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## The contradictions and consequences of religious beliefs

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**Summary** Humans have assumed for thousands of years that they have a spirit or soul that will survive the body after death. These beliefs gave rise to countless religions that developed in different directions and led eventually to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, and many minor religions. Hinduism and Buddhism, however, could be better described as a mixture of philosophy and religion. All religions are based on faith, so not surprisingly they evolve in different directions and originate countless branches and subdivisions. It should be noted that these contradict not only each other, but also scientific knowledge. Faith is a primitive form of irrational knowledge in which the truth or falsity of the beliefs cannot be tested. But faith is an essential component of all religions.

Drastic religious changes took place during the Reformation in the sixteenth century, and some of these had major political and religious consequences, sparking off many political conflicts and still fuelling wars even today, mainly in the Middle East and in western Asian countries. The freedom given to all established religions and new religious movements has unintentionally created further conflicts, many of which have ended in tragedy. Extreme faith can produce shared psychotic disorders that may have lethal consequences.

### 2.1 Cultural and religious contradictions

The first encounters with contradictions probably originated at the dawn of civilization, when humans started to face the contrast between their raw instincts and the incipient human aspirations of having a shelter and food for their family. Our hominid ancestors (Chap. 3) were probably striving to separate themselves from the ruthless animal world in which they were born and to avoid the constant challenges of dealing with predators and competing

hominid groups. The evolution of the hominid brain progressed slowly, but the development of the prefrontal cortex and the areas of association that increased the interconnectivity of different brain regions and functions resulted in a dramatic increase in intelligence and in the probabilities of survival. These changes were mainly due to development of areas related to creative intelligence and language.

With the progressive development of higher intelligence, abstract thinking, and language, primitive humans became better prepared to face life, and as agriculture gradually came on the scene, there was some free time between harvests to think and to wonder about the meaning of life and death. Early humans assumed at some point that there must be something else after death [1–3], so they conceived the existence of a supernatural creator and assumed that they had their own supernatural soul that would survive death. In analogy with their own world, they thought that there were good and bad spirits, angels, and devils, who could affect their lives. Similar beliefs apparently developed independently in many isolated populations.

Today, the major religions are Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, if we consider Hinduism and Buddhism to be better described as philosophies of life rather than religions. The Christians believe in Jesus Christ as their main deity, while followers of Islam believe in Allah. Like the Christian God, Allah is believed to be the creator of the Universe and the source of all good and evil. Muhammad (570–622 A.D.) was the most important prophet of Islam; he codified the strict rules that Muslims must follow, which include praying in Arabic five times a day. Besides, during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Moslem calendar, Muslims must abstain from food, drink, sex, and smoking, from sunrise to sunset. They must go on a pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime to worship at a shrine in Mecca. At death, they believe, like Christians, that they will enter either paradise or hell.

But despite their similar expectations after death, these religions involve important differences that preclude their unification into one single religion. Thus, since the main religions were born, there have been inherent contradictions between believers. The existence of contradictory beliefs between different cultures is one of the reasons why the world is chaotic, generating arguments about politics, territories, and religion which can easily result in armed conflict and religious persecution. Unfortunately, the United States government sometimes feels compelled to intervene as a peacemaker to protect American investments.

The American political, economic, and racial confrontations of half a century ago were solved with minimal violence. Today, we have in theory the freedom to choose beliefs, express opinions, and decide how to live our lives. While these are considered among the most important assets for American people, only a small fraction of the population really has the means and the privilege to choose their career and attend the schools of their choice.

Even though our freedom is nominally guaranteed by the constitution, the choices available to most Americans, and especially of those that have just immigrated, is unfortunately limited by a constellation of cultural, social, and economic factors. They include the cost of higher education, the lack of popular role models outside the sports or musical arenas, and the provincial mentality that predominates in many small communities.

