The Complexity of Beliefs: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of Religion and Culture

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This paper explores the intricate relationship between religion and belief systems, emphasizing the complexity of religious phenomena as cultural constructs rather than mere expressions of faith. Through a comprehensive analysis of various anthropological perspectives, we argue that religion encompasses a diverse array of cognitive processes that shape human understanding and social interaction. By examining case studies from different cultures, we highlight the significance of supernatural beliefs and their implications for societal cohesion. This study aims to elucidate the cognitive underpinnings of religious beliefs and their role in shaping human behavior, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of religion.

1. Introduction

When contemplating the topic of beliefs, religion often emerges as the most prominent example, representing a significant aspect of human conviction. Phrases such as "If you sacrifice a sheep, your ancestors will be pleased" or "Ganesha is your ally in overcoming obstacles" serve as notable symbols of our collective beliefs. These expressions reflect what humans accept as truth about the world, even in the absence of empirical evidence. However, as this paper will demonstrate, this perspective can be misleading. Religion is not merely a subset of beliefs; it is a complex amalgamation of cultural phenomena that encompasses cognitive processes similar to many other aspects of human life (Dickinson, 2024; Hannam et al., 2025). By closely examining how beliefs function, we can gain a better understanding of how religious ideas are acquired and transmitted. To illustrate this point, let us consider the beliefs that "witchcraft can cause death" and "our ancestors watch over us." These statements may reflect shared beliefs within the specefic community, often noted in anthropological literature. However, such descriptions face numerous challenges. In anthropology, "beliefs" do not always directly represent the views of specific individuals; rather, they often serve as a generalized interpretation by anthropologists attempting to give meaning to specific propositions. For instance, these propositions might include claims like "Person A envies Person B and uses witchcraft to make them ill" or "He cheated on his wife, but his ancestors prevented this and ensured he faced consequences." Anthropologists, through their constructed individual propositions, attempt to demonstrate that a coherent belief system exists, seemingly manifesting in the collective consciousness of a particular culture (Sperber, 1996). However, this assumption may not be entirely justifiable.

Moreover, even when these propositions align with what some individuals express, they cannot serve as clear indicators of those individuals' beliefs. The term "belief" is ambiguous, referring to a colloquial concept in psychology that may lack the necessary scientific validity (Stich, 1983). To clarify what is embedded within these propositions, we must examine the cognitive processes that underpin them, whether religious or non-religious. Historically, the scientific study of religious beliefs has faced challenges due to two prevalent assumptions. First, there exists only one religious domain that encompasses all forms of traditions and rituals, ranging from hunter-gatherer societies to literate civilizations, which should be explained through some general theories about religion. Second, religion is viewed as a unique phenomenon distinct from other cultural aspects, leading scholars in the field of religion to feel no need to learn from psychological, social, or other disciplines. Both assumptions are erroneous and hinder our understanding of religious beliefs (Boyer, 2022). Before explaining why religious beliefs should not be considered unique, we will first address the topic of "diversity."

Supernatural Imaginations

Many individuals possess beliefs that we broadly categorize as "religion." These beliefs pertain to invisible or mysterious entities such as spirits, gods, or ghosts, and can even encompass extraordinary phenomena like magic. At first glance, these ideas may seem disparate; however, they collectively aid in our exploration and analysis of the subject. We seek to understand how people with such ideas think, behave, and what distinguishes them from other types of beliefs. Before commencing, we do not require a precise definition of religion. We can merely observe the evidence and see where it leads us, akin to a naturalist studying an unusual phenomenon in nature. For instance, people once believed that "jade" was a single mineral, only to later discover that it consists of two distinct minerals with different properties: "nephrite" and "jadeite" (Wikipedia, 2024). We may arrive at a similar conclusion regarding religious beliefs and ideas, recognizing that they belong to several categories and some may not even fall under the umbrella of religion. This is precisely the issue we are examining and elucidating. One common characteristic of many religious beliefs is that they transcend our everyday experiences of the world. They describe occurrences that appear not to conform to the natural or logical laws with which we are familiar; for example, spirits resemble humans but lack physical bodies and can even pass through walls. Gods, too, resemble other humans but possess extraordinary abilities, such as immortality or omniscience.

