**Charisma, Buddhism, & New Religious Movements:**

**The Cult of Osho (Rajneeshism) and Shambhala (Vajradhatu) International**

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**Introduction**

During the 1970s, there was shift occurring in the United States in all aspects of civilian life, but particularly influencing their ideology. Following the counter-culture of the 1960s, many individuals began to challenge the norms of society, including religion. For some, the appearance of new religions movements (NRMs) offered answers to the questions they had about where they fit into society. Rajneeshism, led by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and Shambhala International, led by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, are two prominent examples that gained large followings were fairly prominent in the 1980s. Through application of what Weber called ethical and exemplary prophets, both Trungpa and Rajneesh introduced ways for Western society to come to terms with the new challenges of the 20th century by the adaptation of ancient Buddhist teachings and modern ideologies.

**Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh & the Cult of Osho**

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh began his NRM in the same fashion as many other seekers of NRMs, according to the status-process model described by Lofland and Stark (Dawson 2006:75-76). Born and raised in rural India, Rajneesh was immersed in a community centered on Hinduism. Sue Appleton (1987) describes Rajneesh as a man on his own path, uninterested in doing as he was told or following assumed social customs (p. 15); Rajneesh only did what made sense to him, regardless of the repercussions. Appleton even quotes Rajneesh as saying, “As far back as I can remember, I loved only one game- to argue” (Appleton 1987: 15). This attitude continued throughout his formal education.

While attending university in Jabalpur, he eventually found enlightenment on March 21, 1953 (Appleton 1987: 20). Through the blending of the social sciences (particularly the ideas of Freud), Hindu-Buddhism, and meditation, Rajneesh began spreading his ideas as a professor of philosophy at the University of Jabalpur. This is when Rajneesh began to gain followers as he established his first ashram in Poona. As an ethical prophet, as defined by Max Weber, Rajneesh created doctrine for his sannyasins, or followers, to guide their practice, as well as recorded his many lectures for public use (his beliefs changed over time, however, but this is discussed later in the paper). At the same time, he was while also living the life he intended his sannyasins to follow; as an exemplary prophet, he epitomized the self-actualized man for his followers.

Through his charismatic leadership, he was able to combine his extensive academic knowledge with his overwhelmingly convincing arguments that won over hundreds of followers by the mid-1970s. Once the ashram was opened in Poona, the sannyasins cohabitated together, thus strengthening the bonds between members. Rajneesh encouraged the development of the intense in-group interactions and is quoted as describing his idealized commune (as the commune in Oregon was becoming a reality), “The new commune will be on a big scale… sannyasins living together as one body, one being” (Gordon 1987:92). This emphasis on a united front was a major emphasis of the practice, as sannyasins were encouraged to live in communes or to make trips to the various ashrams.

One of the basic tenants of Rajneeshism was the idea that Western society was so focused on the outside world that it prevented individuals from reaching enlightenment. By addressing the Western focus on the sciences and integrating the worlds’ religions, Rajneesh encouraged intense meditations in order to obtain self-actualization (Appleton 1987:58). Sannyasins showed their devotion by wearing red and the mala- a necklace with the face of Rajneesh painted on it (Palmer 1988:120). While Rajneesh appeared as a wholesome, self-actualized leader, he also supported capitalism, apparent in his fleet of cars, consisting of 96 Rolls Royces (Goldman 2009:313).

Before his death in 1990, Rajneesh did not appoint a new leader to the movement (Goldman 2009:314). He delegated some power to a few trusted advisors, including Ma Anand Sheela, his personal secretary (Goldman 2009:314). However, Rajneesh did not have full faith in their abilities to lead and held back some power (Carter 1990: 224-26; Goldman 2009: 314). Without a recognized organization of the movement, the Cult of Osho as it was called at the time of Rajneesh’s death the movement split into individual sects found on websites like Oshoworld.com, Osho.com, and Oshorajneesh.net. Followers may find those with similar interpretations of Rajneesh and his teachings in this way. Even after his death, the movement still remains alive today. Smaller sects have adapted the lectures and texts created by Rajneesh to incorporate into their practices. In the practices of today, sannyasins meditate using mantras described by Rajneesh, as well as visit ashrams worldwide.

**Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche & Shambhala International**

In the most comprehensive ethnographic analysis to date, Lynn Eldershaw (2007) provides insight to the complexities of Shambhala International and how the NRM still survives today. The movement began when the Tibetan native, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Buddhist monk, moved to England in the 1960s (Eldershaw 2007: 75). Trungpa believed that the people of the Western world needed a new way to find happiness and acceptance in this busy world was by incorporating Buddhist traditions to their lives; however, in order to be an effective leader, he renounced his monastic ties and took up smoking, drinking, and sex so as to better fit in with the practices of the Western world (Eldershaw 2007: 75). In the 1970s he moved to the United States, in Colorado, and the movement originally named Vajradhatu, took root.

