

'Michaeling'

Postsecular Religion in Contemporary Society

Fardo Eringa

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.

Erica, MJ-pilgrim

Introduction

On 25 June 2009, the eve of his come-back tour, Michael Jackson (MJ) passed away.¹ Jackson's sudden death triggered a global outpour of grief and for several days it overshadowed and preempted all other news.² In the aftermath of Jackson's passing, 'Michaeling' originated: a pilgrimage in honor of MJ that gave fans a way to cope with their loss and express their dedication. 'Michaeling' can be interpreted as an exemplar of post-secular religion in contemporary society and, by its very nature, challenges binary oppositions in studies on pilgrimage and contemporary religion.

The opening line of Erica introduces the key issue of this article: MJ-pilgrims who view their relationship with MJ through a spiritual lens. This investigation answers the question how MJ-pilgrims understand their world view and how 'following' MJ shapes their everyday lives. I focus in particular on the appropriation of the ritual of pilgrimage as an example of a religious practice that is used to empower a world view and lifestyle. I argue that MJ-pilgrims are conscious agents, who actively engage with MJ's artistic and humanitarian legacy and use 'Michaeling' as a tool to reinforce a world view and cultivate an ethical self.

'Michaeling' is best illuminated by a quotation of an MJ-pilgrim, Sophie:

A Michael-pilgrim is an individual who visits sites familiar to Michael during his life which have taken on special meaning since his transition (for example his burial site, his beautiful Neverland, etcetera). 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.

¹ This article is based on a Master's thesis written for the Master Religion and the Public Domain at the University of Groningen.

² P. HOLLANDER: 'Michael Jackson, the celebrity cult, and popular culture', in *Culture and Society* 47 (2010) 147-152, p. 147.

'Michaeling' has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. This is probably due to more factors than its being a recent phenomenon: in research regarding fan culture, the fan is often characterized as juvenile, obsessed, and not to be taken seriously. The topic of 'celebrity worship' evokes even further lamentations about superficiality and is taken as proof of the 'weakness' of the fan, who, manipulated by the entertainment industry and mass media, is helplessly steered into the path of consumerism.³

This article introduces the outcome of a preliminary investigation into the pilgrimage experiences of eleven MJ-pilgrims and an examination of the MJ-memorial in Munich. It presents an interdisciplinary investigation with an ethnographic, bottom-up approach, that centralizes the pilgrims' experiences. This is a small-scale, qualitative study; I do not make any claims about MJ-fans in general, nor do I state that the accounts of these MJ-pilgrims are typical for every MJ-pilgrim. The respondents of this study refer to themselves as 'pilgrims' and to their journey as a 'pilgrimage'. It is my intention to take them seriously and to describe how they understand their journeys and relationship with MJ. I purposefully choose not to start this contribution with definitions of 'religion' or 'pilgrimage' to keep an open view and not to steer the pilgrims' accounts in a particular direction. Instead, I begin by giving an account of their stories, which I will then interpret and connect to a theoretical discussion. First, I will reflect on my method and data collection.

1. Method

Following the concept of triangulation, this contribution uses multiple forms of qualitative research methods, and is rooted in a narrative approach.⁴ It tries to stay as close as possible to the lived experiences of the MJ-pilgrims and focuses on how 'Michaeling' functions.⁵ The rough data were gathered through fieldwork at the MJ-memorial in Munich (on which I will elaborate below) and contact with eleven MJ-pilgrims. The analysis of the MJ-memorial is based on participant observation, field notes, photographs, the official website of the memorial and an interview with its founder. The analysis of the eleven pilgrim accounts consists of two typed semi-structured in-depth interviews with Nena Snezana and Karen Moriarty; extensive e-mail correspondence with Michelle, Jennie, Susan, Charlot, Erica, Monica and Sophie from the period of January 2015 till May 2015, and an exchange of information via postings on a forum of ama-

³ J. JENSEN: 'Fandom as pathology: the consequences of characterization', in L.A. LEWIS (ed.): *The adoring audience* (London 1992) 9-29, p. 13; P. HOLLANDER: 'Why the celebrity cult?', in *Symposium: Celebrity in America today* 47 (2010) 388-391, p. 388.

⁴ D.J. CLANDININ & F.M. CONNELLY: *Narrative inquiry: experience and story in qualitative research* (San Francisco 2000); N.K. DENZIN: 'Triangulation 2.0', in *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 6 (2012) 80-88, p. 82.

⁵ C. GEERTZ: *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays* (New York 1973) 6-7, 10, 15, 17.

zon.com with Nikki98 and J. Leone.⁶ I furthermore maintained an e-mail correspondence with Nena and Karen.⁷

Coming into contact with the pilgrims proved to be more of a challenge than I expected. I posted on several websites dedicated to MJ-pilgrimage, and invited fans to share their experiences, either on existing forums, or in a private e-mail.⁸ Some pilgrims were excited from the start, such as Michelle, Karen, Nikki98, J. Leone and Nena. After a few e-mails back and forth they brought me into contact with the last six participants of my study, amounting to a total of eleven participants. Besides these responses, the reply to my request was slim. It dawned on me that even though many fans shared their pilgrimage experiences online, they were cautious when personally approached. Michelle later remarked on 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". After we became acquainted, the respondents were very open about their experiences and voiced gratefulness for my research. Erica: "Thank you so much for your work to bring credibility to what we do and who we are."

