

Some aspects of leadership in the neo-Hindu religious movement: The case of the Art of Living Foundation in Lithuania

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Abstract. The leader in any new religious group is a very important person and a key feature in the establishment of the organized religion. The special role and place for the leader is found in the so-called spiritual groups—the Neo-Hindu religious movements. Although such groups do not relate themselves to any religious phenomena in general, an analysis of their activities reveals the traditional importance of their leader in doctrinal and organizational development. The aim of this article is to analyze the role and place of Ravi Shankar, the leader of the Art of Living Foundation (AoLF), the process of his charismatization, as well as the attitudes of members toward the leader and his legitimization from the perspective of the sociology of religion. The work is based on the analysis of certain official documents of the organization and through narratives of members from Lithuania and Denmark. The article focuses on the case of Lithuania, which is revealed through the comparison of the data from Denmark.

The analysis revealed that individuals expressed special attitudes toward the leader of the group: that, on the one hand, modern individuals sought liberation from institutionalized religion but at the same time they were searching for spiritual authority. Interviews with members of the AoLF revealed diverse concepts of the spiritual leader. Contrary to the traditionally accepted understanding of a spiritual leader as the head of authority, the narratives revealed an understanding of the spiritual leader as both an advisor and a service provider.

The problem of charismatic leadership: a social constructionist perspective

In the broadest sense this text is a contribution to discussions about charismatic leadership in the sociology of religion. The problem of charismatic leadership has been approached by social scientists starting with Max Weber (Weber 2000) who, as Roy Wallis correctly observed, ‘has left an unclearly defined concept and a problem

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with charisma Wallis (1993, 169) that gave way to diversity in the interpretation of its meanings'. Weber distinguished a few types of authority and charisma is among them. According to Weber, the essence of charisma is not only in the personal features of the leader but also in the features that are ascribed to her or him by their followers. Charisma is constructed by the group, which gives authority to the leader by supporting the leader with their faith and trust.

The academic concern with the problem of charisma increased together with the studies of new religions in the seventies and eighties. Bryan Wilson (1975), Roy Wallis (1993) and Eileen Barker (1993) paid special attention to this problem and analyzed it by focusing on particular case studies: The People's Temple, The Manson Family, Synanon, Moses David (The Family or Children of God) and Sun Myung Moon (The Unification Church). A decade later, Mikael Rothstein (2003) approached the problem of charisma in the social construction of the leader of the Aetherius society.

According to Bryan Wilson, the term 'charisma' expresses more about the relationship (with the leader) rather than about the quality of person. Charisma contains the followers' acceptability of a leader, the endorsement of his personality and the endowment of its powers by society or at least by its group. A charismatic leader must have some grounds on which a claim to exceptional competence can rest: on theirs, there must already be an ethos propitious to the mobilisation of sentiments. But charisma expresses the balance of claim and acceptance—it is not a dynamic, causal explanatory concept; it relates to an established state of affairs (not to the power of one man) to cause events to move in a particular direction (Wilson 1973, 449).

According to Wallis, the concept of charisma is useful as the explanation of the actions and their consequences of the group's leader instead of using this concept to explain the behaviour of the followers. He explains that charismatic leadership is a fundamentally precarious status that is influenced by relationships and subjective factors (Wallis 1993, 176). According to him, charisma in the face of failure may evaporate in the eyes of followers, others may appear who claim access to the same source of legitimisation, and it may become *routinized* in the process of institutionalization. These are main problems of the precariousness of charisma as Wallis sees them, but he also discusses the innovative potential and wide range of opportunities that charisma brings. These contradictory elements may compose the explanation of the leader's actions and their consequences.

Eileen Barker analyzed the problem of *charismatization* through what she called the process of socialization (Barker 1993, 184). She was interested in how followers participate in the process of the charismatization of Sun Myung Moon and discovered that his charismatic leadership affected only those who had spent some time in the community and accordingly, did not affect those who had not met with him. She

stressed the importance of the social environment, the internal structure and culture of any organization that supports a charismatic leader.

Wilson also raised questions about the charismatic leadership in contemporary society. He discussed that in advanced Western Society charismatic leadership 'must be supported by exotic provenance. If God is alive he must come from a society that is still traditional, unplanned, unprogrammed, and in which arcane mystery and occult philosophy may still flourish... Yet it is clear that however dependent are modern societies on bureaucracy, technology, and conscious planning, the appeal of a charismatic does not entirely die'. Although at the same time Wilson predicted that the charismatic leader is unlikely to be accepted in modern society—except when 'his power lies only within the circumscribed arena of his own voluntary movement' (Wilson 1975, 114–15).