One of the most severe blows to American confidence was produced by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The shock of losing our hopes for rationality and innovation was compounded by the passive and uncritical acceptance of family tradition, religion, and social conventions. Still today, freedom of choice cannot truly be exercised by most people, for they become prisoners of their own traditions and environment. In addition to their poor education and the need to work long hours to pay for food, high-interest mortgages, and the traps of easily obtainable credit cards, the average American worker is constantly *distracted* and *diverted* from preparing for a better future. There are no Roman circuses with gladiators, but there is football, basketball, and baseball, not to mention video games and movies that provide immediate entertainment to *divert* a large sector of the population from more fundamental issues. Americans seem to live in a modern adaptation of Huxley's *Brave New World*, with a blind and irrational confidence in a future inspired by television shows, soap operas, or sporting matches.

We have a diversity of local traditions and religious beliefs that are all thought to be intrinsically respectable, and cannot be openly criticized by political leaders. In the average American cities and in the countryside, there are many competing churches showing that religious freedom and practice are the backbone of our society. Religious participation provides a respectable status in the community and a social outlet to interact, not only at a personal level but also in business and politics. These developments are not always positive, because political and religious leaders are beginning to control the decisions of school community boards, and to oppose the teaching of biological evolution, for example, as well as the innovations brought about by competitive newcomers and immigrants. To make the situation worse, the voice of intellectuals cannot be clearly heard over the background noise created by primetime television commercials and political propaganda [4].

Our cultural tradition also seems to have been short-lived, because many nonfiction authors whose books were read by the previous generation are hardly read today. Interestingly, books for or against religion are selling well today, but the great majority of nonfiction books are written about popular entertainers, sports heroes? and political personalities. There are also many "How-To" books, on cooking and other crafts, as well as travel, dieting, adventure, and other entertainments. But the number of scholarly books produced by private publishers is actually at an all time low. Even university presses often agree to publish serious non-fiction only if the book could be used for teaching.

This is because non-fiction books simply do not sell nearly as well as popular fiction or memoirs about the horizontal lives of famous actors. Perhaps the new electronic forms of communication and the WWW will facilitate the reading of thought-provoking books and replace the role of the classic *public intellectual* that characterized Europe a few decades ago.

The cultural crisis is not new, but it has reached unprecedented proportions. As Adler indicated, it was Averroës (1126–1198) who proposed to accept independently the “truths of faith” and the “truths of reason”. However, he assigned a higher status to the truths of reason, because the truths of faith belong to the sphere of imagination [3]. Besides, Averroës thought that religious writings could be interpreted allegorically, giving him room to avoid contradictions. Averroës was probably the first to suggest life in such a schizoid world. Dualism reaffirms the existence of different realms and the use of faith as a legitimate method to validate beliefs.

Descartes (1596–1650) contributed significantly to putting dualism on apparently solid grounds [5], and other philosophers and some scientists have tried to justify the simultaneous acceptance of two independent realms. This was probably a way to avoid conflict between religion and reason, which could have been fatal during the Middle Ages or the Inquisition. Even today, some philosophers and scientists keep their religious beliefs in a compartment well separated from their objective knowledge. The majority of people get along with social conventions by dividing reality into two independent worlds, the *natural* and the *supernatural* [3]. The objective world is understood through science, which relies on reason, logic, and empirical knowledge, while the supernatural world, ruled by *faith*, provides religion, astrology, and other superstitious beliefs. The duality of body and spirit, which is implicit in today’s popular culture, is still fundamental to the organization of the intellectual and spiritual life of most people.

## **2.2 Early spiritual beliefs**

*Homo sapiens* seems to be anything but *sapiens* in relation to faith and religious beliefs. Our early ancestors may have started to have religious thoughts when the Neanderthals began to bury their dead in special positions. Burying a parent or a child is certainly a painful experience. It feels like a deep injustice, and makes us want to take good care of the dead, compelling us to ponder the meaning of life and death. The existence of these universal feelings suggests that religions would have been developed in the early stages of civilization by the most primitive and ignorant cultures, who still believed in magic, spirits, and witchcraft. As discussed below, people thought that being alive and moving, that is, being *animated*, meant having a soul.

All religions support the idea that humans have a soul or a spirit. Animals were also thought to have a soul, *anima*, or *vital spirits*, because they can move

at their own will. Actually, the word *animal* derives from *anima* or soul in Latin. Observing the movements and autonomy of animals fascinates everybody, especially children. This is probably why Walt Disney's *animated* cartoons became so popular, and today animation is used in television, not only in advertisements for children, but also for adults. The existence of animal spirits, however, was disproven in the 1700s, when the Italian physician Luigi Galvani (1737–1798) was able to produce movements in the legs of recently sacrificed frogs by applying electrical discharges to the frogs' sciatic nerve.

