

## ON MONTE VERITÀ: MYTH AND MODERNITY IN THE *LEBENSREFORM* MOVEMENT

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The dynamics of European culture around 1900, and the delight this culture took in experimenting, have fascinated many. Sigmund Freud and Max Weber, for instance, identified, among the main trends of their times, the discontent with civilisation and the impending threat of the iron cage of bureaucracy, respectively. There was also an increasing *bourgeois* attraction towards socialism, anarchism and the so-called *petites religions*.<sup>1</sup> Both men and women cultivated a wide range of interests in ethical, feminist, mystical, and spiritualist ideas and practices. There was also a new fascination: the culture of one's own body. Max Weber dubbed this diversity a 'Warenhaus für Weltanschauungen'. It appears reasonable to relate these phenomena to the development of a bourgeois culture that was still struggling with its own boundaries, anxieties and identity.<sup>2</sup>

It is no coincidence that recent historiography has dubbed the period around 1900 'the age of nervousness' or 'a quest for purity'.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis placed by society, the state and individuals on physical education led to more intensive and more varied forms of exercise. These new forms also represented new ideals. They were practised in a social context by groups of middle-class academics, civil servants, technicians and self-employed professionals. In nineteenth-century Germany, men's and women's *Turnvereine* had fostered a practice of physical education focusing on order and discipline. In Britain, on the other hand, the invention of sports had initiated a corporal culture of achievement and competition.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Bois, *Les petites religions de Paris* (Paris: Chailly, 1894).

<sup>2</sup> P. Gay, *Schnitzler's Century. The Making of Middle-Class Culture 1815–1914* (New York: Norton, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> J. Radkau, *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität. Deutschland zwischen Bismarck und Hitler* (Munich: Hanser, 1998); A. Labrie, *Zuiverheid en decadentie. Over de grenzen van de burgerlijke cultuur in West-Europa 1870–1914* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2001).

### *Culture of the Body*

From the 1880s onward, a third form of physical exercise also caused a sensation.

Within the existing broad romantic mainstream of 'Back to Nature', a new body culture movement developed, often known under its German name *Lebensreform*. It became popular among and was supported by well-educated, often young people, mainly in the German-speaking countries, but also in Britain and the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup> Through their many clubs and journals, these 'life reformers' propagated a new, natural and individual corporality. This new way of life was supposed to result in a reform of society as a whole. The movement had unambiguous religious traits: the human body itself was referred to as a sacred temple. Great value was also attached to contemplation, meditation and spirituality. The focus was not on sporting achievement as such, but rather on ascetic bodily practices that might set one free from the nervous, everyday routines of bourgeois society: practices such as vegetarianism, abstention from tobacco and alcohol, nude sunbathing, hydrotherapy, yoga, walking and free expressive dance.

There is an extensive literature on this *Lebensreform* movement. It is often seen in a broader perspective as a conglomerate of movements. The Garden City movement, land reform, colony life and teetotaling, all have been perceived as undercurrents found in it, while vegetarianism, natural medicine, nudism, Reform food, Reform stores, and Reform dressing were at its core.<sup>5</sup> Authors differ considerably in their views on the relationship between *Lebensreform* and Modernity. Was it a movement of this-worldly salvation to compensate for individual, personal as well as social deficits?<sup>6</sup> Or was *Lebensreform* essentially a nostalgic and escapist reaction to an increasing distance from nature, coupled with the ongoing disintegration of life spheres, caused by technology and bureaucracy? By the same token, *Lebensreform* may also be viewed as a move-

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<sup>4</sup> According to Barlösius, *Lebensreform* was more popular in Protestant than in Catholic areas. See E. Barlösius, *Naturgemässe Lebensführung. Zur Geschichte der Lebensreform um die Jahrhundertwende* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1996), 14. See for the Netherlands: A. Otterloo, "Die Bewegung für natürliche und gesunde Nahrung als 'petite religion'", *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 18 (1993): 41–55.

<sup>5</sup> W.R. Krabbe, *Gesellschaftsveränderung durch Lebensreform* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974).

<sup>6</sup> U. Linse, "Lebensreform und Reformreligionen", in *Die Lebensreform. Entwürfe zur Neugestaltung von Leben und Kunst um 1900* (eds. K. Buchholz et al.; Darmstadt: Häusser 2001), 193–198.

ment that was part of bourgeois culture, with societal membership as its ideal organisational model. The contrast between *Lebensreform* and the labour movement has indeed been duly noted. Yet, is it not also possible to emphasise its anti-bourgeois, anti-modern traits?<sup>7</sup> In his authoritative study, Wolfgang Krabbe describes *Lebensreform* as a 'secularised gnostic-eschatological salvation doctrine'. Resisting socioeconomic change and the authority of medical science, it aimed to create a New Man. Yet the *Weltanschauung* developed in that process appeared to be anything but coherent. On the contrary, it was extremely eclectic.<sup>8</sup>

### *Interpretations and Key Concepts*

In the light of recent research, these interpretations are no longer convincing in most respects. Too great an emphasis placed on cultural pessimism and anti-Modernity has obscured the dynamic agenda of the *Lebensreform* movement in terms of its attitude towards the future and the construction of new forms of communities, with a focus on the shaping of one's life according to one's own insights. It would appear that these 'life reformists' intended to make full use of the leeway they were allowed socially. Considered more closely, the most outstanding among them seem to be relatively young, mobile and enterprising people who had the necessary social and intellectual capital to be able to dedicate themselves to *Lebensreform*. All were idealists, but they were also individualists with widely different pragmatic attitudes. The latter becomes apparent from the history of the new communes in western and central Europe around 1900, which were closely associated with *Lebensreform*. Generally speaking, these were facilities where people could gather in order to live together on a permanent basis so as to realise their new ideas about life.

