

The Charismatic Group Phenomena

By

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Introduction

In 1984, a man residing in the Malaysian state of Johor claimed that he was the reincarnation of Saidina Abu Bakar As-Siddiq, a companion of the Prophet. Authenticating his allegation by describing his ‘mysterious birth of a unified conjoined twin’, he managed to command allegiance of 60 followers. His claims were further exaggerated by his ability as a ‘*pawang*’ or mystical healer who was highly acclaimed by residents of all races. His followers were so convinced that when the man was to be arrested, they were willing to defend him with their lives.

While such an exuberant assertion is not uncommon, given that many episodes of ‘living prophecies of Jesus and Imam Mahdi’ has successfully mapped the Muslim tradition to the likes of Guru Nanak, Baha’ullah, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, Rashad Khalifa and Ashaari Muhammad, the claim by the Malaysian man mentioned above was one that was not ‘prophesied’. What is more interesting is the fact that his 60 followers were staunchly convinced of his affirmations, believing it to be aspects of the ‘Truth’.

What was the self-proclaimed ‘Saidina’s’ mode of control, and were his claims valid?

‘Saidina’ first professed a mysterious birth. This was supported by subsequent demonstrations of healing abilities, good teachings and prophecies. After gaining the trust of his followers, he proclaims his ‘reincarnated’ status and ultimately conveyed a decree of heresy to those who disputed his declarations. This was similar to the experiences of countless others – Guru Nanak, reborn after three days of communion with God when thought to have drowned, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad fell asleep only to be embraced by the ‘prophet’ giving him heir to the religion, Rashad Khalifa to claim absolute truth behind the magical number nineteen and Ashaari Muhammad prophesising several ‘major’ events that seem to come true. All of them were learned men of the religion before their prophetic enlightenment, sustained the trust of their followers and severed ties of their followers from external influences while instilling fear in those who doubted them. The result was a group of followers who unquestioningly abide by the decree of their leaders.

Closer to home, several personalities appeared to invoke religious chants to promote alternative healing. Religious groups claiming to have secret knowledge specific and permissible only to its followers were mushrooming and fast capturing audiences. The most alarming of these latent groups was the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) whose leader Ibrahim Maidin was described as a “self-taught charismatic religious teacher and spiritual leader” by his followers. Although Ibrahim Maidin did not proclaim to be the Imam Mahdi or the reincarnation of Jesus, he was hailed as the ‘saviour of Islam’ among his followers.

Understanding Charismatic Groups

Studies in psychology relate these trends of control to match descriptions to that of a *Charismatic Group*. While the Charismatic Group phenomena are not peculiar to religious-based personalities (having also been known to have manifested in political groups and other institutions), research shows that there was a tendency for members of such groups to: (a) adhere to consensual belief system, (b) sustain high level of cohesiveness, (c) be strongly influenced by group behavioural norms, and (d) attribute charismatic or divine powers to the group or its leadership.

In the West, studies were done to better understand the Charismatic Group phenomena. With special attention paid to circumstances of membership, lifestyle and group cohesion, David Koresh's Waco massacre, Jim Jones' Jonestown massacre and the more peaceful Mormons and Unification Church revealed several things which were common.

It was highlighted that unlike members of mainstream religions who most often affiliate themselves to a religious institution of tradition on the basis of intra- and inter-cultural dialogues, entry into a zealous religious sect often involves dramatic conversion. Psychological and emotional distress often precedes these conversions. Upon conversion, Charismatic Groups appear to offer succour and promise to resolve conflicts, particularly with respect to identity and participation in a viable peer group. In terms of lifestyle and group cohesion, members of these groups tend to adopt the following:

- (a) Communal Living – where living resources are shared amongst members
- (b) Shared Belief and Thought Control – where a shared belief of members' actions are devoted to some grand plan for higher good and often rationalised by the presence of mysticised direction and assistance not comprehended by the mind
- (c) Shared Experience and Practices – where experience of altered states of consciousness are disclosed yet never disputed and practices to achieve these altered states shared to allow the experiences to pass on to other members
- (d) Code of Conduct – where individual and social behaviour are controlled and insulated through imposed norms
- (e) Charismatic Leader – who forms the central 'magnet' to the group. Such leaders are usually able to inspire hope and fear combined with a dynamic presence. Idiosyncrasies of the leader often translate into norms amongst members
- (f) Social Control – although there may not be physical coercion, psychological forces described in the five points above allow members to attribute new meaning and values to their experiences by means of social reinforcements and compliance.

