

BRAINWASHING

COERCIVE PERSUASION

UNDUE INFLUENCE

MIND CONTROL:

**A Psychologist's point of
View**

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**BRAINWASHING, COERCIVE
PERSUASION, UNDUE INFLUENCE,
AND
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Brainwashing and Religion: The Influence Process Revisited

Throughout human history people have tried to influence one another (cf. Brown, 1963). I can just hear my wife's response to such a statement as that. She would say, "Any one knows that. Is that what you psychologists do all day: Come up with statements that sound profound but are nothing more than common sense?" In part, I agree. Psychology is, indeed, little more than organized common sense. We psychologists have skills in understanding, predicting, and changing human behavior that are just a shade above tea-leaf reading. Our only claim to fame is that these skills lead us to conclusions that are significantly better than chance alone.

So when I begin with the statement that "throughout human history people have tried to influence one another," I acknowledge that I have spoken a truism that is already well-known. I think it important to remind ourselves, however, that attempts to change people's opinions and/or their identities did not begin with the Communists in China and will not end with the Cult Awareness Network's attempts to control the proselytizing activities of new religions. Attempts to change people are as current as the advertisement of Anthony Robbins in a LA Weekly (August 18-24, 1995) newspaper ad where he billed himself as a "master of persuasion" who could teach attendees at his seminars **How to influence anyone, anytime** and as recent as the theme of Singer & Lalich's newest book entitled Cults in our midst: The hidden menace in our everyday lives (1995).

Social Influence is Inevitable

As a matter of fact, there would be no human beings without influence from the outside. Human beings come into being through a process of interaction with those who are trying to influence them. Persons do not emerge; they become. Persons do not pop into life full blown like bathing beauties or clowns jumping out of cakes. Persons grow and develop; they come to

according to Barth. He makes his own "point of contact" with human beings. He does not depend on human awareness of sin, sorrow, or sadness to provoke peoples' need for a Savior -- contrary to the position Emil Brunner so forcefully supported. In Christ, God takes the initiative and breaks into life on His own terms.

Those who perceive new religions as dangerous cults whose leaders are brainwashing professionals, pervert Barth's analysis by insisting that these groups force their way into innocent converts' lives and completely change persons against their wills, quite apart from any personal motivation or desire. They contend that new devotees were not in the market for a religion just as Korean war prisoners did not want to be exposed to Communist theory. They further contend that, in spite of this absence of motivation, both Korean war prisoners as well as those who join new religions were, and are, overwhelmed by the brainwashing power of authoritarian manipulators who coercively influence helpless people to change to a totally new outlook on life. From this point of view, people become zombies or robots who slavishly do the will of their masters (Hunter, 1960; Singer & Ofshe, 1992).

As a psychologist, I strongly doubt that this is true. Unmotivated behavior is rare, if not nonexistent. People do not read the ads for cars in the newspaper unless they are in the market to buy a car. People do not join health clubs unless they have a desire to exercise. People do not accept Christ who do not sense their need for a Savior. People do not join a new religion who are satisfied with their old faith (Tippett, 1977). Behavior, even religious behavior, is controlled from within; it is motivated. The mind that controls behavior belongs to us, not to some force outside of us.

In my opinion, Emil Brunner and Paul Tillich were right. The point of contact we have with God is through our anxieties, our needs, our wants, our desires. As James Sellers concluded