

Prologue

I was the weird kid—on steroids. The year was 1969. I dressed oddly and didn't fit in with my classmates. I didn't know their music or their culture. I was ignorant of professional sports and even most childhood games. From the moment I enrolled in Broadmoor Elementary kindergarten at the age of five, I learned that my home and cult lifestyle had a bad reputation in our upscale neighborhood, which was nestled at the foot of Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado Springs. My family occupied an enormous 17,000-square-foot brick mansion called La Tourelle—by far the largest home in the neighborhood—along with 60 cult staff. Everyone knew I was from “that house.” Further cementing my peculiarity, a young Black staff member named Leon dropped me off at school in a green Cadillac. To the other kids, I couldn't have been stranger.

The spectacle of my daily chauffeured grand entrance was enough to raise plenty of six-year-old eyebrows. Even kindergartners were smart enough to recognize there was a lot more going on there. Even *I* thought it was odd that my parents didn't drop me off. *Why couldn't I be like everyone else?* Why were they in on every joke, and what made me their target? When I asked my mother to explain why no one wanted to play with me, she blamed my “light.” They were “of the world,” and I was a “light bearer,” destined for a superior path.

Of course it was a lie—among the first of a litany of falsehoods I was spoon-fed during my childhood indoctrination. The real reason I didn't fit in was that I was born into a classic *thought-reformed* cult environment—a princeling in bizarro world. My parents Mark and Elizabeth Prophet were self-proclaimed messengers of the “Teachings of the Ascended Masters.” I had been sequestered in their enclave, only gradually catching snippets of external reality: Television, newspapers, films, music, travel. I learned to keep two mental ledgers for every experience—how it would be interpreted at home, and how it was viewed outside. Beginning my first day of school I struggled to master code-switching—adopting the dual identity required to alternate between the norms, behaviors, language, and values of disparate cultural environments. I didn't know the term. Only that I was moving in two worlds.

What set me apart was *how* we arrived at our beliefs—through divine revelation from my parents—our certainty, and our strategic rejection of

society. Which made it impossible for me to fit in with my peers. I was separate, and chosen—a boy-messiah.

I soon learned that outsiders believed the people in my cult were “brainwashed,” which seemed to inspire fear. Whatever brainwashing was, I had always been that way. As strange as our beliefs and practices were, I accepted them. “Normal” American culture was alien. It’s taken most of my life to parse these differences and learn the mechanics of thought reform.

In early January 2024, I set myself the task of writing a book about the cult into which I was born. As I started pouring out my memories, I chronicled the many lessons I learned as the firstborn son of the founders and leaders of The Summit Lighthouse—which later became known as Church Universal and Triumphant. Over the next year, the book grew into something larger in scope, and perhaps more controversial. I came to recognize that the beliefs, tactics and abuses that suffused my cult could only be understood within a greater context that includes the world’s religions, its politics, and how we derive our ethical norms. I also came to recognize important parallels between my own upbringing and the hyper-religious Christian Nationalist underbelly of the MAGA cult. Cult tactics have now become so pervasive that it is likely that you or someone you know has been or is currently a member of a cult. Hence the title, *My Cult Your Cult*.



on five continents.

My mother was fascinated with the Arthurian legends, which are deeply entwined with our theology. So she named our Malibu headquarters “Camelot.” The 240-acre King Gillette Ranch² is located just three miles off the 101 Freeway. We were within commuting distance of most of Los Angeles, which gave members access to plentiful jobs and housing, while still providing an isolated retreat environment. Though many of our staff lived off campus in both Malibu and the San Fernando Valley, in our parlance, we were “in the world, but not of it.”

The entrance to Camelot was a quarter-mile-long drive off Mulholland Highway lined with eucalyptus trees, leading to a spectacular mix of lush lawns, ancient California oaks, and a varied topography of scrubby knolls and farmland. We held Easter Sunrise services at the highest peak we dubbed “Ascension Hill.” Our main facilities were the Gillette Mansion and two chapels with attached dormitories—built in the 1950s by the Claretian Order—one of which held our commissary. Amenities included three tennis courts, a swimming pool, and a soccer field. A small stream called Stokes Creek fed an idyllic artificial pond surrounded by drooping trees we called “Swan Lake.”

