The Presentation of the Charismatic Self in Everyday Life: Reflections on a Canadian New Religious Movement

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Taking inspiration from Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor of sociality, this article explores the dynamics involved in the presentation of the charismatic self in everyday life, with a focus on the new religious movement led by John de Ruiter. The concept of "the everyday" was central to the thought of both Erving Goffman and Max Weber, and I illustrate how a marriage of insights from both thinkers can provide new opportunities for understanding the causes of charismatic disenchantment. Specifically, I focus on instances of discrepancy between de Ruiter's charismatic and noncharismatic roles. Among the various alternative, noncharismatic images of de Ruiter that are in circulation, those of psychological and moral deviance produced and propounded by the counter-cult movement are less germane to processes of deconversion than simple "ordinary guy" roles that devotees glimpse during backstage encounters with him.

Key words: charisma; charismatic movement; cults and sects; new religious movements; Goffman; dramaturgy.

When Jesus declared, "[o]nly in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honour" (Matt. 13:57), he was protesting the poor treatment he experienced upon bringing his ministry to his hometown of Nazareth. He was also commenting more generally, however, on a challenge faced by all charismatic leaders—namely, the difficulty of maintaining the plausibility of an extraordinary or divine status while in the company of those who have an

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intimate knowledge of one's history, and—to use Erving Goffman's term—one's "backstage" regions (1954:112–13). Indeed, perhaps a reason why many sages and gurus travel is that—while it is a tricky business convincing a stranger of one's divinity—it is all the more difficult to convince a life-long friend. Thus, in one form or another, the typical challenge, "[i]sn't this the carpenter's son?" (Matt. 13:55), has been hurled at charismatic leaders throughout history. Canadian reporter Jeannie Marshall provided a contemporary example when she titled her *National Post* article about Edmonton-based guru, John de Ruiter, in a way that pointed to his mundane origins. Indeed, it is a bizarre, impossible idea: "*Shoemaker to Messiah?*" (Marshall 1998:D1, italics added).

Taking inspiration from Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor of sociality, this article explores the dynamics involved in the presentation of the *charismatic* self in everyday life, with a focus on the new religious movement (NRM) led by John de Ruiter.[1] Begun in Edmonton, Canada, in 1986, this group has hundreds of local followers and thousands more who attend when de Ruiter tours to cities such as London, Hamburg, Poona, India, Byron Bay, Australia, and Tel Aviv, Israel. These followers believe that de Ruiter is the "living embodiment of truth" and that he dispenses this truth in public meetings. Although prior to forming the current group de Ruiter had spent years developing his ministry in various tributaries of North American Protestantism, the ideology of the group as it exists today is not directly traceable to mainstream religious traditions, making it a highly innovative movement, reflective of a diverse array of influences from the globalized cultic milieu (Campbell 2002:14; Stark and Bainbridge 1985:25). Meetings are in the traditional *satsang* style, and involve question-and-answer dialogues punctuated by long periods of silence and gazing between de Ruiter and attendees (Joosse 2006). The meeting place, a large ornate hall owned by de Ruiter in the west end of Edmonton, regularly hosts 300 predominantly middle-aged devotees three times per week—devotees who display through their comportment and words that the meetings are sacred events, intentionally bracketed away from routine, "everyday" living.

The concept of "the everyday" was central to the thought of both Erving Goffman and Max Weber, and in this article, I illustrate how a marriage of insights from both thinkers can provide new opportunities for understanding the causes of charismatic disenchantment. Specifically, I focus on instances of discrepancy between de Ruiter's charismatic and noncharismatic roles, particularly between de Ruiter's religious status as "the living embodiment of truth"

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[1]Hereafter referred to as "the de Ruiter group." My designation of it as a new religious movement should not overshadow the fact that the group's leadership also operates as a for-profit business called Oasis Edmonton Inc. For a description of de Ruiter's methods of cultivating charisma between himself and followers, as well as in-depth descriptions of the group's culture, belief system, form of worship, methods of generating revenue, and recruitment strategies, see Joosse (2006).

and the simple "ordinary guy" images that my participants glimpsed during backstage encounters with him. These latter "ordinary" images often served to elicit cognitive dissonance in followers regarding de Ruiter's legitimacy as a spiritual leader, while images of moral deviance propounded by countercultists, by contrast, were often met with incredulity. While much of the sociological literature on NRMs (see, e.g., Barbour 1994; Brinkerhoff and Mackie 1993; Jacobs 1989; Kent and Samaha 2011; Mauss 1969)—and indeed much of the focus of the countercult movement (for an arbitrary selection, see Brackett 1996; Corydon 1996; Davis and Davis 1984; Kaihla and Laver 1993; Lattin 2007)—is preoccupied with how moral or psychological deviance among leadership contributes to deconversion, I argue that this focus can overlook how encounters with simple "ordinary" images also constitute an important factor in causal explanations of charismatic disenchantment. An exploration and elucidation of this latter factor would bring charisma theory back in line with Weber's original perspective, which is wholly centered on an axis involving the interplay between the everyday and the extraordinary (1922 [1978]:241). I end the paper by using Goffman's micro-oriented dramaturgical model to detail the specific strategies of impression management that de Ruiter and his inner circle employ, and show how these strategies are primarily comported toward the maintenance of the barrier between what Goffman referred to as the "front" and "backstage" regions of the charismatic community—a barrier which ultimately keeps the "everyday" at bay.

METHODOLOGY

I began my study of the de Ruiter group in 2005, which included attending 30 meetings, viewing/listening to over 100 hours of audio-taped and video-recorded meetings, reading court files, collecting media accounts of the group, viewing the group's self-published literature and web materials, and conducting multi-stage in-depth interviews in locations separate from group meetings with nine individuals, all of whom had spent at least two years in the group. The population consisted of eight women and one man, reflecting the greater prevalence of women among the group's membership (though a rough estimation of the population suggests that the ratio is not that severe).

After collecting the documents, secondary sources and after transcribing the first-round interviews, I coded these data sources for themes that eventually came to serve as the basis for my findings. To analyze the data I collected, I used aspects of content analysis and grounded theory, generating themes through "identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data" (Patton 1990:381), and then employing "constant comparison," where "all pieces of data are compared with other data" (Morse 1995:27–28). As I analyzed transcriptions of interviews and other textual data, I noted possible themes and emerging concepts in the margins of the documents. I then

expanded and refined these themes and concepts as I compared them with each other and with nontextual data. Without recourse to the positivistic need to eliminate researcher bias, Packer and Addison assert that researchers must "show the entity, or more precisely, let it show itself, not forcing our perspective on it. And we must do this in a way that respects the *way* it shows itself" (1989:278). This is by no means to imply that the researcher should try to eliminate or "bracket" his or her biases—the pretension that such attempts would be anything but futile ignores the hermeneutical nature of interpretive inquiry. One vital implication of Packer and Addison's assertion, however, is that the interpretive inquirer must at all times be careful when pulling quotes from transcriptions, checking, and rechecking in order to perceive nuances and multifarious meanings, while avoiding the temptation of over-simplification for the benefit of the categories and codes that are developing. Indeed, my methodology called me to revisit the interview transcripts, the materials produced by the group, the secondary sources, my own experiences at group meetings, and even my participants many times (in the follow-up interviews).

