
FREEDOM TO SURRENDER WITH BHAGWAN

by

Eileen Barker

There are, of course, Methodists who commit murder, Catholics who run guns, Anglicans who smuggle heroin, Jews who rob old ladies and Baptists who turn to prostitution. We do not, however, expect the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Rabbi or the Nonconformist minister to advocate such behaviour in the name of his (or her) God - not today, not in civilised, contemporary society. Criminal acts such as these are not considered part and parcel of any established, mainline, orthodox, traditional, 'proper' religion. If a member of such a religion should happen to fail, that is unfortunate but unlikely to be considered the direct outcome or responsibility of the sinner's faith. It may, indeed, be assumed that had the sinner been more faithful, more diligent in godly observance, the sin would not have been committed.

But what about practices promoted by the new religious movements - or 'cults', as they are more popularly termed in the media? What about the Manson murders? What about the mass suicide of and murders by members of the People's Temple in Guyana? What about the Children of God's 'flirty fishing'? What about the 'Heavenly Deception' practised by the Unification Church Moonies? What about the murders, the child abuse, the drug trafficking and the stock-piling of armaments said to have been perpetrated by some ISKCON (Hare Krishna) gurus? And

what about the recent goings-on in Rajneeshpuram, the 64,229-acre ranch in Oregon in which Bhagwan Rajneesh and his followers settled after the Bhagwan's flight from the ashram in Poona that had, itself, been the focus of both local and international attention?

Altogether, thirty-four Rajneeshes, including Rajneesh himself, have been charged with twelve different types of State and Federal charges. They include attempted murder, first-degree assault, second-degree assault, first degree arson, burglary, racketeering, harbouring a fugitive, electronic eavesdropping, immigration conspiracies, lying to the US authorities, and criminal conspiracy. (Milne p. 313)

A lot of rubbish is talked about the new religions. The sins of one are frequently heaped upon all. Very often, dual standards are applied - what passes without comment in orthodox or traditional religion is the focus of excited disapproval when perceived as part of a 'cult'. **Member of Bizarre New Cult Found Guilty of Child Abuse** makes a much better story than **Anglican Found Guilty of Child Abuse**. The religious affiliation of the child abuser is almost certain to be mentioned in the former case, but very unlikely to be remarked upon in the latter. Such asymmetry of visibility results in

disapproved behaviour commonly being assumed to be typical of cult membership and atypical of the membership of conventional religions.

That said, however, not only do new religions have in their midst those who perform actions that most of us would undoubtedly consider anti-social, but also a number of the movements would, themselves, appear to promote the perpetration of such acts.

Why should this be so? Unlike several previous waves of new religious movements, the present wave cannot be referred to as the religions of the oppressed or socially inadequate. On the contrary, a number of researchers have demonstrated that the membership of the cults is not of particularly weak or pathetic persons; many of those joining the contemporary new religions are from good homes, well-educated and of above average intelligence. They tend to be idealistic people in their twenties or early thirties who are eager to transform themselves into more godly and/or spiritual persons, often with an overwhelming desire to make the world a better place for us all to live in. Although few have a clear idea of what the better place would actually look like, most are aware of and would like to banish the evils of materialism, drug abuse, prostitution, pornography, greed, murder and misery.

It is, of course, dangerous to generalise too widely. The kinds of people who take Rajneeshee sannyas differ from those who become either Krishna devotees or Moonies, and those who died with Jim Jones in Guyana were predominantly poor

blacks and they included among their number a substantial number of children and the elderly. While Moonies and Krishna devotees are enjoined to lead ascetic, monogamous or celibate lives, Rajneeshees and the Children of God have been encouraged to experiment with numerous sexual partners. The events that led to Bhagwan's fleeing prosecution are very different from those that led to the Jonestown tragedy, and these again differ from the situation that resulted in either Moses Berg's organising his 'flirty fishing' campaign, or the murders associated with the ISKCON settlement in West Virginia.

But while we must recognise differences, we might also recognise that people who join movements which offer simple answers to the problems of their followers and/or the world and whose members live in relatively closed communities, would seem to run a fairly high risk of finding themselves performing actions which, according to their own erstwhile standards, would be anathema - or even criminal.

