

Trance Formation

The Spiritual and Religious
Dimensions of Global Rave
Culture

Robin Sylvan



**TRANCE
FORMATION**



Slaves to the rhythm. Willits, CA, August 2004. Photograph courtesy of Jon Ross (nephology.org).

TRANCE FORMATION

The Spiritual and Religious
Dimensions of Global Rave Culture

ROBIN SYLVAN

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
New York · London

First published 2005
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2005 by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

International Standard Book Number-10: 0-415-97090-3 (Hardcover) 0-415-97091-1 (Softcover)
International Standard Book Number-13: 978-0-415-97090-7 (Hardcover) 978-0-415-97091-4 (Softcover)

No part of this book may be reprinted, reproduced, transmitted, or utilized in any form by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying, microfilming, and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without written permission from the publishers.

Trademark Notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Catalog record is available from the Library of Congress

T&F informa

Taylor & Francis Group
is the Academic Division of T&F Informa plc.

Visit the Taylor & Francis Web site at
<http://www.taylorandfrancis.com>

and the Routledge Web site at
<http://www.routledge-ny.com>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	VII	
PART I	THE WORLD OF RAVES	
	INTRODUCTION: THREE SCENES	1
CHAPTER 1	A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RAVE SCENE	17
CHAPTER 2	THE FULL SPECTRUM OF EVENTS: FROM WAREHOUSE PARTIES AND CLUBS TO BURNING MAN AND THE LOVE PARADE	33
PART II	THE SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF GLOBAL RAVE CULTURE	51
CHAPTER 3	TRANCE FORMATION: THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF RAVE	63
CHAPTER 4	TECHNO TRIBAL CHURCH: THE RITUAL AND CEREMONIAL FORMS OF RAVE	97
CHAPTER 5	TRANSFORMATION: RAVE WORLDVIEW, RAVE SPIRITUALITY, AND GLOBAL RAVE CULTURE	129
CHAPTER 6	LIVING LABORATORIES: RAVE COMMUNITIES AND NETWORKS	157

CONCLUSION: RAVE NEW WORLD	177
APPENDIX: THE INTERVIEWEES	185
NOTES	191
BIBLIOGRAPHY	203
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	207
INDEX	209

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Doing research for this book has been an incredible experience; I have made great connections with so many cool people and been privileged to be able to attend many amazing events. Not only have I learned a great deal about the rave scene, but I myself have also been transformed in the process and my life has been immeasurably enriched. Working on this project has allowed me to integrate my professional, personal, and spiritual paths, and put them in the service of a greater good, and I am grateful for the opportunity. As I have traveled to various locations and tapped into different communities, I have come to see that this project, in some small way, is part of the next stage of new interconnections and networks developing in the larger rave culture. It is my deepest wish that this book can give something of value back to a scene that has given so much to me. Rave culture is such a powerful vehicle for people to connect with the sacred; may it continue to thrive and evolve and take things deeper.

I would like to thank James Romero and Dagny Thomas for initiating me into the rave scene in a good way. Thanks to James Frazier and Echo Mae for opening the door to the rave scene in the Northwest for me, and to Chrissie Wilson for doing the same thing for me in Los Angeles and Southern California. For their assistance and support, my thanks go to Isis and Osiris Indriya and Michael Manahan from the Oracle in Seattle; to Sobey Wing from Tribal Harmonix in Vancouver and the Sunshine Coast; and to Bobbi Gerlick and David Nugent in Bellingham, Washington. I would like also to thank Kevin Gervais and Manoj

Mathew in Portland, Oregon; Jason Keehn and John Kelley in Los Angeles; Irene Moessinger and Micky Remann in Germany; and Frasier Clarke, Jill Purce, Gregory Sams, Anja Saunders, and Rupert Sheldrake in London. To all of my friends and fellow travelers in the Rhythm Society—especially Shams Shirley, Natasha Singer, and Shannon Titus—I send my thanks; a big shout out goes to the whole San Francisco Bay Area rave community, and to all the great people and crews. Deep gratitude goes to all the producers and DJs who have provided music that continues to blow my mind and inspire me. Thanks as well to all of my good friends who have loved and supported me as I have worked on this project—especially Greg, Kara, and Patti, as well as James and Kyra. And, last but not least, thanks go to Spirit, which continues to manifest in new and powerful ways in this world and in my life. I dedicate this book to peace and unity on the planet.

