pied pipers and would-be messiahs

BY A. JAMES RUDIN AND MARCIA R. RUDIN

For over 2,000 years, would-be messiahs, self-proclaimed prophets, and religious pied pipers have occasionally attracted Jews into their fold. Especially in times of bitter oppression and persecution, masses of Jews could be swept up into fervent messianic movements that later turned out to be false. Today, Jews in the West, and particularly in America, are living in freedom and equality, yet pied piper movements echoing vague messianic hopes seem to have some appeal for certain young people. The influence of such movements upon young Jews is a cause of growing concern within the Jewish community. What are some of these movements in America today, and what do they preach?

THE REVEREND MOON

The Reverend Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church, is a Korean-born Presbyterian-trained minister who moved to the United States in 1973. In the past year or so, he has become the center of intense public controversy because of his extensive financial holdings; his over sixty "front groups"; his alleged ties to the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (which, according to recent investigations, has been spending millions here to buy influence for the dictator of South Korea); his demonstrations against the impeachment of former President Richard Nixon; and his campaign of aggressive recruitment of new members.

Estimates of the Unification Church's membership vary from 2,000 to 30,000. Followers work full-time for the movement. All money they earn goes to the movement, and frequently members have donated their own personal funds. They must renounce all ties to their former lives, including their families, and live with other followers in isolated Unification Church centers under Moon's control. Some critics charge

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that young men and women in the group are brainwashed.

Moon claims that both Judaism (the "First Israel") and Christianity (the "Second Israel") have failed. A "Third Israel" is now needed to save humanity. The leader of this "Third Israel" will come from Korea, and his followers will acknowledge and worship him—Moon—as the true Parent, as "the Lord of the Second Advent," and, ultimately, as the Messiah.

Moon's basic beliefs are found in his 536-page tract, Divine Principle. There are over 125 examples of anti-Jewish teachings in this book. Moon does not accept the authenticity and integrity of the Jewish people or of Judaism. He sees Jews as a people devoid and emptied of any genuine faith or spiritual qualities, and of Judaism, he says, "The inner contents are corrupt." He claims that the Jewish people are collectively guilty for the crucifixion of Jesus, having acted as allies of Satan. Jews have been "faithless." They have lost God's "heritage," and are still being "punished" for their many sins. He says:

Jesus came as the Messiah but due to the disbelief of and persecution by the people, he was crucified. Since then, the Jews have lost their qualification as the chosen people and have been scattered, suffering persecution through the present day.

Arthur Robins, 22, a Jewish former "Moonie," says he was taught that Hitler had to kill six million Jews as an "indemnity" because they did not accept Jesus as the Christ. Robins ominously warns, "Moon is building an army, not a church."

"JEWS FOR JESUS"

The "Jews for Jesus" movement represents a continuation of the first-century theological dispute among the early followers of Jesus, in which the issue was: Can one believe in Jesus as the Messiah and still be a Jew? According to both Judaism and Christianity, the answer is "No." One cannot be both a Jew and a Christian at the same time. For Jews, neither the Messiah nor the Messianic Age he would usher in has yet come; for Christians, Jesus is the Messiah.

However, a closer study of this movement reveals that its ultimate aim is, in fact, to bring Jews into the established Christian Church. Moishe Rosen, a "Jews for Jesus" national leader, recently expressed his group's strategy in a letter to Christian pastors. "As we won people to Christ, we have followed the policy of referring these converts to the local church. Where possible, we like to be able to refer these new Christians to evangelical congregations."

"Jews for Jesus" represent a religious "no man's land," for they are deeply resented and resisted by the Jewish community, and many Christians are wary and suspicious of the group's attempt to remain Jewish while professing the classic Christian belief in Jesus as the Messiah. One leading Christian pastor objects to the group because it "treats Judaism as some kind of incomplete religion."

HARE KRISHNA

In twenty-two cities across the United States, and throughout the world, the sight of young people with shaven heads and dressed in yellow robes ringing bells and chanting on street corners...
has become familiar. They are members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, better known as Hare Krishna.

The group, headed by Bhativedanta Swami Prabhupada, who brought his ideas from India in 1965, claims over 2,000 members in the United States. More than 90 per cent are twenty-five years old or younger; many joined while they were in their early teens.

They want to develop “Krishna Consciousness” by completely surrendering themselves to Krishna, a popular Hindu god. Believing that it will automatically deepen one’s love both of God and of humankind, the members try to spread “Krishna Consciousness” to others through complete devotion of their lives to service of Krishna.

Concrete practical methods rather than abstract philosophical speculation will attain “Krishna Consciousness.” One must follow sixty-four rules as set down by Hindu scripture, with four minimal requirements: (1) Meat, fish, and eggs are forbidden. All Hindu dietary law must be observed, and one cannot eat food which has not first been offered to the gods; (2) Gambling and sexual activities outside of marriage are prohibited; (3) The use of drugs or other intoxicants, including coffee, tea, or colas, is forbidden; and (4) One must chant sixteen rounds on prayer beads every day, repeating names for, and praises of, Krishna.

