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*Journal of Religion in Europe* 6 (2013) 1–18

*Journal of  
Religion in  
Europe*  
brill.com/jre

## **Tolstoyans on a Mountain: From New Practices of Asceticism to the Deconstruction of the Myths of Monte Verità**

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### **Abstract**

The decades before the Great War were a period of exciting cultural creativity and great social upheaval. Both men and women cultivated a great range of interests in ethical, feminist, mystical, spiritualist and sexual ideas and practices. Max Weber referred to this diversity as a 'department store for worldviews'. Recent historiography has dubbed this period 'the age of nervousness' or 'the quest for purity'. New fascinations held many people in their thrall: the culture of the body and, more specifically, the Life Reform movement. Some felt inspired by their ethical hero Count Leo Tolstoy, the famous Russian writer and pacifist. Tolstoyan colonies based on his philosophy of back-to-nature simplicity were founded in several European countries. One of the places where Tolstoyans experimented with new practices of asceticism was the Monte Verità near Ascona, a village on the Lago Maggiore in the Swiss region of Ticino. This article deals with the transformation of this Tolstoyan colony into a nature cure sanatorium, inspired by ethical and aesthetic values. As a case study it addresses crucial, but ambivalent, aspects of modernity in the 'natural' life of nude sunbathing, vegetarian meals, walking barefoot, living in wooden light-and-air cabins and free love marriages. However, this microcosm of Belle Époque Europe has also been the subject of much mythification. The article argues that these forms of myth-making reveal different narratives and models of identification. Deconstruction of Monte Verità myths reveals their popularity as counter-culture narrative (discourse) in the historiography of the 1970s. During the last decade, a comparison between the elitist, artistic lifestyle experiments on Monte Verità and trends in our modern, mass culture (referring to 'personal authenticity' or to Foucault's 'technologies of the self') seems to be gaining in influence.

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DOI 10.1163/18748929-00604007

### Keywords

Belle Époque Europe; Life Reform movement; vegetarianism; asceticism; nude sunbathing; free love marriages; Gesamtkunstwerk; myths of Monte Verità; practices; narratives; discourses; counter-culture; Leo Tolstoy; Max Weber; Michel Foucault

The dynamics of European culture around 1900 and the delight people took in experimenting have fascinated many scholars. In retrospect, the years between 1890 and 1914 were called the *Belle Époque*, the Beautiful Era. It was a period characterized by optimism, political stability, new technological and medical discoveries as well as rising expectations about the emancipation of the working class and women. Young men and women with a bourgeois background started to experiment with a wide range of ethical, aesthetic, feminist, mystical and spiritualist ideas and practices. There was also a new fascination for the culture of the body, expressed in practices such as sports and gymnastics, but also in vegetarianism, abstention from tobacco and alcohol, nude sunbathing, hydrotherapy, yoga, hiking and free expressive dance. Nevertheless, among the main trends of their times, Sigmund Freud also identified a discontent with civilization, while Max Weber saw the impending threat of the iron cage of bureaucracy.<sup>1</sup> The Belle Époque was both an exciting and disturbing period in European history.

One of the biggest bestsellers about the political and ‘civilized’ elites of the Belle Époque is undoubtedly Barbara Tuchman’s *The Proud Tower*, published in 1966.<sup>2</sup> This valuable study is based on a narrative of an early twentieth-century European society that was not in decay but struggled with “new tensions and accumulated energy” in such a way that the shadows of war and death were already manifest and the coming disaster unavoidable. However, more recently Philip Blom’s historical magnum opus *The Vertigo Years. Change and Culture in the West 1900-1914* (2008) uses another grand narrative, more experimental and inspired by cultural history than that of Tuchman, which in my view is a more fruitful one.

<sup>1</sup> Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber. Die Leidenschaft des Denkens*, Munich: Hanser 2005 (English edition: *Max Weber: a biography*, Cambridge: Polity 2009). The key argument of Radkau’s biography is that ‘nature’ provides the vainly sought missing link between Weber’s life and work; cf. Peter Thomas, “Being Max Weber,” *New Left Review* 41 (September-October 2005). On Freud see Georg Markus, *Sigmund Freud. Die Biographie* (Munich: Langen Müller, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World before the War: 1890-1914* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1966).

