

Unstructured networking in a charisma-based new religious movement: the ‘Baba lovers’

- Ray Kerkhove, Ph.D (University of Queensland)

The relatively unstructured beginnings of many charisma-based new religions, and their rapid transformation into structured institutions is a process that has attracted many studies since original forays into this field by Max Weber. Although several scholars - notably Luther Gerlach and Virginia Hine – have identified more diffuse modes of religious organization amongst new religions (usually ‘networks’ of one sort or another), there has been little investigation of why some groups begin with a charismatic leader yet never transform into a structured, hierarchical entity. The ‘Baba lovers’ movement is considered in this paper as a prime example of this occurrence. Despite its origins in the charismatic authority of its founder - Avatar Meher Baba (1894-1969) –it does not seem to have solidified into a structured, hierarchical form. It seems to have remained a loose network. This essay identifies various ways in which the Meher Baba movement exemplifies a SPIN-type network. The author seeks an explanation for this continued fluidity in Meher Baba’s dictates concerning organizational structures, and in Indic notions of “internal guidance from the Master.” The author argues that for many “guru”-oriented groups past and present, belief in posthumous “internal guidance” minimized the need for complex organizational/ hierarchical structures.

Informal structure and routinisation in charismatic movements: Weber and his successors

As Douglas Barnes once noted, for a 'new' religion to be new and separate at all, it must in some way move beyond whatever structure it emerged from (Barnes 1978: 13). This act can place it beyond civic perceptions regarding what is and is not "religious" (see Wilson 1990: 84). We can see this type of reasoning behind Max Weber's insistence that any new faith begun by a charismatic leader - is "a... creative revolutionary force" (Weber 1968: 1117) bereft of structural bearings:

...(it) knows of no abstract legal codes and statutes and of no ‘formal’ way of adjudication.

Its 'objective' law emanates concretely from the highly personal experience of heavenly grace and from the god-like strength of the hero [= the new creed's 'prophet' or founder]. ... (This) means the rejection of all ties to any external order in favour of the exclusive glorification of the genuine mentality of the prophet and hero (Weber in Gerth & Mills, 1946: 246f).

For this reason, Weber viewed all charismatic groups as initially nebulous entities: "no career, no promotion... no hierarchy... no established administrative organs... no system of formal rules" (Weber 1947: 331) - just a "communal relationship" heavily reliant on the leader's guidance. He quotes Christ: "It is written, *but I say unto you*" (Weber 1947: 331).

For fifty years, this line has been toed by a variety of scholars, with many definitive studies being made of how this initial informality is 'routinised' into an ordered, often hierarchical, form - usually upon the death of the founder (see Barrett 2001: 61). There have been diverse studies of this phenomenon supposedly occurring within the Divine Light Mission, Children of God and the Unification Church. More recently, Lewis Carter demonstrated how - in his opinion - Bhagwan Rajneesh's movement transformed from a fairly casual arrangement into a tiered hierarchy with very specific titles and privileges in a matter of years (Carter 1990: 158f).

Despite the testimony of such studies, Weber's model for routinisation was never fully accepted by students of new religious movements (NRMs). As Schroeder found, even Weber's notion of routinization is far from clear. Sometimes Weber seems to be referring to the process by which charismatic authority means becomes part of everyday life, and other times he refers to what happens when this authority is transferred to the leader's successors or followers (Schroeder 1992: 9-10). Moreover, the theory fails to explain many historical movements - for instance, Protestantism, which never based itself on a single, powerful leader (see Schroeder 1992:18).

Thus it is now acknowledged that many NRMs never develop formal organisational structure. Geoffrey Nelson identified several NRMs that evolved into "a diffused collectivity

composed of isolated individuals and/ or local groups united only in holding common basic beliefs (and having) no formal organisation" - a phenomenon he called "cult movements" (Nelson 1968: 359). Somewhat similarly, Yinger proposed the notion of a 'lay sect' - a movement that "more strongly resists tendencies toward professional leadership and bureaucratic structural development"(Yinger 1970: 272). During the 1970s, Hine and Gerlach developed this concept further, noting the prevalence of a 'grapevine' type organisations that Hine called SPIN (Segmented Polycentric Integrated Networks) – noncentralised, many-celled groups (Gerlach 1971: 815). More recently, such entities have also been dubbed "clusters" (Starhawk 1988: 115) or "camps" (York 1995: 36).

Whatever they are called, faiths of this informal type do not normally begin as a charismatic group headed by a single, authoritative leader (see York 1995: 326). In this paper we explore one charisma-based group that, even after the death of its central figure, manifested much of the informality one would expect of a leaderless SPIN group.