These types of ideas specifically leverage our imagination (Harris, 2000; Roth, 2007). They combine two types of information:

1. Highly specific information that violates intuitive expectations about a domain of reality (e.g., trees that are plants but can understand speech), and

2. Intuitive and generally implicit expectations about that domain of reality are preserved (a tree that understands speech still possesses a trunk, roots, leaves, etc.) (Boyer, 1994; Barrett, 2000).

The term "type of thing" refers to a collection of entities with shared essential characteristics, such as "person," "animal," or "tool." While there are numerous ways to alter these essential features, there are limited options for creating imaginative ideas. In reality, only a few constrained patterns exist from which these entities can be constructed (Boyer, 1994).

To clarify this matter, let us examine several real-world examples of how humans utilize their imagination to create religious ideas across different cultures. In ancient Egypt, people believed in many gods with animal heads and human bodies; for example, "Anubis," the god of mummification and the afterlife, had the head of a jackal and a human-like body; "Bastet," the goddess of cats, had the head of a cat and a human-like body. These gods presented a new and different image of themselves by combining specific information that violated our intuitive expectations about animals (e.g., the ability to speak and behave like humans) while preserving some intuitive and implicit expectations about animals (e.g., possessing animal characteristics such as fur and tails) (Hart, 2006). Even in modern times, some believe in the healing power of crystals; for instance, "amethyst" is a crystal believed to promote mental calmness and enhance intuition, while "rose quartz" is another crystal thought to attract love energy. In this example, two characteristics are combined: these minerals possess unique and unexpected properties, such as affecting emotions and health, yet still retain the ordinary physical properties, color, and shape of other minerals (Danish et al., 2020). Considering these examples, it is evident that religious ideas systematically utilize our imagination to create new combinations of information that are both appealing and familiar. This characteristic makes these ideas more memorable and engaging than ordinary concepts. However, the question arises: how do these ideas influence our social and cognitive processes, and why do some become more popular than others? These are some of the questions that challenge and provoke our contemplation.

Some individuals hold supernatural beliefs that they perceive as highly realistic and vital to their personal and social lives. These beliefs are based on the assumption that these supernatural entities possess minds similar to ours, and we are capable of understanding and interpreting their thoughts and behaviors (Lawson & McCauley, 1993). Furthermore, these entities possess extraordinary characteristics that distinguish them from ordinary beings (Barrett & Keil, 1996). For instance, they may be able to pass through walls, have immortal lifespans, or, like "Dionysus," the Greek god of wine, be born from a god's thigh (Allan, 2024). Such characteristics render them more appealing and memorable than ordinary entities; however, these supernatural beings are not entirely different from us. They still retain some human traits, such as the ability to see, hear, remember, think, and even have desires. They also possess goals and strive to achieve them using the tools and resources at their disposal. In other words, these supernatural beings are similar to us in some respects while differing in others (Guthrie, 1995; Wolsink, 2024). This combination of familiar and unusual features in supernatural entities makes them appealing and relatable. This characteristic allows us to feel "empathy" with them while simultaneously enjoying their extraordinary and astonishing traits.

When individuals participate in religious rituals and activities, their focus tends to be on supernatural entities with extraordinary abilities rather than on other natural entities that lack such powers. They are also inclined to interact with beings that possess minds similar to their own, rather than with entities that lack any form of consciousness. For example, humans can connect with ancestors who are not physically present. They may sometimes hear the voices and whispers of their ancestors and, in times of need, turn to them for forgiveness or assistance in their endeavors. In this case, instead of relying on visible rocks or stars that cannot be heard or sensed, they choose this approach. Ultimately, they hope to receive kindness and grace from these supernatural entities or, at the very least, to prevent certain disasters and calamities from occurring (Boyer, 1994, 2022). From this perspective, "anthropomorphism," which is a broad concept in religion (Guthrie, 1995; Porzia, 2024), is highly

selective, and the wide range of human characteristics can be defined under the umbrella of " intentional agency." In fact, among the diverse domains of supernatural concepts, individuals select a very limited subset when participating in religious activities and rituals. Their focus is primarily on agents rather than on entities or processes that lack personality (Doncker, 2024). These agents are generally described as a combination of (a) "counter-intuitive" physical properties and (b) various mental processes that humans expect from other human agents. Thus, while our ancestors may not have a physical presence, they are still perceived as present and aware of our affairs, forming beliefs based on such understanding and sense of presence. They also possess intentions that, combined with these beliefs, pursue goals they strive to achieve using available means and resources.

