

Manipulation: Methods employed by Cult and Religious Leaders to Exploit Followers

Alexander J. Earnest

Augustana College

RELG 211-01: Film and Religion

Professor Wolfe

19 January 2024

In 1978 Jim Jones, cult leader of a religious group called the Peoples temple, orchestrated the mass murder of over 900 of his followers through the use of poisoned punch. Today this tragedy is known as the second largest loss of U.S. civilian lives, second only to 9/11. Jim Jones, however, is not the only man who has taken advantage of those seeking spiritual guidance. Throughout the world there are countless gurus and self-proclaimed “spiritual leaders” who prey upon and take advantage of those around them for power, financial gain, and other various reasons. The films *Kumare* and *An Honest Liar* examine these risks related to an overreliance on spiritual leaders and psychics respectively, as well as the impacts they can have on people’s lives. The purpose of this paper is to examine the reasons countless people are attracted to worshipping spiritual leaders as idols; as well as to analyze the methods employed by religious leaders to gain and maintain popularity, using *Kumare*, *An Honest Liar*, and the life of Jim Jones as reference. The purpose of this paper is not to make the argument that all spiritual leaders are false or manipulative, as such a statement would be profoundly ignorant and exclusionary, but it’s to examine the factors that make people susceptible to manipulation in a religious context. I argue the reason for this reliance on spiritual leaders can be attributed to a variety of reasons, most notably how victims typically come from a position of vulnerability, have an adamant desire for spiritual guidance and community, and how religious leaders often employ psychological mechanisms such as confirmation bias, social proof, love-bombing, and the halo effect to win over subjects.

As I alluded to previously, many of the individuals who choose to seek spiritual guidance from mortal figures are often in a state of vulnerability, and leaders often choose to seek out individuals with such vulnerabilities. This concept is clearly illustrated in *Kumare* as most of the followers Vikram Ghandi had come to obtain throughout his journey as a false prophet had

recently faced some form of hardship in their life. For example, Teresa and Eric had just lost their jobs two days before coming to meet Vikram. Kimberly was a divorced single mother who worked 2-3 jobs, reported getting two to three hours of sleep each night, and struggled loving herself. And Toby worked as a judge for inmates on death row, an unquestionably emotionally tolling occupation. The importance of this lies in the fact that when people are subjected to heightened levels of stress, cortisol is released from the adrenal cortex into the bloodstream, and while different people will experience varying effects, excessive levels of cortisol, or stress hormone, are directly linked to reduced cognitive functioning. A recent study by Dr Olmez confirmed that individuals who are under excessive amounts of stress are considerably more likely to experience cognitive decline in the form of impaired ability to focus, recall, and acquire new information.¹ From a rational perspective this is fairly intuitive, it's not an uncommon experience to have difficulty thinking and making cognizant decisions when facing stress and hardship, especially when coupled with the emotional responses of sadness, anger, and grief that often come with it. Not only are people in these positions more vulnerable to exploitation, they're also more likely to seek out spiritual leaders for guidance. During difficult times people often grapple with existential questions such as the meaning and purpose of their lives. Spiritual leaders offer a solution to this problem by offering religious frameworks for understanding suffering and finding solace. But more notably, they provide a sense of hope and assurance to those that need it most.

This concept of susceptibility is further demonstrated in *An Honest Liar*, as psychics, channelers, and faith healers such as Peter Popoff and Uri Geller often exploited followers who had undergone or were currently facing some kind of hardship. These were often no minor

¹ Ölmez, Zeynep, and Özlem Selçuk Bozkurt. "THE IMPACT OF STRESS," 1. Dr. Olmez and Ozlem are both doctors of Neuroscience from Penn State who focus their work on memory and cognition.

hardships either. People with sickle cell, blood clots, tumors, cancer, and many other terrible conditions would all come to these figures desperately seeking help. When life and finances get in the way, and medical assistance is no longer a feasible option for these ailments, religious figureheads, psychics, and cultists, all tend to offer much more appealing solutions. These figures, Like Popoff and Geller, typically just ask for faith, and sometimes donations, in return for their self-proclaimed “miracles” and healings. The fact that Geller owns multiple properties, including a mansion in England; and that Popoff has both a mansion and multiple luxury vehicles, such as the Rolls-Royce, is clear evidence of how they've profited considerably from their practice.² While there is nothing inherently wrong with seeking out external sources for hope and assurance, people with ill-intentions can exploit these characteristics for their own gain; as has also been the case with many other famous psychics and cults such as the Manson Family, Sullivanians, Nxivm, Heaven's Gate, and Good News just to name a few. The fact that seeker and support groups such as “People Leave Cults” exist, is itself evidence that many of these groups bring about harm to their followers, even if they don't result in anything as tragic as mass homicide, such as what was seen in the Jonestown massacre.