Blom chronicles the period 1900-1914 year by year, not only referring to the follies of politicians and diplomats and the absurdities of nationalist politics – as did Tuchman in abundance – but in addition to high culture, such as painting, dance and music, also addresses issues such as technology, education and sexuality in detail. Some pillars of a culture of modernity were already developed in early twentieth-century Europe, such as the emancipation of women, mass shopping and popular media: “The Vertigo years had much in common with our own day, not least their openness. (...) In a large part, the uncertain future facing us early in the twenty-first century arose from the inventions, thought and transformations of those unusually rich fifteen years between 1900 and 1914, a period of extraordinary creativity in the arts and sciences, of enormous change in society and in the very image people had of themselves.”<sup>3</sup> Writing from a perspective of a history of mentalities, Blom invites the reader to suspend all knowledge of the events of the post-Great War era and to follow him in his task of unravelling the world of the Belle Époque from within. Blom recently said that what struck him while writing his book was that around 1900 you find dynamics and uncertainty in every corner of European culture and society.<sup>4</sup>

### A Case Study of Modern Asceticism

Blom’s observations of prewar Europe brings us to the topic of this essay: a case study of a new, ‘modern ascetic’ community of men and women, living in a colony on a hill near the tiny Swiss village of Ascona on Lago Maggiore in the Italian-speaking region of Ticino.<sup>5</sup> During the Belle Époque these young people were deeply involved in the Life Reform (*Lebensreform*) movement. They were inspired by their ethical hero of the New Life, Count Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), the most famous Russian writer, pacifist and social

<sup>3</sup> Philipp Blom, *The Vertigo Years. Change and Culture in the West, 1900-1914* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, **YEAR?**), 3.

<sup>4</sup> See also Joachim Radkau, *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität: Deutschland zwischen Bismark und Hitler* (Munich: Hanser, 1998). This study extensively reveals the dominant discourse and treatment of ‘nervous disturbance’ under the Second Reich.

<sup>5</sup> On the concept of ‘modern asceticism’ and body culture see: Evert Peeters, Leen van Molle and Kaat Wils (eds), ‘Introduction’, in: *Beyond Pleasure. Cultures of Modern Asceticism* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 1-18.

reformer of the time. Among his admirers he had the reputation of being the ‘Man of Truth’. In several European countries, colonies were founded on the basis of the philosophy of life that Tolstoy preached in his later writings, often interpreted as “living in harmony with nature”. The founders of this Swiss colony of idealists – a colony based on the principles of mutual cooperation and free marriage partnership – shared the practices of vegetarianism, new forms of dress (wearing *Reformkleidung*), abstention from tobacco and alcohol, nude sunbathing and walking barefoot. In the eyes of the local press and population, but also of tourists passing by, they were a kind of naturalistic human being (*Naturmenschen, naturale degli uomini*), living on the hill of Monescia, from which one had a beautiful view of the lake and the surrounding mountains. However, as we will see, ancient repertoires of asceticism were quietly reformulated by these colonists in such a manner that at one and the same time they fitted within the idiom of modernity and could still function as a critique of dominant bourgeois culture. It appears that these modern forms of asceticism were no longer only practised for the sake of communal ideals but perhaps even more for the sake of personal authenticity. Do we meet here practices that Foucault once characterized as “technologies of the self”?<sup>6</sup>

Soon after settling on the hill in November 1900 the group decided that the colony would also function as a health resort for visitors who were tired of the pace of city life. They embarked on constructing light and airy wooden cabins and establishing gardens for food production and meadows for sun therapy. At the end of 1901, they founded a nature-oriented sanatorium as a commercial venture, which they named the Individualistic Cooperativa *Monte Verità* with the Italian name being a homage to Tolstoy, the Man of Truth.<sup>7</sup> By the end of 1904 the colony opened the doors of its Community House, an impressive flat-roofed building in stone with electricity and running water. It was built in the Jugendstil, expressing

<sup>6</sup> Peeters, *Beyond Pleasure*, 8–9; M. Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in: L.M. Martin, H. Gutman and P.H. Hutton (eds), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock, 1988), 16–49. Foucault interprets ‘techniques of the self’ as “those reflective and voluntary practices by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria”; cf. Clare O’Farrell, *Michel Foucault* (London: Sage, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> E. Hanke, “‘Der Mann der Wahrheit’. Die Ideen Leo N. Tolstois und der Monte Verità,” in: Andreas Schwab and Claudia Lafranchi (eds), *Sinnsuche und Sonnenbad. Experimente und Leben auf dem Monte Verità* (Zurich: Limmat, 2001), 23–42.

natural elegance and organic unity. Its seven glass front doors displayed the *ying yang* symbol, at that time very popular in theosophical circles. The Community House was multi-functional: it had a vegetarian restaurant, a music room, a game room, a library and, of course, a sun terrace for nude sunbathing.<sup>8</sup>

From this short description of the early Monte Verità project we can deduce some central questions that I will pose in this essay. How should we understand this New Life experiment, especially in its Tolstoyan version? How does it fit into the context of the recent historiography of the Belle Époque? Did communal life and practices on Monte Verità constitute a protest against the dominance of bourgeois culture? Was it a return to a natural lifestyle, understood as a reaction to stressful city life and the pressure of routine work?