Camelot bustled with activity. We repurposed dorm rooms as offices, a former horse stable became our graphic arts department, and the hay barn became our print shop. We ran a small farming operation that included sheep and goats. Our Montessori School, administrative offices, and audio-video department occupied the mansion annex. We modernized the larger “Chapel of the Holy Grail” with video lighting and sound equipment and built a 200-seat Summit University classroom. The smaller “Chapel of the Holy Family” often served as a wedding venue. For large conferences, we set up a circus tent in one of our parking lots. We planned to build more permanent facilities including a 3,300-seat auditorium and plenty



Mark and Elizabeth Prophet with Sean Prophet.
La Tourelle, Colorado Springs, Colorado c. 1966

PROPHET FAMILY LITERARY TRUST

of housing. But we lacked funding, and we were unprepared to navigate California's strict permitting process.



SEAN PROPHET

The former King Gillette Ranch and headquarters of Church Universal and Triumphant—known as Camelot from 1977-1986, Malibu, California.

As the Cold War escalated in the early 1980s, following President Reagan's "evil empire" speech and the Soviet downing of Korean Air flight 007, my mother's millenarian rhetoric swelled. In 1986 she published *Saint Germain on Prophecy*, quoting 16th-century seer Nostradamus to forecast a modern ride of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. She admonished our members to expect nuclear war and "Earth changes," supporting President Reagan's "Star Wars" initiative for a defensive anti-missile shield. On October 3, 1987, at the Penta Hotel in New York City, she thundered: "...ere twenty-four months have passed, there shall be a confrontation and a reckoning if something is not done." She later clarified that our members should complete their war preparations, including bomb shelters, by October 2, 1989.

My mother had been preparing to withdraw from civilization since 1981, when we bought the sprawling 12,000-acre Forbes ranch in Park County, Montana, 50 miles south of Livingston. In July 1986, we sold Camelot, which is now again called King Gillette Ranch, and is a part of Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. A convoy of semi-trucks moved our operation to the former Forbes property, which she

renamed the “Royal Teton Ranch”—also dubbing it “The Inner Retreat,” a name with survivalist undertones. By December, our pullout from Camelot was complete. As she sold our remaining urban real-estate assets, our Montana holdings grew to more than 33,000 acres, including the two 4,000-acre residential subdivisions Glastonbury North and South, the 13,000-acre Lazy W ranch, the OTO Ranch, the Big Spur Campground, and industrial property in Livingston.

Our lands were concentrated in Montana’s Paradise Valley which extends from Livingston to the north entrance of Yellowstone National Park—a scenic marvel carved by the Yellowstone River, which meanders through lush meadows, past towering peaks of the Absaroka and Gallatin Ranges. From 1987 to 1989, thousands of members streamed into the valley. Many built underground bunkers ranging from single-family models to concrete and steel complexes that could hold hundreds.

In July of 1989, we made national news when my stepfather Edward Francis was indicted with staffer Vernon Hamilton for conspiracy to purchase heavy weaponry under an assumed name. Both did prison time. In March 1990, we conducted two dress-rehearsal drills, moving thousands of people and their belongings into the dozens of shelters spread across the Paradise Valley. That spasm of activity, along with a 32,000-gallon fuel spill in April at our Mol Heron Creek shelter site, brought intense national and global concern along with legal scrutiny.

By 1991, most shelters were completed and stocked. The fuel-spill cleanup took a year and cost \$1 million. Unfinished bunkers in the Glastonbury subdivision remained open-pit scars on the land. Some members pulled out of Montana and moved back to cities. Our primary concern became financial survival—paying back the money we had borrowed while preparing for the end of the world. We fund-raised. We sold gold and land. We balanced our books.

Members believed their prayers, combined with our expensive steel and concrete tombs, had averted the apocalypse. While the shelter-building effort was an epic fiasco, we consoled ourselves that we had saved the world. We weren’t broke fools who’d dug pricey hidey-holes in the ground. We were heroes.