The use of electricity to study animals has had far-reaching scientific and philosophical consequences, besides disproving the theory of "vital spirits" to explain animal movements. Vital spirits were replaced by what Galvani called "animal electricity". Galvani's experiments were published more than two centuries ago, in 1791. They provided the basis for the studies of Alessandro Volta (1745–1827), who invented the battery, and for the German physician Emil du Bois-Reymond (1818–1896), who continued to study animal electricity in electric fishes. The multiple devices designed by these investigators to register animal electricity led many years later to the invention of the EKG or ECG (electrocardiogram) and EEG (electroencephalogram), and these in turn have provided the starting point for much more sophisticated imaging techniques, such as positron emission tomographic scanning (PETs) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Besides being powerful diagnostic tools, these can visualize some of the brain activity involved in mental processes and in the maintenance of consciousness.

### **2.3 The contradictions between science and religion**

Most cultures have been through similar, but not identical developmental stages that started with primitive taboos, animism, and polytheism. The evolution toward monotheism seems a major simplifying step. While replacing the complexity of polytheism in some cultures, it required a greater capacity for abstract thought. However, some religions that are considered monotheistic, such as Christianity, actually refer to a multitude of deities, including various saints and virgins, who are said to be specialized in solving specific problems or in helping to cure some diseases. In many churches, there are separate altars that allow people to pray directly to different saints. But, if everything else fails, it is still possible to pray directly to any member of the Catholic Holy Trinity, which includes the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. But the idea of three persons existing in One Divine Being is a Catholic dogma that is not acceptable to Protestants. The Catholic Trinity has been declared a mystery, and it has been complicated by more than 2,000 years of theological arguments and irrational explanations.

Today, almost 90% of Americans are religious and believe in two independent realms, living thus in a schizoid universe with a natural and a supernatural

component. Moreover, some contemporary philosophers have even tried to demonstrate that physicalism is wrong, proposing that there is a fundamental difference between the subjective character of qualitative experiences and the physicality of the brain [6, 7]. It is a pervasive illusion to believe that qualitative experiences and the mind are nonphysical phenomena. The overview provided in this book will show that qualitative experiences are ineffable, not because they are mysterious or supernatural, but because they consist in *language-independent* neural processes that could be named, but not re-created in the brains of others through explanations (Chap. 4). Actually, languages can only be developed and translated by anchoring words or gestures into qualitative experiences, or by making the appropriate sounds and gestures that are understandable because humans and higher animals have similar phylogenetic backgrounds and common experiences [8] (Chap. 6).

There are no satisfactory explanations for how the natural and the supernatural realms could interact with each other. Do we have a dual nature, material and spiritual as most religions teach, or are the duality of body and spirit only an ancestral hope supported by religious beliefs, family tradition, and wishful thinking? The most common answer is of course that we have a body and a spirit. At some point in our lives, we have all been deeply preoccupied about our nature and ultimate fate. We realized, probably during our early teens, that we are not just acting in a school play, but we are living our real and only life. When we were young, we envisioned growing up, preparing to face life, and realizing all our dreams, while knowing that some day in the very, very distant future we will be facing death. We may also have sometimes hoped that the preachers were right, and that we would enter the supernatural world, where we could live happily through all eternity in the company of our loved ones.

But this would be possible only if we had a *dual nature*, a physical body and a spiritual soul that would survive death. Actually, it really does seem as though we have a spiritual or intellectual component that is not physical. I will show later that this feeling is produced by the impossibility of perceiving our brain and its functions, which are then attributed to a supernatural soul. We have no doubts that our physical body will eventually die and decay, so it seems encouraging that the major religions and our subjective feelings tell us that we may also possess a non-physical spiritual component. The problem with this view is that faith and beliefs are not rigorous ways to tell what is true or false. Faith is *only a primitive way of validating beliefs*, because it gives rise to innumerable contradictions, as indicated by the religious incompatibilities that have always plagued the world. Moreover, faith is not compatible with science and reason, both of which we have learned to trust. Religion and faith require belief in an interaction between the *natural world* and a hypothetical *supernatural realm*, but nobody has explained how the two realities could interact without violating the most fundamental principles of physics and reason.

