Autobiography of a Schism

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Abstract:
In my youth, I was a member of Yogi Bhajan's Healthy Happy Holy Organisation (3HO), a new religious movement that blends kundalini yoga with Sikhism. In the process of leaving that organisation, I formed a short-lived splinter group – the Spiritual Dawn Community – that lasted less than a year. In the present article, I recount the narrative of this splintering, and then reflect on the split in terms of different theoretical discussions of schisms and apostasy. Though prior theorizing provides certain insights, no analyst has thus far adequately captured the dynamic and fluid situation that leads up to a schism. From the perspective of someone who has experienced the schismatic process from the inside, it is clear that there are any number of different points at which a schism could have been prevented – even in cases where the split appears to have been inevitable.

The notion of a detached observer, occupying a privileged epistemic position from which neutral, objective knowledge can be distilled was decisively rejected in the latter part of the twentieth century. One consequence of this epistemic shift is that currently in disciplines such as anthropology, studies of other cultures have come to include autobiographical components in which ethnographers narrate the process by which they gathered data from informants (e.g., Mahmood 1996). In a few cases, researchers have even 'converted' to the religio-cultural systems of the people they were studying, as in the prominent case of Karen McCarthy Brown who became a Vodon priestess over the course of her research (1991). In yet other cases, scholarly insiders have produced semi-autobiographical ethnographies (e.g., Magliocco 2004). Comparable autobiographical styles have been adopted by some religious studies scholars as well (e.g., Seager 2006). In the present paper, I will be utilizing a somewhat different – but not completely unrelated – autobiographical approach.

During the early to mid Seventies, I was a member of Yogi Bhajan's Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO). For many years, the group went by the name Sikh Dharma Brotherhood. However, in more recent years the organisation seems to have gone back to its original designation, at least for the purpose of interacting with the general public.[i] In my capacity as a local 3HO leader, I organized a small community that at its height included eighteen people living together in an old mansion, plus a larger number of informally affiliated participants in the Tallahassee, Florida, area. Through a stepwise process, I became disaffected from 3HO, and re-formed the Tallahassee 3HO ashram into a short-lived schismatic organisation.

Following a descriptive overview of the Sikh tradition and 3HO, I will provide a narrative overview of the stages by which this schism occurred. In the latter sections of the paper, I will analyse these events in terms of a number of different theoretical approaches.

I make no special claim for the 'objectivity' of my memories. I was a strongly-motivated social actor, making decisions that affected the lives of people I respected and with whom I felt a deep connection. This involvement, plus the fact that so many years have elapsed since the schism, means the reader should take everything I say with the proverbial grain of salt. At the same time, it should be noted that, at the present stage of my life, I bear 3HO no ill will. The individual with whom I was in conflict leading up to the split was a mid-level manager who subsequently left the organisation under unsavoury circumstances (for years he had secretly pilfered income from the Washington, DC, ashram's various businesses, so that when he finally defected he left with a handsome bank account). I was never in direct conflict with Yogi Bhajan or the top leadership.

I should also point out that I was a college dropout in his early twenties during my stint in 3HO, meaning my membership years did not negatively disrupt the overall course of my life (as it might have had I been older and invested numerous years in the organisation). To the contrary, my time with 3HO provided a foundation for my later academic work on the Sikh Tradition (e.g., Lewis 1985; 1987; 1989a), and, in a more general way, for my ongoing interest in new religious movements (e.g., Lewis 2002; 2003; 2004). So the long-range consequences of my membership have been quite positive. Finally, I have come to view my 3HO years in terms of the 'youth-crisis' model of new religion involvement laid out by researchers like Saul Levine (1984), meaning I now see my membership in an intensive religious group as a developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood, rather than as a sidetrack. Thus while my perspective on these events is far from 'neutral', I do not believe it to be informed by lingering resentments.

Overview of the Sikh Tradition and 3HO

The founder of Sikhism was Guru Nanak, born to a Hindu family in Punjab, North India in 1469. Nanak stressed that there was but one creator God. Although he regarded his revelation as transcending both Islam and Hinduism, his teachings embodied certain traditional South Asian ideas, such as karma, reincarnation, and the ultimate unreality of the world. He emphasized the unique role of the guru as necessary to lead people to God. He urged his followers to meditate, worship God and sing hymns.

According to the Sikh tradition, the ultimate purpose of religion is union with God through his indwelling in the human soul. Receiving divine grace, human beings are freed from the cycle of birth and rebirth and then pass beyond death into a realm of infinite and eternal bliss. Nanak's teaching offered a clear and simple path to salvation. By meditating on the divine name, human beings were cleansed of their impurities and were enabled to ascend higher and higher until they achieved union with the eternal One. Sikhs hold that suffering in the world arises as a result of humanity's separation from God.

