

Brahma Kumaris: A New Religion?

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1. *New Religious Movements and New Religions*

The expressions 'new religious movements' and 'new religions' are mostly used as synonymous terms for one and the same phenomenon. On the one hand, this habit can be justified. After all, a 'new religion' is always a new religious movement. On the other hand, however, is every new religious movement a new, that is, independent religion? Of course, every 'new religious movement' is religious, but is it thereby also a 'new religion'? I would like to argue that the two concepts should be distinguished and not considered as synonymous. The term 'new religious movements' refers to the many different groups that are found within the different religions and traditions. 'New religions' should be used to refer to groups that offer something new with respect to religion in comparison with the tradition from which they emerge and in the end become a separate organization. 'New religions' are, in fact, 'new world religions' (note: I do not mean new world religions in the sense of New Age, but world religions that are presented as new.) It is a separate category.

I will explore this further. In 1970 Needleman published *The New Religions*. Was this book actually about new religions? With respect to content one must say no. He mentions Zen Buddhism and the Tibetan Vajrayana which, as is well known, are both very old religions; he discussed Gurdjieff, Krishnamurti, Transcendental Meditation and Meher Baba, which are indeed new movements but not really to be characterized as 'new religions', for these persons and groups remain emphatically within existing religious traditions. He also mentions Subud, which is perhaps the only one which could take the predicate 'new religion'. Needleman used the concept 'new religion' in a purely formal way in the sense of new in America. Indeed, that is what they all were: it was only recently that they to be found in the United States. I do not view the expression 'new religions' in this way.

When I speak of 'new religions' I mean a specific category which is clearly to be distinguished from that of 'new religions movements' by means of a number of criteria. I use the term 'new religion' only if the phenomenon in question displays the following characteristics:

- a) The group presents something new with respect to content, something that was not found previously in the tradition in which it originated. This 'something new' is not only a renewal of old truths or a revival of old forgotten practices: it is something essentially other.
- b) This leads to the group deviates clearly from the existing views and practices within the tradition in a decisive way. Of course, the group will take over much from the tradition, but these beliefs and practices are not decisive.

c) A consequence of this is that a break with respect to content and practice is noted both by the group itself and the tradition within which it originated. If any group whatsoever breaks with the tradition on its own initiative, this does not have to entail that it becomes a new religion. There does not have to be any break concerning content. This is clear from the many groups called 'sects' in the sense of the classical sociology of religion. Neither can we claim that we have to do with a new religion if the tradition itself initiates the break, for the group can participate to a large degree in the tradition as far as content is concerned and does not, in many cases, recognize its excommunication from the tradition. We encounter this in what traditionally have been called 'heresies'.

d) In addition, the group must have an all-encompassing, complete program. It must, regarding content and practice, encompass all aspects of life and doctrine. If, for example, a certain group offer only a new method for self-realization via regular sessions, this is, in principle, too limited.

I will illustrate this with a few examples. We can begin quite simply with Christianity, which arose within the tradition of Judaism. Here something new is offered, namely, the belief that a certain person was very God himself. In this or because of this great differences in views (for example, on reconciliation) and praxis (the law was no longer valid) arose and the break was established at a specific time by both sides and young Christianity had clearly a complete program. Behold the birth of a new religion. Another example is that of Bahai, which originated within the tradition of Shi'ite Islam. Here certain revelations were received, something that was both formally and materially new and here also various differences arose as to what must be believed or done and both sides signalled a break (the Shi'ites could not view Baha'i as Islamic nor did Baha'i itself want to be called Islamic). The movement also had a clear, all-encompassing program, as can be claimed right up to the present.

If Baha'i serves as an exemplary model, in most cases it is difficult to determine whether we have to do with a new religion. Take, for example, the Unification Church. In the first instance it is, I would say, a 'new religion': it arose within Christianity, but it does present something new: Moon as the returned Jesus, in combination with a new book, *The New Principles*. One can claim that there are essential differences in teaching and practice with Christianity. It is also clear that Christianity broke with the Unification Church, but it is less clear as to whether the reverse is true, because the Unification Church is inclined to see itself as the true expression of Christianity, i.e. as it was essentially intended to be. Finally, the Unification Church has a complete, all-encompassing program. Is it therefore a new religion? Yes, but with this proviso: the Unification Church's view of Christianity can lead to its becoming continually more 'christian'. It is very much conceivable that after Moon's death the church will assimilate itself more into the whole of the Christian tradition and will thereby become a 'new religious movement'. We can indicate something similar in connection with 'The Family'.

