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Charisma and Abdication: A Study of the Leadership of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh¹

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This study attempts to apply Roy Wallis' model of a charismatic leader's four responses to institutionalization to the career of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, founder of a new religious movement. After outlining seven phases of Rajneesh's career which can be interpreted as different strategic responses to institutionalization, the conclusion is drawn that Wallis' model oversimplifies the relationship between charisma and institutionalization and is inadequate as a tool to explain the behavior of this particular leader. It is proposed that a fifth category, that of Abdication, be added to Wallis' four, and that a distinction between two aspects of charisma, the Performer and the Pastor, be drawn in order to understand this new category.

A study of the career of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the 55-year-old guru from India, reveals a leadership which constantly fluctuates in its style and in its authoritative claims. The history of his movement, the Rajneesh Foundation International (RFI), is remarkable for its abrupt changes in policy, and the varied and contradictory demands made upon its members. Due to his considerable personal charm and a certain dramatic flair, Rajneesh was able to render these divagations coherent and meaningful to his disciples for whom their leader's inconsistencies were an integral part of his charisma. As one member explained:

When you are with Bhagwan you never know what to expect. He takes you on a journey that is full of surprises and mystery. He says what he is experiencing at that moment, so he might say the opposite the next day. If you are looking for a dogma, a creed, you are wasting your time. He is a reflection of life itself which is a paradox and full of contradictions.

In order to interpret this pattern of unpredictable and apparently arbitrary change which has characterized Rajneesh's leadership, I will refer to Roy Wallis' theory of relationships between charisma and institutionalization which is outlined in his paper, "Charisma, Commitment, and Control in a New Religious Movement" (1982).

Wallis attempts to refine Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority, which he finds

1. The author wishes to thank Dr. Frederick Bird for suggesting the Responsibility/Performance model of charisma and for explaining Weber's various routes to institutionalization.

“relatively brief and not entirely lacking in ambiguity” (Wallis, 1982: 73). While Weber’s theory traces the various routes to bureaucratization or traditionalization after the leader’s death, Wallis is concerned with the living leader’s struggle to keep his or her charismatic authority untrammelled by the forces of institutionalization. Wallis focuses on the career of Moses David, the prophet-founder of the Children of God, a deviant Christian group which originated in California in 1968, and then analyzes the relationship between charisma and its “nemesis,” institutionalization, by identifying four possible responses of charismatic leaders to this problem. The responses are: Encouragement, Acquiescence, Displacement, and Resistance. Wallis then argues that the seemingly erratic behavior of “Mo” David can be interpreted as an example of Resistance; a deliberate strategy intended to undermine the attempts of his followers to stabilize and institutionalize his movement. He describes this response as follows:

. . . in which the charismatic leader foresees the threat of institutionalization subverting his authority and takes active and effective steps to forestall it (Wallis, 1982: 119).

In attempting to explain Rajneesh’s leadership as an example of Resistance, I encountered a series of obstacles which suggest that the relationship between charisma and institution building is more complex than Wallis’ four categories allow for. Although Rajneesh employed the strategy of Resistance at many points in his career, he also adopted the strategy of Encouragement. Wallis describes Encouragement as a process

in which the charismatic leader embraces the possibilities involved in institutionalization and actively directs the process in such a way as to control it and utilize institutionalized structures and procedures to buttress his authority, rather than allowing it to constrain him (Wallis, 1982: 117).

In outlining the seven phases of Rajneesh’s career, I have attempted to show that he vacillated between these two extremes. On the one hand he encouraged strong leaders within his movement and conferred upon them considerable power in decision-making. On the other hand he occasionally challenged them or destroyed their institutions if they were steering the movement in a direction not to his liking. Since these two policies are apparently contradictory responses to institutionalization, it is clear that Rajneesh’s case represents a different relationship between charisma and institution building than Mo’s.

The second difficulty in fitting Rajneesh’s case to Wallis’ model of Resistance, is that Rajneesh did not appear to share Mo’s desire to control and direct his followers’ lives. The outstanding example which illustrates this is Rajneesh’s announcement on September 26, 1985, that he was renouncing his role of guru and ending his religion, Rajneeshism. He advised his followers on this occasion to stop wearing red and the *mala* (necklace bearing Rajneesh’s photograph) which were symbols of initiation into the master-disciple relationship. This extraordinary gesture might appear to be an extreme case of Resistance, as it delivered the death blow to the institutions of the movement, but instead of strengthening the leader’s authority over his followers, it weakened it (see phase seven). Therefore I would like to propose that a fifth category be added to Wallis’ four which represents a new relationship between charisma and institutionalization. This I shall call Abdication. In order to explain the vacillations in Rajneesh’s leadership, to interpret the meaning of Abdication, and to explore the inner logic of this new category my strategy will be as follows:

(1) To describe the peculiar nature of Rajneesh’s charisma, and to examine the mechanisms whereby he protects and enhances it.

(2) To describe seven phases of Rajneesh's career, which represent different strategic responses to the problem of institutionalization and exhibit his tendency to vacillate between the two extremes of Resistance and Encouragement.

