Evaluating Spiritual and Utopian Groups

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NOTE

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Spiritual and utopian groups will always exist because they answer to fundamental human needs. However, not all of those needs are spiritual or utopian and that is the problem. Some groups may fulfil their announced goals, benefiting their members and society, others may turn into a nightmare of exploitation, fear and violence. So it becomes necessary to have a way of evaluating groups, avoiding those that are, at best, ineffective and, at worst, injurious.

In order to do this one must recognize that the experience of the truly spiritual is not a fantasy, a delusion or an emotional binge but a valid aspect of human life known to almost everyone *to some degree*. Even today, in a culture that has embraced the scientific world view, most people have intimations of a larger, more perfect reality that transcends the material world. This intangible perception has been shared by some of the principal physicists who established modem science, such as Newton and Einstein. The intuition of the spiritual does not require esoteric, dramatic ecstasies; in its most convincing form it is part of everyday consciousness. There it is reflected in our awareness of "the good".

Tolstoy describes this perception in his novel, *Anna Karenina*. At the end of the story, Levin, who has been struggling unsuccessfully to find meaning in life and is close to suicide, is talking to Theodore, a peasant worker, about two other peasants, Mityuka and Plato. Theodore comments:

> "Oh well, you see, people differ! One man lives only for his own needs: take Mityuka, who only stuffs his own belly, but Plato is an upright old man. He lives for his soul and remembers God."

Theodore's words spark a transformation in Levin's understanding of his life. He sees that the value of his life has been linked to an inherent knowledge of goodness, a knowledge that lies outside reason:

> "I looked for an answer to my question. But reason could not give me an answer – reason is incommensurable with the question. Life itself has given me the answer, in my knowledge of what is good and what is bad. And that knowledge I did not acquire in any way; it was given to me as to everybody, given because I could not take it from anywhere.

Where did I get it from? Was it by reason that I attained to the knowledge that I must love my neighbor and not throttle him? They told me so when I was a child, and I gladly believed it, because they told me what was already in my soul. But who discovered it? Not reason! Reason discovered the struggle for existence and the law that I must throttle all those who hinder the satisfaction of my desires. That is the deduction reason makes. But the law of loving others could not be discovered by reason, because it is unreasonable."[1]

Unscientific as it may be, the spiritual shines ahead of us through the darkness and we seek its source. Even in dealing with material existence, the sense of a potential for unlimited love, beauty, and unity gives rise to utopian visions and repeated attempts to create a society in which suffering will be absent and people will lead joyous, satisfying lives. This wish has led many to join groups that promise such fulfilment. Spiritual groups have union with God as their goal, utopian paradise on earth. They both share a fervor, idealism and sense of mission that indicates their kindred origin although their stated aims may be at different levels. Both reflect a similar impulse, a similar hope of realizing a higher state. These hopes should be respected.

History records waves of such activity. The most recent was in the sixties when the United States experienced a proliferation of New Age spiritual and utopian groups. Although that wave began to decline in the late seventies, Christian fundamentalist and charismatic organizations then went through a similar phase of rapid increase. But throughout these recent decades there have been many casualties. The most notorious incident occurred when the members of one group committed mass suicide at the direction of their leader. In other less publicized groups members have been harmed by being sexually and financially exploited, and quite a few leaders, spiritual as well as utopian, have turned out to be other than they seemed, falling far short of delivering what they had promised.

The mystical tradition insists that despite the overabundance of such misguided, ineffective and damaging enterprises, effective spiritual groups have been in operation in all eras, including this one.[2] The fact that spurious groups also exist is not surprising. "Counterfeit coins are accepted because real coins exist". So we are left with two pressing questions, "How can one separate the genuine from the counterfeit?", "How can one judge a spiritual or utopian group and its leader?"

The first step in answering the questions is to realize that confused with intimations of the spiritual are longings and impulses derived from childhood. Thus, although a person may wish to find meaning and certainty,

to serve God and humanity, he or she may also want to be taken care of, to find a home, to be praised and admired, protected and loved. These latter yearnings are seldom acknowledged because adults are not supposed to be motivated by them. Nevertheless, in seeking to gratify those wishes we are drawn to join groups that seem to be new families and to accept leaders as surrogate parents. Covertly, the "bliss" that is sought and frequently experienced is that of children who have been rescued from uncertainty and responsibilities, who have found a home.

Furthermore, we are social beings and derive benefits from joining with others. Groups can provide a gratifying sense of belonging, support and purpose while leaders can teach and inspire. As I will show, these aims may be important and valuable but they are not spiritual, no matter how pious their outward presentation. Correspondingly, our motivations for joining a spiritual or utopian group may be other than we realize or wish to know. Detecting such covert purposes enables us to evaluate a group's legitimacy.

Judging a spiritual group is complicated by the fact that spiritual leaders often present a unique problem. The outsider as well as the member may be intimidated by the claim that the leader has special knowledge, is "enlightened", able to perceive and know what the ordinary person cannot and, therefore, immune from ordinary criteria of behaviour. Such leaders say that what they might do in their wisdom may make no sense to the unenlightened. Indeed, the mystical tradition in the various forms it has taken throughout history has been quite consistent in defining its teachers as people whose spiritual development had progressed to the point that they could "see" what others could not. If we grant that such people do exist, how can it be possible for the ordinary person to judge them?

Actually, the problem is not as difficult as has been thought, for the spiritual traditions are quite consistent about their goal and the requirements for reaching it. It is this fact that permits us to make a functional assessment of spiritual groups and thereby avoid cultural bias. We can make a judgement based on how well the activities of a group and its leader are suited to its stated aims.

A careful study of the literature of the mystical traditions – Vedantic, Taoist, Zen and Tibetan Buddhist, Sufic, Hasidic and that of the English and Spanish Catholic mystics, as well as the writings of such people as Jacob Boehme and Meister Eckhart – shows that they share the same basic goal. Their diverse procedures represent different ways of reaching that goal, according to the type of people being taught and the culture in which the teaching is taking place. The aim of the mystical traditions is the development of the ability to perceive directly (intuitively) the reality that underlies the world of appearances, whatever that reality may be called. All

the traditions agree that the primary requirement for the development of this capacity is that a person shift from a self-centered orientation to one of serving the Truth. This service must be without concern for personal gain As one saint put it:.

> O Lord!
>> If I worship you from fear of hell, cast me into hell.
>> If I worship you from desire for paradise, deny me paradise.[3]

The shift away from self-centredness is not a matter of being virtuous but is a functional necessity. The type of consciousness we employ is that which is appropriate for our intention. Thus, self-preservation and acquisitive activity call for the "object mode" of consciousness featuring distinct boundaries, focal attention and logical thought, enabling one to act on the environment. In contrast, to receive, to take in, requires a shift to a different mode, one featuring diffuse attention, the dominance of the sensual over the formal and a blurring or merging of boundaries.[4] The two modes of consciousness are different because they address different tasks. Thus, our consciousness is a function of our underlying intention, it adapts to our motivations, to our purpose. You can grasp a stone but to scoop water from a stream you need to cup your hand. Similarly, if you wish to perceive a world of connectedness, of unity, you cannot rely on the same mode of consciousness you use to attack or defend. For unitive perception, for that access to the spiritual domain, a selfless orientation is required in which the Truth is served for its own sake.

This selfless orientation is referred to in a variety of ways, depending on the tradition in question. For example, in the Upanishads it is referred to as "the purified heart"; in the Buddhist literature it is the attitude of "non-attachment". We might call it serving the task, rather than the self. To serve the task a carpenter might finish the underside of a chair out of a sense that it was called for, whether or not the carpenter gained anything from doing what was correct. Developing that selfless orientation requires years of the right kind of effort – there are no shortcuts. Although brief glimpses of the larger reality are possible to almost anyone without such development (as in the case of spontaneous mystical experiences), it is a different matter to establish such perception as the ongoing basis of one's actions in the world. To do so necessitates a long period of skilful work.

This fact, that enlightenment requires an enduring change in a person's motivations, has a number of interesting consequences. The most important is that "the secret protects itself". No matter what you may say or do, if your underlying intention is selfish, and even if you are unaware that this is the case, no perception of the Truth is possible. It follows that a teacher cannot

bestow the Truth on someone else. The capacity for the perception of the Truth must be developed – there is no short cut. Teachers who imply that enlightenment is in their gift are frauds.

These requirements provide a basis for assessing both new religious movements and traditional ones as well. A genuine spiritual organization is run in such a way as to assist the student in making the shift from a self-centred life to one that is centred in service. Almost all groups advocate service and their members will work long hours for a bare subsistence. However, at the same time self-centred emotions and desires may be stimulated.

An organization whose methods of operation enhance self-centred intentions can be judged dysfunctional, no matter how much overt self-sacrifice is demanded of its members. For example, the members of one quasi-Christian group were told that if they left the Church they would be damned. In another group, members were told that terrible things had happened to people who had defected in the past. Fear for one's safety or fear of being damned is not the sort of motivation that promotes spiritual development.

Some groups make little use of fear but appeal directly to the members' greed. They maintain that only group members will receive the divine bliss that the leader can convey. Indeed, extensive use may be made of procedures that bring about dramatic alterations in consciousness and these unusual experiences are then interpreted as proof that "paradise" awaits faithful followers. Initiation into one Indian guru's group featured a procedure causing members to experience a bright white light in the center of the head. Other sensory experiences are induced, as well. These experiences are called "knowledge" and are interpreted as validating the claims and promises of the guru.

Sometimes it is not bliss that is promised but power. A well-known group advertised a series of meditation sessions that would enable participants to levitate! Such a group might do a good job of meeting other needs, but it is not actually engaged in spiritual development. Consequently there is no basis for its leader to claim the special status and authority of the enlightened spiritual teacher.

These examples are relatively crude, although very prevalent. There are more subtle behaviours indicating that a group is not really spiritual. Often one can see that considerable use is being made of flattery, of appeals to the members' vanity. It was common practice of recruiters for one organization to direct "love bombs" (lavishly bestowed attention and praise) toward potential converts. Lonely young people found them hard to resist. Most groups convey the message that the new member has shown marvellous

spiritual discernment by joining them. The leader may be a potent dispenser of flattery, calling attention to converts' good qualities and promising great things to come. Indeed, attention alone may be enough to accomplish seduction, whether it is delivered in the form of praise or as a severe rebuke. Such appeals to egotistical concerns indicate the corrupt character of a group and its leader.

The manipulation of guilt is another sign that a group is spurious. Lifton has documented its central role in "thought reform" or "brainwashing".[5] Basically, it establishes a dependent, regressive relationship to the leader and group; the member tends to feel like a bad child.

Many groups rely heavily on indoctrination. We can understand the general problem of indoctrination procedures by remembering that real mystical schools are aiming at a type of development. Indoctrination is not development, it is substituting one belief system for another. If a group makes use of the components of indoctrination it is a sure sign that its purposes are mundane. It is not hard to determine if this is the case because the principles of indoctrination are well known. They include: the arousal of guilt; group rejection alternating with group approval; repetition of accusations and dogma; restricted access to information; restricted privacy; and attacks on a person's previous affiliations and way of life.

When one surveys new religious movements as well as traditional religions, it is very striking how few are free from the components of indoctrination. This is in contrast to the mystical literature's emphasis on the need to acquire freedom from fixed assumptions and culturally derived beliefs about the self, God, causality, good and evil. Furthermore, indoctrination is antithetical to the expression of individuality and the mystical literature makes clear that individuality is crucial to the developmental process and must eventually manifest itself. A Hasidic anecdote relates that Rabbi Zusya on his deathbed told his assembled disciples:

> "When I get to the world to come they will not ask me 'Why were you not Moses?', they will ask me, 'Why were you not Zusya?'"[6]

Spiritual development requires the opposite of indoctrination: learning to discern how the perception of the world is influenced by egocentric thought and motivations. To the extent that groups employ indoctrination components they are not legitimate spiritual groups, no matter what other valuable functions they may perform. Accordingly, their leaders are not entitled to the authority claimed by genuine spiritual teachers, an authority that would otherwise render them immune from conventional criticism. This is an extremely important point because bogus leaders fall back on the

argument of spiritual authority as justification for the most exploitive and destructive acts. Without relating a leader's behaviour to the requirements of spiritual development, there is no adequate reply to the argument.

It is because the leader's role is functional rather than magical that genuine spiritual teachers can be seen to obey implicit rules. Despite the general impression that great teachers indulge in any and all behaviour, careful attention to traditional teaching stories and anecdotes reveals that there are certain principles that are never violated. For example, I can recall no anecdote depicting a teacher ordering one student to harm another or condoning such an action. Nor are there examples of students being encouraged to compete for the teacher's attention. There are no examples of teachers entering into sexual relations with their students or enriching themselves with their money. All these examples have been common among current and past "spiritual" groups.

The reason why such examples are absent in authentic spiritual groups is that real teachers do not use their students to advance their own personal interests. In this matter the mystical literature is quite consistent and clear: a spiritual teacher does not have licence to exploit students in any way or for any cause – the only legitimate basis for the teacher's actions is the advancement of the student along the spiritual path. This is not to say that larger purposes may not be served at the same time; indeed, such synchronous activity is said to be the norm but it is never at the expense of the student's development. The fact is, far from having unlimited licence, a genuine spiritual teacher obeys functional requirements that far exceed the restraints most people are accustomed to impose on themselves in the name of religion or common decency. The behaviour of many so-called spiritual leaders is a travesty of the authentic situation.

Utopian Aims

Some groups that do not have explicit spiritual goals speak in terms of rehabilitative and therapeutic aims (e.g. teaching convicts to be responsible, law-abiding or curing emotional problems) or the more general idea of self-development, of actualizing one's potential. These groups may promote themselves as an ideal society that provides its members with all they need to live and develop in a wholesome, satisfying and creative way. Here, too, we have the means for evaluating the authenticity and genuineness of such an organization and its leader by the use of functional criteria.

A good place to start is with Freud's definition of a healthy individual as someone who is reasonably able to work and to love. The simplicity of the definition is deceptive. For example, to be able to work a person must

have sufficient impulse control to persevere until a given task is completed. It is also necessary that he or she be able to detach from emotions and fantasies to the extent necessary to perceive the task requirements accurately and carry them out. Furthermore, for the work to be satisfying it must in some way be expressive of individuality, even if that expression is in terms of the quality of the work rather than in some unique design or process. The ability to be individual, creative or innovative is not an automatic capacity of human beings. For some, it is achieved only after years of effort; for others, it never takes place.

The ability to love is also complex. We can understand that phrase to mean the capacity both for intimacy and for unselfish concern for another person. Intimacy is measured by the extent to which two people can be unguarded with each other, expressing their most personal feelings, thoughts, fantasies and wishes. To do this requires three things: 1) the capacity for trust; 2) a basically positive evaluation of oneself; and 3) sufficient acceptance of one's own thoughts, feelings and desires to be able to accept those of another without rejecting the other person or engaging in dis-identification: "How could you possibly have such (childish, cruel, sexist, filthy, selfish, etc.) thoughts!" Unselfish concern requires the ability to set aside self-protective and acquisitive strategies – and that is not easy. Thus, to work and to love is an achievement often requiring considerable learning and effort.

Despite the wide ground that Freud's definition covers, it is helpful to supplement it by looking at health from another perspective, that of autonomy. Autonomy is measured by the capacity to stand alone; it is the mark of adulthood. To stand alone means to be able to decide for oneself what one should and will do. It does not mean amorality or lawlessness but, rather, "the experience of being the author of the law you obey".[7] To have that experience, one must be willing to give up the idea that there are Big People to whom one looks (up) for answers and to whom one assigns responsibility and power. Autonomy exists only in an eye-level world. In contrast to autonomy, dependency is the readiness to structure one's relationships, both real and fantasised, on the model of parents and children. Although the dependent person is assumed to be the one who takes the role of the child, a person who plays the role of the parent is also participating in the fantasy and has not reached a sufficient stage of autonomy to give the fantasy up.

