Religiosity Rejected: Exploring the Religio-Spiritual Dimensions of Landmark Education

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Abstract

As the descendant of Werner Erhard’s 1970s Human Potential group est (Erhard Seminars Training), Landmark Education has continuously denied being a religious organization. Despite ample discourse on the religious nature of the group within popular online and print media, a conspicuous void within academia—particularly within Religious Studies—speaks volumes. Rarely are the boundaries of what constitutes a “religion” expanded in order to explore those groups that, though not understood to be “religious” in a traditional sense, clearly contribute to contemporary “spiritual” life. And yet, that Landmark Education is perceived as being somehow religious demands deeper analysis. This article highlights the problematics of “religion” within late Western modernity as illustrated by the contention surrounding the religious status of both Scientology and Transcendental Meditation. A discussion of Landmark Education is offered in light of these issues, along with a dissection of the religio-spiritual dimensions of the organization and its primary product, the Landmark Forum. Incorporating several Eastern spiritual practices, the highly emotional nature of the Landmark Forum’s weekend training is such as to create Durkheimian notions of “religious effervescence,” altering pre-existing belief systems and producing a sense of the sacred collective. Group-specific language contributes to this, whilst simultaneously shrouding Landmark Education in mystery and esotericism. The Forum is replete with stories of miracles, healings, and salvation apposite for a modern Western paradigm. Indeed, the sacred pervades the training, manifested in the form of the Self, capable of altering the very nature of the world and representing the “ultimate concern.”

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Introduction

Landmark Education is a highly successful “global educational enterprise” which purports to “deliver programs and training that make a significant difference in those aspects of people’s lives that they care about most” (Landmark Education Website 2011h). The official position of Landmark Education is that it is not a religious organization, yet the group has been viewed as possessing religious qualities, not only within a sensationalist context but also within print media and academia. Accordingly, an examination of Landmark Education draws attention to the problematics of “religion” within late Western modernity. An exploration of the group’s religio-spiritual dimensions also serves to highlight several trends within contemporary Western spirituality, particularly within the “secular” paradigm of Human Potential groups and the seminar industry.

Of these, perhaps the most noticeable is the apparent utilization of Eastern practices and beliefs, particularly from Zen Buddhism. The primary purpose of the training appears to be achieving a form of enlightenment. Furthermore, the intense emotional experiences and heightened sense of drama throughout the weekend of the Landmark Forum parallel Durkheimian notions of a “religious effervescence,” so potent as to completely alter individual belief systems and potentially result in the birthing of the religious idea.¹ These intense group experiences also generate a sense of the sacred group collective, as participants bond through the mutual sharing of painful and joyous experiences. Also contributing to the impression of a “sublime congregation” is the group-specific language employed by Landmark Education, identifying “insiders” from “outsiders.” Within the organization, the language tool is viewed as so commanding as to be capable of enabling the subject not only to effect their own transformation, but that of the world around them. Landmark-unique expressions add to the esoteric nature of the group, as “outsiders” bear wit-

¹ A sense of the numinous is unquestionably produced during the Landmark Forum. Otto’s definition of the term, however, as a “non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary object is outside the self” (Otto 1958 [1917]: 5) is unsuitable only in the sense that the primary object of the experience is the Self. While the group experiences and teachings of the leader help to elicit the numinous experience, the systems of the training ensure that the ultimate “high” described by participants is based purely on what they bring to the Forum, and their own personal unification with the “authentic,” sacred Self.

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ness to the “miraculous transformations” of “insiders,” who are disinclined to explain the processes in real-world terminology. Further intensifying its transcendental nature is the manner in which the corporation presents itself publicly as a highly professional and practical training experience, yet definitions of the Forum become increasingly transcendental during the actual training, when it is no longer referred to as a “course.” The lack of detail about the methodology of the Forum available on the group’s official website, combined with the strict copyright restrictions placed on all materials, results in a shrouding of Landmark Education in a kind of impenetrable esotericism, and the Forum itself appears to possess a mystical quality.

Like est, Landmark Education outwardly rejects the concept of “belief” and belief systems. However, rather than denying the existence of God or any entity requiring belief, the training is apparently capable of enhancing individuals’ religious experiences, and thus their relationship with the divine. Both est and the Landmark Forum have subsequently offered participants a greater understanding of God, appearing to transcend religion itself as forces capable of unifying the individual with their chosen deity. Landmark Education’s denunciation of belief is, in fact, paradoxical, with the group espousing a clear system complete with the promotion of miracles and healings. Also promoted are the traditionally religious concepts of salvific rebirth and transformation, albeit to correspond with the aspirations of subjective life in the consumerist West; salvation from the ordinary and the mundane. Finally, while the organization and its followers tend to deny its religious nature based primarily on its lack of a godhead or sacred body, closer inspection of the group reveals that the sacred does exist within its systems in the form of the Self. With explicit descriptions of the Self as a transcendental entity, it is ascribed complete power to effect transformation and alter the very world around it. While the religious terminology used to describe the sacred Self was more explicit in the form of est, the concept still permeates Landmark Education. In this sense, the organization moulds perfectly to theologian Paul Tillich’s (1963) definition of religion, the Self representing an “ultimate concern,” capable of revealing the answers to the universe and the very meaning of life.

**est and Landmark Education: A brief overview**

Landmark Education today insists that the Landmark Forum is entirely distinct from est, claiming that it is not based on or a derivation of Werner Erhard’s original program. Certainly, there are profound differences between the methodologies, pedagogies and praxes of the est training and those of the

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contemporary Landmark Forum. However, it is argued here that there are also significant similarities, particularly in regard to the ultimate aim of the training. This article will subsequently discuss both forms of the training, along with the relevant experiences of Werner Erhard.

*est* or “Erhard Seminars Training” was the creation of the charismatic leader Werner Erhard (b. 1935), who changed his name from John (Jack) Rosenberg in 1960 as part of his search for a new life (Bartley 1978). In 1971, whilst driving along a San Francisco freeway, Erhard had an experience he describes as “timeless, unbounded, ineffable” (Erhard in Bartley 1978, 166) in which he “found enlightenment, truth, and true self all at once” (Erhard in Bartley 1978, 168). Erhard’s realization that he simultaneously knew nothing, understood everything, and that “there were no hidden meanings, that everything was just the way that it is, and that [he] was already alright” (Erhard cited in Bartley 1978, 167) was foundational to the philosophy of *est*; that what is, *is;* what isn’t, *isn’t,* and that the Self is “the creator, the source” of all individual experience and thus ultimately responsible for reality. In Erhard’s words, “It is as if the Self is the projector, and everything else is the movie” (Bartley 1978, 168). The quest for the nature of reality, taking personal responsibility for its ultimate creation, and subsequent explorations of the “Self” are also primary within the contemporary Landmark Forum.

