Robert Jay Lifton’s Eight Criteria for Identifying Authoritarian Cults

by Brad Sargent ~ May 2012

The following material appeared in a three-part mini-series within a larger series on “Thought Control, Toxic Churches, and Lessons from The Hunger Games Trilogy.”

Lessons from The Hunger Games 5A – Dystopian Dynamics, Totalitarian Tactics, and Lifton’s Criteria for Identifying “Cults”

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5. How Do We Discern Dystopian Dynamics and Totalitarian Tactics? POST SUMMARY: This post introduces and overviews Robert Jay Lifton’s eight criteria for totalitarian thought reform (“brainwashing”) systems. It also gives some learning exercises for two groups: survivors of spiritual abuse and their personal network, and organizational designers/leaders who want to develop healthy and sustainable ministries. Note: I have split this material into three parts so readers can receive the best benefit from it.

Part 5A prepares our thinking with a review of previous points in the series for discerning an abusive/dystopian system, thoughts on totalitarian tactics from The Hunger Games trilogy, and the “before” part of the learning exercise.

Part 5B summarizes Dr. Lifton’s system for identifying “cults” and how the various elements work together. It then explores the first four of his eight criteria, dealing with: communications, motivations, absolutism, and confession.

Part 5C explores the final four of Dr. Lifton’s eight criteria: ultimate vision, language, ideological conformity, and ostracism. It also gives the “after” part of the learning exercise, and draws out three key issues for putting “brainwashing” into perspective.
5. How Do We Discern Dystopian Dynamics and Totalitarian Tactics? ~ Part A

Perhaps you expected to read far more of my analysis of *The Hunger Games* by now. I can understand that frustration. But as I’ve come to see, there are layers of complexity to how social control is created and maintained, and the way this series unfolded, it seemed better to give some background concept frameworks first, to build understanding rather than to just dive in. Meanwhile, I have inserted a few thoughts and questions about *The Hunger Games* along the way. Persevere! Your diligence will be rewarded, I trust! We’ll be getting to some really good, direct *Hunger Games* stuff, starting in just a few more posts:

- **Social coercion and control** woven into the everyday cultural fabric of Panem’s Capitol, outlying districts, and District 13.
- Various ways that both Panem and District 13 **manipulate** the tributes and victors for **political purposes**.
- Transgenerational dynamics of dystopia – how totalitarian controls become **permanently implanted over a span of several generations** after they are first implanted, and how dissent is **deterred** through propaganda, public punishment, and mind control.
- Sources and symptoms of **post-traumatic stress disorder**, and different ways that Hunger Game victors respond to the pain of trauma by avoiding it or recovering from it.
- “Cultural capital” in a family or other social group that generates the “**DNA for dissidence and discernment**” in next generations.

I find all of these topics fascinating, with their relevance to thought control techniques. In fact, *The Hunger Games* may be one of the best contemporary media sources to mine for nuggets of insight on how toxic churches demonstrate the techniques of totalism. We’ll get there soon.
Meanwhile, since we’re about midway through the series, I thought this would be a good place for a review. So, let me restate points from earlier posts what I’ve observed as characteristics of a dystopian organization or society that perpetuates totalitarian control over people. After that, I’ll preview the eight criteria for identifying an organizational “cult,” as described in psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton’s groundbreaking book from 50 years ago, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China*. So, here are key points from previous posts. To reinforce them in your thinking, you may want to read them aloud. (Granted, this doesn’t work for everyone, because of learning style differences, but you may want to give it a try anyway!)

**Post #2 – Characteristics of Dystopian Societies**

- Dystopias always seem to be about bullying.
- Dystopias have some kind of social hierarchy with over-classes of privilege and under-classes of marginalization, servitude, and/or poverty.
- For bullies and over-classes to elevate themselves, they must also actively devalue, dehumanize, and overlord others.

**Post #3 – Actual Totalitarian States**

- Totalitarian systems restrain the thought-life of their subjects through psychological control tactics physical violence, and/or social manipulation. These techniques keep people constantly busy, bored, or off balance.
- When younger generations feel abandoned and/or betrayed by their society’s “elders,” they may reject the older generation’s systems and form a “sibling society” where the opinions of their peers count for more. Such disconnection and alienation can be manipulated to create further social chaos and control.
- Dystopias deal with classic questions of good, evil, and redemption, but they focus on the social aspects of these issues rather than on individual salvation.

**Post #4 – Fictional Dystopias Like Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-four**

Dystopias typically manifest:

- Hierarchical control structures with a small number of elite power holders, who govern all major goals and forms of resources: people, products, time, etc.
- Surveillance methods that condition people to repeat the party line and say nothing critical of the regime.
- Communication control, especially through “loaded language” (for instance, Newspeak, doublethink, thoughtcrimes) that conditions people to “groupthink” whatever propaganda they are fed.
- Totalism can target for take down any aspect of being human – beliefs, emotions, and/or creative imagination.

Throughout this set of posts and points, I’ve implanted seeds that lead directly to Dr. Lifton’s eight criteria of “cult” organizations and societies. **And by “cult,” we are talking here in the sociological sense – namely, a group, organization, or society that seeks to extend total control over its**
participants or subjects – not in the *theological* sense of a religious group or sect that holds to doctrines that are not “orthodox” Christian faith and practice.

Now, onward to introduce the eight criteria and where they came from, then focusing in on the essence of “thought reform” and how it relates to spiritual transformation, and instructions for the “Before” section of the learning exercise.
Background and Overview of Dr. Lifton’s Research

The word *brainwashing* was coined in the early 1950s to describe the radical results from a set of re-education techniques. They were noticed in the West when P.O.W.s of the Korean conflict were freed physically from captivity, but still proved to be prisoners mentally. They had endured indoctrination, propaganda, social isolation, sleep/sensory deprivation, and various types of physical and psychological torture. These traumatizing experiences left their thinking and behavior so radically changed that they didn’t seem to be themselves any longer – much like Peeta Mellark after he was “hijacked” by the Capitol and his memories altered through injections of tracker-jacker venom that targeted the fear center of his brain. At least temporarily, they acted the opposite of who they normally were known to be.

[Sidenote: There is a fascinating five-page section on "Hijacking and Psychological Torture by Fear" in Lois Gresh’s book, *The Hunger Games Companion: The Unauthorized Guide to the Series* (pages 122-126). She explores cutting-edge research into neuroanatomy, and the biochemistry of fear and memories, and applies it to the brainwashing experiences of Peeta Mellark by the Capitol.]

Dr. Lifton began his studies on “thought reform” in the mid-1950s. He was then a therapist for the U.S. military, and originally worked with prisoners of war from the Korean conflict. This shifted and he began working with men and women who survived Communist China’s “re-education programs.” He interviewed 40 of these former prisoners of the communist China regime – 25 Westerners and 15 Chinese. From their case studies, he pulled out a set of eight elements that were common pattern in what they experienced and how it affected them.

