FRUSTRATED BELIEFS AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

A Psychological Enquiry into the Gospels of the New Testament

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Belief is essential to the conception of religious systems and individuals. Belief crisis is an almost inevitable part in the evolution of both of them. Belief crisis might happen as a result of frustrated or disconfirmed beliefs, unfulfilled hopes and expectations. From a psychological point of view, this crisis can be examined using the theory of cognitive dissonance and its resolution, which was developed and researched by Festinger et al. and which won recognition after the publication of their book, *When Prophecy Fails*.

Here it will suffice to explain cognitive dissonance as: “The condition in which one has beliefs, or knowledge that disagree with each other or with behavioral tendencies; when such cognitive dissonance arises, the subject is motivated to reduce the dissonance through changes in behavior or cognition.”

The idea that Christ's crucifixion is an instance of disconfirmation of a belief (his being the Messiah) and thus creating a cognitive dissonance in his followers is hinted at by Festinger, though with deep reservation (His main objection to using the crucifixion as a demonstration of his theory is “the unreliability of the data.”) This line of reasoning is not new at all, as it is clarified by Flusser in “Salvation Present and Future”:

Since Albert Schweitzer, the importance of eschatology for original Christianity has rightly been stressed. Later, a further point entered the scholarly discussion: If Christianity at its very beginnings expected that “The present


generation will live to see” Christ’s second coming (Mk. XIII, 30), these hopes were not fulfilled. How much did this frustrated belief change the original structure of Christianity? Many think that this “Parousieverzögerung” was the decisive turning-point in Christian faith, which almost utterly changed its structure. According to this opinion non fulfilled eschatological expectations caused orthodox Christianity to come into existence and became the center of Christian thought; instead of expecting their salvation in future, Christians learned to look back. Their hopes now became based upon the salvation which already took place through Christ. It seems to me that it is worth rethinking this thesis, because in its outspread form it does not fit the facts as reflected in ancient Christian sources and study of parallel phenomena in history of religions does not confirm it. 3)

A careful analysis of these two studies reveals that two independent and two dependent variables are dealt with. The first two are alternative conceptions of the belief crisis:

A. Unfulfilled eschatological expectations.
B. The crucifixion or death of Jesus.

The second two are alternative modes of the crisis resolution:

1. Structural change, which is the core of Festinger’s theory, that specifies the circumstances under which increased proselytizing would be expected to follow disconfirmation.
2. Content change i.e. Christology as expressed in the New Testament.

From these variables, four research hypotheses can be extrapolated. Flusser excludes A1 and A2 and Festinger rejects B1. Consequently, B2 will be dealt with in this paper.

Unfulfilling Festinger's condition for cognitive dissonance, the validity of variable A is to be doubted. 4) Other research reports failure to replicate variable A. 5) Thus, further support is given for examining hypothesis B2.

4) According to Festinger, disconfirmation of a belief will lead to and bring about a cognitive dissonance under the following five conditions; (1) A belief must be held with deep conviction and it must have some relevance to action. (2) The believer must have committed himself (by taking important action which is difficult to undo). (3) The belief must be sufficiently specific and sufficiently concerned with the real world so that it may be refuted unequivocally by events. (4) Such undeniable disconfirming evidence is produced and recognized by the believer. (5) The individual believer must have social support which enables him to withstand the disconfirming evidence.
5) Hardyck A. Jane, and Braden, Marcia. “Prophecy Fails Again; A Report