Erhard’s hugely successful courses were seminal in forming what may now be referred to as the “seminar industry,” representing as it does an amalgamation of the Human Potential Movement, large group awareness training, and corporate success strategies. The growth rate of *est* is reported to have doubled every year between its inception in 1971 and 1976 (Stone 1982, 141). In 1985, *est* became known as the Forum, and in 1991 Werner Erhard and Associates sold the “technology” to the company’s employees who rebranded it “Landmark Education Corporation.” Since then over 1,200,000 people have participated in its programs. Delivered by 780 trained “leaders,” Landmark Education now offers programs in 125 cities in 19 countries. In 2010, revenues for the corporation reached around $75 million (Landmark Education Website 2011a). As the “flagship program” of the corporation, the Landmark Forum is a far more consumer-friendly descendant of the *est* seminar, with slightly shorter hours, more breaks allowed, and a far less abusive delivery of the “technology” from the seminar leader.  

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2. Hence, as well as an acronym for Erhard Seminars Training, *est* was initially chosen as the Latin verb “to be,” symbolizing “what people got out of the program.” Author’s email correspondence with Werner Erhard, August-October 2007.

3. A major part of the *est* training involved the leader screaming at the participants that they were

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ends, the Landmark Forum now runs for three full days and an evening, is usually held in a Landmark Education office or a hotel conference room and involves between 75-250 participants (Landmark Education Website 2011b). Today, the Landmark Forum is far less experiential in its approach than the est training, which employed numerous relaxation techniques, visualisations and “processes” involving bodily sensations for which the chairs were often stacked to the side while participants were made to lie on the ground. At times, they were also administered vomit bags (Bry 1976; Rhinehart 1976). This level of physical and practical participation is no longer required within the Landmark Forum, which promotes ontological inquiry over experiential processes. The evolution of Erhard’s “technology” and the manner in which it is presented naturally parallel the changing zeitgeists; shifting from a vastly more “spiritual” and experiential paradigm in the age of encounter movements and the Esalen Institute to a far cleaner, more conservative corporate approach in the age of seminar culture and brand traditions. Despite its significant pedagogical evolution and rebranding processes, it appears that the fundamental purpose of the core program has remained. Achieving a moment of enlightenment regarding the nature of reality, recognizing the mechanistic and narrative-based perceptions we hold of it, and locating the source of truth and ultimate creativity that is the “Self” are the ultimate goals of both Erhard’s original programs and of those of the Landmark Forum today.

Finally, it is imperative to note that during its inception, the possibility of establishing est as a church was indeed considered, but its official position as an “educational corporation” eventually prevailed (Bartley 1978, 177). It is also significant that in its original form as est, the group was less anxious about religious connotations. Thus, whilst all of the religio-spiritual aspects discussed below are present within Landmark Education, it is essential to explore them also within est, when the term “religion” carried a less authoritarian subtext, derogatory “cult” dialogue was less threatening, and members were more open to religious discourse.

Literature review and methodological remarks

As one of the most popular and controversial representations of the Human Potential Movement—complete with charismatic leader—est received signif-
icant scholarly attention, particularly from Donald Stone, though these critiques were generally imbued with censure of the “utilitarian individualism” purportedly promoted through Human Potential groups (Stone 1976; 1982; Rossman 1979; Bellah 1976). The popularity of the group and its founder, combined with a less stringent approach to protecting its intellectual capital than currently practiced by Landmark Education, resulted in several pseudo-academic texts describing the est training in significant detail (Bry 1976; Rhinehart 1976), as well as two biographies of Erhard, one sensationalist and lacking academic rigour (Pressman 1993) the other endorsed by Erhard himself (Bartley 1978). est has also appeared in several encyclopaedic-style texts on new religions, including Timothy Miller’s America’s Alternative Religions (Miller 1995, 421) and Andrew Rawlinson’s The Book of Enlightened Masters, which describes est as “spiritual psychology” involving “spiritual practices that can transform consciousness” (Rawlinson 1997, 262). J. Gordon Melton includes a brief description of Erhard and est in his Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology (Melton 2001, 513–514, 518).

Following the sale of est and the subsequent loss of the charismatic leader, Landmark Education has failed to evoke the same sociological interest that the original training ignited, yet the group is certainly reviewed within the context of sensationalist media and anti-cult discourse (Samways 1994; Ross 2011). Within the academic paradigm, presentations of Landmark Education most commonly appear as brief entries in encyclopaedic-style texts, which generally fail to adequately address the questions of the religio-spiritual functions of the group; at times the accounts are factually inaccurate (Puttick 2004, 407). Chryssides includes a reasonably thorough description of est and Landmark Education in a chapter on “The Human Potential Movement” in Exploring New Religions (Chryssides 1999, 303–314), and the group appears under “Personal Development Movements” in David Barrett’s The New Believers (2001). Finally, several articles have been published online and in print media detailing the experiences of journalists who have participated in the Landmark Forum.6

5. Puttick states that “Landmark Forum” was founded in 1985, when in fact it was 1991. 1985 saw the transformation of est into the Forum, which was still delivered by Werner Erhard and Associates.

6. While Barrett states explicitly that he makes no implication Landmark Education are in any way religious, it must be noted that the vast majority of the information used in his analysis comes from direct correspondence with Art Schreiber, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Landmark Education. Barrett’s analyses of the religious aspects of the group are limited to say the least.

7. These have proved to be valuable resources, and are referenced here only when their

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The scarcity of academic research on Landmark Education Corporation is largely due to current scholarly lack of interest in the group, though this may change as the effects of consumer culture, subjectivization and the sacralization of the Self on Western religiosity become increasingly popular themes within Religious Studies. Another significant reason for the textual vacuum lies in Landmark Education’s rigorous approach to protecting copyrighted material, which create a barrier for potential researchers and demand multifarious methodological techniques in order to produce an adequate examination. For this reason, gaining primary information on the group through personally participating in the Landmark Forum enabled the author to filter the publicly available information accurately, as well as achieve an experiential understanding of the religio-spiritual dimensions of the group. Furthermore, valuable information was offered by graduates of the Landmark Forum in their responses to questionnaires devised specifically for this study.\(^8\) Other primary sources include personal correspondence with the head office of Landmark Education in the United States, as well as personal communication with Werner Erhard, the original creator of est and thus of Landmark Education’s current “technology.” Certainly, these approaches have confirmed that a detailed analysis of the religio-spiritual dimensions of Landmark Education is lacking. However, the semantic issues of “religion” and “spirituality” within the context of late Western modernity must first be addressed.