The above mentioned Mikael Rothstein researched the process of charismatization in the case of the leader of The Aetherius Society—George King. He stressed the influence of a close environment in the construction of the charisma of George King and discussed the levels of such a process starting from (1) the position of the movement to describe their leader instead of allowing him to speak for himself, (2) legitimating him by referring to various formal recognitions from institutions, (3) creating his hagiographical biography showing 'his remarkable kind since his birth', etc. Rothstein came to the conclusion that all this process of charismatization was dedicated to insiders in order to keep them engaged in the society's activities and to provide them with 'stimulating information' (Rothstein 2003).

All the above presented ideas are relevant for following discussion about charismatic leadership in contemporary religious movements. As some time has passed and we are witnessing changes in the religious field of contemporary society I think it would be useful to renew the discussion about charisma and to see how contemporary religious leaders gain attention, love and admiration of their followers.

Some reflections about research methodology

Vaiva, a 69 year old woman (my interlocutor from Vilnius) had a long, personal history of practicing yoga, but what she experienced when she saw Ravi Shankar for the first time was in her words 'something extraordinary'. When she gazed upon him, his eyes proved so deep, that she 'fell into them' and had no more questions to ask. According to Vaiva, the energy that came from this person pierced one with kindness. Giedrė, a 37 years old woman explained as well that at the beginning she saw Ravi Shankar as one of the Indian gurus who created a system of teaching and practices for Westerners, but later it transformed into a very personal relationship, which was followed by the sense of easiness.

I heard these and other stories about first meetings with Ravi Shankar during my research into the Art of Living Foundation 2006–09.¹ I have never met Ravi Shankar personally, although I had asked for such meeting in 2009 when he was visiting Lithuania. Yet during the same occasion I held certain personal impressions about him that led me to consider more about his role in the group. Of course, I knew him from the many stories told about him and from all those pictures of him standing in the rooms of satsangs.

In 2009 Ravi Shankar visited Lithuania and I, along with thousands of people came to see him. Waiting in the queue to buy a ticket, I noticed that many of the people in queue with me were not from Lithuania, but from neighbouring countries—Latvia, Poland, Belarus, etc. I bought my ticket, entered the building though the main arena was still closed so everybody gathered in the long corridor. Searching for a more peaceful place I found it near the service entrance where unexpectedly after a few minutes, the car with Ravi Shankar with his escort arrived and when they got out and came into arena, I saw a short Indian man wearing a serious look on his face, and he did not remind me at all of the smiling man from the pictures I used to see of him in the satsang rooms. After a half hour I saw him sitting in the middle of the huge stage in front of a few thousand of his followers and he smiled, which was shown on the big screens so that everyone in the arena could see him. He told the same stories that I had read before and the people were asking the very same questions asked and documented already for years and I felt like the only person in the audience who was not fascinated by Ravi Shankar.

Meanwhile the audience admired him.

A few days later, a story about the event was published in one of the leading newspapers basically describing the meeting with the well-known humanist. I talked with the journalist who prepared the story and she told me that she felt strange in the meeting, where everyone seemed to be adoring Ravi Shankar, but she decided not to demonstrate this feeling in her text as ‘it was too strange’.

This begged the question: why did a few of us see Ravi Shankar and not be in awe of him, while everybody else remained so fascinated with him?

These questions I will address in the following text through the discussion of the role and place of the leader in a contemporary spiritual group by analyzing its

¹ The research of the Art of Living Foundation took place in Lithuania and Denmark. The participant observation method was applied for the research of the group's activities. The semi-structured interview method was applied for the research of various aspects of its teachings, membership and its social consequences, leadership, etc. that were internalized by its members. There were 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the Art of Living Foundation. The content analysis method was applied for the analysis of organization documents and books with the aim to research its teachings and main activities and to find explanations for certain aspects that were observed in the group's activities.

