

6.9 Watch Out For Cults/False Gurus

Some spiritual leaders and groups can be dangerous.

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The outcomes of most things you may wish to learn can be easily measured. If you want to play better golf, you engage a golf instructor. You will soon know whether he's good at his job because you will see measurable improvements in your game and your scores.

Spirituality, on the other hand, is almost impossible to measure. There's no externally verifiable scale of spiritual growth, so both assessing your own progress and discerning the spiritual development of others is subjective. This makes it much harder to discern whether someone is a qualified spiritual teacher. Some people who call themselves spiritual leaders are brimming with charm and charisma and hold out tempting promises of enlightenment and inner peace. They may or may not live up to these claims, and their legitimacy can be hard to evaluate. Furthermore, some might actually be dangerous! Therefore, you should listen to your own inner wisdom and decide for yourself.

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- Exercising your own judgment and critical thinking is a valuable skill to develop in any context.
- A little well-placed skepticism can protect you from potentially dangerous religious groups.
- If you avoid wasting energy on false paths, you'll be free to explore and find paths that do work for you.

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- If you are already enmeshed in a cult, it can be hard to get out. Sometimes, you don't realize you are part of a dangerous organization until you are fully entrenched.
- It's possible to become too suspicious and miss out on spiritually enriching life experiences.

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If you're questioning whether you should belong to a group or follow a particular leader, you can compare the behaviors of the leaders and the group's expectations with characteristics of known cults or false gurus. In particular, there are three warning signs to watch out for:

1. All power in an organization stems from the leader.

When a spiritual leader claims ultimate authority in spiritual matters, this is often a dangerous red flag. They may reinforce this attitude by creating a mythologized origin story about how they reached such a high spiritual plane, by dismissing the insights of others, or by maintaining a ritualized separation between themselves and other members of the group. This is sometimes evidenced by awarding special privileges, such as gifts and acts of service, to leaders, often in ways that cross sexual or other boundaries.

2. The creation of in- and out-groups.

This can take several forms. For example, the world within a cult may be upheld as beautiful, pure, and special, juxtaposed against the corrupted or fallen world outside. Another possibility is the use of specialized jargon, understood only within the context of a cult, that conveys a sense of separation. The leader may also distinguish themselves from other spiritual lineages to place themselves beyond comparison and, therefore, criticism. One key sign of this tendency is when a group discourages, limits, or even prohibits contact with those they deem outsiders, including friends and family.

3. Weaponizing peak experience and healing.

Cultic spiritual groups may impose tightly controlled conditions on sex, prayer, breathwork, dance, and drugs. Only those deemed worthy are allowed to access these techniques, creating a way to reward and punish followers. This approach may be reinforced by emphasizing the value of feeling over thinking—for example, encouraging members to “follow their heart” or “trust their gut.” This could also mean pressuring people to make consequential social, financial, or emotional commitments while they are in euphoric states and feel deeply bonded to other members of the group.

A powerful antidote to falling in with such groups or coming under the spell of charismatic yet dangerous individuals is listening to your own voice, checking in with what’s right for you, and knowing what falls outside of your boundaries. In addition to the signs listed above, you should take the time and space you need to really listen to yourself rather than to other people’s suggestions about what’s supposedly good for you. To that end, you can try Tool 6.1: Meditation or Tool 3.4: Talk to Your Inner Selves.

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The Ethical Cult Checklist:

https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/5e74e8349194e2f76b9ffcd1/5e754938d25345a72291f0a3_Ethical%20Cult%20Checklist.pdf