Belief in the existence of a spiritual nonphysical component implies that there is a natural reality and a supernatural reality, and that we are part of both worlds, even though there is no evidence for the latter. We know that we have a physical body and a thinking mind as well as a strong moral sense and deep emotions that seem somehow spiritual. Nevertheless, there are too many religions and contradictory beliefs for all of them to be true, as each individual religion claims. When we grow up, no answer comes, and regardless of our education or occupation, we realize that we still do not know what comes after death, if anything. Thus, we carry on with dignity, while looking for reassurance. The majority of us initially accepted the most popular belief: if we are good in this world, our souls will go to Heaven after we die, but if we are not, we will go to Hell, where we will suffer forever. However, this statement is just a childish dream, and some of us have serious doubts about the existence of a God with good intentions who would create a perverse Devil. It seems that the God of the Bible was also schizoid.

The most ironic aspect of religions is that they were invented at a time when primitive humans were living in deep ignorance, when the Earth was thought to be flat, and the Sun to revolve around the Earth. Since religions cannot discriminate between false beliefs and true knowledge, they simply qualify as superstitious beliefs, the irrational creations of well meaning, but deeply ignorant people, some of whom were in addition epileptic or paranoid enough to have auditory hallucinations, such as the Prophet Muhammad.

Mary Baker G. Eddy (1821–1910), the founder of the *Church of Christ, Scientist* in Boston, was also mentally unstable and reported that she was able to have conversations with God. She founded the *Christian Science Monitor*, a newspaper, and a magazine. Her teachings advocated refusing medical treatment in favor of prayers, because she believed in the spiritual healing of diseases, including all the bacterial diseases of childhood. It was said by her followers that she was able to heal people instantaneously, and this could well have been true if she was dealing only with rampant psychosomatic complaints. Initially, she had thousands of followers, but the number of believers has shrunk to less than 10% in recent years. Eventually she was found guilty of contributing to the deaths of several children, who got prayers instead of regular medical treatment. Some of her followers still believe in spiritual healing, and even recently this has resulted in the unnecessary deaths of several children, whose parents are being brought to trial under the accusation of manslaughter.

Since all religions claim to be true, none of their claims can be taken seriously, simply because religions contradict each other. A true religion is an oxymoron. In addition, there are major inconsistencies between the omniscience and the omnipotence of the Christian god and the contradictory realities in which we live. God seems to ignore all the problems that affect humans, including the chronic infantile mortality and the hunger of children in Africa, especially Somalia, in the area of the African Horn, where in August

2011, children less than 5 years of age were dying at the rate of 10,000 per month. It seems reasonable for humans to expect an omnipotent god to solve at least some of the serious problems that chronically affect many children.

In fact, such problems should never have developed. God's neglect is universal, because there are many catastrophic situations around the world. For example, God should have stopped all the calamities that have plagued the world in recent years, such as the devastation of New Orleans by the hurricane Katrina in August 2005, which killed more than 1,800 people and destroyed a considerable fraction of the poorer neighborhoods. Not to mention earthquakes, which regularly produce a much higher toll: an earthquake of magnitude 7 in Haiti killed more than 85,000 people in January 2010, and the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011 produced a tsunami that resulted in more than 13,500 people being killed, while 14,500 were still missing a month later. The same tsunami also destroyed three nuclear reactors and resulted in the spread of highly radioactive particles that have been incorporated into the food chain and have made a large area uninhabitable for many years to come. While religious leaders might argue that these disasters are necessary to test the strength of human character, they are much more likely simply to indicate natural forces beyond our control, with or without the help of Divine intervention.