The colonies of idealists, vegetarians and artists especially have often been cited as examples of the anti-Modernism of the *Lebensreform* movement. The validity of such sweeping interpretations should really be questioned. In their own publications, the life reformists did not see their ideas and ideals as anti-modern. They were convinced that a particular attitude towards life would bring about a more vigorous personality. Religious elements are undoubtedly also discernible within this ideol-

<sup>7</sup> Barlösius, *Naturgemässe Lebensführung*, 16–18.

<sup>8</sup> Barlösius, *Naturgemässe Lebensführung*, 171–172.

ogy, although this would not reasonably justify discarding it as just an *Ersatzreligion*. In his perception of *Lebensreform*, the German cultural historian Nipperdey senses an ‘empathic, religious, eschatological register.’<sup>9</sup> This non-denominational religiosity—in Nipperdey’s opinion actually not a religion at all—displayed a kind of religious mood that revealed at least some inclination towards religiosity. Nipperdey does not comment on the supporting group or the followers of the movement. He does note, however, other contemporary currents of secular faith which became manifest in, among others, the social-democratic belief in revolution and the belief in *Bildungs- und Kunstreligion*.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to Nipperdey’s observations, I would also consider including some apparently prophetic and charismatic aspects of the *Lebensreform* movement, which for its propagation depended heavily on exemplary personalities. In certain ways these personalities fitted Max Weber’s ideal type of the ‘prophet’ who entirely subjected material interests to an idealistic way of life.<sup>11</sup> Around 1900, the most conspicuous exponents of *Lebensreform* were nonetheless subjected to the mockeries of their non-vegetarian *Umwelt*. They were nicknamed ‘barefoot prophets’ and ‘turnip apostles’.<sup>12</sup>

The works of the historian Jan Bremmer show his consistent fascination with the phenomenon of prophets, with periods of transformation in the history of religion, and with topics related to ascetics and culture of the body.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, he has enjoyed giving lectures on the processes of transformation of religiosity and spirituality in modern Europe and America.<sup>14</sup> Typical of Bremmer’s research is his keen eye for biographical aspects. Once he has touched upon the history of ideas, he will

<sup>9</sup> T. Nipperdey, *Religion im Umbruch. Deutschland 1870–1918* (Munich: Beck, 1988), 148.

<sup>10</sup> Nipperdey, *Religion im Umbruch*, 136.

<sup>11</sup> M. Weber, *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik, III. Abt. Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (second edition; ed. S. Altmann et al.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1925), 251.

<sup>12</sup> Barlösius, *Naturgemässe Lebensführung*, 94.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. his inaugural lecture at the University of Groningen: *Profeten, zieners en de macht in Griekenland, Israël en het vroegmoderne Europa* (Utrecht: Bijleveld, 1991); idem, “Walking, Standing, and Sitting in Ancient Greek Culture”, in *A Cultural History of Gesture* (eds. J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg; Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 15–35.

<sup>14</sup> For example, as appears from his inaugural lecture at the Getty Research Institute, “Religion, Ritual, and Festivals: From Ancient Greece to Contemporary America, via the Enlightenment”, delivered on 5 October 2006; a revised and expanded part of this lecture was published as “From Salvation to Empowerment: European Notes on Contemporary American Religion”, *First Draft: The Newsletter of the Getty Research Institute* 6 (2007): 10–15.

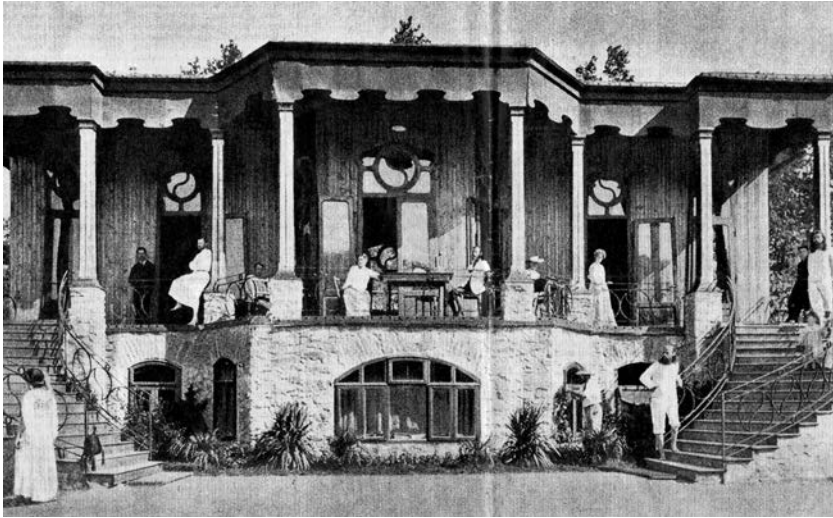


Fig. 1. The Community House of the nature cure sanatorium Monte Verità, built in 1904, was a temple of *Lebensreform*, Vegetarianism, and Wagnerism. It was surrounded by wooden, light-and-air cabins and meadows used for sunbathing and dancing. Left near the staircase is Ida Hofmann; right on the staircase are Henri Oedenkoven (below) and Cornelis Gouma (on top) [photo from a private collection in Ascona]

immediately look for the people who embody or propagate those ideas. Using this Bremmerian toolkit, I will now try to analyse the remarkable case of Monte Verità near Ascona in Switzerland.

Today, Ascona is a popular holiday resort, but its name still has a sophisticated ring to it. Monte Verità, a hill next to Ascona, now has a museum bearing that name. The museum stands on the site of a nature-cure resort run by a previous community of colonists. Between 1900 and 1920, the hill was the scene of experimentation with alternative ways of life and the arts. In those days, Monte Verità was very much the place to be for vegetarians, theosophists, spiritualists, nature worshippers, anarchists, socialists, feminists, psychotherapists, free lovers, novelists, poets, painters, sculptors, and dancers. The site may indeed be seen as the Magic Mountain of *Belle Époque* Europe. As a microcosm, it reflected the dynamics and contrasts characteristic of the macrocosm of contemporary European intellectual culture. Yet it has also been the subject of much mythification. The construction of this 'myth of Monte Verità' and its protagonists together form the topic of the present article. It follows

from the limited space available that I will only be able to briefly describe the interplay of religious, historical and biographical aspects in the construction of this myth, and will need to forego elaborating on the precise biographical backgrounds of the most illustrious of the Mount Veritans.

