

# The Puzzling Power of Group Self-Deception

Seminar excerpt, February 7, 2003

What we could call “group self-deception,” is a type of culturally reinforced delusion. Missionaries are legitimately fearful of destructive cultural practices entering into the Christian movement, and of the puzzling power of group self-deception. However, we deceive ourselves if we think our own cultural tradition is devoid of group self-deception.

I want to address a major killer in much of the Westernized world which our society does little about. This is a cultural tradition that is very deep and strong in the Western world. I speak of the role and deeply rooted function in our society and churches of an addictive and dangerous drug called alcohol.

We are dealing with a culturally reinforced delusion that pervades both secular society and the cultural tradition of Christianity. Compare an evangelical writer on this topic writing in *Christianity Today*, with a secular author writing in *Newsweek*. The evangelical author mentions the alternatives of total abstinence and limited use, but he goes on actually to recommend limited use over abstinence:

Christians who do not commit to a principle of total abstinence should follow a guideline that would represent both discernment and Christian freedom by allowing limited use.

Totally lacking in the article is any awareness of the inevitable tragedy for many of those who follow its suggested social use of alcohol.

The secular author, unrestrained by the evangelical panic to conform to this world, says,

Booze and beer are not the same as illegal drugs. They're worse. ... Alcohol is a factor in more than half of all domestic-violence and sexual-assault cases. In 1995 four out of every 10 people on probation said they were drinking when they committed a violent crime, while only one in 10 admitted using illicit drugs. ... But when members of Congress tried to pass legislation that would make alcohol part of the purview of the nation's drug czar, the measure failed. The argument is this: heroin, cocaine, and marijuana are harmful and against the law, but alcohol is used in moderation with no ill effects by many people.

But here's the counterargument: there are an enormous number of people who cannot and will never be able to drink in moderation.

Years ago Upton Sinclair, a social prophet of his time, observed that few home owners would keep a dog around if it leaped upon one out of ten dinner guests and dragged them down by the throats to their deaths, yet that is what we do when we serve a deadly drug that does not seem to harm nine out of ten who use it, but condemns one out of ten to years of difficulties, often leading to violence, crime, child abuse, wife abuse and highway deaths of others who are totally innocent.

Our basic commitment to doing the will of God and glorifying Him must lead us to a serious reevaluation and questioning of both our theology and practice. This is the definition of mission: what is necessary to glorify God? And if “what is necessary” is more than merely becoming aware of Him, but coming alongside Him in the conquest of evil—then we have a huge mission to attack. 

BY **RALPH D. WINTER**

The late **Ralph D. Winter** founded the US Center for World Mission (now Frontier Ventures) to “beat the drum” for frontier missions. Believing we are called to glorify God in these cultures through fighting evils, he also founded William Carey International University to give degrees in International Development and the Roberta Winter Institute and the Institute for the Study of the Origins of Disease to focus on eradicating disease.