

# Multi-faith Invisibility - The Case of Meher Baba (1894-1969)

- Ray Kerkhove\*

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Gordon Melton's *Religious Bodies in the USA* - a directory on religious groups - rates *Avatar Meher Baba* (Merwan Sheriar Irani, 1894-1969) as "...one of the most influential figures in the West."<sup>1</sup> During the 1970s, scholars of new religious movements including Robert Ellwood,<sup>2</sup> Peter Rowley<sup>3</sup> and Jacob Needleman<sup>4</sup> - lauded Meher as an important new figure. They encouraged further investigation.

No studies eventuated. In fact, few current religious directories so much as list Meher Baba or his following - the *Meher Baba movement* (also termed *Baba lovers*). Most recent writers in the field have never even heard of the peculiar 'Silent Master' who intrigued Gandhi,<sup>5</sup> won the hearts of Hollywood celebrities<sup>6</sup> and starred on the cover of *Rolling Stone*.<sup>7</sup>

Has the movement died out? Hardly: *People's* Castelino estimates current adherence at "millions... all over the globe... so vast that the net has nearly 600 web pages of information on (Meher Baba)."<sup>8</sup> Since Meher's death in 1969, following has grown fourfold. Faced with this curious obscurity-amidst-popularity, the British *Independent*, in an article on Meher's centenary, proffers a simple answer. 'Baba lovers' are "probably the biggest underground network in humanity."<sup>9</sup>

This paper seeks reasons for Meher Baba's obscurity and the movement's 'underground' nature in the multi-faith emphases of the man himself. Thereby, we will consider to what extent multi-faith figures and multi-faith movements carry the seeds of their own 'disappearance' (or at least invisibility) within general society.

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<sup>1</sup> J Gordon Melton, *Religious Bodies in the United States - A Directory* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 161.

<sup>2</sup> Robert S Ellwood Jnr, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1973), 285.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Rowley, *New Gods in America* (New York: David McKay Co, 1971), 122.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Needleman, *The New Religions* (Garden City: Double Day & Co., 1970) 76f.

<sup>5</sup> Details of this can be read in 'The Press Announces Meher Baba,' *Glow International* Vol. VII:1 (February 1972), 16 and Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher (Meher Prabhu) - Avatar of the Age Meher Baba Manifesting* (Myrtle Beach: Manifestation, 1971) Vol. V 1932 - 1934, 1716-1718.

<sup>6</sup> For example, on 1 June 1932, Hollywood's leading couple- Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks- hosted Meher Baba. On that occasion alone, 1000 people from the film industry, including major Hollywood stars, came to meet him. Naosherwan Anzar, *The Beloved- The Life and Work of Meher Baba* (Ahmednagar: Sheriar, 1974), 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Rolling Stone* No. 71 (26 November 1970).

<sup>8</sup> Meher Castelino, 'As Luck Would Have It,' *People (India)* 23 August 1998, 25.

<sup>9</sup> 'Baba Don't Preach,' *The Independent* 24 February 1994, II.

### a. Meher Baba as a Product of Multi-faith Upbringing

“I belong to no religion. Every religion belongs to Me... the religion I impart to all is love for God, which is the truth of all religions” - *Sayings and Messages of Meher Baba*.<sup>10</sup>

Meher Baba places himself as a multi-faith figure, and would seem to have been successful in defying ‘pigeon-holing’ into a specific tradition. Certainly there is still no agreement within scholarly circles as to how to place him. For example, Robert Humphreys and Ronald Ward call him ‘Muslim-influenced.’<sup>11</sup> Kevin Shepherd considers him a ‘Zoroastrian liberal.’<sup>12</sup> Gerald Larson and Purusottama Bilimora prefer to class Meher Baba as ‘Neo-Hindu.’<sup>13</sup> Paul Brunton on the other hand categorizes him as ‘Christian Revivalist-influenced.’<sup>14</sup>

It is not unusual for Indian ‘holy men/ women’ to defy religious categorization. For centuries, the cults and schools surrounding India’s ‘Masters,’ whether they are perceived as Hindu *Sadgurus/ Avatars*, Muslim *Harzrats/ Qutbs* (‘Perfect Masters’), Sikh *Gurus* or Christian *Saints*, betrayed fairly identical emphases.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, if in nothing else, the ‘Indian founder/ Guru’ tradition is multi-faith. Anil Sooklal finds Indian examples of multi-faith ‘Masters’ at least as far back as the Middle Ages.<sup>16</sup> Nanak, Kabir, Eknath and Ramakrishna are good examples.

In some regards, multi-faith standing characterizes founders of many new religions – most especially those that appeared in a multi-faith environment. Joachim Wach noted many parallels between the actions and emphases of “religious founders” in such contexts.<sup>17</sup> This has sparked on-going debate on the suitability of various multi-faith labels for founding figures: “prime mediator,”<sup>18</sup> “the hierophant,” “the Divine Man,”<sup>19</sup> “the exemplar.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Perin Jasumani (comp.), *Gift of Love: Sayings and Messages of Avatar Meher Baba* (Ahmednagar: Avatar Meher Baba perpetual Public Charitable Trust, 1994), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Humphreys & Ronald Ward, *Religious Bodies in Australia – A Comprehensive Guide* (Melbourne: Humphreys & Ward, 1995), 227-228.

