

The Guru Papers: A Look at Hidden Authoritarianism

By Keith Harary

What if there were a single cause for many of the world's ills in both the social and personal spheres, from overpopulation, ecological destruction, ethnic violence and hatred, to addictions, conflicts between the sexes, the breakdown of the family, and even why it feels good to be bad? Sound too simplistic or far-fetched? Not according to Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad, authors of *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* (North Atlantic Books). A core underlying cause of all these problems, the pair contends, is hidden authoritarianism.

"Obvious political authoritarianism based on physical coercion is just the tip of the iceberg," says Alstad, a Yale-trained cult expert. "Because this kind of control is brutal, it gets all the attention. But covert authoritarian control is far more pervasive, insidious and dangerous because it lives in people's minds like a computer virus without their knowing it." According to Kramer, a philosopher and yoga adept who has served on the resident faculty of Esalen Institute, authoritarianism involves a person, belief system or ideology that is unchallengeable and that claims to know what is best for others. "Hidden authoritarianism," he says, "is generated by moral codes that denigrate certain aspects of being human, such as the need for self-gratification, thereby making people feel that something is inherently wrong with them. Buddhism's making selflessness the highest virtue, and the Christian concept of original sin, are examples of unlivable ideals that villainize normal human behavior. Buying into such beliefs generates self mistrust, which makes people easy prey."

Once people are made to feel that they are fundamentally flawed, says Kramer, "authority figures are all too willing to step in and tell them how to live, including the mass media, family members, lovers, and 'spiritual' and political leaders who manipulate their fears, desires and guilt. The danger in this is that, when people become frightened, they turn to authoritarian solutions – from looking for "magical" saviors, be it gurus, channelers or extra-terrestrials, to draconian measures like capital punishment, more prisons and giving up their civil liberties." The fear, adds Alstad, has led to a proliferation of cults.

"All cults," she says, "whether spiritual cults, UFO cults, therapy cults, prosperity cults, and even organized religions, though they appear externally different, have the same, simple internal structure. They all have an unchallengeable leader or ideology that people must surrender to."

According to the authors, hidden authoritarianism is a social virus that, like a computer virus, makes our basic human operating system dysfunctional. Just as a computer operating system controls how the parts work together, they say, moral codes provide the operating system both for self-control and social interaction. "When the operating system is faulty, this produces distortions and malfunctions at all levels," say Alstad. "So it is not surprising that we are experiencing all sorts of personal and political breakdowns, such as social and domestic violence, and epidemics of addiction and depression. All of these problems are multiplied exponentially at the planetary level to the point that the world is out of control and our very survival is threatened."

In spite of this threat, say the authors, there are grounds for hope. "As with computers, unmasking and decoding a virus allows one to disempower it," says Alstad. "The good news," adds Kramer, "is that the problem lies more in our software than our hardware. It is not mainly in human nature but in the nature of human programming." 🌐

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