These two aspects of religious representation, namely "counter-intuitive" and "intuitive," are transmitted in different ways (Boyer, 1994, 2007). Generally, counter-intuitive elements may manifest as explicit propositions ("the gods already know what humans will do") or as direct consequences of explicit propositions ("he closed the door, but this did not prevent the spirit from entering"). In contrast, intuitive elements do not require explicit and direct expression. These elements are not transmitted culturally; instead, they are reconstructed automatically and without the need for additional explanations. There is no need to explain to someone what spirits perceive, what beliefs they hold, or what they remember; generally, all humans have such implicit expectations of agents. These expectations result from the intuitive psychological systems formed in our minds (Leslie et al., 2004). Furthermore, since these intuitive psychological systems exist in the minds of all humans and are largely similar, these similarities cause the agents we envision in our minds to be described with similar psychological capacities. This subset of supernatural concepts forms a common foundation across various religious traditions; however, it is interesting to note that people do not simply engage with such notions as mere fantasies, illusions, dreams, or imaginations. They perceive these notions as a plausible description of the reality of the world. These notions serve as tools for reasoning and analysis and provide a framework for thinking and decision-making. Additionally, these notions may be employed as indicators of group identity and markers for collective actions (Boyer, 2022). To better understand, consider the following example:

Imagine that you go to the house of a friend who has a cat. You have seen this cat many times and you know that it is a normal cat that is always playing and sleeping, but this time, when you enter your friend's house, something unexpected happens. The cat, in a clear voice, tells you: 'Hello, nice to see you again.' It is natural that you are surprised and confused by this unexpected occurrence. Finally, a question arises in your mind: can a cat really talk? that their grandfather has recently passed away but still roams the house as an invisible spirit watching over the family.They are confident that their grandfather can see everything and even communicate with you through dreams or special signs You will be surprised by the new and unfamiliar belief, but how can a dead person be present invisibly?

In both scenarios, you are confronted with a counter-intuitive concept that challenges your intuitive knowledge about cats and humans. Intuitive knowledge is based on your experiences and observations of how events typically operate in the world. You have learned that cats are animals that cannot speak human language, and humans are beings whose existence ends definitively with death. These are examples of "default knowledge" that you do not need explicit training to acquire but obtain implicitly through your cognitive systems (Näreaho, 2008; Horst, 2013).

However, in both scenarios, you are presented with explicit propositions that contradict your default knowledge. Your friend claims that their cat can speak because that cat is part of a secret experiment designed to transfer human intelligence to cats. Your other friend firmly states that their grandfather, upon entering another realm, has transformed into an invisible state. They believe that their grandfather can still influence the material world. These claims are examples of "transmitted knowledge" that must be explicitly presented to you. Depending on the available evidence or your level of trust, you may accept or reject such claims. The primary difference between the two scenarios lies in the nature of the counter-intuitive situations each presents. In one scenario, you face a "non-religious counter-intuitive" (a talking cat), which is typically regarded as an anomaly or error that requires explanation or correction (Russell & Gobet, 2013). In the other scenario, you encounter a "religious counter-intuitive" (the invisible spirit of the grandfather), which is often considered a mysterious truth that

should be respected. The fundamental reason for our differing responses to religious versus non-religious counter-intuitive situations lies in how they are situated within larger belief systems. Religious counter-intuitive situations typically reside within a broader belief and behavior structure that imparts them with value and purpose. For example, the belief in invisible ancestors might be part of a worldview that values continuity of life and connections between generations. Additionally, religious counter-intuitive situations are often accompanied by social and emotional factors that make them appealing and memorable. For instance, the belief in invisible ancestors can provide comfort and solace in times of difficulty or uncertainty. In summary, these examples demonstrate how our thinking about agents with intention in religion utilizes counter-intuitive and intuitive elements. We employ theory of mind to project our human-like qualities, such as perception, memory, intentions, and beliefs, onto these entities; moreover, we modify some of these characteristics to better align with their supernatural nature, such as the ability to exist beyond the constraints of space and time. We accept or reject these concepts based on their alignment with our presumptive or transmitted knowledge and their relevance to our cultural or personal contexts.

