivity to the ‘message’ of Michael and subsequently act upon this inspiration. Charlot describes this as follows: “being a Michael fan embodies caring about the things he cared about: the environment, children, poverty, peace, etc. Which is different from fans of other entertainers/stars.” Michelle furthermore stresses the spiritual dimension underlying their fandom: “Elvis has a loyal fan base also, but Michael has a huge fan base motivated by spiritual love. Michael called His fans Soldiers of Love, and I truly believe we take this to heart.”

#### 4.6.2 Experience of pilgrimage(s) (2)

On the basis of the different accounts, a general attitude can be found as to what a Michael Jackson pilgrimage looks like. The different accounts all describe a journey (1) where the pilgrim tries to walk into the footsteps of Michael Jackson (2) and tries to be as close to him as is possible (3) to hopefully spiritually connect with Jackson (4). Sophie defines a ‘Michael pilgrim’ as follows: “A Michael-pilgrim is an individual who visits sites familiar to Michael during his life which have taken on special meaning since his transition (i.e. his burial site, his beautiful Neverland, etc.) In general, these pilgrims go to great expense in time, energy and money to be physically present at these sites to increase their individual connection with the spirit of Michael Jackson.” All eleven pilgrims have made at least two or more pilgrimages. Pilgrims Erica, Susan and Karen even visit Los Angeles every year. It is clear that there are certain sites that are the main foci for ‘Michaeling’. These are: Michael’s grave at Forest Lawn, the gate of Neverland (Neverland itself is closed to visitors), Michael’s star in Hollywood and Michael’s childhood town Gary. Most pilgrimages take place in the months June and/or August, since these months contain the special events of Michael’s birthday and the anniversary of his death. Moreover, in June a special ‘Michael-week’ is organized in Los Angeles that contains all sorts of special events dedicated to Michael Jackson.

Most pilgrims describe their pilgrimage as a social event that contains traveling with a group and will take up quite some time. This directly tells us something about the nature of ‘Michaeling’; it is not about visiting just *one* place. Most Michael pilgrimages comprise a visit to multiple locations and the pilgrims ‘make a big event of it’. *Experiencing* Michael Jackson to the fullest seems to be at the heart of ‘Michaeling’. For example Nena states: “I have followed Michael’s footsteps in America twice. It was my goal to visit all the places where Michael Jackson has been. To eat in restaurants where he ate, to visit his house, stand on the porch of Neverland, and of course visit the cemetery of Forest Lawn and the Hollywood Walk of Fame.” One remarkable thing is that the pilgrimage places do not necessarily have to

be places that Michael visited himself. This is explained by Jennie and Monica who experience visits to the theatre shows 'Michael Jackson One' and 'The Immortal World Tour' and the movie *This Is It* also as part of their pilgrimage.

The wish to be 'as close as possible to Michael' runs through all the pilgrim accounts. J. Leone describes as a highlight of one of her pilgrimages a visit to an auction of Jackson's belongings: "You were able to actually touch the clothes Michael wore (...) It was so incredible to see and touch things that he had on his body." Monica also describes her pilgrimage to Gary, Jackson's hometown, as a means to get as close to Jackson as possible and explains how uplifting this experience was for her: "It's amazing to be where he was, to see what he saw, touch what he felt, breathe in the air that he breathed." The wish to be near Michael is also voiced by Michelle. In this research Michelle takes in a special position. She is a pilgrim 'in spirit' and has never made a physical journey to a "sacred Michael spot". However, Michelle would love to make a physical pilgrimage to Michael's thinking tree. For her this is the closest she could get to him in physical form, because Michelle believes this is where his spirit is.

Besides wanting to experience Jackson during their pilgrimages, the pilgrims often also take something with them on their pilgrimage, such as flowers or notes. Pilgrim Nena takes in a special position as she is the only pilgrim that describes that she actually prefers to also take something from the pilgrimage sites: "to pick a rose at the site of Neverland and take it with me, that is worth so much. Also leaves from trees of Neverland, I have gathered it all and for me that is sacred. Not within the meaning of 'religion' or in a church-like manner, but sacred within the meaning of love. It is something in itself."

All pilgrims describe Michael pilgrimage places as sites that retain some special power. The sites that are most often mentioned to contain a special power are Neverland, Forest Lawn and Michael's Star of Fame. At these places the spirit of Jackson is described as 'palpable'. Because of the presence of Jackson's spirit some pilgrims label these sites 'sacred', as is done by Nena, Michelle, Karen and Erica. For Erica the pilgrimage is above all a means to connect with the spirit of Michael Jackson and she describes this as a very uplifting experience: "The magic of Neverland was amazing and very special (...) It is beautiful, peaceful and full of Michael's love. The Love connection was very strong, and I only wanted more of it." Erica also created her 'own' pilgrimage place in her hometown: "We have planted a tree in our city for him, and although there are only two of us who visit regularly, it has become a sacred place." For Karen, Neverland and Forest Lawn are most special, regarding Neverland she says: "He really became so much part of Neverland. It feels sacred, it feels important, it feels different. It has a specialness that you can only attribute to a spiritual set. The feeling I have when I am at Neverland: this flood of emotion and the sense of having a spiritual reaction, I have only had this twice before in my life: when I visited a very old monastery in Japan and in the Sistine chapel. (...) These were spiritual feelings." For Karen the spiritual feeling she experiences at the pilgrimage site is one of the main motivations for her visit. Sophie also experiences Michael's presence most strongly at Neverland and Forest Lawn: "Neverland retains his smile, his joy in sharing his Garden of Eden with all. (...) I am grateful to be able to sit at its gates and meditate. Forest Lawn holds his physical remains and I feel him very strongly there as well. (...) When I am on pilgrimage, it is my main goal to touch that energy and bring it more fully into my life and all the things I do." Sophie describes her pilgrimages as transformational, after her journeys she feels renewed, empowered and spiritually connected. Besides Sophie, pilgrims Nikki98, Monica and Erica also explicitly describe their pilgrimages as transformational and/or life-changing. Erica also describes that she experienced difficulty to adjust to her regular life after her first pilgrimage. However, she states that: "As

time goes by, I find that my regular life is more and more like a pilgrimage every day. There is no crash on returning anymore because Michael is my life always.”

It is remarkable that the pilgrimages are described as very spiritual, meaningful experiences for the pilgrims. For example pilgrim Monica compares her multiple visits to the *This Is It* movie with the experience of a church and “how one feels after a very moving sermon”. Some pilgrims even describe the experience of miracles during their pilgrimages. For example Jennie states that all her pilgrimages were surrounded by miracles. She experienced one of these miracles when she visited Michael’s Star of Fame: “I felt him so strong, as I put my hand into his hand print, that my MJ sisters had to catch me because the force made me swoon.” Sophie also experienced miracles during her pilgrimages: “These miracles would be difficult to describe ... little signs that he was with us like the shadow of his toe-stand that arose from putting six white roses against the frame of the entrance of Holly Terrace.” Sophie describes her pilgrimages as very much a spiritual quest: “whether Michael pilgrimage or Compostella. (...) For me, a "pilgrimage" is a contemplative action ... one in which there is a spiritual quest to re-align the soul of the pilgrim with a higher purpose ... to empower and find new meaning ... to renew commitment. As such, it is a journey into inner space and the journey into outer space.”

Because of the intense, sometimes spiritual experience ‘Michaeling’ might be difficult to understand for outsiders. The majority of the pilgrims does not think that someone who is not a Michael-pilgrim can understand the experience. Charlot: “I think it requires a personal, mystical experience to fully appreciate what it means to be in those places that Michael inhabited when he was in the flesh.” For Charlot the spiritual nature is also most important during her pilgrimage. Pilgrim Susan is the only one who *does* think that the pilgrimage experience can be understood by outsiders: “The feeling of unity that is demonstrated in the coming together of people from all over the globe, and the out pouring of Love for Michael is one of the most uplifting, incredible experiences I have ever known. It is truly spiritually overwhelming, and I believe, something that can be felt and appreciated by anyone, whether they are a Michael fan or not.”

With this last statement Susan touches upon another important characteristic of ‘Michaeling’, namely its social dimension, which is very much stressed by all pilgrims. Some travel with a personal friend, others with a whole group, but the ability to share experiences at least with one person seems to be very important to the pilgrims and adds an extra layer of meaning to the journey. This is voiced by Nikki98: “For those who experience Michael as a balm for their soul, the experience is intensely magnified when visiting places where he frequented and his energy is palpable, especially at times when others of like-mind are also gathering together and the exchange of this very high frequency energy is very strong and transformational.” Often a feeling is expressed of unity at the pilgrimage sites between fans that before did not even know each other. The experience of openly sharing their love with like-minded fans during the pilgrimage is described as very meaningful for the pilgrims. The pilgrims describe a feeling of unspoken connectedness and unity because of their shared love for Michael Jackson.

Even though the experience of ‘Michaeling’ is described as a highly social event, at the same time the pilgrims state that their pilgrimages are very personal. For example Charlot describes a difference of effect of her pilgrimages to Gary: “The first time I went to the house, it took my breath away. (...) I have been back, once on his birthday. But even though it is fun to be there with others, still the fact that the first time I saw it I was alone, holds more meaning.” Sophie also mostly enjoys to travel to pilgrimage sites in a quieter, less event-laden mindset. In the future, she prefers to visit Forest Lawn

and Neverland 'off season' during January and February because at these more quiet times she experiences her pilgrimage as "much more contemplative" and has "a much deeper and more soulful connection with the energy of Michael."