<sup>12</sup> See Kevin R. D. Shepherd, *Meher Baba, an Iranian Liberal* (Cambridge: Anthropographia, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Purusottana Bilimora, *Hinduism in Australia* (Melbourne: Spectrum, 1989), 32, 36-37; and Gerald James Larson in his *India's Agony Over Religion* SUNY Series in Religious Studies (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 135, 137.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Brunton, *The Notebooks of Paul Brunton* Vol. II (New York: Paul Brunton Philosophic Foundation, 1987); Note 5:128 (p. 129).

<sup>15</sup> See Daniel E Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity: The Myth of the God-man* (London: Macmillan, 1987) 105f, 157f, Brian Hutchinson, ‘The Divine Figure in the Transmission of Religious Tradition,’ ed. Raymond Brady Williams, *A Sacred Thread: Modern Transmission of Hindu Tradition in India and Abroad* (Edison: ANIMA Publications, 1992), 103, 115; Lise F. Vail, ‘Founders, Swamis and Devotees: Being Divine in North Karnataka,’ and Raymond B. Williams, ‘The Holy Man as the Abode of God in the Swaminarayan Religion,’ in Joanne Punzo Waghorne & Norman Culter (eds.), *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 6, 123f, 131, 143-4f.

<sup>16</sup> Anil Sooklal, ‘The Guru-Shishya Parampara - A Paradigm of Religio-Cultural Continuity,’ *Journal for the Study of Religion* Vol. III (September 1990), 17-21.

<sup>17</sup> Joachim Wach, ‘Types of Religious Authority,’ *Sociology of Religion* (Chicago: Phoenix, 1944), 341-344.

<sup>18</sup> John Hicks, ‘Jesus and the World's Religions’, in John Hicks (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 169-171, 181.

<sup>19</sup> David Lenz Tiede, ‘The Charismatic Figure as Miracle Worker,’ *SBL Dissertation Series 1* (St. Paul: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972), 1-14, 241f.

<sup>20</sup> John Stratton Hawley, ed., *Saints and Virtues* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), xiv.

In any case, certain regions of India present a religious polyglot,<sup>21</sup> even if Indian ‘tolerance’ is more mythical than real.<sup>22</sup> Meher Baba’s hometown of Pune particularly exemplified this situation. It had a broad mix of faiths.<sup>23</sup> His school friends, teachers, and neighbours were therefore diverse - Zoroastrians, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, ‘primal’ religionists (folk religionists/ animists)<sup>24</sup> and occasionally Theosophists, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jews and Jains.<sup>25</sup>

Merwan Irani’s parents and relatives were themselves outsiders (*Iranis* - recent migrants from Iran). His father followed an eclectic form of Zoroastrian mysticism (Kaivanite ‘Theosophy’) and had friends and colleagues from many different religions. The young Merwan also had an entirely Christian (Roman Catholic) schooling, under the instruction of German monks.<sup>26</sup>

At this time, most Parsis in India kept themselves current with the fads of Western civilization - imagining themselves to be British ‘white Aryans,’ distinct from the ‘brown’ Indian populace.<sup>27</sup> Given this kaleidoscopic environment, it comes as no surprise that by his mid-teens, Merwan was writing English fiction for *John Bull* yet also composing Muslim-style *ghazals* and Hindu-style *abhangas* for orthodox Parsi newspapers - combining phrases and terms from four different languages and five different religions.

In the polyglot world Meher Baba grew up in, he – almost necessarily - drew his “spiritual Masters” from diverse traditions. One - Tajuddin Baba (1861-1925) was recognised as a Chisti (Sufi Muslim) *Qutb*; two - Upasni Maharaj (1870-1941)- a *brahmin*- and Narayan Maharaj (1885-1945) are considered representative of the dominant Maharashtra Hindu *bhakti avadhuta* tradition - Datta cult *Avatars*.<sup>28</sup> Another (Hazrat Babajan, c.1790-1931) was allegedly a Qalandari Sufi but was intriguingly influenced by Turkic Shamanism.<sup>29</sup> The last of Meher’s main Masters - Shirdi Sai Baba (c.1836-1918)- spanned both Datta cult Hinduism and Chisti Sufism.<sup>30</sup>

These Masters *during their own lives* had mixed (Hindu - Muslim) lineages. In fact, even the greatest figures of their own lineages (Tukaram, Eknath etc.) had Masters and influences from several faiths. Thus in Meher’s situation we seem to be dealing with a tradition of

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<sup>21</sup> J Gordon Melton is fond of stressing this. See his *Religious Bodies in the United States*, 161.

<sup>22</sup> See Rev. Martin Forward, ‘Gods, Guides & Gurus,’ *Aeropagus* Vol. 6: 3 (1993), 38-40.

<sup>23</sup> Eckehard Kulke, *The Parsees in India - A Minority as Agent of Social Change* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing Press, 1974), 141.

