

**Reflexive Traditions:  
New Religious Movements  
and the 'Negotiation' of Identity**

**John Walliss**

## **Abstract**

A persistent theme within contemporary social theory is the claim regarding the 'end of tradition' - even the 'end of modernity' - and the emergence of a post-traditional or post-modern social order wherein, amongst a general fragmentation of the social, individual biography becomes increasingly the site of personal choice. In this article I intend to critically examine these claims through a discussion of fieldwork with a contemporary NRM; the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University. Drawing on the work of Richard Jenkins (1996) on 'social identity' and Philip Mellor (1993) on 'reflexive traditions', analysis will focus on the process of identity (re)construction and 'negotiation' engaged in by individuals in relation to the Brahma Kumaris. To this end, a fourfold typology of the differing levels or types of identity negotiation and loci of authority will be proposed and discussed in relation to interview data.

## **Biographical Statement**

**John Walliss** has recently completed his PhD at the University of Sheffield. His research interests are situated broadly in the intersection between the sociology of religion and social theory. In addition, he is interested in exploring the place of religion in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. His current research interests include an ethnography of contemporary Spiritualism and a sociological analysis of the 'fringe' archaeology of Graham Hancock. He is also re-working his thesis into a book which, all things been equal, will be published in 2001.

## **Reflexive Traditions:**

### **New Religious Movements & the 'Negotiation' of Identity**

A persistent theme within contemporary social theory is the claim regarding the 'end of tradition' - even the 'end of modernity' - and the emergence of a post-traditional or post-modern social order wherein, amongst a general fragmentation of the social, individual biography becomes increasingly the site of personal choice. For example, Giddens (1991) discusses how, within what he refers to as Late Modernity, identity becomes a reflexive project - an attempt to sustain a coherent, revisable life-narrative in relation to the lifespan, from past to anticipated future, within the context of multiple choice as filtered through various experts, products and services. Likewise Bauman (1996:50) argues that "it is now all too easy to choose identity; but no longer possible to hold it" and that identity thus "has to be constructed [even though] no design for the construction can be taken as prescribed or foolproof" (Bauman, 1992:193). Against this view of radical detraditionalization, however, critics such as Mellor (1993) and Heelas (1996a) have argued that the growth of the New Age and New Religious Movements (NRMs) as well as the rise in fundamentalism and nationalism world-wide points to a *coexistence* and dynamic interaction between such reflexivity and processes of tradition maintenance, reconstruction and even rejuvenation. The aim of my own research is to examine these claims in relation to New Age spiritualities and NRMs. Thus, while the emphasis within the New Age on individual choice, self-development, the rejection of external voices of authority and the utilisation of various spiritual and quasi-spiritual 'consumables' point to a situation of radical detraditionalization as advocated by Giddens and Bauman this is

offset by New Agers drawing on such traditions as much for their (posited) *authenticity* and *authority* as for *inspiration*.

In this paper I intend to examine this interaction through a discussion of fieldwork with the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, a NRM of Indian origin currently operating within the UK. Drawing on the work of Richard Jenkins (1996) on 'social identity' and Philip Mellor (1993) on 'reflexive traditions', analysis will focus on the process of identity (re)construction and 'negotiation' engaged in by individuals in relation to the Brahma Kumaris. To this end, a fourfold typology of the differing levels or types of identity negotiation and loci of authority will be proposed and discussed in relation to interview data.

## **The Brahma Kumaris**

Before doing so, however, it would appear pertinent to present a brief overview of the Brahma Kumaris' history and theology. The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University emerged in the mid 1930s in Sindh, now part of Pakistan, around the figure of a retired diamond Merchant, Mr. (Dada) Lekhraj who claimed to be the incarnation of the Hindu deity Shiva. The other significant aspect of Lekhraj's ministry was millenarianism, the belief that the world was shortly to be destroyed and replaced by a paradise on earth to be populated by a small number of spiritually pure souls. However, this philosophy - as well as the emphasis placed on female spirituality within the group that gathered around Lekhraj - caused a backlash within the local