The Michael Jackson pilgrimages are described as meaningful, spiritual journeys by the pilgrims. The journeys, in my opinion, certainly qualify as pilgrimages regarding Digance's definition of 'journeys redolent with meaning'. Moreover, I think that 'Michaeling' meets the three general features that Digance discerns, namely the notion of a journey, sacred places and a quest. Many of the pilgrims describe their journey as a spiritual quest. It is their main motivation to come as close as possible to Michael and connect in one way or another with his spirit. Many of the pilgrims describe the pilgrimage sites they visit as 'sacred'. These places are declared sacred by the pilgrims, because at these places they can feel Michaels' spirit. Moreover, 'Michaeling' is very much a social activity. It seems to be a joyous event where like-minded people, for a certain amount of time, shamelessly can immerse themselves in the world of Michael Jackson and celebrate being Michael Jackson fans together. 'Michaeling' therefore shows a similarity to the description of Christine King of pilgrimages made to Graceland. King argues that these pilgrimages function to enhance the identity of the fans and the experience of being part of a community.<sup>310</sup> At the same time, the experience of 'Michaeling' is very personal. The pilgrims are motivated by their wish to connect to Michael Jackson and to experience him to the fullest. It seems that 'Michaeling' is never motivated by the wish for physical healing or doing penance, which are two main motives within the context of Christian pilgrimage. Still, I believe that there is a question of an inward spiritual journey for many and at the pilgrimage sites there is a strengthening of faith. I think that the pilgrimage experience can be interpreted as both a liminoid experience and a feeling of *communitas*. The liminoid character is through the act of motion and because 'Michaeling' is so clearly set apart from the everyday lives of the pilgrims. Moreover, some of the pilgrims describe an experience of transformation in the form of a strengthening of their connection with Michael Jackson. Both the palpable *communitas* and the feeling of *communitas* are present in the descriptions of the Michael pilgrims. During 'Michaeling' the pilgrims can be openly themselves. There is no question of rivalry and all are one.

#### 4.6.3 Influence of Michael Jackson on personal life (3)

All pilgrims state that in one way or another they are affected by Michael Jackson in their everyday life. This may be in the form of seeing Michael Jackson as a role model or guide for their behavior, being creatively inspired by him or doing charity in honor of Michael Jackson. Often these go hand in hand and a clear pattern can be discerned: first, the pilgrims are inspired by Michael Jackson (1) and internalize his messages that they deem important (2), subsequently they feel the urge to act upon their inspiration (3), which takes several forms (4). Most pilgrims state that they were touched by Jackson's messages after his passing, this was for many pilgrims a transformational event.

Many pilgrims state that they view Michael in some way as a role model. This may be in a very personal way, as a guidance for the everyday life, but also in a more broad way for the Michael Jackson community. The pilgrims state that Michael Jackson is so inspiring because he truly set a living example: he practiced what he preached, moreover the messages of his songs are interpreted as guidelines. Nikki98 states: "Michael inspires me daily because I am acutely aware now of wanting to always be

<sup>310</sup> King, 'His truth goes marching on: Elvis Presley and the Pilgrimage to Graceland', 98, 101-104.

better in every way (...) Michael shows people how to live up to their potential. (...) He lived and loved with endless abundance and joy. Even in the worst of times, he modeled a staggering degree of dignity, faith, humility and strength. Everything about him inspires me. I learn from him constantly and don't plan to ever stop. He is and always will be part of my daily life." Monica expresses her need to imitate Jackson: "I love Michael and I want to live my life in a way that would make him proud and to follow in his teachings what he taught us through his music and the way he lived his life (...) He cared deeply for the planet. He was very giving, an amazing humanitarian, and would give the shirt off his back to someone in need, especially a child." Many of the pilgrims state that they try to incorporate the living example that Michael set into their everyday lives. Erica formulates the influence of Michael on her daily activities as follows: "I see Michael as my beacon of Light, showing me who I am and how to be the best I can be. (...) He is my example, my inspiration, my guide, and my greatest love. I try to live my life as if he is watching me and to be a good reflection of him in my daily life. I light candles and talk to him every day. I have a room in my house that is devoted to him."

For the majority of the pilgrims the passing of Michael Jackson has been a life-altering event and in their accounts the pilgrims often make a division between their lives *before* and *after* Michael's death. Most pilgrims express that since Jackson's death they have become better persons. For example Erica states that: "Michael has changed the way I think, the way I act, the way I see the world. Personally, I was a very self-absorbed person before, living my life and not very concerned about the welfare of others or things that did not affect me personally." After Michael's death Erica was "struck by Michael's love" and now she is "different, and better, happier, more fulfilled and a more giving and loving person." Since Jackson's passing Erica has participated in many charitable projects and even created some herself. Karen's life also changed profoundly: "After Michael died I started doing a number of things I hadn't done before. I have been volunteering in a shelter for animals, I started feeding a colony of cats (...) I have gone to the Buddhist center to do meditation every week (...) and I reach out for the homeless, I always give them some money. Sometimes I even say this is 'in honor of Michael Jackson.'"

The feeling of being inspired by Michael and the feeling of a personal transformation have motivated almost all pilgrims to 'take action'. The majority of the pilgrims is creatively inspired by Michael Jackson and for instance writes or paints based on this inspiration. Furthermore, the pilgrims are involved in many diverse charitable causes, some of which they have initiated themselves. For example pilgrim Sophie paints and has published books and writes a blog. She moreover dedicates herself to charity as she donates all of the proceeds from her books and artistic endeavors to various fan-based charities. For Sophie this is "simply the right thing to do" and it is her mission to emulate Michael's humanitarian outreach as much as possible. With this last statement Sophie touches upon a similar motivation that was described in chapter three: now Jackson is gone, it is the responsibility of the Michael Jackson community to continue the legacy. This is expressed by many of the pilgrims, including Nena who has made it her life-goal to defend Michael Jackson and spread his message no matter what: "When we don't do anything, then who will? I want to show him that we have understood his messages of 'heal the world' and 'we are the world' and that we will continue these messages and spread them."

For the pilgrims Michael Jackson truly functions as a moral guideline for their everyday behavior. Jackson's death has inspired the pilgrims to 'do better' and give something back. His passing has functioned as a moment of reflection and as a realization for the pilgrims of what Michael Jackson has meant to the world and their own responsibility to do their bit.

#### 4.6.4 Michael and the spiritual (4)

That there is a spiritual dimension connected to 'Michaeling' has probably already become clear in the examples mentioned above. Throughout the different narratives the religious discourse is striking. For example many pilgrims refer to Michael with capitals - for instance 'His'. The following part will specifically look into the relationship between Michael and the spiritual. Some pilgrims make a connection between Michael and the divine, while others feel spiritually connected to Michael himself. This part will highlight these aspects and focus on how Michael Jackson is integrated in the personal worldview of the pilgrims.

Erica believes that Michael is still present in the world: "I have felt that he is still here doing his work and asking us to join him in healing the world." Erica's worldview and Michael are very much interconnected: "Before Michael, I believed in God, but I did not have a personal relationship with God. Now I do. I find it easier to understand other points of view and accept people as they are, because I am confident and secure in my beliefs. Michael has everything to do with all of it." Michelle explicitly believes in Jackson's divine nature and argues that Michael's life is "simply another example of God's presence on Earth (...) preaching His message of universal love". Michelle has written two books to defend this position: "Michael (...) is our modern messiah. (...) He was sent by God to remind us of what is important: our 'selves', the planet, and our children. I think He is an incarnation of the Archangel Michael...ChristMichael, if you will."

Monica, Erica, Sophie, Michelle, Jennie, Susan and Charlot all feel a personal spiritual connection with Jackson outside of the spiritual connection at the pilgrimage site. Sophie, Jennie, Monica and Michelle also converse with him. Sophie explains that because of her personal relationship with Jackson she sees herself more like a disciple or follower than a fan. Sophie is active as a volunteer at the 'Major Love Prayer' and involved in the 'Change the World' initiative. She believes that Jackson recruited his fans to heal the world and she takes this mission very seriously. Jennie claims that she has felt a spiritual connection to Michael since 2009: "I guess that you could call it visitations from him and these continue until today although not so frequently as before. It is from these experiences that I receive the poetry and the encouragement to do so many things in and for his love. It has made me a better human being." Michelle has felt connected to Michael since she was a young child. She has also had several visitations of Michael: "He has spoken to me 2 times since He passed away...other than in dreams and visions. (...) He spoke in the first person both times. If I was unsure of the spiritual world or my connection to Michael, before these times...I was completely convinced of it afterwards. (...) I've never been a religious person, or even had a religious experience...ever...until Michael coming to me after His passing." Monica also converses with Michael: "I talk to Michael and he sends me answers, encouragement, signs. Sometimes there are small things, like a bird that flies up to the window, or a song of his that suddenly comes on the radio. Sometimes, it's not so subtle by something falling off a shelf in my house for no reason (...) All things that are meaningful to me if I'm open to receiving them!"

Throughout the different accounts the topic of Michael's innocence comes up regularly. Some of the pilgrims describe Michael as a martyr. For example Michelle states: "Michael was persecuted and then prosecuted. This world took Him apart, thread by thread. We watched in horror as the fabric of His spirit was slowly unraveled." Susan states something similar: "He lived the highest demonstration of strength, dignity, and tolerance in the face of personal injustice and merciless cruelty." Nena argues: "when one really sees Michael with one's soul than you understand how much injustice has been done

to him. This has only reinforced my lion's heart. Michael truly has suffered. He fought for justice (...) But he got so many enemies. I think this is also the reason that he died. They killed him. And I believe that he knew. He was simply surrounded and that hurts my soul. He has suffered and truly was persecuted. His soul has suffered and he did not deserve this." J. Leone finds Jackson similar to Christ as he did so much good in the world and was still persecuted. She experiences her insatiable curiosity for Michael after his passing as a 'spiritual phenomenon'.