Nanak initiated a lineage of human successors that terminated in the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh. Gobind Singh formed the Khalsa, the Community of the Pure, which included the distinctive regalia that distinguish Sikhs from non-Sikhs. Khalsa Sikhs change their last name to Singh (women change their name to Kaur) and adopt the five Ks: Kesh, long hair, a sign of saintliness; Kangh, a comb for keeping the hair neat; Kach, short pants for quick movement in battle; Kara, a steel bracelet signifying sternness and restraint; and Kirpan, a sword of defense. In sharp distinction from the Hindu tradition, the Khalsa was open to men and women of all castes. The writings of the Sikh gurus were compiled into the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*, which became the guru for the movement following the death of the tenth guru. After Gobind Singh's passing, the Khalsa became a military and political power in Punjab.[ii]

Yogi Bhajan (1929-2004), a well educated Sikh from Delhi, India, moved to Toronto in 1968. From Toronto he moved to Los Angeles in December 1968, and in 1969 he founded an ashram and the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO) to teach kundalini yoga. Corporately, 3HO was later supplanted by Sikh Dharma, and 3HO retained as Sikh Dharma's educational wing.

Individuals associated with Bhajan's Sikh Dharma are usually Westerners rather than Punjabis. They are encouraged to seek formal initiation and join the Khalsa. 3HO Sikhs are vegetarian, usually preferring natural foods. Fish, meat, alcohol, and drugs are prohibited. Several members have opened vegetarian restaurants and groceries. They also prefer natural methods of healing. The traditional holidays of Sikhism are observed by 3HO Sikhs. Despite the striking appearance of its members, 3HO/Sikh Dharma Brotherhood has received little attention from scholars (e.g., Tobey 1976; Khalsa 1986).

The first controversy involving the Sikh Dharma regarded its relationship to the older Punjabi Sikh community. American Sikhs criticised Punjabi Sikhs for becoming lax in their discipline, especially the failure of many Sikhs to adhere strictly to the five Ks. An attack followed on Yogi Bhajan by Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany, editor of the *Sikh Sangar*, the magazine of the Sikh Foundation, who condemned Bhajan's emphasis on yoga and diet. Other Sikh leaders echoed Kapany's criticisms in the United States, as well as in India. Although these issues were never resolved, Bhajan's emphasis on orthodoxy was supported by the centre of Sikh authority in Amritsar.

Sikh Dharma received relatively little attention from the anti-cult movement. Few deprogramming attempts took place. In the early 1980s, militant Sikhs announced a policy of actively opposing any attempts by deprogrammers to attack their organisation. No further attempts were reported. Yogi Bhajan was accused by some ex-members of sexual involvement with several of his staff members. In 1984 a number of high ranking leaders in Sikh Dharma left the organization, complaining about the intense discipline and being cut off from the Sikh community as a whole and mainstream American culture.

Controversy has mainly been focussed in other issues, such as members' dress, especially the turban, as in the case of Thomas Costello who, in 1971, faced a military court-martial for refusing to either cut his hair or remove his turban. Although this case led to a change in Army regulations granting permission for Sikhs to wear turbans, in 1983 Gurusant Singh Khalsa was not allowed to enlist in the Army because he was a Sikh. In 1984 Karta Kaur Khalsa was threatened with losing her teaching certificate because she refused to take off her turban during classes, but in 1985 the Oregon Court of Appeals declared the law under which she was suspended unconstitutional.

From Adherent to Schismatic

The 1971-72 academic year was my senior year as a philosophy major at the University of South Florida. Through a convoluted process I shall not recount here, I dropped out of USF and moved from Tampa to the 3HO ashram in Orlando in the late spring of 1972. After one year, the head of the Orlando centre, who I shall refer to as 'Jack', sent me to Tallahassee to teach yoga and start an ashram. By the fall of 1973, I had managed to bring together a couple of other people into a small household.

Back in Orlando, however, Jack disaffiliated from the organisation shortly after sending me off to Tallahassee. 3HO had subdivided North America into five administrative regions. All centres in the eastern seaboard states had been placed under the authority of the Washington, DC, ashram, headed by a gentleman I shall call 'Lance'. Prior to the adoption of this five-fold structure, the heads of certain local ashrams (particularly the older students of Yogi Bhajan such as Jack) had the authority to send out yoga teachers to other cities in their home states. Subsequently, however, these kinds of decisions were supposed to go through the appropriate regional centre.

