

*MuseLetter* is a monthly essay of philosophical exploration, touching upon myth, spirituality, deep ecology, primitivism, and cultural renewal.

**MuseLetter** NUMBER 20 / AUGUST 1993 A book review by Richard Heinberg

*When I started MuseLetter...I intended it to carry an occasional book review. While...I've read many worthwhile books, none has stirred me to devote an entire issue to it—until now. My desire to share my*

*enthusiasm for this book is heightened by the fact that it is published by a small press and has [thus] likely escaped most readers' attention and may not be widely distributed unless there is grassroots demand for it.*

## Beyond Authoritarianism

*The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*, by Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad, is one of the most deeply insightful works of our time. It is a searching examination of power in social and personal relations that throws light on the inner dynamics of control in human cultures.

The book is not written in a scholarly fashion appears to flow from beginning to end from the authors' own original thinking. Each of the authors' ideas is clearly articulated, and nearly every page crackles with statements that—for this reader—provoked one “Aha!” after another as I saw elements of culture, history, and my own experience from a new perspective that made immediate sense.

Alstad and Kramer began the book in the early 1980s, intending it as an analysis of the guru-disciple bond, which they felt constituted a classic authoritarian relationship of absolute control on one hand and total surrender on the other. But, as they began to pull the thread of authoritarianism, “much of the fabric of civilization began to unravel.”

While most people associate authoritarianism with dictatorial political systems, the authors find it embedded in religion, morality, the family, and sexual relations, everywhere subtly informing worldviews and values.

### WHAT IS AUTHORITARIANISM?

Authoritarianism, briefly defined, is a form of relationship in which the establishment, protection, and exercise of power become ends in themselves. In human interactions some people will inevitably have more power than others, if only temporarily and with regard to specific tasks. We would find it impossible to cooperate to accomplish common goals, or even to communicate, if we were unable willingly both to control others momentarily and to surrender to

others' control. Authority and control as such are unavoidable and even desirable components of relationship. Control becomes authoritarian when someone with authority—by virtue of position, role, or some perceived capacity—expects to be obeyed without question, and either punishes or refuses to deal with those who do not obey. In the authoritarian relationship, even though common goals may be endlessly articulated, the primary task is actually the maintenance of power.

Authoritarianism is not strictly identical with social hierarchy—the unequal distribution of power and authority—although all authoritarian systems are hierarchical and most hierarchies tend to be authoritarian. Hierarchy is a form of organization that is to some extent inherent in nature; social hierarchy, however, is a human innovation, like the wheel. It leverages power, enabling the group as a whole to do more. A hierarchical group has an advantage over a non-hierarchical group (just as a society that has advanced technology enjoys a certain advantage over one that does not), and when societies compete, the more hierarchical and technologically advanced ones tend to win. That doesn't mean that technology and hierarchy are therefore inherently good; it simply means that they are effective ways of leveraging power.

Kramer and Alstad believe that once a society has adopted hierarchy, there's no going back; but they say that it is possible for a hierarchy to be non-authoritarian. They offer the example of a purely task-driven hierarchy, such as a construction crew. Again, the key to whether authority and hierarchy are authoritarian is the way power is maintained and protected. Does power flow only from top to bottom, or are there mechanisms to give lower rungs a say in who the higher rungs are and what they do? Who decides

the group's purpose and whether it is being fulfilled? How responsive is the hierarchy to change from within and without?

### **GURUS AND FOLLOWERS**

The guru/disciple relationship is a particularly pure example of authoritarianism. The student comes to the teacher in an attitude of complete and constant surrender; the teacher is the absolute authority on everything. According to tradition, the disciple can expect a certain payoff from the arrangement—the eventual attainment of enlightenment through exposure to a living saint. Also, for the student the experience of surrender opens psychological boundaries, evoking feelings of love. The guru's rewards are seldom explicitly stated since they are regarded as clearly deserved: He has complete control over the thoughts and actions of another person, he can expect to be showered with gifts and attention, and he is deferred to in every instance as a superior being.

The costs of this form of power relation to both disciple and guru are almost never elaborated in religious lore. The disciple is expected to give up his personality, his very sense of self. His life is no longer his own. The guru, meanwhile, even though he may be a fountain of love and goodwill, comes to live behind a wall of separation from others: he is a "knower"; others are merely "seekers." The guru is different; this is why he deserves to be deferred to. But this difference undermines intimacy. "Gurus and disciples need each other, but as roles, not as individuals, which makes real human connection almost impossible. So gurus must create other ways of turning themselves on besides intimacy, the most usual ones being adulation, material wealth, impersonal sexuality, and power."