While some of my participants were rank-and-file members of the group, three of the people I interviewed played pivotal roles in de Ruiter's elevation to guru status, and have been with him since the 1980s. Some of my participants still have contact with the group and express varying levels of affection for its leadership and members. Often these members have gone through varying levels of participation in the past (from the style of what Stark and Bainbridge [1985] would call "audience cult" participation to more involved modes). In the context of this study, then, often I found it difficult to dichotomize particular interviewees, or de Ruiter's congregation more generally, into "current" and "former" members, though I am fully cognizant of many of the controversies that attend the use of former or disgruntled members' accounts (Bromley et al. 1979). Moreover, I consider the intensity of charismatic attraction to be a metric that is sometimes overlapping, but not necessarily consonant with "degrees of membership," since often even disenchanted members can remain bureaucratically involved with religious organizations. Important for this study is that all of my interview participants had experienced a recent decline in their charismatic attraction to de Ruiter, and all were eager to speak to me about these experiences. In this article, all participants are referred to pseudonymously.

GOFFMAN'S DRAMATURGICAL MODEL

Goffman's method of theorizing through complex allegories is so salient because it provides astoundingly rich vocabularies for describing social interaction at the most micro-levels. In his dramaturgical model (1954), "actors" inhabit a social life or "theater" in which "performances" of various "roles" take place—depending on "character" and "setting." As Goffman wrote:

A character staged in a theater is not in some ways real, nor does it have the same kind of real consequences as does the thoroughly contrived character performed by a confidence man; but the successful staging of either of these types of false figures involves use of real techniques—the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations. Those who conduct face to face interactions on a theater's stage must meet the key requirement of real situations; they must expressively sustain a definition of the situation: but this they do in circumstances that have facilitated their developing an apt terminology for the interactional tasks that all of us share. (Goffman 1954:254–55)

In short, Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, for all of its incredible elaboration, takes as its basis the Shakespearian insight that "all the world's a stage" (1969:257).

In this connection, central to the dramaturgical view are the "front" and "backstages"—interactional regions characterized by performative requirements that constantly shape the way we negotiate our way through social life. The front stage is simply any "place where a performance is given" (Goffman 1954:107). It is the arena in which one behaves in expected and "characteristic" ways. Dress, speech, staging, and setting all factor into the management of impressions, and, to the extent that actors are able, they will seek to control these elements so as to cast themselves in the most favorable light. By contrast, the backstage is:

a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course. . . . It is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. . . . Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character. (1954:112)

The maintenance of barriers between front and back regions is of paramount importance for effective impression management, and when this social barrier is permeated:

[w]e find that discrepant roles develop: some of the individuals who are apparently teammates, or audience members, or outsiders, acquire information about the performance and relations to the team which are not apparent and which complicate the problem of putting on the show. (Goffman 1954:239)

It is precisely these instances where "discrepant roles" develop, that I explore below, with particular attention to how this plays out in the context of charismatic relationships.

THE APPLICATION DRAMATURGICAL MODEL TO NRM STUDIES

Goffman is perhaps the most influential sociologist to emerge from Canada in the last century, and it is therefore surprising that there would be a dearth of scholarly examples of the application of his dramaturgical model to study

charismatic religious groups. Indeed, while many studies of NRMs cite Goffman's research on totalistic institutions—a topic he tackled in his book *Asylums* (1961a)—the field has displayed, with some important exceptions, a lack of scholarship that applies the most famous and oft-cited work he did in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1954)—work which serves as the basis for his dramaturgical model.

Some studies of religious charisma already speak in ways that can only be described as Goffmanian, and thus exhibit a dramaturgical orientation, if only implicitly. Ronald Glassman, in a piece titled "Legitimacy and Manufactured Charisma," explained how, in some societies, "charisma was maintained through artificial attempts at stage-managing the charismatic process" (1975:618). He also proposed that, throughout history, cadres of elites that surround charismatic leaders have "participat[ed] in the manufacturing process, making sure that robes, scepters, insignias, myths, ideologies, and ceremonies strictly and carefully surrounded the leader at all times" (1975:624). While highlighting the importance of emotions to charismatic formation, Wasielewski wrote:

> well developed role-taking abilities make it possible for the charismatic to accurately perceive followers' feelings and desires, and working from this, to establish their legitimacy as leaders. . . . Charismatics must therefore either start out with a commitment to the beliefs they express, or they must come to define their beliefs and feelings as authentic through "deep acting." (1985:218)

Thus, there is something very intuitive about the stage-acting metaphor, so much so that it naturally manifests idiomatically in popular and scholastic discourse. Goffman's brilliant accomplishment was to recognize this fact and systematize the perspective so as to give his readers a comprehensive analytical tool.

One researcher who has led the way in terms of explicitly applying the dramaturgical perspective to studies of NRMs and charisma has been Robert Balch (Balch 1980, 1995; Balch and Langdon 1998). In a landmark participatory study of conversion within Heaven's Gate,[2] Balch extolled the value of Goffman's dramaturgical model, which helped him to show that, in the first stages of conversion, the incipient follower will learn "to act like a convert by outwardly conforming to a narrowly prescribed set of role expectations" (Balch 1980:142). In a study of the Love Family, a hippie-generation charismatic movement located in Seattle, Washington, Balch (1995) described the group's meetings as "elaborate dramaturgical productions," and convincingly argued that these staged meetings served as the mainstay for leader Love Israel's

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[2]Led by Marshall Applewhite (1931–1997) and Bonnie Nettles (1928–1985), this UFO cult gained infamy when 39 of its members committed suicide on March 26, 1997 (see Balch and Taylor 2002; Raine 2005).

charismatic image. Balch also described the great lengths to which Love Israel's inner circle went in order to keep rank-and-file members insulated from "potentially discrediting information about [Israel's] private life" (1995:172–73). Finally, an interest in the "backstage" of NRMs also informs Balch and Langdon's (1998) examination of an interdisciplinary study of the Church Universal and Triumphant by the Association of World Academics for Religious Education (AWARE). Here, Balch and Langdon criticized the research community that convened for the study because it failed to recognize that church members were engaging in strategies of impression management in their interactions with researchers. This oversight seemed so egregious to Balch and Langdon that that they titled one section of their piece, "Has anyone read Goffman?" (1998:200–2). They further insist that:

> [r]esearchers should keep Goffman in mind whenever they study new religions. His dramaturgical model demonstrates that virtually all groups [such as police departments, academic institutions, and families] have secrets to hide. (Balch and Langdon 1998:207)

