

## HOW COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS AFFECT RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISTS

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Cognitive behavioral psychology is based on the premise that our feelings are largely determined by our thoughts. To oversimplify, most forms of cognitive behavioral psychotherapy are based on the idea that we can change how we feel by changing how we think. Thinking can be differentiated into *content* of thought (i.e., what we think about) and form, structure, or *process* of thought (i.e., how we think). *Cognitive distortions* are errors in the process of thinking, which can then lead to various fears, anxieties, and resentments.

An important cue or signal that one or more errors in thinking is operating is a person's degree of emotional distress or interpersonal conflict. An important distinction can be made between *perceptions* (i.e., what someone actually says or does in a specific situation that can be seen or heard), *inferences* (i.e., how someone interprets what is seen or heard in a specific situation based on one's underlying assumptions), and *assumptions* (i.e., the underlying attitudes, core beliefs, or cognitive schemata that provide a filter by which perceptions are interpreted. The basic cognitive equation is that, if we want to change how we *feel*, we need to change how we *think*. The basic behavioral equation is that, if we want to change how we *think*, we need to change how we *act*. In reality, people often act their way into better thinking faster than they think their way into better actions.

Cognitive behavioral concepts have become part of the public domain, which includes many concepts and terms adapted from various original sources including the writings of researchers and psychotherapists such as Albert Ellis, Ph.D., Aaron T. Beck, M.D., Donald Meichenbaum, Ph.D., James P. McCullough, Ph.D., Martin Seligman, Ph.D., Marsha Linehan, Ph.D., and others.

Cognitive behavioral forms of psychotherapy are mainly practiced within the field of professional psychology. There have been few attempts to apply these concepts to the study of religion. This article does not address the *content* of religious beliefs, but rather provides a perspective of how *processes* of thought may affect adherents of any religion.

**Absolutistic thinking** occurs when a person's beliefs, feelings, or opinions are equated with reality. The underlying belief is, "If I think it's so, then it's so." This process involves an egocentric assumption (largely "unconscious" or outside of awareness) that one's thoughts are in fact reality, often accompanied by the claim that others' beliefs are not reality. In other words, absolutistic thinkers equate their certainty with absolute truth. In contrast to *faith*, which involves a balance of belief and doubt, absolutistic thinking involves a sense of certainty—which can give rise to *absolute truth claims*. Even the 16<sup>th</sup> century German theologian and religious reformer Martin Luther observed that, "Where there is great faith, there is great doubt." To an absolutistic thinker, however, doubt is the antithesis of faith.

Theologian Charles Kimball (2002, p. 41) describes one of the most pathological consequences of absolutism when it occurs within a religion: "In every religion, truth claims constitute the foundation on which the entire structure rests. However, when particular interpretations of these claims become propositions requiring uniform assent and are treated as rigid doctrines, the likelihood of corruption in that tradition rises exponentially."

In his book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, Kimball (2002) examines the role of religion in the world, with an emphasis on the conditions under which a religion (or parts of a religious

community) can deteriorate from its original purpose. While emphasizing that religion is basically necessary and positive, Kimball describes five warning signs of how religion can become dangerous. One of these signs, which he places first on his list, involves “absolute truth claims.”

Every cult, sect, order, or denomination of every religion has some adherents who are inclined toward absolutistic rigidity. In other words, no religion has a monopoly on rigidity, nor does any so-called secular belief system (e.g., capitalism, communism, socialism, totalitarianism, secular humanism, and so on) have a shortage of rigid adherents. Absolutistic thinking is not confined to the philosophical or political right, left, or center. From a cognitive perspective, absolutistic rigidity is more related to *type* of thinking than it is related to *content* of thought.