Cognitive Processes of Religious Beliefs

Many individuals are curious about whether religious beliefs differ from other types of beliefs. The answer to this question depends on the comparison we make. Some researchers argue that religious beliefs are not like ordinary beliefs about facts, such as the statement "the cat is sleeping behind the door." They refer to these common beliefs as "factual beliefs" and suggest that religious beliefs are more akin to "religious credences." Van Leeuwen is one such researcher who explains how factual beliefs and religious credences differ in several respects (van Leeuwen, 2014).

Factual beliefs are those we rely on for decision-making and reasoning about the world around us. These beliefs are mutable and can be revised upon observing new evidence. For example, if we believe that a cat is sleeping behind the door, our behavior may change (e.g., we might open the door gently to avoid waking the cat), and this belief can influence our subsequent conclusions (e.g., if the door is transparent, we can see the cat). However, if we open the door and do not see a cat, we are likely to revise our belief. In contrast, religious credences possess unique characteristics that distinguish them from factual beliefs. The first characteristic is that these convictions are associated with normative attitudes; they are defined not only as beliefs held by an individual but also as beliefs that an individual ought to hold or beliefs that justify moral behavior. Second, religious credences often stem from "creative imagination," which Harvey Whitehouse refers to as "spontaneous exegesis" (Whitehouse 2000). In other words, we can arrive at more detailed and elaborate explanations about these beliefs without significant constraints. For example, one might say, "Witchcraft can cause someone's death" and then elaborate, "because witches can launch invisible poisoned arrows at you." Additionally, these beliefs typically form based on the authority of individuals who claim to possess greater knowledge about a specific topic than others.

These differences in people's beliefs are crucial for understanding their perspectives on various subjects. This diversity is not limited to religious beliefs. In fact, Van Leeuwen's description of religious credence could be applicable to various types of beliefs found within our culture (van Leeuwen, 2014). For example, some individuals hold political beliefs that function similarly to religious beliefs. These beliefs also have specific moral implications that may not change even in the face of strong evidence. Furthermore, such beliefs can be influenced by the statements and opinions of leaders or prominent figures. Thus, what conclusions can we draw from these observations? Religious credence is a useful way to describe a specific type of belief, but it is not exclusive to religion. We can find it in many cultural domains where individuals hold strong beliefs that are fundamentally not based on reality.

Another method for understanding the differences between factual beliefs and other types of beliefs is to consider how our minds form and utilize them. Dan Sperber argued that we possess two types of beliefs: intuitive and reflective (meta-representational) (Sperber, 1997; Mercier & Sperber, 2009). Intuitive beliefs are those that form automatically and with little effort based on our perceptions and intuitions about the world. For example, we intuitively believe that when something is hidden from our view, it does not mean it does not exist, or that the behavior of living beings is based on their

emotions, feelings, and thoughts rather than external factors and forces, or that emotions like anger and joy can be recognized from facial expressions. We may be aware of these beliefs, but the processes by which they form are often unclear to us.

In contrast, beliefs considered reflective or meta-representational are formed through processes of thought, comparison, and evaluation of intuitive beliefs or through the use of language and symbols. These beliefs are more complex and abstract and include a type of mental meta-representation that expresses something like "It is true/valid/deep/interesting that P," where P is a proposition or idea. For example, we might hold a reflective belief such as "the appropriate interpretation of e=mc² is correct" or "it is true that three identities can manifest as one entity (the Trinity)" (Sperber, 1997). These beliefs are not about the proposition or idea (P) itself, but about our attitude toward it; therefore, there is nothing inherently illogical or irrational about reflective beliefs, even if their content is based on weak evidence, incomplete definitions, or even contradictions. For instance, some individuals may believe propositions like "the future is female" or "God is endless love" without truly understanding what they mean or how such propositions could be true. They may simply feel that these propositions signify something important or inspiring.