PART I

THE WORLD OF RAVES

INTRODUCTION: THREE SCENES

Scene One

It is New Year's Eve 2001–2002 in the Mission District of San Francisco, a dicey neighborhood populated by street people picking through the detritus of discarded items left for garbage collection on the grungy sidewalks. In the midst of this gritty gray urban tableau, in front of the Episcopal Church of St. John the Evangelist, small groups of brightly dressed people congregate at the entrance, their colorful attire and vibrant energy standing out in stark contrast to the bleakness of the external environment. I am one of these people and, when I pass through the gate, friendly greeters welcome me with hugs as I enter into a completely different reality, the world of an all-night underground rave. This rave is called Alchemie and, according to what is written on my invitation, is conceived of as “a divine vessel for personal and global transformation through ceremony, dance, music, light, food and personal interaction.” It is one of four seasonal raves put on each year by the Rhythm Society, a group of dedicated organizers who “come together in dance and celebration for primary religious experience, spiritual growth, and community.”

I make my way through the courtyard to the church building itself, and the first thing I see upon entering the foyer is a large altar filled with an assortment of sacred objects. I step into the main room, which is normally

used as a sanctuary for church services, and the full impact of the rave environment overwhelms my senses. Incredibly loud, pounding, beat-driven electronic dance music is blasting from an enormous sound system at a volume that produces shock waves I can feel in my solar plexus and throughout the rest of my body. Innovative lighting fills every nook and cranny of the room in a variety of creative configurations, and one wall is completely taken up by huge projected video images morphing with state-of-the-art programming artistry. All of the pews have been cleared to the sides and the central area of the floor is already crowded with people dancing to the music. There are four distinct sizable altars in each of the cardinal directions, an area with massage tables and masseurs/masseuses, and an area of tables with food and beverages. At the perimeter, people have laid out cushions and blankets and personal items, and are sitting and lying together in various groupings, engaged in intimate interactions. As I search for a place to put down my own things, I run into a number of close friends, many of whom I have not seen since the last Rhythm Society event, and we greet each other warmly, sharing our excitement in anticipation of the night ahead of us.

At a certain point close to midnight, a person with a microphone calls the several hundred people to gather together and be seated for the opening ceremony. Welcomes and introductions are given, as well as an orientation to the church, the Rhythm Society, the space, and the scheduled sequence of events. Another person talks about the theme of alchemy, and the intention to create a sacred container for alchemical transformation from base elements to higher spiritual refinement. Another person calls in the four elements and the four directions, and yet another leads everyone in a guided meditation in which we draw energy up from the earth and down from the heavens into our bodies. Finally, we are given two small strips of paper—a white one, on which we are supposed to write down difficult issues we have been struggling with over the last period of time, to put in the fire in the courtyard to be burned, and a gold one, on which we are supposed to write down dreams we wish to call in over the next period of time, to be placed in an urn in the center of the main altar. We meditate on these two strips of paper and their meanings for us for a few minutes of silence, and this is brought to an end by the powerful reintroduction of uptempo electronic dance music. A palpable surge of energy fills the room as everyone jumps up and starts to dance enthusiastically, and the rave begins in earnest.

