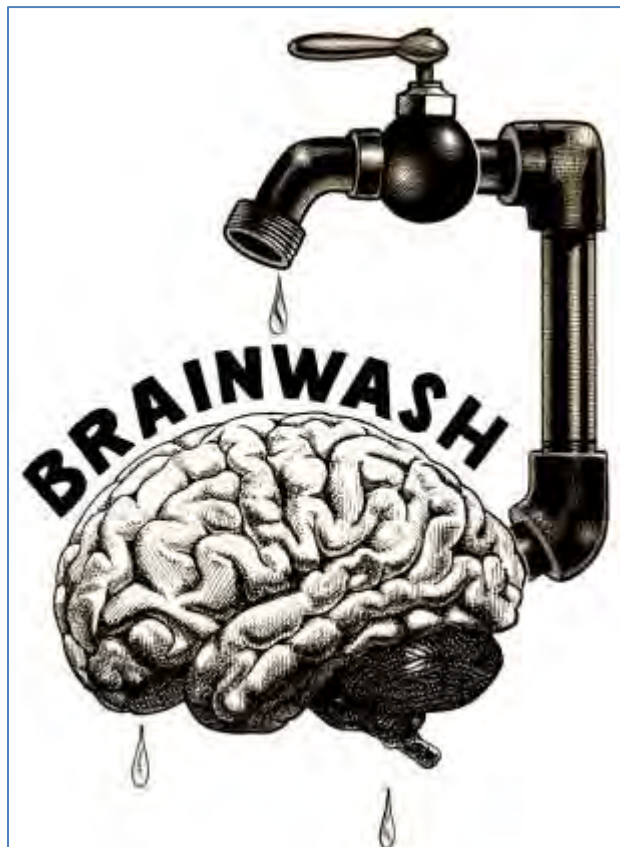


## Brainwashing and Conversion: A Comparison

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Though the invention of radio, television, the telephone, and cinematography have revolutionized communication, proselytizing and conversion are indigenous and essential to Christianity. In Matthew 10:7 Jesus told his disciples to go out and preach "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." He wanted them to extend themselves -- to love. The elder brother of Christianity -- Judaism -- has a history of proselytizing. During the last two hundred years before Christ, Jews were forced to become international and actively began to convert Gentiles to their faith. Christianity subsequently carried forward with even greater inspiration and evangelical zeal the exhortation to convert. Motivated by a noble ideal, willing to be martyred for righteousness' sake, and able to demonstrate in their daily lives the highest of virtues, early Christians gave to thousands a personal experience with God and Christ.

Also prominent in our modern world are bullies and tyrants most notably the Communists who seek to coercively impress their will upon other men's minds. Through incarcerating, threatening, questioning, abusing, and intimidating their

captives, Communist interrogators seek confessions and political conversions, insisting that they renounce their past and adopt the Marxist way of life. That is to say, Communists believe brainwashing is possible. The implication of Marxist theory is that a man can be forced by his physical surroundings to think and act differently. Marx and Marxists believe that if a person is placed in the "right" environment, he can be and will be transformed into a totally new and different person. Material conditions determine how a man thinks. Thus, Marxism philosophically justifies coercion and human manipulation.

Both Christianity and Communism: seek to change people; are comprehensive belief systems and lifestyles; use persuasion and education techniques; offer solutions to man's problems; and demand total loyalty, devotion, and commitment of one's body and soul.

I will present the history and process of brainwashing in Communist China, then point out the differences between the Communist brainwashing process and alleged examples of brainwashing in American society today.

### Brainwashing

The concept of brainwashing has become of increasing interest in American society as we become more and more aware that man may be vulnerable in a time when social structures and institutions are losing their meaning, values, and authority. Continued study of man's psyche and new discoveries in the field of psychology also make manipulation of the human psyche a great possibility. The cry "brainwashing" in this social climate can create an unrealistic mass hysteria.

