

HOW TO START A CULT WHILE TRYING NOT TO:

an open letter to a visionary who's trying not to but who's on the verge of

Dear _____,

1. Today you presented me with a dilemma I've been confronted with enough times to constitute a category. I hope it doesn't feel too cold for me to say it: you are in a category of spiritually sensitive, mission-minded individuals who across the decades have asked me (1) how to effectuate their witness (2) without starting a cult, or a new religion. Your personal identity is irrelevant to the purpose of this Thinksheet, so this is an open impersonal letter personally addressed to you anonymously. It's a compliment to you that I, convinced your message is more important to you than your image & ego, believe that this manner of speaking to you will not turn you off.

2. I've not the slightest doubt of your sincerity & passion, without which characteristics you'd not qualify as a visionary. Nor do I doubt that God wants me to take visionaries seriously: what have I, spiritually, that I have not received from them? I thank you for your witness to me as to the "above & beyond" dimension of reality, a dimension we human beings are able to grasp, or rather more be apprehended by. Ironically, Mad. Av. manipulates this image: Prudential Insurance has shifted attention from its Rock-of-Gibraltar logo to its "Above and Beyond" slogan. In our fag-end narcissistic culture, Peggy Lee's "Is This All There Is?" is heard with more variations & at higher decibels: people are becoming more aware of their spiritual hunger & are expressing it in freedom outbreaks & in revived & new spiritualities.

3. To avoid starting a cult or new religion, you must understand the essence thereof, lest you fall into the pit unseen. Here are the essentials:

(1) A vision of could-should-must, three words various therapies warn us to avoid if we are to do a better job of coping with "reality," meaning the everyday here-&-now. Avoiding the here-&-now as too painful, the schizophrenic dreams up a less threatening, more promising world. Freud's claim (in THE FUTURE OF AN ILLUSION) that this is the etiology of religion is an instance of his simple-minded, pleasure/pain reading of reality. Eg, Eve had a vision of a garden in which diet would be unrestricted & nobody would tell her what not to do: it would strain the pleasure principle to eat all of that. Common sense teaches us to judge whether a vision is pathogenic by observing its personal, interpersonal, & historical effects: if the fruits are good, so is their tree (Mt.7:17-19 [L.6:43] Mt.12:33).

Some visions come from God "trailing clouds of glory" like meteors in the soul, & some of these hit earth (as spiritual meteorites) & inevitably pick up some dirt, which works its way into the world as the vision is lived: no unpolluted people ("original sin"), no undistorted vision.

Does the world have a lodestone, touchstone vision for judging, evaluating, rating all other visions? I believe it does, & that the world received it less by human discovery than by divine gift, by biblical revelation. Described from the standpoint of relationship & order, it goes by the phrase "the Kingdom or -ship of God," which Adam & Eve's dietary experiment turned from. Described from the human standpoint, the vision is "shalom," that rich Hebrew word comprehending all the best (peace, prosperity, restoration of relationship [forgiveness, atonement, **justification**], love, joy, & **justice**). Good will intends all the best for all; if it can be, it should be; if it should be, it must be. And the visionary has no doubt it can be, so....

(2) The visionary is passionate about the vision, which is all-consuming & instant. No waiting till your housing problem is solved (Mt.8:20 [L.9:58]) or your parents have died (Mt., next v.; L., next v.). Not even taking time to say goodbye (L.9:61f). No excuses for not coming to the vision's feast (L.14:18-21).

(3) The visionary makes a public claim that the vision is an otherwise inaccessible opening on the really real, a unique disclosure of noumena beyond/within/above/underneath phenomena. The claim usually is universal, that the vision is for all humanity; & it is exclusive at least in the sense that all other visions are seen as

inferior if not false (& even when it's agglutinative, accomodating of other visions, the control vision relativizes & digests the other visions, so the magnanimity is more appearance than substance--instance especially Hinduism).

(4) The fourth essential of a new cult or new religion is that its devotees, or at least its visionary leaders, are missionary, determined to communicate the vision & secure new adherents. With nonverbal supplementation, verbal efforts proceed along these lines: (a) Directly, using almost exclusively the terms (in the original &/or translations) used by the founding visionary; (b) Directly & by targum, a rather full translation into the audience's language-world (words, idioms, ideas); (c) Indirectly, the vision expressed in the audience's language-world with only occasional tie-backs to the language-world of origin; & (d) Indirectly, with intention to conceal the origin (therefore, no tie-backs) till after conversion. Not uncommonly, all four procedures obtain, but one may stand out.

(5) A final essential is the visionary, in some cultures (eg, Japan) more apt to be a woman than a man. Almost always this venerated figure is the cult's leader, the religion's founder. The visionary's name may be lost in the mists of prehistory, as in "primitive" religions. Shamans & gurus recapitulate the original visionary. Guru & synonyms may be used, too, of the founding visionary, as in many modern Hindu cults East & West.

4. All I've said so far is no insult to your intelligence or information: I know you know & understand it all. But I've written it out in hope it may be helpful as a schema for self-examination vis-a-vis what you've sought my help on, viz how you can share your ecumenical humane vision without losing your ecumenicity by becoming a cult (& therefore sectarian, nonecumenical) leader?...COMMENTS:

(1) Your project is unique, viz how to be a religious visionary leader without starting a personality cult, thus sacrificing credibility vis-a-vis your ecumenicity. You are profoundly religious as well as spiritual. Dag Hammarskjold was a profoundly spiritual secular ecumenical visionary: you are unabashedly, incurably religious. I pray for your project's success despite my having little hope for it.

(2) Your extensive knowledge of the world's religions, your central lifelong study, is splendid preparation for what is now needed more than ever before, viz bridge-building from all the world's religions to a world-public numinous space, a new space in the heart & in history. Communication & transportation technologies have made all geographical borders porous, but also all cultural borders (& thus all religious borders, religion being the heart of culture). (Let the soon-to-be-completed "chunnel" between Britain & France be an icon for this third industrial revolution.) What you are dreaming of & praying for is urgently needed, a place (whether or not geographical) for world-religious meeting on common concerns--eg, the environment.

(3) As I said in §1, you are "spiritually sensitive, mission-minded." If you see your mission as providing what I described in §4(2), you must be as an empty chalice (modest, humble, receptive, passive, with §3(4)(c)* language-orientation--as eg NCC's excellent ecumenical officer Bro. J.Gros). But your chalice is full & running over: you are message-full, high-key, anything but passive! You've a guru profile, as does Sri Chinmoy with his 1,100 centers centering in him. Your (impossible dream?) project is how to let God use your gifts so as to create ecumenical numinous spaces without yourself filling the spaces, as every Hindu guru fills the spaces he creates.

(4) To the extent you--your presence, your writings--fill the spaces you create, to that extent you are guru & cannot expect Christians to enter your space. Why not? My best answer is JESUS AS GURU, a Harv.PhD dissertation by Thos. Tangaraj, who grew up Christian in a guru-thick part of the world. In Jesus we Christians have all the guru we need & want, thank you. But we are increasingly desirous of providing & using ecumenical numinous spaces for communicating with all other Christians & with nonChristians (which explains why Sri Chinmoy gets to use, occasionally, the Church Center for the UN & St.Peter's Lutheran Church even though he uses such space for strictly sectarian, Hindu purposes: have you ever heard of a Hindu temple that open?).

Grace & peace,