### *Tolstojans on the Mountain*

Munich in the autumn of 1900. A group of seven young men and women decided to leave behind the hustle and bustle of the city, with the intention of founding a resort for natural cures on a communal basis in some sunny southern location, preferably on a lakeshore. The area they had in mind was the mountainous Swiss region of Ticino, inhabited by Italian-speaking Roman Catholics. The two initiators of this plan had been living together as common-law spouses. They first met in the summer of 1899 at Arnold Rikli's nature-cure resort at Veldes, then in Austria, now in Slovenia. In this sanatorium, guests were put on a vegetarian diet, supplemented by air, water and sunbaths for their physical health. The man was Henri Oedenkoven, a 25-year-old Belgian, the son of a well-to-do Antwerp industrialist. After a period of serious illness, he had become a vegetarian. The woman was Ida Hofmann, a gifted piano teacher from Germany, eleven years his senior and, like her lover, a confirmed vegetarian. She was also the oldest member of the group of seven.

Although all group members had a solid *bourgeois* upbringing, their looks indicated a decided opposition to that background. The men wore long hair with wild beards and sandals, while the women were clad in loose dresses and refused to wear corsets. On the way south, they made a visit to the Oberammergauer Festspiele. There, the group raised many eyebrows with their apostle dress and barefeet. Along with Oedenkoven and Hofmann, Karl Gräser and his younger brother Gustav—the former a retired army officer-turned-pacifist and anarchist, the latter a fervent anarchist and painter—were travelling with them. There was also Ida's younger sister Jenny, a pianist, teacher and singer, along with the beautiful Lotte Hammerer, the daughter of a mayor, who had eloped with a certain Ferdinand Brune, a theosophist and the owner of a manor house. From the very outset, Brune did not fit well into the group. He was to remain an outsider.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> J. Frecot, "Landkrone über Europa", in *Monte Verità. Berg der Wahrheit. Lokale Anthropologie als Beitrag zur Wiederentdeckung einer neuzeitlichen sakralen Topographie*

After reconnoitring the environs of tourist sites on Lake Como and Lake Maggiore, Monescia Hill near Ascona was eventually chosen. This quiet fishing village with its population of nearly 1,000 was not far from the town of Locarno, then already a favourite holiday resort for wealthy tourists. Three valleys met at this 900 ft hill, which offered a nice panorama of Lake Maggiore and the distant snow-covered mountain tops. It soon appeared that other artists, life philosophers, idealists and political refugees were also living scattered in rural, self-imposed seclusion in this part of Ticino with its attractive climate. In November, the group paid 150,000 francs for a few acres of beautifully situated yet rather barren hill terrain in order to build their resort for vegetarians. Oedenkoven, the wealthiest and most business-minded among them, handled the paperwork for the purchase.<sup>16</sup>

Monte Verità ('Mountain of Truth') was the new name chosen by the colonists for their hill. The name was redolent of the ambitions of this idealist-vegetarian project. Ida Hofmann later wrote that it was not intended to mean that the colonists had found, or wished to monopolise the truth. Rather, they aspired to be 'true' in word and practice, and thus to help Truth prevail over the lies and prejudices of the commercial world.<sup>17</sup> This idiosyncratic interpretation of Truth appears borrowed from the Russian author Count Leo Tolstoy, who at the time was immensely popular among vegetarians, for some he was even a prophet. In several countries, colonies were founded on the basis of the philosophy of life advocated by Tolstoy in his later writings. The celebrated author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* practised a form of religious ('Truly Christian') anarchism focusing on non-violence, abstention from luxury and a return to a natural life of manual labour. In the early days of the Monte Verità community, there were frequent contacts with the Hungarian physician and draft resister Albert Skarvan. As a refugee, he was lovingly received by Tolstoy and given shelter on his estate. He then began translating Tolstoy's later work on how one should live. Skarvan avidly reported his experiences with 'the Man of Truth' to the reformist Oedenkoven-Hofmann couple.<sup>18</sup>

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(ed. H. Szeemann; Locarno and Milan: Electa, 1978), 55–64, esp. 56.

<sup>16</sup> R. Landmann, *Ascona—Monte Verità. Auf der Suche nach dem Paradies* (Cologne: Ullstein Sachbuch, 1979), 24–27.

<sup>17</sup> A. Schwab, *Monte Verità—Sanatorium der Sehnsucht* (Zurich: Füssli, 2003), 69.

<sup>18</sup> Landmann, *Ascona*, 28–29; E. Hanke, "'Der Mann der Wahrheit'. Die Ideen Leo N. Tolstois und der Monte Verità", in *Sinnsuche und Sonnenbad. Experimente und Leben auf dem Monte Verità* (eds. A. Schwab and C. Lafranchi; Zurich: Limmat, 2001), 23–42.



*Idealists and Intellectuals*

The above reconstruction of the earliest history of the colony is almost entirely based on a brochure entitled *Monte Verità—Wahrheit ohne Dichtung*, published by Ida Hofmann in 1906. Much of it, together with her other writings, was later used as a source for Robert Landmann's *Ascona—Monte Verità. Auf der Suche nach dem Paradies*, which appeared in 1930.<sup>19</sup> In 1923–1925, Landmann and others were exploiting the erst-while sanatorium as a hotel. In 1925, the entire compound was acquired by Baron Eduard von der Heydt, a banker and collector of Western and Eastern art, who also owned a beach house at the Dutch North Sea resort of Zandvoort. It was symbolic for this breaking point in the history of Monte Verità that the affluent baron built a grand new Bauhaus-style hotel on the spot where in 1904 a community house had been built in Jugendstil.<sup>20</sup> This new, prestigious health resort soon became popular among aristocrats, artists and politicians in search of entertainment and inspiration. Landmann was still able to consult oral sources and original documents for his book. It was reprinted a few times and later completed with newly retrieved photographs of famous residents of the 'global village' at Ascona. This gallery of honour also included Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, the Dutch founder of the Eranos Conferences held from the summer of 1933 onward in her Casa Eranos.<sup>21</sup>

When Ida Hofmann looked back on the early days of the Monte Verità colony in 1906, she began her account by introducing a group of young people who had grown up in a world 'built upon egotism and luxury, delusion and lies'. In contrast, these youngsters wished to give their lives 'a more natural and healthy direction'. 'Truth and Freedom of

<sup>19</sup> I. Hofmann, *Vegetabilismus! Vegetarismus! Blätter zur Verbreitung vegetarischer Lebensweise* (Ascona, 1904); idem, *Monte Verità—Wahrheit ohne Dichtung* (Lorch and Württemberg: Rohm, 1906); Landmann, *Ascona*.

