

# Religion as Mental Short-Circuit

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## ABSTRACT

By identifying religion as schema and attribution process, the first two following sections of the essay argues that religions and cults short-circuit normal cognitive process, bypassing the objective evidence and logical argument inconsistent with the belief system. In the last two sections, the essay demonstrates that recognizing religious thinking mode as a mental short-circuit can be extended to the broader application in human cognition. What's more, the essay examines the perspective of believers who prioritize the fulfillment of their psychological needs over the righteousness of the logic and calls on building new healthy connections with previous victims in cults instead of spending major effort convincing them of the logic flaw in their previous belief.

## Introduction

According to Pew Research Center(2015), an estimation of 85 percent of the world population are religious by 2021. Religions and cults, which existed as early as the dawn of human civilization, have long influenced our belief system that perceives and interprets the world. Though many people have found mental comfort and answers to life questions in the religious belief system, the fundamental thinking mode underlying the system inevitably presents the danger: the distorted view of the world under others' manipulation instead of one's independent critical thinking. This drives believers to act without rationality or morality in certain occasions, creating tragedies such as terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda, massacres during the Crusades, and the 1978 mass murder-suicide case of Peoples Temple. These infamous events have directed the world's attention to understanding the cognitive framework behind religious people's behavior. By identifying religion as schema and attribution process, the first two following sections of the essay argues that religions and cults short-circuit normal cognitive process, bypassing the objective evidence and logical argument inconsistent with the belief system. In the last two sections, the essay demonstrates that recognizing religious thinking mode as a mental short-circuit can be extended to the broader application in human cognition. What's more, the essay examines the perspective of believers who prioritize the fulfillment of their psychological needs over the righteousness of the logic and calls on building new healthy connections with previous victims in cults instead of spending major effort convincing them of the logic flaw in their previous belief.

## Religion as Schema

By definition, a schema is a cognitive structure or mental representation containing organized, prior knowledge about a particular domain (Fiske & Linville, 1980). Recognizing religion as a cognitive schema, the fundamental feature lies in its propensity for stability, fitting or adapting the new data to the existing religious schema rather than modifying the religious schema to the real-life stimuli (Neisser, 1976). This is reflected in that religious people continue to believe in what they have been previously taught in church or family even in situations with inconsistent and contradictory information, remaining ignorant to evidence that logically challenges their previous perception (McIntosh, D. N., 1995). Two following results of the stability in religious schemas are religious interpretation consistent with belief system and

ignorance of non-religious objective evidence or logic. People with religious schema are more likely to impose a religious interpretation on the events by taking the short-circuit of direct implementation of schema, thus making faster and more determined perception than those without religion in general (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). This creates a self-verification circularity because the religious interpretations of multiple events reconfirm and reinforce believers' faith in the truthfulness of a religion. In addition, the tendency for stability in schema induces people to fill in the gaps of their perception to quickly form a religious explanation that is consistent with rule books, short-circuiting across possible logic gaps and going beyond the actual information given (Bruner, 1957; Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977). However, the cost of increased efficiency in short-circuit cognitive process is the high possibility of errors, such as mistaking correlation for causation, because the anticipations are often made in the absence of enough objective environmental bases (Taylor & Crocker, 1981).

## Religion as Attribution Process

Attribution theory is described as the process by which people form causal interpretations of the events around them, seeking to make sense of their experiences (Jones et al., 1987). Many researchers claim that religious way of thinking is attribution process in nature because religion provides a broad scale "meaning system," which is a frame of reference for interpreting the whole range of life events (Gorsuch & Smith, 1983; Pargament & Sullivan, 1981). There are three underlying motivation for using religion as an attribution process: a general desire to understand religious meaning in the world, an attempt to control events using rule books and a propensity to enhance self-esteem by ignoring information inconsistent with one's religious belief system (Spilka, B. et al., 1985).

Firstly, according to Lerner, people are motivated to see the world as not only meaningful *per se*, but also as "just" and fair (1970). This is where religion comes to place as it interprets events in terms of some broad meaning-belief system to satisfy humans' desire to know and understand. People tend to interpret an event simply following rule books without further consideration because religion incorporates a sense of meaning to everyday events, providing believers with a short-circuit to form causal reasoning. Systems of religious concepts offer individuals a variety of meaning-enhancing explanations of events in terms of concepts of God, salvation, and sin. (Spilka, B. et al., 1985) Likewise, the creation of "afterlife" and "reincarnation" covers the flaws in the "just" world belief, allowing believers to adjust flexibly to the inner logic of the belief system.

Secondly, theorists have suggested that the intrinsic motive for acquiring knowledge may have evolved from the more extrinsic motive of control and prediction (eg. White, 1966). The rule books, in this case scriptures of religions and doctrines of cults, perfectly meet this motive because one of their essential purposes is to explain its self-invented inner logic and connection between different things and events. By referring to these guidelines and incorporating life events into the concepts and frameworks in the belief system, humans can reach causal conclusions with unfalsifiability and all-condition adaptability. In this way, people obtain an illusionary sense of control by following a short-circuit of religious attribution instead of going through the whole process of reflection.