Two recent books about Bhagwan and the Rajneeshee movement offer us several clues as to the kinds of processes that might be involved in such a phenomenon. **Bhagwan: The God That Failed 1)** is written by Hugh Milne, a Scottish osteopath who joined Bhagwan back in the early Poona days. He became one of his Master's most trusted devotees and his personal bodyguard, but was eventually ousted from the elite circle that surrounded Bhagwan after the move to America early in 1981. Despite various misgivings about the way things were working out, he stayed with the new regime, led by a formidable lady called Ma

Prem Sheela, until late 1982. The break-up of the Oregon ranch in 1985 was precipitated, first by Sheela's defection, then by Bhagwan's attempt to escape prosecution by fleeing from the country in a Lear jet.

The book has no academic pretensions. It is easy to read; it is anecdotal and only occasionally makes an analytical point about what was going on; there are no references and no index, but there is a useful glossary and a cast list. The style and general tenor are set by the cover which, on the front, has a picture of Bhagwan wearing one of his many bejewelled wrist watches and apparently making some utterly simple and/or deeply significant point to a devoted sannyasin and/or the world at large. The back of the cover has a picture that resulted in my being held up by an incredulous customs official on a recent visit to Warsaw; it shows Hugh Milne in a flowing red robe, standing in a praying position, knee-deep in water underneath a waterfall; in the foreground, his wife is meditating in the lotus position with nothing to clothe her damp body save the mala with Bhagwan's image that falls between her magnificently rounded breasts.

Judith Thompson and Paul Heelas have written a very different book on roughly the same subject. 2) Describing themselves as anthropologists from the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster, they provide a comprehensive account of Bhagwan's teachings and describe life in Medina, the erstwhile Rajneesh commune in East Anglia. They also tell us, more briefly, about some sannyasins whom Thompson studied

in the Lancaster area, referring *en passant* to Poona and, in somewhat more detail, to Rajneeshpuram. Thompson and Heelas tend in their descriptive chapters to quote, without immediate comment, the enthusiastic accounts that the sannyasins give of their life. While reading Milne's book, one sometimes wonders how much his bitterness about the movement might colour the picture he gives of it; reading Thompson and Heelas, one occasionally wonders whether they might not be over naive in their presentation of life in a Rajneesh commune. Take, for example, the point when they tell us how Rajneeshpuram was chosen because of the ecological damage that it had suffered, and how this challenge was met with such success by the sannyasins. Milne tells a very different story of how the ranch came to be bought and of the bungling that was endemic throughout its construction. When, however, one comes to their two final chapters, it becomes clear that Thompson and Heelas, like Milne, are very well aware that the story which they tell is, at least in part,

one of tension, paradox, contradiction and intrigue. Both books are concerned to describe and explain a situation in which those seeking to escape from what they saw as a repressive, authoritarian and materialistic society, found themselves in a movement that 'became as totalitarian, repressive and materialistic as anything its adherents were attempting to break away from. 1) (Milne p.17)

Taken together, the two books help us to understand what neither book by itself explains entirely satisfactorily; that is, how the

movement could (and still can) convincingly offer unprecedented freedom to its members at the same time as it succeeded in controlling their lives so effectively that Rajneeshpuram could come to be described (albeit by a bitterly disillusioned ex-sannyasin) as

Totally regimented, alarmingly conformist in its own ranks, militaristic, a mini-empire ruled by a recluse with a penchant for very expensive toys. (Milne p.22)

Interestingly, it is the sympathetic outsiders, Thompson and Heelas, who give us the clearest picture of the way in which the beliefs and ideals of the movement seem to convince the sannyasins that they are free at the very point when they are being controlled, while the non-social scientist, Milne, shows us how the system (the power and communication structures) of the movement became progressively constraining. While it is difficult to appreciate from his account just what it was that held Milne in the movement for so long, it is difficult to understand from the Thompson and Heelas account what form the control and criminal behaviour actually took.

Granted that Bhagwan has a charismatic appeal for his followers - and most of them profess to having a deep love for as well as complete trust in their Master - one would expect him to have an important influence on their lives. Charismatic authority implies, by definition, that followers empower their leader to control every part of their lives, not according to precedence or bureaucratic rules, but in accordance with the special knowledge or grace which they

believe is his and his alone. Thus, sannyasins who accept that Bhagwan is indeed an Enlightened Being, endowed with a very special charisma, may grant to him the right - will glory in his being willing - not only to decide where they should live, what kind of work (worship) they should perform, but also with whom they should sleep and whom they may marry. Furthermore, one cannot expect consistency in the teachings of the charismatic leader; nor can one rely on there being any continuity in the place one lives, the work (worship) one does or the person one sleeps with.