<sup>20</sup> Both the community house and the new hotel were designed by German architects Walter Hoffmann (a friend of Oedenkoven who died at Monte Verità in 1904) and Emil Fahrenkamp, who also designed Shell House in Berlin. See M. Folini, "Ein architektonischer Rundgang. Von den Licht- und Lufthütten bis zum Hotel Monte Verità", in *Sinnsuche und Sonnenbad* (above, n. 18), 77–89.

<sup>21</sup> The theme of the first meeting was 'Yoga and meditation in East and West', with C.G. Jung as one of the speakers. See Landmann, *Ascona*, 231–232 en 238, and E. Barone, M. Riedl, and A. Tisch (eds.), *Pioniere, Poeten, Professoren. Eranos und der Monte Verità in der Zivilisationsgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003); S. Rosenbaum-Kroeber, "Was ist Eranos und wer war Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn?", in *Monte Verità* (above, n. 15), 117–119.



Thought and Action' were to guide their aspirations as their most faithful companions.<sup>22</sup> Full of zeal and enthusiasm, the tiny group on the hill used axes, spades and saws to clear pathways and to build wooden cabins which were open to light and fresh air. From the beginning, however, tension between them became apparent. The Gräser brothers, led by the younger Gustav (now called Gusto), found their freedom bridled by the strict labour regime advocated by Henri and Ida, with long, ten to twelve-hour working days. Gusto was the first to leave, followed by his brother Karl, who had been living in a free-love relationship with Ida's sister Jenny. This latter young couple then settled on a different plot of land on Monte Verità. Meanwhile, other idealists had joined Henri and Ida to help them build this 'individualistic cooperative' in exchange for food and board. Ida and Henri had quarrelled with the Gräser brothers about the colony's anarcho-communist character. Henri, being a major shareholder in the project after having invested his family money, felt entitled to set out its strategy together with Ida. The brothers disagreed. They rejected the idea of private property and the use of money. Their ideal cooperative was based on the ideas of Fourier and Owen. Ida and Henri, on the other hand, wanted a stronger emphasis on the educational character of their commune. According to Ida, who was more vocal than Henri, it was not simply a resort but 'a School for Higher Living', in other words, 'a place for the development and gathering of more profound knowledge and awareness' in order to overcome the antithesis between idealism and materialism through individual self-actualisation. The latter could only be realised on the basis of a strictly implemented vegetarianism and the granting of full equal rights to both men and women.

### *Anarchists and Socialists*

In 1905, the anarchist Erich Mühsam gave his account of the Monte Verità project. He had been a volunteer in the colony for some time, but came to believe that it was doomed to fail, as the vegetarian commitment which united the colonists was much too disinterested and incompatible with revolutionary socialism.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Hofmann, *Monte Verità*, 1–2.

<sup>23</sup> E. Mühsam, *Ascona. Eine Brochüre* (Locarno, 1905).

From early morning through late night I was only chewing apples, prunes, figs, walnuts, groundnuts and coconuts. It was horrid, and I felt my vitality seeping away. I kept up with it for a fortnight and then went to the director to complain that this was destroying me. *Herr Oedenkoven* gave me a penetrating look: 'That may be the case, but in that event nothing is lost with you.'<sup>24</sup>

So Mühsam walked down the hill to Ascona, went into the first inn and immediately ordered a steak with a *mezzo litro* of wine. According to this starved anarchist, vegetarianism had been glorified on the hill as a liberating idea for all humankind, yet, having proved ineffective, it had relapsed into a capitalist, speculative enterprise. He had also noticed that in spite of all the experiments with free love, no babies had been born in this 'shining vegetarian resort on the hill'—here, of all places.

How differently Ida Hofmann looked back on those first five years. 'Life on Monte Verità in its entirety is subject to remarkable uplifting,' she reported, and also that a hard-working gardener, a bookkeeper, a masseur and some journeymen had been hired, 'all very much needed.' There was now also a bakery, a Reform health-food shop, a Reform dressmaker, a florist and a Reform school. This all was meant to prove that on Monte Verità one did not need to become a member of the individualistic cooperative in order to work on one's personality. Ida defended the adapted strategy—of running the resort as a business for profit instead—by pointing to the increased amount of free time disposable to its workers and the steady stream of incoming resort guests and visitors, among whom were many physicians. With self-confident pride, she records how August Bebel, co-founder of the German Social Democratic Party and the author of a famous book on women and socialism, had spent an entire afternoon on Monte Verità with them. Among socialist politicians, the resort apparently already enjoyed some fame, for Pieter Jelles Troelstra, then leader of the Social Democratic Party in the Netherlands, also visited in the spring of 1905. He may or may not have met with two fellow countrymen, one of them Raphael Salomonson, the colony's fifty-something bookkeeper, a passionate naturalist, vegan, Wagner worshipper and retired consul. He had himself pictured on a postcard in the nude, working on the hillside, with the *motto*: 'Shame has clad us; honour shall make us nude again.'<sup>25</sup> The other Dutchman was a certain Cornelis Gouma, a

<sup>24</sup> E. Mühsam, *Namen und Menschen—Unpolitische Erinnerungen* (Leipzig: Volk und Buch, 1949), on which see T. Kneubühler, "Die Künstler und Schriftsteller und das Tessin (von 1900 bis zur Gegenwart)", in *Monte Verità* (above, n. 15), 136–149 (quote on p. 140).