community and, as a result, the group spent the first thirteen years of its existence in a state of almost constant persecution. As a result, during this period the Lekhraj's alleged visions developed into an elaborate theology of world-rejection (Wallis, 1984) and spiritual elitism with the group living an enclosed life in preparation for the Millennium. However, Beginning in the 1950s the group began a campaign of intense proselytization firstly within India and then, from the 1970s onwards, the world. The organisation's internationalisation, however, along with its association with the UN from the 1980s onwards has resulted in it, while maintaining its original world-rejecting theology, attempting to recruit members and arguably increase its international profile through offering courses in seemingly world-affirming skills such as self-development, positive thinking and stress management. Thus, as a result of this situation - which I have referred to as *world-ambivalence* (see REFERENCE) - the Brahma Kumaris now effectively promote two mutually-antagonistic theologies and, as a result, is characterised by a heterogeneous membership, differing both in their level of seriousness and, most importantly, their orientation to the University's normative structures and millenarianism. For example, on the one hand at the periphery there are those individuals attracted by the idea of positive-thinking or vague affirmations concerning 'a New Age' while on the other, the hard-core of the University still draws on and 'lives' the original world rejecting *Raja Yoga* theology and awaits the millennium. There is, in sum, often a high degree of individual malleability or 'negotiation' between individuals and the Brahma Kumaris 'tradition' at the level of its local centres around issues of commitment, motivation and interest.

## **Negotiating 'Om Shanti'**

The work of Philip Mellor (1993) on reflexive traditions or 'sacred eating communities' (Mellor & Shilling, 1997) and the work of Richard Jenkins (1996) on social identity is suggestive for the analysis of such a phenomenon. Mellor proposes the term *reflexive traditions* in response to and as a critique of Giddens' (1990) view of tradition and reflexivity as mutually exclusive. Against this view, he argues that - although not by any means an exclusive late modern phenomenon - within contemporary traditions there is a dynamic interplay between the normative and the reflexive; between 'tradition' in the sense of an external voice of authority and reflexivity in the sense of personal choice and institutional malleability. Thus, traditions should be seen as a two-way order; shaped (or 'eaten into') by individuals while simultaneously 'filling up' individual's identity to varying degrees (Mellor & Shilling, 1997:68).

Likewise, Jenkins suggests that that identity is inherently a social process and constituted through what he refers to as the *internal-external dialectic of identification*; the ongoing, dialectical process of internal self-definitions and external social classifications of individuals in terms of similarity and difference. Identity is therefore the synthesis of 'moments of identification' between internal and external; "something *over* which struggles take place and *with* which stratagems are advanced" (Jenkins, 1996:25). For example it may be argued that the seriousness of a particular individual's identification of the University's spiritual affirmation 'Om Shanti' (translated as 'I am a peaceful soul' or 'I, the soul, exist in peace') is an outcome of

such a dialectical process between, firstly, their self-identification with the Brahma Kumaris' normative structures and, secondly, the interplaying of this identification with other - for example, dissonant - biographical factors or social classifications. On this basis it is possible by adapting slightly existing the typological work of Campbell (1978), Wallis (1974) and Stark & Bainbridge (1979; 1985) to differentiate broadly between levels or types of membership in regard to the degree of influence in everyday life of the Brahma Kumaris belief system in three key ways;

- *Orientation to the 'divine within'*, specifically whether it is utilised by the individual for instrumental purposes or for illumination (Campbell).
- *Levels of involvement* in the movement, in terms of whether it proximates the sporadic involvement of an audience or clients or the commitment of a (cult movement or sect) member (Stark & Bainbridge).
- *Locus of Authority* (Wallis) in terms of whether authority lies 'within' (epistemological individualism) or 'without' (epistemological authoritarianism).

In this way, I intend to explore with reference to interview data the interaction of personal reflexivity and the Brahma Kumaris' normative structures through an analysis of individual membership patterns as grouped into four ideal types; *instrumental users*, *eclectic users*, *spiritual searchers* and *interpretative drifters* in relation to the three key interlinked issues outlined above. In sum I will be attempting to ascertain, firstly, *why and to what extent individuals choose to place themselves*



*within the Brahma Kumaris' normative structures and, secondly, the influence of these structures on the ongoing (re)construction of identity.*

## **Orientation to 'Divine Within'**

In discussion with those attending Brahma Kumaris events a initial, broad distinction may be drawn between those for whom the meditation, and thereby the 'divine within', serves an instrumental purpose and those for whom it serves as a basis of spiritual illumination or between, on the one hand, 'instrumental users' and 'eclectic users' and, on the other, 'spiritual searchers'.