These criteria for identifying a totalistic paradigm and the thought reform techniques that sustained it were published in the groundbreaking 1961 book, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China*.

The initial phrase is the exact title Dr. Lifton uses to name the criterion, and the description that follows it is my ultra-brief summary. We’ll get into specifics in the next post.

1. **Milieu Control** – restrict what communication modes are allowed.

2. **Mystical Manipulation** – appeal to some higher purpose, as set by the leader or organization.

3. **The Demand for Purity** – require purity of thinking, that is, with a black-and-white mentality where all our group thinks is absolutely correct.

4. **The Cult of Confession** – use a radical level of personal confession to unburden people from their crimes (real or imagined) against the organization.

5. **The “Sacred Science”** – promote our moral vision as ultimate: Our way of life is the only right one.

6. **Loading the Language** – create code words and insider jargon that reduces complex problems to simplistic solutions, and condenses categories into judgmental labels.

7. **Doctrine Over Person** – require people to conform to our perfect system of truth so that individuality is eradicated and sublime conformity is the sacred norm.
8. The Dispensing of Existence – exercise the “right” to decide who has the right to exist in public and who needs to be isolated or excommunicated.

His criteria have since been applied over the years to political organizations and movements – like the cult of Mao in China. They have also been applied to spiritual/religious groups – like the cult of Jim Jones and The Peoples’ Temple. His approach to understanding totalitarian systems is relevant wherever extreme social coercion is applied to force people toward social conformity. Unfortunately, this includes toxic churches and malignant ministries, where a dystopian paradigm of authoritarian power, fear, and demands for compliance dominate.
In Chapter 22 of his book on thought reform, Dr. Lifton devotes several pages to each element in his set of criteria. In the next post, I’ll summarize each element, and select quotes that illustrate the principle he saw at work in social systems of totalism. (Note: I’m using the W.W. Norton 1963 version, so page numbers may not be the same in other editions.)

If you think you might be interested in reading the entire book, you might want to secure a copy before working through the next post. It is available in several print editions, as well as a Kindle version and a Nook version.

Whatever edition you choose, I’d strongly recommend that you read Chapters 1 and 2 before reading Chapter 22. They are short, but give invaluable background on how Dr. Lifton got into this area of study in the first place, the kinds of Chinese and Western subjects he conducted his in-depth interviews with, and important notes on “brainwashing.” Here is his summary description of that term

“As I proceeded with the [interview] work, I realized that one of the main causes for confusion about thought reform lay in the complexity of the process itself. Some people considered it a relentless means of undermining the human personality; others saw it as a profoundly ‘moral’ – even religious – attempt to instill new ethics into the Chinese people. Both of these views were partly correct, and yet each, insofar as it ignored the other, was greatly misleading. For it was the combination of external force or coercion with an appeal to inner enthusiasm through evangelistic exhortation which gave thought reform its emotional scope and power. Coercion and breakdown are, of course, more prominent in the prison and military programs, while exhortation and ethical appeal are especially stressed with the rest of the Chinese population; and it becomes extremely difficult to determine just where exhortation ends and coercion begins” (emphasis in the original).

Dr. Lifton goes on to describe the Chinese government’s own view of their use of these tactics. He notes that they believed that “All crimes have definite sociological roots” which involve “evil ideology and evil habits” of the old society. “Thus if we are to wipe all crimes from their root … we must carry out various effective measures to transform the various evil ideological conceptions in the minds of the people so that they may be educated and reformed into new people” (page 14).

Wow … when I read this last sentence, I shuddered as I thought how easily such perverse concepts of coercion have been adapted into spiritual abuse – under perverted “lamb-o-flague language” that hijacks the words of Scripture, like “be renewed in the spirit of your mind,” or “new nature,” but uses them deceitfully for their own agendas. In such cases, God’s Word has too often been misused to divide people from the truth and isolate them from healthy relationships, not lead them into spiritual growth or vibrant participation in a community of saints.

Perhaps as frightening was Dr. Lifton’s conclusion that “In all of this it is most important to realize that what we see as a set of coercive maneuvers, the Chinese Communists view as a morally uplifting, harmonizing, and scientifically therapeutic experience” (page 15, emphasis in the original). I have a couple of thoughts about why I find this scary, as relates with spiritual abuse.

First, in my experiences, spiritually abusive leaders never, ever acknowledge that what they do is coercive and damaging. At best, they appeal to the truth that “nobody’s perfect,” or deflect responsibility by giving a generics-filled non-apology like, “IF I ever did anything that might have been offensive, I’m
sorry.” At worst, they find ways to increase the pressure on you to extinguish criticism, “submit” to their authority, and align with their doctrine. Or they kick you out of the church and make sure you continue to remember their power through their “leading” the rest of the congregation to shun you.

Second, “brainwashing” may be meant for “conversion,” but it cannot bring Christlike transformation. The techniques of brainwashing are not the same as genuine teaching, counseling, mentoring, overseeing, and/or ministering that is designed to bring about personal growth, creativity, individuality, and social contributions to community. Instead, brainwashing involves intentional, insidious pressure for conformity through confession and re-education. Its indoctrination is designed to manipulate people into a conversion of values, beliefs, and behaviors that overthrow the individual’s identity, will, and natural network of connections, and to embrace an imposed paradigm of philosophy/faith, practice, family, and unassailable authoritarian leaders.

Finally, if you decide to go on and do other background reading on the subject of brainwashing and cults of totalism, you’ll find a range of academic perspectives and controversies. There are questions as to whether any form of religious “conversion” is actually “brainwashing,” and whether “emerging alternative religions” are always cults, and whether “cult deprogramming” tactics are too similar to those of brainwashing, even though for an opposite purpose. These are important questions with implications for identifying malignant ministries and toxic leaders. But, so much of the discussion eventually resounds back to Dr. Lifton’s work that this is the book I’ve chosen to focus on here.
Do This Exercise to Prepare for Studying Dr. Lifton’s Criteria

Before we get into the specifics of Dr. Lifton’s criteria in Part B, I’m going to suggest that you do at least one of the following “Before You Read” exercises to get your mindset ready. (At the end of the Part B post, once you’ve gone through Lifton’s list, there will be an “Afterward You Read” part of the exercise to analyze things and consider some applications.)

Before You Read Dr. Lifton’s Definitions and Criteria

For both survivors and organizational designers/leaders:

Be aware as you can of your being while you read and consider these points, to see what specific items seem to be impacting you the most.

- When do you notice you stop to focus, and perhaps either stop your breathing or breathe rapidly?
- Do any items or illustrations cause your heart to beat faster?
- Which one(s) make you shift around in your seat?
- Are there other physical and emotional signals that might be indicators that something has disturbed you or caught your attention or brings memories to the forefront of your thinking?

