

## **How to Best Protect yourself from Propaganda and Thought Control – The Story of Bishop Barker (A Resilience Story)**

**‘He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, *He* is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.’** Psalm 91:1-2 (KJV)

**‘Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.’** Ephesians 6:11 (KJV)

**‘The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.’** Psalm 121: 7-8. (KJV)

This is a true story relating to one man’s enduring faith that was tested through extreme ‘brainwashing,’ a practice developed by post-revolutionary (1949) Chinese Communist party officials as techniques of ‘thought reform’ in ‘re-education camps’ for political prisoners. Most importantly, it presents a model of effective protection from extreme propaganda. I have felt that the resilience factors included in this story, that helped one individual triumph over thought reform, are important to share.

The story is about a man named Hans Barker (Bishop Barker). I encountered the story about this Belgian Bishop, reading Robert J. Lifton’s book on thought control (*Thought Reform: A Psychiatric Study of “Brainwashing” in China*). I have not found information about Bishop Barker anywhere else. Lifton, a psychiatrist, had conducted significant, in-depth research with forty individuals who had undergone Communist brainwashing in China in the early 1950s, and Bishop Barker was one of them. Bishop Barker had been imprisoned in China and survived the effects of the thought control he was subjected to remarkably well. Lifton wrote about Barker after his release from prison:

**‘He arrived in Hong Kong, gaunt but confident, expressing to his friends the conviction that he had successfully met a severe trial. He experienced much less fear and suspiciousness than most, and the physician who first examined him described him as a “superior person,” much more composed than others he had examined immediately after the same ordeal.’**

In essence, Bishop Barker had been so successful in avoiding the worst effects of propaganda by always converting the religious fervour and enthusiasm that was expected of him under Communist thought control, back to genuinely fulfilling, religious enthusiasm for God.

### **The Story of Bishop Barker**

Hans Barker was the son of a ‘deeply religious mother’. At a young age he was fascinated with the lives of the saints, in particular those who had been martyred. Lifton writes that as a

boy, Hans ‘donated his spare money to Church collections for missionary work’. Lifton goes on to say that **‘by the time he was eight years old, he had already determined to do missionary work in China.’** Hans Barker went on to do just that.

It was while he was a missionary in China that Barker was imprisoned and was subjected to three years of intensive thought reform. Prior to his years of imprisonment Bishop Barker had lived in the interior of China for over forty years. After the Communist takeover 1948-1949, things were initially comfortable for Westerners living in China and they were encouraged to remain, but that soon changed. **‘Most arrests occurred in 1951’,** writes Lifton, **‘during the national campaign for the “suppression of counterrevolutionaries, at which time tensions concerning “subversion” were very great. The Westerners were accused, usually on flimsy or even manufactured evidence, of dangerous “espionage” activities. And they were subjected, as few men have been, to a test of the durability of all that had gone into their sense of being.’**

After Bishop Barker realized that his captors were **‘indicting his mission society and his Church’** as part of an **“espionage network”** he began to consciously substitute in his mind the religious equivalents of the subjects under discussion by his accusers. Lifton recorded Barker’s words:

**‘This saving thought came to me: for the state I substitute God; for the people, my Christians; for the imperialist’s failings, greed and pride,** are aptly represented by uncharitable self-love and love of pleasure.....It was necessary for me to find the proper standpoint in relationship to God.’

Barker began to **‘view his imprisonment as a personal religious trial’,** wrote Lifton.

