

# Durkheim and Mothman:

## A 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AMERICAN TOTEM

By Joe Laycock

For twelve months from 1966 to 1967, the small town of Point Pleasant West Virginia was haunted by reports of a winged apparition known as “the Mothman,” with over a hundred people claiming sightings. The phenomenon climaxed when the Silver Bridge collapsed during rush hour killing 46 people. At the time, it was the worst highway accident in American history. Reports of the Mothman largely ceased after the collapse and a story formed that the Mothman had either caused the disaster or else had attempted to warn the town of immanent danger.

These events were recorded in the book, *The Mothman Prophecies* by Ufologist John Keel. In 2001 the book was made into a major motion picture and today there is widespread interest in the phenomenon. Several books and television segments have emerged on the subject and an entire mythology has emerged around the Mothman. The town of Point Pleasant now features an annual Mothman festival and has built a Mothman museum and research center. The town has also erected a large bronze statue of the Mothman in the center of town—only about two blocks from a small plaque commemorating the bridge disaster.

Using Durkheim’s theory of religious phenomena as a manifestation of social stimuli, I argue that the Mothman has achieved the level of a religious phenomenon in public consciousness. Specifically, I argue that the Mothman acts as a “totem” as described by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Furthermore, due to its unique circumstances, the Mothman phenomenon has the potential to inform a general theory about how religious phenomena are formed in public consciousness.

*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* looks primarily at totemism and attempts to reconstruct its origins. Durkheim cannot actually “watch” the rise of the first totem, so his process of reconstruction is largely theoretical. However, with the Mothman phenomenon, we have a wealth of evidence such as interviews, letters, police affidavits, and press clippings. This evidence shows the initial reactions to the phenomenon and how attitudes and discourse evolved over time. Furthermore,



many of the original witnesses are still alive and willing to talk about their experience. This evidence allows us to trace the rise of the Mothman phenomenon from its beginning as a police report made by frightened teenagers, to its current status as a mythic patron of the town of Point Pleasant.

After an overview of the events surrounding the sightings and the bridge collapse, I will address the problem of how we can reconcile the Mothman legend with traditional paradigms of religious phenomena. From here we can compare Mothman to Durkheim's theory of totemism. Finally, I will give evidence for a reassessment of how social events affect the creation of new religious phenomena.

## The Year of the Garuda

The Mothman was first sighted on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1966. The Silver Bridge disaster occurred on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1967—exactly thirteen months later. During this time—which John Keel dubbed, “the Year of the Garuda”<sup>1</sup>—Mothman was by no means the only paranormal phenomenon in the area. On November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1966, Woodrow Dergenberger in nearby Mineral Wells reported an encounter with an extra-terrestrial named Indrid Cold. Dergenberger's ongoing relationship with Cold, which included telepathic contact and visits to the planet Lanulos in the Ganymede galaxy, made him a local celebrity.

At the same time, UFOs were being reported all over the Ohio Valley. Dave Peyton, a former reporter for the Herald-Dispatch, and a guest speaker at the 2005 Mothman festival, described how the paper had set up a call desk specifically for UFO reports due to the incredibly high volume of calls. He mentioned that many of these calls began, “I'm a Christian and I don't drink . . .”

On the night of November 15<sup>th</sup> 1966, two teenage couples, Roger and Linda Scarberry, and Mary and Steve Mallette, were joy-riding through a region known as the “TNT area.” A few miles outside of Point Pleasant, this area was used during World War II to store and manufacture high explosives. The explosives were stored in camouflaged bunkers called “igloos.” After the war, the igloos were emptied and left standing in an otherwise wooded and isolated area. A power plant was built using the foundations of one of the buildings and this too, was abandoned. In the late '60s, the TNT area was a popular nighttime hangout

for teenagers.

As the teens drove past the abandoned power plant, they saw a pair of enormous, red, glowing eyes. The eyes, which were described as “hypnotic,” were attached to a grayish, winged biped about seven and a half feet tall. Roger Mallette, the driver, beat a hasty retreat out of the TNT area towards Route 62. As he did so, the creature appeared again atop a small hill. Spreading its wings, the creature shot directly into the air and gave chase. Although all witnesses claim they were driving at or around 100 mph, the creature managed to keep up with them. Furthermore, it did so by gliding rather than flapping its wings.