Most pilgrims that express an affiliation for a certain worldview, argue that Michael is definitely a part of this. Only Nena makes a difference between her personal worldview and her love for Michael: "I am an orthodox Christian. My faith has nothing to do with my love for Michael. I must say that I never thought of these as intertwined. My love for Michael has to do with my heart and with my soul. He has touched my soul and I loved him already since I was a child." The other pilgrims express a feeling of interconnection between their worldview and their love for Michael. Most pilgrims state to be spiritual, however not bound to one specific religion. For example Charlot believes in God as a Spirit of Love that permeates all of life and she sees Michael as one of God's messengers: "The Christian Bible says in Matt. 7:20, By their fruits you shall know them. Michael set an example that all of us can draw from, in how to live life. I think he was given his world-wide platform by God, to get the message of love and peace out." Sophie calls herself "a very spiritually-oriented person". Her worldview is: "LOVE IS THE ANSWER to all that we see around us. Non-judgmental, unconditional love and respect." Concerning the interconnection between her worldview and Jackson she says: "I believe that my worldview was present before I became involved with Michael in a kind of embryonic state, but it became much more focused and much more a part of my daily activities as a result of my fascination with Michael. He is the prism through which the light of my spirituality is refracted. To me, he embodies all of the very best principles of all the world religions (...) I see the face of God in Michael (...) And, in the seeing, I rejoice that God hasn't forgotten us." Susan explains that through her study of Michael Jackson she has discovered spiritual enlightenment and "the Bliss of discovering and developing a direct intimacy with the Divine."

Karen believes in the transcendence, extraordinary charisma, and special energy of Michael. For Karen, her love for Michael and her own personal worldview are very much interlinked: "I do not label myself a Buddhist, but I do feel some sort of connection and I do a lot of meditation. Michael believed we are all one and that we do have a responsibility to help each other out. I think in a way he very much was like the very Buddhists and he used to go round and put his hands together as a prayer about the people. (...) I really admire that and I find that very spiritual." Karen wrote her book because of this spiritual connection: "I would not have written this book if I was crazy in love with his music, although I do listen to it all the time, but it really was because of the man, the human being."

Michelle was raised a Catholic, but realized at a very early age that "Christianity was not the religion to beat all others." She now labels herself as 'spiritual': "Believing in the ethereal world has also always been part of my life, and Michael makes it easier, especially after having spiritual experiences involving Him. I feel like because of Michael, I now know and understand Christ." Nikki98 takes a similar position as Michelle. She was also born Catholic, but does not consider herself now as having any one religious affiliation in particular: "Like Michael, I am fascinated by the study of all religions and spiritual paths and I seek to learn and grow from all of them. My 'worldview' is not independent of my love for Michael; the two are entirely interlinked and my experience of Michael is completely through the spiritual dimension."

The connection of Michael with the supernatural is a remarkable feature in the accounts of the pilgrims. The pilgrims describe Michael Jackson as a saint. First of all, there is the notion that Michael Jackson is a martyr. Even though he did so many good deeds, he was still persecuted and suffered heavily. His death was a homicide and therefore he also died a martyr. With this description, the pilgrims implicitly refer to the suffering of Christ, which J. Leone even makes explicitly. In this way, a direct link can be made between Michael Jackson and the first saints, who died heroically for their faith. Moreover, Michael Jackson seems to function as a palpable figure that mediates and translates the messages of a broad range of spiritualities and helps to incorporate these into the daily lives of the pilgrims. Jackson thus functions as a medium between the supernatural and humanity. All pilgrims experience Michael Jackson's presence on earth in one way or another. Some have a personal spiritual connection with him and also converse with Jackson, whilst others do not experience Jackson in this way, but do believe that he still has influence on the earth and feel his presence at certain pilgrimage sites. Furthermore, Michael Jackson is presented as the guru for the everyday life of all the pilgrims. All try to imitate him and 'do him proud', which very much reflects the moral aspects of for example Christianity.

#### **4.6.5 Part of a community (5)**

Most pilgrims experience a special connection with other Michael Jackson fans and feel part of a (global) community. Often this community is online and is accessed through for example Facebook. However, many pilgrims experience their pilgrimage also as the opportunity to meet their virtual friends. The pilgrims sometimes express a feeling of relief, meeting like-minded people. Many of the pilgrims have experienced negativity and misunderstanding from their environment and sometimes even family. The experience of meeting like-minded people during the pilgrimage is for many a cathartic experience.

The majority of the pilgrims who have been open about their feelings for Michael Jackson towards their environment and family have encountered negativity; this is for example expressed by Erica, J. Leone, Karen, Michelle and Sophie. These pilgrims describe that their families and friends are 'tolerant' at best, but often feel agitated because they do not understand the reason for the depth of the pilgrim's devotion to Jackson. Sophie says: "I felt very much alone. My family and friends thought that I had lost my mind completely. I was frequently asked by acquaintances, 'Why is this so important to you? It's only Michael Jackson and he's weird anyway.' (...) My defense of him during the 1993 allegations was ridiculed by everyone around me, but defend him I did. As time has progressed, my family has learned to tolerate my idiosyncrasies. They don't agree with me, but they have accepted that he is a major part of who I am." J. Leone expresses a similar reaction of her family and friends: "My family and friends are really tired of me talking about him. I really don't have someone that I can cry with and talk about my feelings. (...) Even my sister, a psychologist, has told me that it wasn't 'normal' to grieve over someone you had never met or known." Nena is the only pilgrim that can count on support from her family and environment. However, she is familiar with the problem of incomprehension and ridicule. This is one of the main encouragements for Nena to maintain the Michael memorial in Munich, so she can provide a place where Michael fans can be open about their feelings without being declared 'crazy'.

Many pilgrims are a bit wary when it comes to being open about their feelings for Michael. Most pilgrims are aware that their 'obsession' with Michael Jackson might not be regarded as 'normal' by society and therefore keep their feelings to themselves to avoid stigma. For Charlot the likely negative response keeps her from opening up: "I have not been very open...I have my select group of friends with

whom I share. I have not experienced any negativity, because I do not openly share with strangers.” Sophie has also been hiding her feelings, but now she is retired she feels that she can be open about her identity: “I don't hide anything anymore. I am who I am ... and my attitude is ‘take it or leave it.’ My circumstances now allow me that freedom and I shamelessly take full advantage of it. If I want to spend days drawing or painting Michael, that's exactly what I do.” Pilgrim Michelle kept her feelings for to herself her whole life. However, she felt compelled to be open about her feelings after Jackson visited her and told her to write a book. Michelle thinks that there are others who feel the same way but “I think fear of exposure stops many from expressing too much. That's another reason I wrote the second book (...) to encourage people to be brave and speak the truth.” After her ‘coming out’ Michelle has encountered negativity. However, she still finds it important to be open: “The little ridicule, or pain I might feel from disbelievers or haters, is NOTHING to the pain Michael endured during His lifetime. I can handle it. It's my duty to honor and defend Him.” This final remark is quite interesting, since with this comment the catholic background of Michelle is somewhat revealed. Since this statement is reminiscent of Catholics that reflect their suffering with the suffering of Christ.

The feeling of having to keep their feelings for Michael Jackson to themselves make the experience of meeting like-minded pilgrims during a pilgrimage into a real cathartic experience. All pilgrims describe their pilgrimages as uplifting experiences with loads of social contacts, special encounters and no need to hold back feelings. This is stated by Nikki98: “There was an unspoken understanding among the fan community of the love and grief everyone was experiencing, and it was so liberating to be able to express that fully without any concern of judgment from those who don't understand the strong connection to Michael that we all felt, and the pain of losing him.” J. Leone explains a similar feeling of excitement: “It was a wonderful time of friendship to be with like-minded people that you knew you could freely share with those who would not judge you, or look at you like you are crazy.” Besides meeting ‘kindred spirits’ during pilgrimages, the Internet provides a great platform for the pilgrims to share experiences that they cannot be open about in their direct environment. For Monica the Internet has been a great relief: “I stumbled across a forum on *amazon.com*, quite by accident, I read the post that started the thread ‘why I am still crying over Michael Jackson’. It was touching and heart wrenching, but it also fully outlined everything I had been feeling. Eureka! I was not crazy after all.” That the encounters online can develop into close friendships is something which is stated by all pilgrims but Nena. The online community is sometimes even described as being more close than the pilgrim's family.

The immediate close connection that the pilgrims feel among their physical and online community is rooted in their communal love for Michael Jackson. This is formulated by Susan: “I often find there is an instant and deep connection between myself and others who are living parallel experiences to mine.” The secure feeling of connectedness have motivated many of the pilgrims to meet up during their pilgrimages with co-fans they had only met online. This conviction of trust between the pilgrims is something which is not always understood by ‘outsiders’. J. Leone explains: “My family was very concerned that I was traveling to meet a perfect stranger, although I knew she wasn't a stranger to me in my heart. (...) We could understand family concerns, as we know people can pretend to be anyone, or anything, online. However, I felt I “knew” her as a good friend from all of our conversations on this forum. We were bound immediately by our love of Michael Jackson.” The same is stated by Nikki98, who's family declared her ‘crazy’ for travelling with someone she had met online. For Karen her online

friendships are much more than acquaintanceships and over time her best and closest friends are Michael Jackson fans and they are bonded by their admiration of Jackson. She calls it her social evolution. For Jennie the main motivation for her pilgrimage, besides experiencing the spirit of Michael Jackson, was to meet the others with whom she had been in contact on Facebook: “To be able to talk face to face and touch and embrace the women who I felt as if I had known for years and years. As I expected the meeting was very emotional. We had seemed to have formed a special bond and that lasts and grows until today.”

All pilgrims feel part of a community. Most of the pilgrims are part of an online community, that consists of for example forums, Facebook or other virtual groups. Nikki98 states that the Michael community is united by their: “passionate commitment and devotion to Michael Jackson, belief in his innocence, love and respect for his creative genius and artistry, and most of all admiration for his gentle spirit, humanitarianism and compassion.” Erica says: “I have found soul friends, casual friends, acquaintances, and people who know me better than my own family does. Most of the people I have met have been online only. I feel close to them. They are mostly women, of all ages and in all countries of the world.” Karen also states that the majority of Michael Jackson pilgrims is female: “Among my MJ followers, 71% are female, 29% are male.”