(3) To argue that a close examination of Rajneesh's career reveals that his incompatibility with the process of institutionalization arose not from his desire to exact total obedience from his followers (as was the case with "Mo"), but rather from a reluctance to assume the responsible, authorizing role. By distinguishing between two aspects of charismatic authority, (i) Performance, and (ii) Responsibility, I will attempt to prove that Rajneesh's behavior indicated a desire for the adulation, deference, and fame that come with performance, but a dislike for the responsibility that leadership entails. I will then argue that Rajneesh was a brilliant performer but a weak or recalcitrant pastor, and that he chose to delegate the responsible role to various members of his core group. His final gesture of Abdication I interpret as his solution to the problem of responsibility and of institutionalization, in that it enabled him to get rid of his fully committed followers, or "flock," while retaining his devoted (and rotating) audience.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on my involvement with the Montreal Rajneesh center as a participant-observer from October 1984 to September 1986. During this period I interviewed ten sannyasins and attended five therapy groups and various ritual and social events at the center. Initially my aim was to collect data for my Ph.D. dissertation on women in spiritual communes, but when Rajneeshpuram fell I became fascinated by Rajneesh himself. Throughout the exercise I managed to remain impervious to his charisma, but not to his charm. I feel it is important to note that while Wallis' theory is a useful tool for interpreting the history of the RFI, it is inadequate as a means of fathoming the inner workings of the complex and creative mind of a spiritual master. That is to say, this study is not meant to imply that Rajneesh is acting out of secular motives rather than responding to an inner religious drive.

THE NATURE OF RAJNEESH'S CHARISMA

Rajneesh was born in 1931 in Kuchwada, India, to a Jain family of wealthy cloth merchants. While teaching philosophy at the University of Jabalpur he laid the foundation for his career as a spiritual leader by giving lecture tours in which he expounded his eclectic and controversial ideas. He conducted meditation camps, and in 1966 resigned his teaching post to travel across India criticizing local religions and preaching that the individual was his own religion or god. In 1968 he delivered a series of lectures on sex as a meditative first step on the path to enlightenment, which attracted a large following of American and European tourists. By 1970 he had settled in Bombay and begun to initiate a group of disciples, which marked his transition from an intellectual critic of religion to a spiritual master.

If a leader's charisma can be measured by the number of his followers, Rajneesh's authority has been considerable, extending to approximately 350,000 *sannyasins*, or initiates, according to the claim of the *Rajneesh Times*, October 14, 1983. The *Oregonian* notes, "Figures supplied by Rajneesh officials and by outside observers . . . were often wildly different" and quotes an "insider's figure of 60,000" (*Oregonian*, 1985: 3). Rajneesh manifested his charisma through his "discourses" or public lectures, which have been transcribed

into several languages in over 350 books and also recorded on videocassette. These discourses have had an extraordinary effect on his followers. Several sannyasins I interviewed said they “fell in love with Bhagwan” through exposure to his discourses. Even his critics attest to the power of Rajneesh’s presence. Sally Belfrage, who wrote a rather disparaging account of life in the Rajneesh Ashram in India, confessed on viewing him in person, “He was AB-SO-LUTE-LY R-IVET-ING” (Belfrage, 1981: 131). The *Oregonian* claims it is his message rather than his presence which has attracted disciples:

Their guru’s lectures . . . tell his disciples to live life to its fullest, to abandon their own egos in favor of a communal consciousness and to view sex as . . . creative energy leading to enlightenment. Sin and guilt are not worth worrying about and everyone has the potential to realize a personal divinity through daily meditation and worship (*Oregonian*, 1985:2).

Rajneesh, however, corresponds to Weber’s model of the exemplary leader, not the ethical prophet.

. . . the prophet may be an exemplary man who, by his personal example, demonstrates to others the way to spiritual salvation, as in the case of the Buddha. The preaching of this type of prophet says nothing about a divine mission or an ethical duty, but rather directs itself to the self-interest of those who crave salvation, recommending to them the same path as he himself traversed (Eisenstadt, 1968: 263).

Rajneesh is the living example of his message of self-realization:

I am absolutely content. If I were to die this very moment my life would be complete (*The Way of the Heart*, 1984: videocassette).

His charismatic authority is based on his claim to be the “Enlightened One” who returns throughout the millennia to awaken spiritually an elite group of seekers. Many of his disciples believe they have resumed work with him begun in a previous life. Rajneesh stresses the notion that the master-disciple relationship transcends even the limitations of death.

Weber states:

The . . . leader may be required periodically to offer miraculous signs as proof of his powers in order to maintain [his followers’] commitment (Weber, 1947: 359).

A testimonial to Rajneesh’s power of maintaining relationships through the reincarnation cycle is offered by Ma Anand Vivek, an Englishwoman who has lived with him since 1971, whom he describes as his “caretaker.” Rajneesh claimed she was the reincarnation of his childhood sweetheart, Sashi, who, before she died in 1947, made him promise to wait for her return. Vivek states:

One of the first things Bhagwan said to me . . . was, “Do you remember me?” I went click! “I remember that you’re someone I loved very much” (Joshi, 1982: 107).

Unlike many well-known spiritual leaders who assume the role and image of father in relation to their followers (as, for example, Reverend Moon), Rajneesh is described by his disciples as a lover, and, paradoxically, a child. Although he appeared to be, at age 55, a frail

old man with long white hair and whiskers, his personality was that of a mischievous and intellectually precocious child. He was surrounded by his core group of attractive women who played the role of the doting (but sexually liberated and expressive) mother to the brilliant, capricious prodigy.

Wallis notes:

Since the charismatic identity is precarious, it must be protected against subversion or challenge by hiding the prophet away from general contact, carefully vetting all who may come into his presence, and immediately excluding those who do not display complete surrender (Wallis, 1982: 5).

