

RELIGION EXPERTS COLUMN

*This is my response to this week's question of **Ask The Religion Experts**, a feature in the Sunday **Ottawa Citizen**. Questions are the editor's. All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog for the feature. We invite you to consider this response and share your own. It is our hope this will generate some thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

Sunday, November 13, 2011

Q : How can you distinguish real holy men from charlatans ?

A : A Middle Eastern proverb advises: "If beards were a sign of wisdom, every goat would be a Socrates." And, we are just as likely/unlikely to find a holy woman as a holy man, gender is no guarantee. From Eckhart Tolle to Pema Chodron, from the Dalai Lama to Oprah Winfrey, many are touted as wise or saintly.

Charlatans are of two types - tricksters and criminals. With tricksters, we are dealing with those who, for their own reasons, want to fool us into seeing them as wise. I have met so-called self-taught Zen masters, those capable of transforming themselves into birds, reincarnations of everyone from Cleopatra to Jesus and intimates of inter-stellar visitors. Usually, their personal histories include mental illness or drug abuse. It's simpler to avoid them than to argue. Debates with the deluded or those whose primary purpose is to prove me wrong no longer hold much fascination. Ultimately, they are little more than annoyance.

The second and more dangerous type claim to be extraordinary to defraud for gain. These criminals seek to separate me from my money, and tend to be as obvious as Nigerian Bank scammers. In fact, they are all well documented on religious scam-buster websites. The scariest ones, from Papa Doc Duvalier to Charles Manson, further exploit the vulnerable into doing their bidding, using alleged spiritual

proress to acquire and exert social or political power.

Buddhists rely on three criteria to filter claims. First, the Buddha himself encourages us to be sceptical and never take anyone at their word. Secret knowledge is just a Visa-card swipe away. The test of any teaching and practice is its power to end suffering in the world, to speak for compassion not power. The second filter is whether they have legitimacy in an authorized lineage. Buddha-wisdom is transmitted and approved from master to student, so claims outside this line are usually spurious. Thirdly, our precepts require us to teach without financial gain. The Dharma is not for sale and those who require money to teach or authorise us should be doubted.

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