

ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF *SPIRITUAL MOVEMENTS*

Introduction:

Hello,

Some 15 years ago I published the article below on my website 'Man and the Unknown' (<https://wichm.home.xs4all.nl/>). It is a general analysis of characteristics of spiritual movements. Some of the conclusions may also apply to Subud, but certainly not all.

For seventy years I have been in contact with spiritual movements, or read up on them. I have been interested particularly in their influence on its members, who I have followed now for a considerable number of years all over the world. I have been struck by the fact that developments within such groups always seem to follow a similar pattern. When people unite for a special purpose a field of tension seems to arise based on unleashed subconscious drives. Please allow me to share with you some of my observations.

Psychological group-mechanisms

Before introducing the subject I should like to make it clear that it is not meant to belittle members of spiritual movements. I am myself a member of one. That does not mean that we should close our eyes to the psychological processes that operate in them. If undiscovered they may well gnaw at their foundation, or steer the movement in a way the original founder never wanted to. Human beings, grouped together, are obeying unconsciously drives they are hardly aware of. Yet, associations of people are very necessary to reach a common goal or bring about something in the participants' life. Their combined efforts create strength.

Herewith a tentative summary of factors operative in spiritual movements. A psychologist may well do the same for other groups such as stamp-collectors (few people within the committee have to bear the burden yet are being criticized etc., etc.), sport-associations and political parties.

Victor Mansfield has done so for the special *guru-disciple* relationship.

The late Margeret Singer for **cults** based on health fads, business-training programs, getting-rich quick schemes, on one hand, and on the other groups who use fundamentalist religious interpretations, or ideas and discipline borrowed from Eastern culture to further their causes/courses. In those the following summary of tendencies have become a systematic pattern of exploitation of the individual.

I do not wish to deal with those. Instead I wish to turn to well-known spiritual and religious movements many of us may be a member of to mutual benefit and to satisfy our particular spiritual aspirations. If I have offended unintentionally the reader in his genuine conviction, I offer my apologies beforehand. It is my sole intention to direct his attention to pitfalls which may not be applicable at all to his situation.

The main features

Which are the features of psychological influence most common to spiritual movements ?

- 1. [Outlook/aspiration of members](#)

- 2. [Authority of leader/founder](#)
- 3. [Shared belief in scripture, revelation, or sayings.](#)
- 4. [Uniqueness of the movement.](#)
- 5. [Salvation through baptism, initiation, or conversion.](#)
- 6. [Belief in prediction/prophecy](#)
- 7. [Belief versus intellect/Secrets](#)
- 8. [Common practice of a ritual](#)
- 9. [Sacrifice. Financial secrecy, favours to the rich](#)
- 10. [Unquestioning leadership, reprehensible behaviour amongst members.](#)
- 11. [Fear of expulsion](#)

1. Type of members.

There are many types of members, each with its own motivation.

- First of all there are the ones who have been moved to do so out of a genuine spiritual aspiration, prepared to sacrifice.
- Other members may have been searching for a truth behind the dreadful aspects of life around them and an escape therefrom.
- People who wrestle with a psychological problem seek (unconsciously) a key or solution to it in a particular teaching or discipline.
- Then there are those that did so out of a feeling of isolation and loneliness. Lack of true companionship may have made them long to be taken up in a fraternity of kindred souls.
- People will be drawn to a brotherhood whose aims are within their reach of comprehension and nearest to their hearts. A religious background may make them veer towards a sect that accomodates nostalgia, like the Jehova's Witnesses.
- For younger people it may be an escape from having to enter into a harsh materialistic society. They are in an idealistic life-cycle, prepared to give up their study and career to a worthy cause.
Some older people can never make up their minds and wander from one cause to another.
- Finally there are those who wrestle with a father/mother complex. The childhood's need for such archetypal figure may persist in later life. It is transferred subsequently to the master, who then holds sway over him/her.

The weaker the individual's independance, the more will he be tied to the group. Members who understand group-mechanisms, prepared to cope with them in order to direct their attention to the spirit, will benefit most as they are selective in picking up the cream of what is given and taking the rest with a grain of salt.

