

## **When Faith Breeds Paranoia**

A number of the world's faith communities are persecuted by rival faiths. The Baha'i community is subject to persecution in Islamic countries. Jews continue to be the target of anti-Semitic hatred in many countries. Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians have perpetrated acts of hatred toward Muslims. Muslims have maltreated Christians and Jews that live in their nations.

We also see violent struggles between sects within religions: between Sunni and Shia in Syria, Iraq, and Pakistan; among Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland.

This webinar will explore how the mindset born from real or imagined persecution breeds mistrust and paranoia; will trace the parallels in the development of mistrust in childhood; and will examine how this shows up in religious cults and terrorist groups.

### **How Innocent Faith Transforms into Paranoia**

Innocent faith is fostered in an environment where believers can practice their worship, prayers, and meditations without interference from other groups or the government. Innocent faith can readily change into paranoia when believers are traumatized or persecuted. This violation of the believers' sense that their world is safe shifts them into a defensive mode, where they seek to defend their beliefs, their property, and their lives.

On the basis of their faith, they gain the conviction that certain things are true. When someone makes an attack on these essential values, believers identify a perpetrator—an evil other or enemy—and blame the enemy for their trauma.



The group may adopt one of two strategies towards this identified enemy: fight or flight.

In **fight mode**, believers will find out the flaws or secrets of the enemy, and attempt to attack or undermine the persecutor. This can take the form of vitriolic condemnation, litigation, acts of violence, destruction of the enemy's property, or even outright war.

In **flight mode**, believers turn the enemy into a hidden, evil presence, who seems to be present everywhere. This leads to wariness, hyper-vigilance, erosion of trust, and increasing paranoia. They believe that they will be attacked again at any moment—that their families and their group is not safe. This leads them to seek protection, either by retreating from the persecution, going underground, or arming themselves and creating survivalist fortresses.

### **Parallels in Human Development**

When children feel loved by their parents, and feel their environment and the people around them are safe, they live their lives in relative peace. But if there is a trauma or violation of trust, children lose trust and may develop cynicism and doubt about their former assumptions that the world is safe.

If there are repeated shocks, violations, or traumatic experiences over their lives, people will come to believe other people, the government, or the world is unsafe. This leads them to adopt methods to protect themselves from danger.

To defend themselves against other people who are perceived to be unsafe, they may acquire weapons, learn martial arts, or remove themselves from the place where they feel danger.

To protect themselves against the government, they may withdraw from the system, change their identity, go underground, or leave the country.

It is difficult to restore trust once it has been violated. Mistrust breeds cynicism and doubt, and constructs mental filters that lead one to suspect any statement of action of the “enemy.”

Once the mind identifies someone as the enemy, an agent of evil, or as a malicious adversary, this filter of mistrust subjects each statement or action of the enemy to a “threat analysis.” This analysis finds logical flaws, inconsistencies between statements and behavior, and confirmation that the enemy’s intentions are evil.

### **False Evidence Appearing Real (FEAR)**

This constructed filter of mistrust creates beliefs in conspiracies, and perceives the enemy as secretive, devious, and frightening. Those who have constructed these filters expect that the enemy will lie, cheat, deceive, and continue to harm and abuse them. This fear prompts suspicion, vigilance, and an inner state of alarm, making them ready to fight or flee.

This filter of suspicion and fear no longer allows people to regard other people or institutions—who are suspected of harming them—as they are. Rather this filter portrays them as a dangerous malevolent agency.

For the disciple on the path, the challenge is to identify these fear/mistrust filters they have constructed, and assess whether the labeling of others as fearful objects is justified.

Indeed, in some cases, the disciple will find that a single past experience has been generalized and blown way out of proportion.

In other instances, the threat is no longer present, but the disciple continues to react as if he or she is still vulnerable to its threats—with a similar reaction to those experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder.



- Have you ever experienced a shock, trauma, or violation that was a *solitary event*, but continues to color your perceptions today?
- Have you experienced *repeated* shock, trauma, or violation in your past? How did this shape your beliefs about whether the world is safe? How does this influence your behavior today?
- Notice if you try to justify or rationalize your beliefs that uphold this fearful perception, even if there is data to the contrary. For which trauma have you constructed this filter?
- If you have had more than one shock, trauma, or violation, how many of these filters do you have in place?
- Select one of these filters. Is there any data that suggests that your conclusions may be false? How credible is this data?
- What might your motivations be for maintaining this filter in place?
- Is your fear or suspicion truly justified? Is this still a present threat that can harm you? What false evidence makes this threat seem real? What would it take for you to know for certain that it is false?

## **Paranoia in Religious and Terrorist Groups**

This construction of mental filters is a common experience, and as you may have experienced in this meditation, even you may have some of them. So you should not be surprised that religious groups develop these filters; and the more extreme elements that these religious beliefs influence—religious cults and terrorist groups—have them, too. But as you may expect, as religious cults and terrorist groups often hold extreme or radicalized beliefs, they become more deeply enmeshed in their paranoid worldviews than traditional religious groups.

Once a cult or terrorist group has identified someone as an enemy, they readily adopt a paranoid mindset—shifting either into a victimized/persecuted mode, or into a hero/savior mode.

In the **victim/persecuted mode**, the members of the group attempt to save themselves by fleeing or escaping from the persecutor. This mode is seen in those groups that go underground, or who build isolated, survivalist communities.

In the **hero/savior mode**, the members of the group are willing to sacrifice themselves to preserve the group. In these groups, martyrdom may be seen as a doorway to paradise. These groups may adopt terrorist tactics, performing guerilla attacks on the enemy, or commit suicide to destroy others. This is prevalent in those who embrace the jihad mentality.