Most pilgrims favored contact through e-mail. Only Nena agreed to meet with me and Karen preferred a telephone interview. Meeting face-to-face with the other pilgrims was not an option on account of geographical differences.⁹ I chose to draw up a survey, utilizing insights from the fields of (contemporary) religion, popular fan culture, ethnomusicology, and pilgrimage studies. This survey formed the basis for my interviews with Nena and Karen and I shared it online with the other pilgrims. I subdivided it into four themes: personal data, fandom of MJ, content and experience of 'Michaeling', and world view. The line of questioning was open to give pilgrims the opportunity to expand on their 'Michaeling' experience. Examples of questions are: 'How would you describe a Michael pilgrim?', 'How did you experience your pilgrimage?', 'Are you religiously/spiritually affiliated? If yes: how would you describe your 'world view'?'. All pilgrims answered the questions, except for Jennie and Susan who replied with a personal account of their pilgrimage(s). Nikki98 responded on the Amazon forum, whilst J. Leone decided to post an overview of her pilgrim-experiences. The next sections present an overall picture of the eleven pilgrim accounts, structured by the following subjects: (2) experience of 'Michaeling'; (3) influence of MJ on personal life; (4) the MJ-memorial in Munich.

⁶ Since the pilgrims of this investigation are female, I refer to them in the feminine form (she, her etc.).

⁷ The names Jennie, Susan, Charlot, Erica, Monica and Sophie are pseudonyms, the information I received from them is based on confidential e-mail correspondence. Karen, Michelle and Nena are public figures within the subculture of MJ-pilgrims, so I refer to their personal names. Since the responses of Nikki98 and J. Leone are openly visible on amazon.com I will refer to their 'nicknames'.

⁸ Examples of websites are the forum 'Michael Jackson Los Angeles Pilgrimage' on amazon.com and mjworld.net.

⁹ Nena lives in Germany, the other ten pilgrims live in North-America and Canada.

2. Walking in the footsteps of Michael Jackson

The first thing one probably asks oneself after hearing about ‘Michaeling’ is: what motivates these fans to embark upon a pilgrimage in honor of their deceased idol? Based on the experiences of the eleven pilgrims, ‘Michaeling’ seems to comprise a mix of motives ranging from a spiritual quest to consumerism and entertainment.

‘Michaeling’ originated after Jackson’s demise; a decisive moment in the lives of the MJ-pilgrims that evoked heavy feelings of grief, which are sometimes experienced as surprising and confusing. J. Leone: “On the day he died, I was sitting at my desk at work. (...) I had never had anything affect me so profoundly. I truly thought I was losing my mind! So much so, that I actually typed into my search engine on my computer, “Why can’t I stop crying over Michael Jackson?”” 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.” The intense, uncontrollable response to Jackson’s death is experienced by many as an ‘awakening’ and life-changing event; the fans realized the global importance of MJ and the great loss for the world of an entertainer, unsurpassed in both artistic accomplishments and philanthropy. Most pilgrims express that since Jackson’s passing they have become better persons. Erica: “I was a very self-absorbed person before [MJ’s death], living my life and not very concerned about the welfare of others or things that did not affect me personally.” After MJ’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.”

‘Michaeling’ originally functioned as a coping system for the fans’ grief, but evolved into a ritual that incorporates many different facets, such as ‘saying thanks’, meeting other fans, and doing penance.¹⁰ A general description can be composed of what ‘Michaeling’ looks like: ‘Michaeling’ entails a journey (1) where the pilgrim tries to walk in the footsteps of MJ (2) and tries to be as close to him as is possible (3) to hopefully spiritually connect with MJ (4). Sophie: “Whether Michael pilgrimage or Compostela (...) 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.” The pilgrims express an insatiable curiosity to discover all there is to know about Jackson and the urge to visit every place that is connected to him. Nena: “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.” Susan:

¹⁰ Some pilgrims voice a feeling of guilt for not having been there for MJ in his time of need. Through ‘Michaeling’ they show MJ that they will commemorate him and continue his legacy.

My overwhelming desire to be in the places that Michael lived and Loved has taken me to California every year (twice in 2012) since the first Memorial in June of 2010. Each year I travel with 'Michael friends' to show reverence to Him, and to honor His life. (...) We have visited His homes, the Staples Center, recording studios, film locations, the court house in Santa Maria (...) as well as restaurants and shops that He frequented.

The range of places that Nena and Susan mention shows the multidimensional character of 'Michaeling', including touristic, commercial aspects. This facet of the journey is also demonstrated by the recently published book *Travelling with a King*: the Lonely Planet for MJ-pilgrims that contains hundreds of places linked to the King of Pop. The book was created by two loyal MJ-fans and was first released in French, in March 2014. On request, an English version was brought on the market on the 15th of June.¹¹

MJ-memorial places retain power; they radiate sacrality because here the spirit of MJ is 'palpable'. The pilgrims mention a hierarchy among sites. The most important places are: MJ's grave at Forest Lawn, the gate of Neverland (Neverland itself is closed to visitors), MJ's star in Hollywood and MJ's childhood home, Gary. Most pilgrimages take place in the months of June and/or August, since these contain the special events of MJ's birthday and the anniversary of his death. However, memorial sites are often crowded at this time. For Sophie, this is a reason to travel 'off-season' in a quieter, less event-laden mindset. She prefers to visit Forest Lawn and Neverland during January and February, when her pilgrimage is "much more contemplative" and has "a much deeper and more soulful connection with the energy of Michael." Being present at memorial places can evoke overwhelming emotions and is experienced as uplifting, empowering and spiritually renewing. Monica: "It's amazing to be where he was, to see what he saw, touch what he felt, breathe in the air that he breathed." Sometimes pilgrims even experience miracles. This happened to Jennie 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." 'Michaeling' is not a once-in-a-lifetime experience; it is used repetitively to cultivate personal growth and its re-energizing effect is one of the main motivations for going on another pilgrimage. The ritual functions as a new starting point: the pilgrims incorporate the knowledge they gained from their pilgrimage experience(s) into everyday life. Sophie: "When I am on pilgrimage, it is my main goal to touch that energy [of MJ] and bring it more fully into my life and all the things I do. (...) I believe this is why I long to repeat my pilgrimage."