2. Leader/founder/guru

New religious movements arise usually around a father/mother figure who has gained authority after receiving a special revelation, communication, truth or insight. His charisma will vouchsafe loyal followers, even if his lifestyle may give rise to severe doubts to some. He may boost his prestige by claiming to follow the footsteps of an esteemed spiritual teacher,

represent an esoteric tradition, be of noble descent, or channel the wisdom of a great mind. (**Eckankar's** Paul Twitchell is the last in the lineage of 970 "Eckmasters")

He/she represents an archetype in members' subconscious minds. That of a wise father, or mother. As such he/she will have a compelling influence on followers who project their father/mother complex on him/her.

Alternatively women may fall in love with the leader, worship him, exert themselves to cater after his wishes and whims. They will try to stay in his viscosity, make themselves indispensable and slowly take control of the movement. Jealousy amongst them will make things even worse and split the ranks.

The psychological make-up of a guru may be generalized as follows:

- Difficult youth. Self-chosen isolation at childhood. Introvert. Therefore not used to share inner life with friends.
- Narcissistically absorbed in inner mental processes.
- Undergone a traumatic experience.
- Authoritarian attitude. Élitist and anti-democratic.
- Attracting disciples rather than friends on account of the fact that they never learnt to exchange thoughts in childhood.

Jeffrey Masson (see below) has this to say about **gurus**:

Every guru claims to know something you cannot know by yourself or through ordinary channels. All gurus promise access to a hidden reality if only you will follow their teaching, accept their authority, hand your life over to them. Certain questions are off limits. There are things you cannot know about the guru and the guru's personal life. Every doubt about the guru is a reflection of your own unworthiness, or the influence of an external evil force. The more obscure the action of the guru, the more likely it is to be right, to be cherished.

Ultimately you cannot admire the guru, you must worship him. You must obey him, you must humble yourself, for the greater he is, the less you are - until you reach the inner circle and can start abusing other people the way your guru abused you. All this is in the very nature of being a guru.

Sub-conscious drive

Nature seems to instill in a person, faced with a mission, great task, or challenge, a feeling of superiority, unsurmountable optimism, and enormous self-esteem, bordering on an inflated ego, to accomplish what is needed. This drive is reminiscent of the reckless impetus of the adolescent. Having reached maturity a person may feel "chosen" - impelled to forge ahead with vigor and inspire others. Undaunted in the face of obstacles and criticism, it is as if a cloak of invulnerability is laid on his/her shoulders.

Similarly an artist may be driven by a compulsion to express an inner content. He will be prepared to sacrifice everything to give way to his creative impulse. Fortunately his sacrifice does not involve more than the people immediately around him.

Not so with the leader. The number of his followers may grow to considerable proportions. Nature is not concerned whether his sense of superiority has any real foundation. The inflated ego is more or less instinctively driven towards a goal.

Although attaining heights no one would have thought conceivable of that person, when the hour of truth has come events may prove that he has overreached himself, disregarded good advice, or lost complete sense of reality. The result may be either catastrophe, or the uncritical followers may be saddled up with a heritage built on quicksand - on a flight of fancy without

actual foundation.

This applies to many fields of human endeavour (*Hitler*), but specially in the treacherous domain of the spirit.

Discipline – nausea

The teacher may come to the conclusion that unless his followers change fundamentally - undergo a catharsis, or transformation - they will never be able to move forward. He/she regards them as being "asleep" (Jesus, Gurdjieff). Unless drastic measures are employed they will not wake up. To jolt them out of their complacency great sacrifices are demanded. Jesus asked a rich young man to give up all his worldly possessions (S.Matthew 19:21) before following him. Masters in **Zen Buddhism**, or Gurdjieff, made novices undergo a harsh regime in order to crack open and attain a different state of mind.

This I can have no quarrel with, if it is done against a background of compassion. If the unselfish motive disappears, or commercial considerations become dominant, the harsh discipline may become morbid and degrading. Having lost his dedication the teacher may become nauseated by the mentality and sheepishness of his followers, and in cases derive a sadistic delight in tormenting them.

In recent years reports are brought out about sexual violation of members by guru's, leaders and....bishops! Another example of authority being abused.