To this end the core group at the ashram in India created a distance between Bhagwan and the large mass of his following. A bodyguard controlled access to the guru's presence. Sally Belfrage describes the procedure governing admission to the evening *darshan* at Poona:

At least half a dozen people are turned away from darshan every night, it seems, for failing to pass the sniff-at-the-gate test, which has become more stringent lately because one woman slipped through with a perceptible odor of perfume and it made Bhagwan sick the whole of the next day. Some people have been turned away. . . . I have washed my hair eight times. . . . Shiva, a red-bearded Scottish sannyasin who seems to be his chief bodyguard intones the drill before the smelling starts. Personal questions about Bhagwan are not permitted. Do not go nearer to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh than a meter. Do not touch him except his feet. If you are turned away, wash harder next time (Belfrage, 1981: 137ff).

An important feature of Bhagwan's special status (and regarded in the RFI as a sign of enlightenment) is his reputed autonomy and self-sufficiency. Throughout the RFI literature this notion is stressed. Stories of his childhood picture him as an independent, anti-authoritarian being who was impossible to influence or control. Even in infancy he was supposedly not dependent on his mother:

It is said that the child neither cried nor accepted any milk for the first three days (*Sannyas* 5, 1980: 8).

Bhagwan has described himself as follows:

I have never been initiated into society. I entered as an individual, and I have remained aloof and separate like an island (*Sannyas* 5, 1980: 10).

In this respect he remained distant from his sannyasins, whose communal lifestyle and encounter group experiences encourage gregarious behavior and physical and emotional intimacy.

*THE SEVEN PHASES OF RAJNEESH'S CAREER**Phase I—Initiation and Discipleship: Claiming Charisma*

In 1970 Rajneesh created his ritual of *initiation darshan* or “taking sannyas,” in which he touched initiates on the “third eye,” endowed them with Sanskrit names, gave each a *mala* (necklace of wooden beads bearing Rajneesh’s photograph) and required them to wear orange (later changed to red).

Through this ritual Rajneesh established a following and claimed a charismatic status as an enlightened master. He explained the meaning of initiation as a surrender of the ego to the master.

When you become a sannyasin I want to destroy that identity. . . . When all these identities have been destroyed you will know who you are: the unidentified, the nameless, the formless, the indefinable (Joshi, 1982: 17).

Rajneesh began to live in a close community of devoted followers which he termed his “buddhafield.”

To create a buddhafield, to create a *sangha* means you are now creating an alternate society. You are no longer a single individual; you are gathering power. . . . Now you can create a revolution (Joshi, 1982: 100).

Robin Theobald had observed that an “Attitude of complete submission is what is required of disciples who form part of the *Gemeinde*” (Wallis, 1982: 107). The buddhafield corresponds to Theobald’s description of the *Gemeinde* or household living in “an emotional form of communal relationship” with the leader. Spheres of authority are not clearly defined and the leader assigns duties on an *ad hoc* basis and intervenes at will. Members are chosen not for their skill or training, but rather, Weber argues, for their charismatic qualities. Wallis adds that an equally important quality is the intensity of their devotion. Rajneesh’s core group of women invariably described themselves as “in love with” their leader.

Phase II—From Acharya to Bhagwan: Building Charisma

In 1971 Rajneesh changed his name from *Acharya* (which means teacher) to *Bhagwan* (which means “blessed one” or “God”). Joshi narrates the event as follows:

I was known all over the country as Acharya. . . . I was teaching and travelling. That was just the introductory part of my work . . . one day the word teacher will not be enough. . . . Find something which is universal. . . . And then he found “Bhagwan” (Joshi, 1982: 112).

This change in title implies not only that he was claiming greater charisma, but that he affected a change in type as a spiritual leader. According to Frederick Bird’s typology of new religions (Needleman and Baker, 1978: 173), there are three types: Devotee, Apprentice, and Disciple, each of which features a different type of leader-follower relationship. The role of the apprentice leader is to be a teacher of techniques which the apprentice learns in order to tap a source of sacred power which is perceived as located within the self. The devotee type

leader is looked up to as a lord, avatar, or Second Coming and is perceived to be the transcendent source of sacred power to which the devotee must surrender in order to find salvation. What is interesting in the case of Rajneesh is that he managed to retain some of the characteristics of the apprentice group, such as each individual being the source of sacred power, while raising his own status to that of the most powerful type of leader, the devotee type. His reply to the question, "Why do you call yourself Bhagwan?" demonstrates this:

Because I am—and because you are—and because God is. . . . When I call myself God, I mean to provoke you, to challenge you. I am simply calling myself God so that you can also gather courage to recognize it. If you can recognize it in me, you have taken the first step in recognizing it in yourself (Joshi, 1982: 114).

Like the initiation ritual, this move was effective as a test of loyalty and served to weed out the less committed of his members:

. . . people who used to come to me to gather knowledge they stopped. The day I called myself Bhagwan they stopped. It was too much for their egos, somebody calling himself Bhagwan (Joshi, 1982: 113).

Phase III—The Poona Ashram: Encouragement

In 1974 Bhagwan moved from Bombay to Poona where he founded the Shree Rajneesh Ashram. The daily program began with the Dynamic Meditation, and in the evening Bhagwan would deliver his increasingly famous discourses. By 1975 western-style therapy groups were incorporated into the program and drew an international crowd of one to two thousand participants a week, according to the *Oregonian*. *Time* magazine reported that between 1974 and 1978 more than 50,000 seekers had tried the therapies at Poona (*Oregonian*, 1985: 9). The fast-growing membership and the transient population meant that the leader could no longer be personally available to his sannyasins, except for a small core group. Thus the problem of institutionalization arose. Bhagwan's response at this point of his career fits Wallis' category of *Encouragement*. Bhagwan encouraged growth and approved the efforts of his "power ladies" to establish an efficiently run ashram while trying to imbue the growing superstructure with his own personal mystique. The ubiquity of his photograph served this purpose. Besides being displayed on every disciple's chest in the *mala*, his smiling visage decorated the walls of the ashram, inviting Belfrage's comparisons to Orwell's Big Brother. Another strategy was to insist that Bhagwan was even *more* present to his disciples in his absence. For example, an empty chair was placed on the podium when he stopped directing the Dynamic Meditation. Joshi explains:

The master was present—but now his disciples had to feel Him on a more subtle level.