The Baba lovers/ Meher Baba movement

It was Robbins and Anthony who first classified the *Baba lovers* or *Meher Baba movement* as a typical "monistic charismatic group" (Robbins, Anthony & Richardson 1978: 103). The case for doing can hardly be contested, as this NRM is very much a personality cult - concerned with the persona, life and teachings of its founder - Avatar Meher Baba (*aka* Merwan Sheriar Irani, an Indian-born Parsi who lived from 1894 to 1969). Meher Baba is viewed as God Incarnate; the Creator; the same eternal Avatar who came as Jesus, Buddha, Krishna etc.

Amongst the galaxy of NRMs (new religious movements), Baba lovers are fairly inconspicuous, yet they represent a faith of substantial proportions (between 200,000 and

1,000,000 adherents – see Ward & Humphreys 1995: 292 and Tuelen 1994). Beginning in 1921, the movement was best known in the 1960s and 1970s, being one of the first ‘guru cults’ to be embraced by Western youth (Rowley 1971: 126).

Baba lovers have been identified as a loose-knit “movement” at least since the 1960s. The realization that this entity was essentially a network came much later, when writers such as Michael York began to speak of it as a set of ‘camps’ or part of ‘the spiritual camp’ (York 1995: 36).

SPIN/ cluster -type structure within the Meher Baba movement

A. Nebulous and autonomous groups

According to Michael York, “networks” will demonstrate a “proliferation of segmentation” and a general lack of cohesive organization (Michael York 1995: 326). The first study of the structure of the Meher Baba movement, conducted in 1956 by Filis Frederick, evidenced no cohesive organization. Frederick encountered undefined clusters of individuals who “voluntarily decided to get together regularly” (Frederick 1984: 39) to share their mutual interest in Meher Baba. There seemed only one body with a glimmer of structure - the *Universal Spiritual League in America Inc.* – but Frederick discovered that even this was merely a legal device created to aid Meher’s visits. It had no membership or board. As might be expected of a typically ‘segmented’ network, it proved difficult to estimate how many ‘Baba groups’ existed at this time. No followers were keeping a tally (Frederick 1984: 40).

We might expect that twenty years on, during the zenith of ‘Hippy’ interest, the faith would have acquired rudiments of structure. Instead, when Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins produced

their 'classic article' on the Baba movement (Stone 1978: 149) that could see “no clear or unified authority structure... [just] autonomous [groups]” (Anthony & Robbins, 1974: 491). They concluded that the movement still “lack[ed] ...clear criteria for identifying precisely who is or is not a Baba lover”(Anthony & Robbins, 1974: 491). Ann Johnson was making identical observations with regards to British Baba lovers at this time (see Johnston 1977: 31-2, 38), whilst Robert Ellwood – who was examining Californian Baba ‘scene’ – encountered only:

...scattered groups, usually meeting in Meher Baba bookstores (run by enthusiasts without much financial profit) or private homes. No permission to organize or join is needed (Ellwood 1973: 285).

The groups were found to be diverse and self-governing. Ellwood even met Baba lovers who did not seem to belong to any group (Ellwood 1973: 284-285).

Lack of organizational structure was so marked at this time that a Parsi publisher in New York, Naosherwan Anzar, was convinced that ‘Baba lovers’ were a not ‘religious movement.’ In one editorial piece for his magazine - *Glow*, he explained that because Baba lovers had no set conditions or rules of membership, there was “no violation and thereby no such thing as expulsion or excommunication” (Anzar 1977: 2). This, in his view, meant that there was also no separate identity as a religious body. Anzar’s main evidence for this was the fact that Baba lovers never assembled or organized themselves in any predictable pattern, let alone sought legislative support to do so (Anzar 1977: 2).

Anzar’s conclusion was based on a rather limited notion of what constitutes religious organization. In fact, the features mentioned above - absence of a membership tally; absence of any organs or persons capable of making binding/ regulatory decisions for all; and a general lack of agreement amongst participants about what the movement means - closely match Gerlach's conception of a SPIN group (Gerlach 1971: 821). It is notable that Frederick, Anzar, Ellwood and

Anthony all highlighted the Meher Baba movement's strong emphasis on emotional comradeship and personal change - traits Gerlach and Hine found typical of SPIN groups (Gerlach & Hine 1973: 163).

The nature of the Baba Movement today seems little altered from these observations of thirty years ago. Richard Kyle still calls the groups "more or less autonomous" (Kyle 1993: 245), and the British *Independent* newspaper, observing the movement's centenary celebrations (one hundred years since the birth of its founder), described it as "probably the biggest underground network in humanity" (Anonymous 1994: 2).

In my own study of the Australian 'Meher Baba scene,' I noted that Australian Meher Baba projects and publications are instigated by sporadic, temporary alliances between interested individuals (Kerkhove 2000: 77). Where Australian Baba centres exist, they are mostly followers' homes. These close or relocate when followers move elsewhere (Kerkhove 2000: 78).

