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Believing Selves and Cognitive Dissonance: Connecting Individual and Society via “Belief”

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Abstract: “Belief” as an analytical tool and critical category of investigation for the study of religion has been a resurging topic of interest. This article discusses the problems of language and practice in the discussion of “belief” and proceeds to map a few of the emergent frameworks, proposed within the past decade, for investigating “belief”. The issue of inconsistency, however, continues to remain a perennial issue that has not been adequately explained. This article argues for the utility and value of the “believing selves” framework, in conjunction with revisionist theories of cognitive dissonance, to advance the claim that beliefs are representations, as well as functions, of cultural history which bind individual and society.

Keywords: study of religion; belief; believing selves; cognitive dissonance; individual; society

1. Introduction

“Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independent of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own—unaided by the describing activities of human beings cannot.”

—Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* [1]

“Words do not express thoughts very well. They always become a little different immediately after they are expressed, a little distorted, a little foolish. And yet it also pleases me and seems right that what is of value and wisdom to one man seems nonsense to another.”

—Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha* [2]

The two quotes note the mediating function of language in translating and expressing our thoughts. This places a fundamental dilemma with the study of beliefs in religious contexts. Given linguistic differences, cultural and subcultural nuances, the translation from cognition to language and the observer’s subsequent inference from language to cognition leads us to wonder the extent to which we can truly understand one another. Not only do misunderstandings and misinterpretations happen between persons of the same neighborhood but the issue is accentuated when we aim to understand persons of another language and culture. In *Belief, Language and Experience* [3], anthropologist Rodney Needham began his inquiry by raising the question whether a non-English speaking person, from a culture without a concept of “belief,” can say: “I believe in God.” Within this proposition, the concepts of “belief” and ‘God’ are put into question. What does it mean to “believe” and what does this person mean by “God”? Moreover, we can beg the question of that singular pronoun: “I,” which evokes notions of self, identity, and the individual. While each of these concepts can be discussed and their respective meanings excavated, this article will focus only on “belief.”

The article will first discuss the problems of language and practice that have complicated the discussion of belief as an analytic tool and critical category for the study of religion. It then proceeds to

sketch a few emerging frameworks for the investigation of belief followed by some critical thoughts on their respective proposals. Taking up the framework of “believing selves,” and its emphasis on commitment, the issue of inconsistency is addressed through the theory of cognitive dissonance and its four emergent revisionist theories. This combination situates religion’s meaning-making capacities in relation to identity and the individual as a reflective index of social structures. This is not to say that persons are one-to-one reflections of society but are rather embodied beings possessing particular trajectories and experiences along individualized space-time continuums. Beliefs are not only reflections of our being but they facilitate our orientations to our respective realities. In this regard, the concept of belief is taken out of its “religious” context and considered in terms of its quotidian features through the field of social psychology before being re-applied to religion. The article argues that beliefs are embodied representations, a function of cultural histories, that bind individual and society together.

2. The Problem of Language and Practice

Within anthropological literature, the concept of belief—as represented in the English language—has been thoroughly discussed with respect to its etymological history [3,4], syntax and semantics [5], and the influence of Christian history including the dynamics of power that have influenced the meaning of belief [4,6]. In this regard, critical analysis of the concept has declared belief a Christian concept [7] and its employment creates translational and cultural concerns in the description and analysis of non-Christian religious traditions. Quite famously, Needham [3] called for the abandonment of belief by arguing the concept’s analytic inadequacy and indeterminacy for any meaningful study of religion. However, this is a dramatic and hasty conclusion. Instead, his analysis illustrates the inadequacy of the English language and the constraints of Christian history. This critical stance towards Christianity’s influence on the study of religion has prompted a reflexive turn towards the religious background of social scientists [8,9], their implicit influences, contextual relationships in the field, and even the consideration of their emotions as a source of data [10]. Despite such efforts, the concerns of the English language persist in the depiction and investigation of belief.

As a major source of empirical data, language is an intuitive starting point when thinking about belief. Ludwig Wittgenstein, at the end of his critique of Fraser’s *Golden Bough*, claimed that in order to understand belief—and go beyond the levels of description and explanation—we must take a holistic approach to language [11]. And indeed, much research has taken this approach by focusing on language as a vehicle of thought and, therefore, a window into belief. What emerged from ethnographic investigations, however, is not what people *believe* but rather what they *think* about belief and the various methods of verification and justification of their beliefs being true [12,13].

