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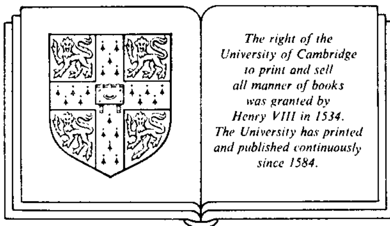
The role of shared values in the creation of a community

Lewis F. Carter
Washington State University



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Dedicated to Ruby and Travis Carter

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Preface

It is no secret that urban-industrial-bureaucratic societies have proved *less* than satisfying for considerable numbers of even their more successful citizens, whose quests for personal fulfillment may lead to the several psychiatries, to innovative therapies, or in more spiritual directions. Though many find purpose in the established religious traditions of their own cultures, others have turned to a variety of new spiritual movements which emphasize direct personal experience and which reject the authority of organized religions. These movements include some of the ''born-again'' variations of Christianity and the multiple varieties of ''new age'' groups emerging in the wake of the 1960s counterculture as well as a number ''neo-Hindu'' sects exported to the ''West'' from India.

In 1981, a group headed by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh moved to Oregon and by 1984 had established a new community which offered therapies from the ''human potential movement'' and meditation practices from several Hindu and Sufi traditions. A visit to their commune suggested that here was a unique opportunity to study one of the ''neo-Hindu'' groups as it became established in the United States.

I found a flamboyant and provocative group of young, largely professional, Americans and Europeans who were convinced that theirs was the way to spiritual fulfillment. These disciples, called ''sannyasin,'' were dedicated to building a ''new society'' which would avoid what they saw as the repressions of the spirit they had experienced in their home societies. As a sociologist, I was most intrigued by sannyasin's assertion that this utopian community could be developed without a shared ideology, with no system of beliefs subscribed to by its residents. I also observed heavy regimentation which was difficult to rationalize with the expressed emphasis on absolute individual freedom.

Above all, it was obvious that the commune was locked in a contest for dominance with prior residents. Subsequent visits and interviews with rural residents and residents of the commune showed me that a determined struggle was underway on both sides. Oregon officials had become

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interested in the movement because of complaints from other residents. Locals hardened in opposition as they saw a town taken over by what they considered to be unfair social and political tactics.

It was difficult, for me, throughout the interviews, to remain objective; the sides presented their cases forcefully and, in some cases, cleverly. Nevertheless, it seemed important to me to record as accurately as possible the social history of this movement as it became more firmly established and was more vigorously resisted. However, I had to recognize that whether I liked it or not I had become a *participant*-observer in the conflict; the antagonists saw researchers as potential allies and as resources for possible use in their contest.

I found, and I hope the reader will find in this social history, that in many respects the Rajneesh movement was not unique. Like many movements emphasizing individual experience, this group attracted people seeking enlightenment and fulfillment, but in the absence of shared ideology they had difficulty controlling collective action without instituting rigid rules. The group was unusual in the extent to which it rejected the ideals of consistency and rationality. Obviously, this meant that they could attract a varied group of followers and accommodate to a wide variety of individual behaviors. Moreover, rejection of consistency allowed a tough, skillful leadership to reject internal and external criticism and to deflect responsibility for past actions (the ultimate in "deniability").

Perhaps most fascinating was the fact that, while denying the relevance of reason and consistency, group members could at the same time develop artful legal briefs and complex organizational structures to further their own goals. They were technically capable and serious about succeeding, yet able to dismiss radical shifts in doctrine or temporary setbacks as little more than (good or bad) jokes. Though sannyasin took developing the commune seriously, most of them denied taking their own movement seriously. It was "play," a series of "jokes," though as an observer the consequences seemed often to me to be serious for many participants and for their targets. Briefly, at the time this study was concluded and this text written, the movement appeared to have come to an end. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh announced that he no longer wanted to be called by the honorific title "Bhagwan." As he put it in the (then) most recent news conference: "Enough is enough. The joke is over." (However, it now appears that the Poona group will continue as before, though "Bhagwan" is using the title "Osho" Rajneesh.)

