



# ਕਹਿਣ ਗੁਰਪੁੰ ਇ ਗੁਰਵੇ ਕਰਵੇ ਗੁਰਪੁੰ ਇ ਭ ਕਰਲਾਨ QUESTION

How do American followers of Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma) construct meaning from following a Hindu female religious leader, in a traditionally male dominated role?

## METHOD

- ◆ Conducted literature review on female religious leaders, Hinduism in America and materials by and about Amma and her Mission, specifically focusing on issues of gender
- ◆ Conducted nine in-depth interviews, as approved by the Institutional Review Board, at a spiritual retreat in Iowa held by Amma's Mission
  - ◆ Transcribed, coded and analyzed the interviews
- ◆ Engaged in observation of Amma's devotees, her work as a guru and the structure of her organization at spiritual retreats in Iowa and Illinois as well as at her ashram (spiritual center) in San Ramon, California

## DEMOGRAPHICS

- ◆ Interviewed nine Amma devotees
  - ◆ Six females and three males
    - ◆ Ages 19-62
  - ◆ Four had a Christian background
- ◆ Four had a spiritual background in Transcendental Meditation (TM)
- ◆ Two of the ex-Christian participants had been exposed to other Eastern religions
  - ◆ One participant had been an Amma devotee since the age of nine

## AMMA'S BIOGRAPHY

- ◆ She has been labeled the "hugging saint," as she embraces all that come to her with love and affection. Mata Amritanandamayi spreads her embrace around the world through her darshans (meetings with a guru/holy person) and her message of peace and seva (selfless service). She has been claimed as a poster child by liberals and conservatives alike in many nations, with her freely given love and acceptance, as well as her traditional Hindu teachings.
- ◆ Rising up out of poverty and social inferiority as a low-caste, dark-skinned Hindu female from a small fishing village in southern India, Amma has become a prominent female guru, claiming many thousands of followers around the world. Her teachings encompass a change in social structures, while reiterating traditional dharmas (duties/obligations) and traditional religious practices.
- ◆ Amma's focus on selfless service has produced ashrams and spiritual centers in thirty-three countries. Her charitable service endeavors include hospitals, hospices, care and shelter for the elderly and widows, orphanages, elementary schools, as well as various technical and medical colleges. She has also dedicated herself to disaster relief and has built over 25,000 homes for tsunami victims and the poor (Cornell, 2001, 9-125).



## REGARDING THE FEMININE

- ◆ Amma stresses, "Woman is the creator of the human race. She is the first Guru, the first guide and mentor of humanity." As mother she influences and inspires her children (Amma, 2003, 53). The mother-child relationship is glorified in India. A mother is the symbol of selflessness; she knows the heart of her child and dedicates her whole life to her child. Amma is not a biological mother, yet she sees everyone as her own child (Amma, 2002, 71-88).
- ◆ "The rules and superstitious beliefs that degrade women continue to prevail in most countries. The primitive customs invented by men in the past to exploit and to subjugate women remain alive to this day." Amma asserts that any genuine religion would not look down upon women or speak of them in a derogatory manner, but would rather raise women to their rightful status as equals with men and to their exalted status as mothers (Amma, 2003, 35-43).
- ◆ Amma encourages women to establish their own identities, and thus recreate society. She warns, though, that such freedom also entails responsibility and is not a license to act any way one wants. Today women are living in a world fashioned by and for men; both should be aware of their unique dharma (duties). Men and women have to support and complement each other and have cooperation and respect for one another (Amma, 2003, 43-57).

## CONCLUSIONS

- ◆ Our findings suggest that there is indeed a difference between viewing the Divine as feminine or masculine.
  - ◆ Most of our respondents are clearly drawn to Amma because of her gender.
- ◆ Our respondents believe that Amma, as a female guru, is meeting spiritual needs that they felt were unsatisfied within their previous spiritual paths.

