

CATALYST: Religion and religious faith in the light of the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance

Cognitive dissonance is when you prevent yourself seeing that your belief is false or probably untrue. It does not matter if it is true - your attitude to it is the problem.

Cognitive dissonance is a bad enough problem in the world without religion giving you an extra reason to engage in it as if there is not enough. Not only that but religion, particularly Christianity, is the best friend cognitive dissonance ever had.

You can meet Christians who seem to be open to the truth. You prove to them that their religion is in error or is man-made. They study the case against it and though it is airtight they still follow the faith. How can somebody maintain faith after knowing that it is absurd?

If atheism is true and convincing then how do we explain intelligent thinkers being Christians?

Psychologists say the Christian might be a hypocrite. He might not really care about the truth and is in the habit of acting as if he believes absurdities when he in fact does not. He may be just telling himself he believes but that does not mean he really believes. The Christian might be exercising cognitive dissonance where part of him knows his faith is misplaced and the other part believes. What he is doing is just ignoring his own knowledge of the truth. Or he might be a hypocrite and also engaging in cognitive dissonance.

If it is true that you need faith in God and religion to find your life has purpose and this is what ultimately and fundamentally matters, then it is to be expected that cognitive dissonance will reach its full illogical or evil potential in the context of God and religion. You would end up wanting to kill anybody who can debunk your faith successfully because you fear the truth and you fear the servants of the truth. Some Christians say the Bible God was so severe against other religions and strict with the one he started for that very reason. But it still means that they fall under suspicion of cognitive dissonance themselves.

You may tell yourself that what you feel it is true and that is a sign from God that it is true no matter what evidences or proofs say. You may tell yourself that your belief cannot be refuted. This indicates an attitude where you formulate your belief in such a way that nothing can refute it. For example, eg when magic or prayer fails you argue that it is working but not in the way you expect. The result is that you fail to let evidence against your belief talk to you. It does not sink it. You will end up ignoring such evidence or avoiding it and only looking for evidence that suits you.

It is certainly true that religion encourages and sets the stage for cognitive dissonance. But it doesn't follow that any religion thrives totally or mostly on it. Psychologists usually decide that if members of a mad religion cannot be reasoned with and seem sincere that they are suffering from cognitive dissonance. Nobody knows for sure if they are just stubborn and bigoted actors. And we do know that it is easy enough to act religious out of habit.

Anyway that aside, let us assume that religious people have cognitive dissonance. The sillier or the more evil their religion is, perhaps the stronger the dissonance is. You will notice that Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons despite their religions opposing modern science and modern culture and being generally difficult deliver a vastly stronger commitment. The sillier and the more out of touch and arrogant the religion is, the better it is at creating addicts to escapism. The more it attracts people who want to be escapists. It is obvious that Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons have a cheek in declaring modern science to be wrong when they have no relevant scientific education. The arrogance can be an attraction too. Cognitive dissonance and arrogance both pretend to know what is in fact not known for sure at all.

Belief in a God that you must please can only encourage and worsen cognitive dissonance. There is enough to develop dissonance over without that. Also, God is claimed to be a major and basic belief, far more important than you becoming a parent or anything like that.

Elliott Aronson says that cognitive dissonance is the strongest when you feel your concept of yourself as a good person is being challenged. So if you believe you are a good productive person and you hurt somebody else you will try to dehumanise them in some way. They don't deserve good treatment so you are still a good fair person if you hurt them. This is a dangerous thing for you are using the idea of deserving which goes with the idea of being a person to make them not much better than rodents. You are well aware that you cannot really guarantee getting the consequences you want. Outside factors let that happen which means God cooperates with you. So your revenge when it works is not all down to you. Believers in God are saying, perhaps without realising it, that what they do is more God's responsibility than theirs. It sanctifies evil. Also, if God is important to you that will trigger dissonance when you do something to offend him.

Faith is really about acting on God's behalf - you don't just believe, you believe and exercise belief in action. Faith means that belief and action are unified. What you do speaks of belief. If you do good, the dissonance gets worse for you are telling yourself that you are bad if you start to doubt or question the beliefs.

Religion says that faith is a gift from God and God can put feelings in you and ideas in your head but only if you consent. This way, your spontaneous religious feelings and faith seem to have arisen because you have chosen them and co-operated with God. This is a trick that makes you imagine you believe and follow religion freely when in actual fact you are not free because you have been conditioned and because people have reduced your connection to reality and reduced your power to perceive reality accurately. Those who entice you into cognitive dissonance will tell you that you are letting yourself look through the lens that God gives. This is gaslighting - it is trying to stop you perceiving that the faith is wrong if it is indeed wrong.

Religion, particularly very mystical and magical religion, is training in cognitive dissonance and thus a force for evil. When religion is good it facilitates subtle forms of evil and injustice and mental illness so it is never really good. The results may take decades to come to a climax but they will.

Dissonance is at work in parents who take their baby to church as it has been found guilty of original sin and thus needs forgiveness from God in baptism. Their emotions are not right. They should rage against such an accusation. Faith does not justify accusing the innocent. Where is the proof? Does anybody care? Thousands of other examples could be thought of.

No wonder hellfire and brimstone preachers act as if everybody else will go to Hell but them. Jesus gave out about proud hypocrites. Imagine how much worse it is to imagine you are too brilliant to go to Hell and it is something for others to worry about! It implies you would send them there yourself if you had the authority.