We can conclude that most 'new religious movements' are by far certainly not 'new religions'. Very different groups like Hare Krishna, the Order of the Solar Temple, the Family, the Branch Davidians, Rajneeshism, New Age,, etc. can be characterized as 'new religious movements'. They remain within their own tradition, the deviations are too minor, what is presented as new is not specific enough, and the break is not fundamental. Thus, there are not very many truly 'new religions'. But they do exist. In a certain respect, we must also include the modern groups in the

category 'new religions', which, as it were, originated out of nothing. An example is the Heaven's Gate. It had the potential to become a 'new religion' but died because of its exclusivity and extremism. In this connection Scientology could also be mentioned (if we take its religious claims seriously). It did not originate within a certain tradition and there can therefore be nothing said of deviations or of a break, but it does offer something new, both with respect to intention as well as to views. In addition, it also offers in principle a complete program. The converse, however, is that it can be considered as an exceptional variant within the gnostic-esoteric tradition—and is thus ultimately not truly new—and that the group has the tendency to orient itself more and more to the technical aspect, thereby neglecting other aspects.

In short, I hope that I have shown that it is worthwhile to introduce a separate category 'new religions', which is clearly to be distinguished from the broader 'new religious movements'. And it is clear that the number of 'new world religions' is not large in comparison.

On the basis of the preceding I wish to present a case study of a possible 'new religion'. It concerns the movement, Brahma Kumaris, which originated in India. My question is whether Brahma Kumaris represents a new Hindu religious movement or whether it is more proper to speak of a 'new religion'? If the latter is the case, why?

2. Brahma Kumaris: An Overview

It is important to give a broad overview of the movement that is known internationally as 'Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University'.

a) The Founder and the Foundation of the Movement

The movement was founded in 1936 in Karachi by Lekh Raj who was born in 1876. He grew up in a devout Hindu environment which placed heavy emphasis on the Bhakti. For a long time Narayana was the object of his piety. Lekh Raj was a diamond merchant and attempted to live in accordance with the praxis of the ashramas. When he wanted to withdraw from this life in 1936 so that he could devote himself to the spiritual life, he had a radical religious experience. He had the feeling that he had come into contact with the Supreme Soul or God; at the same time he experienced himself in this encounter as an eternal soul and the connectedness of that soul with the Supreme Soul. In this event he acquired insight into himself and into the true nature of reality. He felt himself to be an instrument of the Supreme Soul who had passed on the knowledge to him or had him experience it, intending that Lekh Raj pass it on to others. Or, as it was stated, he experienced the love of God who gave him the highest spiritual knowledge. This experience was different than that with which he was acquainted from his Bhakti: there God was the other who was outside of him, whereas here he experienced that that Other was also very close to him, without it being the case that his own eternal soul merged completely with the Supreme Soul. The experience that he himself was involved in the Supreme Soul was new, different from previously. Lekh Raj had such encounters for some time, in which he experienced the Supreme Soul who passed knowledge on to him. The knowledge that Lekh Raj received is written down in the so-called Murli.

The experience was described by the movement as follows: During meditation "he felt a warm flow of energy, surrounding him, filling him with light and exposing him to a series of powerful visions" (26); "... giving him new insights into the innate qualities of the human soul, revealing the mysterious entity of God and explaining the process of world transformation." For Lekh Raj the experience was so radical that he wanted to pass it on. For that reason in that same year he founded the organization of Brahma Kumaris. He himself was the inspiring force in the background, called Brahma or the comforting Brahma Baba by the adherents. It was striking that he surrendered the leadership within his organization emphatically to women. Women are still the main leaders in the movement (the present leaders are Dadi Prakashamani and Dadi Janki, who have been involved since the very beginning). After Pakistan split from the former British India the movement was re-established on Mount Abu, where the headquarters of the movement are still situated. Brahma died in 1969.