<sup>25</sup> Landmann, *Ascona*, 39 and 60–61.



Fig. 2. The members of the 'individualistic and vegetarian co-operation', practising Rudolf Steiner's eurhythmics; Monte Verità, around 1904. From left to right: Henri Oedenkoven, Ida Hofmann, Anni Pracht, Raphael Friedeberg, Cornelis Gouma, and Mimi Sohr [photo from a private collection in Ascona]

young man with a passion for long-distance walking. His Jesus-like looks appear on many early group photos of the colony. Like Salomonson, he was a vegan. His diary shows that he was working in the colony on the basis of his idealistic beliefs and that he received only minimal compensation for it. Gouma is also in a photograph that strongly influenced how Monte Verità was seen around 1905. It is a picture of a group of men and women dancing in a circle outdoors. Wearing Reform dresses and dancing mostly barefoot, they are shown practising eurhythmics, a form of artistic movement introduced by Rudolf Steiner (then still a theosophist). Next to Henri Oedenkoven and Ida Hofmann is the German physician Dr Raphael Friedeberg (1863–1940), one of the most legendary characters in Ascona between 1900 and 1920. In Berlin he had edited a socialist monthly journal and advocated a general strike. After one summer on Monte Verità, he had become a friend of Henri and Ida. The latter wrote: 'All those who call themselves anarchists, happily gather around his congenial personality.'<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Landmann, *Ascona*, 75.

Before long, Friedeberg would become the central figure in an international network of prominent anarchists who would stay with him at Ascona for therapy and financial support. However, not only fugitive or burnt-out anarchists, but also socialists, theosophists, spiritualists and vegetarians flocked around Friedeberg. Among his more intimate political friends were the Russian revolutionary anarchist Prince Pyotr Kropotkin, the German social-democrat ideologist Karl Kautsky, and the prophet (in the Weberian sense) of Dutch anarchism, Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis. The beloved Dr Friedeberg lived next to the resort in a free marriage with the much younger Elly Lenz, a painter and theosophist, who had also previously lived in the colony. Later she would share her life with her great source of inspiration, Rudolf Steiner.<sup>27</sup> Much later, in 1935, Friedeberg himself would sum up his personal development as having taken a long detour through anarcho-socialist self-understanding, with intermediate stops at *Lebensreform*, reformist and revolutionary socialism,—culminating in anarchism.<sup>28</sup> The great ideologists of socialism and anarchism, who were frequently at odds with each other in public, often knew each other from international conferences. Many, including Bakunin, Lenin and Trotsky, also appear to have passed through Ascona at some time or other. The mere mention of such names has contributed strongly to Ascona's literary reputation as a global village.<sup>29</sup>

### *Sun Worship*

For the reputation of Monte Verità, however, the presence of artists has probably done more than any of these political connections. Many accounts, from Robert Landmann's romanticising book published in 1930, through to Martin Green's counterculture perspective in 1986, and on to Andreas Schwab's down-to-earth assessment in 2003, feature the author Hermann Hesse (1877–1962).<sup>30</sup> Hesse's oeuvre is highly autobiographical and full of self-searching protagonists. Having been translated

<sup>27</sup> H.M. Bock and F. Tennstedt, "Raphael Friedeberg: Arzt und Anarchist in Ascona", in *Monte Verità* (above, n. 15), 38–53.

<sup>28</sup> Bock and Tennstedt, "Raphael Friedeberg", 40.

<sup>29</sup> See especially Landmann, *Ascona*; and *Monte Verità* (above, n. 15).

<sup>30</sup> Landmann, *Ascona*; Schwab, *Monte Verità*; M. Green, *Mountain of Truth. The Counterculture Begins. Ascona, 1900–1920* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1986).



Fig. 3. The writer Hermann Hesse (fourth from the left), visiting the sanatorium Monte Verità in April 1907. Second and third from the left are Henri Oedenkoven and Ida Hofmann [photo from a private collection in Minusio]

into 60 languages, its appreciation has fluctuated over the years. In the 1960s, he was rediscovered by the American hippie movement.<sup>31</sup> As a young writer, he sympathised with *Lebensreform*. He confessed to his

<sup>31</sup> See J. Mileck, *Hermann Hesse: Life and Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). In August 1903, an anarchist newspaper in San Francisco published a long article

colleague Stefan Zweig that he would prefer living in some 'distant Italian nest' in order to escape 'the hustle and bustle of our modern life'. In the spring of 1906 at Lake Boden, he met a bunch of odd characters on their way to Monte Verità. Hesse decided to join these self-styled 'sun brothers'. Together with a physician friend, Hesse himself had already developed a passion for long walks and nude sunbathing. He spent several weeks at the resort with Henri and Ida, as contemporary photographs show. Back at Lake Boden, he looked 'pitiably skinny and as brown as a mulat' and was extremely irritable. Yet eventually Hesse, who was struggling with his drinking problem, returned to Ascona, hoping at Monte Verità to resume an ascetic vegetarian life without alcohol and coffee. This new therapy turned out to be counterproductive. Instead of finding spiritual relief, Hesse relapsed into his old hedonistic lifestyle. His experiences with the 'nature people' were reflected in an ironic context throughout his subsequent fictional works.<sup>32</sup>

In March 1904, another remarkable visitor came to the resort: the Dutch psychiatrist and writer Dr Frederik van Eeden (1860–1932), sometimes dubbed 'the Dutch Tolstoy'. He had many international contacts with other writers and academics.<sup>33</sup> In 1898, Van Eeden himself had founded a socialist colony named Walden based on common landownership. The colony with its characteristic, simply built wooden cabins, was located on an estate near the town of Bussum, not far from Amsterdam.<sup>34</sup> The colony would develop into a consumer cooperative which went bankrupt in 1907. In a nearby village, Van Eeden's soul mates, calling themselves Christian anarchists, had founded their own Tolstoyan colony in 1899. It would only survive for four years.<sup>35</sup> Van Eeden had named his own colony after Henry David Thoreau's *Walden or the Life in the Woods* (1854), which Van Eeden himself had published in Dutch translation. On Thursday, 17 March 1904, Van Eeden wrote in his diary:

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about Ascona, describing the people on the Mountain of Truth. This was certainly one of the first times that detailed news of the European *Lebensreform* reached the Californian coast.

