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Silence, Charisma and Power: The Case of John de Ruiter

PAUL JOOSSE

ABSTRACT *Charismatic authority, as Max Weber originally conceived it, is predicated on followers' perceptions that their leader possesses superhuman or extraordinary powers. This article points to a novel link between silence and charismatic authority by examining the new religious movement (NRM) led by John de Ruiter and showing the important role that interpersonal silence plays in the social construction of his superhuman status. Specifically, de Ruiter's management of three distinct aspects or qualities of interpersonal silence allows him to perform seemingly miraculous feats for his devotees. Firstly, the projection-eliciting aspect, of interpersonal silence fosters the belief within devotees that de Ruiter has the ability to speak to the specific personal needs of people whom he has never met. Secondly, the punitive aspect of silence enables de Ruiter to perform superhuman displays of power over others at meetings. Thirdly, de Ruiter's use of silence fosters the belief that he has a miraculous ability to form intimate bonds with complete strangers, simply by gazing at them. To familiarize readers with this NRM, the article begins with a description of the group's culture, belief system, form of worship, methods of generating revenue, and recruitment strategies.*

Introduction

John de Ruiter is a man of few words and humble origins. The son of Dutch immigrants, he grew up in the small Canadian prairie town of Stettler, Alberta, earning his living as a shoemaker. He is not a person one would expect to see leading a ''worldwide phenomenon'' (Piercey). Over the past decade, however, his burgeoning New Religious Movement (NRM) has become just that. Claiming to be ''a living embodiment of truth'' (de Ronde 3–4), he is now one of the fastest rising stars on the international guru circuit (Hutchinson 32). Thousands attend his meetings worldwide, regularly filling theatres and halls in the UK, Germany, the US, and Australia. Further, many have chosen to follow him home, leaving their countries to join hundreds of other full-time devotees who now live near him in the northern Canadian city of Edmonton, Alberta (Hutchinson 32).

What often provokes consternation and wonder, from bystanders and devotees alike, is de Ruiter's peculiar style of teaching at group meetings—a style that for the most part consists of long periods of utter *silence*. This article explores the dynamics of interpersonal silence within charismatic relationships and posits a novel link between this silence and the cultivation of charisma. To illustrate this link, I conduct an in-depth examination of 'the de Ruiter group'[1] and postulate that John de Ruiter's use of prolonged periods of silence is the most important

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component in his cultivation of charismatic bonds with followers. De Ruiter's wife at the time put it most simply when she stated: ''[s]ilence . . . is John's specialty'' (qtd. in Hutchinson 36).

The charismatic relationship, as Max Weber originally conceived it, is predicated on the belief that a leader is ''endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or exceptional powers or qualities'' (Weber, *Theory* 358). I contend that three aspects or qualities of interpersonal silence enable de Ruiter to perform seemingly *miraculous feats*, helping his devotees to ''attribut[e] to him a status beyond human'' (Kent qtd. in Hutchinson 34). Firstly, the projection-eliciting aspect of interpersonal silence, fosters the belief within devotees that de Ruiter has the ability to speak to the specific personal needs of people whom he has never met. Secondly, the *punitive* aspect of silence enables de Ruiter to perform superhuman displays of power over others at meetings. Thirdly, de Ruiter's use of silence fosters the belief that he has a miraculous ability to form *intimate bonds* with complete strangers, simply by gazing at them. To familiarize readers with this NRM, the article begins with a description of the group's culture, belief system, form of worship, revenue acquisition, and recruitment strategies.

The Culture of the de Ruiter Group

John de Ruiter's independent ministry began in 1986 when he left his duty of occasional preaching at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Edmonton, taking five families with him (Hutchinson 33). In its earliest incarnations, the de Ruiter group was thus very much a Christian organization, although an unconventional one. De Ruiter claimed to experience regular visitations from Christ (Legge) and this direct revelation often undermined conventional Christian doctrines as well as the rest of worldwide Christianity generally. De Ruiter expressed this antagonism very poignantly one day when he erected a billboard outside his workplace, which read, ''Jesus Christ says Christianity is Satan's Masterpiece'' (Pedersen).

As time went on, de Ruiter began to make connections with several influential non-Christians who would eventually have a dramatic impact on the culture of the de Ruiter group. One was Dilbagh Singh (Baba) Bhangoo, a man of Indian origin, who—through connections of his own—arranged for de Ruiter to hold his meetings at a New Age bookstore. A long-standing member commented:

> that's when a flock of south side [the 'trendy' section of Edmonton], New Age, you know, somewhat young, various walks of life, but a lot of young people—that's when they all joined. So, that would have been when it took a big step in growth. Until then it was basically Christian people—you know, stable families. That's when it attracted people from all over the place. (Kent 10)

Further changes to the culture of the group followed de Ruiter's acceptance of invitations to speak at various places, first in North America and then around the world. New believers followed him back from New Age circles in Vancouver, Canada; Maui and New York City (US); Bristol and London (England); and Byron Bay, Australia. In February 1999, de Ruiter traveled to Poona, India, and attracted many followers from the Osho/Rajneesh ashram there.