It is important in works like this one to recognize all of those who helped with economic, professional, or moral support. I want to thank

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the graduate students who joined me on the first visit to Rajneeshpuram: Don Beck, Janet Lee, Andara Masman, Quang Tran, and Susan Weeks. Working as a team allowed us to observe in several places simultaneously and to cross-check our impressions. Les Whitbeck was generous in supplying an initial newspaper file which alerted me to some facets of the growing conflict before that visit; and Barry Coyne was invaluable in briefing our team on some of the surprising rules we would encounter in the "Buddhafield" (as sannyasin termed their community). Lee Freese, then Chair of the Department of Sociology, provided support for what was at that time a class field-observation project. Also, I appreciate accompaniment on subsequent visits by my son Erik who, like the graduate students, helped anchor my frame-of-reference outside the "Buddhafield."

The Society for the Scientific Study of Religion provided a grant to support field research during the summer of 1986. I am grateful to all of the Oregonians who discussed their perceptions of the conflict with me that summer and to the sannyasin who also shared their experiences. Particular thanks goes to Agneya, Vivek Bakshi, Brad Bell, Bud Beamer, Laura and Ralph Bentley, Bill Bowerman, Chittantra, Christ (C.C.) Chitana, Ronald Clarke, Deva, Ms. Finley, Dave Frohnmayer, Marion Goldman, Vedanta Hanya, Barbara Hill, Bob Jackson, Kusum, Karen LeBrent, Diane McDonald, Nura, Prem Prasad, Sambodi, Ted and Cari Shay, Sukraj, and Uma. May they all forgive me for listing their names together, but that is the fractured way I experienced meeting these people who fought on opposite sides. They were all so gracious and helpful to me that I still sometimes momentarily forget the bitter antagonisms which divided them.

Washington State University granted me professional leave for the 1987 spring semester to develop the first draft of this manuscript. I particularly want to thank Dean John Pierce for his support in securing that leave for this work. To reduce distractions while I sorted through the tangled and conflicting accounts of the Rajneesh incident, I moved to an isolated farm near Uniontown, Washington. Support and encouragement from several people were critical during that hectic and isolated winter; they include Gerald Adams, Michael Alperin, Julie Hatfield-Mayfield, Patrick Jobes, Richard Ladzinski, Barry Masson and Jim Payne. My wife Jeanne and daughter Kim were uniquely understanding of my need for isolation and my obsession with the project.

I was very pleasantly surprised by volunteered assistance in the form of reprints and references from James Richardson, Thomas Robbins, and

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Roy Wallis when each of them encountered an article I had written on the Rajneesh movement and learned that a book was in progress. I appreciate the continuous support and encouragement given by Fritz Blackwell, Robert Jones, Roy Roper, and William Willard. Each of these colleagues also read an earlier draft of the manuscript and each saved me from at least one grievous error by their reading.

Special thanks go to the reviewers and readers for the Arnold and Caroline Rose Monograph Series whose criticism was relentless enough to force two major revisions of the manuscript, yet encouraging enough for me to persevere in making those improvements. These include Nancy Ammerman, Emory University; Helen Ebaugh, University of Houston and President of the American Society of Religion; Kai Erikson, Yale University; Sherryl Kleinman, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Dudley Poston, Cornell University; and David Snow, University of Arizona. I am indebted to the two who served as editors for the monograph series during development and revision of the manuscript – Teresa Sullivan, University of Texas, and Ernest Campbell, Vanderbilt University. They were both insistent, patient, and encouraging.

I owe more intellectual debt than can be conveyed here to my two mentors, Richard Hill and Louis McNew. Long ago and far away, Dick taught me a good hard-nosed positivistic approach to social research; he also taught me that research method should be determined by research problem and I trust he will understand that making sense of the Rajneesh incident required some eclecticism in these matters. In addition to continuous encouragement in this project and sometimes vigorous debate concerning my analysis, Louis has taught me that good humanism and good social science complement each other. He has also shown me that only the most naive of scholars would routinely dismiss Louis's academic specialty, *rhetoric*, with the diminishing qualifier "mere."

Before turning to the story, I should alert readers to the fact that this study is not an ethnography of sannyasin, though it does include field observation (participant-observation) by a sociologically trained observer. A single researcher cannot rely on a single method – certainly not direct observation – to study a group which has spread across five continents over two decades. The prologue explains how the several research problems posed by the attempt to place the Rajneesh incident in an understandable context required variety of method.