From this moment of midnight until the break of day after 7:00 A.M., participants dance to the continuously mixed, beat-heavy music, losing themselves in deep trance states as they merge into a unified field of sound, light, and motion. This intense experiential matrix of the dance floor is the central focus of the rave, the crucible in which powerful energies are activated, shaped, and transformed by both the dancers and the DJ, who leads them on a musical and spiritual journey. For long stretches of time, I dance in my own universe, experiencing transcendent peaks of joy and terrifying valleys of fear, working through personal issues of light and darkness. At other times, I am actively engaged with those dancing around me, interacting with gesture and movement; we acknowledge each other with eye contact, and let out shrieks of delight when the music carries us to a shared ecstatic high. This ongoing dance-floor experience is punctuated by occasional breaks to go to the bathroom, cool off, drink some water, eat some food, sit or lie down, and visit with friends. Over the course of the night, each person develops his or her own unique rhythm of oscillating between the high energy intensity of the dance floor and the more relaxed intimate atmosphere of the specially designed “chill” spaces. Although dancing is the primary activity of any rave, many people may also have their most profound experiences in quieter contexts off of the dance floor.

As the long hours of night give way to daybreak, light begins to illuminate the stained-glass windows and the music is brought to an end with one last uplifting anthem that leaves everyone smiling and happy. Acknowledgments and hugs are exchanged as music issues forth from the enormous church organ and people lie down on the floor to listen to the baroque intricacies of the Bach fugues. When the organ music finishes, we are brought together for a brief concluding ceremony that provides closure to the rave. Some people, like myself, begin to gather our belongings and get ready to go, saying goodbyes to old and new friends alike, while others busy themselves with the tasks of breaking down the equipment, cleaning the space, and putting the church back to its normal configuration. For those hard-core ravers who still haven't gotten enough, there will be an “after-party” in a different location when the breakdown is complete. I myself walk out into the morning air with a sense of satisfaction and fuzzy exhaustion, taking in the beauty of the new day. I find my car, drive home, and sleep until the afternoon. Although I am tired for days afterward, the rave has provided me with just the type of transformative experience I was

looking for, and I enter the new year with a feeling of spiritual renewal that allows me to approach the next phase of time with fresh energy and vision.

Scene Two

It is Labor Day weekend 2002 in Nevada's Black Rock Desert, an ancient seabed that is one of the most desolate locations on the planet, a perfectly flat expanse where temperatures regularly exceed one hundred degrees and virtually no living thing grows. Nearly thirty thousand people are attending Burning Man, a weeklong festival of communion, revelry, and creative expression that culminates in the spectacular nocturnal burning of a forty-foot-tall wooden sculpture in the shape of a man. The gathering is laid out as a temporary city in a circle of "streets," with the Man himself as the central focal point, towering above everything. People live in elaborate theme camps they have created, which have a ramshackle, almost Third World quality that is counterbalanced by an astonishing display of creativity and high-tech wizardry. Because of the barren, two-dimensional nature of the desert landscape, anything that is constructed stands out in high relief against an empty backdrop, a blank canvas that is then filled with the vibrancy of the visionary mind. Indeed, any survey of the incredible proliferation of camps and installations reveals a mind-boggling array of artistic, conceptual, and technical expressions, forming a surrealistic tableau that feels like a waking dream. One is bound only by the limits of one's imagination, and these limits seem to be temporarily suspended out on "the playa" (the name is loosely based on the Spanish word for *beach*), as though the imagination has been exteriorized into a three-dimensional physical landscape where it is given form.

Yet these external forms, amazing as they are, are not even the main show; they are often mere backdrops for the humans that inhabit them. At Burning Man, the human body itself becomes another blank canvas on which to express creativity. In addition to widespread nudity, body painting, and outrageous clothing, there are amazing costumes on display, from eight-foot-tall satyrs to glowing machine men to aliens. And these costumes are usually not mere decorations, but are employed in all manner of performance that is constantly happening—dance, theater, ritual, music, and so on. These performances are also highly creative endeavors, ranging anywhere from original techno-operas to reconstructions of ancient

Sumerian ceremonies. Some performances function within the traditional performer/audience division, but more often than not, they break down the barriers between performer and audience and encourage audience participation. Such interactive engagement is one of the primary values espoused at Burning Man, expressed in the official aphorism “no observers, only participants.” These intensive interactions can occur anytime and anyplace, not only at planned performances, but just as frequently in unplanned spontaneous circumstances. This spontaneous unfolding of intense experiences and interactions characterizes each individual’s time at Burning Man. Although days are usually spent covering in the shade, waiting for the heat to pass, evenings are spent wandering from camp to camp, never knowing what type of environment, performance, or interaction one might encounter.