texts and official documents, self-presentation strategies and through interviews with the members of the Art of Living Foundation (AoLF) in Lithuania and Denmark. This paper aims to reveal the case of this organization in Lithuania through the comparison of data from Denmark. After the death of many Eastern spiritual leaders like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (passed away in 2005), Sri Chinmoy (2007), Sathya Sai Baba (2001), Mataji Nirmala Devi (2011) who successfully brought Hinduism to Western societies, the leader of Art of Living Foundation organization—Ravi Shankar is becoming one of the most visible and successful international guru.² Besides, his successful activities in post-communist countries like Lithuania and Poland have also attracted attention to this leader and his organization in this part of Europe.³

Ravi Shankar—contemporary religious leader: portrait and ideas

In a famous and widely quoted discussion with Ravi Shankar, he was asked who he was. He answered that he was a child who had never grown up (Gautier 2008, 17). With this reference to eternal childhood, Ravi Shankar makes the allusion to the Christian understanding of saints as children, the need to be a child to understand the secrets of the sacred and to get to heaven and thus makes his teachings more attractive and understandable to the Judeo-Christian milieu. The biographies of Ravi Shankar show his relations with the social environment where he grew up and a focus on his childhood. It seems that Ravi Shankar had a special relationship with his parents and sister and emphasis is added on his spiritual qualities that were evident from his early years—the ability to plunge into deep meditation, and that at the age of four he had already quoted the scripture of Hinduism—the *Bhagavad Gita*.

As with most biographies of spiritual leaders, (known as hagiographies, or life stories of the saints), Ravi Shankar's biography pays scant attention to the events of his life and rather focuses on his current activities. These are introduced by an important point of departure—the recession into silence after which he introduced the world to the breathing technique *Sudarshan kriya*. Another important part of such biographies—various awards Ravi Shankar received for his activities that testify to his worldwide recognition.

² Despite its visibility and activities in Western and Eastern societies, the Art of Living Foundation and its leader Ravi Shankar have received little attention from academics. The first empirical research based academic publications were published in 2009 by Alexis Avdeef and Milda Ališauskienė. In 2009 Ališauskienė also defended her Ph.D. thesis where the case study of the Art of Living Foundation was analyzed.

³ According to the sources from the Art of Living Foundation, the number of people who finished the basic course of Shankar's teaching in Lithuania has already gone over ten thousand; such a number significantly exceeds the membership of other new religions in Lithuania.

Other biographies that are not published on the Internet show the wider spiritual explorations and discoveries of Ravi Shankar. The one written by French journalist Gautier revealed that Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, founder and leader of the Transcendental Meditation (TM) technique and organization, has played important role in Ravi Shankar's life and was his authority for a while (Gautier 2008, 35–9). One may recall the book by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi 'Science of Being and Art of Living' published in 1963; a portion of its title is used by his pupil Ravi Shankar for the title of his own organization. The fact that the relations between these two spiritual leaders is not widely discussed among the followers as TM is treated differently in various social contexts, for instance, in Lithuania such a reference is not discussed because TM is not widely known and it tends to evaporate the carefully constructed image of Ravi Shankar as a very original and new leader.

Meanwhile, I met people in Great Britain who have been following both teachers and their teachings at the same time who explained how they complemented each other.

Not much is known about what happened between Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Ravi Shankar, only that the teacher and his pupil finally separated. Gautier suggested that issues had arisen because of organizational problems and emphasized that the relationship between Shankar and Yogi remained positive (*ibid.*).

The main source on which one may study the teachings of Ravi Shankar is the electronic messages to followers, which are afterwards put into books. For example, the analysis of the content of three books with Ravi Shankar messages published in Lithuania revealed the variety of topics he approached. The main topics that interest him were 'I' and the processes taking place in me—doubt, hope, suffering, sadness, guilt, shyness, the path to the objective—sacrifice, freedom, devotion, spiritual teacher, relationship with the worldly—religion, God, transcendence, enlightenment, dedication (Šri Šri Ravi Šankaras 2001; Jo Šventenybė Šri Šri Ravi Šankaras 2009, 4, 188).

According to the teaching of Ravi Shankar, there are seven levels of human existence—body, breath, mind, intellect, memory, ego and the real 'I' and the four sources of energy—physical access, emotional resilience, mental stamina and mental flexibility (Gautier 2008). Health, said Ravi Shankar, harmonizes all levels of human existence. Harmony may be achieved through the use of a breathing technique *Sudarshan kriya*, which is the key element of breath. According to Ravi Shankar, no matter what religion one belongs to, there is one God and universe that is found in one's heart. Every man by nature, according to Ravi Shankar is divine. And this divinity is a unifying feature for all individuals.