The path of a guru is like that of a razor's edge. He may so easily succumb to the temptation of exploiting the power he has attained over his followers. Financial irresponsibility, abuse of followers, reprehensible sexual behaviour..... mass suicide, it is all within his reach once he has overstepped boundaries.

Legacy

During his lifetime the leader will act as a moderator and steer the movement. He will interpret his teachings as he sees fit from the responses he receives. The death of the founder marks a turning point. His teachings will become inflexible, as no one dares to temper with them as he did himself. The élan disappears, rigidity takes over, unless another figure arises that leads the movement in a different direction, for better or for worse (St.Paul).

3. Doctrine/teaching

The more secret(ive) the leader's sayings the better. Pronouncements are characterized by great certainty and authority as if it were the word of God. In some cases it is presented as such. By his special way of delivery and presentation it may escape the audience that similar wisdom may be found in any book on spirituality nowadays found in the bookshop around the corner.

Whether the guru bases his wise words on actual experience or on hearsay is difficult to ascertain. In general it may be said that the more mystifying his teachings the stronger their appeal. After all it is beyond reason and should appeal only to the heart.

An exception should be made for true mystical literature based on inner experience which can hardly be expected to appeal to the intellect, but be appreciated intuitively, especially by those who had similar experiences.

Group-speak

Members may adopt fresh meanings to words, talk to each other in a jargon that the outsider can hardly follow (*group-speak*). The result being an inability to relate in speech, or explain

new concepts to the outsider (Fourth Way).

(This may be best understood in other fields: help-programs of software, pop-up windows, warning-messages, not to speak of manuals for installing hardware, drawn up by boffins, are a nightmare to most users!)

Another characteristic is to lift out of context one aspect of religious truth and make it absolute. Such key truth will overshadow all other aspects of faith.

It may be:

- prophecy, as we have seen with Jehova's Witnesses, Adventists and countless sects;
- baptism at an adult age, important to Baptists;
- charity in the case of the Salvation Army (but who could blame them for this?);
- channeling in New Age/Spiritualistic movements,

etc. When this occurs other significant facets of faith are pushed to the background.

Such partial truths are often heralded as the result of a search for knowledge. The motto "Knowledge is power" is used to suggest that the statements are objective, scientific, or historical facts. Actually they cannot stand the touchstone of the merest critical scrutiny. Authorities may be paraded to back-up such claims. They have either never been heard of, cannot be considered impartial, or their pronouncements have been lifted out of context. The discussion about the veracity of evolution is full of such red herrings.

4. Uniqueness of the movement

Movements will extol usually their superiority over others. After all there should be a strong reason to select that particular group. Some present themselves as being the sole way towards salvation, being God's chosen people. Others make a promise of a benefit that is only reserved for members of that sect. To avert attention some pride themselves of not having a teaching, or for their openness and democratic rules.

In short new movements will advance a variety of reasons for their uniqueness. Herewith a few:

- Our holy book is the word of God.
- Never before has mankind been offered this discipline/interpretation/insight of our leader.
- Do not pour new wine in old bottles.
- God's, or a celestial, new message to mankind for this particular time.
- Impending disaster (pollution, atomic explosion, collision) calls for drastic measures. Salvation only reserved for faithful members.
- Fresh interpretation of holy book thanks to fresh insight/revelation of founder.
- Esoteric tradition, once accessible to adepts only, now revealed.
- New channel for teachings of esoteric lodge/brotherhood.
- New doctrine/insight based on latest scientific discoveries, reveals truth.
- Only those following this particular work on self, discipline, or belief, will reach eternity, be released from earth's satanic attraction, cycle of rebirths, etc.
- Preparatory group to make way for the coming of the new messiah/world-teacher/avatar

Noteworthy is the vehemency with which groups stress differences between each other. The closer movements share an outlook the more virulent the attacks on their rivals become, seemingly more than on groups which follow a completely different belief.

Eric Hoffer writes in his 'The True Believer': "*true believers of various huesview each other with mortal hatred and are ready to fly at each other's throat...*"

This manifests itself specially when groups split. In Christianity one could not step low enough to attack other followers of Christ, who held a slightly different opinion. It resulted in persecution of heretics, burning of early Christian literature, and disastrous wars.