Anthropologist, Charles Lindholm notes that the justification and maintenance of belief can be discussed along a Durkheim-Weber continuum. At one end, we have the Durkheimian camp which discusses belief in terms of an “affirmation of identity, emotional commitment, belonging and authenticity within a sacred community.” At the other, the Weberian camp discusses the effort and appeal of “constructed types of legitimated meaning systems that confirm belief” ([13], p. 348). Lindholm acknowledges that the two camps for “inculcating belief” are limited and that a focus on one camp is necessarily supplemented by the other ([13], p. 353). In other words, the two camps are neither mutually exclusive nor independent of each other but complementary and necessarily dependent without lending primacy to any one. Constructed types of legitimated meaning systems (examples include sacred texts or systems of thought, which confirm a belief as true) require recipients who affirm and commit to those meaning systems for their efficacy and function as legitimizing and confirming systems. Conversely, the formation of identity and the embodiment of meaning presupposes social structures that support various constructed systems of meaning which inform the development of identity and embodiment; “thought can live only on grounds which we adopt in the service of a reality to which we submit” ([14], p. 19). This dynamic is further illustrated by “moral-somatic processes” presented by Douglas Davies. He discusses how Weberian forms of

belief become associated with Durkheimian forms through embodied feelings that are experienced through “powerful but quickly passing emotions or influentially enduring moods” ([15], p. 2187). Scott Atran and Ara Norenzayan [16] argue for the importance of ritual in affirming, supplementing, and sustaining emotions and moods pervading religious postulates. While Roy Rappaport sees rituals as enabling the performative quality of such postulates with the persistence of their “validity as a social fact” being “contingent upon its continual enunciation” ([17], p. 281) and informing one’s identity and beliefs.

Although the methods of justification and verification assist in convincing persons of the veracity of their beliefs, the methods themselves are not beliefs and we should not presume that utilizing such methods entails a belief in the advocated proposition. In other words, there are degrees of belief and levels of commitment to the truth-value of a proposition. Appealing to a particular system of meaning, or an emotional experience, does not necessarily entail that one holds a corresponding belief. Moreover, the degrees of belief and varying levels of commitment include the possibility of discrepant, situational, and inconsistent beliefs [3,7,18–20] that can be contradictory, seemingly “syncretic,” and vague [21]. The field of anthropology has well-documented the observation that “religious behavior and language are not explained by systems of well thought out belief” ([21], p. 451). For example, David Hicks notes that, in the 1960s, “none of his Timorese informants—not even professed members of the [Catholic] Church—expressed any doubts” regarding the “existence” of ancestral spirits. Even avowed Catholics would consult their village shamans (*matan do’ok*) and while they might attend Mass, they may still “give ritual offerings to ‘lords of the earth’—nature spirits linked with specific localities in their countryside—without apparently feeling the least concern about intellectual contradiction or about how priests might interpret their conduct” ([22], pp. 172–73). Similarly, Thomas Kirsch [23] described the negotiation of beliefs among the Gwembe Tonga of southern Zambia who move between various Christian denominations in search of the Holy Spirit’s healing power. The emphasis is not on dogma or creed but rather practical and experiential efficacy of practice. This draws parallels with Alice Street’s ethnographic work with hospital residents in Papua New Guinea [24]. Street argues for belief as a form of “relational action.” She notes the shift from “belief,” *bilip*, that emphasizes kinship relations and witchcraft to a notion of belief that was exclusively a relationship with a Christian God and “forgetting” the context of discordant kin relations. However, this shift was due primarily with a concern for social and medicinal efficacy rather than a notion of truth ([24], p. 272). In this regard, the variability of belief is not sufficiently determined by publicly declared methods of justification and verification especially in cases of behavior that seemingly contradict such statements.

The investigation of belief for the study of religion therefore lies within a set of issues concerning the relationship between cognition, language, and behavior. In religious contexts, inconsistency and skepticism are ubiquitous. If we are to take persons seriously as culturally informed cognitive agents, it is necessary to delineate what is meant by “belief” and how we can think about it without being constrained by the influences of Christianity. Is there a model for thinking about belief that can exist independently of Christian constructions while still remaining applicable to Christian and non-Christian traditions alike?

3. Emergent Frameworks of “Belief”

Over the past decade, several frameworks have emerged with the resurgent interest in the topic of “belief.” In 2008, *Social Analysis* produced a journal issue discussing the merits of writing “against belief.” While it is near impossible to abandon the term, Galina Lindquist and Simon Coleman [25] argue that we can be skeptical and draw on the ongoing discussion, as well as the criticisms, of “belief” to present a different notion of “culture.” For example, Lindquist draws on the discussion of belief to present a view of “social styles” not in terms of fixed cognitive stances but in terms of modes of “being in the world” as well as “practices that are not merely repeated, but are forms of *poesis* whereby cultural perception and practice mutually constitute each other” ([25], p. 15). Jon and Hildi Mitchell draw on criticisms of “belief” to present a performative rather than a propositional stance toward

culture in their discussion of embodiment among Mormons and Catholics [26]. Hicks wrote “against belief” by investigating belief as an index of attitudes to sacred artefacts. Based on his fieldwork in East Timor, he noted that the differing attitudes to sacred objects and engagement in rituals reflected a range of commitment and attitudes persons had regarding religious propositions, i.e., belief in ancestral ghosts [22].¹ In this regard, “belief” can be utilized as a concept and critical category to contrast ethnographic investigations against what has typically been considered to be “belief.” This retains the concept as a problematic category with its own set of criticisms in the study of religion but utilized as a methodological platform of analysis to present a different notion of culture.

