

Understanding the Authoritarians & Their Followers

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(this is a short abbreviated synopsis from the book that is available free of charge on the internet <http://theauthoritarians.org/Downloads/TheAuthoritarians.pdf>)

In experiments, a person's fear of a dangerous world predicts various kinds of Authoritarian aggression.

In calm, peaceful times as well as in genuinely dangerous ones, Authoritarian Followers feel threatened.

The Releaser. What *releases* the aggressive impulse that comes from fear? What slides off the safety on the gun? This, it turns out, is a no-brainer.

How good, how moral are you, compared to other people? If you're an average human being, you'll think you're a better than average human being. Almost everybody thinks she's more moral than most.

But high Authoritarian Followers typically think they're way, way better. They are the Holy Ones. They are the Chosen. They are the Righteous. They somehow got a *three-for-one* special on self-righteousness. And self-righteousness appears to release Authoritarian aggression more than anything else.

Frightened Authoritarian Followers, looking for someone to attack because fighting is one of the things people do when they are afraid, are particularly likely to do so when they can find a moral justification for their hostility. Despite all the things in scriptures about loving others, forgiving others, leaving punishment to God, and so on, Authoritarian Followers feel empowered to isolate and segregate, to humiliate, to persecute, to beat, and to kill in the middle of the night, because in their heads they can almost hear the loudspeakers announcing, "Now batting for God's team, his designated hitter, (their name)."

Most people seem spring-loaded to become more right-wing Authoritarian during crises. ...When there's trouble, people generally look to the authorities to fix things. And some authorities will gladly amass greater power in times of peril, whether they have any intention of fixing the problem or not.

I have discovered in my investigations that, by and large, high Authoritarian Follower students had simply missed many of the experiences that might have lowered their Authoritarianism.....

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They simply had not met many different kinds of people or done their share of wild and crazy things. Instead they had grown up in an enclosed, rather homogeneous environment--with their friends, their schools, their readings, their amusements all controlled to keep them out of harm's way and Satan's evil clutches. They had contentedly traveled around on short leashes in relatively small, tight, safe circles all their lives.

How Authoritarian Followers Think

But research reveals that Authoritarian Followers drive through life under the influence of impaired thinking a lot more than most people do,

1. exhibiting sloppy reasoning,
2. highly compartmentalized beliefs,
3. double standards,
4. hypocrisy,
5. self-blindness,
6. a profound ethnocentrism, and--to top it all off—
7. a ferocious dogmatism that makes it unlikely anyone could ever change their minds with evidence or logic.

These seven deadly shortfalls of Authoritarian thinking eminently qualify them to follow a would be dictator. As Hitler is reported to have said, "What good fortune for those in power that people do not think."

Illogical Thinking

High Authoritarian Followers indeed had more trouble remembering details of the material they'd encountered, and they made more incorrect inferences on a reasoning test than others usually did. Overall, the Authoritarians had lots of trouble simply thinking straight.

[On the issue of God,] they seldom made a two-sided search of issue..... Basically they seem to be seeking *reassurance* about the Divinity, not pro- and con- arguments about its existence--probably because they were terrified of the implications if there is no God.

Highly Compartmentalized Minds

Authoritarian Followers' ideas are poorly integrated with one another. It's as if each idea is stored in a file that can be called up and used when the Authoritarian wishes, even though another of his ideas--stored in a different file--basically contradicts it. We all have some inconsistencies in our thinking, but Authoritarians can stupefy you with the inconsistency of their ideas. Thus they may say they are proud to live in a country that guarantees freedom of speech, but another file holds,

"My country, love it or leave it." The ideas were copied from trusted sources, often as sayings, but the Authoritarian has never "merged files" to see how well they all fit together.

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It's easy to find Authoritarian Followers endorsing inconsistent ideas. Just present slogans and appeals to homey values, and then present slogans and bromides that invoke opposite values. The yea-saying Authoritarian Follower is likely to agree with all of them.

Double Standards

When your ideas live independent lives from one another it is pretty easy to use double standards in your judgments. You simply call up the idea that will justify (afterwards) what you've decided to do. High RWAs seem to get up in the morning and gulp down a whole jar of "Rationalization Pills."

Blindness To Themselves

If you ask people how much integrity they personally have, Authoritarian Followers think they had lots more integrity than others do. Similarly when I asked students to write down, anonymously, their biggest faults, right-wing Authoritarians wrote down fewer than others did, mainly because a lot of them said they had *no* big faults. When I asked students if there was anything they were reluctant to admit about themselves to themselves, high Authoritarian Followers led everyone else in saying, no, they were completely honest with themselves.