Turning firstly to the instrumental user, (s)he is initially drawn to the University through what they perceive as the benefits to their life in the *here and now* of the implementation of a stress-free or positive-thinking life style. Such individuals have typically, although not exclusively, recently experienced either (minor) psychological or medical problems, a loss within their personal life or generally feel that they are agitated or suffering through stress related factors. For example, 'Janet' became involved after being diagnosed with a serious illness;

they told me not long after that I wasn't very well...And when they told me that, the doctor said 'but you've got to be positive', so I thought 'I need positive thinking; I need [the local Brahma Kumaris centre co-

ordinator]. So I rang [her] up and that's how I came...and I've sort of been popping down since

Likewise, when asked what benefits they think they have achieved or, further, what their aim in continuing attending is, (s)he is again likely to respond in predominantly instrumental terms;

*Do you think that you have changed in any way since becoming involved with the Brahma Kumaris?*

A bit calmer and more relaxed, I think.

*Why do you say that?*

I listen to my tapes at night before I go to bed and it helps me to relax and helps me to unwind at the end of the day you feel calmer, you think about what you've done in the day. It brings it all together rather than rushing and tearing from one day to the next, it ends the day off quite nicely

Thus to the instrumental user the meditation represents a means to a particular end rather than a spiritual means in-itself. When asked (s)he will express the benefits of the meditation in terms of how it has helped them to become calmer, more relaxed or able to deal with a particular situation or malady more effectively. Sometimes this may even be expressed through quasi-spiritual or humanistic terminology, such as 'achieving inner peace' or 'becoming centred'. Similarly, instrumental users may state that since becoming involved with the meditation they have, on the surface at least, taken up aspects of the Raja Yoga lifestyle, particularly vegetarianism. However,

when questioned further on this, instrumental reasons often emerge. Thus, 'Mark' has become vegetarian since attending meditation classes although;

it was more because the doctor said that I had to cut down on my cholesterol (laughs). So I have cut down on meat but the trigger was the doctor rather than the spiritual

Many of the characteristics of the instrumental user are also a feature of what I would refer to as the *eclectic user*, although there are important differences. (S)he also places a strong emphasis on the utilisation of the meditation practice for practical benefits. Indeed, when asked what their reasons for attending are, there is little to distinguish between both types. However, whereas the instrumental user employs a predominantly pragmatic, instrumental approach (i.e. I find that it relieves the pain caused by x), the eclectic user links the instrumental with what they see as the spiritual through the notion of a process of 'self development' or, in the words of Heelas (1996b), *self spirituality*. Thus, self development, in terms of the development of the 'higher self', takes on for the eclectic user the status of the spiritual quest. For example, after discussing the benefits of attending stress-free living and self esteem courses one told me how she felt that it had "brought [her] closer to God" adding "I think I'm a unique person and that's what I want to explore". Similarly another told me that the Brahma Kumaris' "idea of looking after yourself and therefore being a better person to other people seems to fit in very nicely with the other things I'm involved with". Thus, in contrast to the instrumental user's somewhat sporadic use of

the meditation technique, the eclectic user considers themselves to be 'on the spiritual path' to 'empowerment', 'being more centred' or simply a 'better person'.

In radical contrast to the instrumental orientation of the instrumental user and, to some extent the eclectic user, one may locate the transcendence, for which the meditation serves as a basis, sought by the *spiritual searcher*. Like the eclectic user this individual also considers themselves to be on 'the spiritual path', however, what is significant about this membership type is that their involvement grew out of a sense of disillusionment with conventional religiosity. This may take the form of a rejection of what is perceived as the negative attitude of the church or alternatively (s)he may be attempting to find answers to the questions they perceive as ignored, glossed over or not satisfactorily answered by their existing faith. For example, 'Wendy' was drawn to what she felt to be the positive message of the Brahma Kumaris spirituality in contrast to her Christian faith;

Within the church...it tends to make you negative inasmuch as you're always feeling guilty - you've done this wrong, you've done that wrong, you're not worthwhile - whereas with the Brahma Kumaris its totally different. You're told that you are worthwhile and this [the Church's] is the wrong way of looking at things

In this way, (s)he will claim that Raja Yoga not only answers these questions but also provides a technique that allows them direct, largely unmediated contact with this spirituality. For example, in contrast to the perceived 'fuzziness' of Christianity in

regard to the soul, within the Brahma Kumaris they feel that not only are they told what a soul actually is but also taught a technique that engenders the perception of them as a soul and facilitates union (literally *yoga*) with God;

