



AT&T offers discounts designed for communication professionals.

- Fair and flexible plans
- Talk and surf the web at the same time
- Access to the nation's fastest 4G LTE network

Start saving now

[Back to Article](#)[Click to Print](#)

TIME

Monday, Sep. 05, 1977

Religion: Yogi Bhanan's Synthetic Sikhism

The leader of 3HO inspires devotion—and hostility

Nine years ago, he was an anonymous yoga teacher who owned little but a suitcase full of beads. Today he earns over \$100,000 a year in lecture fees as Yogi Bhanan, the "Supreme Religious and Administrative Authority of the Sikh Religion in the Western Hemisphere." Thousands of American disciples in his Healthy-Happy-Holy Organization ("3HO") revere the robust, bearded Bhanan as the holiest man of this era. With equal fervor, opponents denounce him as a charlatan and a heretic.

The kind of Sikhism preached by Bhanan, 48, an Indian born in what is now Pakistan, is far different from that practiced by 10 million Indians. Sikhism, a blend of reformed Hinduism and Islam, is practical-minded, allows democratic election of its priests, and abhors personality cults. Bhanan's powerful personality is central to his sect, and ambition has driven him far since his days as an unknown customs officer at the Delhi airport.

In 1968 Bhanan emigrated to Toronto, later that year moved to Los Angeles and eventually started his own ashram—spiritual commune—in a garage. Although India's Sikhs are renowned as meat eaters, Bhanan has insisted that his followers be strict vegetarians. While yoga is not part of Sikhism, Bhanan teaches the practice, and not the mild form widespread in the U.S. but Tantrism, a strenuous, mystical variety practiced by men and women in pairs. Claiming to be the only living master of Tantrism, Bhanan stresses Kundalini yoga, which supposedly releases secret energy that travels up the spine. He reveals breathing and massage techniques said to improve sexual performance. And he preaches: "The man who ties a turban on his head must live up to the purity of the whiteness and radiance of his soul."

Undeniably, Bhajan has struck some kind of chord. There are now 110 ashrams of various sizes in the U.S., Canada, and overseas. The yogi claims to have won some 250,000 followers, but a more realistic estimate would place the number of zealots at several thousand, although many more flock to his meetings. Bhajan's base is a well-groomed 40-acre ranch near Espanola, N. Mex., where his quarters are said to feature a domed bedroom and a sunken bath. Neighbors are nervous about 3HO's expensive land purchases in the area.

Less visible than the cymbal-clanging Hare Krishnas, the 3HO disciples rival them in devotion. Men and women alike follow the Sikh traditions of not cutting their hair and bearing symbolic daggers, combs and bracelets. Ashram members rise at 3:30 a.m. to practice yoga and meditate, sometimes while staring at a picture of Bhajan. They often work twelve hours a day on low salaries and skimpy diets at 3HO small businesses, such as landscaping companies, shoe stores, and quality vegetarian restaurants. Full-fledged initiates follow Bhajan's every dictum on diet, medical nostrums, child rearing, even orders to marry total strangers. Guru Terath Singh Khalsa, who is his lawyer and spokesman, says that Bhajan is "the equivalent of the Pope."

For most of the converts, the discipline of Bhajanism seems to have rilled a deep spiritual vacuum. Many are in their mid-20s and come from upper-middle-class homes. A number had been dependent upon LSD and marijuana; the movement claims that all have broken the habit.

The adherents are flushed with the rosy beauty of new faith. "We got involved in Sikhism so we could re-establish a direction in our lives based on real principles," a young Jewish woman at a Los Angeles ashram told TIME Correspondent James Wilde.

Chimed in an ex-Catholic who misses the Latin Mass: "The demystification of the church turned me off." Even a Massachusetts girl who has broken with the movement says wistfully, "At the ashram we had the nucleus of a real family. It was one of the most beautiful things I have ever experienced."

Bhajan has important backers in India. High Priest Guruchuran Singh Tohra, president of the management committee for northern India's Sikh temples, confirms that his council has given "full approval" to 3HO and recognizes the yogi as a preacher. Tohra, however, says that this does not mean Bhajan is the Sikh leader of the Western Hemisphere, as he claims. The Sikhs do not create such offices. Nor, Tohra adds, has the committee given Bhajan the rarely bestowed title, Siri Singh Sahib (the equivalent of saying "Sir" three times), which he uses.

Bhajan has his critics—and they are severe. Many traditional Sikhs insist that yoga has no place in their

religion. Sikh Historian Trilochan Singh says Bhajan's synthesis of Sikhism and Tantrism is "a sacrilegious hodgepodge." Far more important, High Priest Jaswant Singh, a leader of the Sikhs in eastern India and comparable in status to Bhajan Backer Tohra, last week denounced Bhajan's claims. He and his council professed to be "shocked" at Bhajan's "fantastic theories." Yoga, Tantrism and the "sexual practices" taught by Bhajan, the council declared, are "forbidden and immoral."

There are more delicate matters at issue, many raised by people who knew Bhajan when. Judith Tyberg, respected founder of Los Angeles' East-West Center, where Bhajan briefly gave courses, questions his knowledge of Kundalini yoga. She fired him from her faculty after three months for another reason —which she refuses to divulge.

Bhajan has repeatedly been accused of being a womanizer. Colleen Hoskins, who worked seven months at his New Mexico residence, reports that men are scarcely seen there. He is served, she says, by a coterie of as many as 14 women, some of whom attend his baths, give him group massages, and take turns spending the night in his room while his wife sleeps elsewhere.

Colleen and her husband Philip, Bhajan's former chancellor, who quit last year, say they could no longer countenance Bhajan's luxurious life-style when so many of his followers had to scrimp along. Filmmaker Don Conreaux, an early apostle, says that originally the yogi was "against titles, against disciples. Now he teaches only obedience to him." When Philip Hoskins quit last year, he says, Bhajan told him he would suffer 84 million reincarnations and be "reborn as a worm for betraying your teacher."

The current chancellor insists that Bhajan "lives in a moderate manner," and asserts that reports of illicit affairs and of women in the yogi's bedroom are "absolutely untrue." Yogi Bhajan himself was unwilling to grant TIME an interview until he visits India this month with a group of disciples for a Sikh festival. When he arrives there, the "Supreme Authority" of the Sikh religion in the Western world may have to answer a few questions from his fellow Sikhs about the kind of religion he is preaching—and practicing.

 [Click to Print](#)

Find this article at:

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,915413,00.html>

Copyright © 2013 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Add TIME Headlines to your Site](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Customer Service](#)