The creature gave up chase near the city limits. The teens went directly to the Mason County Courthouse where they told their story to a deputy. Their claim was taken seriously and a deputy went with them back to the power plant. There was no sign of the creature, however, the deputy did experience heavy interference when he attempted to use his police radio. The next morning, the local sheriff called a press conference in which all four teens were interviewed. This resulted in a media blitz in the Ohio valley over “the bird.” Soon, the creature was dubbed, “the Mothman.”<sup>2</sup>

Another major sighting of Mothman occurred on November 27<sup>th</sup> and was unusual in that it occurred in broad daylight. The witness was 18-year-old Connie Carpenter—the niece of reporter Mary Hyre. Carpenter was returning from church at 10:30 am when she saw Mothman on the Mason County Golf Course. As with the previous sighting, she reported a gray humanoid, over seven feet tall, with a ten-foot wingspan and red, hypnotic eyes. Mothman performed another vertical take-off and, without flapping its wings, dive-bombed Carpenter's car. Following her encounter, Carpenters' eyes become red, watery, and nearly swollen shut. The condition lasted over two weeks. John Keel, drawn to Point Pleasant by reports of Mothman, met with Carpenter and diagnosed her condition as *κλιεγ conjunctivitis*—exposure to overly bright light. Keel claims that this is a common symptom following contact with such phenomena.

About one hundred people reported similar encounters with the Mothman during this time. Many of these people, including Linda Scarberry, are still willing to speak about their experiences. Many of

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<sup>2</sup> Many have claimed that the name was inspired by an obscure comic book villain, “The Killer Moth,” who had first appeared battling Batman and Robin in 1951. The Killer Moth swung from tiny steel cables to simulate flight and could see infrared using special glasses.

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<sup>1</sup> The Garuda being a giant bird from Hindu mythology.

those who encountered Mothman experienced ongoing electronic interference with phones and radios. Others, like Carpenter, reported ear bleeds, swollen eyes, and other physical symptoms.

When the Silver Bridge collapsed in 1967, a traffic light was out on the West Virginia side, which, combined with rush hour traffic created the extra load that broke the bridge. The Silver Bridge was an experimental form of suspension bridge using carbon steel “eyebars” instead of cables. At the time, the cause of collapse was totally unknown. Some connected the collapse to Mothman. However, in the immediate aftermath, the tragedy was largely blamed on an Indian curse dating back to Chief Cornstalk, who was murdered in 1777. The cause of the collapse was eventually revealed to be corrosion of one of the eye-bars. However, the flaw could not have been detected, even using modern methods, without dismantling the bridge.

Reports of Mothman and other unexplainable phenomena largely ceased after the disaster. What was left was a rich fodder from which Mothman mythology could be weaved. Today there seem to be as many theories of what actually happened during the Year of the Garuda, as there are believers. Mothman has been interpreted as an alien, a spirit, a cryptid (an animal not yet discovered by science), an angel, and a demon. The speculations over Mothman’s relationship to the UFOs, the curse of Chief Cornstalk and the Bridge Collapse are endless. Reports of Mothman now occur all over the United States and as far away as Serbia. There are reports

that Mothman was seen before the Chernobyl disaster and can even be seen in the smoke of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

## Mothman as a Religious Phenomenon

Although things like Mothman and UFOs are not normally thought of as religious phenomena, I believe that this is largely due to cultural bias about what constitutes religion. For this reason, I find Durkheim’s functionalist criteria useful as they break through some of our unstated assumptions about what forms religion.

Durkheim begins with the argument that religion does not need to revolve around a notion of deity. As a counter-example, he cites Buddhism. This alone, gives us a broad span in which to define religious phenomena. He also argues that religion cannot be defined by “mystery.” As a counter-example, he points out that for pre-industrial cultures, belief in spirits is not mysterious but is the simplest explanation possible. When we apply this argument to belief in Mothman, we see that we cannot dismiss a particular theory of Mothman as religious because it does not strike us as mysterious—therefore, a belief that Mothman is an alien or a cryptid has the same potential to be religious phenomena as a theory that Mothman is a spirit or an angel.