**The problematics of religion**

The acknowledgement of “implicit” or “secular” religions within the academy over the last few decades has highlighted the problematics of “religion.” No longer is the professed position of the group in question sufficient to justify attention or rejection from Religious Studies, which now endeavours to dissect the vast and dynamic landscapes of Western spirituality and the impact of myriad economic, technologic and cultural forces.

These issues have been highlighted in the debates concerning the religious nature of such modern movements as Scientology and Transcendental Meditation (TM); the former has fought for religious status while the latter has sought to denounce it. Housed within arguments concerning both groups are the fundamental dilemmas of “religion” in the context of late Western modernity. While a myriad scholars do classify Scientology as a religion (Beckford

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8. This article is one section of a larger case study of Landmark Education by the author. Landmark Education asserts that the material used in the Landmark Forum has evolved since the author participated in it in August 2007.

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1980; Wilson 2004) or at least a “quasi-religion” (Bromley and Bracey 1998), those who reject its religious nature tend to cite its profit motives as just cause for doing so. Kent classifies Scientology as a “multi-faceted transnational corporation that has religion as only one of its many components.” Others, he observes, include “political aspirations, business ventures, [and] cultural productions...” (Kent 1999, 1). Yet one need only observe the functioning of evangelical Christian denominations in the United States to understand that new religious movements have no monopoly over these extra-curricular activities. Similarly, Beit-Hallahmi argues that the group is merely a business empire seeking tax-exemption, employing the argument that he can find no other historical example of a religion that propagates a secular version of its ethical system, nor which has presented its esoteric texts as “trade secrets” (Beit-Hallahmi 2003). Rather than serving to support a parochial and outdated definition of religion, these facets of Scientology may be viewed as evidence of the changing Western religious landscape under the generative forces of capitalism and consumer culture. As Beckford asserts, “It is naive to think that any new religious movement could survive in the modern world without a business-like material basis for its operations” (Beckford 1980, 4). Indeed, more “traditional” religions are now also operating upon this understanding.

Unlike Scientology, Transcendental Meditation denies the status of religion, claiming rather to be a “scientific technique” (Partridge 2006, 183) or a “tool” (Chryssides 1999, 292).9 The primary arguments for TM’s religious nature revolve around its employment of initiation ceremonies, as well as a system of mantras that are believed not only to empower the individual but potentially to heal the world. Yet the fact that adherents are free to follow other religions, are not given a dogmatic code of ethics to follow and do not belong to a “real” or visible “community,” but rather seek to benefit themselves through their practices, has been sufficient for others to deny its religious character (Chryssides 1999, 303). Yet again, this does not take into account the changing landscape of Western spirituality, described by Wade Clark Roof as an “expanded spiritual marketplace” (Roof 1999, 10) in which religions must come to see their followers as consumers rather than life-long members, and operate accordingly (Lynch 2007, 112).

These principles of individuality and freedom of choice are now recognized as fundamental pillars of Western ethics, and as such naturally impact upon

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9. Transcendental Meditation classes were taught in several schools in the United States for several years, until it was challenged on the grounds that it was unconstitutional to teach religions in American public schools. TM’s denial of religiosity was ultimately not accepted by the courts and it was ordered to stop (Barrett 2001, 26).

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the nature of Western religiosity and subsequently Religious Studies as an academic discipline. While secularization theories based on the total dissolution of religion have generally expired, the decline of religious authority and the rise of individual “spirituality” have inspired new hypotheses based on the “subjectivization” of Western culture and religion (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Chaves 1994). In this context, the term “religion” carries the burden of dogmatic authoritarianism, antithetical to the values of choice and individual freedom that are necessarily ultimate within the modern consumerist West. This was illustrated perfectly in FutureBrand’s 2005 marketing campaign for Christianity within Australia, which decided to keep “religion well out of the picture” (Lohrey 2006, 26–27). The rejection of this moniker by groups and individuals must be considered in this light, and the religio-spiritual function they play considered carefully.

This is important to note when examining groups like Landmark Education. Alone in the stark void of academic discourse on the group, Chryssides’ thorough, albeit brief, outline of est and its evolution into Landmark Education concludes with doubts as to the religious nature of the group (Chryssides 1999, 314). Published in 1999, his reasons for this rest within an outdated understanding of religion in late Western modernity, and as such require a brief discussion. The first, that Landmark Education makes no claims to be “religious,” has been discussed above.

Chryssides next highlights that est and Landmark Education are dissimilar to other religious groups in that they are not “membership organizations,” thus not offering conditions in which “community is one of the principle characteristics, providing an environment in which people can share life’s problems and celebrate life’s significant events” (Chryssides 1999, 314). While an argument is made below for the production of a more traditional sense of community within Landmark Education, it should be noted that the semantics of “community” within the twenty-first century must also be considered, its scope reaching beyond simple geographic or corporal confines to include communities based in media and particularly, the Internet (Chambers 2006; Dawson 2004; Krogh and Pillifant 2004). Such modern communities are rarely fixed but fluid and dynamic, their “members” participating with varying degrees of commitment. Landmark Education now hosts a site on which participants and graduates share their stories and experiences (Landmark Education Website 2011c). This includes both written material and videos, as well as links to social networking sites such as Facebook.10

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10. At the time of writing, 21,496 people “Like” Landmark Education on their Facebook page.
There also exists a Landmark Education news blog (Landmark Education Website 2011d) which invites contributions of video and text media by graduates of the program, in addition to a Landmark Education subscription-based newsletter (Landmark Education Website 2011e). Each of these sites can be accessed via “Landmark Connect” which encourages readers to “Join the Landmark Community, connect with fellow graduates—local and global—who share your passion for possibility” (Landmark Education Website 2011f). In this context, Landmark Education may certainly be viewed as a membership organization, offering its participants a very real sense of community as it is understood in the twenty-first century.

