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A Spirited Battle for Hearts, Minds, and Souls

Transcendental Meditation Vies with
Mainstream Religion in the American Midwest

The tiny farm town of Fairfield, Iowa, became the unlikely American home of Transcendental Meditation (TM) in the 1970s, when followers bought a bankrupt Presbyterian college and turned it into the Maharishi University of Management (MUM). Today, an estimated two thousand or so devotees in town continue to adhere, in varying degrees, to the teachings of the TM movement's guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who died in 2008. They warm to occasional praise for TM from such media personalities as journalists Candy Crowley and Soledad O'Brien, ABC News host George Stephanopoulos, and TV stars Oprah Winfrey and Ellen DeGeneres. Comedians Jerry Seinfeld, Jim Carrey, and Russell Brand, as well as radio and TV personality Howard Stern also try to keep alive the movement's flame by publicly endorsing it. Further, filmmaker David Lynch, perhaps the movement's most passionate public advocate, lends a hand by running a foundation that espouses TM—in public schools and in programs benefitting veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder and others dealing with various traumas.

But long gone are the days when college-age baby boomers flocked to TM by the tens of thousands—even as meditation of all sorts surges in popularity across the United States. The movement, which claims that some six million people have learned TM in the past fifty years, is graying. Thus, it is not clear how long it will endure or in what form. TM may not survive this generation's passing. Will the group find a healthy stream of new practitioners through its outreach efforts? Will the Fairfield TM community continue to loom large in the global movement?

Part of the reason for the movement's decline is an unsettled argument over whether TM constitutes a religion, particularly one that competes with Western faiths. Can adherents practice Judeo Christian religions while hewing to the late Hindu master's teachings? Or must one choose? This issue, which has dogged the movement ever since Maharishi took TM into the West from India in 1958, even landed the TM organization in court, when meditators sought to teach their practice in public schools, something that proponents are doing anew. That court battle, which the TM leadership lost, marked the end of the movement's headlong growth in the United States. Movement initiations plummeted after a federal court ruled, in *Malnak v. Yogi* (1977), that the teaching of TM and its accompanying explanations—called the Science of Creative Intelligence, or SCI—was “religious in nature.” This decision halted instruction programs in public schools in New Jersey.¹ The case was at the core of “a shockingly steep fall from grace for the TM movement.”²

One way to explore the issue is to look at how TM and various religions interact in Fairfield, as well as how the movement has fared in other places. The town offers a case study in the limits of tolerance in the Midwest. While TM practitioners have made a home for themselves in this archetypal Iowa farm community over the last forty years, coexistence falls short of full acceptance, especially in the religious realm. This became clear in a series of interviews I conducted in the town over a three year period, beginning in 2010. These interviews, buttressed by a review of the literature by and about meditators and their critics, as well as an examination of relevant religious studies scholarship, form the basis of my study.

“We Don’t See TM and Christianity as Being a Compatible Mix”

When worshippers at St. Gabriel and All Angels Church gather for Sunday services in Fairfield, some among the couple dozen or so faithful believe they are in divine company. Angels help out in the services, they say. Indeed, ever since the earliest days of this Liberal Catholic congregation in 1985, members indicate that they have enjoyed the blessing of their patron saint, St. Gabriel, an angel important to Catholics, Jews, and Muslims. As the church proclaims on its website, “We continue to feel the guidance of St. Gabriel to this day.”³

Such mystical beliefs, while well outside the mainstream among Christian churches in Fairfield, suit the TM practitioners who established St. Gabriel.



Fig. 1. Meditators have built a bevy of new structures on the campus at Maharishi University of Management. The sprawling MUM dome welcomes men to practice meditation in large groups every day. Women are welcome at another dome nearby. Photograph by author.

The Fairfield church's founders gravitated to the Liberal Catholic Church (LCC), established by English psychics in 1916, in part because the LCC adheres to sacraments and rituals familiar to Roman Catholics, yet also incorporates an array of otherworldly ideas. Its philosophy, for instance, includes the idea of reincarnation, salvation through a series of lives that lead to perfection, and the Kingdom of Heaven. "The founders went over the liturgy and removed all the references to sin and guilt and being miserable," a longtime St. Gabriel member told me after one Sunday service. "It's all positive." She added that the approach echoes the TM movement's upbeat message about avoiding "negativity." Warming to the notion that drew her fellow meditators to the church's founders, she added, "they were psychics and could see the angels and used all the best parts of the liturgies they could find to get the assistance of angels at every service."