The term "brainwashing" was originally coined and employed in the Western world in 1951 by Edward Hunter in his book entitled *Brainwashing in Red China*. It is a translation of a colloquial Chinese phrase meaning literally to "wash brain." Hunter used it to depict the process of ideological re-education used in Communist China.

Thus, originally the word brainwashing was used in the Western world to refer to a particular process of political indoctrination and thought reform found in China; however, later it came to refer to all Communist efforts to extract confessions or indoctrinate prisoners (whether in China or elsewhere). Subsequently it has been applied to anything the Communists have done anywhere in the world. Most recently, it has been used in the non-Communist world by various individuals and groups to attack their political, religious, or ideological opponents, and has been incorrectly and ambiguously applied to the educational methods and persuasion techniques of churches, schools, businesses, advertising, the military, psychiatrists, and parents.

Employed in a popular sense, "brainwashing" connotes an aura of fear and mystery. There is a mythology that it is some kind of mysterious, Oriental device and that it is an omnipotent, irresistible, magical way of involuntarily forcing compliance. He is thought to be sensationalistic and diabolical. However, in a rather technical, unequivocal sense, it refers to Communist efforts to break a person down by a prolonged, scientific program of mental destruction; empty him of his old beliefs; and pour into him new beliefs. Change is the result of a state of physical and mental exhaustion producing fatigue and psychological strain, breaking down the defenses and senses with which one would normally test new ideas.

Probably the classic book on the actual brainwashing technique is Robert Jay Lifton's book, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China*, 1961. Based upon interviews and research into the lives of Chinese civilians and Western military and civilian personnel who had either escaped or been allowed to leave Communist China, he was able to study the psychological effects of thought reform on individual's lives.

### **Techniques**

The brainwashing technique and psychological process according to Lifton consists of three major processes and seven specific steps. The overall processes are disorientation and disillusion; interrogation; and criticism and self-criticism. Chinese officials seek to disorient and disillusion a prisoner by isolating him from others; breaking down his resistance; placing him at their mercy; subjecting him to irregularity; refusing to allow him to eat, sleep, or talk with anyone; dressing him in poor clothes; and not allowing him to wash properly.

Most significant are techniques used to disorient an individual by subjecting him to irregularity and ambiguity. By not allowing a captive to eat, sleep, wash, know when he will be interrogated, or know what will happen next, the captors are able to break up a prisoner's habitual, routine life patterns and effectively disillusion him. Having incarcerated him and being in complete control over all of his actions, government officials are able to operate capriciously, arbitrarily, and unsystematically.

Apparently only people who are not habit-formed and are able to adapt to ambiguous, confused situations are able to psychologically survive this technique. For example, if someone who normally sleeps eight hours a night is forced to stay awake for 30 or 40 hours, or if he is compulsive about eating three meals a day and is not allowed to eat for several days, or if he is meticulous about his clothes and physical appearance and he has his own clothes taken away and is given only poor, ugly clothes such a person could easily become insecure, confused, and upset because he is not allowed to do what he wants to do. Subjecting people to irregularity makes prisoners totally dependent upon their captors, breaks down their resistance, and causes them to become disoriented and disillusioned.

By being in total control of the external environment surrounding a captive, prison officials are often able to control his internal attitudes and thoughts. All this is possible because he is constrained against his will in a prison situation. Repetition of a pattern-less, routine-less existence results in such frustration that in order to keep sane the prisoner must let go of resistance to change. Basically he loses his former goals and can no longer work toward his own desires; he loses control over his life. He loses his identity as a person with specific ideas, concerns, plans, and goals. He no longer knows who he is and what he stands for and is more ready to accept a new identity.

Secondly, the captive is confronted with continuous interrogation and with confessions of friends and with imaginary evidence against him. He is intimidated, abused and humiliated. In a few instances the interrogators were able to obtain some information beforehand, but in most cases (in the beginning) they knew nothing about the person. In fact what they learned they obtained during interrogations directly from captives through a process of threats, exhortation, pleading, questioning, torturing, rewarding, and punishing. Primarily interrogators threatened and tortured their captives. In addition, they also pleaded, exhorted, and rewarded them.