## Thought Control Resilience Factors

In the face of the thought control Bishop Barker was subjected to, the following personal characteristics, and approaches, were characteristic of his resilient approach. Not surprisingly, Bishop Barker’s strong identity in God was the primary one. Lifton lists several factors that helped Bishop Barker cope with the intense pressures he was placed under, and to come out of his trials relatively unscathed, he calls them **‘Resistance Factors’**:

- **A Sense of Understanding:** Lifton stated that: ‘The first form of resistance is the acquisition of a sense of understanding, a theory about what is going on, an awareness of being manipulated.’ This big picture approach helps dispel a **fear of the unknown,** and a **sense of complete helplessness,** which Lifton refers to as **‘two great stimulators of human anxiety upon which thought reform depends.’**
- **The Avoidance of Emotional participation:** ‘In other words, the prisoner remains as much as possible outside the communication system of thought reform.’ For instance, despite being friendly to other prisoners, Bishop Barker **was careful to avoid real intimacy** with them. This gave him some relief from what would have been more intense thought control pressures and would have ‘integrated him more firmly into the prison world’. He ‘emphasized his difficulties in sight and hearing, and his limited knowledge of written Chinese.’ All this, Lifton writes, **‘enabled him to do what was most important**

**of all – maintain a private inner world of values, judgements, and symbols, and thereby keep a measure of independence from the ever-pressing environment.’**

- **The adoption of a neutralizing attitude:** Bishop Barker retained his **sense of humor** (a critical factor). In the last five months he received his most severe treatment, including handcuffs and chains ‘which he referred to as “decorations”. Lifton wrote: ‘Hostile rejoinders gained a prisoner little, and in fact brought about even more devastating pressures. But **humor or humane stoicism** (Both of which Bishop Barker demonstrated) put officials and cellmates in a difficult psychological position.
- **Identity Reinforcement:** Lifton refers to ‘**identity reinforcement**’ as generally ‘**the most important resistance technique**’. He wrote of Bishop Barker: ‘Bishop Barker’s major way of resisting thought reform was to make it a Catholic theological struggle, rather than a Communist remolding. He sought always to maintain himself as a priest struggling against his selfishness, rather than as a stubborn imperialist spy. To do this, he needed a continuous awareness of his own world of prayer, Catholic ritual, missionary experience and Western cultural heritage; with nothing around him to encourage it, this awareness could come only from within.....This kind of identity reinforcement was for any prisoner the essence of self-protection, both against reform influence and against always-threatening psychological disintegration.’ Lifton also wrote: ‘**...apparent resisters (Bishop Barker) possessed great strength of identity in contrast to the apparent converts...**’

**Overall, Barker devoted himself to his religion with greater intensity during his imprisonment.** He saw the parallels between devotion to the State, and religious devotion, giving his energies to the later, stating ‘**The state demands such a complete change and turnover of mind as we only allow God to demand.**’ And “**I had to become more religious or else give way to the Communists.**”

**Propaganda – Often a devastating perversion of religion and one that is antithetical to Christianity.**

Bishop Baker recognized that Communism/The State was demanding of him a religious devotion, that he, as a truly religious man, could only give to his God. In many respects Barker continually **reversed** the perversion of religion being utilized for the ends of man, not God, in his head. He always took it back to God. In doing so, he continually reversed the very thing that much propaganda and thought control has long set out to achieve: a devotion to something other than God.

Here, we must acknowledge that some who have influenced others significantly in history have first analysed religion. The early French Socialists, for instance, replicated elements of religion to utilize it toward their own purposes.

**‘Both Saint-Simon and Comte had analysed the role of religion and other ‘systems of ideas’ for their powers of ideological control – ‘capable of surmounting the opposition**

**of individual tendencies’ – and mystification.’** (Corcoran, *Before Marx: Socialism and Communism in France, 1830-48.*)

Even marketers who seek to influence others at the deepest level, at the level of soul, in our present day, and who have done so very successfully over the last few decades, study, and have studied, religion for their own ends. Have you ever considered why branded products now hold such esteem and why so many people seem to find their primary identity in brands and materialism? In what surely stands as one of the sickest, and most devastating, marketing campaigns ever conducted, and ongoing to this day, the advertisers set out to make branding a religion for youth, and they have been very successful in achieving it.