Religion is a sensitive matter for followers of the late Maharishi. The faithful at St. Gabriel felt compelled to turn to a relatively new and less mainstream church because they sought a more positive message, one in keeping with the spirituality TM kindles. Other meditators who also are Jews, Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons have taken a different path, affiliating with their various coreligionists in Fairfield even as they hold to the guru's teachings. As they joined established mainstream churches in Fairfield, however, they have often kept to themselves, especially outside the church walls, socializing mainly with other meditators.

Whether they attend St. Gabriel or a more mainstream church, these practitioners generally side with the movement's official view that TM is

not a religion. They hold that the practice of meditation, indeed, can “en-liven” one’s established religious practices. During services at St. Gabriel and at Beth Shalom—a synagogue set up by meditators—speakers may refer occasionally to meditation or Vedic teachings, for instance, but the rituals and practices are distinct to the religions. Jesus Christ is front and center at St. Gabriel, while Adonai (God) reigns at Beth Shalom.

But TM practitioners also cannot join some churches in Fairfield. The leaders there see TM as a competing religion that conflicts with Christianity. Like anyone else, meditators are welcome to attend services at Immanuel Lutheran Church, for instance, but the church will not accept them as members. “We don’t see TM and Christianity as being a compatible mix,” Immanuel Lutheran pastor Mark Brase declared in an interview with me. TM practitioners, he added, try to “get in touch with divinity or the divine nature wherever they can find it,” but Lutherans in his denomination, the conservative Missouri Synod, look to Jesus Christ. The minister affirmed, “We have a God that took on flesh and bone.”

Much to the consternation of some traditional religious leaders in Fairfield, the ethereal interests of meditators have brought a mystical bent to the town. Once home solely to mainstream Christian churches, the town has developed into a spiritual smorgasbord. Seekers can find everything from conventional religious practice to adherence to rival Indian gurus whose heresies—in the view of TM officials—could lead a TM supporter to suffer the equivalent of excommunication. More than two dozen houses of worship operate in Fairfield, some serving just a handful of followers and some drawing hundreds. These institutions compete with established churches for members, posing a theological and practical challenge: by excluding meditators, the established churches would seem to limit their own growth potential.

This competition appears less of a concern to some Fairfield clerics. According to Rev. Brase at Immanuel Lutheran, the issue is theological. Meditators, he argued, look inward and empty their minds “to be filled by a supreme entity.” In a sense, he said, that approach makes oneself into a god rather than accepting God as separate from humans. He drew a similar distinction between Christianity and religions that hold that God is found in everything. “God may be the energy behind everything, but I’m not God. The tree outside is not God,” he asserted. God, he holds, is the Holy Trinity. Accepting the views espoused by the TM movement is bound to breed confusion, Rev. Brase maintained. He suggested that children raised in homes where both TM and “conventional” religion are observed are likely

to be theologically perplexed. “There are going to be a certain number of people who see that it somehow fits together and, under an objective view from my perspective, being raised in that would maybe confuse me,” he contended. “They need the Gospels. We all need Christ.”

Much like some other non-meditators in Fairfield, Rev. Brase does not shun TM practitioners, but just has little to do with them. In town since 2002, when he came to Immanuel Lutheran, he does not have much occasion to socialize with meditators. He stays away from events at MUM and does not shop at stores such as Thymely Solutions, a natural remedies store run by a meditator. He does sometime stop by Revelations, a used bookstore and dining spot frequented by meditators. Fairfield, Rev. Brase added, is composed of “two groups that go our separate ways,” despite what he called a “certain amount of integration.” Practitioners of TM in Fairfield, though, have moved far in the last forty years to develop a civil relationship with non-meditating neighbors. Ed Malloy, the town’s popular mayor since 2001, is a meditator, as are several members of the city council. Meditators run many businesses in town, some employing hundreds of non-meditators. Members of both groups may rub shoulders at city government meetings, Chamber of Commerce events, or even meetings of ecumenical organizations such as the Fairfield Area Ministerial Association, a pastors’ group.

Indeed, many of the public amenities developed in the town in recent years are examples of cooperation between the meditator and non-meditator communities. For example, meditators launched a nonprofit community radio station, KRUU-LP 100.1 FM, in 2006 and have been joined in the effort by many non-meditator volunteers. Similarly, members of both groups teamed up to back the construction of a new Fairfield Public Library building, the Fairfield Arts and Convention Center, and a loop trail system. KRUU radio host Cheryl Fusco Johnson, who moved to Fairfield from Seattle in 1982 as part of the meditating community, celebrates this collaborative spirit: “People working together is what makes Fairfield such a great place to live.”