<sup>24</sup> A primal Animism pervades the folk religion of Pune’s street culture. It is especially noticeable at the burial shrines of saints. John M. Stanley, ‘Gods, Ghosts and Possession,’ in Eleanor Zelliott & Maxine Berntsen (eds.), *The Experience of Hinduism: Essays on Religion in Maharashtra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 30-1, 35-47.

<sup>25</sup> Meher Baba’s closest childhood friends included a Gaonese Christian (Louis Veegus), a Buddhist (Ramnath) and Muslims such as Abdul Munsiff Ghani. See Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher (Meher Prabhu)- Avatar of the Age Meher Baba Manifesting* (Myrtle Beach: Manifestation, 1971) Vol. I, 1894 - 1922, 166, 186.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 175-6.

<sup>27</sup> Eckehard Kulke, *The Parsees in India- A Minority as Agent of Social Change*, 141.

<sup>28</sup> Dr. S. N. Tipnis, *Contribution of Upasni Baba to Indian Culture* (Sakuri: Sri Upasni Kanya Kumari Sthan, 1966), 4, 11 & Dr. Shankar Mokashi-Punekar, *Avadhoota Gita with English Translation by Shree Purohit Swami* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1979), 21, 32-33.

<sup>29</sup> Kevin Shepherd, *A Sufi Matriarch: Hazrat Babajan* (Intercultural Research Series of Anthropography No.1 (Cambridge: Anthropographia, 1986), 32, 62-63 and A. Ghani Munsiff, *Hazrat Babajan* (Pune: meher Era, 1981), 23-25.

<sup>30</sup> Antonio Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993), 49f.

eclecticism that was long established, flourishing in Maharashtra from the 12th - 16th centuries onwards.<sup>31</sup>

### **b. One Size Fits All? Universalism as Invisibility**

To comfortably straddle several faiths, many historic figures of the past developed a creed sufficiently generalised to accommodate the essential features of each. This usually emanates as an insipid, flavourless fog that barely outlives its creator. An alternative approach - and usually the more durable - seems to have been a type of aggressive universalism, denying the validity of apparent diversity.

Meher Baba apparently favoured the latter stance. In his view, the differences that split religions into “narrow groups” were “superficial and ultimately false.”<sup>32</sup> They did not represent spirituality. Rather, they were in his view man-made aberrations - created and perpetuated through “ignorance, prejudice and selfishness.” He considered much of what passed for religion as a lifeless shell far removed from its intrinsic unity: “...an archaeological department trying to preserve things which only resuscitate the past. The living spirit (is) absent....”<sup>33</sup> In fact, Meher believed the world’s religions had moved so far from their inner oneness that “it is time that (all) religion should go, to make room for God.”<sup>34</sup>

This stance led him to some unusual conclusions about the inter-faith process. Even though he promoted “rich diversity of expression” in spiritual and cultural matters,<sup>35</sup> he could not believe such diversity denoted separate realities. Creeds were just “the so-called religions.” Their differences were illusory:

*“You are already parts of the one life and as such, brotherhood is not something which is brought into existence through laborious efforts, but is the supreme FACT, which claims your recognition and wholehearted allegiance, as soon as you have the candidness and courage to face the Truth.”*<sup>36</sup>

When one of Baba’s followers, yogi Bharati (who commanded a vast Yoga school in his own right), was called to chair the Parliament of Religions at Swami Shivananda’s ashram, Baba was displeased. He sent Bharati the following message: “these conferences, societies and functions *murder* spirituality.”<sup>37</sup> Later, when Bharati returned, Meher told him that “conferences cannot unite mankind... *words* have failed.” That, Baba explained, was why he remained silent (for forty-four years) and preferred to emphasise love: “the awakening of the heart alone can achieve it” (i.e., religious unity)... I am the Silent Awakener.”<sup>38</sup> In the next

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<sup>31</sup> N. K. Wagle, ‘Hindu-Muslim Interactions in Medieval Maharashtra,’ in Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer & Hermann Kulke, Hinduism Reconsidered (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997), 148f.

<sup>32</sup> Meher Baba, ‘The New Humanity,’ Discourses (Ahmednagar: Adi K Irani, 1939 - 1945), 7.

<sup>33</sup> Meher Baba, ‘Message to Reporters and Press Representatives aboard ‘Bremen’ New York on 19-5-1932,’ Adi K Irani, comp., Messages of Meher Baba Delivered in the East and West (Ahmednagar: Adi K Irani, 1945), 84.

<sup>34</sup> Meher Baba, ‘God and Religion,’ in Messages of Meher Baba Delivered in the East and West, 65.

<sup>35</sup> Meher Baba, ‘The Unity of All Life,’ in Messages of Meher Baba Delivered in the East and West, 75.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 74.

<sup>37</sup> Bhau Kalchuri, Lord Meher Vols. XI - XII 1952-1954, 4112.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

six sections we will examine the agenda through which Meher Baba tried to implement this ‘silent awakening’ about religious unity, and how this generated his own, and his movement’s invisibility.