Thus, while the group's constituency consisted initially mainly of former members of mainline Christian churches, the type of recruits changed after de Ruiter gradually removed Christian references from his message and after he targeted alternative/New Age spiritual markets during his tours. Indeed, as the group grew in size and age, it increasingly drew recruits from what Campbell describes as the 'cultic milieu', a cultural underground that ''continually giv[es] birth to new cults, absorbing the debris of the dead ones and creating new generations of cult-prone individuals'' (14).

Today, adherents of de Ruiter's message share a common ideology of seekership, despite their disparate backgrounds and cultural heritages, and are thus, generally, very tolerant of the views of others. One former member described her experience of the retreats as

> exciting. It was nice to have . . . something where people are coming from all over the world to join for one thing and . . . everyone was really loving each other, lots of hugs and kisses . . .. It was just kind of like spreading the message of this Truth and love. (Anne, Interview[2])

Despite these differences of places of origin and spirituality, the demography of the de Ruiter group is fairly homogenous, mostly ''white, middle-aged, and affluent'' (Hutchinson 32). One former member also noticed that ''there's [sic] not very many men in the group and there were lots of young beautiful women''—an imbalance that, she theorized, was due to the fact that ''a lot of women are really drawn to John'' (Anne, Interview). The general demeanor of de Ruiter's followers reflects his call to be 'soft'. Another former member said that ''people in the group were very similar, spoke very softly, very slowly, almost in a very hypnotic state'' (Olivia, Interview).

Belief System

Grasping the belief system of John de Ruiter and his followers is no easy task, mainly because of the esoteric nature of their doctrinal discussions. Andrew P., a writer for the e-zine *Energy Grid*, experienced this frustration when he attended two meetings:

> [t]he main problem with John's lectures is the limit of semantics. Describing 'things' that to most of us are abstract to the extreme—such as 'okayness', 'truth', 'honesty', 'it', 'real', and 'reality'—will always present an insurmountable problem. These terms were used by John without any explanation, and when some of the questioners did challenge them, his definitions were tautological, involving further nebulous abstractions. So, 'truth' became that part of us that is 'real', and 'reality' became that part within us that is 'true'.

The long silences that punctuate the discussions between de Ruiter and his followers also contribute to perceptions that the meetings are doctrinally vacuous. Follower Carol Askew said: ''[t]here wasn't [sic] really any teachings. It was just going and sitting and being with John for hours and hours with mostly silence'' (qtd. in Piercey).

These caveats aside, some core religious ideas do guide de Ruiter and his followers' thinking—ideas that appear regularly at group meetings[3] and in the group's publications. De Ruiter maintains that most people are disconnected from true reality, in an out-of-touch state that has its genesis in an incorrect identification with the ''*outermost* 'vehicles of expression'" of the ''mind, body, emotions, intuition, and will'' (Oasis, *Truth* 3). This identification, which prevents people from accessing Truth, is a manifestation of our wish to hold on to things, people, and perceptions of ourselves that are dear to us. Thus, de Ruiter prescribes for his followers ''a release from the bondage of self-generated mental and emotional illusion into an original, authenticity of being''—something that ''will cost you your entire self-created existence'' (Oasis, *Truth* 1–2). In conversations with several former members, I noted that all of them mentioned de Ruiter's encouragement that they were to be 'soft' and 'open' and that rather than worrying, they were to accept things 'as is'.[4]

When someone struggles with, or resists, this 'releasing' process, de Ruiter and the group regard this person as having an 'issue' and believe that such a person needs to go through a 'death'—letting go of everything until all that is left is 'that tiny little bit' or 'that one percent' that is not an illusion, but completely real (de Ruiter 154–5). De Ruiter claims to have gone through many of these deaths himself, to the point where he lives ''absolutely and unconditionally surrendered to ever deepening depths of 'home,' surrendered to innermost consciousness, reality, Truth'' (ibid 103).

Worship Site and Form of Worship

For years, the de Ruiter group worshiped in rented facilities. Recently, de Ruiter opened his double-storied new complex, the 'Edmonton College of Integrated Philosophy',[5] which—as advertised on <www.oasisedmontonconferencecentre.om>—is situated on 3.7 acres of land in the west end of Edmonton. The state-of-the-art facility, which can accommodate gatherings of up to 630 people, is equipped with audio- and video-recording facilities, an audio/video projection system, and two ten-foot projection screens. De Ruiter now holds four meetings per week at this site for most of the year, when he is not on tour. When on tour, the de Ruiter group gathers in places such as the Palais Auersperg in Vienna; the Royal National Hotel, and the Grand Hall of the Battersea Arts Centre in London; and the SBW Independent Theatre in Sydney, Australia (Oasis, *Truth* 6).