Brahmin faith makes more sense than Christian faith, really...its the same God to me and Jesus is part of that faith but it doesn't just end there, its an extension...I don't know if you've found that, but lots and lots of questions that I used to sit in church and think from books that I'd read and deeper thinking...you don't get any sermons on souls and as Christians you're supposed to have a soul somewhere but they don't seem to do a sermon on souls and I wanted to know deeper things about Heaven and afterlife and things like that. It seems just a bit fuzzy in church somehow; you're just there for the here and now, you're not there for what's been before and what's coming afterwards whereas I find that with the Brahmin faith you know what happened before, you know all about Heaven and who God really is

In some other cases however, individuals who initially attended for instrumental reasons gradually become more and more oriented towards the spiritual. This membership type I have named the *Interpretative Drifter*, in reference to the work of Tanya Luhmann (1994). By this I mean that the interpretative drifter, through participating in an instrumental course, begins to develop the basis of the Brahma Kumaris' 'way of seeing' the world and themselves that is developed further as they become more involved in the meditation. However, "rather than realising that their

intellectual habits have changed they feel that they have discovered that the ideas [behind the belief] are true” (Luhrmann, 1994:124).

Thus, (s)he will describe coming along initially for specifically instrumental reasons (*à la* instrumental user) such as the need to unwind or to ‘de-stress’ themselves;

When I came along to learn meditation I had a vague idea that it might have something to do with God (laughs) but for me the idea of God was just some kind of source of energy, that would be about it. I was very unsure about the whole thing and I didn't want to get entangled up in anything religious, what I would see as religious belief; blind faith or that type of thing

However, they then describe an ‘awakening of the spiritual’ which distinguishes them from the previous types. The instrumental user is not interested in the spiritual nor in becoming spiritual, rather their aim is more pragmatic and therapeutic; attention is directed to finding a practical means to cope better with a particular issue or ailment in the physical world. Likewise, the eclectic user considers their instrumentality to be spiritual; for them self development is equated with the spiritual path. Moreover, the spiritual searcher would consider themselves to be spiritual prior to becoming involved with the organisation and would claim that the meditation only helped to develop or rediscover this spirituality. In contrast, the interpretative drifter, while (s)he

did not initially attend for spiritual reasons, rather found - as one put it - that later “all these other [spiritual] things come up and you start to think about them”;

And I would say that over the five years up until now that it really has been a *process* of liking what I heard, initially, thinking ‘well, yeah, that sounds really good, but I'm not sure personally whether that's true’ (laughs) and then through meditation and also through continuing to study the ideas and discuss them and think about them then over time *those initial ideas that were put forward gradually, gradually have become confirmed through different experiences either in meditation or daily life* and so that whole aspect of relationship with God, or Baba, that has become *an unfolding thing* which is really beautiful. And so, five years ago I would never have imagined that I'd quite happily talk about God or just feel that there would be this being that I would be able to experience love for and love from on a daily level (emphasis added)

In comparison, then, to the other types so far outlined the interpretative drifter represents a process; a transitionary stage between an orientation to the ‘divine within’ based on instrumentalism and one seeking illumination. As a result, within this type a continuum may be sketched ranging from the individual for whom the instrumental orientation is dominant, albeit coloured by their ‘awakened spirituality’, to the individual for whom the spiritual orientation has come to the fore.

Turning first to the 'newly awakened' interpretative drifter, (s)he will still be attending due to instrumental factors but in contrast to the instrumental user *per se* they will be beginning to explain any improvements in their life in relation to their 'spiritual awakening'. For example, changes in interpersonal relationships will be related to succeeding or failing to see that individual as a soul, setbacks will be cited as an example of karmic accounts while various events on both the personal and global level will be felt to add credence to the Brahma Kumaris *Weltanschauung*. In sum, they become like a specialist in any subject; they begin to learn "a new way of paying attention to, making sense of and commenting upon their world" in which

there are new ways to define evidence which offer grounds to the expert that the non-specialist cannot see, and ways to order events so that the specialist sees coherence where the non-specialist sees only chaos; there is a body of specialist knowledge which gives discrimination and depth to the specialist's interpretations (Luhrmann, 1994:124)

However, at this early stage in drift, or what may more properly be referred to as the process of conversion, (s)he may still be encountering difficulties with religious concepts outside of the, usually Christian, tradition that they have been brought up with or which goes against conventional scientific wisdom. As a result, while the idea that they are a soul, that there is a God and that the fruits of good and bad actions will be reaped, difficulties will be expressed in relation to more Eastern spiritual concepts, such as reincarnation, cyclic time and karmic accounts.