Another important aspect of unity for individuals is their humanity, according to Ravi Shankar. Individuals are divided by gender, nation and religion and if these

parts of their identities are understood in sequence then, according to Ravi Shankar, human values become the object of worship (ibid., 177).

I see that today the world is in crisis. This is the identity crisis. People describe themselves with a number of restrictive characteristics—gender, race, religion or nationality, forgetting their essential identity, that they are part of the universal spirit. (Jo Šventenybė Šri Šri Ravi Šankaras 2007)

Ravi Shankar in his teachings approach issues relevant to the modern individual. He speaks of identity conflicts experienced by modern man in the context of a differentiation process which is taking place in contemporary society. Ravi Shankar offers to return to the universal issues of human values; he offers to remember the spiritual nature, the existence of the universal spirit and says that it is possible to avoid conflict situations.

The teaching of Ravi Shankar becomes attractive to the contemporary individual, because it responds to the questions of modern existence. Shankar's teachings are worldly and focused on the present. In this respect, AoLF teachings do not differ much from its 'mother' religion—Transcendental Meditation and other spiritual development groups that are focused on the problems of the contemporary individual and his/her existence in modern society.

To acquaint oneself with Ravi Shankar teachings, one begins with a visit to the introductory courses. (Usually information about the courses is disseminated through the Internet and through email lists.) It is here that the first information and practical advice on how to achieve 'freedom from stress' is provided. (An introductory course lasts five days, about 25 hours.) During the course visitors are acquainted with yoga exercises, called *asanas*, which, according to the organizers, strengthen and relax the body and provide 'a deep relaxation of the mind'.⁴ During these courses visitors are introduced to the breathing exercises—*pranayamas* (control of breathing; lit., 'stopping of breathing') and *bhastrika* (forced, quick breathing exercise) (see Gautier 2008, 213, 215). The primary focus of the course is the *Sudarshan kriya* breathing exercise, discovered by Ravi Shankar. The course consists of meditation, listening to the wisdom of Ravi Shankar or to oriental music. At the end, a participant receives a short description of the course as well as knowledge and tips on how to use the newly-acquired knowledge and skills in everyday life—to carry out daily *asanas* and breathing exercises. After completing the introductory courses, visitors are usually invited to attend weekly meetings—*satsangs*, where lessons of yoga *asanas* and breathing exercises are performed. According to Gautier, the *satsang* is a meeting at which all the songs glorify the deity and meditate on it (Gautier 2008, 216). *Satsangs*

⁴ Internet website of The Art of Living (Lithuania). Available from <<http://gyvenimomenas.lt/pop/Asanos.htm>> (accessed on 12-08-2008).

became an important part of the AoLF ritual, where the community gathers and shares past and present spiritual experiences.

In general, to follow Ravi Shankar and the possibility to go to listen to his teachings and practice can be portrayed as the courses, which are set out in Figure 1. The opportunity to follow Ravi Shankar opens only after finishing the introductory course, without which the visits to weekly *satsangs* or to other courses (Ashtavakra Gita, the Full Moon Meditation) are not possible. For those who want to raise awareness of healthy lifestyles, courses of Ayurveda are offered, and for those who wish to go into a deeper understanding of their personalities—two courses of meditations (Sahaj Samadhi and Full Moon meditation) are proposed.

The third part of the AoLF courses usually takes place in the regional centres of the organization—for example; one is located in Bad Antogast, in Germany. This part is allocated for those who want to become teachers of the Art of Living themselves and usually Ravi Shankar is present there. The scheme of AoLF courses depicted in figure 1 reveals the process of the charismatization of Ravi Shankar—where his

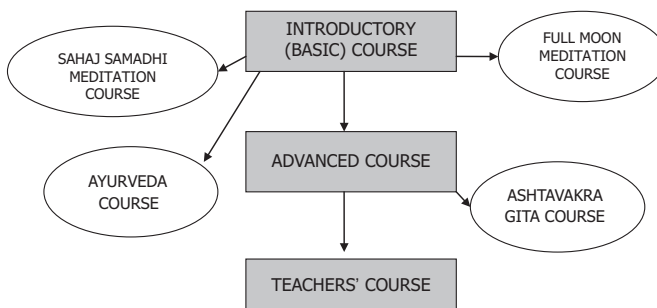


Figure 1. The Scheme of AoLF courses

teaching and practice is introduced to followers in steps. The case of AoLF supports Barker's idea that the social milieu is very important in the charismatization process; the organization creates such a milieu for followers of Ravi Shankar through the succession of the courses where the knowledge about him and his teachings are introduced gradually.