As we will see, in this case study, Monte Verità functions as a microcosm of European intellectual culture in the Belle Époque. In the more traditional historiography on the Life Reform movement around 1900, its representatives are often labelled as ‘romantic’, ‘escapist’ and even ‘reactionary’.<sup>9</sup> The German historian Krabbe even typified *Lebensreform* as a “secularized gnostic-eschatological salvation doctrine”.<sup>10</sup> His colleague Thomas Nipperdey discerned an “empathic, religious, eschatological register” in Life Reform, that is to say a kind of religious mood that expressed at least some inclination towards religiosity.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, how

<sup>8</sup>) For my reconstruction of the early history of the Monte Verità project in this article I primarily relied on: Robert Landmann, *Ascona-Monte Verità. Auf der Suche nach dem Paradies* (Zurich: Ullstein, 1973 [1934]); Andreas Schwab, *Monte Verità –Sanatorium der Sehnsucht* (Zurich: Orell Füssli, 2003); Kaj Noschis, *Monte Verità. Ascona et le génie du lieu* (Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2011). Additional information was found in: Harald Szeemann et al., *Monte Verità. Berg der Wahrheit. Lokale Anthropologie als Beiträge zur Wiederentdeckung einer neuzeitlichen sakralen Topographie* (Locarno/Milan: Electa Editrice, 1978); Martin Green, *Mountain of Truth. The counterculture begins. Ascona, 1900-1920* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1986).

<sup>9</sup>) See for example the valuable study by the Dutch Marxist historian Jan Romein, *The Watershed of Two Eras. Europe in 1900* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1978): “Then there were the homeopaths, vegetarians, non-smokers, bare-footers, natural composers, earth-prayers, simple-lifers, most of whom were also pacifists, anti-vivisectionists and disciples of Tolstoy, the great prophet from Yasnaya Polyana. Their concern with health and purity had almost something sickly about it; their pursuit of higher goals was so single-minded and humorless as to make them appear quite inhuman,” 505.

<sup>10</sup>) Wolfgang R. Krabbe, *Gesellschaftsveränderung durch Lebensreform* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974).

<sup>11</sup>) Thomas Nipperdey, *Religion im Umbruch. Deutschland 1870-1918* (Munich: Beck, 1988), 148.

incompatible is the Life Reform movement with modernity and the rise of individual consumer culture?

### The Construction and Deconstruction of Monte Verità as *Génie du Lieu*

Apart from these questions there is the riddle of the magic and fame of Monte Verità and Ascona. Various authors, politicians, artists, dancers, actors, scientists, anarchists, socialists – mostly from German-speaking countries – visited the hill and natural sanatorium during the Belle Époque. Many did not stay for long, but some did: Bakunin, Lenin, Trotsky once stayed in Ascona, as did Bebel, Kautsky and Kropotkin. The writer Herman Hesse stayed even longer than these political icons, residing in the sanatorium in the spring of 1906 and 1907, desperately trying to overcome his drinking problem.<sup>12</sup> The sociologist Max Weber went to Ascona in the spring of 1913 and 1914 and on two occasions lived in the village for about a month without his wife, meeting women with well-known reputations for free love such as Frieda Gross (former wife of the psychiatrist Otto Gross, one-time lover of Max Weber's mistress Else von Richthofen) and her friend, the countess and writer, Franziska zu Reventlow (who had been part of the Munich Cosmic Circle and wrote a famous novel about her experiences in this mystic and artistic group). There were no direct connections between these two women – or the whole circle around Otto Gross – and the colonists on the Monte Verità.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, their reputation as feminists living in sexual freedom was quite crucial in the construction of the myth of Monte Verità as the enchanted and eroticized mountain of Belle Époque Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Recently, the Finnish psychoanalyst and historian of religion Kaj Noschis published a small book about the reputation of the hill and the village (including the Eranos Conferences in Moscia, very close to the famous hill).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ralph Freeman Freeman, *Hermann Hesse. Pilgrim of Crisis. A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>13</sup> Kornelia Küchmeister, Dörte Nicolaisen and Ulrike Wolff-Thomsen, '*Alles möchte ich immer*'. *Franziska Gräfin zu Reventlow 1871-1918* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2010); Radkau, *Max Weber*, 590-591.

<sup>14</sup> Examples of these more or less 'myth driven histories' include: Szeemann, *Monte Verità*, and especially Green, *Mountain of Truth* (see note 8). The label 'myth driven' is not meant here as a dismissal of these studies.