b) Ideas about God

The ideas concerning God deviate considerably from what we encounter within Hinduism as a whole. Not only is God eternal, the eternal power or energy but matter is also eternal—it is not created by God. But the souls that we encounter in human beings are also eternal. They do not emerge from God and are not created by him. God is seen as one of the souls, even though he is the 'supreme soul' or the 'all-highest soul'. He therefore has all knowledge and is in that sense omniscient, although he is not omnipresent. Different names and epithets are given to God: Father, Shiva, sometimes also in combination 'God Father Shiva', Brahma, Baba, 'ocean of bliss', 'ocean of love', 'ocean of virtues', liberator and redeemer, guide and liberator. God, Shiva, the All-Highest, is the creation of the *trimurti*, which together represent three aspects of God. Traditionally, Hinduism speaks of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, and these three are seen as a unity. In Brahma Kumaris, however, Shiva stands above the *trimurti* and the third aspect is termed *Shankar*. On the one hand, this notion of *trimurti* is understood in line with the traditional Hindu view, namely as creator, preserver, and destroyer. But on the other hand the movement gives a more specific content to these terms. The meaning of the 'creator aspect' means that God, whenever humanity is at a low point, will come into the world, awaken humanity and thus restore primal harmony; such an act of creation will preferably occur via a messenger, whereby one can think of someone like Lekh Raj. Shiva's 'preserver aspect' becomes visible in the energy that he gives through, for example, the power of the *raja yoga* and through the knowledge that is derived from him in this last period, through which one can develop a balanced personality. The 'destroyer aspect' is expressed in the fact that evil and negativity will be eliminated, particularly by the meditative activities of those who walk along the way.

c) Ideas about Human Beings

As has already been remarked, the human being is essentially an eternal soul. In the beginning all souls lived together, with the All-Highest Soul in a non-material world, but because of the law of *karma* the souls left this world for the material world and entered into human bodies. All souls play their own roles in the material world and therefore assume a body in order to give expression to their original positive qualities. Only in the body is the soul able to experience life. Apart from the connection to the physical, the soul has three aspects: intellect, conscious mind, and subconscious mind. The intellect is the guiding and determining part of the soul; it

determines the thoughts and the condition of the human being, with the intention that it become independent of the human being and does not allow itself to be influenced by external factors. The mind is that part of the soul that produces thoughts and ideas; emotions, feelings and experiences are also located in this part of the soul. It is of great importance to discover how and why thoughts are created, for if they are determined or created by external negative influences, the individual becomes spiritually darkened. It is very important to understand the origin of thoughts. The unconscious mind contains the so-called *sanskars*, i.e. the impressions or consequences of everything that one undergoes or has undergone in this life or has undergone in previous lives. It is in particular this unconscious mind that primarily bears on the origin of the thoughts. It is the intention of Brahma Kumaris that the origin of thoughts and thinking itself become increasingly determined by the orientation to the All- Highest Soul. If this contact exists, people will become freer and the *sanskars* will be purified.

It is necessary in this context to discuss karma and reincarnation. Brahma Kumaris holds that souls are continually reborn in other bodies but exclusively in human bodies. The reborn souls are determined by the law of *karma* of action and reaction. When the soul enters into matter, in the world of action, the game of action and reaction between intellect, mind and subconscious mind begins. The *sanskars* from the unconscious mind inspire one to actions and thoughts, which in turn call *sanskars* down upon themselves, for all deeds have their consequences. The purpose of this life and future lives are determined by this whole process. The human being must learn to distinguish between the fact that he produces *karma* and that the intention is that he, by attuning himself to the All-Highest Soul, produce positive karma. Through this negative *karma* is burned away, after which positive *karma* is formed and the human being or soul is liberated. In other words, only through knowledge of God and the connection with God is a human being liberated and no longer has to enter into this liberated world. (For the rest, no distinction is made between *mukti* and *jivanmukti*: in the former one is liberated *from* life and in the latter one is liberated *in* life).

