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GURU KNOWS BEST?

A Review of *Cartwheels in a Sari* by Jayanti Tamms

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The influx of Eastern religious influence on Western culture is nothing new. Self-proclaimed gurus of one sort or another have long sought to export and sometimes repackage their ideologies for broader audiences. In 1893, for instance, the World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago, introduced Westerners to Swami Vivekananda, while Swami Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) gained popularity in the 1960s and beyond. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, known for his at one time faddishly popular Transcendental Meditation and his celebrity following, gained his share of attention, as did the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's lavish lifestyle, which included ownership of many Rolls Royces, and his compound full of devout followers in Oregon, also drew attention.

But what of Sri Chinmoy (1931–2007)? He lived comfortably but not lavishly in apparently modest circumstances in Queens, New York, championed the cause of global peace, and was even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. He met with famous politicians such as Mikhail Gorbachev, and other influential individuals including Princess Diana and Mother Teresa, not to mention a long line of celebrity disciples that included Carlos Santana.

Was Sri Chinmoy a genuine spiritual leader the New Age movement could finally look up to as an altruistic champion of peace and tolerance? Or is there more to the story in this case, as there so typically has been with others? *Cartwheels in a Sari: A Memoir of Growing Up Cult* by Jayanti Tamm seeks to shed some light on Sri Chinmoy, not as a detached analysis or evaluation, but as a memoir written by a former disciple. Tamm, in fact, was born into Chinmoy's religious circle and observes that her memoir "isn't the definitive account of Sri Chinmoy; it is my own remembrance" (author's note). Nevertheless, along the way Tamm offers several insights that are helpful in understanding not only Sri Chinmoy and his followers, but also the characteristics of cultic organizations and, consequently, how best to interact with adherents.

A Guru and His Ways. Tamm's parents, an American mother and an Estonian father who immigrated to

America with his family, became disciples of Sri Chinmoy, also known as Chinmoy Kumar Ghose, while unmarried. Chinmoy summarily informed them they were to “marry but remain celibate” (p. 7). When Chinmoy learned that Tamm’s mother had become pregnant, he first scolded them for “indulging in ‘lower-vital forces,’” but upon conferring with the Supreme (Chinmoy’s word for “god”), he announced a “special soul” would “incarnate as his chosen disciple” (7). This “chosen one” was named Jayanti, or, “the absolute victory of the highest Supreme” (9). Thus began Tamm’s experiences “growing up cult.”

As expected, Tamm’s firsthand recollections of life in the Sri Chinmoy Center make up the bulk of *Cartwheels in a Sari*. From her early devotion and commitment to everything guru to her later expulsion and banishment as she approached her mid twenties, Tamm covers a variety of topics.

Chinmoy’s ascetic teachings run throughout the book, with Tamm noting such restrictions as forbidding television, newspapers, pets, computers, interaction with the opposite sex, unnecessary interaction with nondisciples, dietary restrictions, and more. Chinmoy, however, made exceptions, particularly for himself. As a result, he kept an illegal “zoo” of exotic pets in his basement, cared for by disciples. While he forbade the watching of television, Chinmoy craved the attention of the media, often staging elaborate weight-lifting events—one of his many areas of interest—in order to draw attention. It pleased him to be photographed with celebrities of all kinds, and he often lured them by granting them awards.

Page after page, Tamm reveals the underlying purpose of Chinmoy’s disciples—to please him. Everything revolved around Chinmoy and his wishes, demands, restrictions, and interests. “The sole point of everything,” writes Tamm, “was Guru” (13). A self-proclaimed “avatar” who had reached “God-realization” at age eleven, Chinmoy repeatedly told his disciples that if they did not live according to his dictates, they would not only cause Chinmoy physical suffering, but would also bring down karmic punishment upon themselves. Unfortunately, Tamm’s parents offered little in the way of traditional or healthy parenting. “Ask Guru” seemed to be their primary response to every situation.

Chinmoy, with few exceptions, restricted the education of his disciples. Essentially, college was out of the question for any disciple. Chinmoy claimed educational pursuits emphasized the life of the mind over the life of the heart. Since he viewed the life of the heart as superior to the life of the mind, his restrictions on education limited the opportunities many of his disciples had. As a result of the unquestioned authority of Chinmoy, combined with total devotion, many disciples had no lives beyond Chinmoy, working for him or for “divine enterprises” (businesses owned, operated, and employed by disciples who were expected to give much of their income to support the guru). Employment exceptions were made when Chinmoy had other ideas in mind, such as having many of his disciples employed by

the United Nations in order to curry the favor of the organization.

“Guru knows best” appears to have been the approach everyone was expected to take when it came to Chinmoy’s decrees. Tamm quotes Chinmoy as saying, “The Supreme acts in and through me. You do not question what I do or tell you to do on my behalf. All commands are coming from the Highest Supreme. I only take advice from the Supreme” (42). Elsewhere she writes, quoting Chinmoy, “True disciples never doubt their guru” (51).