“You Have Your Lifestyle and We Have Ours”

But for many there remains a divide. Meditators and non-meditators do not get together regularly at backyard barbecues, Rev. Brase observed. “Within the non-TM group, there really are people who just don’t want to

have anything to do with them,” he explained. “I can’t speak for them, but I imagine there’s a certain group [of TMers] who stay to themselves, too.”

For some residents the “us and them” sensibility does not represent active hostility but rather a split based on separate interests and social ties. It shows up most clearly in some churches. Meditators, for instance, are welcome to join one of the oldest churches in town, the First Presbyterian Church, which dates back to 1841 in Fairfield. Several meditators sing in the choir there, and the church has run activities such as Taize services that include Christian meditative prayer and singing.

But some members disclosed in interviews with me that the friendships end at the church door. “I’ve never been invited to [a meditator’s] house,” observed Robert Rasmussen, a former mayor of Fairfield and member of the Presbyterian Church. “Why would I go? What would I do there when I got there?” He said the split is “sad” because “they have just as much to offer.” Yet Rasmussen also explained that the separation is mutual: “you have your lifestyle and we have ours, and it stops there.” He added, “people would worry about the fact that if the meditator invited you, they would worry about, I suppose, that they’re going to try to convert you [sic].”

Rev. Joseph Phipps, pastor at the Presbyterian Church since August 2008, seconded the idea that “there is a cultural divide between the meditator community and the non-meditators.” The meditators in the church choir come to services to sing, for instance, but tend not to attend services when the choir is not singing and avoid other church functions, such as potluck meals. He said, “Many folks feel, rightly or wrongly, that they have their life and we have ours.”

Rev. Phipps suspected the rift stems from a time of more explicit antagonism between the communities. “I don’t believe that’s the case now, but feelings carry over,” he reflected. For his part, the Presbyterian minister had reservations about the focus of some meditation, especially if it may involve invoking the names of Hindu deities through mantras—something that TM backers dismiss as anti-TM propaganda—though he does not object to meditation per se. “My concerns are what you are meditating on,” he observed. “The Bible is clear that we’re to meditate on God’s word, so the issue is not meditation. The issue is, what is the focus of that meditation?” He asked, “Are we focused on seeking God and his word” or the “divinity” of individuals? Rev. Phipps said he is concerned, too, about the influence of non-Christian ideas on Christians. In a religiously and philosophically diverse community such as Fairfield, “the whole idea is you can

pick and choose and take a little from here and a little from there.” That, he fretted, can very easily undermine one’s observance of Christianity.

Some Religious Leaders Embraced TM

The split in the religious realm endures even though one of the stronger backers of TM in town hailed from the Presbyterian Church, longtime pastor John R. Dilley. In a 1975 piece in *Christian Century*, Rev. Dilley recalled that church members worried about what the meditators might do with Parsons College, the Presbyterian affiliated school whose campus the TM movement bought out of bankruptcy.⁴ He wrote: “We had visions of flowing robes, burning incense, long hair or shaved heads, prayer beads and sandals (and sandals would be unthinkable inside a pair of overshoes on a cold January morning in Iowa!).” But movement representatives who appeared at a church meeting in May 1974 could not have been more at odds with the hippie image. “The two neatly dressed young men with attaché cases who were the university’s emissaries to Fairfield looked as though they had stepped of Madison Avenue into the cornfields of southeast Iowa,” Dilley described. “Their speech was serene yet assured. Their fiscal and educational knowledge satisfied the business and college contingent present.”

Rev. Dilley pressed state and national officials to help open the way to the movement, even in the face of “the forceful and violent opposition of a vociferous minority group that included a few members of our congregation.” Once the meditators agreed to set up shop at Parsons, moving the school then known as Maharishi International University (MIU) from California to the Parsons campus, apprehension was high among townspeople. “Rumors abounded,” Dilley remembered. “Fundamentalist churches drew crowds from fifty and sixty miles away to hear a ‘specialist on Satanism’ who had been called in to disclaim the virtues of TM and the leaders of MIU.”