Finally, the focus of this work is not on religion, but rather on the cultural conflict and the views of that conflict held by participants who had radically different frames-of-reference through which they viewed it.

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Nevertheless, a significant part of the conflict revolved around what *constitutes* religion and what immunities are (and are not) granted to religions by secular societies. Despite some of the uniqueness of the Rajneesh incident, I hope that this work contributes to the growing literature concerning "new religious movements" in religiously diverse societies.

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I regret the untimely deaths of two of those who, while still living, were acknowledged in this Preface for their importance to this work.

Professor Richard J. Hill, my most revered mentor, was a master methodologist and an academic statesman. He was clear about matters of evidence and principle, as he saw each of these.

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, called Osho Rajneesh in his last days, was a master of charisma and social organization. His call was an invitation to individual enlightenment and bliss, to be achieved by "dropping the past"—by shedding the personal continuities of character and culture.

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Prologue

To tell a balanced story – to give a fair account – of a conflict among human groups is never easy. Many stories are told; what is hard to determine is which stories are true, or to what extent particular interpretations of events seem reasonable.

The story I want to tell involves a group called "the Rajneesh" who were the followers, disciples, or managers of an Indian guru called Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. The Rajneesh attempted to establish a sovereign settlement in the canyons of the high northern desert country in the Pacific Northwest. They purchased a 64,000-acre ranch, acquired political control of the small village of Antelope, Oregon (changing its name to "Rajneesh"), and they built the much larger community of "Rajneeshpuram" on their ranch.

Many of the "ways" of the Rajneesh (customs, manners, ethics) were different from those of their immediate neighbors, the "prior residents" of Wasco County, Jefferson County, and the Warm Springs/Umatilla Indiana Reservations. From 1980 to 1984, conflict escalated from initial exchanges of insults on through political contests, lawsuits, and threats of violence to a "Declaration of War on Oregon" by the commune's then dominant leaders. The Rajneesh incident in Eastern Oregon was a contest between an exotic culture and the cultures of some established residents. The conflict eventually took on some features of previous range wars (poisonings, arson, threats), though with the addition of uniquely contemporary social weapons and tactics (television, radio, press, recording and photographic technology, image management, marketing techniques, teams of lawyers, lobbying, sovereignty claims) not available in earlier land-use conflicts in the region.

To their undoing, the Rajneesh eventually alienated many of their neighbors and overstepped the norms about tactics permissible in the region's politics. A number of Rajneesh leaders were charged with serious crimes and a smaller number of them were convicted. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh was expelled from the United States in 1985 and, after unsuc-

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cessful attempts to relocate in a number of other countries, he returned to his home "Ashram" in Poona, India in January, 1987. Several other leaders were serving prison terms as this monograph was being written in the spring of 1988.

The prior residents of Wasco and Jefferson counties who were active in the defeat of the Rajneesh have celebrated the "liberation" of Antelope and returned, more or less, to their normal relationships.

Summaries of the conflicting stories

Range wars give rise to stories evoking images of actors, events, and motivations. The Rajneesh tell stories of a "Garden of Eden" being constructed in harsh desert country; they called Rajneeshpuram the "Oasis Community." They speak of an enlightened guru, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the focus of their community and their movement. He was, they said, "a simple man" who "owned nothing." Disciples, who called themselves "sannyasin," tell of feeling the unconditional love of "Bhagwan" and many of them sought to reciprocate by giving him whatever they felt he desired. Some pointed to their dream city as a physical realization of those desires.

Sannyasin talked and wrote of surrounding "bigots" and "hicks" who could not understand their community, who persecuted them for their religious practices, and who eventually drove their "enlightened one" into exile. They pointed to harassment and pressures from surrounding peoples as reasons for a progressive preoccupation with control; security of their community was seen as justifying increasingly stronger measures to counterbalance external threats. They saw themselves as maligned, slandered, deprived of basic political and property rights. Many sannyasin now acknowledge bad judgment in their community's administration, but do not see this as invalidating their movement. While some have disassociated themselves from the movement, others see the building of Rajneeshpuram as having been an exciting and valuable task and they await an opportunity again "to be with Bhagwan."

