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The Religion of Kerista and Its 69 Positions

Robert Anton Wilson

1965

Beatniks, swingers, and hippies all over the world are banding together to create a society where anything — but *anything* goes.

Eight years ago, an ex-Air Force officer named John Presmont was sitting in his room on East 31st Street in New York City when a voice spoke to him and told him he would be the founder of the next great world religion. Presmont, after leaving the Air Force with an honorable discharge, had become, by the age of 38, what nice people call a ‘bohemian’ or ‘beatnik’. At the time the Voice spoke to him, he had been reading the Koran and smoking marijuana rather heavily for 6 weeks. For several months before that, he had been laboriously plowing through all the scriptures of the great religions — Hindu, Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, and so forth. Earlier still, he had chewed and digested a great deal of modern psychology and sociology. Like most of us, he was concerned with the growing horror of this age and, like a few of us, he had felt this concern grow within him until it overmastered and all but obliterated all his other interests. Nonetheless, he was abashed by the Voice.

“Why does it have to be *me*?” he cried.

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“Because you’re so gullible,” the Voice answered solemnly.

“But what should I do?” Presmont continued to object. “I don’t know anything about founding a religion.”

“People will come to give you strength,” said the Voice unperturbed. “There is nothing you can do to prevent this thing from happening. Have a ball, enjoy yourself to the utmost. Find the mountain beside the sea. The Pied Piper will pull out the Swinging People.”

Today, a chubby and cherubic 44, John Presmont has become Jud the Prophet to a few thousand followers scattered in such odd places as London, Berlin, Tangier, New York City, San Francisco, and Passaic, New Jersey. For the first 5 years, his religion was called ‘our thing’ by its adherents because the Voice had said that ‘There is nothing you can do to prevent this thing from happening.’ Three years ago, however, the word got out that the Mafia is called ‘our thing’ (*cosa nostra*) by *its* members, and Jud soon had another vision, seeing a colony of Buddhas (Enlightened Ones) living on an island with a huge mountain by the sea., and it was revealed to him that the island would be called Kerista (derivation unknown). His followers now call themselves Keristans, and the religion is called Kerista.

The rule of the religion of Kerista is the rule of Rabelais’s abbey of Theleme: Do What You Will. Kerista is a religion of joy and freedom, a religion without dogma or restriction, and a religion of ecstasy, for the Voice had told Jud the Prophet, ‘Have a ball, enjoy yourself to the utmost.’ The Keristans uninhibitedly follow this injunction, and Kerista is, therefore, utterly unlike the dominant forms of religion in Judeo-Christian cultures. The New York Police have been harassing the New York Keristans for quite a while, and on October 16, 1964, they arrested Jud the Prophet and 11 others for possession of marijuana. The police, obviously, didn’t believe that anybody who is having a ball is really religious. Jud the Prophet, like Jesus and Mohammed before him, will have to endure the persecution of the infidels.

backs, though: Dau brought in some really weird types. “There was one guy who showed up, balled 20 girls in a week, and never came back or paid for anything.. And there was one girl who was pretty far out, all she ever said was the word ‘fuck’.” Jud is trying to persuade other Keristans to screen out “the wrong types.”

Joy is pregnant and Jud is shortly coming up for trial on a marijuana charge, but his spirits remain high. “Kerista can’t fail,” he says, “because people *need* it. We’re all isolated in modern society. Isolation makes men paranoid: They’ve proved that in the laboratory. Cut a man off from all human contact and he starts going mad in about 6 hours. We’re all too isolated and cut-off since the old religions died and commercialism began. We need a new religion — Bernard Shaw said it. Koestler said it, every intelligent man has said it. Kerista is the new religion. Nothing can stop Kerista. Nothing.”