### c. No Practices: Pursuit of the Ordinary

One of Meher Baba’s most radical emphases was abandoning set religious practices. As Bhau Kalchuri, a major disciple, summarises:

“The (spiritual) path is *not open* to them who put on robes, meditate and repeat mantras mechanically, preach dogma, perform rites, and pose as if they are spiritually advanced.”

“The way of the path is made of  
love - not rituals;  
longing - not ceremonies;  
honesty - not orthodoxy;  
surrender - not teaching;  
sacrifice- not preaching;  
forgiving - not meditating;  
being divinely intoxicated - not repeating mantras.”<sup>39</sup>

Meher insisted: “I lay down no precepts”<sup>40</sup> - “no prayer, no meditation, only love me.”<sup>41</sup> Even this last element had to be invisible: “the flame of love within does not even give out smoke for others to see....”<sup>42</sup>

Although Meher’s key writings such as *Discourses* offer detailed guidelines on prayer, meditation and chanting, he believed this was for later centuries, when his ‘spiritual presence’ will be less accessible. Such practices, as his *Discourses* states, are distractions used by aspirants to avoid the ‘real (spiritual) task’ of meeting life “fully and adequately, without being overpowered by the opposites.”<sup>43</sup>

What this meant, as Meher’s disciples discovered through the various ‘mundane’ tasks he set them, was that spirituality as envisaged by Meher Baba had to be pursued in the daily challenge of *ordinary living*:

“The best way to cleanse your heart and to prepare for the stilling of the mind is to *lead a normal life in the world. Living in the midst of your day-to-day duties, responsibilities, likes and dislikes* becomes the very means for the purification of your heart.”(italics mine)<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Bhau Kalchuri, *Avatar of the Age Meher Baba Manifesting* (Myrtle Beach: Manifestation, 1985), 82.

<sup>40</sup> Meher Baba, ‘Universal Message,’ ed. Jamshed B. Mistry & J. Flsgg Kris, *Meher Baba Calling* (n/p, 1964), 81.

<sup>41</sup> Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher* Vols. VII & VIII 1940-1945, 2818.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, Vols. XIII - XIV 1954-1956, 4528.

<sup>43</sup> Meher Baba, *Discourses*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Purdom, *The God-Man* (London: GeorgeAllen & Unwin, 1964), 286.

Naturally, such an 'ordinary path' is no different (except, perhaps, in its aim) from secular life. *Neither was it specific to any particular faith.*

Meher Baba had a similar attitude to rites and dogmas. He found such specifics too limiting, no doubt on account of their single-faith nature. The main reason he gave for avoiding specific creedal statements and ceremonies was their "superficial and ineffective (nature)... positively harmful and misleading."<sup>45</sup> The earliest accounts on Baba's life - *Ramjoo's Diaries, The Combined Diary* and *Life in a Hut* - show that he gradually created circumstances through which his Brahmin disciples halted their dietary customs<sup>46</sup> and his Muslim and Zoroastrian disciples ceased their set prayers and rites. When his Brahmin contingent would not volunteer for kitchen duties on 'religious grounds' and demanded separate eating arrangements, Meher deliberately placed a non-Brahmin on kitchen duties and compelled his Hindu followers to either eat with everyone or leave him altogether.<sup>47</sup>

#### **d. No Uniformity**

"Spirituality is neither restricted to, nor can it be restricted by, anyone or anything, anywhere, at any time. It covers all life for all time"- Meher Baba, from *Glimpses of the God-man*.<sup>48</sup>

As his attitude to religious practices shows, the 'Parsi Prophet' was extremely hesitant about limiting spirituality to prescribed activities or statements. Believing the spiritual journey to be fundamentally individual, he encouraged the development of personalised practices: "give up all forms of parrotry. Start practicing what you truly feel to be true."<sup>49</sup>

Attempts to restrict or standardise spiritual practice were consequently frowned upon during Meher Baba's life. When an Andhra leader, Mr. Dhanapathy, offered to vet his region's correspondence to Meher, the 'Silent Master' would not allow it: "Don't try to bind my lovers... Everyone should have free scope for the expression of his love."<sup>50</sup>

Dread of 'standardisation' is so marked amongst current Baba lovers that any convention creeping into one segment of the movement is quickly undermined by non-conformity on the part of the rest of the group. In Australia today, I have noted that regular 'Baba meetings' and regular celebrations are few. Even these sporadic events are attended by only the tiniest fraction of the total adherence (as little as 5 persons in the major capital cities and major centres, despite local groups of 150 - 300 persons). When Anne Cushman and Jerry Jones surveyed religious practices at Meherabad (the main Baba centre in India) as part of their guide to the sub-continent's major gurus and ashrams, they immediately noted how, in contrast to most Indian centres:

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<sup>45</sup> Meher Baba, 'God and Religion,' in Messages of Meher Baba Delivered in the East and West, 65.

<sup>46</sup> For instance, he forbade his Brahmin disciples from eating naked to the waist, as was their custom.

<sup>47</sup> Bhau Kalchuri, Lord Meher Vol. III 1925-1929, 869-870; and Gangaram Linbaji Pawar et al, The Combined Diary: Includes Padri's, Pawar's, Pandola's, Naridshaw's and Chanji's, Covering the Following Periods in Continuation of the First Part of "Two Years with Meher Baba" (Meherabad: MSS, 1924-1926) (21 October 1926), 376.