The multiplicity of religions is illogical, unnecessary, and contradictory, because we only need one true religion and one effective god, but neither can be identified with any degree of certainty. Actually, although this critique may sound childish and naive, it applies to the gods of all religions, all of whom have been neglecting the needy around the world. If Jesus Christ was actually a god, who descended from Heaven to be with the mortals, it seems strange that he has not been able to come back to talk to and advise humans for the last two millennia. God should be aware that many serious problems have occurred since his last visit; we have had many wars and plagues, and more recently, we have had two world wars that were much more devastating than anyone could have imagined two millennia ago. Besides, God has also been ignoring the crimes of tyrants and despots from Argentina and Afghanistan to Tunisia. Are these tests of our character and faith, as proclaimed by many religious leaders, or are they an indication that we are on our own and would do better to protect ourselves.

### **2.4 The fragmentation of culture**

The problems of human nature are complex and intertwined, so *Contradictions* is not only about beliefs, but also about the nature and reliability of our culture. Inspired by C. P. Snow's "The Two Cultures" [9], I realized that the arbitrary division of knowledge into disciplines allows us to create tight compartments to avoid contradictory beliefs and confrontations. For example, we could justify



almost anything by taking refuge in a particular religion, philosophical doctrine, or narrow academic discipline. The idea is to convince people and ourselves that other disciplines have no relevance to the subject under discussion, or that they have an “independent nature”. We easily forget that nothing is in fact independent in this way, because universal laws encompass the whole Universe and supersede our provincial cultures. Besides, matter and energy are physically equivalent as described by Einstein. Opinions are subjective, but truth is universal (or at least it should be), and it has a coherence and beauty that leaves no room for contradictions. Today, the coherence of knowledge and truth are both essential, not only for our intellectual well-being, but also for the survival of our civilization.

Our cultural situation contrasts sharply with the Western philosophical tradition that started with the cosmological preoccupations of the pre-Socratic philosophers, who speculated on the origin of celestial bodies, life, and the structure of matter, the existence of movement or the nature of numbers. The early Greek philosophers were not only theoreticians, but also tried to solve practical problems, such as measuring fields and calculating the distance of faraway objects. With Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, philosophy expanded into an all-encompassing body of inquiry that included the origin and the possibility of knowledge, ethics, geometry, logic, biology, metaphysics, etc.

Specialization and the ensuing fragmentation of knowledge into disciplines and sub-disciplines is one of the generally accepted, but potentially divisive developments that today threaten the unity of our culture. The fragmentation of knowledge is institutionalized by academic departments at many universities, which sometimes become responsible for the fragmentation of teaching. These departments are organized and maintained for several reasons. Initially, their names were derived from a new specialty with a fancy name, which suggested that their members were working in the forefront of knowledge. However, the dual obligation of research and teaching created the need for a territorial demarcation. Moreover, they have personnel that have to be supervised and sometimes paid for by obtaining competitive research grants. Thus, academic departments are *territories with a budget*, which become symbols of the power of each departmental chairman, who tends to perpetuate the status quo by resisting any attempt to reorganize or to change the curriculum. This is why academic departments are generally reorganized only after the replacement of a chairperson.

## **2.5 Religious atrocities and shared psychotic disorders**

Different churches and new sects start as small congregations that branch out from larger denominations, such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Many developing sects incorporate elements from other religions. For example, Christianity began as a synthesis of Judaism and Greek religion which

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also incorporated elements from Celtic religions and Roman paganism [10]. All major, time-tested religions have proven their social acceptability and have generated major independent denominations. The explosion in the number of denominations can probably be traced to the Reformation. Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), who initiated the Reformation in Switzerland, preached that the Bible is the absolute authority. The German theologian and leader of the Protestant Reformation Martin Luther (1483–1546) also accepted the Bible as the sole source of revelation. He believed that salvation would be granted on the basis of faith alone, and supported a universal priesthood of all believers.

Unitarianism was a movement that emerged from the Reformation and favored a view of the scriptures as interpreted by reason. They did not believe in the Trinity or in the divinity of Christ. One of the first promoters of Unitarianism was the Spanish physician and theologian Michael Servetus (Miguel Serveto), who discovered the circulation of blood through the lungs. He argued that there was nothing in the New Testament that contradicted the monotheism of the Jewish Scriptures [11]. For his denial of the Trinity, Servetus was burnt alive at the stake in 1553 by order of John Calvin. His execution provoked a justified reaction against punishing heresy with death, and this probably had a role in the spread of Unitarianism to England during the seventeenth century. The seditious movements breaking off from the central authority of the Roman Catholic Church, and the license for free interpretations of the Bible which could be validated just by personal faith alone, contributed to the generation of a wide variety of religious denominations, sects, and cults. The Bible thus became a useful kit for developing religions to suit individual tastes and the fashion of the times.