Typically if a prisoner began to confess, the interrogator would reward such steps in the right direction by taking off his chains, allowing him to sleep, or giving him extra food; often the interrogator would become exceedingly kind and gentle. Unmethodical use of reward and punishment is a most effective way to disorient people. Again the prisoner loses control of his life. Everything is too inconsistent to plan or to work for his own goal; he finds a new goal -- that of pleasing his captors.

### **Confession**

The captive is given the impression that if he gives in and confesses something (even if it is not true), he will be freed. This idea is not only a complete illusion, but it is also false, insofar as often the exact opposite seems to be true. The mistake of many prisoners is that they naively presume that all men (including Communists) are basically good and that they rather than the Communists are wrong. Gullible and guilt-ridden, they fall into the Communist trap. Moreover, it is a basic human trait to want to please

one's superiors, assuming that one's superiors care about each individual and that their goal or purpose is good. The system of brainwashing itself is destructive, therefore it is disorienting, because it is based upon a different premise.

Typically a prisoner may have almost nothing to confess, yet having continually been told that by analyzing his past he can discover how he has been guilty, he is able (after delving deep into minute instances in his past) to recall two or three small incidents in which his actions have harmed the Chinese people. And he confesses. Haplessly, however, the interrogator rejects his confession as being insufficient. Eventually the prisoner often decides to make up an imaginary story of how he was raised in a wealthy, bourgeois family, how he mistreated and spoke in a derogatory way toward the Chinese people, and even how he had spied for the American CIA. Of course, the story is not true, but he believes that if he can confess something, he will be freed. But as ill luck would have it, because the story is false, the interrogator is usually able to point out contradictions in it and attack him as having lied. Thus, his predicament worsens. Having confessed (even having created an imaginary story), he nevertheless fails and finds himself more harassed than before.

The people who are most susceptible to brainwashing are ordinary, good, sane, conscientious people. Having committed only a few crimes (but having highly developed consciences), they most deeply feel their own inadequacy and guilt when faced with criticisms and accusations. Healthy, red-blooded American boys were easy prey for such techniques, when placed in a situation where they were made to feel guilty. Because the government considers him a criminal, everyone but he knows his crime, and his actions have been harmful to the Chinese people, gradually he becomes convinced that his own belief in his innocence is incorrect and he begins to consider what he might have done in the past that was wrong.

Meanwhile the interrogator contends that the government knows his crimes, that his friends have already confessed, that the government is willing to help him understand his sins, and that he might as well confess. Thus, well integrated, healthy people with an ordinary amount of guilt succumb to Communist thought reform.

### **Destroying Self-Image**

Intent upon totally separating the captive from his environment, interrogators seek to persuade and coerce him into betraying others, as well as himself. To betray one's friends is to betray oneself and one's past. Unaware of this simple truth captives eventually find themselves enslaved by their betrayal. Having betrayed their friends, they begin to feel guilty, yet the more guilty they feel the more they need to confess, and the more they confess the more they betray. Thus, not only do they dishonor their past, they also lose respect for themselves. In this way Communists are able to destroy a man's self-image and to completely subjugate him to their own ends.

Thirdly, he is subjected to struggle meetings in cell groups in which he is forced to undergo criticism and self-criticism and in which cellmates use accusation, abuse, fear, and humiliation to reform the newcomer. These cellmates are fellow prisoners who are well on their way to being reeducated. According to Lifton, these cellmates are convinced that unless they are able to subjugate their new cellmate, all of them will have failed, will be held back, and will be punished by not being allowed to eat, sleep, or wash properly. Concerned for their own bodily need and driven by selfish desires, they attack, criticize, browbeat, and humiliate him. Determined to save themselves, they do everything they can to reform him. Undoubtedly this technique is most effective.

In addition to these overall processes, Lifton pointed out the following interrelated steps in the actual brainwashing process: (a) Assaulting a captive's identity in order to obtain a confession. Guilt is a major cause of confessions. I tend to believe that guilt arises out of a lack of acceptance, love, and respect for oneself. Communists thus seek to destroy the human spirit by destroying one's self-image. If a person accuses and hates himself, he will eventually feel compelled to confess.