In line with the former idea is how many followers of spiritual leaders feel as if they need guidance and community to be at peace with themselves or to find something beyond the physical realm. While many interpretations of what religion is exist, I find Robert Orsi's interpretation of “religion as a network of relationships in which men, women, and children together make religious worlds in relationships with special beings and with each other,”³ to be a fitting description of what many followers are pursuing in these figures. Religious communities have the potential to quell the inherent human need for belonging and community that few

² Weinstein, Justin & Tyler Measom, dirs. “An Honest Liar.” 2014. 20-45 min.

³ Meghan Aelabouni, “White Womanhood and/as American Empire,” 2.

groups and institutions can. In *Kumare* the religious group “Urantia” is described by Vikram as being a happy community, in which everyone feels like they belong. However, it’s also noted that NBC did a case study on this group in which it was revealed that all followers would be required to give up all their belongings to the “cosmic family,” a characteristic of what many consider to be cults.⁴ While there is no one formal definition of what a cult is, the APA dictionary of Psychology defines a cult as “a religious or quasi-religious group characterized by unusual or atypical beliefs, seclusion from the outside world, and an authoritarian structure.”⁵ Considering groups such as Peoples temple fit all of these characteristics, I find the use of the word cult is only fitting. By targeting vulnerable people and groups, these cult leaders are able to create communities that make individuals who typically feel isolated, disconnected, or marginalized, feel welcomed, which is undoubtedly very powerful. On the surface making these sorts of people feel welcomed seems like a good thing, however, in the case of infamous cults such as the one’s I’ve mentioned, it’s typically a ploy for a much darker desire.

Religious groups, both with good and ill-intent, generally tend to form and strengthen community bonds through the use of ritual and myth. Lyden, in his book *Film as Religion* mentions how ritual has largely become seen as an essential part of religion in today’s world, and how many modern groups tend to invent rituals believing that they offer inherent spiritual or therapeutic value that cannot be obtained from words alone.⁶ The role ritual plays in drawing people together is clearly portrayed in *Kumare* when Vikram creates what he calls “Blue Light Meditation.” After the experience, many of his followers reported the experience to feel deeply spiritual and therapeutic, and for some, it was the catalyst that pulled them into following and idolizing Kumare. It’s impossible to talk about ritual, however, without mentioning myth, as the

⁴ Vikram Gandhi. *Kumare*. 30-33 min.

⁵ “The Psychology of Cults: UT Permian Basin Online.” 1.

⁶ John Lyden. 2019. *Film as Religion : Myths, Morals, and Rituals*. New York: New York University Press, 62.

two are often interconnected. While many interpretations of myth exist, I find the interpretation from Geertz that myth serves as a means of connecting the real world with the world of mysticism, or more remarkably, of connecting the real with the ideal, to be both inclusive and practical. Similarly, Eliade's interpretation that myth serves to give an account of the creation of the cosmos, and life in general, is comparably fitting.⁷ Cults, such as The Peoples Temple, tend to have unique and deviant belief systems. Myths play an instrumental role in creating narrative frameworks that explain and validate important points of consideration such as the origins of the group, its teachings, and its ultimate purpose. Some figures such as Jim Jones, even employ fear based-myths to instill a sense of urgency and dependency on the group. These could be notions that the world is going to end if certain actions aren't followed, or even threats that leaving the group could result in something catastrophic.

I contend that the biggest contributor to the formation and success of religious cults, such as that of the People's Temple, Heaven's Gate, or Urantia, is the employment of psychological manipulation tactics by religious leaders themselves. Sometimes these tactics are coupled with what I can only describe as straight up lies or false narratives. For example, Jim Jones was actually a confirmed atheist, he did not believe in what he termed the "Sky God." (His name for the Christian Creator).⁸ Yet, much of his following was founded on Christian based notions of an eternal creator and afterlife. All for the simple purpose of gaining followers, and consequently power. Many self proclaimed psychics and faith healers have also been shown blatantly lying to their followers. For instance, in *An Honest Liar* James Randi proved that Peter Popoff was using an ear-piece, in which his wife would direct information about specific people in the audience back to him. He would then use this information to pretend he knew what was wrong with them

⁷ Ibid., 44-45.