One of the movement's major centres outside India is *Avatar's Abode*, a property at Woombye in Queensland, Australia. I resided here from 1995 to 2000, whilst researching the movement. I found that although the centre demanded considerable upkeep (containing eleven buildings, retreat accommodation, extensive landscaped gardens and 100 acres of bushland walking tracks), there was no designated staff (Kerkhove 1998: 42-45). For half a century, clusters of followers have lived on or near the property – sporadically gardening or renovating the place in an *ad hoc* fashion whilst their committees and activity groups appeared and disappeared (Kerkhove 2001: 2). A voluntary, part-time board, whose members mostly work and live at some remove from the centre, now makes most of the administrative or maintenance decisions, but otherwise, the only unifying force seems to be annual *Anniversaries* of Meher Baba's visit. This festival - held each Queen's Birthday weekend (early June) - transforms Avatar's Abode into a

bustling hive of diverse activities and entertainments, involving several hundred participants.

Such an arrangement exemplifies Starhawk's "clusters" of "affinity groups." Starhawk viewed "clusters" as adaptive, overlapping bodies that rely on media such as newsletters, bulletins and festivals to perpetuate themselves (Starhawk 1988: 115). We can see exactly this in the Meher Baba movement in Australia, where the prime organs of participation are festivals and newsletters.

B. Lack of identifiable traits/ identifiable practices

Another feature of the Baba lovers that is suggestive of a 'network' is its lack of identifiable traits. It has been noted that Baba lovers are extremely diverse and "conspicuously adaptive" (Anthony & Robbins 1982: 228). It is difficult to define their practices. George Chen observed his fellow devotees at their founder's tomb. He noted that some bowed down. Others walked straight past or straight in. Still others just sat outside. Chen concluded that such variety pervaded everything associated with Meher Baba:

We are not homogenous in any external way. ...a standard of devotional practices, attitudes and beliefs for all Baba lovers is impossible... Baba left no worldly mechanism for the transmission, supervision, correction or enforcement of such a code. Nor do we, as a community, seem to have the slightest inclination to invent one (Chen 2004: 2).

What this means is that there is often very little to distinguish Baba lovers from their surrounding culture. As Sandford revealed in his interviews with prominent creative Baba lovers such as singers Pete Townsend and Tuck and Patti, playwright Stephen Miller, and screenwriter Patrick Meyers, there is a distinct absence of overt 'Meher Baba' (let alone spiritual) themes in Baba lovers' creative lives - even in what they consider their most "spiritual" productions (Sandford 1986: 11-17).

Such mergence with the mundane is typical of what Albridge describes as the

“world-affirming” NRMs (see Aldridge 2000: 46). Baba lovers have been likened to est, Scientology and TM in emphasising reintegration into conventional vocational, educational or familial roles (York 1995: 291). As one New York follower boasts:

There is no program to convert the multitudes... no uniform, no mantra, hairstyle or diet. In fact, except for our inner experiences... we are no different from humanity itself. *We are humanity, in all of its infinite diversity and imperfection* [emphasis mine] (Chen 2004: 2).

At times, this drive for normalcy manifests as “hostile attitudes toward any kind of formal ritual or procedure” (Anthony and Robbins, 1974: 491). Some of Meher’s closest disciples – notably Bhau Kalchuri – issued strong statements against definitive practices and customs:

The [spiritual] path is **not open** to them who put on robes, meditate and repeat mantras mechanically, preach dogma, perform rites, and pose as if they are spiritually advanced.
The way of the path is made of
love - not rituals;
longing - not ceremonies;
honesty - not orthodoxy;
surrender - not teaching;
sacrifice- not preaching;
forgiving - not meditating;
being divinely intoxicated - not repeating mantras [original emphasis]
(Kalchuri 1985: 82).

Without specific practices, customs, venues or paraphernalia, a movement has little need for personnel or infrastructure. Of course, if such a lack of specifics were enforced, this would require a group of ‘enforcers’ and thus another mode of structure, but the open-ended nature of the Meher Baba movement seems to have worked against this. In fact, Baba lovers’ passion for adaptation and personalized spirituality seems to have enabled some followers to pursue highly specific practices. When Anne Cushman and Jerry Jones surveyed India's innumerable ashrams and centres six years ago, they commented that at the Meher Baba centre (Meherabad), they encountered much freedom and time to “pursue your own practice... your own personal

development in whatever way is best for you,” – unlike the structured programs of other groups (Cushman & Jones 1999: 175, 178).

C. Lack of internal hierarchy

SPIN-type networks are typically non-hierarchical (Michael York 1995: 326). As far as Anthony and Robbins could discern, Baba groups in the 1970s were egalitarian, with “hostile attitudes toward ...any formal system of authority” (Anthony and Robbins, 1974: 491). Ellwood even painted the movement rather romantically as “a fellowship of coequal love” (Ellwood 1973: 284-5).