Thirdly, religious attributional activity consists in part of an individual's attempt to minimize threats to self-esteem and maximize the capacity for self-enhancement. Conventional religious practices, such as personal faith, prayer and rituals, enhance feelings of control and self-concept by directly referring to the integrated meaning-belief system in rule books (Spilka, B. et al., 1985).

## A Larger Scope of Application

By investigating the significance of the conclusion on the short-circuit thinking mode in religions and cults, the essay demonstrates that the conclusion have a larger scope of application in the general cognitive process than simply in the field of religions and cults, thus maximizing the importance of the current finding as a warning for people's overconfidence in the justification of their judgments.

The fundamental base of schema theory and attribution theory is the existence of a belief system in an individual. In fact, it is not restricted to a specific religious belief but any inner criteria people have for interpretation and evaluation (i.e, people's views on the world, life and values). Likewise, the "rule book" in this case is not just *The Bible* or *Das Kapital*, but all the past knowledge and experience one has acquired in their lifetime. The previous "rule books" together form a comprehensive orderly system of one's belief, also referred to as "inner working-models of the world" by Bowlby (1982). The similar cognitive framework developed by Ball-Rokeach et al. (1984) enables the person to engage in cognitive activity related to "selective remembering and forgetting, information processing, decision-making, conflict resolution, ego defense," in other words, interpreting the whole range of life events.

The key feature of schema, propensity for stability, is seen in all kinds of belief systems. For example, studies show that people tend to persist in maintaining beliefs they have formed in the research settings, even when the original evidence is later proven false (Anderson et al., 1980). The two following results of propensity for stability, interpretation towards previous belief system and ignorance of objective facts and logic, are also pervasive in cognitive process. In the experiment of Markus et al. (1985), participants who possess a masculine self-schema (i.e., consider themselves highly masculine and view masculinity as very important to themselves) perceive a video of everyday behavior in terms of masculinity to a greater degree than those without a masculine self-schema. From the evolutionary perspective, heuristic information processing (shortcuts that simplify and shorten the process of problem solving) has advantages of being faster and more economic than systematic information processing (attempts to thoroughly understand any available information through careful attention, deep thinking, and intensive reasoning; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). The price people have to pay for this advantage is the higher possibility of distorted and biased judgment under external manipulation of others, such as political propaganda that affects their belief system, or inner influence of their own belief system, such as prejudice and discrimination learned from the environment they grow up in.

In addition, the key to understanding the broader application of attribution theory is to see the general humanity underlying it. As Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid once argued, "animal principles of action" is that of desire: "the desire of power, the desire of esteem, and the desire of meaning." First, the attribution process that meets human's need to seeking meaning can be traced back as far as the introduction of teleology in the age of Aristotle. People have the tendency to add meaning and draw causal conclusion to everything, even when that deviates them from the true mechanism of the entities they observe. Second, the attribution process satisfies humans' desire for a sense of control over outcomes. For example, people tend to attribute more control and power of prediction to themselves than is warranted by objective circumstances (Langer, 1975; Wortman, 1975). Lastly, the process enhances self-concept and self-esteem, which are central to nearly all areas of human behavior and motivation (Epstein, 1984). A common example of it is the "self-serving bias," which is "the tendency to attribute our successes to ourselves, and our failures to others and the situation" (Stangor, 2015).

To conclude, the propensity for stability in schema and the desires for meaning, control and self-esteem in attribution process have a broader application in all kinds of human cognitive process. By incorporating our own belief system

into daily interpretation, we often unconsciously follow the easily-accessible short-circuit while firmly believing that we make totally rational judgments without prejudice. This should make us question the existence of a so-called “only correct mode of thinking” and acknowledge the inevitable flaws and dangers in our cognitive process, constantly reminding ourselves to doubt and investigate into our “confident” and “rational” judgments.

## **A Perspective from Believers**

From the perspective of those who have faith simply for mental comfort, this essay argues that the short-circuit thinking mode in religions and cults does not matter for them because they prioritize the fulfillment of their psychological needs acquired from religion and cults, such as feeling of confidence, peace, connection and love, over the rationality of the logic.

According to Langone (1995), people who join religions have some similar features such as a high sense of stress or dissatisfaction, lack of self-confidence, desire to belong to a group, frustrated spiritual searching and cultural disillusionment. However, their psychological needs are not always satisfied in a healthy and sustainable way from outsiders' perspective. In some cases, the charismatic groups cause members to become extremely dependent on its compliance-oriented expressions of love and support by gradually isolating members from outside influences, establishing unrealistically high, guilt-inducing expectations, punishing any expressions of “negativity,” and denigrating independent critical thinking (Langone, M. D., 1995). As many members were introduced to the religion/cult when their prior connections were lost and when they were seeking connection, they dread losing their current connection with the group. This fear induces them to follow everything in the principles of the “rule book”, putting aside the significance of whether the principles have logic flaws or other practice of mental short-circuit. In addition, research on post-cult effects (Galanter, M., 1983; Martin, P. R. et al., 1992; Langone, M. D., 1995) indicates that those who leave the charismatic group experience considerable distress after their return to the mainstream. This finding shifts our conventional view on coping with those who have left charismatic groups: what truly matters is helping them build their new connection with the world through healthy love and support, instead of spending our major efforts on convincing them of the logic flaws in their previous belief system.

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