The meeting style of the de Ruiter group takes the form of a *satsang*: a gathering of devotees around a guru, at which participants listen to, talk about, and try to assimilate, Truth. Meetings are essentially three-hour long question-and-answer periods, punctuated by long periods of silence and gazing between de Ruiter and his followers. De Ruiter, the only recipient of questions, sits on a platform and speaks through a headset, with devotees sitting around him on chairs. A special row of chairs marks the place from which one can ask de Ruiter questions through a microphone. To get to the questioner's chair, one needs to sign a list that volunteers keep at the back of the hall. When one's turn has come, devotees will leave their seats and make

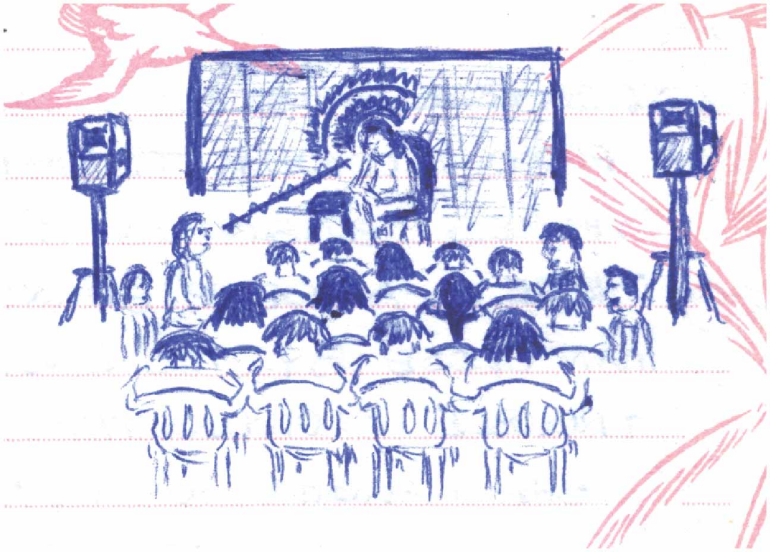

Figure 1. A teenaged member created this drawing during one of de Ruiter's meetings. Notice the aura that surrounds de Ruiter and the intense stare that is occurring between de Ruiter and one attendee. Reprinted with permission.

their way to the questioner's chair. One member described de Ruiter's dialogical style of teaching as follows:

> [E]very teaching comes out of a question; the question is a springboard always ... [W]ith questions, he could do one of three things basically. He could just gaze, which is a very common thing with the meetings, and not answer. And the person either feels like they [sic] don't need an answer or he answered them in an internal way ... [O]r he could give a short answer, sometimes there was a bit of dialoguing back and forth ... and occasionally, maybe once a weekend, twice a weekend ... the question will be a springboard for a long teaching. (Kent 14)

Before the meetings, there is much talking among de Ruiter's adherents. As he enters, however, there is a very distinct hush and the reverent silence of the meeting begins. In order to preserve this silence, Oasis asks attendees to "ensure that noisy or chatty babies are quickly taken from the Conference Hall as a courtesy to others" (Oasis, *Retreat* 1). There have been times when a whole three-hour session passed in which de Ruiter did not speak (McKeen, "Dear John" B1).

Revenue

Weber predicted that, aside from providing the social support that legitimates a charismatic leader's authority, followers "to whom the charisma is addressed [would] provide honorific gifts, donations or other voluntary contributions"

in order to support their leader (''Charismatic Authority'' 247). Accordingly, de Ruiter gains resources from his adherents in several ways. Members volunteer to perform the many duties associated with the running of de Ruiter's corporation, Oasis Edmonton Inc. The group's volunteer form has 62 categories of skills that it asks members to contribute, from typing and baby-sitting to welding and masonry (Oasis, *Volunteer* 1–2). It also asks volunteers for access to business equipment, ''major equipment/tools'', and vehicles (ibid). The time commitments that the form suggests range from ''1–5 hours'' per week, to ''more than 20 hours'' per week (ibid 2). De Ruiter's former wife, Joyce, recalled in a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) interview that ''People would offer to clean my house, do my yard work. I could have had my kids driven anywhere if I wanted'' (qtd. in Piercey).

Apart from voluntarism, de Ruiter receives funds from his devotees in several ways. Indications are that some members pay tithes to de Ruiter (Hutchinson 35). There is also an entrance fee for meetings and retreats. CBC reporter Judy Piercey noted that in Hamburg, Germany, the admission fee was the equivalent of $16.00[6] and she estimated that de Ruiter ''would walk away from the five days in Hamburg with $40,000 in admission alone''. The fee was similar at one of his tour stops in Amsterdam, where 300 people attended his sessions twice a day for three days (Hutchinson 31). Attendees also provide finances to the group by purchasing from a large line of merchandise at meetings. De Ruiter's book, *Unveiling Reality*, audio-taped meetings (162 of these are offered on a 2002 order form [Oasis, *Inventory* 2]), videotapes, DVDs, and ''flattering portraits of himself'' are available for purchase (Hutchinson 32).

Given that de Ruiter privately owns Oasis Edmonton Inc., information about the specific success of these revenue-generating strategies is not available to the public. Even the most conservative estimates, however, make it clear that fundraising associated with attendance alone generates a considerable amount of income for the group. Although de Ruiter worked as an orthopedic shoemaker early on in his career as a guru, he no longer holds a day job and thus stands, as Weber predicted ideal-typical charismatic leaders would, ''outside the ties of this world, outside of routine occupations'' (''Charismatic Authority'' 248).