Frederick, on the other hand, found that domineering, charismatic leaders did emerge in some Baba groups and centres - particularly during a group's formative years. However, she noted that these autocrats were eventually rejected and ousted by followers as the groups matured (Frederick 1984: 36f). During the 1980s and 1990s, followers at the main Indian, American and Australian centres each ousted their Chairman on such grounds.

Today, the Baba movement presents a broad range of autonomous groups and centres: “we have no earthly leader and no chain of command”(Chan 2004:2). Some of the larger centres do have Trusts or Boards that carry a mantle of administrative authority over the properties concerned, but it does not seem to extend beyond this. Individual Baba groups and projects apparently remain a loose network. Different persons take the lead at different times, according to their interest and availability, but certainly there remains a notable absence of unity and hierarchy (see Kerkhove 2000: 78).

Origins of SPIN-type Structure in the Baba Lovers movement

A. Meher Baba's Dictates and Actions

The fluidity of the Baba lovers movement seems partly attributable to deliberate policies of Meher Baba, which followers carried out in great detail. Meher Baba is regularly quoted by followers as saying he did not wish to establish a “cult, society or organization, nor ... (a) new religion” (Meher Baba 1963: 15). Certainly in various statements he likened religious organizations to “...the foam which brings unwanted things up to the surface of the sea, letting the real substance lie beneath, submerged in the depths” (Kalchuri 1973: 2270). His suspicion of structured religion even extended to centres:

...by attaching to it [a centre] great importance ... it develops into a **regular organization or system**, and I do not wish to **limit myself or bind myself** with any such thing... If such centres are allowed to prosper, they form themselves into organizations or societies. **For that reason, I build structures and then demolish them...** (original emphasis, Meher Baba in Kalchuri 1973: 2270).

During his lifetime, Meher forbade the development of “*panths* (groups) or *jaats* (classes, or ...ashrams” (Chen 2004: 2). He also issued directives against followers erecting any sort of religious institute (Kalchuri 1973: 4544). Thus when Pune devotees decided to build a centre in Meher Baba's name, he advised them:

You can establish one hundred centres for Baba, and I will have no concern with any of them. You yourselves will be concerned with them. It is all your concern, not mine... (Meher Baba 1954: 9).

It was apparently to resist the development of centres that Meher Baba constantly moved house - shifting all over India and even overseas. Each time this was envisaged as a permanent relocation. Previous centres' buildings were sold or demolished (Kalchuri 1973: 899). Even Avatar's Abode was returned to its purchaser – Meher Baba pressing home his disaffiliation by reimbursing all who had contributed money or labour to create the centre (Grant 1985: 101).

Meher Baba was similarly hostile to the development of ‘organizations’ bearing his name.

In the early 1950s, a group of Baba devotees in Andhra decided to create a governing body. Meher visited and disbanded the group, telling them: “even about books and all other literature on ‘Baba’ I won't be responsible... I will have no concern whatsoever with either office or publications...” (Meher Baba 1954: 10). Though sometimes he actively encouraged the creation of certain centres, groups, publishing or governing bodies (see Kalchuri 1973: 6223), many such bodies came and went during his lifetime, and others he threatened with dissolution at the first signs of hierarchy or disharmony (see Meher Baba 1957: 14 and Kalchuri 1973: 6081).

Likewise, Meher Baba established measures for avoiding features that might hasten the development of infrastructure. Claiming that 'ordinary living' - “living in the midst of your day-to-day duties, responsibilities, likes and dislikes” – was the best spiritual discipline (Meher Baba in Purdom 1964: 286) - he would not allow any distinctive dress or customs and even forbade the use of a distinctive religious symbol (Kalchuri 1973: II: 609). To associate closely with him, people had to look like the surrounding populace. All traditional marks of renunciation such as long hair, shaved heads, beards and monastic garb were abandoned:

When you wear *sadhu* (renunciate) clothes, indirectly you court respect. A false sense of advancement in spirituality is liable to be created when you try to lead a life in some other way than that of the common people (Meher Baba 1971: 21).

Such ‘blending in’ extended to refusing to acknowledge racial and national differences. Meher ran mixed-faith, mixed-caste schools. His disciples – drawn from diverse creeds and nationalities – could not engage in any customs or religious practices that set them apart from the rest of the group (Kalchuri 1985: 38f; Pawar 1925: 48). They were told:

You are already parts of one life and as such, [racial/ national/ religious] brotherhood is not something that is brought into existence through laborious efforts, but is the supreme FACT, which claims your recognition and wholehearted allegiance, as soon as you have the candidness and courage to face the Truth (Meher Baba 1945: 74).