Tanya Luhrmann in building upon her notion of “interpretive drift”—which notes the gradual transition from the suspension of disbelief to a period of ambiguity and ultimately a submersion into a framework of thought, interpretation, and commitment [27]—develops the role of the imagination, or training the imagination. In this, God becomes/is a real entity in a U.S. evangelical Christian community that taught people to talk to God through prayer, with whom they could laugh and get angry, have conversations, and even “go on dates” with God [28]. She further explains:

“None of these subjects had those experiences willfully. They did not intentionally decide to hear God say, ‘Excuse me.’ They did not intentionally decide to have an angel wake them up. They entered the project with a broad, generic desire to hear God speak or perhaps just to get their prayer life moving again; they spent thirty minutes a day imaginatively immersed in the scriptures; and then they had unplanned, idiosyncratic experiences that they saw with their eyes and heard with their ears” ([28], p. 216).

For Luhrmann, the imagination plays a pivotal role that enables a transition from voluntary engagement to involuntary visual and auditory experiences. The focus on imagination, and “interpretive drift,” emphasizes the meaning-making process via practice, which then serves as a method of justification and verification. By describing the psychological and social contexts, Luhrmann engages with a “culture of belief.” Jonathan Mair has explicitly advocated that the study of belief should engage in a comparative approach of different, historically specific modes, and styles or “cultures of belief.” In his discussion of Inner Mongolian Buddhists, he argues that rather than the particular content of belief the emphasis is placed on *style* which is associated with a set of attitudes, modes of experience, practice, and the relationships that stipulate cognitive and non-cognitive associations to propositional content ([21], p. 450).

In 2013, the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* produced an issue focusing on the performative dimensions of belief. This view builds upon Talal Asad’s criticism of Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion, which emphasized meaning over practice [6]. He states, “it is a modern idea that a practitioner cannot know how to live religiously without being able to articulate that knowledge” ([6], p. 120). Abby Day and Gordon Lynch state that, over the past decade, studies utilizing “qualitative methods to establish patterns of belief in Britain and North America have found that respondents struggle to articulate beliefs that are consistent or have a high degree of salience in their lives” ([20], p. 200). They further observe three common, “default yet not universal,” assumptions in the sociology of religion ([20], p. 200):

¹ Hicks’ approach to “belief” and material religion is applicable to instances of uproar and anger when the “sacred” is violated. Not only does this pertain to caricatures of the prophet Muhammad, notably Denmark in 2005 and France in 2015, and the crucifix or images of Jesus (examples include: the practice of *fumi-e*, stepping on an image of Jesus or Mary, in Japan during the 17th century as a method of discerning and persecuting Christians; Andres Serrano’s 1987 photograph, *Piss Christ* of a crucifix submerged in a glass of his own urine, which created a stir in New York at the time of its exhibition and again in Paris in 2011; a teenager facing jail time for mimicking fellatio with a Jesus statue in Pennsylvania in 2014; and another case of two teenagers in Utah, 2015, for vandalizing a Mormon meetinghouse) but it also engages with discussions of the sacred in secular contexts (e.g., *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, 2015; and debates regarding the violation of human rights).

- (1) “all people all have some form of religious or existential belief system which forms a central reference point for their lives and belief can be universally found in all human cultures.
- (2) Religious beliefs exist as cognitive, creedal propositions, in relation to which people orient their identities and practices in a direct and generally consistent way.
- (3) A person’s religious beliefs, or spirituality, can be explicitly stated as a set of propositions and are therefore open to the gaze of the researcher through methods such as surveys (which measure degrees of assent to creedal propositions) and the research interview (which allows for a more open-ended explication of an individual’s “beliefs”).”