The Voice that spoke to Jud 8 years ago had more humor than the Voices that have spoken to the other visionaries in the past, and Kerista may seem, to the skeptical, a satire on religion. But there could be no doubt of the fervor, and the sincerity, of Jud when he said, “Nothing can stop Kerista.” Kerista might very well become, like Zen in Japan, the church of the intellectual and artistic minority. There is certainly a market waiting for Jud’s product. Three-quarters, at the very least, of the creative people I have met have been living as if they were members of Kerista without knowing it.

A few weeks ago, I journeyed down the the eastern part of Greenwich Village — where the bohemians now hang out — to meet nine members of Kerista and learn the essence of the faith. Do you know the East Village? You can walk for 10 blocks and never see a building that doesn’t look as if it should have been condemned during the reign of Warren Gamaliel Harding. Puerto Rican kids, sleepy from marijuana, lounge in the windows watching you with insect eyes of indifference or brush past you angrily on the sidewalk and the message *Screw white America* comes off them like garlic from an Italian kitchen. Negroes loiter about with no more hope of the future or despair for the present than a rock has. The smell of poverty comes back to you, and if you haven’t smelled it in 20 years you still recognize it — it is a blend of of cooking that is too spicy (to hide the fact that the food is too little) and the reek of dying bodies of old men who have known despair for too many years and the odor from the always-slightly-plugged-up hall toilets — and you see teams of cops pacing nervously around and they look at you with mean cop eyes wondering if you’ve got \$100,000 worth of Heroin in your attache case and what you are doing here in your uptown clothes anyway. Yes, this is a good place for a religion to be born, in such squat hutches Peter and Paul and Matthew must have preached.

My appointment was with a 24-year-old C.C.N.Y graduate who called himself Dau. When I found his apartment, a good-looking brunette who said her name was Tre let me in and said Dau would be back shortly. (Most of the Keristans eventually take these new names, which, like the Black Muslim ‘X’ or the Catholic confirmation name, symbolize a new identity) The apartment consisted of just two rooms. A monument-sized American flag acted as a room divider; another American flag hung over the window in lieu of curtains. There were no lights.

Dau suddenly charged in behind me, a hyperactive boy with a short, neat beard, and announced that the ‘vibrations’ were better in the ‘nursery,’ so we would conduct the interview there. We

tramped down the stairs into the building next door and went to another apartment where seven other members of Kerista were waiting.

"I'm E.Z.," said a giant of a man who reminded me vaguely of illustrations to Paul Bunyan stories. He was wearing trousers, but nothing above the waist and no shoes or socks. His thick black hair hadn't been inside a barber shop for at least a year and his curly black beard was as wild as Rex Barney's pitching the season the Dodgers retired him. Three naked babies, all less than a year old, were playing on the floor. (The Keristans share everything, including care of the babies.) A blonde young lady wearing nothing but a pair of black panties came out of the kitchen, nodded at me, and went into another room, from which she soon emerged in a bathrobe and joined the discussion.

"You see?" Dau said. "Aren't the vibrations better here?" Everybody agreed that the vibrations were better.

I asked if Jud was present, and it turned out that he wasn't. "But I wanted to speak to the leader," I complained. A 22-year-old boy named Good quickly explained, "No, no man, you don't get it. Kerista has no *leader*. Jud is the *prophet*. Kerista doesn't need leaders, or teachings, or theories, or stipulations, or restrictions. Kerista is *freedom*."

"Kerista is freedom and *love*," E.Z. corrected.

What I heard about town was that Keristans were all bisexual, promiscuous, and 99% of the time zonked out of their skulls on marijuana, peyote, LSD-25, or some other psychedelic drug. As delicately as I could, I inquired about this aspect of their freedom.

"Well, first of all," Good said, "we're not trying to enforce anything on anybody. That goes against freedom, and freedom is our law. People can keep any hang-up they've got, as long as they want to keep it. Of course, if they want to get over their hang-ups, we'll help them. But we don't try to pressure anybody to try anything that they're still square about. We have one member who's still a virgin."

precautions and make visitors submit to a medical before mixing with the community."

None of the unmarried Keristan girls has yet to become pregnant through Keristan group-sex, Jud said. "At least," he added, "not in the New York groups." The three babies I had seen were all born before the mothers joined Kerista.

