Interplanetary Adventure and Flirty Fishing:The Charismatic Claim to Authority in The Aetherius Society and The Family International

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Introduction

Participating members of NRMs are divided into two elements: leadership and membership. Authority within a NRM is mutually exclusive between leadership and membership. Members of leadership in NRMs maintain the attribute of “authority and imperative co-ordination” outlined by Max Weber’s types of authority and imperative co-ordination. Emphasis will be placed on the concept of charismatic authority in both of NRMs, identifying dimensions of leaderships’ charismatic authority. The ideal type of charismatic authority will also be used to understand NRMs organization. The characteristics of each NRM as either a sect or church will also be considered. The social attributes of membership will be examined with the Lofland-Stark Model of Conversion.

 Ideology and the composing beliefs and practices will be examined for their functionality. The content of each NRMs’ digital media will be examined for its use of symbols, functionality, and historical representation. Comparison of both NRMs will be based on the aforementioned theories and sociological writings.

The Family / The Children of God

The Family International, now The Family, was founded in 1968 as an “amalgam of the late-sixties youth counterculture and the traditional holiness movement” (Bainbridge 2002: 123). It also remains as one of the more notably controversial Christian new religious movements (Chryssides 1999: 134). The Family has lasted for three generations, maintaining devoted adherents and “economically and ideologically sympathetic friends” (Shepard & Shepard 2005: 67). Founder David Berg was born in 1919 (Beverly 2005: 81) and derived charismatic authority from the claim that he was “specifically chosen by God as his prophet to lay the necessary groundwork for the end time” (Shepard and Shepard 2005: 64). Bainbridge notes that before any major controversy, The Family International was a religious group, continuing to draw much of its inspiration from the bible (2002: 45). Berg’s charisma was legitimized through the distribution of thousands of “Mo Letters”, compiled as “The Word” (Shepard & Shepard 2006: 69). Berg’s charismatic qualification was strengthened by his “olympian form of organizational guidance...and withdrawal from direct contact his his followers,” Shepard and Shepard (2006: 126) note. Published MO letter titles include “Revolutionary Sex,” identifying only few prohibitions on behavior like fornication, adultery, incest and sodomy (Chryssides 1999: 137). In more obscene illustrations, Beverly (2006: 81) states that member activity included making soft-core videos for Berg. Flirty Fishing, an especially relevant doctrine of Bergs, was described as form of witnessing in which “women of the family would offer their love to emotionally needy men” (Bainbridge 2002: 6). Bainbridge’s (2002: 125) examination of attitudes towards non-marital sex amongst The Family and respondents of the 1991 General Social Survey indicate largely different attitudes on premarital sex, sex between individuals under 16 years of age, and monogamy. Members of The Family take a much more ‘relaxed’ stance towards premarital sex.

 During Berg’s lifetime The Family’s corporate group took the form of communal relationship as outlined by Weber, defined by “strict communitarian structure, extreme membership mobility and fluid leadership” (Bozeman 1998: 126). In 1944, Berg married Jane Miller, known in the NRM as Mother Eve (Chryssides 1999: 135). After Berg’s death in 1994, The Family’s organization underwent a classic routinizing of charisma. The planned nature of this transition as well as the purposeful restructuring of membership categories both before and after Berg’s death have provided The Family its longevity as a NRM (Shepard & Shepard 2005: 69). After a process of year long planning and consultation with rank-and-file members before Berg’s death, a two hundred page constitution called The Love Charter was written (Bozeman 1998: 128). The Love Charter is described as a “legal-rational statutory document” by Shepard & Shepard (2006: 72). Other reforms within The Family included repudiations of previous behavior and warnings against the sexual mistreatment of children (Beverley 2005: 82). The Family routinization’s process also included developing standardized norms around recruitment. While the Lofland-Stark Model of Conversion identifies the role of “verbal convert” as a transitory phase to “total convert” via the conversion process (Dawe 2008: 76), reform within The Family membership has attempted to facilitate the existence of both roles congruently. Bozeman (1998: 128) writes that in 1989 the categories of “TRF supporter” and “DO members” were created; the former are individuals who could not devote their full time to The Family but can give donations, while the latter have the privilege of reading certain “disciples only” literature. Contact between these two groups is given high priority, when in 1996 Family leadership “received divine approval of the higher level of contact between TRF and DO families” (Bozeman 1998: 129). The longevity of the group could suggest that initial, first generation members were disproportionately young and thus bore children into The Family. The current ability to give donations of income and maintain innovative leadership suggest a correlation to middle and upper class status, as well as the education of membership. The development of The Family international also indicate a transition from “sect” to “church”: attributes of an the initially exclusive nature of membership and hostility to the secular state shifting to attributes of more inclusive membership policy, adjustment and accommodation to existing social values, and large bureaucratic organization (Robert and Yamane 2012: 166).