Recruitment

Although the de Ruiter group does not have any formal proselytizing programs, word-of-mouth promotion is quite effective, since many in the group are former members of other NRMs and can use existing social networks for recruitment purposes. The Internet is a powerful advertising tool for the de Ruiter group as well. Several web sites that devote space to spiritual masters feature de Ruiter, linking to his own elaborate web site, <www.johnderuiter.com>. Here, one can find links to his touring schedule as well as time-tables for his retreats. As mentioned, de Ruiter's speaking tours are very successful, with many people having followed him back to Edmonton from all over the world in order to live near him. This constitutes the main way in which the de Ruiter group recruits new adherents. The primary aim of the group's recruitment strategy is therefore to get potential recruits to attend worship services, which provide opportunities

for de Ruiter to form charismatic connections with attendees. The thesis of this article is that the *interpersonal silence* that occurs at these meetings is crucial to the formation of charismatic bonds between de Ruiter and potential adherents. The next three sections will elucidate three aspects or qualities of interpersonal silence that de Ruiter uses to this end.

Silence: A Medium of Projection and Inference

In attempting to understand the communicative dynamics of de Ruiter group meetings, the first aspect of interpersonal silence that is of particular interest is its ability to elicit *projection* and *inference*. Political leaders at times take advantage of this, as communication theorist Barry Brummett found in his study, *Towards a Theory of Silence as a Political Strategy*, published in 1980. While conventional wisdom suggests that political leaders gain a following by persuading listeners to accept the content of their arguments, Brummett contended that sometimes, the *absence* of content can be rhetorically effective and politically strategic, because it elicits an increased involvement of the audience in political discourse.

Silence from political leaders seems striking because, by the nature of their profession, they are engaged in a nearly continuous dialogue with the public. If a politician suddenly and purposely disengages from this dialogue, ''the public's attention is riveted on the silence as it tries to attribute meanings to it'' (Brummett 290). Brummett further explains the dynamics of silence between political leaders and their audiences:

> [a] silent, passive persona has relinquished control over defining and shaping the world. Even if a silent persona is actually doing a great deal, definition of those actions has been relinquished to the speculation of the press and public, speculation that will find mystery, passivity, etc., in those actions. Silence allows unchecked inference about one's motives and actions. (293–4)

Politicians may thus choose to use silence *strategically*, if they estimate that the inferences of the public will be favorable to their causes.

Other communication theorists have made claims similar to Brummett's about the projection-eliciting quality of interactive silences. Thomas Bruneau writes that ''lengthy interactive silences appear to allow each participant a chance to make inferences and judgments about the many possible meanings of a message (including the meaning of the silences)'' (29). Adam Jaworski sees silence in terms of Marshall McLuhan's division of the media into *hot* and *cool*. For him, silence is one of the 'coolest' mediums because it requires ''from the participants more filling in, more completion, and higher participation than communicating in speech'' (*Power of Silence* 141). There is then some agreement in the communications literature that our pursuit of understanding is not limited to the words that we hear. We seek to understand the meanings of silences as well; when there are gaps in our readings of the world, we will attempt to fill them in through projection and inference.

Leaders' strategic use of this projection-eliciting aspect of silence can have divergent results. The attributions and projections of the audience may or may not be favorable towards the leader. One may marvel at the silent leader,

wondering what his/her next action will be or one may come to suspect that the leader is not speaking because s/he *does not know* what to say next. Regardless of this inherent danger, the increase of listener participation in the leader–listener dialogue and the achievement of an aura of mystery around a leader can make silence a powerful leadership strategy.

The meetings of the John de Ruiter group illustrate how silence can facilitate this 'reading in' or projection of meaning in a *religious* context. One important difference, however, between religious and political contexts is crucial to note. While the focus of political discourse concerns the internal and external affairs of the *state*, those who attend de Ruiter's meetings usually come with the aim of personal fulfillment or self-understanding. Sociologist of religion Stephen Kent, who has attended several meetings and spoken with several former and current members posits that ''Much of what's going on with de Ruiter, I think, is that people are trying to make sense of their own autobiographies'' (qtd. in Piercey). The difference between the religious context of de Ruiter's meetings and the political context described by Brummett is that the meanings that de Ruiter's listeners project (as opposed to those of the body politic) are *highly personal*.

Experts on new religious movements have confirmed that followers of John de Ruiter project highly personalized meanings and insights into de Ruiter's vague words and long silences. Kent says of de Ruiter's followers that ''for years they've been reading New Age and spiritual material ... They can project onto John what they know and what they need. Silence is the perfect vehicle for that projection'' (qtd. in Hutchinson 33). Likewise, sociologist of religion David Lane surmised that ''such experiences [the merging of de Ruiter's being with his followers] are a function of what a believer wants or expects to happen—not the guru'' (qtd. in Legge). Gordon Neufeld, a former member of the Unification Church, theorizes that ''Mr. de Ruiter has fashioned himself into a mirror, onto which his followers project whatever image they want to see''. One reflective interviewer and admirer of de Ruiter wonders: ''[i]s it a *projection* that I hear, a resonance with the original sayings of Jesus, which have recently by scientists been re-discovered in the Lost Gospel Q?'' (de Ronde 4, emphasis added).