It is clear that the social is very much a part of the pilgrimage experience of the eleven Michael Jackson pilgrims. Since they often do not find like-minded people in their environment the online Michael Jackson community is very valuable to them. To candidly state that one is a Michael Jackson pilgrim or express one’s dedication in public can have quite the social consequences and resembles a ‘coming out’. To avoid stigma, some pilgrims have decided to keep their feelings to themselves. Others have dared to openly declare their feelings and sometimes have had to pay the price of losing friends and turning family members against them. The vocabulary that the pilgrims use shows what kind of reputation sticks to their fandom. They are afraid of being declared ‘crazy’ and refer to their dedication to Michael Jackson as an ‘obsession’. The Internet is often experienced as an outlet. For the Michael Jackson pilgrims the Internet works as an environment which enables them to ‘gather’ and openly share thoughts and experiences without having to be ‘guarded’. They can participate in forums and other communities, such as the amazon forum where J. Leone and Nikki98 met. This would not be able in the off-line world, besides during their pilgrimages. Throughout their pilgrimages the pilgrims very much voice a feeling of *communitas*. Both in the sense of belonging to a community and the feeling of unity.

#### **4.7 Reflection and preface to the next chapter**

This chapter showed what moves Michael Jackson fans to embark upon a journey dedicated to Michael Jackson and what needs these pilgrimages fulfill. It seems that the most important motivations are to spiritually connect with Jackson’s spirit and come into contact with like-minded Michael Jackson fans. The next chapter is the conclusion, in which I will confront the findings of my qualitative research with the theoretical framework of this thesis. In the conclusion I will furthermore answer my main question and three sub questions.

## CHAPTER V: Conclusion

“That's why I wrote these kind of songs, to give a sense of awareness and awakening and hope to people.”

Michael Joseph Jackson

### 5.1 Introduction

This thesis investigated the act of ‘Michaeling’ as an example of the global influence of the universal pop icon Michael Jackson and studied whether this phenomenon can be regarded as a religious expression. The main focus of this research has been the experience of eleven Michael Jackson pilgrims, fans who feel the urge to embark upon a journey dedicated to Michael. For these pilgrims, Michael Jackson is at the heart of their everyday lives; he is their moral compass and guideline for daily behavior. In this final section, I will confront the findings in my qualitative research with the theoretical chapters one and two. In my introduction I formulated the following main question as a guidance for this research:

‘In how far can the phenomenon of Michael Jackson ‘pilgrimage’ be interpreted as a ‘real’ pilgrimage and an expression of (implicit) religion arisen as a result of modern post-secular society?’

Furthermore, I formulated three sub-questions:

- ‘How can the phenomenon of Michael Jackson pilgrimage be understood in reference to (medieval) Christian pilgrimage and secular pilgrimages?’
- ‘In what way do Michael Jackson fans use religious symbols and rituals in their online behavior to express their dedication to Michael Jackson?’
- ‘What moves Michael Jackson pilgrims to start ‘Michaeling’ and how does Michael Jackson influence their daily lives?’

In the next part of this chapter I will first briefly research the above named three sub-questions, after which I will reflect on my main question.

### 5.2 ‘Michaeling’ as a form of secular pilgrimage?

My first sub-question reads: ‘How should the act of Michael Jackson pilgrimage be understood in reference to (medieval) Christian pilgrimage and secular pilgrimages?’ The phenomenon of ‘Michaeling’ is connected to the field of popular fan culture. On first appearance, the act can therefore be categorized as a secular pilgrimage, because it belongs to the profane realm of the entertainment industry and exists outside of typical confessional realms. Some scholars, such as Peter Jan Margry, are hesitant about putting journeys in the profane and confessional pilgrimages under the same umbrella and fear a watering down of meaning with regard to the term ‘pilgrimage’.<sup>311</sup> Even though I agree that not every journey should be considered a ‘pilgrimage’, I still need to apply a broad definition of pilgrimage as a basis for my study to be able to consider whether ‘Michaeling’ can be regarded as a pilgrimage. For this study, I consider the definition of Justine Digance to be appropriate and functional. Digance states that pilgrimages, whether secular or confessional, should be regarded as ‘journeys redolent with meaning’.

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<sup>311</sup> Margry, ‘Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?’, 19.

Digance furthermore distinguishes three key features that comprise a pilgrimage; namely the notion of a quest, a journey and sacred places.<sup>312</sup> In correspondence with Jennifer Porter, I consider that Digance's definition should be completed with the notion of a pursuit of sacred ideals.<sup>313</sup> However, what Digance ultimately stresses most is the pilgrim's own view. This is also stated by Mark Duffett.<sup>314</sup> I agree with both scholars and regard that the authority of definition lies most with the pilgrims. These people are eventually the ones who can best describe why their journeys should be regarded as pilgrimages or not. So, even though the act of 'Michaeling' belongs on the outset to the secular realm, the question in how far the journeys of the pilgrims should be regarded as secular or confessional pilgrimages depends on the personal accounts of the pilgrims.

### 5.3 Michael Jackson fans and the use of religious symbols and rituals

The second sub question underlying this research is: 'In what way do Michael Jackson fans use religious symbols and rituals in their online behavior to express their dedication to Michael Jackson?' Michael Jackson fans are known for their fierce dedication to their hero. Their ardent commitment is rooted in the belief that Michael Jackson is unique and extraordinary: he not only stood out for his artistic accomplishments, but was also unsurpassed in his broad-ranging humanitarian efforts, with a special care for the environment, animals and children. Moreover, as a global icon, Jackson had the advantage to translate his mission of peace and love and his social activism into catchy songs and was thus able to 'recruit' a worldwide 'army'. Together, these so-called Soldiers of Love form a global brotherhood that is fighting for Jackson's message to 'Heal the World'. The fans express a feeling of a moral responsibility to imitate Jackson's philanthropy; Michael Jackson 'gave' them his words and living example, now it is up to them to give something back and carry on the legacy.

Chapter three showed a few expressions of the dedication of Michael Jackson fans and the way in which they make use of religious symbols and rituals to express their dedication. This is firstly made clear in the reference of 'Army' and 'Soldiers of Love'. These terms are reminiscent of the 'soldiers of Christ'. Not only the title of the fans, but also the actions of the fans, have Christian connotations. Because Michael Jackson fans not only fight for the legacy of Michael Jackson, but also defend their king and try to rectify 'the truth' and show the way in which Jackson was persecuted. The portrayal of Jackson's suffering and his strength and persistence to 'do good' in face of adversity turns Jackson into a martyr and resembles the suffering of Christ. Like the followers of Christ, in their defense, Jackson's fans are tested and they even experience an element of suffering themselves caused by 'Michael-Haters'. Still, the responsibility to spread Jackson's legacy is more important than the experience of hostility. Moreover, as pilgrim Michelle states: her suffering will never be as great as that of Michael. In addition, the encounter of Michael-Haters seems to reinforce the mission of the fans and they perceive these 'Haters' as ignorant and worthy of pity, because they do not share in the global love of Michael Jackson.

The Christian symbolism is also present in the online behavior of the fans. For example, the 'Michael-iconography' shows Michael Jackson as a healing force, a supernatural entity and as being blessed by Jesus and welcomed to heaven. Furthermore, the rituals of prayer and the lighting of virtual candles have religious connotations. In the case of the initiative of the monthly Major Love Prayer, the

<sup>312</sup> Digance, 'Religious and Secular Pilgrimage: Journey redolent of meaning', 36-43.

<sup>313</sup> Porter, 'Pilgrimage and the IDIC Ethic', 161.

<sup>314</sup> Duffett, 'False Faith or False Comparison?', 513.

religious affiliation is very broad and stated explicitly. The act of lighting online candles is less obviously religious and also is not always intended to have this meaning. However, this act could be interpreted as implicitly religious when the virtual places where the candles can be lit are meant as places for reflection and commemoration. The phenomenon of starting non-profit organizations in honor of Michael Jackson might not look religious on the outset. However, when one reads into the different motivations underlying the initiatives, it becomes clear how much Michael Jackson and his music function as inspirational sources and guidelines for the behavior of the fans. Michael Jackson is portrayed as a guru and his messages are interpreted as gospels. Every charity mentions explicitly his 'good deeds and messages'. Consequently, statements such as 'Heal the World' and 'It's all for L.O.V.E' are not just slogans but have become moral laws. The charities furthermore appeal to the internalized messages of Michael Jackson by their fellow-fans and urge them to contribute; this is clearly shown in the example of the non-profit organization of Michael Jackson Fans For Charity.

Whether the online behavior of Michael fans can be interpreted as online pilgrimages is disputable. There exists no such thing as a 'real' copy of a physical 'Michaeling' journey online. The different acts of virtual fan behavior could however be interpreted as separate rituals that could be part of a physical pilgrimage. In the view of Paul Post the Major Love Prayer can for instance be interpreted as a pilgrimage. However, does this mean that the ritual of going to church or praying at home should also be viewed as a pilgrimage? This is a matter of linguistic debate. I feel that when one renders these acts a 'pilgrimage' the interpretation of the term becomes too broad.