Music is as much a part of Burning Man as visual art, and one can also wander from camp to camp with huge sound systems blasting electronic dance music of every variety, incredible decorations and lighting, and dance floors filled with dancers deep in trance. Although Burning Man is a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be reduced to any one component or conceptual framework, the rave scene is clearly a very strong presence, not only in terms of the countless “mini-raves” going on and the large numbers of people involved, but also because the powerful experiential states, spirituality, sense of community, alternative/utopian values, and high-tech psychedelic aesthetic of raves are a perfect fit for the ethos of Burning Man. In fact, a few years ago, the rave contingent became so dominant that organizers felt that it threatened to take over the whole gathering, and so they discontinued the central rave after the burn and efforts were made to concentrate rave camps in one area. Nevertheless, rave culture continues to be an integral part of Burning Man, and there is a symbiotic relationship between the two phenomena.

This relationship is best illustrated by the activities the night of the burning of the Man, which is the culminating peak of the whole gathering. After days of intense adventures, wandering dispersed throughout the playa, the entire population assembles as a whole for the first time and the sense of anticipation and excitement is palpable and contagious. There is a long procession of a seemingly endless profusion of costumed performers and brilliantly decorated vehicles that moves slowly down the central boulevard to the cheers of the crowd toward the waiting Man, which glows with multicolored neon lights attached to its skeletal structure. The crowd

gathers in an enormous circle around the Man, kept at a safe distance from danger, and begins to chant “Burn him, burn him!” The method by which the Man is set on fire differs from year to year, but it is always accompanied by a spectacular pyrotechnic display and a huge explosion that results in the Man going up in flames. Spontaneously, and as one, the crowd screams at the top of their lungs. It is impossible to convey the intensity of the moment and this intensity continues until the Man has burned long enough to lose its structural integrity and fall to the ground, which takes several minutes. The falling of the Man is another peak experience accompanied by a crescendo of screaming and then, as the crowd spills out onto the playa in all directions, what can best be described as total chaos breaks out as far as the eye can see. It is as though the final bonds of restraint have been broken and wild revelry ensues in thousands of manifestations, including dozens of raves going off in every direction. For many people, it is the best rave of the year, with the best DJs, sound systems, and visuals; the wildest, most dedicated crowd of dancers; and the most powerful experience on the dance floor. For myself, I went to the Illuminaughty camp and danced with friends to a series of incredible DJ sets and a live performance by the techno group Medicine Drum. The party continued all night into the next day, culminating with the pastel colors of the dawn and the spectacular desert sunrise, which provided an inspiring and memorable conclusion to the Burning Man experience.

Scene Three

It is the first Saturday afternoon of July 2000; in the central Tiergarten Park in Berlin, Germany, I am one of over a million people who have come to attend the Love Parade, the largest rave gathering of any in the world. As I exit the subway and begin to walk up the stairs to street level, I can already feel the ground shaking with the continuous pounding beat of incredibly loud electronic dance music. I emerge from the underground station into daylight and am immediately overwhelmed by the densely packed mass of people crowding the city streets. The vast majority of them are brightly dressed in all manner of rave clothing and paraphernalia, smiling and dancing to the music, which is blasting from countless sources at a volume of deafening proportions. I am still close to a mile away from the park and the actual parade itself, so after steeling myself, I begin slowly moving in that direction, pulled along in the flow of people.