Even de Ruiter himself seems to acknowledge this projective process. He told interviewer Ojas de Ronde that ''[t]he energy in the audience is so high because people are hearing from deeper and deeper *within*. They are *hearing* from the very core of their being'' (de Ronde, emphasis added). The claim in de Ruiter's introductory leaflet that ''John can reveal to you who you really are'' is thus somewhat misleading, because it fails to acknowledge the contribution of the attendee to his/her own self-discovery. The meetings of the de Ruiter group illustrate how people can ''hear from the very core'' (de Ronde) in an atmosphere of silence.

Because religious silence can elicit the projection of highly personalized meanings and because religious seekers are *looking* for personally relevant revelation, silence is a valuable resource for the de Ruiter group. Kieran Flanagan writes that silence ''is a resource to be mobilized if meanings are to be best expressed as unuttered'' (214). An extension of Flanagan's insight would be that the meanings that de Ruiter's communication provides for his followers can *only* be expressed and can *only* be heard through silence or vague speech, because of their highly personal nature.

Further, the follower who perceives this process not as projection, but as *receiving* wisdom from de Ruiter will develop the belief that de Ruiter has an uncanny ability to say 'just the right thing'. In this frame of mind, de Ruiter becomes a master diagnostician, with superhuman powers of insight into the intensely personal needs of his devotees. One former member recalls being ''terrified if I ever saw him anywhere [outside the meetings]'', primarily because ''I just felt like he could read me and I was always a bit scared of that'' (Anne, Interview). These demonstrations of seemingly unparalleled wisdom and fantastic powers of perception reinforce the devotee's belief that de Ruiter is an extraordinary spiritual leader. In short, projection-eliciting silence allows de Ruiter to perform a seemingly miraculous feat, thereby increasing the intensity of the charismatic relationship between de Ruiter and his followers.

Silence: A Punitive/Dependency-Fostering Tool

The management of silence may also be useful as a *punitive* tool for those who employ a charismatic leadership style. Kipling Williams outlines how ostracism threatens a person's sense of belonging, self-esteem, and feelings of being in control (60–4). Williams notes that ostracism might even cause a person to question the meaningfulness of existence (64). Ostracism can take the form of 'the silent treatment' between intimate partners as well as 'shunning' at the community level.

Some religious leaders use silence, in the form of shunning, as a punitive tool against wayward group members. The Amish use of *Meidung* is an example where the practice of ignoring can serve as a ''severe form of punishment against members who act in violation against rules set forth by the elders'' (Williams, Shore, and Grahe 122). Gregory Nwoye noted that among the Igbo of Nigeria, silence acts as a ''sanction against deviations of members of a village community'' (188). In these examples, those shunned face a community that is completely unresponsive to them. They experience non-person treatment and the opportunity to end this treatment is a strong incentive for wayward members to resume adherence to the group's rules.

At a micro level, intimate partners often engage in silent warfare. One frequent result of this use of 'the silent treatment' is a power differential between the person who gives it and the person who is at the receiving end of it. Paraphrasing one of Bruneau's insights, Sommer et al. write that

> by failing to respond to another's efforts to communicate, the source gains control over the target by placing him or her in a frustrating and aggravating position. In an effort to relieve the awkwardness of the situation and resume control, the target persists in communication attempts, which are met with further silence. The level of control is thereby augmented for the source and reduced for the target. (226–7)

Receiving no response after asking a question can be a devastating experience. The person receiving 'the silent treatment' feels non-existent to the other person and becomes very aware of a sense of dependency on this other person. Demonstration of dependency can amplify the power differentials that exist

in relationships. Brummett notes that ''[s]uperiors may be silent towards subordinates as a mark of their own status'' (290).

It appears that John de Ruiter uses the punitive aspect of silence in his meetings. Typically, when people go to the questioner's chair to pose a question, they receive responses—although sometimes after a considerable wait. There are times, however, when de Ruiter gives no response or when the response is so short and esoteric that it seems to ignore the question completely. Most notably, this lack of response has happened when attendees express complaints about de Ruiter or dissatisfaction with their progress in following him. For example, when Joyce de Ruiter confronted her husband about his adulterous relationship with two sisters—clearly a topic that was very significant to Joyce—''John spoke a few soft words about truth and ended the meeting'' (McKeen, ''God's Wife'' E7). Another attendee recalls de Ruiter's response in this instance: ''[t]hen he did not respond at all to her. He just didn't say a thing. And he did not look happy.'' (qtd. in Piercey) The devastation that the silent treatment inflicted on Joyce was clear to reporter Scott McKeen and to some devotees. McKeen writes that ''[i]nside, Joyce mourned, as a few of her husband's disciples came up to hug her and tell her they admired her honesty'' (''God's Wife'' E7).

In subsequent meetings, other followers expressed crises of faith which had been brought on by de Ruiter's adultery and polyamory. One former member remembers witnessing a woman ''freaking out'' at John, telling him that ''I only come because I have a lot of friends in this group . . . I don't believe in it anymore and what you did to Joyce'' (Olivia, Interview). John's reputed response to this outburst was that ''[h]e stared the whole time and did not break his silence at all in any way—very good control in those situations'' (ibid). Despite these instances of expressed frustration, de Ruiter still managed to retain legitimacy in the eyes of many followers. One member explains the logic of his believers: ''for the most part the group has just fallen more in love with him. That he is willing to do something that looks so bad and will be so misunderstood, but he'll do it anyways.'' (Kent 25) De Ruiter's silent lack of self-defense, his 'turning the other cheek' when attacked, fosters favorable interpretation of his motives by his followers, thus frustrating and punishing his attackers.