Feeling the lack of a definitive summary of Kerista, Jud had been working on a kind of statement of principles. Since Moses had his 10 Commandments, Luther his 95 Theses, and Anglo-Catholics their 39 Articles, Jud has decided to have 69 Positions. "This is just tentative, though," he said. "You don't have to agree with all of it to be a Keristan." He has written 25 of the 69 Positions and showed them to me:

Legalize group marriage. Legalize indecent exposure. Legalize trial marriage. Legalize abortion. Legalize miscegenation. Legalize religious intermarriage. Legalize marijuana. Legalize narcotics. Legalize cunnilinctus (sic). Legalize transvestitism. Legalize pornography. Legalize obscene language. Legalize sexual intercourse. Legalize group sex. Legalize sodomy. Legalize fellatio. Legalize prostitution. Legalize incest. Legalize birth control. Legalize Lesbianism. Legalize polygamy. Legalize polyandry. Legalize polygyny. Legalize homosexuality. Legalize voluntary flagellation.

"You see," he said, "it's all common sense. Almost all intelligent people are Keristans already, without knowing it." He has a half-formed plan to amalgamate Kerista with LEMAR (the League for Legalized Marijuana) and form a new political party with the 69 Positions as its platform. "We've still got a secret ballot," he said, "and people who are afraid to stick their necks out in public could go into the voting booth and, for once, stand up for what they really believed. I bet we'd get a lot of votes and scare the pants off the squares."

Later, Jud was reminiscing about the loft in which 22 Keristans had lived together for a while last year. "It was groovy," he said. "The rent came to \$10 a month for each person." It had its draw-

can have one partner, if that's what they really want. I'm married to Joy. We were married 7 weeks ago."

Joy, who is 19 and came up from Alabama a year ago, told me how she got into Kerista. "I was taking around a petition to ask the city to keep the Mobilization for Youth open, and I met Jud in a bar and asked him to sign. 'Sure,' he said 'I sign everything.' Then he started telling me about Buddho, and I agreed to come to a Kerista meeting. After I heard them all I said, 'You people are crazy.' But I thought it over. Two days later, I joined up."

About a week afterward, at my invitation, Jud and Joy came out to spend a weekend with my family in our home high in the mountains of Sussex County, New Jersey. Unlike many hipsters we have had over, Jud and Joy were excellent guests, and my four children quickly fell in love with Joy. After the first meal, Jud insisted on washing the dishes. Joy cooked the big meal on Sunday, Jud also forced us to let him pay for some of the food for the weekend.

In the relaxed atmosphere of my own living room, I probed Jud for some information about the unconventional sexual practices of the Keristans. I soon learned, for one thing, that it is not at all unusual for two or three Keristans to be engaged in sexual hi-jinks on a couch while others carry on a conversation in the next room. I then inquired about the problem of contraception.

"Most of the Keristan men detest condoms," Jud said, "so it's up to the girls to protect themselves. They use the usual things, diaphragms and coils and pills."

This is protection against unwanted births, but it seems to leave the venereal disease problem unchecked. I asked about the rumor that Kerista had suffered a gonorrhea epidemic a few months ago.

"Yeah," he said morosely, "That was Dau's fault. He went balling with outside chicks and brought back a beautiful case of the clap. It spread to nine of the downtown Keristans in a week. But then we caught it and everybody went down to the Public Health Service and had shots. It's all cleared up now. On the island, we'll take

It developed that this apartment — which belonged to E.Z. and Marquel, the blonde girl who greeted me in her panties — was the 'nursery' only today. The three babies belong to all of this Kerista cell, and whichever apartment they are in for the day is the 'nursery' for that day. All in all, there are 10 such apartments in the East Village now.

The interview proceeded:

Q: Well, what happened after Jud heard the Voice?

A: [By Good] Nothing. He had to wait for the people to come, like the Voice said. One by one, over the years, we've found him.

