

# Thinking about Levinas in Relation to a Spiritual Community

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As a phenomenological approach to the study of New Religious Movements (NRMs) this paper attempts to explore participation in an NRM by thinking about Levinas' idea of the Other. In this exploration Levinas helps in questioning what may underpin the response to the Other, and specifically to the Guru. The first part of this paper highlights my own area of interest in the practice of Siddha Yoga in Australia, and the popular concept of affiliation around brainwashing. Brainwashing has been an influential model in informing mental health professionals on affiliation, which has included my own profession of social work. Therefore, it is important that I present a discussion of brainwashing before offering an alternative.

Since the 1960s there has been a growth in the variety of NRMs in western countries.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most commonly known of the Indian influenced movements are the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON or the Hare Krishna's), Rajneesh/Osho and Transcendental Meditation. However there are many smaller, less visible organizations scattered throughout the Australian community that also have their roots in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The movement that I am concentrating on for my doctorate is Siddha Yoga, a Guru Disciple tradition based in the non-dualist philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism, and specifically the experience of the Australian devotees.

Siddha Yoga practice was introduced to Australia by Swami Muktananda in 1970 as part of his first world tour.<sup>2</sup> After his visit,

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, 'New Religions and the Social Bond,' *The International Scope Review*, Vol 5, No 9, 2003, 126-48.

<sup>2</sup> Gene Thursby, 'Siddha Yoga: Swami Muktananda and the Seat of Power' in Timothy Miller, editor, *When Prophets Die: The Postcharismatic Fate of New*

devotees established centres and ashrams. In 1982 Swami Muktananda died at his ashram in India. However before he died he named a brother and sister, Swami Nityananda and Swami Chidvalasanada, as his co-successors. By this time Muktananda's teachings of Siddha Yoga had grown into a worldwide organisation called SYDA Foundation with centres and ashrams in many countries.<sup>3</sup>

The brother and sister co-led the movement for three years until a leadership dispute in 1985, which resulted in Swami Chidvalasananda, now known as Guru Mayi, continuing as head of the SYDA Foundation.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately Swami Nityananda established an alternative movement called Shanti Mandir in 1987.<sup>5</sup> Both of the successors to Swami Muktananda continue his spiritual legacy of Siddha Yoga practice. There are also other expressions of Muktananda's Siddha Yoga practice such as Shiva Yoga, established in Melbourne by Swami Shankarananda, who was one of Muktananda's earliest western swamis. Within these types of movements the Guru is generally at the centre of the community and is often a representation of the divine or actually divine, depending on the interpretation. For followers, to be close to the Guru is to be close to the Divine. However, to meditate or contemplate on the Divine is also to be close to the Guru or the inner-self. Therefore the Guru represents the inner-self, often termed 'consciousness' or 'ultimate consciousness.'<sup>6</sup> The Guru may also be thought of as an individual who is immersed in consciousness and radiates this from his or her being to those close-by, or at a distance through

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*Religious Movements*, with an introduction by J G Melton, Albany, 1991, 165-181; 171.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Alan Yeo, *Siddha Yoga in Britain*, PhD Thesis, University of East Anglia, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Thursby, op cit, 176; and Lis Harris, *O Guru, Guru, Guru*, 1994 [cited 30/10/05 2005]. Available from

[http://www.leavingsiddhayoga.net/o\\_guru\\_english.htm](http://www.leavingsiddhayoga.net/o_guru_english.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Shanti-Mandir, *Shanti Mandir*, 2005 [cited 30/10/05 2005]. Available from <http://www.shantimandir.com/main/sn.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Susie Foster, editor, *Mukt-Anand*, Gujarat, 2002, xi.

dreams, photographs, chance meetings or in the company of their followers. Siddha Yoga presents an ideal opportunity to explore followers' experience of the growth and fracturing of a movement in the Guru/disciple tradition.

What became apparent to me, which may have been less of a surprise to those who study the sociology of religion, is that a functional perspective is reasonably prevalent.<sup>7</sup> So when I began to explore this area, whether from a psychological, sociological or historical perspective, what began to resonate was the function and not the experience. The function of religion has been seen to assist humans to live with existential dilemmas such as illness, loss, meaninglessness or death.<sup>8</sup> Even notions of mysticism, although experiential, can reveal a function of protest against established forms of worship acting as a revitalisation process.<sup>9</sup> Since the Enlightenment religion has often been reduced to social and, later, psychoanalytic interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

An even more radical departure from 'something of itself' into function is represented through the literature around brainwashing and its application to involvement in NRMs. The brainwashing or thought control thesis took hold in the anti-cult milieu of the late 1960s early 1970s, in parallel with the growth of NRMs. The attractiveness of these movements to some young middle class men and women appeared to need some rationalisation. It could not seem possible that intelligent young people could be participating of their own free will; parents were more willing to accept that their children had been

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas F O'Dea, *The Sociology of Religion*, New Jersey, 1966; Sigmund Freud, *Civilization, Society and Religion: Group Psychology, Civilization and Its Discontents and Other Works*, Middlesex, 1985; Erich Fromm, *The Dogma of Christ and Other Essays on Religion*, London, 1963 and T Parsons, '1965 Harlan Paul Douglass Lectures: Religion in a Modern Pluralistic Society' in S Bruce, editor, *The Sociology of Religion*, Vol 1, 125-146.