The noted studies of inarticulacy and inconsistency of beliefs question these assumptions. Day and Lynch go on to argue for a “three modes” model of belief that emerged from their research among “young people.” The first notes “belief as a *marker of cultural identity*” ([20], p. 201). That is, belief is a mode by which “they” could distinguish themselves from “other” cultural groups. This mode was particularly significant for “those who identified as being part of a minority group within a wider dominant religious/non-religious milieu or who wished to distinguish themselves from another minority group” (which minority groups are not specified). Moreover, this mode of belief is “learned and cultivated as a visible marker of difference in the context of establishing a distinct cultural identity.” The second mode is “*an expression of significant social relationships and networks of belonging.*” They reflect a “sense of belonging” and “express a sense of bond with others who are taken to be important sources of guidance, and affiliation.” The third mode is stated as “*an organizing centre for an individual’s or a group’s life*” and involves a “sustained attempt to shape thought, emotion, body, and practice in accordance with an explicitly stated set of beliefs derived from experiential, textual or institutional sources of religious and spiritual authority” ([20], p. 202). In this regard, Day and Lynch focus on the function of belief and its expression as, what Erving Goffman called, a “presentation of self” [29]. In this sense, they agree with Coleman and Lindquist that it would be premature to abandon belief despite its limited utility. Instead, the sociology of religion, they state, needs to “conceptualize belief in more diverse and complex ways” ([20], p. 200; [19]).

4. A Few Critical Thoughts

At this juncture, it is worth briefly noting Emile Durkheim’s theory of *homo duplex*: “On the one hand is our individuality—and, more particularly, our body in which it is based; on the other is everything in us that expresses something other than ourselves” ([30], p. 152). Each of us have been molded by our own “modes of existence”—thoughts, emotions, and experiences—navigating our “awareness of reality” as bodily agents: “My experience of life within the floating time structure of past, present, and future cannot be experienced by anyone else.” And yet, we are “a member of a species, a social being” functioning within society according to the “rules and patterns of society” ([31], p. 13). Our sense of becoming and social belonging is thus a “mixture of [social] enforcement and personal freedom” ([32], p. 182) by which our seemingly free actions become acts of reproducing and perpetuating a particular culture. With this duality in mind, Durkheim fashions the social and human sciences:

“Although sociology is defined as the science of societies, it cannot, in reality, deal with the human groups that are the immediate object of its investigation without eventually touching on the individual who is the basic element of which these groups are composed. For society can exist only if it penetrates the consciousness of individuals and fashions it in ‘its image and resemblance.’ We can say, therefore, with assurance and without being excessively dogmatic, that a great number of our mental states, including some of the most important ones, are of social origin” ([30], p. 149).

In this regard, the individual is a necessary subject of inquiry for belief as a reflection of broader social structures. As Claude Lèvi-Strauss notes, “The proof as to what is social can only be a mental one [. . .] we can never be sure we have fathomed the meaning and function of an institution if we are

not capable of reliving its impact upon the individual consciousness" ([33], p. 14; [34,35]). The study of belief is then a study, among many, of the diverse relationships between individual and society.

However, between individuals and society lies the problem of language, the interpretation of propositional statements and performativity, and the complexities in that discussion for the investigation of belief. As noted above, many studies "reveal *how* believers convince themselves that their beliefs are true," which prompted Lindholm to discuss the two camps of justification and verification ([13], p. 341). In part, the observed methods of justification and verification, as well as the varieties of discourse, present a range of ways by which social institutions and structures influence individual thought, value, and meaning-making processes. Tanya Luhrmann's work on "interpretive drift" (in the case of modern witchcraft in England) and the "imagination" (among evangelical Christians in the U.S.) contributes to the discussion about this process. Jonathan Mair's proposal of "cultures of belief" also configures within this dynamic by which persons, as historically-situated beings, develop and justify their beliefs and propositional attitudes as true through practice.

The three modes of belief, by contrast, are not modes of justification—although they can contribute to them—but instead they note the function of beliefs in relation to identity and community. For Day and Lynch, identity is conveyed and represented by belief. However, this framework lacks a working definition, set of characteristics, or discussion that delineates belief and how it functions as a mode denoting a "marker of cultural identity," an "expression of significant social relationships," or an "organizing center." Categorizing such functional modes of belief does not distinguish beliefs from other propositional statements nor is it clear how these modes are different enough from each other to warrant a distinct category. How is the expression of belief as a marker of cultural identity different from belief as an expression of one's social relations or an organizing center? A cultural identity implies social relations and should not be considered as something particular for "minority groups" (this is evident in Day's *Believing in Belonging* [36] of the white Britons in North Yorkshire). Contingent upon life style, belief as a marker of cultural identity can also be an organizing center for either the individual or a community—religious (e.g., Southern Baptist Convention) or non-religious (e.g., English Defense League), both of which represent a particular "culture." Nonetheless, the view that belief is performative and functions as three modes of cultural identity provides a significant contribution to the discussion regarding the relationship between individual and society.