The Protestant legacy and the religious freedom guaranteed by the American Constitution, assure the endless proliferation of sects, churches, and denominations. This proliferation is further fueled by competition between the different denominations, which have to recruit followers and donors to survive. Churches without parishioners do not prosper. Kosmin and Lachman [12] list an impressive number of denominations in their text and tables, but after several failed attempts to count them all, let us just say that the U.S. Department of Defense lists 260 denominations under the general heading of Protestant chaplaincy alone.

### 2.6 The “new” religious movements and their apocalyptic predictions

Dissident sects or churches are usually recognized as legitimate, even though some are weird, by almost any standard. They are tolerated in the name of religious freedom, providing that they are not socially obnoxious. Sometimes these sects evolve into large denominations, despite certain odd features. An example are the Mormons, who were polygamous until 1890, or the

Christian Scientists, discussed previously. More recently, several New Religious Movements, such as the Hare Krishna, The Unification Church (“Moonies”), the Divine Light Mission, and others, even though they were ephemeral, have created serious social and psychiatric problems because they have violated the civil liberties of certain cult members.

New Religious Movements also recruit emotionally disturbed youngsters, 30–38% of whom have been under psychiatric treatment before joining these cults [13]. These youngsters become easy prey of the cults because of the “affection and concern” shown by cult members, who are oriented toward communal or unconventional living, as a large extended family. Such cults, which exceed 2,500 in number in the US alone, provide emotional support, a mission in life, and a feeling of accomplishment that is badly needed by their members. On the other hand, some cults are a public health hazard, because their leaders have been found guilty of inflicting mental distress, coercive persuasion, peonage, unlawful imprisonment, sexual abuse, physical violence, deceptive fundraising practices, misuse of charitable status, and other abuses.

Concerned parents and friends of group members have occasionally counter-attacked by rescuing and “deprogramming” the recruits. Deprogramming consists in removing the cult members from the group, and subjecting them to a coercive reeducation process. This technique, even though successful in many instances, has created additional legal and psychological problems, because the rescue also violates the civil rights of the recruits. We cannot analyze here all the psychiatric and civil rights issues surrounding the cults and New Religious Movements, but the interested reader is referred to the American Psychiatric Association report [13] and to Galanter [14].

## **2.7 The tragic consequences of blind faith**

There is obviously a wide spectrum of sects and cults. In the extreme cases, the cult leader is eccentric, with bizarre ideas, demanding absolute obedience. The leader becomes the self-appointed interpreter of God’s will, and demands absolute faith, which may have tragic results. These leaders manage to convince the converted individuals to abandon their families, or bring them into the sect community, to which they must subsequently donate all their possessions. The followers often live in an unconventional manner under the guidance of an authoritarian and charismatic leader. In some cases, when the leader makes apocalyptic predictions such as the catastrophic end of the world with the salvation of the righteous, or the Second Coming of Jesus, they are prone to violence, which usually ends in tragedy when the predictions do not materialize. This is what happened with the mass murder–suicide of the People’s Temple sect in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978, when more than 900 US citizens died.

Another incident in which a sect was involved, in 1993, destroyed the Mount Carmel Center, in Waco, Texas. There was an armed conflict between a religious sect, the Branch Davidians headed by David Koresh, and the Federal law enforcement agents, following a 7 week siege. The sect, which had a long history of apocalyptic predictions, separated from the Davidians Sect of the Seventh Day Adventists, who believe that Jesus' Second Coming and the end of the world are near. The first prediction, by William Miller (1782–1849), was that Christ was returning on October 23, 1844. When Jesus did not show up, this led to much disappointment [15]. Since then, the second coming has been supported by visions and delusional interpretations of the scriptures by Ellen G. White. She had about 300 visions in her lifetime, and seems to have been frankly paranoid: she thought that Satan, who was represented by the Bishop of Rome, would seek to control the world. She believed that only those whom God addresses audibly are able to understand and explain the Scriptures [15]. The most parsimonious explanation is that Ellen G. White was not only paranoid, but was also having very vivid auditory hallucinations.