<sup>8</sup> O'Dea, op cit, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>10</sup> John Caputo, *On Religion*, New York, 2001, 59-60.

brainwashed.<sup>11</sup> This appears understandable considering that at the time brainwashing or thought reform was such a powerful psychological process that humans could not help but comply.<sup>12</sup>

The predominant notion or model of brainwashing in regard to NRMs or 'cult' involvement is influenced directly by the work of Lifton and his study of Communist China's thought reform program during the Korean War.<sup>13</sup> Lifton's work has since been used by key health professionals as the basis of a model of cultic involvement and has been influential in informing cult awareness groups.<sup>14</sup> Within the discourse of cult awareness networks and literature, it is commonly considered that individuals have been recruited to the movement rather than having joined of their own free will.<sup>15</sup> From this perspective cult affiliation is not perceived to be voluntary but to be caused by the accumulation of a coercive and destructive psychological process, or brainwashing.<sup>16</sup> However, the true paradox of the 'brainwashing thesis' is that many researchers, even the proponents of the thesis acknowledge that most people leave NRMs or 'cults' of their own free will.<sup>17</sup> The application of this perspective to the area has been rejected by many of those who study NRMs, yet has found

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<sup>11</sup> Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults*, Oxford, 2002, 173.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Verdier, *Brainwashing and the Cults: An Expose on Capturing the Human Mind*, Hollywood, 1977, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Dick Anthony, 'Pseudoscience and Minority Religions: An Evaluation of the Brainwashing Theories of Jean-Marie Abgrall,' in *Social Justice Research*, Vol 12, No 4, 1999, 421-56.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Helen Larsen and Rick Larsen, *Cult Encounter and an International Story of Exit Counselling*, Australia, 1997, 170; Doni Whitsett and Stephen A Kent, 'Cults and Families,' *Families in Society*, Vol 84, No 4, 2003, 491-502, and David Ward, 'Cults and the Family,' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, Vol 23, No 2, 2002, 61-8.

<sup>16</sup> Janja Lalich and Madeleine Landau Tobias, *Captive Heart Captive Minds: Freedom and Recovery from Cults and Abusive Relationships*, Sydney, 1994, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, California, 2000, 136.

lasting favour with health professional and cult information services.<sup>18</sup>

The function of NRMs (from the perspective of the 'brainwashing thesis') is to strip the individual of free will and use the individual as a deployable agent for the benefit of the group's leader. The individual, once recruited into a movement through purposeful and deceptive tactics, appears no longer to be the person they once were and their only purpose for life is to serve the leader. Therefore the function of the individual is to serve, and the function of the movement is to facilitate this service. Once the individual leaves the group, one way to deal with the experience seems to be to acknowledge that brainwashing took place and the individual's personal responsibility in the process is minimised. What must be done with those experiences – expressed by some as love and joy for the Guru, the charismatic experience of their presence, dreams of the Guru or other messengers from the tradition – that have had profound meaning at the time and now have no place and no community to converse with? The baby may as well be thrown out with the bathwater, because outside of that particular community, nobody may understand or even be able to see the baby, just the dirtied water.

But what happened? Can a person be drawn to another in such a way that there is an overwhelming desire to abandon their own welfare to serve the Other? This responsibility is so

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<sup>18</sup> Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* New York, 1984, 147; David Bromley, 'Conservatorships and Deprogramming,' in *The Brainwashing/Deprogramming Controversy*, edited by D G Bromley and J T Richardson, New York, 1983, 267-94; Massimo Introvigne and James T Richardson, 'Western Europe, Postmodernity, and the Shadow of the French Revolution: A Response to Soper and Robbins,' in *The Journal of Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol 40, No 2, 2001, 181-86, and Dick Anthony, 'Pseudoscience and Minority Religions: An Evaluation of the Brainwashing Theories of Jean-Marie Abgrall,' in *Social Justice Research*, Vol 12, No 4, 1999, 421-56.

overwhelming that some have come to the conclusion that it is beyond the will of the person and have given it the name of brainwashing. Although this is a popular conception, many of those who study NRMs have recognised that most of those who leave movements do so of their own free will and rarely conceptualise the experience as brainwashing.