Authors of the book *Brand Child: Remarkable insights into the minds of today’s global kids and their relationships with brands* (Martin Lindstrom with Patricia B Seybold) write within it:

**‘The dramatic change in the role of brands has been part of the advertising agencies’ long-term goals. It was initially the advertisers who envisioned turning brand into a form of religion, to increase their sales. And it has worked.’**

We will not go deeply into the cost of turning brands into a form of religion, for instance, how many youth murders have been related to stealing brand jackets and shoes as a direct consequence of this advertising goal. Let’s just say, when religion is perverted, to serve the ends of man, not God, it gets ugly, very ugly, on many levels. Thought control, at its deepest level, often operates as a devastating perversion of religion, and has the opposite effect of authentic religion. Not surprisingly, propaganda, writes Jacques Ellul, has played a significant role in the de-Christianisation of the world:

**‘...propaganda is one of the most powerful factors of de-Christianization in the world through the psychological modifications that it effects, through the ideological morass with which it has flooded the consciousness of the masses.... And this de-Christianization through the effects of one instrument – propaganda – is much greater than through all the anti-Christian doctrines.’** Ellul (Propaganda)

Thought reform, and Communist propaganda, of the nature Bishop Barker was exposed to, appears to have perverted two very important elements of Christianity—the call for **the repentance of sins**, and a **reassessed spiritual and physical walk** after such repentance (and God given forgiveness). Lifton wrote that thought reform had **two basic elements** and you will see the parallel when you read them below.

### **Thought Reform’s two basic elements:**

- 1] **‘confession the exposure and renunciation of past and present “evil” and**
- 2] **‘re-education, the remaking of a man in the Communist Image’**

Lifton writes, **‘These elements are closely related and overlapping, since they both bring into play a series of pressures and appeals – intellectual, emotional, and physical – aimed at social control and individual change.’**

We can see such thought reform elements playing out in our world today, with people expected to repent of their thought crimes/sins and for holding less 'enlightened' (i.e., traditional perspectives), all the while being expected to enthusiastically embrace the new ideologies.

The Ultimate Propagandist hates religious devotion toward the one true God, and apparently loves to pervert distinct characteristics of religion, twisting them toward his with his own, devil-friendly, ideological propaganda.

## **Bishop Barker's Beneficial Big Picture Thinking**

Bishop Barker came to an understanding in his imprisonment that the mind control he was subjected to aimed to destroy his religion and elevate its own. In recognizing that, he essentially addressed the perverted messages he was encountering and successfully reversed them. All the while, he kept his identity in God, to the benefit of his own wellbeing, noticeably more so than those who had also gone through the same imprisonment and thought control, and, in many cases, went on to suffer significant identity issues.

Bishop Barker understood that behind the evil he experienced in prison were principalities. He knew what he was dealing with, and of the primary importance of God, and therefore could face the attack on his mind and his beliefs far more effectively than others. Perhaps Lifton thought Bishop Barker odd in his approach, certainly he could only consider Bishop Barker's reference to an alliance between the Communists and demons as 'symbolic'. Despite this, Lifton was *also* from a time when relating truthful accounts in research, regardless of personal opinions and feelings, was, for most, a matter of important personal integrity. Lifton wrote of Bishop Barker: 'The evil and the power of the Communist behavior could only be explained, he felt, through the influence of demons – the evil counterpart of angels who have equally great power. His explanation, enthusiastically rendered, combined biblical and modern history.'

Bishop Barker had informed Lifton:

'The Old Testament says that the demons are the murderers of mankind. The Communists have killed off fantastic numbers of people. The demons seek to further the idea of people without God, as do the Communists. Both try to make the human being happy without God and against God. The demons are the mortal enemies of mankind. The demons make use of the Communists in order to kill as many human beings as is possible.... Therefore, in the long run, it is a religious question, only thoroughly understood through religion.'

Bishop Barker was able to effectively function both through, and after, extreme brainwashing because he understood the dark place it was coming from, and all the while he retained his secure identity in God.

**'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.'** Ephesians 6:12 (KJV)