⁸ Shelly Barclay. "Jim Jones and His Jonestown Cult," 2.

through the use of psychic ability, which made his faith healings all the more convincing. In the following paragraphs I will delve into some of the various psychological mechanisms employed by religious figures and the implications of their use.

Confirmation bias is a cognitive bias in which individuals “seek, interpret, and remember information in a way that confirms their preexisting beliefs.”⁹ Every person is vulnerable to this bias, after all, we interpret the world based on our experiences within it. Cult leaders often exploit this bias by selectively presenting information that aligns with followers beliefs while dismissing all contradictory information. Moreover, they often work to create an environment that reinforces and amplifies these biased beliefs through group discussions, rituals, and practices that solidify shared values, and effectively create an echo-chamber. In line with this idea is how many cults rely on an US versus Them mentality, where by identifying a common force of evil, a strong sense of group identity and solidarity is fostered. Thus motivating followers to seek out information that supports this new group identity. In the case of the Peoples Temple the “them” were largely the racists masses, as Jones drew on people’s desires for civil rights and racial justice to draw in many of his followers. In *Kumare*, Urantia demonstrates the same mindset by constructing a group that worked to oppose the Capitalist forces of hegemonic society.

Social proof is the concept that people often look to others’ actions and behaviors to determine what is correct or appropriate. In *Kumare*, Vikram started his journey with two assistants who followed him and worked to spread his message, this is a classic example of the use of social proof. Similarly in *An Honest Liar*, figures such as Peter Popoff were often shown having confederates who played along with readings in order to make them more convincing to the rest of the audience. An individual is much more persuasive as a leader when one can see other’s who already believe in and follow them. It makes one think “If these other people are so

⁹ M. Oswald, & S. Grosjean, (2004). *Cognitive Illusions: a handbook*, 79.

devoted, then there must be *something* important about this person.” The use of testimonials and success stories from cult and religious leaders are another clear example of exploiting this psychological phenomenon. By suggesting that other people have found value, happiness, and or success through their involvement, it creates the perception that joining the group must have merit.

Love bombing is a psychological technique that involves overwhelming individuals with excessive displays of affection, acceptance, and attention. People in vulnerable or stressful situations, as mentioned before, are particularly vulnerable to this technique. By showering potential recruits with love they make them feel valued and special, creating a strong emotional connection to the group and leader. Jim Jones utilized this method to gain many of his African American followers, by showing what appeared to be love at a time when it was most scarce. Jim Jones was a very large supporter of civil rights, or at least he preached for it. Whether he actually intended to support the civil rights movement, or whether it was only a ploy for more support, is an object of speculation

The halo effect is a cognitive bias in which individuals tend to perceive someone as possessing overall positive qualities based on a single positive attribute. In the case of religious and cult leaders, this bias is often exploited through the use of charismatic speech and the projection of moral virtues. By projecting a charming, virtuous, and charismatic image, followers are often led to believe that the leader is trustworthy, knowledgeable, or even divine, among other properties. This bias is likely a large reason figures such as Geller were so widely believed. They were charismatic and good at speaking publicly, which makes their claims all the more believable to the masses. All of these biases and techniques serve as a hook to pull followers into their group, where often much more sinister forms of manipulation and exploitation occur. For

example, once Jim Jones had several hundred deeply devoted followers within his cult, he began to utilize sleep deprivation to further weaken critical thinking and foster dependency. By the time he had emigrated to Guyana with his followers, right before the tragic incident occurred, he resorted to the means of blackmail, beatings, and threats of death to prevent followers, including his own wife, from leaving.¹⁰

