Review: Revisiting The True Believer

Reviewed Work(s): The True Believer by Eric Hoffer

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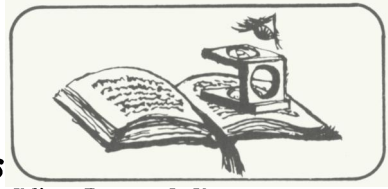
Revisiting The True Believer

The True Believer, by Eric Hoffer. New York: Perennial Library, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966.

Twenty-five years have passed since Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer* first appeared, but its analysis of and insights into mass movements and fanaticism still seem fruitful today. Many movements have threaded their way through the fabric of America in the years since 1951: McCarthyism, the civil rights struggle, the peace movement arising from involvement in Vietnam, and a variety of "powers" (Red, Black, Chicano, Gay, Gray, and Kid, among others). Some movements have dwindled or disappeared. Others have changed their guise, while still others continue to shape the national cloth.

If some observers have noted the presence of incipient fanaticism in some of these movements since 1951, that fact is not surprising. As movements emerged as visible phenomena and in some cases became violently militant, the threat of virulent change may have seemed all too real. After all, movements—especially mass movements—reflect the need or intent of some people to achieve change. *The True Believer* is not an antidote to fears of violent, wide-spread fanaticism, however, nor to a concern about the probability of massive, organized fanaticism in America. Neither is the book an alarmist rallying point. It is a provocative model rich with insights into the nature and functioning, the dynamics, of mass movements generally and fanatics and fanatical movements specifically.

Even if Hoffer's book does not "bring us up to date" on the mapping of fanatics and fanaticism as phenomena, it certainly helps stimulate necessary questions about those phenomena. If we do not see *The True Believer* offering final answers to the necessary questions, the book can be—and is—a useful tool for analyzing and understanding

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fanaticism and the functional role of fanatics within diverse move-
ments.

Those familiar with Hoffer's book need no content review. Indeed,
a full review probably would match the slim length of the book. How-
ever, a few words about content will be helpful in establishing bench-
marks for subsequent discussion.

Hoffer is concerned with the dynamics of mass movements, and
with the underlying dynamics of the fanatic and fanaticism which lend
some movements a special kind of virulence. While most movements
contain or attract some fanatics, all movements are not fanatical in
nature; nor do all movements have built into them all the features
which mark the special virulence of those movements characterizable
as "mass fanaticism." *The True Believer* suggests that virulent
movements require particular combinations of factors which attract,
gain, hold, and unify fanatics under the banner of a "cause." The ex-
istence and effective working of the combinations defines, in a general
way, the "fanatical movement" and allows us to distinguish it from
movements which may share some of the factors but which cannot be
characterized as fanatical movements even if they are massive in
nature. All movements need adherents, but it is the general combina-
tion of methods and goals in special combinations which separate
virulent fanatical movements from more positive or non-fanatical
movements as Hoffer constructs them. According to Hoffer, the fa-
natic looking for a cause is the disaffected individual who is perpetu-
ally insecure and incomplete, who lacks individual hope and a "sense
of self," and who seeks out a "cause" to try to fill what is in reality an
unfillable void of Self. By being "reborn" into a new "self"—the self of
the "cause"—the fanatic tries to find worth, value, and meaning in
selflessness. The "cause" puts worth, value, or meaning outside the in-
dividual and promises security and completeness through selfless devo-
tion—through "true faith".

When Hoffer details the unifying factors which provide the opera-
tional dynamics of the fanatical cause, he suggests an operational
definition of fanatical movements: the use of a "devil" or "enemy" out-
side the group; the existence of a strong, central leader in whose exist-
ence followers can see the "cause"; use of propaganda and coercion;
and imitation, action, and suspicion to promote identification of the
individual with the cause and to generate unification of individuals
committed to the cause. Hatred and suspicion are some of the ele-
ments used by the fanatical movement to attract and hold disciples,
and it is such factors and their dynamics which seem to give some
movements their special virulent quality. It is important to note that,

while non-fanatical movements (or people within such movements) may make occasional use of such tactics or unifying factors, these factors do not characterize the operational fabric of a non-fanatical movement. The opposite is true of fanatical movements — the unifying factors Hoffer sketches in his construct are intrinsic to, or inherent in the fabric of, the successful (and virulent) fanatical movement.

Two contemporary examples can illustrate these points quickly. The examples are the feminist movement and the religious movement embodied in the Unification Church. While both seem to share broad generic likenesses — the seeking of converts from among the "disaffected" (as Hoffer labels them), the use of persuasive propaganda, the attempt to mobilize people against a common, identified "enemy" or "devil," and so forth — they exhibit certain critical differences when viewed from the perspective of *The True Believer*. Whereas feminism seeks to raise the consciousness of individuals to the end of increasing awareness and self-worth and, thus, security and completeness of Self, the Unification Church seeks to obliterate individual consciousness and/or to fill the void of Self with the "self" of Reverend Moon. The term "Moonies" even suggests this. Whereas feminism is a movement which is not seen as coalesced around a single strong leader, a leader able to promote unification through hatred and suspicion, precisely the opposite is true of the Unification Church. For the Church, the "devil" is real, hatred a vital ingredient in the "true faith," and suspicion of "outsiders" both demanded and sustained. This does not mean that some of the factors operative in the Unification Church movement do not exist in the feminist movement; but such factors are incidental to, or sporadically operative within, feminism. This is in sharp contrast to the total fabric of the Unification movement.

Such contrasts might be pursued at length, but generally the point is this: *The True Believer* is useful. Its usefulness as an analytic model lies in its ability to stimulate some of the right questions about mass movements and fanaticism. If it does not help us resolve some of the basic ethical questions arising from the phenomena of mass movements in general, it does at least help us to seek answers. After all, the "true believer" doesn't question. Perhaps that is reason enough to explore what Hoffer has to say.

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