To further negate distinctions, Meher Baba seems to have experimented with implementing various types of democracy within his circle of followers. His vote on activities was generally given an equal standing with suggestions of the rest of the group (Abdullah 1929: 37f), and when a branch of the hierarchical Sufi Society (followers of Inayat Khan) came into his fold, Meher devised a new Charter for the group wherein he specifically ruled that:

All conventions, rules, regulations, Articles and By-laws must be strictly based on the democratic principles of adult franchise and equal opportunities for all... without allowing any exceptions to anyone on grounds of spiritual advancement or enlightenment (Meher Baba c.1956: 5).

Closest disciples (*mandali* - 'within the circle') were never identified but were rather assigned anonymous or humiliating roles, such as feeding chickens or being the personal aides to particularly obnoxious persons (see Kalchuri 1984). This attitude extended to Meher Baba himself. He conducted many of the lowliest chores: sweeping the floors, grinding grain, running errands, collecting the mail and eggs, and cleaning the toilets - which in India meant scooping out tins of human waste (Donkin 1948: 96-97; Mehera Irani 1989: 64). He had the duty of changing bed linen, and washing, feeding, dressing and toileting residents of the hospitals and schools he and his group operated (Kalchuri 1985; Donkin 1948: 96-97). He also usually conducted the movement's on-going charitable work in person and in disguise:

There [in the Calcutta area] Baba gave help [handing out food, clothes and money] without anyone knowing who he was. He went right into the middle of the villages where people were dying. ...Nobody knew... (Jessawala 1995: 39).

Of course, there is an inherent contradiction in claiming someone is God yet attempting to avoid hierarchy. Despite the facade of group consultation, Meher was the instigator of major decisions, demanding that everything be done "on the condition of explicit obedience to (Me)" (Pawar 1924-1926: 113). Nevertheless, within these constraints, it does appear that Meher Baba

was intent on radically reducing the paraphernalia, privileges and adulation surrounding Indian 'guruship.'

For example, in India, it is common for devotees to establish shrines and statues honouring their Guru or their political leaders - even whilst the latter are still alive (see Sooklal 1990: 21). Meher permitted only one such structure (at Hamirpur). It had to carry large inscriptions denouncing ceremonies and explaining that the building and statue did not and could never contain him (Udaseen 1952: 109).

Perhaps a more significant step was banning all bowing to Meher Baba (Jessawala 1976: 148). This was a surprising measure for Indian society where even secular professions are based on the Guru-disciple system and all its associated protocols (Antze 1992: 73) such as emotive speeches, garlanding or touching the leader's feet. One of the central rules of Meher's community was "falling at the feet of Meher Baba is strictly prohibited" (Abdulla 1979: 18-19). Later (1949), Meher made it a principal condition (No. 25) of being a 'Companion' in his 'New Life' wanderings: "you will not... create (any) circumstances that might invite homage to me" (Udaseen 1967: 71). Equally, traditional *guru-dakshina* - the Indian custom of honouring teachers with gifts and garlands (Antze 1992: 76) - was abandoned (Kalchuri 1973 XIII -XIV: 4798). This measure was sometimes ignored by outsiders, although Baba's even derided *arti* (prayer and worship performed in front of a Guru) as "mean(ing) absolutely nothing... a wastage of money... a sheer wastage of breath and energy" (Meher Baba 1954: 2). In his old age, Meher very occasionally accepted traditional *darshan*, on account of the frequent requests from devotees (Anzar 1974: 96) but even then indicated: "I am so fed up with all this bowing down" (Kalchuri 1973 XI - XII: 4320).

All these various measures and emphases of Meher Baba seem to have been continued

since his death, no doubt on account of the movement's intense focus on Meher Baba's words and actions. As so much of Meher Baba's life seems to have been directed towards avoiding 'ceremonies' and a highly structured hierarchy, it is not surprising that the movement remains a loose network.

B. The Concept of the Internal Guru

Another key to understanding the continuing lack of ordered structure within the Meher Baba movement may be the *guru-shishya* (Master-disciple) system itself. Anil Sooklal has argued that *guru-shishya* ensured an "absence of a central hierarchical structure" in Hinduism. He believed that the Hindu tradition of having innumerable "Divinities" (God-men, Avatars) ruling their own particular "worlds" (ashrams, movements etc.) made it impossible to develop a single, hierarchical 'church' (Sooklal 1990: 28).

Within Hinduism, each Master is usually considered Divine - omnipresent and omnipotent and already embedded in the devotee's soul (see Vail 1996, Williams 1996). This has important ramifications for organizational structure. If the Guru/ Avatar already mystically occupies the devotee's soul and is spread throughout the universe - monitoring every action, and deciding the course of all events - where is the need for exterior organizations and their representatives? With 'the guru within us,' there is no need for levels of ecclesiastical authority (Hutchinson 1991: 47). All structure becomes internal under such a belief system, with the guru invisibly governing all events.

