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## A Living Image of a False Face

More and more as his youthful beard grew longer, Sergei Torop doubtless heard, “*You look like Jesus!*” He could step cleanly into a thousand paintings of Jesus as a strikingly handsome Northern European, the living image of a false face (since Jesus was Near Eastern). We should not be surprised that he spends much of his time painting.

If we don’t block our narcissistic tendency, what people think of us will become the mold into which we pour the liquid plastic of our self-perception. Sergei didn’t watch it, and inwardly became a plastic Jesus with the unbiblical character which that Northern European image entails.

1.....“God with hair and skin” was Martin Luther’s earthly way of putting the Christian conviction that Jesus on earth was God incarnate. But Sergei’s Jesus is only that Northern European painting with hair and skin come alive. There ends the similarity. The *real* Jesus comforted the distressed and distressed the comfortable—and for the latter, was executed. Sergei is a Ganges guru with the sounds of human-potential Esalen Institute Lite: comfort for some distressed, no confrontation of those causing much of the distress.

2.....But hold it! This guy is no fraud. He’s *real*, and doing some good as we all do when we are real, even when—as he is—self-deceived. His little town provides a rough retreat for Russians wanting to run away from the present general turbulence of their socio-political realities. They can run to him, find they’re not really getting away from it all, and discover something hopeful they don’t want to get away from. Some, I’ve no doubt, even find the real Jesus, find God—and get on with their life-responsibilities.

3.....The real Jesus said that before his return to earth, “many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray” (Matthew 24:5; Mark 13:6; Luke 21:8). The counterfeit compliments the genuine, and the ultimate celebrity temptation is to play God, so there have indeed been many pseudo-Christ. But again, God gets some good work done through them. Generous-hearted Paul, apostle of Jesus, even accepted frauds: “Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. Yes, and will continue to rejoice.” (Philippians 1:18).

4.....Religions start out as movements, then either die or settle into institutions (“organized religion”) lacking the liveliness of movements. Next, the institutions serve as wombs to “renewal movements” or to new religions. Religion itself never dies, for our spirits are as much made to reach out beyond dailiness and death as our flesh is made to flow through generations. After World War II, Japan experienced hundreds of start-up religions. We of the religion faculty of the University of Hawaii got to experience some of them as late as 1973. Each Wednesday evening during the summer a different group from one of these would come to the university, worship in our presence, then discuss with us their vision and life. Few of them survived to the settled, institutional form. But all had significant religious vitality. For human beings prefer vision to death, and “where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18 King James Version; some later translations are equally true: “where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint”).

5.....“How do we know true revelation from false?” (Here’s the “On Faith” preface to this question: “A man in Siberia named Vissarion who has 5,000 followers claims to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Such claims have been made by various people over the millenia.”) “Vissarion” means “giver of new life.” I’ll limit my answer to that. Any evidence of new life in Sergei’s movement? Enough to call it inspiration for the few, not revelation for the many. Revelation for the many—indeed for all—was and will be Jesus Christ himself.

BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | FEBRUARY 7, 2008; 4:34 AM

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