

**Plumage From Pegasus:  
Our Feynman Who Art in Heaven...**  
by Paul Di Filippo

“[Ettore Majorana’s] promising career was cut short with his sudden disappearance at the age of 31 during a boat trip between Palermo and Naples in Italy. His body was never found despite several investigations, and opinion is divided on whether he committed suicide, was kidnapped, or changed his identity and started a new life.

“Now, theoretical physicist Oleg Zaslavskii ... is suggesting that the ambiguity surrounding his fate was part of an elaborate illusion engineered by Majorana himself to demonstrate quantum superposition.... Majorana wanted to mirror the paradox with events in his own life....”

—“The man who was both alive and dead,” *New Scientist*, 5 August 2006.

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Covering the religion beat for a big city newspaper, I thought I had encountered pretty much every possible variation in mainstream faith, and every minor cult imaginable. Among the major religions, I had interviewed and sympathetically written up worshippers from Jehovah’s Witnesses to Mormons, Transcendental Meditators to Wiccans, Nichiren Buddhists to Scientologists, Moslems to Shintoists. Once I had even spoken to Cardinal Ratzinger, before he became the Pope. We had been at a charity banquet together and I had asked him to pass the salt. But still....

Yet none of my fieldwork had prepared me for the Majoranists.

My editor called me in that eventful day and brusquely gave me my new assignment.

“Apparently there’s some kind of strange new church on the corner of Hoyle and Wickramasinghe. Why don’t you check it out?”

Armed with a small digital voice recorder, a backup notebook, and my tattered copy of *Larson’s New Book of Cults*, I set out.

As soon as the taxi discharged me, I knew I was in for a unique experience.

The building hosting the new church literally hurt my eyes.

I couldn't seem to focus on its shape. Rooms and wings and extensions appeared to sprout and dissolve, coming and going. Eventually I gathered an impression of some kind of matrix of cubes adjoining each other at impossible angles.

Finally, by closing my eyes and advancing blindly up the walkway, I was able to attain the front door and ring a bell.

When I sensed the door swinging open, I raised my eyelids.

The person facing me, with an utterly normal reception room backgrounding him, was a young, brown-haired man of average appearance, wearing a white robe. The front of his robe bore a single large black lowercase "n."

"Hello," said the man pleasantly. "I'm Nick, a Neutron. Welcome to the First Majoranist Temple. Won't you come in, please?"

I stepped inside and the door swung closed.

I introduced myself to Nick and explained my mission. He reacted very enthusiastically.

"This is wonderful! Our religion has never had any publicity before, and we're eager to attract converts. I'll be happy to answer any questions you might have."

"Well, first—what kind of structure is this?"

"Oh, that's simple. It's a four-dimensional tesseract. A hypercube. Have you ever read Heinlein's '—And He Built a Crooked House—'?"

"No, I can't say I have...."

"Well, do so! You'll learn all you need to know. But surely our church building is less interesting than our congregation and beliefs."

"Yes, you're right of course. I believe you called yourself a 'Majoranist'...?"

"That's correct." Nick proceeded to explain the life story of Ettore Majorana, the man who had inspired their cult.

“So,” I said, “you worship this scientist for his dedication to his field...?”

“Not at all. We merely regard him as a prophet and saint, the rock upon which our church was founded. What we worship is the Standard Model.”

“The Standard Model of what?”

Nick made an exasperated face. “There is only one Standard Model, and that’s the current consensus paradigm of modern physics.”

“You mean, all that stuff about subatomic particles?”

“Precisely. Although your crude summary of the subject of our faith hardly does it justice. The Standard Model is, more elegantly put, mankind’s best apprehension and summation and understanding of how creation works. Can you conceive of a better text for governing one’s life, or a more fit object of worship?”

“I don’t make judgments about anyone’s beliefs, Nick. Why don’t you just continue to explain things to me, as you’d like our readers to hear?”

“Very well. I’ll give you a tour of our various halls of worship.”

We set off across the reception room, heading toward an arched exit. When I stepped through the arch, I felt twisted through a dozen different dimensions. Suddenly I found myself in a dimly lit room not previously visible through the opening.