For members of such groups, conversion is a powerful experience that can result in unyielding conviction of the group's cause. This can be attributed to the psychological shift from confusion to certainty that transpired during conversions. At the point of conversion, initiation foregrounds feelings of renewal such as believing that one has wiped his/her moral slate clean and that this purity can only be maintained through unquestioning conformity to the group and its leaders.

It can be summarised that followers of a Charismatic Group trust the correctness of the leader's beliefs, feel affection for, and obey him/her willingly, as well as feel an emotional

involvement in the mission they are led to do. It must be noted that Charismatic Groups can either be radical and exclusive or peaceful and inclusive. The latter can be reflected through the formative periods of Guru Nanak and his teachings, now known to be Sikhism, the world's fifth largest religion, Baha'ullah and his teachings whose followers are now known as Bahais, the Mormon Christians and the Unification Church. The former takes the likes of the Davidson sect in Waco, Jim Jones' sect in Jonestown and Jemaah Islamiah (JI) among many others.

While it may be easy to pinpoint that the examples cited have referred mainly to groups whose ideas and claims are clearly detached from mainstream teachings, it is in truth not easy to identify potential Charismatic Groups whose ideas are not outwardly radical.

For instance, a certain Haji Ahmad Laksamana bin Omar propagated the controversial teachings entitled *Hakikat Insan* while passing it off as Islamic in the mid 1980s. Just like the formative stages of Sikhism, Baha'ism and Qadiyannism, his teachings centred on selected Qur'anic values and principles. These teachings were then laced with interpretations known only by 'guided teachers'. These teachings constitute privileged knowledge not to be disclosed to those who have not pledged the *bai'ah* (oath of allegiance).

His teachings further penetrated the masses and took up several forms; from highly controlled *tariqah* movements to *Jami* lessons taught to potential teachers taking the Diploma in Education course at the National Institute of education (NIE). Although the teachings of *Hakikat Insan* was formally denounced as a deviation by an established local religious organisation PERDAUS, remnants of its teachings may still reside within the crevices of the minds of many who may not be able to decipher and differentiate between his teachings and religious teaching.

Identification and characterisation of Charismatic Groups neither reveal constructive nor destructive tendencies. It is possible that a charismatic group be purposeful and socially beneficial as it is possible for such collectives to be negatively inclined and be a part of social problems. Although there is no foolproof method to authenticate such groups, one can still apply a 'litmus test' in the form of self-checking. Upon encountering what may seem to be a potential exclusive assembly, one may want to reflect whether the group displays the characteristics and tendencies mentioned above.

If they do, irrespective of the teachings, message or activity, it is likely that the group encountered may be a Charismatic Group whose actual ideas and beliefs will only be revealed upon membership. For the case of 'Saidina', his excessive claims may not have gone down well with the masses, thus the limited following.

In the case of Ghulam Ahmad, the group bloomed into an established entity now openly propagating their once exclusive teachings. In between these extremes, there are many more Charismatic Groups with varying ideas and intents. Charismatic Groups tend to be very protective over their ideas and teachings, choosing not to participate in an open discourse where intellectual properties are patented or discussed for academic development. For those who conform, powerful feelings of euphoria validate and justify the new teachings and beliefs. By the nature of their *modus operandi*, it may not be easy to determine a

Charismatic Group's true intent especially if clarifications are regarded as dissent and condescending replies to seemingly harmless questions make the questioner look foolish.

Think about it; do followers of Charismatic Groups embrace its teachings and ideas through informed decisions?

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