With respect to early identification of absolutists, one can begin with *Regula Sancti Benedicti*, a book of precepts written in 516 by Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–550 CE) for monks living communally under the authority of an abbot. In the first section of Chapter One of the English translation of *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Fry (1980, pp. 20-21) provides an account of the most detestable types of monks—described as the *sarabaites*:

Their law is what they like to do, whatever strikes their fancy. Anything they believe in and choose, they call holy; anything they dislike, they consider forbidden. (Rules 1.8-1.9)

In more contemporary language, anything absolutistic thinkers believe is named as truth; anything they don’t believe is condemned as heresy. By contrast, as observed by Kimball (2002, p. 41), “Authentic religious truth claims are never as inflexible and exclusive as some of their zealous adherents insist.”

Absolutist thinking can lead to *disavowal of personal responsibility*. Disavowal of personal responsibility occurs when people attribute their beliefs to an absolutistic source, and the source becomes more authoritative when it is capitalized (e.g., “The Truth” in contrast to “my Truth”). In the three great world religions that are based largely upon sacred tests, for example, an absolutist might say, “If my Book says it’s so, then it’s so.” This type of thinking can sometimes lead to cognitive inflexibility and rigidity. Within this context, no religious tradition has a monopoly on absolutism.

Absolutism can also lead to *theological arrogance*, which involves an absolutistic certainty—essentially the opposite of faith. A related but broader concept is *particularism*, which refers to an exclusive attachment to one’s own group, religion, nation, or political party. *Religious particularism* refers to the belief that one’s own faith is the only path to the experiencing, understanding, or worshiping of the Transcendent—by whatever Name called. Another related concept is *exceptionalism*, which is the perception or belief that a country, society, institution, individual, or time period is “exceptional” (i.e., unusual or extraordinary). Exceptionalism carries with it the implication, whether specified or not, that the referent is superior in some way. Religious or theological absolutism often involves both exceptionalism and particularism.

**All-or-nothing thinking**, which is less often termed “all-or-none” thinking, is a form of absolutistic thinking that occurs when a person thinks in terms of “always,” “every,” or “never.” We are all prone to slipping into reductionist type of thinking from time to time, partly because it simplifies information. At the same time, all-or-none thinking reduces our choices when we ignore exceptions, gradations, and the middle ground. All-or-none thinking is a *binary*, *bifurcated*, or *dualistic* type of thinking, often described as “black and white”

thinking. In contrast, as most people have experienced, the wide array of colors in the real world are much more complex than simply shades of gray. To the binary thinker, the various shades of gray may feel too “fuzzy” for comfort. From a psychological perspective, all-or-none thinking is often associated with personality traits such as inability or *difficulty tolerating ambiguity, ambivalence, or uncertainty*.

**Arbitrary inference** involves drawing a conclusion when evidence is lacking or contrary to the conclusion. It can also involve taking a single quotation or verse out of context, while attributing a highly personalized meaning to it. In scriptural exegesis, this process is known *proof texting*, which refers to the practice of taking a quotation or verse out-of-context and then using it to support one’s own presuppositions, beliefs, or biases. Taken literally, a proof text (also known as a “proof-text”) refers to “a Scriptural passage adduced as proof for a theological doctrine, belief, or principle” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). As a form of arbitrary inference, proof texting might involve ignoring the cultural, historical, or semantic context of a verse while giving an idiosyncratic or highly personalized interpretation to the verse. It is sometimes referred to as reading one’s own ideas into the Scripture. To guard against making arbitrary inferences, scriptural scholars strive to interpret ancient texts by using context (e.g., cultural, historical, linguistic). They avoid taking a verse out of context or arguing a position from one verse or a handful of verses alone. To use an old adage, “Scripture interprets Scripture.” That is, the weight of one verse or one author’s writings should be balanced against the weight of the whole of what Scripture teaches.

**Attribution theory** is a conceptual model based on the idea that we attempt to understand the behavior of others by attributing feelings, beliefs, and intentions to some other source

(i.e., usually to ourselves or to another person). Attributions can be *internal* (attributed to self) or *external* (attributed to others). In an external (or situational) attribution, a person infers that another person’s behavior is due to situational factors. By contrast, in an internal attribution, we attribute some behavior or event to internal factors within the other person (or within ourselves). We have a tendency to attribute positive events to internal characteristics within ourselves, and we are more likely to attribute negative events to external or situational factors outside of ourselves. For example, when bad things happen to us, we attribute those events to others or to circumstances or forces outside ourselves, whereas when good things happen to us, we attribute those events to the internal traits of within ourselves. In other words, we attribute positive outcomes to our own actions, whereas we are more likely to attribute negative outcomes to circumstances or forces outside ourselves.