Although a small number are permitted to live outside of the group and to hold jobs, most Hare Krishna members live together in small enclaves numbering between twelve and twenty-four. Their lives are strictly disciplined according to an unvarying schedule which regulates nearly every minute of the day. Rising at 3:45 AM, their time is divided among the study of Hindu scriptures, chanting, praying, preparing food offerings for and symbolically dressing and bathing statues of Krishna and his consort Radha, and spreading the group’s teachings to others.

Although celibacy is encouraged, they may marry another member. The marriage cannot be terminated. Sexual activity is only for the purpose of producing children who must be raised within the group in order to develop their “Krishna Consciousness.”

In October, 1976, two top leaders of the Hare Krishna movement in New York were indicted on charges of unlawful imprisonment of two members and of attempting to extort $20,000 from the father of one of the members.

You are assigned your own secret “mantra” (a Sanskrit word), and if you repeat it and meditate upon it for twenty minutes twice a day, you can overcome tensions and anxieties and renew your psychic energy. Such is the claim of the Transcendental Meditation, or TM, movement.

Since 1959, when an Indian mystic known as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi transported these ideas to the United States, TM has attracted, according to one estimate, a total of 800,000 followers here. There are presently 454 students, 13 per cent of whom are Jewish, at the new Maharishi International University in Fairfield, Iowa. There are over four hundred other TM centers in the US and hundreds of groups centered on college campuses.

The newest leader of the movement is an 18-year-old Indian, Guru Maharj Ji, who five years ago founded his “Divine Light Mission.” At its peak, the group claimed 50,000 adherents in the US, but with only 575 living in communes called “Ashrams.” Now that the Guru’s followers are growing older, many have opted for traditional family structure and outside jobs, and the Ashram population has declined to about three hundred. Marahaj Ji himself has modified his formerly luxurious life style. He has decentralized his authority over the mission branches and has dissolved many of the group’s business holdings.

Hare Krishna followers with yellow robes and shaven heads are familiar in large US cities. This group is dancing and chanting down London’s busy Oxford Street. Keystone.
His adherents no longer claim that he is "Perfect Master" or "God incarnate" (God in human form).

The TM movement has recently become embroiled in the constitutional issue of the separation of church and state. The federal government has funded research projects centered around TM and sponsored a teacher-training program. TM has been taught in some public schools throughout the country. Critics maintain that it is a religion and hence should not be practiced in the public schools or be given public funds. Supporters maintain that, although TM draws upon ancient Hindu words and symbols, it is a secular psychological "self-help" method and is compatible with all religious faiths.

ZEN BUDDHISM

Another group of Eastern origin, Zen Buddhism, has been popular in the US since the 1950s, due primarily to the influence of Dr. D. T. Suzuki. In the Rinzai branch, one uses the "Koan" (a short, illogical statement such as "What is the sound of one hand clapping?") in order to come to insights about Reality. In the Soto method, one sits quietly for long periods, sometimes up to six hours, with a straight posture and regulated breathing. This meditation is called "Zazen."

There are over one hundred Zen groups in the US. Some students live full-time in communes and monasteries; others attend study centers in their leisure time.

WHY?

Why do these various movements attract adherents? Why are some young people, including Jews, turning to them? It is impossible, obviously, to interview each of the sect members for personal answers. Still, it is possible to frame some general conclusions.

We know that many young men and women today have come to realize that unlimited personal freedom and the acquisition of material possessions do not always bring happiness. Some may wish to cast off the responsibility of earning a living and coping with daily problems; they choose a sect which offers shelter and isolation.

Many young people today want clearly defined values. They seek meaning in their lives and commitment to goals which they haven't found (or perhaps may not have sought) in their own religious heritage. They search for answers to the ultimate philosophical questions concerning the meaning of life and purpose in the universe. In the case of Jewish students, we cannot know if they first explored Jewish philosophy (which is concerned with those large questions) before trying elsewhere.

FINDING MEANING

Yet most young Jews have been able to resist the appeals of these groups even, at times, in the face of strong peer pressure. Why? Perhaps they think more independently and do not wish to subject themselves to religious authoritarianism and to rigid regulation of their lives. Also, through a deeper study of their own Jewish tradition, they are discovering that Judaism does provide from within its own rich and diverse tradition the satisfactions they seek.

Many young people today want a definite step-by-step guide to personal happiness, rigid regulation of their lives, and the security that comes from strict discipline and submission to strong authority. Nor can we overlook personal longings for fellowship, family, and community.

Some young people may join these movements as a sort of passive social protest. While the youth of the sixties wished to correct the world through active social change, some of today's young people desire to withdraw—temporarily or permanently—from the world and to concentrate on achieving their own personal happiness and well-being. With others, there may be a search for a utopia, a perfect world. If the Messianic Age has not arrived, they are seeking the Messianic Age in a miniature setting.

The emotionalism and anti-intellectualism of these movements are also appealing to certain people. Some young men and women have concluded that factual knowledge does not lead to personal fulfillment, and so they seek a different kind of knowledge that comes from intuition. Others want direct religious experience of a kind they have not found (or perhaps sought) in their heritage.

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Many young Jews are finding meaning in their lives through the creative adaptation of ritual as prescribed by Jewish law and practice. Many young Jews are reaping the joy and emotional rewards found, for example, in Chasidism.

Those young people who are knowledgeable about Judaism and the variety of alternative life styles that it offers are better able to judge and to resist the temptations of today's would-be messiahs and spiritual pied pipers. §§