For those who are survivors of spiritually abusive/toxic organizations and their family, friends, and advocates:

Take some time to remember what happened to you (or to the family, friends, advocates you care about) in an authoritarian organization. Jot down what comes to mind about the following issues – and don’t worry about taking time right now to analyze them – save that process for later.

- How would you define social coercion, thought reform, and/or brainwashing?
- What kinds of things were done in that organization to control the ways people thought, felt, and communicated?
- How did you feel stifled?
- What happened to relationships you had within the group?
- In what ways did leaders/bullies there work to instill fear in people?
- How did they seek to manipulate your emotions?
- How did they use verbal abuse and/or manipulative speaking to get their way?

Go through the introductory list of Dr. Lifton’s eight criteria and jot notes on anything that strikes you about each item – what happened to you, how that particular element seemed to be used, how it made you think and feel, what it did to those around you, etc.

1. **Milieu Control** – restrict what communication modes are allowed.
2. **Mystical Manipulation** – appeal to some higher purpose, as set by the leader or organization.
3. **The Demand for Purity** – require purity of thinking, that is, with a black-and-white mentality where every view our group holds is absolutely correct.
4. **The Cult of Confession** – use a radical level of personal confession to unburden people from their crimes (real or imagined) against the organization and realign them with its principles.
5. **The “Sacred Science”** – promote our moral vision as ultimate: Our way of life is the only right one.
6. **Loading the Language** – create code words and insider jargon that reduce complex problems to simplistic solutions, and condense categories into judgmental labels.
7. **Doctrine Over Person** – require people to conform to our perfect system of truth so that individuality is eradicated and sublime conformity is the sacred norm.
8. **The Dispensing of Existence** – exercise the “right” to decide who has the right to exist in public and who needs to be isolated or excommunicated.

*For those who are organizational systems designers and/or leaders:*

Get spiritual abuse systems back in mind:

- If you ARE a survivor of spiritual abuse yourself, go through the survivor’s exercise above first.
- If you are NOT a survivor of spiritual abuse yourself, read my futuristguy post on “Strategies and Tactics of Leaders Who are Abusive.” Then, you should find someone who is a survivor and interview them, using the questions above as guidelines.

Consider your current organization or your plans for a forthcoming church or ministry:

- How would you define *social coercion, thought reform,* and/or *brainwashing*?
- What preventive measures does your organization have in place already so that no leader, member, process, or procedure can fall into such evil actions?
- How do you handle accusations of bullying in your organization?
- What happens to those found to be bullies, and to those found to be shielding, helping, or enabling them to harm others?
- How do you train new staff and members of your organization about harassment, bullying, verbal abuse, coercion, legalism, etc.?
- Is it part of your regular schedule as an organization to conduct internal reviews of your systems for health versus harassment?
- Do you use only internal monitors, or do you use qualified outside people as evaluators and monitors?
- What procedures do you have in place for filing a grievance against another member of your organization?

And now, on to Part B, and specifics of Robert Jay Lifton’s eight criteria for identifying organizational “cults.” There we’ll go deeper into detail, and finish by bringing things together.
Thought Control, Toxic Churches, and Lessons from The Hunger Games Trilogy

5. How Do We Discern Dystopian Dynamics and Totalitarian Tactics? ~ Part B

Introduction and the “While You Read” Exercise

Before we get into the specifics of Dr. Lifton’s criteria, I’m going to suggest that you take a moment to review what you learned during the “Before” exercise that went with Part 5A. Then read through the exercise below. (It is the same for survivors of spiritual abuse as for designers and leaders of sustainable systems.) Follow what it says in the “While You Read” section as you work your way through the overviews of the eight criteria. At the end of the post, you’ll find an “Afterwards” exercise to help tie things together.

While You Read Dr. Lifton’s Definitions and Criteria

For survivors of spiritually abusive/toxic organizations and their family, friends, and advocates; and for organizational systems designers and/or leaders:

- How do you respond to the definitions of key terms? Do any strike you as odd, unrealistic, amazing, …?
- Note items that come to mind to add to your own list of coercive/abusive experiences.
- Note items that come to mind to add to your own list of ways your current church, ministry, or organization is potentially coercive, and ways it exhibits health.
- Assuming you have read The Hunger Games trilogy, make a list of insights and questions you have about how various of Lifton’s eight criteria apply to Panem’s Capitol, to its outlying districts, and to District 13.
Totalitarian Ways and Means (and Mean Ways) In a Nutshell …

I have been processing my experiences with authoritarian churches, ministries, and organizations intentionally for four years. I’ve been working through Dr. Lifton’s criteria for identifying totalistic systems and methods intensively for four weeks.

This is complex material. It deals with ideas and leaders, politics and people, cultures and controllers. It is difficult to capture the essence of what Dr. Lifton is getting at, or select the most relevant quotes, when I’ve underlined or starred half the lines on every page!

Nevertheless, it had to be done. So, I will begin with a one-paragraph synthesis of the key topics and how I see them fitting together. Then I will look at the eight criteria, four in Part 5B and four in Part 5C. I’ll extract what I interpret as key thoughts, seek to “translate” technical material as best I can, and quote directly from Dr. Lifton when that seems the best way to deal with the material. At the end of Part 5C, I will also share three issues that are particularly important to the overall discussion how to interpret and apply these criteria.

Four last notes. First, this is meaty material. It’s okay to going through it slowly so you can really chrew on it. In fact, to broaden your learning style technique repertoire, you may want to invite some other people to join you in person on via phone or Skype, read a section aloud, and then discuss it together using the “While You Read” guidelines and any other questions or comments that come to mind.

Second, I am not only pulling vocabulary and quotes strictly from Dr. Lifton’s material in Chapter 22 of Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China. I draw in related ideas, applications to ministry situations, and experiences to help clarify the criteria. However, the essence of the definitions and descriptions do come from Dr. Lifton. (And when I do quote Dr. Lifton, I am using the W.W. Norton 1963 version, so page numbers may not be the same in other editions.)

Third, I am not dealing here with how-to’s of recovery for people who’ve suffered traumatization by leaders and laypeople in authoritarian systems. Also, I won’t address intervention of toxic leaders, or prevention of totalistic systems and social coercion tactics. Those are among the main subjects of my forthcoming book Safe Houses for God’s People, in which this series serves as part of the media studies section.

Fourth, I find it frightening to see how many concepts that appear in Dr. Lifton’s work could be developed oh, so very easily from contorted authoritarian interpretations of the Bible – like authority hierarchies and “confession” and “transformation.” If doctrinal interpretation and application is left in the hands of one CEO pastor/elder in a church, or even a very tight-knit cadre of doctrinaire leaders, that is dangerous beyond words and beyond the Word. The antides for counterfeits involve the full truth in a system that is not toxic. Much more on safe, healthy, and sustainable systems in the entire Opal Design Systems Curriculum, of which Safe Houses is the first volume.

