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INCONSISTENCY OF BELIEF AMONG ROMAN CATHOLIC GIRLS: CONCERNING RELIGION, ASTROLOGY, REINCARNATION

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The religious attitudes of 227 junior and senior students at a Catholic girls high school are examined. Students who expressed a belief in astrology did not report religious attitudes which differed significantly from the other students. Those who expressed belief in reincarnation manifested only slight differences in attitudes. Students expressing a belief in astrology were more likely to express a belief in reincarnation. These results were held to be inconsistent with cognitive theories which stress the importance of attitude consistency. The author presents a functional perspective. Although these attitudes are structurally incompatible with each other, they serve similar functions for some adolescent girls: the provision of security in the face of confusion and uncertainty.

Many social scientists have presumed that individuals strive to attain and maintain a consistent set of attitudes. Several social psychological theories have attempted to isolate and define those factors which either encourage cognitive consistency or account for its absence. Among these formulations are those which focus on balance (Heider, 1946), congruity (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), logical-affective consistency (McGuire, 1960), affective-cognitive consistency (Rosenberg and Abelson, 1960, and belief congruence (Rokeach and Rothman, 1965).

HYPOTHESIS

Simultaneous belief in Roman Catholic doctrine, astrology, and reincarnation is logically incompatible. The body of Catholic doctrine presumes both the omnipotence of God and the free will of man, which is inconsistent with fate being determined by the stars. Likewise, the Catholic conception of the hereafter leaves no room for a return to life in the flesh. Furthermore, astrology's fatalism is based upon blind impersonal forces and is substantially different from whatever fatalism reincarnationists attribute to the workings of *karma*. Therefore, it is hypothesized that a study of beliefs of adolescent girls will show an acceptance of only one of these three belief sets (Roman Catholic, astrology, reincarnation) accompanied by a rejection of the others.

PROCEDURES AND RESULTS

The subjects were 227 juniors and seniors at a Catholic girls' high school. Most of the subjects came from working class families of Polish or Italian extraction living on Chicago's northwest side. The data were collected in June, 1976, by administering the questionnaires during class time. Whoever was present in religion class (a required course) that day got a questionnaire.

TABLE 1
SUBJECTS EXPRESSING AGREEMENT WITH FOLLOWING STATEMENTS
(In Percent)

	Astrology Belief (N=70)	Non- belief (N=157)	χ^2	Rein- carnation Belief (N=59)	Non- Belief (N=168)	χ^2
There is a God.	86	87	0.010	86	87	0.018
Jesus is the Savior.	60	70	1.806	54	71	5.078 ^a
It is important to live a moral life.	63	61	0.037	56	63	0.665
Prayer makes me a better person.	26	32	0.752	20	34	3.193
It is good for a person to go to confession.	26	20	0.200	40	26	5.620 ^a
Unselfish people are happier.	63	68	1.301	58	60	0.033
It is good for a family to be religious.	46	58	2.965	36	60	10.106 ^b
I would go to mass even if my parents did not make me go.	47	52	0.225	41	54	2.408
I would like to get married by a priest.	82	90	2.373	76	91	7.300 ^b
I would like to have my children baptised.	83	94	6.287 ^a	85	93	2.250
I would like to receive last rites.	74	82	1.150	67	83	6.992 ^b
The Roman Catholic religion is the one for me.	51	53	0.021	49	54	0.261
I believe in astrology.	100	0	- - -	54	23	19.004 ^c
I believe in reincarnation.	46	17	19.004 ^c	100	9	- - -

^a $p < .05$ ^b $p < .01$ ^c $p < .001$

Results indicate that subjects who expressed belief in astrology had only slightly lower adherence to most parts of Catholic doctrine, and were even slightly more adherent on a few points. The reincarnationists had somewhat lower rates of adherence, but these approached statistical significance on only a few points, and did not entail a rejection of the entire belief system. The most striking finding is the tendency of some subjects to report a belief in *both*.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The hypothesis was *not* confirmed. Acceptance of one belief system was no assurance that incompatible beliefs would be rejected. This pattern has been seen in Thai religion (Piker, 1972). It also has been noted previously among American adolescents, and Erikson (1950, 1959) attributed it to the confusion and uncertainty of that developmental stage.

This survey raises more questions than it answers. The author was somewhat surprised at the low response of the subjects to the statement about Roman Catholic religion being the one for them, inasmuch as the vast majority of the girls had been in parochial schools for many years. But there are numerous and competing cultural influences on the development of religious belief in an individual. American culture has become very fragmented and dissociated (Bellah, 1970). Perhaps the development of the counter-culture in the last ten years has simultaneously encouraged a relativistic approach to traditional religion and an interest in alternative doctrines, such as astrology (Wuthnow, 1976). Another possible interpretation is that religious education itself is not striving for adherence to a prescribed set of dogmas and practices, but seeks to stimulate personal growth (Brink, 1976, 1977). Some religion teachers in parochial schools have encouraged student doubt about religious dogma, and have fostered interest in Eastern religions and humanistic philosophy. Further research on this topic should try to ascertain some of the factors in adolescent backgrounds (societal, familial, educational) which correlate with belief in astrology and reincarnation, or belief inconsistency in general.

Wuthnow (1976) demonstrated a relationship between marginality and belief and interest in astrology. The higher the index of marginality, the greater the likelihood of belief in astrology. The present study may offer some confirmation of this theory, especially with reincarnation and marginality or alienation. The subjects who were most alienated from socially-oriented religious rituals (baptism, marriage, last rites, the importance of family religion) were the ones most likely to express a belief in astrology or reincarnation. Wuthnow (1976:167) then speculated that belief in astrology "may function in ways similar to, and indeed as a substitute for more conventional religious commitments." The present study fails to confirm the substitution hypothesis. Believers in astrology or reincarnation are not significantly less likely to express a belief in Roman Catholic religion.

A consideration of the function of beliefs may be helpful here. One purpose of beliefs is to protect the ego by reinterpreting situa-

tions with which the ego cannot cope (Katz, Sarnoff and McClintock, 1956; Rokeach, 1960, 1968). Beliefs which could not fit together in the sturcture of the same logical system, nevertheless, may serve similar functions as different means to the same end. For example, Freud (1915) contended that belief in heaven and belief in reincarnation represented civilization's attempts to deny the meaning of death. Therefore, the individual who believes in both heaven and reincarnation is something like the man who wears both belt and suspenders. He appears foolish to outsiders who only consider the consistency of his actions, but protects his ego from a fearful situation by adherence to different beliefs or practices which strive for the same function. The adolescent's response to confusion and uncertainty frequently is the adoption of religious attitudes which are structurally inconsistent but functionally similar.

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