At times, comprehending or explaining sentences or ideas that people hold as reflective beliefs can be quite challenging. Depending on who the reference is, they can have various meanings or interpretations. For example, Jacques Lacan was a famous thinker with many followers who admired his mysterious and complex writings. He often made statements such as "There is no sexual relation" or "The real is impossible" (for a better understanding, see Pahucki, (Pahucki, 2010)). These statements may seem meaningless or contradictory, but his followers believe these statements are indeed correct and profound, requiring high intelligence and deep studies in philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis to comprehend. This type of thinking is not limited to avant-garde intellectuals with complex and difficult ideas in Paris; rather, we can observe this kind of thought in simple and primitive societies worldwide. For instance, the renowned anthropologist Fredrik Barth presented a striking example of esoteric knowledge in Papua New Guinea. He explained that a small group of individuals in this region possesses a complex system of knowledge that is not accessible or understandable to the general public. This knowledge, akin to a valuable treasure, is accessible only to those who have proven their competence and loyalty. The teachings of this group evoke a sense of mystery and curiosity among newcomers, who are eager to learn more and advance along this path. These individuals believe that these teachings, like a map leading to treasure, contain deep and hidden secrets of life and existence—secrets that can genuinely transform life (Barth, 1975).

Cosmides and Tooby provided an interesting and practical explanation of the difference between intuition and representation, describing this distinction using the concept of "decoupling of representation" (Cosmides & Tooby, 2010). Consider the following two sentences: "The spirits are watching you" and "Information can pass through a black hole." The first sentence pertains to our psychological intuitive system that helps us better understand the minds and behaviors of others. In contrast, the second sentence challenges our intuitive physics and enables us to understand better the objects and forces present in the physical world. Both sentences contain information that our specific cognitive systems can process, but the processing methods differ in each case. The primary difference is that intuitive beliefs are interconnected with our other intuitive beliefs, forming a coherent and intertwined network of knowledge. Conversely, reflective (meta-representational) beliefs are separated from our intuitive beliefs, creating an independent and distinct layer of knowledge. In other words, when we think about a reflective belief, not all the intuitive consequences associated with it are activated automatically; for example, when we think about the sentence "The spirits are watching you," we generally do not concern ourselves with the details of what spirits are like, what expectations they have of us, or how they might influence our lives. We simply accept this statement as a fact without questioning or linking it to our other intuitive beliefs. Similarly, when we consider the sentence "Information can pass through a black hole," we usually do not seek answers to questions like "What is information?" "How does it move?" or "What are the characteristics of a black hole?" We accept it as a fact without involving our intuitive physics knowledge in this sentence. In other words, meta-representational beliefs are like isolated islands in our minds, surrounded by a sea of

intuitive beliefs.

Sometimes, we reflect on what others believe or what we believe ourselves. In this case, we employ a specific mode of thinking known as meta-representation. "Meta-representation" essentially means thinking about a thought, that is, representing one representation of another; for example, when I say, "I believe that [God is omnipresent]," I am actually meta-representing the thought "God is omnipresent." However, this does not simply mean repeating this thought in my mind; rather, it means that by connecting this thought to myself and my beliefs, I add an additional layer of meaning to it. Understanding this concept is crucial because it indicates that meta-representation is not a passive or superficial mode of thinking; rather, it is an active and deep thought process that involves comprehension and cognitive evaluation (Boyer, 2022). This is why there is a significant difference between saying, "I believe that [God is omnipresent]" and saying, "I believe that [Худо дар хама ҷоаст]" in Tajik, a language I do not understand. If I were to express the second sentence, I would not be meta-representing any thought because I do not comprehend the meanings of the words; instead, I am merely repeating some sounds or symbols without having any understanding or reflection about them. However, if I say the first sentence, I have meta-represented a thought that I can understand and analyze. I can think about what the word "God" means, what the term "omnipresent" implies, and how they relate to each other and to reality.

Several philosophers and psychologists have studied this phenomenon of meta-representation and have provided various names and explanations for it. For instance, François Recanati referred to it as "iconicity," meaning that meta-representations, like symbols or images, represent the original representations (Recanati, 2000). When you see a symbol or image of something, you also view that thing in a simplified or distorted manner. Similarly, when you meta-represent a thought, you think about the thought itself in a modified way; thus, meta-representation is not merely a means of quoting or copying thoughts but a way of transforming and discovering thoughts (Boyer, 2022).

Types of Religions and Beliefs

Non-doctrinal traditions

Religion is a complex phenomenon, often viewed through the lens of one's own culture. Many individuals grow up in environments dominated by significant traditions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism, which are termed "world religions." These religions, which emerged in advanced ancient civilizations like China, India, and the Mediterranean, have shaped our understanding of faith and morality (Bellah, 2011; Baumard & Boyer, 2013). In areas where world religions prevail, people typically perceive religion as a distinct aspect of life, governed by specific rules and goals. They believe that religion encompasses a set of beliefs that dictate what should be accepted and how to behave, often associating it closely with ethics (Boyer, 2007; Bellah, 2011; Pyysiäinen, 2021). However, this perspective does not capture the full spectrum of religious experience. Anthropologists and historians have documented various other ways of practicing religion that diverge significantly from the mainstream narrative.