As though responding to this call, Lorne Dawson has discussed and outlined how a dramaturgical perspective can bring light to understandings of charismatic maintenance, through "framing," "scripting," "staging," and "performing" (2006:19–20; see also Gardner and Avolio 1998 for an example of this tack within the business management literature). In another piece, Dawson suggests that charisma may be threatened if the boundary between the private and public life of the leader is too porous:

> [I]f too many people have too much access to the leader, his or her human frailties may begin to shine through the most polished image. Exposure may actually undermine the element of mystery and exaggeration essential to sustaining the tales of wonder, compassion, and extraordinary accomplishments used to establish the leader's charismatic credentials. (Dawson 2002:86, also see 87)

A main theme of the present argument is that this trajectory of inquiry must be distinguished from moral suspicions about the hidden nefarious activities of religious leaders or groups, as well as from a sociological interest in deviance. The social sciences have been affected by a tendency to shy away from the study of religious deviance, perhaps because many researchers fear the trappings of sensationalism or because of a readiness to recoil against the idea that their work may be construed as having normative implications (Shupe 1995:8–11). It is not hard to see how, in certain circumstances, these reservations could engender an inhibition against a Goffmanian interest in all things "behind the scenes" when religion is the subject.

If this is the case, however, the neglect of Goffman by researchers of new religions has been unjust, for Goffman's motive was anything but sensationalistic or moral in its thrust. If the dramaturgical perspective is applicable to a wide variety of social phenomena, from, say, the interactional dynamics of

romantic relationships to the presentation of national identities at the United Nations, its application to new religions should not be seen as an indication of particular moral suspicion on the part of the researcher. Rather, the use of the model merely acknowledges that, like all other social groups and individuals, NRMs and their leaders engage in processes of impression management (Dawson 2006:20). Below I argue that, for all the delegitimizing power of perceived deviant morality within charismatic contexts (Barbour 1994; Brinkerhoff and Mackie 1993; Jacobs 1989; Kent and Samaha 2011; Mauss 1969), a Goffmanian examination of "the ordinary" can give insights into the dynamic processes of charismatic maintenance.

JOHN DE RUITER'S CHARISMA

John de Ruiter's role as the "living embodiment of truth" (De Ronde 2000:1) is charismatic in the classic Weberian sense (1922 [1978]:241; Joosse 2006). Followers see de Ruiter as an extraordinary figure, not bound by traditional ethics or rationality, and his leadership style is predicated solely on an ability to be a unique source of wisdom through his service as a paradigmatic, living emblem of the group's philosophy. Although he began his professional religious career as a Lutheran minister, de Ruiter's current role rarely invokes Christian language or imagery, but rather employs an idiosyncratic lexicon of highly interpretable terms such as "surrender," "that tiny little bit," "honesty," and "truth," as well as an esoteric dialectical style that has both confounded and intrigued many followers and critics alike. Over the years, de Ruiter's religious speech has become much slower and sparse—so much so that the current process of ascribing divinity to him is best explained not in terms of the *content* of the dialogue between leader and follower, but rather in their more basic interactional comportment toward one another during group meetings; a comportment that involves long silences and intense gazing (Joosse 2006).

Within the context of the group, there are escalatory social dynamics that work to heighten de Ruiter's perceived level of divinity. The coin of the realm within all charismatic communities is charismatic attention from the leader, a form of attention that is elicited through the devotional comportment of adherents (Wallis 1982). de Ruiter's group is no different, as attested by my participant Rebecca who remembered that, "having John stare at you is definitely a reward, and having him not even make eye contact with you is definitely punitive." From a dramaturgical perspective, this increased charismatic attention from the leader tends to further increase the intensity of devotional performances among the devotees, leading to ever-more ebullient expressions of love and praise for him. The intensity of this process is also increased through the competitive way in which devotees strive for de Ruiter's attention, fostering a "one-upmanship" in how they spoke about their leader. Remembers Yvonne,

People would just flock, it was how you'd picture how it was in the days of Jesus. People would just mull around him. . . . I can think of a couple of times when one or two girls might get hold of him and just yak his ear off and . . . he might stay with one person for hours at a time talking, and then everyone around him is like, they're going through all of this agony because they want [to be around him] and it's a funny thing because the whole thing was about not being attached and not wanting, but everybody wanted John, everybody wanted to touch him, to be by him.

In addition, the way that devotees share their de Ruiter-related experiences with one another *after* group meetings also was conducive to an escalatory track for de Ruiter's divinity status. Yvonne recalled the excitement of having her first truly spiritual experience at a group retreat:

I guess it would almost be like a drug, you know when you slip into it, it's amazing, and then it gives you something to talk to your friends about later. I mean, all of a sudden everybody has these interesting experiences, and I think that as a group we'd just feed off of each other— like, you can't wait to hear the next story. Like, I mean, there's so many stories that would go on about that and the excitement and the frenzy.

Thus, devotees received social rewards for telling amazing stories about their experiences with de Ruiter, and these amazing stories seemed to set the bar for future accounts.

One result of these escalatory processes has been an ever-increasing amazement among de Ruiter's followers at his reputed powers and sublimity. Benita Von Sass, one of the numerous women with whom de Ruiter established a "bond of being," provided a good example: "What I know is that John is absolute purity of heart. I know John is goodness and purity personified. I'm in love with love" (quoted in McKeen 2000:E7). Devotee Erica Hunter told CBC reporter Judy Piercey that "John came and his words touched me in a way that I never [have] been touched before" (quoted in Piercey 2001). At an Edmonton meeting, one attendee exclaimed:

I can't believe this is happening. I've never trusted anybody in my life. I haven't trusted the world. I haven't trusted myself and I have total trust in you. Total trust. I can't believe that I can go "home," and it's possible to go "home." And you're Truth and we're Truth. Why is this happening? How is this happening? ("Questioner," quoted in de Ruiter 1999:102–3)

Reflective of the nature of these statements are de Ruiter's own. On the back of his book, *Unveiling Reality*, is the claim that de Ruiter's "gift is not limited to the rational content of his words, but resides within the living essence of truth emanating through him" (de Ruiter 1999: back cover). Thus, although de Ruiter no longer uses the language of divinity found in religious traditions such as Christianity, it still makes sense to say that his devotees venerate him in a religious sense.

Ann Willner examined how the cloaking of leaders in heroic myths can greatly increase charismatic attraction (1984:89–127). Instead of using

Christian references in this process (as he was prone to do in the past), de Ruiter is now just as likely to use pop culture in his authority claims. Amy recalls de Ruiter's claims that movies such as *The Green Mile*, *Powder*, *Meet Joe Black*, and *The Matrix*—all of which feature characters that have messianic roles or supernatural powers—were "supposed to mean something, they were supposed to make you think that [the extraordinary character] was John in some way." Yvonne also remarked on de Ruiter's penchant for teaching from movies:

> He does a lot of his teachings from movies, like, when [in] The Matrix, *you know how Neo is "the one," well we all think John is "the one."* . . . He gets his themes from really interesting places and he knows how to use it [sic] and take that material.

de Ruiter's savvy with pop culture and mass media thus play a large part in his self-presentation, which involves modeling himself after extraordinary roles.