With these three functions in mind – work, love and autonomy – we are in a position to assess the validity of organizations that aim at competency in any or all of these areas. Just as in the case of spiritual groups, it is important that a prospective member be able to discriminate between

effective and ineffective organizations. The least ill effect of the latter is to waste time and resources; the worst effect is to retard and damage the psychological growth of those participating in them. This is especially true of groups that set themselves up as utopian communities within which their members are expected to live their entire lives.

Many groups are successful in achieving improvement in the basic work skills of their members. They offer support, behavioural contracts, attention rewards from the leader, and a ready-made work structure – all of which contribute to the ability to carry out tasks and be productive. Indeed, since the work performed by the members is in most cases the source of income for the group and its leader, it usually receives top priority and may, in fact, be the only priority – apart from recruitment – no matter what else may be said to the contrary. Unfortunately for individuality, its expression through a member's work is not really necessary for the economic success of the group. Since individuality is also perceived as a threat to group cohesiveness, it is seldom encouraged.

Individuality requires autonomy and when it comes to achieving autonomy the requirements are more difficult than in the case of basic work skills. This is due to the fact that the very thing that is often most attractive to potential members – a charismatic leader – tends to accentuate dependency. When leaders exploit this situation by making promises of what they will bestow through their power or largesse, it is clear that autonomy is not likely to be achieved. Pressure towards conformity to group standards and ideals, inhibition of critical thinking and reliance on the magic of the leader are also factors working in the wrong direction. One of the common signs that the development of autonomy is being impeded rather than assisted is the aping of the leader in dress or manner. The basic difficulty here is that the authority of the group and the leader tends to be challenged by autonomous individuals and such confrontations are seldom welcomed. Despite these problems, it is possible for a group to enhance autonomy. If it does not inhibit or punish challenge and criticism, if it refuses to play parent to its members and if it discourages their magical expectations, it can help reach that goal. Otherwise, it is likely to be a hindrance.

The goal of intimacy is also not easy to attain. Because issues of trust are strongly based on earlier life experience, therapeutic processes are often required to bring about improvement in that area. Furthermore, the group and the leader must sanction the development and maintenance of strong emotional ties between members, "pair bonds", if members are to have the opportunity to learn how to be close. It is a fact, however, that the power of the leader and the sense of security of the group is diminished by strong pair

formation because it sets up conflicting loyalties. This has been illustrated by those who managed to leave powerful exploitive cults. In many cases it was the competing needs of children or the love for a spouse that finally brought about the break with the group. Arranged marriages; the breaking of relationships by order of the leader or the group; pressure towards promiscuity or chastity; sexual relationships with the leader; interference with bonds to children and to parents – all these are signs that individual intimacy is being sacrificed to increase the members' ties to the group and the leader. Since the group and the leader together constitute a parent-child structure, neither adult intimacy nor autonomy are fostered by such policies but are impeded. In fact, what often takes place is a regression of psychosexual development.

From one point of view, this is not surprising. After all, for many converts the last thing they want is the complex demands of adult sexuality and true intimacy, to say nothing of real autonomy. The organization may function as a haven and the restricted relationships within the quasi-sibling group may well be a relief after the difficulties the members had been encountering prior to joining. That this is often the case is suggested by research that found that the fewer social ties a convert had before joining, the more likely that he or she would remain in the organization.[8]

Of course, there is nothing wrong with a haven or a moratorium for people wishing to regroup their forces, heal their wounds or solve their personality problems before proceeding further with their lives. However, to be therapeutic a group must not only comfort, it must help resolve its members difficulties and move them further along the development path. Fixation at the level of a sibling group is non-therapeutic. People leaving such ineffective or exploitive organizations are likely to be in the same developmental phase they were in at the time they joined – only worse off because they are older and more out of step with the life of their contemporaries.