After Jack disaffiliated, the Orlando centre went through a period of upheaval. It was not until late in the fall, after the dust had settled in Orlando, that I was contacted by Lance and directed to close the Tallahassee centre and move to DC for 'teacher training'. Jack had been a bit of a maverick within 3HO, and his sudden defection amplified his already eccentric reputation. As a student of Jack's, I became suspect as well, and I realised I was in no position to resist this directive. I

requested that a new yoga teacher be sent to Tallahassee in my stead, but the request was flatly refused. So I shut down the Tallahassee centre and moved to the Washington 3HO ashram. I do not recall exactly when the move took place; it could have been as late as the spring of 1974, though I seem to recall that it was the late fall of 1973.

The Washington 3HO community was a heavy work scene during this period. The ashram was running a very successful restaurant and an even more successful landscaping and lawn care service. Everyone worked long hours, six days a week, and received a small allowance for personal expenditures. As someone nominally in Washington for 'teacher training' rather than a regular resident, I was ineligible for an allowance. In fact, I actually *paid* the Washington centre a few hundred dollars for my 'course'. Furthermore, my 'training' consisted almost entirely of washing dishes and mowing laws. Other people who came to Washington for teacher training from other ashrams in the region had similar experiences.

The situation in 3HO's eastern region was a classic case of an organisational headquarters draining resources – human and otherwise – from local centres. This common organisational problem was exacerbated by Lance's embezzlement scheme. As mentioned earlier, Lance was lining his own pockets with the profits generated by the ashram businesses and this purpose was best served by putting everyone to work. People I met who came to DC for a few months of teacher training typically ended up staying indefinitely. The stereotype of the selfish cult leader raking in a handsome income from the labours of his overworked devotees did not fit Yogi Bhajan, but it certainly fit Lance. The seeds of my disaffection from 3HO were sown during my sojourn in Washington, DC. One incident toward the end of my stay stands out as emblematic of the experiences that were compelling me to become more critical of the organisation.

The majority of residents typically ate one or two meals per day at the ashram restaurant. When the restaurant was closed for repairs and a general upgrade for several weeks, we were told that Lance had decided everyone would go on a diet consisting primarily of mung beans and rice. Yogi Bhajan had predicted social upheaval in our lifetimes, and had recommended mung beans and rice as a staple that would see us through the 'hard times.' So the DC ashram's temporary diet was presented to us as preparation for these prophesied 'hard times'. It appeared to me, however, that the real goal of this simple fare was to save money. I remember thinking at the time that it would have gone down much better had the diet been presented to us as something that would prepare us for the hard times *plus* save the ashram money. But the real kicker was when I found out Lance was secretly (at least as far as rank-and-file residents were concerned) going out to nice restaurants – of which there are *many* in Washington – most evenings with his friends, and paying for the meals with ashram funds. I had frankly never been very impressed with Lance, but this discovery left me completely disenchanted. My awareness of Lance's hypocrisy prompted me to begin making regular trips to the

ashram restaurant after dark. Though it was closed, all residents had a key to the back door. I would raid the walk-in freezer, taking mostly nuts and dried fruit. Once I ran into another ashram resident also clandestinely appropriating items from the restaurant freezer. My guess is that more than a few other residents made similar foraging trips.

I had not been in DC for more than a month when I was compelled to return to Tallahassee to settle some financial issues that had arisen from not properly terminating the lease agreement on the house I had used as an ashram. I found a job in Tallahassee, and decided I would work through the summer before returning to DC. At the same time, I decided to offer a non-credit yoga course at Florida State University though the same program in which I had taught in the past. The course attracted an unusually serious group of students, one of whom even asked me not to leave Tallahassee following the end of the course. Around the same time, an old friend of mine from my college days contacted me to let me know that an old mansion in her neighbourhood had become available – a large house that would serve nicely as a home for an ashram.

At this juncture, I made a fateful decision. After determining that I had enough yoga students willing to participate, we acquired the house and moved in. I then penned a letter to Yogi Bhajan in which I explained what I had done, and once again requested that another 3HO teacher be sent to Tallahassee to take my place. Arrangements were subsequently made for me to meet with Yogi Bhajan at the next national 3HO gathering, which would take place four months later at the winter solstice. Though then (as well as now) not all of my motives were clear to me, I reassured myself regarding the purity of my overriding motivation by dwelling on the fact that I had asked to be replaced by an 'authorised' 3HO teacher, instead of requesting that I be allowed to stay in Tallahassee as head of the ashram.

Whatever my ultimate motives, by the time of the solstice gathering, the ashram had grown to become a thriving (to my mind) community of sixteen residents. When I finally got together with Yogi Bhajan toward the end of the gathering, the meeting was brief: I was introduced as Pundit (an Indian title that I had been given as a 'spiritual name') from Tallahassee. Rather than initiating the conversation, Yogi Ji (a title of respect and affection that everyone in 3HO used when referring to Yogi Bhajan) sat there waiting for me to say something. Although this interview took place over thirty years ago, I must have reflected on it numerous times because I can still remember the words of our conversation almost verbatim.