In 1992 we held our largest-ever conference in a tent pitched on the picturesque Taylor Meadows adjacent to the Mol Heron Creek shelters, also known as “The Heart of the Inner Retreat.” It was attended by nearly

5,000. Strengthened by that impressive audience, my mother turned outward, scheduling new lecture and book tours. But this time the crowds she had attracted through the 1970s and '80s failed to materialize. Notoriety over the bomb-shelter debacle and her husband's plea-deal on weapons charges had damaged her brand.



A satellite view of Church Universal and Triumphant's 756-person bomb shelter, located in Taylor Meadows by the pristine Mol Heron Creek, near Gardiner, Montana

As 1993 drew to a close, I was tired of trying to rationalize our messianic failure. And I began to see other cracks in our spiritual facade. I finally left my cult for good. I realized what the world already knew: 1989-1991 marked the end of the Cold War. The 1987 INF treaty eliminated an entire class of medium-range missiles in Europe. The Berlin Wall fell in November 1989. The 1991 START I treaty halved the number of nuclear missiles pointed at the United States. The Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991. We had misjudged history. We hadn't saved the world, or even ourselves. Instead of building a thriving above-ground community, we squandered our endowment on a subterranean boondoggle.

It's difficult to describe my disillusionment. What made our members embrace survivalism? Why were they so eager to reject civilization? I had an excuse: I trusted my mother. But what explains those who joined even *after* she announced a world-ending apocalypse? What convinces people to join cults—in general? There's no single answer. In this book I'll do my best to explore these vulnerabilities, which are as varied as the people in-

volved. Understanding the basis for morality is critical. I will focus on Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, and touch on Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive developmental stages. My hope is to apply the lessons of my failures, and the failures of my cult, to the larger complications of the human search for meaning—and perhaps to achieve some harm reduction.

I'm highly attuned to cultic patterns on a national scale, because I grew up watching a smaller version unfold. If you didn't grow up like I did, you're unlikely to recognize the broad impact of cult-like thinking. These beliefs, tactics and abuses can only be understood in the greater context of the world's religions, politics, and ethical norms.

The difficulty is plain: Cults aren't easy to identify. Media perception tends toward caricature and sometimes limits public understanding. Dangers that may seem obvious while watching a Netflix documentary won't be obvious if you agree with a cult's dogma. Or when you're energized about some new group you found. You won't want to admit you're on the verge of being suckered in. Cults prey on your deepest longings and exploit your blind spots. This was as true of my cult as others.

Cult is a pejorative term that screams danger, fraud, and abuse of power. But if the dangers were obvious, cults wouldn't exist. They offer benefits to offset their high costs. These include social cohesion, belonging, a sense of purpose, plausible-sounding answers to big questions, and a refuge from boredom and the rough-and-tumble aspects of life. Lost people can feel very found in these groups. I knew thousands of them. But they got much more than they bargained for.

Most cults are also threads woven into the world's religious fabric, and they can tend to wield outsized political power. In the US, that power is concentrated under the rubric of Christian Nationalism—a term I'll be using frequently. According to the 2024 documentary *Bad Faith: Christian Nationalism's Unholy War on Democracy* (Amazon Prime), "Christian Nationalism is a political movement that believes America was founded as a 'Christian Nation,' privileging Christianity over all other faiths. Masquerading as religion, this ideology exploits scripture and sacred symbols to achieve extremist objectives." My cult was far removed from mainstream evangelical churches, yet it shared some of their theocratic doctrines and goals.

Words like "theocracy," "fascism" and "genocide" may seem hyperbolic, but there are aspects of cults we can't consider any other way. We can't protect ourselves from what we refuse to name. The authoritarian leadership of

cults and religions—and less overt forms of tyranny hiding within spiritual movements—are fascist. When cults and Christian Nationalist churches clamor for the establishment of “God’s law,” or “God-government,” that’s an assault on democracy that should alarm us all. Many espouse an overly broad tolerance—in the name of religious freedom—of churches and “spiritual communities.” Many dismiss the apocalyptic ravings of preachers and cult leaders as mere kookiness, rather than recognizing “end times” prophecies as calls for genocide.