In contrast, the 'fully awakened' interpretative drifter is much closer to the spiritual searcher with them considering themselves to have discovered a spiritual path above and beyond instrumental goals. This is perhaps the most common scenario that I found in my discussions with members. They describe a similar narrative of being either atheist or agnostic and initially attracted to the instrumental courses. Indeed, many claim that they were positively put-off by the spiritual overtones of the courses, almost to the point of ceasing to attend. However, around this time they describe either a meditation experience or a 'moment of clarity' in which 'everything clicks into place' and they realise the great spiritual truth embodied by Raja Yoga and that they must lead a spiritual life. In other words, to return to Luhrmann (1994:340), through practising the meditation, attending classes and meditation sessions and even speaking to centre co-ordinators, (s)he "becomes progressively more skilled at seeing new patterns in events, seeing new sorts of events as significant, paying attention to new patterns". Armed with these new perceptions and knowledge, their sense of identity is reformulated as is their perception of the world around them; the world appears as *Kali Yuga* poised at the brink of 'transformation', evidence is found in aspects of their life to suggest the nature of some of their previous lives and, most importantly, they gain the awareness of themselves as a soul who has *remembered* their true identity in contrast to those souls who remain in ignorance. Another, more tangible, shift that occurs is in regard to their level of involvement within the organisation. It is to the discussion of this issue that I now intend to turn.

## **Level of Involvement**

Individuals' orientation to the 'divine within' may also be seen to relate to their level of involvement within the University itself. As would be suspected, those who perceive that they have discovered their true spiritual path typically become more involved within it, attend more events and practice the meditation more frequently than those for whom it represents one particular lifestyle sector or 'spiritual consumable'.

Stemming from the instrumental user's utilisation of the meditation as a tool to overcome problems within their life, or to use Heelas' (1996b) term, a method to *empower* their life, rather than to transcend it, their involvement at meditation evenings is often infrequent, usually occurring when they are able to put time aside and feel they would benefit from either the meditation or the peaceful environment of the centre. In this way, the instrumental users' membership pattern proximates that of a 'client' rather than 'member' *per se*. For example, (s)he will emphasise the benefits of the *peaceful* or *quiet atmosphere* within the centre or the *friendliness* of those present, rather than overtly spiritual reasons, as a factor for their continued involvement;

I find that just coming and sitting sometimes quietly in [the group meditation room] is really all I want, really and its just nice to sit and be quiet after a busy day at work, I benefit from that...I think the sitting together in a small group that you get to know, I think you do benefit from

that; knowing that there's one or two others sitting and enjoying the peace  
and quiet

In similar way, the eclectic user remains uncommitted to the Brahma Kumaris and, indeed, to the other techniques or groups they utilise in their spiritual quest. However, whereas the former type remain as 'clients' to the organisation, the latter are best characterised as a form of 'audience' in terms of both their lack of commitment to the organisation as well as the manner in which they are 'constitutional nibblers'; "‘interested’ in all new ideas in the general area of the eccentric and the mystical” (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985:28). The eclectic user may therefore be best pictured as an eclectic *instrumental* user, characterised by, to use a phrase borrowed from one I spoke to, an attitude of “dipping into things”; of picking and choosing from a variety of spiritual consumables on the basis of ‘what feels right’ or ‘makes sense’ to them in contrast to the instrumental user *per se* who merely considers themselves to be partaking in a form of relaxation or the interpretative drifter who may be seen to be moving from being a client to member.

In contrast, the commitment to the Brahma Kumaris’ spiritual message by the spiritual searcher results in behaviour characteristic of ‘membership’. Following their preliminary involvement, spiritual searchers describe a re-evaluation of their existing faith and Church membership in the light of the new spiritual message. As a result some cross over totally while others attempt to, while favouring the new, straddle between both. Concentrating on the former example, this essentially marks a move from membership of one spiritual tradition, or one set of normative structures, to

another. On the more practical level this may be manifested as a move from attending Church services to attending spiritual classes or from practising Christian devotion and prayer to practising yoga.