Additionally, the Art of Living Foundation offers courses for children—Art Excel courses for children; Yes and Yes Plus for young people and the Prison Smart course for prisoners. Special courses for people with cancer are offered, too. Such a strategy of suggesting courses for various social groups is a kind of niche marketing, which is observed in various Western societies. In the AoLF case such niche marketing has been successfully received as well as the openness of the organization towards new forms of activities—yoga in the supermarkets, yoga music parties, etc.

The Art of Living Foundation courses, except special programs for prisoners and ill people, are paid-courses and the price is determined by each country separately.

Ravi Shankar and his followers: the data from the field

The narratives of Art of Living Foundation members have revealed the role of Ravi Shankar within this organization. Informants were asked to describe who Ravi Shankar is to them:

Ravi Shankar is a teacher. ... This man gives me knowledge like a granny—crocheting knitting, as a teacher—to write. This man gives me the knowledge, spiritual, and something more—it is what I wanted to hear all the time ... (Ruth, 29 year old female, Lithuania)

Ruth's narrative introduces the concept of the teacher, which she presents in an intelligible context, providing a metaphor of the grandmother and her granddaughter. One may understand how special relations are usually between these relatives and this metaphor may be interpreted as 'illustrating warm and immediate relations where special knowledge is transmitted'. In general, the teacher's image is very widely discussed among the informants. Ravi Shankar is commonly called *teacher* among members of the Art of Living Foundation in Lithuania. Danish informants also used the concept of the teacher, but the more frequently illustrated personal relationship uses such concepts as *guruji* or just a *guru*, i.e. they were more liberal in using terms of Hinduism. These trends among Danish informants can be interpreted as their awareness of other cultures through processes of globalization and multiculturalism. As the consequence, the concept of *guru* is not perceived in a negative connotation.

On the other hand, the avoidance of using the concept of *guru* by informants from Lithuania can be interpreted as their desire not to be targeted with other religious communities, originating from the East, whose leaders are so called. Such tendencies refer to the atmosphere of religious pluralism in Lithuania where the Roman Catholic Church dominates in all aspects.

But as far as I see Sri Sri he is my teacher, my authority in any case. As far as I can see how he lives his life, he demonstrates and justifies the whole idea [Art of Living—M.A.]. ... Sri Sri, if I do not see how it is fulfilled in life ... I would never have entrusted the matter. (Eglė, 34 year old woman, Lithuania)

Eglė, in her narrative, uses the typical name that the majority of Lithuanian informants use for Ravi Shankar—Sri Sri—and that refers to his status of holiness. She also emphasizes Ravi Shankar as an authority thus, differently than Ruth, who does not reveal the immediate relations with him. She rather stresses him as a teacher who shows examples that encourage people to follow him. One of such examples, according to Eglė is the coincidence of teaching and life in Ravi Shankar's person, the harmony between

his life and teaching. Such a comparison was quite typical for other informants too, who in their narratives expressed the need to seek harmony, which they discovered in the person of Ravi Shankar, and to use him as example worthy to follow.

Giedrė, a 37 year old woman, revealed a particular evolution in her narrative concerning her relationship with Ravi Shankar as the authority from the organization's founder to an intimate, personal relationship. At first she saw Ravi Shankar as a simple Hindu who applied ancient wisdom to modern Westerners. Thus in her case, the process of the charismatization of Ravi Shankar went from merely accepting him as a simple man, to the founder of the organization, to one of many Hindu gurus to the spiritual master, and later it arrived to the point where she decided that he is the one with whom she may have personal relations. Giedrė's approach, which is also echoed by other informants, supports Weber's understanding of charisma that was based mainly on the relationship between the leader and the followers, as in narratives they emphasized the personal relations with Ravi Shankar, they constructed and maintained his charisma.

I realized that I agree with everything he said. I felt such a strong 'yes' feeling. (Mary, 42 year old female, Denmark)

Mary's narrative revealed her approach to Ravi Shankar, his teaching and her emotional relationship with him—when she felt inner approval for his ideas. Like Mary, the majority of informants described the first impression that Ravi Shankar had made on them during the first direct meeting, although all of them went through the introductory course before they met him. Thus, they were prepared and already socialized into the charismatization process of Ravi Shankar. This impression for the majority was positive. But there were other opinions, too.