Bhagwan reassured them: "even if I am not here in the body, the contact will not be lost." This placed the onus on the followers to cultivate their awareness of his occult presence, and constituted a test of faith.

A strong core group of what Wallis would term "institution builders" ran the ashram with maximum efficiency—and they were sufficiently high-handed and dictatorial in their *modus operandi* to be labelled the "power ladies," and, by a disgruntled exsannyasin, as the "dowager duchesses." These women were chosen for their charismatic qualities which, in Bhagwan's terms, meant receptivity to his "energy." He explains in *The Book* that women are

superior to men because they are more receptive, less aggressive, and the essence of the mystic is receptivity. The *Oregonian* suggests that he preferred to work with women because they were more obedient than men and offered no competition.

Unlike Moses David, Bhagwan allowed his core group a considerable degree of power in decision-making and leadership, but at the same time he found ways to undermine their complacency and to maintain their dependence on his charisma, so as to discourage any tendency to develop independent signs of charisma. Of his personal secretary, Laxmi, who became the managing trustee of the Rajneesh Foundation, he said,

“Always remember that Laxmi never does anything on her own. She is the perfect vehicle, that is why she is chosen for this work. . . . Whatever is said she does” (Joshi, 1982: 102).

According to the *Oregonian* there are many indications that Bhagwan took care to keep his core group under control:

He chose the ashram’s department heads and pitted them against one another.

Although he delegated office duties to Laxmi, he was known to countermand her decisions.

There was a hierarchy, but no one was protected. . . . He was always the final word (*Oregonian*, 1985: 5).

At the early period of Poona, Bhagwan appears to have been in close touch with every aspect of the ashram. He would listen to reports from the individual therapy groups, offer personal advice, and perform the initiation darshans himself.

Bhagwan encouraged a healthy rivalry among his power ladies and prevented the formation of permanent offices (one of the perennial symptoms of institutionalization) by allowing them to oust each other from their posts:

Ex-sannyasins said Sheela edged out Prem Arup for the number two spot on Rajneesh’s office staff.

Bhagwan appeared to encourage competition and quarrels among the power ladies and allowed Sheela to oust Laxmi as his personal secretary (*Oregonian*, 1985: 7).

This strategy resembles Moses David’s tendency to demote or rotate his leaders, and is an example of Resistance to the process of institutionalization.

In the last two years of the Poona era, Bhagwan played a less active role in ashram life, due to his declining health. Afflicted with asthma, diabetes, and back pains, he temporarily stopped giving discourses and darshans in 1979, and substituted silent meditation. In 1981 he withdrew his physical presence from these sessions, and it was announced that “Bhagwan is entering into the ultimate, silent stage of his work” (Joshi, 1982: 155). Three core group members were appointed to perform the initiation darshans as “Bhagwan’s mediums” and in May, *Satsang* was introduced, “the silent communion between master and disciple.” The empty chair strategy was reintroduced:

The day you are able to see this chair, this body empty, this being empty, you will have seen me . . . that’s the real moment when the disciple meets the master. It is a dissolution, a disappearance . . . the dew dissolving into the ocean. . . . And there prevails profound silence (Joshi, 1982: 158).

The *gacchammi* ritual was incorporated into the *satsang* meetings at this time, which involved bowing to Bhagwan's empty chair or photo while chanting the buddhist creed:

Buddham sharanam gacchami
 sangham sharanam gacchami
 dharmam sharanam gacchami

This is translated by sannyasins as "I go to the feet of the Enlightened One. I go to the feet of the community of the Enlightened One. I go to the feet of the Ultimate Truth of the Enlightened One." This is clear indication that the institutional charisma of the *sangha*, or community, now equalled the personal charisma of the master, and that due to his physical inaccessibility Bhagwan was in danger of being reduced to a symbol, or (in Durkheimian terms), a totem of his community.

In 1981 Bhagwan left the Shree Rajneesh Ashram in Poona and flew to the United States. The move to America appears to have been a unilateral decision on the part of Sheela, who claimed it was for medical reasons. She oversaw the buying of the 64,229 acre ranch in Oregon and began to supervise the building of what would soon be the city of Rajneeshpuram.

Phase IV—The Silence: Acquiescence

Bhagwan's silence began in the spring of 1981, and ended in October, 1984.

During the silence the institution builders were active, and Bhagwan's response at this time appears to conform to Wallis' description of Acquiescence; ". . . in which the charismatic leader, finding himself trammelled and constrained, acquiesces to the situation with more or less good grace" (Wallis, 1982: 117)."

As Bhagwan withdrew into self-imposed solitude and silence, and made Ma Anand Sheela his representative, he became increasingly unaware of the administrative decisions, the political struggles with local authorities, and even the innovations in religious life taking place in his commune. In 1981 Rajneesh granted Sheela limited power of attorney, and removed the limits in 1982. In 1983 Sheela announced that "He" would only speak with her. At this stage it appears that his knowledge of goings on in the commune was exclusively derived from Sheela. He claimed in a later press conference that she kept him in ignorance.