<sup>48</sup> Bal Natu, Glimpses of the God-man Meher Baba (Walnut Creek: Sufism Reoriented, 1977), Vol. 1 1943 - 1948, 218.

<sup>49</sup> Meher Gazette Vol.2: V (Nov - Dec 1933), 3.

<sup>50</sup> Bhau Kalchuri, Lord Meher, Vols. XIII - XIV 1954-1956, 4538.

“You won’t find much in the way of structured programs... What you will find is a warm and peaceful environment with plenty of time to pursue your own practice... Meherabad is unstructured; you are encouraged to pursue your personal development in whatever way is best for you.”<sup>51</sup>

This lack of set practices and precepts has meant that some ‘Baba lovers’ are vegetarians whilst others are strongly carnivorous; some are professionals and heads of major businesses; others are Alternative ‘drop-outs.’ Some meditate and pray; others never engage in anything resembling ‘religious practice.’ Equally, there is a wide range of faith-orientation amongst ‘Baba groups- some being openly Christian, Hindu or ‘New Age;’ others refusing to align with any tradition. Despite this, most would consider their lifestyle as being ‘in the spirit’ of their Master.

### e. No Outer Signs

In 1924, some of Meher’s early disciples moved that the group devise their own religious symbol. Baba immediately vetoed the notion:

“We are not a society. *Any mark of distinction* would rob us of our independence and would prove a binding to restrict our minds.”<sup>52</sup>

It was a significant point. As the disciples soon came to realise, Baba was out to quash everything that gave a sense of division or exclusiveness. Even long hair, shaved heads and beards had to be discarded by his closest followers, as he felt it gave them a ‘renunciate’ look. He would likewise reprimand yogis for appearing before him in saffron robes:<sup>53</sup>

“When you wear *sadhu* (renunciate) clothes, indirectly you court respect. A false sense of advancement in spirituality is liable to be created when you try to lead a life in some other way than that of the common people.”<sup>54</sup>

It does seem that Meher himself tried his best not to ‘stand out.’ He shaved and often kept his long hair curled up under his hat. In France he dressed French. In America he dressed like an American (Kansas City news reporters found him wearing “a Depression suit... dull brown suede (shoes)” when traversing the US in 1932),<sup>55</sup> whereas in India he was attired as an average Parsi. Likewise, he donned a neat suit to mix with ‘high society,’ but wore rough, tattered cottons when traveling amongst ordinary people in the Indian countryside. In India he ate *dhal* and rice; in Australia and Europe he ate chips, Spam and corn flakes.

Followers of Meher Baba today are camouflaged by a similar ‘normalcy’. There are no distinguishing features in their lifestyle. Most will have photographs or books of Meher Baba in their homes, but few dare to carry such identity into the public sphere. In fact, ‘famous’

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<sup>51</sup> Anne Cushman & Jerry Jones, From Here to Nirvana - the Essential Guide to the Yogis and Gurus, Ashrams and Temples of Spiritual India (2nd Edition, London: Rider, 1999), 175, 178.

<sup>52</sup> Bhau Kalchuri, Lord Meher Vol. II 1922-1925, 609.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, Vols. XIII & XIV 1954-1956, 4710-11.

<sup>54</sup> Meher Baba, ed. Eruch Jessawala & Rick Chapman, Darshan Hours (Berkeley: The Beguine Library, 1971), 21.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Baba to Give Up His Uh,’ Kansas City Evening Star Kansas City: 27 May 1932.

Baba lovers (and there have been quite a few: singers Pete Townsend and Tuck and Patti, playwright Stephen Miller, screenwriter Patrick Meyers) are noted for their secrecy (or reluctance) about revealing their faith.<sup>56</sup>

It is worth noting that Meher encouraged his followers to blend into their religious surrounds - continuing in the religions of their birth. He even sanctioned some followers abandoning all books and photos of him and 'keeping Me in your heart' if their spouse or community found such objects offensive. Some of his closest disciples such as Elizabeth Patterson and Dr Munsiff Ghani played a leading role in Christian and Muslim organisations (the local Anglican Church in Elizabeth's case and a Sufi society in Ghani's case).<sup>57</sup>

#### **f. No Organisations, No Centres**

In 1956, Filis Frederick conducted the first sociological survey of the Meher Baba movement. This was in the United States. By that time, the movement had been flourishing on American soil for twenty-five years, producing a number of groups, yet to Frederick's dismay, she found no 'Meher Baba organisations.' Only one body seemed to have a glimmer of structure - the *Universal Spiritual League in America Inc.* Frederick found that even this was nothing more than a legal device created to aid Meher's visits. It had no on-going membership, meetings or hierarchy.<sup>58</sup> Generally, Frederick's encounter with the 'Baba movement' consisted of undefined clusters of individuals who "voluntarily decided to get together regularly" to share their mutual interest in Meher Baba. She could not calculate how many 'Baba groups' existed because *no Baba followers were keeping a tally - there was no overseeing body.*<sup>59</sup>

Twenty years on, Ann Johnson was still finding 'Baba lovers' (in this case in the UK) "loosely organised,"<sup>60</sup> whilst Robert Ellwood's explorations of the Californian 'Baba scene' turned up nothing but:

"informal fellowship ...scattered groups, usually meeting in Meher Baba bookstores (run by enthusiasts without much financial profit) or private homes. No permission to organise or join is needed."<sup>61</sup>

Meanwhile, Naosherwan Anzar, a Parsi publisher in New York, was not even convinced that 'Baba lovers' could be classed as a 'religious movement':

"There are no set conditions or rules to be a Baba-lover and as such there is no violation and thereby no such thing as expulsion or excommunication...."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Danny Sandford, 'The Guiding Light,' *Glow International* May 1986, 11-17.