If we attribute our desires and wishes to a deity, then our own desires and wishes are easier to justify. To carry the analogy further, if we attribute our wish-list to God—rather than to ourselves—then we run the risk of confusing our will with God’s own will. In this sense, petitionary prayer can be distorted into “not thy will, but My will be done.” When the fuel of nationalistic fervor is added to the fire—and God always seems to be on “our” side—the war cry becomes, “Our will is God’s will.” Holy wars, whether they are accompanied by the patriotic flags of a government or the banners of a religious Crusade, always seem to be the most unholy in their destructive power.

**Binary thinking** is another term for *dichotomous reasoning*, which refers to *all-or-none* thinking. It is also known as *dualistic* thinking, in contrast to *holistic* thinking (which some writers term non-dualistic thinking, which itself reflects dualistic categories). A binary thinker may use categories such as right-wrong,

saved-unsaved, saint-sinner, us-them, normal-abnormal, and so forth. It is not in only religious fundamentalism, but in our world in general that is filled with binary thinking such as suffering and thriving, vulnerability and resilience, unification and diversity, and so forth. Spiritual truths usually involve paradox—not one dimension or the other, but rather a blend of both and others. Optimal functioning requires going beyond binary thinking.

Binary thinking is also expressed in the logical fallacy known as the *false dilemma*, also known as the *fallacy of false choices*, in which something is falsely claimed to be an “either/or” situation, when in fact there is at least one additional option. This type of bifurcated thinking usually takes the form of acknowledging only two options—one of which is usually extreme—from a continuum of possibilities. For example, “Either we accept the belief in \_\_\_\_\_, or we must no longer call ourselves religious.” The fallacy of the false dilemma is sometimes the result of a habitual tendency, whatever the cause, to view the world with limited sets of options. One antidote for mutually exclusive “either-or” thinking is a more inclusive “both-and” thinking.

To some extent, binary thinking is involved in the cultural or sociological process of *othering*, which refers to a reductionist labelling of a person, culture, or religion as belonging to the subordinate and intrinsically inferior category of the Other. The practice of “othering” excludes people who do not fit the norm of the majority or prevailing social or religious group, which is some version of the Self.

In his book *The Colonial Present*, Derek Gregory (2004), British academic and Professor of Geography at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, offers his critique of the so-called “war on terror” in Afghanistan and its extensions into Palestine and Iraq. Gregory

traces the long history of British and American involvements in the Middle East and shows how colonial power continues to cast long shadows that reach into the present. Gregory provides a quote from cultural critic and Columbia University Professor of Literature, Edward Wadie (1935-2003):

To build a conceptual framework around a notion of Us-versus-Them is, in effect, to pretend that the principal consideration is epistemological and natural—our civilization is known and accepted, theirs is different and strange—whereas, in fact, the framework separating us from them is belligerent, constructed, and situational. (Gregory, 2004, p. 24)

In some ways, binary thinking is similar to the mathematical concept of a *bounded-set* (i.e., one is either inside or outside of a boundary or set), as opposed to a *centered-set* (i.e., in which one is moving closer to the center of a set). Bounded-set thinkers can draw a circle that keeps others out, whereas centered-set thinkers can draw a larger circle that lets others in. In religion, heaven vs. hell would be one example of bounded set thinking, whereas diverse concepts such as purgation, reincarnation, and unification have some similarities to centered set thinking. Unless one is an absolutistic thinker, it is not a matter of whether one type of thinking is right and another type is wrong (which is by definition a binary distinction), but rather it is that bounded-set type of thinking is more *exclusive* and centered-set thinking is more *inclusive*.