The framework of writing "against belief" suggests that we anchor our discussions and remain beholden to the critiques of Christian conceptions of belief and present contrasting evidence that give rise to alternative accounts of cognition and culture. While this can be useful for comparative purposes and is capable of yielding considerable insight into conceptualizations of belief in non-Christian religions it places the English language and Christian forms of belief as the antagonized measure by which non-Christian religions are compared. By negation, the framework unintentionally affirms a form of Christian exceptionalism. Rodney Needham [3] makes a similar move when he conducts a cross-cultural survey of the term belief in non-English languages. In comparative fashion, Needham draws on the work by Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer and looks to comparative terms for belief among the Navajo in the U.S., Hindi in India, the Kikchi in Guatemala, the Cuicatec, Tzeltal, and Huichol in Mexico, various dialects in the Philippines, the Uduk of Ethiopia, the Shipibo and the Piro of Peru, and terms in Indonesia, as well as China. This is certainly an impressive range of cultures and terms that *could* be, and *have* been translated into belief or the act of believing. According to Needham, many of the terms vary and express concepts like trust, commitment, obedience, faithfulness, integrity, or singularity. Needham speculates that "it is as though the faculty of belief, and perhaps even the necessity to believe were thought to be given in human experience and to be adequately recognized in Greek, Latin, and modern European languages" ([3], p. 38). So why is it that some languages lack or vary in their verbal equivalents to belief and other "psychological vocabularies"? Needham posits that "the concept of belief is not simple but covers a very wide range of meanings. The definitions indicate no central or essential meaning, and it is obvious why the English word must be hard to translate into other languages" ([3], p. 40). This motivates Needham to turn and investigate the etymology

of the English word for belief instead of considering the dynamic social and historical contexts of non-English languages and their various uses of the term. While this investigation has been useful for many subsequent scholars, it reinforces a particular exceptionalism about the English language and excludes a more dynamic anthropology of thinking through a more sophisticated analysis of language.

In this sense, it is not necessary to write “against belief” but we can give each comparable term its due justice and equal treatment by considering the etymological history and the linguistic nuances contained in each of them. Furthermore, just as Talal Asad [6] and Malcolm Ruel [4] considered the relationship between language, power, and history enabling them to further problematize belief by noting its saturation with Christian history, non-English languages may also be laden with their respective histories of religious or philosophical thought. In other words, it is possible to retain the methods of etymological inquiry and historical critiques of power without taking a stance “against belief.” Not only does this enable a richer consideration of non-English languages but it also contributes to a more nuanced approach to cognition and thought across various historical and cultural contexts. However, this is not the task of this article.

Asad’s critique of Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion was not intended to get away from meaning and focus solely on performative dimensions but rather to emphasize the meaning-making processes by which practice is critical in its contribution to the construction of meaning. In writing “against belief,” many have noted the performative dimensions of practice that contribute to the meaning-making process (e.g., [26,37]). Moreover, this view further accentuates the inconsistencies between propositional statements of belief and its performative dimensions, which were illustrated by Hicks [22] and Kirsch [23]. This latter point also directs us to proceed with caution. If we conjoin propositional and performative dimensions of lived religion under a singular category of belief, without considering the relationship between thought, emotion, language, and behavior and their subsequent variations, textures, and nuances, we flatten the category to include all linguistic and behavioral dimensions of religion as if they hold the same degree of commitment and meaning. This is less than helpful and simplifies the complexities involved with belief; not only is it misleading to ascribe a religious belief when there is none but it obfuscates the ontic dimensions of what belief is with the epistemic dimensions of how we study whether a person has a belief. That is, the methodology for investigating belief—by observing propositional statements and behaviors—supersedes whether there is indeed a belief which effectively conflates “how we know” and “what it is.” This is not necessarily to argue that there are non-religious elements in religious beliefs nor is it to argue that there are not propositional and performative dimensions to religious belief (language and behavior are certainly germane). Rather, it notes the simple observation that not all things said or done within a religious context entail a religious belief.

The frameworks of writing “against belief,” the role of imagination, investigating “cultures of belief,” and the three modes of belief, all suggest inter-linking relations between cognition, self, and identity engaged with meaning-making processes and their expressions. However, these frameworks lack a sufficient consideration of language and the implications of inarticulacy and inconsistencies that suggest varied commitments, degrees and textures, of belief.

5. Believing Selves and (In)consistency

As social animals, it is a truism that any individual is, what Marilyn Strathern [38] has called, a *dividual*. That is, an individual must be situated within the parameters of one’s non-individualist dimensions of personhood highlighting the “social,” “relational,” or “intersubjective” perspective. Additionally, despite our relational and situational embeddedness that invariably connects individual to society, we are still—individually—at the center of our perceptions and experiences. In other words, persons are not only socially, culturally, and historically situated beings but also actively thinking beings informed by our orientations to the world and our embodied engagement with it.