While Chinmoy often presented one face to the general public—such as to the media, celebrities, and dignitaries— another face was seen far more often by devoted disciples. The media saw the kindhearted guru eager to foster peace and unity in the world, while disciples often saw a restrictive and severe teacher who fostered a sort of caste system among his own disciples, often causing them to vie for positions of power and turn each other in for the smallest infractions. According to Tamm, “Guru enjoyed competitions that set up disciples against one another” (102). Ex-disciples were shunned, even by family members. Tamm’s brother, for instance, severed all contact with Tamm following her banishment from the Sri Chinmoy Center (276). It was not uncommon for Chinmoy to sell items to disciples, expecting them to pay for signed photographs, books, and other materials, while also expecting them to donate any windfalls, such as inheritance money.

What did Chinmoy want from Tamm? “What he wanted and expected was my unconditional obedience and undying love” (69). Later Tamm adds, “No matter what Guru asked... I needed to carry it out, swiftly and obediently” (75).

Cultic characteristics. Tamm is not shy about deeming the Sri Chinmoy Center a cult, referring to it as “the cult of the short bald man in the flowing robes who declared himself to be God” (2). But did the Chinmoy Center fit the description of a cult? If the definition of a cult is based on theological and sociological approaches, several aspects of the center do indeed qualify it as cultic. Theologically speaking, Chinmoy’s teachings are clearly at odds with Christianity. He declared himself an avatar (a divine manifestation), believed in karma and reincarnation, believed human beings could achieve God-realization, held to an essentially pantheistic view of reality (all is divine), and viewed Christ as merely one avatar among many.

If we are to believe Tamm, the Chinmoy Center also fit the sociological description of a cult in a number of ways. First, Chinmoy served as the unquestioned authority. Tamm writes, “He was our avatar, the direct representative of our insignificant selves to the infinite pantheon of divinity. He was both father and God, the sustenance of our lives” (122).

Second, members were isolated from traditional surroundings, including contact with family members who were not disciples and with outsiders. As much time as possible was to be spent with Chinmoy or involved in related center activities, leaving little time to think or reflect on involvement.

Third, the center discouraged independent thinking. It promoted unquestioning allegiance to Chinmoy while discouraging the life of the mind.

Fourth, the center made it clear that ex-disciples were to be shunned completely. This cultic technique is particularly nefarious in that it plays on the fears of members, promising swift and severe separation for those who no longer belong.

Fifth, according to Tamm, Chinmoy was also a charismatic leader. This alone did not make his organization a cult, but it is a common characteristic of such groups. Tamm writes of his “beautiful presence. The waves of energy that surrounded him enveloped me completely, erasing all thought. This is what I loved about Guru. Being in his presence created a tangible change in me; it made me holy, better” (138).

Leaving a Cult. *Cartwheels in a Sari* is instructive in many respects. While Tamm’s memoir is candid and at times more explicit than some readers would be comfortable with, it does serve the purpose of helping readers better understand cultic involvement. Christian apologists and countercult ministries are right to point out doctrinal deviations of cults and new religions, but Tamm’s book illustrates the reality that many disciples of such groups are not involved primarily because of doctrine, but because of relational needs the group is meeting. We are to test doctrine and compare it with truth, but not at the expense of neglecting human needs. Apologetics and evangelism require “gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15), but they must be reasonable and relational. Piles of theological evidence against a cultic organization will do little to sway the follower if the relational aspect is neglected.

Tamm’s memoir also serves to underscore the many challenges that an adherent of a cult or new religion must overcome in order not only to leave the group, but move beyond it to some sense of normalcy. After being banished from the Sri Chinmoy Center, Tamm explains, “As far as I knew, no manuals or instruction guides were readily available on how to create a life and how to function in a post-Guru world....Nothing from my past was available for me to rely on—I was on my own” (280–81).

Leaving a cultic organization is rarely easy. In Tamm’s case it resulted in shunning not only by disciples, but also by members of her immediate family. With her entire life spent serving Chinmoy, leaving the group meant literally starting her life over from scratch. What Tamm needed at that point in her life was not a tract or tirade about the theological errors of Chinmoy— though they were many—but

love and kindness. Tamm's memoir is also instructive to those involved in counseling former members of cults and new religions. We need to keep in mind the many hidden scars that such individuals may carry with them even years after their cultic involvement.

Although Sri Chinmoy passed away in 2007, his legacy and that of countless other Eastern gurus lives on. In many respects, Eastern mysticism has become mainstream. The teachings of such groups, however, are not only at odds with God's revelation and human reason, but also with our very humanity.

—Robert Velarde

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