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Beliefs and the True Believer

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Abstract. Analysis of the True Believer may lead us to question our beliefs about psychological theory.

The term True Believer often denotes someone who believes in something--even if nothing is that something-- no matter what is available to seemingly disconfirm the belief. The term usually has been applied to political ideology or discrete political views, but through psychological research it has also been applied to religious beliefs and, in fact, to any belief relevant to the believer and/or the researcher, e.g., belief in the loyalty of a romantic partner.

In any case, True Believer and its associated denotations, connotations, and constructs continue to be relevant in the world of politics. True believers are candidates to engage in homicidal and suicidal political violence, e.g. terrorism and counterterrorism. They may be quite valuable performing the thankless administrative and logistical drudgery of a political campaign. They may be counted on to turn out for numerous demonstrations and rallies, to vote for a certain party, candidate, or proposal, to mirror a party line, even if that line is curved. Most people on most matters of political relevance are not true believers--hence the political psychological interest in studying them.

Through the years a number of psychological constructs have been posited to account for the True Believer, perhaps most commonly, (1) a number of personality traits--authoritarianism of the left and right and, especially, dogmatism. Each of these traits has, in turn, been associated with still other personality traits to form a personality nexus allegedly responsible for generating specific beliefs and behaviors. However, personality traits may be more or less operative on beliefs and behavior dependent on the situation or environment. Also, the correlation between personality traits and specific beliefs and behaviors, as well as the variance "explained" by these traits--be it (the variance) conceptualized through variants of classical test theory or item response theory--are often not very high. (Whether the appropriate statistical measures are being used, and whether statistical values are significant in a practical as opposed to statistical sense, is somewhat more controversial (Lubinski & Humphreys, 1997.) (2) Psychological constructs such as the self, self-identity, and self-perception also have been advanced to account for the True Believer, because loss of true belief may precipitate a huge, radical change or even loss of these constructs--assuming their ontological validity. The True Believer must guard against this to psychologically survive. Without the jargon, the true belief and the self are merged to form a view similar to the noted lay psychologist Popeye the Sailor Man who--in a pithy, concrete manner not unlike the recently deceased Deng Xiaoping-- has stated "I y'am what I y'am and that's what I y'am." Deng Xiaoping, of course, implies that cats--black and white--may be True Believers as long as they catch mice. (3) Consistency models exemplified in classical versions of cognitive consistency and cognitive dissonance also have been applied to the True Believer. Being inconsistent is so aversive or, perhaps, being consistent is so appealing that one will do just about anything to guard one's beliefs and keep one's behavior consistent with beliefs. Obviously, these folks are not successful politicians--the latter already retreating from saying "Do not as I say but as I do" to "Do not as I say or as I do". (Note, however, that the latter is consistently inconsistent.) (4) Psychodynamic conflict. Various unconscious thoughts, feelings, motives, and the like are so threatening to the psyche's viability that they can only be

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expressed in a distorted form. The True Belief is that form and can only be tampered with at the risk of personality chaos, regression, and decompensation.

But the question still remains what happens to people when they are repeatedly confronted with the disparity between their beliefs in the goodness of their belief and the badness of the belief's consequences? Some people, at least, continue to believe in the True Belief and its goodness, but make negative self-attributions to themselves and others like them for the alleged failings of the Belief (Conway & Ross, 1984.) As it were, the belief is still good, but they are now bad. This psychological phenomenon may have something to do with victims of Soviet show trials, Communist purges throughout the world, and bureaucratic power plays everywhere becoming willing accomplices in their own demise.

So, what to believe about True Believers? Perhaps readers only can believe what they must, regardless of information to the contrary. This is why there will continue to be internecine conflict among political, religious, intellectual leaders and their respective leaders. This is why much Western public clucking against a certain fatwa may be hypocrisy more than anything else. This is why the only True Belief is in its own continued existence. (See Conway, M., & Ross, M. (1984.) Getting what you want by revising what you had. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 47, 738-748; Davies, M.F. (1993.) Dogmatism and the persistence of discredited beliefs. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19, 692-699; Hunsberger, B., Alisat, S., Pancer, S.M., & Pratt, M. (1996.) Religious fundamentalism and religious doubts: Content, connections, and complexity of thinking. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 6, 201-220; Moscovici, S. (1991.) Reflections and reactions to the credo of a true believer. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 9, 215-225.) (Keywords: Belief, Cognitive Dissonance, Personality, Typology.)