d) Ideas about the World Cycle

In accordance with classical Hinduism, there is within Brahma Kumaris the doctrine of the four or five world ages: the golden age (*sat yuga*), the silver age (*treta yuga*), the copper age (*dvapar yuga*) and the iron age (*kali yuga*). Within this last age, however, as a kind of preparation for the new golden age, there is the diamond age (*samgam yuga*). The content of the ages is about the same as in Hinduism; the most striking difference is that for Brahma Kumaris the whole cycle lasts 5000 years in total. At the moment the world is now in the *kali yuga*, although this age is near its end. After the *kali yuga* the world will be completely different and transformed into a new golden age. This transformation for the better depends on there are being a sufficient number of people now who possess the spirituality or mentality of that future age. The more people there are who are on that level, the better and smoother will be the transition. We can speak here of the 'diamond age', that which entails that God is very much involved with people and returns the soul again to its original form. This happens emphatically through what Brahma Kumaris presents and achieves. (If there are not sufficient people on the proper level, the transformation will not take place and we will remain in the *kali yuga* for now.)

In principle, all souls enter into the new golden age. One has the impression that the souls that have contact with the All-Highest Soul in the diamond age will return to the primal world of the beginning after the end of this world, in which they can live in an eternal relation with the All-Highest Soul. In this way they are back with God in order afterwards to start anew with and in a golden age.

In short, for Brahma Kumaris the whole notion of the world cycle entails that it is believed that old world in which we now live will be transformed, after which a new age begins, a new cycle of human life, a new beginning.

e) The Practice of *Raja Yoga*

The entire way of the Brahma Kumaris can be characterized as *raja yoga*. One should not think here in the first place of classical yoga, as described by Patanjali. The name *raja yoga* is only the name of a specific way which is travelled. Central to *raja yoga* is that one becomes connected with the Highest Soul and with the highest in oneself. The central idea behind *raja yoga* is that one arrive at a connection with the Supreme Soul and with the highest in oneself. It is a way to the true self, which is to be expressed in everyday life (which is why one hears of *Karma Yoga*). Above all, *raja yoga* has to do with meditation, whose content consists in that one is occupied with the understanding that the soul is on the way to God. The meditation strengthens this understanding, increases one's knowledge and strengthens the connectedness. The meditation and the knowledge leads to the formation of character and to service. Meditation makes a person internally and personally stronger and leads others to be inspired to follow the way and to become purified as well. *Raja yoga* also entails a 'spiritual lifestyle', which includes that one be a vegetarian, seek good company, be regularly occupied with study and have as many fixed moments as possible during the day for meditation and live a life oriented towards celibacy. The meditation practice of the *raja yoga* consists of sitting properly, eyes open but directed internally, possibly listening to a text or music, preferably under the supervision of a (female) guide. There are different stages in the meditation: first, the preparation within which visualization plays a role, followed by the initial meditation in which one is conscious of one's soul and of God, next is concentration in which one experiences the purity and directness of the One and finally, realization, in which the unique connectedness of the soul with the Supreme Soul is attained.

Raja yoga is very closely bound up with 'positive thinking'. In any event, it concerns going to the origin of one's thoughts and letting one's thoughts be generated by the pure source. When these thoughts come and work in the individual, he becomes a positive being that can influence his environment in important ways. On account of this he also performs the right acts. Because of *raja yoga*, one can succeed in receiving and using positive thoughts.

f) Different Activities

Brahma Kumaris has been active, primarily in recent years, in many different areas. A number of these activities need to be mentioned. Of course, courses are given which are connected to *raja yoga*. One should mention here the course 'Positive Thinking'. Related to this is the course, 'Stress-free Living' which is also concerned with developing a proper way of thinking and a

proper tuning in to one's most profound nature. Courses such as 'Self-Managing Leadership', 'Secrets of Self-Esteem', 'Self-Management for Quality of Life' have a similar orientation: the emphasis continually falls on understanding who the human being is at bottom is how the human being is connected with the All-Highest and how rest, power and balance can be brought into life. Another category of activities is more global in nature. Brahma Kumaris has been involved in the activities of UNO, UNESCO and UNICEF, it has supported human rights, the importance of a good education, and defended more equality among people. Within this framework there are a number of connected programs, such as 'The Million Minutes for Peace' (in which the intention is that for a few minutes every day several people think positively of world peace), 'Global Cooperation for a Better World', 'Sharing our Values for a Better World'. The latter project has been continued in the still existent 'Living Values'. The 'interfaith' projects should be mentioned in this same context: the unity of all religions is sought and members are active in organizations that promote or pursue this. Finally, the attempt is made to be active in different sectors of social life. Thus there are programs dealing with art, organization of academic conferences (it is not for nothing that Brahma Kumaris is called the *Spiritual University*), contacts within the world of medicine, and programs for working with prisoners, etc.