Inspired by Mircea Eliade's concept of *axis mundi* he gave his book a very apt title: *Monte Verità. Ascona et le génie du lieu*. The author tries to develop a "specific perspective that will show how the genius of place (*le génie du lieu; genius loci*) manifests itself in certain prominent artistic and intellectual trends of an era that still bears fruit for us."<sup>15</sup> What was the significance of Monte Verità as *genius loci*? Or, what was 'the spirit of Ascona'? In his last chapter Noschis refers to the specific but various attractions the place had for men and women over the course of the twentieth century. Searching for a common denominator, on the one hand he points to an opposition to "the dominant patriarchal system" and "against the authority of the father, the family, and the state," and on the other hand, he discovers (with reference to studies by two historians of religion, Karl Kerényi and Erich Neumann) "an evocation more or less of what we can call the Mother Goddess." It is a striking fact "that most of the believers had no direct contact with one another, but were all attracted by the same force and stimulated to construct something," Noschis writes.<sup>16</sup> His final conclusion is that during the first two decades of the twentieth century, women on and around Monte Verità tried to liberate themselves from the chains of patriarchal repression in 'free marriages', but the results of their struggle for emancipation left them highly ambivalent.<sup>17</sup>

Telling the 'real' story of the Monte Verità is, of course, illusory. In 2003, the Swiss historian Andreas Schwab published his doctoral thesis on Monte Verità, with the striking subtitle 'Sanatorium of Desire'. One of the great merits of his study is that it succeeds in finding a balance between a reconstruction of the history of an early commercially run natural health resort (including all kinds of paradoxes of modernity) and an analysis of the construction of the myth of the Monte Verità which had already started in the 1930s. In 1934, the first monograph was published, extending the exotic fame and reputation of Ascona and Monte Verità. Its author, Robert Landmann (whose real name was Werner Ackermann), had been one of the owners of the complex in the early 1920s. He gave his book, mostly based on oral history, the quite neutral subtitle "History of a mountain," but called Monte Verità the "animated mountain". Forty years

<sup>15</sup> All the translations of the original French and German texts in this article are mine; Noschis, *Monte Verità*, 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 131-132; here the author used Kerényi's *Athene: Virgin and Mother in Greek Religion* (1952) and Neumann's *The Great Mother* (1955).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

later a new edition was published with a new subtitle, “In search of paradise”.

During the 1940s and 1950s there was no intellectual interest in the history of Monte Verità. However, after the late 1960s things changed drastically. As historiography, exhibitions and publications demonstrate clearly and abundantly, since the 1970s, Monte Verità has been ‘re-invented’ as an extraordinary place. Adherents of very different worldviews, ranging from counterculture and new forms of spirituality to artistic free expression and political anarchism, identified strongly with its history – and especially with their own favourites among the protagonists of the stories about life on Monte Verità. The following reconstruction of the early history of the Cooperativa, mostly based on the study by Andreas Schwab, will reveal some crucial aspects of the life of some of these protagonists. One can read this reconstruction as a form of Geertzian ‘thick description’ (which attempts to do justice as much as possible to the actor’s point of view); however, it also includes crucial elements of a story which in a Lévi-Straussian sense can be seen as ‘mythems’, the materials used in constructing a myth.

### Back to Monte Verità as *Gesamtkunstwerk*

It all started in Munich in the autumn of 1900. A group of seven young men and women travelled south to start a new life far from their mundane city lives. Although all of the group members had a solid bourgeois upbringing, their appearance already indicated a clear, dedicated opposition to this background. The men had long hair and wild beards and wore sandals, while the women were clad in loose dresses and no longer wore corsets. On the way south, they attended the Oberammergauer Festspiele and raised many eyebrows in Germany, Italy and, finally, Switzerland, with their apostle-like dress and bare feet. The pair who had initiated this project had met in the summer of 1899 at Arnold Rikli’s natural health resort of Veldes – then in Austria, now in Slovenia – where guests were put on a vegetarian diet which was supplemented by fresh air, swimming and sunbathing to promote their physical health. They were Henri Oedenkoven, 25 years old, son of a well-to-do Antwerp industrialist, and his lover Ida Hofmann, a gifted piano teacher from Germany, eleven years his senior and also the oldest person in the group. The other members of the group were Ida’s younger sister Jenny, a pianist and singer, two German brothers,



Karl and Gustav Gräser, fervent pacifists and anarchists, and the beautiful Lotte, who had eloped with Ferdinand, an Austrian theosophist.

