



BRAINWASHING--WHAT IS IT?

#1 MILIEU CONTROL

A Series on Lifton's* Eight Points of Thought Reform

Cult experts have long debated what defines a cult and people have often wondered how a cult exercises control over a free-thinking, independent person. The answer: Subtle and insidious thought reform.

What is thought reform? Margaret Thaler Singer, Ph.D., Professor at the University of California at Berkeley, acknowledged leading authority in the world on cults says: "Thought reform...is the systematic application of psychological [i.e., through indoctrination and emotional manipulation] and social influence [control of your environment and social circle] in an organized programmatic way...The goal is to produce specific attitudinal and behavioral changes...Contrary to popular misconceptions, a thought reform program does not require physical confinement...[However} thought reform is environment-dependent." In other words, a cult applies psychological and emotional manipulation along with control of your environment in order to produce changes in your attitude and behavior." [bracketed material added]

Many people have trouble understanding or accepting the antiquated term "brainwashing." Prisoners of war come to mind and people will argue that cult members aren't retrained (physically) and forced to do anything. But to manipulate someone, you don't need to confine them. You just need the right environment present. An example I like to use in my cult seminars is the parent/child relationship. A parent can say to his or her child: "Don't you eat that cookie or you'll have to go sit in time out for 10 minutes. If you eat that cookie, you'll feel naughty and Mommy will be *really* angry with you!" The child doesn't need to be restrained in order to comply with the parent. The child knows there will be physical and psychological consequences if he or she disobeys. Cult leaders are the parent to the cult members' child.

Robert J. Lifton, a noted cult expert and author who studied the effects of thought reform and mind control on prisoners of war talked about eight psychological techniques used to control another. Milieu control is one of earliest methods employed by the cult leader to create a leader/follower or parent/child dynamic. Milieu control is simply control of your environment—both internal and external. These two controls are usually instituted simultaneously to achieve the optimum result.

Internal Control

One of the first things a cult leader will do to gain the upper hand is discourage or even forbid any critical thought and questions. They will often tell you that "Satan is the cause of all doubt; he is keeping you from knowing the truth." If you do question things, you are shamed and told that you have prideful or sinful or thinking. Rejection (fear of being shunned), punishment (being counseled in front of the group or facing the wrath or disapproval of the leader), losing one's salvation, missing the rapture, going to hell, and floundering in a life outside the cult are all weapons of fear and intimidation. Any questioning of authority is treated as rebellion and makes you undesirable. And who wants to be an outcast? Thus, the cult puts a "check system" in place wherein they teach and expect you to monitor and correct your own thoughts. They essentially teach you to "box your thoughts in." You essentially become a prisoner held hostage by a prison guard (AKA your new cult personality) and the cult leader becomes the warden.

External Control

Out of the Cocoon



There are several factors that go into external control. The first is **isolation**. I remember my mother sitting me down shortly after studying with Jehovah's Witnesses and telling me that I shouldn't have anything more to do with my relatives unless I was trying to convert them because Satan might be working through them. Isolation is one of the cult's most effective tools and Jehovah's Witnesses still practice this method today (eventually) when they offer free Bible studies while recruiting door-to-door. Isolation can occur subtly or in a more blatant manner (as was the case in my family). An example appears in the Jehovah's Witnesses own literature: "Beware of those who try to put forward their own contrary opinions." (*The Watchtower*, March 15th 1986 Issue, Page 17)

Keep in mind that cult members do NOT need to live in communes to be isolated from society. Emotional and intellectual isolation is equally as effective.

Another method is what I like to refer to as "**keep 'em busy.**" The member's time is sucked dry by the cult vacuum, leaving little time for privacy or reflection. Many cults deprive their members of sleep and/or food and demand constant "Bible" study, attendance at religious meetings, and/or proselytizing. An extensive use of propaganda/literature, singing, and/or chanting may be utilized to fill the member's mind with repetitive, hypnotic-like indoctrination. Different cults use different techniques to foster an environment for cult members where they feel they are on a perpetual hamster wheel.