Chryssides’ final repudiation of the religious functions of est and Landmark Education, that “there is no ritual, no festivals, no religious calendar to punctuate the year, and the chief life-cycle events of birth, marriage and death are not celebrated within the organization” and that “participants are free to follow their religion, or to have none” (Chryssides 1999, 314) again fails to consider the contemporary landscape of Western spirituality within the consumer-oriented twenty-first century. Certainly, in many facets of modern Western culture, rituals and festivals hold connotations entirely distinct to those they may have carried only fifty years ago, and the religious calendar that “punctuates the year” has been all but annexed by commercial enterprise and consumerism; Christmas and Easter are now celebrated predominantly by greater than usual levels of consumption and brand sales. Moreover, scholars of Religious Studies will require a shift in consciousness in regard to what constitutes such events and activities, as ultimate subjectivity permeates the West, and the very notion of an outside authority explicitly controlling or dictating the manner and method of individuals’ personal spiritual practices becomes ever more culturally abhorrent. Indeed, Landmark Education is organised as a facilitator of transformation, rather than one that attempts to produce the miraculous externally from the individual.¹¹ That religious groups (or those fulfilling their traditional function) will come to offer goods and services from which consumers may pick and choose, rather than demanding conformity to dogma and tradition, is virtually indisputable. Like businesses, groups that fill a spiritual need cannot expect “customers” to remain loyal out of any traditional sense of obligation. All things within this commercial paradigm are transient. As John Grant enthusiastically announces in the New Marketing Manifesto, “brand loyalty” cannot be expected in an environment of constant change (Grant 1999,

¹¹. It is this aspect of “authority” that Chaves believes is in decline within the religious paradigm. In regards to Catholics in the United States, he asserts “there is loyalty, but not obedience.” That is, “there is religion, but there is little effective religious authority” (Chaves 1994, 769).

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Religiosity Rejected

53). Religions and spiritualities of the marketplace, like all corporations, will need to confront this reality.

In light of these issues, Wilson’s observation that “religion itself is a phenomenon that changes, and the conception of what constitutes a religion must, therefore, also change” (Wilson 2004, 267) seems logical. It is not within the scope of this article to offer a novel definition of religion, but rather, to simultaneously highlight the problematics of “religion” within late capitalist modernity and to draw attention to the new trends in Western spirituality through a dissection of the religio-spiritual dimensions of a group that claims to be secular in nature. Whilst not a “religion” in a traditional, theological sense, Landmark Education is certainly representative of numerous novel trends in Western spirituality, many of which are illustrated below in the examination of those dimensions of the group that are religio-spiritual in nature.

**Eastern spiritual traditions in Landmark Education**

The utilization of Eastern philosophies and practices has been a significant part of Western spirituality since the 1960s (Campbell 2007), and certainly played a central role in the creation of the original est training. In the contemporary Landmark Forum the act of sitting in one place for hours on end listening to the repetitious oration of the Forum leader, with enlightenment as the anticipated outcome, clearly parallels Eastern meditation practices. As noted above, the intentions behind these methods were more overt within est, in which members were directly encouraged to experience the pain resulting from “just sitting” or just being, and to subsequently rise above it. est openly taught that people choose to ignore or cover up the truth of their lives with everyday, mundane activities. Bry writes,

> We smoke, make idle conversation and eat at the exact moments when, if we were to be still, the meaninglessness of our lives, the pain which we repress which only pops out as headaches and lower back pain, the emotions we suppress, would come to the surface and be experienced. ...Underneath the things people don’t allow themselves to experience is the experience of their truth.  
> (Bry 1976, 185)

This, she explains, is why participants agree to sit uncomfortably for up to seventeen hours a day, eating, drinking and taking toilet breaks only

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12. The extent to which Erhard was influenced by a broad spectrum of Eastern spiritual traditions was made manifest also in his personal philosophy. Explaining that his everyday actions came from his moment-to-moment “experience,” Erhard described his behaviour as having a spontaneous character, a quality lacking in actions based on rules. Such a quality, Erhard enthusiastically referred to as “living in the Tao” (Stone 1982, 157).
when they are given permission, and forgoing all illicit drugs, alcohol and unprescribed medication. Much the same intention lies in the techniques of the Landmark Forum, the primary difference being that water-coolers are provided and participants may go to the toilet when necessary. They are, however, required to forego all the other forms of “distraction” listed above (Thornburgh 2011; Hill 2003) and the discomfort resulting from sitting still for hours at a time is still clearly a part of the weekend training.13

Perhaps more prominent in the teachings and philosophy of the Landmark Forum are Buddhist notions of reality and the essential meaninglessness of all things material. The purpose of the training—to demonstrate that the “reality” in which humans have always believed is nothing more than a creation of the Mind—corresponds directly with the philosophy of the Yogacara school of Buddhism which views the world as we experience it as “purely mental” (Harvey 2001, 107–108). Obviously, neither Erhard’s training nor the Landmark Forum are unique in their employment of these ideas; they are ubiquitous throughout myriad modern spiritualities and ultimately add to the capacity of the sacred Self. If the world itself is pure, and impurities lie solely in the eye of the beholder, a purification or “enlightenment” experience had by an individual will essentially bring about the requisite change needed in order to live a meaningful existence.14

The influence of Zen Buddhism on Erhard was paramount (Bartley 1978, 121) and is visibly manifest in the Landmark Forum. Perhaps most significant is what Erhard perceived to be the immediate nature of enlightenment in Zen, stating, “The distinctive element in Zen is instantaneousness leading to transformation, rather than process leading to change” (Bartley 1978, 122). Instant enlightenment, along with the rejection of contemplation along with lengthy processes were to become a fundamental facets of both est and Landmark Education methodology; Landmark Forum leaders continue to refer to “being in the dark and finding the light switch” and “seeing yourself for the first time.”15 Similarly, one of the aims of Zazen, known as kensho-

13.A journalist for New York magazine claims that a sign was placed in the seminar room during the Landmark Forum that read: “IF YOU LEAVE THE ROOM FOR ANY REASON, EVEN FOR A FEW MINUTES, YOU MAY GET THE RESULT BUT HAVE NO RIGHT TO EXPECT IT” (Grigoriadis 2001).

14.In their discussion of the privatisation of Asian religions, Carrette and King highlight the tendency to focus on this particular aspect of Buddhism within New Age philosophy and praxis (Carrette and King 2005, 99).

