

A GOSPEL OF HATRED - WITH SEVERAL THOUSAND FOLLOWERS, THE WHITE-SUPREMACIST WORLD CHURCH OF THE CREATOR IS SAID TO BE ONE OF THE FASTEST-GROWING HATE GROUPS IN THE WORLD.

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Author: Kirsten Scharnberg, Tribune Staff Writer.

The young woman is quiet, shy, not terribly articulate.

She is trying to explain why she hates Jews and blacks and other "mud races," but World Church of the Creator disciple Christy Weiss is stumbling.

It has something to do with how she loves white people, something about how she is interested in family trees and genetics, bloodlines and ancestry. It's hard to explain, she admits. She looks at the ceiling, then around the room, searching for the words to explain the inexplicable.

Finally, she says she should just stop talking. Her public words will hurt her parents in suburban Chicago, will make them more embarrassed even than the day she shaved her head or the time she turned in a high school English paper about the protection of hate speech under the 1st Amendment.

Then Rev. Matthew Hale, the 27-year-old leader of the Illinois-based white supremacist church that is said to be one of the fastest-growing hate groups in the world, pats her arm and gently urges her to continue.

"We need you to step up, Sister Christy," he says, his voice low and intimate, his dark eyes probing hers. "It's your decision, of course. But the church needs you to step up and be proud of who you are. Sister, be proud of what you believe."

That is all it takes. Just one deft nudge from the man his followers call "Pontifex Maximus," the man they vow to obey unquestionably when they sign on as members of the World Church of the Creator, the man the nation has watched for the past week defending a bible of racism and a plot to systematically eradicate Jews and Americans who are not white.

Emboldened, Weiss begins anew, proudly declaring herself a "racially aware racist" and calling Benjamin Smith, the former church member who allegedly went on a murderous shooting spree that targeted racial and religious minorities before killing himself over the 4th of July weekend, a "friend and martyr of the white race."

As the 20-year-old Glencoe native talked, Hale smiled. The scene, which unfolded last week in the living room of Hale's East Peoria home--a dim room filled with stuffed animals, a Norman Rockwell print, framed family pictures and piles of propaganda advocating "A Whiter and Brighter World"--illustrated the larger questions being raised as authorities scrutinize the possible connections between the church and its philosophy and the terror of last weekend:

How much power and control does Hale really have over his several thousand church members? How much have his teachings about hating non-whites influenced followers who subsequently have been linked to violence? And how much, if any, responsibility does Hale bear when some of his loyalists carry out horrible crimes against those they have been conditioned to despise?

`Pontifex Maximus'

Inside the World Church of the Creator, where a Tribune reporter spent portions of three days last week with Hale, the extremist would-be lawyer and trained violinist

appeared to be largely a one-man operation, exerting his hold over members by fax, phone, computer and an occasional meeting. He signs his letters and e-mails, "Yours for a whiter world, Pontifex Maximus."

Hale is the self-appointed prime minister of the hate-based religion founded in the mid-1980s by the late Ben Klassen, a German-born white supremacist who later killed himself. Members are told that Hale will one day lead them in a holy war that will change the face of the United States.

According to the group's membership manual, they are to call one another "brother" and "sister" and exchange greetings in Nazi fashion with outstretched right arms, saying, "Rahowa," short for "Racial Holy War."

"Pontifex Maximus Hale is a brilliant, wonderful man," Rev. C. L. Peterson, a church member from Milwaukee, said in a phone interview last week in a voice filled with reverence.

A dark, narrow set of stairs leads to Ground Zero of the hate-based religion.

"Come on in," Hale said Wednesday, and for all of the horrific, extremist views he espouses, the slightly built man has honed an aura of friendliness, confidence and hospitality. "You'll see we're just working away here to get our message out."

To enter the room, one has to step on the flag of Israel, which bears the Jewish Star of David. Using the white and blue flag as a rug is designed to remind followers that Jews are the "No. 1 enemy of the church." The walls are covered with swastikas.

The cramped room, on the second floor of the East Peoria home Hale shares with his father, is painted bright red to symbolize passion for the movement to advance the white race as well as to reaffirm the church's contention that "blood is thicker than water," Hale explained.

Hanging at the head of the room is the symbol of the church: a crown and a halo hanging over a giant "W," meant to depict the white race as the elite, chosen race, a race so perfect that it deserves to be worshiped and glorified.

One table is piled with copies of the church's two holy books: "The White Man's Bible" and "Nature's Eternal Religion: A Powerful New Religious Creed Structured for the Survival, Expansion and Advancement of Nature's Finest." The "bible" costs \$5, the other tract \$10.

Hundreds of loyalists distribute the books and other literature, especially the flier titled "Facts the Government and Media Don't Want You to Know," throughout the Midwest. And though they are spreading the word at Hale's request, church members, who already pay \$35 dues each year, must purchase from Hale all the literature they pass out.

Hale, who doesn't have a job and says he lives and travels on donations from his members, chafes at the suggestion that he is making money off his organization. "They don't print this stuff for nothing," he said angrily.

In the background, the fax machine whirs, the room's two phone lines ring constantly.

If hate could be mass-produced, this little room would be the busiest worker on the factory line.

Stance on violence

At some point, almost all outsiders who come to the Red Room ask Hale the same two questions: Does the church condone violence? And does it condone the actions of Ben Smith, the former member who allegedly bought two illegal guns, loaded up on ammunition and targeted racial and religious minorities? Police believe he killed former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdson, an African-American, and Won Joon Yoon, a Korean-American, in addition to wounding six Orthodox Jews, one Asian-American and two African-Americans.