Theocracy is a terrifying term for a brutal, exclusionary form of government that’s incompatible with democracy or human rights—or even freedom of religion. Its leaders demand special reverence because they are “divinely” guided or chosen. It’s rife with apocalyptic thinking that stands athwart civilization. In *Cults Like Us* social critic Jane Borden observes “The avatar of our country’s founding was a doomsday group. We’ve been iterating on its prototype since”—referring to the Puritans, who established America’s first theocracy in New England.³ This enduring pattern in which communities prioritize rescue by a superhuman savior over the honest work of self-rule has been called “the American Monomyth.” From those early colonial theocracies to modern examples like Iran, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia, the pattern is clear: Religious belief supplants laws and constitutions.

Fascism is another scare-word I use liberally throughout this book, to describe not just cults but Christian Nationalism, radical Islamism, political billionaires, and other anti-democratic movements based in order and hierarchy. It’s not limited to 20th-century examples like Spain under Franco, Germany under Hitler, or Italy under Mussolini. That’s *nationalistic* fascism. But Ur-Fascism, or “eternal fascism,” is a subtler phenomenon that can fester within democratic republics—a morally vacuous strategy for seizing power.

In the 20th-century, the world endured numerous ethnic and political cleansings. The top three genocides were the Holocaust, the Holodomor, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which together claimed about 100 million lives. Lesser genocides have recurred in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, Myanmar, Indonesia, Gaza and elsewhere. We say “never again.” Yet in spite of widespread awareness, the world tends to sit on its hands.

Cults and religions routinely preach in favor of genocide, raising the specter of violent apocalypse in which “chosen people” will rise to heaven

while non-believers perish. Sometimes these dark fantasies piggyback on real-world fears like nuclear war, Y2K, or stock-market crashes. They are hostile gambits by preachers, politicians and cult leaders to dominate society by stoking fear of mass death—usurping God’s authority—to dole out “divine retribution.” Since no one has a hot-line to the Almighty, we should recognize these doom-prophecies as power grabs.

Fascism is a growing danger, and it’s not alarmist to say so. Over the past two decades, former secular democracies like Hungary and Turkey have succumbed to it, and more nations in Europe are leaning in that direction. With Donald Trump’s re-election in November 2024, the United States has fallen prey to its own home-grown fascist insurgency—the MAGA cult.

How do cults differ from religions and political movements? How do they form? How do you avoid getting hooked? What is it like to be in one? What goes on behind the scenes? As a cult veteran, and former cult leader, I’m in a unique position to answer these questions. In 1987, I was ordained a minister and the next year became vice-president of my cult at age 23.

I will tell my own cautionary tale. My post-cult struggles drove me toward science, philosophy, and ethics. By revealing the steep price I paid for clarity, I hope to help others avoid becoming ensnared—and to help others escape, like I did. It’s not enough to learn cult tactics. Cult abuses are real, and you should know what kind of distorted hall of mirrors a cult can be. But that won’t keep you safe. Your best defense against cults is introspection, leading to well-examined, internally-consistent values. You must devote serious thought to existential questions, before someone uses your confusion against you. Cult marketing appeals to your fear of mortality, selling you made-up non-solutions.

Another wide funnel into cults is *conspirituality*—a portmanteau of conspiracy and spirituality. These have always been widespread. But they’ve become more entangled, especially since the early-2020s Covid-19 pandemic. You can explore this topic through the Conspirituality Podcast, and the bestselling book *Conspirituality: How New Age Conspiracy Theories Became a Health Threat*, by Derek Beres, Matthew Remski, and Julian Walker. In December 2021 I was interviewed on “Conspirituality 81: Praying for Fire,” about my cult deconversion. There’s a surprising link between my cult and one of QAnon’s best-known proponents, retired US General Michael Flynn.

True to conspiratoriality form, no cult leader lets a good crisis go to waste. Millenarian cults thrive on political, economic, and personal malaise. I can't remember a day in 30 years when we weren't praying about some dire world condition, or against some dastardly politician or ex-member. It was a constant fight for global and spiritual survival. The nightly news blared at dinnertime, whether at home or in the commissary, and there was always urgency fueling our spiritual warfare.