Worries eased, though, when a local paper ran a photo of a dozen or so students getting off a plane in Des Moines. “[T]he fellows all in shirts and ties and jackets and, best of all, short hair,” Rev. Dilley explained. “[T]he girls [were] in dresses, not jeans.” The Presbyterian Church’s welcoming service drew more than two hundred students and faculty members, jamming the parking lot with bicycles and filling the seats, aisles and balcony at the church. “The electric vibrations which ran through the congregation that morning were fantastic,” Dilley wrote. “It was a real spiritual happening, a celebration of the highest order.”⁵

Rev. Dilley had personal reasons to endorse TM. He had suffered heart attacks in 1970 and 1973 and had his heart catheterized in April 1974. He learned of studies suggesting that meditation could lower one's heart rate and help ease high blood pressure, and his doctors urged him to consider practicing TM. He became a meditator, as did others in his family. "Our entire family have become meditators and we have found no compromise in our commitment to Jesus Christ and to his church," Rev. Dilley held. "Indeed, we have found that our entire lifestyle has become more Christian as we both give and receive love with less tension in our lives."⁶

A Cult?

Perhaps more unsettling to residents of Fairfield—meditators and non-meditators alike—is the question of whether the TM community constitutes a cult. Some meditators, in interviews with me, shrugged off the question, saying a religion is nothing more than a cult that has succeeded. Unlike cults that demand total adherence, moreover, the TM movement allows considerable flexibility. Even as meditators insist that TM is not a religion, one Jewish TMer compared the Fairfield meditating community to Judaism, saying some practitioners are more traditional in their practice (akin to the Orthodox, in Jewish parlance) and others take a middle road (Conservative) or a much more relaxed approach (Reform). Some TM practitioners, for instance, are celibate, vegetarian, and teetotal in accordance with the guru's preferences. Others down meat and alcohol with gusto, such as one couple that served me barbecued chicken and wine in their home.

Academics draw more specific distinctions. Religious scholars Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge define cults as "deviant religious bodies" that operate in a "state of relatively high tension with their surrounding sociocultural environment" and which generally add a new revelation or insight to justify the claim that they are different, new, or "more advanced."⁷ They maintain that TM struggled to avoid the "religion" label, even though the movement was based in a religious tradition. "[F]or a long time," Bainbridge and Daniel H. Jackson contend, TM's "more religious teachings and practices were revealed only to the inner core of members while ordinary meditators were offered an apparently nonreligious, practical technique." While noting its decline, Bainbridge and Jackson call TM "a solidly organized religious cult movement" that, when they wrote of it in 1981 anyway, was "undoubtedly one of the largest new religions in America."⁸



Fig. 2. Vegetarian restaurants, a homeopathy shop and other health-oriented businesses have sprouted around Fairfield's quaint town square area. Bars there serve meditators—who may indulge despite the guru's discouragement of alcohol—and non-meditators alike. Photograph by author.

For over thirty years scholars and critics have jostled with TM proponents over whether Maharishi created a religion. TM opponents hold that the system of beliefs and teachings espoused by the late guru amounts to little more than bastardized Hinduism. They point to references to the divine, to heaven, and to Hindu deities in movement literature, initiation ceremonies, and oaths. The mission of TM teachers, according to an oath these teachers sign, is to “spread the Light of God to all those who need it.”⁹ Some followers embrace a Hindu type of astrology called Jyotish that believers say reveals “the relationship of individual life with cosmic life”; a form of architecture, Sthapatya Veda, that “connect[s] individual life with Cosmic Life, individual intelligence with Cosmic Intelligence”; and to Maharishi Ayurveda, an herbal supplement system said to respect “the intimate connection between the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of our being.”¹⁰

To buttress their case, critics say followers called Maharishi “His Holiness.”¹¹ They note that the honorific “Maharishi” refers to a Hindu teacher of religious and mystical knowledge. (The guru’s given name was Mahesh Prasad Varma). Indeed, movement documents are replete with references to the creation of heaven on Earth. The Global Country of World Peace, a part of the movement based in Maharishi Vedic City near Fairfield, was

chartered “to establish Heaven on earth by raising the quality of life of every individual to complete fulfillment and affluence in enlightenment,” according to its articles of incorporation.¹²

Initiation practices, moreover, seem sacramental, featuring incense, candlelight, and a photo of “His Divinity” Swami Brahmananda Saraswati Jagadguru—also known as Guru Dev—who was Maharishi’s master.¹³ The worship ceremony, called a *puja*, that precedes initiation makes TM a religion, not the scientific technique backers insist it is, maintains former TM teacher Lola L. Williamson, an associate professor of religious studies at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. She adds that followers of the guru greet one another by saying “Jai Guru Dev” with their hands folded in front of their chests in a position of prayer. The words, she maintains, could be translated as “Hail to the Guru, who is God.” The reference is to Maharishi’s guru.¹⁴