In this sense, Carlisle and Simon define belief “as subjective commitments to truth, by which we mean subjective commitments to those truths as being true” ([12], p. 222). Beliefs are then socially

and culturally informed attitudes and dispositions which enable us to discern what is and is not, to what extent something is or is not, true, as well as what should and ought to be true. They are embodied methods of discernment by virtue of our being and becoming² within the world. There is a diversity and range of epistemologies intimately tied to our respective cultural histories and personal experiences. This acknowledges that different operational epistemologies are functioning at various levels, intersections, and experiences of realities enough to present the claim of multiple worlds and multiple realities. In this regard, not only do beliefs orient ourselves to the world but they inform how our agency navigates the world within the parameters by which we understand ourselves, as “believing selves,” in relation to it. Through various practices, discourses, and meditations, persons will “find ways to believe particular truths amid many possible truths” and determine what it means to believe such particular truths, what that entails in practice, and how it contributes in “understanding the nature and moral status of human beings” ([12], p. 222). Attention is thus given to the negotiation and “the interaction between individuals as centers of experience and agency, and the sociocultural structures within which those individuals live” ([12], p. 223; [39–42]). In this regard, commitments to truth are not constrained by epistemology as it has been conceived within the Western paradigm of philosophy and its normative claims on truth nor are they constrained by Christian forms of belief. Instead, the framework of “believing selves” emphasizes the relational dimensions of persons within their respective socio-cultural and historical contexts, varieties of discourse, and their subjective commitments and attitudes to truth and to what is real (textured commitments of what is and ought to be the case). This opens up the epistemological realm by which meaning can be obtained and value derived from an open-ended range of possible truths and a variety of forms.

Even within this framework, however, the inarticulacy and “inconsistency” of beliefs (noted above) continues to remain an issue. According to David Graeber, the word “fetish” has often been invoked “when people seem to talk one way and act another. The surprising thing is that this can happen in entirely contrary ways” ([43], p. 11). As discussed by Asad [6], and recently by Graeber [43]³, we can certainly acknowledge that a systematic and coherent understanding of one’s religious tradition or worldview is not a necessary condition to be a religious practitioner. However, the descriptive observations of inconsistency do present a concern with respect to how persons may depend on contradictory positions or premises in practice and how persons navigate and negotiate them ([44], p. 245). A greater appreciation of this can be seen with respect to the development of ethics and morals within a religious tradition by contrast to the development of moral and ethical positions in society-at-large instantiated by law. Emile Durkheim stated that it seems that “human malaise continues to increase. The great religions of modern man are those which insist the most on the existence of the contradictions in the midst of which we struggle” ([30], p. 156). The issue of “inconsistency” and skepticism is thus relevant for the investigation of religion and its intersections—among other things, with gender, sexuality, race, as well as institutions such as law and economics—each of which contain a diverse range of concerns and contradictions as they pertain to religion. This presents methodological concerns regarding how persons embody, negotiate, and navigate contradictions, inconsistencies and various forms of bias in religious contexts [46–53].

² Kirsch [23], based on fieldwork that emphasized practicality and efficacy, suggested that we substitute belief (conceived as a stable interior state) for *believing* to denote a state of becoming in the internalization process.

³ “I went to Madagascar expecting to encounter something much like a different ontology, a set of fundamentally different ideas about how the world worked; what I encountered instead were people who admitted they did not really understand what was going on with *fanafody*, who said wildly different, and often contradictory, things about it, but who were all in agreement that most practitioners were liars, cheats, or frauds. Coming back from the field, I consulted with colleagues who had been in similar situations (in the Andes, Andaman Islands, Papua New Guinea . . .) and discovered that such sentiments are actually quite commonplace. They also confessed they never knew quite what to do with them. And in fact, this is precisely the aspect of magical practice that is most often dismissed as unimportant, or simply left out of ethnographic accounts” ([43], p. 11). Graeber [44] also notes that Evans-Pritchard encountered a similar dynamic among the Azande and that “in the case of any particular witchdoctor they are never quite certain whether reliance can be placed on his statements or not” ([45], p. 276).

Moreover, additional challenges are presented with the issue of how to make sense of discrepancies among propositional statements of belief, as well as their discrepancies with behavior and action.

6. The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

In social psychology, one of the areas of research devoted specifically to this phenomenon of discrepancy is the theory of cognitive dissonance (or “dissonance theory”). Since Leon Festinger first proposed the theory in the early 1950s—writing about it in *When Prophecy Fails* [54] and explicating the theory in a book by the same name [55]—decades of research has yielded four emergent revisionist theories. Notably: Self-consistency, Self-affirmation, New Look, and Action-based (each of which is discussed further in the following section). These models all frame the theory of cognitive dissonance in relation to the self. When Festinger first proposed the theory, he began with the assumption that we, as persons, strive toward consistency ([55], p. 1); an ideal of cognitive integrity and subsequently congruent behavior. He further posited that when persons are made aware of two discrepant or inconsistent cognitions, “psychological discomfort” (that is, dissonance) would result thereby motivating one to reduce the discomfort by finding some form of consistency. By “cognition,” Festinger referred to “any knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about oneself, or about one’s behavior” ([55], pp. 2–3). Joel Cooper further adds that, within the theory of cognitive dissonance, cognition can “refer to many different types of psychological concepts. An action is different from an attitude which, in turn, is different from an observation of reality. However, each of these has a psychological representation—and that is what is meant by cognition” ([56], p. 6). In this sense, cognition is navigational and relational to the world in which one is living and becomes critical in meaning-making processes.

