

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 indicator that one or more errors in thinking may be 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 dynamic balance of belief and doubt, absolutistic thinking involves a sense of certainty—which can give rise to *absolute truth claims*. The 16th 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 cognitive 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 texts, 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.

Absolutistic, exclusivist, and particularistic thinking can converge in the form of *supersessionism* (also known as *replacement theology*), in which one covenant supersedes or “replaces” another (usually later) covenant (see Charry, 2011). Regardless of its variant forms, supersessionistic beliefs usually contain elitist elements of absolutistic, exclusivist, and particularistic beliefs that are more characteristic of fundamentalistic traditions than of traditions on the liberal, moderate, progressive, or reform end of the continuum.

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, which is a type of confirmation bias. In contrast to exegesis (i.e., the discipline of extracting what the text says by using grammatical, historical, and textual analysis), *eisegesis* is when a reader imposes their own interpretation on the text by introducing their own agenda, bias, or presupposition. William Shakespeare wrote, “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose” (*The Merchant of Venice*, Act 1, Scene 3), as an unflattering description of the character Shylock’s use of Scripture.

In describing some of the ways the Evangelical church in America is breaking apart, media commentator and conservative Christian writer

Peter Wehner observes: “They might insist that they are interpreting their politics through the prism of scripture, with the former subordinate to the latter, but in fact scripture and biblical ethics are often distorted to fit their politics” (Wehner, 2021, para. 23).

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 own will with God’s 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 a limited set 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. To *otherize* (in British *otherisation*) involves making a person or group of people seem different or to consider them to be different. 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.

The binary thinking style of othering is not only a form of judging and prejudice, but it can also be the foundation for anger, aggression, and even violence. On both an individual psychological level as well as a communal group level, the internal emotions of anxiety and fear may underlie the more external actions ranging from religious indignation to religious persecution and violence. According to spiritual director Deborah Midkiff, MS, NCC, SD, “The problem of othering is inherent in the process of excluding based on differences rather than

including based on similarities. Thus, fear exists on both sides of the equation” (D. Midkiff, personal communication, June 22, 2021).

As implied by author Mirabai Starr, a self-described “Native New York Jew who grew up in the counter-culture of New Mexico,” the practice of othering violates the Abrahamic tradition of welcoming the stranger. As asserted by Starr, “Although it did not make it onto the stone tablets, “*Thou shalt not otherize* is one of the pillars of the Judeo-Christian traditions” (2013, para. 2, italics original).

At its worst, the process of othering can lead to *demonization*, which involves the portrayal of some activity or group as immoral, wicked, or threatening. Collective rationalizations are regularly constructed for acts of aggression (Smith & Mackie, 2007, p. 513), based on exaltation of the in-group and demonization of the opposite side or out-group. As the Gestalt psychotherapist Fritz Perls (1971, p. 9) expressed the idea, “Our own soldiers take care of the poor families; the enemy rapes them.” In religion, this tendency to exalt ourselves and demonize the other can be similarly expressed: “Our religion takes care of the poor; the other religion exploits them.”

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. Whereas bounded-set thinking can involve an “us-them” dichotomy, centered-set thinking can involve a “we” mentality. In thinking of an afterlife, heaven vs. hell beliefs would be an 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*.

In religion, a bounded-set thinker may view people as either A or B, whereas a centered-set thinker may view people as moving toward C—

or becoming more C-like. For Christians, the centered-set thinker is less focused on a binary distinction whether one is or is not a “Christian” (by whatever definition the one who judges the other is using), but rather the focused is more on how one is being more Christ-like with others. Within this context, holiness knows no denominational—or even religious—boundaries.

The principles of inclusiveness and exclusiveness also have implications in moral psychology. One principle of moral psychology is that “morality binds and blinds.” As First Amendment attorney Greg Lukianoff and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, Ph.D. (2015, para. 12) point out, “Part of what we do when we make moral judgments is express allegiance to a team. But that can interfere with our ability to think critically. Acknowledging that the other side’s viewpoint has any merit is risky—your teammates may see you as a traitor.” In the case of religious fundamentalism, traitors are often viewed as heretics—and punished accordingly.

