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# Four Prophets

What the Free Speech Movement, Jesus Freaks, Esalen, and Goddess worship have in common

**W**e are in the midst of a major transformation in the way Americans practice—or don't practice—religion. Old paradigms are losing their relevance and sometimes disappearing altogether. Religious institutions once at the center of American life have gradually drifted to the margins. It's not that spirituality matters less to our contemporaries—even famous “new atheists” such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris emphasize that they are deeply spiritual people.

Religions are like living organisms, constantly finding new ways to be meaningful by deconstructing and reconstructing practice. Religious movements can't be understood from a distance. They must be observed in action and judged by the deeds they inspire. They can only be understood fully from the inside, on their own terms. Many people think of California as secular—even post-religious. But they are mistaken. For decades, California has been at the forefront of transformation in religion.

California Zen, the ethos of the hippies and the antiwar demonstrations in the 1960s, the first women's studies classes—which quickly expanded across the country—the uniquely Californian evolution of transpersonal psychology at the Hutchens School of Sonoma State College: each has articulated a worldview, has urged its members to change the world and themselves, and is rooted in a spiritual connection to people and place. We might even consider plays and musicals—whether traditionally religious such as *Godspell*, or California-inflected such as *Hair*, with its proclamation of the Age of Aquarius and its naked call to “Let the sunshine in”—as part of this tradition. Film, art, and architecture could each demand their own separate studies.

I'd like to look at just four California spiritual movements and their leaders in this light: Lonnie Frisbee's Jesus People, Michael Murphy's Esalen, Mario Savio's Free

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Mario Savio at Berkeley. COURTESY BANCROFT LIBRARY AT UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY.

Speech Movement, and Starhawk's neo-paganism. Each movement reveals a central spiritual dimension, and each leader functions as a sort of prophet for his or her followers, moving out in front of the rest, casting a new vision of better ways forward, breaking out of the mold, and re-creating something new, something with religious dimensions. With all four stories as examples of California religious phenomena, the concept of religion itself begins to bend, grow, and become more interesting. By the end, religion, California-style, may emerge as a new and intriguing area of study, breaking free of old ways and challenging traditional definitions.

I write with a particular love for this topic and with no claim to neutrality or distance. As a religion scholar and fifth-generation Californian, I draw deeply from my own experiences as a participant-observer. My route through these stories is also unashamedly autobiographical: I was born in Berkeley, joined the Jesus People in high school, spent years working with Michael Murphy in research conferences at Esalen, was a colleague and friend of Mario Savio at Sonoma State University, and came to teach environmental ethics through the influence of Starhawk and other ecofeminists.



Lonnie Frisbee.

## Jesus Freaks

Reverend Chuck Smith founded the immensely successful Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, which, for a time, was a leading fellowship within a larger “Jesus movement” in the 1960s and 1970s. “Jesus People” (or “Jesus Freaks” as even members called themselves) were the product of a California marriage between elements of the hippy counterculture and mainline Protestantism. Calvary Chapel grew slowly at first. Chuck Smith was too straight-laced to build a movement of Jesus People by himself. He needed someone who could give testimony to the transformative power of Jesus for the lost young souls of the 1960s. He needed someone like Lonnie Frisbee. Everything about Frisbee—well, almost everything—suited him perfectly for the role: his long hair, effeminate voice, and Jesus-like appearance; his intelligence, poise, and voracious memory for scripture texts; and above all the

simple sincerity of his testimony. As one biographer wrote, “Lonnie Frisbee put the ‘freak’ into ‘Jesus Freak.’”<sup>1</sup>

Lonnie Frisbee spoke as prophetically for the religious side of the hippie movement as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and many others sang and spoke for its secular side. The Jesus People spread from beach baptisms in Orange County across the United States, and then overseas.

But Lonnie was John the Baptist to another major cultural development as well. In an age (and a religion) that was homophobic, Lonnie was gay. He would party with the underground gay community of Laguna Beach on Saturday nights and preach the gospel to huge crowds of Jesus People on Sunday mornings. When confronted by Chuck Smith and other Calvary leaders, he was upfront about his homosexuality. The leaders of the movement stripped him of his leadership roles and finally cut him out of the movement and its historical narrative altogether. Lonnie later died of AIDS in 1993.