There are not many primary sources about the early history of the colony written by people who were fully involved, but the most important is a brochure in German by Ida Hofmann from 1906: “Monte Verità – Truth without Poetry,” its title referring to Goethe’s autobiography, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Another early source is a pamphlet from 1905 by Erich Mühsam, a German anarchist who lived in Ascona. He fiercely attacked the vegetarian worldview of Hofmann and Oedenkoven, who in his eyes were doing nothing more than running a capitalistic “hotel with an ethical sounding name.”<sup>18</sup>

Right from the start, the group in Ascona was in touch with Dr Bela (Albert) Skarvan, a Slovakian Tolstoyan who had also lived on Tolstoy’s estate, Jasnaja Poljana, for a while, during which time he began translating his Christian and moral writings into German. While a military doctor in the Austro-Hungarian army he had read the *Man of Truth* and as a result became a conscientious objector and had to flee to Switzerland. He had also direct links with Tolstoyan colonies of Christian anarchists in England and the Netherlands.<sup>19</sup> However, the Tolstoyan colony on the Monte Verità did not have a Christian mission or practise sexual abstinence. In November 1901, in the first contribution to *Peace*, the bi-monthly publication of the Dutch Tolstoyans (who called themselves “The International Brotherhood”), Skarvan noted that the colonists, who not only worked hard but also sunbathed, rowed and walked a lot, were no longer united about the right course for their living utopia, with visitors, among whom – according to the reporter – were very well-known people, paying for their stay. One month later Skarvan reported to his fellow Tolstoyans in the Netherlands that the colony at Ascona had been dissolved.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the colonists did split up, with Gustav Gräser, the leading communal-anarchist and anti-capitalist of the group, being the first to leave Monte Verità, followed by his brother,

<sup>18</sup> Ida Hofmann, *Wie gelangen wir Frauen zu harmonischen und gesunden Daseinsbedingungen* (Ascona: PUBLISHER?, 1902); idem, *Vegetabilismus! Vegetabilismus! Blätter zur Verbreitung vegetarischer Lebensweise* (Ascona: PUBLISHER?, 1904); idem, *Monte Verità – Wahrheit ohne Dichtung* (Lorch-Württemberg: Rohm, 1906); Erich Mühsam, *Ascona. Eine Brochüre* (Carnio: PUBLISHER?, 1905).

<sup>19</sup> Ruden Jans, *Tolstoj in Nederland* (Bussum: Paul Brand, 1952), 82–83.

<sup>20</sup> *Vrede* [Peace], *Halfmaandelijks blad tot bespreking van de Praktijk der Liefde. Orgaan van de Internationale Broederschap* (October 1897–September 1909).

who left soon after with his lover, Jenny Hofmann, having bought some land next to the Hofmann-Oedenkoven estate.

Andreas Schwab rightly observed in his published dissertation *Monte Verità – Sanatorium der Sehnsucht* (2003) that the founding of the sanatorium was the decisive factor for the continuity of the Monte Verità vegetarian community. The biographical part of his study relies on a narrative in which Ida was the ideologist of the project and Henri its pragmatic and strategic entrepreneur. Also significant was the German physician, socialist and later anarchist, Dr Raphael Friedeberg. He had lived in Ascona from 1904 and was a regular guest at Monte Verità. Friedeberg brought with him famous socialists and anarchist leaders from across Europe and had a free marriage with the artist Elly Lenz, who had previously lived in the colony. Elly bore Friedeberg a child, but then left him to follow Rudolph Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy.<sup>21</sup> Along with Henri and Ida and some others, Raphael Friedeberg was photographed on Monte Verità in 1905, the group dancing outdoors in a circle, wearing Reform dress and practising Steinerian eurhythmics. The picture is now famous and also had a strong influence on the image of the community in its own day, as had so many photographs of the early complex and its sunbathing visitors.<sup>22</sup>

As mentioned above, Ida Hofmann was the ideological architect of the Monte Verità during the first decade. In her opinion, the ideas of 'Truth' and 'Freedom of Thought' had to guide the new, alternative lifestyle of those who refused to be slaves to the dominant masculine, materialistic and egoistic bourgeois culture. Monte Verità was, in the eyes of this former school teacher, a School for Higher Living, "a place for the development and gathering of more profound knowledge and awareness." The final goal of this permanent education with fellow believers was 'individual self-actualization'. In 1906 the Individualistic Cooperativa already had its own bakery, a Reform health-food store, Reform dressmakers and a Reform school. It also organized special evenings with music and lectures on literature. Much more than her partner Henri, Ida Hofmann felt attracted to theosophy as well as to dance and music. Her ideal concept of a natural health resort was as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. She adored Richard Wagner and Isadore Duncan, having met the latter at the Bayreuth Festival in the

<sup>21</sup> Hans Manfred Bock and Florian Tennstedt, 'Raphael Friedeberg: Arzt und Anarchist in Ascona', in: Szeemann, *Monte Verità*, 38–53.

