

“Cult” Stereotypes in *Signs and Wonders* (1995)



Carole M. Cusack
University of Sydney

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The Plot of *Signs and Wonders*

- Twenty-four year old Claire Palmore (Jodhi May), the daughter of Rev. Timothy Palmore (David Warner) and his wife Elizabeth (Prunella Scales), has joined a group called the Mercy Mission in Los Angeles. She lives in an austere communal house in which inhabitants are devoted to Father Mercy (Ric Young), who is rarely glimpsed. Devotees sell flowers, ostensibly for charity, at bus stations and other public locations.
- In the UK, Claire's family is imploding, unable to cope with her absence. Elizabeth hires an American 'exit counsellor', Diamond (James Earl Jones), to grab Claire and return her to her family. While Elizabeth is in the US Rev. Palmore has a stroke and is hospitalised.
- Claire initially resists Diamond but later comes to accept his view that she was 'brainwashed' and returns to her family. In this brief summary, *Signs and Wonders* appears to be a simplistic four-part anti-cult drama series. It is that, but it is more.

What Is the Status of Faith?

- *Signs and Wonders'* plot interweaves three (possibly four) narratives of the loss of faith, the most obvious of which is Claire's. However, at the start of the series Rev. Palmore has lost his faith.
- He performs the role of Anglican clergyman as an empty show to a dwindling congregation (the majority having decamped to the local revivalist chapel), while consoling himself with alcohol.
- Image: David Warner as Rev. Timothy Palmore.



Non-Religious Loss of Faith

- Stephen Palmore (Michael Maloney), Claire's elder brother, is an academic whose 'guru' is Cornelius van Damm (Donald Pleasence in his last role), a radical 'deconstructionalist'.
- This figure is based on Paul de Man (1919-1983), whose posthumous reputation was tarnished in 1988 by the revelation of a Nazi past. This was later compounded with convictions for fraud and embezzlement, faking of academic credentials he did not have, bigamy, and false employment records.
- Stephen Palmore has, by the end of the series, lost his 'faith' in van Damm, who is unrepentant.

Paul de Man and Cornelius van Damm



- 'I would also like to suggest a ... continuity between de Man's mode of operation as a literary theorist and his mode of operation as a con man. It has to do with his style. In his writing, abstruseness, bristling abstraction, and a disorienting use of terms make his essays often difficult to penetrate. This was part of the key to his success: to his American admirers, with their cultural inferiority complex, it seemed that if things were difficult to grasp, something profound was being said' (Robert Alter, 'Paul de Man Was a Total Fraud', *New Republic*, 6 April 2014. At: <https://newrepublic.com/article/117020/paul-de-man-was-total-fraud-evelyn-barish-reviewed>).

Marital Faith Eroded

- The Palmore family is deeply dysfunctional. However, Timothy and Elizabeth have an affectionate relationship, and are broadly supportive of each other.
- Yet, his refusal to acknowledge the situation regarding their daughter and the terrible grief his wife feels at her loss, leads to Elizabeth abandoning him, spending their savings on Diamond and his team, and becoming a person of interest in an FBI investigation.
- While she is absent Timothy has a stroke that cripples him, though at the series' end he remains capable of continuing as a minister.

What Is Mercy Mission?

- Mercy Mission is sketched vaguely, in that it could be any generic 'high-demand' new religious movement (what is pejoratively termed a 'cult').
- Members are called Brother and Sister, and the charismatic leader is Father Mercy. The members work long hours selling flowers and seeking to 'save' people (that is, convert or recruit them to the Mission). Claire's abduction is facilitated by her going on a last evangelistic foray with her friend Daniel, as Father Mercy has revealed a higher calling for her.
- Father Mercy is Asian and there is a whiff of the Unification Church ('Moonies') about the group.

The Exit Counsellor and His Team

- Diamond has three assistants. One, Australian Brandon, masquerades as a backpacker who failed to meet his friends, in order to meet Claire and size up the Mercy house.
- Diamond is presented as fatherly and kind, on the side of right, the opposite of predatory Father Mercy. Though no sex between the guru and disciples is presented, there are hints of a 'sexually charged relationship between the Father and his unquestioning disciples' (<http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/fba66f70096f4a68a1779f4a4d1541cd>).
- Diamond's activities are scrutinised by the FBI, after the Mercy spokesman Brother Nahum (David Rasche) has alerted them to Claire's having been kidnapped. Claire, however, eventually leaves of her own will, denying that she was kidnapped, pressured, or otherwise made to change her mind.
- Image: James Earl Jones as Diamond.



Scholarly Tropes in *Signs and Wonders*

- The Bainbridge and Stark (1979) model of 'entrepreneurial' cult formation is clear in the Mercy Mission, and it might be argued that both psychopathology (of Father Mercy) and subcultural evolution (the members) are also detectable.
- Richardson's (1993) examination of popular uses of the term 'cult' is also relevant. His call to abandon the term is important as the series perpetuates 'cult' stereotypes.
- George Chryssides' (2012) examination of Reverend Moon's 'unrecognized' charisma is also enlightening; Father Mercy, like Moon, is a charismatic leader, 'not someone merely with personal charm, but rather someone whose followers are persuaded that he has the specific personal characteristics that match his or her office' (p. 197).

One Person's Cult/Sect Is Another's Religion 1

- “Terms [like] ‘sect’ and ‘destructive cult’ I would call a social weapons to use against groups that you do not like. They are part of an effort to exert social control over unpopular groups or groups that someone in a position of power does not like. If you can ‘successfully’ label a group or organization as a ‘sect’ or ‘cult’ you have achieved power over them, the ‘right’ to exert social control over them and do terrible things to them. If person is a member of a regular religious organization that is accepted and as religious organization, they can exert their rights for religion – that is a human right – but you can say ‘this is not a religion, that is a sect or cult’, then it does not qualify for those protection[s] so you can do anything you want to – treat them badly, beat them up, or you can even kill them. And some people will think that's okay because they are member of this terrible groups.” James T. Richardson (Foundation Professor of Sociology and Judicial Studies, University of Nevada, Reno) 15 June 2016.

One Person's Cult/Sect Is Another's Religion 2

- **IMDB User Reviews: 10/10.** 'The story of my life, only worse,' 8 September 2002, by [Crispin](#) (Portland, Oregon)
- 'This is a good story about cults, how they really are and what it is like to leave one. it is also the best role of james earl jones i think other than darth vader or thulsa doom. the story has particular significance for me as i left a cult type of thing right before i watched it on public broadcasting. i could relate, plus the lead actress whatever her name is way cool'.



Conversion to Secularism

- ‘It becomes increasingly apparent that each family member is a victim of his or her beliefs but as Eaton explains, “It's not a question of what people believe, it's how they believe”,’
<http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/6616c97601a64a7fbc00655f652dc5bb>.
- The message of *Signs and Wonders* is that faith – in established religion, in new ‘cults’, in academic theories, or even in personal relationships – is justifiable only if it is critical, provisional, open to revision, and not as a flight from individual, independent, judgment. In other words, secular reason is paramount.