Piercey, a reporter at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, documents another occasion when de Ruiter ignored a follower who expressed dissatisfaction:

> UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: I'm all very confused. I can't really connect with people. I can't connect with myself. It just hurts very much because it feels like being dead.
>
> PIERCEY: After contemplating for nearly two minutes, here's de Ruiter's reply.
>
> JOHN DE RUITER: Relax without concern.

An attendee posted an example when de Ruiter used silence to devastating effect on a web log:[7]

> . . . de Ruiter glare[d] into space for 2 full hours while woman after woman supplicated herself 'at his feet', teary-eyed, BEGGING for an answer, or some guidance for their questions. NOT ONE WORD IN 2

> FULL HOURS. He failed utterly to speak even one word of reflection for these needy people coming to this self ADVERTISED guru of 'Truth'. Not even an acknowledgement of the importance of their question—mere silence.

De Ruiter's use of silence, when he ignores the concerns his followers express in their questions, thus sometimes punishes the questioners while simultaneously increasing their dependency on him.

That attendees perceive de Ruiter as the locus of power in such situations is largely due to the *unilateral* direction of the communicative silences. This unilateralism differentiates the silent meetings of the de Ruiter group from those held by other religions that practise group silence. For example, Quakers practise group silence so that each person at the meeting might have ''the direct personal experience of the spirit of God within oneself'' (Bauman 23). In contrast to the Quaker belief, those who experience interpersonal silence at de Ruiter group meetings are invariably waiting for *external* satisfaction: receiving direction from de Ruiter. The difference between the loci of revelation in these two faiths means that Quakerism displays a distrust of authority and an egalitarian quality, while the de Ruiter group displays an authoritarian power structure. It would be very difficult to read the silence at Quaker meetings as a punishment which is dealt out by an authority figure, but—as has been shown—this is precisely the sense in which de Ruiter sometimes uses silence at his meetings.

Clearly, de Ruiter's authority takes on an extraordinary, even superhuman, quality when the mere act of his non-response to questions creates so much distress within his followers. Rudolph Otto's description of *mysterium tremendum* is germane here: it describes a terror that seems to take on a transcendent quality. Otto took great pains to distinguish this 'aweful' feeling, which is clearly religious, from normal fear. He explained that ''[h]ere we have a terror fraught with inward shuddering such as not even the most menacing and overpowering created thing can instill. It has something spectral in it.'' (14) De Ruiter's use of punitive silence provides an experience of the supernatural, both in the form of the 'spectral' terror in the mind of the punished as well as to onlookers for whom the punishments constitute an astounding display of might. In some religions, hell is separation from God and, as echoed in the pleadings of some of de Ruiter's devotees, expressed in the ancient cry, ''my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?''(Mark 15:35; Psalm 22:1). The only *human* reaction to the intensely personal divulgences and questions from de Ruiter's devotees would be compassion and concern, but de Ruiter's ability to ignore this compulsion marks him out as superhuman in the eyes of many of his followers.

Silence: The Lack of 'Small Talk' and Intimacy

De Ruiter also uses silence to foster the belief that he has an extraordinary ability to form intimate connections with complete strangers simply by gazing at them. De Ruiter calls these connections ''bonds of being'' (Oasis, *Bonds*). Schweitzer notes how Weber considered the intimacy between leaders and followers to be an important component of the charismatic relationship (67). Weber regarded ''emotional union . . . as the culmination of natural charisma'', a state achieved by

the ''psychological process of mutual identification of the leader and the led'' (ibid). The following section focuses on the way in which de Ruiter's management of silence facilitates his achievement of intimacy with his followers.

In contrast to ostracism, when silence seems hostile, silence can at times denote feelings of intimacy. Adam Jaworski presents an excerpt from Quentin Tarrantino's film *Pulp Fiction* as an illustration of the relationship between silence and intimacy:

> [33 seconds of uncomfortable silence]
> Mia: *don't you hate that?* (2)
> Vincent: *What?*
> Mia: *uncomfortable silences* (2) *why do you feel it's necessary to yak about bullshit* (.) *in order to feel comfortable?*
> Vincent: *I don't know* (.) *that's a good question* (2)
> Mia: *that's when you know you've met somebody special* (2) *when you can just shut the* [***] *up for a minute* (.) *comfortably share silence*. (''Silence '' 118)[8]

In this passage, Mia suggests that being able to enjoy silence with someone else can be a sign of intimacy, an implicit acknowledgment that the persona one usually adopts for presentation in public is unnecessary with *this* person. Gudrun Grabher and Ulrike Jessner note that'' [t]he sharing of silence among friends, undisturbed by the compulsion to utter meaningful words, is considered a qualifier of friendship'' (xi). Thus, silence is inappropriate on a first date or at a gathering of previously unacquainted people (such as 'mixer' functions), because those who are newly acquainted have not yet developed a level of intimacy that would warrant shared silence. People in these situations experience awkwardness in interpersonal silence, because here, silence is an *act* of intimacy between people who are not yet intimate.

