Thought Reform and Totalism
The Psychology of the LDS Church Missionary Training Program
By Scott D. Miller

Attempts at human manipulation have occurred in virtually every society in history, from as far back as the early Mosaic ritual to today's secular self-help programs. In recent decades, however, dramatically new approaches to reeducation have appeared. These modern-day methods first received public attention in the 1950s, when American journalist Edward Hunter coined the term brainwashing to characterize indoctrination activities of the Communist party in Red China (see Brainwashing in Red China). Unlike earlier attempts at behavior control, these new approaches have, through advances in psychology, achieved a degree of sophistication that gives today's manipulators a better chance of succeeding where their predecessors may have failed.

Despite its historical image, brainwashing is not "an all powerful, irresistible, unfathomable, and magical method of achieving total control over the human mind" (Robert J. Lifton, Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism, p. 4). Rather, it is an entirely real and nonmystical process aimed at either reforming or strengthening existing patterns of thought through a highly specialized and focused program of reeducation. In other words, the term brainwashing represents the process through which some outside agent—be it therapist, communist, or religious leader—attempts to reform the thoughts of another. Thought reform, then, is the essence of the brainwashing phenomenon.

In addition to thought reform, brainwashing also attempts to achieve ideological totalism, an all-or-nothing behavior change which replaces a person’s normal ideological convictions with fanatic, exclusive, totalistic preoccupations with the controlling belief system. Individuals affected in this manner, for example, may be observed to adopt abruptly new, uncommon behavior, including shaving their heads, radically altering clothing or living arrangements, or severing long-time social and familial relationships.

Unlike normal education, then, brainwashing or thought reformation tends to seek totalitarian control over the person rather than enhancement of personal autonomy. Reason, critical thinking, and logic are usually placed in subservience to emotion, simplified thinking, and obedience—that is, if they are given any credence.
whatsoever. Likewise, access to available information vital to the decision-making process is either completely restricted from the person or befuddled in biased group rhetoric. (Richard Delgado, *Society*, March-April 1980, pp. 26, 28.) In sum, the educational process involved in the thought-reform environment is one of constriction.

Through his extensive studies on thought reform, Dr. Robert J. Lifton has outlined eight dominant psychological themes recurrent in the underlying educational processes in thought-reform environments. Those eight themes are: (1) milieu control; (2) mystical manipulation; (3) the demand for purity; (4) personal confession; (5) the acceptance of basic group dogma as sacred; (6) the constriction or "loading" of the language; (7) the subordination of person to doctrine; and (8) the dispensing of existence. According to Lifton, these themes may be used as "a set of criteria against which any environment may be judged" by considering first the total number of themes present in a given environment and second the degree to which that environment enforces each theme. (Lifton, *Thought Reform*, p. 420.) Experts in the study of thought reform agree that this element is the most basic feature of the thought-reform environment (Delgado, *Society*, p. 27). Indeed, the control of stimuli impinging upon the individual creates the optimum psychological disposition for successful reform.

Milieu control disrupts the individual's normal balance between self and the outside world. Control of external, environmental input and internal, individual reflection deprives the individual of the ability to test the reality of his environment and to maintain an identity that is separate from it.

There appear to be a number of elements present in the MTC and mission field resembling this criterion of milieu control. Indeed, the rigid control and regulation of the Mormon missionary environment is perhaps the most basic characteristic of the MTC and mission field. One is hard-pressed to find an area of missionary life that is not governed by some regulation.

Both the MTC and the mission field have established rules regulating what is to be seen,
Rules regulate what is to be seen, heard, read, written, experienced, expressed, and thought. For example:

- Missionaries follow a rigid schedule of daily activities from 6:00 A.M. until 10:30 P.M., seven days a week. Deviation from the schedule is not tolerated. There are no vacations, and only a day of free time per week. This day is to be used for completion of "worldly" necessities. Often part or all of that free time is set aside in order to proselyte.
- Missionaries are always assigned to a same-sex companion whom they are required to "be with at all times" (Missionary Handbook, p. 19). Missionaries are never to be alone and are instructed always to address each other as either "elder" or "sister."
- The MTC and mission field employ an elaborate reporting system. Missionaries are encouraged to comment on their companions to various representatives in the mission leadership. Each missionary writes a weekly letter to the mission president and district leader. District leaders report to zone leaders, and they in turn to the assistants to the president. (cf. Lifton, Thought Reform, p. 421.)
- Missionaries are required to read only Church-published books and magazines. This is usually interpreted as including the LDS standard works, James E. Talmage's Jesus the Christ and The Articles of Faith, the Ensign, and the Church News (Missionary Handbook, p. 14).
- Missionaries are not allowed to watch television, listen to the radio or modern music, read newspapers, magazines, books, or other literature.
- Correspondence is regulated in various ways. There are no phone calls allowed to home or friends, and "no correspondence... within the mission boundaries" is allowed either (Missionary Handbook, p. 14).
- At times, tape recorders and tape recorded messages have been prohibited in the MTC.
- Missionaries are to "put out of [their] lives all thoughts and discussions of home, school, girl friends, and worldly things" (Missionary Handbook, p. 20). To this end, missionaries are often encouraged to devote every moment to missionary work. Time spent waiting in meal lines, for example, is considered a good opportunity to read the missionary pamphlets or memorize scriptures and discussions.