Adjustments and changes to the process of routinizing within The Family’s ideology validate Weber’s claim that the adaptation to economic life is almost identical to the routinizing of Charisma. This includes the administrative roles that Berg’s personal staff gradually assumed over the years before Berg’s death (Shepard and Shepard 2006: 30) and the famous 1983 MO letter entitled “Ban the Bomb”, rescinding the flirty fishing policy and formulating new rules on sexual relationships (Chryssides 1999: 139). In light of economic adaptation, the Family’s ideology is in part maintained by what Berger and Luckmann identify as the “plausibility structure,” functioning to “maintain adherence to the particular belief system” (Shepard and Shepard 2006: 44). Berg’s former wife, Maria, and fellow member, Peter, produce “officially approved prophecies” that standardize doctrine and policy for The Family as an organization (Shepard and Shepard (2006: 44). In this way, this process of routinely issuing prophecies helps to maintain their institutional authority as successors to the charismatic authority (Shepard and Shepard 2006: 39). Shepard and Shepard also identify fundamental beliefs of The Family that have been resistant to change: the Christian responsibility to “save souls for Jesus throughout the world” and an “imminent apocalyptic conclusion of human history.” The Family’s economic beliefs are a rejection of both the world’s wickedness and materialism, with over 54.2% of Family respondents agreeing with the claim that ‘the world is basically filled with evil and sin’ (Bainbridge 2002: 106). This rejection is also illustrated in members of The Family categorically expressing much less confidence in business, government, church, and legal institutions than respondents of the 1991 General Social Survey (Bainbridge 2002: 98). These beliefs also seem to spill into politics: “Family members tend to agree that politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for public office, and that it would be better if more people with strong religious beliefs held public office” (Bainbridge 2002: 103). The significance and duty of observing these beliefs has been inverse to changes in membership requirements; while members may avoid certain economic duties and ritual participation, “disciple member standards have been morally reaffirmed and are being further tightened” (Shepard and Shepard 2005: 80). In this way the sacred is still maintained and the profane still identified, yet the group is able to adapt to changing economic conditions through restructuring. The Family International’s digital media outlet is a .org website, elaborately set up and well designed- reflecting the innovation mentioned above. While there’s no immediate link to membership opportunities, the website is filled with information describing the positive attributes of The Family International. The website comes in more than one language, reflecting again the expansive and successful nature of the organization. The Family International’s digital media’s function does not seem to be to attract membership; rather, its function is to attribute positive images to the group, in order to alter potential perceptions engendered by past incidences within the group.

Aetherius Society

George king lived between 1919 and 1997, and is considered the ‘Founder and President of the Aetherius Society’ (Rothstein 2003:3). George King’s claims include being ‘approached by extraterrestrial beings of superior intelligence’ in 1954, (Rothstein 2003: 6) resulting in over six hundred transmissions and telepathic contact with “extraterrestrial entity named Master Aetherius” (Melton 2001: 860). Other claims include meeting ‘Master Jesus’, and that the text Twelve Blessings was blessed by Jesus Christ (Rothstein 2003: 10). King held countless titles and awards described in The Age of Aetherius, often from ethereal institutions beyond verification (Rothstein 2003: 8, 13) and members of the Aetherius Society believe that King’s various inventions have a basis in science (Saliba 2006: 2). Rothstein notes that ‘the hagiographic texts with exalted characterizations of George King legitimize his teachings’ (2003: 23). Doctrine underlying all Aetherius Society belief and action is the conception and existence of Space Intelligence, “extraterrestrial entities ...that allegedly communicate telepathically to chosen individual channels or through Spiritualist Mediums” (Encyclopedia of Occultism & Parapsychology). The image of highly evolved transcendent teachers from other realms coming to help humanity is an ideological requirement of UFO-based religions (Partridge 2004:111). This includes the Aetherius Society, which followw a “theosophical model” of an esoteric group communicating with and informed by their “ascended masters.” (Partridge 2004: 110) Theosophical group goals reflect the conception of extraterrestrials giving assistance and responsibility to organizational membership in putting this assistance to use. Saliba’s (1998: 6) identifies Aetherius Society goals as “administer spiritual healing”, “balance all spiritual practices through tuning in and irradiating the power transmitted during a holy time or spiritual push,” and the “conviction that aliens are visiting Earth to offer help for human beings” illustrate Partridge's observations. Partridge (2004: 110) also notes the “physicalist” tendency of UFO religions to take what is mystical and often unknown to other religions, and make it concrete and material. The Aetherius Society’s various psuedo-scientific practices like the use of spiritual energy to charge batteries reflect a physicalization of spirituality and serve to legitimize George King’s charisma as an ultra-intelligent individual.