And then Sri Sri seems to me..., I did not catch everything, that I was told [the first time took courses—M.A.]. The course was very good; the experience was really profound and unexpected. There was such a nice Hindu teacher. But Sri Sri personally bothered me, all those *bajanas* [Sanskrit chants—M.A.] bothered me. (Ignas, 43 year old male, Lithuania)

Ignas' narrative is different but there is also another important factor: he had met Ravi Shankar during his introductory course. Thus, this narrative also supports the idea of the charismatization process as Ignas had not gone through the socialization process; he was not prepared to meet with Ravi Shankar and this may be one of the reasons for his criticism. Also, Ignas' narrative reveals not only a critical but rather a consumerist approach to Ravi Shankar, as he liked his ideas and techniques but not him personally. The continuation of the informant's story revealed an altered approach to the AoLF founder—although he remained active in the organization. Ignas' story is important in revealing the fact that the approach of Ravi Shankar is very individual and variable depending on the person and its individual involvement

in the organization. Such an attitude to Ravi Shankar was also quite typical for other members of the AoLF who were not very much involved in its activities. For instance, one informant from Denmark, a middle aged man told me that he did not want to go to meet with Ravi Shankar for the 25th anniversary because he had begun to distance himself from organization and although he thought that the ideas were good and beautiful he did not want to go to a more intimate relation with the leader of group anymore. Such stories suggest the idea that the charismatization process of Ravi Shankar depended not only on participation in the courses but on other factors, too. And these factors are very individual.

When I think about contemporary enlightened people I think about the Dalai Lama, Sathya Sai Baba and Ravi Shankar. I know his work; I know where he is now. It is my understanding that this is a light of consciousness, people who currently live here and those I know, at least in my eyes, I think of two—the Dalai Lama and Ravi Shankar. And according to my belief in reincarnation I see these as very bright souls, a very conscious reincarnation of souls. Well, from where they receive a mission—I do not understand everything. My natural mind, these are people who are associated with the supreme consciousness, and remember their mission from there. (Vaiva, 69 year old woman, Lithuania)

Vaiva's narrative placed Ravi Shankar among other spiritual leaders. Although Ravi Shankar did not talk about other spiritual teachers, his followers tend to compare him with others they know. Vaiva compared Ravi Shankar with the Dalai Lama and Sathya Sai Baba, and discussed the source of the knowledge of Ravi Shankar and others. Some of the Danish informants also compared Ravi Shankar with other spiritual leaders like the Dalai Lama, Sathya Sai Baba and Osho. For example, the informant John described these people with the concept of 'an enlightened mind', and explained that their wisdom is not understood by modern people. In addition, according to John, he now understands much better what Jesus and his disciples felt when no one around believed that he was God. John also explained that to follow a living teacher required courage. The placement of Ravi Shankar in one line with other spiritual leaders legitimizes him, but also this may be understood as the process of his charismatization, too, as for some people, from the field of spirituality these spiritual leaders may look like having charisma.

John is a 34 year old man from Denmark and his commitment to Ravi Shankar is note-worthy in another aspect as it can be seen as a feature of traditional religion. However, it appeared that he chose his teacher from others, whose teachings he also found familiar. During a visit to the informant's home, I discovered images of various spiritual teachers. Thus, although the narratives of informants revealed their commitment to Ravi Shankar, their relationship with the teacher demonstrated the aspects of modern religion where religious bricolage manifested itself in everyday lives, through the construction of home altars with pictures of various spiritual

teachers. Such religious bricolage may be interpreted as an expression of religious consumerism in contemporary society, but this feature was more observed in Denmark than in comparison with Lithuania.

It should be noted that among the informants from Denmark, there was more commitment to Ravi Shankar in a religious sense than among the informants in Lithuania. According to the informant Rita:

There are many gurus in the world, but I like him the most. (Rita, 26 year old female, Denmark)

Or as informant Michael puts it:

Guruji means everything to me. ... I feel for him very strong love and respect. I feel deep commitment to him; because I owe him for all that I have best in my life. Most importantly, I can now enjoy what is good and he told me how to do it. (Michael, 37 year old male, Denmark)

These differences between the narratives of Danish and Lithuanian should be contextualized in the socio-cultural peculiarities of each country, paying attention to negative provisions in respect of other believers and the intolerance for religious innovation. This is peculiar to a majority of post-communist societies, as well as Lithuania. The majority of Lithuanian informants were reluctant to disclose their personal relationship with Ravi Shankar—as a religious leader. They did not want to be compared with other religious organizations in any sense.