Space does not permit an elucidation of the many other examples of apparent regulation of the LDS missionary environment. The important thing to note is that milieu control does not consist of any one of these examples but is the result of their powerful combination in a single environment.

2. Mystical Manipulation. Following milieu control, the practitioner of thought reform attempts "to provoke specific patterns of behavior and emotion in such a way that [these patterns] will appear to have arisen spontaneously from the environment" (Lifton, Thought Reform, p. 422). These manipulations are intended to enhance the validity and omniscience of the prevailing ideology and leadership through mystical experiences. However, such experiences are usually generated through entirely nonmystical processes, such as the direct manipulation of individual emotional variables and the extensive use of post-hoc reasoning (the fallacious assumption of a cause-effect relationship) or self-fulfilling prophecy (behavior influenced by an observer's expectations). According to experts, the more mystical or unprovable the supposed relationship between cause and effect or prophecy and fulfillment, the more omniscient and chosen the interpreters of that relationship appear to be.

The MTC and the mission field use such forms of mystical manipulation. The practices surrounding goal-setting in the MTC, for example, seem to involve direct manipulation of individual emotional variables:

- Within the first week's stay at the MTC, missionaries were at one time required to set goals for the number of discussions or proselytizing presentations (eight in all) that they would memorize during their eight-week stay. Immediately preceding a formal goal-setting session, the missionaries were shown the BYU production, John Baker's Last Race. Immediately thereafter, the missionaries were removed to their respective classrooms to set goals. Interestingly, research has shown that this film, which portrays a young man's struggle against cancer and revolves around a theme of persistence, instills in the audience a tendency to persist longer at problem-solving tasks for which no solution exists (Scott D. Miller, "The Effects of Positive Affective Modeling on Persistence-related Tasks," Unpublished paper, 1982).
More recent examples of mystical manipulation from the MTC are attributable to either the use of post-hoc reasoning or self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, one mission required that missionaries wear black derby hats during winter months. Missionaries reluctant to don the out-of-style hats were told that because they refused to participate, they as well as their fellow missionaries, would not be able to find converts. Such predictions and explanations, sincere and uncomical, appear to be the rule in the missionary environment.

3. Demand for Purity. Here, the thought-reform environment attempts to polarize the world of the individual into the ideology’s preconceived definitions of purity and impurity: “The good and the pure,” observes Lifton, “are of course distinct from those ideas, feelings, and actions which are consistent with the totalitarian ideology” (Lifton, Thought Reform, p. 423). The criteria for purity are generally defined through the establishment of regulations extending into every aspect and domain of individual life. Further, absolute compliance with regulations is demanded in order that purity be maintained and the greater mission—always dependent upon the purity of the group—accomplished.

How does this result in thought reformation? Lifton explains: “By defining and manipulating the criteria for purity, and then by conducting an all-out war upon impurity the [controllers] create a narrow world of [individual] guilt and shame” (Thought Reform, p. 424). Such feelings of guilt and shame are then easily manipulated to achieve individual rededication and reformation.

As already demonstrated, the MTC and mission field are highly regulated environments. It also seems evident that these environments operate under high demand for purity as outlined by mission leadership and LDS church policy. For an example, one need look only to the stringent rules governing missionary sexual behavior or the constant emphasis on sexual purity found in the missionary environment (Missionary Handbook, pp. 13, 14, 15, 20).

4. Personal Confession. In the thought-reform environment, there is usually a great deal of personal confession, often occurring in combination with the theme of demand for purity. In this process, the environment enacts rigid and extensive regulation, follows those enactments with the demand that all regulations be observed, and concludes by insisting that each infraction be confessed to the appropriate authorities. In such a manner, where “sinfulness is artificially induced, . . . confession becomes a means of exploiting rather than offering solace for [personal] vulnerabilities” (Lifton, Thought Reform, p. 425).