So – finally, here is my one-paragraph synthesis/summary:
Ideological totalism is about creating the perfect paradigm of absolute truth about what everyone should value, believe, feel, do, and contribute in every aspect of life. Thought reform is about methods for getting every person to embrace that paradigm and to emulate the gurus who already embody it. Because this ideological system is the one and only true way to live, and the answer to all questions, we need to have its premises present everywhere, all around us, so we are constantly reminded of its values and re-educated to its truths. Thus we present the truth and refute error, even if it means applying restrictions to all forms of communication and even to relationships. That is because it is our sacred duty to follow this paradigm with purity and to eliminate any and all impurities. This calling challenges us to rid ourselves of personal imperfections and impurities through confession and re-education. And, sometimes, we must even contain or rid our society of those who would hold back its progress to perfection through their questions, criticism, or lack of zeal. We denounce all doubts, we uphold the truth! Whatever it takes to realign doubters with the truth, or to remove them if they repeatedly refuse, we will do, because those who do not contribute, do not count. We undertake this all as our moral obligation to our beliefs, to our leaders, to our society, to ourselves.
Reference List of Dr. Lifton’s Eight Criteria: Ideological Totalism and Thought Reform

1. Milieu Control – restrict what communication modes are allowed.

2. Mystical Manipulation – appeal to some higher purpose, as set by the leader or organization.

3. The Demand for Purity – require purity of thinking, that is, with a black-and-white mentality where all our group thinks is absolutely correct.

4. The Cult of Confession – use a radical level of personal confession to unburden people from their crimes (real or imagined) against the organization.

5. The “Sacred Science” – promote our moral vision as ultimate: Our way of life is the only right one.

6. Loading the Language – create code words and insider jargon that reduces complex problems to simplistic solutions, and condenses categories into judgmental labels.

7. Doctrine Over Person – require people to conform to our perfect system of truth so that individuality is eradicated and sublime conformity is the sacred norm.

8. The Dispensing of Existence – exercise the “right” to decide who has the right to exist in public and who needs to be isolated or excommunicated.
1. Milieu Control [Communications]

“Milieu” is the cultural context in which something exists or in which an action occurs. In talking about totalistic systems, “milieu control” relates with how the social surroundings are manipulated to limit independent thought and promote “groupthink” (ideological conformity).

Milieu control involves restricting the kinds of communication modes that are allowed (promoting propaganda) and not allowed (imposing censorship). This is designed to “save” people from having the trouble of figuring out the right way (which the leaders or the Party already have worked out); all the regular people have to do is adopt the truths of the ideology and follow the leaders.

Typically, any disallowed forms of communication, like questions or criticism, are punished. This often occurs publicly, through a variety of means, such as verbal berating, hazing, and even imprisonment. When people know that such punishment is unavoidable, it serves to extinguish wrong beliefs and behaviors, and reinforces for everyone the importance of adhering to the rules about what one can/cannot say.

Also, the leaders enact the appearance of “social omniscience” where there is constant surveillance and therefore no secrets. Everyone knows that information is passed along all the time, so at any given moment, whatever you say might be overheard and transmitted to the leaders by informants. In Western forms like Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four*, surveillance was done through technology of the omnipresent telescreens. In the Chinese form, reporting is done by people, including conditioning children to the point where they would denounce their parents, extended family, neighbors, teachers, etc., for failure to adhere to the Party’s ideology.

How does milieu control affect people? This kind of constriction on communication pressures people to polarize what they think and feel. So, they split the real (i.e., the promoted paradigm/ideology) from the unreal (everything else). This results in destruction of any sense of personal equilibrium that balances self and society/the outside world.

For many, milieu control results in increased emotional passion for the belief system that is held in common. Meanwhile, it also increases mental passivity, which decreases independent judgment (i.e., individual discernment and decision-making). Ultimately, there is no independence, only dysfunctional dependence. It burns out people’s internal regulators so that all input (all truth) is expected to come from the external controllers.

(Sidenote: This feature of external control is disturbingly presented in the classic sci-fi film, *Dark City*, which will be explored in another segment of the media studies section of *Safe Houses for God’s People*, along with three other film adaptations of core themes from Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four*.)
2. Mystical Manipulation [Motivations]

If milieu control is about making people TALK like everyone in the group, mystical manipulation is about motivating people to ACT like everyone in the group. This is needed because the group has a unique calling and stunningly special destiny to achieve—it’s like a holy crusade—and this can only be fulfilled if everyone does what they’re supposed to! This requires trust … trust in the chosen leaders who have the amazing foresight to see and understand the way the group needs to go. Following them cannot be wrong, can it?

However, if a person loses trust in the leaders or in the magnificent purpose of the group, he or she may become a passive part of the system—remaining a cog in the gearworks, but their passion and heart are no longer in it. This means they may continue surface-level participation and even continue persuading and manipulating others on behalf of the system, in order to hide their mistrust. But they will still feel like a pawn: without power, without creative options, without self-expression or hope.
3. The Demand for Purity [Restrictions]

This demand here is not so much about moral purity, but about purity in thinking. The cult wants to reduce and restrict what people think to only and always what paradigm planks the cult teaches. The cult’s ideology is black and white, and absolutely right. This means that the leader-party-organization serves as the sole arbiter of absolute good and absolute evil. Also, all that is pure is found only inside the boundaries of the group. All that is impure is always found outside the group. Therefore, we must purge the group of any impurities – thoughts, feelings, actions, opinions, people, vocations, etc.

In a paradigm of totalism, everything is about polarization (black OR white). No thinking in paradox (both black AND white) or gradation (degrees of grey) is sanctioned. Also, there is assigning of guilt and shame to thinking whatever is evil-impure-tainted – just as perfection and righteousness are assigned whatever the cult decides is good-pure-perfect. (Sometimes what was acceptable today is bad tomorrow, and vice versa, which keeps people guessing and therefore dependent on leaders to tell them what is what.)

So, to keep thinking managed rightly and righteously on the inside requires a culture of guilt and shame on the outside.

- **Guilt** emphasizes when you DO something wrong, and that you have to pay for that wrong. The debt of guilt is therefore removed by a just form of punishment, or by some other appropriate form of redemption payment. Western cultures tend to be more guilt-oriented and individualistic, and so it is no surprise that North American theologies emphasize substitutionary atonement for sin.

- **Shame** emphasizes when you ARE someone wrong, and that you lose face or relationship as a result. The debt of shame means you deserve relational separation, humiliation, and/or ostracism [shunning] to remove the shame and deserve restoration. Eastern cultures tend to be more shame-oriented and communal, and so it is no surprise that their theologies emphasize the family relationships of being siblings in the Body of Christ, and restored relationship through Christ with the Father.

I would suggest that, together, the demand for purity (criterion #3) and confession (criterion #4) may prove among the easiest ways for malignant ministries to exploit the sincerity of Christians who wish to grow, but do not yet have the wisdom to discern when wolfish people are posing as genuine leaders. That is because the demand for purity and confession both hinge upon guilt and shame, and deceptive, self-serving overlords can manipulate the unwary and unwise.

- “[T]here is no emotional bondage greater than that of the man whose entire guilt potential … has become the property of ideological totalists” (page 425).
- “Closely related to the demand for absolute purity is an obsession with personal confession. Confession is carried beyond its ordinary religious, legal, and therapeutic expressions to the point of becoming a cult in itself. There is the demand that one confess to crimes one has not committed, to sinfulness that is artificially induced, in the name of a cure that is arbitrarily imposed. Such demands are made possible not only by the ubiquitous human tendencies toward guilt and shame but also by the need to give expression to these tendencies. In totalist hands, confession becomes a means of exploiting, rather than offering solace for, these vulnerabilities [toward guilt and shame]” (page 425).
4. The Cult of Confession

In authoritarian groups, confession is part of the thought reform process. Followers use confession to purge personal impurities AND to self-surrender to the social group. After all, in the group (not the individual) resides all absolute wisdom, so all techniques that bring anyone more tightly into alignment with the movement are righteous acts.

However, this extreme form of confession offers a false sense of humility for those who confess and therefore feel unburdened by it. They are following orders, doing what they are told. This seeming freedom from obedience and the unburdening of self can lead to a sense of elation, even ecstasy (and who knows – perhaps addiction?). But, confession is not the same as repentance (a change of thinking and direction). Relief from guilt and shame are not necessarily evidences of transformation. The reality is, confession may or may not be based in authenticity or vulnerability, and may or may not lead to repentance.

In fact, Dr. Lifton notes three inherent problems in this purge-form of confession. They are interrelated and, unfortunately, highly relevant to the current practices of many churches and ministries being identified as toxic in the North American Church.

1. **The cult of confession actually increases (not decreases) the level of secret-keeping.** That may seem surprising, but here is how he says it works. Our secrets exist in an internal tension: We suppress our own awareness of them or, if we are highly aware of them, we withhold expressing our secrets to others. Either way, unmasking them frightens us. However, we may also be willing to open up to see them in ourselves if we are alone and safe, or reveal them to others if we are in a safe and loving-enough relationship to share them.

   But when there is social pressure to conform by confessing, we may indeed reveal *old* secrets – yet at the same time, create *new* secrets as we hide our doubts or resentment toward the ideology or organization or movement or leaders that forced us to be unmasked. We must also hide any other aspects of our values, beliefs, and behaviors that we find fall outside what the totalist ideology allows. So, the more we learn of the doctrinaire system, potentially the more we find to hide.

2. **One’s identity/boundaries become blurred.** “Each person becomes caught up in a continuous conflict over which secrets to preserve and which to surrender, over ways to reveal lesser secrets in order to protect more important ones; his own boundaries between the secret and the known, between the public and the private, become blurred” (page 427).

3. **It is impossible to attain a reasonable balance between worth and humility.** Here Dr. Lifton refers to the Judge-Penitent character in Albert Camus’ book, *The Fall*. “The enthusiastic and aggressive confessor becomes like Camus’ character whose perpetual confession is his means of judging others: ‘[I] … practice the profession of penitent to be able to end up as a judge … the more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you.’ The identity of the ‘judge-penitent’ thus becomes a vehicle for taking on some of the environment’s arrogance and sense of omnipotence. Yet even this shared omnipotence cannot protect him from the opposite (but not unrelated) feelings of humiliation and weakness, feelings especially prevalent among those who remain more the enforced penitent than the all-powerful judge” (page 427).
It seems to me that a flawed understanding of confession probably has the most damaging effect on disciples: It makes some even more susceptible to pride if they perform this rite well externally and/or are extraverted. But it makes others more susceptible to confusion, anxiety, and bitterness if they are more highly sensitive and introverted. May the true Lord of the Church and Shepherd of the Sheep deliver us from its abuse!

**Conclusion – Criteria #1 through #4**

I find it intriguing to see how much space Dr. Lifton dedicated to each of the first four of his eight criteria for identifying ideological “cults.” Number of words used gives some indicator of the importance and/or complexity of each element. And he spent the most time on the cult of confession (criterion #4, 86 lines of text), the second most on restrictions/the demand for purity (#3, 71 lines), the third most on communications/milieu control (#1, 63 lines), and the least on motivations/mystical manipulation (#2, 56 lines). Hopefully I’ve reflected those priorities in the details of my attempts to explain and translate this material.

(Learning style note: For some people, such counts are meaningless. Yet, for others, this gives what they consider important evidence. It’s just another one of those things where people differ in the ways God created them to process information – and it’s okay.)

Part 5C will continue with the last of the eight criteria: ultimate vision, reductionist language, ideological conformity, and social ostracism.
5. The “Sacred Science”

Leaders and followers in a cult organization present its ideology as the ultimate moral vision – as if theirs is the only right and righteous Way of life. They act as if it has an airtight logic and unassailable methodology for achieving that vision. So, since their system of precepts and practices is absolutely perfect, that elevates it to the status of dogma – “orthodox faith.” It constitutes “sacred science.”

Because the entire system is sacred and transcends “normal” and “worldly” wisdom, it is right for guiding every aspect of life. Adherence to it is a moral responsibility. Protecting it is a moral obligation – even if it means taking actions others do not understand, or may even find “immoral.” But protecting the organization, its leaders, and its ideology may require it. No one is allowed to “mess” with the sacred texts or to oppose the highest leaders in the hierarchy, because they mediate that truth to the rest of the congregation, community, or movement. Everyone must show reverence for the truth and never, ever question it or those who dispense it.

“This sacredness is evident in the prohibition (whether or not explicit) against the questioning of basic assumptions, and in the reverence which is demanded for the originators of the Word, the present bearers of the Word, and the Word itself” (pages 427-428).

The totalist system as sacred science offers comfort and security, because it makes no distinction between logical reasoning and mystical insights. By fusing the two, it offers a starting place of common ground for various kinds of people. Problems arise, however, when peoples’ mind, feelings, or gut instincts tell them “something is off.”

“Since the distinction between the logical and the mystical is, to begin with, artificial and man-made, an opportunity for transcending it can create an extremely intense feeling of truth. But the posture of unquestioning faith – both rationally and nonrationally derived – is not easy to sustain, especially if one discovers that the world of experience is not nearly as absolute as the sacred science claims it to be” (page 428, emphasis added).

