

Five questions for a new conviction system

[Science](#), [Anthropology](#)



December 13, Belief Systems: Attraction and Consequence Belief systems can be, quite literally, a matter of life and death. Everyone uses them to define reality, select community, and direct behavior. Some people inherit belief systems, while others choose a belief system with personal intention. Some people combine fragments from multiple systems, or insert fragments into a system. This essay will introduce three of the most important aspects of any belief system in drawing new believers into it, and six core questions that should be considered when examining any belief system.

One of the primary aspects of a belief system that attracts new believers is its relevance to the pulse of the times, the psycho-socio-historical dynamics (Whitsett). The rise and spread of Chuck Smith's Calvary Chapel, for example, had its beginnings in California, a state of transients and extremes, and the belief system, while fundamentalist Christian, moved away from dour old people in suits and welcomed new believers, including Society's rejects (gang members, mental patients, drug addicts) with love, rock music, jeans and T-shirts, and mass baptism in the ocean (Smith and Brooke). The Amish, on the other hand, attract few new believers because they are focused on retaining their separateness through norms and values of another place and time (Keiser).

A second important aspect, that attracts new believers to a particular belief system, is the presence or implied presence of a charismatic leader who interprets and represents the belief system for new believers and provides a strong figure with which to merge (Inzlicht, McGregor and Hirsch). People who are shopping for a new belief system may feel lost and alone, failed by a previous belief system. They want to feel strength and power and belonging (Inzlicht, McGregor and

Hirsch). Although the presence of a community assists in providing these things, it is the charismatic leader who holds the community together and keeps everyone focused on the principles of the belief system.

Thirdly, the capacity of the belief system to relieve uncertainty and anxiety by outlining practical steps to take to be right, to bring about desired change, or to be safe, is of critical importance (Whitsett). Belief “ is marked by reduced reactivity in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), a cortical system that is involved in the experience of anxiety and is important for self-regulation (Inzlicht, McGregor and Hirsch 385)”. Whether it is a religious belief system that promises a scriptural guide and better life after death, a political belief system that promises honesty and socio-political improvements, an ecological stance that outlines ways to save the planet and give our children a natural future, an education belief system that argues for a certain method (like homeschooling or unschooling, for example) to empower children to be self-directed and less vulnerable to State agenda, this anti-anxiety aspect is critical.

Here is a six question framework for examining any belief system:

1. In what way(s) is this belief system relevant to the times and culture in which we live?
2. What answers are provided to questions, challenges, dilemmas people face?
3. Where does authority lie, in the basis, interpretation and application of this belief system?
4. Based on information available from both etic and emic accounts, what are the lifestyle consequences one might expect if adopting this belief system?
5. What is the background and foreground of the leader or leaders?
6. What are the criticisms offered, about this belief system, by former believers who no longer support it?

One cannot forever bask in the protected glow of new

believer status. Choosing a belief system engages the person on a path that leads somewhere. These questions attempt to gain understanding of the foreseeable consequences of membership. Perhaps the belief system sounds intriguing, but if it requires the sacrifice of loved ones, career, hobbies, and home, and if it is likely to leave you dead in a jungle (a la Jim Jones), exploded in a fire (a la David Koresh), sharing a partner's intimacy with others (as in a polygamist community or hippie commune), suffocated in a plastic bag while wearing new Nikes in preparation for reunion with the Mother Ship, or in Federal prison for domestic or international terrorist actions, then one should consider these implications very carefully.

Works Cited

Inzlicht, Michael, et al. "Neural Markers of Religious Conviction." *Psychological Science* (2009): Vol. 20, No. 3, 385-392. Print.

Keiser, Steve Hartman. "Pennsylvania German in Ohio." 2005. Ohio State University. Web. 13 December 2011.

Smith, Chuck and Tal Brooke. *Harvest*. Old Tappan: Chosen Books, 1987. Print.

Whitsett, Doni P. "A Self Psychological Approach to the Cult Phenomenon." *Clinical Social Work Journal* (1992): Vol. 20, No. 4, 363-375. Print.