> I finally said, 'I'm the guy who started the ashram in Tallahassee'.
>
> He responded, 'And how is ashram?' in his strong Punjabi accent.
>
> 'It's doing fine,' I said. 'We have sixteen people living in a large house'.
>
> He nodded, and then looked at me like it was still my turn to speak.

> So, somewhat awkwardly, I continued, 'Well, the problem is that Jack sent me to Tallahassee'.
>
> 'Jack is no longer with us', Yogi Ji interjected.
>
> 'Yes, I know,' I responded, 'but the problem is that I'm not an authorised teacher'.
>
> He responded by looking me directly in the eyes, and calmly and deliberately stating, 'You are highly authorised'.
>
> I immediately realised he was personally authorising me to stay in Tallahassee. I was, however, still concerned about Lance, so the next thing I said was, 'What should I tell Lance?'
>
> Yogi Ji responded, 'You tell anyone same thing: you are highly authorised'.
>
> So with that reassurance, I finally said 'Sat Nam' (literally 'true name', an expression 3HO members used for communicating everything from 'Hello' and 'Good-bye' to 'Thank You') and left. The entire exchange could not have taken more than a few minutes.

I was elated, but my elation quickly disappeared after I returned to Tallahassee. What I now realise in hindsight, and what I partially realised at the time, was that I had become ambivalent about my involvement. Part of the problem was that I had become disenchanted with the 3HO hierarchy as a consequence of my experiences with Lance and the exploitative work conditions in DC. Another problem was Yogi Bhajan had gradually been changing the nature of the organization so that instead of being a group that stressed yoga and meditation practices, 3HO was becoming an ultra-orthodox Sikh organisation (a transformation reflected in the name change from 3HO to Sikh Dharma Brotherhood).

I had undergone profound changes over the three short years I had been involved. And while I felt no hesitation teaching yoga and recruiting people for a quasi-communal, spiritual lifestyle, I lacked enthusiasm for the task of converting people to a highly orthodox form of Sikhism.[iii] This growing lack of enthusiasm for recruiting activities was likely the main reason I was so willing to hand over the reigns of power to another teacher – it would have taken me off the front lines, so to speak, and allowed me to shift my attention to other matters such as my inner, spiritual development. Had I been successful at negotiating a replacement, I would have moved to a 3HO centre in a different region with the goal of eventually finding a different 'niche' in the organisation (a scenario discussed as an alternative to disaffiliation in Bromley 2004:304).

It was only after my return that I realized the full extent of my ambivalence. In preparation for the anticipated replacement teacher, I had brought the early morning spiritual practices up to what was then the standard two-and-a-half hour 3HO *sadhana* (a generic South Asian term for one's daily spiritual routine). In addition to yoga, chanting, and meditation, this included, at the time, a recitation of the Ardas – a traditional Sikh prayer that, among other components, includes fairly graphic descriptions of the tortures endured by Sikh martyrs. Though I personally found the Ardas inspiring, other ashram residents disliked it because of the torture component. So I immediately dropped the Ardas from the community's daily routine upon my return. Other minor changes were made as well. The Tallahassee ashram residents were happy with these changes, but I was inwardly conflicted about future problems I might have with the 3HO organisation as a consequence of these decisions.

Sometime in February or March I received a letter from Lance (with the benefit of hindsight, I wish I had kept a copy) in which he asserted he had spoken with Yogi Bhajan and convinced him that I should not be running an ashram. Furthermore, despite my repeated requests for a replacement, 3HO was not going to send a replacement teacher. Instead, I was once again ordered to shut down the Tallahassee ashram and move back to Washington, DC.

I can still recall the wave of relief that washed over me as I read Lance's letter. It had a liberating effect because it resolved my ambivalence. I was forced to make a sharp choice between my loyalty to a community of people who had become personal friends, and my loyalty to an organisation I had increasingly come to feel was deeply flawed. I immediately sat down and wrote a letter to Yogi Bhajan (that I cc'd to Lance) in which I resigned from 3HO (another document I wish I had copied and preserved).

With the exception of my anguish in the weeks preceding my defection, the split, when it finally came, was accomplished easily. The 3HO organisation had never contributed a single iota of support to the Tallahassee ashram, so there were no buildings or other properties to fight over. Also, none of the other community members had had any contact with 3HO other than indirectly through me, so there were no split loyalties for them to sort through. The difficult question following the schism was, Now that we were no longer beholden to an external authority, what kind of a community did we want to become?