Terms used in Sanskrit in the *puja* ceremony appear to support the critics. TM teachers chant an invocation to Lord Narayana and “lotus-born Brahma the Creator,” among other figures, saying they bow down to those Hindu deities. Further, they say “To the glory of the Lord I bow down again and again, at whose door the whole galaxy of gods pray for perfection day and night.”¹⁵ Former TM practitioner Mike Doughney, a longtime TM movement critic, argues that the TM movement “seeks to remake the world in its own image, based upon its contemporary interpretation of ancient scriptures.” Doughney holds that: “The Transcendental Meditation organization is a Vedic revivalist religious movement.”¹⁶

Indeed, Maharishi identified problems in some Western religious observance and suggested TM could bring individuals closer to God. “The fulfillment of all the knowledge of theology must be to lead every individual to live the light of God,” the guru averred, “which is very naturally and spontaneously gained through the practice of Transcendental Meditation.” Further, he argued, “the true spirit of religion is lacking if it . . . creates the fear of punishment and hell and the fear of God in the minds of men.”¹⁷ Nonetheless, Maharishi also maintained that Transcendental Meditation is helpful to religions, not in competition with them. “TM is a friend to Christianity because it takes the awareness of the people to the field which Christ wanted everyone to enjoy,” he observed in a 1971 interview. “Knowledge of TM and its practice is a universal principle and universal practice. No matter to what religion one belongs, every man has to be a fully developed man . . . our movement desires the people of all religions to meditate and become graceful members of their religions.”¹⁸

Despite his ecumenical language, Maharishi's personal religious devotion was firmly rooted in the traditions of Hinduism, particularly the ancient Vedas, early Hindu scriptures. Scott Lowe, a religious studies scholar at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, writes of the guru's belief that "Vedic hymns provide direct contact with *devas*, the gods of the Vedic religion. Through chanting and Vedic rituals the skilled spiritual technocrat can enlist these deities to produce changes in the mundane world." Lowe employs a quotation from Maharishi to illustrate his point. "We do something here according to Vedic rites," the guru explained, "particular, specific chanting to produce an effect in some other world, draw the attention of those higher beings or gods living there. The entire knowledge of the mantras or hymns of the Vedas is devoted to man's connection, to man's communication with the higher beings in different strata of creation."

Moreover, Lowe notes that Maharishi in the 1960s produced several books that were "openly religious in language and content" with titles such *Love and God* (1965). He described one of the guru's works, *The Science of Being and Art of Living* (1963), as a "presentation of Maharishi's personal understanding of the spiritual path." This, Lowe contends, refers to "traditional Indian theories of reincarnation into progressively higher states of existence." The book, he contends, presents "divine consciousness, God-consciousness" as the ultimate goal of human life.¹⁹ While publicly proclaiming its nonreligious character, the TM movement in fact gradually deepened its connection with Hinduism over the years. As religious studies scholar Cynthia Ann Humes, who has practiced TM herself, writes: "A hybrid of Eastern and Western sensibilities, the American TM package predating the mid-1970s focused on meditation and its attendant promises of self-fulfillment, shorn of any residue of undue spiritualism." Later, though, Maharishi "incorporated many facets commonly understood as 'Hinduism,' distinguished from the old, unimproved Vedic wisdom by his unique spellings and trademarks," she observes. "In this sense, the TM Movement that evolved into Maharishi's later programs resembles an even more ethnic Hinduism than that which he first exported: Not only is it Hinduism, but it is a specific incorporated brand of Hinduism."²⁰

The package of ideas and practices grew to become as fully fleshed out as many religions. Maharishi urged favored followers to practice celibacy. He incorporated Indian cultural habits "ranging from dressing [in] specific colors, speaking in certain ways, reading only accepted books, avoiding certain astrological occurrences, and avoiding inauspicious architectural

design. And despite New Age deemphasis of devotionism, he prohibited free choice in ‘guru-shopping,’ insisting that followers either love him or leave him.”²¹ Finally, Humes points to a “cognitive dissonance” among followers, noting that Maharishi’s initial insistence on TM’s nonreligiosity prompted charges of deception and hypocrisy. She asks, “When is a path to enlightenment, which sponsors rituals to deities and is based on meditation that deploys the names of gods, not a religion?”²²

High Stakes

For movement supporters, the stakes are high in the battle over whether TM constitutes a religion or is even religious in nature. For one thing, if the movement is seen as proselytizing in the same way recruitment-minded exclusivist religions do TM might attract fewer adherents. By emphasizing the simple technique of meditation—instead of the dogmatic elements of SCI or Maharishi Vedic Science—the movement can garner followers who continue to observe the religions they hold dear. Even atheists can enjoy meditation, Maharishi taught.²³ Moreover, by carving out the meditation technique—“just twenty minutes, twice a day”—instead of offering the whole package TM proponents figure they would be free to bring meditation into public schools without being accused of promoting religion.²⁴