Q: Do you take these odd names when you join Kerista?

A: [by Dau] Well, first you got to get in contact with your pure self, through Buddho, the art of no-defense. That means not defending the social self with all the usual hang-ups and bullshit. When you find the pure self, you take a new name.

Q: How do you get new names?

A: [by Dau] From a Ouija board.

Q: I see. What is Buddho, the art of no-defense?

A: [by Dau] You get rid of bullshit. You stop defending yourself. Dig? You don't put up a front. You admit who you are. You don't play-act, you don't put people on.

Q: But how do you learn Buddho?

A: [By Good] We teach it. You name the price, half-price for the first lesson. You start with conversation and learn how to stop defending yourself on that level. Then you move in and get rid of more subtle defenses.

Q: Did Jud invent Buddho?

A: [By Tre] Dau invented Buddho. It's a contraction of Buddha and judo. We've all added something to Kerista. There's no one truth.

Q: Now, about this voice that spoke to Jud. Do you believe it was the Voice of God?

A: [By E.Z.] If you want to call it that. You could call it Jung's 'collective unconscious' or the Zen 'not-self' if you wanted. We're

not particular. The important thing is not theories. The important thing is living according to the pure self, not full of a lot of bullshit.

When you ask the Keristans about the ‘vibrations,’ they are rather vague. “You know, man, the vibrations.” When you ask if they mean the hypothetical ‘orgone energy ocean’ suggested by Freudian heretic Willhelm Reich, they disagree. Some think Reich’s orgone energy is the vibrations, some doubt it. Reich and Freud, chiefly, they blame for the conservatism of modern psychiatry, and recently they sent out advertisements to all the psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and psychotherapists in New York City offering to help them. “Let us solve your problems,” the ad said, “We have none of our own. Learn Buddhho, the art of no-defense. You name the price. First visit half-price.” There have been no takers.

Ther Keristans I interviewed came from a variety of backgrounds and it was hard to find a common denominator among them. E.Z. is 28 and grew up in the slums of the lower East Side, not far from where Kerista now flourishes. Although he was born of poor Russian immigrants and didn’t finish junior high school, E.Z. acquired an education in the Air Force and worked for the Federal Aviation Agency after his discharge. “I was a good, middle-class square for 5 whole years,” he says of his period with the F.A.A. His salary finally reached \$10,500 and he acquired a wife and a home in a fashionable Long Island suburb. But all the time he was “reading, reading, reading” and brooding over the meaningless of his job and his life. One day, he says, “The bullshit got to be too much for me. I just said to myself, ‘This is no way for people to live.’” He quit his job, left his wife, and moved to the East Village and “became a beatnik,” in his own words. Two years later he met John Presmont and was convinced that Kerista was the proper way for people to live. “Our society is all warped and fucked-up,” he says.

Onn, a divorced 22-year-old with one child, was born in Alaska. Her parents were both teachers. Onn attended Northeastern University before making the East Villlage scene. She was converted

with machetes.” He means it. He has done it before. “Of course,” he adds, and his eyes twinkle, “I’ll pick these 14 damned carefully.”

After the island is founded, Slattery plans to make it a tourist attraction for hipsters. “Kerista will become the hip San Juan,” he says enthusiastically. “We’ll keep our rates low, so people without a lot of bread can afford to come. There’ll be thousands every year. Instead of living in a hotel with a lot of rich squares for three days, they can be happy with other swingers for a whole month. Every hippie in the States will eventually come down to make the scene with us.” He is expecting to charge \$120 for a year on the island of Kerista, payable at \$10 per month for the previous year. (Further details about the island colony can be found in Keristan Flyer, 25 cents from Box 557, Radio City Station, New York.)

A friend of mine asked Jud, 4 years ago, why he founded Kerista, and Jud had answered, “I don’t want to work for a living.” I asked him about that, and he answered, “That’s right. When we get the colony going, nobody will *work*. When you are doing what you want to do, it isn’t *work*, it’s *play*. One cat is raising rabbits, another is raising chickens, somebody’s growing vegetables, they’re all having a ball, is that *work*? Work is when you are taking orders from someone you hate.”

