

Gurus and Groupies

The Golden Guru: The Strange Journey of Bhagwan Shree Rajaeesh, by James S. Gordon, *Lexington, Mass: The Stephen Greene Press, 1987.*

Monkey on a Stick: Murder, Madness, and the Hare Krishnas, by John Hubner and Lindsey Gruson, *New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.*

IN A SENSE much of the major history of the twentieth century is the story of the formation, rise, and disintegration of messianic utopian cults. The Lenin cult, which began around the publication of Lenin's newspaper *Iskra* in 1902, is now collapsing. The Hitler cult began in Munich in 1919 and was taken apart in a horrendous *gotterdammerung* by Allied armies in 1945 that left Germany and Europe divided by an "Iron Curtain" walling the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinists in and their hated "capitalist" enemies out.

As one born into this world civil war in the 1930s, I have long been fascinated by messianic gurus like Lenin and Hitler, who promised a "Thousand Year Reich" or post-revolutionary utopia populated by "the new Soviet man," and who recruited masses of followers and launched genocidal wars on recalcitrant, nonconforming freemen who insisted on marching to different drummers.

As a young reporter I found myself reporting on such figures as George Lincoln Rockwell and his tiny American Nazi Party; and later on Tom Hayden and colleagues and the Students for a Democratic Society, which gave rise to a terrorist "Weather Underground" group: then came L. Ron Hubbard and his Scientologists; Lyndon LaRouche and his Marxist-Leninist cult; and the Reverend Sun Myung Moon and his "Moonies"; the Reverend Jim Jones and his Jonestown massacre; and assorted others. It be-

came apparent that these groups follow regular patterns, a sort of “natural history,” something like the patterns meteorologists associate with severe weather such as thunderstorms and tornadoes. To me the early phase of these social squalls is the most interesting—the emergence of a leader and his attraction of adherents via the magic magnetism of mass media, an essential element which we professional journalists often contribute unwittingly. Then comes the congregation of hosts of followers who become, in Eric Hoffer’s immortal description, “true believers” ready to die—and often to commit mass murder—for a holy cause.

In 1981 I was in England, Denmark, and Germany studying the Scientologists when, from European church people concerned about cult abuses, I began hearing horror stories about an Indian “ashram” or commune run by a guru called Rajneesh¹, who preached a brand of modern psychotherapies, Tantric yoga, and free sex. Rajneesh’s mixture of mysticism and libertinism had attracted hundreds of young Europeans and Americans, and a delegation of European church workers concerned about destructive cults had visited the scene.

A couple of years later, I read that Rajneesh had brought his commune to a farm in rural Oregon, U.S.A. Having interviewed some very sophisticated on-the-scene observers of Rajneesh’s ashram, I expected fireworks. I was not disappointed. Within three years, Rajneesh built a little empire, collected 93 Rolls Royces, plotted to take over the local government of an Oregon county, collected a small air force of half a dozen planes and helicopters, and began stockpiling weapons for a Hindu version of “der tag,” the old German Marxist term for preparing for the apocalyptic day of the final anticapitalist uprising.

The whole story went ka-boom in late 1985 when Rajneesh and his top lieuten-

ant, one Ma Anand Sheela, were indicted on a variety of charges. Sheela pleaded guilty and drew a twenty-year prison sentence. (She will serve probably only about four.) Among the crimes she admitted was plotting and actually poisoning several hundred Oregonians with salmonella, a usually non-fatal food poisoning, so they would be too weak to go to the polls on election day, thus allowing the Rajneeshes to win control of the local government. She had also executed the most massive illegal wiretapping and bugging scheme in U.S. history, targeting dissenters, visiting journalists, and local officials. Rajneesh was not proven to be a party to Sheela’s plots; he pleaded guilty to immigration law violations, and was expelled from the United States.

Now comes a former National Institute of Mental Health psychiatrist, Dr. James Gordon, with a magnificent and insightful insider’s view of the Rajneesh movement. Gordon went to Poona in 1979 as a self-described “seeker” himself and became a friendly occasional participant observer in Rajneesh’s commune. But he always maintained an underlying scientific detachment and analytical view. The result is a dramatic narrative description and analysis of the rise and fall of a messianic movement with a global reach.

By coincidence another new book tells the story of another Indian Hindu monk who came to America and built a worldwide following. Swami A.C. Bhaktivendanta Prabhupada arrived in New York City in 1965 at the age of 69 with seven dollars in rupees and a few battered pots and pans. In a Manhattan storefront he founded the Hare Krishna movement, based loosely on the 5th century B.C. Hindu “bible,” the Bhagavad Gita. When he died in 1977 his movement had over 200 temples and farms in 60 countries, tens of thousands of followers, and tens of millions of dollars. In the United States alone he had more than

5000 devotees and thousands of uninitiated believers and 57 temples and farms. The Hare Krishna book, written by a pair of journalists, is excellent in its own way, and together these two books offer fascinating inquests into the collective psychopathology of destructive cults.

