

## Gurus and Followers

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In recent months, a number of articles and television reports<sup>1</sup> have addressed several situations involving an individual identified as a guru. These reports paint a picture of individuals recognized for their healing powers and their ability to cure conditions such as autism or chronic health problems such as diabetes, Alzheimer's or diseases such as cancer<sup>2</sup>. Other reports speak of the influence of certain individuals over others because of their wisdom or what's more, their ability to communicate with the Divine<sup>3</sup>. In these reports, the word guru is synonymous with manipulator, fraudster, or opportunist who uses the credulity of some for his own personal gain. Invariably the believer, or the client, is described as a victim, a gullible person, a weak person.

The relationship between a guru, perceived as all-powerful, and a follower whose belief in the guru's power can even lead to death, was raised by two members of the Quebec National Assembly during the turmoil surrounding the death of Chantal Lavigne, as well as reports concerning some followers of Marcel Pontbriand. Sylvie Roy of the Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) stressed that Quebec needs a law that would protect individuals who are under the influence of cultic groups<sup>4</sup>, specifying the intention of her party to propose a bill to that effect. On the other hand, Lawrence Bergman of the Quebec Liberal Party, and official opposition spokesperson for professional legislation, demanded that the government act to protect individuals who are under the influence of charlatans<sup>5</sup>.

The interest of political parties or of the Quebec government is not new. As far back as 1993, the Quebec government set up a **commission** to examine the issue of alternative therapies and of individuals who offer or seek out these services. At the time, a poll conducted by this commission found that more than 65% of Quebecers were worried about the presence of charlatans in the area of alternative therapies<sup>6</sup>. Twenty years later, questions concerning the influence of gurus and charlatans, as well as the tendency of men and women to follow them, are still relevant.

The **term guru** has several distinct meanings. For some, the notion of a guru is synonymous with manipulator, spiritual aggressor, condescending<sup>7</sup>, while for others, a guru is synonymous with spiritual master or guide<sup>8</sup>. In fact, this notion tells us little about the relationship and power between a person described as a leader and another described as a follower. How then can we understand the guru / follower relationship? Why are some adults willing to follow the path set out by another person known as a guru, a leader, a healer, teacher, or prophet? Current research defines three types of leader / follower relationships that can help us to better understand the motivations or circumstances of this relationship.

1. For some<sup>9</sup>, the leader / follower relationship is a **healthy relationship**, one that fulfills a need, provides hope and eases tensions. This relationship between a person seen as a leader and another seen as a follower is called a transactional relationship, that is, the relationship continues as long as the leader is able to deliver the reward promised to the follower. The relationship is thus dependent on the leader's ability to fill certain deprivations felt by the devotee, including<sup>10</sup>:

- Material deprivation (employment, food);
- Social (belonging to a group, friends, activities);
- Morals (way of living, philosophy, standards);
- Psychological (easing of anxieties, the meaning of life, intense sensations).

Thus, the relationship between the leader and the follower is seen as a positive one, as long as it benefits the follower<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, in order for the relationship to continue, the leader must satisfy the needs of the follower.

2. For others, the relationship between a leader and a follower is a **coercive relationship** between a persecutor and a victim.

From this perspective, the individual enters into a relationship with a leader, and the bond with him and the group is maintained through the use of control techniques<sup>12</sup>, seduction<sup>13</sup>, and indoctrination<sup>14</sup>. The choice of the follower to stay in the group can be described as a forced choice. Thus, despite doubts and questions, a person will maintain the bond with the group due to the presence of a charismatic leader who seduces the devotee into maintaining the relationship. The connection is also maintained because the member has accepted that the philosophy and teachings of the group is the only truth, the only one that will help achieve the objective(s) pursued by the leader and the follower (access to paradise, achieving perfection, healing...).

Within this frame of reference, the group is often viewed as good and the outside world as bad. It is therefore difficult for a member to leave a group perceived as good to join the outside world, perceived as bad. In addition, the leader or the group may implement an internal control system (feeling of guilt if the member is critical of the group), monitoring of individual members by other group members (use of cameras) and manipulation (isolation, sleep and food deprivation). All this serves to minimize opportunities for the follower to criticize, and ultimately to leave the group<sup>15</sup>.

3. Finally, for other authors, the relationship between the leader and the follower is a **reciprocal one**<sup>16</sup>.

Thus, both need each other in order to survive. The follower feels the need to associate with

someone whom he sees as great and important in order to continue his or her search for an ideal. The follower submits to the influence of a leader because he idealizes him, and in the leader's presence feels like someone important and different from the masses. The intensity of this relationship will cause some members to lose their capacity to discern and judge for themselves. They will become entirely dependent on the leader. The leader feels a constant need to be reassured about his greatness and must maintain the fervor of his members. The follower also becomes increasingly dependent on the narcissistic gratification that idealization of the leader provides. To preserve this special relationship, the follower may feel forced to meet all the demands of the leader. It is the intensification of dynamics of this relationship that results in extreme and dangerous behaviours (crime, physical threats and abuse)<sup>17</sup>.