Through their pilgrimage, MJ-pilgrims strengthen their personal relationship with MJ as their moral and spiritual guide. The ultimate goal of 'Michaeling' seems to be a fostering of right intention that is thereafter practiced in everyday

¹¹ *Sur les pas de Michael Jackson*: "Travelling with a king: travel guide about Michael Jackson", <http://surlespasdemichaeljackson.com/en/> [accessed 13 July 2016].

life. Eventually even daily chores and practices are transformed into an opportunity to secure moral capacities. Erica: “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.” Whereas Erica’s first pilgrimage was an experience set apart from ‘ordinary life’, now, after having made a few pilgrimages, she experiences her whole life as becoming one with MJ. Erica:

I try to live my life as if he is watching me (I really think he is) and to be a good reflection of him in my daily life. (...) I have stickers of him on my car, so when I am driving I am always extra courteous because I want whoever sees Michael on my car, to think well of him, and of me.

Besides its strong individual component, ‘Michaeling’ is a social endeavor. The ability to openly share experiences seems to add an extra layer of meaning to the journey and at the pilgrimage sites the pilgrims feel part of a (global) community. 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.

J. Leone: “It was a wonderful time of friendship to be with like-minded people, and knew you could freely share with those who would not judge you, or look at you like you are crazy.” In their remarks, Nikki98 and J. Leone touch upon a downside of ‘Michaeling’: to candidly state that one is an MJ-pilgrim can have negative social consequences. Most pilgrims keep their feelings to themselves to avoid stigma and bullying. Pilgrims who have been open about their lifestyle often encounter antagonism. Karen:

Some people couldn’t understand how I was altered by it [MJ’s death] or even didn’t like it. (...) For me it has been transformational; my friends now are different friends and there have been some people who actually shunned me or turned their backs on me (...) so that was kind of painful.

The pilgrims’ vocabulary shows what kind of reputation sticks to their fandom: they refer to their dedication as an ‘obsession’ and are afraid of being declared ‘crazy’. The Internet provides a safe platform to share experiences and encounters online can develop into close friendships that are sometimes more dear than the bond with the pilgrim’s family. An entirely different response to hatred and opponents takes the form of activism. Michelle: “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.” Michelle is not alone in her battle. I will come back to this aspect in my description of the MJ-memorial in Munich.

3. Influence of Michael Jackson on personal life

In the course of daily life, MJ’s music and philanthropy are inspirational sources and tools that guide the pilgrims’ behavior. MJ is portrayed as a role model and the pilgrims try to internalize his message and imitate him. Nikki98:

Michael inspires me daily because I am acutely aware now of wanting to always be better in every way (...) Even in the worst of times, he modeled a staggering degree of dignity, faith, humility and strength. (...) I learn from him constantly and don't plan to ever stop. He is and always will be part of my daily life.

The personal relationship between the pilgrims and MJ is often described as a ‘love’ or ‘family’ bond. Monica:

Michael is my life’s blood; he’s my heart and soul. (...) 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 is my Guide and helps me every step of the way.

The pilgrims predominantly have a (Catholic) Christian background, but the majority states to be ‘spiritual’ and does not confine this spirituality to one religion or singular institution per se. Nikki98: “I was born Catholic, but do not consider myself 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.” Only Nena separates her devotion to MJ from her Orthodox-Christian belief; she argues that her “love for Michael” has to do with her “heart and soul” and calls the ‘relics’ she takes with her from her pilgrimages ‘sacred’, but adds: “Not within the meaning of ‘religion’ or in a church-like manner, but sacred within the meaning of love. It is something in itself.” The other pilgrims experience their close contact with MJ through a spiritual lens and say that Jackson is part of their world view. A striking recurrence in the pilgrims’ accounts is the portrayal of MJ as a spiritual mediator, who clarifies religion. Sophie:

I believe that my world view 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. (...) I see the face of God in Michael (...) I rejoice that God hasn't forgotten us.

The pilgrims explain that MJ had a special mission on earth. Like Christ, he was sent to preach love and peace and allowed the pilgrims to feel closer to God. The interpretation of MJ as a messenger of God presents Jackson as a guide, who translates the messages of the super-natural into tangible guidelines that can be incorporated into daily life. MJ’s fresh example has given the pilgrims a boost in their religion.

MJ's humanitarian heritage and music motivate the pilgrims to 'take action'. Nena:

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. (...) I want to show him that we have understood his messages and that we will continue these messages and spread them.

The responsibility to continue MJ's legacy finds expression in several ways. Most pilgrims are involved in charity work that is connected to charities that MJ himself supported.¹² Sophie donates all the proceeds from her books and artistic endeavors to various fan-based charities, because this is "simply the right thing to do"; it is her mission to emulate Michael's humanitarian outreach as much as possible. Karen:

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 (...) and I reach out for the homeless, I always give them some money. Sometimes I even say this is 'in honor of Michael Jackson'.