When I was in silence I was completely unaware . . . for eight months I supported Sheela. . . . All things came to my knowledge yesterday. . . . I was in isolation (September 16, 1985).

The rapid development of institutions can be observed during this phase. Sheela's book, *Rajneeshism* (1983) is a striking example of the routinization of charisma. It describes the newly created Academy of Rajneeshism as an "ecclesiastical organization" in which there are three categories of ministers: Acharyas, Arihantas, and Siddhas. A symptom of creeping institutionalization for Wallis is the appointment of officials "on the basis of their qualifications and experience rather than on their inspirational virtues" (Wallis, 1984: 116). *Rajneeshism* stipulates:

To be eligible for the ministry, a person must have the following experience and training: a minimum of

- two years as a neo-sannyasin
- two years of participation and practice in meditation

- one year of worship-meditation or apprenticeship in Rajneeshism
- specific orientation for the ministerial duties (*Rajneeshism*, 1983).

Aside from creating a “charisma of office,” Sheela seemed to be claiming a charismatic status by conferring upon herself titles like “Boddhisattva” and dressing long red silk robes in her office as Chancellor of Rajneeshism. She declared in an interview, “I am the head of a religion” (*Oregonian*, 1985: 16). The head therapist, Swami Anand Teertha, performed most of the Ranch initiations and began to exhibit signs of independent, non-Bhagwan-derived charisma;—it was rumored that he was enlightened.

Another sign of the routinization of charisma was the creation of permanent offices. Weber notes that it “takes the form of the appropriation of powers of control and of economic advantages by the followers” (Weber, 1947: 367). Wallis adds that the officials “hope to preserve their hitherto ad hoc status and enjoy a commensurate lifestyle and thus press for some tenure of office and the regulation of office-holding in a non-arbitrary way” (Wallis, 1984: 116). Rajneeshpuram was governed by an efficient hierarchy of female coordinators called “moms” who were in turn directed by a small core of “supermoms.” The *Oregonian* contrasts the luxurious lifestyle of the supermoms with the ascetic regimen of the rank-and-file sannyasins. Sheela kept her office as Bhagwan’s personal secretary for almost five years and held executive positions in all the major organizations of the city. “I am going to live like a princess. That’s my style!” (Sheela, interviewed in the *Oregonian*, 1982: 16).

Wallis notes that “to pay for the ‘permanent routine structure’ . . . some form of rational fiscal basis for the movement must be secured” (Wallis, 1982: 116). A host of small chain businesses was established out of Rajneeshpuram, such as boutiques, restaurants, discos, therapy centers, and bookshops. An interesting effort was made to imbue these rational workaday ventures with mystery and humor (Rajneesh’s charismatic qualities). The twelve-hour day of unpaid labor expected from all residents was described in *Rajneeshism* as “An abundance of creativity” and was regarded as a form of meditation-in-the-world called “Worship.” The Rolls Royce collection was a wise investment of the commune’s money but explained to a skeptical public as “a sign of the great love between master and disciple,” or, alternatively, as a “joke”:

Bhagwan is like a child who delights in his toys. He has 92 Rolls Royces, the most expensive car in the world, and yet he . . . can only drive one at a time, and for only half an hour a day. For us, it is a great paradox, a great joke.

Sheela organized a Rolls Royce Raffle for which every sannyasin was expected to buy tickets, and the winner invariably gave the Rolls back to Bhagwan. In Rajneesh’s system gambling can be a spiritual exercise as it involves “taking a risk” (in the language of Encounter). The Rajneeshpuram City Council passed an ordinance in September 1982 requiring that a joke be told at the beginning and end of every meeting. This appears to have been an attempt to retain an atmosphere of spontaneity in the face of an increasing tendency toward organization.

Phase V—Prophecy and Resistance

When Rajneesh came out of silence in October 1984 his first discourse was what Weber would call a “charismatic display.” Having had the good fortune to be present at the Montreal Rajneesh commune on this occasion, I witnessed the extraordinary effect on his disciples of their master’s (taped) voice. Approximately 300 people wept, laughed uncontrollably or sank to the ground as if in a swoon. It was clear from his words that he was claiming an increase in

charisma. He said that he had travelled so deeply into the Absolute through his silence that he was now virtually indistinguishable from It.

Bhagwan announced on this occasion that there was no God, which had the effect of elevating his own status to the next best thing. The convention of referring to Rajneesh as "He" and "Him" in the RFI literature certainly implies this. Bhagwan proceeded to denounce great religious leaders to whom he had referred favorably in the past. He then claimed to have founded "the first and the last religion," Rajneeshism, and explained how it was superior to all previous attempts:

Rajneeshism is a kind of religion-ness, not a dogma, cult, or creed, but only a quality of love, silence, meditation, and prayerfulness. Hence it can never end. . . . Jesus did not know about Buddha, Buddha did not know about Lao Tzu. . . . I have travelled all the paths. . . . What I am saying is going to last forever because nothing more could be added to it.

This move can be interpreted as a strategy of Resistance. Rajneeshism was contradicting previous statements. In Poona he had often referred to God and had declared in 1971 that all religions were acceptable paths leading to the superconsciousness.

Wallis explains how Mo of the Children of God constantly contradicts himself in order to resist institutionalization.

Thus the prophet's charisma is further heightened through the fact that the only certainty left is himself. The arbitrariness of his statements entailed that one should not even be committed to any particular thing he said but to Mo *regardless* of what he said.

Rajneesh also attempted to de-institutionalize Rajneeshism by explaining it as "the laughing religion," a "religion-ness," "the religionless religion."