The "neighbors" tell stories too. They tell of Sheela Silverman, a "rich lady from back East [New Jersey and Gujarat]," who bought the Big Muddy ranch for $5.75 million and immediately began courting public officials, journalists, businessmen, and legislators. They point to early land-use plans for establishing a "small agricultural commune of about 40 people" down on "John and Sheela's place" and to the inconsistency of the

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nearly immediate requests for building permits appropriate for a community of several thousand residents. Some neighbors report feeling initial pleasure at the prospect of a diverse, educated, international community; they welcomed Sheela into their local society. The stories of other neighbors suggest suspicion of foreigners and alarm over incursions of "strange religions."

Shortly, the stories sour as these turn to the political takeover of the small retirement village of Antelope and to changes in the public school system serving that town and surrounding ranches. Neighbors tell of raised taxes, harassment by the Rajneesh "Peace Force," and desecrations (e.g. Rajneesh officials' choice to site their "Adolf Hitler Garbage Dump" next to the existing community church). Neighbors felt intimidated, threatened, and slandered. They tell of blockages of public roads, pressures to sell homes, harassment at public meetings, wire taps, public displays intended to offend, and endless mind games.

As the conflict escalated in legal and political arenas, the stories turn more sinister. There are stories of targeted poisonings, apparently by arsenic, indiscriminate mass poisonings by salmonella, disabled school buses, burned buildings, and plans to assassinate public officials. They tell of a marriage market to secure "green cards" for foreign nationals, child abuse, and of malicious rumors of a personal nature.

Shortly before the 1984 fall elections, new stories were added. The Rajneesh imported several thousand indigents from the streets of U.S. cities, whom they intended to house through November and, with the swollen voting strength, to sweep local and county elections. The Rajneesh were unable to integrate the "street people" into their community and the neighbors tell stories of hundreds of indigents who were dumped in a parking lot in Madras, Oregon to be dealt with by small town police and social services. Neighbors and officials report a startling array of tactics: animal body parts left in the yards of public officials, sexual devices mailed to courthouse clerks, and anonymous gifts like candies mailed to known Rajneesh enemies (who dared not sample them without first testing for poison).

Finally, the neighbors tell of naive media reporters who published unverified Rajneesh press releases after being entertained and taken on staged tours by hostesses at the ranch. They tell of public officials who were slow to investigate complaints and who chose, at first, to treat their complaints as contrived, and of other officials who were personally compromised in their relationships with the Rajneesh. Some neighbors view

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the Rajneesh incident as a struggle with an alien, totalitarian social system contesting the political dominance in their towns, counties, and associated institutions.

Deciding which of the stories are true

One of my purposes is to reconstruct a defensible history of the conflict between sannyasin and neighbors. This "social history" forms the basis for the second purpose of this book, summarized in the concluding chapter, which is to understand the challenges that the Rajneesh movement (and others) pose for traditional institutions, along with the cultural resistances to those challenges.

To give a fair account of this little range war requires sifting among the stories, cross-checking for validation through documents or other testimony and, in some cases, direct field observation and interaction with the Rajneesh and their neighbors. Some conflicting stories require suspended judgment. In other cases, assessment of the stories requires personal judgment about the character of the informant and the context in which the story is told. In making character judgments, I came to know my informants, meeting them on their own turf among their families, friends, and neighbors. In so doing, the observer inevitably slips over into the role of participant. His identity, personality, and demeanor change the behavior and, in some cases, perhaps even the stories of his informants.[1]

The participant-observer may develop strong rapport if he chooses to enter and identify with one of the groups in a conflict, but the task is further complicated when he insists, as I did, on long-term contact across the spectrum of hostile groups. Each group seeks to persuade, convince, to sell their "reality claims."[2] The observer is caught in a delicate balancing act. He must be friendly, though not really a friend and certainly not a member of any of the groups. It is an exercise in marginality. He must be skeptical, pushing for evidence to support the stories, yet not seen as hostile and certainly not as an inquisitor. Partisans try to recruit him and he may be the object of friendly offers capable of being "misunderstood." His detachment may threaten those whose behavior he cannot endorse; and it is suspect to participants who are utterly convinced of the truth of their stories.[3] Many antagonist expect him to share their outrage, to become allies. Once human groups have locked in conflict, members' patience shortens with those outsiders who seek to remain detached, neutral, or skeptical.