Moreover, as the guru is envisaged as having a very direct and intimate link to all the affairs (and very existence) of the devotee, one's 'personal religion' naturally takes precedence over institutional forms. Hutchinson even viewed this belief as the "realization of a new centre of

the personality” - a capitulation of the devotee's ego before an even greater self- individuation (Hutchinson 1991: 39).

It follows that the more absolute and all-pervading the Guru claims to be, the less infrastructure he/ she requires, because in that case, any follower anywhere has simply to resort to his or her higher or inner self to know what 'spiritual actions' to take. Indeed, if the guru is absent (in seclusion) or dead, it only strengthens individualized segmentation, as then there is no one (not even the guru!) to monitor or deny the 'promptings of the Inner Guru.'

Thus it is not surprising that when NRM scholar Dick Anthony (himself a Baba lover), was asked to explain how he monitored his spiritual life, he spoke of the importance of the 'inner guidance' from Meher Baba that he felt had occurred through various experiences and promptings he had over the years. He viewed such 'inner guidance' as the ultimate source of authority within the Meher Baba movement, and also the source of each devotee's autonomy (see Anthony 1982: 20).

It is easy to see how this operates in maintaining a network-type structure within the Baba movement. During his own lifetime, Meher Baba insisted on having a 'direct line' with his followers - devoid of intermediaries (see Kalchuri 1973 XIII-XIV: 4538). He viewed the spiritual path as a very individual, very private concern (Meher Baba 1955: 178).

Consequently, religious activity in Meher's own lifetime was highly individualized (personal) and internal. Anthony's informants told him: "we've got it within us" (Anthony & Robbins 1982: 227). Ultimate reality in this understanding is assigned to the realm of consciousness latent in innumerable personalized spiritualities, thus "it cannot be translated into any rigid or normative system" (Anthony & Robbins 1982: 231). Such highly personalized (individualized) spirituality is inevitably:

...one-on-one, and ...idiosyncratic, in the sense that he (Meher) deliberately manipulates what happens to them to confront them with important experiences, challenges or opportunities. ...Baba is perceived as intervening in the unique and particular details of each follower's life history, monitoring to each person's distinctive spiritual needs...(Anthony & Robbins 1982: 227).

By the 1950s, this notion already dominated Meher's messages. Increasingly, he withdrew from sustained contact with his wider following, insisting they rely instead on 'internal connections':

It is only to establish the internal connections that the external connections have been maintained till now. The time has come for being bound in the chain of internal connections. Hence external contact is no longer necessary (Meher Baba 7 October 1954 Circular, in Udaseen 1954).

Especially during the last decade of his life, Baba requested that followers rely less and less on their personal contacts with him and more and more on what they 'felt' from him in their own heart /conscience. As a consequence, the movement developed a strong emphasis on 'internal guidance' in the 1960s and 1970s. If anything, this made the loose network structures that had arisen during Meher Baba's lifetime even more fluid.

Conclusions

We have identified several areas in which the Meher Baba movement displays a loose organizational structure. The dictates of the movement's founder were found to have initiated much of this fluidity. It is obvious that devotees expended considerable effort in trying to remain faithful to Meher Baba's wishes. Thereby, despite the movement's origins in a charismatic figure, it retained its open, network-type structure for all of its history (more than eighty-five years).

The very strength of devotees' efforts to remain faithful to Meher Baba's wishes suggests a

powerful hold of what we could term “posthumous charisma” - the belief in guidance from the ‘internal Guru.’ In some regards, the continuity of *any* historically founded religion could be attributed to belief in ‘internal guidance’ from that religion's founder. For example, people continue to try to establish structures in the “spirit” of Christ, or to “better” embody Buddha’s teachings, despite centuries of political change and even persecution.

In the Indian context, the notion of ‘internal guidance from the guru’ seems particularly well developed. It made it possible for groups such as the Meher Baba movement to retain their original, fairly unstructured organization, long after the founder’s death.