<sup>32</sup> A. Prinz, 'Und jedem Anfang wohnt ein Zauber inne'. *Die Lebensgeschichte des Hermann Hesse* (Weinheim: Beltz und Gelberg, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> J. Fontijn, *Trots verbrijzeld. Het leven van Frederik van Eeden vanaf 1901* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1996); Hanke, "'Der Mann der Wahrheit'", esp. 28.

<sup>34</sup> A. von Grävenitz, "Hütten und Tempel: zur Mission der Selbstbeziehung", in *Monte Verità* (see above, n. 15), 85–98.

<sup>35</sup> R. Jans, *Tolstoj in Nederland* (Bussum: Brand, 1952), 99–108.

Yesterday walked to Ascona and visited the colony. Made acquaintance with the Gräsers, those prehistoric people, but rather sweet Germans anyway. It was very pleasant. I am going there again today. Working well.<sup>36</sup>

The Gräsers were Karl Gräser and Jenny Hofmann, who were living at Monte Verità, but outside the resort compound. In the resort proper, Van Eeden spoke to a fellow countryman who happened to be a brother of the baker in his own Walden. This Dutch acquaintance told him that the quarrelsome atmosphere in the sanatorium had disappeared due to the fact that the most troublesome of the early colonists had left. Those long-haired characters had allegedly had a propensity for the extreme. Van Eeden later published a report of his visit in his favourite magazine *De Pionier*. He found Ascona of little use to the social movement. Social work in the slums of Amsterdam was, after all, nobler than the cultivation of 'a certain haughty selfishness' in this beautiful natural setting.<sup>37</sup>

By the end of 1904, two impressive flat-roofed buildings in stone and wood were completed on the resort grounds: the community house and Casa Anatta ('Soul House'), Ida and Henri's new residence.<sup>38</sup> Both had electricity and running water from the newly built waterworks. The community house, built in Jugendstil, beautifully matched the couple's ideas on art and life: handcrafted simplicity and organic unity. Its seven large glass front doors displayed the *ying yang* symbol popular in theosophical circles. Ida was highly interested in theosophy. The main structure that reflected Henri's vision concerning the exploitation of a vegetarian-naturist resort consisted of a large dining room, a music room, a game room, a library and a large sun terrace for nude sunbathing.<sup>39</sup> In his diary, Cornelis Gouma describes the Winter Solstice celebrated by the sanatorium crew for the first time in the community house in December 1904. With Dr Friedeberg and Karl Vester (who had spent some time in Samoa and was now a permanent resident of Monte Verità), Gouma had cut down a giant fir tree under the moonlight. They hauled it into the house and erected it in the dining room.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> F. van Eeden, *Dagboek 1878–1923*, vol. 2 (ed. H.W. van Tricht; Culemborg: Tjeenk Willink & Noorduijn, 1971), 586. Van Eeden was working on a novel at the time (*De kleine Johannes*).

<sup>37</sup> F. van Eeden, "De vegetariërskolonie Ascona", *De Pionier* (2 April 1904).

<sup>38</sup> The community house of the Theosophical Society in Adyar, India, may have been an example: N. and O. Birkner-Gossen, "Zur Baugeschichte von Monte Verità", in *Monte Verità* (see above, n. 15), 121–125.

<sup>39</sup> Folini, "Ein architektonischer Rundgang", 82–84.

<sup>40</sup> Vester would later buy his own plot of land on Monte Verità where he baked his own



The party started with the lighting of a huge pyre in front of the Central House on the rock: a salute to the Sun, provider of light and warmth. What a mighty fire it was. Huge flames roared and flared up twenty to thirty feet, bursting apart in showers of sparks. The women sang to this in polyphony.<sup>41</sup>

The party went on with presents and poems, a feast prepared by Hedwig Vester, a piano recital by Ida, lectures on Goethe, and, finally, dancing. This ritual was more or less repeated on New Year's Eve. The tree ended on the pyre, together with an idol representing the bygone year.

### *Music and Dance*

In 1905–1907, it became clear that Henri and Ida themselves—with Ida taking the ideological lead as a publicist—saw their life project increasingly as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The compound with its gardens and sun-bathing facilities looked beautiful and well kept. Lectures and discussions were held at the community house, to which not only resort guests but also outsiders were invited. Wagner's compositions were especially well received at the concerts. Ida would play selections from *Parsifal* with great dedication. Wagner was himself a vegetarian and his hero *Tannhäuser* wore sandals. In her pamphlet of 1906, Ida described herself and Henri visiting the Wagnerian Mecca of Bayreuth where they had watched Isadora Duncan perform. Ida wrote on Wagner from a feminist angle:

The woman of today and tomorrow must be new, above all, in her freedom from men, in free employment of her right to love, to make a new life, to be a Brünnhilde who awakens sleeping heroes like Siegfried.<sup>42</sup>

Around that time, Oedenkoven told a journalist that his resort was not a *Naturmenschenkolonie*. This was a statement made to counter the image of nudists and free-loving 'ape-men' at his Monte Verità, an image that had been cultivated in the newspapers as well as in anarchist pamphlets. There is some ambiguity in this statement, for the therapeutic programme offered to guests was indeed entirely based on the principle that

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bread until he died in 1963. He was reputedly the 'last *Naturmensch* on the mountain': Frecot, "Landkrone über Europa", 61–63; see also Landmann, *Ascona*, 132.

<sup>41</sup> Copy of the diary of Cornelis Gouma (1904–1906) in the Frisian Historical and Literary Centre 'Tresoar' at Leeuwarden, manuscript collection no. 089.350.