In another apocalyptic prediction, Florence Houteff, the wife of a deceased leader of the Mount Carmel Center, announced that on April 22, 1959, the faithful would be slaughtered, then resurrected and carried to heaven on clouds. Nothing happened, so everybody was disappointed, and the prophet gradually lost her followers. It is clear that the Davidians have been waiting a long time for a bloody confrontation between the good forces of God and the evil intentions of Satan. The stage was set for the unfolding of the Waco tragedy.

The leader of Mount Carmel Center was David Koresh, a peculiar self-appointed Messiah. His interpretations of the scriptures are clearly delusional and self-serving. Biblical revelations prompted him to father many children by different concubines, several of whom were under age. In contrast, the males in the colony were required to abstain from sex. Moreover, he was known to practice cunnilingus, which was considered a diabolical act by some members of the sect. His sexual practices were an obstacle, not only for preserving the flock, but also for expanding their number. Koresh believed that he had to be, not only a lover but also a *fighter*, so he accumulated an arsenal of semi-automatic rifles, and materials to manufacture hand grenades and other explosives [15].

The recurrent apocalyptic prophesies of the sect were fulfilled when the Federal law enforcement officers, who were probably identified with the forces of Satan, prepared to invade the Mount Carmel complex. The final episode, on April 19, 1993, was brought about by a fire that consumed the Mount Carmel Center. It ended with the death of 76 men, women and children, including David Koresh. The origin of the fire that engulfed the Mount Carmel Center

is in question and the Federal agents may share part of the blame. However, it is clear that such incidents do not develop unless faith is pushed to the limit, to create a shared psychotic disorder.

Independently of these events, another apocalyptic episode took place in late 1994, when 52 members of the “Order of the Solar Temple” were found dead in Switzerland and Quebec, in a murder–suicide ritual. Sixteen additional members of the same sect died in France, near the frontier with Switzerland, in December 1995. The bodies were found arranged in a sunburst pattern. Fourteen were shot after ingesting a sedative, and two—who were assumed to have shot the rest—died of self-inflicted gunshot wounds.

Sects whose beliefs generate violence or mass immolation attract attention, and they are labeled as deviant cults. The teachings and the doctrines of these charismatic groups are considered eccentric. In these extreme cases, it is clear that their leader is a disturbed paranoid individual who has induced a *shared psychotic disorder* in all the members of the sect. However, if the activities of the cult do not have tragic consequences, society does not recognize the psychotic character of the cult’s teachings. The members of the cult could not be judged as delusional, because religious beliefs are protected by the American Constitution. The New Religious Movements are only judged by their results, and not by the delusional beliefs of their members. It is important to remember that not even the most grossly ridiculous religious beliefs are considered delusional because of a loophole in the official definition of delusion that is in compliance with the constitution [13].

Faith does not have any truthful cognitive value because it cannot distinguish objectively between true and false, and cannot distinguish religious extremism from moderation. Deductive and inductive logic, as well as empirical knowledge, have rules that preclude gross deviations from the truth. Despite its limitations, faith is considered by all religions as the highest form of knowledge. However, faith is the engine that has produced the most striking injustices in history, and keeps the faithful ignorant of what science has to say. Another of the self-serving theories that some theologians, preachers, and gurus have proclaimed is that religious experiences are the “highest forms of consciousness”, which is a senseless metaphor in terms of truth. The mountains of incomprehensible gibberish created and propagated by religious writers hardly testify to the “superiority” of such states of consciousness. There is no acknowledgment of the fact that faith cannot discriminate truth, so any religion becomes true by definition. The tragedies generated by the cults, the ridiculous predictions of hundreds of visionaries and prophets, the Inquisitors of all times, the witch hunters, the religious persecutors and terrorists, are all based on “The True Faith”. Indeed, religious faith is blind by necessity, because the “right” and the “wrong” faiths are not distinguishable by their truth value.

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