Bibliography

- ‘Baba Don’t Preach,’ 24 February 1994, *The Independent* (London), 2.
- Abdulla, Ramjoo, 1929 (1979) *Ramjoo's Diaries 1922-1929 - A Personal Account of Meher Baba's Early Work* (Walnut Creek: Sufism Reoriented)
- Aldridge, Alan, 2000, *Religion in the Contemporary World- A Sociological Introduction* (Oxford: Polity)
- Anthony, Dick, 1974, 'The Meher Baba Movement and Its Effect on Post-Adolescent Social Alienation,' in ed. Irving I. Zaretsky & Mark P. Leone, *Religious Movements in Contemporary America* (Princeton: Princeton University)
- 1982, 'The Outer Master as the Inner Guide: Autonomy and Authority in the Process of Transformation,' *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* Vol. XIV: 1, 1 -31.
- Anthony, Dick & Thomas Robbins, Winter 1982, 'Spiritual Innovation and the Crisis of American Civil Religion,' *Daedalus* Vol. III: 1, 215-233.
- Antze, Rosemary Jeanes, ‘Teacher, Student, Lineage,’ Fall 1992, *Parabola*, Vol. 17, 73-77.
- Anzar, Naosherwan, 1974 *The Beloved- The Life and Work of Meher Baba* (Ahmednagar: Sheriar)
- August 1977 ‘Moving Towards God,’ *Glow International*, 2 - 34
- Barnes, Douglas F., March 1978, ‘Charisma and Religious Leadership: an Historical Analysis,’ *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Vol. 17: 1.
- Barrett, David V., 2001, *The New Believers - A Summary of Sects, Cults and Alternative Religions* (London: Cassell & Co.)
- Carter, Lewis F., 1990, *Charisma and Control in Rajneeshpuram* (Cambridge: Cambridge University)
- Chen, George L., June-July 2004, ‘The Proprieties of Reverence: Can Devotion to Meher Baba be Standardized?’ *Meher Baba House Newsletter* (New York), 2.

- Cushman, Anne & Jerry Jones, 1999, *From Here to Nirvana - the Essential Guide to the Yogis and Gurus, Ashrams and Temples of Spiritual India* (2nd Edn., London: Rider)
- Donkin, William, 1948, *The Wayfarers: Meher Baba with the God-Intoxicated* (Ahmednagar: Adi K. Irani)
- Ellwood Jnr., Robert S., 1973, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall)
- Frederick, Filis, 1984, 'The Meher Baba Group: A Sociological Study' (transcript of 1956 paper), *The Awakener* Vol. 21: 1, 39-40
- Gerlach, Luther P., 1971, 'Movements of revolutionary change,' *American Behavioural Scientist* 14:6, 812-36
- Gerlach, Luther P. & Virginia H. Hine, 1973, *Lifeway Leap: The Dynamics of Change in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota)
- Gerth, H. H. & C. Wright Mills, 1946, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Clarendon)
- Grant, John, 1985, *Practical Spirituality with Meher Baba* (Sydney: Merwan)
- Hine, Virginia H., 1977, 'The basic paradigm of a future socio-cultural system,' *World Issues* (April/ May), Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions
- Hopkinson, Tom & Dorothy, 1982, *Much Silence: The Life and Work of Meher Baba* 3rd Edition (Bombay: Meher House)
- Humphreys, Robert & Ronald Ward, 1995, *Religious Bodies in Australia - A Comprehensive Guide* (Melbourne: Humphreys & Ward)
- Hutchinson, Brian, March 1991, 'Guru, Godman and Individuation,' *Journal for the Study of Religion* 4, 35-50
- Irani, Mehera, 1989, ed. Janet Judson, *Mehera* (Ahmednagar: Beloved Books)
- Jessawala, Eruch et al, 1976, ed. D. E. Stevens, *Tales from the New Life with Meher Baba Narrated by Eruch, Mehera, Mani and Meheru* (Berkeley: The Beguine Library)
- 1995, *That's How It Was: Stories of Life with Meher Baba* (Ahmednagar: Sheriar)
- Johnson, Ann Braden, 1977, 'A Temple of Last Resorts: Youth and Shared Narcissisms,' in Marie Coleman Nelson, ed., *The Narcissistic Condition* (New York: Human Sciences Press)
- Kalchuri, Bhau, 1971-1973, *Lord Meher (Meher Prabhu) - Avatar of the Age Meher Baba Manifesting* (Myrtle Beach: Manifestation) 1: 1894 - 1922, 2: 1922-1925, 3: 1925-1929, 5: 1932 - 1934, 6 & 7: 1934-1940, 7 & 8: 1940-1945, 11-12: 1954, 13-14: 1954-1956, 17 & 18: 1960-1965
- 1984, *While the World Slept* (Myrtle Beach: Manifestation)
 - 1985, ed. Ward Parks, *Let's Go to Meherabad!* (Berkeley: Beguine)
- Kerkhove, Ray, 1998, *Meher Baba's Australian Travels: A Guide to Road Routes, Dates and Places* 2nd Edition (Woombye: Ray Kerkhove)
- 2000, *Avatar Meher Baba: His Life, His Message and His Followers* 3rd Rev. Edn. (Woombye: Meher Baba Foundation)
 - Sept-Oct 2001, 'Towards a History of Avatar's Abode,' *Meher Baba Australia* (Brisbane)
 - 2002, 'Authority and Egolessness in the Emergence and Impact of Meher Baba (1894-1969),' unpublished Doctoral thesis (Brisbane: University of Queensland, School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics)
- Kyle, Richard, 1993, *The Religious Fringe: A History of Alternative Religions in America* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity)
- Le Page, Bill, 2002, *The Divine Humanity of Meher Baba* (Woombye: Meher Baba Foundation).
- Lux, Kenneth, 1995, 'The Avatar's Progress: Gazing at a Fuzzy Crystal Ball,' *Glow International* (August 1995)
- Meher Baba, 1933, *Meher Gazette* Vol.2: 5 (Nov - Dec 1933), 3
- 1938-1945, *Discourses* (Ahmednagar: Adi K Irani, 1939-1945)
 - 1945, 'Message to Reporters and Press Representatives aboard 'Bremen' New York on 19-5-1932,' 'God and Religion,' and 'The Unity of All Life,' in Adi K Irani, comp., *Messages of Meher Baba Delivered in the East and West* (Ahmednagar: Adi K Irani)
 - 1952, *The Fiery Free Life* (Ahmednagar: Meher Publications)
 - 1954, *What Baba Means by Real Work, as Explained by Meher Baba at Rajhmundry on the 1st and 2nd March 1954 During His Tour in Andhra State* (Ahmednagar: Adi K Irani/Meher Publications)
 - 1955, *God Speaks - The Theme of Creation and Its Purpose* 2nd Edition (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co.)
 - 1956, *Chartered Guidance from Meher Baba for the Reorientation of Sufism as the Highway to the Ultimate Universalized* (n/p)
 - 1958, 'Share with Me in My Final Work,' *Universal Message; Share with Me in My Final Work; God Alone Is* (Meherabad: n/p)
 - 1963, *The Moving Finger Writes* (Ahmednagar: Amy A. Arjun & Adi K. Irani) *Part I*
 - 1964, Meher Baba, 'Universal Message,' in Jamshed B. Mistry & J. Flagg Kris, ed., *Meher Baba Calling* (n/p)
 - 1971, *Darshan Hours* (Berkeley: The Beguine Library)
- Pawar, Gangaram Linbaji, et al, 1924-1926, *The Combined Diary: Includes Padri's, Pawar's, Pandola's, Naridshaw's and Chanji's, Covering the Following Periods in Continuation of the First Part of 'Two Years with Meher Baba'* (Meherabad: MSS.)
- Purdom, Charles, 1964, *The God-Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin)
- Robbins, Thomas, Fall 1969, 'Eastern Mysticism and the Resocialization of Drug Users: The Meher Baba Cult,' *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* Vol. 8: 2, 308-317.