In March 1984 Rajneesh prophesied the death of two thirds of humanity from AIDS, the "spiritual disease." As a result, sannyasins were required to wear rubber gloves and condoms while making love and to refrain from kissing. This development resembles Moses David's millenarian prophecies which Wallis interprets as examples of Resistance. Certainly the newly instituted sexual taboos were a Resistance strategy insofar as they served to break down exclusive ties between couples and emphasized the ritual function of sexual activity. I have argued elsewhere that the AIDS threat encouraged Renunciation, one of Kanter's six commitment mechanisms (Palmer, 1986).

Rajneesh undermined the claims to charisma among his core group in the following manner: two sannyasins interviewed described his reading out a list of one hundred people in the commune whom he pronounced enlightened. This caused a sensation, and excited rivalry and argument until Bhagwan admitted later the whole thing had been a joke. One sannyasin who described the incident to me saw it as a test:

It was to show what big egos people had, that they could ever imagine they were on the same level as Bhagwan.

Rajneesh began to oppose Sheela's efforts to build a solid institution to survive his death, and to ensure her succession. Over the summer of 1984 she had announced that Rajneesh had created three *sansads* to offer spiritual guidance after his death. On August 19th of the same year Rajneesh flatly contradicted her in a deposition filed in Multnomah County Circuit Court:

I am not making anybody head of my religion because I don't want any books to be followed by me exploiting people in my name. I am not going to be succeeded by anybody. The day I am dead I am dead. There is no question of any succession.

Phase VI—Sheela's Betrayal: Attempted Displacement

On September 16, 1985 Bhagwan held a major press conference at Rajneeshpuram in which he revealed a series of crimes allegedly carried out by Sheela and her "fascist gang." These alleged crimes included three poisoning attempts, salmonella food poisoning in The Dalles, wiretapping, bugging rooms, and financial abuse which left the commune \$55,000,000 in debt.

From the evidence at hand it appears that Sheela's alleged crimes (of which she is now convicted and serving a prison sentence) were the end-result of an unsuccessful Displacement attempt. Wallis describes the response of Displacement as follows:

A third case is that which institutionalization proceeds without clear recognition by the charismatic leader of what is occurring until too late for him effectively to reverse the situation despite a strong antipathy towards it (Wallis, 1984: 118).

A close look at her alleged crimes suggests that she was attempting to preserve her exclusive access to the guru, which she had enjoyed during his silence. Her three poison victims were the only sannyasins who were close to him. The bugging devices found in his rooms suggest she wished to control his sources of information. Some of her statements from prison indicate that she might have intended to displace Rajneesh as the head of Rajneeshism:

She said the allegations were merely a device used by Bhagwan to keep the sannyasins movement united behind Him. Otherwise it would have split into two camps, one following her and the other staying with Bhagwan. . . . "I'm still your Mom. You may not have a Dad any more but I'm still your Mom" (*Rajneesh*, March 11, 1986).

Rajneesh appeared to regard her actions as a displacement attempt:

It seems these people could have even killed me. If I was dead they could have worshipped my dead body and have full power to do whatever they wanted to do (September 1986 press conference).

He ascribed her motives to jealousy of his charismatic authority:

As I started to speak again, a strange thing happened. Sheela became very sad. Everyone was ecstatic that I spoke again except Sheela. Strange! Within a few days it became clear. While I was in isolation she had become a celebrity through the news media. She was famous all over the world. When I started speaking again Sheela's swollen ego started shrinking. If I speak myself there is no need for a mediator, a messenger, a representative. I said. . . . "You have become addicted to being famous . . . the worst drug in existence" (September 16 press conference).

Bhagwan's first reaction to Sheela's displacement attempt was to protect his own charisma. He disassociated himself from her activities by publicly denouncing her. This laid him

open to the charge of irresponsibility and weak leadership in remaining ignorant of her abuses. However, he deported himself with his characteristic charm and managed to tread the fine line between accepting responsibility and disclaiming responsibility for the unfortunate events. On one hand he showed concern over the gravity of the situation:

They were absolute criminals, inhuman, fascist in outlook!

On the other hand he joked about it: “Adolf Hitler has died again!”

He promised to take responsibility for the welfare of his commune in the future—

I am going to continue to speak for the rest of my life. I will be here!

—and yet disclaimed responsibility for Sheela’s behavior: “One can never really know another human being.”

Another strategy (eagerly embraced by his sannyasins who wished to preserve their absolute faith in their leader’s infallibility) was to blame everything on the followers. Bhagwan hinted that he had allowed the situation to develop as a learning “device”:

People were almost asleep. Unless something really shakes them up they don’t see much. We have seen in time!

One sannyasin echoed this notion:

We thought we were surrendering to Bhagwan, but it turned out we were obeying Sheela. It was our own fault what happened. Bhagwan has always warned us not to give up our independent judgment, not to be blindly obedient. He allowed Sheela to go crazy with power and it was a great learning experience for all of us.

Phase VII—“I am not your guru”: Abdication

On September 26, Bhagwan told his sannyasins to stop wearing the color red and the *mala*, their traditional symbols of initiation (*Rajneesh Times*, 1986: 27). All *malas* were to be sent back to the ranch. When his followers protested, Bhagwan relented and allowed them to keep the *mala*. He announced the end of Rajneeshism, saying “A religion has died.” A celebration of the death of Rajneeshism took place at Rajneeshpuram in which a bonfire was made of copies of Sheela’s book *Rajneeshism* and her “pope’s robes.” The *Rajneesh Times* of October 4, 1985 offers Bhagwan’s explanations which reveal his acute concern for the problem of institutionalization.