(b) Forcing him to feel guilty and that he is suffering not because of the injustice of his captors but rather because of his own crimes. The government officials continuously maintain a stance of righteousness, indicating freely their willingness to help the captive understand his crime. The impression is conveyed that they are good people and the captive (not they) has been sinful and that he is not allowed to sleep, etc. because of all the horrible crimes he has committed against the people. What prisoners fail to realize is that even though they may have committed sins, in comparison with Communists leaders they are righteous and their leaders are sinful, cruel, and unjust. But unfortunately, people with good consciences often accuse and blame themselves instead of the unjust officials.

(c) Getting him to betray himself and others. This point I have previously discussed.

(d) Making him feel that everyone but he knows his crime and that he might as well confess.

(e) Confronting him with total annihilation as a person and thus invoking within him a fear of death.

(f) Compelling him to confess by making him believe that the only way to remain alive is to do so. Probably the opposite is true (the more he confesses, the worse his situation), but few prisoners understand what is happening. He does not realize that he is being reduced to the level of an animal fighting for his own self-preservation and bodily needs. Seduced by their blandishments, tortured to undermine one's own self-image, intimidated by the fear of death -- most prisoners are coerced into submitting psychically as well as physically to their Communist captors.

(g) Finally, restricting his freedom by depriving him of his daily routine and making him dependent. Without his freedom and such emotional supports people are easily manipulated and disoriented.

The following factors increase the tendency to confess: (a) How susceptible a person is to social guilt. To illustrate, if a person's parents were well-situated, prosperous, and comfortable, he may feel guilt toward poor and oppressed people. (b) Lack of commitment to values, goals, or a group. A fundamentalist Christian armed with an ideological understanding of Communism is often less susceptible to brainwashing. His commitment to Christ gives meaning to his life and enables him to withstand coercive persuasion. (c) The confidence of the government officials. Through strategic usage of kindness and consideration, the Chinese were able to obtain prisoners' attraction toward certain interrogators. (d) The better one knew the Chinese language, the more susceptible he was. Inability to speak the language has been effectively employed as a defense mechanism. These then are the essential processes and steps used by the Chinese to politically indoctrinate and reform their captives.

### **Is Brainwashing Possible?**

The question arises: Can a person be forced to permanently change his beliefs? According to Lifton, in many instances prisoners were converted to Communism as long as they remained in prison. Yet what I tend to believe and what several authors confirm is that the change obtained through coerced confessions is seldom permanent. Lifton indicates that often people who had seemingly been converted, later on after having been released from prison, were able to see themselves and their Communist captors more objectively and were able to understand that they had in fact been coerced and deceived. Although momentarily their views had apparently been altered, soon after their release they were able with some loving kindness and reassurance to recount the horrors of their prison experience. (Yet, for a period of months or even years most of them suffered from extreme paranoia and fear of being incarcerated.)

Brainwashing is an illusion. A man cannot be permanently forced to believe what he doesn't want to believe. The Communists are crazy to think that through violence and physical force they can completely wash away an individual's past experiences and remold him into a Marxist man. Brainwashing presupposes confession. If a man chooses to remain silent and refuses to be intimidated, no one can coerce him. If on the other hand he chooses to confess while under duress and against his will, deep-seated feelings of resentment and hatred will eventually demand release.

This is not to deny that brainwashing is not a powerful weapon for human manipulation. Brainwashing is most significantly a negative, destructive technique; it urges submission, disorients, evokes fear, arouses emotions, causes within each person a significant psychological upheaval, and effectively breaks down the human spirit. Its effect is negative. Some people were presumably permanently converted to communism; the majority were not.