II

GORDON BEGAN to investigate the cult phenomenon for NIMH in 1974. Over the next dozen years he interviewed in depth more than 800 participants in more than forty groups, participated in their meetings and workshops, did their meditations, and lived in their communities for days or weeks. He covered Scientologists, Krishnas, Moonies, Transcendental Meditationists, Erhardists, and a host of others. But none fascinated him like Bhagwan—"the Bleeding One"—Rajneesh of Poona.

When Gordon visited, some 4000 to 5000 followers were in residence, many of them from Europe and America. The Poona ashram offered some sixty different therapies, with ninety psychotherapy groups functioning at once, from art therapy and encounter to primal scream and hypnosis, Gestalt, deep tissue massage, shatzu, foot reflexology, rebirthing, Rolfing, tarot, chakra balancing, a veritable gourmet supermarket of self-exploration and experimentation with forms of consciousness. In one group, the "Enlightenment Intensive," participants sit on the floor in pairs facing one another. "Tell me who you are," one says to the other, and after five minutes, it is the partner's turn. They do this for four rounds, then change partners—and keep at it 14 or 16 hours a day!

Rajneesh spiced this psychic goulash with a "daily discourse," a kind of Sermon on the Mount to his followers. Rajneesh's commentaries on the Upanishads aptly used Marx and Maslow, Plato and Heidegger, Freud and Beckett. A former professor of philosophy, he

drew on all religions, claiming they are but one, differing only by accidents of time, place, culture—a theme unsurprising to any reader of Joseph Campbell's four-volume work, *The Masks of God*. "LEAVE YOUR SHOES AND MIND OUTSIDE," a sign admonished. Rajneesh, wearing a white gown, arrived in a yellow Mercedes.

Gordon describes his performance with great art and poetry. One wishes we had such an artist-observer to describe the early performances of Lenin and Hitler. Once in a while, he drops in a sly or cynical dig that makes the reviewer think the good shrink would have made a fine journalist instead. Consider: "enlightenment is very difficult to characterize, impossible to certify, and—especially for the consumption of credulous and eager seekers—easy to counterfeit." Rajneesh drew not only on Nietzsche and Buddha, but also Barnum, and Gordon spotted it early.

Rajneesh won the sobriquet of "the sex guru," and his commune and philosophy authorized free sex, open and in any combinations the neophyte might want. Indeed, if the neophyte harbored any resistance or revulsion, the pressure was on to break it down.

The term "charismatic" is often misapplied by contemporary journalists, as if it were synonymous with "magnetic" or "persuasive," to describe leaders. But as Ann Ruth Willner points out in her definitive study, *The Spellbinders, Charismatic Political Leadership* (1984), it properly describes the relationship between a leader and his followers, and thus it tells as much about the character of the followers as the leader. Gordon points to an old saying in the East: "When the disciples are ready, the guru will appear."

In 1967, America offered hordes of young adults, products of the postwar baby boom, who were questioning and rejecting the Establishment and seeking Revealed Truth in radical political ide-

ologies and exotic religious systems. Indeed, the "birth dearth" of 1933-34 coincided with the "baby boom" of 1947-63 to deliver a tidal wave of young adults at exactly the time the 25-to-35-year-old cohort bottomed out. The America of 1967 had 9700 more young men in the 15-to-25 age group per 100,000 mature men 25 and older compared to America of 1955—a substantial increase in population volatility. Germany had just such a maximum greening in 1928-33, when the increment of first-time new voters was 6.5 million, fully one sixth of the total. The younger voters responded heavily to the Nazi slogan, "Step down, you Old Ones!" and the result was Hitler, who gained his first mass following on the college campuses.

All contemporary cult leaders develop similar methods for transforming followers into "true believers," Eric Hoffer's classic term. And they develop a common apocalyptic psychology: Mankind is, at the crossroads, the elect are the vanguard, we must create a "new man" and save the world from damnation. We've heard that line before, too, throughout the twentieth century.

Gordon vividly describes the recruits, the process, and the transformation of "seekers" into true believers filled with ideology, roaring with conviction, poisoned with contempt for unbelievers, and ready to die for the leader. He took careful histories, and found that many of the followers had been seekers since childhood. From earliest consciousness they had carried a feeling they were different, and were now questing for some sort of destiny. Many no doubt were moved by the quest for significance Ernest Becker described in his classic work, *Denial of Death* (1973). And some no doubt were schizoid personalities, neurologically fragile, fleeing a world of conflict and ambiguity in search of a perfect master to resolve all issues for them.