## **Orientation to Normative Structures**

Finally, then, a distinction may be drawn between membership types in relation to their, either largely epistemologically individualistic or authoritarian, orientation to the Brahma Kumaris normative structures. Thus, for the instrumental user, the normative structures, particularly the theology, of the Brahma Kumaris is somewhat down-played. Instrumental users who I spoke to, although having often attended events for years, were somewhat vague when asked about the normative, spiritual side of the practice. For example, one described the 'spiritual side' as "tricky" for her due to her Christian upbringing, adding that she found some difficulty with it although she did not know why. This apparent vagueness, especially when considered in relation to the strict 'rules and regulations' recommended by the University - such as celibacy, teetotalism and vegetarianism - was also expressed by 'David';

It seems that the Brahma Kumaris organisation does not have such a big text book of rules and regulations which is partly the attraction of it to me. I suppose there must be some textbook of rules and regulations but...I know one or two, I guess. I don't think really any rules and regulations of the hierarchy of the organisation really affect my life

This situation is made all the more noteworthy when it is considered that these individuals have been attending courses, meditation evenings and discussion groups at a centre for often a couple of years. Therefore, one cannot claim that they had not been exposed in some way or another to 'the spiritual side' of Brahma Kumaris life.

Part of the answer to this issue lies, I would argue, in the attitude of the instrumental user to the meditation. In discussion, they appear somewhat to be working on the basis of a crude cost/benefit model; they are receiving what they perceive to be an invaluable service for free so, aside from any possible donations, they feel that they should either be courteous to the giver, politely listening to 'the spiritual side' even though it is of virtually no interest to them, or give something, particularly the effort of participating in return.

In this way, the instrumental user manifests clear characteristics of epistemological individualism, accepting only those aspects of the Brahma Kumaris' message, specifically the meditation technique and the idealised idea of a stress-free or positive lifestyle, that they feel will benefit their life in the here-and-now. As a result, the spiritual, normative aspect of Raja Yoga is down-played or treated with indifference. This view was expressed concisely by one individual;

So, I tend to go for the practical ways it can affect my life as far as seeking out peace and calmness rather than any...reason of feeling that I'm in contact with God. I find that a bit off putting when there's

someone talking about God, so the language is Baba or Shiv Baba and that aspect of it is not one I feel enthusiastic about

Such a tendency is expressed in a more radical form by the eclectic user for whom Raja Yoga is just one practice or spiritual philosophy amongst possibly many that they 'dip into'. For them 'the spiritual path' involves the detraditionalized utilisation of various techniques and belief systems, what one referred to as a 'toolbox' approach to spirituality; the Brahma Kumaris' meditation or belief system (as a whole or broken down) representing one 'tool' (amongst many) for self development, empowerment etc. For example, one who I spoke to told me how elements of the theology "*fits in with my belief system*" and how, although she did not accept most of the theology, "that isn't a problem as the Brahma Kumaris *don't make you believe anything* and they're *quite happy to accept you right where you are*" (emphasis added). This is particularly the case with the meditation which is again favoured above and beyond the belief system *per se*. For example, one described it as "one of the most useful meditations...a really practical way of calming down and being more centred" but added that during the meditation course;

[the centre co-ordinator] got onto the Golden Age and the [idea of time as a predetermined cycle ] and I thought 'no, this isn't for me' and I nearly didn't come back. Then I had a chat with [her] about it and said 'Even if I don't swallow it all, I like the meditation and I like the other things that you're saying. Is that OK?' and she said 'Yes, that's fine'

Thus, as with the instrumental user, the eclectic user exhibits clear characteristics of epistemological individualism; (s)he determines what 'truths' to accept and in what degrees, (s)he determines how committed they will be to any particular 'truth' or organisation and, most importantly, (s)he will *fit the Brahma Kumaris into their belief system* rather than *fitting themselves into it*.

This characteristic is not shared, however, by the spiritual searcher or the 'fully awakened' interpretative drifter for whom the Brahma Kumaris normative structures serve as an external voice of ultimate (divine) authority (or epistemological authoritarianism). Thus, such individuals have joined the organisation in order to structure their lives in reference to overarching norms. For example, in comparison to the other membership types, they are more likely, although not always, to take up, at some level, the Brahma Kumaris' terminology and recommended lifestyle. Another common theme in this regard, as mentioned previously, is the reinterpretation of their previous faith in light of the new. Membership is seen as 'answering God's call' or the result of being the reincarnation of an original member in the University's early years and having their unconscious reactivated by coming across Raja Yoga again. Similarly, as a reflection of the spiritual searcher's and 'fully awakened' interpretative drifters acceptance of Raja Yoga as a salvational system, there is the merging of Brahma Kumaris and personal goals and identity. Thus, the personal goal becomes spiritual perfection or to be become one of the souls to who is to reborn in the future - post-apocalyptic - earthly paradise.