Lifton describes such personal confession acts as “a means of maintaining a perpetual inner emptying or psychological purge of impurity, . . . self surrender, . . . and total exposure” (Thought Reform, p. 425). Personal confession appears to play an important role in the entire missionary process. For example:

- A candidate for missionary work is interviewed by his bishop with a series of questions concerning the candidate’s worthiness. At this time, the prospective missionary is expected to confess any unrepented sins. Thereafter, the candidate is given another interview, this time by the stake president, who asks the same questions. In some cases, General Authorities or the First Presidency may be asked to interview a prospective missionary (Spencer W. Kimball, Ensign, October 1974, pp. 2-14).

- Confession continues in the MTC with weekly interviews with the district leader and biweekly interviews with the branch president. Too, missionaries are constantly urged to clear away, through confession, any pending or new sins.

5. Acceptance of Basic Group Dogma as Sacred. The thought-reforming environment generally asserts that its basic dogma is sacred. Therefore, individuals are usually required to dispense with the “ordinary concerns of logic” and on faith accept the dogma as absolute truth. Lifton points out that these totalistic assertions of sacred dogma and concomitant rejections of ordinary logic are usually “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” (Thought Reform, pp. 427-28).

This aura of sacredness, prohibition against questioning, and required reverence of officials allows the individual to escape effectively the responsibility of making decisions. Over time, individuals learn to censor their own decisions and instead submit to the decisions of those in control. Erich Fromm has called this phenomenon of the totalitarian environment “escaping from freedom” (Escape from Freedom).

Here again, the MTC and mission field appear to use Lifton’s criteria. For example, missionaries are frequently instructed that questioning the dogma or criticizing the leadership hinders the work of God. To this end, any thought or action which questions the sacredness of the dogma, the logic of the assumptions, or the dictates of the leaders brings immediate rebuke.

6. Constriction or “Loading” of the Language. In this process, language is “characterized by the thought-terminating cliche. [In other words,] the most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed” (Thought Reform, p. 429). Such loading of the language works to constrict the verbal capabilities of the individual. Since the human experience of thought and feeling are
dependent upon that capability, constriction of the language results in impaired intellectual functioning.

It is not difficult to find examples of language constriction in the MTC and mission field. Perhaps the most obvious occurrence of language-loading in these environments is the use of the standardized missionary discussions. In these discussions, complex issues are reduced into brief, authoritative-sounding statements to be memorized by the missionary. Indeed, recent revision has further reduced their length and complexity to levels compatible with a fifth-grade education. Furthermore, in the past even personal testimony has been rehearsed, with the discussions pointing out when the missionary was to bear testimony and what generally was to be said. Missionaries are directed to deliver the discussions either as outlined or word perfect to prospective converts.

Other examples of this criterion in the MTC and the mission field include:

- After three days’ stay in the MTC, foreign-language missionaries are required to speak only in their mission language (the “Speak Your Language” or SYL program). Not surprisingly, the materials are highly loaded with vocabulary items specific to the LDS faith and missionary work.
- In many instances, missionaries are instructed to memorize the Missionary Handbook containing mission policy and regulations.

7. Subordination of Person to Doctrine. This criterion is imposed in the thought-reform environment in an attempt to create a schism between actual human experience and the interpretation of that experience by the prevailing ideology. Specifically, individuals are required to accept on faith the ideology’s interpretation of past, present, and future events. Personal or outside interpretations of those same events are considered “unorthodox” and are to be disregarded. As a result, individuals are thrust further into the reforming influences present in their environment.

The MTC and the mission field clearly promote interpretations of life events consistent with their purpose. For example, one mission required missionaries to leave their residences to begin missionary work by 9:25 A.M. instead of by 9:30 A.M. as specified in the Missionary Handbook (p. 15). The extra five minutes, the missionaries were told, would prove to the Lord that the missionaries really wanted to baptize. Thereafter, missionaries not leaving their homes by 9:25 A.M. were criticized for hindering the work of God. The acceptance of such an interpretation acts to enhance the supposed orthodoxy of the missionary. The missionary environment contains many other examples of this practice.

8. The Dispensing of Existence. In this last criterion, “the conviction [is] that there is just one path to true existence, just one valid mode of being, and that all others are perforce invalid and fake.” According to Lifton, the notion is conveyed to individuals in the thought-reform environment that the prevailing ideology is “the ultimate moral vision for the ordering of human existence” (Thought Reform, pp. 434, 427). In this manner, meaningful existence becomes equated with an individual’s acceptance of group dogma. Such acceptance of basic dogma is also enhanced by the consensual validation offered the individual through the group. In other words, those who accept or rally the group ideology are themselves accepted and rallied. They become a part of the “good” or the “worthy,” part of the all-embracing mission. Simply put, they are granted existence or being. For those who are convinced in this manner, any question or serious logical contemplation of the ideology becomes a questioning of personal existence—a crisis of being versus nothingness. Such a technique effectively prevents individual question of group dogma.