<sup>22</sup> For the photograph of the dancing company with Friedeberg see Szeemann, *Monte Verità*, 42.

summer of 1906. Theosophy, Wagnerism, an admiration for Nietzsche and mystical religion, all fitted into the philosophy of nature practised on Monte Verità. In his diary, the Dutch colonist Cornelis Gouma described the Winter Solstice, celebrated by the sanatorium crew and visitors for the first time in the Community House in December 1904: “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. The women sang to this in polyphony.”<sup>23</sup>

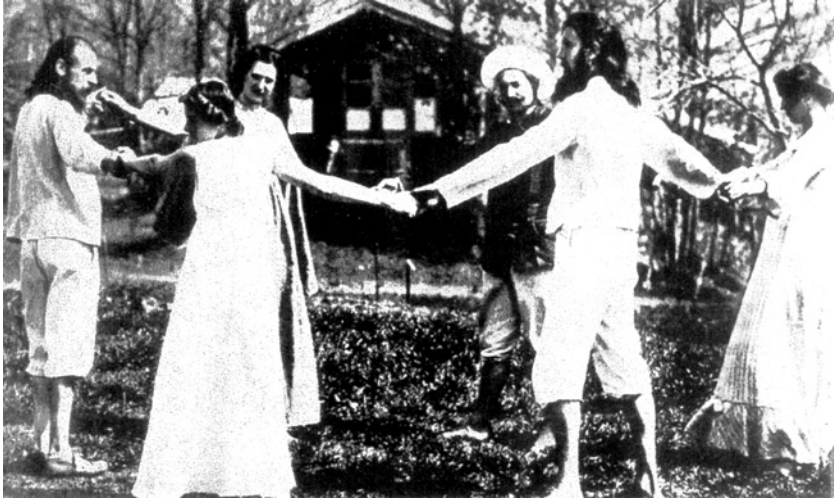
Alongside the nude sunbathing, the dancing school at Monte Verità, which was led by the famous Hungarian Rudolf Laban from 1913, was most crucial for the construction of the image of Monte Verità as a mountain closely associated with nudity, free love and free expression. Photographs of the mountain-meadow dances, with barely clothed men and naked women, reveal how Laban’s ideas on free dance as a pure form of art were matched by the natural surroundings. In 1913, Mary Wigman and Isadore Duncan also visited the mountain, which was then at the heights of experiment in eroticized dance, enchanting outsiders and insiders alike.<sup>24</sup> By this time Henri Oedenkoven had fallen in love with an English dancer and the couple had married and had children. This meant that the free love between Ida and Henry was now over, but not their mutual dream of the purity of natural colony life in the surroundings of a natural health resort. However, the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 was the beginning of the end for the resort. As the owner of the land and most of the houses on it, Henri was eventually able to sell the complex in 1920 and with his wife Isabella and his spiritual friend Ida he first founded a sanatorium in Spain and then moved to Brazil to establish a new vegetarian health resort. Ida died in 1926 and Henri ten years later.

### Narratives and Models of Identification

We could end the story of the Tolstoyans of Ascona here, dealing and struggling with ethical- communal rules and individualistic-commercial

<sup>23</sup> A copy of the diary (1904-1906) of Cornelis Gouma is kept in the Archives of Tresoor, Leeuwarden (The Netherlands), manuscript collection no. 089.350.

<sup>24</sup> Edmund Stadler, ‘Theater und Tanz in Ascona’, in: Szeemann, *Monte Verità*, 126-135; Rudolf Laban, *A Life for Dance* (London: PUBLISHER?, 1975 [the original German version was published in 1935]); Green, *Mountain of Truth*, 83-115.



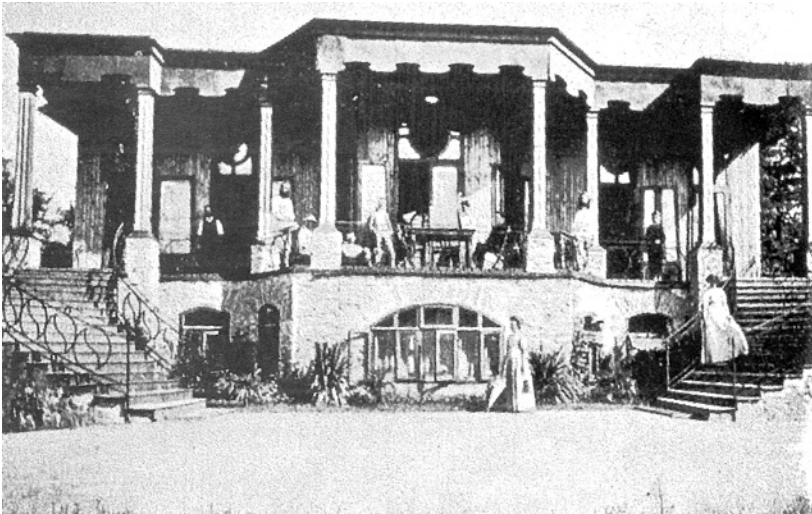
**Figure 1.** Practising Steiner's eurhythmics in Reform dress on the Monte Verità. From left to right: Henri Oedenkoven, Ida Hofmann, Anni Pracht, Raphael Friedeberg, Cornelis Gabes Gouma and Mimi Sohr; around 1904 (photo: private collection, Ascona).