During the early stages of Vajradhatu, Westerners were drawn to the Trungpa’s theory to finding enlightenment. He believed that in the contemporary world, people were distracted by the stresses in society that they could no longer enjoy “basic goodness” (Trungpa 1984:30). This “basic goodness” can be enjoyed by simply appreciating a breathe of fresh air or a bird’s song. Trungpa “elevates everyday experience to the level of sacredness, and at the same time, he brings esoteric concepts, such as magic, into the realm of ordinary understanding and perception” (Trungpa 1984:16).

As both an exemplary and an ethical prophet, Trungpa created doctrine multiple foci, including the Shambhala Training- a secular approach to meditation- and the Monarchy Principle- “a set of teachings for personal conduct in everday life,” and exemplified the practice as well (Trungpa 1984: 78). He epitomized the ideas of the Vajradhatu. He left behind many doctrines including *The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (1978), which was used in this paper. He actively drank, smoked, and interacted with his followers, who viewed his crazed behavior as signs of his “authentic, realized spiritual master” (Eldershaw 2007:77). However, his behavior also caused concern, as it was detrimental to his health and, therefore, his continuance as master.

Under Trungpa, there was an executive board, designed to delegate power among the leading followers with Trungpa as the self-appointed President (Eldershaw 2007:79). At the same time, a line of succession had been established in case of Trungpa’s death, which was allotted to the Vice President, Ösel Tendzin (Eldershaw 2007:79). The centralized organization was balanced by the influence of the local centers of practice spread across the world, each with their own interpretation of Trungpa’s teachings; the individuality of the centers were exacerbated by the death of Trungpa and the scandalous end to Tendzin (Eldershaw 2007:80).

The centralized organization of Shambhala International was revamped under the leadership of Trungpa’s son, Sakyong. After the controversy under Tendzin, many followers were skeptical of the previous administration and were encouraged by Sakyong’s changes, particularly of his emphasis on a “gender-balanced board of directors” selected from fifteen locations world-wide (Eldershaw 2007:86). From this point on, the NRM no longer had the centralized, charismatic leader that Trungpa had been for Shambhala. Senior students were appointed to act as Acharyas, or individuals that teach by example (87), who were also responsible for completing Sakyong’s education in Shambhala.

One of the most important unifying changes that Sakyong implemented was the symbol of the Primordial Rigden Thangka. According to the official Shambhala International website (2009), the Primordial Rigden Thangka is a symbol of the complex history that has been enmeshed with the traditional teachings of Tibetan Buddhism and the secular beliefs of the original leader, Trungpa; “The details of the painting are symbolic, each one pointing to an aspect of the view, the training, or the full realization of awakened mind,” explains the author of the website. The painting is also available for individuals to purchase through the website, which enables a deeper sense of community.

At the meditation centers around the world, followers meet and work to perfect their meditation experiences, as well as strive for stronger community ties. A major belief of Shambhala International is finding happiness; this happiness is found within oneself, but also in the work of helping others.

**Comparison and Conclusion**

Where Rajneeshism and Shambhala agree is the extent to which the charismatic leaders were able to resist the routinization of their NRMs in order to maintain their strength as the leader. Dawson (2006: 157-160) outlines six major approaches charismatic leaders may take to prevent the routinization of NRMs. Both Rajneesh and Trungpa applied the same approaches, while to varying degrees, to conserve their power. The first approach the two movements applied, was a sudden shift in beliefs. Rajneesh was notorious for changing his doctrine often without explanation or warning, however, the deep-seated love and admiration for the leader trumped most dissent for the changes in policy. Trungpa, on the other hand, had two major shifts in doctrine; one occurring in the early 1970s, where the once “approachable” and “casual” practices to find happiness became an “austere” and “demanding” practice (Dawson 2006:157). The practice shifted once more before Trungpa’s death, which returned the practice to a more attainable system. This tactic not only enticed new followers, but also reaffirmed the loyalty and hierarchy of the leaders within the movements.

The second approach both leaders used to retain control was the relocation of their centers. Rajneesh was continually battling a love-hate relationship in Poona. One author wrote about this experience as he was traveling through India: “Everywhere I went… [l]ips puckered and heads shook as my informants declared him either a rotten spot on an ancient and honorable culture or a breath of fresh air in the miasma of Indian life, a bum or a hero” (Gordon 1987:18-19). Eventually this conflict led to Rajneesh establishing Rajneeshpuram in central Oregon, half way around the world. By the late 1980s, however, the United States government saw Rajneesh as a threat to national security and tried on numerous occasions to have Rajneesh deported, which was successful in 1985 (Appleton 1987; Johnson 1992). Though the shift in locations was fairly sudden and far away, thousands of followers moved to the commune in Oregon. Through this movement, Rajneesh not only shook loose the criticism in India, but also regained major control over both new and old sannyasins. Similarly, Trungpa moved Shambhala International from its headquarters in Boulder, Colorado to Halifax, Nova Scotia (Dawson 2006: 160).

These two NRMs, both originating in the 1970s and continuing after their leaders both died in the late 1980s and early 1990s, are great examples of how charismatic leaders can leave a lasting impact on a NRM. While the doctrines of today have been broken into many sects, both Shambhala International and the Cult of Osho have been continued through their devout followers.

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