Another vantage point from which to look at the question of whether a man can be forced against his will to do something he doesn't want to do is to ask the question: Can a man's will be violated? If it can, then such a discovery would have profound implications for education, psychiatry, religion, advertising, and ethics. The implication is that the brain can literally be washed clean, the individual's personality broken down, and a completely new person created. J.A.C. Brown, in *Techniques of Persuasion: From Propaganda to Brainwashing*, denies that this is possible, maintaining that it is completely unrealistic to think that all of man's past experiences and thoughts can so easily be wiped away. Everything takes time. Human beings are complex organisms. We are deceived by a fantasy of the imagination to believe even tyrants can within moments wash away another's past.

### **Brainwashing and Marxism**

Brainwashing is possible in Communist society because it is entirely in accord with Marxist doctrine and theory. Karl Marx taught the following beliefs: (a) Man and the universe are matter in motion. Ideas, a soul, and God do not exist. (b) The material world creates thought. Man can be forced by material conditions to think along certain lines. Man is the result of the circumstances in which he is placed. (c) Thoughts are merely configurations of matter; thought itself does not exist. (Hence, freedom of thought cannot exist in a society in which thought is merely matter in motion.) (d) Man is a product of his environment, molded and shaped by social, political, and economic conditions, particularly the prevailing economic system of the times. (e) A man is merely a thing, to be controlled and manipulated by his environment.

Marxist theory provides the philosophical justification for brainwashing. Communists believe that if a person is placed in the right physical surroundings, he can be transformed and molded into a totally new and different person. Thus, Marxism justifies coercion, violence, and terror.

### **Christian Conversion**

The word "conversion" comes from a Latin word that means "to rotate" or to turn. It is a concept indigenous to Christianity. Jesus told his disciples to go out and proclaim the kingdom. From the very beginning, evangelism was an essential part of Christianity. Conversion may be generally defined as the process of making an abrupt, total reorientation in one's life by changing one's beliefs, values, and behavior.

There is a certain uniqueness to the Christian faith, because it is a revelation from God and carries with it a divine imperative to reveal God and His word to people. A Christian has a responsibility to witness to Christ. To be a Christian has meaning and demands a decision. Only those who have made a commitment will ever know the value of the Christian life and of an experience with Christ.

Out of love the Christian extends himself and penetrates the lives of others. In that sense he seeks to convince the non-Christian of the values of an experience with God and Christ. But his methods are exhortation, inspiration, persuasion, education, and propaganda -- not force, coercion, and violence. There are fundamental differences in the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of Christians and Communists, and in no legitimate sense is religious conversion the same as brainwashing.

### **Basic Differences**

"The most essential difference is that in Communist brainwashing the stress is upon "washing" the brain. The major emphasis is not on what the person will accept in the future, but rather on getting him to a point where he will accept anything he is told without evaluating or making judgments. The person's freedom to make independent evaluations has no meaning to his captors.

Methods of education and persuasion, on the other hand, although they may use subtle and manipulative techniques, seek to influence a rational being to freely make evaluations and judgments on the basis of new and additional input. The advertiser wants to influence the public to believe that his product could make his life more pleasant and he should buy it. The educator wants to direct and orient the rational being to broaden his life and horizons with new and challenging ideas that the student may freely either adopt or reject. The preacher seeks to convince his congregation that there is something spiritual to add to life -- that there is more to be learned for the taking. Again, he expects and encourages the rational being to make judgments and adopt life-styles on the basis of additional knowledge and experience.

Ambiguously defined, brainwashing could be applied to a host of teacher-student, minister-congregation, employer-employee, leader-follower, parent-child relationships. Obviously we are all influenced by and influence others. Yet to apply a rather technical term like brainwashing to techniques of education and persuasion seems to me to misconstrue and pervert its true meaning. To speak of a teacher as brainwashing students or of an evangelist as brainwashing converts is an illegitimate, fallacious misrepresentation of the word. There is no other technique of persuasion which is as coercive or as destructive as the real brainwashing process in China with its emphasis on the "washing" of the brain as opposed to constructive stress on either enhancing or enlightening the brain or on persuading it to respond in a desired manner. Education and persuasion are not brainwashing techniques.