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There are inevitable slips and compromises with the observer falling short of the idealized detachment. Suspicion and ego can cloud an encounter when the observer does not fit standard categories (friend, enemy, potential convert, seeker) of his informants. Temper may color other judgments when the observer discovers that he has been misled, either through intentional misrepresentations or by differences in perceptions of reality. Sannyasin often view ''life as laughter,'' as a great cosmic joke. Events which they construe as elaborate ''jokes'' (recruiting the street people, nonlethal poisonings, a threatened AIDS colony in Antelope) will be seen by their neighbors as ''sinister.'' As a non-Rajneesh observer, one is confronted with many situations where it would be easy to construe the joke as a threat; though as observer, I generally tried to construe the implied threats as jokes.

There are many competing accounts of the Rajneesh movement and their attempt to settle in Eastern Oregon. All of these, including the narrative to follow, are attempts to reconstruct social reality, to describe and understand a human conflict. All major participants in the Rajneesh–Oregonian war are alive and a number are writing, attempting to sell their views of reality in retrospect, as they did during the conflict.[4]

My own narrative is in some ways a personal one, based on four years' experience as I came to know some sannyasin as well as some of their neighbors. I resolved some conflicting accounts of ''factual situations'' at Rajneeshpuram by personal observation and interaction with participants. I formed character judgments as the claims of some informants proved illusory while those of others were prophetic. I assessed conflicting claims concerning strategies and tactics in terms of historical published statements by Rajneesh writers and others, news accounts, official documents, findings of officials and courts of law, official records, personal diaries of participants, and the ''stories of others.'' To satisfy interpretive questions raised by the Rajneesh incident, I examined the history of the movement in India and the spread of an international network of Rajneesh centers. I reconstructed widely scattered and historical events through a ''cross-linked chronology'' comparing official claims of the movement with accounts of contemporaneous outside journalists and those of researchers in several countries.

Finally, before we turn to ''the story,'' I should note that in some cases apparently conflicting stories are both (all) true. Comparison of some accounts give us especially valuable insights because observers' experiences of the ''same general events'' were so different. For example, two

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women who had first-hand experience with "the street people" recruited by the commune in 1984 give radically different accounts, though each is credible from the structured vantage point of each observer.

The first account is Deva's, a sannyasin whose job was to supervise a camp of street people, to keep them "busy" while the commune played out the Wasco County voter-registration conflict. From among the 5,700 street people picked up in U.S. cities, the commune selected for Deva's care the forty recruits who appeared most stable and most cooperative. She has fond memories of many of the street people.

A second and radically different account is given by Ms. Penland (pseudonym), who ran a coffee shop in Madras and who also encountered the Rajneesh street recruits. Her experience, in contrast to Deva's, was limited to those the commune termed "rejects" (1,455 recruits who were deemed too "unmanageable" for retention at the commune). These sometimes bellicose street people were dumped from ranch buses near Ms. Penland's cafe, where each of them was given any weapons or other personal effects which had been taken from them when they had first left city streets to board Rajneesh buses.

As might be expected, the two women's reports of the "Share-a-Home" recruits (which are detailed in Chapter 6) differ quite markedly. Both sets of experiences were consequences of the same recruiting program. Both were credible as they were conveyed to me. As we shall see, the most interesting thing about such contrasting stories is *not* always which of them is true. Rather, the remarkable thing in the cases of Deva and Ms. Penland, is that *both* sets of stories are true as the "event" was experienced from different social locations.

Just as the 1950 film *Rashomon*[5] reconstructed the same events quite differently (as rape or seduction, murder or suicide), depending on whether we focus on the account of robber, samurai, wife, or passing woodcutter, we will find that many conflicting accounts of the Rajneesh incident make sense when we consider the social location and frame-of-reference of the teller. I tried to maintain detachment most like that of Kurosawa's "passing woodcutter."

In some cases, like the salmonella placed in Wasco County salad bars, one interpretation of events will be shown to be more defensible than others, but some events can be understood better by acknowledging the validity of multiple constructions of social reality. Individuals who report "experienced-events" and who like Deva and Penland do so from different social positioning, and who may also have radically different views

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of reality, may understandably see the same events as either ''playful'' (sannyasin term) or ''sinister'' (opponent term). Part of the story to follow is about contested events, but the greater part of the message is the importance of who is reconstructing the events and how their frame-of-reference shapes the reconstructions.[6]

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