## **Trust on the Developmental Matrix**

According to Erik Erikson's developmental theory, trust is one of the first life challenges that each person must master. When this basic foundation of trust is vitiated, it leads to paranoia mindsets and maladaptive behavior.

Violation of the perception of safety and trust—whether this violation comes from another person, a group, the government, or the world—taps this most primitive stratum of their life history matrix. It may lead some people to re-evaluate their initial impressions of trust.

If other people are not felt to be safe, there are a number of strategies that people might adopt.

- (1) They might retreat into an inner space where they feel invulnerable and omnipotent in their fantasy
- (2) They might adopt irresponsible or self-destructive behavior, where they do not have to face the terror—this is commonly seen in addiction
- (3) They might learn to cope with life through using a false self, where they pretend that they are happy, and they live a fake, inauthentic life
- (4) They might seek to strike back at those who harmed them, through acting out or rebellion
- (5) They might seek to destroy those who caused them injury, which spawns murderous rage and a desire for revenge
- (6) They might adopt a paranoid mindset and personality disorder, where they mistrust everyone, and do not share their inner world with others
- (7) They might internalize the rage they feel against others, and perform self-mutilation, or seek to commit suicide



Wounds to basic trust occur in a stage of life that are non-verbal, and are felt to be core wounds. These wounds can only be healed through emotional healing—through immersion in unconditional love, the infilling of the Holy Spirit, or suffusion with Divine Love. For only when you are OK in this emotional core, can you open your heart and love others, and trust them again.

Basic trust is primary. People learn mistrust through trauma or violation. Invocation of the Light of Divine Love is crucial to restore basic trust.

Trust appears at the first step of human development. We explore these steps in this list excerpted from *Religions, Cults, and Terrorism: What the Heck Are We Doing?*

“In Newman and Newman's (1995) adaptation of Erik Erikson’s model of the developmental life stages and their challenges, each life stage, from infancy to very old age, has a characteristic psychosocial crisis. [1] Their formulation of Erickson's model is summarized below, from infancy to early adulthood (birth to age 34).”

Life stage	Psycho-social crisis
Infancy (birth to 2 years)	Trust versus mistrust
Toddlerhood (2 to 4)	Autonomy versus shame and doubt
Early school age (4 to 6)	Initiative versus guilt
Middle school age (6 to 12)	Industry versus inferiority
Early adolescence (12 to 18)	Group identity versus alienation
Later adolescence (18 to 22)	Individual identity versus identity confusion
Early adulthood (22 to 34)	Intimacy versus isolation

“Newman and Newman note that if the infant is exposed to startling new stimuli that cause fright without being comforted or reassured, if the caregiver is unable to tell what the infant needs, or is unusually harsh while meeting the infant’s needs, the infant may doubt the trustworthiness of the environment.”

“This loss of trust can degrade the quality of attachment between infant and mother, which has implications for the formation of future relationships throughout the life cycle.”

“Further, if parental care giving neglects the infant’s needs, or tries to force him or her into behavior that is beyond the infant’s current capacity, the infant may withdraw, and lose hope that his or her needs can be ever met by the environment.”

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[1] Newman, Barbara and Newman, Phillip (1995) *Development through life: A psychosocial approach*. 6th edition. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks Cole Publishing Company.

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We may speculate that the religious cult member relies upon strategies one (living in fantasy) and three (assumption of a false identity) to function in a frightening and alien world, and adopts strategy six (a paranoid mindset) when they feel that people from that dangerous and evil world attack or persecute them. In some rare cultic groups, they may elect to use strategy seven (committing suicide) as a way of escaping from this world to “a better world.”

The terrorist group seeks to destroy the perceived evil of the enemies of their faith, gravitating towards strategies four (rebellion), and five (rage and revenge); many of these groups may condone strategy seven (suicide), which they perceive as a martyrdom that leads to paradise—a honorable death. We may underscore that initially, the perceived injustice and violation that leads them to attack their enemies, may spring from a paranoid mindset, which mistrusts any promises or actions of the enemy.

## **Can Meditation Heal the Paranoid Mindset?**

We have previously noted in our webinar on altered states of consciousness (ASC) that members of religious cults and terrorist groups readily enter and remain identified with an alternate frame on reality. To break the hypnotic fascination of this ASC—and the plethora of suggestions that have been anchored at this level of the mind—we said that the true believer’s attention has to be brought out of this state, and returned to the normalized state of awareness.

Since paranoia is founded on mistrust, we noted earlier in today’s webinar that the wound to basic trust must be healed—and we recommended modalities from emotional healing, such as receiving the Holy Spirit, or immersion in Divine Love, as ways of overcoming the core of mistrust of other people and the world that underlies the paranoid mindset.

The more challenging aspect of the paranoid mindset is the array of false beliefs and unwarranted suspicions that stem from this core of basic mistrust. While the clear intuition that streams from the Buddhic Plane—the Spirit of Truth—could correct the warped cognition of paranoia, we point out that in most individuals, this stream is largely silent. Instead, their inner intuitive voice, contaminated by the hatred and mistrust embedded in their unconscious mind—rather than uprooting the false beliefs—reify and reinforce them.

We suggest that the corrective emotional experience—where the perceived “enemy” treats them with kindness, dignity, and compassion—may be more effective than any attempts to argue with the entrenched beliefs that cast other people and the world as agents of evil. We also propose that only long and patient psychotherapy may begin to undermine this armor of the mind; meditation is helpful only when the individual recognizes and rejects the paranoid beliefs, and actively works to uproot them—this alas, is all too rare.

Thank you for attending our webinar today!