- Rowley, Peter, 1971, *New Gods in America - An Informed Investigation into the New Religions of American Youth Today* (New York: David McKay)
- Sandford, Danny, May 1986, 'The Guiding Light,' *Glow International*, 11-17.
- Schroeder, Ralph, 1992, *Max Weber and the Sociology of Culture* (London: Sage)
- Sooklal, Anil, Sept. 1990, 'The Guru-Shishya Parampara - A Paradigm of Religio-Cultural Continuity,' *Journal for the Study of Religion* Vol. 3, 15-30
- Starhawk (Miriam Simos), 1988, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* (Boston: Beacon)
- Tuelen, Tim (prod.) & Dina Snow (narr.), 1994, *Meher Baba, the Awakener* (Video recording) (Los Angeles: Divine Sport)
- Udaseen, Satya Porakash, comp., 1954, *The Life Circulars of Avatar Meher Baba (A Compilation of the 67 Life Circulars)* (Hyderabad: The Meher Vihar Trust)
- 1967, comp., *The New Life of Avatar Meher Baba and His Companions (A Compilation of all the 34 New Life Circulars)* (Hyderabad: The Meher Vihar Trust)
- Vail, Lise F., 1996, 'Founders, Swamis and Devotees: Being Divine in North Karnataka,' in Joanne Punzo Waghorne & Norman Culter, eds., *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India* (New York: Columbia University)
- Weber, Max, 1947, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* Rev. ed. (London: William Hodge & Co)
- 1968, *Economy and Society* (New York: Bedminster)
- Williams, Raymond B., 1996, 'The Holy Man as the Abode of God in the Swaminarayan Religion,' in Joanne Punzo Waghorne & Norman Culter, eds., *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India* (New York: Columbia University Press)
- Wilson, Bryan R., 1990, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism: Sects and New Religious Movements in Contemporary Society* (Oxford: Clarendon)
- Yinger, J. Milton, 1970, *The Scientific Study of Religion* (London: Macmillan)
- York, Michael, 1995, *The Emerging Network: A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield)