

"Peace Blossom" Lady Liberty

"Give me your tired, your hungry, your poor; your new age adepts yearning to breathe free; Your sari-clad gurus from Bangalore...." Although this re-write of Emma Lazarus' "New Colossus" does not really adorn the walls of the Statue of Liberty museum on Ellis Island, it very well could — if the disciples of Sri Chinmoy have their way.

On August 27th, Chinmoy, an Indian mystic who presides over the United Nations meditation group, dedicated the Statue of Liberty as a "Peace Blossom." With the approval of the National Park Service, Chinmoy's followers placed a plaque inscribed with one of the guru's poems in an alcove of the Statue's lobby. Lady Liberty thus joins more than 900 prominent sites around the world — including Grand Coulee Dam and Alaska's Mt. McKinley — that have been designated "Peace Blossoms" by Chinmoy's "spiritual family."

Pagan Poem

In addition to his supposed role as an avatar of "god consciousness," Chinmoy is said to be an accomplished weightlifter and prolific artist and writer. He claims to have authored 750 books and composed more than 17,000 poems. "America's Proudest Vision-Pride," the Chinmoy composition which greeted recent visitors to Ellis Island, reads as follows:

O Polestar Statue of Liberty!
Earth-heart's pinnacle-Divinity.
America's proudest Vision-pride —
Her Beauty's cosmos-fragrance-ride —
Freedom-smile-bestower is your Soul.
World-peace-hunger's nectar-flooded Goal.

According to Nishtha Baum, the Chinmoy disciple who secured permission for

the poem to be displayed on Ellis Island, the Statue's "Peace Blossom" designation is "a very deep, meaningful thing, something that I hope will be inspiring to other people the way it is to us." National Park Service spokesman Manny Strumpf shares

Island National Monument, who granted official approval to Chinmoy's display. Dayson emphasized to the *New York Times* that while a request for a religious plaque would have earned an immediate rejection, Chinmoy's message of "world peace" was safely apolitical and commendable on its face. Nevertheless, Dayson claimed to have been smitten by the "spirituality" of the guru and his followers: "I recognized that there was much more to them, that they were on a higher plane, that they had spiritual roots." Indeed, Dayson and the Park Service apparently regard the "Peace Blossom" designation as a significant honor. On August 27th, immediately following the dedicatory ceremony, the Park Service issued a press release which quoted from Dayson's rhapsodic speech at the ceremony: "With this initiative, the Statue of Liberty now belongs not only to America, but to the whole world. What better symbol than 'Lady Liberty' to lead us all to the light of peace and harmony?" At the ceremony, the Park Service also presented Chinmoy with a birthday cake in the shape of the Statue of Liberty.

Change of Heart

But the Park Service's ardor for Chinmoy cooled rapidly following a gust of negative public reaction, and suddenly what had been an honor became a major public relations liability. "We've gotten a lot of calls from some folks who complain that these are 'kooky' people," Dayson recounted to THE NEW AMERICAN. "Well, I think that the Statue of Liberty is supposed to represent kooks, the disadvantaged, minorities, the homeless, women — it's supposed to represent anyone, and not just be geared to elitist people."

Dayson once again insisted that the "Peace Blossom" designation has no religious significance, and that the Park Service was not endorsing Chinmoy's



A pagan shrine? Chinmoy dedicates Statue of Liberty.

Baum's enthusiasm and breezily dismissed potential complaints that Chinmoy's followers are using America's most frequently visited tourist attraction to proselyte: "It's a sign of peace more than a matter of converting others to their faith. What greater symbol is there for peace and freedom than the Statue of Liberty? It's totally appropriate."

The supposedly "non-religious" nature of the "Peace Blossom" designation was also emphasized by Diane Dayson, superintendent of the Statue of Liberty/Ellis

AP/Wide World

movement. "It's not the norm here to research every group that makes a request," she stated. "Their representatives came here and made a presentation, and I thought that they made a worthwhile case that their interest was in world peace, and I thought that's what Lady Liberty is supposed to symbolize."

According to Dayson, "what clinched the case was that two of our sister National Parks thought that [the Chinmoy designation] would be a good way to show support for the concept of world peace." A mere three weeks after the dedication, however, the Park Service quietly announced that it had removed Chinmoy's plaque from the museum pending specific approval from the service's director or Congress. A wire service report explained that this decision was made in response to negative public reaction to the plaque. But the Park Service has yet to concede that the Chinmoy group's notion of "world peace" is something other than a benign, "apolitical" message. "Peace," from Chinmoy's perspective, is a product of submission to the "Absolute Supreme," which may be embodied either in himself, another vessel of "god-consciousness," or the United Nations.

