Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, founder of the Transcendental Meditation Organization, was a prime example of a Hindu leader who appealed to the authority of science to lend his movement legitimacy. The interpretive lens Maharishi applied to the sacred scriptures collectively called the Veda, “knowledge”, reflected a specific Indian philosophy: the School of Nondualism known as Advaita Vedanta. Maharishi claimed that parallels to quantum physics and other forms of Western science such as biochemistry confirmed ancient Vedic “sciences”, thus developing strategic apologetics to redescribe traditional Advaita Vedanta philosophy and various practices as scientific. Maharishi added to his apologetics intensive field study through which he claimed he could prove the western scientific basis of his metaphysical interpretations. Indeed, Transcendental Meditation and its purported benefits has been the subject of over 600 studies of its physiological, psychological and sociological impact; TM is perhaps the most researched meditative technique seeking empirical proofs on the nature of the mind and techniques of all time. (N. A., Scientific Research, 2000) Maharishi even claimed that the worldview of physics and quantum field theory had successfully bridged the subject-object divide, pointing to and validating the metaphysics of the Vedic worldview, leading him to conclude that the “vacuum state” was equal to the “state of least excitation”, which was none other than the ultimate reality described in the Vedas. Moving beyond the laboratory, Maharishi sought to validate his programs by undertaking social-scientific research of Transcendental Meditation, the Sidhi techniques, and group meditation. These studies purported to show dramatic beneficial physiological, psychological, and sociological results, leading to assertions of what came to be called the Maharishi Effect. Maharishi also unveiled unique interpretations of alternative and borderline sciences grounded on Vedic sources. In addition, new technologies, particularly EEG machines and brain scans, served as para-technology aids to supposedly diagnose “imbalances” and assist practitioners in improving themselves by increasing brain
“coherence”. And finally, Maharishi made use of educational scientific capital that could provide an independent and non-religious mode of alternative credentialing. He promoted those with accredited academic degrees, particularly in science, to higher positions of authority in the Transcendental Meditation Organization, and he established academies, universities, institutes, as well as journals, and held quasi-academic conferences to announce and explore the “Science of Creative Intelligence”. In this chapter, I briefly trace the major phases in the development of Maharishi’s movement in the West and provide explanations for these seven scientistic strategies to show how he could simultaneously appeal to the authority of science to lend his movement legitimacy and still claim to be “Vedic”.

Maharishi was a disciple of Shankaracharya Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, who served in the mid-twentieth century as the chief pontiff of the Jyotir Math hermitage in North India. When the philosopher and religious innovator Shankara systematized Advaita Vedanta in the late eighth century AD, he also sought to create a hierarchy that would preserve and spread its teaching. He established monasteries in each of the four cardinal directions in India; Jyotir Math is the northernmost monastery. The head of each monastery is titled “Shankaracharya”, or a “Shankara teacher”. The fact that Maharishi was a disciple of the famous and authoritative Shankaracharya Swami Brahmananda Saraswati lent his philosophy and activities great prestige to those who honor the Shankaracharya tradition.

After Shankaracharya Swami Brahmananda Saraswati passed away in 1953, Maharishi left the monastery and went off on his own. In 1955, during a visit to South India, he experienced a spontaneous revelation that he had a divine mission to spread spiritual regeneration to the entire world. (Humes, 2005, p. 62) Maharishi had earned an undergraduate degree in physics from the University of Allahabad. Conspicuously, although he had the appropriate religious credentials in having been a disciple of a Shankaracharya, he taught his master’s Advaitin message through metaphors and analogies rooted in western scientific concepts, even as he invoked a “science of the soul”:

The spirit or soul [atman] is the basic motive force of our existence and spirituality is the science of that motive force. The material science of tody [sic] speaks highly of atomic power. Today the political power of a nation depends upon its resources of atomic energy. But we in India know that the atomic energy is not the basics [sic] motive power of our existence. It can only be called the basic motive force of material