Despite their peaceful appearance relatively new spiritual movements like Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, etc., following splits, exert themselves in accusations against former comrades.

Attacks against belief in paranormal phenomena, for instance by **CSICOP**, are reminiscent of the zeal of a Christian crusade, be it that they have their roots in humanism and its desperately clinging to a rationalistic/materialistic outlook on life current at the beginning of the 20th century. Consequently the groups of these 'evangelists of rational enlightenment' have similar behavioural patterns and vehemency as sects.

5. Probation and conversion

Certain sects are only too eager to accept individuals. They may have high entrance fees. Or their members are swayed by zeal to convert.

Many movements will put up a barrier by means of an initiation to test the applicant's fitness to become part of the group. Henceforth they will play an important pioneer-part in the foretold future. Having reached such coveted stage members will not fail to follow what they are being told for fear of expulsion.

The new member may undergo a *conversion*, gaining a completely new insight in the meaning of life, see it in a way the sect does. His previous life with all its relationships has become meaningless. He may have turned himself inside out by a *confession* of his previous "sins". His conversion is marked by a feeling of peace, happiness and transcendence.

6. Failure of predictions

Common belief in a prophecy will be a strong binding force. One of the principal attractions of the first Christian sects was that they offered salvation from a threatening disaster. That being the end of the world. Only the baptized would await a glorious future. Sects like the Jehova's Witnesses have taken over this succesful formula.

Christians have had to come up with all sorts of arguments to explain away the unfulfilled prediction of their founder regarding the end of the world: "This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished." (S.Matthew 24:34). One of the lame excuses being that this prediction concerns the fall of Jersusalem only. However, all prophecies in the New Testament in this respect suggest that the impending doom was to be expected in their lifetime.

Jehova's Witnesses have taken the risk of being more specific in their predictions. Older members, who built their faith on them, have had the humiliating experience of having had to explain away various times in their lives the failure of the outcome of their forewarnings.

But predictions are not limited to the religious faiths. The *New Age* movements use this shared belief in portents as well. For more than sixty years an imminent landing of UFO's has been predicted. Various cults claimed in vain to be their first contactees.

In other movements the second coming of Christ was a main feature (**Benjamin Creme**). In Theosophy a Messenger was expected from 1975 onward.

The uncritical believers in **Edgar Cayce's** trance sayings put weight on his predictions of cataclysms (*photo Edgar Cayce*).

Nostradamus' (*photo*) obscure astrological foresayings have captured the minds of people for centuries. Each time his verses were interpreted again to suit the circumstances. In hindsight some of his quatrains seem to have relevance to the catastrophe of the destroyed World Trade Center. Quatrains I, 87 - IX, 92 and X, 59 may refer to skyscrapers in New York involved in a terrible explosion.

Sociologists have observed that, failure of prediction results in quite the opposite effect on believers. Contrary to what one would expect it may cause a rally amongst members. Failure is blamed on a misunderstanding, or a faux pas by members. To counteract ridicule they tend to stick together more than ever.

Of course there is a limit. According to a social survey, when predictions fail to materialize three times in a row members are bound to stop, reflect and draw conclusions.

The shattering of such false hopes comes as a severe blow and may mark the beginning of the end of a movement.

One wonders in this respect how many members of the **People Forever International** sect promoting physical immortality for its followers would have to die before their groups would break up in disappointment. (Since I wrote this ten years ago I have been informed that indeed members have died and the movement broke up in 1998!)

Yet, we see from the Jehova's Witnesses that skilful manoeuvring may off-set unfulfilled prophecies.

To what extremes such believes can lead shows the mass suicidal action of the **Heaven's Gate** sect and later in Uganda. Such tragic endings are the result of various contributing factors, which are beyond the scope of this article.

7. **Belief versus intellect/Secrets**

Often disciplines followed in spiritual movements have the effect of a lowering of the threshold to the unconscious mind. Suggestion will begin to play an important part. Precepts are being experienced as the truth, sacrosanct and sure. There is no element of doubt anymore about assumptions and speculation, although actually they lack any factual foundation.