... I have total faith in his insight. The questions come up but they go away as well, and it doesn't matter that I don't always understand the reasons behind things, (Thompson and Heelas p.117)

But following Bhagwan is not a cheap pursuit. Rajneesh centres offer courses that provide the techniques by which one can become liberated from the inhibitions and constraints of modern society, and these can cost hundreds or even thousands of dollars. Starting in Poona, there are plenty of reports of sannyasins engaging in prostitution and drug-running in order to cover their living expenses and the fee for the next course. But while such dubious fund-raising ventures were (at least initially) little more than an indirect consequence of Bhagwan's charismatic appeal, more direct consequences were to follow from his teachings and the organisation that grew up around him.

What Thompson and Heelas illustrate with a vivid clarity is the extent which Bhagwan's teachings

play a crucial role in creating an environment within which the key concepts of freedom and surrender are intimately intertwined. Sannyasins join the movement in search of freedom and in doing so, they are told to surrender themselves completely and utterly to Bhagwan. Only through such total surrender can they free themselves of all the constraints that have prevented their becoming - or, more importantly, **being** - their true, real selves.

If you surrender partially, you are not surrendering. Surrender is always total. At the moment you surrender totally, things begin to change. (Thompson and Heelas p.41)

In some movements - especially those (such as the Unification Church or ISKCON) which are more obviously religious - surrender to the new leader implies taking on a new body of knowledge with a new system of ethics. In so far as the sannyasins surrender successfully, however, they can no longer appeal to the ego, to rational thought or previously held standards of behaviour.

For myself, after a few months in Poona, this 'killing my ego' became a regular struggle between my old 'I, my sensible, thinking personality, and my new, not-thinking, floating 'being'. I was living in an inner ecstasy where the surroundings did not matter, where I had no will left of my own (or rather a very confused will). (Thompson and Heelas p.68)

Beyond what might seem like an unbridled hedonism and a certainty that there can be no certainty of what might next be asked of one, nothing concrete in the way of standards or knowledge takes the place of what has been relinquished.

The moment you are a sannyasin, you are totally at freedom. It means you have taken a decision and this is the last decision, to live in freedom. The moment you are initiated into sannyas, you are initiated into an uncharted, unplanned future. Now you are not tethered to the past. (Thompson and Heelas p.42)

In such a situation, individuals make two decisions for themselves. But one cannot live in a world of utter chaos. Some sort of order is needed to make sure that the basic necessities of life are met. Food has to be cooked; clothes must be washed; loos must be cleaned - and money must be collected. All this provides a very understandable rationale for someone taking charge and making sure that the centre runs smoothly.

There are rules here, like the one most people follow of driving on the right hand side of the road... If we all had motor cars and just drove anywhere, I would PRAY for somebody to make a rule so we could all drive safely. That is to say, rules don't restrict my freedom. (Thompson and Heelas p.104)

And, to make the separation from ego even more complete, it is part of

the philosophy that one should not identify with any particular job:

*You don't **become** a boss or an underling, a doctor or an accountant or a cleaner. These are just jobs you are doing now, and tomorrow you could be doing something completely different. (Thompson and Heelas p.99)*

So far, so good. There does not seem to be anything particularly sinister about such an arrangement. How can such free surrender lead to complicity in far more anti-social or criminal behaviour?

Space does not permit a detailed analysis of the ways in which the abuse of power developed first in Poona and then, more obviously under Sheela's rule at Rajneeshpuram. Let us, however, list some of the circumstances which contributed towards the collapse of Rajneeshpuram, if not of the movement as a whole.

Apart from the adoration that Bhagwan inspired in his followers, the friendship and community life of the sannyasins has undoubtedly been a major force for keeping many of those who might otherwise have left, loyal to the movement. This loyalty was reinforced by an increasingly sharp distinction being drawn between those inside and those outside the movement. A spiral of fear and distrust was built up in which the reactions of the locals to the sannyasins and of the sannyasins to the locals became increasingly antagonistic, thus proving to both sides the righteousness of their own and the wickedness of the other's position - a

perspective that tended to add credence to the belief that the end (of preserving and fostering Bhagwan and his enlightened community) could justify increasingly questionable means - means such as the sprinkling of salmonella poisoning in local salad bars, setting fire to an office, holding files on the Rajneesh organization and, allegedly a number of attempted (and possibly some successful) murders.

The claim that the means could justify the end was also used within the ranch. Milne tells numerous stories of the way that sannyasins were made to labour for long, long hours without adequate food or medical treatment. He also tells the story of how one of his friends was swept away down a river and Sheela would not allow him or anyone else the use of facilities, or even the necessary time, to conduct a proper search.