#### **5.4 Walking in the footsteps of Michael Jackson**

The final sub question, that I formulated, asks: 'What moves Michael Jackson pilgrims to start 'Michaeling' and how does Michael Jackson influence their daily lives?' In chapter four, I focused on the pilgrimage site of Munich and the analysis of eleven pilgrim accounts. The Michael memorial in Munich is plastered with all sorts of offerings of fans that are reminiscent of 'ex-voto's'. For these fans the main motivation for their visit is to thank Michael Jackson for his messages of love and his contributions to the world, for example in the form of his humanitarian efforts and his music. For founder Nena Snezana saying thanks is also the main motivation for preserving the memorial, besides publicly honoring Jackson and 'rectifying the truth'. Furthermore, for Nena the memorial is a magical place that radiates the spirit and love of Michael Jackson. Based on the eleven pilgrim accounts, it becomes clear that 'Michaeling' is a means for the pilgrims to come as close to Michael Jackson as is possible. This is done both in a physical way, through literally walking in Michael Jackson's footsteps and in a spiritual way, by connecting with Michael Jackson's spirit. What moves these pilgrims to start 'Michaeling' is mainly the wish to spiritually connect with Michael Jackson and to come into contact with like-minded pilgrims. The pilgrims' stories demonstrate that Michael Jackson is at the heart of their daily lives and that 'Michaeling' is one example of a ritual that reinforces their personal connection with Michael Jackson. For these pilgrims Michael Jackson functions as a moral guide and his living example and songs greatly influence the personal choices of the pilgrims.

#### **5.5 'Michaeling' as a 'real' pilgrimage?**

I have now come to the main question of my research which asks whether the phenomenon of 'Michaeling' can be interpreted as a 'real' pilgrimage and as an expression of religion arisen as a result of

modern post-secular society. In the following, I will relate the experiences of the eleven pilgrims to theories about pilgrimage and contemporary religion. I will first study 'Michaeling' as a form of pilgrimage.

I think that 'Michaeling' definitely can be interpreted as a 'real' pilgrimage. For a start, because all eleven pilgrims in this study regard their journeys as pilgrimages and explicitly refer to their travels as 'pilgrimages'. Furthermore, the content of their 'Michaeling' journeys meets the three distinguished features of Digance. All pilgrims, except Michelle, have made a physical journey to pilgrimage sites dedicated to Michael Jackson. The main foci are Forest Lawn, Neverland, Michael Jackson's star of fame and his childhood home Gary. For the pilgrims these sites are special and some refer to them as 'sacred places'. The main motivation of the pilgrims seems to be to *experience* Michael Jackson and to come as near to him as possible. Furthermore, most pilgrimages are motivated by a spiritual quest, namely the wish to connect with the spirit of Michael Jackson.

In pilgrimage research the concept of 'sacred places' is central. For a definition of 'the sacred', many scholars have been inspired by Durkheim and Eliade. Durkheim and Eliade both apply a very strict separation between the sacred and the secular and consider the sacred to be something set apart from the ordinary. Durkheim states that anything can be sacred and that sacredness is something that can be *created* and *attributed* by people. Consequently, if something or someone is sacred, this person or item can make something else sacred through contact, which Durkheim refers to as the 'contagiousness of the sacred'. According to Eliade something is sacred after a *hierophany*. Both Durkheim and Eliade argue that the sacred and the secular are mutually exclusive and consequently state that behavior should be according to either state of being.<sup>315</sup> Like Durkheim, Frijhoff interprets sacrality as something which can be *ascribed* to something or someone.<sup>316</sup> According to Margry what gives shape to the sacred, during pilgrimage, is the existence of a cult object and this object consequently gives sacrality to its environment.<sup>317</sup> For Dubisch, sacrality has a more broad connotation. She states that the sacred is not confined to pilgrimage sites, but can also be in form of an experience and objects that have been connected to the sacred.<sup>318</sup> Hunt argues that for modern people sacred space is not confined to religious buildings, but can be self-created and take on many shapes both in the physical and metaphorical world.<sup>319</sup>

The accounts of the Michael Jackson pilgrims mainly correspond to the theories of Durkheim, Frijhoff, Dubisch and Hunt. The pilgrims' accounts demonstrate that sacred places are not sacred on account of a *hierophany*, but because these sites convey a special meaning for the pilgrims because they are in some way connected to Michael Jackson. Consequently, these sites are qualitatively different and are experienced as set apart from other 'ordinary' places and declared 'sacred' by the pilgrims themselves. The pilgrims apply a very broad interpretation of sacrality, which is not confined to a cult object per se, but corresponds more with the description of Dubisch. 'Michaeling' comprises both places and activities that can be sacred. Still, there seems to be a hierarchy in 'sacrality' among the different

<sup>315</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Form of the Religious Life*, 308-309; Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11-12, 26, 28, 36-37, 91.

<sup>316</sup> Frijhoff, *Heiligen, idolen, iconen*, 20-21, 51, 80-81.

<sup>317</sup> Margry, 'Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?', 29.

<sup>318</sup> Dubisch, 'Epilogue', 232.

<sup>319</sup> Hunt, 'Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Do Not Go to Church', 165.

pilgrimage sites; the places where Jackson's spirit is most palpable contain most meaning and therefore are labeled more sacred. Especially Forest Lawn and Neverland are regarded as sacred places where Michael's spirit is felt. Thereafter, Jackson's star of Fame and Gary are mentioned as important places. The same is the case with the memorial in Munich. Because Michael Jackson resided in front of the memorial, Nena has ascribed sacrality to the monument. Moreover, through the daily work of the Memorial-Fairies at the memorial site the monument's sacrality is preserved and enhanced. This is also done through the engagement in devotions and proffering of votive offerings of the fans.

The clear-cut separation between the sacred and the secular of Durkheim and Eliade is not so strict in 'Michaeling'. For instance, according to Durkheim the profane act of eating should not take place near the sacred. But during 'Michaeling' the profane act of eating can take on a ritualistic meaning for the pilgrim when this takes place at a restaurant where Michael Jackson used to eat. The nature of 'Michaeling' therefore blends the sacred and profane because this phenomenon is ultimately about becoming one with Michael Jackson and experiencing him through all sorts of events, ranging from dining in his favorite restaurants to touching his clothes and visiting Forest Lawn and Neverland. Many of these places are profane sites, however in the whole array of places that the pilgrims visit they attain a special meaning and therefore sacrality. Through the narratives of the pilgrims it becomes clear that anything can be sacred. This is nicely made clear by pilgrim Erica, who states that she has created her own sacred pilgrimage place in the form of a tree in her neighborhood. For her this site is sacred because of the meaning she has attached to it.

The research of the Turners also seems to have some relevance concerning 'Michaeling', because the aspects of both *liminality* and *communitas* are present in the accounts of the eleven pilgrims. During 'Michaeling' the pilgrims depart from their known surroundings and for a certain amount of time the pilgrim is in limbo and forms unifying and egalitarian bonds with fellow pilgrims. The pilgrims describe a feeling of 'unspoken unity' during their pilgrimages and there is a general feeling of excitement because of the feeling of *communitas*. For some pilgrims, 'Michaeling' is the one time they can be open about their 'true' identity, apart from on the Internet. 'Michaeling' is therefore often felt as a cathartic experience. There is thus certainly the aspect of *communitas* both in a physical and emotional form. Especially when pilgrims 'gang up' together for a couple of days, the social experience very much characterizes the experience of 'Michaeling'.

### 5.6 'Michaeling' as an expression of religion?

I have now come to the second part of my main question and will study whether the phenomenon of 'Michaeling' and the influence of Michael Jackson on the daily lives of the pilgrims can be interpreted as a form of religion? To answer this question, my main focus will be on the definition of 'religion' of Geertz. Next, I will compare the experiences of the pilgrims with theories about contemporary religion.

Geertz defines religion as: "A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."<sup>320</sup> Considering the definition of Geertz, I think that the experiences of the pilgrims can be interpreted as religious. The pilgrims describe their whole worldview as centered around Michael

<sup>320</sup> Geertz, 'Religion As a Cultural System', 90.

Jackson. Jackson shows the pilgrims how to make sense of the world and he is their moral compass; In both Michael Jackson's living humanitarian example and his music, they see the way in which they ought to live their lives and the pilgrims arrange their everyday behavior according to Jackson's virtues and values. Jackson inspires them ethically to be a better person and they want to 'do him proud'. In this sense Michael Jackson can be regarded a religious symbol; he is the embodiment of the pilgrim's ethos. All pilgrims state that Michael Jackson has changed the way they think and consequently has changed their lives. For most, Jackson's death has been the decisive moment of 'awakening'. After this event, the pilgrims truly 'saw' Michael Jackson and understood their own responsibility in the world. As a response, the pilgrims adopted Jackson's worldview and changed their behavior accordingly. This has not been a passing fad, but can truly be interpreted as 'pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations'. For these pilgrims, their belief in- and experience of Michael Jackson is all encompassing and undergirds their everyday lives; loving Michael Jackson is not something that they sometimes 'do', it is in their every breath and underlies their every move.

Moreover, the pilgrims have changed their lives both personally, for example in the form of changing friendships, and publicly, for example in the form of charitable involvement. In this way, Michael Jackson has given the eleven pilgrims a purpose in life; namely to internalize and spread his legacy. Michael Jackson furthermore gives the pilgrims hope and strength. Jackson's life shows the pilgrims that also in times of adversity one can still persist and 'keep the faith'. For the pilgrims their love for Michael Jackson and their common sense are completely intertwined and their daily behavior reinforces their vision of what their lives are and should be about. To reinforce their belief the pilgrims use rituals, such as participating in charity, painting, writing or 'Michaeling'. Through their pilgrimages the pilgrims can truly experience Michael Jackson and re-empower themselves with Jackson's strength and message. The Michael Jackson pilgrims do not have a church, but they do have an active, tight community that enforces their identity as 'Michael Jackson fans and pilgrims'.

Duffett states that the question whether fandom is religion does not depend on apparent empirical similarity, but instead upon the speaker's authority. All pilgrims, except Nena, state that they feel a spiritual connection with Michael Jackson and argue that he is connected with their worldview and spiritual affiliation(s). Furthermore, all pilgrims experience a spiritual feeling during their pilgrimage and many are motivated by the will to connect with the spirit of Michael. The experiences of the pilgrims show the way in which their love for Michael *functions* as a religion.