We renamed ourselves Spiritual Dawn Community (I seem to recall I was primarily responsible for that name, but my memory is vague on this point), and reduced the length of our daily sadhana. A number of ashram residents were talented craftspeople, and we began to discuss the possibility of acquiring land out in the country for the purpose of establishing a spiritual craft community. Things seemed to be going very nicely, and I have many warm memories from that period of my life. The community, however, rapidly became unglued. By the end of 1975, we had completely fallen apart.

There were a number of specific factors contributing to the break-up that I will not go into here, primarily because a discussion of them would take us too far afield from the topic at hand. But the larger issue – as I was only able to see many years later – was the lack of an external authority that legitimated not only my authority, but our entire lifestyle.[iv]

I had a very relaxed leadership style and I could be flexible on most issues. However, I could also be firm when necessary, especially when it came to requiring residents to adhere to a properly yogic lifestyle within the ashram. Distant and abstract though the organisation was to community members, everyone knew 3HO was the ultimate authority. Once that link was broken, however, everything became open to negotiation.

We can understand this situation in terms of Max Weber's familiar schema of the legitimation of authority (Weber 1968). Though 3HO's authority was ultimately legitimated by Yogi Bhajan's charisma, in my world at the local level authority was legitimated by legal-rational means, by virtue of our being part of the larger organisation. Spiritual Dawn Community had broken the link with 3HO and my personal charisma was far too weak to provide a new basis of authority. So even had events unfolded differently following the break, our little community in Tallahassee was likely doomed from the moment we declared independence.

Spiritual Dawn Community and Schism Theory

Older discussions of schisms focussed on the motivations of schism leaders, and tended to emphasise personality conflicts and personal ambition as explanatory factors (e.g., Calley 1956; Wilson 1961). However applicable these two motivations might be to many schisms, they are inadequate for describing my motives for splitting from 3HO. In my particular case, the conflict between me and Lance was an organisational rather than a personality conflict. Similarly, though I had abundant personal ambition, I do not believe personal ambition was my overriding motive – at least not prior to the winter solstice gathering when Yogi Bhajan authorised me to return to Tallahassee.

In contrast to motivational approaches to interpreting schisms, Roy Wallis proposed a structural approach in *Salvation and Protest* (1979). After a quick survey of other structural theories (e.g., Nyomarkay 1967; Wilson 1971), Wallis argued that the key to understanding a movement's 'propensity to schism' was the way in which authority is recognized as legitimate within a movement. The variables are whether a movement views its truth as *uniquely* legitimate or *pluralistically* legitimate, and the *availability* of means of legitimation. In terms of his schema, 3HO was pluralistically legitimate in more than one sense.

In the first place, like most other groups in the South Asian tradition, 3HO did not claim a monopoly on truth. Other religious groups were viewed as valid spiritual paths. Additionally, and unlike many other contemporaneous South Asian groups, Yogi Bhajan did not claim the status of a guru. An overriding motive for not making that claim was his desire to remain faithful to Sikhism, and in mainstream Sikhism the last human being to legitimately wear the title of guru was Guru Gobind Singh. Thus, despite his de facto role as guru, Bhajan never explicitly laid claim to that title. Instead, he relied on his personal charisma plus his status as the master of various systems of yoga as the basis of his authority. By implication, then, other charismatic individuals with a mastery of yogic disciplines should be able to claim comparable authority.

The potential for rival authority claims in many other South Asian groups is different. For example, in a movement like the Divine Light Mission (Downton 1979), which was quite popular in Tallahassee when I first moved there in 1973, any schismatic leader would have to claim to be a guru on par with – if not actually better than – Guru Maharaj Ji. In fact, at least one of Maharaj Ji's Mahatmas (meaning, in the context of the Divine Light Mission, spiritual functionaries empowered to initiate people in the name of the guru) split off from the organisation and set himself up as a guru.

In contrast, I was able to present myself as a legitimate leader and initiate a schism from 3HO without the necessity of also claiming exalted spiritual status. In terms of Wallis's analysis, 3HO was thus structurally more vulnerable to schism than a movement like the Divine Life Mission. However, the authority to take the lead in the process of splintering from a parent body does not necessarily translate into the authority to lead an emergent group once the schism has been accomplished, as I discovered soon after the Tallahassee ashram began the process of reconstituting itself as an independent community.

One other point I would like to draw from Wallis is his discussion of how schisms take place disproportionately during 'the early stages of a movement's life cycle' and following 'the death of a charismatic leader'. In the case of 3HO, the movement was in its early years, and its authority structure was not yet fully institutionalised. In the case of Spiritual Dawn Community, the imprecision in 3HO's hierarchical structure was not the proximate cause of the schism, but it laid the foundation for conflict when Jack sent me to Tallahassee in violation of an emergent procedure about sending teachers to regional centres prior to authorising them to open new ashrams.