Absolute belief that the Bible is God's word is the cornerstone of most orthodox Christian sects. In Islam the Koran is supposed to contain the word of Allah.

Intellectual analysis of faith is tantamount to heresy.

The ideal breeding ground for convictions are mass-gatherings. During mass gatherings, such as congresses, members are stirred up to an euphoria, the effect of which may linger on for weeks. This is the precise period of time for leaders, or committees, to announce fresh sectarian measures, postulate incredible notions/prophecies, call for further sacrifices, etc. etc. It will all be accepted unquestioningly. Only at a later date, when the euphoria has worn off, will one start to wonder about what was decided.

Secrets

Spiritual movements often hide a corpse in their closet. It may be a part of the history of the movement, details about the hidden life of the leader, or a once revered figure. Things may have been written by them one does not like to be reminded of. A fight, quarrel, full of vehemence and hatred, may have led to a split.

There are so many examples that a long list could be drawn up of the many concealed secrets of spiritual groups.

Whereas in most movements the works of the leader are almost known by heart, **Jehova's Witnesses** hardly know of the existence of the seven volumes of writings *Studies in the Scriptures* of their founder Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916). Some of his opinions are such cause of embarrassment that they are not deemed worth reading nowadays.

Eventually a renegade member will reveal such secrets in writing. Frantic denials and counter accusations by those in charge presently will follow almost automatically. These are usually accepted in gratitude by devotees, who cannot get over the shock of such revelations.

8. Common practice, work and ritual

Communal singing, ritual and (incomprehensible) practices (Freemasonry) are strong binding factors. The more irrational they are, the better. Others are a special food regime, the change of name, clothing, or a common aversion.

Joint work for the benefit of the group gives the feeling of a common endeavour and unites the participants. So does proselytization in the streets, menial work of construction and renovation of premises. There is a thin line between true participation and exploitation, however.

Dubious was the practice, common in the seventies, to incite members to criticize one of them to an extent that he/she would break down under the weight of often absurd allegations and insults, resulting in a brainwash effect.

9. Sacrifices, financial secrecy, favours to the rich.

Finances are always a ticklish matter. Human groups always wish to grow. Finances are important. Accountability is often not considered appropriate. Danger arises that members of the inner circle become lax in expenditure of members' contributions. Ambitious schemes call for a constant need for funding. This is the ideal breeding ground for favours to wealthy members. Those who contribute generously stand more chance to be taken in confidence and admitted to the inner circles. Often, as a proof of loyalty, extraordinary sums of money are demanded.

Degrees of initiation may be dependent on one's years of loyalty to the group. In **Eckankar** up to 8 degrees are given. However, if one fails to pay membership's fees for some time, degrees of initiation may be stripped off again.

Next to financial contributions members will often be expected to offer services to the group. However, if they also have to work for practically nothing in commercial enterprises it becomes dubious. Movements that gather wealth at the expense of their members are questionable. Seldom or never requests for return of contributions/investments are honoured.

10. Unquestioning leadership, reprehensible behaviour amongst members

Man in a herd may not show the best side of his nature. Unconscious drives may reign his/her behaviour. This is applicable especially in circumstances that man strives for the spiritual. He/she may tend to show split-personality behaviour. On one hand the spiritual personality which is supposed to have come to terms with his animal nature. It is wise, friendly and compassionate on the outside. In the shadows lurks the personality that has been forced into the background, still ridden with all the expelled human frailties. In moments of weakness it will see its chance to play hideous tricks. It will do so without being noticed by the person involved. The result being: uncharitable behaviour, envy, malicious gossip, hypocrisy, harsh words, insensitivity, unfounded criticism and even worse, not expected from such charismatic

figure. It is one of the main reasons for people leaving a particular group in great disappointment.

It is not often realized that, like other human groups, spiritual movements behave like organisms. Group-psychological processes manifest which are sometimes not unlike those in primitive societies. There is the pecking order, the alpha members, and also the group-instinct directed against similar groups. Aggression goes unnoticed and is tolerated when an acceptable common goal is provided. For instance hostility against an individual outside the group, or a critical member inside. This has the effect of strengthening ties within the group like in the animal world.