practices, admitting, of course, that the story told in the last section is not *the* story of *the* Mountain of Truth, but rather *a* story about *a* resort where experiments with unconventional forms of communal life ended up in a commercially run health resort. The owners of the complex had to attract people who could afford to travel to Ascona and live there for some time, close to nature but not deprived of modern technological comforts. However, the myth of Monte Verità is still with us, and thus we have to ask: why?; and furthermore: how should we understand its lasting popularity and attraction?

As mentioned above, the construction of the myth of Monte Verità started with the personal memories of Robert Landmann, who also made use of oral history. In his 1934 monograph, Landmann produced an outspoken 'flight from civilization' narrative. About half a century later the American historian Martin Green gave his 1986 monograph on the Mountain of Truth the very striking subtitle: "The counterculture begins. Ascona, 1900-1920." Green's counterculture narrative had been inspired by the political and cultural rebellions of the late 1960s and a large exhibition on the history of Monte Verità initiated by the Swiss artist and publicist

Harald Szeemann in 1978. Both Landmann and Green are exponents of a romantic and idealizing view of Monte Verità. Green's interlinking of biographical portraits and sketches in particular, transformed Monte Verità into a platform of 'sex, drugs and rock-and-roll' *avant la lettre*. Crucial differences in the lifestyles and worldviews of the men and women on this stage were overlooked in his narrative of the freedom-loving 'Asconans'.

The catalogue of Szeemann's exhibition *Monte Verità – Berg der Wahrheit* had a very programmatic German subtitle, here translated into English as "Local Anthropology as a Contribution to the Rediscovery of a New Age Sacral Topography." The exhibition itself was structured around the themes of anarchism, life reform, sexual revolution, the Eranos circle and the visual and expressive arts. Szeemann asked German, Swiss and Italian political and social historians, social scientists, art critics and art historians, architects, artists and writers to participate in his project. The exhibition in the Kunsthaus Zürich during the winter of 1978-1979 was very successful,



**Figure 2.** The Temple of the New Life; central house of the sanatorium, built in 1904, which had a restaurant, a library and a music room. The interior, designed by Henri Oedenkoven, had Art nouveau elements. On top of the building was a terrace for nude sun bathing. Right on the staircase: Ida Hoffmann; third pillar from the left: Henri Oedenkoven; and sixth pillar from the left: Cornelis Gabes Gouma; 1904 (photo: private collection, Ascona).

showing Monte Verità as more of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* than a “New Age Sacral Topography.” Its success led to the foundation of a permanent exhibition of the story of Monte Verità at the complex on the mountain itself – to be more precise – in the Casa Anatta, the original wooden house used by Henri Oedenkoven and Ida Hofmann. This has meant that the complex is no longer dominated by the new Hotel Monte Verità, built in Bauhaus style (the modern architectural style par excellence) in 1928.<sup>25</sup> Szeemann himself was an inspired collector of objects, documents, photographs, graphic art and so on, which could be connected to the history of Monte Verità and its colonists and visitors, and he also travelled around the world to interview people who had recollections of the years that Henri and Ida managed the resort.<sup>26</sup>

Let us now return to the question of how this case study of Monte Verità can provide us with a deeper understanding of the transformation of the cultural, religious and spiritual landscape of Europe around 1900. From a historical-anthropological perspective, with a keen eye for the interplay of narratives (discourses) and practices, we can identify at least three models of identification in the interwoven lives of the men and women who were searching for a New Life in the experimental community of Monte Verità: Tolstoyan-Vegetarian, Theosophic and Anarchistic-Utopian. The first two models especially had feminist and eroticizing traits. These three models of identification can also be used to understand the ongoing fascination for Monte Verità and the literary construction of a Monte Verità myth.

Was Monte Verità indeed a microcosm of European intellectual culture? It is not very difficult to recognize Philip Blom’s dynamics and the uncertainty of Belle Époque European culture in this case study of Monte Verità. In his chapter “Dreams and Visions,” Blom points to Tolstoy as the first prophet of the New Life and mentions Friedrich Nietzsche as the second. Blom finds that young people in Germany and Austria-Hungary, especially from Munich and Vienna, were much more attracted to alternative lifestyles than those from France or England. As examples he provides brief portraits of Fanny von Reventlow, Gustav Gräser (whom he quite

<sup>25</sup> Nicoletta and Othmar Birkner-Gossen, “Zur Baugeschichte von Monte Verità,” in: Szeemann, *Monte Verità*, 121-125. The Dutch nobleman Eduard von der Heydt asked the Berlin architect Emil Fahrenkamp to design this new building, in which the baron also kept his art collection, including non-western and sacral art objects.