<sup>42</sup> Hofmann, *Vegetarismus! Vegetabilismus!*, quoted in Green, *Mountain of Truth*, 128.

‘Only Nature Cures’. The naturism associated with nude sunbathing may indeed have been a major attraction for many of the guests. Oedenkoven himself had been allowing day-trippers to visit the resort—on payment of an entrance fee.<sup>43</sup> In contemporary advertisements, his ‘vegetabilist therapy’ was defined in a broad and sportive sense: light and air-bathing, along with sunbathing, water and mud therapies, gardening, mountain tours and all kinds of sports. A lawn tennis court was also constructed on the premises.

Apart from nude sunbathing, the dancing school led by Rudolf Laban (‘Der Mann der Wahrheit’, 1879–1958) was essential for the image of the resort. In 1913, Laban started his Summer School for Kinetic Arts on the premises. It soon became integrated into the regular resort programme. Dancers would rent ‘light-and-air cabins’ and eat whatever the resort kitchen offered. Laban’s own vision on the art of dance became famous internationally. He saw dance as a personal expression in which the body virtually liberates itself from music and rhythm in order to find its own forms of expression, thus creating free dance and pure art. In the compound, Laban could freely experiment with all kinds of group exercise and dancing attire, to be donned or removed at will. Photographs of this mountain-meadow dance practice strongly influenced the image of Monte Verità. One of Laban’s favourites was the *Reigen*, a round dance with an unmistakably erotic appeal.<sup>44</sup> The majority of the twenty-odd guests signing up for the dance group every season were women. They not only practised dance but also weaving, dress and shoemaking, painting, sculpture and architecture. The Summer Schools stopped in 1919.<sup>45</sup>

By then, Henri and Ida had already been separated as a couple for many years. According to Landmann, Ida had drawn increasingly closer to theosophical and occult circles, while Henri had married Isabella Aderley. This Englishwoman had enrolled in Laban’s dance school in 1913. She would bear Henri three children.<sup>46</sup>

During the Great War, business was down. The resort was only able to survive with financial support from Henri’s mother. Oedenkoven soon lost interest in his property on the hill. He left for Spain with his family in 1920 in order to set up a new, less glamorous resort. This merely proved

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<sup>43</sup> Landmann, *Ascona*, 92–99.

<sup>44</sup> Green, *Mountain of Truth*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> Schwab, *Monte Verità*, 181–193.

<sup>46</sup> Schwab, *Monte Verità*, 89.

to be a brief interlude. Before long, they were off to Brazil where a much larger and more attractive property had been acquired. Ida Hofmann had now joined the family. She was to contribute substantially to the organisation of a new vegetarian colony. She died in Sao Paulo in 1926.<sup>47</sup>

### *Narratives and Models*

Does the story of Monte Verità end here? Actually, it does not, for the story told above is not *the* story of *the* Mountain of Truth, but rather just *a* story about *a* resort where experiments with unconventional forms of communal life were conducted. The narrative perspective adopted in this version is simply the *shared* perspective of Henri Oedenkoven and Ida Hoffmann, with the story of their lives being treated as a story about a nature-cure resort. From Henri and Ida's shared viewpoint, Monte Verità was a spiritual centre that was in need of a sound financial base—preferably a cooperative one—in order to survive. Although their cooperative approach turned out to be unsuccessful, Henri, Ida and their most concerned co-believers hoped that their sacred centre would transform society. From a more distant perspective, a historian of religion such as Jan Bremmer would tend to see the construction of an attractive tourist resort as being symbolic of a holy and wholesome mountain. This constructive approach is very different from phenomenological and/or essentialist visions such as Eliade's, in which the 'Cosmic Mountain' would probably be taken to represent no less than an *axis mundi*.<sup>48</sup>

From the perspective of the history of religion, our narrative of the interwoven lives of men and women in search of the Mountain of Truth allows us to identify at least four different models of movements (imaginary or real communities) of *seekers*. First is the Tolstoyan model of a commune steeped in asceticism, pacifism and vegetarianism. Collective landownership and labour are as characteristic of this type as is the cult of an exemplary prophet. Tolstoy's vision of sexual abstinence was not considered part of his prophetic example, yet when this *Lebensvirtuose* died in 1910, his followers in Ascona were shocked:

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<sup>47</sup> Landmann, *Ascona*, 155–156.

<sup>48</sup> M. Eliade, *Le sacré et le profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

We as vegetarians have lost our greatest comrade of all times, literature one of its great classics, and mankind its most noble teacher, patriarch and prophet.<sup>49</sup>

Second is the movement of theosophist seekers, oriented towards the religions of the East such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Their rather individualistic approach is apparent from the popularity of meditation and the organisation of their society. One key figure was Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), who was also influenced by Nietzsche. Third is the movement of vegetarian seekers with their focus on natural and healthy living, along with their predilection for nature mysticism, pantheism and occultism. Characteristic of this group is their culture of nudism and free expression and their vitalist-aesthetic self-perception. Wagner, Nietzsche and especially Fidus, with his drawings of thin, naked greeters of the sun, bronzed by long hours of walking in the open-air and labour, were all popular in this circle.<sup>50</sup> Last is the living utopia of anarchism: seekers in this category were often writers and other artists, many living as bohemians or vagabonds. All four movements had unmistakable feminist and eroticising traits. These tendencies materialised in all kinds of entanglements and embroilments related to the practice of free love.

These four models together are useful in characterising the fascination for Monte Verità and the literary formation of a Monte Verità myth. In its many anecdotes and photographs, Landmann's book, written in 1930, tells the story of the resort's attraction for both male and female seekers who were unhappy with their society, along with celebrities from the arts as well as politicians. The catalogue for the great Monte Verità exhibition of 1978 is the first publication in which an entire group of specialist researchers systematically and profoundly analysed and contextualise the ideas and practices of the erstwhile inhabitants of Monte Verità: from anarchism and *Lebensreform* to the Arts and Psyche, with the latter field also covering the sexual revolution and research focused on myths as conducted by the Eranos group. The objective of that publication was to contribute to 'highly topical debates on explosive themes' such as civic initiatives opposing atomic armament and protection of the

<sup>49</sup> Locarno-Ascona Bote. *Zeitschrift für Freunde und Anhänger naturgemässer, vegetarischer Lebensweise* (15 December 1910).