Finally, after what seems like an eternity, I enter the park, its wide boulevards and wooded paths filled beyond capacity with ravers in full party mode. Several dozen large “floats,” brightly decorated semi trucks with powerful sound systems, crawl up and down the boulevards through the crowds, each with DJs spinning electronic dance music and packed with gyrating dancers. All of the boulevards converge at a central circle, at the center of which stands the famous Victory Column—adorned with a triumphant angel at the top—that serves as ground zero for high-volume music, wild revelry, and a maximum density of people. Somehow I manage to reach this epicenter without getting crushed and take in the tableau. It is an ocean of humanity stretching endlessly outward in every direction as far as the eye can see, everyone smiling and moving to the insistent rhythms of the all-encompassing techno soundscape. The sheer scale is impossible to grasp, and yet the fact that so few people are injured every year is a testament to the palpable and pervasive feeling of goodwill, unity, and cooperation shared by everyone.

The partying continues unabated for hours into the evening. At a certain point, the floats come to a stop and all of the sound systems are linked by radio signal to a central stage, so that over a million people are now all dancing to the same music. It is undoubtedly the biggest party anywhere on the planet, and dancers are rewarded with a lineup of some of the world’s best DJs spinning the best music and with hours of ecstatic trancedancing. Strangely, everything comes to an end at 10:00 P.M., a very early time by ravers’ standards, a time at which most raves usually haven’t even gotten started. There is, however, method in this madness. While many people have heard of the Love Parade, what most of them don’t know is that the parade itself is just the tip of the iceberg, a pretext for dozens of raves occurring throughout the city in the days before and after. In effect, it is a raver’s paradise for the hundreds of thousands of dedicated aficionados who have come from all over the planet, and they are the proverbial kids in the candy store, with an overwhelming variety of top-quality events to choose from. So, when the music shuts down at 10:00 P.M., most people go home to rest, perhaps take a nap, recharge, and get ready for a full night of raving. For myself, after dinner and a nap, I went to a club called the Tempodrom and danced all night under a big-top tent in a warehouse courtyard to the psychedelic trance music of DJ Goa Gil. (As his name implies, this particular style and scene of electronic dance music, known as Goa trance, got its start in Goa, India, and is strongly influenced by Hindu spirituality and

iconography.) When I left at 6:00 A.M., happy and exhausted, the music was still going strong and the dance floor was packed.

Although these descriptions of events may seem strange and unusual to someone who has never attended a rave, in fact, thousands of people regularly engage in such activities every weekend in numerous locations across the planet. Since the mid-to-late 1980s, raves and the culture surrounding them have become a huge global phenomenon that has made an enormous impact not only on the lives of the people directly involved, but also on many aspects of larger mainstream popular culture. While most media accounts of raves sensationalize their negative features, emphasizing excesses of drug use and bacchanalian revelry, what goes unnoticed is perhaps their most important positive feature—their tremendous spiritual and religious power. For thousands of ravers worldwide, raves are one of their primary sources of spirituality and the closest thing they have to a religion. This is a theme that has emerged repeatedly in my research, and one that ravers have articulated again and again in my interviews with them:

It's definitely a spiritual experience. And I never had any spirituality before, so this was my first time that I had ever experienced that.¹

I consider it to be a very spiritual experience. In fact, I can say that prior to doing that, my sense of spirituality was pretty weak, pretty undeveloped, pretty dormant in me. . . . I definitely felt a very strong sense of spirituality. . . . At that point in my life, things really transformed in me. I really started feeling like I had a more noble purpose in life. . . .²

I've had what I might term, and not facetiously, religious experiences when I've been dancing. You just get incredibly happy. You get filled with a real sense of joy. . . . The music is a religion. . . . If you've got a keyhole somewhere, that's the thing that puts the key in and turns the lock and opens you up.³

For a lot of people, it was equal to a religious experience, but they didn't have to follow a religion. . . . On a ritualistic level, going into something and coming out feeling different, or feeling that you had become enlightened in some way. . . . You felt very connected to yourself and connected to other people. There was an incredible amount of energy, [a] feeling that you were energized when you left and this feeling of being very happy for a few weeks.⁴