<sup>26</sup> Enno van der Eerden, *Ascona, bezield paradys* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bas Lubberhuizen, 2011), 328.

misleadingly typifies as the founder, in the name of universal love, of the nature commune of Monte Verità) and Fidus (Hugo Höppener), who drew the naked sun-worshippers. Nevertheless, Blom's narrative of Life Reform experiments focuses a little too much on pathology and sex and, more importantly, he has no eye for the ambivalent relationship that the Life Reform movement had with modernity.

What this case study also shows are the complex relationships and tensions between, on the one hand, the aspirations of world-improving colonists and, on the other, the market-economic realities that they were confronted with in creating institutions that had to deliver and guarantee their food, clothing, education, sexual freedom and health as elements of the Truth of a New Life. It would therefore be quite misleading to interpret the Monte Verità experiment as just another romantic 'back-to-nature' phenomenon. Schwab argues convincingly that this natural health resort project was strongly embedded in the context of modern sanatorium culture and well-to-do tourism to sunny mountain areas, which is also apparent in its advertising campaigns.<sup>27</sup> It also reflected a spurt in the modern, individualized culture of the body, made concrete in sunbathing and hiking, ideologically interwoven with a philosophy of natural health and fitness. In addition, the Tolstoyan movement in Europe could profit from an international network of reporters, publishers and printers who produced and distributed, at low cost, enormous numbers of Tolstoy's publications. When Tolstoy died in November 1910, not only was the entire Russian nation rapidly informed by the press, but the local journal for Locarno and Ascona also brought out a special edition.<sup>28</sup> Tolstoy's followers in Switzerland seemed to be in shock: "We as vegetarians have lost our greatest comrade of all times, literature one of its greats, and mankind its most noble teacher, patriarch and prophet."<sup>29</sup>

## Final Remarks

The New Life in its Monte Verità version was just one of the outcomes of what we can now understand in retrospect as a plurality of new, modern

<sup>27</sup> Schwab, *Monte Verità*, 259-266.

<sup>28</sup> William Wickel, *The Death of Tolstoy. Russia on the Eve. Astapovo Station, 1910* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> *Locarno-Ascona Bote. Zeitschrift für Freunde und Anhänger naturgemässer, vegetarischer Lebensweise* (15 December, 1910).

forms of 'light asceticism'. I would like to emphasize the concept of 'plurality' here. Those seeking a new life on Monte Verità could practise the same forms of physical exercise together, while having underlying ideas which differed widely. Some saw the body as a sacred temple, while others considered it a vehicle of individual strength and beauty, or simply enjoyed physical effort in leisure time. Rather detached from the public sphere, this light version of asceticism, with its individualistic tendency, indeed reminds us strongly of Foucault's metaphor of "technologies of the self," referring to reflective and voluntary practices by which humans seek to transform themselves. In his rich and informative study, *Zuiverheid en decadentie. Over de grenzen van de burgerlijke cultuur in West-Europa 1870-1914* ("Purity and Decadence. On the frontiers of bourgeois culture in Western Europe 1870-1914"), the Dutch cultural historian Arnold Labrie argued that the Life Reform movement rejected narrow-minded bourgeois morality and pleaded for a 'puritan, ascetic lifestyle', including "an aesthetic, 'natural' form of sensuality." However, beneath the cry for a more free and natural lifestyle, Labrie conjectures (referring to Mary Douglas' classical anthropological monograph *Purity and Danger*), lay an urge for order and control, which could contribute to the delimitation of their own uncertain identities.<sup>30</sup>

Today, Monte Verità hosts a hotel and conference centre. However, visitors will still find some sites and objects at the complex that take them back to the days of the wooden cabins and nude sunbathing, to the practices of self-realization by men and women who once desperately sought the New Life. The latest attraction at the conference centre is a renovated old cabin, recently transformed into a Japanese teahouse surrounded by a Japanese tea garden. Here, for around 40 Swiss francs, one can participate in a complete Japanese tea ceremony, including tea tasting and a guided tour of the Zen Garden, undertaken by Japanese women and a retired German teacher, who initiate the visitor into the secrets of the tea leaf and the ritual consumption of tea. Monte Verità still offers many truths.

<sup>30</sup> Arnold Labrie, *Zuiverheid en decadentie. Over de grenzen van de burgerlijke cultuur in West-Europa 1870-1914* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2001), 149; idem, 'Purity and Danger in Fin-de-siècle Culture: a Psychohistorical Interpretation of Wagner, Stoker and Zola, *Psychoanalytische Perspectieven*, 20/2 (2002), 261-274; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).



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