<sup>57</sup> Allen Y. Cohen, *The Mastery of Consciousness* (New York: Colophon, 1977), 152.

<sup>58</sup> The League existed solely to make Merwan's travel possible. The McCarthy-influenced US government at that time demanded such bodies exist, as a means of controlling the movements of foreigners. Filis Frederick, 'The Meher Baba Group: A Sociological Study' (transcript of 1956 paper), *The Awakener* Vol. XXI: 1 (1984), 39-40.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, 33, 35.

<sup>60</sup> Ann Braden Johnson, 'A Temple of Last Resorts: Youth and Shared Narcissisms,' Marie Coleman Nelson (ed.), *The Narcissistic Condition* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1977) 31-32, 38, 60.

<sup>61</sup> Robert S. Ellwood, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America*, 284-5.

<sup>62</sup> Naosherwan Anzar, 'Moving Towards God,' *Glow International* (August 1977), 2, 32, 34.



All this grew out of Meher Baba's express wish not to establish another "cult, society or organisation, nor ... (a) new religion."<sup>63</sup> Throughout his life, the Parsi teacher was scathing of religious organisations. He likened organised faith to: "...the foam which brings unwanted things up to the surface of the sea, letting the real substance lie beneath, submerged in the depths."<sup>64</sup> For this reason, he was constantly dissolving whatever organisations and institutes he established. When a group of Andhra devotees created an organisation called 'K.D.R.M.' he visited it, healed its rifts, and promptly ceased its activities, adding:

"Even about books and all other literature on 'Baba' I won't be responsible... I will have no concern whatsoever with either office or publications..."<sup>65</sup>

This wariness about organisations and offices extended to the development of temples and ashrams. In Meher's *Final Declaration* (1954), he indicated that:

"I have not come to establish retreats or ashrams. I.. repeatedly dissolve them once that purpose has been served..."<sup>66</sup>

Meher believed that his work would only be complete when all cathedrals, mosques and temples had fallen into disuse. He felt that, instead of erecting churches, temples and mosques, people should establish "a house for the Beloved in their hearts."<sup>67</sup> He was convinced that temples, ashrams and centres inevitably become vehicles for controlling and structuring the spontaneity of true spirituality:

"...by attaching to it (a centre) great importance ... it develops into a *regular organisation or system*, and I do not wish to *limit myself or bind myself* with any such thing. ..If such centres are allowed to prosper, they form themselves into organisations or societies. *For that reason, I build structures and then demolish them...*" (italics mine)<sup>68</sup>

Certainly from the start of Meher's spiritual career in 1921 through to 1952, he was constantly relocating and dismantling his main base. He shifted all over India and even overseas. Often the centre's buildings were sold or demolished.<sup>69</sup> Though Meherabad (near Ahmednagar, Maharashtra State) soon emerged as Baba's principal 'home base,' it was frequently - often suddenly - abandoned by him. Meher had many of its structures destroyed, rebuilt or put to new use throughout the decades.

Similarly, in 1938, Meher went to the trouble to create a 'Universal Centre' at Byramangala near Bangalore. He even laid its foundations and plans,<sup>70</sup> but it seems to have been an entirely symbolic act, for nothing further was erected. Ten years later (1949), the entire place was

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<sup>63</sup> Meher Baba, *The Moving Finger Writes*, (Ahmednagar: Amy A Arjun & AdiK Irani, 1963) Part I, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher* Vols. VI & VII 1934-1940, 2270.

<sup>65</sup> Meher Baba, *What Baba Means by Real Work, as Explained by Meher Baba at Rajhmundry on the 1st and 2nd March 1954 During His Tour in Andhra State* (Ahmednagar: Adi K Irani / Meher Publications, 1954), 7, 9-11.

<sup>66</sup> Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher* Vols. XIII & XIV 1954-1956, 4544.

<sup>67</sup> Meher Baba, *The Moving Finger Writes Pt.1*, 16.

<sup>68</sup> Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher*, Vols. VII & VIII 1940-1945, 2270.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. III 1925-1929, 899.