Religion trains people in cognitive dissonance through prayer. People pray for they think it does good. When it doesn't save them from terrible things such as a crippling depression they may reason that it protected them from worse. So they try to prevent themselves from seeing that prayer does not work. If it does not work, they cannot see it.

Prayer is fundamentally immoral because it thrives on and feeds on blindness.

Suppose you sold tap water around the doors as a preventative for cancer. What if people get cancer nevertheless? Will you tell them that it protected them from the other cancers they could have got but didn't? Why not? You see how awful and conniving it would be to do such a thing! Prayer is bad for the same reason. It is the principle. You cannot condone one thing and not another. People can only guess that prayer works. It is only their opinion. But they build too much on that opinion. They may even be enraged against you should you question the power of prayer. It is dangerous and intolerant of them to take their mere opinion that seriously.

Cognitive dissonance takes place when a person may love and hate a person at the one time. That is why those who talk about loving the sinner and hating the sin can be accused of hating the person and inciting hatred. Hating the sin means wanting to see the person hurt for committing sin. Sin is against the law of God meaning it is intolerable. The person is to be forced to obey by the threat of punishment and punished if he refuses to obey. Loving the sinner is nonsense in such a context. Talk about loving the sinner and hating the sin is just something people say to make themselves look good but do not mean. This form of cognitive dissonance is very basic in religion. The notion of people being frail sinners who are loved by God depends on it. So if love the sinner and hate the sin is wrong then there is no point in worrying about God or religion. Religion is then based on error and lies and hypocrisy.

Cognitive dissonance in religion is very common. Another example, is how a person can think that the Bible is written by God and is the perfectly good book despite knowing that God commanded his people under threat of dire retribution to murder relatively good people by stoning. The person does this for she feels that presenting herself as well-meaning despite her reverence for such evil will get people to accept her. If she ranted that God did right to have those good people murdered and didn't present herself as a goody-goody adorer of the Bible she would get the reaction she should get. People would despise her.

Her masquerade as well-meaning should actually enrage people more but human nature cares more about fitting in and an getting an easy life than it does about principles of decency. That is why she gets away with it.

Religious people think helping others to drop God and stand firm on their own inner resources as a way of getting the best they can out of life even in the middle of suffering is a waste of time. They insist that God is needed. They arrogantly claim to know that belief in God is beneficial and an essential for everybody.

Some unbelievers encourage people to trust themselves and their coping faculties not God. They get disheartened when what they say seems to have had no effect. Perhaps they are forgetting that denial of the truth is a bereavement stage. The

believers' opposition to the truth and denial of the truth do not prove your efforts are failing. The person mourns the loss of their religious faith and denial is one of the stages of grief. It is a stage they have to go through before they can approach the truth and process it.

Remember, it is the priests and teachers or whatever that are accountable for their pain - not you. They have been really hurt by their religion. That hurt needs to be acknowledged and worked through.

Denial can co-exist with acceptance of the thing denied. That might be why it hurts many so much. Denial is an attempt to try and get rid of the pain by ignoring it or refusing to face it.

In my experience, losing faith in Catholicism was very painful and I still found myself acting Catholic and forbidding anybody to question Catholicism in my presence long after my faith had vanished. The faith had gone but the habits of faith had not. I did not have the self-confidence to be happy about my mind telling me that Catholicism was not credible or healthy. I needed help.

People encouraging my faith were hurting me not helping me. When I read a philosophy book that dismantled all the excuses for belief in God despite his standing by and letting evil sometimes have free rein I felt validated in my unbelief. I felt relieved. I had won the comfort that none of my family or friends or me could ever be damned to Hell forever by the Christian God simply because he is a cruel man-made fiction. It is better to go out of existence at death than to maybe live forever in Hell no matter how small the chance of that happening is.

Christians say that you need to act against forces that threaten innocent life such as abortion or the family such as LGBT. They say that if nothing is done all babies could die and all families be ruined. That is a denial that God will intervene and thus an affirmation that he will only work through us. So what do they want God for? It is obvious they are using God as a crutch and a contradictory one at that! If God is God then if the families are all ruined then he let it happen so it is his will! It is then not really man that has destroyed marriage but him for he is the creator of all and thus responsible for all. If you want to believe in God but don't, it is to be expected that you will try to tell yourself that your best efforts to do good are God's effort. You don't want to think that God will do something if we do nothing even though doing something is what God is for!

People should be aware of the problem of cognitive dissonance and examine themselves. Only when they find it in themselves can they try to be free from it. Only then can they recover from it. The more religious a person is the stronger it will be - that person needs psychological and professional help. People who don't believe in the supernatural are capable of cognitive dissonance. But people who do believe in the supernatural are at a bigger and more dangerous risk. They have something that the unbeliever in the supernatural has not got, they have something extra with which to create cognitive dissonance. For example, Ann is dying of cancer. Her husband gets a priest in who says God told him that he will miraculously heal her. The priest does the healing but Ann simply worsens. The husband might reason, "The priest did heal her but then Satan interfered and miraculously inflicted illness on her." With the supernatural, any bizarre logic is possible. And there is nothing anybody can do to prove the husband wrong. That empowers his dissonance and there is no reason to believe that he will ever get out of it. The most powerful and addictive cognitive dissonance needs belief in the supernatural.

To conclude, we are all prone to cognitive dissonance but by telling us that faith is God's gift from him telling us to believe in the Christian religion and that faith can be right though it seems wrong at times the Christian religion is a catalyst for religious cognitive dissonance. The Christian ends up failing to care about herself or others enough to be a servant of undiluted truth.