

Study reveals religious leader's silent secret

November 1 2006

Edmonton-based John de Ruiter 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 Ruiter'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 Ruiter'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 Ruiter's charismatic authority over his followers in three ways.

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

Silence is also used by de Ruiter 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 Ruiter, the irreplaceable, exclusive authority figure in his group, uses it unilaterally.

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

"That de Ruiter 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 Ruiter's silence is that it accelerates the formation of intimate bonds between de Ruiter and his followers, especially when he combines it with extended eye contact. Joosse added that many of de Ruiter's followers, a good number of whom are middle-aged females, see de Ruiter 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 Ruiter group permits a type of interaction that is usually exclusive to new lovers - deep, silent gazing into one another's eyes. Strangers to de Ruiter 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 Ruiter, 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 Ruiter is able to achieve this simply by remaining silent."

Source: University of Alberta

Citation: Study reveals religious leader's silent secret (2006, November 1) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2006-11-reveals-religious-leader-silent-secret.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.