In the diverse world of religion, numerous rituals and practices exist that differ greatly from conventional understandings of "religion." These practices may involve communication with spirits, ancestors, or shamans, healing or cursing through magic, and divination using signs and symbols. Such rituals are often found in small hunter-gatherer or agricultural societies and predate the emergence of major world religions. They persist in modern societies, sometimes in conflict with, and at other times coexisting with, world religions. These practices, referred to as "non-doctrinal traditions," lack a fixed or formal set of beliefs or teachings. Within small communities, beliefs in "superhuman agents" are prevalent. These agents possess powers beyond human capabilities and can interact with humans (Spiro & d'Andrade, 1958; Child & Child, 1993). Such beliefs shape a supernatural world that contrasts with our tangible reality. Anthropologists have long explored these beliefs, often labeling them as "primitive" or "tribal religions" (Soleimani, 2024). Despite their diversity, common patterns can be observed across various regions.

Healing rituals often involve communication with spirits or ghosts. This ancient belief, known as "shamanism," seeks solutions to problems such as illness or misfortune through intermediaries—shamans—who have the ability to connect with supernatural beings. These shamans acquire their

knowledge and skills through oral tradition and may struggle with challenges from more powerful rivals. Among non-doctrinal traditions, respect for and reliance on the deceased, especially those who had connections with the living, hold significant importance. Rituals performed by community leaders or elders are based on the belief that the dead can influence the living, providing protection from dangers and assisting them. Such practices are more common in settled communities than in nomadic hunter-gatherer societies. The ways of thinking about and interacting with the dead vary greatly by culture and location, with the deceased sometimes recognized as unique individuals or, at other times, as collective ancestors of the group. These religious traditions, rooted in experience and social norms, differ significantly from the formal, doctrinal religions more familiar to us (Insoll, 2011; Soleimani, 2024). They do not contain a fixed set of beliefs, and anthropologists have found that most individuals do not share a precise or common image of the supernatural beings they contact. Instead, they possess vague ideas about these beings, often uncertain about how to interpret their experiences.

Another notable feature of non-doctrinal traditions is the existence of individuals with special abilities who can communicate with supernatural entities. These religious specialists differ significantly from priests or monks in world religions. They do not belong to an organized group with standardized training and rules; their recognition comes solely from themselves and their clients. These specialists may vary widely and may even compete with one another. Individuals consult these specialists not to join a religious group but to find solutions to personal issues, such as healing illnesses or alleviating misfortunes believed to stem from supernatural forces. They choose specialists based on reputation, cost, and accessibility, rather than any communal endorsement (Boyer, 2022). Across the globe, people turn to various mechanisms to deal with misfortunes, often seeking help from specialists who can communicate with powerful entities like gods and spirits. One possible explanation for this behavior is our innate ability to recognize and avoid danger. We possess inherent systems that allow us to identify various threats, from diseases to social conflicts. These systems alert us to take protective actions, fostering a sense of safety and control over our circumstances (Woody & Szechtman, 2011). However, when faced with unpredictable or mysterious situations, we may seek explanations that transcend our natural and social worlds, leading us to believe in the existence of supernatural beings capable of causing or preventing our suffering (Boyer & Bergstrom, 2011).

Doctrinal Religions

Throughout human history, numerous religions have emerged, each presenting a unique worldview and understanding of humanity's place in the universe. These religions differ significantly from non-doctrinal traditions and arose during periods of societal evolution, characterized by the growth of cities and empires. In these complex societies, specialized occupations, including religious roles, developed. Religion became a distinguished profession, with leaders claiming exclusive access to communicate with deities or spirits. These religious organizations, often collaborating with political authorities, established distinct characteristics that set them apart from other social groups.

