MY TURN
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How To Guard Against Conversion

Boyd, George A. Conversion can be brought about by altering one's beliefs and basic values through a series of sophisticated psychological manipulations.

How is it done? First, doubt is cast on your current beliefs. Ridicule, recitation of conflicting scriptures, testimonials, presentation of arguments that prove the proselytizer's point of view make you question your current beliefs. Second, by active inquiry into your unfulfilled needs or desires, the proselytizer gains a "hook" into your inner motivations. He will suggest, "If you follow my path, your desires will be miraculously fulfilled. You will be healed, saved from the wrath of the Divine, receive prosperity, experience happiness and be profoundly loved." Third, the proselytizer, once he has you desiring to have your needs met from his particular source of Divine Blessings, will then attack your self-image. He will make you feel terrible about yourself, evoking the specters of your failures and frustrations. He will emphasize how weak, how insufficient, how sinful, how mean you are and how great and glorious his God is. Then, seeing your misery and pain (which he has evoked by his suggestion), he will "compassionately" offer you a solution-whichever brand of salvation he happens to be selling.

The next step in this seductive process is to ask you for a commitment. "Come to my center, be baptized, make a public confession of faith." Once you have done this, you will be rewarded, praised, supported by other followers. You obtain instant love, community, or so it seems...Dependence is fostered by telling you not to trust your own judgement or intuition, not to doubt the "true faith that has brought you salvation," and to continue further education (indoctrination) in the teachings.

Though these conversion tactics may vary slightly between the different groups out to "save your soul" or "show you the True Path," their basic strategies are familiar to us in other forms: political brainwashing, advertising, and yes, hypnosis.

Given this information, how then should we protect ourselves from those who would convert us into a religion?

1) Recognize the proselytizer's intent and tactics. Stop him in his tracks with a polite, "Thank you, I'm not interested."

2) Educate yourself about the psychology of brainwashing, advertising and hypnosis. Learn to recognize the effects of suggestion in yourself, and learn how to psychologically immunize yourself and to de-hypnotize yourself.

3) Ignorance is the greatest friend of the proselytizer. Study the religions of the world. You will then be able to see the narrowness of the proselytizer's approach and his obvious attempts to play on your ignorance, emotions and deep needs.

4) Think for yourself on the existential questions of life. You do not need the subtle coercion of someone trying to sell you religion: in the quiet of your own soul, let your own "still, small voice" whisper to you, your Dharma and life-direction.

5) Be willing to look directly at why you could "need" the proselytizer's "spiritual product." Discover what your needs are and determine how you can meet these needs through your own efforts, without having to subject yourself to the turmoil that a conversion experience may bring to you.

It may well be that you have found no meaningful answer within your culture or religion. In such a case, you may do well to listen to the voices of other faiths that may more clearly resonate with the sense of truth that resounds within. When inner revolution is required, you should, with discretion, consider conversion's merits. But if you already have a flowing fountain, why seek out another's well?