For young LDS members, the dispensing of existence appears to begin much earlier than upon their arrival at the MTC as a missionary. From childhood, Mormons are taught that theirs is the “only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth” (D&C 1:30). Those who deny this faith and apostatize may become “sons of perdition,” residing in “outer darkness.” Such are “the only ones upon whom the second death shall have any power,” and “it had been better for them never to have been born” (D&C 76:37, 32). Such teachings may explain in part the extraordinary devotion many Mormons give to their Church and mission leaders.

This theme is also found in the encouragement young Mormons receive to serve a mission. Recent leaders have begun advocating that every LDS male prepare to serve a mission. As a result, parents, Church teachers and leaders instruct Mormon males to anticipate and prepare for that day when they will leave to serve a mission. Such teaching and preparation appears to act as a predisposing influence, eliminating the possibility of a negative decision regarding mission service.

ETHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

The preceding analysis indicates that the Mormon missionary environment uses a number of strategies similar to those operating in traditional thought-reform environments. Charges that the Church employs such an approach to achieve its goals demand careful consideration, particularly because of moral repugnance that resides in the notion of “brainwashing” and the ethical and theological issues it raises.

In defense of such methods, some have argued that thought reform already permeates most areas of human life. Television, advertising, mili-
tary training schools, alcohol and drug-abuse centers are often cited as examples of its practice. Generally, the use of such methods in these instances is looked upon favorably. After all, such practices appear to be motivated by a justifiable goal, the betterment of mankind. Too, the use of these processes in organizations such as the military, law-enforcement, and self-help programs tends to enhance their validity and acceptance. What harm, then, can there be in the LDS church utilizing this approach to convert the world to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

As an additional defense, it might be noted that the MTC merely employs a sophisticated, rapid, and apparently effective process of educating missionaries along such dimensions as language, culture, and proselyting techniques. Indeed, these accomplishments have been recognized as extremely successful by significant outside agencies, including the armed services, international businesses, language training experts, and others (Marvin K. Gardner, *Ensign*, October 1983, pp. 12-13). At every turn, the methods used to accomplish this work seem to be prompted by altruistic desires to further God’s plan or practical considerations in managing the training of such a large and diverse body of young people.

Unfortunately, indications of effectiveness and piety of purpose overlook the fundamental ethical problem in thought-reform environments. The underlying processes involved in such indoctrination procedures, while useful in enforcing group cohesion, deter the expression of individuality. Indeed, when conformity, stereotyping, and group goals are placed above the worth of the individual, individuality ceases to exist. While secular organizations such as corporate entities, businesses, or the armed services may thrive in such sterile environments, it seems to me that the religious experience ought to remain a deeply personal, individual experience.

Additionally, the use of such educational methods raises an important theological issue. It should be remembered that the thought-reform milieu attempts to arrange the environment in such a manner that individual choice and careful consideration are eliminated. As a result, individuals are manipulated into adopting systems of belief and action which, under circumstances conducive to choice and consideration, might be completely different. Such forced choice (coercion) appears to conflict with basic LDS theology. Indeed, Joseph Fielding Smith remarks that it was “Satan’s plan in the beginning . . . to compel” and that free agency “is a divine principle. . . . the only principle upon which exaltation can come” (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:70). LDS scripture and literature are replete with similar statements stressing the eternal verity of choice and free agency. Therefore, the existence of influences in the Mormon missionary environment detrimental to these doctrines seems not a little ironic.

At present, there appears to be little indication that the LDS leaders will revise the missionary training program in the near future. In fact, the Church’s Evaluation Correlation Committee has hired a battery of social scientists and has appropriated an estimated half-million-dollar annual budget in order to identify the variables often present in religious conversion and missionary indoctrination. This study is intended to produce better institutionable, programmatic, and productive missionary programs.

Perhaps the entire issue of thought reform in the LDS missionary environment can be viewed as symptomatic of a larger concern. Erich Fromm illustrates how small organizations experiencing massive growth typically turn toward totalitarian methods in maintaining and controlling their membership (*Escape from Freedom*, p. 304-27). Similarly, as membership in the LDS church has grown at impressive rates over the last few decades, so has the tendency toward more centralized control and comprehensive management. As long as such tendencies persist, “liberty of thinking and believing as [one] please[s]” which Joseph Smith saw as characteristic of the Latter-day Saint religion, will be in jeopardy (*History of the Church*, 5:340; 5:215).

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