

LIBERTY

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*The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*, by Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad.  
North Atlantic Books/ Frog Ltd., 1993, 374pp.

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## *The Authoritarian Behind the Curtain*

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Sharon Presley

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Don't be deceived by the title: *The Guru Papers* is about much more than cult groups. It is a profoundly important critique of the covert authoritarianism of most religions, both Eastern and Western – and of such allegedly secular cultural values as unconditional love, addiction, and twelve-step programs. It is also a critique of any mode of thought, religious or secular, that encourages following leaders and looking for saviors.

At the heart of all the cultural and religious authoritarianisms that authors Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad decry are what they call “renunciate worldviews.” By this they mean philosophies which suggest that the “solutions to life's problems involve making what goes on in this world and this life secondary to some other projected kind of existence deemed more important and sacralized.” In their view, this notion leads inevitably to valuing sacrifice of the non-sacred to the sacred, and to un-

challenged authority figures who define how this sacrifice is to be accomplished. This morality of self-sacrifice, they argue, is at heart authoritarian because it claims that being good means sacrificing self-interest to some higher interest – which, of course, the authority conveniently defines. Thus the guru, church, or state that preaches self-sacrifice can control its subjects by defining which behaviors are acceptable and “good.”

The authors' insight into how fundamentalist religions use renunciation to maintain their power is an especially useful addition to critiques of fundamentalism. An entire chapter is devoted to examining how fundamentalists exploit the desire for certainty in a time of social fragmentation. This is accomplished not only by offering an absolute worldview but by emphasizing the importance of the rules of the system over the actual moral principles of the religion. Rules that must be obeyed provide clear and secure answers to trou-

bling existential questions. Fundamentalist leaders know, the authors assert, that the easiest way to convince people that they want to obey these rules is by making people feel bad about themselves, then offering them a way to feel better. Disobeying the rules and being selfish (pursuing one's own interests) is bad; obeying the rules and putting higher interests (duty, obedience, and sacrifice) first is good.

The application of Kramer and Alstad's analysis of the doctrine of renunciation to cultural as well as religious values provides another useful insight. “Accepting selflessness as the highest value,” they observe, “is where the insidious authority of the old order unwittingly seeps into the many modern paradigms that attempt to be new.”

Consider the model of unconditional love that says we should love selflessly and sacrifice endlessly to the beloved. The authors argue that this is a carry-over from renunciate religious views.

The danger of unconditional love is that it leaves no room to withstand abuses, keeps people in old role-dominated relationships, and sets no boundaries on demands from the other partner. It can thus become a way of controlling the person who is doing the sacrificing. “Love between adults,” Kramer and Alstad point out, “flowers only when there is some balance between self-centeredness and giving.”

They argue that twelve-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous are also authoritarian, sharing many features of cult groups: unchallenged authority, admission of helplessness and self-mistrust, disagreement labeled as resistance, surrender to religious experience. While I don’t agree that all 12-step groups can be pilloried on this point, it is a legitimate criticism of at least some of them.

Another thought-provoking and radically important point that Kramer and Alstad make – one that, as a psychologist, I particularly applaud – concerns the tacit messages many parents send to their children. “Most of us as children have been conditioned to the idea that being bad means disobeying the rules and being selfish, while being good means obeying the rules and putting others first.” To be self-centered, we’ve been taught, is to be morally lacking. Coupled with this exhortation to be uncritical of authority is the equally troubling message that others know what’s best. Many people are thus deeply conditioned to expect some outside agency, power, or person to somehow solve their problems.

“Looking for saviors, or holders of wisdom, as the way to lead humanity (or oneself) to salvation or survival,” assert Kramer and Alstad, “has been ingrained into the old order...Behind much of the appeal of such authority is the essentially childish hope of external and magical answers to the existential problems and fears around living and

dying.” No wonder gurus. New Age flakism, and fundamentalism are popular: they all offer different brands of the magical answer.

At the root of the power gurus have over their followers is a desire for a savior to provide certainty and clear-cut answers – which raises the specter of political guruism. Kramer and Alstad’s guidelines for recognizing authoritarian religious control provide a standard for evaluating any ideological group: no deviations from the party line are allowed, the authority is always right, the actions of the authority are always defended without knowing what has actually occurred, the leader is trusted to know what’s best.

These guidelines can provide the opportunity for some critical thinking about our own beliefs, rather than merely attacking such obvious targets as guru-led “cults.” It’s much easier to identify others who fall under authoritarian control than to examine on our own beliefs. I have seen quasi-cult-group behavior exhibited by individuals in every religious, political, and social-issue oriented group I have ever observed in my studies of ideological behavior: socialist, progressive, humanist, feminist, libertarian, Objectivist, and others. So pervasive is the desire for clear-cut answers that members of even the most rational groups can fall prey to the seduction of the dogmatic.

Having praised this book for its many virtues, I should also point out its problems. The dearth of specific concrete examples of groups exemplifying the authoritarianism under attack makes the book very abstract, even abstruse. Also, though its psychological insights are right on target, *The Guru Papers* is written more like a philosophical treatise than a popular psychology book, which will make it slow going for some readers.

Despite these caveats, I hope that many people will read this extraordi-

narily rich and complex book. What the authors are calling for is a profound change in the basic philosophy of our culture, for a morality that integrates and values both sides of the self, the spiritual and the carnal, the selfless and the self-centered, the compassionate and the egotistic. Only by refusing to deny legitimate parts of our selves can we heal the wounds created by authoritarianism. We must teach our children to be more critical of authority, to weigh evidence, to ask questions, to trust their own experience. We must learn new ways of structuring society without the crippling hidden authoritarianism of the old order.

“The old paradigms,” conclude Kramer and Alstad, “all have some authority – be it leader, wise man, guru, avatar, representative of god, or prophet – telling the rest of us what life is about and how to lead it. How to replace the old methodology that we are outgrowing is a major issue facing humanity.” This book can make an important contribution to that change, if enough people read it and take it to heart and mind. □

*This review was excerpted with the author’s permission.*

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