In the narratives of Lithuanian informants various types of relationships with Ravi Shankar were found:

And I say to him, you know, it seems to me that you are very often here in my meditations. I see you when you wash the floor. I had several very vivid inner visions, when I saw just how he is doing something slightly different from usual. I saw him in a completely different way, dressed in secular clothes, helping me to make something to eat and so on. He smiled mischievously, looked at me and said, 'Yes, yes, I'm often here'. (Adam, 43 year old male, Lithuanian)

Because of such experiences revealed in Adam's narrative, the sources of which are not the subject of social science research, we can generalize that Ravi Shankar, in the lives of his followers, became an important figure—accompanying them in their visions and everyday lives.

In the narratives of the members of the AoLF, Ravi Shankar is presented as the one who has a higher consciousness, or even a divine authority; he is a spiritual man who is able to manage crowds and provide simple answers to the complex questions of existence. The emergence of the spiritual authority changed the lives of the informants, both in the relationship with environment and with the teacher. All the informants in their narratives revealed the experience of personal communication with Ravi Shankar.

Such communication may be direct and indirect. Indirect communication meant communicating with Ravi Shankar in thoughts, an emerging sense of abandonment when he leaves, or on the contrary feeling that he is always close. Informants also mentioned more direct communication with Ravi Shankar, i.e. communication during meetings when glances meet or even talking with him personally.

Some informants compared Ravi Shankar with other spiritual teachers of contemporary religiosity like Sathya Sai Baba, the Dalai Lama, etc. But at the same time they emphasized his uniqueness. Meanwhile other informants emphasized not just the spiritual authority of Ravi Shankar but his secular activities. They mentioned that he participated in the meeting of world leaders in Davos or that the AoLF is acknowledged by the United Nations. One informant revealed that AoLF courses were attended by the former President of the Lithuanian Supreme Council, Vytautas Landsbergis. It appeared that Ravi Shankar and Vytautas Landsbergis met in the European Parliament, later V. Landsbergis visited AoLF events and conferences. After a meeting in the European Parliament, photographs depicting Ravi Shankar's meeting with influential politicians were circulated. In Lithuania and in post-communist countries, a well-known politician became one of the legitimating factors for the charismatization of Ravi Shankar and the *emplacement* of the AoLF in this country.

Conclusions

The analysis of the Art of Living Foundation official documents and texts and narratives of the members of this organization in Lithuania and Denmark lead us to a few conclusions.

The charismatization process of Ravi Shankar's leadership is constructed and maintained both by organizational and individual efforts. Organization provides hagiographical biographies of Ravi Shankar where he is depicted as a peculiar man and his activities—as extraordinary. The organization supported the publishing of books about him and introduced courses where his person and ideas were presented to visitors gradually, and by maintaining a monopoly of knowledge about him and his ideas.

On the individual level, the construction and maintenance of the charisma of Ravi Shankar is revealed in the narratives of informants both from Lithuania and Denmark. The majority of informants met Ravi Shankar after introductory and other courses and already had some knowledge about him. The first impression in the majority of cases was positive and the individuals continued to have a very personal relationship with Ravi Shankar. The analysis of narratives revealed that the relationship with Ravi Shankar was usually maintained by direct or indirect communication with him. The

important role of the charismatization process of Ravi Shankar was his legitimization. According to the research data, this was usually done either in a spiritual or a secular way. In the spiritual way he was placed in one line with other spiritual leaders by emphasizing his spiritual capabilities. In the secular way Ravi Shankar was presented as an important figure in the world of science and politics. This was followed by the dissemination of information and photographs about his meetings with well-known figures.

In general, the case of Ravi Shankar as a spiritual leader in Lithuania supports theoretical considerations of scholars about charisma and at the same time enriches them with new data from the field of new religions in post-communist Europe. Further research into this topic should be carried out with the aim to show how locally, in Lithuania and Denmark, the observed pattern of the construction of Ravi Shankar's charisma may be applied to the global manifestations of this new religion.

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