4. The MJ-memorial in Munich

After Jackson's passing, five women felt compelled to build a memorial in the city of Munich. In July 2009 the women, led by MJ-pilgrim Nena Snezana, initiated MJ's legacy association: the first officially recorded German public association in honor of MJ.¹³ The women devoted themselves fully to the commemoration of their idol and pledged to make their memorial globally known. Seven years later, the place has grown into an internationally acknowledged pilgrimage site. In the weekend of 1-3 May 2015, I visited the site to observe the MJ-memorial in its context. In this section, I will present a descriptive and explanatory account of the memorial together with its significance and purpose for founder Nena.

The thing that will immediately strike the visitor to the memorial is that the statue of focus is not an image of MJ, but displays the Franco-Flemish composer Orlando di Lasso. Nena and her co-fairies purposefully chose the statue of Di Lasso as their place of commemoration: the monument is positioned right in front of the 'Bayerische Hof' hotel, where MJ used to stay during his visits to

¹² MJ was mostly concerned with children, nature and animals. There are many examples of fan-initiated charities in honor of MJ. See for example: MJFFC: 'About', <http://www.mjffc.org.uk/about-ace> [accessed 13 July 2016].

¹³ MJ's LEGACY ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONAL: 'Welcome', <http://www.mjs-legacy.com/p/welcome.html> [accessed 13 July 2016].

Munich.¹⁴ By adopting the original statue and changing its function into a memorial for MJ, the fans’ action is a classic case of cultural appropriation, turning the bronze figure of Di Lasso into a memorial for two.¹⁵

The women gather daily at the memorial to lovingly keep up (*pfliegen*) the site and decorate it with ornaments. This occupation has earned them the title of ‘Memorial-Fairies’ (*Denkmal-Feen*). Nena: “It takes about two to four hours per day to sort 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.” For Nena the memorial is ‘magical’, because it radiates Jackson’s spirit. She uses it as the ultimate opportunity to publicly thank and respect MJ. More importantly, she intends the site to be a social place where people can openly express their love for MJ, without being declared ‘crazy’. At the memorial everything can happen; people dance, cry bitterly, or caress the images and the memorial. Sometimes even miracles happen: one of the fairies was cured of her illness after she started nursing the memorial. At the memorial she has no pain and does not need any medication. According to Nena the current generation of MJ-fans has a great responsibility to internalize the message of MJ and ‘set things straight’. She wants to set an example:

I have always loved him and defended him, everywhere no matter what. Even if I would lose my job. You could really describe it as something you feel for your parents or your children. I would go through fire and water for my children and I would also go through fire and water for Michael Jackson.

MJ’s humanitarian and artistic legacy are the core inspiration and philosophy behind all the activities of MJ’s legacy and the association feels indebted to him: “Now it is time to give something back. To carry on his message of ‘Heal the world and make it a better place..’ and do not consign him to oblivion.” Through MJ’s legacy association, and donations, the fairies are able to finance the memorial and its maintenance. Besides taking care of the memorial, MJ’s legacy organizes several events that are dedicated to him, such as the anniversary of his death. Furthermore, the association has initiated a variety of charitable projects that are inspired by MJ. Currently the association has spent over €19,000 on child aid; all donations are made explicitly in honor of MJ.¹⁶

¹⁴ Information document on East side of the memorial: ‘Why a Michael Jackson memorial right here?’.

¹⁵ W. FRIJHOFF: ‘Toeëigening: van bezitsdrang naar betekenisgeving’, in *Trajecta* 6 (1997) 99-118, p. 108.

¹⁶ MJ’s LEGACY ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONAL: ‘Welcome’; MJ’s LEGACY ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONAL, ‘About us’, <http://denkmalfuermichaeljackson.npage.eu/das-team-ueber-uns-about-us.html> [accessed 8 July 2016]; MJ’s LEGACY ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONAL: ‘MJ’s LEGACY goes CHARITY – Our projects’, <http://www.mjs-legacy.com/p/mjs-legacy-goes-charity.html> [accessed 13 July 2016].



Illustration 1: MJ-memorial in Munich [photo: Fardo Eringa]

The MJ-memorial is still recognizable as the statue of Di Lasso. However, its foundation is plastered with photographs of MJ and crammed with ‘offerings’ of fans [illustration 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 the pedestal, behind a small bush, a broom is stored above two bottles of water; the cleaning-attributes of the fairies [illustration 2]. On the same step in the right corner lie two plastic boxes with documents in German and in English; the documents are intended to clear Jackson’s name by rectifying wrong information that has been spread by the media. The introduction reads:

We – as a group composed of teachers, 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 – which has been ignored and purposely withheld from the general public for tactical reasons for many years.¹⁷



Illustration 2: The cleaning attributes of the fairies and the information documents [photo: Fardo Eringa]

The documents answer ten questions, ranging from Michael’s changing skin-color to his alleged child molestation [illustration 2].

Besides its purpose to clear Jackson’s name, the monument is a place where MJ-fans can leave a gift for their idol. The fans’ contributions can be roughly divided into: flowers/plants, candles, notes, statues and listed photographs (of MJ) with or without messages. The handwritten notes and statues with personal messages mostly reveal the intentions of the fans: they are grateful for MJ’s messages of love and peace. Other themes are grief/loss, and love. The theme of love is also recurrent in the many heart-shaped items that are attached to the memorial [illustrations 3-5].

It is not sure to what

extent the choice of gifts is motivated by a spiritual connection with Jackson. However, illustration 5 displays a special contribution: 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”.

¹⁷ Information document: ‘Michael Joseph Jackson (1958-2009) philanthropist, humanist, pacifist’.



