

Line between inspiration and insanity may be narrow

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SALT LAKE CITY (RNS)—A teenager says God appeared to him in a grove and told him to start a new Christian church. Another person claims the Almighty talks to him through the radio. A French girl gets messages from heaven to lead an army against the British, and a Utah woman thinks she is meant to have Jesus' baby and 12 husbands.

Some of these figures were considered prophets and saints, while others were judged insane. The question is: How do you tell which is which?

Jim Jones, who founded the Peoples Temple in San Francisco, led more than 900 followers to commit suicide in Guyana.

Historic figures who started new religious movements—including Martin Luther, who launched the Protestant Reformation; Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism; Mary Baker Eddy of Christian Science and Ellen White of Seventh-day Adventism, as well as Jim Jones of the People's Temple and David Koresh of the Branch Davidians—were viewed by outsiders as delusional. But followers, ranging from the millions to the hundreds, considered each to be credible guides to divinity.

"There is ample research to suggest that, for the most part, religious people are no more inclined to mental illness than nonreligious people," said Wendy Ulrich, founder of [Sixteen Stones Center for Growth](#), a small group of mental-health professionals, in Alpine, Utah. Pathology arises,

Ulrich asserts, when a person's search for meaning "goes into extreme overdrive" and people "lose touch with vital aspects of reality."

From the start, psychologists must weigh a person's religious and cultural expectations. The more important faith is, the more prominent a role religious language will play in a person's mental process.

Maybe the person is speaking in tongues, communing with the dead, sensing the presence of a guardian angel or getting messages from milk cartons. So, the questions arise: Does the experience fit with some religious tradition that is dominant in a culture? Does it make sense to a particular faith community, or is it out of the norm? Is it consistent with the faith's scripture, practices and beliefs, or does it challenge them?

Unbalanced people may repeatedly quote scriptures or obsessively perform rituals or adopt a grander, more spiritual identity such as King David, Moses, Muhammad or Jesus.

"If the pope says he's the Vicar of Christ, that's OK because it fits with a centuries-old tradition," said [Ralph Hood](#), who teaches psychology of religion at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga. "If I think I am, I'm in trouble."

There are at least two common ways in which mental patients describe their delusional experiences with God, Ulrich says. Schizophrenics hear voices or see things that are not there. Those suffering from paranoia, meanwhile, see conspiracy in everyday events or think God is speaking specially to them.

"They over-interpret common experiences to mean either someone is out to get them or God is out to help them," Ulrich says. "Ideas of grandiosity and thinking of themselves as special or chosen in some way are not uncommon."

But it never is easy to assess the authenticity of another person's spiritual experience.

Ulrich has known people whose behavior could be inspiring or could signal a muddled mind. Many of them take part in church services without fellow believers even being aware.

She has known some religious folks who are unusually clairvoyant, with a penchant for and openness to revelatory experiences. They largely are calm, highly functioning, rational people, who are socially engaged but don't call attention to themselves.

She's also seen people who are "very high-functioning in some areas of life and can be quite charismatic, intelligent and charming," but they begin to "over-interpret impressions or events as messages from God in ways that make other people nervous, even people within their own value system or religious system."

Such people think the "rules" of the community don't apply to them and may start to feel that others are out to get them, she says, and they don't understand why.

If you ask a religious person how God communicates, she might say through impressions or a kind of whispering. But if you ask a mentally ill person that question, he might say, "I shook hands with him yesterday."

For a believer such as Gregory Johnson, the line between genuine religious experience and madness sometimes is blurred. Johnson, who directs [Standing Together](#), a Utah group of evangelical pastors, is not a charismatic Christian, so he doesn't speak in tongues or engage in the more ecstatic practices. But he does believe God heals, speaks and leads.

"I see a range of healthiness and levels of extremity within the confines (of Christianity)," he said. "I see people who are zealous but not insane."

One of the tests, Johnson says, might be the “fruits” or outcomes of the divine communication. Does the experience lead a person into more altruistic actions, greater caring for others and deeper relations, or does it simply draw the recipient further into narcissism?

As a pastor, Johnson says, he would worry about actions that are “destructive to other people or to themselves.”