The Aetherius society’s organizational structure include branches on several continents and two headquarters, (Saliba 1999: 4) suggesting an effective routinization of King’s charisma. There is not significant information on the attributes and characteristics of Aetherius Society membership, (Saliba 1999: 5); Barrett states that in “1987 a newsletter reported the circulation of 560 copies of the Cosmic Voice” (Saliba 1999: 4), indicating participants. The generalizations about membership that are provided by Saliba are also qualities identified by Dawe: middle-class status, and with the nature of the Aetherius society relying on technical experience, better educated (2008: 84, 85). Both men and women share leadership roles within the Aetherius society (Saliba 1999: 5). Given the bureaucratic structure developed by the Aetherius Society and its small membership size, the model of communal organization and informal social status presented by Weber loses applicability. The corporate organization is described as “well-structured with a well-defined religious agenda,” qualities which “favor institutionalization” (Saliba 1999: 14). There is an existing Board of Directors, Saliba writes, that manage the organizations affairs. Membership is divided into three categories: “friends of the society”, “Associate membership”, and “Full Membership” and indicate differentiating levels of commitment (Saliba 2006: 110). The Aetherius Society has also never participated in an active conversion campaign (Saliba 2006: 110). Membership performs sometimes “elaborate” rituals of prayer and other “spiritual practices”, like the consumption of healthy foods (Saliba 1999: 13). Teachings include that Jesus Christ now lives on Venus (Baker, 2000: 13) and that “700 hours of psychic energy can be stored in prayer batteries, which can be ready to use for 10,000 years” (Baker 2000: 13). Members participate in missions and operations related to beliefs that require significant commitment, including several hundred phases of “Operation Sunbeam”: traveling up a mountain to charge batteries with believed spiritual energy. (Saliba 1999: 12) This benefit energy “can be directed anywhere in the world, dispersing violence and strife and promoting love and harmony (Baker 2000: 13). Activities like these are indicative of the intensive interaction and formation of affective bonds with fellow participants, suggested parts of the conversion Loftland-Stark conversion model (Dawe 2008: 75). Unfortunately there is no reliable information on Aetherius Society members (Saliba 2006: 110) to identify the existence or nonexistence of religious seeker status and attributable feelings of tension towards religion. The Aetherius society does not hold major hostility towards the secular state, and its practices have been notably less destructive than those of other UFO religions: the Aetherius Society described the suicide of heaven’s gate as the result of a “dangerous imbalance of technology and spiritual growth” (Saliba 1999: 8). However, the Aetherius Society also has a set of attributes associated with sects: small numbers, radical social ethic and somewhat exclusive membership policy are indicative of its deeply esoteric set of beliefs (Roberts, Yamane 2012: 166). The memberships’ predisposition to the basic methodology of science may be the cause of both their general pacifism and system of organization, but group beliefs on the ultimate nature of reality are a source of radicalism for the Aetherius Society as a NRM.

The Aetherius Society uses digital media, an online webpage, to provide an aesthetically appealing image and portrayal of their beliefs and practices. This includes information on the elaborate prayer rituals mentioned above, as well as the explicit practice of charing batteries with spiritual energy. Information on membership is included, listing a variety of different expenses incurred, events to attend and even an exam to take. Practices such as this indicate a routinization of charisma in the recruitment process, as well as organizational developments identified by Niebuhr’s writing.

Comparison and Controversial Behavior

The Family International has been the target of much attention, including worldwide media scrutiny and litigation (Beverly 2005: 81). Instances of sexual abuse were illustrated in a court case in Rome concerning a Family chapter in Italy. The Family International’s Rome disco was “raided and fifteen persons were identified as members of a “cult,” “leading to the indictment on March 17, 1979 of David Berg himself” (Introvigne 2000: 3). The most controversial of MO letters implicated that flirty fishing with children of a young age was permissible (Introvigne 2000: 2). Some six hundred children have been taken into custody (Chryssides, 1999: 135) and police raids have occurred in three different countries (Beverley 2005: 82). In contrast, The Aetherius Society lacks any controversial attributes to their reputation. The organization’s elaborate prayer rituals, esoteric basis of thought and various operations to “spiritually heal” a given place or peoples are drastically different from The Family International. The former is based on a mythology of what could be described as romanticized science fiction, while the latter’s roots in the social change of the 1960s and 1970s focused more on the individual’s freedom of conduct - with latent consequence.

 In a 2009 Wales on Sunday article by Clare Hutchinson, the author mockingly describes one of the Aetherius Society missions: a climb up South Wale’s highest peak to collect spiritual energy. While the Aetherius Society may have impressions of strangeness, their ideology’s nature of a savior-like status sustains an impression of harmlessness. In a stark contrast, a 2005 New York Times article by Laurie Goodstein describes a revitalization of child abuse claims made by former The Family International Members. The article was specifically about Ricky Rodriguez, who Goodstein identifies as the son and stepson of the group leaders. Mr. Rodriguez, at the time of the article, had committed homicide then suicide. Family leaders blame his suicide on the media and anti-cult movement (Beverly, 2005: 83). Despite changes due to the routinization of charisma, The Family still holds controversial practices like the sexual activity of sharing domestic partners with others remains (Chryssides, 1999: 137). The Family International’s organizational existence and its subsequent transitory phase from sect to church characteristics have not removed past incidences of abuse and societal rejection, given the organizations longevity.

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