Illustration 3: Close-up of pedestal [photo: Fardo Eringa]



Illustration 4: Close-up of pedestal [photo: Fardo Eringa]

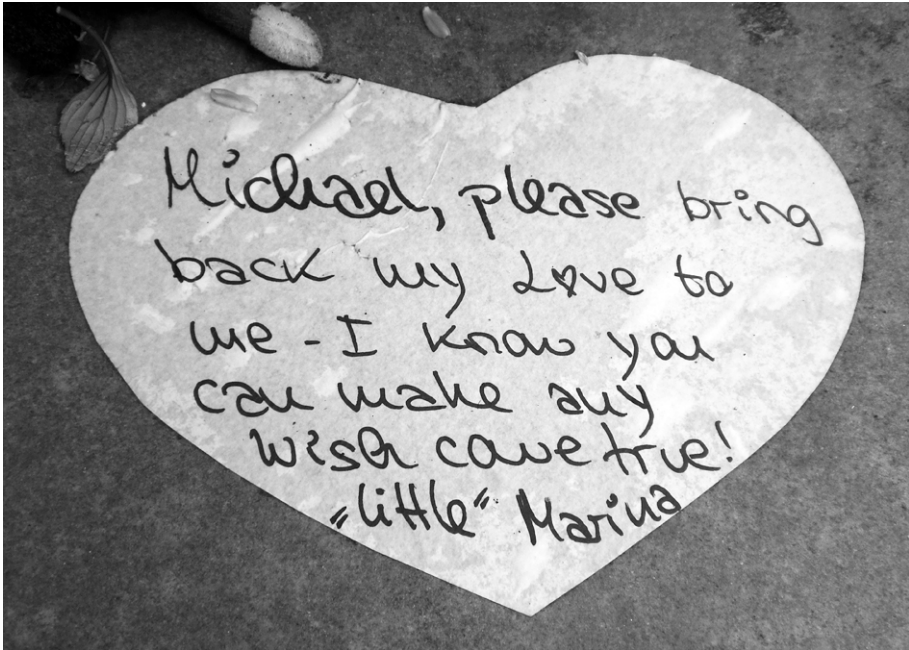


Illustration 5: Gift of 'little' Marina [photo: Fardo Eringa]

5. Discussion

In this section, I bring the experiences of the pilgrims into a discussion with theory. I will first interpret 'Michaeling' and connect it to the debate of pilgrimage, secondly I will interpret the influence of MJ on the daily lives of the MJ-pilgrims and connect these to a discussion about religion and popular culture and to theories about (contemporary) religion.

'Michaeling' is described as dynamic, layered and complex; many different, sometimes competing motivations and practices co-constitute the ritual. Most pilgrims are motivated by an individual quest for spiritual growth and transformation. At the same time 'Michaeling' is described as a cathartic 'fun-journey', to be enjoyed with likeminded people. The sacred and secular co-constitute the practice, which challenges Durkheim's assumption that ritual is separate from ordinary life.¹⁸ This is made clear, for example, when MJ-pilgrims dine at MJ's favorite restaurant: at that moment the profane act of eating takes on a ritualistic meaning.

The MJ-pilgrims refer to 'Michaeling' as a 'pilgrimage'. In contemporary society 'pilgrimage' has become a widely used term, triggering a difficult debate

¹⁸ E. DURKHEIM: *The elementary forms of the religious life*, translation by J.W. SWAIN (London 1915) 307.

about what defines 'pilgrimage' and whether journeys within profane contexts qualify as 'pilgrimage'.¹⁹ Through the years scholars have categorized the phenomenon in many ways, with a past tendency towards binary categorizations.²⁰ Roughly, the most persistent discussions have been about whether the sacred site or movement is at the core of pilgrimage and about whether pilgrimage is, at heart, a social experience or an individual experience, and whether it is connected to power (conflicts).²¹ Present-day pilgrimage studies appear to move beyond binary categorizations such as 'religion' versus 'secular'. 'Michaeling' connects to this current trend in pilgrimage studies: it is an individual journey and a social happening – it confirms belonging to a group, and reinforces a world view of a life 'with MJ'. Places and movement are equally important for the overall experience of 'Michaeling'. Spirituality and sacrality are dynamic and the connection with MJ's spirit is not confined by memorial sites: the journey is a 'linked pilgrimage circuit' and the sacred may be taken with the pilgrim once the site itself is left behind – in the form of an alteration in the self or in the form of objects that are connected with the sacred.²²

Digance distinguishes three standard characteristics that apply to every pilgrimage: the notion of a quest, a journey, and sacred places.²³ An approach of this kind offers a workable definition to the research of pilgrimage in non-

¹⁹ J. PORTER: 'Pilgrimage and the IDIC ethic: exploring Star Trek convention attendance as pilgrimage', in E. BADONE & S.R. ROSEMAN (eds.): *Intersecting journeys: the anthropology of pilgrimage and tourism* (Illinois 2004) 160-179, p. 161.

²⁰ See for an overview of the anthropological study of pilgrimage: M. BUITELAAR: 'The hajj and the anthropological study of pilgrimage', in L. MOLS & M. BUITELAAR (eds.): *Hajj. Global interactions through pilgrimage* (Leiden 2015) 9-25.