According to scholars of contemporary religion, religion is taking on different shapes in modern, post-secular society. Contemporary religion is not bound to religious institutions and communities, it is less dogmatic, more tolerant and flexible and better suited to the pursuit of personal inner quests.<sup>321</sup> Furthermore, traditional rituals and meanings become malleable and adaptable. What characterizes these new forms of spirituality is a flux between the ordinary, profane, and religious life. Modern day people do not want to be dependent on external authorities, but are focused on their personal needs and this is reflected in new forms of spirituality.<sup>322</sup> New spiritualities and ways of 'being religious' are triggered by modernization. Furthermore, expressions of modernization have facilitated these new

<sup>321</sup> Woodhead, 'Introduction', 1-2; Gräb, 'The Transformation of Religious Culture Within Modern Societies', 114.

<sup>322</sup> Partridge, 'The Modern Western World', 360; Hunt, 'Understanding the Spirituality of People who Do Not Go to Church', 165; Campbell, 'Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society', 65, 68.

forms of spirituality. For example, the Internet provides the perfect environment and tool for the way in which people 'do' religion in contemporary society. The Internet fits perfectly to the lives of modern people, who live hectic, work-oriented lives. Moreover, the Web affords less of a stigma for alienated social categories.<sup>323</sup>

Considering the accounts of the pilgrims, the Internet is an important factor in the way these pilgrims 'shape' their religion. In fact, the example of the eleven pilgrims directly opposes the statement that with the rise of modernity religion disappears: without the rise of modernity this type of pilgrimage and religion could not exist. In the 'real world' these pilgrims encounter negativity, ridicule and sometimes even threats. This is one of the reasons why many of the pilgrims refrain from being open about their 'conviction' to their direct surroundings. For these pilgrims, the Internet not only provides the environment, but also the tool for their pilgrimage and community; through the Internet they make their appointments, organize their gatherings and share experiences. Furthermore, initiatives such as the Major Love Prayer and Michael's Circle of Love need the Internet for their existence. This marginal group of Michael Jackson fans needs this multi sized medium to perform their religion without the stigma of society.

Another important characterization of modern post-secular society is individualism and a reluctance to identify with one particular religion or institution. This is also apparent in the pilgrims' accounts. Only Nena states clearly that she is an Orthodox Christian. The rest of the pilgrims says that they are spiritual, but do not want to confine this spirituality to one religion or singular institution per se. However, most religious symbols and vocabulary that the pilgrims use are bound to Christianity. The individualism can also be found in the pilgrimage experiences of the pilgrims. On the one hand these journeys are about connecting with like-minded pilgrims, on the other hand 'Michaeling' is experienced as an individual and spiritual journey and the relationship between the pilgrims and Michael is very personal. For the pilgrims in this study the pilgrimage sites are places of reflection, contemplation and ultimately sites that offer the opportunity for the pilgrim to connect with the spirit of Michael Jackson and consequently experience a feeling of empowerment and spiritual renewal. Many pilgrims are in search of an inward spiritual growth and transformation. Because of this spiritual quest one might even say that 'Michaeling' is more related to confessional pilgrimages than to secular pilgrimages.

I would argue that the phenomenon of 'Michaeling' can be interpreted as an example of the way in which religion is taking on different shapes in modern, post-secular society. The accounts of the pilgrims illustrate what religion is about at its core and reveal what needs religion fulfills. The accounts of these pilgrims show us the innate need of society to look for guidance, consolation and morality. The love for Michael Jackson of the pilgrims is self-initiated and intertwined with their worldviews. These pilgrims decided after Michael's passing to become his followers and chose to devote themselves to a life 'with' Michael Jackson. Through the act of 'Michaeling' they reinforce their way of life; these journeys strengthen their faith and empower their life style. Therefore, 'Michaeling' is not a one-time only thing, it is a never-ending journey and is completely intertwined with the personal lives and worldview of the pilgrims, or as Erica describes it: her life is more and more like a pilgrimage every day.

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<sup>323</sup> Lynch, 'The Role of Popular Music', 482; Campbell, 'Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society', 65, 68; Hackett, 'Religion and the Internet', 68, 70; See the difference between 'online religion' and 'religion online' and 'religion on cyberspace' and 'religion in cyberspace' on page 37 of this study.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Additional examples of 'Michael-iconography'

#### I Michael Jackson and the holidays

Three examples of images that connect Michael Jackson to the holidays.<sup>324</sup>



Image A.1. Jackson connected to New Year. Image A.2. Jackson connected to Easter. Image A.3. Jackson connected to Halloween.

#### II Michael Jackson and the 'Heal the World' theme

Two examples of Michael Jackson connected to the 'Heal the World' theme.<sup>325</sup>



Image A.4. Jackson singing to the world. Image A.5. Jackson holding the earth.

<sup>324</sup> Image A.1: Facebook, 'Timeline photos of TheJackson', <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1571597753051727&set=t.100002343013063&type=3&theater>, (accessed April 22, 2015); Image A.2: Facebook, 'King of Pop Forever <3', <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=463307507151192&set=t.100002343013063&type=3&theater>, (accessed July 13, 2015); Image A.3: Facebook, 'Photos and Videos of Brigitte Feda', <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=256805331021685&set=t.100001759952207&type=3&theater>, (accessed April 22, 2015).

<sup>325</sup> Image A.4: Facebook, 'Photos of Michelle', <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=527524264013733&set=t.100002343013063&type=3&theater>, (accessed April 22, 2015); Image A.5: Facebook, 'Photos of Fãs de Michael Jackson', <https://www.facebook.com/337817052959372/photos/pb.337817052959372.-2207520000.1429701262./820682918006114/?type=3&theater>, (accessed April 22, 2015).

### III Michael Jackson connected to nature, the seasons and animals

Two examples of images that connect Michael Jackson to nature.<sup>326</sup>



Image A.6. Jackson portrayed with blossom and horses. Image A.7. Jackson connected to spring.

### IV Michael Jackson and the iconography of saints, gods and angels

Two examples that connect Michael Jackson to the supernatural.<sup>327</sup>



Image A.8. Jackson in heaven with Jesus and doves. Image A.9: Jackson with his three children, blessed by Mary and Jesus.

<sup>326</sup> Image A.6: Facebook, 'Photos and Videos of Aryan Love Mj', <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=405617279527912&set=t.100002458798229&type=3&theater>, (accessed April 24, 2015); Image A.7: Facebook, 'Photos of Debbie Martin', <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=587343628068751&set=pb.100003793574412.-2207520000.1429702725.&type=3&theater>, (accessed April 22, 2015).

<sup>327</sup> Image A.8: Facebook, 'Timeline photos of Ilona', <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=228612127203444&set=a.127581447306513.22773.100001639756291&type=3&theater>, (accessed April 22, 2015); Image A.9: Facebook, 'Photos of Elisa', <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2534682769775&set=a.2534666249362.2105209.1334753307&type=1&theater>, (accessed May 12, 2015).

**V Michael Jackson as an inspiration for artists: David LaChapelle and David Nordahl**

One example of the exhibition 'American Jesus' of David LaChapelle and two paintings of David Nordahl.<sup>328</sup>



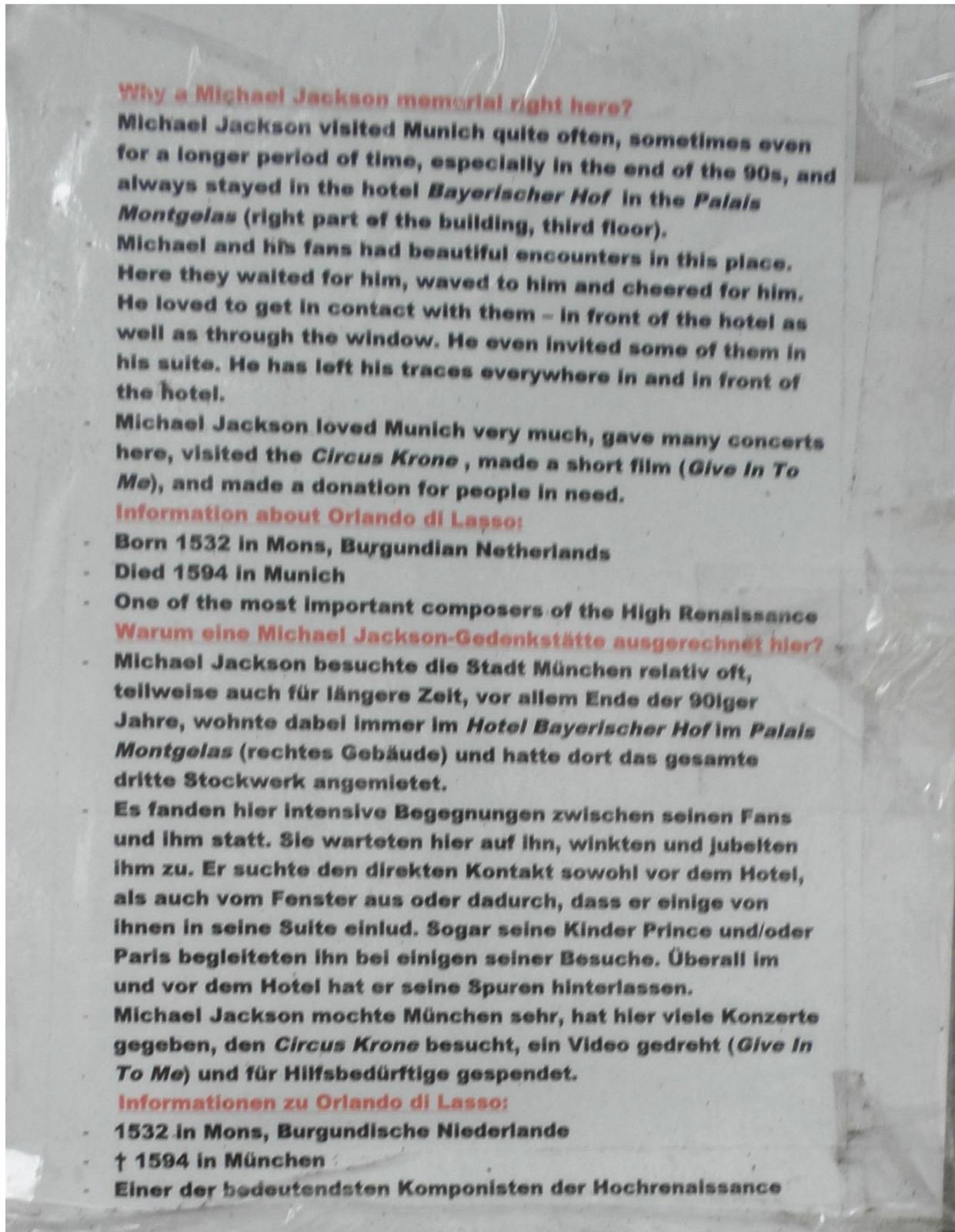
Image A.10. David LaChapelle 'The Beautification: I'll never let you part for you're always in my heart' from the 'American Jesus' exhibition.



