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## Religious belief – how does it work? The answers of modern academic psychology

Classical psychoanalysis as well as modern academic psychology perfectly solved the mystery of religion – how it came into being, why it is believed, and how it works. Most recent brain research results that can demonstrate the effects of religious tools on the mind (as bells, candles, incense, Pavlovian linking of priests' gestures with believers' movements and so on) remain rather trivial in spite of their elaborate and expensive technology; of far greater interest is the older research of Leon Festinger, the experimentally proven theory of Cognitive Dissonance Reduction (= CDR). The CDR is probably most impressively demonstrated by the famous »two workers' groups' experiment« which was designed and performed the first time by Dr. Leon Festinger and amazes by its surprising results:

Two groups of workers without any knowledge of their each other's existence had to do the same kind of work: the most boring and nasty work you can imagine. But there was one decisive difference: group A was paid very well, whereas group B received a miserable salary. In the end, these groups had to answer questionnaires about their satisfaction with their work. According to Festinger's theory, which group will be more content with this awful and tiresome work? – Of course the miserably paid one; and exactly that did and always will happen. Why?

The CDR theory gives us the key to the solution. If you have two perceptions that contradict each other, you will experience a dissonance. This dissonance will make you feel uncomfortable. Therefore, you would like to reduce this feeling of uneasiness. As an attempt to reduce the unpleasant dissonance, that perception will be wiped out which you can more easily wipe out.

Now consider our experiment again. In group A you have two perceptions that fit together well: you do an unpleasant job, **but** it is paid well, which means a compensation. So no cognitive dissonance needs to be reduced, consequently your perception that you are doing an unpleasant job remains untouched and unchanged. Compare this with the other group B conditions: they cannot evade from general uneasiness, because there is no compensation to perceive. Out of their two perceptions – doing an unpleasant job and being miserably paid – they will in consequence change the first one of them, because it is easier to alter a subjective feeling (here: the feeling of discomfort whilst working) than the perception of a number (the salary in figures is well-known to everybody and fixed in every mind). That is why the miserably paid group is more »content« with their work than the well-paid one, and in this mechanism you will also notice the central secret of religion.

The CDR theory itself is substantially not much more than a reduced theory of repression sensu Freud. This is of special interest if you consider the effects of a strong vs. a weak sender which is also described within the theory

of Cognitive Dissonance Reduction: it has repeatedly been proven by experiment that you are far more inclined to believe facts, but also lies, if spread by a strong sender than if spread by a weak sender. But this is not all: lies that are spread by a strong sender are more easily believed the bigger and the more impudent they are. For you feel a strong dissonance (and thus uneasiness) whilst perceiving a sender as a strong one (e.g. your father as an honest to wonderful man, the big newspaper as serious to omniscient, the priest as venerable to unfailing) **and** perceiving the same as being a despicable villain (because of its resp. his silly to cynical lies). Compared to this, there is more consonance in the perception that someone habitually might be great, but is telling just now a little or even medium-sized lie – but never a big one! Thus, if he really needs to be believed, he sternly must spread bland and big lies. This is because of the CDR process described above, thus also revealing the secret of power.

Transferred to our question why religion needs and keeps believers, the insights of the CDR theory also reveal the solution of the question: why do people believe (or at least seem to believe) religious stuff? The famous Early Father Tertullianus (~ 200 A.C.E.) already knew the answer: »*Credo quia absurdum*« – I believe **because** it is absurd (remember: no compensation! – not: **although** it is absurd). But considering the idea and origin of gods, their substance and emergence, their shape and their appearance, we still grope in the dark; and Festinger cannot help us. – But psychoanalysis can, because it is aware of the necessity to explain substance, even psychic substance, not only psychic mechanisms.

»Wundt informs us, then, that taboo is an expression and derivative of the belief of primitive peoples in ›demonic‹ power. Later, he tells us, it freed itself from this root and remained a power simply because it was a power – from a kind of mental conservatism. And thereafter it itself became the root of our moral precepts and of our laws. Though the first of these assertions may provoke little contradiction, I believe I shall be expressing the thoughts of many readers when I say that Wundt's explanation comes as something of a disappointment. This is surely not tracing back the concept of taboo to its sources or revealing its earliest roots. Neither fear nor demons can be regarded by psychology as ›earliest‹ things, impervious to any attempt at discovering their antecedents. It would be another matter if demons really existed. But we know that, like gods, they are creations of the human mind: they were made by something and out of something« (SE XIII 24).

The most important insight into religion's origin and mechanism is disclosed by the Freudian theory, not so much by Freud's famous but widely invalidated pre-historical speculations than by his findings about infantile experience and its removal from consciousness by fear, mainly by the fear of retaliation (by something like a preventive stroke of the stronger one, i.e. mainly the parent of the same sex).