As we have seen, the *living embodiment of truth* is a religious, charismatic representation of de Ruiter. Through this representation, de Ruiter is venerated by his devotees and is "considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber 1922 [1978]:241). Sociologist of religion Stephen Kent summed up the extent of de Ruiter's charismatic involvement with devotees saying, "[t]he group seemed to cross some sort of threshold, and that threshold was the extent to which [its members believe that] any of his actions are spiritually driven" (quoted in Piercey 2001).

We must caution against seeing de Ruiter's ascendance to divinity as purely orchestrated and desired by de Ruiter himself. It is clear that de Ruiter's devotees played an equal role in this process. Members who had been with de Ruiter for longer periods of time thus were at times resentful of the way that new, exotic devotees often changed the general way that devotees comported themselves to de Ruiter. Amy reasons:

> I wouldn't totally . . . completely blame John for where it's gone to because it is a group dynamic, I think. I mean, I think the more people that are just willing to give up everything to him and the more people that, you know—women that [sic] are falling in love. It's like, people are giving him their power too. It's not like he was always taking, not even really in the beginning. . . . I would be frustrated when people would be going up to him and kissing his feet 'cause then it's just, like, "why are you being so silly?" You know, it was almost like they were being more silly than John could ever be, you know what I mean? . . . I would [say] equal—equal party in the whole way that it's changed, for sure. . . . Yep, definitely a group effort.[3]

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[3]This quote points to an interesting factor, about which we can only speculate at this point; namely, de Ruiter's inner deliberations about the extent to which he would choose to be complicit with the exalted role that was at times being foisted upon him by disciples. Goffman perceptively documented the ambivalences that many actors feel regarding their roles, and described one compensatory mechanism that is often invoked: the establishment of a "role distance," through which actors deny "the virtual self that is implied in the role" (Goffman 1961b:108).

Thus, the representation of de Ruiter as a divine spiritual teacher was clearly the product of an interactional group setting in which role expectations on the part of followers interact with de Ruiter's charismatic performances. Only through the group's services and other gatherings did the image of de Ruiter as a divine being become accessible to the large numbers of people who now were devoted to him. In addition, the services and subsequent discussions about them were central to the escalatory processes that led to increasingly extreme expressions of de Ruiter's extraordinariness; both the *modeling* process (occurring during meetings), and the *experience-sharing* among devotees (occurring primarily after meetings).

In the course of my research, I have come across some other representations of de Ruiter that differ from the "de Ruiter-as-divinity" image in interesting ways. Not surprisingly, these other characterizations of de Ruiter occur most commonly in social settings separate from the dramaturgical spaces of group's meetings. These differing views at times posed a challenge to the attitude of reverence toward de Ruiter that the group holds. For lack of space and lack of relevance, I will not explore the many morally/psychologically deviant images that the countercult movement (which has arisen around de Ruiter) propounds. I instead choose to focus on the less sensational—but more charismatically efficacious—"everyday" image that I frequently came across during my research.

John the "Ordinary Guy"

The sentiment, "[s]hoemaker to Messiah?" (Marshall 1998:D1), most poignantly illustrates the tensions between "ordinary guy" and divine representations that surround de Ruiter, tensions that trade on perceptions that are simply incommensurable with what one would expect of a divinity. Joyce de Ruiter, John's wife and companion for 19 years, had a "backstage pass" in John's life, and de Ruiter's ascendance to divinity was clearly something that she struggled with. Near the end of her marital relationship, she confronted "John the divinity" at a meeting, but not as a follower would. Instead, she addressed him as his wife, an act she clearly intended to serve as a demonstration of the dissonance between two of de Ruiter's roles. She pleaded with him, "Dear John, my dear John . . . I am the only one who loves John, the man. Everyone else loves John the God" (quoted in McKeen 2000:E7).

At times, members also accidentally gained access to de Ruiter's backstage regions. These experiences created the same type of cognitive dissonance that Joyce experienced—though certainly to a lesser degree. It is important to note that, though devotees were attracted to de Ruiter, often they had fearful inhibitions about experiencing casual or personal interactions with him. Olivia recalled:

> I never actually sat down and talked to him by myself. Never that "person to person." . . . I
> still don't think I would be comfortable talking with him and what he is, um, he's got such a

powerful presence that it almost scares me, that I wouldn't want to put myself in that type of what I feel could be a dangerous situation.

Amy relayed a number of stories of encounters with de Ruiter—outside the space of group meetings—that seemed to undermine for her the image of de Ruiter as divine. About five or six months after she had left the group, she was surprised to find herself sitting next to de Ruiter and Katrina Von Sass in a movie theater. She still had a reverent fear of de Ruiter, and, uncomfortable with the seating arrangement, she asked to switch spots with a friend to avoid sitting next to them. Her attitude changed, however, when she sensed that he was just as uncomfortable to see her as she was of him. She remembers:

he knew that it was me, and it seemed like he was pretending that he didn't see me, or, I don't know, I don't know why, it was really weird, it was a little bit awkward. Maybe, maybe it almost seemed like when, when he wasn't in the space of the meeting and all the people sitting there and him on the stage and the special lighting . . . then he had that power to spread his message. . . . But then when I sit next to him in a movie theatre, he looked like he was like trying to avoid looking at me because he didn't have his [power].[4] . . . Maybe I was being a little, I was kind of smirking and laughing, like, "you know, this guy doesn't have all this power, he's embarrassed to look at me right now."

Thus, in the everyday world of this encounter, Amy's reverent fear of de Ruiter no longer seemed to her to be appropriate or justified, and in that moment the last vestiges of their charismatic relationship were laid to rest.

Another "backstage" encounter between Amy and de Ruiter provoked a similar reaction. During her days as a regular attendee, she went to parties held by de Ruiter's followers that de Ruiter also attended. She remembered that at these parties:

if John started dancing, especially with Joyce [his wife at the time], everyone would gather around and watch and it was this big amazing thing that John was dancing, you know, and he was the worst dancer that I have ever seen in my entire life! . . . I used to say, "how can someone that enlightened*—and he's supposed to have all these powers—be such a horrible dancer?!" Like, wouldn't he know that he's a bad dancer and . . . [that] he should just sit down? [laughter] Ah, its funny!*

In my viewing of de Ruiter group meetings, de Ruiter would occasionally crack a joke, and his devotees would laugh along with him, but the laughing *at* de Ruiter displayed in the above scenario is of a different, far less reverent, quality. Peter Berger saw humor as something that "recognizes the comic discrepancy in the human condition . . . mock[ing] the serious business of this world and the mighty who carry it out" (1969:88). The comedy for Amy was

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[4]de Ruiter's comportment here, including the avoidance behaviors, and what Amy perceived as his discomfort about her may indicate his experience of what Goffman described as a "shameful gap between virtual and actual social identity" that stigmatized persons endure (1963:127).

clearly of this quality. Confronted with a discrepancy between the views of de Ruiter as divine and the "ordinary guy" view arising from the situation of his reputedly bad dancing, she could not help but laugh.