Why do people not leave under such circumstances? Some do, of course; but to do so can be a very difficult decision to reach. There is likely to be a feeling of deserting one's friends, and fear of the outside can be reinforced by uncertainty at the thought (after perhaps years of constant companionship and dependency) of having to make one's own decisions, without friends, money or employment. Milne describes a couple of occasions on which he tried to break away from the movement but found himself drawn back. When he did eventually sever all ties, he tells us how he was both ostracised and pursued on Sheela's (and Bhagwan's) instructions, and how it was only after spending some

time receiving psychiatric treatment that he was able to settle down to a normal life. He also reports that, in 1985, some time after he had left:

Dissatisfaction and dissent on the ranch, though silent, was now rife. To prevent people leaving, mind-altering drugs began to be prescribed to treat people who made it known that they wanted to leave ... One old friend of mine ... made the mistake of telling Sheela that he was thinking of leaving ... He was given Haldol, a powerful drug which produces a comatose state for up to forty-eight hours. His girlfriend was so shocked when she saw him drugged out that they both left secretly a week later. (Milne pp.290-1)

While a sharp them/us divide has the effect of drawing the community closer together against the common enemy, loyalty to the movement was increasingly interpreted as loyalty to the elite group of leaders who surrounded Bhagwan and prevented all but a few, specially privileged sannyasins from having any direct contact with him (although many sannyasins would claim that he knew exactly what they were thinking and was able to influence them - even if they were physically far removed from him). With the strengthening of this elite's hold over the commune, questioning of decisions came to be defined as disloyalty, and sannyasins were encouraged to report any 'subversive' words or actions to Sheela - who was now in a position to make life extremely unpleasant for those who attempted to thwart her every whim.

Eventually, she no longer relied merely on sannyasins' telling her about their fellows; she installed an elaborate system of electronic surveillance - that included a bug in Bhagwan's chair. Apparently, eleven sannyasins who knew about the wiretapping and bugging were kept in total isolation for months on the (false) pretext that the AIDS virus had been found in their bloodstream. One of these eventually died and, Milne reports, the Oregon State authorities believe that he may have been slowly poisoned. (Milne p. 295)

Sheela is now in prison, and Bhagwan, is back in Poona, surrounded once more by blissfully happy sannyasins. There is no doubt that both stand well and truly condemned by Milne. Thompson and Heelas are more ambiguous, but they do display a certain scepticism over just how impressively Bhagwan comes out of it all. There are, however, those who see the whole affair as just one more step on the path to Enlightenment.

On the penultimate page of their book, Thompson and Heelas quote the editor of **The Rajneesh Times** exonerating Bhagwan from all responsibility for what his followers did in Rajneeshpuram: "WE are responsible for everything". He concludes:

The rest of us 'who didn't do anything', are guilty of being too innocent. We watched and sometimes cooperated while Ma Anand Sheela and her fascist gang ran roughshod over our friends, us, and anyone else who got in their way.

But just because we were often wrong in our attitude doesn't mean that the Oregon politicians and press were right. To varying degrees, for different reasons, we all misunderstood the nature of the experiment, the nature of the man who was among us. We all proved what Bhagwan said. We are asleep. So whatever we see is dream, whatever we do is unconscious.

There was real nourishment, love and ecstasy at Rajneeshpuram.

Otherwise, no-one would have come and no-one would have stayed. Things which might have taken us lifetimes to get round to, we experienced at supersonic speeds. (Thompson and Heelas p.130)

Neither Milne's nor Thompson and Heelas' book will give us any definitive answers, but they are both recommended to those who believe that "WE are responsible" for learning from such dreams.

*Eileen Barker is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at L.S.E. Among her books on religion is the award winning **The Making of a Moonie**. Blackwell, 1984.*

References

1. Hugh Milne - **Bhagwan: The God That Failed**, London: Caliban, 1986.
 2. Judith Thompson and Paul Heelas - **The Way of the Heart: The Rajneesh Movement**, Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1986
-

TIMELESSNESS

To what end is end
itself a bend
to a beginning;
ringing
timeless ages
overlapping stages?

What is today
time saw it yesterday.
What is tomorrow
in exchange
to rearrange.

Time is fiction;
chiming diction
of illusion
of seeing
and being.

A state to mark
and follow dark
futility.
when utility
is strength of sight
and length of light.

Joe Cousins