<sup>50</sup> J. Frecot, J.F. Geist and D. Kerbs, *Fidus 1868–1948. Zur ästhetischen Praxis bürgerlicher Fluchtbewegungen* (Munich: Rogner & Bernhard, 1972). Fidus' real name was Hugo Höppener.

natural environment. It is difficult to ignore the emphasis on the contrast between the anarchism of artists and the *bourgeois* individualism of *Lebensreform*, and on the possibility of ties between *Lebensreform* and National Socialism.<sup>51</sup> Across the board, the catalogue aimed to evoke the sacred landscape of Europe around 1900.

### *Myth-Making and Its Deconstruction*

Martin Green's monograph of 1986 goes one step beyond the catalogue of 1978. By investigating all virtual and existing ties among the significant personalities in the fields of politics, the arts, and culture in general, he attempts to reposition the 'Asconian Idea' as the expression of a pan-European network rather than as a local phenomenon. In the end, Green nevertheless admits:

How we should feel about Ascona as a whole is too large a question; it presupposes a consensus that does not exist.<sup>52</sup>

Green's study is actually part of his grand project on the 'Great Chain of Counterculture'. In his earlier books, he interlinked the lives and ideas of Tolstoy, Gandhi, D.H. Lawrence, Max Weber and Otto Gross.<sup>53</sup> Gross was an Austrian psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who had made it his mission to liberate women from the stranglehold of patriarchy. He was a temporary resident of Ascona, where he brought extreme despair to several women, including Lotte Hammerer, a first-generation Mount Veritan. She committed suicide using poison provided to her by Gross. Beforehand, in 1913, Max Weber and Raphael Friedeberg took care of the abandoned Mrs Gross.<sup>54</sup> Green's narrative strategy is to evoke the role of the erotic movement in counterculture (as he constructs it) by magnifying such biographical details. This is not enough to prove a specific 'Asconian influence' in any one instance, at least not without presupposing this influence from the outset at the same time. Green appears to be casting his net too wide in order to come up with a

<sup>51</sup> See Kneubühler, "Die Künstler", in *Monte Verità* (see above, n. 15), 142–143.

<sup>52</sup> Green, *Mountain of Truth*, 256.

<sup>53</sup> See also M. Green, *Prophets of a New Age. The Politics of Hope from the Eighteenth through the Twenty-First Centuries* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992).

<sup>54</sup> See also J. Radkau, *Max Weber. Die Leidenschaft des Denkens* (Munich: Hanser, 2005), 592–594.

convincing interpretation of the interdependency of the different ways of life at Monte Verità during the early twentieth century.<sup>55</sup>

In his doctoral dissertation of 2003, the Swiss historian Andreas Schwab takes issue with Green's holistic vision as well as with some authors of the 1978 catalogue who have interpreted *Lebensreform* as a chiefly anti-modern, escapist and protofascist movement.<sup>56</sup> Schwab limits his own research almost entirely to the history of the Monte Verità resort. By highlighting both its idealist and economic aspects, the more modern traits of *Lebensreform* as practised in the resort become visible. Schwab also juxtaposes the free-floating religiosity of many of the 400-odd guests—who visited the resort between 1906 and 1909 in order to cultivate their bodies on a temporary basis—with the quest for self-actualisation and the fitness culture of our times. In a way, Schwab's opposition of alternative tourism to starry-eyed counterculture also desacralises Monte Verità. One strong point in his argument is that the concept and practice of nudity in this secluded, cultic environment had a secular religious character. With its ascetic intentions, it had an unmistakably erotic attraction to both insiders and outsiders, but it also carried some ambiguous undertones of elitism and *Uebermensch* ideology.<sup>57</sup>

In view of the four models described above, Schwab's attempt to desacralise and modernise Monte Verità appears somewhat extreme. Even without falling back on Green's construct of counterculture or Landmann's exotic romanticism, a systematic comparison of the religious landscape of Europe around 1900 with our own time still remains attractive.<sup>58</sup> In both periods we see a plethora of religiosity and spirituality developing within non-denominational contexts (and connected with a so-called 'subjective turn'). Two points deserve special attention. Around 1900, their revival was mainly an elite matter, while our time sees a great deal of 'religion-shopping' or, to use Jan Bremmer's term, 'zapping religion', the latter being notably more massive, popular and commercial.<sup>59</sup> Another intriguing point is the (often ambivalent or dialectical) relation-

<sup>55</sup> Cf. J. Joll, "Esalen East", *New York Review of Books* (26 June 1986); G.L. Mosse, review of Green, *Mountain of Truth*, in *American Historical Review* 92 (1987): 983–984.

<sup>56</sup> Schwab, *Monte Verità*.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. A. Schwab, "Ohne Hintergedanken? Ambivalente Stilisierungen der Nacktheit auf dem Monte Verità", in *Nacktheit. Ästhetische Inszenierungen im Kulturvergleich* (ed. K. Gernig; Cologne: Böhlau, 2002), 111–129.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution. Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality. Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>59</sup> J.N. Bremmer, *Van zendelingen, zuilen en zapreligie. Tweehonderd jaar godsdienst in Nederland en het Apostolische Genootschap* (Delft: Eburon, 2005); see also L. Woodhead,

ship between individualism and collectivism in the sacral field. Ambiguities and paradoxes appear here, too—not unlike those on Monte Verità. Today, the hill is covered by luxury hotels, where wooden cabins were once built to create a new world.

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“Why Do Religious and Spiritual Movements Grow?”, in *Big Questions in History* (ed. H. Swain; London: Cape, 2005), 167–174.