One other 'schism factor' bearing on my split from 3HO was the 'response to changes in a group's doctrines, liturgy, and/or degree of strictness' (Introduction to Lewis and Lewis 2009). The classic treatment of this pattern is Richard Neibuhr's discussion of sectarian schisms resulting from the liberalisation of mainstream Protestant denominations in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism.* (1957[1929]). Another example is provided by the traditionalist Catholic schisms that formed in

response to Vatican II. Schisms can, however, also occur in response to a group's increasing conservatism. The exit of some of the more liberal churches from the Southern Baptist Convention in response to the ascendancy of conservatives within that denomination springs readily to mind as an example of this latter pattern.

When Yogi Bhajan started out in the late Sixties, 3HO focussed on kundalini yoga, not Sikhism. This is not to say it was a 'loose' organisation. 3HO was never unstrict. From day one, vegetarianism, abstention from alcohol and drugs, abstention from sexual relations outside of marriage, two-and-a-half hour daily sadhanas, and the like were stressed.

However, very soon after the organisation started, Yogi Bhajan began adding elements of the Sikh tradition to the 3HO lifestyle. At first these elements were superficial, such as encouraging followers to stop cutting their hair and to start wearing turbans. But it was not long before 3HO began taking on the substance of Sikhism, a transformation reflected in, as mentioned earlier, the name change from 3HO to Sikh Dharma Brotherhood. I have already mentioned my reluctance to convert individuals to orthodox Sikhism as a factor in my disaffection. In the next section, I will discuss how the growth of this additional dimension to 3HO played a central role in influencing me to conclude that the movement was incapable of ever becoming a world-transforming movement.

My Exit and Disaffiliation Theory

Though from one point of view the split with 3HO was a schism, from another point of view it was my personal defection. When I became interested in new religions as an area of scholarship in the eighties, I initially found myself attracted to the issue of *individual* apostasy. Because of the brainwashing-deprogramming controversy, individual disaffiliation was a hot issue at the time, and I authored/co-authored a series of articles in which I contrasted voluntary defectors with deprogrammed defectors (Lewis 1986; Lewis 1989b; Lewis & Bromley 1987). It thus makes sense to analyse the formation of Spiritual Dawn Community in terms of disaffiliation theory.

David Bromley's concise survey of defection research in one of his chapters in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* makes a useful point of reference for this discussion. In the section where he summarizes disaffiliation factors, he states that three major issues are 'disruption of internal solidarity, destabilization of leadership and authority, and problems in organizational development' (2004:300). His example of the disruption of solidarity is when individuals are 'sent on missions of various types that isolate the person for extended periods of time' (*Ibid.*:300). Cut off from the social reinforcement provided by participation in the group, an individual must constantly interact with a world that does not support her or his alternative lifestyle and beliefs, and the tendency is simply to drift away and eventually to drop out.

In my case, I was able to maintain my commitment, but my constant interaction with the non-3HO world contributed to my eventual disaffection. With the benefit of hindsight, it would have served the organisation better if 3HO had sent groups of at least three or four committed members to start new centres rather than single individuals.

To extend this observation from individual apostates to schismatic groups, the Tallahassee 3HO ashram was significantly isolated from the larger organisation. I have already mentioned that the ashram received no support of any kind from either the regional or the national office. No officials or other people from 3HO ever bothered to come through and visit. And no one except myself ever attended organisational events outside of Tallahassee. Thus we were, in many ways, isolated – a factor that made our schism with 3HO easy to accomplish.

With respect to destabilisation of leadership and authority, the examples Bromley provides are of disillusionment with charismatic leaders. In my case, I was much more disillusioned with the 3HO hierarchy as embodied in the person of Lance than with Yogi Bhajan. At the time I felt (and later confirmed) that Lance was placing the immediate needs of the Washington ashram's various businesses above the best interests not only of the Tallahassee ashram, but also above the best interests of the entire eastern region. But my disillusionment with the 3HO hierarchy rubbed off on the charismatic leader when Yogi Bhajan opted to throw his support behind Lance in Lance's efforts to close down my activities in Tallahassee. As a more general principle that can be extended from individual defections to organisational schisms, this could be restated as an individual church or set of churches' disillusionment with the leadership of the larger organisation.