Some former TM adherents, troubled by what they see as deceptive practices by TM proponents, have fought such efforts. They warn that the practice of group meditation in schools is a Trojan horse, a vehicle for seducing the unwary into accepting Maharishi’s full package of ideas and into joining a group they brand as a cult. “Coercive persuasion is subtle and slow,” former TM practitioner Gina Catena argued in a 2006 letter to school officials in San Rafael, California, who were considering opening their doors to TM teachers. “TM promoters well-intentionedly [sic] reveal only stress management information in introductory talks. The more elaborate teachings are carefully hidden in the beginning.”²⁵

For the movement in general and for Fairfield, in particular, a 1977 federal court ruling proved transformative. The *Malnak v. Yogi* decision held that SCI, Transcendental Meditation, and their instruction were “all religious in nature.” The ruling, upheld on appeal in 1979, barred as unconstitutional the teaching of the system in the New Jersey public schools.²⁶ “With the courts having declared TM to be a religious practice,” Humes recounts, “the movement directed its momentum inward and made a swift

retreat to Maharishi's deep Vedic roots."²⁷ The guru had developed a belief in what came to be called the Maharishi Effect, a conviction that a certain number of meditators practicing TM daily in groups could spread peaceful vibes across a city, even a country, and thereby reduce crime and violence. So, in 1979 he issued a call for devotees to flock to Fairfield to create a community where a certain fraction of the United States population (the square root of one percent of the populace) would meditate daily, many in two sprawling golden roofed domes—one for men and one for women—built on the university campus. Followers from across the country joined those who had set up the university five years before, with the newcomers in time accounting for a fifth or more of the population of Fairfield, which now totals about 9,500 people in all.

The guru also provided the Fairfield newcomers with many embellishments to the simple TM practice. One major innovation was Yogic Flying, a practice in which meditators would try to engage in such deep meditation that they could levitate off the ground—though to outsiders the cross-legged meditators appeared merely to be hopping around on mattresses.²⁸ The practice was based on a claim in a classic text of Hindu philosophy, the “Yoga Sutras” of Patanjali. If followers attained spiritually high enough levels, they could also read minds and become invisible, according to a catalog from the movement university in Fairfield.²⁹ Meditators could also expand their practice from forty minutes daily to several hours a day in the TM-Sidhi program, introduced in 1977. Even as thousands flocked to Fairfield for special events, however, the fallout from the federal court ruling about religion and the embellishments alienated many. Initiation rates plunged from nearly 300,000 in 1975 to 49,689 in 1977.³⁰

Giving ammunition to the movement's critics, the guru frequently mentioned God in his talks, speaking of how meditation could bring one closer to the divine. After the first federal court defeat and before the movement's unsuccessful appeal, Maharishi was quoted by the movement's World Plan Executive Council as saying, “If the law of the country will demand from us that we teach in the name of religion, then fine, we will abide by the law and feel nearer to God.”³¹

A Matter of Definition

Part of the problem for critics is the eclectic and fluid nature of Hinduism, as compared with Western faiths. Derived from a term that referred simply

to those who lived on one side of the River Indus, “Hinduism” is something of a catchall, according to religious scholar Christopher Partridge. It would appear flexible enough to allow room for Western beliefs, although those Western beliefs are seldom as accommodating of foreign ideas. Partridge writes:

Hinduism is not, strictly speaking, a single religion, but rather an umbrella term for a diverse collection of beliefs, practices and traditions that are rooted in the ancient Vedic scriptures and civilizations and date from roughly 2500 BCE. Beliefs differ from village to village, and vary considerably between the major regions. In modern India, Hindus worship in different ways, honour different deities (traditionally numbering 33 million), have different temples and sacred sites, observe different festivals and read a variety of sacred writings; they may believe in an ultimate God who is personal (e.g., *Brahma*) or they may not (e.g., *Brahman*); they may worship a single deity or a variety of deities.³²

Furthermore TM movement teachers contend that they do not require practitioners to believe anything. They insist that practitioners need not adhere to anything other than regular meditation practice to enjoy various physical and psychological benefits. These benefits, they hold, have been amply documented by science, and are thus not matters of belief. Long-time TM proponent and author Jack Forem argues: “No faith is required for the benefits of TM practice to accrue, nor is any faith in God (or Maharishi) asked of anyone participating in the program.”³³ Part of the issue, though, is definitional. What constitutes a religion? Stark, who codirects the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, defines the term as referring to “any system of beliefs and practices concerned with ultimate meaning and which assumes the existence of the supernatural.”³⁴ While the practice of meditation may be essentially mechanical and not require any beliefs, the guru’s teachings deal extensively with beliefs and ultimate meaning, as well as the supernatural.