“How would you sum up Kerista?,” I asked.

“Total sharing,” he said. “Getting rid of masochism *and* sadism, inferiority *and* superiority. Being yourself.”

“Kerista is the essence of hip,” Jud went on. “There are millions of hipsters all over the world who have a part of it. They’re looking for Kerista without knowing it. Norman Mailer said that hip was going to give birth to the next religion. He was right and we’re it.”

When I had entered Slattery’s office, I had been introduced to a young Negro girl, Joy, who then proceeded to sleep through most of the interview. Just before I left, I asked Jud if Keristans objected to monogamy — I was thinking of the Oneida colony in 19th century New York which regarded monogamy as antisocial selfishness, — and he said, “You still don’t understand. Kerista is freedom. People

“I don’t care whether people call it a religion or social movement,” Jud said. “The important thing is that they act naturally and decently.”

Desmond Slattery began to explain the island colony to me. He had voluminous papers, maps, booklets, charts, and other paraphernalia to illustrate everything he said. A graduate of sociology from the University of Wichita, Slattery went into the jungles of British Honduras 5 years ago and created a new industry — the breeding of bees in a new environment and the extraction from them of a special honey obtainable only from bees fed on jungle vegetation — and his success was written up enthusiastically in an article in *Bee World*, the beekeeper’s journal. Slattery sold the business as soon as he proved it could be done, for profit-making is the least of his interests. He has been a merchant seaman, a pilot for Pan Am, and Air Force officer, a hobo, a movie actor, and a TV producer, but most of the time he has preferred agricultural work in such odd corners as Tahiti, Japan, and South America. His real love is ecology, the science of biological balances that reveals the interdependence of all living beings. “That’s my religion,” he says. “Ecology.” The Kerista island colony is to him a scientific experiment. “We’ll put Jud’s ideas to work in a natural environment and find out what they can do,” he says. All the laws relating to agricultural cooperatives in British possessions are before him on his desk, together with maps of several possible islands; you believe, suddenly, that he will do what he says he will do. He may well be the Pied Piper who will pull out the Swinging People.

But a doubt remains. “How do you get the money to start?” I asked.

Slattery hauls out a piece of paper. “Here’s four plans,” he says. “I’m cooking up a few others if these all fall through.” He has set a goal at \$50,000 and each plan seems like a fairly possible approach. One plan starts with 200 members, and another with 100 members. “If we can’t get all the bread we really need,” he says, “I go in with only 14 people, hire a few Indians, and start clearing the jungle

to Kerista after her first LSD session with Keristans because “they looked so beautiful and everyone else looked so ugly.”

Fly, an intense, highly-charged girl, is also 22 and has a B.A. in philosophy from Brooklyn College. Before becoming involved with Kerista, she was a member of the Committee for Non-Violent Action, an uncompromising pacifist group that practices hard-core Gandhian civil disobedience and is always going to jail for it. Fly is convinced that Kerista will be “the next great world religion.” Self-consciously hip, Fly told me that she has sampled “pot, hashish, and Heroin,” quickly amending the last to “uh, I mean junk.”

Dom, 21, a bearded giant, comes from a Ukrainian farm family in Pennsylvania, “real European peasants,” he says. He attended the University of Pennsylvania and later lived for a while in the Glen Gardner community in New Jersey, a religious (mostly Roman Catholic) anarchist group.

Good, 22, comes from a lower-class Hungarian-American family and summed up Kerista for me by quoting a line of poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s: “Everybody has his own hole to climb out of.” He has attended C.C.N.Y. and joined Kerista as soon as he heard about it. “Like as soon as it came along it was the thing to do,” he says.

