We live in a world of change. It is perhaps the most unremarkable and self-evident truth of life. Some see the world as essentially progressive, that over time we grow more advanced technologically, more confident in our abilities to control our destinies, more sure of our moral and ethical ascendence. This world is increasingly governed by the rule of law and a commitment to universal justice and freedom for all. We change for the better—such is the optimistic perspective.

Others see human society as essentially governed by chance, by capricious and arbitrary rulers who evoke hope, but govern through fear and the steel fingers of coercion. This is a desperate world of poverty and deceit, where moral fabric is thin and the needs of the elite loom ever larger at the expense of the common. Human beings are essentially impotent and look only toward maintaining a rude, yet stable existence—human nature is not noble, morality not assured, freedom an aberration.

These two visions of change, of progress or stifled development, seem to have co-existed across time in human society. Apart from the larger determining factors of change (unseen social and economic forces, imperialism, chance), how does the individual participate in this human drama as fodder for battle, as catalyst in public demonstration, or as believer in a religious congregation? How do we find shelter and stability amidst the rubble of war and revolution? Finally, how can the individual insulate herself from the vicissitudes of fortune, the tyrannies of life, and the excessive freedom of decision-making when the right pathway is unclear?

Eric Hoffer, in his seminal work, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (1951), viewed the post-war world at mid-century with trepidation. He found it difficult to explain the forces that had channeled the disillusion of trench warfare and poison gas, had established the foundation of Nazi fascist excess, perpetuated the prison of Soviet totalitarianism, painted the Red Sun of the People’s Revolution in Maoist China, launched nuclear destruction, or assembled the factories of death during the Holocaust. So much had depended on the creation of mass movements,
coalitions of the willing, led by fanatics who preached a glorious future, yet preyed on the vulnerabilities of the frustrated and disengaged. This remains a controversial book, because Hoffer did not limit himself to political or nationalist movements, but also examined religious and social organizations that were subject to the same principles of mass identity. For Hoffer, those lost souls on earth, the poor, the sinners, the misfits, who listened to the witching song of an eternal future in a thousand-year Reich, a life after death in heaven, a jihadist martyrdom, who subordinated their individuality into the communal grey of a mass movement, they themselves became the essential force for change.

Please read Parts I, II, and III of The True Believer, as well as sections xv, xvi, xvii, and xviii of Part IV. Then consider the following questions for a future discussion.

**Part I: The Appeal of Mass Movements**

1) According to Eric Hoffer, what are the primary shaping forces of change in the world? What is the role of faith, hope, and a vision of the future? Why is experience a handicap?

2) Why is faith in a holy cause something that engenders a burning conviction so important in the constitution of a mass movement? How does this faith act as a substitute? Why is selfless participation in a mass movement beneficial?

3) Why are mass movements interchangeable? Doesn’t this seem contradictory? How can a social revolution be stopped?

**Part II: The Potential Converts**

4) Hoffer argued that the “game of history is usually played by the best and worst over the heads of the majority in the middle.” (p. 24) What did he mean? Why can the undesirable elements in society exert such a marked influence on the course of a nation? What disaffected elements in society do you believe are least and most important for launching a mass movement? How does a mass movement benefit or suffer from discontent, hope, freedom, or poverty?
5) Analyze and explain in detail the following quotes by Hoffer:

- “The intensity of discontent seems to be in inverse proportion to the distance from the object fervently desired.” (p. 29)
- “Freedom is an irksome burden.... The most fertile ground for the propagation of a mass movement is a society with considerable freedom, but lacking the palliatives of frustration.” (p. 31)
- “It is futile to judge the viability of a new movement by the truth of its doctrine and the feasibility of its promises.” (p. 41)
- “The general rule seems to be that as one pattern of corporate cohesion weakens, conditions become ripe for the rise of a mass movement.” (p. 42)

Part III: United Action and Self-Sacrifice

“It is perhaps impossible to understand the nature of mass movements unless it is recognized that their chief preoccupation is to foster, perfect, and perpetuate a facility for united action and self-sacrifice.”—Eric Hoffer (P. 58)

6) Hoffer argues that the frustrated in society seek to escape an “irremediably blemished self.” They are willing to sacrifice and dissolve this self “by losing one’s individual distinctness in a compact collective whole.” (p. 59) Please analyze the way they do this through:

- Make-Believe
- Deprecation of the Present

7) Among the factors that promote self-sacrifice is a confusion between “things which are and things which are not.” Hoffer maintains that “we are less ready to die for what we have or are than for what we wish to have and to be.” What does he mean? Do you think it is true that “things which are not are indeed mightier than things that are”? Explain....