Whether the leader is described as a guru, a charlatan or a healer does not say much about the relationship between these two people. Research tells us, however, that some believe it is the follower who has the power (beneficial relationship), others that it is the leader who has the power (coercive relationship), and still others believe the relationship to be interdependent (reciprocal relationship). How then can future devotees protect themselves from exploitative situations (financial, physical, psychological) before getting involved in alternative treatments, or in a group that requires an intensive commitment? It is preferable in any situation to first become knowledgeable about the person or group to whom one is committing. Therefore, it is advisable to **seek information** on the service we want to use, or the group we want to join, from a variety of sources (newspapers, websites, information services, members, former members, patients/clients, former patients/clients).

**Here are some questions to ask:**

- Who holds the power in the group?
- Who is the leader / the group's founder?
- What kind of training does the leader have?
- What is the leader's personal history?
- How are decisions made regarding the lives of each member?
- How is power distributed within the group?
- Do members, in addition to the leader, hold any form of power?
- What is the price of joining the group (financial, relational, and familial)<sup>18</sup>?

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Malboeuf, M-C. (2012). «Gourou Inc.». La Presse, 28 septembre 2012, consulté le 27 mai 2013 : <http://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/201209/28/01-4578585-gourous-inc-notre-grande-enquete.php>

- <sup>2</sup> Malboeuf, M-C. (2012). Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> MNS actualité. (2013). «Le gourou en cavale». MSN Actualité, le 31 janvier 2013, consulté le 27 mai 2013 : <http://news.fr.msn.com/m6-actualite/monde/sectes-gourous-escrocs-et-manipulateurs?page=7>
- <sup>4</sup> TVA Nouvelles. (2013). «Groupes sectaires : La CAQ veut un projet de loi». TVA Nouvelles, le 5 février 2013, consulté le 27 mai 2013 : <http://tvanouvelles.ca/lcn/infos/national/archives/2013/02/20130205-222017.html>
- <sup>5</sup> Boivin, J. (2003). «L'opposition officielle demande de sévir auprès des gourous». CNW Telbec, 14 février 2013, consulté le 27 mai 2013 : <http://www.newswire.ca/fr/story/1114527/l-opposition-officielle-demande-de-sevir-aupres-des-gourous>
- <sup>6</sup> Gouvernement du Québec. (1992). Commission parlementaire sur les thérapies alternatives : proposition, 15 décembre 1992.
- <sup>7</sup> Maes, J-C. (2010). *Emprise et manipulation : Peut-on guérir des sectes*. Belgique : Éditions de Boeck. 288p.
- Pelletier, P. (2000). *Les gourous et les Maîtres*. Montréal. Édition Fides
- <sup>8</sup> Pelletier, P. (2000). Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Chagnon, R. (1988). *Conversion aux nouvelles religions : libres ou forcées ?*. Québec : Éditions Fidès.
- Duhaime, J. (1998). « L'adhésion à la conscience de Krishna de 1965 à 1977 aux États-Unis : Un point de vue des sciences sociales », dans *Croyances et sociétés*. Montréal : Fides (Collection Héritage projet), p.247-263.
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- <sup>10</sup> Glock C. Y. (1963) « Origine et Évolution des groupes religieux », *Archives de sociologie des religions*, vol. 8, p. 29-38.
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- Duhaime, J. (1998). Op.cit.
- <sup>11</sup> Stark, R., Bainbridge, W.S. (1985). *The future of religion: Secularization, revival and cult formation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- <sup>12</sup> Lifton, R.(1989). Op. cit.
- <sup>13</sup> Maes, J.-C. (2010). Op. cit.
- <sup>14</sup> Fournier, A., Monroy, M. (1999). *La dérive sectaire*. Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 234p.
- <sup>15</sup> Lalich, J. (2004). *Bounded Choice : True believers and charismatic cults*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 353p .
- Lifton, R. (1989). Op. cit.
- <sup>16</sup> Casoni, D. (1996). *Les sectes : De la promesse du paradis à l'expérience de l'enfer*. Université de Montréal, Interlaken, Suisse.
- Roy, J.Y. (1998). *Le Syndrome du berger : essai sur les dogmatismes contemporains*, Montréal : Boréal.
- <sup>17</sup> Casoni, D. (1996). Op. cit.
- Casoni, D. (2000 a). *Du Paradis à l'enfer : étude des mécanismes psychologiques associés aux dérives sectaires*, Conférence ACFAS 2000.
- Casoni, D. (2000 b). *The Relation of Group Philosophy to Different Types of Dangerous Conduct in Cultic Groups*, *Cultic Studies Journal*, vol. 17, no.1, p. 143-167.
- <sup>18</sup> For more information and questions, you can consult the following document: Kropveld, M. & Pelland, M-A. (2006). *The Cult Phenomenon: How Groups Function: Info-Cult*. 169 pages. How can I assess if the group I belong to or plan to join corresponds to my needs? <http://infosect.freeshell.org/infocult/phenomene/English/HTML/index.html>