This aspect of silence can give rise to what the character Mia called 'yakking about bullshit'—or small talk.[9] Small talk indicates that we are willing to be in contact with a particular person, but that our decision whether to progress to a level of greater intimacy will come only after we receive more information about that person. Indeed, it seems that people sometimes use small talk deliberately to *bar* the progression towards intimacy in order to keep the other at a safe distance. Bruneau writes that

> long silences in interactive situations may promote informality too fast—making it necessary for cautious persons to halt the informality movement in their own mind by making small talk in order to keep from getting too close. (30)

In a study of social cohesion, Judith Beinstein notes that small talk can ''protect the personal space of communicators'' (148).[10] In certain situations, small talk is a strategy for avoiding silence, a tool that people may use to maintain a certain distance between one another.

The interactive silence between de Ruiter and attendees of his meetings does not permit this type of defensive action. The collective silence of the congregation dictates that small talk with one's neighbor is socially unacceptable. The meetings are orchestrated so that de Ruiter is the recipient of all the questions and the aim in *these* conversations is to obtain *profound religious meaning*—the antithesis of

'small talk'. Therefore, in the context of group meetings, de Ruiter is free to comport himself towards attendees in a way that simulates true intimacy, while recipients of this treatment are prevented from using the distancing techniques that they would otherwise employ with strangers who are becoming too intimate too quickly.

In a news segment of Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television, de Ruiter group member Carol Askew describes the deep gazing ritual that de Ruiter performs to begin and end his meetings: ''[h]e touches everybody's eyes but sometimes he lingers in some people's eyes. But he will actually touch everybody's eyes in the room before the meeting'' (qtd. in Piercey). Another attendee confirms this strategy on a web log:

> For about the last fifteen minutes of the meeting, John simply gazed out at the audience in silence, making eye contact with as many people as possible. He made eye contact with me and I looked away. A minute or two later he looked at me again, I think because I had looked away the first time. This time I met his gaze and stared back at him. I continued to look into his eyes for the rest of the meeting . . .

Reporter Jeannie Marshall writes of her personal experience of attending a meeting: ''[h]e stares me down in silence for 12 long minutes. I feel uncomfortable and my vision goes fuzzy fairly quickly. His stare is unwavering and his face is expressionless.'' (D1)

Thus the cultivation of silence by the de Ruiter group permits a type of interaction that is usually exclusive to new lovers—deep, silent gazing into one another's eyes. Strangers to de Ruiter find themselves locked in an intimate gaze and it is not surprising that attendees confuse the *act* that usually accompanies intimacy with *actual* intimacy, feeling connected to de Ruiter in a deeply loving way. *Calgary Herald* writer Gordon Legge gives an account of Helen Hamilton, who

> describe[d] how during her first encounter she melted into de Ruiter's eyes. De Ruiter says that during those intense gazes, he merges his being with other people's being, bypassing their identity. He takes them 'home' . . .

One former member recalls that

> there was a lady that had a crush on John and was convinced that he was looking for the right time and he wanted to be her lover and all sorts of different things and I thought more or less, 'wait a minute . . . I thought that was *me*, cause he was looking at me the whole time' . . . I think he was doing it to a lot of women. (Olivia, Interview)

Clearly, de Ruiter's ability to connect so quickly with people in a deeply emotional way, partly made possible by his management of silence at group meetings, further convinces devotees of de Ruiter's extraordinariness. There can be no doubt that 'love at first sight' is a major factor in many devotees' decision to leave home and live near de Ruiter. The intimacy-fostering quality is another aspect of the interpersonal silence which is important for the creation and intensification of de Ruiter's charismatic connection with his followers.

Conclusion

Thomas Bruneau writes that to "'Be silent, for so are the Gods' seems to summarize the highest authority perceptions in Western culture" (38). This article underscores Bruneau's assertion, positing a novel link between interpersonal silence and *charismatic* authority.

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of charismatic leadership, as Max Weber described it, is its *instability*. The charismatic leader retains power over subordinates only "so long as he knows how to maintain recognition through 'proving' himself" ("Charismatic Authority" 246). In the cultivation of interpersonal silence, leader John de Ruiter has found an easily replicable method which provides ways for his followers to see him in "divine terms" (McKeen, "Dear John" B1), when he performs seemingly *miraculous feats*. De Ruiter's management of *projection-eliciting* silence fosters the belief among followers that he has the ability to speak to the specific personal needs of people whom he has never met. De Ruiter's silence sometimes serves a *punitive* purpose, solidifying beliefs that he possesses an authority of godly proportions. Finally, de Ruiter's use of *intimacy-fostering* silence encourages the belief among followers that he has an extraordinary ability to form intimate bonds with complete strangers, simply by gazing at them.

