

## Richard Gombrich

# THE DIVINE LIGHT MISSION

The success of the Divine Light Mission seems to call for an explanation. The movement may be unique in the West, in that its leader, the Guru Maharaj Ji, is in his teens. This fact is probably the crucial ingredient in the successful recipe.

### *ideology*

The movement combines very strong leadership, highly centralized and autocratic, with a complete absence of doctrinal justification for it. Ideologically, conversion to the Divine Light Mission consists of the realization that each individual has a divine light within. This is called 'taking knowledge'. Though they take the metaphor of light literally (and conversion may also be referred to as 'opening the third eye'), adherents recognize that the divine light symbolizes an assurance that one is of some intrinsic worth. The light may be meditated upon, though techniques for such meditation do not seem to be taught; at least, they are not standardized. Beyond this the movement seems to have no soteriology, and virtually no doctrine at all, except for some central but rather ambiguous beliefs about the Guru Maharaj Ji himself. He is regarded as the latest in a long line of religious teachers, which includes all the founders of the world religions; some say that the previous figure in this line was his father; above all, he is in some sense an incarnation of God. The divine light however is eternal and exists independently of its proclaimers. The Guru merely happens to be the most recent enunciator of a doctrine which can be found, for example, in the Bible and the Koran. He cannot grant or withhold salvation, and commands no obedience. Nevertheless, the movement's salient characteristic is the ecstatic devotion of the devotees to the Guru. They call themselves *premis* ('lovers'), wish to devote their lives to his service, and know no higher happiness than to be in his presence. Their relation to him is expressed in the song (which I took down at a meeting): 'Lord of the universe, come to us this day. And he's come to show us light And he's come to show us love And he's come to show us the way. And to our father open up your hearts in the universe of love. And he will fill you up.'

### *organisation*

Organisationally the movement functions through an oligarchy of *mahatmas*, who are said to be controlled by the Guru, though one wonders whether in fact it is not they who control him. The only doctrinal rationale for the *mahatmas* is that they mediate the message of the Guru as his apostles. Ideally conversion occurs in the presence of the Guru, and converts wish to perform *his* will; but in fact many conversions occur in the presence of a *mahatma*, and *mahatmas* frequently tell adherents how to run their lives,

and seem to be implicitly obeyed. As the *mahatmas* lack both logical connection with the doctrine of divine light and the emotional appeal of the Guru, it is not surprising that I have found no reference to them in the movement's publicity material; yet they are the sinews of the movement.

### *individualism*

The doctrine that each man has the divine light recalls the Quakers, and might in a broad sense be called Protestant. There is no spiritual elite, not even spiritual superiority; this is extreme religious egalitarianism. Moreover, this is totally privatized religion, the consummation of the movement from *Gemeinschaft* through *Gesellschaft* to the mere conglomeration of socially atomized individuals. Not only does the ideology fail to provide a ritual or to justify a cult; the only soteriological act which it legitimates is introspection, and even this not according to rules provided by a (typically Indian) tradition or promulgated by an authority, but according to one's own uninformed fancy. This might be called the vanishing point of religion as a social phenomenon.

And yet there is, ideologically unjustified, the cult of the Guru, which holds the movement together in a typically sectarian pattern. Indeed, an adherent would probably reply, if God is before you what further justification is required for his adoration?

### *clientele*

The great majority of converts to the Divine Light Mission whom I have seen are aged between 15 and 25. They are part of the same general clientele as adherents to the (much larger) Jesus movement and the (smaller, albeit more conspicuous) Hare Krishna movement. Observers of the Jesus movement have already noted that it appeals particularly to young people who have been involved with drugs, what one might call drop-outs from the drug scene. General observation suggests that such people have usually left the parental home and have often moved right out of their parents' community, but have not yet found a stable social environment elsewhere. After the first relief of breaking away from the restraints of home and school many of them feel lonely and at a loose end, till they welcome the regular companionship, and even the regimentation, of sectarian life. Partly because of guilt at flouting childhood norms, partly because dependence on drugs may lead to further degradations, many come to suffer from a serious loss of self-esteem. The 'divine light', like the divine spark said to be within each Christian, however sinful, is simply a reassurance, conveyed in this case with a minimum of metaphor — as the clientele have retained few connections with the cultural traditions of western civilization.

## *authority*

The needs of socially displaced young people may be and have been variously catered for. The peculiar genius of the Divine Light Mission lies in its relationship to authority. My impression is that the young people who join it come from a group which is very consciously in rebellion against authority; 'authoritarian' is their favourite polysyllable, a term of abuse roughly synonymous with 'fascist' (though that word may be too political in tone, and hence too related to the authority structures of our political system, to appeal to many of them). Authority is held to be bad *per se*. They are therefore well suited by an ideology which offers nothing but an unreasoning radical egalitarianism. On the other hand they have found autonomy difficult, perhaps unbearable, and crave an external authority. How better to answer this need, *without having to admit to it*, than by following an Indian boy, 'just a kid' who rides around on a motor-scooter spraying his 'lovers' with a water-pistol, who could not possibly, by any stretch of the imagination, be your real father. That he can nevertheless, in the anodyne context of the hymn quoted above, be referred to as a father, demonstrates the ambivalence. Mahesh Yogi of the Transcendental Meditators and Bhaktivedanta of the Hare Krishna movement are grandfather figures; but Maharaj Ji has gone one better: he is God the Father incarnated as your kid brother. Moreover, he is a kid brother — with his Rolls-Royce and his black patent-leather shoes — about whom you do not have to worry: he is not going to make the mistakes you made.

## *eroticism*

The Guru's behaviour with the water-pistol has been described to me as arousing great enthusiasm: 'Just imagine — God with a water-pistol!' I shall not discuss the Freudian overtones. But there is an interesting cultural parallel. Sprinkling one another with water, usually containing washable dyes, is the main activity of an important Indian religious festival, Holi; it is particularly associated with

Krishna, the sexually mature adolescent god, and his play with the dairy-maids, his lovers, who are said to symbolize the souls who adore and yearn for God. The cult of the Guru is tinged with the eroticism of the teeny-bopper.

## *resocialisation*

The Divine Light Mission appears to be what Bryan Wilson has called a 'conversionist' sect. Initially, conversion is a sudden and overwhelming emotional experience, and subsequent gratifications in the movement are entirely emotional, not intellectual. Moreover, the movement seeks to promote accommodation to society at large. Doctrinally it is eirenic: an adherent told me that the Guru had advised his (the adherent's) mother, who was a Christian, just to go and be a good Christian. (In this he was following a sound Indian tradition.) On the practical level, followers are constantly advised on how to accommodate successfully to the world. The Guru reconciles children to parents and husbands to wives; I have heard a speaker recount how after conversion hippies cut their hair and returned home to wash the dishes while their parents wept tears of joy; he told us that the Guru had been given the key to the city of New York and was about to be honoured there by a Fathers' Day parade. Adherents are allowed to preserve holy poverty for themselves as long as they desire it; but this is preferably to be achieved by their handing over what they have or earn to the Mission, and the hierarchy is interested in getting them into well-paid steady jobs. The Guru's jewelled wrist-watches, which are reputed to have troubled the customs of more than one country, symbolize his ability to provide an almost exaggerated resocialisation into the dominant values of our culture.

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