If leadership loses contact with its members it will have to exert greater discipline. Deviating opinions cannot be tolerated anymore. Persons who hold them are seen as traitors. Acting against them, preferably in secret, is the only way out for the leadership to avert this danger. Members may disappear suddenly without the reasons becoming known, much to the surprise of those left behind. For such machinations in **Theosophy** read Emily Lutyens: "Candles in the Sun".

Spiritual *newsgroups on Internet* provide illustration of (un)conscious nastiness being ventilated under the veil of anonymity. Messages are often rife with diatribe, personal attacks and misunderstanding. Many of such contributors have no interest at all in the matters discussed. Yet even in closed newsgroups, only open to subscribers, complaints about the tone of communications are being aired.

11. Fear of exclusion

The stronger members are tied to a group, the more the fear of exclusion lurks. They may have invested their life's savings in the work (Scientology), paid a percentage of their income, failed to conclude their study, or make a career, or sacrificed a successful one.

In many cases a member will have alienated himself from family and friends. He has been told to cut ties with the past. (In the Attleboro cult followers are advised to burn photographs that remind them of bygone days). No wonder his or her sudden conversion, accompanied by fanaticism and urge to proselytize, has shied away former friends and relatives.

There is no way left but to seek comfort and understanding with members of the spiritual group.

Isolation is sometimes intentionally sought. Formerly, in the **Bhagavan Shri Rajneesh** movement, members went about in red/orange dresses and wore mala's with a photo of their master, so setting themselves aside from the mundane world.

The Hare Krishna movement goes even further. Groups of members go out into the streets in their oriental dresses for song and dance routines. However, in most movements the alienation is far more subtle and the natural outcome of an adverse attitude towards the materialism of society.

The true nature of the so-called friendships within the group will only be revealed after a devotee has left the fold. Members have seen this happen, but did not give it a thought at the time, because it happened to someone else. But when they undergo the same fate themselves they will feel the humiliation of being ignored, not being greeted anymore, marriage gone - even not being recognized by one's own children anymore.

The outcast feels thrown in an abyss. He is cut off from social contacts, his life in pieces. The magnitude of this desperate experience should not be under-estimated. The renegade will feel deep shame. He may have confessed in the group intimate secrets, which are now being ridiculed by his former so-called friends.

The expulsee, deeply hurt, may become embittered and even enter into a suicidal mental state.

Those readers who have been a member of a movement may recognize some of the above psychological mechanisms. The first reaction of non-members may be to vow never to enter a group. Let us bear in mind, however, that it should be considered a challenge to face these obstacles for the benefit that may result from association with kindred spirits.

A prerequisite is that these conditions are being noticed, looked in the eye, and not denied. The closer people live together, the more group-tensions will build up. Even in reputable circles as Freudian psycho-analytical associations they occur. Few communes are granted a long life as a result of one or more of the pitfalls summarized above. Headquarters, contrary to expectations, are known to be hotbeds of gossip, mutual repulsion and cynicism.

So, do not be disheartened and join a group of your liking. After all people who marry also see wrecked marriages all around them, yet go ahead intent on a happy union in mutual trust, without regard to the outcome.

Involvement with other people will lead to personal growth if the consequences are anticipated. The more one stands on one's own feet the more benefit will arise from cooperating with others. It should be borne in mind that the saying "It is better to give, than to receive" is not merely a moral precept.

Please remember that there are hundreds of movements and that it has not been my intention to summarize them all, or to level any form of criticism at one of them. Indicating the psychological mechanisms operative in some, or all of them, has been my main theme.

On a separate page I have gone into the mysterious [presence-phenomenon](#) arising between people who meet in harmony.

In conclusion one may take heed of Krishnamurti's words in 1929 when he refused to become a 'World Teacher' of an organisation set up for him:

I maintain that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect. Truth being limitless, unconditioned, cannot be organised, nor should any organisation be formed to lead or coerce people along any particular path. If you first understand that, then you will see how impossible it is to organize a belief. A belief is purely an individual matter, and you cannot and must not organize it. If you do, it becomes dead, crystallised; it becomes a creed, a sect, a religion, to be imposed on others.

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