At another encounter with de Ruiter during a wedding ceremony, Amy was surprised to find that de Ruiter was confused about what was actually taking place. (de Ruiter had previously unofficially married the couple, and at this time they were choosing to officially wed.) She recalled:

> standing beside him and I remember him whispering to the person beside him and saying, "Are they actually getting married? I thought this was . . . a reception or a party or something." You know, and I was, like, "I thought John's supposed to know everything!" you know? . . . I mean, I didn't want to . . . take away the specialness of him being there, because it was supposed to be . . . a big special thing that, you know—this was a real true union if John came to witness it, and everything like that. . . . And I was kind of laughing that he didn't even know what he was coming to and he messed up, and then you could see that he was a bit embarrassed. . . . It was kind of funny, 'cause John was supposed to be aware of everything, right, or at least he made it seem like he was always aware of everything, like he knew all the time what was going on.

In this instance, Amy felt that her less-than-sacred view of de Ruiter jeopardized the "specialness" associated with his attendance at the wedding, and for this reason, she refrained from making her newly discovered irreverent attitude known to others present because she sensed that it would spoil their experience. The three incidents relayed above clearly opened up for Amy a way of seeing de Ruiter as an ordinary guy; a perception that—because of de Ruiter's divine pretensions—became comical and thus antithetical to the worshipful attitude that accompanies viewing him as a divine being. This "ordinary guy" role thus provided avenues that led to the dissolution of her charismatic attachment to de Ruiter. By contrast, she never remarked about or found noteworthy the morally depraved/psychologically deviant representations propounded by de Ruiter's countermovement, and these latter representations had little efficacy in terms of her own deconversion process. When I brought up these characterizations, she simply responded with a look of incredulity.

In a similar manner, former member Jason Horsley, when reflecting on his deconversion remarked:

> My "judgment" of John based on this wasn't that he was a bad guy. It was that he was just a guy. But when I took into account the fact that he has persuaded however many people that he IS more than just a guy, that he is in fact "the living truth," unfortunately that opened a whole new can of worms whereby I had to consider that he is not "just a guy," but a very deceptive (or deceived) guy. (Horsley 2011)

This recounting suggests that the process of deconversion was not initiated by a sense of moral outrage. Rather, perceptions of moral malfeasance were secondary, occurring later, after reflection and the passage of time, suggesting that "unpacking the can of worms" may be better understood as a later, self-justifying

process of leader-demonization in which former members feel compelled to give morally exonerating accounts of their decision to exit the group. Given that "atrocity tales" are socially constructed phenomena (Bromley et al. 1979), it would make sense that these constructions would themselves take time to develop, and that the originating moments of charismatic disenchantment would (as shown here) be ones of puzzlement, confusion, mild irritation, and even humor. Now firmly ensconced in a countercult role, Horsley is writing a critical book about de Ruiter and actively entering into online debates with current members about the legitimacy of de Ruiter as a spiritual leader.

Perceptions of ordinariness were also charismatically salient for issues surrounding the resources that de Ruiter obtained from the group. Weber predicted that charismatic leadership would be based on a fundamental economic inequity in that the leader would be unencumbered by worldly concerns while those "to whom the charisma is addressed [would] provide honorific gifts, donations or other voluntary contributions" to support their leader (Weber 1946:247). The pretention at work here is that the leader or guru must be free from menial tasks in order that he or she may pursue elevated spiritual work even when they are not "on"—i.e., not interacting charismatically with devotees. From the earliest days of his ministry, the financial support that de Ruiter's followers provided him was justified by the idea that, "[h]e was supposed to be studying during the week," but his wife Joyce always was similarly uncomfortable with that arrangement because she "didn't see him doing a whole lot to earn it. . . . [H]e slept a lot and piddled around with other things" (quoted in Hutchinson 2001:33). Yvonne's backstage encounter with de Ruiter's noncharismatic role traded on similar sentiments. One day while filling up at a gas station. She recalled:

> [t]here was this [gas] station . . . and I used to see his truck there quite often and one time I went there and I was gassing up and I had to walk around the back and I saw his truck in the bay and I said to one of the guys, "I know the guy who owns that truck" and I said "Oh it's in here again!" and the guy says, "Oh yeah it's in here all of the time and he always goes up to the mountains and he's always wrecking it. You know, he loves to four-wheel drive." That's what kind of pissed me off, because I think that he's got a really good life, I mean because he does these meetings what, maybe fourteen, sixteen hours a week and the rest of the time it just seems, I could be wrong, but, it seems like he's out just gallivanting.

In this moment, Yvonne realized that de Ruiter's ministry afforded him a lot of money and leisure time, which enabled him to enjoy very pedestrian pursuits, while she herself felt overwhelmed by the temporal and financial costs associated with being a devotee. When Yvonne inadvertently glimpsed de Ruiter's backstage self at the gas station and saw him as someone who spends his free time not as a studious religious sage, but rather in a way that one might expect of many ordinary males with enough money, her feelings of reverence evaporated.

The special social position of the inner circle[5] that surrounds the charismatic leader warrants some comment in this connection, for it highlights, in an albeit less direct but nevertheless still salient way, the centrality of the ordinary/extraordinary metric (as opposed to a moral metric) to charismatic interaction. Inner circle members, through their organizational roles, will tend to have more frequent, more casual, less ritualized interactions with the leader than the charismatic laity. The trade-off for this "privileged" access is, of course, that, as Dawson writes, "human frailties may begin to shine through the . . . polished image" (2002:86), threatening the basis for charismatic fascination. In the case of inner circle members, therefore, very often there will be extra religious innovations that lead to perceptions of the ordinary or mundane personas and activities of the leader in *extraordinary* ways. Two examples from my sample will suffice to illustrate this phenomenon. First, Oksana described her way of looking at John, which differed greatly from the perceptions of the average lay devotee:

> *He's a boy with boy toys, and people keep forgetting: he's human, and man does he show it, he's got a big boy toy of a truck and he's got this motorbike and, so what? What's the big deal? He's not God. What is awesome is that he's managing to be human, make his human mistakes and be totally OK that that's exactly what's happening. That's what's different from him and everyone else on this earth plane.*

Paradoxically for Oksana, de Ruiter is able to be simultaneously ordinary ("just a boy") and extraordinary ("different from everyone else on this earth plane"). Inner circle member Andrew had a similarly extraordinary perception of the "ordinary John." Speaking of his travels with de Ruiter, he commented:

> *So that was huge too, just travelling through airports . . . how does a person who is wholesome deal with going to 7–11 by himself?. . . . There is a real profoundness in how he behaves, so just watching him boarding a plane . . . with everything there was an extreme gentleness, there was never any arrogance. . . . I just hung around him like a dog, just like "I just want to be where you are." He was living something that—I don't understand God stuff or spiritual stuff—but this was translated into a practical form or idiom, that was like, "I get this."*

In these examples, perhaps more than any other, the unmistakable charismatic will on the part of followers toward extraordinary perception—so central to

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[5]Most often referred to in contemporary research as the "inner circle," the "cadre" or "organizational elites," Weber defined what he called "the charismatic aristocracy" as the leader's "personal staff, . . . a select group of adherents who are united by discipleship and loyalty and chosen according to personal charismatic qualification" (1922 [1978]:1119). These members enjoy organizational power, greater access to the charismatic leader, and their devotional fervency serves as an example to lower members. Thus, the typical charismatic organization will consist of a three-tiered social structure, involving the charismatic leader, the small inner circle, and rank-and-file members (Weber 1922 [1978]:119; see also Balch 1995:159; Couch 1989:272).

