

Study reveals religious leader's silent secret

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Edmonton-based John de Ruiters has been known to sit on stage, gaze out at his flock and say nothing for hours. When he does speak, long gaps of silence often separate his sentences. Sometimes, when he takes questions, the self-proclaimed "living embodiment of the truth" will answer with nothing more than a silent, stone-faced stare.

For more than a decade, de Ruiters's taciturn ways have managed to attract thousands of people from around the world to join his religious movement; a University of Alberta researcher has been exploring why de Ruiters's silent approach has been so successful.

Paul Joosse, a PhD candidate in the U of A Department of Sociology, recently presented his findings at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion annual conference in Portland, Oregon, and his research was published recently in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*.

Joosse concluded that interpersonal silence effectively asserts de Ruiters's charismatic authority over his followers in three ways.

Joosse believes de Ruiters's silence allows his followers to project their own "highly personalized" meaning into the answers they receive from him. Joosse noted that de Ruiters's followers often have a history of participation in various alternative religious movements before they settle into the de Ruiters group and are therefore more likely than most to find meaning in the vague messages that de Ruiters is known to express.

Silence is also used by de Ruiters as a punitive tool and a means to

discourage dissent, Joosse said, adding that the effect is similar to the way the Amish, at times, shun non-conformists in their group. However, one crucial difference is that the Amish employ the silent treatment collectively, while de Ruitter, the irreplaceable, exclusive authority figure in his group, uses it unilaterally.

As an example, in 1999 at a group meeting, de Ruitter's ex-wife confronted de Ruitter about his adulterous relationships with two female devotees, who were sisters. According to various accounts, de Ruitter glared at her in response, essentially remaining mute.

"That de Ruitter still retained a large following after that episode speaks to the charismatic sway that he continues to exercise over his devotees," said Joosse, who has conducted interviews and analyzed the group's various communications material, such as video-taped meetings, which are for sale through the group's website.

The third function of de Ruitter's silence is that it accelerates the formation of intimate bonds between de Ruitter and his followers, especially when he combines it with extended eye contact. Joosse added that many of de Ruitter's followers, a good number of whom are middle-aged females, see de Ruitter as possessing "a mysterious aura".

In his article, Joosse wrote, "Silence is inappropriate on a first date or at a gathering of previously unacquainted people... (But) the cultivation of silence by the de Ruitter group permits a type of interaction that is usually exclusive to new lovers - deep, silent gazing into one another's eyes. Strangers to de Ruitter find themselves locked in an intimate gaze, and it is not surprising that (they) confuse the act that usually accompanies intimacy with actual intimacy."

Joosse believes that de Ruitter, by keeping his mouth shut, has found an easily replicable method that works on a number of levels to captivate

his followers.

"When people follow a charismatic leader, the existence of the group depends upon the continued belief that their leader is somehow extraordinary or even superhuman," Joosse said. "Therefore, the leader must continually prove himself to his followers, and de Ruitter is able to achieve this simply by remaining silent."

Source: University of Alberta

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