Robert Jay Lifton’s Eight Criteria for Identifying Authoritarian Cults • © 2012 Brad Sargent • Page 20 of 32
As Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson state in *Dune: The Butlerian Jihad*, “Assumptions are a transparent grid through which we view the universe, sometimes deluding ourselves that the grid is that universe.” So, perhaps the presumptive claim that the cult’s “sacred science” is a complete, perfect, closed system is eventually what leads to discontent for followers. It presents itself as everything, but at some point, problems will arise because reality is bigger than the cult’s box. As with the cult of confession, the more that followers attempt to adhere to the fullness of the totalistic system, the greater the possibility that they will see how it does not fit. And so, the system itself creates the probability of internal resistance which provides fertilizer for growth of rebellion.
6. Loading the Language

Because my professional training is in linguistics, a lot of things occurred to me that might not for others as I read the section on Loading the Language. For instance, the concept of *simulacra* came to mind as a metaphor for the problem of language in a totalist ideology cult. A simulacra is when you pass around a copy of a copy of a photocopy, ad infinitum, to the point where you don’t know where the original is (if it even exists anymore), and every generation of duplication away from that original loses clarity of content. The more blurry the latest copies become (as they inevitably will, cloned from a mega-copy instead of taken freshly off a clear original), the less the level of meaning that might be decipherable to read from.

Cult language is like a simulacra. The originators of the jargon may have found a certain term meaningful, because they did the work to synthesize (or create from scratch) what it meant in the first place. But eventually, all anyone else can do is repeat the term. They never experienced the underlying origins, never processed it for themselves. For them, the meaning has collapsed. It becomes mere code for some dense point of orthodox dogma. It transforms into what Dr. Lifton calls an “interpretive shortcut” so followers don’t have to (nor do they get to) think for themselves. Jargon just promotes passivity and mental laziness.

As an example, think about how Communist theory talked about “the bourgeois” – an over-class that oppresses “the proletarians.” Say a Communist revolution killed off the bourgeois, and within a few generations, no one grows up with a living memory of who those bourgeois were and what they did. But the code word *bourgeois* still gets used repeatedly. It no longer has any historical anchoring, no context, no real content anymore. And yet, young people who are born generations after the revolution still use the term. Is it out of following a charismatic leader? Or because they don’t have vocabulary for other possibilities? Or has the limited language actually constricted their worldview? Questions like these are why the peculiar use of language is crucial to identifying organizational cults.

That’s all backstory that I’m filling in. Dr. Lifton seems to assume that his readers know enough about general issues of language and communication that he dives right in. Here is how he opens this section of the book:

“The language of the totalist environment is characterized by the thought-terminating cliché. The most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed. These become the start and finish of any ideological analysis” (page 429).

By using language that is more loaded, authoritarian leaders create dependence (the leaders know what these terms mean; I don’t have to) and limit thought (the truth is encoded in a limited number of terms that tell what is good-pure-right and what is evil-impure-wrong; those are the only categories that matter).

Granted, every social group uses “insider language” to some degree. It helps us identify others as “one of us” and can give a common vocabulary for conversing about issues of interest. Over time, though, such group language should grow and change. However, Dr. Lifton notes that totalistic organizations take labeling to the extreme, giving their code words the status of sacred and therefore being perfect and unchangeable. That is part of how they manipulate language usage to serve their purposes.
“Totalist language, then, is repetitiously centered on all-encompassing jargon, prematurely abstract, highly categorical, relentlessly judging, and to anyone but its most devoted advocate, deadly dull: in Lionel Trilling’s phrase, ‘the language of nonthought’” (page 429).

And, in the extreme cases, what happens with the followers? He says that “[I]magination becomes increasingly dissociated from … actual life experiences and may even tend to atrophy from disuse” (page 430). I find this particularly interesting because, in my understanding, our imagination is closely tied with hope. Imagination helps us consider positive horizons and constructive scenarios that are outside the realm of our experience. So, to capture the imagination – and not just mental cognition and emotions – brings more of people’s personhood into alignment with the authoritarian leader.
7. Doctrine Over Person

But what happens when people don’t align with the authority of the group’s sacred word or its leaders?

The basic thought in this section is: You modify people to fit the system, not the system to fit being human. So, when it comes right down to it, People AREN’T more important than things (i.e., the ideology). There is no room for challenge, growth, or variety. The system is perfectly absolute and absolutely perfect: “We have the truth, they don’t. They need to change.” (Therefore, it is not a huge leap forward to consider that those who continue to reject The Truth and resist thought reform do not qualify as human – which is the essence of criterion #8.)

This absolutist language is sterile. Everything allowable – thoughts, feelings, concepts – gets clinically categorized and labeled. If the ideology does not name something, it does not exist. Accordingly, any experiences that “seem” outside the bounds of the catalog of dogma must be immediately reinterpreted “correctly” to fit within it, or otherwise their existence must be denied. People must conform to it, not vice versa.

Also, the catalog of recognized realities is complete. It is frozen in time and will not be expanded – unless, of course, the leaders have some great new revelation. So, instead of any humanistic broadening of the doctrinal/philosophical model to accommodate peoples’ experience or cultural changes that it does not yet cover, it continues the dogmatic limitations on them. People who are trapped in the system must find a way to ignore, isolate, or otherwise excise those experiences – if they wish to survive.

Thus, the “human” drama has a very limited set of stock scripts and roles to play out. Leader/follower. Hero/villain. Compliant/convict. There is no room for creativity either inside or outside those bounds, because difference constitutes deviance. So, the totalist system is mechanistic, not humanistic. It either turns people into automatons, or treats them like non-humans. Even the sacred nature of the system requires overlooking the variety of human experiences for the sake of maintaining the official sanctioned ideology, history, and psychology:

“[P]ast historical events are retrospectively altered, wholly rewritten, or ignored, to make them consistent with the doctrinal logic. … The same doctrinal primacy prevails in the totalist approach to changing people; the demand that character and identity be reshaped, not in accordance with one’s special nature or potentialities, but rather to fit the rigid contours of the doctrinal mold. The human is thus subjugated to the ahuman” (page 431).

Dr. Lifton refers to Benjamin Schwartz’s description in his 1951 book, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao*, of a will to orthodoxy, saying it “requires an elaborate façade of new rationalizations designed to demonstrate the unerring consistency of the doctrine and the unfailing foresight which it provides” (pages 431-432). This is exactly what we witness in Orwell’s novel, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, and the work of Winston Smith. He serves the so-called Ministry of Truth by rewriting the newspapers and books of the past to make them appear as if Big Brother and the Ingsoe Party accurately predicted the realities of the present – and then destroys the old evidence that contradicts it.

How often these days do we find that authoritarian ministers rewrite their personal past to manage their current public persona? Or edit organizational documents and drop pages from websites in an effort to do damage control? In the internet era, however, digital documentation is often retrievable, which means old facts can re-find their way, back to the light of day.
In such settings, identity and equilibrium become key struggles for people with a conscience and a consciousness of how they are being dehumanized by the dominating cult of ideological totalism and the “doctrine-dominated pressure to change.” He is “thrust into an intense struggle with his own sense of integrity, a struggle which takes place in relation to polarized feelings of sincerity and insincerity. In a totalist environment, absolute ‘sincerity’ is demanded; and the major criterion for sincerity is likely to be one’s degree of doctrinal compliance – both in regard to belief and to direction of personal change” (page 432).