<sup>70</sup> This was published as a small (eight-page) booklet: *Scheme of Meher Baba Universal Spiritual Centre at Byramangala near Bangalore, Mysore State* (Bangalore: Publication Committee, Meher Baba Universal Spiritual Centre, 1939).

sold to a follower. Eventually this new owner had to abandon the place.<sup>71</sup> He visited Baba over the matter, only to be told: “I disposed of everything that was in my name in 1949. Still you regard this property as mine! So go and sell it...”<sup>72</sup> When followers in Australia built a house and hall in Baba’s honour in 1958, Meher visited and named it. However, he immediately *reimbursed* all who had contributed money or labour to its construction, *and then gave the property back to the chief purchaser*, explaining, “I hold no goods or property.”<sup>73</sup>

Thus although permanent centres did eventually arise (there are now dozens of permanent Baba centres around the world), and Baba himself saw them as useful and significant to a degree, he ultimately attributed them to his followers’ needs and whims.<sup>74</sup> With a few exceptions, he seemed hostile to the entire process:

“You can establish one hundred centres for Baba, and I will have no concern with any of them. You yourselves will be concerned with them. It is all your concern, not mine...<sup>75</sup> (*italics mine*)

This ‘hostility’ was particularly marked when disharmony erupted at centres. Meher would then order those involved to either patch up their differences or “dissolve”<sup>76</sup> or “close”<sup>77</sup> their centres, *and not open new centres*.<sup>78</sup>

For the most part, the Baba movement today does not operate through centres, and those that exist have few (mostly voluntary) staff. Most of the hundreds of Baba centres in India and the West are not permanent. They are simply special rooms in ordinary homes, or halls that find temporary use as a meeting place. They tend to close or be relocated when followers move elsewhere. Similarly, ‘Baba projects’ and publications are not coordinated in any fashion, but are produced by sporadic, temporary alliances between various interested parties.

### **g. No Homage; No Hierarchy?**

One of the most intriguing aspects of Meher Baba’s multi-faith stance was it being undergirded by his repeated and extreme claims of being the *absolute spiritual authority* - God Incarnate (*Avatar, Messiah* etc.). Thus though he tried to democratize faiths, and do away with internal hierarchies amongst his own followers, he paradoxically expected “explicit obedience” from those closest to him.<sup>79</sup> This led to the unusual situation of placing himself as “elder brother” and “friend” and viewing “all (as) One with God”<sup>80</sup> yet at the same

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<sup>71</sup> D. V. Balakrishna Meher, The Glory of Meher Baba (Byramangala: MBUSC Publications, 1997), 108.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, 112.

<sup>73</sup> John Grant, Practical Spirituality with Meher Baba (Sydney: Merwan, 1985), 101 & Bill Le Page, The Turning of the Key- Meher Baba in Australia (Ahmednagar: Sheriar, 1993), 114.

<sup>74</sup> Bhau Kalchuri, Lord Meher Vols. XVII - XVIII 1960-1965, 6223.

<sup>75</sup> Meher Baba, What Baba Means by Real Work, as Explained by Meher Baba at Rajhmundry on the 1st and 2nd March 1954 During His Tour in Andhra State (Ahmednagar: Adi K Irani/ Meher Publications, 1954), 7, 9-11.

<sup>76</sup> Meher Baba, Warning from Meher Baba to His Lovers, (Ahmednagar: Adi K Irani, 1957), 14.

<sup>77</sup> Bhau Kalchuri, Lord Meher Vols. XVII & XVIII 1960 - 1964, 6081.

<sup>78</sup> Meher Baba, Warning from Meher Baba to His Lovers, 14.

<sup>79</sup> Gangaram Linbaji Pawar et al, The Combined Diary (7 February 1927), 113.

<sup>80</sup> Meher Baba, The Fiery Free Life (Ahmednagar: Meher Publications, 1952), 5-6.

time being incredibly firm on his closest disciples precisely adhering to his instructions and requests.

Nevertheless, Meher did carry his ideals of equality into his own daily activities. It is well known that he personally shouldered many of the mundane tasks at his centre at Meherabad. For instance, he regularly swept, ground grain, cleaned the toilets (scooping out tins of human waste), changed bed linen, and joined the others in washing, feeding and toileting the residents of centre's hospitals and schools.

Perhaps more radical than this was that he managed for the most part to avoid the customary homage gurus, school teachers, political leaders and even one's parents or spouse enjoy in India. This involved matters such as falling at the feet and garlanding persons one esteemed. In pursuit of equality, Meher forbade people bowing to him.<sup>81</sup> He also stopped people from garlanding him,<sup>82</sup> explaining:

"... to chant my *arti*, perform my *puja*, garland me, offer me fruits and sweets and bow down to me means absolutely nothing. It is wastage of money on goods... and a sheer wastage of breath and energy..."<sup>83</sup>

One of the major rules of early Meherabad was: "falling at the feet of Meher Baba is strictly prohibited."<sup>84</sup> This seems to have been nevertheless broken by many visitors, for by 1949, Meher gave this as a principal condition (No. 25) of being a 'Companion' in his New Life wanderings: "you will not... create circumstances that might invite homage to me."<sup>85</sup>