Gurus usually don't even have authentic peer relations with other gurus. On the face of it, one would think that enlightened beings would naturally seek each other out in order to find respite from having constantly to deal with spiritual inferiors. But in fact they seldom visit one another because when they do, their disciples are always watching to see who comes out best. The mere fact of who goes to see whom carries implications of dominance.

While the guru/disciple relationship is, strictly speaking, a product of the spiritual traditions of ancient India, a similar pattern of authoritarian

control can be discerned in virtually every religion or cult among every civilized people. Prophets and visionaries seem always to attract followers. The prophet's vision makes him special. Playing upon this specialness, he eventually gets caught in the trap of always having to be right (or to appear to be right); meanwhile, everybody else simply stops thinking. After all, the prophet has all the answers. Some kind of hierarchy inevitably develops, and soon a pope is making infallible pronouncements and condemning heretics to the stake.

### **AUTHORITARIANISM, MORALITY & RELIGION**

Why is this scenario played out again and again ad nauseam, and especially so among civilized peoples? Perhaps the fact that civilization is inherently hierarchical (division of labor having arisen along with farming and cities) has made it especially susceptible to religious authoritarianism. But Alstad and Kramer propose that religion, rather than merely having been swept along in an accelerating current of social stratification, has played an active role in fostering civilization's dominator mode of thought, and this by way of a certain kind of morality.

If a society is to become more complex and hierarchical, then increasingly individuals must be persuaded or coerced to sacrifice their personal interests for those of the group. The sacrifice of self to a higher cause comes to be seen as a virtue, even as the supreme good, and self-centeredness is increasingly identified as evil. The spiritual path comes to be seen as the quest for utter selflessness. Kramer and Alstad call this *renunciate* morality. Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, the guru, and other spiritual heroes are models of selflessness. In a renunciate morality, hardship is seen as deserved (because of original sin or prior karma), or as part of a morality play whose purpose is to teach selflessness. "This way of framing both powerlessness and abuse make[s] it easier for people to resign themselves to their often not very pleasant lot. It also makes it easier to be inured to the lot of others."

At the same time that they were developing renunciate moralities, early civilizations increasingly emphasized the superiority of the spiritual realm over the mundane world of daily life. Only the enlightened being who had

transcended self could proffer the keys to this realm of bliss.

Alstad and Kramer do not suggest that renunciate morality should be turned on its head—that selfishness should be regarded as good and selflessness as evil—or that spirituality is purely a product of social stratification. They make it clear that self-interest is simply a necessary part of being human: like everything else in life, it is something to be acknowledged and kept in proportion and balance. As for spirituality, “Our indictment is not of the concept of spirituality per se, but rather of the ways it is used to . . . mask authoritarian control,” which it does when it is rigidly separated from ordinary experience. “The hidden function of the sacred has been to get people to sacrifice to it.”

We are so accustomed to the renunciate worldview that we are normally blind to its authoritarian basis. The very construction of a category considered sacred immediately creates the non-sacred. Human experience becomes split, with all that is sacred being automatically unquestionable, protected, and “selfless”; meanwhile the realm of the non-sacred is unclean and unworthy, but more open to the free expression of selfishness and greed.

Once a person is invested with spiritual qualities, he is assumed to be selfless and therefore beyond corruption; his statements tend to be regarded as unquestionable truth. Strong leaders are always needed in times of crisis. If crisis becomes a way of life (as it often does in civilizations), people learn always to look to leaders for their salvation. In the bargain, they surrender their own self-trust and therefore their capacity for discernment. If the leader is a spiritual figure who is by definition beyond self-interest, the potential for abuse (either by the leader personally or by followers acting in his name) is very great—as history shows only too well.

It seems odd at first that renunciate moralities would flourish precisely in those cultures that place great emphasis on the accumulation of wealth and prestige. The accumulation of power and wealth seems antithetical to renunciation.

This seeming enigma is understandable if it is seen as the result of separating the divine from the earthly: Accumulating was the activity that got one ahead in the secular domain; renouncing was

the path that got one ahead in the spiritual. . . . One could accumulate spiritual merit through sacrifice. Renunciation is the mirror image of accumulation, with inverted (opposite) values, but with the same structure (hierarchical) and process (striving), and the same measuring, ambitious mentality.

### **ABSTRACTION AND CONTROL**

In one of the most striking sections of *The Guru Papers*, the authors trace how civilizations and renunciate moralities evolved together through their common reliance on theological abstractions.

Language is power, and it is language perhaps more than anything else that makes us human. Each culture uses words—abstractions—to construct and transmit a unique sense of reality. Abstraction enables control, and higher levels of abstraction facilitate the expansion of control. Hierarchies depend upon abstractions in order to work, because people must be objectified and categorized in order to be treated modularly as members of a class. Historically, as civilization gradually became more complex, leaders (those at the apex of a hierarchy) needed an increasingly abstract worldview in order to wield power more effectively. This abstract worldview took the form of religion—a particularly conservative and enduring kind of symbol system.