Weber's descriptions of charismatic interaction—shines through in its purest form. When confronted with an "ordinary John," these heavily invested members of the charismatic elite reinterpreted and reinscribed the most pallid banalities in the most sacred terms.

WEBER'S CHARISMA AND THE CENTRALITY OF THE EXTRAORDINARY

In the previous two sections, I have outlined two representations of de Ruiter that circulate and interplay in the charismatic economy of the de Ruiter group. Another representation, however, has been given short shrift in this analysis, for reasons that will soon become clear: namely, that of de Ruiter as a moral or psychological deviant. These representations, which are the stock and trade of countercult groups (Kent 1990), disgruntled families of members, and commonplace in the sensationalistic environs of cyberspace (Cowan 2004; Peckham 1998), most frequently cite de Ruiter's extramarital sexual relationships with sisters Katrina and Benita Von Sass, his alleged megalomania, the financially lucrative nature of his corporation (Oasis Edmonton Inc.), and perceived manipulative relations with followers, as evidence of "unsaintly" or insane motivations behind de Ruiter's actions. On the face of things, one might presume that these representations of de Ruiter as a psychological or moral deviant would be the most toxic to the plausibility of the divine role. After all, what could be more dangerous to a saint than suspicions of "unsaintly" behavior? Yet in the deconversion processes I witnessed, accusations of deviance were clearly less salient than simple perceptions of ordinariness. In fact, as we will see below, de Ruiter's dramaturgical strategies themselves display a lack of concern with images of deviance, instead being clearly comported to the prevention of perceptions of "ordinary" backstage roles. Without presuming to be able to read the mind of de Ruiter, we can at least postulate some reasons why this prioritization of concern would indeed be well advised in charismatic contexts.

First and most obvious is that representations of deviance originate most often from disgruntled former members, from the press, from the distraught family members of devotees, or from secular or Christian members of the countercult movement—everyone but the followers themselves. For this reason, the group's defensive accusations about the negative bias of their enemies almost go without saying, and it is unlikely that devotees themselves will be convinced by the "de Ruiter-as-deviant" image, which they likely regard as unreasonable, unrecognizable, or simply bigoted. More simply, for de Ruiter to argue at a group meeting that he is wise rather than psychologically deviant, or that he is good rather than selfish and manipulative, would be literally to preach to the converted.

Conversely, in terms of intragroup perceptions of de Ruiter's divinity, the backstage encounters responsible for the "ordinary guy" perceptions illustrated

above create a cognitive dissonance among perceptions of Ruiter, and these jarring perceptions are elicited *within the devotees themselves*. When followers actually see de Ruiter perform two very different roles in two very different settings (i.e., the movie theater versus the group meeting), this contrast has a much more existential, affectual impact on charismatic plausibility—far greater than anything that is to be derived from reading a newspaper, blog, or countercult organization web site. Indeed, the adage, "seeing is believing" has its counterpoint—for depending on *what* one sees, it would seem that sometimes "seeing is disbelieving" as well.

Second, at the corporate level, the critical posture of wider society toward minority religions (the sharp edge of which is surely the countercult movement itself) may actually be beneficial to sectarian groups in certain circumstances. Rodney Stark's model for cultic success prescribes that NRMs should develop a healthy level of tension with the larger society that they inhabit (1987:15–16, 2003). Stark's (1987, 2003) insight is that, while inner solidarity can be achieved through an "us against the world" ideology, tension can also create social barriers from without—barriers that enable religions to stake out their niche in a highly competitive religious market (see also Goffman 1963:38).

But all of these explanations for de Ruiter's apparent lack of concern with his notoriety in wider society are in themselves weak if not buttressed by a third more fundamental consideration. The charismatic relationship, as Weber described it, does not turn on a *moral* axis; that is, it hinges not on followers' intuitions about the presence of good or evil in their leader. Rather, the quintessential dichotomy at play in the economy of charisma is that between the *extraordinary* and the *everyday*. Weber's charismatic ideal type can help us to understand both Hitler and Gandhi[6] because, for all their differences, the distinguishing charismatic feature of both men was the fact that they were, in Weberian parlance, "*spezfisch außertäglich*" or "specifically outside the everyday" (Weber 1976:140; see also Aron 1967:229; Shils 1965:199;[7] Weber 1922 [1978]:241, 1111, 1115). That this distinction is fundamental to Weber's thought is also evidenced by the fact that the two other forms of legitimate authority in his thought, namely, the traditional and the bureaucratic, are inherently characterized by their "everydayness." "*Alltag*" ["everyday life"] is a common prefix that Weber uses to describe institutions that develop within traditional and rational–legal authority structures (Adair-Toteff 2005:194), and

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[6]Weber died too soon to examine these colossal twentieth-century charismatics, but in his passages on charisma, he did write without regard to moral consideration, speaking about the charismatic pirate and St. Francis of Assisi in the same breath, for example (1922 [1978]:1113). This ability to do so derived from his commitment to a sociological conception of charisma that was "value-free" (1922 [1978]:242, 112, 113, 117).

[7]It should be noted that Goffman was a student of Edward Shils, and that he therefore would have been quite aware of Shils's insistence on the everyday/extraordinary dichotomy as being fundamental to charismatic authority.

for Weber, "routinization" always marks the natural end of "pure" charisma (1922 [1978]:246–49).[8]

The strategy of the countercult movement, then, which involves envisioning charismatic leaders as villainous deviants, seems to be predicated on a fundamentally flawed understanding of charisma. If anything, images of profound notoriety may even serve to bring followers further away from the "everyday" perceptions that actually would work to dissipate charismatic affectation. The copious fan mail and love letters delivered to prisoner Charles Manson's cell are a noteworthy testament to this fact (Lindholm 1990:135–36), as is the "crazy wisdom" tradition practiced by Chogyam Trungpa (Bell 1998; Eldershaw 2007).