## SUGGESTED FURTHER RESEARCH

- ◆ Our respondents feel that there is an imbalance in the exclusively masculine conception of the Divine in the West, missing the feminine. We suggest further research to determine how prevalent this imbalance is within the larger society and in what ways people are attempting to address this perceived imbalance.
  - ◆ There were indications that following a female spiritual leader can be spiritually, emotionally and socially empowering for female devotees, but this is a complex issue which requires more in-depth investigation.
- ◆ The spiritual backgrounds that devotees bring to their encounters with Amma appear to have a profound influence on how they interpret their relationship with Amma; this was most evident when interviewing former practitioners of TM. Since this was an unanticipated finding, we were not prepared with questions to address this issue and we believe further research is necessary on this topic in order to fully understand Amma's appeal as a female spiritual leader.

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## FINDINGS

Our findings suggest that neither gender nor age seems to have a significant effect on how devotees view Amma and their relation to her.

All participants:

- ◆ View Amma as 'Mother', either symbolically or as a divine incarnation of the Goddess
  - ◆ Conceive of this motherly quality of Amma's to be expressed through an energy of unconditional love and comfort, as experienced mostly through her hugging darshan (meeting with a guru/holy person)
    - ◆ Believe that the energy of love and comfort seems to be best expressed through a female form and essence
  - ◆ Recognize a difference and significance between following a female spiritual leader and following a male
  - ◆ Recognize an imbalance in our society, favoring and representing masculine divine and human qualities over feminine
  - ◆ One participant stated that it is "psychologically freeing" to view God as female (Respondent 8)
  - ◆ Another participant stated, "True feminine energy is missing from our society and the way it's structured... It's a really powerful energy and I think our society misses out a lot by not tuning into that energy... Amma is proof that that power exists." (Respondent 2)
- Most participants mentioned women's significance within Amma's organization:
- ◆ Female devotees of Amma outnumber male devotees, in the United States (Our interviews suggest that this may not be true in Amma's native India)
  - ◆ Females have equal access to all positions within Amma's organization, such as the priesthood which is traditionally reserved for high-caste males
    - ◆ Amma's organization encourages female lay devotees to be active participants and empowers women to utilize and expand their individual skills within the Mission

## FINDINGS, cont.

Whereas all participants, regardless of gender or age, agreed on the function and value of Amma's female gender in her spiritual leadership, devotees did vary in their emphasis, depending on their previous spiritual influences and practices:

- ◆ The four devotees with a primary background in Christianity focused on Amma's motherly qualities and presence, emphasizing her love and comforting appeal. These devotees put the greatest importance on having female spiritual leadership and feminine conceptions of the divine in a society with predominantly masculine-oriented spirituality.
- ◆ The four devotees with a primary background in Transcendental Meditation (TM) largely drew upon their experience in the TM movement in creating meaning from following Amma. These devotees also spoke of Amma's love, although their focus was on "consciousness," on the Self, rather than on love and comfort. Former TM-ers spoke of recognizing a connection in consciousness with Amma, with an emphasis on her perceived transcendent qualities and abilities. These devotees seem to approach the Amma movement seeking a balance between the masculine and feminine. They speak of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the late TM founder and leader, as having a masculine energy who has imparted the discipline of meditation, whereas Amma, with her feminine shakti (energy), provides connection and comfort. A common saying attributed to Amma by devotees states, "Maharishi is your father and he gives you knowledge, I am your mother and I give you love." (Respondents 4 & 6)
- ◆ The two formerly Christian devotees who had some influence from other Eastern religions expressed many of the same sentiments, yet emphasized the qualities of love and comfort.
- ◆ The one participant who had been an Amma devotee since the age of nine did not see Amma as guru, but as a literal mother. Beyond unconditional love, this devotee stressed her relationship with Amma, both emotionally and spiritually. This devotee experienced a feeling of perpetual care from Amma, whom she felt was always with her.

Julian of Norwich: "Our savior is our true Mother in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come" (hooks, 2000, 105).

"I wonder what it might have been like growing not with Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty as role models, but Lalleshvari or Mira Bai... No wonder our fantasy women marry princes and live happily ever after while theirs marry princes, cultivate wisdom, and discover themselves in the essence of all things" (Johnsen, 1994, 20).

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