²¹ Site adherents: J.P. MARGRY: 'Secular pilgrimage: a contradiction in terms?', in IDEM (ed.): *Shrines and pilgrimage in the modern world: new itineraries into the sacred* (Amsterdam 2008) 13-46, p. 29; V. TURNER: *Process & performance & pilgrimage* (Bali 1979) 153-154; Movement adherents: A.K. HERMKENS, W. JANSEN & C. NOTERMANS: 'Introduction: the power of Marian pilgrimage', in IDEM (eds.): *Moved by Mary: the power of pilgrimage in the modern world* (Surrey 2009) 1-13, p. 1, 7; S. COLEMAN & J. EADE: 'Introduction: reframing pilgrimage', in S. COLEMAN & J. EADE (eds.): *Reframing pilgrimage: cultures in motion* (London 2004) 1-25, p. 4, 16-17; Social experience adherents: I. READER: 'Introduction', in I. READER & T. WALTER (eds.): *Pilgrimage in popular culture* (Basingstoke 1993) 1-25, p. 21; V. TURNER & E. TURNER: *Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture* (Columbia 1978) 8, 31, 191-192; Individual/power related adherents: J. EADE & M.J. SALLNOW: 'Introduction', in IDEM (eds.): *Contesting the sacred: the anthropology of Christian pilgrimage* (London 1991) 1-29, p. 5; MARGRY: 'Secular pilgrimage: a contradiction in terms?' 23, 34.

²² I. READER: *Pilgrimage a very short introduction* (Oxford 2015) 22; J. DUBISCH: 'Epilogue: the many faces of Mary', in A.K. HERMKENS, W. JANSEN & C. NOTERMANS (eds.): *Moved by Mary: the power of pilgrimage in the modern world* (Surrey 2009) 227-238, p. 232.

²³ J. DIGANCE: 'Religious and secular pilgrimage: journey redolent of meaning', in D.H. OLSEN & D.J. TIMOTHY (eds.): *Tourism, religion & spiritual Journeys* (New York 2006) 36-48, p. 36-43.

confessional realms. According to Digance's definition 'Michaeling' qualifies as a pilgrimage: MJ-pilgrims travel to sacred memorial sites, which are places of reflection and contemplation, where the pilgrims try to connect with Jackson's spirit. The obvious critique of such a broad approach is that everything qualifies as a 'pilgrimage' and that the term is bereft of meaning. 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.²⁴ Therefore, I agree with Dubisch that in determining whether a journey is a pilgrimage or not, the pilgrim's own view is most important.²⁵

'Michaeling' might be best understood when one approaches identity as dynamic and multidimensional. The MJ-pilgrim is not solely a 'serious' traveler, looking for spiritual renewal, nor only a 'fun' traveler, wanting to have a good time. She can be both, at different times or simultaneously. The narrative approach of this contribution shows that MJ-pilgrims are constantly (re)inventing a (group)identity when they engage with, reflect on, and act in response to, the music and person of MJ. 'Michaeling' functions as a new starting point and it is a never-ending journey: the pilgrims long to repeat their journey every year to reinforce their connection with MJ. The pilgrims' reflexive process of constructing their intentions, emotions and desires in accordance with the norms and values of MJ, confirms the notions of 'ethical self-formation'.²⁶

For most, Jackson's death was a decisive moment of 'awakening': the pilgrims 'saw' MJ and understood their own responsibility in the world to continue and spread his legacy. All pilgrims state that MJ transformed their way of thinking and acting. The moral obligation to give something back takes shape in the participation in charities and voluntary work. This social activism of MJ-pilgrims challenges the still pervasive characterization of fans as irrational and passive. MJ-pilgrims describe themselves as MJ's followers. Jackson shows them – through his humanitarian example and his music – how to make sense of the world and how they ought to live. The pilgrims want to internalize MJ's message and 'do him proud'. MJ furthermore gives the pilgrims hope and strength: he shows them that also in times of adversity one can persist and 'keep the faith'.

²⁴ MARGRY: 'Secular pilgrimage: a contradiction in terms?' 19; P.S. GORSKI, D.K. KIM, J. TORPEY & J. VANANTWERPEN: 'The post-secular in question', in IDEM (eds.): *The post-secular in question: religion in contemporary society* (New York 2012) 1-22, p. 7.

²⁵ J. DUBISCH: 'Heartland of America': memory, motion and the (re)construction of history on a motorcycle pilgrimage', in S. COLEMAN & J. EADE (eds.): *Reframing pilgrimage: cultures in motion* (London 2004) 105-132, p. 114-115.

²⁶ A. GIDDENS: *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age* (Oxford 1991) 52, 75, 81, 99; H.T. ZOCC: 'Voicing the self in postsecular society. A psychological perspective on meaning-making and collective identities', in A.L. MOLENDIJK, J. BEAUMONT & C. JEDAN (eds.): *Exploring the postsecular: the religious, the political and the urban* (Leiden 2010) 131-144, p. 132-133, 142; S. MAHMOOD: 'Rehearsed spontaneity and the conventionality of ritual: disciplines of "Şalât"', in *American Ethnologist* 28 (2001) 827-835, p. 832.