INTRAGROUP IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

These considerations seem not to be lost on de Ruiter himself, however, for while he appears to expend very little energy counteracting the efforts of his own countermovement, he, along with the help of a dedicated inner circle, has made great efforts to ensure that followers' encounters with de Ruiter's backstage are as infrequent as possible. Also, when these encounters do happen, de Ruiter has methods of ensuring that these experiences are not shared amongst other devotees. Most helpful for understanding this project is Balch's concept of "vertical information control" whereby the inner circle protects the leader "from criticism by not revealing potentially discrediting information about his private life" (1995:172–73). In extreme cases, this can result in the virtual sequestration of the leader. In a study of charisma within the Children of God, Roy Wallis described how by 1970 leader David Berg (1919–1994) "was in contact only with a committed elite" (1982:33) and that "through distancing himself and milieu control, Berg was able to avoid the danger of familiarity incompatible with his sacred status" (38). Before outlining de Ruiter and his inner circle's strategies for preventing and containing backstage slippages, however, we must first examine the group's *positive* efforts at impression management. For this, Goffman's concept of the "front" will prove useful (1954:29).

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[8]In an interesting parallel, the sacred/profane dichotomy that underlies Durkheim's work on religion is similarly at risk of having moral schemas mapped onto it (Pals 1996:99). This risk is especially pronounced considering contemporary colloquialisms in which "profane" is associated in a moral sense with "profanity" and "sacred" with "righteous." But Durkheim was very insistent that, "[t]he traditional opposition between good and evil is nothing beside this one [between sacred and profane]: Good and evil are two species of the same genus, namely morals, just as health and illness are nothing more than two different aspects of the same order of facts, life: by contrast, the sacred and the profane are always and everywhere conceived by the human intellect as separate genera, as two worlds with nothing in common" (1912:36).

Goffman divided his conception of "the front" into three constituent components: "the setting, the appearance, and manner" (1954:29). The setting involves things such as furniture, décor, physical layout, etc. Goffman noted that, "it is only in exceptional circumstances that the setting follows along with the performers. . . . In the main, these exceptions seem to offer some kind of extra protection for performers who are, or who have momentarily become, highly sacred" (1954:22). The setting of de Ruiter group meetings presents an example of one such exceptional circumstance as there are uncanny similarities between the physical arrangements of group meetings, from Edmonton, to Hawaii (viewable on *An Evening with John de Ruiter* [Oasis Edmonton Inc. 1998]), to Poona, India (viewable on *John de Ruiter Speaks about Truth: Innermost Blossoming* [Oasis Edmonton Inc. 2000]). The most fundamental concern in the design of these settings seems to be that de Ruiter is *central*. At the Edmonton meeting center, ten-foot screens on either side of the sitting de Ruiter zero-in on his face, creating a larger-than-life sense of his gaze over the audience. He always sits elevated in the middle-front of the setting, in the direct sight-lines of all who are present, while microphones and speakers assure acoustic preeminence. Special lighting invariably gives de Ruiter an aura that reflects his importance as well. Finally, de Ruiter's performance entails the use of an array of special props—a fan, an elegantly carved wooden table, a plant, and a glass of water—that indicate that he is to be accorded special treatment in the setting of meetings. The centrality of de Ruiter to the setting also is reflected by the performances of devotees, who, when de Ruiter enters the room, immediately become quiet, take their seats, and stare intently at him.

In the dramaturgical perspective, "appearance" and "manner" are closely related:

> *"appearance" may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer's social statuses. These stimuli also tell us of the individual's temporary ritual state. . . . "Manner" may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the same time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation.* (Goffman 1954:24)

de Ruiter's appearance appears to be something that has been carefully and consciously crafted over the years of his ministry, and images of him, which are strikingly similar to traditional western representations of Jesus, feature prominently on his web site, johnderuiter.com, and as framed hangings in the homes of his followers. In terms of his "manner," de Ruiter's slow and sparse style seems to relay the message to his devotees that his words are profoundly precious (Joosse 2006:361–63). This valuation is enacted in the performances of devotees as well—many of whom write down in notebooks every word that de Ruiter speaks.

In operation simultaneously with front stage impression-management strategies are rear-guard measures that de Ruiter and his inner circle use to conceal

his *backstage* regions and self. First, de Ruiter has undertaken a series of legal actions aimed at silencing members who have in the past been granted special access to de Ruiter's backstage areas. One of these actions was against follower Jeanne Parr, a retired CBS news reporter and independent television producer from New York. Because of her expertise in television, Parr was instrumental in the production of some of de Ruiter's videos. She also had plans to shoot a documentary about de Ruiter, and, according to de Ruiter, she made "approximately 50 videotapes"—some of them with this aim (Oasis vs. Parr *Statement of Claim* 2001:para. 4). In December 1999, when Parr became disillusioned with de Ruiter because of his adulterous relationships, she left Edmonton, taking the tapes with her. Reporter Brian Hutchinson quoted her speaking in metaphorical terms that themselves sound very Goffmanian: she remarked that she "missed his teachings on higher consciousness [but that] . . . I can't sweep his behaviour—what he's done to his family—under the carpet" (2001:35–36).

It seems that de Ruiter and Oasis Edmonton Inc. perceived that Parr's possession of the videotapes was now a threat, and subsequently sued her, asking for "an interim and permanent injunction restraining the Defendant [Parr] from making use of the Videotapes" (Oasis vs. Parr *Statement of Claim* 2001:para. 9). In the court files, there was no statement of defense from Parr, indicating that she either settled the matter with de Ruiter out of court, or that, from the United States, she has not bothered to deal with the suit.

de Ruiter and Oasis Edmonton Inc. took a similar action against long-term member Boots Beaudry. According to the plaintiffs, Beaudry, "in her capacity as a volunteer . . . was provided with materials belonging to Oasis which were intended for the benefit of Oasis or John de Ruiter" (Oasis vs. Beaudry *Statement of Claim* 2005:para. 4). Beaudry failed to return the materials, and as a result, de Ruiter and Oasis sued, asking for the documents back as well as "such further and other relief as this Honourable Court deems just" (Oasis vs. Beaudry *Statement of Claim* 2005:para. 9). In her statement of defense, Beaudry claims that she was not holding the materials maliciously, but rather that they may have been thrown out inadvertently when she moved out of a business she owned (Oasis vs. Beaudry *Statement of Defense* 2005:1). At her court appearance, she returned one tape she had found that belonged to de Ruiter (Oasis vs. Beaudry *Statement of Defense* 2005:1).

Indications are that de Ruiter has also taken legal action against his former wife, Joyce. She told reporter Jeremy Loome that she "ha[s] agreed to not do anything that is potentially harmful to his earning potential" (quoted in Loome 2006:19). Presumably, de Ruiter is worried that books or interviews that pursued her perspective on "John the man [as opposed to] . . . John the God" might jeopardize his charismatic plausibility (Joyce de Ruiter quoted in McKeen 2000:E7).