A Profound Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism means dividing the world up into in-groups and out-groups, and it's something people do quite automatically.

Authoritarian Followers see the world more sharply in terms of their in-groups and their out-groups than most people do. They are so ethnocentric that you find them making statements such as, "If you're not with us, then you're against us."

Most of us associate with people who agree with us on many issues. Birds of a feather do, empirically, tend to flock together. But this is especially important to Authoritarians, who have not usually thought things out, explored possibilities, considered alternate points of view, and so on, but acquired their beliefs from the authorities in their lives. They then *maintain* their beliefs against new threats by seeking out those authorities, and by rubbing elbows as much as possible with people who have the same beliefs.

Authoritarian Followers want to belong, and being part of their in-group means a lot to them. Loyalty to that group ranks among the highest virtues, and members of the group who question its leaders or beliefs can quickly be seen as traitors.

The ethnocentrism of high Authoritarian Followers makes them quite vulnerable to unscrupulous manipulators.

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Scum-bucket politicians will usually head for the Authoritarian Followers, because they hunger for social endorsement of their beliefs so much they're apt to trust anyone who tells them they're right. Heck, Adolf Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany running on a law-and-order platform just a few years after he tried to overthrow the government through an armed insurrection.

You sometimes hear that paranoia runs at a gallop in "right-wingers". But maybe you can see how that's an oversimplification. Authoritarian Followers *are* highly suspicious of their many out-groups; but they are credulous to the point of self-delusion when it comes to their in-groups.

First of all, they rely on the authorities in their lives to provide their opinions. Usually they don't care much what the evidence or the logic for a position is, so they run a considerable chance of being wrong. Then once they have "their" ideas, someone who comes along and says what Authoritarian Followers want to hear becomes trustworthy. High Authoritarian Followers largely ignore the reasons why someone might have ulterior motives for saying what they want to hear; it's enough for them that another person indicates they are right.

But everything is not correct, for the Authoritarian Follower makes himself vulnerable to malevolent manipulation by chucking out critical thinking and prudence as the price for maintaining his beliefs. He's an "easy mark," custom-built to be snookered. And the very last thing an Authoritarian leader wants is for his followers to start using their heads, to start thinking critically and independently about things.

Dogmatism: The Authoritarian's Last Ditch Defense

It's easy to see why Authoritarian Followers would be dogmatic, isn't it? When you haven't figured out your beliefs, but instead absorbed them from other people, you're really in no position to defend them from attack. Simply put, *you don't know* why the things you believe are true. Somebody else decided they were, and you're taking their word for it. So what do you do when challenged?

First of all you avoid challenges by sticking with your own kind as much as possible, because they're hardly likely to ask pointed questions about your beliefs.

But if you meet someone who does, you'll probably defend your ideas as best you can, parrying thrusts with whatever answers your authorities have pre-loaded into your head. If these defenses crumble, you may go back to the trusted sources -- or you simply insist you are right and walk away, clutching your beliefs more tightly than ever.

But you don't have to know anything to insist you're right, no matter what. Dogmatism is by far the best fall-back defense, the most impregnable castle that ignorance can find. It's also a dead give-away that the person doesn't know why he believes what he believes.

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Fundamentalists and Evangelicals in America

“Fundamentalism” has a particular meaning in the United States. It refers to a movement that grew within Protestantism nearly a century ago in reaction to developments in the then modern world, most particularly to scholarly analyses of the Bible that cast strong doubt on its supposed divine origins.

To refute these analyses a series of pamphlets called “The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth” was widely distributed. At first they dealt mainly with scriptural issues, rebutting the charges that the Bible was man-made, rewritten as time passed, and laced with myths, biases and inaccurate history. Instead, the pamphlets claimed, the Bible has no error in it whatsoever; it is the original word of God, exactly as God wanted things put.

But the focus shifted by the end of the series, and essays came out against “The Decadence of Darwinism,” “Romanism,” Christian Science, Mormonism, and socialism.

Evangelicals had a different “take” on the role of religion in society in some respects. In particular, they believed they had a responsibility not just to defend Christianity, but to evangelize, to preach the Gospel to others.

Fundamentalism and Right-Wing Authoritarianism

The first thing you need to know about religious fundamentalists, in case you haven’t inferred it already, is that they usually score very highly on the Authoritarian Follower scale -- a solid majority of them are Authoritarian Followers.

The two traits, authoritarianism and fundamentalism, go together so well that nearly everything I have said about high Authoritarian Followers in the previous chapters also applies to high Religious Fundamentalists.