There are two further reasons why progress in the ability to be intimate does not take place in most religious, spiritual or New Age utopian groups. The first is that it requires therapeutic skill and experience to be able to uncover and clarify the barriers to intimacy that may exist in any one individual. Few people in such organizations have the necessary skill and it is rare for time to be given to formal psychotherapeutic activities. Secondly, resolving the conflicts that interfere with intimacy requires that the person become aware of transference reactions; that is, inappropriate feelings and attitudes derived from childhood relationships. These feelings tend to be experienced towards parental and sibling surrogates without the person being aware that that is what is taking place. To clarify such misperceptions

requires that group members examine their attitudes toward the leader and towards the quasi-sibling group. Such an examination is likely to diminish the emotional bonds that maintain and contribute to the power of the leader and the organization. For this reason, authoritarian organizations are not usually advocates of psychotherapy.

Any organization that purports to be a complete or ideal society must be capable of providing the means for its members to progress in the areas of work, love and autonomy. Otherwise, the organization is functioning as a haven, nursery, business, or summer camp, but not as a society that enables its members to mature and make their individual contribution in the world. The fact that a small society may be economically successful and have many members does not make it ideal, spiritual, therapeutic or even harmless.

It must be acknowledged that no organization can be pure. No matter how skilled the leader, no matter how sincere the group members, human imperfection will manifest itself to some extent. Any group will tend to be exclusive and dependent; leaders are not omniscient and they all have distinct personalities. The spiritual traditions have been well aware that organizations in the world partake of its imperfections. Here is a story from the Sufi tradition that deals with this reality:

The Celestial Apple

Ibn-Nasr was ill and, although apples were out of season, he craved one.

Hallaj suddenly produced one.

Someone said: "This apple has a maggot in it. How could a fruit of celestial origin be so infested?"

Hallaj explained:

"It is just because it is of celestial origin that this fruit has become affected. It was originally not so, but when it entered this abode of imperfection it naturally partook of the disease which is characteristic here".[9]

Human activity is always flawed. Nevertheless, there is a difference between an apple with a maggot in it and one that is rotten. A small area of imperfection can be isolated, it can be avoided and corrected. When corruption is pervasive the apple must be discarded. It is expected that whatever personality flaws a teacher may possess, they will not be allowed to interfere with the teaching activity; certainly not to determine it. Whenever inappropriate group behaviour occurs it is to be noted and eliminated. The important and obvious point is that the behaviour of the teacher and the group must contribute to achieving the stated goal.

These considerations make possible a preliminary judgement of a leader or of a group. Such a judgement need not be an esoteric matter but one that is possible to a sufficiently sophisticated observer. It is true that much of what a genuine spiritual teacher or a New Age leader/therapist might do could be quite incomprehensible or misunderstood by an outsider, but the basic functional relationships I have outlined will hold and provide a basis for making a judgment.

Furthermore, there is no evading this assessment; indeed, we make judgments of groups all the time, whether we wish to or not. We decide whether to join or not to join, whether to support or to discourage, and it is necessary that we do so, both for ourselves and for others who look to us for guidance in these matters. As I discussed earlier, the unsatisfied hunger for spiritual fulfilment may take highly inappropriate forms and lead people to embrace organizations and leaders whose destructive activities can be extreme. In the case of less pernicious groups, precious time and resources are squandered and the person may be left with a barren and cynical outlook. For this reason alone it is necessary that we judge the legitimacy of a group and its leader.

Protection is not the only issue. If the mystics are correct, each of us has a need to develop our own capacity to perceive the fundamental nature of the reality in which we live and the self that is at the core of our being. Valid mystical schools exist to bring about that perceptual development. It is of considerable importance that we become able to detect the existence of genuine groups amid all the counterfeits so that progress in this area can be made.

The functional criteria I have presented permit at least a provisional assessment of spiritual and utopian organizations that is not heavily biased by the observer's social class, religion or political affiliation, because it makes use of criteria based on the spiritual literature itself, as well as on our psychodynamic understanding of individuals and groups. Since judge we must, we may as well judge skilfully, as befitting members of a culture in which our knowledge can provide a basis for our doing so.

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