What Beaudry, Parr, and Joyce de Ruiter all have in common is that they are inherently threatening to de Ruiter's front stage presentations by virtue of their formerly intimate relationships with him. All three were, at one time,

part of de Ruiter's inner circle, operating on a more "everyday" basis with de Ruiter than that of the rank-and-file devotee. Thus, all three had access to materials and experiences of de Ruiter that no doubt could challenge the "divine" presentation in the very ways that backstage encounters did for Yvonne and Amy.

de Ruiter and his inner circle have been taking other measures—outside the court system—that seem aimed at preventing his devotees from having backstage access to him. Much of this move toward making de Ruiter less accessible to devotees than he had been in the past has occurred after Benita Von Sass took a greater role in the organization.[9] As Yvonne commented:

> there was, I guess, a sense of community and I guess in the early days there was even more because we used to sometimes have parties and gatherings for some of John's birthdays and stuff and that kinda stopped later. Like, we used to have Christmas—well not Christmas but like a New Year's party and that—but it seemed that when he got together with Benita, his second wife, then it just seemed—I don't think she wanted him to be—many people feel like she didn't really want him to be as accessible. But in the early days he was so much more accessible and that made it really fun.

Thus, by this account, the parties that elicited the "ordinary guy/terrible dancer" perceptions that Amy experienced are no longer occurring.

Control over media has also increased at group meetings. Hutchinson surmised that:

> de Ruiter has become more guarded than ever about his affairs . . . . [T]he company insists followers who take his photograph hand their film over for development "in order to determine that all images are appropriately representative of John for the general public. . . . Any negatives deemed unsuitable by Oasis [are] permanently marked, so that they not be copied." (2001:36)

Thus, this policy enables de Ruiter to prevent the development and distribution of photographs that would be harmful to his front stage presentation if they were to depict him conducting himself in a backstage manner.

Oasis Edmonton Inc. exacts similar control over print media. Oasis has always permitted devotees to take personal notes during sessions with de Ruiter, but the "Marketing and Public Relations Department" took action when some devotees began distributing these notes amongst themselves. In their *Distribution of Meeting Notes Policy*, Oasis worried that:

> such enthusiasm [the sharing of notes] easily and unintentionally ends up doing John and Oasis a great disservice if quotes are not entirely accurate, accurate but lacking the necessary frame of reference (verbal or other) in which they were spoken, or relatively sensational in nature. Unnecessary confusion for readers and even negative attention and publicity often

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[9]Sources and court documents now indicate that, as of August 2009, sisters Benita and Katrina Von Sass have departed the group.

arise—something John's Public Relations Department does its best to monitor through person-
ally confirming the content and any dissemination of John's teachings, with John himself.
(Oasis Edmonton Inc. 2004:1)

Thus, even if backstage slippages occur in meeting settings, through "slips of
the tongue" on de Ruiter's part, or through particularly unsuccessful or
less-than-profound dialogues with questioners, de Ruiter has (or, at least he
seeks to have) complete control over the proliferation of these events, what
Balch referred to as "horizontal information control" (1995:173–74).

CONCLUSION

In his most influential and oft-cited work, Goffman was concerned with
the presentation of the self in *everyday* life. The application of his dramaturgi-
cal model to charismatic leadership is interesting precisely because there is
nothing "everyday" about the self that charismatic leaders present.
Extraordinary or superhuman claims are in fact antithetical to the "ordinary
person" impressions that most people elicit while performing in wider society.
de Ruiter's "front" is in fact not comported to the wider society in which we
all live, but rather to the carefully crafted and controlled social arena of group
meetings—a "theater" that is predominantly filled with devotees who are in
charismatic relationships with him. Correspondingly, from the perspective of
the devotee, his backstage area is in fact the "everyday" world we all frequent.

Because of this arrangement, which is particular to charismatic situations,
what might at first seem counterintuitive has actually been borne out by this
research. In the case of my participants, images of de Ruiter as simply an "ordi-
nary guy" seemed to take the lead role in terms of negatively affecting charis-
matic plausibility—even in contexts where demonizing images were readily
available. I have theorized several possible explanations that can account for
the relative importance of "the ordinary" in processes of deconversion, and
more research is needed to confirm, complicate, or confound these explana-
tions, which are described below.

First, from the perspective of the charismatically enraptured devotee, the
statements by people in the countercult movement undoubtedly seem fraught
with bias, and marked by a cartoonish implausibility. Many of the images,
whether they focus on the purported moral or psychological deviance of
leaders, simply will be unrecognizable to devotees who hold their leader in
high regard. Put simply, by proffering seemingly unreasonable characterizations
of the charismatic leader, the critics wind up delegitimizing not the leader, but
rather themselves as credible commentators. Further, notorious depictions of
charismatic leaders may in some circumstances even work to augment
followers' charismatic valuations of their leader, to the extent that the
notoriety is itself extraordinary.

Second, in a dramaturgical sense, we realize that, while the countercult movement can produce negative *images* of a charismatic leader, the "ordinary guy" trope is an actual *role* performed by the leader him/herself. To be criticized by one's enemies is relatively benign—in fact it is to be expected. To be seen to be doing things worthy of criticism, or things that are simply "out of (charismatic) character" is an altogether different situation, with a far greater potential for causing reputational damage. This distinction between role and image highlights the importance of the contribution of Goffman's dramaturgical perspective to analyses of charismatic interaction.

Finally, and most importantly, the moral outrage of countercultists is less affective because, rather than being at bottom a moral phenomenon, charismatic legitimacy (following Weber's classic description) is much more dependent on extraordinariness—regardless of moral status. Put simply, infamy is preferable to indifference if charismatic attachment is the goal. The benefit of this conception is that, when it is imbricated into Goffman's dramaturgical model, it can help us to understand why countercult attempts to delegitimize charismatic leaders tend to be less affective, from the perspective of the devotee, than ordinary backstage encounters between charismatic leaders and their followers. Rebecca, who had been one of de Ruiter's long-term followers before the scales fell from her eyes, made a remark that offers a poignant summary of the Weberian understanding of charismatic disillusionment: "these guys are a dime a dozen."

The importance of this finding to the sociological literature stems from the fact that it serves to highlight a tacit and hitherto unexamined agreement between countercultists and academics when it comes to understandings of charisma. Those involved in sociological analysis who maintain a focus on deviance as the primary causal factor in charismatic disenchantment unwittingly support moralistic and incomplete understandings of charisma held by the countercult movement—a movement that has little interest in Weber's original "value-free"[10] analytical aspirations. Sociologists of religion have made important contributions to understandings of the interactions between leader malfeasance and charisma (see, e.g., Barbour 1994; Brinkerhoff and Mackie 1993; Jacobs 1989; Kent and Samaha 2011; Mauss 1969; Shupe 1995), but a revival of the Weberian understanding, which trades on the distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary, would complement and correct current trajectories of charisma research. Indeed, the commonplace and the charismatic certainly constitute an important factor in causal explanations of charismatic disenchantment among members of the NRM led by John de Ruiter.

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[10]A phrase that seems quaint in our day, but that nevertheless expresses a wish common to many sociologists who seek to remain separate from projects of advocacy or admonishment, when it comes to the subject of religious movements.

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