Perhaps further research will find that this three-part taxonomy of interpersonal silence lends itself to similar interpretations of other gurus' silences. Two examples suggest the potential fruitfulness of this line of study. Firstly, silence was clearly integral to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's interactions with his followers. It was a key component of the 'dynamic meditation' that his devotees experienced (see Osho 201–2; Ellwood and Partin 208, 211–2) and Rajneesh often observed periods of prolonged silence himself explaining its value to his followers:

> Being silent, hearing silence, doing nothing and being interior, deeper than all expression, that is satsang. One simply sits with the Master, feeling his presence, becoming part of his energy-field, breathing with him, pulsating with him. Slowly, slowly, the ego dissolves of its own accord, just as the sun rises and the snow starts melting. (qtd. in Joshi 159–60)

Indications are that Rajneesh also used interpersonal silence in a punitive manner. Christopher Calder, a long-time devotee, recalls that during one of his visits to the group's ashram

> in 1988, Rajneesh was in silence because he was angry at his own disciples. He wanted his sannyasins to demonstrate in the streets against some Indian officials who had spoken out against him. Wisely, no one was interested in creating a new confrontation. This spell of sanity among the flock irritated Rajneesh, who cancelled public talks as punishment.

The second and perhaps best example is the Sufi mystic and self-proclaimed "God in human form" (qtd. in Davy 562) Meher Baba. It is clear that silence played a crucial role in his charismatic relationships with followers. From 1925 until his death in 1969, he did not utter a word, instead communicating to his

followers by pointing at an alphabet-board and later, through sign language (Ellwood and Partin 217). Although it never came, the highly anticipated 'breaking' of Baba's silence was strongly linked to the group's millenarian beliefs. Baba declared:

> Of My own I shall not break My Silence; universal Crisis will make me do so. When the Crisis will reach its absolute culmination, it will make Me utter the WORD at that moment ... As I am the PIVOT of the Universe, the full pressure of the universal upheaval will bear on Me. (qtd. in Davy 568)

Baba made clear that his silence might end "at any time, any hour, any day. That Moment is not far away" (qtd. ibid) and indeed often promised to break his silence at particular moments, most notably during a visit to Hollywood in 1932 (Purdom 235). After leaving such promises unfulfilled, he would teasingly rebuke his followers:

> Did you think I would speak on a specific date in a large hall before a crowd of people? I went into Silence without giving warning and I will speak in the same way—who knows when? But when I speak the whole world will know and realize who I am! (qtd. in Davy 95)

More research is needed to determine whether the three-part taxonomy of interpersonal silence—comprised of *projection-eliciting*, *punitive/dependency-fostering*, and *intimacy-fostering* aspects is complete or whether it is in need of more categories. For John de Ruiter and his followers at least, it seems that these aspects are integral to their religious experiences. Indeed, refracted through these aspects, silence is golden.

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NOTES

1. I refer to the group in this way, because so far, members have not given themselves a collective name. In the course of my research, I have heard people refer to members as 'Johnnies' and 'John people'. Reporter Scott McKeen refers to devotees as 'John-ites' ("Dear John" B1). I choose to avoid these labels, because they might sound flippant or pejorative. My naming strategy does, however, fall in line with the three appellations above in one important respect: it refers to the name of the leader, indicating the centrality of John de Ruiter to the movement.

2. The names of all interviewees are pseudonyms.
3. I make this assertion after having viewed over eight hours of video-taped meetings and after listening to over 20 hours of audio-taped meetings that Oasis Edmonton Inc. produced for sale. De Ruiter's book, *Unveiling Reality*, is also informative in this respect, as it consists of several transcriptions of meetings, organized into chapters. Finally, the former members that I interviewed found it easy to recount central tenets of the group's theology that they had learned while in attendance at de Ruiter group meetings.
4. The name of de Ruiter's corporation, Oasis Edmonton Inc., intentionally contains this catch phrase: O *as is*.
5. For pictures of the new centre, see <http://www.johnderuiter.com/ConstructionUpdates2.pdf>.
6. All amounts are in Canadian dollars.
7. Because of the newness of web logs, there is no consensus about their ethical use in research. For this reason, I shall not to disclose the names of those whose web logs I have used or provide references to the web sites from which I have taken the relevant passages.
8. Jaworski uses (2) to represent two seconds of silence and (.) to represent a silence of less than one second.
9. The desire to eliminate silence through small talk should not be seen as contradicting what Goffman perceived as a general rule against opening talk with strangers (178). In the examples I have presented (a first date and 'mixer' functions), a prior commitment exists between people to spend time with one another and efforts like small talk make this time pass comfortably. Such situations are very different from those involving 'strangers on the street' who have made no such commitment and thus feel no obligation to speak to one another.
10. Beinstein measured the relative amount of small talk versus more meaningful talk in conversations between service industry workers (beauticians, barbers, pharmacists) and their patrons and took these measurements to be indicators of levels of cohesion in communities. Her thesis was that the more people practised small talk, the less cohesive their community was. Beinstein orders public conversation on a continuum; "at one end ... we would find no conversation at all; at the other, meaningful discussion topics" (148). She fits small talk somewhere in the middle. The representation of silence as the opposite of intimacy is a particular type of silence ('cold silence' as in shunning) that is different from the intimate silence described in this section. Despite these different characterizations, Beinstein's view that people use small talk to stave off intimacy is still germane.

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