Caputo asserts 'A religious person [is] someone who has made a pact with the impossible.'<sup>19</sup> Part of me would love to believe in the impossible, however researching religious movements I am also struck by the possible and all-too-human side of affiliation. Part of this is social or functional and the other is experiential and much more difficult to rationalize or communicate. Some of what people experience as religious experience may be put down to a crowd effect or the charismatic appeal of a leader. Usually the combination goes together as part of the theatrics involved in promoting charisma.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, we have the crowd to give some explanation of the charismatic build up around the leader or Guru, but what lends to his or her charisma when there is no crowd, just a few followers, or a single follower in their own home meditating in front of a picture of their Guru? Weber discusses two types of charisma: one appears to be innate and the other may be cultivated, including the use of theatrics involved in mass events such as concerts, football games or rallies, which cause heightened arousal responses.<sup>21</sup> Charisma may be part of the attraction to a Guru figure, and context and heightened arousal certainly may play a part, but what is it that devotees talk about when they experience the divine emanating from the Guru, as they do in Siddha Yoga practice, so divine that the devotee loses his/her own sense of self and merge with the infinite, merge with the Guru?

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<sup>19</sup> John Caputo, *On Religion*, New York, 2001, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Lindholm, *Charisma*, Oxford, 1990, 116.

<sup>21</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, London, 1965, 2.

Duffy Daugherty, an English football coach once said, 'when you're playing for the national championship, it's not a matter of life or death. It's more important than that.' So what is this that is more important than life or death; what is this connectedness that calls into question your own individuality? Levinas moves us away from the merging experience of the crowd; he does not allude to the charismatic presence, or theatrics of individual leaders. What is interesting for me in Levinas is that he introduces some of these same ideas of merging with something greater than ourselves, however in the meeting of just two people, '...rooted in the phenomenology of the body...'<sup>22</sup>

Levinas interprets 'the original state of the self [as] atheistic...self sufficient,' the approach of the Other disturbs this state and makes us aware of something of our origin and the religiosity of the self.<sup>23</sup> God calls through the meeting of the Other, the call is to respond, to be responsible.<sup>24</sup> For Levinas the only way to come close to the experience of God is through the meeting with the Other, especially through the face, though he also recognises the whole of the body. However, the face, I think, is a strong metaphor for what he and we consider to be human. This idea is opposed to introspection, as Levinas asserts 'the individual is pulled out of their interiority, awakened and exposed to the Other.'<sup>25</sup> This differs from other notions of prayer or meditation. Saint Augustine, for example, says 'if you want to find God, the most real and transcendent being of all, do not go outside, remain at home, within the soul. ... If you go in (*intra me*) you go

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<sup>22</sup> Bernhard Waldensfels, 'Levinas and the Face of the Other,' in Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, editors, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Cambridge, 2002, 65.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Hutchens, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, New York, 2004, 116.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 118.

<sup>25</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Of God Who Comes to Mind,' translated by Bettina Bergo, in Werner Hamacher and David E Wellbry, editors, *Crossing Aesthetics*, Stanford California, 1998, 73.

up (*supra me*).<sup>26</sup> Levinas does not turn within but is drawn to the Other. For Levinas, when the two come together it is a kind of prayer that invokes the third:<sup>27</sup> 'The presentation of the face...does not disclose an inward world previously closed, adding thus a new region to comprehend or to take over.'<sup>28</sup> In the face of the Other is almost an incantation, an incantation that comes about through bodies, which is reminiscent of the quote from Mathew, 18:20, 'Whenever two or three of you come together in my name, I am there with you.' With Levinas, however, whenever two come together, it is always in the name of the God.

We could say that in the face of the Other is a recognition of God, but I think using the word 'God' is problematic since it can have as many meanings as there are people who use it. However, Levinas is careful as to what he means by God or what he means by what is recognised in the face of the Other. Levinas asserts, 'in the access to the face there is certainly also an access to the ideas of God...for my part I think the relation to the infinite is not a knowledge, but a desire.'<sup>29</sup> For Levinas, God is the infinite: humans are finite and God is infinite, however he does note that humans are the 'in' of infinite (and then he apologises for the play on words).<sup>30</sup> 'Man is not therefore a "fallen angel who remembers the heavens:" he belongs to the very meaning of the Infinite.'<sup>31</sup> Therefore, when we come into contact with the Other in a face-to-face relationship, Levinas exclaims, 'here I am, under your eyes, at your service, your obedient servant.'<sup>32</sup> For Levinas being at service is at the very core of who we are. 'It is the presupposed in all human relationships. If it

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<sup>26</sup> John Caputo, *On Religion*, New York, 2001, 47.

<sup>27</sup> Hutchens, op cit, 119.

<sup>28</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Pittsburgh, 1995, 212.

<sup>29</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, Pittsburgh, 2000, 92.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, op cit, 51.

<sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, Adriaan Peperzak, editor, et al, Bloomington, 1996,146.

were not that, we would not even say, before opening a door, "After you sir!" It is an original "After you sir"....<sup>33</sup> When Levinas was asked if this was a reciprocal relationship, he suggested that it is up to the Other.<sup>34</sup> Levinas is interested in something more immediate, not what somebody else is responsible for or to, but what I am: here I am, in an act of presenting myself for service to the Other.<sup>35</sup>

I spoke of the Guru as being Divine. However, divinity is not a concept that Levinas would attribute to his idea of God, for this is likened to a divine 'being.' So 'being' is not what God would be: God is otherwise than being, beyond ontological categories, although accessible as a trace of the infinite in the face of the Other, but not an infinite 'being.'<sup>36</sup> The Guru possibly represents for the follower something of the infinite. As I have mentioned earlier, the group I am studying has the concept of God as beyond being and referred to as consciousness or ultimate consciousness personified in the Guru. The Guru figure may act as a close and distant 'face-to-face' encounter for spiritual followers; it is the face of the guru that is the representation of a particular organisation. This can be seen quite obviously with the group Rajneesh/Osho, as their participants wore the face of the guru as a necklace, or Siddha Yoga whose ashrams are filled with different expressions of the guru's face. The pictures of the Guru are often, but not always, built up around the face, which Levinas has called the most naked and destitute, especially the eyes:<sup>37</sup> 'The face is exposed.'<sup>38</sup> The large picture of Rajneesh's face outside his centre on Oxford Street Sydney in the early 1980s seemed centred on his hypnotic eyes and, as a young man, I found it difficult to avoid the gaze.

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<sup>33</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, op cit, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, op cit, 146

<sup>36</sup> Hutchens, op cit, 118.

<sup>37</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, op cit, 86.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

The Guru in Siddha Yoga is often thought of as unknowable through the intellect. Like Levinas' infinite, the Guru has to be experienced (through the body) and this experience generally leaves the follower even more keen for the company of the Guru. However, what I feel is misunderstood about the Guru/disciple 'face-to-face' encounter is not that it is not a true experience but that it is interpreted retrospectively as a unique encounter attributed solely to the Guru, as a 'being.' The Guru seems to be given credit for a unique experience that Levinas recognises is common among all people. If the Guru's face has something to offer, it is that which already exists in all 'face-to-face' encounters.

At this stage I must quote a critic of Levinas and acknowledge there are more than one. Alford asserts that Levinas is 'abstract and evocative...writing in the language of prophecy...The Levinas Effect, as it has been called, the ability of Levinas' text to say anything the reader wants to hear....'<sup>39</sup> When I came across it in relation to my study, I was excited by Levinas' ideas of becoming hostage to the Other; of obeying the commandment to serve the Other above the self. All the Guru bells rang.<sup>40</sup> Levinas is evocative, however he is not writing about New Religious Movements or Gurus. There is something of his writings that brings these ideas out for me, something which made me laugh when I read Alford's words. Alford does critique Levinas well, albeit from a perspective characteristic of psychoanalysis. He asserts,

How might you respond to this experience of the infinite? You feel shocked, maybe a little scared, but mostly you feel gratitude for being released from your little world of pleasures and worries. It is a defeat of your self-satisfied little world that is ultimately a victory, as you now belong to another. You feel small and

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<sup>39</sup> Fred Alford, *Levinas, the Frankfurt School and Psychoanalysis*, New York, 2002, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, op cit, 58.

insignificant, but not devalued, because your life now has a purpose, to serve the Other. It is almost as if you were called to devote your life to a God.<sup>41</sup>

However Levinas is not implying what could be; he is attempting to explain something in human relationships which is already present. What Alford seems to present in the above statement is more in line with a popular understanding of followers in relation to a Guru or authoritarian leader, which I have also leapt upon, possibly too quickly: not Levinas' original and very gentle, 'After you Sir.'

I am not altogether comfortable applying Levinas' work to my own study. I love his prophetic language, it is loud and evocative, but on the other hand it seems too loud; too evocative. When beginning to understand what Levinas is talking about, it is found to be quite subtle: his God is subtle, and the command is a whisper, although impossible to ignore. And as I walk around in my day, I do hold doors open to strangers, and in other contexts people put their lives at risk to save others they have never met. Some devote their lives to the service of their idea of God. Caputo says 'If you do not love God, what good are you? You are too caught up in the meanness of self-love and self-gratification to be worth a tinker's damn.'<sup>42</sup> However, for Levinas it is not relevant if you love God or not, because 'the third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other.'<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Alford, op cit, 16.

<sup>42</sup> Caputo, op cit, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, op cit, 213. The author thanks Rosalyn Diprose for her comments on this paper.