15.Journalist Jeannie Marshall describes her experience of this within the Landmark Forum stating, “Jinendra told us that you can expect results even if you do not understand the language. All that is required is your presence in the room, and a very open mind, for the
godo, is “seeing into your True-nature. …It is the sudden realization that ‘I have been complete and perfect from the very beginning’” (Fowler 2005, 115). Following the “Wernerism” that opens the Landmark Forum, “you are whole, and complete, and perfect,” participants are reminded that they will not understand this truth until they have “got” the Forum, or undergone the guaranteed enlightenment experience.16

The importance of the koan in Zen also had a significant impact on Erhard and the subsequent methodology of est and the Landmark Forum. These paradoxes or riddles, such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” (Fowler 2005, 104) and “What is your Face before your parents’ birth?” (Kapleau 1989, 144) serve to release the mind from the bonds of rationality. Kapleau describes the purpose of the confusing nature of the koan as being to “throw sand into the eyes of the intellect and force us to open our Mind’s eye and see the world and everything in it undistorted by our concepts and judgements” (Kapleau 1989, 70). As such, Erhard became famous for his use of “mind-boggling” language, employing phrases like, “What is a human being that listening is?” (Dougary 1987, 19). Similar perplexing “Wernerisms” still arise within the Landmark Forum: “You can have any result for yourself or your life that you invent as a possibility and enroll others in your having gotten” (Alford 2010). Participants who question the meaning of such statements are told to simply “try it on.” The ultimate purpose of the koan and indeed of Zen, being to guide the listener to their true Self while simultaneously “[prying] us loose from our tightly held dogmas and prejudices, [stripping] us from our penchant for discriminating good from bad …to the end that we may one day perceive that the world of Perfection is in fact no different from that in which we eat and excrete, laugh and weep” (Kapleau 1989, 70) remains today a fundamental objective of the Landmark Forum. Continuously, participants are reminded of the meaninglessness of their judgements, beliefs and intellect, all of which prevent them from understanding the true nature of Self. Undoubtedly the principles of Zen, along with other Eastern traditions, may be found embedded within the Landmark Forum.

Religious effervescence and the sacred group collective

The emotional vibrancy of the spectacle created within much of the seminar industry has often been likened to that of a religious revival, with “human performance educators” such as Anthony Robbins arousing a crowd of thousands of lights of self-knowledge to be switched on” (Marshall 1997, 24).

into a “peak state” designed to transform both their experience of the world and their entire way of being. The intensity of the group dynamic created during the Landmark Forum certainly parallels Durkheimian notions of a “collective effervescence,” capable of birthing “the religious idea” (Durkheim 1976 [1915], 218–219). Bry describes an _est_ training process that resulted in 250 participants screaming, laughing hysterically, raging, shaking and vomiting through their own re-creation of an experience which, for the author, lead to feeling “overcome with feelings of my own goodness and beauty. It was like nothing I had ever experienced before” (Bry 1976, 84–85). While this specific exercise is no longer used in the Forum, other practices produce results akin to those described by Bry, if only slightly milder and less graphic. During the weekend participants bear witness to compelling and seemingly miraculous breakthroughs, in which individuals “share” their personal life and relationship dramas in a highly emotionally charged environment, resulting in what the forum leader refers to as “getting it,” or understanding the true nature of being, self and reality.

Part of the creation of such “religious ideas” is the altering of pre-existing belief systems and ethical codes. In describing the force of the collective effervescence during an Australian Aboriginal _corroboree_, Durkheim writes, “The passions released are of such an impetuosity… [and] are so far removed from their ordinary conditions of life… that they feel that they must set themselves outside of and above their ordinary morals” (Durkheim 1976 [1915], 216). This is mirrored within the Landmark Forum; the weekend resulting in countless participants publicly re-ordering their entire belief-systems after impassioned moments of emotional group cohesion.17 The indignant rancour initially expressed by Forum participants regarding such personal issues as adultery, sexual abuse or domestic violence diminishes rapidly over the course of the weekend, as comprehension of the “meaninglessness” of such judgements or ethical positions becomes more significant than moral disgust.18

Combined with forming “religious ideas” and altering belief systems, the “collective effervescence” produced in the Landmark Forum serves to create an intense feeling of unity and interconnectedness within the group, resulting in a

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17. Canetti asserts that the “dynamics of packs, and the particular kind of interplay between them, explain the rise of the world religions” (Canetti 1984, 128).
18. An extreme example of this within the _est_ training is offered by Rhinehart, who describes the manner in which a trainer illustrates to a woman that her _experience_ of her being molested by her uncle as “dirty” has made it so; that to another person it may have in fact been “wonderful.” He further illustrates this by telling the group about a woman who, after hearing of another woman’s guilt about committing incest with her father for years, exclaimed, “I just realized …how much I loved my father and part of me wished my father had committed incest with me” (Rhinehart 1976, 113–114).
sense of “sacred community.” Oakes’s description of “the charismatic moments” vital to the strength and unity of new religious groups is certainly applicable to the countless emotional episodes produced during the Forum. Using Lindholm’s phrase “the electrifying blurring of boundaries,” Oakes describes the moments of connection between members that may occur naturally or as part of ritualistic practices within the group. These “moments” which are based upon “a deeply evocative communion of self and other” (Oakes 1997, 144–145) occur repeatedly throughout the weekend as participants share their most personal and painful experiences in what may be regarded as ritual practices. One journalist who took part in the Landmark Forum wrote, “By Sunday night, people who were strangers just three days before embraced, often weeping with joy in each other’s arms” (Marshall 1997, 27). Another, writing for The Times Magazine, reported “Our marathon of soul-bearing had bonded everyone in the room, as if to an enormous instant family…” (Bennet 2000).

This sense of community was an essential aspect of est. At “Something About Nothing,” a seminar given by Erhard to a crowd of five thousand in New York, the charismatic leader stated, “There really isn’t anything to do… I love you and I’m here to be with you. Besides which you will all get the chance to be with each other—and that’s all that’s going on” (Bry 1976, 171). Even without the presence of Erhard, masses of est graduates attended such occasions as “The First Special Graduate Event” held at the Lincoln Center. These events were described by participants as consistently producing “a wonderful sense of camaraderie and of being a part of a community of people who are transforming their consciousness” (Bry 1976, 131). Bry describes the post-training events she attended as holding “a feeling of being among dear friends and of belongingness” (Bry 1976, 93).

Graduate courses, rather than single events, are today a major facet of Landmark Education. Nevertheless, a powerful group dynamic still saturates events involving a graduate collective. This is demonstrated on the final evening of the Forum referred to as “graduation night” for participants, who are encouraged to invite family members and friends. A manifest feeling of unity pervades the room as graduates stand and bear witness to their transformations. When finished describing what he had “got” from the Forum,

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19. The rules concerning when and where participants are allowed to share their experiences certainly add to a sense of the ritualistic. Speaking without raising a hand is forbidden, and once chosen, the participant must stand at one of the strategically placed microphones. Furthermore, whilst each participant invariably has a different “story,” the manner in which the Forum leader dissects this remains consistent, and certain questions and diagrams used to bring about a “breakthrough” are repeated ceremoniously.
one participant concluded by stating, “I’m not letting any of you leave. I love you all.” McClure (2009) describes a Forum leader himself “tearing up” during graduation night and announcing to the group, “I love you forever.” This sense of group unity is also demonstrated by the thousands of volunteers worldwide who devote countless hours to being part of the Landmark experience. Certainly, the great numbers of Forum graduates who attend the Sunday-evening sessions of the Landmark Forum, along with the dozens of volunteers, demonstrate that a sense of community and of belonging to a group retains its significance for participants within Landmark Education.

The religious power of language: Maintaining a sacred group-collective and transforming the world

The group-specific language of Landmark Education, some of which has been adapted from that of est, plays a significant role in creating and maintaining a sense of the sacred group-collective. The observations of one est volunteer are salient here: “[L]ike many religions, est has its own language. Not only does this language provide a unique way of communicating, it also immediately identifies whoever uses est phrases as an ex-asshole, a member of the club” (Bry 1976, 108). This volunteer later described being “struck by the contrast between an interchange among est grads and the comparative superficiality of communication between friends and colleagues on the outside” (Bry 1976, 108-9). Similarly, a graduate of the Landmark Forum reports having “found a community of people who know how to live life fully. People that are able to... relate on a level that is beyond belief until you too have done the Landmark Forum” (Lovemarks Website 2011). Interestingly, participants of the Forum are warned of potential ridicule from outsiders, and encouraged to stay strong in their new perspectives. This sense of potential “outsider persecution” also adds to the sense of a sacred community.

Correspondingly, from an opposing perspective, Dougary acknowledges the alienating potential of “Werner-speak” to “outsiders” in an article published in the Sydney Morning Herald’s Good Weekend magazine. Having attended

21. Landmark Education do not refer these people as “volunteers,” but rather “customers” who “choose to participate in the Assisting Program.” According to Landmark Education, approximately 2% of Forum graduates take part in this. (Author’s email correspondence with Eileen LaCario of Landmark Education, September-October 2007). In the last decade, popular estimates have placed the number at around 7,500 “volunteers” globally (Bennet 2000).

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a special seminar given by Erhard at the Sydney Opera House in 1987, the
journalist noted her confusion at such statements as, “What gives you the
power? It is to know that you were given a way of being called being your
thoughts and feelings but you’re not stuck with it ... by owning your already
always way of being” (Dougary 1987, 19). To graduates of the Landmark
Forum this sentiment is far less obscure, having been largely rationalized in
one of the seminars known as “Already Always Listening” (Landmark Edu-
cation Website 2011g). Thus, the group-specific language of Landmark Edu-
cation contributes exponentially to the religious dimensions of the group,
highlighting the sense of the “enlightened” versus the ignorant. As stated
by Reat, “Every religious tradition, by its very existence and regardless of its
claims to universality, divides the world into two sets: insiders of the tradition
and outsiders of the tradition” (Reat 1983, 459).

More than creating a sense of “sacred community,” the group-specific lan-
guage of Landmark Education also adds to its esoteric nature, subsequently
playing a role in its expansion. As Landmark Education does not advertise,
their recruits come primarily from the recommendations of graduates. Many
participants have enrolled in the course after a friend, lover, colleague or fam-
ily member graduated, claiming it had made their life better but were unable
to explain how or why (Bennet 2000). This is largely because the specialist
language used within the training does not translate well into “real-world”
dialogue. Often, the result is the perception of an esoteric solution that is
highly appealing in its ambiguity.

Landmark Education regards the powerful nature of language as being able
to bring about both personal and global transformations. On an individual
level, the actions of listening and speaking are perceived to “take on new
dimensions and unexpected power,” becoming “instruments of creation” and
personal transformation (Landmark Education Website 2011g), supporting
Erhard’s assertion that “One of the pathways to being a new way is to speak a
new way” (Dougary 1987, 19). During the Landmark Forum, as in est semi-
nars, certain key words and their definitions are read out from the dictionary
in order to highlight the discrepancies between their various connotations,
with the purpose of opening a space for new, more “appropriate” understand-
ings. In this sense, a correlation may be found in Rudy and Griel’s assertion of
the religious dimensions of Alcoholics Anonymous, in that both groups teach
a “true” epistemology and work to erase the previous, false epistemology of
the individual (Rudy and Greil 1989, 43). The manipulation of language
subsequently becomes a means for promoting the spread of what one Forum
leader described as “the Human Movement,” capable of “transforming the

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world." Erhard himself claims that as a result of the training, “whole communities have been transformed in countries as diverse as South Africa and the U.S.” (Erhard 2007). Thus, the sentiment expressed by one EST volunteer: “What EST does have in common with traditional Western religion is a sense of service, of mission, and of course it’s definition of a way of being and experiencing” (Bry 1976, 108) is similarly applicable to Landmark Education, and is largely made manifest through group-specific language.

The transcendental nature of Landmark Education

Transcendental descriptions of the Landmark Forum add a further religious dimension to the group, which can be seen as possessing enigmatic powers. Again, it is interesting to note this aspect of EST, described by Erhard as similar to a mystical entity; an all-encompassing force or energy like the Tao. “EST does not come out of the world” he explained, “It doesn’t try to give people what they need. It doesn’t come from responding to people’s deficiencies. EST actually didn’t come from any place or any thing. It comes to the world from nothing, from the fact that being just is, and there’s nothing to be done about that” (Bry 1976, 173). Today, Landmark Education’s official website states, “The Landmark Forum is not a one-time event. It is a moment-by-moment approach to being alive” (Landmark Education Website 2011g). Outside the Forum and during events for potential participants, the training is typically referred to as a “course.” During the actual Forum, however, participants are told continuously that this definition is incorrect, describing it instead as a “space.” One participant reports a leader stating “the Forum is holographic. It’s not linear” (Faltermayer 2001). Indeed, the esoteric definitions of the Forum given during the training intensify over the weekend, as fiercely emotional breakthroughs are followed by such exclamations from the leader as, “The Landmark Forum is this! The Landmark Forum is you!”

One participant stated on graduation night that he brought his friends along in order to “give them the opportunity to experience something profound.”

This sense of the Landmark Forum possessing sacred or transcendental properties is further elevated by the group’s unwillingness to advertise. Participants

25. For a glossary of EST terms, some of which, such as “racket,” remain employed by Landmark Education, see Bry (1976, 225–231).

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are told that the primary reason for this is that such blatant methods could never do it justice; that the Forum is “too profound” for public promotion.28 Whilst the official Landmark Education website appears to be a tool of mass-marketing, it is significant to note that nowhere on the site are visitors able to locate specific details, techniques or practices used by Landmark Education. Rather, ambiguous language is employed to assure readers that on completion of the Landmark Forum, participants discover that “the way we approach the world, and the way the world approaches us, changes” (Landmark Education Website 2011g). Similarly, by copyrighting all materials, concepts and information presented in the Forum, the special nature of the group is well sustained and the Forum retains a certain sacred, enigmatic nature of its own.

The authority of experience: Unifying the individual with “true religion”

Landmark Education’s outward rejection of “belief” is as strong as it was in the form of est, with notions of “truth” also resting on the foundations of experience.29 Participants are reminded throughout the Landmark Forum of the intellectual nature of belief, which is thus no more than a mechanism of the mind and subsequently illusory. Only direct human experience can be true. Despite the seemingly anti-religious nature of such rejection of belief, however, the group claims to offer a deeper understanding of God and religion through this very notion. As stated by Erhard, “Belief in God is the greatest single barrier to God and the Universe; [it is] almost a total barrier to the experience of God. When you think you have experienced God, you haven’t. Experiencing God is experiencing God, and that is true religion” (Bry 1976, 199). Correspondingly, an anecdote delivered by Erhard in East-West Journal describes a training session in Hawaii at which he told a devout Buddhist that the Buddha was nothing but “dog shit.” He writes, “She started to cry. And I kept pressing that with her until she finally got that Buddha was, in fact, dog shit. And she had a total release from her belief in Buddha. And at the same instant she had the experience of Buddha” (Stone 1982, 157). Participants in the Landmark Forum are often told of the numerous religious leaders who have benefited greatly from the training, including monks, priests and monastic leaders.28


29. It is interesting to note that, with the organization’s rejection of rationalization and intellectualization, combined with its highly sensible corporate image, it fits with Rudolf Otto’s definition of a superior religion. Otto writes, “The degree in which both rational and non-rational elements are jointly present, united in healthy and lovely harmony, affords a criterion to measure the rank of religions—and one, too that is specifically religious” (Otto, 1958 [1917], 142).
rabbis. In a sense, therefore, this concept of experience over belief further adds to the omnipotent nature of Landmark Education, transcending even religion itself, whilst simultaneously facilitating the union of religious experience and the individual.

The doctrinal rejection of belief: A paradox

Interestingly, despite this apparent denial of belief, Landmark Education espouses a clear system, including a very distinct notion of right and wrong, good and evil. Participants are encouraged to be “extraordinary” individuals, by “honouring their word” and remaining “true to themselves.” The ideal state of being is one in which an individual is void of his or her hang-ups about the past, indeed, about all realities that were constructed on past events. Furthermore, “Rackets”—defined as “a fixed way of being plus a personal complaint”—are believed to be the major controlling force in the lives of individuals. Participants are told that the Self and these rackets, or their “perceived” identity, are at war with one another. So long as they exist, humans are incapable of freedom. One Forum leader asserted that these rackets are “killing our lives” (Faltermayer 2001) whilst another declared that they are “designed to kill and destroy,” stating too that she was not yelling at the individual, but at their “disgusting rackets.” Subsequently, participants may be left with a definite feeling of something “inauthentic” and evil dwelling within, requiring immediate exorcism.

Further highlighting the irony of Landmark Education’s rejection of belief is the group’s focus on the miraculous. Copious examples of miracles and healings are recorded from graduates of est, such as an orthopaedic surgeon who, after completing the training, announced to his patients, “If you want to get rid of your lower back pain go to est” (Bry 1976, 28). Yet this phenomenon is certainly not confined to Erhard’s form of the training. Participants of the Landmark Forum still engage in an activity described by Bry, in which they “disappear” headaches, body pains and tiredness (Bry 1976, 79; McClure 2009). In the Landmark Advanced course, this skill apparently evolves into the ability to dissolve all of one’s pain and suffering. Nor are stories of healing confined to physical ailments; they are even more prominent within the spheres of personal relationships and achievement. On the

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30. One Rabbi stated “I have found Landmark Education programmes to be particularly empowering in strengthening my personal commitment to Judaism.” Author’s correspondence with Landmark Education, 2011.


“Landmark Results” blog, one graduate states,

Every encounter with people is almost a spiritual awakening for me. I feel connections with perfect strangers instantly when before I didn’t even feel properly connected with my kids. The Landmark Forum helped me step out of my own little world and into the real one…where I watch in half amusement half sadness the people all around me rolling around constrained in their own bubble of reality. I find myself naturally relating to them. I can see people with complete clarity. I see myself with complete clarity.

(Landmark Education Website 2011c).

Similar stories dominate graduation night of the Landmark Forum, with one self-described “emotionally-detached” individual testifying, “I have so much love in my heart.” Such a focus on healings and the miraculous certainly seems to challenge the group’s outward rejection of belief, and adds to the sense of the sacred within Landmark Education.

Salvation, transformation and rebirth

Another facet of the Landmark Forum that strongly parallels conventional religious ideas, and one that is shared by myriad Human Potential groups and seminar leaders, is the promise of salvation offered through personal transformation (Bennet 2000). As Stone asserts, weekend training experiences like est hold “many similarities with …the traditional church retreat, where renewal and rebirth are emphasized” (Stone 1976, 108), while Wallis refers to Erhard’s training as a “new salvational movement” (Wallis 1982, 6). The ultimate goal of the Landmark Forum, as stated on the official website, is a transformation which is “inherently expansive and infinite.” The result of this reawakening is salvation from an unfulfilling existence and rebirth into a new way of being. “Unencumbered by the past,” it states, “we experience a greater level of vitality, well-being and fun…” (Landmark Education Website 2011g). One Forum leader described currently living a “second life,” having been “dead” before the Forum. The salvific nature of this transformation or “rebirth” offered by the Landmark Forum certainly echoes that provided by traditional Western religions, with deliverance from the ordinary and the mundane replacing monotheistic soteriologies.

The sacred self: Recognizing the divine in Landmark Education

Perhaps the most common rationale for denying the existence of a religio-spiritual dimension to Landmark Education is the absence of deity-worship, or, indeed, of any form of sacred symbol. An investigative journalist at The Times


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Magazine ensures readers that Landmark Forum leaders themselves are not venerated, and describes how the business-like décor, “without logos, images or any of the physical trappings of cultery also discouraged any tendency towards false worship. Instead,” she writes, “it kept people’s attention focussed exactly where natural selfishness would dictate it should be—on themselves” (Bennet 2000). Apparently, despite manifest evidence, the sacralization and indeed deification of the Self within Landmark Education is effectively unrecognized.