**Cognitive deficiency** occurs when an important aspect of one’s life situation is disregarded, dismissed, or ignored. The term does not refer to a mental defect or intellectual disability, but rather it comes closer to the psychodynamic concepts of denial, repression, or lack of awareness. While judging others harshly, a

cognitively deficient person might ignore his or her own self-righteous hypocrisy. Jesus of Nazareth condemned this type of exclusivism:

You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. (Matthew 23:13; New International Version)

**Confirmation bias** refers to the tendency to interpret new data or evidence as confirmation of one's own pre-existing beliefs or theory. Even the most objective scientific researchers must be continually on guard against seeing what they expect to see in the data. In the study of Scripture, *eisegesis* refers to the process of interpreting or Scripture in such a way as to introduce one's own presuppositions, beliefs or biases. As a form of confirmation bias, eisegesis involves reading into the text one's own ideas, often as a way to "prove" one's pre-conceived assumptions, beliefs, or opinions. Eisegesis is best understood when contrasted with *exegesis*, which involves striving to interpret a text's meaning in accordance with the author's context and discoverable meaning. In contrast, eisegesis is when a reader imposes his or her own interpretation onto the text. Whereas eisegesis is highly personalized and subjective, exegesis tends to be objective. *Perspective-taking*, which involves striving to understand a subject matter from the perspective of the other person or an alternative hypothesis, is one way to guard against confirmation.

**Dichotomous reasoning** is another term for *binary thinking* or *all-or-none-thinking*. It involves viewing situations as binary rather than multidimensional. Rather than seeing in color or even in shades of gray, dichotomous thinking involves seeing in black and white. A dichotomous thinker may view events as either sacred versus secular, which ignores the subtle nuances of how some activities involve a blend

or combination of the sacred and secular. In a similar manner, a dichotomous thinker may see others as either religious or not religious. Dichotomous thinkers who see others as Christian vs. Not Christian may also be inclined to thinking of consequences such as Heaven vs. Hell.

Religious fundamentalists do not have a monopoly on dichotomous reasoning, which can also be seen in the artificial distinction between the so-called secular and the sacred. This type of thinking puts an emphasis on the exclusivity of sacred places, sacred times, sacred actions, and even sacred persons. Although such distinctions may help the religiously observant pay attention to that which is sacred for them, the unfortunate consequence is that such exclusivity leaves the majority of life secular or un-sacred. Yet throughout the centuries, there have been those who have seen the sacred in the ordinary experiences of life. A spiritually attuned person does not have to go to sacred places to pray, wait for holy days for the holy to happen, or engage in sacred actions for good to be done. We can pray always, anywhere, and at any time—just as we can pray at dawn, on our knees, on our prayer mats, or before an altar. Everything that happens can be sacred if we allow it to be. In the words of Austrian writer and philosopher Franz Kafka (1883-1924), "Even the merest gesture is holy if it is filled with faith."

**Literalism** is not a term used by cognitive behavioral theorists, but rather it is a term used by various writers concerning scriptural or textual interpretation. Because it serves as one of the foundational pillars of religious fundamentalism, literalism deserves special consideration. Literalism generally refers to an adherence to the exact letter or the literal meaning of a word or words, as opposed to a figurative, metaphorical, or metaphysical meaning.

Although the term can be applied to any religion, literalism is more relevant to People of the Book, an Islamic term that refers to Jews, Christians, and Sabians. The term is also used in Judaism to refer to the Jewish people and by members of some Christian denominations to refer to themselves. Depending on one's religion, a scriptural literalist could be an adherent to *The Torah* (particularly to the Book of Leviticus), *The Qur'an*, or the *King James Bible* (particularly the New Testament). For example, *biblical literalism* (or *biblicism*) is a term related specifically to biblical interpretation. According to a 2011 Gallop poll, 3 in 10 Americans interpret the Bible literally, saying it is the actual word of God, whereas 49% of Americans say the Bible is the inspired word of God but that it should not be taken literally (Jones, 2011, p. 1).