Early Paleolithic peoples had not yet objectified nature or spirit; but the Magdalenian cave paintings of Europe give evidence that by roughly 20,000 years ago people had begun to represent and worship qualities abstracted from nature. This was an early form of animism—the belief that nature is full of spirits embedded in water, wind, fire, animals, herbs, and trees.

Gradually, with the appearance of the first agricultural communities in Sumer and Egypt, the spirits within the natural world came to be seen as gods or goddesses acting through nature. Animism became polytheism. Now the divine could be embodied in paintings and sculptures of the gods and goddesses and thereby localized. Human beings were now assumed to have been created for the purpose of serving the gods and freeing them from manual labor. The king was the intermediary of the gods, or a god incarnate. Moreover, the goddesses and gods were increasingly believed to represent abstract moral

principles (e.g., the Egyptian goddess Maat = *truth*). Like the pantheon of competing deities, morality came to be seen as a hierarchy—in this case, of values.

But as populations grew and came increasingly into mutual contact, competitions within and between pantheons led to the need for a new level of abstraction. “A quarreling hierarchy of gods initially better explained quarreling hierarchies of people. But its ability to unite diverse peoples was limited.” Unification could better be accomplished by pointing to one god as the wielder of all power, the source of all knowledge and wisdom. This one god was, of course, the God of monotheism, a theological innovation that turned out to be a supremely effective means for concentrating power. The love for—and fear of—an inescapable, all-knowing, and vengeful God provided a new foundation for psychological control that could be internalized in each person from early childhood on. Whether monotheism actually brought moral progress is debatable (the assertion is questioned by many feminist historians, since God was assumed to be male and men thus gained cosmic justification for their domination of women), but it did at least make for consistency: now a single set of abstract principles—embodied, for example, in the Ten Commandments—could be universally applied among peoples with otherwise differing languages and customs.

The culmination of religious abstraction was reached in the Eastern concept of oneness. Monotheism posits an ultimate dualism: God and the world. But the idea that all is one leapfrogs and includes not only monotheism but all previous religious forms. That is why Hinduism can embrace not only oneness (Vedanta) but monotheistic and polytheistic strains of belief as well. Unlike monotheism, oneness doesn’t construct a separate omnipotent authority that dictates how to be, so the authoritarian modes inherent in oneness religions are more subtle. “Their authoritarianism is not in specific rules, but in a more generalized abstract rule that states [that] the more selfless one is the better, supported by a more abstract force, karma, to ensure that everyone gets what they deserve.”

The problems with abstracting unity from diversity come when unity is given more value

and more reality than individual life. Unity and multiplicity . . . are two sides of a dialectical process . . . neither has priority. Self-centeredness and selflessness are also embedded in each other. A morality that equates virtue with selfless behavior can have great control over human action, but it cannot eliminate the self-centered. Instead, self-centered behavior merely becomes organized around what is socially acceptable or displays itself unconsciously. The state of the world is a testament to the failure of renunciate values to deal successfully with the core issue of self-centeredness.

The authors don’t deny the reality of the mystical experience of unity or oneness. They merely question the tendency to regard that experience as better than, or more real than, the experience of diversity and separation.

Alstad and Kramer propose that the world desperately needs a new level or kind of abstraction—the dialectical approach that sees oneness and diversity, competition and cooperation, selfishness and selflessness, as mutually generative and supportive.

“Power within a culture is directly related to who creates and controls its symbol systems.” Historically, the many have been sacrificed to the few; today, the world itself is being sacrificed on the altar of profit. Our only chance for survival, say the authors, is somehow to outgrow our self-mistrust and need for sacrifice to authoritarian systems, and to understand and accept our self-centeredness so that it ceases to overwhelm us. “Whatever form the new symbol system takes, it must include a shift from accumulation to preservation, from exploitation to care, and from otherworldly hope to hope in this world.”

In addition to the material just summarized, *The Guru Papers* contains brilliant sections on love and control, and on the authoritarian basis of addiction. Along the way, the authors offer lucid critiques of channeling, the New Age, fundamentalism, and the idea that “you create your own reality.”

I earnestly hope that *The Guru Papers* is widely read and discussed, as the issues it addresses are of immense and immediate consequence.

*The Guru Papers* (Frog Ltd./North Atlantic Books, 1993)  
[www.northatlanticbooks.com](http://www.northatlanticbooks.com) (800) 337-2665 at \$16.95