Most importantly, Durkheim argues that religious phenomena can exist independently of a religion. This is crucial, as I am not advocating that “Mothmanism” is a religious tradition. As an example of



such phenomena, he cites traditions such as May Poles. Durkheim observes that these are usually vestiges of earlier religions, but acknowledges that they are

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sometimes, “formed spontaneously under the influence of local causes. Beliefs relative to genii, local demons, etc. are cases in point.” What is Mothman, if not a local demon? What better way to explore “the influence of local causes” on religious phenomena than the events surrounding Mothman?

So far, Durkheim has questioned previous modes of defining religion. In creating his own criteria, he begins with the premise that a religion consists of “beliefs” and “rites.” From here, he argues that the rites are really dependent on the object of the rites, which in turn is dependent on the beliefs about the object. Beliefs, finally, are dependent on a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, which Durkheim argues is present in all human cultures. He concludes, “We have a religion as soon as the sacred is distinguished from the profane.”

There are indeed “rites” associated with Mothman. The annual Mothman festival, which began in 2002, draws interested parties in from as far away as Canada. While attending the 2005 Mothman festival, I took a midnight hayride through the TNT area. I was not told that the ride entailed being attacked by people dressed in Mothman suits or Mothman effigies (complete with electric glowing eyes) dive-bombing the wagon from zip-lines. The ride was a mimesis of the original encounter with Mothman on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1966.

I spoke with Jeff Wamsley, author of several books on Mothman and a major organizer for the festival. He commented that the hayride had originally been just a hayride without special effects. Teenagers have been returning to the TNT area at night searching for Mothman for the last 40 years, so the hayride is really a continuous rite dating back to 1966. The rite could not be recreated in a place other than the TNT area, nor could it be done in daylight—these requirements reflect beliefs about the object of the rite—namely, Mothman.

Finally, I turn to Durkheim’s argument regarding the sacred and the profane. A serious

drawback to this argument is that it burdens the comparativist with trying to cast the labels of “sacred” and “profane” onto a cultural system that may or may not have such a notion. This dilemma is all the more complicated due to the heterogeneous nature of Mothman theorists. The 2005 Mothman Forum included speakers on Ufology, Appalachian folklore, parapsychology, and cryptozoology. However, from each of these perspectives, Mothman seemed to represent a sense of “otherness” and the unknown that was in some way opposed to that which is banal or ordinary. Indeed, the term “Fortean” has been used for a wide range of anomalous phenomena—be they supernatural, scientific, or other.<sup>3</sup> Durkheim argues that the deference to scientific knowledge in Western culture is as much a manifestation of the sacred as is belief in spirits. Therefore, Mothman passes the litmus test of “sacred versus profane,” and, at least by Durkheim’s standards, can be considered a religious phenomenon.

## **Mothman as Totem**

Durkheim argues that totemism is the very earliest (and therefore the most simplistic) form of religion. A totem, according to Durkheim, serves a dual purpose: it is a symbol of the community and a source of shared identity; at the same time, it is a manifestation of a religious concept that is all-encompassing and ineffable. From this premise, Durkheim concludes that the sense of the sacred is actually none other than the experienced influence of social stimuli. The dual nature of the totem is therefore the foundation of his entire theory of religion. He writes, “So if it [the totem] is at once the symbol of the god and of the society, is that not because the god and the society are only one?”

I argue that Mothman does indeed serve the dual symbolic purpose described by Durkheim: it is a totem for the town of Point Pleasant. I should note here that the presence of a totem, which is a religious phenomenon, does not constitute totemism—which is a religion. If we accept Mothman as a totem, we are in a unique position to assess Durkheim’s theory of religion.

No one visiting Point Pleasant can deny the prominence Mothman has taken in the town. At the 2005 Mothman festival, I saw Mayor James Wilson give

<sup>3</sup> Charles Fort (1874-1932) was a satirist and researcher of anomalous phenomena. He railed against scientific positivism and is credited with coining the term, “teleportation.”