The pilgrims are strengthened in their lifestyle by listening to MJ's music. The way in which they respond to MJ's life and music corresponds with DeNora's theory.²⁷

All pilgrims, except Nena, state that they feel a spiritual connection with MJ and that he is intertwined with their world view. Many pilgrims say they were detached from their religious belief before their connection with MJ, through MJ they now have a personal relationship with the divine. The pilgrims' MJ-centered world view mostly parallels Geertz's functional definition of religion.²⁸ MJ can be regarded a religious symbol: he is the embodiment of the pilgrim's ethos. For these pilgrims, their belief in and experience of MJ and the wish to imitate and learn from him are all encompassing and undergird their everyday lives. It is not a passing fad, but can truly be interpreted as 'pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations'. The spiritual agency of MJ feels like a paradox: as a figure bound to secular popular culture, MJ brings the pilgrims closer to their religious affiliation. Contrary to what one might think, the incorporation of MJ does not pose a threat to the original belief, but reinforces it. The pilgrims do not separate MJ from their spiritual affiliation; they 'see' him 'through' this spiritual lens. The characterization of MJ as a spiritual mediator, who enables a direct link between God and humanity, is reminiscent of the function of saints.²⁹ The self-description of 'followers' combined with the ardent wish to imitate MJ and MJ's function as a messenger of God suggests a parallel with *John* 14,6: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well."³⁰ Charlot also explicitly refers to MJ, as being 'the fruit'. One could argue that Jackson is the perfect figure to be appropriated in a religious context; as the embodiment of identity crossover, Jackson facilitates a smooth blend of popular culture and religion. In his music he borrowed and mixed from rock, funk, disco and R&B. In his personal life he displayed an indeterminate mix of identities, blending race, gender, sexuality, adult and child behavior. Furthermore, Jackson personified a mix of the human and the supernatural, inviting the listeners to his songs to be part of his global mission to 'Heal the World'. His homicidal death turned him into a tragic martyr, purifying his more dubious lifestyle.³¹

²⁷ T. DENORA: *Music in everyday life* (Cambridge 2000) 16-17.

²⁸ GEERTZ: *The interpretation of cultures* 90.

²⁹ A. ANGENENDT: 'Relics and their veneration in the Middle Ages', in A.B. MULDER BAKKER (ed.): *The invention of saintliness* (London 2002) 27-37, p. 29; A.B. MULDER BAKKER: 'The invention of saintliness: Texts and contexts', in IDEM (ed.): *The invention of saintliness* (London 2002) 3-23, p. 4, 9.

³⁰ New International Version, via <http://biblehub.com/niv/john/14.htm> [accessed 20 October 2016].

³¹ D. BRACKETT: 'Black or white? Michael Jackson and the idea of crossover', in *Popular Music and Society* 35 (2012) 169-185, p. 180-181.

The important role that MJ plays in the shaping of the everyday lives of the pilgrims confirms the notion that in contemporary western society a comprehensive understanding of the impact of religion must take into account the increasing importance of popular culture in the meaning-making of individuals. Whilst the social and cultural significance of institutional religion is declining, a spiritual revival is noticeable in this field, with globalized media providing a new set of practices and resources.³² Especially in the field of popular fan culture there is a mix-and-match of religious and profane practices that negates a dichotomy between ‘the sacred’ and ‘the secular’. The way MJ-pilgrims use MJ to clarify and intensify their already present spiritual affiliation, resonates with the notion that there is still a spiritual need in contemporary society. According to theories of post-secularization, religion, spirituality and (re)sacralization can exist simultaneously with certain forms of secularization in the modern world. New ways of ‘being religious’ are individualistic, less dogmatic, more tolerant and flexible – also referred to as ‘lived religion’. Sacred space and categories do not have to be limited to traditionally religious buildings, but can be appropriated or self-created, and religious authority has shifted to the individual self. The Internet provides the perfect environment and tool for the way in which people ‘do’ religion and affords less of a stigma for alienated social categories.³³

MJ-pilgrims are not bound to a religious institution and are their own religious authority. However, they have a tight (virtual) community that enforces their identity as MJ-fans and pilgrims. The way in which these pilgrims perform their world view is individualistic (they focus on a personal relationship with MJ) and flexible (they choose when and where to be spiritual and create their own sacred space and rituals, for example the ritualistic use of MJ’s music as a source of inspiration). The pilgrims have stretched their original spiritual affiliation to incorporate the thought-system of MJ, which shows a flexibility in their original belief-system. The reluctance to identify with one institution per se also pervades the pilgrim accounts; only Nena identifies as an Orthodox Christian and

³² R.I.J. HACKETT: ‘Religion and the internet’, in *Diogenes* 2 (2006) 67-76, p. 68, 70.

³³ C. PARTRIDGE: *The re-enchantment of the West: volume 1 alternative spiritualities* (London 2004) 4; G. LYNCH: ‘Introduction’, in IDEM (ed.): *Between sacred and profane* (London 2007) 1-4, p. 1; H.A. CAMPBELL: ‘Understanding the relationship between religion online and offline in a networked society’, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 (2012) 64-93, p. 65, 68, 70; J. CASANOVA: ‘Rethinking secularization: a global comparative perspective’, in *The Hedgehog Review* (Spring 2006) 7-22, p. 7; J. HABERMAS: ‘Notes on post-secular society’, in *New Perspectives Quarterly* 24 (2008) 17-29, p. 17; L.S. CLARK: ‘Why study popular culture? Or, how to build a case for your thesis in a religious studies or theology department’, in G. LYNCH (ed.): *Theology and popular culture* (Durham 2008) 5-20, p. 8; LYNCH: ‘The role of popular music’ 482; L. WOODHEAD, P. HEELAS & G. DAVIE: ‘Introduction’, in IDEM (eds.): *Predicting religion: Christian, secular and alternative futures* (Hampshire 2003) 1-16, p. 1-2, 7; M.B. MCGUIRE: *Lived religion: faith and practice in everyday life* (Oxford 2008); P. BERGER: ‘The desecularization of the world: a global overview’, in IDEM (ed.): *The desecularization of the world: resurgent religion and world politics* (Washington 1999) 2-3.

separates her dedication to MJ from her religion. Nena's case is interesting, because she gives her own meaning to the word 'sacred'. This is an example of the 'transmission of the sacred': she appropriates religious vocabulary and gives it a new meaning to describe 'worldly affairs'.³⁴ For MJ-pilgrims the Internet is of vital importance; they need this multi-sized medium to perform their lifestyle without the stigma of society. In the physical world they encounter negativity, ridicule and sometimes even threats. The Internet provides a safe environment to share experiences. Furthermore, it is a practical tool for the organization of 'Michaeling'.