Some may argue against the statements I've made thus far with arguments such that many religious/spiritual figures genuinely care for their follower's well-being and want to serve their communities. This is a valid point, as it's very important not to make blanket statements about all religious figures, and that is not my intent. My intent is to demonstrate *how* exploitation can and does occur, so individuals may be mindful not to fall prey to exploitation. The majority of religious leaders work with integrity and sincerity. Some may point out how manipulative leaders exist in all domains, not just in religious or cult settings. This is also true, as the world has witnessed many exploitative political and business leaders throughout its history. This, however, does not take away from my point. In fact, it's my hope that awareness of these biases, vulnerabilities, and psychological mechanisms can make individuals more cognizant in domains that aren't explicitly religious. Others may contend that, ultimately, followers of religious, spiritual, or cult groups, have individual agency and personal choice in the groups they decide to join and associate themselves with. Thus, individuals are responsible for their own choices, and the blame should not be solely placed on the figures themselves. I disagree with this argument, and not because people don't have autonomy, but because the groups and figures I've mentioned often (1) strip individuals of that autonomy via the use of threats, intimidation, and physical harm; and (2) the use of manipulation tactics such as what I've mentioned above influence

¹⁰ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Jim Jones," 2. The many horrors of Jim Jones go far beyond the scope of this paper. For those curious for more information I recommend watching The Casual Criminalist's Youtube documentary on the matter.

information control, thinking, and ultimately make it difficult for individuals to exercise their autonomy fully. These individuals are not given informed consent about their leader's true intentions, but are misled by false claims, deceptive practices, and are fundamentally kept in the dark about the group's true nature. It's not as if individuals are making choices based on full or accurate information, it's anything but. One other argument individuals are likely to make is how I *know* psychics such as Geller and Popoff are fake, as psychic abilities ultimately cannot be disproven. This is true, it's impossible to disprove that which cannot be seen directly. However, in *An Honest Liar*, James Randi continually showcases how all of these psychic feats can be reproduced with simple strategy and sleight of hand. Furthermore, he showcases how when put under strict, truly controlled scenarios, the psychics suddenly "feel weak" and can no longer perform their abilities. While it ultimately can not be completely disproven, it has also never been proven. These facts make it *extremely* unlikely that the feats are the result of psychic ability alone, and not illusion and sleight of hand.

It's my hope that by understanding the methods employed by cult and religious leaders to exploit and gain followers, we can develop strategies to identify, prevent, and ideally counteract such manipulation. The case of Jim Jones and the Peoples temple serve as a stark reminder of the profound impact these methods of exploitation have on individuals and society as a whole. Figures such as Geller or Popoff, while in a much less destructive sense, showcase how manipulation by religious figures can serve as a tool of financial gain, while leaving followers with nothing. By promoting proper education and support systems it may be possible to protect vulnerable individuals from falling victim to future tragedy and exploitation in the future.

References

Aelabouni, Meghan. "White Womanhood and/as American Empire in Arrival and Annihilation."

MDPI, Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, published 16 Mar. 2020,

www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/11/3/130.

Barclay, Shelly. Jim Jones and His Jonestown Cult, Historic Mysteries.

www.historicmysteries.com/jim-jones-jonestown-cult/.

Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Jim Jones." Encyclopedia Britannica, November 14,

2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jim-Jones>.

Gandhi, Vikram. Kumare. Disposable Television, 2011. 1 hr, 24 min.

Lyden, John. 2019. Film as Religion : Myths, Morals, and Rituals. New York: New York

University Press.

Ölmez, Zeynep, and Özlem Selçuk Bozkurt. "THE IMPACT OF STRESS ON COGNITION."

IBRO neuroscience reports 15 (2023): S878-.

[https://www.ibroneuroreports.org/article/S2667-2421\(23\)01895-X/fulltext](https://www.ibroneuroreports.org/article/S2667-2421(23)01895-X/fulltext)

Oswald, M., & Grosjean, S. (2004). Cognitive Illusions: a handbook on fallacies and biases in thinking, judgment, and memory. Psychology Press, vol. 1, 79.

<https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=MS5Fr8safgEC&oi=fnd&pg=PA79&dq=confirmation+bias&ots=9QhBJEaOUe&sig=jrdsD96SNeR-XJ-yViVZqNiaXe#v=onepage&q=confirmation%20bias&f=false>

"The Psychology of Cults: UT Permian Basin Online." UTPB, 11 Oct. 2023,

<https://online.utpb.edu/about-us/articles/psychology/the-psychology-of-cults/>

Weinstein, Justin & Tyler Measom, dirs. "An Honest Liar." 2014. 1 hr, 30 min.