Festinger suggests that holding any two discrepant cognitions will result in the affective experience of dissonance. This is further qualified by noting that the “magnitude of dissonance” will be in direct relation to the importance of the cognitions involved. In other words, the experience of dissonance is related to the degree of commitment one has to one or more of the cognitions. Rodney Needham, while dismissing a distinctive emotional or affective characteristic of belief, noted that “there is a feeling associated with (actually, provoked by) a challenge to belief” ([3], p. 96) which becomes much more apparent when a significant belief—with a stronger commitment than others—is challenged ([3], p. 97). Needham’s observation and the significance of the “magnitude of dissonance” both highlight the relationship between emotions and embodiment and “the way human bodies respond to social values and the actions of other people” ([15], p. 186). This is the affinity between the theory of cognitive dissonance and the “believing selves” framework by which the former develops the affective dimensions of commitment in the latter. That is, the focus on dissonance and its affective elements of discomfort contributes to the various emotional dimensions involved with subjective commitments to truth and meaning-making processes in “believing selves.”

7. Revisionist Theories of Cognitive Dissonance

The four emergent revisionist theories delve into this area of research and illustrate a consensus that dissonance is most salient with regard to cognitions relevant to the self but diverge on the particulars. The first revisionist theory argues that cognitive dissonance was most apparent with cognitions involved with one’s self-concept [57]. This view presupposes that persons possess a particular view about one’s self (i.e., what kind of person I think I am) and maintain expectations of competent and moral behavior in accordance with “conventional morals and prevailing values of society” ([57], p. 592). Dissonance thereby occurs when behavior is discrepant with one’s self-concept, which itself incorporates personal standards as well as expectations of competence and morality one has about one’s self. The reduction of dissonance, in this theory, is thereby aimed at maintaining one’s self-concept by justifying discrepant behavior ([58], p. 229). Furthermore, as the self-concept is intimately tied with one’s self-esteem in terms of self-expectations, self-consistency theory proposes that dissonance will occur with behaviors or actions that are incongruent with one’s self-esteem. That is,

if one has low self-esteem (low expectations for competent or moral behavior) dissonance will occur after a moral and competent act, but *not* after an immoral or incompetent act because those actions are expected of him/her self [59,60]. This has been the case of those with negative expectancies [61] and those with mild depression [62]. By contrast, “people with higher expectations of competent and moral character (i.e., high self-esteem) would perceive a discrepancy [with the immoral or incompetent act] and be motivated to seek justification” ([58], p. 230). This has also been observed with perceptions of extroversion or introversion regarding one’s self-concept [63].

In a similar, yet different manner, self-affirmation theory argued that dissonance occurs primarily due to behaviors that “threaten one’s sense of moral and adaptive integrity” ([64], p. 14). The presumption here is that “a motive high on people’s priority list is the protection of the integrity of their self-system” ([56], p. 90). Unlike Festinger’s original proposal and self-consistency theory above, self-affirmation theory argued that the particular inconsistencies did not matter so much as the holistic integrity of the self. In other words, one could “do almost *anything* to make it right. The problem is not one of rectifying the specific wrong, but [of] finding some way to affirm the global integrity of the self” ([56], p. 92). In this way, it is possible to focus on other positive aspects of one’s self and reduce dissonance without directly addressing the discrepant cognitions in question ([58], p. 230).

The New Look theory places an indirect emphasis on the self by arguing that dissonance occurs from “feeling personally responsible for producing aversive consequences” ([64], p. 14). That is, the effects of dissonance are greatest when persons feel “personally responsible for their actions” and when “their actions have serious consequences [. . .] the greater the consequence and the greater our responsibility for it, the greater the dissonance” and thereby “the greater our own attitude change” ([65], p. 216).

The action-based model of cognitive dissonance argues that “dissonance between cognitions evokes an aversive state because it has the potential to interfere with effective and unconflicted action” ([66], p. 1524). This model further proposes two modes of motivation for the reduction of dissonance: proximal and distal. The former is the motivation to reduce or eliminate the negative affect of cognitive dissonance. The latter is the motivation for effective and unconflicted action ([67], p. 138).