Tightly bunched trios of people, all in white robes adorned with various Greek and Roman letters, interspersed the room.

“All of our postulants begin as quarks,” explained Nick. “The most primal particles. Strange, charm, up, down, top, bottom. They seek to shape their mentalities so as to empathetically grok this lowest level of creation.”

“Why are they all knotted up in threes?”

“Because that’s how real quarks aggregate, in unbreakable sets of three.”

Peering through the dimness, I realized that each knot of three concealed a fourth person in the middle. I inquired about the identity of these hidden souls.

“Oh, those are  $W$  and  $Z$  bosons. They mediate the weak force that holds the quarks together.”

It all looked and sounded rather kinky to me, and I suspected that perhaps the Majoranists were another sex cult like so many before them.

But if these were orgiasts, they were stolid and dispassionate, standing motionless with no groping. I felt very confused.

Leaving the bland groups behind, we made another shocking transition, and this time I found myself in a large, bright, airy hall. The hall was filled with a tremendous number of people, most of them zipping to and fro.

“We call this room the ‘Cloud Chamber.’ After graduating from quark status,” explained Nick, “our postulants become fermions and bosons of various sorts, depending on their innate qualities. Electrons, muons, protons, leptons. Photons, gravitons and Higgs bosons. At least we think there are some Higgs bosons present—no one’s ever quite seen one. But in any case, they mingle in a kind of undifferentiated cosmic soup, akin to the universal cosmic state some time after the Big Bang. Then, gradually, they settle out into atoms and molecules.”

I observed the chaotic scene for a while. It resembled recess at a Montessori school. Then I asked, “Can I see the next stage too, please?”

Nick waved me off. “Oh, it’s very boring at that point, I’m afraid. After the phase change, it’s all mere chemistry and biology.”

“Do you mind if I interview another Majoranist?”

“Well, most of my co-religionists are very energetic at this stage, but you’re welcome to try.”

I approached several candidates, but they all ignored me and raced off, hither and thither. Nick laughed at my efforts.

“Good luck capturing a neutrino! They don’t interact with anyone! We neutrons are about the only ones who are slow and solid enough to conduct a conversation.”

So I sought out another Majoranist wearing a lowercase “n” and interviewed her. She confirmed everything that Nick had told me.

The tumult of the Majoranist “service” was giving me a headache. I asked Nick if we could adjourn to the reception area, and he agreed.

Back in the anteroom, alone with Nick, I said, “It seems as if your church features no hierarchy. Don’t you have leaders of any sort? Wise men and women who decide matters of doctrine?”

“Why, yes, we do. The Constants.”

“The Constants?”

“The Standard Model acknowledges several universal constants. The speed of light in a vacuum, the fine-structure constant, Newton’s gravitational constant. Then there are the ones named after Planck, Dirac, Boltzmann, Bohr, von Klitzing, Josephson, Fermi, and others.”

“You’re saying that certain Majoranists attain the rank of Constant then?”

Nick’s face acquired a dreamy, reverential look, like that of a teenager coming face-to-face with a pop idol. “Yes. It’s a status all of us aspire to. But although many are called, few are chosen.”

“Well, I believe I’ve learned enough to write a feature on your church. If you’d show me out now, please....”

“Certainly.”

Nick conducted me to what appeared to be the same door through which I had entered from the corner of Hoyle and Wickramasinghe. But when I stepped through, I found myself in Chicago, half a continent away.

After some tribulations I eventually made my way back home and began to write up my piece on the Majoranists. But in researching the Standard Model I discovered some puzzling things that caused me to return to the church.

Nick greeted me on the doorstep once again. I cautiously did not enter.

“Nick, I need to ask you some questions. What about string theory? What about quantum loop gravity? What about various GUTs? These are all rival theories that contradict the Standard Model.”

Nick became enraged. He wiggled his hands through the air, sketching out what I later discovered was a complex Feynman diagram.

“Heretics! Blasphemers! Go! You are no longer welcome here!”

So I left. And because I never got my questions answered, I never wrote the article.

I was just thankful I wasn't attending a Majoranist service when their temple folded up and vanished.