It was what I always thought that religion was supposed to be, the community lightening of yourself, and to come out of a party and just be so filled with pure love and leaving the frustration of the week behind at the rave. It showed me true spirituality, from within flowing out of myself and joining it with other people. Undoubtedly the most spiritual feeling I've ever had.⁵

These are strong statements describing spiritual and religious experiences of a profound, life-changing nature. Such experiences are widespread among ravers, perhaps more so than even for people who participate in formal religious traditions. However, it is not simply that raves provide a powerful spiritual and religious experience, an encounter with the numinous that is at the core of all religions, although that in itself is remarkable enough. Raves also provide a form of ritual activity and communal ceremony that regularly and reliably produces such experiences through concrete practices. But it goes even further than that: Raves also provide a philosophy and worldview that makes sense of these experiences and translates them into a code for living, a map for integrating the transformative experience into the concrete details of day-to-day life. And, last but not least, raves provide a sense of community, a cultural identity, and an alternative social structure that exists in the “real world” outside of the rave. When one considers these powerful spiritual and religious dimensions of raves, combined with the fact that so many people regularly participate in them, it becomes clear that global rave culture constitutes a significant religious phenomenon, one worthy of closer investigation and serious study. Moreover, in examining raves as a significant religious phenomenon, what makes them even more interesting is the fact that they do not really resemble religion as we traditionally think of it, but rather are an innovative and unexpected development that has arisen in “secular” arenas of music, dance, entertainment, and popular culture. As such, raves also provide a template for new forms of spirituality and religion emerging in the rapidly changing social and cultural landscape of the twenty-first century. Therefore, a close study of raves will not only tell us a great deal about the spiritual and religious dimensions of this particular phenomenon, but will also provide general keys to understanding the dynamics of a wide variety of other innovative new spiritual and religious phenomena. What are some of these keys?

1. A combination of the sacred and the secular. While many raves have a general spiritual orientation, a sense of the sacred in the peak

dance-floor experience, and even explicitly religious components like altars or ceremonies, they also have many clearly secular aspects, such as paradigms of partying, “making the scene” (whether motivated by beauty, sex, status, or power), recreation, entertainment, artistic and aesthetic expression, and even good-old-fashioned commercial profit. The sacred and secular aspects are interwoven to such a degree that they often cannot be separated from each other, or they may even be the same aspect, but given a different conceptual gloss by different people. For example, one person’s peak dance-floor experience might simply be construed as having a good time at a party, while another’s might be a spiritual connection to the divine.

2. Expression within the arts. Raves combine several art forms—particularly music, dance, and the visual arts—in a unique manner to produce their characteristic experiences. Each of these art forms is a highly valued means of creative expression that in and of itself can lead to spiritual and religious experience and meaning. For example, the act of composing and producing a piece of electronic dance music can be a spiritual process. So can the act of DJ mixing, in which songs are strung together seamlessly in a creative fashion. Dancing to the mixed music on the dance floor is also a highly creative form of expression with spiritual implications. And the visual components—whether original art to decorate walls; flyers and websites to promote a rave; altars, lighting, or projected video/computer graphics—are taken seriously as forms of creative expression and spirituality and also contribute to people’s dance-floor experiences of these art forms. Music is the most important, and in the rave context, music is more than just a means of creative expression. It is also a sophisticated and powerful tool for the induction of altered states of consciousness, particularly the trance state, and for opening access to the sacred.
3. Expression within popular culture. Raves are popular phenomena in several senses of the word. First, raves are not elite phenomena reserved only for the privileged few, such as a symphony orchestra concert or a religious ceremony closed to outsiders might be. Generally, anyone can come to a rave and, as I will show in greater detail later, the demographics often cut across traditional boundaries of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Second, raves are popular in the sense that a significant number of people attend them, a number

