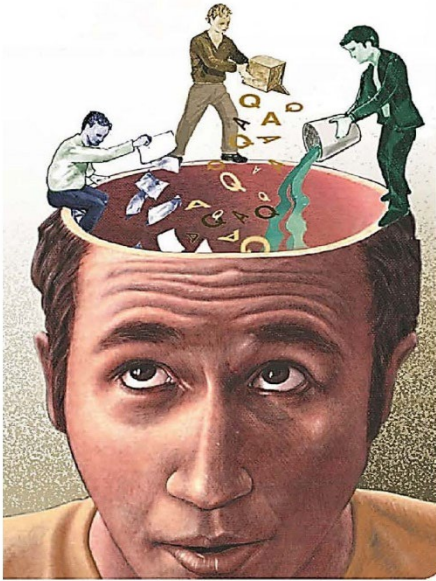


The Power of Persuasion or Critical Thinking

What Do Cults and Terrorists Have in Common?



For decades, religious cults have taken advantage of people who have given over their lives and fortunes to charismatic figures who prey on naive individuals.

People of different faiths usually disagree on theology. However, theological differences are not necessarily the determining factor that defines a group as a cult. Others may consider a particular group to be a false religion. but it is not a cult in the classic sense of the word nor from the perspective of modern psychology.

Legitimate religions encourage honesty, transparency, and critical thinking.

Conversely, cults, and their leaders, condone the use of deception for recruitment and fundraising purposes. They also use manipulation and fear tactics to maintain control of their members. The negative characteristics of deception and manipulation distinguish a cult from a legitimate religion.

Additionally, cults and religions often embrace social behavior that mainstream society considers out of the ordinary. In and of itself, this is acceptable, whether it is a different dress code, diet, or language. However, some cults cross the line and foster bizarre, destructive, and even dangerous social behavior.

It will be helpful to examine some cult behavior that ranges from defying common sense to outright destructive and criminal behavior.

In the 1970s, followers of *Reverend Sun Myung Moon*, a self-proclaimed messiah, supported his Unification Church by standing on street corners for hours selling flowers. These followers, known as "*Moonies*," would use misleading "salesmanship" and claim they were raising money for non-existent senior centers or homeless shelters. They referred to this tactic as "*Heavenly Deception*." They used it to rationalize that it was okay to lie because they were taking money from Satan and collecting it for "God's work." This was extreme misbehavior, but nothing compared to what cult leader Jim Jones did.

In 1978, Reverend Jim Jones moved his Jonestown *People's Temple* cult from San Francisco to Guyana, South America. In an unbelievable show of destructive behavior that would become known simply as the *Jonestown Mass Suicide*: 913 men, women, and children drank poisoned Kool-Aid and died simply because Jones told them to.

No one anticipated the next wave of destructive cult behavior. Cults would be responsible for the first two acts of domestic terrorism.

In 1985, cult guru *Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh* settled in Oregon after immigrating from India. Rajneesh attracted thousands of followers and reportedly amassed more than 90 Rolls-Royce vehicles and other luxury items, including jewel-studded watches.

From their ashram, located on a 60,000-acre ranch property in Antelope, Oregon, the cult launched the first large-scale biological attack in United States history. In response to community opposition, the cult poisoned 751 people after sprinkling food in a restaurant with salmonella germs grown in a commune laboratory.

The next act of cult-driven domestic terrorism took place in 1995. The *Aum Shinri Kyo*, a Japanese doomsday cult, killed 19 people and injured more than 5,500 in two sarin nerve-gas attacks in the Tokyo subway system.

The power of persuasion and influence that Reverend Moon, Jim Jones, Rajneesh, and Aum Shuni Kyo held over their followers would establish a precedent and training model for international terrorism in the 21st century.

What influenced John Walker Lindh, a young American who grew up in affluent northern California Marin County, to join and fight for the Taliban until he was captured in 2001 by U.S. forces in Afghanistan?

What persuaded Mohamed Atta, an architecture student and son of a lawyer, to join *Al Qaeda* and follow the instructions of terrorist Osama bin Laden? On September 11, 2001, Atta led the 19 suicide bombers who killed more than 2,950 people when planes attacked the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC.

How did Hamas indoctrinate Palestinian "*suicide*" bombers as young as 16 years old to murder innocent civilians on crowded buses and pizza parlors? What could influence Hamas terrorists to blindly perpetrate the inhumane Hamas massacre of October 7, 2023, when more than 1,400 men, women, and children were brutally murdered, beheaded, burned, and raped?

An answer comes from some of the world's leading psychologists, including Dr. Robert Jay Lifton, a Harvard psychiatrist noted for his study of North Korean

brainwashing, and UC Berkley's cult expert, Dr. Margaret Singer. They call this power of persuasion "*Thought Reform*."