Marquel is an attractive 29-year-old blonde who was born of a middle-class Irish-American family and attended Bennington. She worked as a researcher for a leading advertising firm for 3 years, then, in disgust, went on unemployment “while I tried to find myself.” When unemployment ran out, she waited on tables and posed for artists. Later she went to Paris and lived on a houseboat on the Seine for a year. She has two children, by natural childbirth, and has never married. Along with standard psychedelic drugs, she has also tried belladonna, an unpleasant experience which she finds impossible to talk about.

Tre comes from a middle-class German family in Pennsylvania and is 23. She attended Maryville College and now lives with Dau, who is 24. “The first time I was turned on to LSD,” Tre told me, “I

wanted to see Dau, so I picked up his vibrations and followed them. I went right into a park, following the vibrations, and there he was.”

All of these Keristans were either born into the middle-class, or, like E.Z., achieved middle-class status through their own talents, and all have rejected it. They have turned their backs on the Affluent Society and now squat in the slums of the East Village convinced that they have liberated themselves from a living death. Their poverty does not bother them much, except to the extent that it handicaps them in fending off the police, who are taking an increasing, and unwelcome, interest in Kerista.

All that is central to Kerista, as it was explained to me, is Buddhho, the art of no-defense: there are no regulations or stipulations. Buddhho, it seems, is a technique, invented by Dau, for escape from other-directedness. It begins with watching yourself in ordinary conversation and observing how often you are ‘defending’ against implicit (or projected) criticism from the other party. More advanced Buddhho includes the conquest of greed, sexual jealousy, and other “hang-ups.” “We’re trying to live according to the pure self, not full of bullshit,” E.Z. says. When asked how Kerista differs from the many other swinging, free-living people in the East Village, San Fran, and other pockets of bohemia, E.Z. answers, “No difference. Except we have purpose, direction, goals, and love.”

The economics of Keristans, I learned, are as strange as their religion and their sexual practices. At present, in the East Village group, four are working, four are receiving compensation from the Department of Welfare, and 18 are living hand-to-mouth. In practice, the eight are supporting the other 18 — or, if you prefer, the four who are working and the State of New York are supporting the 18. (Whenever anyone is in danger of eviction, for example, the group raises the money for that month’s rent on that apartment.) What keeps this from being pure parasitism is that the ones who are working and the ones who are sponging are continually changing places, and that the ones not working are providing services for the entire group, such as baby-sitting or shopping or carrying

clothes to the laundromat. When money gets especially short, a few members will return to their parent’s home to live for a while. (The groups in Passiac and Paterson each have a high-salaried executive in them, and the group in Las Vegas are all said to be comfortable.) John Presmont’s Air Force pension guarantees that the New York group will always have an apartment on which the rent is paid up to date.

It was getting late, and Dom was eager to brew up some peyote tea, so I left, after making an appointment to meet Jud the Prophet.

Two days later, I went up to the Radio City office of a man named Desmond Slattery to meet Jud the Prophet. I found Jud to be a large, amiable, bearlike man with a shock of white hair that made him look more elderly and patriarchal than his 44 years. I started by asking him about the Keristan philosophy of sexual freedom. “We believe in love,” he said. “People shouldn’t be like balloons, ready to explode if they are touched. We believe in total sharing, and that means sharing love and affection as well as property. In Kerista, the only standard of a sexual relationship is mutual consent, by the two or three or four or however many parties are involved. We only have one fulltime homosexual member that I am aware of, but most of us are bisexual. People either dig that this is a natural, decent, loving way to behave, or they don’t. I won’t give you a lot of details for pornographic readers to drool over.

“Look,” Jud said, “my work is over, in a way. I had the vision and communicated it, and now I’m finished. It’s up to Des here to take the next step. You should interview him. Des is the most important man right now, because the most important part of Kerista right now is building an island colony, and that’s his territory.”

Desmond Slattery, a man of 50 with a short gray beard that made him look like Walter Huston playing Satan in *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, took the ball immediately. “Get this clear,” he said, “I’m not religious. I abominate all religions, without exception. To me, Kerista is a social movement, and Jud knows how I feel.”