- totaling in the millions. One need look no further than the Love Parade to verify this point. Finally, raves are an expression firmly grounded in the forms and sensibilities of popular culture; they are youth oriented, mass-mediated, global, trendy, rapidly changing, disposable, have a high level of sensory stimulus, and so on.
4. Emphasis of experience over content. The incredibly powerful altered states of consciousness experienced by ravers on the dance floor are the single most important aspect of the spiritual and religious significance of raves. These states are brought on not only by the continuously mixed, highly amplified, electronically generated, beat-heavy music and uninterrupted high-energy dancing, but also by the innovative lighting and visuals, and the use of drugs such as MDMA and LSD. The content itself may be superficial, but that does not detract from the tremendous power and significance of the experience itself. Historian of religions Charles Long has touched on this shift in emphasis from content to experience in the “locus and meaning of religion,” noting “Because of the *intensity of transmission*, the content of what is transmitted tends to be ephemeral; thus, the notion of religion as establishing powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations is shifted away from content and substance to *modes of experience*. Popular religion is thus no longer defined in terms of sustaining traditions, but in the *qualitative meaning of the nature of experience*.”⁶ Therefore, the powerful experiential states attained by ravers on the dance floor are the key to understanding raves as spiritual and religious phenomena.
 5. The central importance of the body. As I will show in greater detail in chapter 3, these powerful experiential states on rave dance floors are bodily states, and the religious experience takes place in the body. Moreover, each person’s distinctive style of dance, with its vocabularies of characteristic gestures and movements, correlates to specific experiential states that they produce, making raves not only an *embodied* religious experience, but also a *danced* religious experience. This central importance of the body is in stark contrast to Western culture’s mind/body split, a split found in Christianity as well as in modern rationalism, which privileges the mind or the spirit and relegates the body to a status of subservience, repression, or even evil. From this perspective alone, the popularity of rave culture is a significant development in the religious history of Western culture.

6. Use of digital technology, multimedia, and global communication systems. Raves are high-tech affairs that take advantage of cutting-edge, state-of-the-art digital music production and amplification technology; lighting and computer graphic technology; and global networks for communication such as the Internet, cell phones, and satellite linkups. In contrast to earlier countercultures, rave culture does not see technology as negative and something to be avoided, but as a set of tremendous resources and tools that can be creatively utilized to enhance and intensify the dance-floor experience.
7. Postmodern, hybrid, cut-and-paste nature. Raves draw from a variety of different religious influences, from Hindu to Native American, Mayan to shamanic, neopagan to Christian, and combine them all together in a hodgepodge hybrid. From an historical perspective on religions, this is an extremely new development made possible by the advent of modern globalization that renders all cultures and religions accessible to everyone on an unprecedented scale. Today, not only can one choose to be a Jew, a Christian, a Buddhist, a Muslim, or a Hindu, but also a Wiccan, a Scientologist, a theosophist, or a UFO cult member and, more important, a combination of any or all of these. Raves clearly illustrate this hybrid, cut-and-paste nature of contemporary spirituality and religion. I use the word *postmodern* here in the sense that ravers have selectively appropriated elements from various traditions, placed them in an entirely different cultural context, and combined them in ways that suit their own purposes, which are not necessarily the originally intended purposes. In addition, many of these elements may not even come from spiritual or religious sources, but from arenas such as race, nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as technology, communications, economics, and ecology.

The face of contemporary spirituality and religion is clearly changing, and global rave culture is an excellent example illustrating the nature of these changes. But what do these words, *spirituality* and *religion*, really mean? While there are no definitive or universally accepted answers, I think it is important to explain the approach I will take in this book. Here I will use a broader framework for the word *religion*, a framework that goes beyond the narrow reified institutions that the word is normally used to describe. This broader framework was developed decades ago by some of the pioneering scholars in the “history of religions” school of religious studies. In this approach, the emphasis is on the numinous as the central

ordering structure for human beings. The human encounter with the numinous, the religious experience, forms the basis for subsequent developments that lead to the organized external forms that we call religion. Implicit in this perspective is the notion that religion, in a broader and more fundamental sense, is the underlying substratum for all cultural activity and serves as the foundation for culture in general. As Charles Long writes, "Religion is thus understood to be pervasive not only in religious institutions, but in all the dimensions of cultural life."⁷