In an interview with Bill Graves of the *Bulletin*, Bhagwan said he decided to take these steps in an effort to keep his movement from becoming institutionalized.

The book and the word “Rajneeshee” were developed by Ma Anand Sheela against his wishes during his three-and-a-half years of silence.

“I hate the word ‘ism.’ ”

Bhagwan continued to deliver blows to the institutions of his movement. The *Rajneesh Times* of October II reports that he abolished the daily “gacchamis” or bowing ceremony “which he said was too similar to ritual Christian and Mohammedan prayers” and at the same

time he put an end to the terms "worship" and "temple" which were to become plain old "work" and "department" again. He attacked the large international communes by declaring "I am absolutely against centralization" and invited his sannyasins to start new communes.

On October 18 the *Rajneesh Times* announced "Friends of Rajneesh International is born" meaning the name of the movement was no longer The Rajneesh Foundation International. This move was inspired by Bhagwan's statement that he was not a guru to his sannyasins, but merely a friend.

On October 27 Rajneesh boarded a Learjet on what he claimed was to be a vacation, but he was forced to land, was arrested, jailed, and charged with arranging "sham marriages" among his disciples in order to bypass U.S. immigration laws. He entered a technical plea of guilty (while privately denying the charges) and on November 14 was deported from the United States. Rajneeshpuram officials decided to close down their utopian city, since Sheela's alleged "financial abuse" had left them 55 million in debt, the Rajneesh would no longer be in residence to attract thousands of visitors to the summer festivals which were the city's main source of income. The international communes began to disband, the Montreal commune following suit in April 1986.

PERFORMANCE AND RESPONSIBILITY: TWO ASPECTS OF CHARISMA

In order to account for the divagations in Rajneesh's career and to explain his abdication it is useful to distinguish between two aspects of charismatic authority: (1) Performance, and (2) Responsibility.

Performance. A charismatic leader's authority rests on his ability to demonstrate "exceptional powers or qualities," to convince others of his "supra-mundane power or knowledge for which [he provides] the channel of which [he is] the source" (Wallis, 1982: 2). In this capacity his role is not unlike the inspired performer or the creative artist who receives adulation from his audience or fans.

Responsibility. This role demands the leader's willingness and ability to provide a direction for the movement, to set policies and handle administrative decisions. It also entails giving counsel to his followers, and settling conflicts arising within the group and also from without: in confrontations with the larger society. In this capacity the leader assumes the role of the pastor who protects and guides his "flock."

The portrait which emerges from a close study of Rajneesh's career is of a man who excels as a performer but is weak or recalcitrant as a pastor. Although Rajneesh showed considerable leadership ability in phases 1, 2, and 3 of his movement he demonstrated an increasing unwillingness to assume the responsible, authorizing role after 1980 and appeared to shy away from the active exercise of power, leaving the direction of his movement in the capable hands of Sheela. Many of the changes in his movement correspond with shifts that allowed him to back away from assuming the authorizing, responsible role. The effect has been to preserve his personal, exemplary charisma as an object of devotion and to avoid institutional restrictions on this authority.

Interviews with Montreal sannyasins supported this view of Rajneesh's leadership. His gifts as a performer were praised:

Bhagwan would get up there and just do his own thing. You could tell he was having a ball!
—The first thing I thought was, "This guy is a brilliant comedian!"

He was often described as childlike, innocent, carefree:

Bhagwan is like a child, awake in the moment and filled with the wonder of life. . . . Even when he found out he was going to jail his reaction was, "What fun! Will they put handcuffs on me? I've never tried handcuffs before!"

Many disciples did not appear to expect concrete guidance from their leader:

Bhagwan never tells us what to do.

After you took sannyas, it was up to you. Whatever you chose to do with Bhagwan's energy, it was your affair.

This analysis of Rajneesh's leadership explains his tendency to vacillate between Resistance and Encouragement. His aversion to the pastor role led him to delegate the responsibility of leadership to Sheela and her core group of "supermoms" who were energetic and determined institution builders. Rajneesh appeared to view his female leaders as receptacles of his own charisma. His writings stress the passive, receptive qualities of women, and his policy of making a woman-ruled commune was a means of extending his charisma into the government of his movement through the channels of women devotees who were filled with his "energy." Free from the constraints of responsibility, Rajneesh could pursue an untrammelled career as the performer whose gestures of Resistance were often his most exciting acts. Thus his jokes, tantrums, and shock tactics were a means of pruning the institutions to his own taste without necessitating an active involvement in decision-making procedures, and at the same time a means of entertaining his disciples, who interpret his more outrageous moments as "a device to wake us up."

It could be argued, therefore, that Resistance and Encouragement are not necessarily contradictory strategies, and that Rajneesh's case challenges the assumption underlying Wallis' theory; that the process of institutionalization *inevitably* constitutes a threat to the leader's charisma. Even in his example of Mary Baker Eddy as a successful case of Encouragement, Wallis sees her institution-building as "a process of bureaucratization" in which "some charismatic elements were retained" whereas "initially Christian Science was emphatically charismatic" (Wallis, 1982: 117). Weber, however, does distinguish between several typical patterns. There can be institutionalization that amounts to an eclipse of the charismatic quality of devotion to authority: this occurs with bureaucratization and traditionalization. There are also forms of institutionalization that attempt to (or are able to) preserve the charismatic qualities. Weber discusses these in relation to the terms "routinization of charisma" and "hierocracy." Rajneesh's strategies of Encouragement and Acquiescence, therefore, could perhaps be better described as the routinization of charisma.

