

The Guru Papers

Post - 9/11

by Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad

Since 9/11/2001 *The Guru Papers* has become ever more timely and relevant to the growing threats to democracy, women, children, and a viable world. It points to the very things currently unfolding in our increasingly unstable and polarized world. Widespread terrorism was not an immediate issue when this book was written. Now it has become an escalating and extreme extension of the morality wars predicted in *The Guru Papers*. The analysis of what we called hidden authoritarianism is now a more necessary piece that needs to be understood to combat the frightened forces of blind faith in absurdities. Any religious leader who asks his followers to kill themselves and/or arbitrary people who just happen to be there, for “God” or some so-called religious cause, displays all the authoritarian mechanisms carefully presented in our book. Few people would be suicide bombers without believing in a religious ideology that assures them great rewards in an afterlife—no matter what anger or political justifications they have.

Our analysis of self-sacrifice within *renunciate* (self-renouncing) religious values is likewise even more pertinent now because its dangers are ever greater. The ability of the likes of a bin Laden to convince people to sacrifice and kill themselves for some presumed higher sacred ideology, displays the most extreme form of self-sacrifice and cult mentality that we attribute to the word guru. Even though most gurus whose unchallengeable authority and power are linked to a so-called spiritual ideology do not usually have their followers commit suicide, several have done so. And it is such absolute power that makes it possible for them to do so. Religions that project the end of the world with believers escaping to some glorified eternal state of bliss, while the rest of us are doomed, are equally dangerous as the Earth and the unsaved become fodder for their fantasies.

The traditional guru/disciple relationship that demands absolute surrender from disciples magnifies the dynamics of power, as it is the most extreme form of one person’s power over another. This extremity can more readily shed light on authoritarian personal power in all walks of life. This can also give people greater insight into their own relationship to authoritarianism, on whichever end they find themselves. Many of us live with an “inner authoritarian” that both judges and constrains ourselves by internally buying into unlivable ideals out of which we judge not only others but ourselves. It is very possible that how powerful one’s inner authoritarian is directly relates to how susceptible one is to external authoritarian manipulation and control.

Terrorism is an example of an authoritarian mentality *in extremis* because it justifies killing people randomly who are not causing anyone immediate harm through an absolute authoritarian ideology that defines them as evil, or at best expendable. It is also an indication of real powerlessness, and especially when suicides are involved, a sign of hopelessness and of course rage. Given that terrorism has become a major preoccupation of the world, what needs to be examined is what about the world isn’t working that makes terrorism attractive. Merely eliminating terrorists will never eliminate terrorism while the worldwide reasons for its popularity continue unabated. As long as significant segments of the world applaud its outcome, even though they wouldn’t personally engage in it, the Hydra of terrorism will continually reappear.

Terrorism has far greater ramifications than who and how many get killed. It has created a fear-based world that gives easy access to leaders within democracies to exercise authoritarian control through squeezing and retracting civil liberties and pumping money into a war machine that makes the rich richer, while the ordinary person must struggle harder for survival. It also gives sustenance and political power to authoritarian solutions and religious fundamentalism. The religious right, in the

desperate certainties of their antiquated morality, has a real appeal during times of fear, confusion, and moral breakdown.

The forces of the old can unite more easily because of similar authoritarian values and beliefs. The power of tradition with its unchangeable, archaic worldview can muster alignment that is effective in coalescing power, keeping people from intelligent problem-solving. On the other hand, more progressive people have greater difficulty aligning because the way forward is necessarily less defined with more creative options. Protecting the past is relatively easy as its fixed nature limits historical reinterpretation. Constructing a future using pieces of the present along with some vision of future viability has many possibilities that vie with each other. This basic difference around the capacity to agree, share a vision and create strategic alignments, is another very real threat to democracy. If the United States, the one-time beacon of democracy, succumbs to a religion-based oligarchy of the rich (the world's historical heritage), there is little hope for creating the pan-cultural values and agreements necessary to make the planet sustainable for human viability.

Authoritarian moralities and worldviews are geared at preserving the *status quo* by sacralizing tradition and thus inherently cannot cope with the modern world. Our world of accelerated change demands feedback-oriented instead of tradition-bound solutions or pat formulas. Yet the historic way that morality has been justified is through the past archaic pronouncements of some authoritarian presumed intelligence that cannot be challenged—whether God, prophets, or gurus.

The challenge our world is facing now is its urgent need for a morality, a system of values, that transcends the arbitrariness of being merely culturally pegged, and realizes that some pan-cultural agreement on the basics of how situations are to be dealt with is essential. The challenge is not only moving morality beyond authoritarianism, but also to show that not all values are relative to a given culture or merely a function of human individual preference. *The Guru Papers* does not offer any absolute solution to this problem, but it does address how this problem needs to be approached through offering different perspectives on such basic issues as self-centeredness and selflessness, competition and cooperation, egoism and altruism, sacrifice and the sacred. It also suggests how to create a non-relativist morality that has within it relativistic overtones.

Authoritarianism is embedded in any morality that falsely (and often harmfully) polarizes the selfless and self-centered, altruism and egoism. By making self-sacrifice the paragon of virtue and egoism the villain, such moralities are essentially “renunciate” (requiring people to renounce self-interest). Because renouncing all self-interest is ultimately impossible—and not even healthy—as it is a core part of being human, this ideal, like original sin, makes people feel unworthy. It is always an elite group of authorities that determines and defines who is to sacrifice what and to whom.

Renunciate moralities instill self-mistrust, which stifles intelligence and induces people to give their power away to individuals or ideologies posturing as morally superior who claim to know what's best for them. These seeming opposites, altruism and egoism, are actually embedded in each other, so any viable morality cannot negate the function, reality, and value of either one. *The Guru Papers* presents a framework for building an ethics for survival that takes into account both the egoistic and altruistic aspects of humanity, allowing more objectivity, care and empathy to flower.