In 1981 Rajneesh and Sheela moved

their commune to a 61,000-acre ranch in central Oregon. Two years later a University of Oregon professor found that 61 percent of the population had bachelor's degrees, 36 percent had advanced degrees, and 12 percent had doctorates. A startling 22 percent had graduate or undergraduate degrees in psychology or psychiatry. That finding confirmed an informal observation I made long ago as a young reporter and have reconfirmed many times that many who enter those fields do so seeking solutions to their own hang-ups.

By 1985 the Oregon commune had 2500 residents and 2000 longterm visitors. Followers had invested more than \$130 million and an incredible amount of free labor. From the start the Rajneeshees had been at war with local residents and county and state authorities. Rajneesh and Sheela, his chief of staff, kept turning up the hysteria over the threat of nuclear war and the state of Rajneesh's health. Fear and hostility toward the outside world and infidels reached frenzied states. Rajneeshees patrolled their ranch with helicopters and assault rifles. Psychiatrist Gordon watched Sheela perform at one press conference like a "malign popess" and reached this diagnosis, which is not to be found in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*: "My God, I think, she really is bonkers."

On September 14 and 15, Sheela and 19 others fled the ranch, and on September 16, in his morning discourse Rajneesh accused her of turning his commune "into a fascist concentration camp." He accused her of the mass poisoning of Oregonians and bugging. He exposed a secret laboratory where experiments were run with toxic bacteria, undetectable poisons, and the AIDS virus. A hit list of potential assassination targets, including state and federal officials and a newspaper reporter, was discovered. Gordon believes Rajneesh accused

Sheela to beat her to the punch and stay out of jail himself. If that was his motive, it worked.

"We don't need Masters," Gordon concludes. "They will inevitably become intoxicated with their power and encourage those whom they promised to liberate to become slaves."

III

IN *MONKEY ON A STICK* Hubner and Gruson give us a straight narrative of the Hare Krishna movement's Manhattan beginnings, its burgeoning and fragmentation into competing cults and gurus. They then focus heavily on the degeneration of one commune in the wilds of West Virginia's panhandle near Moundsville, where the dictator-founder was one Keith Ham. The son of a Peekskill, N.Y., fundamentalist Baptist minister. Ham was working on a doctorate in American religious history at Columbia University. He had already been to India in search of "enlightenment," only to encounter it in the person of Prabhupada in the Bowery in 1966. His commune, which at peak had around 600 devotees, became a horror-hole of sex, drug trafficking, and murder. Indeed, one of his enforcers ranged across the continent to hunt down and murder a rival in California, and after the killer was imprisoned, Ham staged an elaborate prison ceremony to elevate him to swamihood.

Their story runs for 370 pages, with very little analysis, while Gordon tells the Rajneesh story with penetrating analysis in 245. Hubner and Gruson fictionalize huge hunks of dialogue and other parts of their story. Unlike most such journalistic fabrication, however, they supply copious notes on sources, and exercise care to tell the interested reader what sources they relied on in creating their scenes and dialogues—court transcripts, interviews, newspaper accounts, journalistic colleagues. While I find the practice of fictionalizing for readability generally destroys reliabil-

ity, their palliative effort is helpful.

By one estimate the more than 4000 U.S. devotees Prabhupada initiated into "Krishna consciousness" have dwindled to about 500. Hubner and Gruson provide us with many facts and no answers. At the end Sergeant Tom Westfall of the West Virginia State Police, the cop who became the leading expert on the Moundville commune, is trying to solve the mystery of the latest murdered body discovered there and wondering "how people who had set out to make peace and love ended up molesting children, running drugs, committing murder?"

That is probably still the central problem of twentieth century history.

—Reviewed by Eugene H. Methvin

¹Rajneesh died of heart disease on January 19, 1990, at his original commune in Poona, India.

Follies of Development Theory

The Elementary Structures of Political Life: Rural Development in Pahlavi Iran, by Grace E. Goodell, *Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1986. vii + 362 pp. \$45.00.*

IN 1972 Grace Goodell, an anthropologist who now directs the Program on Social Change and Development at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, went to Iran to study economic development in the country's "traditional" and "modern" sectors. For over two years she lived in the southwestern Iranian province of Khuzestan, first in an immemorial peasant village and later in a sort of company town where the Iranian government had resettled peasants uprooted from the countryside. In communities she calls Rahmat Abad and Bizhan, Goodell saw starkly illustrated the pernicious practical consequences of much of