

To whom it may concern

My name is Robert John Egan. I was born in Chicago in 1942. I am a Roman Catholic priest, ordained in 1973, and a member of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) since 1967. My academic training has been in philosophy and theology. My current residence is at the Jesuit School of Theology, 1735 Le Roy Avenue, Berkeley, California.

I have been invited to write this letter concerning Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh about whose status as a religious leader some legal question has arisen in the United States. I am happy to do so.

The American tradition of belief in fundamental freedoms and inalienable rights includes the right to freedom in matters of religious faith and practice. For most Americans this conviction, and the legal tradition that embodies it, is a deep and essential aspect of the American heritage. Nevertheless, there has always been something taken for granted in this conviction. Namely, that it should be easy to decide what things are and are not genuinely "religious." But almost all our ideas about religion came from only one example---modern (and especially Protestant) Christianity. Consequently, we are often unconsciously biased in our views about the generic features of "religion." In the history of the United States, we Roman Catholics have more than once been oppressed and persecuted because our way of being religious seemed illegitimate and unamerican. So also have Jews been the objects of contempt and discrimination on the basis of religious illegitimacy, and even where they are treated courteously they are often treated as a type of covert "denomination." The problem is that many Americans remain illiterate on the subject of religion, so our desire to be tolerant and democratic never gets put into practice.

In this regard the ancient religious traditions of India suffer from even greater distortions and misunderstandings. It is simply that for some Americans their way of being religious is written in a language they cannot translate back into their own. This helps me understand how a question could have arisen about whether or not the status of a religious leader should apply to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, who in the last decade has become one of the best known religious leaders in the international community representing these traditions. His religious community includes many prominent figures and so has become well known in intellectual and artistic communities in the United States and in Western Europe. He is the author of a great many books and my impression is that they have reached a wide audience. In relation to his own traditions, he is a reformer and

innovator, and therefore is, inevitably, controversial. But of course being "controversial" is in almost every case the single most characteristic trait of authentic religious leaders.

In my judgment there could be no intellectually or morally serious reason to question whether or not Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh is a religious leader. I am led to believe, therefore, that there is some kind of religious discrimination and violation of rights involved.

Recently this man has been a story on the evening news. Twice in the week they showed footage of members of his community lining the streets to see him drive by in his car. The reporter's voice-over could not have made it seem more strange. "People line up for hours just to catch a glimpse of their guru being driven in his huge limousine, etc." Then, the same week, there was a story on Pope John Paul II. There was almost identical footage of people waving at a limousine, but the voice-over was talking about "great love" and "kindling their hopes" and "a mood difficult to describe." This is an example of religious bias.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert J. Egan S.J." The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page.

Robert J. Egan, S.J.
July 18, 1983