Literalism refers to adherence to the exact letter or the literal sense of scripture, in contrast to allegorical, figurative, parabolic, or metaphorical interpretations (e.g., as seen in allegories, figures of speech, parables, similes, or metaphors). Literalism stands in contrast to historical-critical methods of interpretation, which investigate the origins of ancient texts in order to understand "the world behind the text" (Soulén & Soulén, 2001, p. 78). Somewhat paradoxically, literalism does not necessarily lead to complete agreement among literalists with regard to one single interpretation of any given passage or verse in sacred writings. To some extent, different sects or denominations within a religion are in part related to the specific verses or texts that its adherents interpret literally. For example, there are some sacred texts or verses that are taken literally, whereas there are verses that are interpreted figuratively.

In writing about how literalism can become a tragic distortion of religion, psychologist and former Middle East reporter Lesley Hazleton

(2004, p. 112) describes some of the unfortunate consequences of fundamentalism:

By restricting itself to the most literal interpretation of poetic texts, it becomes blind to the religious spirit. It becomes, in fact, anti-religious. The sacred is reduced to a set of legal strictures; awe and mystery [are reduced] to obedience and punishment. Lacking all sense of the poetic, fundamentalism hates paradox, and denies mystery. Enigma is anathema. It is religion made harsh, and at the same time—why not be paradoxical about it?—made bland.

Although not so much within the purview of cognitive behavioral theory, literalism is a characteristic sometimes associated with pragmatic language, which is more within the purview of clinical and developmental psychology. *Pragmatic language* refers to the social language skills that we use in our daily interactions with others. It includes context-specific language (i.e., how appropriate our interactions are in a given situation) and non-verbal communication (eye contact, facial expressions, body language etc.). Pragmatic language can be distinguished from *structural language*, which refers to the literal arrangement of words, phrases, and clauses in a sentence. The grammatical meaning of a sentence is dependent on structural organization (also called syntax or syntactic structure or, in written language, the mechanics of writing), whereas the deeper, intended, and underlying meaning of language is more dependent on pragmatic language. In comparison, structural language conveys the surface meaning of spoken language, whereas pragmatic language carries the deeper meaning. In other words, structural language refers to what we say, and pragmatic language refers to how we say it.

Although literalists are by no means people with mental disorders, there are some people

with mental disorders who have difficulty understanding the non-literal and non-verbal cues of pragmatic language. For example, individuals who are impaired by a condition known as *social communication disorder* suffer from difficulty understanding affect, gestures, and facial expressions in others' non-verbal language. As a result, they may have difficulty understanding the meaning of double-entendre, idiomatic phrases, humorous intentions, metaphorical expressions, or hidden meaning (i.e., "reading between the lines") in spoken language. Such individuals are often quite concrete and literal in their speech. As a result, they may be more inclined toward literalism in other areas of their lives.

**Magnification** occurs when the meaning of some event or thing is exaggerated. *Minor* events are misconstrued to be *major* problems, such as "making a mountain out of a molehill." Jesus of Nazareth condemned the magnification of the Pharisees (the predecessors of modern religious fundamentalists):

They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. (Matthew 23:4; New International Version).

As it relates to religion, magnification is a part of how we may focus on the negative aspects of other religions or faith traditions different than our own, whereas minimization is how we may view the negative aspects of our own traditions.

**Mind reading** occurs when a person believes that he or she knows the feelings, thoughts, or beliefs of another person without asking the other person. This type of cognitive distortion can reach theological significance when a person claims to be able to read the mind of a deity. Answers to petitionary prayer—also known as giving God directions—particularly if

they are consistent with what a person already desires, can be attributed to a deity (i.e., a type of external attribution).

**Minimization** occurs when *major* problems are misconstrued as *minor* issues. This type of thinking occurs when one "doesn't care" or when important issues "don't matter," or "aren't important." This error in thinking may occur when a person focuses only on the negative and minimizes the positive aspects of an interaction or situation. It may also occur in reverse, such as when a person minimizes his or her faults or shortcomings, while minimizing the other person's virtues or strengths. As it relates to religion, minimization is a part of how we may devalue or minimize the positive aspects of other denominations or faith traditions different than our own, and minimization is also how we may view the negative aspects of our own traditions. In contrast, we may magnify the positive aspects of our faith tradition while magnifying the negative aspects of other traditions.