Those who fail to comply have their beliefs and behaviors labeled as “deviant.” Always, the person, not the system, is blamed for any failure to conform to The Truth. How very much like so many authoritarian, doctrinaire churches and ministries this is. If someone falls short of the exact doctrinal representation of biblical truth, or falls short of full submission and obedience to leaders as Hebrews 13 (supposedly) demands, it’s because of their own problems, not because of flaws in the ministry’s doctrinal statement, leaders, vision, mission, etc. The purity of these things is always more important than any of the people.
8. The Dispensing of Existence

Once an authoritarian “hive” organization has set its standard of absolute truth, it isn’t that big of a leap of logic to jump from allowed/disallowed doctrines to allowed/disallowed people, solely based on who carries or doesn’t carry those doctrines. The dogma and its mediators determine who deserves to survive and thrive, and who doesn’t. That’s because, as has been noted many times, the cult must protect its purity. And that requires isolating the impurities so they don’t contaminate the majority. Identify-isolate-remove is the core process to get rid of any kind of impurity.

So, what happens to people who refuse to bend their will and yield their mind to thought reform? It makes sense that the cult will progress from identifying such rebels and denouncing them, to either detainment and imprisonment or to expulsion and shunning. And, if need be, there is always execution and genocide for those individuals and groups who will never be like the obedient masses. Admittedly, the exact actions of a given cult state or organization may not go as far as genocide, but the underlying thinking is all of the same piece. Jesus said that anger was akin to murder and lust was akin to adultery. The inner temptation can lead to the outer action, which may turn out to be quite extreme. There is a logic involved, even if there is no longer a conscience:

“Under conditions of ideological totalism, in China and elsewhere, nonpeople have often been put to death, their executioners then becoming guilty (in Camus’ phrase) of ‘crimes of logic.’ But the thought reform process is one means by which nonpeople are permitted, through a change in attitude and personal character, to make themselves over into people. The most literal example of such dispensing of existence and nonexistence is to be found in the sentence given to certain political criminals: execution in two years’ time, unless during that two-year period they have demonstrated genuine progress in their reform” (page 433).

If someone wants to ensure surviving in such an environment, sadly, they must choose to sacrifice themselves to the system. “Existence comes to depend upon creed (I believe, therefore I am), upon submission (I obey, therefore I am) and beyond these, upon a sense of total merger with the ideological movement” (pages 434-435). The totality of one’s being must conform and comply to the totalism of the cult. But authoritarian leaders who make such demands of others act as if they are gods:

“Are not men presumptuous to appoint themselves the dispensers of human existence? Surely this is a flagrant expression of what the Greeks called hubris, of arrogant man making himself God. Yet one underlying assumption makes this arrogance mandatory: the conviction that there is just one path to true existence, just one valid mode of being, and that all others are perforce invalid and false. Totalists thus feel themselves compelled to destroy all possibilities of false existence as a means of furthering the great plan of true existence to which they are committed” (page 434).

How many spiritually abusive leaders in how many toxic churches and malignant ministries show this kind of absolute arrogance? They defraud God and damage His people. And though we as survivors are not to treat them as they have treated us, we know that their day of reckoning will come. They will be accountable for their hubris and the harm they cause …
Conclusion – Criteria #5 through #8

Again, I find it intriguing to see how much space Dr. Lifton dedicated to each of these final four of his eight criteria for identifying ideological “cults.” Number of words used gives some indicator of the importance and/or complexity of each element. And he spent the most time in this group on doctrine over person (criterion #7, 81 lines of text), the second most on the dispensing of existence (#8, 80 lines), the third most on the “sacred science” (#5, 56 lines), and the least on loading the language (#6, 51 lines). Hopefully I’ve reflected those priorities in the details of my attempts to explain and translate this material.

If you want to read more online directly from this chapter, here is where you’ll find an edited excerpt of Chapter 22.
**Lifton’s Criteria and Relative Emphasis**

I find it intriguing to see how much space Dr. Lifton dedicated to each of his eight criteria for identifying ideological “cults.” Number of words used gives some indicator of the importance and/or complexity of each element. How does Lifton’s relative emphasis on the criteria fit with what you see as the key emerging problems with spiritual abuse by authoritarian leadership in churches and ministries?

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<th>Criterion #</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Amount of Text</th>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>The Cult of Confession</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Doctrine Over Person</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>The Dispensing of Existence</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>The Demand for Purity</td>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>Milieu Control</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Mystical Manipulation</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>The “Sacred Science”</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Loading the Language</td>
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1. **Milieu Control** – restrict what communication modes are allowed.

2. **Mystical Manipulation** – appeal to some higher purpose, as set by the leader or organization.

3. **The Demand for Purity** – require purity of thinking, that is, with a black-and-white mentality where all our group thinks is absolutely correct.

4. **The Cult of Confession** – use a radical level of personal confession to unburden people from their crimes (real or imagined) against the organization.

5. **The “Sacred Science”** – promote our moral vision as ultimate: Our way of life is the only right one.

6. **Loading the Language** – create code words and insider jargon that reduces complex problems to simplistic solutions, and condenses categories into judgmental labels.

7. **Doctrine Over Person** – require people to conform to our perfect system of truth so that individuality is eradicated and sublime conformity is the sacred norm.

8. **The Dispensing of Existence** – exercise the “right” to decide who has the right to exist in public and who needs to be isolated or excommunicated.
After You’ve Read Dr. Lifton’s Definitions and Criteria

For those who are survivors of spiritually abusive/toxic organizations and their family, friends, and advocates:

- What particular criteria did you most notice, and how could you tell they were stirring you?
- What personality factors, family background, cultural background, and life experiences do you think may have contributed to your being susceptible to spiritually abusive leaders? How were you “hooked” into their personality and/or their system?
- From these criteria, would you say that the abusive leader(s) you experienced qualified to some degree as being “authoritarian”? How many of the criteria did their communications and actions demonstrate? Which seemed to come across the strongest?
- How did you end up leaving the situation – or, if you have not left, do you think now that you might? What is sparking these decisions?
- What are the biggest “take-aways” in what you read about Dr. Lifton’s criteria? If you also processed this series with other people, what are the best nuggets of wisdom you got from your conversations?
- What areas do you sense you might want to (or need to) investigate more fully in your own life to safeguard you from abusive leaders and totalistic systems in the future?
- Are there actions you are thinking of taking, because of reading this series? What do you plan to do about them?