Today, the Calvary Church’s website embraces Frisbee’s hippie ethic but credits it to Chuck Smith: “With a sincere concern for the lost, Pastor Chuck made room in his heart and his home for a generation of hippies and surfers; generating a movement of the Holy Spirit that spread from the West Coast to the East Coast, and now, throughout the world.”<sup>2</sup> Note the reversal of that quintessentially American doctrine, Manifest Destiny: in the California mind, the Holy Spirit spreads from West to East, not the opposite.

The advancement of gay rights in today’s California would have been unthinkable in Chuck Smith’s Calvary Church half a century ago. Lonnie Frisbee was a prophetic figure for a rainbow of sexual diversity some fifty years before his time—not only in secular but also in religious context. As it was for ancient prophets, being marginalized and ostracized was part of Frisbee’s prophetic experience. Frisbee envisioned a spiritual community to come, even if he himself never fully experienced it.

## Esalen

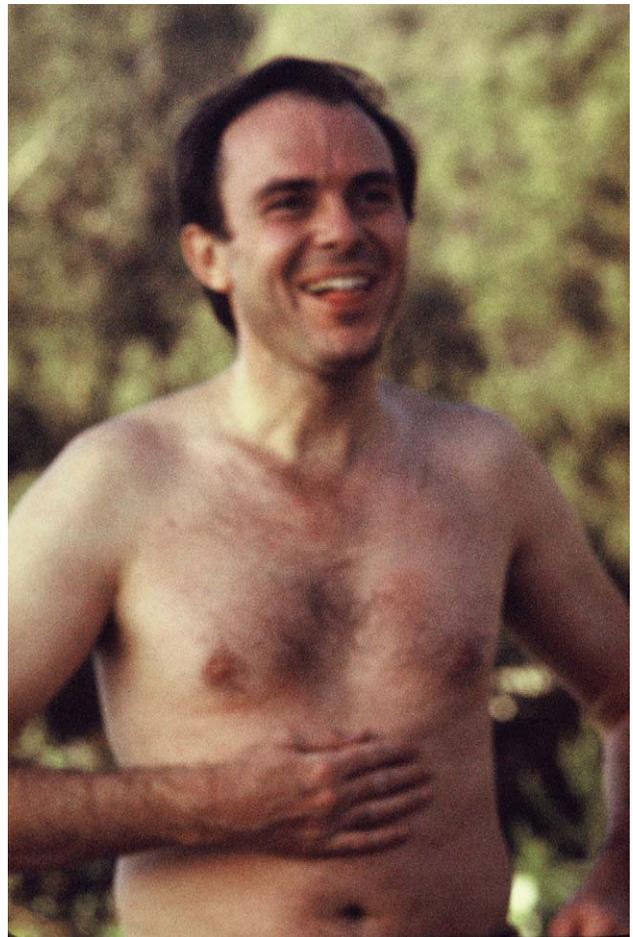
No part of the California landscape more aptly expresses the geography of California religion than Esalen in Big Sur. Esalen’s founder, Michael Murphy, had already become part of America’s mythology before he even reached the age of accountability, thanks to his father’s friendship with John Steinbeck. Murphy once told me that Steinbeck based the

central characters in his classic American novel *East of Eden* on Michael and his brother, using Michael as the model for Aron, the good kid, the Abel character, of course. Michael dropped out of Stanford in the late 1950s and went to live on the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry in southern India. When he inherited his father's coastal property in Big Sur a few years later, Michael formed Esalen. Founded in 1960, Esalen quickly became a hotbed of religious innovation, meditation, drug experimentation, and theorizing about human potential—in short, all things California.<sup>3</sup>

Jeffrey Kripal's history, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, puts the Esalen phenomenon in perspective.<sup>4</sup> In one sense, no retreat center has ever been as inwardly focused, as practiced at navel gazing as Esalen. As Michael Murphy describes it, Esalen's history brought endless ego battles as different resident leaders sought to “capture the flag.” Esalen remains a place where the impossible happens. I have watched intellectuals transformed by psychic readings, wizened scientists accepting the laying on of hands for a disease, “psi” skeptics bending spoons, and uptight East Coast conservatives luxuriating naked in the baths. Rarely has the quest for inner enlightenment been so closely tied to sexual pleasures and psychedelically induced states of the mind.