Even so, many TM practitioners have no problem pondering Maharishi’s teachings and studying ancient Indian sages and, at the same time, practicing Western religions. Like so-called Bu-Jews, who hold that they can simultaneously adhere to Buddhism and Judaism, such practitioners simply do not see a problem. Some draw a line between the meditation technique at the core of the movement and the full array of SCI and Maharishi Vedic Science ideas, saying the twenty minute technique is essential-

ly mechanical and nonreligious. Indeed, movement scholars such as David Orme Johnson, a retired professor of psychology at MUM in Fairfield, point to religious leaders of many faiths who have taken up TM and not found any conflict with their own faiths.³⁵

Still, the practice is avowedly spiritual, if not explicitly religious, and the line between the two can be difficult to draw—as the experiences of some former Fairfield residents suggests. Writer Claire Hoffman offers a mixed message about the technique and the spirituality in which TM is rooted. Hoffman grew up in Fairfield, where she attended the Maharishi School of the Age of Enlightenment, a prekindergarten to twelfth grade school that gave her a hefty dose of the guru's philosophy. She seems to have little use for the ideas now but still meditates twice a day for minutes or more at a time. "I use T.M. to deal with anxiety and fatigue and to stave off occasional despair," Hoffman writes. "But that's because, in my head, I've managed to excise the weird flotsam of spirituality that engulfed T.M. for the first part of my life. Now, for me, it is something very simple, like doing yoga or avoiding dairy."³⁶ More recently, another writer, Willy Blackmore, composed a blog entry about returning to Fairfield, where he attended the same TM movement school as Hoffman. In the posting, called "Growing Up in Utopia," Blackmore refers to second generation meditators who question the traditions with which they were raised, including certain ritual practices, mantras, and Yogic Flying. Some, he writes, air their grievances on Cult Bros, a listserv or private group blog. Likely among these grievances, he suggests, are: "Questioning all of the Hindu mythology that's wrapped up this thing we were told was not a religion."³⁷

TM's Catch-22

Ironically, the TM movement's claim to secularity could be the very thing that winds up doing it in, if it ultimately fades away as so many utopian movements have. Groups that have survived in the United States—such as Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists, Christian Scientists, and the Amish—have endured in part because they offer a full and clear dogma. Further, they have paying members who do more than just buy a set of lessons in a meditative technique and then go on their way, as most TMers have. For most successful groups, a cash-and-carry approach is a nonstarter. Moreover, they offer a promise of salvation in the life to come and provide a crucial sense of community. They are, of course, explicitly religious and

do not pretend otherwise. Some of the groups also very shrewdly prepared for the future. Brigham Young, who led the Mormons after the death of founder Joseph Smith, took his besieged flock to Utah and then grew his following with recruits his missionaries had converted in Europe. His church fostered a culture of missionary zeal that has delivered proselytes for over a century and a half. “He was a very effective leader,” Stark told me in an interview.

For his part, Maharishi was an astute marketer. TM thrived as it did because he deftly fused a meditative technique based in Hinduism—or Vedic knowledge, predating Hinduism, as followers maintain—with Western science. Through a raft of studies described as scientific, he persuaded followers that his approach could verifiably improve their lives. He also packaged it well, marketing the simple twenty minute technique as something anyone could fit into a daily routine. Finally, the guru was adept at using celebrity adherents to publicize and popularize his technique—an approach the movement still uses. However, if TM were explicit about its religious roots and themes, it would risk alienating more people than it would gain. Stark holds that the problem for TM is that proselytizing groups such as the Mormons and Christian Scientists work in America because of their basis in Judeo Christianity. “They had a cultural base to build on,” Stark contends. “You didn’t have to tell people to throw away your Bible the way Eastern faiths have to do.” Such Eastern creeds, he said, have not found the United States to be fertile ground, at least for developing large and enduring followings. Ultimately, he suggested, that may spell the end for TM, whether it owns up to a religious nature or not.