8) Hoffer argues that “the effectiveness of a doctrine does not come from its meaning, but from its certitude.” That sounds like a disconnect. Don’t doctrines represent ideas that have meaning, even absolute truth? Isn’t it important to believe in something tangible that you would be willing to sacrifice for? To die for? And yet,
we can only be “absolutely certain about things we don’t understand.” (p. 81) Hoffer says that “if a doctrine is not unintelligible, it has to be vague; and if neither unintelligible nor vague, it has to be unverifiable.” (p. 81) How do you explain this? Apply this concept to contemporary religious and political movements with some specific examples.

9) Fanaticism seems to be an important ingredient in the success of a mass movement. How would you describe the fanatic? Why can’t he be “weaned away” from his cause by an appeal to his reason or moral sense? What does it mean that he “cannot be convinced, but only converted.” (p. 86) Why must he be intolerant?

10) In what ways is hatred a unifying agent in a mass movement? What does Hoffer mean in noting that mass movements can rise and spread without a God, but never without belief in a devil.” (p. 91) Who is most often the devil and why? How does guilt affect the equation? Apply this to the historical and contemporary political world. How are fanatic Christianity or radical Islam dependent on hatred?

11) Both democracies and authoritarian governments to an extent employ propaganda to convince adherents and “solidify the base” (to use campaign rhetoric). Why do you think it is so important to interpret the truth and infuse commitment within a political or religious constituency? But Hoffer argues that “propaganda on its own cannot force its way into unwilling minds.... It penetrates only into minds already open...and articulates and justifies opinions already present in the minds of its recipients.” Do you think this is true? Would you agree that propaganda itself “succeeds mainly with the frustrated?” (p. 105) Apply this to the historical and political world.

12) According to Hoffer, what is the purpose of the leader of a mass movement? When are they called to the stage and what are the talents requisite for a successful performance? How do you interpret Hoffer’s dictum that “surrender to a leader is not a means to an end, but a fulfillment.” (p. 112) What is the difference between a mass movement leader and a leader in a free society?

13) How does “action” or “faith” unify a mass movement? What are their purposes and how do they reinforce the mass movement? Note how important a “call to action” is to a political or religious mass movement.
Part IV: Beginning and End:

14) There is a difference between fanatic leadership and that of the “practical man (or woman) of action.” Hoffer maintains that the man of action saves the movement from the suicidal recklessness of the fanatics, but his appearance “usually masks the end of the dynamic phase of the movement.” (p. 149) In fact, “the man of action is not a man of faith, but a man of law.” He perpetuates unity in an “arrived movement.” Therefore, he takes “great care to preserve in the new institutions an impressive facade of faith, and maintains an incessant flow of fervent propaganda, though he relies mainly on the persuasiveness of force.” (p. 150) How would you apply this to Vladimir Putin in Russia or Xi Jinping in China? Are these “arrived movements”?

15) Finally, please reflect on this summarizing passage regarding participants in a mass movement: “It is the true believer’s ability to ‘shut his eyes and stop his ears’ to facts that do not deserve to be either seen or heard which is the source of his unequaled fortitude and constancy. He cannot be frightened by danger nor disheartened by obstacles nor baffled by contradictions because he denies their existence. Strength of faith...manifests itself not in moving mountains, but in not seeing mountains to move.” (p. 80) What is the ultimate responsibility of the citizen in a democratic society?

“Power is given only to him who dares to stoop and seize it. There is only one thing that matters, just one thing: you have to dare!”—Fyodor Dostoevsky