In addition to isolation, **ensorship** is probably one of the most effective ways to exert control over someone. Censorship includes dress codes, activities, finances, possessions, food, hair styles, sex, media, books and relationships (sometimes even telling the member whom to marry or have sex with). The leader(s) dictate to the member who is a friend or enemy, what to do, what to say, and how to say it.

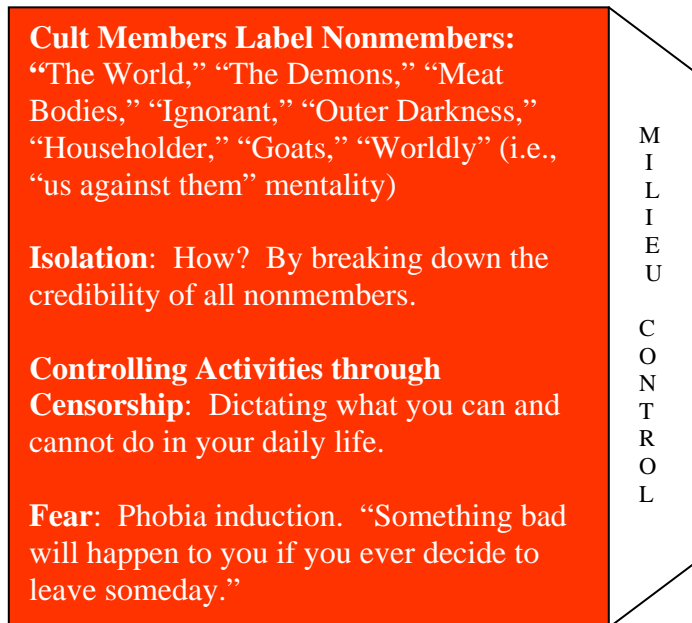
I remember in the Watchtower organization, we referred to other members—good or bad—as "The Friends" and our social circle was limited to other Jehovah's Witnesses. Looking back now, I realize what a misnomer that was for it was these very "friends" who shunned me when I left the cult years later. Here is a recent example of milieu control from the Watchtower organization, a censorship that even includes *the Bible*:

Kingdom Ministry (Watchtower organization literature), September 2007: "Does the faithful and discrete slave endorse independent groups of Witnesses who meet together to engage in Scriptural research or debate? No it does not."

Unbelievably, Jehovah's Witnesses aren't even allowed to study the Bible or engage in spiritual research without the oversight of the Watchtower Bible & Tract Society leaders in New York.



Here's what Milieu control looks like. Without even realizing it, you allow yourself to be placed in the box through peer association and pressure to conform.



Examples of *Internal Milieu Control* (How you might speak to yourself)

1. God's love is dependent upon my behavior.
2. The more works I give, the more God will approve of me. But no matter how much I do, God can still decide to destroy me.
3. When something bad happens, I must keep a peaceful demeanor. Even a death in the family won't jar me. I'll always appear to be at peace and happy.
4. It's not acceptable to say “No.” I must always put God first. It's wrong to be selfish, want a vacation or higher education, or have other priorities.
5. The leaders are always right and are never questioned. To doubt them is to doubt God.
6. God only speaks through the organization (or leader), never to me directly.
7. I must learn the answers to questions and appear to be one with the rest of my brothers and sisters. To the outside world, we need to appear to have one voice.
8. If it's not in our literature, I don't want to know about it. If it's in our old literature and contradicts what we are taught today, I don't want to know about it.
9. God is always looking for the worst in me so he can punish me if I disobey the organization.
10. I am nothing. Only through association with this organization am I recognized and loved.
11. Our religion is the only right religion and only we understand the Bible. Everyone else is doomed unless they join us.
12. If anyone I care about, even my minor child is excommunicated by the leaders, I must shun him/her (never speak to him/her again) until he/she repents. It's the loving thing to do.
13. Dying for one's beliefs proves one's faith. If you aren't willing to do that, you are spiritually weak

*Robert J. Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism—A Study of Brainwashing in China*