With specific reference to academic settings such as college campuses, Lukianoff and Haidt (2015, para. 5) use the term “protective vindictiveness” to refer to a movement to that punishes anyone who interferes with the goal of turning college campuses into “safe spaces” in which “young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable.” According to Lukianoff and Haidt vindictive protectiveness creates “a culture in which everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse” (2015, para. 5). Given how prophets and visionaries have been branded, excommunicated, and burned at the stake for what is sometimes considered heresy,

contemporary academic campuses certainly have institutional role models that have paved the way of protective vindictiveness.

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, also called "myself" bias, refers to the tendency to interpret new data or evidence as confirmation of one's own pre-existing beliefs or theory. In other words, it is the tendency to favor information that confirms one's beliefs—regardless of the actual facts. 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, religious fundamentalists sometimes "attack the errors of the holy books of other religions as eagerly as any freethinker" (Sandoval, 2010, p. 1), yet they set aside their own critical thinking when they study their own Bibles. *Eisegesis* refers to the process of interpreting 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 bias.

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.”

Groupthink is a term coined by the American journalist William H. Whyte Jr. (Whyte, 1952), who described the concept in more detail in his subsequent books (see Whyte, 1952, 1957). Whyte is also independently credited with the term by textbook author Keith Davis (1957), who wrote: “Some people, having carried to an extreme their interest in groups, begin to worship the group. This philosophy has been termed *groupthink* and critically described by W. H. Whyte, Jr.” (Davis, 1957, pp. 283-284).

The term *groupthink* was popularized in a 1971 article in *Psychology Today* magazine (see Janis, 1972). Most of the initial research was conducted by Yale University social psychologist Irving Janis, Ph.D. (1918–1990) and summarized in his influential book, *Victims of Groupthink* (Janis, 1972), which was revised in 1982. In his original book, Janis (1972) used the 1941 Japanese attack on the U.S. Naval base at Pearl Harbor (1941) and the 1961 U.S.

failed invasion of the Bay of Pigs (in Fidel Castro’s Cuba) as his two prime case studies. Groupthink has been defined as “a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive group, when the members’ striving for unanimity overrides their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action...Groupthink refers to a deterioration of mental efficiencies, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures” (Janis, 1982, p. 9).

The concept of groupthink has been applied to the process that can result in deviant behavior in religious cults (Taylor, 2006, 2017; Turner & Pratkanis, 1998; Wexler, 1995). In a section headed “Group Pressures” in Chapter 3 (“God or the group?”) of Part 1 (“Torture and Seduction”) of the second edition of *Brainwashing*, Kathleen E. Taylor, Ph.D. (2017), research scientist (Department of Physiology, Anatomy and Genetics, University of Oxford, UK) makes observations that are relevant to the process of groupthink in religious cults:

“Once committed to the group, members often adjust their own beliefs and values to make them more similar to those of other members; differences grate on the nerves and threaten the impression of solidarity. This leads to one of the most common problems with cult thinking: reality drift. Lower-status cult members will tend to shift their beliefs [p. 63] toward the beliefs of higher-status members, and particularly the cult leader; the reverse is not the case” (Taylor, 2017, pp. 62-63).

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.

In some respects, the literal interpretation of spoken and written language can be contrasted with the figurative interpretation of language. For most people, figurative language is obvious from its context. In stating the obvious, Chris Sandoval (2010) observes, “Nobody has ever mistaken the Twenty-Third Psalm for a story about a real shepherd written by a talking sheep. Nobody interprets the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* or *Onward Christian Soldiers* the same way as the *California State Penal Code* or a manual of transmission repair” (p. 6).

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 Wayiqra’ [Hebrew] or Leviticus [Latin: “of the Levites”]), the *King James Bible* (particularly the New Testament), or the *Quran* [literally: “the recitation”], also romanized Qur’an or Koran. With respect to the Gospels, for some Evangelicals, “If English was good enough for Jesus, then it’s good enough for me.” *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). Although it is not necessarily a dichotomy, for many devout Christians—particularly in liturgical traditions such as Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, and Episcopal—the Bible is not always to be read literally but it is always to be taken seriously.

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. Similarly, some religionists interpret all sacred texts as empirical, historical, and scientific truths, whereas other religionists interpret these same texts as reflecting *ultimate truths* (which some capitalize to reflect the Deity) regardless of

whether they correspond to explicit historical events or scientific information in the modern sense of these terms.