Reaching Out to Schools

Concerns over promoting religion in public schools have not stopped movie director David Lynch, a longtime TM enthusiast, from working to bring meditation into public schools, especially into violence-prone inner city schools. TM teachers, working with the support of the David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-Based Education and World Peace, strip away the SCI elements and just teach meditation. Funded by Lynch’s foundation and others, the Center for Wellness and Achievement in Education (CWAE), for instance, has taught meditation in some of the most socially troubled schools in the San Francisco Bay area since 2007. As a result of CWAE’s Quiet Time program, these schools have reported dramatic down-

turns in fighting and disciplinary suspensions and, perhaps surprisingly, a sharp reversal in turnover among teachers. Academic performance is also up sharply.³⁸

CWAE's program seems crafted to avoid the legal snarls that plagued TM teachers in New Jersey. Students learn to meditate with the help of TM-certified teachers, getting individualized mantras as any TM initiates would. But they do not get instruction in SCI, which landed the earlier program in hot water, or in any philosophy. "There are many philosophies that people associate with meditation," Jeff Rice, CWAE's director of operations, explained. "We do not teach any philosophy, Vedic or otherwise. One of our goals regarding meditation is to demonstrate that it can be learned successfully without any understanding or reference to philosophy." Students also can choose to take part or not. They can opt during two fifteen-minute quiet time periods each day to meditate, read or do other silent activity, as they wish—though most meditate and are glad for it, according to CWAE officials. "They can do anything they want to, as long as it's quiet," Rice indicated. A former Silicon Valley executive, Rice set up the center with a partner, another Valley veteran, Laurent Valosek. The pair had previously taught TM to harried Valley business people. The results so heartened education officials in San Francisco that CWAE now provides its program in several schools there. While the school district occasionally fields complaints about whether meditation crosses a religious line, top officials back it enthusiastically. "Quite simply, Quiet Time should be in every school," Carlos Garcia, a retired superintendent of schools in San Francisco, acclaimed.³⁹

Some have disagreed. In 2006, parents, including a former TM teacher and practitioner who broke with the movement, blocked an attempt to bring Quiet Time into the Terra Linda High School in San Rafael, California.⁴⁰ "There is the danger of becoming a cult member if you learn it," the former TM teacher practitioner, Susan Crittenden, told school officials. "It is part of a destructive cult."⁴¹ Stripping meditation down to its basics does not placate critics. TM still remains grounded in an Eastern religious approach that differs markedly from Christian meditation, one attorney warns. Christian meditation involves filling one's mind with scripture, prayer, or thoughts of God, he said, while Eastern style meditation involves emptying one's mind and striving to reach a state of bliss where one sees oneself as united with the divine, as part of God. "For a Christian or Jewish person," the lawyer intoned, "it's heresy and blasphemy to say you are God."



Fig. 3. A coffee shop in central Fairfield called Café Paradiso is a popular gathering spot, especially for meditators. It offers entertainment along with coffee, tea, and treats. Photograph by author.

TM officials maintain the movement is not a religion, notwithstanding the arguments of outside scholars and movement defectors. Further, adherents feel free to belong to mainstream and non-mainstream churches even as they hold to the teachings of TM's late guru. Hewing to the movement's official policy and the guru's teachings, such devotees hold that TM "enlivens" the practices they follow in those churches.

While the TM movement does not exclude members of Western faiths, it curiously has trouble with rival gurus. In effect it excommunicates meditators—by yanking the badges that give them the right to meditate in the golden domes on the MUM campus—if they take up the teachings, for instance, of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, a once-trusted follower of Maharishi who set up his own movement, and Ammachi, another popular guru. TM leaders defend such moves in the name of keeping "pure" the "knowledge" they offer.

These attitudes toward rival gurus suggest more of a dogmatic approach than TM movement leaders would admit to. It also suggests they

feel a threat from other Eastern based philosophies to the exclusiveness of the “knowledge” they profess. For those who take issue with that knowledge and with TM’s practices, the overtones of religion in TM cannot be ignored. The movement’s language, which often invokes notions of the divine, and its sacrament-like practices flow from its Hindu and pre-Hindu roots. The philosophy espoused by its late leader and its current leaders spring from this same well.

These views appear to put TM into fundamental conflict with some, if not all, Western creeds—or so some Fairfield religious leaders and outside scholars maintain. If leaders of various Christian groups hold staunchly that TM is irreconcilable with their views, no amount of argument by TM practitioners seems likely to change their contention. Nonetheless, it is also true that some Western religious leaders either consider TM compatible with their faith traditions or choose to tolerate TM practices among their congregants. Clearly, religious leaders are not of a single mind on the issue.

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NOTES

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