Dangerous Devotion

Chinmoy Kumar Ghose ("Sri" is an honorific in the Hindu faith) was born in 1931 in West Bengal, India. He claims to have achieved a state of "god-realization" at the age of 12, after which he spent two decades in an Ashram (a religious community). After immigrating to the U.S. in 1963 to work in the Indian consulate in New York, Chinmoy began to recruit followers into a movement devoted to "self-transcendence." Among his most devoted followers were rock guitarists Carlos Santana (who later converted to Christianity) and John McLaughlin, as well as record producer Narada Michael Walden, who says of Chinmoy: "He reminds me of God."

The guru's outreach includes "peace concerts," marathons, and weight-lifting exhibitions. He claims to have lifted over 7,000 pounds with one arm — a feat that supposedly illustrates his spiritual transcendence. However, the January 13, 1989 *Wall Street Journal* noted that "Mr. Chinmoy typically uses a special lifting contraption — which resembles a modified Nautilus machine — to assist him in his stunts." Bill Clark of the International

Weightlifting Federation, an organization that certifies unusual feats of strength, was pestered relentlessly by Chinmoy's followers to confer recognition on the guru's dubious accomplishments. "I don't ever want to hear the name Sri Chinmoy again," Clark complained to the *Journal*.

Clearly Chinmoy's disciples are extraordinarily devoted to their master — an attachment the guru diligently cultivates. This is illustrated in "Take Care, Be Careful," a lecture by Chinmoy to his disciples that was unearthed by the Spiritual Counterfeits Project. "Obedience, obedience, obedience," exhorted the Guru. "At every moment if you are obedient to me ... then you can't make any mistake.... Obedience, intensity, intense oneness with my will and intense determination to please me every day, at every moment in my own way: this is what I need from you. My will power is your freedom."

Chinmoy's injunction to "obedience" took an eerie and macabre turn:

I came and I will go. Even the little progress that you feel you are making, which is falsehood, you will not make in my physical absence.... Before Sri Krishna left the body he destroyed his own family because they were unbearably sad. I don't have the heart or I don't have the power to destroy you people.... But after my departure you will destroy one another, all of you, my entire so-called spiritual family, here, there, elsewhere, all over the world.

The parents of one of Chinmoy's followers testify that the guru nearly destroyed their family. Their daughter, who joined Chinmoy's movement as a sophomore at the University of California, became convinced that the guru "had divine powers. He demanded absolute loyalty and obedience. She was never allowed to ask questions nor doubt his decisions. As her 'Master' and leader she was never to question his authority.... He repeatedly told her she was working for the noblest cause of all, 'World Peace.'"

"Absolute Supreme"

Chinmoy's quest for "World Peace" eventually led him to the United Nations. In April 1970 he founded the United Nations meditation group, which conducts services twice a week for UN delegates

and staff. Former UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim testified of the impact of the meditation group: "I know what you are doing for us. I know it, I can feel it." Chinmoy also found a willing follower in Under Secretary-General Robert Muller, who has stated that world peace will ultimately depend "on divine or cosmic government" and that a prerequisite for "divine government" will be an "alliance between all major religions and the UN." In fact, Muller has referred to the UN as "the body of Christ" — an assessment shared by Chinmoy, who describes the organization as "the chosen instrument of God ... a divine messenger carrying the banner of God's inner vision and outer manifestation." Muller's book *My Testament to the UN* contains the following prophecy by Chinmoy regarding the UN's ultimate destiny:

No human force will ever be able to destroy the United Nations, for the United Nations is not a mere building or a mere idea; it is not a man-made creation. The United Nations is the vision-light of the Absolute Supreme, which is slowly, steadily, and unerringly illuminating the ignorance, the night of our human life. The divine success and supreme progress of the United Nations is bound to become a reality. At his choice hour, the Absolute Supreme will ring his own victory-bell here on Earth through the loving and serving heart of the United Nations.

Such are the insights of the spiritual "teacher" who conferred his puzzling poetic benediction on America's most visible symbol. ■

— WILLIAM NORMAN GRIGG

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