Some concerns were legitimate. I grew up during the Cold War, the Vietnam War, Watergate, the 1973 and 1979 oil shortages, recessions, the Iran hostage crisis, Iran-Contra, the Soviet-Afghanistan War, and AIDS. Our outward focus wasn't bad in itself. Awareness of world events is essential for good citizenship. But we framed everything in stressful terms: We weren't just concerned citizens. We were *personally responsible* for averting calamities with our prayers. That's quite a burden!

There was little recourse for psychological pain. The answer was always to be more devout. If we weren't "out of alignment" with God, or our "divine plan," we wouldn't be suffering, would we? There were licensed therapists in our cult orbit, but the ones who were approved to see staff patients had to report back to my mother, violating doctor-patient confidentiality. Some staff gave their therapists permission to share information with their "guru," turning therapy sessions into a form of confession. This is typical—information is a cult-leader's lifeline.

As I grew up, I watched people I loved fall out of favor and disappear. One was my stepfather, Randall King. And there were other surrogate fathers I lost. Some were teachers, friends, and mentors who had failed to bend the knee to my parents' wishes. Sometimes it was a doctrinal dispute. Sometimes it was because they challenged my parents, had an affair, raised their voice or swore, drank alcohol, or violated some other rule. My mother had a policy that anyone being expelled had to be out by sundown, based on Jesus' words "let not the sun go down upon your wrath."

A lot of young, inexperienced, and idealistic people join cults for a few years and leave on their own. But they never get that time back. Far too many people become cult lifers. I was born into my cult, so I can't tell you what it's like to join one. But I've interviewed ex-cult members about what persuaded them. I'll discuss my 1984 Rumspringa, when I left my cult for two years at the age of 20. There's nothing quite like watching everyone you know turn against you. In spite of those betrayals, I returned to the fold in

early 1987. A fateful decision with a steep price in lost career opportunities.

I've come to terms with my mistakes. Though my cult centered around spiritual teachings, it was a royal court, and I was the prince. In my early 20s, I was unprepared to assume ministerial duties or the responsibilities of being vice-president. My insecurity made me heartless—an object lesson in the pitfalls of nepotism. I casually mistreated and fired people who didn't deserve it. I supported my mother's decisions, even when I knew they were wrong. Still, I had discretion in some areas, and I bear significant responsibility for expanding the scope of our shelter project, as it became a runaway train. This book is a partial effort to atone for my complicity. I apologize to those I hurt. I hope to curb future abuses.

Cults appear to serve a range of human needs for belonging, personal development, and collective action. Finding wholeness, purpose and inner resolve on your own isn't easy. Many people can't—their chains are on the inside. So even if they manage to leave their cult, they can wind up right back in another one. There's no difference between a cult-lifer and a life-long cult-hopper. Both abdicate their psychological freedom, and neither finds resolution of their traumas. The same unaccountable authority, information control and thought reform can be found within nations, religions and institutions. Your mind is the battlefield, and your only defense is rigorous self-knowledge.

I still carry leftover bad habits. One is my messianic sense of personal responsibility for world events. When calamities happen, like mass shootings, terror attacks, or the awful wars in Ukraine and Gaza, I drift toward cult crisis mode. For the past 25 years I've been compelled to write blog and social media posts, or produce podcasts—to *do something* to make a difference. Had I shaken off this burden, my life could have been happier and more focused. I could have had a more lucrative career, and I could have written this book 10 or 15 years ago. I'm not going to say "everything happens for a reason." That's just more cult-speak. But here's hoping my years of marinating on my experience might have produced a bit less anger, and a bit more insight.

¹ Wikipedia contributors. (2024, December 30). Millenarianism. In Wikipedia. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millenarianism>

² Ventura County Trails. (2019, July 11). *King Gillette Ranch has a storied history*. Retrieved from <https://venturacountytrails.org/WP/2019/07/11/king-gillette-ranch-has-a-storied-history>

³ Borden, J. (2025). *Cults like us: Why doomsday thinking drives America*. Atria/One Signal Publishers.