

Supervisor's review of the Bachelor's Thesis

Candidate: Erin Picardy

Title of the thesis: *"We are Committed to Our Success": NXIVM from an Anthropological Perspective*

Study Programme: Liberal Arts and Humanities, Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, Prague.

Supervisor: Mgr. Veronika Seidlová, Ph.D.

Erin Picardy's thesis represents an interesting contribution to anthropology of ritual and new religious movements. She focuses on NXIVM, an organization that existed from 1998 to 2018 and described itself as a human potential movement. With thousands of members led by Keith Raniere, this organization was centered in Albany, USA. However, Picardy understands NXIVM to be a new religious movement that also operated as a multilevel marketing company.

First, I would like to contextualize Erin Picardy's work. Erin attended my courses Diploma Seminar and Anthropology of Ritual in 2020/21. From the beginning, she insisted on NXIVM as a topic of her thesis, which would be theoretically grounded in anthropology. (Erin reflects on her initial interest and position in the Introduction, p. 2-4). As NXIVM doesn't officially exist anymore, with its leader being sentenced to 120 years of imprisonment, it was clear that we would have to rely on the unobtrusive methods of data collection only, specifically on the analysis of existing documents. Erin found three usable published primary sources - auto-biographies of three former members - representing a promising and homogeneous data sample for the purposes of qualitative analysis. After careful consideration of predominantly other methodological and theoretical aspects, we decided that Erin would elaborate this topic into a thesis. Since then, Erin kept surprising me with her systematic, diligent and energetic approach to her research. She was willing to learn and kept incorporating my comments while editing numerous drafts of her chapters. The result is a thoughtful text which presents qualitative data in an extensive, systematic, and engaging way while aiming for in-depth analysis with the help of existing anthropological theories.

Erin Picardy's text is structured typically. In the first chapter, she thoroughly discusses her theoretical and methodological frameworks as interconnected. Firstly, she presents the current state of research on NXIVM, which has been published in the discourse of sociology of religion, mainly the very recent work of sociologist Susan Raine (2021) who conceptualizes NXIVM while utilizing Susie Scott's 'reinventive institution' thesis, one that was built upon the earlier Erving Goffman's well-known concept of the 'total institution'. Raine's research has become one of the two main theoretical pillars of Erin Picardy's thesis.

We read that the student's interest in NXIVM has been centered around three former members' perspectives and the meanings they give to their experiences with the institution. To move away from the scandalous part of the topic toward the original motivations of the chosen actors, Erin Picardy is especially interested in the narratives about the start of the actors' involvement with the institution. That's why she narrows her focus on the "Five-Day" entrance course/workshop. She understands the course to be an initiation ritual into a reinventive institution, which developed its social values, norms as well as hierarchy, performed through various invented rituals. Therefore, she connects the literature on NXIVM and RIs with literature on anthropological theories on ritual (van Gennep, Turner, Hüsken, etc.), specifically, Turner's

concept of *communitas*, *liminality*, and *liminoid* become the second theoretical pillar of her thesis. Thus, Erin Picardy builds a robust basis, on which she formulates her research problem (p. 14). She asks how the selected three authors describe and understand NXIVM as a social institution as well as how they describe and understand the Five-Day course. In the same chapter, she convincingly discusses the methodological steps chosen to answer her questions.

The second and third chapters represent the core of Erin Picardy's thesis. She convincingly presents and interprets the data collected and analyzed by her, while applying the theoretical concepts mentioned above. If the second chapter shows how her data confirmed the results of the latest sociological research on NXIVM, specifically Raine's (2021), the third chapter offers a new, anthropological perspective on the data and NXIVM in general, culminating in 3.5, where the student convincingly presents even her analytical model, which combines the two interpretative frameworks. According to her, the NXIVM experience could be interpreted as existing on interstitial continuums of reinventive to total and 'liminal' to 'liminoid' which represents the fluidity of the NXIVM members' experiences and involvement as described in the selected autobiographies. The student provides plenty of data examples to support her argument. This aspect adds further value to Erin Picardy's thesis.

The reviewed work also fulfills all the formal requirements and benefits from an excellent level of academic language and style.

The final assessment of the bachelor's thesis

After reviewing Erin Picardy's bachelor's thesis, I recommend it for defense and suggest evaluating it with a grade of excellent.

In Hradec Králové, September 4, 2022

Mgr. Veronika Seidlová, Ph.D.