In this regard, all four revisionist models engage with the self in terms of preserving a sense of self and the consequences of one’s actions. However, the theory of cognitive dissonance raises questions about the degree of cross-cultural variability: the construction of self is subject to cultural and subcultural nuance. In the original theory, Festinger noted that dissonance was subject to cultural variance: “Dissonance could arise because of cultural mores [. . .] because the culture defines what is consonant and what is not. In some other culture [. . .] two cognitions might not be [discrepant and evoke dissonance] at all” ([55], p. 14). One of the ways in which cultural variance is apparent is in the different logical implications certain propositions have for the perception of consistency: “the *subjective* nature of personal beliefs supplements the *objective* nature of logical implication, such that (in)consistency within an individual’s system of beliefs is determined by the application of logical principles to what this individual believes to be true or false” ([68], p. 229). Moreover, what is proper or improper, correct or incorrect, right or wrong, in both behavior and ethics contributes to, and can conflate, what is considered to be “objective.” Cultural frameworks of courtesy, etiquette, value, and respect do not *necessarily* involve a truth value and yet they can influence the application of logical principles with regard to what is “rational” and “irrational.” Not only does this entail variance across cultures and conceptions of the self [56,68–72], which play out in the dynamics of multiple social identities [18,73], but variability within cultures [74–76] in the assignment of what is value as well.

8. Summary and Conclusions

Both the frameworks of believing selves and the revisionist theories of dissonance not only emphasize the subjective commitments that integrate “experience and socially learned doctrines and discourses—including those concerning what it means to believe—into truths to live through” but they also “show that the work of believing is motivated by efforts to achieve an internally

consistent and emotionally satisfying sense of the self's relationship to particular truths" ([12], p. 223). Dissonance theory illustrates that this can take different forms and points of emphasis; whether it is on one's self-concept and self-esteem, one's sense of integrity, the consequences of one's actions, or active engagement and efficacy of one's actions, all of which can vary from context to context, culture to culture, and even subcultures within a culture. In other words, the self is conceived in culturally-relative ways and subsequently influences what is meant to be self-interested. Moreover, subjective commitments "may be made to the truth of something's existence, the truth of some proposition about the world or the nature of the self, the truth of someone's or something's abilities or the quality of relationship to oneself (and, thus, "trust" in those abilities or that relationship), or the moral truth of an orientation for living one's life." They are that which we hold dear [77]. These commitments do not necessarily require articulation as propositions and "may not even be consciously recognized as beliefs, but they nonetheless form part of an individual's subjective engagement with the world" ([12], p. 223).

After discussing the problems of language and practice, as well as their limitations, for the investigation of belief in the study of religion, the article presented a few emergent frameworks for belief and commentary on them. However, despite their insights, these frameworks do not adequately address or explain the issue of inconsistency. This article aimed to converge the framework of "believing selves" with its emphasis on belief as a subjective commitment to truth with the emergent revisionist theories of cognitive dissonance. Both implicate the role of the "self" within their respective disciplinary developments that address discrepancies between language and practice as well as the various ways of thinking that reduce dissonance and the perception of inconsistency. Cross-cultural studies in psychology and ethnographic studies in anthropology have shown that inconsistencies and the experience of dissonance are managed in culturally-specific ways according to the variability by which the self is conceived and the social identities involved in the situation at hand. Moreover, this variance also entails a variance in concepts of "truth" as well as the forms of evidence that provide verification and justification to the instantiation of those "truths." This creates additional variance on how persons from various cultures determine what is of "self-interest." By opening up the epistemology by which belief is conceived, a focused convergence emerges on the self and the individual in relation to society.

The individual is necessarily unique. No two persons occupy the same space-time continuum nor will they have the same set of experiences within that continuum. This is much different from considering "individualism" as a cultivated value [78,79]. Belief is a culturally embodied cognitive phenomenon that turns the focus on the individual self and his/her beliefs that ground, situate, and relate one's personhood to one's social contexts and "dividual" relationality. In other words, our beliefs are reflections of an embodied cultural history and ethos that enable our relational connectivity. Whether they are correct/incorrect, right/wrong, proper/improper is beside the point, what is significant is that they function as "true" within the broader parameters of "meaning" [80] in orientation to one's respective reality. Religious beliefs, in all their shapes and forms, are no different and continue to provide a source of meaning and promote our meaning-making capabilities.

Religion is, thus, one among many avenues that connects the individual and the social, the personal and the impersonal. Within the context of Durkheim's notion of *homo duplex*, the individual is necessarily a reflection of on-going history [81] at its many levels and intersections: "the collective is not entirely outside us, and does not act upon us wholly from without; but rather, since society cannot exist except in and through individual consciousness, this force must also penetrate us and organize itself within us. It thus becomes an integral part of our being" ([82], p. 230). Belief is one function of this relationship that enables our individual and collective agency.

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