g) The Murli

Formally, the movement does not have any 'holy book'. Nevertheless, there is the so-called 'Murli', a work that has originated since Lekh Raj received his messages. It contains the words of the Highest Soul itself. These messages have been written down and are largely to be found in the Murli. The work is thus to be used for teaching and study. This material is therefore extremely important, for it provides the truth and true knowledge. The truth content of the book also has a continual effect in the experiences of the disciples: one does not accept the words in a purely intellectual way but learns in one's own life that the knowledge is completely true. The Murli is read and studied carefully. Nevertheless, the Murli did not close with the death of Lekh Raj. Messages continued to be received from the other world via one person, Dai Gulzar. The messages are becoming increasingly more rare, but they still occur. The knowledge that has been passed on also appears in the Murli.

It has become an important text. Brahma Kumaris does not discuss it right away in courses and the text is not available for sale, but in later stages it plays an important role. In the course of time the book is discussed in advanced courses. It is not discussed until this point because a certain certain spiritual level has to be attained before one can work with it. The adherents are to take it very seriously and study it carefully. The degree of seriousness with which it is to be studied is apparent in the fact that the participants are engaged in study of this text for a long time from six o'clock in the morning.

3) A New World Religion or a Hindu Movement?

The question is: how should we see Brahma Kumaris? Is it a (neo-)Hindu movement or can we speak here of a 'new (world) religion'?

On the one hand, it is clear that Brahma Kumaris has emerged from Hinduism. Lekh Raj was a Hindu, devoted to the Bhakti. The All-Highest Soul can be called Shiva, the name of a well-

known Hindu divinity. The idea that a close connection with God is possible is also found within Hinduism. The tripartite division of the human being falls with broader Hinduism as well. The views of karma, reincarnation, the four *yugas* with the fifth *yuga* clearly have Hindu roots. Whoever looks at the *raja yoga* of Brahma Kumaris will discover that many aspects of this are inconceivable without traditional yoga. In short, the Hindu background is clear.

On the other hand, we can indicate a number of aspects in which the relation to Hinduism is considerably less clear and which signify a certain newness. It is not possible to speak here directly of a break, but the differences are sometimes great.

a) The way in which the revelations or messages to Lekh Raj have occurred is not typically Hindu. Of course, people in India have received and do receive revelations, as occurs in every religion, but the way in which Lekh Raj received it is not a frequent occurrence. It occurs in a way that can be encountered elsewhere in other religions. In a certain respect it seems as if this is 'channeling', a way of contact that is not strongly culturally bound.

b) The idea of God as an independent being, in combination with the idea that the human being is an eternal soul, who can essentially live together with the All-Highest Soul is not specifically Hindu. In a certain respect it resembles certain teachings within Bhakti spirituality, in which the divinity is also eternally the other, but the aspect of emotional love and devout worship is lacking here altogether. In certain respects the philosophy of Lekh Raj resembles the old *samkhya* philosophy, which is essentially dualistic and thus holds to an image of God, human beings and matter that appears to resemble what Lekh Raj has advanced. But although this philosophy is known within modern hinduism, it generally no longer finds any adherents in contemporary India. It is, in a certain respect, a reasonable teaching of its own which shows a strong similarity to Western gnosis.

c) Here we have to point to the specific ideas between Shiva and the Trimurti. Traditionally within hinduism Shiva is the third aspect of the Trimurti, next to Brahma and Vishnu, but the Brahma Kumaris make a clear distinction between both. Shiva is the Supersoul or the highest God, and has a position above the Trimurti, which is his creation. The third aspect of the Trimurti is a new god, called Shankar (traditionally a epithet of Shiva, but here an independent personality) These ideas about Shiva I never have met within hinduism.

