



Another Voice

Authoritarian Leaders



By **Dr. John A. Dick** on January 15, 2025



Thinking about next Monday's U.S. presidential inauguration – which this year ironically coincides with Martin Luther King Jr. Day – I have been collecting my thoughts about authoritarian leaders and their followers.

Last week, on Friday January 10th, the president-elect, in a court decision in Manhattan, received an unconditional discharge of his sentence, which formalizes his status as a felon and makes him the very first person in U.S. history to carry that distinction into the White House.

The sentencing resulted from Mr. Trump's conviction on charges of falsifying records to cover up a sex scandal that threatened to derail his first campaign. Once the jury convicted Mr. Trump on all 34 felony counts, he had fought to avoid the spectacle of a sentencing, but the Supreme Court rejected his effort to block it.

Over the years I have had a number of encounters — and a few conflicts — with authoritarian leaders and followers, in ecclesiastical settings but in academia as well. What I learned, early on, is that authoritarian followers are highly submissive to authoritarian leaders and aggressively insist that everyone should behave as dictated by the authority. They are fearful about a changing world and a changing society which they neither understand nor want to understand. They would rather turn the clock back to some imagined golden era because it makes them feel safe and comfortable.

Authoritarian leaders are coercive and dictatorial. What they want to implement is hardly democratic and quite often tyrannical. They become even more sinister, when they begin to proclaim their message in the name of Christianity. Then, in reality their authoritarianism becomes an anti-Christian virus. That anti-Christian virus is very real today.

The Authoritarian Personality:

(1) In their self-righteous efforts to re-shape society in their own image and likeness, authoritarians feel empowered and compelled to isolate, to humiliate, and to persecute.

(2) If an authoritarian leader has a narcissistic personality disorder, he or she may come across as conceited, boastful, or pretentious. That person belittles or looks down on people he or she perceives as inferior.

(3) Authoritarian followers need to conform and belong to their barrel-vision-group. Loyalty to their group ranks among their highest virtues. Members of the group who question group leaders or group beliefs are quickly seen as traitors.

(4) All authoritarians go through life with impaired reasoning. Their thinking is sloppy, and they are slaves to a ferocious dogmatism that blinds them to evidence and logic. As Adolf Hitler (1889 – 1945) said, "What good fortune for those in power that people do not think."

(5) Authoritarians are surprisingly uninformed about the things they say they believe in. Deep, deep down inside, many have secret doubts about their own core beliefs. In somewhat the same way that some publicly outspoken critics of homosexuality, are often unwilling to acknowledge their own same-sex inclinations and actions.

Change is Necessary and Possible:

Today we need to be well-informed and critical-thinking observers who are willing to courageously collaborate with others as effective change agents.

(1) We need to have a clear and correct vision of reality. Dialogue is important here because it must be a shared vision. We listen, we see, and we explore together. And we build and we re-build together.

(2) We need to be courageous and persistent but patient as well. Change does not happen overnight. Many people get frustrated when change does not happen fast enough. The danger is that they lose sight of the vision as something that can really be achieved. Effective change agents need to help people see that every step forward is a step closer to the goal.

(3) We need to show that we are about more than just nice-sounding rhetoric. Effective change agents need credibility. If one wants to create change, one must not only be able to articulate what that change would look like but show it to others.

(4) We must build strong relationships built on trust. All the points above, mean nothing if one does not have solid relationships with collaborators. People will not want to grow and change if they do not trust the person who is pushing for change.

(5) And finally: We must not allow ourselves to become and act like the authoritarians. Nonviolent civil resistance is far more successful in creating broad-based change than violent campaigns. Empathy and compassion are Christ-like. Hatred and denigration of other people are tokens of the anti-Christ.

For further reading, I recommend: *The Age of The Strongman: How the Cult of the Leader Threatens Democracy around the World* – by Gideon Rachman.

And I conclude this reflection with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr. – “Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.”

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