## **Instrumental *Lifestyles* v. the Spiritual *Life***

There are of course individual variations within these broad membership types. What I hope to have conveyed, however, is the general characteristics of each and the manner in which they suggest that there are different levels of involvement and negotiation/reflexivity between individuals and the Brahma Kumaris normative structures around issues of motivation, commitment and locus of authority. These three issues may be seen to be significantly interlinked with, for example, a spiritual orientation correlating with behaviour characteristic of membership and a more epistemological authoritarian attitude. In contrast, those individuals for whom the 'divine within' serves an instrumental purpose are more likely to exhibit characteristics of epistemological individualism and a client-like orientation to normative structures.

Moreover, related patterns are also reflected in the influence of the Brahma Kumaris' normative structures on individuals' sense of identity. For example, stemming from the instrumental user's utilisation of the meditation technique as a 'lifestyle sector', a pragmatic method to cope better in the world, the influence of Raja Yoga on their identity or behaviour is likely to be minimal or non-existent. As we have seen, (s)he is often unclear what it actually entails. Indeed, often the view that the self is inherently stress-free or positive is only accepted by them as an idealised state, greatly distanced from the realities of everyday life in which stress is seen as an intrinsic part. In this way, the meditation is utilised to help the *existing personality* to



cope better in the world instead of as a basis to recreate or rediscover a *new personality*.

Likewise, the eclectic user's sense of identity is highly unlikely to be influenced by the Brahma Kumaris due to their detraditionalized 'borrowing' and combining of different quasi-spiritual 'symbolic tokens' or 'expert systems' (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 1992). However, having said this, it is more likely to play a role in their identity, or 'spiritual path', than in the instrumental users', albeit in combination with other ideas. For example, (s)he may accept the Brahma Kumaris' conception of the soul but may prefer to express it through the metaphor of Celtic spirituality or by colouring it with a belief in reincarnation through different levels of existence. As a result, the meditation technique is highly likely to become decontextualised or divorced from the meditation knowledge and aim and possibly become cross-fertilised with other spiritualities or therapies.

The identity of the spiritual searcher and the 'fully awakened' interpretative drifter, in contrast, is more prone to be influenced by Raja Yoga. For these membership types, the tradition takes on the status of an external voice of authority, providing not only a salvational system but also the basis of a spiritual life narrative. As a result, through the process of conversion, biography is reinterpreted in light of the revealed knowledge; (s)he remembers their true, forgotten identity as a soul and consequently false, bodily/worldly, identities are discarded. This may be effectively illustrated with two examples from my fieldwork. On a long car journey with one Brahmin the conversation turned to cars, in particular the particular model of car that,

resources permitting, I would like to buy. They then replied that they too were considering buying a new car although on reflection it would not be worth it as they would only get a limited amount of use out of it before the world was destroyed. Likewise during my stay at the Global Retreat centre in Oxford I was discussing the Brahma Kumaris' purchase of a digital multi-track recorder with a member. After they had outlined the benefits of digital *vis-à-vis* analogue recording they paused briefly and added 'Yes, you can tell the Golden Age is coming just by the quality of music technology nowadays'. For these membership types, then, the Raja Yoga serves as a basis for not only individual identity but also for understanding and contextualising the world around them. Similarly personal goals merge with those promulgated through the university's theology.

Returning, then, to the notion of detraditionalization introduced at the beginning of this paper; the Brahma Kumaris example would seem to suggest a coexistence between the 'forces' of *detraditionalization* - manifested in individual's shaping their life-narratives through choice - and the 'forces' of *retraditionalization* in terms of the drawing on of tradition as much as a voice of authority as for inspiration. In this way, one may draw a distinction between those seeking to improve their instrumental *lifestyles* and those, in varying degrees, seeking the spiritual *life*. Broadly this distinguishes between individuals for whom the 'divine within' serves an instrumental purpose, who are more likely to exhibit characteristics of epistemological individualism and an audience or client-like orientation to normative structures and those for whom it serves a spiritual purpose, who are more likely to exhibit epistemological authoritarianism and behaviour characteristic of membership proper.

For the former group Raja Yoga serves as a lifestyle sector or, at the most, part of their reflexive biography while for the latter it serves as both the basis of biography and also as a voice of ultimate authority.

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