But throughout it all, the quest—“to explore into the undiscovered country,” as Murphy put it in the documentary *Supernature*—remained spiritual.<sup>5</sup> The same film also describes the goal in psychological terms: “We all have a second kind of consciousness; that subliminal self is also in touch with the cosmic reality around us.” But repeatedly, today as much as in the past, they are also drawn to use theological terms as well: “There is what Meister Eckhardt called a Divine Ground of Being underlying all reality. So everything in the world lifts up out of this Divine Ground of Being, the way waves rise up out of an ocean.”<sup>6</sup>

Esalen is about transformative experiences of body, mind, and spirit—and also about the theologies to which they give rise. For most of the half-century since Esalen opened, Murphy has had his finger on the pulse of an emerging California spirituality, which has spread, like the message of the Jesus People before him, eastward across the continent. Through Esalen, Murphy has been a prophet, even while Esalen itself, which remains a vibrant retreat center, has evolved into something of a more stable, not as surprising place, like so many once groundbreaking California institutions.



Michael Murphy in 1968. COURTESY PAM PORTUGAL WALATKA.

## The Free Speech Movement

Mario Savio was the Moses of the student movement in the 1960s. Raised a shy Italian-American Catholic, Savio was an altar boy and planned to become a priest. When we were colleagues together at Sonoma State University, Mario told me that he was painfully shy about speaking in front of groups. One wouldn't know it from his famous speech in Sproul Plaza at UC Berkeley in December 1964. Speaking without notes, in the passion of the moment, Savio spoke like a prophet and inspired a worldwide movement:

There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious—makes you so sick at heart—that you can't take part. You can't even passively take part. And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to

the people who own it that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all.<sup>7</sup>

Mario Savio described a system that is “totally dehumanized, totally impersonalized, created by a society which is wholly acquisitive.” He fought back against a society geared to “performance and award, prize and punishment—never to study for itself.”<sup>8</sup>

Was Savio a prophet? He had the prophet's gift of the effective, symbolic speech act. He set the stage for a narrative of end times and the possibility of liberation.

“Liberation” and “theology” have gone hand in hand in our age. In a 1994 speech on the Berkeley campus, looking back on the Free Speech Movement that he helped inspire, Savio described his primary motivation as a secular form of liberation theology.<sup>9</sup>

As he told *Life Magazine* in 1965: “I am not a political person. My involvement in the Free Speech Movement is religious and moral. . . . I don't know what made me get up and give that first speech. I only know I had to. What was it Kierkegaard said about free acts? They're the ones that, looking back, you realize you couldn't help doing.”<sup>10</sup>

## Starhawk

Starhawk published her first book, *The Spiral Dance*, in 1979, and later that year organized her first Spiral Dance in Berkeley. The group dance brought together neo-pagans throughout the Bay Area and is still performed annually.

Writing in the late 1970s, Starhawk took on a prophetic voice: “The Goddess is reawakening. . . . A mode of consciousness that has been dormant for thousands of years is now coming to the fore; we are beginning to see holistically; our model of the cosmos has been changed; we are beginning to value the feminine, the life-generative principle, to value humanness and the existing world.”<sup>11</sup> Her book helped bring together and shed light on the female-centered, decentralized spiritual community known as the Goddess Movement.

Born Miriam Simos, Starhawk was twenty-eight at the time. The grandchild of Russian-Jewish immigrants, Starhawk became one of the most important voices in the global Goddess Movement. On the twentieth anniversary of that first Spiral Dance, 1,500 participants joined her in San Francisco to reenact the ritual.<sup>12</sup> The essence of “witchcraft,” the Wiccan practices of the movement to reclaim

goddess worship, she writes, is acrostic vision: “We look at our culture and our conditioning from another angle, and read an entirely different message. . . . It sets us at odds with everything we have been taught.”<sup>13</sup>

The goal is “reclaiming,” the call to a countercultural lifestyle in the name of Earth's oldest religion and the future of the planet. Globally, goddess-reclaiming groups are Wiccan collectives founded on feminist principles, political action, and love for the Earth. Starhawk's Wiccan movement became an important strand of ecofeminism and, with its belief in our deep relationship with the Earth as a single being, it remains a potent part of the Gaia-goddess tradition today.