Image A.11. David Nordahl 'Camelot'. Image A.12: David Nordahl 'Moonrise'.

<sup>328</sup> Image A.10: Artnet, 'Freak Flag', [http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/kley/david-lachapelle-michael-jackson9-14-10\\_detail.asp?picnum=1](http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/kley/david-lachapelle-michael-jackson9-14-10_detail.asp?picnum=1), (accessed April 23, 2015); Images A.11 and A.12: David Nordahl, 'Gallery', [http://davidnordahl.com/Michael\\_Jackson\\_Gallery/](http://davidnordahl.com/Michael_Jackson_Gallery/), (accessed April 23, 2015).

## Appendix B: The Michael Jackson memorial in Munich





*„Right is its own defense“ (Bertolt Brecht)*

## **Michael Joseph Jackson** **(1958 - 2009)**

**Philanthropist, Humanist, Pacifist**

**Because it's most important for us to provide information on the person of Michael Jackson, we want to give answers to some of the most frequently asked questions about his person and his life**

Since the 1990s, Michael Jackson has constantly been haunted and slandered by the media. The reason: jealousy and envy! His motto was: **“Change The World!”** and up to his early and unexpected death in 2009, for Michael Jackson this was all about our own responsibility **for the future of our children and our planet**. But throughout the years, all that became increasingly overshadowed by negative headlines about Michael Jackson, which obviously aimed at sensationalism and pure greed for profit on the part of the media.

The exceptional artist became the target of utterly unjustified accusations with media representatives being instructed not to report any positive story about Michael Jackson since negative stories almost always outsell positive ones. With this background information on the strategy of media coverage back then, it is obviously even more difficult to believe all the things the media wanted us to believe...

Michael Jackson's music was never supposed to be considered as entertainment only - for the most part, the message he tried to communicate was all about social criticism. Thus, his music and his message touched millions of people worldwide - people of all ages, races, cultures as well as very different personalities.

With this letter, we - as a group composed of teachers, academics, university students and people from the fine arts field - would like to present to you the real intention of Michael Jackson's life which he dedicated not only to his music, but to his family, his fans, and to all the people around the world. For the sake of justice and clarity, we are committed to provide truthful information to all of you - information which had been ignored and purposely withheld from the general public for tactical reasons for many years.

### **1. Why did the color of Michael Jackson's skin change over the years?**

In the mid-1980s, Michael Jackson came down with **Vitiligo**, a disorder that causes depigmentation of patches of skin. Since this is an inheritable disease, Michael Jackson must have inherited it from his paternal grandfather, who'd already suffered from Vitiligo. The most notable symptom is the depigmentation of patches of skin that occurs on the extremities or even in the face. Although the patches are initially small, they often enlarge and change their shape. After a while, some areas of Michael Jackson's skin had whitened completely. To cover those irregularities, he used greasepaint.

As the risk of skin cancer is very high for people suffering from Vitiligo, they should absolutely stay out of the sun. So to protect himself against the UV radiation, Michael carried an **umbrella** most of the time. He has never bleached his skin! Medically, this would not have been possible to such an extent, anyway. In addition to that, Michael Jackson often emphasized how proud he was of his origin: "I'm a black American, I'm proud of my race. I am proud of who I am." (MJ 1993)

The autopsy revealed and certified that Michael Jackson was actually suffering from Vitiligo (The Autopsy Report; Interview with Oprah Winfrey, February 1993)

### **2. Why did Michael Jackson undergo plastic surgery?**

When Michael Jackson was about 20 years old, he broke his nose and took this opportunity to correct the shape of it. It is well known that he had undergone several rhinoplasties. But there's another reason for his surgeries: in 1984, Michael Jackson received hospital treatment for **serious burns (second- and third-degree burns)** to his head after his hair had caught fire during a Pepsi Cola-Commercial shoot, which required for reconstructive, complex surgeries and skin grafts to be carried out.

His scalp had to be stretched with a special technique to enable the surgeons to excise the scorched parts. The tightening of the skin caused by this surgery led to the impression that Michael Jackson tightened his skin on purpose, but actually he had had no choice.

After such longtime-treatments, it's simply impossible to prevent the step-by-step change of your facial structure and your eyes.

We cannot deny, of course, that plastic surgery was one reason why the outward appearance of Michael Jackson changed over the years. But we should also consider the fact that Mr Jackson - like every human being - just grew older

### 3. Was Michael Jackson addicted to drugs?

No!!! He never used drugs. We would like to point out that there is a big difference between drugs and prescription drugs/medicines. These two things must definitely be kept separate!

A consequence of his horrible accident in 1984 (see above) - and the following, very painful treatment lasting for years - was that he had to take painkillers for the first time in his life.

We all know how it feels to touch upon fire but Michael Jackson had actually been "on fire" for 11 seconds! Of course it is very hard to imagine how painful that must have been for him, but we could at least try to understand...

### 4. About his sexuality

Not only to protect his privacy but to not hurt the feelings of other people, who might have a different sexual orientation, Michael Jackson never wanted to say anything about his own sexuality. When he was asked something that had to do with it, he would always reply:

"I'm a gentleman. That is something that is private...it shouldn't be spoken about openly. And call me old-fashioned if you want...but for me that is very personal."

(The Oprah Winfrey Interview 1993 & The Primetime Interview 1995)

In a four-page letter written by someone who is not even a fan of Michael Jackson, it says: "This strikes me as an example of his dignity and modesty. However, this very reserve may ironically have fueled further baseless speculation about Jackson's sexual orientation. I wish to ask: is publicly questioning a person's sexual life not way more improper than that person's choice of silence out of a desire for privacy regarding the same? The fact that Jackson was not involved in a multitude of sex scandals

with women, a fact which should normally invite respect, seems unfairly to have been justification for the media to pathologize

Jackson. It is beyond ridiculous to construct the lack of lasciviousness and scandal as itself scandalous and suspect."

And let's be honest: should we really enter into matters that do not concern us?!

### 5. Why did he dangle his baby son over the balcony of the Adlon Hotel in Berlin? Did he really endanger the life of his own child?

Because Michael Jackson was so happy and very proud of his third child, he wanted to share this pleasure with his fans. Many of them were waiting in front of the hotel, asking him to show his baby. You could literally hear them scream for it. It should be emphasized, however, that Mr. Jackson was holding his son very strong and tight. In fact, the whole situation seemed to be more spectacular than it actually was.

But since the incident had caused a lot of commotion among the media, **Michael Jackson issued a public apology.**

"I offer no excuses for what happened," the statement read. "I got caught up in the excitement of the moment. I would never intentionally endanger the lives of my children."

Unfortunately, the media could not get enough of the so called "baby dangling". And in the end, they put their footage in a way together that disproportionately protracted the incident, which, indeed, only lasted approx. 3 seconds.

### 6. Why had Michael Jackson been accused of child molestation?

The first case in 1993 was settled out of court. Before Evan Chandler, father of the alleged victim, filed his complaint against Michael Jackson, he had already tried to get money from the singer several times, which could be proven by a taped conversation. Actually, it was Mr. Chandler himself who began negotiations to resolve the issue with a financial settlement. **But would you, as a parent, really accept a financial settlement if your child had been molested?** Or would you rather try to seek justice by taking legal action against the offender making sure that he'll be put in prison?! Only a few months after Michael Jackson's death, Evan Chandler committed suicide. It's up to you to make your own judgment about this.

We would point out that neither a strip-search of Michael Jackson nor the search of his Neverland Ranch revealed any indication of his guilt. However, his consent to pay the amount of money demanded by Mr. Chandler, only, would not have been enough prevent a criminal prosecution. If there had even been the slightest suspicion regarding his guilt, Michael Jackson would have had to stand trial - especially after the total cost of the investigation of this matter had already amounted to millions of dollars - that's for sure!

**But why did Michael Jackson agree to a financial settlement in 1993?**

The reason is obvious: in 1993, Michael Jackson was travelling around the world as part of his 18-month Dangerous World Tour. If he had chosen to appear in court, first of all he would have been forced to cancel the rest of his world tour, which would have led to contract penalties amounting to millions of dollars. This would have been more expensive for Mr. Jackson than giving Mr. Chandler the sum of about 20 million dollars he demanded. Furthermore, Michael Jackson knew that the tour had required hard work and a thorough preparation in advance. Many jobs were depending on it. So Michael Jackson had the choice: either to stand trial for several months, pay insurance compensation and take the risk of being convicted though innocent or to fulfill his tour-obligations and to pay a relatively small amount to Evan Chandler without taking the risk of being convicted. What would be your decision?

In 2003, Michael Jackson finally had to stand trial because he refused to pay this time. And once more, it was him who became the victim of an extortion. This time, it was the mother of Gavin Arvizo who tried to extort money from the singer. Apparently, she was hoping that Mr. Jackson would just pay to settle the case as he did in 1993.

We would like to draw your attention to the fact that some journalists later admitted an **intentionally distorted, one-sided coverage to the disadvantage of Michael Jackson**. We all know the verdict from June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2005: **NOT GUILTY** on all charges! (A first-class acquittal!)