For organizational systems designers and/or leaders:

- What vulnerabilities toward authoritarianism and totalism within yourself, your organization, and/or your ministry plans did you notice while reading this series?
- Does your organization exhibit emerging or ongoing issues with communications? Expectations? Guilt/shame? Valuing or not valuing yourself, other people, other organization members or former members?
- What particular criteria surprised you as being identified as features of an ideological cult? Which ones did you already know about?
- What are the biggest “take-aways” in what you read about Dr. Lifton’s criteria? If you also processed this series with other people, what are the best nuggets of wisdom you got from your conversations?
- What areas do you sense you need to investigate more fully in your own life or organization, as a result of studying these eight criteria?
- Are there specific strategies, infrastructures, processes, and/or procedures you sense need to be changed? How will you go about researching what to do and then changing them?
- How do you plan on sharing what you’ve learned with those you serve with?
Final Thoughts: “Brainwashing” and the Big Picture

As I absorbed what I could of Dr. Lifton’s approach and mulled it over in light of other academic works on thought reform and “cult studies,” it gradually become apparent that there are at least three crucial big-picture issues we need to understand. Otherwise, we could miss the point and misuse his criteria.

(Sidenote on learning styles: I test out as “Very Analytic” in my “cognitive field orientation,” so I work best by building from details up to the themes. These three points emerged toward the end of my studies on Dr. Lifton’s system for identifying cults. So, in this case, I decided to put the points here instead of at the beginning, where they might have proven more helpful to those who are “Very Global” in their field orientation, as they work from themes to the details. However, remember that for the sake of the global-oriented student, I did put at the very beginning of the eight criteria that one long paragraph to overview themes interwoven from all eight parts. That synthesis emerged even later, after I had developed these three points and spent a significant amount of time analyzing the criteria already.)

First, “ideological totalism” and “thought reform” (more commonly called brainwashing) are not the same thing. Totalism refers to a complete paradigm, which is the content and goal of re-education. It includes core assumptions for processing information, as well as values, beliefs, behaviors, social organization strategies and infrastructures, cultures, collaborations, and lifestyles. Meanwhile, thought reform is about the means and methods used to achieve the goal of integrating the content of a specific paradigm into people. The point: People often get all caught up in the tactics of brainwashing, and perhaps even equate brainwashing to torture. But Lifton’s criteria cover the what, why, and how of both totalism as a system AND the tactics used to get people to conform to it. And most of those means for thought reform involve intense social and psychological pressure.

“The more clearly an environment expresses these eight psychological themes, the greater its resemblance to ideological totalism; and the more it utilize such totalist devices to change people, the greater its resemblance to thought reform (or ‘brainwashing’)” (page 435).

Lifton goes on to note that totalism is perhaps most noticeable when thought reform is being carried out more openly and vigorously. Also, totalism tends to be more prominent at the beginnings of a mass movement, when enthusiasm, zeal, and hope are high. (Could this have any correlation with why church planting and multi-campus development and mergers have such prominence these days among ministry movements that are being identified as authoritarian?)

Second, the type/flavor of the ideological system at issue can differ widely. And thus, cult - a sociological term used of any kind of totalistic organization or totalitarian system – can be applied to totalistic systems that are political, philosophical, or religious. However, Christians typically think of as a cult as holding to false doctrine.

So, we Christians need to be careful and intentional whenever we use the term cult, and specify whether we’re using it in the sociological sense to refer to a totalistic organizational system, in the theological sense to refer to an organization with a doctrinal heresy, or a combination of both. (And to this, I would add a caution on the use of the term toxic. In church realms, it is generally being used these days to describe a ministry system that is definitely destructive but not necessarily a ideologically totalistic cult or doctrinally heretical cult.)

Third, not all forms of personal change lead to ideological totalism. Within the broader issue of through reform, holistic personal “conversion” through an individual transformation process is not the
same as totalistic paradigm “re-education” through a social conformity process. For instance, some people will make blanket comments like, “All religion is brainwashing. All churches are cults.” But then, why isn’t counseling likewise brainwashing? Or why doesn’t atheism automatically equate to brainwashing? What are the distinct differences between personal growth (even if/when it involves “conversion” to another faith or philosophy) and complete thought reform?

This issue of conversion versus totalistic compliance is important in academic-level cult studies. Researchers seem to be far more careful than we Christians are when examining new religious sects and movements. These do not automatically qualify as sociological cults simply because they are new or because people convert to them – even if they do qualify as theological cults. Likewise, researchers tend to be more careful in looking at slow conversion/growth processes that allow for individual pace and identity and diversity, versus one that conforms people to a required social form at a particular pace and with no room for individuality or creativity.

Such emerging studies that distinguish personal transformation from social conformation may prove very important. That is because totalistic cults using Christian language and structures often hide behind practices that they say are for “personal growth” or that “bring transformation” – but in actuality are conditioning people for conformity. But real growth lets God’s unique design for each individual flourish and genuine transformation promotes diversity, not uniformity. The counterfeit version squashes both identity and individuality.
Bonus Content: Dr. Lifton’s Psychology of Trauma Studies

Through the years, psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton – now in his mid-80s – has conducted studies into some of the darkest sides of human nature and the most difficult of historical events. Through these, he has become a leader in “traumatic stress” research. His has done interviews, research, analysis, and publications on such intense topics as:

- Mass killings – the Holocaust, Hiroshima.
- Global issues and ethics – eugenics and medical experiments of the Nazi doctors, nuclear war or disarmament, capital punishment.
- Totalitarian countries and doomsday cults – brainwashing in Communist China, Aum Shinrikyo (Japanese apocalyptic cult that released poisonous gas).

So, when Dr. Lifton writes about psychological and social characteristics of cult organizations, he knows whereof he speaks. In fact, I will be referring later in this series to a book he co-edited with Dr. Jacob Lindy, *Beyond Invisible Walls: The Psychological Legacy of Soviet Trauma*. Published a decade into the post-Soviet era, it focuses on counseling for trauma and loss issues that were common among children and adults of the former Soviet Union and Eastern European Bloc.

But I do have to wonder what gives Dr. Lifton the fortitude to do this kind of deep research into such difficult topics. He has studied real-world events that are as horrific as the fictional world of Panem and the Hunger Games. Where does he find the strength to carry on? I don’t know what Dr. Lifton’s spiritual views are, but I have often pondered this quote from the foreword in his 1986 book, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*.

“One cannot expect to emerge from a study of this kind spiritually unscathed, all the more so when one’s own self is the instrument for taking in forms of experience one would have preferred not to have known about. But the other side of the enterprise for me has been the nourishing human network, extending throughout much of the world, within which I worked. Survivors were at the heart of it, and they provided a kind of anchoring … [We are] capable of learning from carefully examined past evil. I undertook this study, and now offer it, in that spirit of hope” (page xiii.).

Whatever his philosophical or religious beliefs, clearly he embodies the concept of “redemptive investment.” Somewhere, sometime, it really costs someone in order to provide a meaningful blessing to others – even if those so blessed remain completely unaware of those who served to their benefit. Dr. Lifton’s research work cost him personally and spiritually, calling forth sacrifice and transformation through engagement with suffering. Can we expect our efforts at discernment in the realm of toxic churches and malignant ministers to involve it any less?