Lifton and Singer's research clarifies that Thought Reform is not that mysterious. Instead, it systematically applies organized psychological and social influence techniques within a managed environment.

Thought Reform [brainwashing] is successful through the use of psychological and environmental control processes that do not always depend on physical coercion. The most common tools used to induce a personality change include isolation, hypnosis, sleep deprivation, dietary manipulation, and the programming of phobias.

To the average person, Thought Reform sounds mysterious and light years away from their reality. However, to some degree we are all being persuaded and influenced almost daily, albeit on a less sinister and dangerous level.

Social psychologists like Dr. Robert Cialdini have documented how we are manipulated, influenced, and persuaded to change our behavior in our daily lives. Cialdini notes that the average person watches 30 hours of television per week. Based on that, the average person sees 37,822 commercials per year. That is only television; we also see and hear newspaper ads, billboards, and radio and internet ads. They are produced for maximum impact and manipulate us to buy things we may not need or to behave in a manner contrary to our nature.

Cialdini explains that we often fall victim to a reflexive reaction called "*autopilot*." We live in a highly complex world where we receive thousands of messages constantly. Usually, to avoid being misled, we carefully examine everything. But we don't have time to research every decision, so it is impossible to function without using our autopilot. Autopilot helps our brains work more efficiently; without autopilot we would never get anything done.

However, when we don't examine things carefully and allow our minds to take "*autopilot*" shortcuts, our minds become vulnerable to manipulation.

Airplanes use autopilot as a great convenience. It is a sophisticated computer, but computers can be hacked. Similarly, when our minds are in autopilot mode, manipulators can hack our brains. Here is an example of how our minds switch on autopilot. Take a second and read the following sign:



**PLEASE
KEEP OFF THE
THE GRASS**

What did you read?

Most people read, "*Please keep off the grass.*" However, if you look carefully the sign says, "*Please keep off **the the** grass.*" Since we are so used to reading the statement, our autopilot kicks in and we don't catch the extra word "*the*."

Marketing experts are familiar with “*autopilot*” and often take advantage of it. For example, when movies include scenes with cars or computers a specific brand is used to promote that product subconsciously. Whether it is canned laughter, embedded messages, placement advertising, stealth advertising, or skillfully written telemarketing scripts, marketing experts can manipulate how we act and think.

Cults also take advantage of autopilot, lack of critical thinking, and the willingness to follow authority figures. Some cults use mental and psychological manipulation to recruit followers. For example, cult leaders sometime use magic tricks and hypnosis to mislead people to believe the leaders have spiritual powers. Once the leader has been placed on a high pedestal, he can justify and rationalize almost anything to his followers. Some charismatic televangelists defend unscrupulous behavior by misquoting the bible with impunity. Sadly, many unquestioning followers follow their leaders blindly.

Terrorist cults are the most destructive and visible examples of the dangers of the growing use of mind control and social thought control techniques.

Most terrorist organizations actively study and use the thought reform and mind control techniques first introduced by cult groups. These techniques plant the terrorists’ agendas into the minds of their army of recruits.

Most cult members and terrorists are not simply crazy or motivated by a deep hatred. They are usually persuaded into their destructive behavior over an extended period of time.

Few specifics are known about *Hamas* and *Al-Qaida's* methods; nonetheless, cult experts point to the indoctrination of children in fundamentalist religious schools, indoctrination of adults by extremist clerics, and, finally, the isolation of selected recruits in terrorist training camps.

Recruiting and indoctrinating new members may have less to do with the content of the teachings and more with the control of information and silencing of critical thinking.

Dr. Margaret Singer speaks of “*the five D's*”—Deceit, Dependency, Debilitation, Dread, and Desensitization—by which cult members are recruited

and transformed. Dr. Singer says, “*It's a step-at-a time seduction, so the person hardly notices they are being changed.*”

So, how can we protect ourselves and our youth from indoctrination and manipulation?

Dr. William Sargant, in his classic work, *Battle for the Mind*, points out that the best defense against mind control and thought reform is an awareness of these manipulative techniques and a pre-existing and strong belief system.

In other words, the famous Latin expression *Caveat Emptor*, “*Let the buyer beware*,” is an effective defense against the persuasion of cults, terrorists, or unscrupulous marketing manipulation.

Awareness and critical thinking are skills sorely lacking in society but equally needed.

Developing critical thinking skills must start at a very young age. We teach young children to look both ways before they cross a street. Before purchasing a used car, we tell teenagers to have a mechanic check it out. Adults understand that before agreeing to a doctor’s advice for surgery we should get a second opinion.

Likewise, we need to “*look both ways*” and check things out when confronted by seductive challenges, whether they are from marketing, cults, or terrorist organizations.

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