Starhawk's neo-paganism is as much about personal practice as it is about action in the world. Starhawk also promotes the practice of permaculture, a lifestyle and design practice that centers on honoring ecological principles in local ecosystems. Because “we are nature working” and nature is now being decimated by human hands, Starhawk's call is for a radical shift of values.<sup>14</sup> She writes, “To live with integrity in an unjust society we must work for justice. To walk with integrity through a landscape strewn with beer cans, we must stop and pick them up.”<sup>15</sup> She thus grounds her movement in a five-part ethic: sacred values (“Peace, Community, Family”), diversity, self-determination, environment, and social justice.<sup>16</sup> Starhawk's reawakening of the goddess tradition seeks to transform the world and the way people live in it. Transformation requires action; to live differently, people must *do* differently. Hence, her visionary outlook and call to others to move through the present world in a radically different way.

As Starhawk has always insisted, one must transform one's self in order to transform and heal the world. Magic, she notes, is one effective way to challenge cultural norms: “Magic is another word that makes people uneasy, so I use it deliberately, because words they are comfortable with, the words that sound acceptable, rational, scientific, and intellectually sound, are comfortable precisely because they are the language of estrangement.”<sup>17</sup>

In my mind, these four case studies reveal some fascinating, shared features of California-style prophecy. The prophecy in each case is about radical change. In each case, dissatisfaction with the status quo spawns critique. In the eyes of these four prophets, something about the world is wrong, even “lost.” This radical social critique then creates a figure

breaking free, standing before the crowd or congregation, setting forth a passionate call for transformation. Only the transformed community can be the home of the new way, the new vision of where we should go, toward which the prophet helps us move.

Following the new path, each prophet insists, will take total inner commitment. Members of these movements must travel inward journeys to places most people scarcely imagine. Those who respond to the radical message may be called to make immense sacrifices. (Mario Savio still used this language at the end of his life, when he organized a worker's strike at Sonoma State University.) The community of those who are "called out," California style, is a community that stands at right angles (or perhaps left angles) to the rest of American culture. This is what religious leaders do.

California prophets are apocalyptic and eschatological. They speak of the possibility of the abrupt and assured end of the present continuum. From the Jesus People to Starhawk's neo-pagans, they proclaim the coming end of the world as we have known it, and call us to live differently toward a better future. This approach to religion can be transformative, setting trends that reverberate around the world. But if the way is easy, it is not the California way. The call is to sacrifice, to forsake marks of success that are the "false gods" of the rest of the nation. Those who are called often look different, but they must also be different if they seek to change the world. **B**

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> *The Jesus People Film*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmUvnN3mtuc>.
- <sup>2</sup> From the Calvary Chapel website, <http://calvarychapelassociation.com/general-information/history/>.
- <sup>3</sup> See Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton, eds., *Panentheism Across the World's Traditions* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013).
- <sup>4</sup> Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).



Starhawk speaking at Occupy LA.  
Photograph by Laura Sharkey, via Flickr.

- <sup>5</sup> "Supernature: Esalen and the Human Potential: Beyond Reason. Beyond Belief," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljYNAoimM1o>.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Savio, 2 December 1964; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhFvZRT7Dso>.
- <sup>8</sup> Savio, <http://www.fsm-a.org/stacks/mario/mario-lifemag1965.html>.
- <sup>9</sup> Savio, "Their Values and Ours," [http://www.savio.org/speeches\\_and\\_interviews.html](http://www.savio.org/speeches_and_interviews.html).
- <sup>10</sup> <http://www.fsm-a.org/stacks/mario/mario-lifemag1965.html>.
- <sup>11</sup> Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1999), 215.
- <sup>12</sup> Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 5.
- <sup>13</sup> Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 216.
- <sup>14</sup> Starhawk, *Climate Change Primer*, <http://www.earthactivisttraining.org/Climate%20change%20primer.pdf>, 14.
- <sup>15</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, 41.
- <sup>16</sup> Starhawk, "The Five Point Agenda" (1995), <http://www.reclaiming.org/about/directions/fivepoint-agenda.html>.
- <sup>17</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 13.