

On the Nature of "Belief"

"A few years ago a group of people in the United States received messages that the end of the world was coming in a few month's time. They learned that they were to be rescued by 'flying saucers', while the rest of the world would be destroyed by flood. They were instructed to prepare themselves and to be ready. They were firmly convinced of the truth of this prediction, so the members of this group, which included a doctor and a number of university students, gave up their jobs; they set about selling their homes, and they gave away all their money in preparation for the end.

Given this belief, their behaviour was entirely logical. In times of war men give their lives in rash acts of bravery for causes which they believe to be right. The ultimate outcome is not important; the spur to action lies in the belief itself. Our actions are defined by the way we view the situation at any time. Normally we set our alarm clocks at night because we believe that we shall live to be awakened by them in the morning. But if we were to become firmly convinced that we should die in the night, we would probably not bother to set them. The American sociologist W.I. Thomas, in summarizing the important place of belief in the understanding of social behaviour, pointed out that 'if men defined situations as real, they are real in their consequences'. Our understanding of how people behave depends to a considerable degree on knowing how the world looks to them, and how they define their situation in it.

When societies are changing rapidly the established truths of religion and intellectual authority are thrown open to doubt and question. Both sacred and secular relativism are currently breaking down the traditional patterns, and have already created large areas of anxiety and uncertainty. Such a situation provides an opportunity for those who can still offer certainty instead of doubt - a certainty based on an alternative set of beliefs, and usually derived from a transcending source of authority. As indeed has happened in the past, we would expect cults to form around the chief stresses in the social and cultural fabric of our society.

The belief systems of cults are formed to meet undefined or inadequately explained areas of experience. They have usually been concerned with aspects of such basic problems of human existence as death and the hereafter; the problem of improving human mental and spiritual capacity; and the problem of the destiny of the world. Spiritualism, for instance, has developed as a specific cult of the dead, in response to the uncertainty and apparent neglect of this topic in ecclesiastical teaching in the nineteenth century.

New belief systems seek to resolve some of the conflicts of social change by removing the common anxieties of their followers, and by giving them an acceptable explanation of shifts in a world which they appear to be able neither to explain nor control. The particular appeal of these beliefs is to those who feel that they have been denied the rewards that others appear to have; those who have failed in the competition for success; and those who can no longer accept the approved values by which the existing social structure is supported and justified. Alternative explanations at any of these levels can help to provide new purpose and status to replace the old; a new set of beliefs to transform a sense of failure into a certainty of success; and a newly defined cause to provide a channel for useful energies, fresh opportunities for participation and the exercise of power. In this way, the rejected of the old order can become the elect of the new."

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