Within a specific religion such as Christianity, for example, there are some verses that some religious fundamentalists take literally whereas others take them figuratively or metaphorically:

John 10:7-8 (NIV) ⁷Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them.

There are other verses that Evangelical, Fundamentalists, and some Protestant Christians take literally, whereas those in other denominations interpret the verses figuratively:

John 14:6 (NIV) has been interpreted literally: ⁶Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

John 14:6 (NIV) has been interpreted figuratively: ⁶Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

There are verses that are taken literally by most Roman Catholics, whereas the same verses are taken figuratively by most Protestants:

John 6:55-56 (NIV) has been interpreted literally by Orthodox and Catholics: ⁵⁵For My flesh is real food, and My blood is real drink. ⁵⁶Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood remains in Me, and I in him.”

John 6:55-56 (NIV) has been interpreted figuratively by most Protestants and Evangelicals: ⁵⁵For My flesh is real food, and My blood is real drink. ⁵⁶Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood remains in Me, and I in him.”

At the same time, there are some verses that almost all Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, and Evangelicals interpret figuratively rather than literally:

Luke 14:33: (NIV) has been interpreted figuratively by most Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, and Evangelicals: ³³In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.”

Luke 14:33: (NRSV) has been interpreted figuratively by most Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, and Evangelicals: ³³So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

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* refers to how we may downplay the negative aspects of our own tradition.

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—can be attributed to a deity (i.e., a type of external

attribution), particularly if the perceived answers to prayer are consistent with what a person already desires.

Minimization occurs when *major* problems are misconstrued as *minor* concerns. 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.

Othering refers to a reductionist labelling of a person, culture, or religion as belonging to the subordinate and intrinsically inferior category of the Other. To *otherize* (in British, *otherisation*) involves making a person or group of people seem different or to consider them to be different. 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. For more details, see the discussion of this topic listed under Binary Thinking.

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 unable or unwilling to recognize within ourselves. On the other hand, our religious friends may be those onto whom we project our idealized images of ourselves. Some of us create God in our own image, so that our God hates the same kinds of people that we do. 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 *prooftexting*, refers to the process of using selective quotes from a document in order to “prove” one’s own attitudes or beliefs. It is similar to 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 prophesy.” *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*.

When reading the prophecies of ancient writers, it is helpful for contemporary readers to consider the concept of *postdiction*, which refers to an explanation of events after the fact. It is also known as *hindsight bias*, in which someone claims to predict events that were

already known—and which had already occurred—at the time of the writing. Biblical scholars use the Latin terms *vaticinium ex eventu* (“prophecy from the event”) and *post eventum* (“after the event”) to refer to this literary device.

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*, Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor (2019, pp. 64–66), 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 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), spiritual by passing 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).

Straw Man argument is comprised of elements of cognitive distortion, over-generalization, selective abstraction, and self-other rating. Straw man argument, also known as the *straw man fallacy*, involves deliberately distorting an opponent's position in an attempt to gain an advantage in an argument. It occurs whenever someone substitutes an opposing argument with a distorted, exaggerated, misrepresented, or oversimplified version of it in order to make the opposing position (i.e., the straw man) easier to defeat in a debate.

According to the Paul Elsher (2020), this logical fallacy of the strawman argument is that it gives the impression of refuting the other person's actual position. In reality, however, Person A attacks an opinion, position, or view that their opponent does not really hold. The distorted version of Person B's claim may be taken out of context, focus only on a single aspect of the original argument, or be only remotely related to it. The distortions of the straw man fallacy can be applied to groups, denominations, and religions as well as individuals. As clinical psychologist Rian E. McMullin, Ph.D. has observed, "Whatever their

origins, fallacies can take on a special life of their own when they are popularized in the media and become part of a national credo (2000, p. 194). Unfortunately, straw man arguments have become almost the norm in contemporary political debates, particularly as they may involve controversial topics and societal concerns.

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 use 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. Rather than focusing on the content of religious beliefs, dogma, or doctrine, this article focuses more on the form, process, or style of thinking. The

ideas in this article are not Ultimate Truth claims. 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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