Throughout this study I was confronted with the difficulty of distinguishing between the "pure" type of personal charisma and the slightly institutionalized form which serves to buttress it. In other words there is no clear boundary between charisma and institutionalization. The relationship between the two is a subtle one, for charisma cannot exist without institutions, and the process of institutionalization is fed by charisma. There were indications that Rajneesh's charisma was enhanced by some modes of institutionalization but threatened by others. For example, one sannyasin claimed "Bhagwan was at his most powerful during His silence." Another complained about Sheela's book *Rajneeshism* as "a Mickey Mouse version of Bhagwan's religion." When Rajneesh destroyed the institutions in his movement by abdicating, he inevitably undermined his own charismatic authority. A therapist, Amitabh, is quoted in *Rajneesh* saying Bhagwan has "lost it." Many former disciples interpreted his act as a loss of charisma, and some are writing books with titles like *Bhagwan, The God Who Failed* and *Oranges and Lemmings*. Certainly in terms of possessing a visible following with a

distinctive philosophy and life style, Rajneesh's authority is diminishing. These examples suggest that the relationship between charisma and institution building is more complex than Wallis' model permits.

Abdication: Rajneesh's decision to abdicate is in part to be understood in relation to his being a prophet of the exemplary type. He lacked a world historical mission and thus failed to satisfy some Oregonians' expectations of another Jonestown. Instead of urging his followers to defy state authorities unto death he remained true to his claim as the "Enlightened One" to being "aloof and separate as an island," and therefore simply negotiated for the lightest sentence and skipped the country leaving his flock to fend for itself.

Rajneesh's abdication has met with a widely varied response from his sannyasins. Some, like the therapist Amitabh, feel "He" has "lost It" (*Rajneesh*, July 16). Others expressed in interview the notion that Bhagwan had proved himself to be an authentic spiritual master by cutting his disciples off. This was explained as the final stage of a spiritual path in which the disciple has to prove himself or herself by continuing alone, giving up dependence on the guru. Some sannyasins referred to Krishnamurti, who established his credentials as a master by in fact disclaiming the role of avatar which Annie Besant had prepared him for. Others referred to the Russian mystic, Gurdjieff, whose style of spiritual teaching often involved shocking his students or sending them away. It is perhaps significant that recent editions of *Rajneesh* have contained frequent references to Krishnamurti and Gurdjieff, who both abdicated from positions of responsible leadership. One article describes how Gurdjieff closed down his community in Fontainebleu in 1924 and concludes: "any resemblance between their experiences and our life . . . may be coincidental. Be aware, however, that the Master's ways are many" (*Rajneesh Times*, September 8).

Rajneesh, Krishnamurti and Gurdjieff share similar characteristics. They are all examples of what R. S. Ellwood would term the "hermetic magus" type of leader, representatives in their own way of the gnostic tradition (Ellwood, 1973: 49). The spiritual paths they outlined emphasize liberation from mechanical patterns of thought and behavior. The source of the sacred is perceived to lie within the self and the function of the master is to awaken the disciples from sleep, or to shock them out of their preconditioned patterns. This is achieved by putting disciples through ordeals or stopping the mind through outrageous behavior (as in the case of Gurdjieff) or destroying rational thought processes through paradox (as in the case of Krishnamurti and Rajneesh). In this sense their philosophies could be described as individualistic and antinomian.

These masters exhibited an aversion to institutions and an impatience with routine patterns of economic and social life. The *modus operandi* of each leader could be interpreted as an extreme example of Resistance.

Each master stressed the impermanence of life and the importance of learning to live in the present moment. Rajneesh calls it the "herenow," Krishnamurti the "eternal present." They possess a certain detachment from or self-consciousness towards their role as spiritual master, an elusiveness and a shamanic ability to disappear or to change shape. For example when Rajneesh adopted the name, "Bhagwan," he called it a "device" which he could "drop" when the time came.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus far I have attempted to establish that Abdication does represent a new relationship between charisma and institution building and that the meaning of this strategy in Rajneesh's case can be understood by distinguishing between two aspects of charisma: Performance and

Responsibility. Having shown by my examples that Rajneesh is strong in the first aspect but weak as regards the second, I will conclude by arguing that his abdication solved the perennial problem of institutionalization in several ways:

First, it enabled him to renounce the responsible role of pastor, while retaining the role of performer. He relinquished his followers but kept his audience and devoted "Friends."

Second, it was undoubtedly a step to salvage his reputation and protect his personal charisma which Sheela's scandalous behavior threatened to discredit. Thus he disassociated himself from the organization and religion, Rajneeshism, which had suffered an institutional "loss of charisma."

Third, it served as a sort of shaman's ordeal of initiation, a symbolic death which enabled him to change shape. Rajneesh chose to become a disembodied symbol, a mythic figure, on par with Gurdjieff and Krishnamurti who, even in death, resist attempts to systemize or institutionalize. Thus his Abdication was a means of transformation from one type of charismatic leader to another: in Fred Bird's typology it would represent a transition from a Devotee-type to an Apprentice-type leader. Instead of presiding over a utopian city, Rajneesh has become an itinerant performer, and is producing philosophical literature. (Krishnamurti and Gurdjieff wrote or dictated prolifically after they abdicated.) Recent editions of *Rajneesh* have compared their leader to "The Unknowable Gurdjieff" (Bennett 1973). Both masters are mysterious, unattached, and elusive, "teachers" who communicate their vision through verbal performances and cryptic behavior rather than through the creation of coherent belief systems or the building and governing of utopian societies.

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