For many people in today's society, however, our mainstream culture's traditional religious institutions are no longer a context in which they have a religious experience or an encounter with the numinous. So where do these people have such experiences? In other sectors of cultural activity. Historian of American religions Catherine Albanese has called this phenomenon "cultural religion."⁸ Global rave culture is an outstanding example of how a significant number of people are having meaningful religious experiences in other cultural sectors outside of traditional religious institutions. Albanese has also provided an excellent approach to the word *spirituality* and, not surprisingly, this approach also emphasizes the primary importance of religious experience. In this approach, "spirituality [is] read and understood as the personal, experiential element in religion. . . . The task [is] to address aspects of experience that, for those involved, signal transcendence, sacral-ity, ultimacy, and/or a higher and purposive wisdom that empowers."⁹ Here again raves are an outstanding example, clearly providing experiences of transcendence, sacral-ity, ultimacy, and a higher and purposive wisdom that is empowering for thousands—perhaps millions—of people.

In this book, I will examine all of these aspects of the spiritual and religious dimensions of global rave culture in detail. The first section provides an introduction to and overview of the rave scene. Chapter 1 traces the history of electronic dance music and its culture, from its roots in disco in the 1970s, to the emergence of house in Chicago and techno in Detroit in the 1980s, to the explosion of acid house and raves in the Summer of Love in England in 1988, to its growth as a global phenomenon in the 1990s and its current state in the twenty-first century. Chapter 2 surveys the many forms of electronic dance music events, including underground warehouse parties, large commercial "massives," mainstream clubs, outdoor raves, festivals, retreats, and unique phenomena like Burning Man and the Love Parade. These first two chapters provide the contextual backdrop for the second section, which is the real heart of the book, a

close examination of the spiritual and religious dimensions of global rave culture. This section is based on research and fieldwork I conducted over a period of several years, primarily in the United States, but also in England and Germany, and includes my own firsthand observations and descriptions, extensive material from interviews with ravers, and scholarly analysis using a variety of methodological tools.¹⁰ Chapter 3 examines the powerful experiential states attained at raves in detail and analyzes them as religious experiences, identifying key characteristics and themes. Particular attention is paid to the central importance of trance induction, feelings of ecstasy and love, connection and unity, transcending the ego, being in the body, the energetic field, spiritual worlds, and the presence of spirits. Chapter 4 examines the rave as a form of ritual and explores different ways of understanding its ceremonial dimensions, including ritualized time and space, opening and closing ceremonies, altars, ideas of “intention” and the “container,” the role of the DJ as ceremonial leader, the incorporation of specific spiritual and religious traditions, and the use of themes and archetypes. Chapter 5 examines how ravers take the rave experience beyond the dance floor and integrate it into their daily lives and their spiritual paths. It also explores how they see themselves as part of a larger global rave culture and how this “alternative” culture articulates its vision for positive change in the world. Chapter 6 examines a number of West Coast rave communities and how they provide an important context in which this personal and planetary transformation can be concretely manifested. It also explores the emergence and growth of networks that connect these communities as a larger whole. Finally, in the conclusion, I place all of this material in a larger perspective by identifying key aspects of global rave culture as a spiritual and religious phenomenon, charting the current developmental stage of its growth, and exploring the broad implications for spirituality and religion in the twenty-first century.

Ravers themselves are very articulate on this subject and so I would like to end this introduction with the words of a raver, who notes,

There’s a little saying that “We are one in the dance,” so if you get out on the dance floor, and you’re all in that vibe, we suddenly become one regardless of cosmology. And that’s what seems to be so transformative is that people aren’t hung up on any particular dogma, like religion. It’s more about sharing this spiritual nature that we all have with each other, and an understanding that we all do have it. . . . People are literally