Finally, as examples of problems in organisational development, Bromley discusses the impact of failed prophecies and the failure of new religions to progress toward stable organisations that 'provide viable lifestyles for members'. Unlike certain new religions such as the Hare Krishna Movement, 3HO quickly moved from semi-communal ashrams to more conventional lifestyles (though this took place only after I left in the mid-Seventies). This was not an issue for me at the time Spiritual Dawn Community split from 3HO. Yogi Bhajan was, however, prone to making prophecies about the future – particularly about the key role 3HO would play in the future – that failed to manifest. These prophesied events were projected far enough ahead in time that they played no direct role in my disaffiliation, but the puncturing of my faith in the central importance of 3HO assumed by these prophecies did play a role.

I was initially attracted to 3HO because I enjoyed doing kundalini yoga. In my particular case, the attraction of a close community, which is often the primary factor influencing people to affiliate with a religious movement (Lofland and Stark 1965), did not come into play until later. What eventually motivated me to want to become part of 3HO's organisational structure was a strong sense that 3HO was the wave of the future. At the high point of my commitment, I truly believed

that 3HO/Sikh Dharma would eventually become the largest religion in the West, and, as a consequence, transform the world into a better place. Though I did not fully admit it to myself at the time, I was attracted to being a leader – albeit a minor leader – in a 'world-transforming' movement.

This aspect of a movement's attraction for potential recruits is well-described in Stuart Wright's seminal work, *Leaving Cults*:

> World-transforming movements claim to be privileged agents of imminent and total change. The special status of the movement as *the* agent of the new order is an important and attractive feature to potential recruits. New members typically come into the movement with high expectations of realizing a new world. (1987:38)

However, the other side of the coin is that some members will eventually 'leave out of frustration or disappointment with the lack of success of the movement' (*Ibid*.:38). In my case, I can recall a specific incident that jolted me into the awareness the 3HO would never become a large movement.

At the Tallahassee ashram we held bi-monthly pot-luck dinners on Sundays open to the general public. During one such dinner, I was speaking with a former centre resident (even after someone moved out of the ashram, I was usually able to maintain a personal friendship with her or him). I made some remark about my expectation of 3HO's future as a large movement, and this person responded with something along the lines of, 'You must be kidding.' The remark was not made harshly, but in a tone of genuine surprise. She followed up by pointing out that the 3HO lifestyle was so distant from that of ordinary Americans that few people would ever join. I immediately perceived the accuracy of her observation, which likely means I was already entertaining the same thought at another level of consciousness.

When I first joined the 3HO community in Orlando, the emphasis was on kundalini yoga and a disciplined lifestyle. However, as mentioned earlier, the movement changed in the direction of an emphasis on the Sikh tradition. So *in addition to* yoga and a yogic lifestyle, serious recruits were adopting the trappings of Sikhism, doing the daily readings from the *Guru Granth Sahib* mandated by orthodox Sikhism, saying Sikh prayers, et cetera. Compared to the comparatively simple act of switching from one Protestant denomination to another, it was like dropping out of civilian life and joining the military. So it was not just that 3HO lacked the kind of 'cultural continuity' a growing movement needs in order to succeed (Stark 1996); it was, rather, that so much was involved with becoming a serious member of 3HO that it was simply too much to expect of all but a handful of the population.

This realization of 3HO's lack of potential for becoming a world-transforming movement did not immediately prompt me to disaffiliate. But it *was* a significant factor in the background when I eventually did defect. I am not certain if any elements of this aspect of my defection carry over into other schisms. I have a sense that the 'extensive sacrifices' (Wright 1987:38) demanded by a world-transforming movement can lead to schisms when segments of the group realise that their personal sacrifices are for naught, but I am unable to call to mind actual, historical movements for which this was the case.

Another aspect of current disaffiliation theory is the move from focussing on more-or-less static 'defection factors' to attempting to understand disaffiliation as a process. Bromley provides a concise overview of the steps of this process in his survey of disaffiliation research:

> Disaffiliation from NRMs typically involves several phases: individual disinvolvement, during which the member harbors but does not publicly express growing disaffection; organizational disinvolvement, which involves more public expression of disaffection and some open tension between member and movement; a precipitating event or series of events, which make it clear to member and/or movement that conflicts are unlikely to be resolved; separation, the point when an individual crosses the boundary from member to former member; and post-disaffiliation readjustment. (2004:303)

With a little adaptation, I can perceive the stages of my disaffiliation in this summary. The one exception is that in my case the precipitating event and the separation were collapsed into a single step. It was also at the precipitating event/separation juncture that my individual defection became a group schism. However, though I have no memories of relevant conversations, I must have been sharing my second thoughts about the 3HO organisation with other centre residents in the months leading up to the break. I say this because I do not recall anyone having problems with my decision to pull the Tallahassee ashram out of 3HO. To the contrary, I remember that everyone supported the decision. We are now at a point where we can analyse my exit and the schism of Spiritual Dawn Community in processual terms, as a series of steps.

