Dr. Robert J. Lifton - Eight Criteria for Thought Reform

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Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism
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The Future of Immortality

Contents

Introduction

Any ideology -- that is, any set of emotionally-charged convictions about man and his relationship to the natural or supernatural world -- may be carried by its adherents in a totalistic direction. But this is most likely to occur with those ideologies which are most sweeping in their content and most ambitious or messianic in their claim, whether a religious or political organization. And where totalism exists, a religion, or a political movement. becomes little more than an exclusive cult.

Here you will find a set of criteria, eight psychological themes against which any environment may be judged. In combination, they create an atmosphere which may

temporarily energize or exhilarate, but which at the same time pose the gravest of human threats.

Milieu Control

- The most basic feature is the control of human communication within an environment

- If the control is extremely intense, it becomes internalized control -- an attempt to manage an individual's inner communication

- Control over all a person sees, hears, reads, writes (information control) creates conflicts in respect to individual autonomy

- Groups express this in several ways: Group process, isolation from other people, psychological pressure, geographical distance or unavailable transportation, sometimes physical pressure

- Often a sequence of events, such as seminars, lectures, group encounters, which become increasingly intense and increasingly isolated, making it extremely difficult-- both physically and psychologically--for one to leave

- Sets up a sense of antagonism with the outside world; it's "us against them"

- Closely connected to the process of individual change (of personality)

Mystical Manipulation (Planned Spontaneity)

- Extensive personal manipulation

- Seeks to promote specific patterns of behavior and emotion in such a way that it appears to have arisen spontaneously from within the environment, while it actually has been orchestrated

- Totalist leaders claim to be agents chosen by God, history, or some supernatural force, to carry out the *mystical imperative*

- The "principles" (God-centered or otherwise) can be put forcibly and claimed exclusively, so that the cult and its beliefs become the only true path to salvation (or enlightenment)

- The individual then develops the psychology of the pawn, and participates actively in

- the manipulation of others

- The leader who becomes the center of the mystical manipulation (or the person in whose name it is done) can be sometimes more real than an abstract god and therefore attractive to cult members

- Legitimizes the deception used to recruit new members and/or raise funds, and the deception used on the "outside world"

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The Demand For Purity

- The world becomes sharply divided into the pure and the impure, the absolutely good (the group/ideology) and the absolutely evil (everything outside the group)

- One must continually change or conform to the group "norm"

- Tendencies towards guilt and shame are used as emotional levers for the group's controlling and manipulative influences

- Once a person has experienced the totalist polarization of good/evil (black/white thinking), he has great difficulty in regaining a more balanced inner sensitivity to the complexities of human morality

- The radical separation of pure/impure is both within the environment (the group) and the individual

- Ties in with the process of confession -- one must confess when one is not conforming

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Confession

- Cultic confession is carried beyond its ordinary religious, legal and therapeutic expressions to the point of becoming a cult in itself

- Sessions in which one confesses to one's sin are accompanied by patterns of criticism and self-criticism, generally transpiring within small groups with an active and dynamic thrust toward personal change

- Is an act of symbolic self-surrender

- Makes it virtually impossible to attain a reasonable balance between worth and humility

- A person confessing to various sins of pre-cultic existence can both believe in those sins and be covering over other ideas and feelings that s/he is either unaware of or reluctant to discuss

- Often a person will confess to lesser sins while holding on to other secrets (often criticisms/questions/doubts about the group/leaders that may cause them not to advance to a leadership position)

- "The more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you"

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Sacred Science

- The totalist milieu maintains an aura of sacredness around its basic doctrine or ideology, holding it as an ultimate moral vision for the ordering of human existence

- Questioning or criticizing those basic assumptions is prohibited

- A reverence is demanded for the ideology/doctrine, the originators of the ideology/doctrine, the present bearers of the ideology/doctrine

- Offers considerable security to young people because it greatly simplifies the world and answers a contemporary need to combine a sacred set of dogmatic principles with a claim to a science embodying the truth about human behavior and human psychology

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Loading the Language

- The language of the totalist environment is characterized by the thought-terminating cliche (thought-stoppers)

- Repetitiously centered on all-encompassing jargon

- "The language of non-thought"

- Words are given new meanings -- the outside world does not use the words or phrases in the same way -- it becomes a "group" word or phrase

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Doctrine Over Person

- Every issue in one's life can be reduced to a single set of principles that have an inner coherence to the point that one can claim the experience of truth and feel it

- The pattern of doctrine over person occurs when there is a conflict between what one feels oneself experiencing and what the doctrine or ideology says one should experience

- If one questions the beliefs of the group or the leaders of the group, one is made to feel that there is something inherently wrong with them to even question -- it is always "turned around" on them and the questioner/criticizer is questioned rather than the questions answered directly

- The underlying assumption is that doctrine/ideology is ultimately more valid, true and real than any aspect of actual human character or human experience and one must subject one's experience to that "truth"

- The experience of contradiction can be immediately associated with guilt

- One is made to feel that doubts are reflections of one's own evil

- When doubt arises, conflicts become intense

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Dispensing of Existence

- Since the group has an absolute or totalist vision of truth, those who are not in the group are bound up in evil, are not enlightened, are not saved, and do not have the right to exist

- "Being verses nothingness"

- Impediments to legitimate being must be pushed away or destroyed

- One outside the group may always receive their right of existence by joining the group

- Fear manipulation -- if one leaves this group, one leaves God or loses their transformation, for something bad will happen to them

- The group is the "elite", outsiders are "of the world", "evil", "unenlightened", etc.

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