Gods are found to be nothing but the infantile images of the parents, unconsciously stored in the individual's mind and shaped and streamlined by history and society. This can be demonstrated for example by the notorious seats of all gods: every god begins his career on a mountain (e.g. Sinai, Kailash, Olympus, etc.), later moving to the sky: this is exactly the child's perspective when confronted with its parents (and, of course, other adults, but those are normally of minor emotional importance).

The unconscious contents which you will never know by intentionally remembering events of your childhood (but that still do work very effectively on your mind) are mainly acquired during childhood by fear, especially by fear of your by far overestimated parents. But why does this fear work so persistently, so stubbornly, and emotionally involving with long-lasting intimidating effects on man's mind?

There are so many unpleasant things little children can happen to experience. Most of these unpleasant experiences will stem from sexual desire, as the family is not a very suitable place to develop these desires: the young boy develops sexual desires towards his mother, and therefore he feels rivalry towards his father (of course, the same but reversed desires are experienced by the young girl, too, but these developments are of less importance due to the historical circumstances and further development). As the father is regarded as an obstacle, the boy wishes the father to be dead and away. Because children think that the adults can read their minds and know their most secret feelings, the young boy fears the retaliation or the preventive stroke of the father. These fearful desires are therefore suppressed and stored unconsciously but still work very effectively on one's mind (Oedipus Complex). That is why religious stories are:

1. always mirroring something like an idealized family represented by divine figures. These divine figures usually have very humane traits: there is hustle and bustle, tiff, quarrel, love and hatred in the sky – the situations everybody is literally familiar with in his childhood
2. full of sexual fantasies. Evidence you can easily find e.g. in the Ganesh myth, in which little Ganesh is his mother's Parvati's doorkeeper whilst she is bathing in the bathroom and beheaded by his father Shiva whom he firmly refused entry. Even more explicitly this can be observed in the story of Jesus within the Christian mythology: the mysterious, doubtful and otherwise not understandable guilt of Jesus for which he had to be killed, and thus by his crucifixion the rest of mankind is relieved from their guilt, is nothing but the unconscious feeling of guilt for the desires mentioned above. The proof is given by his mother Mary who is a virgin – therefore there is no rival to be feared, the father – represented by old, withered, and impotent Joseph – being virtually castrated. Because of this unconscious, symbolically distorted and disguised fulfilment of the infantile desires Jesus has to die, and that is where this strange feeling of guilt finally stems from. This feeling of guilt is

substantially infantile, but it is exploited by and makes up the substance of every religion.

Of course, these truths are not very amusing to us, as we do not appreciate these unconscious contents. But that does not prevent them from existing. If you face reality, you can sharpen the weapons against religion. Just as fighting diseases, you can only fight what you have understood.

Finally, it must be stressed that religion could never become powerful, if not organized. For this reason, one should also understand its social and historical origins and backgrounds. Or, to say it in Sigmund Freud's words:

»Since I am used to being misunderstood, I think it is worth while to insist explicitly that the derivations, which I have proposed in these pages, do not in the least overlook of the phenomena under review. All that they claim is to have added a new factor to the sources, known or still unknown, of religion, morality and society – a factor based on a consideration of the implications of psychoanalysis. I must leave to others the task of synthesizing the explanation into a unity. It does, however, follow from the nature of the new contribution that it could not play any other than a central part in such a synthesis, even though powerful emotional resistances might have to be overcome before its great importance was recognized« (SE XIII 157, note 2).

In the study ›Are atheists more depressed than religious people?‹ by Prof. Buggle and Nohe (Univ. Freiburg i. Br.), the connection between religiousness and inclination to neurosis is demonstrated: two extreme groups are compared with each other: strictly religious people on the one hand vs. determined atheists on the other. These two extreme groups were compared with »slightly« and »moderately« religious people. The experimental persons were measured in their degree of depression: what Prof. Buggle found out contradicts the widely spread idea of atheists being more inclined to depression than religious people. But all those studies that try to achieve this result in favour of religion, are, without any exception, vitiated by one fundamental methodological mistake: they only compare staunch believers to moderately or vaguely religious people, not, as required, to their counterparts. In fact, Buggle & Nohe, by a more scientific and valid approach, found out something that is noteworthy: slightly religious people were the most depressed ones, followed by moderately religious people. But far less depressed were strictly religious people, being topped only by the determined atheists, who seem to be the happiest group among all the experimental groups. These positive results for strictly religious people on the one hand and determined atheists on the other hand can be explained if you consider that they took side for or against religion and do not fall uncomfortably between two stools like slightly/moderately religious people do. It would be more than interesting to find out if similar results will be achieved in a culturally different society like the Indian one as well.

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