**M. Jackson: "Lies run sprints, but the truth runs marathons. The truth will win this marathon in court."**

## 7. Neverland

In the above-mentioned four-page letter it says: "To those who criticize the 'King of Pop' for purchasing Neverland, I pose this question: Would you have survived without buying a Neverland-sized residential property if you were in reality never able to explore any place alone without being horded by an ensuing media and public frenzy whenever you stepped out of your front door? A huge residence with a vast garden might have been the only possible way for this worldwide megastar to relax and enjoy some fresh air without constant intrusion from the public. In conversations such as with famed animal welfare activist Dr. Jane Goodall, he spoke of his love and concern for animals and nature, which he simply enjoyed surrounding himself with at his personal retreat. After all, Jackson earned his money through incredible hard work and a perfectionist work-ethic." And please do not forget that Michael Jackson shared his property when he opened the gates of Neverland for deprived or sick children over and over again.

## 8. Paragons

Michael Jackson has been a role model in the **fight against alcohol and drugs** among other things. But even he, himself, has had paragons like Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, Princess Diana of Wales and Nelson Mandela. He shared a very close friendship with Princess Diana and Nelson Mandela, who both held him in high regard. In a 2005-interview Nelson Mandela said: "**When you are behind bars with no hope of release, you need to find strength wherever you can. Personally, I found strength in Michael Jackson. Even to this day, Michael Jackson is a constant source of inspiration.**"

(The official Tribute by Adrian Grant: Michael Jackson Visual Documentary 1958-2009)

## 9. Did Michael Jackson have a lavish lifestyle?

Michael Jackson is well known for his generosity- especially with a view to his donations. Considering the fact that he supported **39 charity organizations**, it's, indeed, entirely inappropriate to criticize his shopping habits. Altogether, he spent approx. **\$300 million during his lifetime**. He was listed in the 2000 edition of the Guinness Book Of World Records for breaking the world record for the "**Most Charities Supported By a Pop Star**". Even in his testament, where he memorialized his final wishes, he considered charities with a total of **20% of the value of his estate** going to them every year.

## 10. Donations and Charity

- Michael Jackson used to spend substantial parts of his tour earnings to charities. He even spent **the full amount of his own part** of the 1984 Victory-Tour-earnings (=more than one year of hard work!)
- The Pepsi CO paid Michael **\$1,500,000 compensation** for the accident in the 80s, which Michael **donated in full** to the Brotman Memorial Hospital in Culver City, California, establishing the Michael Jackson Burn Center for Children
- Michael Jackson also paid for the education of **students** until they got their university degree even in Eastern Europe. Furthermore he provided personal support in some stages of their lives.
- To Bombay, he spent \$1,100,000 for the education of the children from the slums
- On the occasion of **9/11**, Michael Jackson organized an 8-hour music marathon according to the motto: "**What more can I give.**" Thus he achieved earnings amounting to \$3,000,000, which were then given to local charities like the Red Cross, for example
- Whenever Michael was on tour, he would visit local **orphanages and the children`s unit of the hospitals** right after his arrival to bring bags of toys to the children and to encourage them. Every time, even the hospitals themselves received generous donations from the superstar and humanitarian Michael Jackson
- In a time where **HIV/AIDS** was an absolute taboo subject and where hardly anyone was courageous enough to take the initiative to support and care for affected people, he already did it
- In addition to that, Michael Jackson constantly strived to support as many young people and disenfranchised or underprivileged children worldwide in the fight against hunger and poverty
- He fought against drunk driving and received an award from President Ronald Reagan in 1984 for his support of charities that helped people overcome alcohol and drug abuse
- 1992: within 11 days, Michael covered 30,000 miles in Africa to visit and support hospitals, orphanages, schools, churches, and institutions for **mentally handicapped children**
- Through his songs and messages like "Heal the world", "Man in the mirror", "Earth song", "They don`t really care about us" and many more, he continually asked people to think about their behavior and emphasized the importance of our own responsibility for the protection of our environment. He wanted to make clear that we all must care about the most vulnerable and defenseless members of our society, who are actually our future – our children!
- And, of course, we should not forget to mention the project "**USA for Africa**" (United Support of Artists for Africa) with its pioneering success, the hymn of which we`ll all remember: "We are the world"  
The song was composed by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie for the purpose of supporting Africa`s needy population after the disastrous catastrophic draught in the country

The enumeration of all of his good deeds would definitely go beyond the scope of this.

## The human rights of children:

On March 21, 2001, Michael Jackson gave a speech at Oxford University in England on the human rights of children. The following are extracts from his speech:

"Today children are constantly encouraged to grow up faster, as if this period known as childhood is a burdensome stage, to be endured and ushered through, as swiftly as possible..."

"Love, ... is the human family's most precious legacy, its richest bequest, its golden inheritance. And it is a treasure that is handed down from one generation to another... I would therefore like to propose tonight that we install in every home a Children's Universal Bill of Rights, the tenets of which are:

1. The right to be loved without having to earn it
2. The right to be protected, without having to deserve it
3. The right to feel valuable, even if you came into the world with nothing
4. The right to be listened to without having to be interesting
5. The right to be read a bedtime story, without having to compete with the evening news
6. The right to an education without having to dodge bullets at schools
7. The right to be thought of as adorable - (even if you have a face that only a mother could love).

People who have known him personally and those who have worked with him always describe Michael Jackson as a very polite, modest, humble, gentlemanly, generous and kind-hearted person. A person who also cared for people excluded from society. So wouldn't it be wise to trust those people, who were able to judge Michael on the basis of their experiences and interactions with him or do you rather want to trust people, who are always judging and insulting him even though they never had the opportunity to meet him ?!

Of course, even a Michael Jackson had his flaws - just like any other human being on this earth. The only difference was that he was just not allowed to have flaws or to make mistakes. Since his early childhood, he had always been under **great pressure**, especially on the part of his father, the public and profit-driven media. If you look at his life story only once from this point of view, you'll realize that it's almost a miracle that, after all, he turned 50!

Michael Jackson was a devoted philanthropist who **never harmed anyone**. He always welcomed other people with open arms and **without the slightest trace of prejudice**. If you want to know how much his fans admire and love him - up to this day - just look at how fast the tickets for his comeback-tour were completely sold out.

Our goal is to let the unique and very talented artist and humanitarian, Michael Jackson, finally receive the appreciation he deserves for his consistent, unremitting commitment for: **more love, tolerance and peace in this world!**

Not causeless he was **nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize**

**"We must learn to live and love each other  
before it's too late!"**

**Michael Jackson**



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This text may be copied and passed on to others.

Translated by Maria W. (Cologne, Germany)

## Appendix C: Questionnaire and basis for interviews Michael Jackson pilgrims

### I Personal data

- Where are you from?
- How old are you?
- Are you male or female?

### II Being a Michael Jackson fan

- When did you become a Michael fan?
- Why did you become a Michael fan?
- Do you think that Michael fans are special? (in comparison with other fans) If yes: in what way?
- What does Michael mean to you?
- Do you see Michael as a role model? If yes: in what way does he inspire your daily behavior?
- Do you feel part of a Michael-community? Why yes or no?
- If yes: Of whom does this community exist?
- Do you feel you can be open about your love for Michael to your social surroundings? Why yes/no?

### III About your Michael-‘pilgrimage’

- How would you describe a Michael-pilgrim?
- What motivated you to go on a Michael pilgrimage? Did the pilgrimage match your expectations?
- What did your Michael-‘pilgrimage’ look like?
- What constituted the pilgrimage: What did you do?
- How did you experience your pilgrimage? Is there something that particularly struck/touched you?
- Do you think someone who is not a Michael-pilgrim can understand the experience of a Michael-pilgrimage?
- What do you consider most important during your pilgrimage?
- Why did you travel to the place(s) you visited? Do you consider these places special? If yes: in what way are these sites more special than other sites?
- How do you look back on your pilgrimage experience?
- Do you feel different after having made your pilgrimage?
- Would you like to go again? If yes: to what place(s)?

### IV Personal worldview

- Are you religiously/spiritually affiliated? If yes: how would you describe your ‘worldview’?
- Do you experience some form of spiritual dimension concerning Michael? Why yes/no?
- If you answered yes to the question about a religious/spiritual affiliation: do you consider your ‘worldview’ to be independent of your love for Michael? Or are the two interlinked?

## Appendix D: List of codes ATLAS.ti

### I Motivation for becoming a fan/pilgrim

- 'Awakening' after passing Michael Jackson
- Michael Jackson is special compared to other celebrities: as an artist and philanthropist
- Michael Jackson fans are special

### II Experience of pilgrimage(s)

- Experience of presence Michael at pilgrimage site
- Individual experience vs communal experience
- Miracles
- Transformation
- Wanting to be close to Michael
- Wish to go again on a pilgrimage
- Content of - and acts during pilgrimage(s)
- Spiritual quest

### III Influence of Michael Jackson on personal life

- 'Awakening' after passing Michael Jackson
- Grief
- Concern for nature, animals, children
- Incorporating Michael Jackson's messages ('Heal the World', Love, 'Man in the Mirror', etc.)
- Michael Jackson as an inspiration for doing charity
- Michael Jackson as a role model for everyday life
- Obligation to act: take action inspired by Michael Jackson
- Transformation

### IV Michael and the spiritual

- Personal worldview and love for Michael Jackson interlinked
- Mission to 'spread' Michael Jackson's messages
- Michael Jackson is innocent: Michael Jackson is a martyr
- Spiritual connection with Michael
- Michael Jackson as a spiritual mediator

### V Community

- Experience of misunderstanding, judgement & negativity concerning fandom
- Level of openness to surroundings
- Can the pilgrimage experience be understood by outsiders?
- Special bond/connection, friendship among MJ fans/pilgrims
- Online community, Facebook