**Overgeneralization** occurs when a single instance such as failure is viewed as a sign that similar incidents will recur. This type of thinking includes the use of words such as "everybody," "always," or "never." Overgeneralizations such as "you always" or "you never" can create also conflicts in relationships. In religion, overgeneralizing can lead to stereotyping others, which can lead to us paying more attention to how we are different rather than how we are similar to others.

**Projection** refers to the process by which we attribute our impulses, feelings, or motives to others. In this sense, projection is related to attribution theory, although the concept of projection originated in psychoanalytic theory as a defense mechanism in which we unconsciously attribute our unacceptable impulses onto others. The "unconscious" refers to that which is outside of our awareness.

In a broad sense, projections can be negative or positive. Our religious “enemies” may be those onto whom we project our own unacceptable impulses that we are not able or willing to recognize within ourselves. On the other hand, our religious “friends” may be those onto whom we project our idealized images of ourselves. For example, what others tell us about God usually tells us more about the person than it tells us about God. Similarly, what we say about God says more about us than it does about God. The emotional reasoning, which is usually outside of our awareness, goes something like this: “If I can’t be more religious, then I’ll make my religion more like me.” Right, or left, or in between, the Divine always seems to reflect the same qualities as the person who is talking about Him, or Her, or Them.

**Proof-texting**, which is also called proof-texting, refers to the process of using selective quotes from a document in order to “prove” one’s own attitudes or beliefs. It is similar what William Shakespeare observed in *The Merchant of Venice* (i.e., “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose”). A *proof text* is a passage of scripture presented as proof for a theological belief, doctrine, practice, or principle. *Proof-texting* is the practice of using isolated, out-of-context quotations from a document to establish a proposition in *eisegesis*. *Eisegesis* is the process of interpreting a text in such a way as to “prove” one’s own agenda, bias, or presupposition. It is a type of *confirmation bias* commonly referred to as “reading into the text.” *Eisegesis* can be contrasted to *exegesis*, which is the process of drawing out a text’s meaning in accordance with the original author’s cultural, historical, and linguistic context and discoverable meaning.

**Prophesizing**, which has also been described as “fortune telling,” occurs when a person “tells the future,” and then consequently acts in a fashion that makes the prediction come true, such as “I won’t succeed.” This type of thinking is also called a “self-fulfilling prophecy.” Confirmation bias can aid the process by allowing us to look back and selectively recall the facts and fictions that fit best with our prophecy—a process known as *prophetic history*.

**Selective abstraction** occurs when we take a bit of information out of context and then generalize it into some global truth. For example, we might take a single event (such as an unproductive day at school or at work) and interpret it in a more generalized manner (saying that we are an unproductive person). Similarly, a person might take a particular verse from a sacred text and then literalize the verse in some generalized way without taking into consideration the original cultural context, the intended audience, or even the original languages from which the verse has been translated. This practice is often referred to as *weaponizing* scripture.

**Self-Other rating** occurs when a person rates global *worth*, rather than *traits*, of oneself or others. It can also involve “comparing one’s insides to others’ outsides.” A self-other rating is a form of overgeneralization, which can be a risk factor in the etiology of feelings of envy, greed, jealousy, hostility, or feelings of inadequacy. With respect to religions, it is easier to compare the best of one’s own religion with the worst of another’s religion. Seeing only the worst in other religions, denominations, or sects can perpetuate stereotyped perceptions.