d) The idea of the four ages is given different content here. The teaching that in total they add up to 5000 years is striking and cannot be found in other groups in India. Thus Brahma Kumaris gives its own content to this idea. Remarkably, this content is in a certain respect related more to old Persian teachings than to Hinduism. But it is very improbable that Lekh Raj would have been influenced by this old and almost non-existent religion. If at all, such influence would have come via Parsis, but it is not known to what extent Lekh Raj was acquainted with them and, if he was, whether he was informed about their older religious teachings.

e) Remarkable is the idea of the fifth age. Within the hinduistic yuga-ideas we cannot find an idea like this. Sure, we can find the idea that within the fourth yuga the seeds is sown of the new golden age, the beginning of a new cycle, but never this seed is viewed as a new fifth age. This idea is unique.

f) The idea of karma and reincarnation has also received a content that deviates from Hinduism. Whoever reads the view of Brahma Kumaris concerning these matters carefully is inclined to conclude that this is almost entirely in line with the Western belief in reincarnation as found in the theosophy of that time than in line with Eastern teachings. The most striking aspect of this can be seen in the fact that reincarnation is not seen as a relapse into life forms other than those of human beings. The way by which one is released from karma is also different.

g) Interesting—and almost unique in India—is the position of women. Women are placed emphatically in the highest position for principal reasons. To my knowledge, there are no parallels to this in India. In Bhakti spirituality women are indeed viewed as equals in many cases but never socially and certainly not structurally. In Brahma Kumaris this equality is structural and it seems that women have a higher position than men. This does not exist in Hinduism up to the present. We do see 'female gurus' in increasing measure in India, 'enlightened' women who gather a circle of disciples about themselves and are seen as avatars of a kind, but they remain exceptions. Their success is often stronger in the West than in the East. In short, with respect to the position of the woman, Brahma Kumaris is distinctly unique.

h) The interpretation of *raja yoga* in terms of 'positive thinking' and positively affecting the environment is not to be found within Hinduism. In this the movement has been strongly influenced by Western thinking. We do find in Hinduism the idea that there is a subtle energy that people can absorb and which they can also radiate, and we also come across the idea that a guru has a specific spiritual power that he can give to his disciples, but none of this is identical with the 'power of thought' of 'positive thinking'. This idea has its roots in the West. For the rest, there are also other movements stemming from India that have gone in this direction, such as Transcendental Meditation. This movement goes considerably further than Brahma Kumaris in this respect and has even deepened the Western idea of positive thinking even more. Transcendental Meditation, however, is an exception. In short, the idea of 'positive thinking' can be combined with a certain side of Hinduism, but it is not identical to it.

i) In its presentation of itself Brahma Kumaris comes across increasingly as a general spiritual movement without any specific connection to a certain religion. If the name would be different, if its headquarters were not in India and if Sanskrit terms were not used, one would quickly have the idea that this is a generally more or less Western religious movement which does not have any relationship with the East. The impression is strengthened even more through the fact that Brahma Kumaris, in my view, seems to be inclined more towards a 'psychological movement' in its presentation of itself.

The question is now: can one, on the basis of the above, state that Brahma Kumaris is not so much a new religious movement within Hinduism as a 'new religion'? On the basis of the above, I would not go that far. In any case, it must be stated that it does introduce relatively new elements, which are not explicitly Hindu, just as it can be stated that they represent a general religiosity, broader and sometimes more fundamental than Hinduism. There is, however, nothing of a break or conflict. The latter can have something to do with the fact that Hinduism is extremely tolerant and a break has occurred only rarely. It can also have to do with the fact that Brahma Kumaris is universalistic and thus recognizes and values a great deal in Hinduism. On the basis of both considerations a break is not obvious. I have the inclination to say that in

Brahma Kumaris we encounter in principle a 'new religion' in the process of being born. A few decades are still needed to be able to make a good assessment. However, we can see that in a certain respect Brahma Kumaris has become more 'Western' in recent years and also that it has gone more in the direction of the 'psychological line', more or less joining the company of many modern New Age psychological movements. If this tendency continues it could become clear that Brahma Kumaris is in fact a new religion, originating within Hinduism but going its own way.

http://www.cesnur.org/testi/bryn/br_kranenborg.htm