

Why We Need To Become Spiritual Consumers

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As people in the counter-cult movement monitoring the ongoing activities of cults, we are more aware than the general public about the importance of asking questions about how groups operate. We understand that a group, a community, or church may appear benign, but in fact have a hidden agenda. The authors of this article understand acutely as cult survivors the importance of preparing people in our society not only to become savvy "material consumers," but also savvy "spiritual consumers."

Think for a moment about the amount of energy we spend researching the consumer choices we make. We spend a great deal of time searching out facts about the safest minivan to buy, the best accounting software package to get, the highest yielding mutual fund to invest in, and the best health clubs to join. But we naively and trustingly silence our analytical powers when it comes to making decisions about spiritual choices in our lives. We are seasoned material consumers by virtue of living in a capitalistic culture. However, we also need to think of ourselves as spiritual consumers before we commit too heavily to a new church, guru, or spiritual community.

As cult survivors, we have compiled what we call our "20/20 Hindsight List" of questions we wish we would have asked as spiritual consumers before we got involved with our spiritual leaders and communities. We didn't demand answers to these questions because we didn't know better. We didn't realize it was important to ask these kinds of questions. Part of the reason for this ignorance is bound up in our culture. What in our society, then, hinders us from questioning spiritual authority?

Even in this new day of the "information age" we are still socialized to always respect tradition and authority. We are not usually taught in our educational or family systems to question authority. Rather we are expected to fit in, to take orders, and obey people in positions of power. When the authority is benign and provides a good role model for young people, then respecting authority is good. But when authority is twisted and manipulative, we are not trained to recognize it, let alone to question it.

If our culture hasn't prepared us to be good spiritual consumers, how else can we protect ourselves from cult exploitation? First it's unwise to make any decisions about joining a group when we are depressed or in a state of transition. At these times we are lonely, more open to suggestion, and less skeptical. Sometimes all it takes is being away from home for the first time, or breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend to be vulnerable to cults.

This vulnerability is especially acute for young people between the ages of 18 and 30, the largest target group for cult recruiters. Developmentally, these young adults are sorting

through their roles and identities. After they have confidence in their identity they focus on issues of intimacy and isolation. Their challenge is to maintain their separateness while becoming attached to others. Cults want malleable members who can be easily molded into pseudopersonalities. Thus, they give people struggling with identity issues a new identity, and those searching for intimacy a ready-made community of friends, which eventually replaces their family.

It doesn't take much to be vulnerable to cults. What, then, can we do to change this, to minimize cults' influence and make good choices about who and what to believe in? Our hope lies in cult education, learning what to look for when considering a teacher or group. The following is a list of questions we wish we had considered before we got involved in our respective cults. We hope these questions may help some say "no" where we unknowingly said "yes."

IMPORTANT ISSUES TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING A SPIRITUAL TEACHER:

1. What credentials does this teacher possess that qualified him/her to give this instruction?
2. How does the teacher maintain his/her authority in the group or in relationships? Does he/she claim to be the only teacher that gives this instruction?
3. Can you challenge the teacher's instruction? Can you question his/her advice? What happens if you disagree with the teacher?
4. Who does your teacher report to? If you were to complain about the teacher, to whom would you go? Is there a system of checks and balances within his/her line of authority?
5. Within this organization who makes the rules? Who can change the rules? How often does this happen? What happens when someone breaks the rules?
6. What will you be expected to "give up" or "sacrifice" to study with this teacher? Ask this question in advance and be as specific as possible.
7. Are students free to leave this teacher/group? What happens to those who leave?
8. When do you graduate from this instruction?
9. How does the teacher talk about people who have left the group? Is contact with them allowed, discouraged or forbidden?
10. What attitudes does the teacher have toward maintaining relationships with friends, family, and others outside the group?
11. What is the teacher's attitude toward people outside the group in general? Are you encouraged to be tolerant and understanding, or judgmental and elite?
12. Are secrets being kept from you? Are doors locked, access to telephones limited, or is information restricted in any way?

13. Does this teacher insist that the world is coming to an end in the near future? What proof does he/she have of this? Prophets and teachers have been predicting this for centuries, and we're still here. Does the teacher use this prophecy to frighten or influence people?

14. Does this teacher repeatedly remind you to listen to your heart and not your head? If so, why must you disconnect from rational thought to learn this teaching?

15. Does the group use "mind-altering" exercises; i.e., meditation/chanting/praying for long periods of time, sleep deprivation, constant busyness, protein deprivation, the use of drugs? What scientific, documented proof does this teacher have that these practices will enable the student to reach higher states of consciousness?

16. Ask the teacher what his/her attitudes are about sex in the group. If celibacy is strongly advised for the student, ask if the same standard applies to the teacher. If the standards are different, ask why.

17. Who pays for the leader's expenses and lifestyle? Is it dramatically different from the students? Will your financial responsibility continue to increase to maintain good standing? Is there an annual report for this group? Every bonafide church, charity, and non-profit organization has this information available for anyone who asks for it.

These questions are meant to provide areas of exploration. Many teachers will not respond directly to your inquiries. We encourage you to conduct your own research and scrutinize your teacher as closely as possible. Remember: avoidance of your questions should raise a red flag. A healthy spiritual community, church, or teacher will encourage questions about their group.

Attitudes of avoidance or secrecy may tell you something about what the future will be like in this group. Rosanne Henry, a former cult member, has been a cult educator for over 10 years. She works as a family therapist and cult educational consultant.

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