Yet the esoteric and transcendental descriptions of the Self offered by Landmark Education alone demonstrate a sacred understanding. As discussed above, the fundamental objective of the Landmark Forum is to create a space for transformation. Ultimately, this transformation is reliant upon participants’ enlightenment as to the true nature of Self as ultimate creator, possessing infinite responsibility for the world: “…beyond the “you” that exists as a character in your story, there is you, the author or source of the story” (McCarl and Zaffron et al 2001). Brimming with overtones of mysticism, a description of the true Self, known within Landmark Education as “the Transparent I,” demonstrates its esoteric nature:

The “I” who authors the story has no fixed or even identifiable characteristics, and thus can be said to be transparent. In its transparency it is beyond all identities; it is nonpersonal, nonpositional, and non-narrational. It is more like a ground of being. …It seems that when I go to find my transparent I, I cannot; I only find its footprints, its expression or exhibition—but never it itself. Yet I am sure of its being (McCarl and Zaffron et al 2001).

Through the enlightenment and transformation offered by the Landmark Forum, participants are able to harness the power of their “transparent I,” becoming creators of endless possibilities. The indefatigable promotion of the individual’s ability to “create from nothing” 35 undeniably adds to the deification of the Self. The Landmark website describes how, in one Forum seminar entitled “Language as an Access to Power,” “listening and speaking …take on new dimensions and unexpected power. They become instruments of creation.” Ultimately, it states, language enables the individual to “bring the world into being” (Landmark Education Website 2011g). During the Landmark Forum this notion is constantly demonstrated; participants are told that they possess the ability “to breathe life into” a relationship or loved one, and when they take a bold stand, “life and the universe align, and it shall be.” 36 Perhaps most illuminating in regards to the deification of the Self are

35. The famous Wernerisms: “One creates from nothing” and “If you try to create from something you’re just changing something” (Erhard 1974) remain as tenets of the Landmark Forum.
the numerous homilies and diagrams intended to demonstrate that before all creation, in the beginning is “the Word.”  

While the concept of the sacred Self is promoted throughout the Landmark Forum, it is not stated as explicitly as it was within est. Included in Erhard’s book of aphorisms, for example, is the statement, “You’re god in your universe. You caused it. You pretended not to cause it so that you could play in it, and you can remember you caused it any time you want to” (Erhard 1974). Similarly, Rhinehart quotes an est trainer as stating, “For two days now I’ve been playing the role of trainer and you’ve been playing the role of trainee. And now I’m going to step down from the platform and return to playing the role of Michael, God pretending He’s a human, interacting with you other Gods, also pretending you’re humans” (Rhinehart 1976, 220). These notions are still utterly infused within the weekend training and, with less explicit use of religious vocabulary, the Landmark Forum maintains the concept of the deified Self.

The self as “ultimate concern”

Thus, we reach the final, yet perhaps most crucial religio-spiritual dimension of Landmark Education; one that highlights some of the most salient shifts within contemporary Western spirituality. Theologian Paul Tillich defines religion as “the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life” (Tillich 1963, 4). In this regard the group under analysis, along with dozens of others belonging to the Human Potential Movement, may be understood as religious in that they openly promote the Self not only as representing the “ultimate concern” —outweighing all others—but also as holding the answers to all existential enquiry. Tillich’s characterisation of religion is yet further germane, describing how in “secular quasi-religions the ultimate concern is directed towards objects like… a highest ideal of humanity, which [is] then considered divine” (Tillich 1963, 5). Within Landmark Education, the divine “object” is the true Self. Void of “rackets” and “inauthenticities,” the “transparent I” epitomises the human ideal, and the authentic Self is sacralized.

Here, yet again, the experiences of Erhard and his creation of the “technology” that would ultimately evolve into the Landmark Forum are of great significance. est’s creator conspicuously promoted the concept of the sacred Self as “ultimate concern” and, as Balch asserts, “[a] new religion, at least in its early stages, may be largely a projection of its leader’s personality” (Balch 37. Author’s experience of the Landmark Forum, Sydney 2007.

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1982, 68). The Self was at the nucleus of Erhard’s own peak or “enlightenment” experiences, the leader describing one occurring in his office in 1963 that “was not related to a person or to my work, not to the ocean or to the sunset or to art, not to any of that. It was a profound sense of Self. I truly experienced the Self…” (Bartley 1978, 108). It is significant to note that one of the major themes listed by Wallace as fundamental to the dreams and visions of a potential leader is the longing for “the establishment of an ideal state of stable and satisfying human and supernatural relations” (Wallace 1965, 270). As the transcendental status awarded to the Self by Erhard raises it to the realm of the supernatural, a harmonious and intimate connection with this entity remains the central purpose of the Landmark Forum, the ultimate goal to achieve Erhard’s final “enlightenment” moment in which he “didn’t just experience Self; [he] became Self” (Bartley 1978, 167).

Conclusion

While the twentieth century bore witness to massive shifts within the landscape of Western religiosity, issues surrounding the semantics of “religion” persist well into the twenty-first. As illustrated in the cases of Scientology and Transcendental Meditation, the purported position of a group does little to silence the debate surrounding its religious elements, as Religious Studies necessarily continues to dissect the nature of religion and spirituality within modern consumer culture. An analysis of the religio-spiritual dimensions of Landmark Education highlights the problematics of religion within this context, whilst also identifying trends ubiquitous throughout the “secular” paradigms of contemporary manifestations of the Human Potential Movement. These include not only the utilization of traditional Eastern religious practices and doctrine involving the Mind, but the explicitly spiritual intentions of reaching enlightenment, becoming reborn and finding salvation from the malaises of modernity. Like many of the spectacles produced within the seminar industry, the “collective effervescence” produced throughout the weekend of the Landmark Forum results not only in the birthing of the religious idea and a complete overhaul of individual value systems, but creates a sense of a sacred group, fitting with Durkheim’s notion of religion as being “eminently collective” (Durkheim 1976 [1915], 47). The power of group-specific language serves to create a sense of the esoteric assembly, desirable to “outsiders.” While the organization appears publicly to represent a corporate training program, definitions and conceptions of the Forum itself become highly transcendentalized during the actual training. The organization appears to transcend even the realm of religion, offering an authentic unification of the
individual with their God through the medium of “experience.” Furthermore, while outwardly rejecting belief as a trapping of the Mind, the group not only possesses a program intended to be followed, but even promotes the possibility of the miraculous—by definition requiring an element of belief. Perhaps most conspicuous of all is the sacralization of the Self within Landmark Education, filling the perceived void of a deity or object of religious authority. Wielding power over the very world around it, the Self is seen within the organization as an entity entirely transcending the individual, who will benefit from its powers only when the Self is recognized, located and employed by the subject. Representing the “ultimate concern,” the Self is seen also to hold the key to all existential inquiry, and consequently Landmark Education moulds intriguingly to Tillich’s definition of religion. In this sense, Landmark Education can be seen as a paradigmatic manifestation of the changing face of Western spirituality.

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