In her book titled *Holy Envy*, Taylor (2019, pp. 64-66), Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor traces the phrase “holy envy” to Krister Stendahl (1921–2008), who was a Harvard



professor, Lutheran priest, and New Testament scholar. After his tenure had ended as Professor and later dean of the Harvard Divinity School, Dr. Stendahl returned home to his home in Sweden and in 1984 was elected Bishop of Stockholm in the Church of Sweden. Stendahl's three rules of religious understanding, which do not appear to be sourced in any of his writings but clearly attributed to him by others (see Landau, 2007), are as follows:

1. When trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.
2. Don't compare your best to their worst.
3. Leave room for holy envy.

According to Landau (2007), Stendahl's use of the term "holy envy" meant that we should be willing to recognize elements in another religion or faith tradition, and find those elements that we admire and wish we might find in greater scope in our own religious tradition or faith. At the same time, argues Landau, not all religions are created equal. From more than one point of view, a particular faith may be preferred above all others.

**Spiritual bypassing**, sometimes called a spiritual bypass, is a term coined in the 1980s by John Welwood, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, psychotherapist, and Buddhist teacher. In the words of Welwood (2002), the term refers to "...using spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep personal, emotional 'unfinished business,' to shore up a shaky sense of self, or to belittle basic needs, feelings, and developmental tasks, all in the name of enlightenment" (2002, p. 207). Although it is a defense mechanism, it is not necessarily unhealthy when it is used as a temporary coping mechanism to deal with acute stress or an intense "spiritual emergency." On the other hand, when it is used as a long-term strategy for ignoring or suppressing unaddressed mental health problems, it can result in maladaptive

functioning that may include mental anxiety, emotional confusion, dichotomous thinking, obsession or addiction, spiritual narcissism, blind allegiance to charismatic teachers, disregard for personal responsibility, and a need to excessively control others and oneself (Picciotto, Fox, & Neto, 2017).

**Thought-action fusion** occurs when a person believes that simply thinking about an action is equivalent to engaging in the action. In its most severe form, thought-action fusion can be a risk factor for the development of obsessive-compulsive disorder. In religion, specific obsessions and compulsions can vary according to the individual's religion. For example, a person might worry that he or she did not perform a particular ritual correctly. The person might obsess about this for hours.

Because obsessions and compulsions can become intertwined in an individual's religious life, it may be difficult for the individual to recognize that he or she may have a serious condition. A person with religious obsessions may focus excessively on one particular—even minor—concern while neglecting other—often major—aspects of the religion. For example, many religions place a high priority on compassion and being a good neighbor to others—especially the stranger. The scrupulous individual may neglect this general idea while focusing excessively on a few specific rules. This type of rule-bound religion can be a precursor to *scrupulosity*, also known as a religious form of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Scrupulosity involves pathological anxiety and guilt about religious matters. It involves personal distress, objective dysfunction, and clinically significant impairment in social and interpersonal functioning. Scrupulosity is often viewed as a form of idolatry because the excessive devotion to a specific ritual (to the detriment of good acts toward other people) elevates the ritual to a god-like status. *Ritualolatry* refers to excessive

devotion to specific rituals, whereas *ecclesiolatry* refers to excessive devotion to the institutional aspects of an organized religion, usually over and against the religion's own beliefs or faith.

*Bibliolatry* is a more specific form of idolatry that involves adoration or worship of a book. As commonly defined, *biblicists* are people who typically interpret the Bible literally and uses their interpretation of the Bible—and only the Bible—for their authority and source of knowledge, blindly holding to their interpretation to guide them through every situation and inform them on every issue. Religious adherents of text-based religions may be more susceptible to this form of idolatry, whereas adherents of ritual-based religions may be more prone toward *ritualolatry* (i.e., in which actions themselves become objects of worship). In contrast to these two forms of idolatry, rigid adherents to hierarchical religions—particularly those dominated by people of power, privilege, and prestige—are more prone to *ecclesiolatry*.

### **Conclusion**

This essay contains mere thoughts—not religious truths—about how some common cognitive distortions or types of thinking can affect religious fundamentalism. Now that these thoughts have been expressed, they can be let go and forgotten. With respect to further research, an equally noteworthy topic would be how cognitive distortions affect religious liberalism.

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### Notes

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