Since Authoritarianism can *produce* fundamentalism if one grows up submissively in a religiously conservative family, and (conversely), fundamentalism can *promote* Authoritarianism with its emphases on submission to religious authority, dislike of out-groups, sticking to the straight and narrow, and so on, one immediately wonders which is the chicken and which is the egg.

So the problem’s not so much that some people are fundamentalists, but that fundamentalists definitely tend to be Authoritarian Followers. But as I just said, religious fundamentalism *does* promote Authoritarianism in some ways. And you can certainly see the influence of right-wing Authoritarianism in many things that religious fundamentalists do.

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The Mental Life of Fundamentalists

Mark Noll, an evangelical history professor at evangelical Wheaton College, begins his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, with a pithy thought: “The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.” Noll observes that “American evangelicals are not exemplary for their thinking, and they have not been so for several generations.” He points out that evangelicals support dozens of theological seminaries, scores of colleges, and hundreds of radio stations, but not a single research university. “In the United States he writes, it is simply impossible to be, with integrity, both evangelical and intellectual.”

“Modern American evangelicals have failed notably in sustaining serious intellectual life.”

Dogmatic Christians also slide quietly around the fact that there’s no real test that what they believe is right. They simply believe it, on faith. They are the faith-full, just as dogmatic Hindus, dogmatic Jews, and dogmatic Muslims all insist they each have the real deal. Unfortunately there’s no way to determine if any of them does, which may be one of the reasons the passionately devoted sometimes resort to the sword, and the car bomb, instead.

Once dogmatism turns out the lights, you might as well close up shop as a civilization and pull up the covers as a sentient life form. You get nowhere with unquestioning certainty. It’s thinking with your mind wide shut. But that would not faze most fundamentalists, because they know that their beliefs will get them exactly where they want to go.

Happiness, Joy and Comfort

Fundamentalists get their joy in life much more from standing firm and believing what they stand for than from exploring and discovering. I once asked a large sample of parents how much happiness, joy or comfort they got, in various ways, from science, and how much they got from religion. For most people, religion proved a lot more satisfying than science did. (This ought not knock us off our horses. Pure science is “head stuff,” not intended to satisfy any human want except our desire to understand.)

But the religion-versus-science comparison proved especially striking among fundamentalists. They said religion brought them *enormous* amounts of happiness. It brought them the joy of God’s love. It showed how they could spend all eternity in heaven. It assured them they would rejoin their loved ones in the kingdom of God. It brought them closer to their loved ones on earth. It brought forgiveness of their sins. It made them feel safe in God’s protection. In contrast, they got almost no happiness from science. Notably, they said science did *not* enable them to work out their own beliefs and philosophy of life, it did not bring the joy of discovery, it did not provide the surest path we have to the truth, it did not make them feel safe, it did not show how to live a happy life, and it did not bring the satisfaction of knowing their beliefs were based on objective facts.

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While most people tell pollsters they are happy, highly religious people number among the happiest of us all. You can see why they would. They believe they know the meaning of life on its deepest level. They believe they are in personal touch with the all-good creator of the universe, who loves them and takes a special interest in them. They say they are certain they will enjoy an eternity of happiness after they die.

In the meanwhile they have answers at their fingertips to all the problems of life that depress others, such as sickness and personal failure. And they are embraced on all sides by a supportive community. Why wouldn't they be very happy? The real question ought to be: why do so many people, including some of the fundamentalists' own children, turn their backs on all this happiness?

Luke's Gospel (6:37) has Jesus saying, "Judge and ye shall be judged, condemn and ye shall be condemned, forgive and ye shall be forgiven," and you will often hear fundamentalists say, "Hate sin, but love the sinner."

When I asked a sample of parents if they believed one should do this, virtually all of the fundamentalists said yes. And yet these same parents only two pages later in the survey were advocating rejection of homosexuals and discrimination against them. Some even agreed with the statement, "In many ways the AIDS disease currently killing homosexuals is just what they deserve." Gentle pieties get shoved back into their files all too easily in fundamentalist minds when a chance to unload on some despised group pops up.

The Authoritarian Leaders

Once someone becomes a leader of the high Authoritarian Followers in-group, he can lie with impunity about the out-groups, himself, whatever, because he knows the followers will seldom check on what he says, nor will they expose themselves to people who set the record straight. Furthermore they will not believe the truth if they somehow get exposed to it, and if the distortions become absolutely undeniable, they will rationalize it away and put it in a box. If the scoundrel's duplicity and hypocrisy lands him on the front page of every daily in the country, the followers will still forgive him if he just says the right things.