Ghani's *Diary of the New Life* records that whenever anyone tried to throw themselves at Baba's feet, he stopped them and bowed to them.<sup>86</sup> At one time, Meher threatened to close Meherabad's school and other institutes if people persisted in bowing to him. He also warned that he would "beat himself" if anyone tried to take his *darshan* (the Indian custom of 'viewing the Master,' usually in a worshipful manner).<sup>87</sup> When, on 21 October 1926: "someone once again broke the order not to pay respects... (Baba) seemed to be very disgusted ...with such slips repeated again and again."<sup>88</sup>

In his later years, we do find Meher Baba succumbed to these traditions, but it does not seem to have been the norm. Even in the midst of it, Meher is reported as signing: "I am so fed up with all this bowing down."<sup>89</sup> He routinely refused 'guru thrones' set up in his honour - only sitting on them momentarily, or if he needed to sit high so that others could see him,

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<sup>81</sup> Eruch Jessawala, D.E. Stevens (ed.), Tales from the New Life with Meher Baba Narrated by Eruch, Mehera, Mani and Meheru (Berkeley: the Beguine Library, 1976), 148.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, 4333 and Vols. XIII - XIV 1954-1956, 4798.

<sup>83</sup> Meher Baba, What Meher Baba Means by Real Work (Ahmednagar: Adi K. Irani/ Meher Publications, April 1954), 2.

<sup>84</sup> Ramjoo Abdulla, Ramjoo's Diaries 1922-1929 – A Personal Account of Meher Baba's Early Work, (Walnut Creek: Sufism Reoriented, 1979), 18-19.

<sup>85</sup> Swami Satya Prakash Udaseen, ed., The New Life of Avatar Meher Baba and His Companions (A Compilation of all the 34 New Life Circulars) (Hyderabad: The Meher Vihar Trust, 1967), 71.

<sup>86</sup> Dr Abdul Ghani Munsiff, Diary of the New life of Meher Baba and His Companions (from 16th October 1949 to 21st January 1950) (n/d, n/p), 69, 73.

<sup>87</sup> Bhau Kalchuri, Lord Meher Vol. III 1925-1929, 870.

<sup>88</sup> Gangaram Linbaji Pawar et al, The Combined Diary (21 October 1926), 378.

<sup>89</sup> Bhau Kalchuri, Lord Meher Vols. XI - XII 1952-1954, 4320.

preferring to sit on the ground amongst the crowds. For a similar reason, he refused to give the standard “spiritual discourses and explanations” expected of ‘guru’ figures<sup>90</sup> and in later life - from 10 July 1958 until his death - told followers that “no one should expect or seek from me any ...*darshans*, *sahavas* (spiritual company) or interviews.”<sup>91</sup>

On many occasions it seems Meher Baba did operate within a strict democracy - allowing close followers to decide his own and the entire group’s actions and movements, through a process of group discussion and voting. Even for *Sufism Reoriented* - a Western group that had *recognised Murshids (Leaders)*, Meher issued a *Charter* to ensure that:

“All conventions, rules, regulations, Articles and By-laws must be strictly based on the democratic principles of adult franchise and equal opportunities for all... without allowing any exceptions to anyone on grounds of spiritual advancement or enlightenment.”<sup>92</sup>

Today, as Elwood noted, the Baba movement consists of innumerable, unregulated, fully autonomous groups, centres and individuals. Meetings, activities and celebrations are led by whoever is inclined at the time. Although domineering leaders have occasionally emerged in particular Trusts and centres, it is interesting that all these have been ultimately rejected and ousted by the general followers.<sup>93</sup>

## **h. Conclusions**

The case of Meher Baba illustrates that individuals and movements emerging from a multi-faith environment may be inclined to abandon faith-specific structures, practices and doctrines – and even abandon structure and form altogether, preferring to blend into wider (secular) society. This has some interesting ramifications for the future of multi-faith dialogue. Does it mean that the process of multi-faith dialogue will encourage (or has already encouraged) the dissolution of organized religion? Will all multi-faith spirituality merge back into general society? Studies of similar movements may eventually answer these questions, but it is interesting to note the growing trend in some sections of Western society towards a rather invisible, personalised spirituality, combining elements of diverse faiths.

\* *Ray Kerkhove*, PhD, MA (University of Queensland) is an independent scholar residing on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. For several years he lived and worked at the main Australian Meher Baba centre. Ray has authored many articles and two publications about the ‘Baba lovers’ movement. His Doctoral thesis is a biographical study of Meher Baba’s emergence and the process through which he was authorised.

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<sup>90</sup> Bal Natu, *Glimpses of the God-Man Meher Baba* Vol. VI *March 1954 - April 1955* (Ahmednagar: Avatar Meher Baba Perpetual Public Trust, 1994), 196-7.

<sup>91</sup> Meher Baba, ‘Share with Me in My Final Work,’ *Universal Message; Share with Me in My Final Work; God Alone Is* (Meherabad: n/p, 1958), 2.

<sup>92</sup> Meher Baba, *Chartered Guidance from Meher Baba for the Reorientation of Sufism as the Highway to the Ultimate Universalized*, (n/p, c.1956), 5.

<sup>93</sup> Filis Frederick, ‘The Meher Baba Group: A Sociological Study,’ 36-8. Between the 1970s and 1990s, the Chairpersons of each of the major Indian, American and Australian Baba centres was ousted.