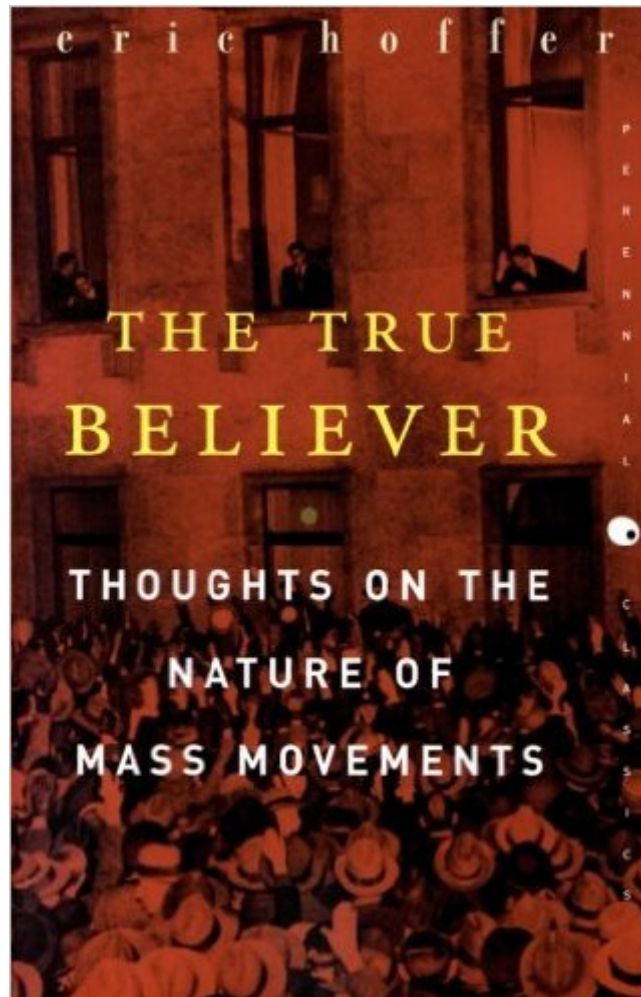


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The True Believer: Thoughts On The Nature Of Mass Movements (Perennial Classics)



Synopsis

Eric Hoffer is a student of extraordinary perception and insight. The range of his reading and research is vast, amazing. [The True Believer is] one of the most provocative books of our immediate day. "Christian Science Monitor The famous bestseller with concise insight into what drives the mind of the fanatic and the dynamics of a mass movement" (Wall St. Journal) by Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient Eric Hoffer, The True Believer is a landmark in the field of social psychology, and even more relevant today than ever before in history. Called a brilliant and original inquiry and a genuine contribution to our social thought by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The True Believer is mandatory reading for anyone interested in the machinations by which an individual becomes a fanatic.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When I first read Hoffer's classic book, "The True Believer", as a graduate student twenty years ago, I was shocked. I was astonished that a writer could openly suggest parallels among Christianity, Islam, fascism, and the KKK, and survive to write another book. Yet I was riveted by Hoffer's observations, which seemed to jump off the page in spite of his straightforward and unembellished prose. But I also recall thinking that Hoffer was a bit too brash in his assertions; that he ought to have tempered nearly every statement with a qualifier--a disclaimer that left open the possibility that he was mistaken. Upon reading Hoffer again, as a middle-aged and somewhat less idealistic professor, I find that several things have changed. First, Hoffer's observations seem even

more keenly relevant today, post 9/11, than they did in the post-Vietnam era. Secondly, I now understand Hoffer's apparent brashness. In my youthful zeal I often rushed through the preface of a book, or skipped it entirely. But therein was Hoffer's justification: "The book passes no judgments, and expresses no preferences. It merely tries to explain; and the explanations--all of them theories--are in the nature of suggestions and arguments even when they are stated in what seems a categorical tone. I can do no better than quote Montaigne: 'All I say is by way of discourse, and nothing by way of advice. I should not speak so boldly if it were my due to be believed.'" While I am generally no fan of blanket disclaimers, I understand why Hoffer did it this way. His words could have been too easily dismissed had they been continually tempered and restrained.

"The less justified a man is in claiming excellence for his own self, the more ready is he to claim excellence for his nation, his religion, his race or his holy cause."--Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer*

None of the terrorists of September 11 were destitute. Some even had wives and children. Nevertheless, they committed suicide for their cause. Anyone wanting to understand this horrible irony would do well to read Eric Hoffer's 1951 classic, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*. Eric Hoffer (1902-1983) was a self-educated US author and philosopher who was a migratory worker and longshoreman until 1967. He achieved immediate acclaim with his first book, *The true Believer*. According to Hoffer, the early converts to any mass movement come from the ranks of the "frustrated," that is, "people who..feel that their lives are spoiled or wasted." The true believers' "Faith in [their] holy cause is to a considerable extent a substitute for [their] lost faith in [themselves]." He says that we are prone to throw ourselves into a mass movement to "supplant and efface the self we want to forget." He then adds, "We cannot be sure that we have something worth living for unless we are ready to die for it." Hoffer offers a general insight about mass movements, which seems to prophetically explain why there is currently widespread anti-Western sentiment within Islamic countries: "The discontent generated in backward countries by their contact with Western civilization is not primarily resentment against exploitation by domineering foreigners. It is rather the result of a crumbling or weakening of tribal solidarity and communal life.

Written 50 years ago this classic book has been dusted off in the wake of the Taliban's bombing of the Pentagon in Washington DC and the WTC in NYC. The book concerns itself with the active phase of mass movements which are dominated by a true believer, a man of fanatical faith who is ready to sacrifice his life for a holy cause. The 19 suicide bombers who have wreaked so much havoc on America are fanatics of this sort. Eric Hoffer attempts to trace the fanatic's genesis and to

outline his nature. Hoffer doesn't dance around the subject like a behavioral therapist billing by the hour. He assumes, in a very straight forward fashion, that frustration with one's life is a peculiarity of fanatics, and assumes that this mindset is necessary for techniques of conversion to achieve their deepest penetration and most desirable results with regard to the fanatic's twisted adherence to his new faith. Hoffer allows that to understand the various facets of the fanatical personality requires an understanding of the practices of contemporary mass movements. Written circa 1951, he studied the Nazi's, the Fascist's, and the Communist's because it was here where the successful techniques of conversion had been perfected and applied. This is a book of ideas and as such it offers up theories. It suggests that through amplifying the negative feelings of its frustrated fanatic's a movement advances its interests by seconding their propensities. Hoffer also posits the thought that all not mass movements are bad, however the central point of the book is to explain the composition of the mindsets of a movement's collective of True Believers. At 168 pages followed by 9 pages of notes, the book is not difficult nor is it an arduous task to read. In fact it's pithy.

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