"We do not condone that," he said last week before launching into a diatribe about how he does not condemn such actions either.

"To condemn the act is to condemn the man. And I will not condemn Brother Smith. He was a loyal church member, a friend and a comrade. He was pushed to these actions. When someone is continuously harassed as he was, the powers that be cannot be surprised when someone explodes. It is inevitable."

It is this failure to condemn violence--at least a half dozen members or former members across the country have been charged in connection with racially motivated crimes--that has caused federal and local authorities to look at whether Hale played any role in the 4th of July weekend shootings.

U.S. Atty. Gen. Janet Reno has indicated that the Justice Department is considering launching an investigation into the organization and its high-profile leader. And one of the men allegedly shot by Smith has sued Hale and his church, in essence accusing him not of throwing the bomb, but of creating the bomber.

As much as Hale denies advocating violence, his organization's literature is rife with it. The final bold-faced words in the "The White Man's Bible" are, "Let us get into the fight today, now! You have no alibi, no other way out, White Man! It's either fight or die!"

'Church of Hate'

Virtually every time Hale appeared on national television last week, some horrified commentator would call the World Church of the Creator the "World Church of Hate." Shortly thereafter, they usually questioned whether Hale's organization was even a church at all.

But in structuring the church, Hale adopted numerous rituals of mainstream denominations--partly in an effort to mock what he and many of his followers call "Christ Insanity."

There are 16 commandments. Children are baptized and later confirmed at age 13, when they are officially deemed adults and expected to publicly declare their loyalty to the church. There is an official wedding ceremony and an "oath of the ministry" for church leaders.

One of the organization's youngest leaders is Rev. Nick Houston. He and his wife, Brandi, met over the World Church of the Creator's hot line in Reno, Houston said in a phone interview last week from Sacramento. The couple, both 19, married in the church, vowing to each other and Hale to be loyal first to the white race, then to their marriage.

During the ceremony, Houston said, the World Church of the Creator minister asked, "Do you, racial white comrade Houston, take this white woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

The young couple now lead the organization's several dozen followers in the Sacramento area by overseeing Sunday services, a Wednesday night study group and annual events such as a back-yard barbecue to commemorate Adolf Hitler's birthday.

The Houstons have a 7-month-old daughter and are waiting for Hale to travel to California to baptize her. "(She) has not had the privilege of being officially welcomed to the church," said Houston, a self-described salesman.

Houston is fiercely loyal to the prime minister of his religion. But he even takes some of Hale's ideas one step further. Where Hale has long advocated the deportation of all ethnic and religious minorities in the United States, Houston says, "I don't want to stop there. It is my goal to rid the world of everything but the great white race."

Another of Hale's devoted ministers is Peterson, who says he is in the marketing business. The highest-ranking Creator in the Milwaukee area, he received word in May that he had passed the extensive 200-point ministerial exam on his second try, thus earning the title of "Reverend."

The exam, graded by Hale, asked questions such as the church's official position on Jews. The correct answer was, "There is no compromising, no negotiating, no co-existence with the treacherous and diabolical Jew." Other questions mocked "befuddled whites," Christians and African-Americans.

In the ceremony that made him an official minister, Peterson said, he had to sign an oath, swearing absolute "allegiance to Pontifex Maximus Matt Hale and his duly appointed successors."

In talking about his life since joining the church, Peterson, 31, complained that he has been persecuted in the same sentence that he talked about taking his hate-filled literature into predominantly Jewish neighborhoods to "taunt those people." He talked about teaching his 12-year-old son his racist ideals, though he said he doesn't "force them on him or try to brainwash him." He said he has nothing against Nazis or skinheads, though they are "a little too violent for me."

Like Hale, Peterson maintains that violence sometimes is necessary, though only as a last resort.

"If they try to take away our guns or our right to freedom of speech, some people are going to go nuts, kick ass and kill people," he said.

Hale said a large percentage of the organization's nearly 4,000 members are young professionals who are Internet-savvy, middle-class racists.

A simple creed

Loyalists such as Peterson, Houston and Weiss are the future the World Church of the Creator, and Hale treats them accordingly, calling them often, befriending them as he did Benjamin Smith.

"I love my members as family," Hale said. "When they say they are willing to follow the creed, to live by our rules, they become my brothers and sisters."

The creed is simple. Sixteen hateful commandments:

A prohibition against "mongrelizing" the white race by procreating with anyone not white.

A demand to "Be fruitful and multiply," thus populating "the lands of this earth with white people entirely."

A call to treat all "inferior, colored races" as "deadly enemies."

"Yes, I live by the commandments," Weiss said last week, and Hale nodded approvingly.

"Of course I do," Peterson said, and Hale called him a "devoted brother and friend."

The Pontifex Maximus reminds followers that their membership will be revoked if they break any of his rules.

Caption: PHOTOS 4

PHOTO (color): Matthew Hale, leader of the World Church of the Creator, listens as Christy Weiss, 20, talks about her involvement with the Illinois-based white supremacist church during an interview in the East Peoria home of Hale's father.

Tribune photo by Bonnie Trafelet. PHOTO (color): 'Pontifex Maximus Hale is a brilliant, wonderful man'. Chris Peterson, (right) a reverend of the World church of the Creator in Milwaukee, with church members Lisa Russell and Bill Krueger.

Tribune photo by Chris Walker. PHOTO (color): Hale works in the church office--a room in the East Peoria home he shares with his father--where a flag of Israel is used as a rug.

PHOTO (color): Matthew Hale is the self-appointed prime minister of the hate-based religion founded in the mid-1980s by the late Ben Klassen. Tribune photos by Bonnie Trafelet.

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