To the best of my memory, I was completely committed to 3HO through the fall of 1973. That fall, which was the first time I was directed to close the Tallahassee ashram, I was disappointed, even frustrated, but I did not waver in my commitment. The Washington, DC, scene prompted my first real doubts about 3HO. Washington centre residents were generating prosperity for the ashram businesses, and the excessive focus on work was distracting members from both their inner spiritual work and from the task of expanding the movement. My personal frustration over the closure of the Tallahassee centre – which, to my mind, was a definite step backwards for 3HO – helped fuel this judgment. Though my initial disillusionment with the organisation focussed on Lance, the fact that

Yogi Bhajan allowed the flawed situation in Washington to exist for years undermined my faith in the charismatic leader as well (though at the time I was not fully conscious of this latter judgment). My disillusionment with the 3HO hierarchy continued to grow as I became more and more judgmental about Lance.

Retrospectively, I can see I must have been suppressing my discomfort with the expanding importance of the orthodox Sikh component of 3HO for some time. I became fully conscious of this discomfort after the incident I mentioned earlier in which a former resident of the Tallahassee ashram forced me to realise that 3HO was incapable of recruiting more than a handful of members and thus incapable of realising the goal of world-transformation. This conversation likely took place sometime in the fall of 1974, after the large house had been acquired for the ashram but before the winter solstice when I spoke with Yogi Bhajan. Immediately following my meeting with Bhajan my faith was renewed, but this renewed commitment quickly gave way to ambivalence.

Beyond remembering my mixed feelings, I am unable to recall my thoughts during that period. But I obviously knew I was leading the Tallahassee community into a less organisationally acceptable daily routine when I allowed ashram residents to stop repeating the Ardas at the conclusion of morning sadhana. For a number of months following my return from the winter solstice gathering, I fluctuated between ambivalence and anguish. This period was so upsetting that I was actually relieved by Lance's letter: Lance's directive struck me as so unjust that it enabled me to feel okay about breaking with 3HO, and leaving the organisation resolved my mixed feelings about 3HO. In outline form, these steps look something like the following:

1. Disillusionment with organisational hierarchy
2. Disaffection from increasing orthodoxy
3. Disillusionment about the group's ability to transform the world
4. Period of ambivalence and retreat from organisation-approved lifestyle
5. Precipitating event, leading immediately to schism
6. Post-schism readjustment

Does this experience enable me to say about the dynamics of schisms more generally? Lance's covert agenda was an overriding factor in the generation of Spiritual Dawn Community, and I think one would be hard pressed to find a comparable schism in which a disaffected, totally self-seeking official played a similar role. What I would generalise from my own experience is that the process leading up to a schism is dynamic and fluid. My disillusionment developed gradually over the course of almost two years, and there were more numerous junctures at which a different response from the organisational hierarchy could have prevented the split. In fact, even after my resignation, a direct, personal intervention by Yogi Bhajan would probably have brought the Tallahassee

community back into the fold. So what can be generalised from this case study is that, if one has access to the details of a schismatic process, one can likely find any number of different points at which the schism could have been prevented – even in cases where the schism appears to have been inevitable.

Notes:

i. In addition to 3HO's name change to Sikh Dharma Brotherhood, members also began to refer to Yogi Bhajan as the Siri Singh Sahib, a title conferred by the Akal Takht, the world centre of Sikh religious authority in Amritsar, India. Though changes were already in process toward the end of my 3HO years, I shall adhere to the original designations throughout the present paper because they resonate better with my memories from that time period. I should also mention that the 3HO corporate entity was retained as the educational wing of the Sikh Dharma Brotherhood, and in more recent years the organisation's public face has shifted back to 3HO.

ii. The classic survey of Sikh history is Khushwant Singh's *History of the Sikhs* (1977). However, there now exist many good, up-to-date overviews of Sikhism, such as those by Gurinder Singh Mann (2003) and W. Owen Cole (2004).

iii. Throughout this paper, I frequently refer to orthodox Sikhism as a component of 3HO to which I was reacting. So that there are no misunderstandings, I should emphasise that I deeply appreciated – and continue to admire – the Sikh tradition, particularly its more orthodox manifestations. What I was specifically reacting against in 3HO was the increasingly strong expectation that I should be converting yoga students to Sikhism. In the early period of my involvement, I experienced the 3HO approach as a more casual adoption of selected elements of the Sikh tradition that helped give shape to our yoga-based movement. I was enthusiastic about recruiting yoga students to a Sikh-informed yogic lifestyle, but I was adverse to the idea of converting people to any sort of ultra-orthodox religion.

iv. As Finke and Scheitle note, leaving a parent group can result in the loss of legitimacy (Finke and Scheitle 2009). This can act as a powerful deterrent against schism.

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