A prominent feature of these religions is the presence of a clear and stable set of beliefs. Religious organizations educate followers about the nature of deities, their roles, and the rituals required for interaction. These beliefs are typically well-coordinated and allow followers to engage in collective learning and practice (Whitehouse, 2000). Written texts often underpin these religions, facilitating uniformity in practices and enhancing professional standards (Goody, 1977, 1986). Doctrinal religions typically select and endorse their experts through formal processes. Members of these organizations possess special skills and knowledge acquired through standardized training, enabling them to perform similar rituals. Unlike non-doctrinal traditions, where personal experience may play a significant role, these religious experts rely on established doctrines and organizational guidelines.

In many ancient traditions, deities were indifferent to human morality, caring only for obedience and offerings. This was evident in civilizations like Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, China, India, and the Americas (Villiers, 2024). However, some religions that emerged during the "Axial Age" introduced new concepts: the idea of a soul seeking salvation and moral deities governing an ethical universe. In these religions, good actions receive rewards, while bad actions face punishment, either in this life through reincarnation or in an afterlife context (Jaspers, 1950/2014). In many belief systems, people hold that a part of their being, often referred to as the soul, survives after death and transforms

into a spirit. These teachings emphasize ethical conduct in personal and social interactions, focusing on self-control and adherence to societal laws, as seen in Confucianism, Stoicism, or Buddhism.

Belief credences as Symbols

In modern societies, the emphasis often lies on what individuals claim about their religious beliefs rather than their actual feelings. Declaring belief in specific religious credences signifies affiliation with a particular group and compels individuals to act in accordance with group norms. Some may view their unique beliefs as indicative of a special trait that connects them to a particular group, fostering a sense of belonging. Humans are inherently social beings, driven by a desire to form and maintain social groups. These groups can vary widely in size and purpose, from small circles of friends to large political entities. The diversity of social groups enriches cultural experiences, and understanding the processes behind group formation reveals insights into human psychology.

When individuals form alliances, they often envision a shared goal that is difficult to achieve alone. They trust that other members will act in the group's interest, viewing rival groups as threats (Medina, 2008; Pietraszewski, 2013). These underlying thoughts are deeply ingrained and often go unrecognized unless analyzed through scientific frameworks like game theory or economics (Tooby et al., 2010). As individuals form alliances, they seek to demonstrate their commitment through various symbols, such as clothing or tattoos. These symbols help distinguish members of a group and reinforce their identity and allegiance (Gambetta, 2009). Religion serves as a crucial symbol for establishing and maintaining these alliances, allowing individuals to identify fellow believers and recognize outsiders. Alliances go beyond mere cooperation; they represent collective efforts toward shared goals, especially in challenging situations, such as combating oppression. Observing the number of participants in a cause can significantly influence individual decisions to join, as greater participation increases the likelihood of success and reduces perceived risks.

The Arab Spring in 2011 exemplifies how collective action can reshape identities and preferences. Sparked by the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor, this series of protests across several Arab nations called for political reforms and social justice (Howard & Hussain, 2013). The success of the Tunisian revolution inspired similar movements, showcasing how public preferences can shift rapidly through collective participation. Timur Kuran's research on "preference falsification" illustrates how individuals may conceal true sentiments due to fear of repression. However, once a few individuals express dissent, it can trigger a wave of revelations, altering public attitudes and undermining the legitimacy of oppressive regimes (Kuran, 1997).

Conclusion

In examining religion as a cultural enigma, this paper has highlighted the complexity and diversity of belief systems across different societies. Rather than viewing religion as a monolithic entity, we have explored the intricate interplay between cognitive processes, social dynamics, and cultural practices that shape religious beliefs. By recognizing the multifaceted nature of religion, we can better appreciate its role in human life and its capacity to address existential uncertainties. The findings of this study underscore the importance of understanding religion not merely as a set of doctrines or teachings but as a dynamic and evolving cultural phenomenon. The insights gained from exploring non-doctrinal traditions and their rituals reveal how individuals navigate their realities through imaginative constructs and communal practices. These beliefs, while often dismissed as primitive or irrational, serve essential functions in providing meaning, identity, and a sense of agency in an unpredictable world. In conclusion, this exploration of religion as a cultural enigma invites further inquiry into the cognitive and social mechanisms that underpin belief systems. Future research should continue to investigate the interplay between individual cognition and collective practices, shedding light on the enduring significance of religion in contemporary society. By doing so, we can foster a more nuanced understanding of the human experience and the diverse ways in which individuals seek to comprehend their existence.

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