The majority of the pilgrims is shaped by inherited Christian traditions, traces of which are exposed in vocabulary (references to 'pilgrims', 'God', 'Christ', and addressing MJ with capitals: 'His'), and in practice (prayer, imitation, visitations, pilgrimage). Furthermore, the pilgrims describe MJ as a martyr; even though he was innocent and did so many good deeds, he was persecuted and suffered and eventually his death was a homicide. MJ resembles the first saints, who died heroically for their faith. The saint-like identity that is attributed to MJ, comes to the fore in the pilgrims' description of the pilgrimage sites; these radiate sacrality because here MJ's spirit is palpable and the pilgrims want to touch this sacrality. The magic power of MJ-memorials can translate into miracles, such as at the MJ-memorial, which cured one of the fairies of her illness. This healing aspect and the possibility of miracles connects the MJ-memorial places to Roman-Catholic pilgrimage sites. Moreover, all the flowers, statues, candles and personal notes at the MJ-memorial in Munich are reminiscent of votive offerings, through which the pilgrim asks a saint for his or her intercession with God. The offering of 'little Marina' touches upon the reciprocal relationship between pilgrim and saint. Like pilgrims in the Christian tradition who give an *ex-voto* in anticipation of a particular wish, Marina is asking a favor of Jackson, a favor which she believes he is able to grant.³⁵

6. Conclusion

This contribution investigates the phenomenon of 'Michaeling': Michael Jackson fans embarking upon a pilgrimage, walking in the footsteps of MJ. It studies how eleven MJ-pilgrims describe their world view and how they make use of

³⁴ W. FRIJHOFF: *Heiligen, idolen, iconen* (Nijmegen 1998) 37.

³⁵ C.L. KING: 'Pilgrimage, promises, and ex-voto's: ingredients for healing in Northeast Brazil', in J. DUBISCH & M. WINKELMAN (eds.): *Pilgrimage and healing* (Arizona 2005) 49-68, p. 49-50; TURNER & TURNER: *Image and pilgrimage* 7-8, 10-11; R. KIECKHEFER: 'Imitators of Christ: sainthood in the Christian tradition', in R. KIECKHEFER & G.D. BOND (eds.): *Sainthood: its manifestations in world religions* (California 1990) 1-42, p. 3-6, 12, 20-21.

MJ's artistic and humanitarian legacy to reinforce an ethical self. Furthermore, this investigation studies the MJ-memorial in Munich. I argue that for the MJ-pilgrims in this investigation 'Michaeling' is a spiritual experience and can be interpreted as an example of post-secular religion that negates binary oppositions in studies on pilgrimage and contemporary religion.

'Michaeling' offers an insight in the complexity of religion and pilgrimage as practiced; the pilgrim accounts demonstrate that 'Michaeling' is shaped by different motivations and experiences that can exist simultaneously or separately. Moreover, 'Michaeling' shows the enduring presence and appropriation of religion and Christian cultural heritage in the public domain and its important role in the shaping of the lives of contemporary people. For MJ-pilgrims no dichotomy exists between 'the sacred' and 'the secular' or between 'ritual' and 'everyday life'; they exist as mutually inclusive. Secular pop culture is even used as a means to explain and clarify 'the sacred' [MJ as messenger of God]. The multi-dimensional character of 'Michaeling' is enforced by MJ himself, who embodied a mix of identities, ranging from entertainer to saint. Consequently, 'Michaeling' spans from a social fun-journey to an individual spiritual quest.

From the pilgrims' accounts I conclude that 'Michaeling' can be interpreted as an example of the way in which religion is taking on different shapes in modern, post-secular society. The pilgrims illustrate how religion functions for them; their accounts show a need to look for guidance, consolation and morality. Their love for MJ is self-initiated and intertwined with their world views. This movement is not a substitute for religion, but a reinforcement of already existent beliefs. These pilgrims decided, after Michael's passing, to become his followers and chose to devote themselves to a life 'with' MJ. Through 'Michaeling' they reinforce their faith and empower their lifestyle. Therefore, 'Michaeling' is not a one-time-only thing, it is a never-ending journey and is completely intertwined with the personal lives and world view of the pilgrims. As MJ-pilgrim Erica describes it: her life is more and more like a pilgrimage every day.

Instead of deeming 'Michaeling' incomprehensible because it cannot directly be linked to official institutions or conceptualizations that scholars have formulated, we should look at this phenomenon as a source of inspiration that triggers discussions about religion in contemporary society. For phenomena such as 'Michaeling' we need new theories that capture its fluid character. But foremost we need to listen to the experts, namely the respondents; they know best what their experiences mean and we should take their accounts as the starting point towards understanding the meaning of religion from the perspective of the individual.

Fardo I. Eringa MA (1991) graduated *cum laude* on the topic of 'Michaeling' within the master Religion and the Public Domain in Groningen. Fardo plays tenor saxophone in several bands. She currently works for the University of Groningen as project manager of educational projects.

E-mail: f.eringa@rug.nl

