

It's All in the Mind: Cognitive Dissonance in the Context of Pilgrims and Tourists

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Abstract

Early Christians during the Roman Empire were persecuted for their faith, at times in brutal and violent games within the Colosseum. Part of the Christian faith is the belief in martyrdom for God. This idea of Martyrdom or Baptism of Blood, can be explained as, "... the case of a person who died for the Christian faith before he or she could receive the sacrament [of baptism]. The effects of martyrdom of blood are the complete remission of sin and the title to immediate entrance into heaven."

This brings us to ask, do people justify their experiences to coincide with subconsciously predetermined notions? To answer the question, we consider the Leon Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, which deals with the mental conflict that occurs when beliefs or assumptions are contradicted by new information. This paper aims to discover how people's notions may be altered because of the things they encounter while on their personal pilgrimages. It takes into consideration those who travel as either tourists or pilgrims, who may change their beliefs based on their experiences and come out as different individuals, as well as those who remain unchanged. Apart from religious beliefs, the paper discusses various locations and events that have left an impact on humanity, with attention paid to dark tourism and non-religious phenomena. All these, in relation to Cognitive Dissonance, present a perception of the world that focuses on how the mind alters beliefs to put one at ease.

Keywords: cognitive dissonance, travel, non-religious phenomena, pilgrimage, dark tourism

Pilgrimages as Universal Phenomena

The early beginnings of pilgrimage can be traced back to pre-Hispanic Andean shrines in the 5th or 3rd centuries B.C.E. Over a few hundred years, these sacred shrines were incorporated into Incan culture and served as significant pilgrimage centers for pagan beliefs. (Moore, 2001) Moving forward into the Middle Ages, we see religious pilgrimage flourish as the faithful of the major monotheistic religions travelled to sacred places to adore their respective gods. Found within the traditions of various cultures, pilgrimage is undeniably a global phenomenon that goes back thousands of years into human history, one that may be defined as a journey to and from sacred sites where beliefs and practices are expressed. (Eade, 2015) Though many scholars describe it with clerical undertones because of its entanglement with religion, the concept no longer is limited to just this one type of pilgrim.

Within recent decades, the concept of pilgrimage has transformed to encompass not only religious journeys but also ones undertaken for purposes of commemoration, resolution, or self-discovery. These secular pilgrimages are often considered so-called New Age phenomena in an ever-evolving world. It has become a general assumption that the rise of secularization would bring about the erosion of religiosity, even as this is not necessarily the case. Instead, secularization has led about a change in the expression of religion and the environment in which it is manifested. (Taylor, 2007 as cited in Nilsson, 2016) Further, a secular society would likely cause religion to redefine and reorganize itself (Gökariksel, 2009 and Sigurdson, 2010 as cited in Nilsson, 2016). Today, multitudes, whether with religious beliefs or without, still travel the world to visit places of personal spiritual importance.

It is inherently human to look for answers to the questions and events that we do not understand. This innate human need to justify the unexplained is what leads us to embark on personal pilgrimages to uncover the unknown and satiate our curiosity. Regardless of belief, it can be agreed upon that pilgrimages have one key element: their association with significant locations. While many go on these journeys in fulfillment of beliefs, whether religious or secular, there are those who travel to settle a disruption of peace that they have within themselves. Pilgrimages—through contact with the extraordinary—satisfy people’s need for reassurance in situations that do not align with their own beliefs. They serve as channels in which people finding resolution for their thoughts are transformed (Graburn, 1977 as cited in Collins-Kreiner, 2016). In this paper, we aim to explore how people’s notions may be altered because of what they come across while on these personal pilgrimages, an attempt to understand people’s need for reassurance in situations that unconsciously threaten their peace of mind as it were.

Two Perspectives

This paper’s first author was born into, and still remains in, an intact family, growing up with four siblings in a Roman Catholic household, with the usual values instilled. From childhood to the present, she has labeled herself fortunate, to the extent that she describes her circumstances as having a plethora of privilege. Growing up, she was surrounded by people in the same social stratum. From age six, she studied in an exclusive conservative school for girls where Catholic theology was taught extensively under the supervision of members of Opus Dei. Though open-minded questions were welcomed by those around her, she saw no need to ask these questions, given the environment she grew up in, not even those concerning beliefs and values of the faith, the authenticity of miracles, or the existence of God. Entering university was another thing altogether, with her beginning to see the world in a different light.

Life in university provided exposure to an environment poles apart from what she was accustomed to. Culture shock was not an exaggeration with what she has illustrated as a cloistered life. At university, she attended classes facilitated by professors who did not share the same belief system as she did, who asked open-minded questions and taught liberal ideas, some of which were discordant to the values that she upheld. With people from different socio-economic backgrounds, she began to acclimate to an environment that was no longer isolated from challenge. One particular professor prompted her to challenge the dogma that she accepted and knew to be true. Even as she still continues to be a practicing Catholic and has no plans of

renouncing her faith through whatever manner, she describes her journey as one of appreciating other perspectives with regard to spiritual and even liberal social beliefs. There is an inevitable tension exerted upon her beliefs and faith, with her move from a sheltered, conservative, Catholic lens to being surrounded by other people and ideas. While there are some ideas that still remain to be challenging for her to accept, she has learned what can be described as sense-making, empathy as it were, as to where these beliefs stem from. This is a personal pilgrimage—a shift from a sheltered world into reality—that continues to intrigue her.

Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

Having inconsistent cognitions puts the individual in an unpleasant state, causing him to seek consistency in thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes. (Miller, Clark & Jehle, 2015). Given that human experience is not an orderly design of events, it is inevitable that one will come across instances that cause imbalances in cognition. As such, we pose the question, do people justify their experiences to coincide with subconsciously predetermined notions? To explain this phenomenon, we consider Leon Festinger's theory of Cognitive Dissonance.

Leon Festinger published *The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* in 1957, when topics such as persuasion and attitudes under social psychology held strong interest in the research community (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953 as cited in McGrath, 2017). *Cognitive Dissonance* refers to the occurrence of mental conflict when one encounters two dissonant beliefs or assumptions in a certain situation. (Cognitive dissonance, 2017).

Being an aversive mental state, people are motivated to reduce this dissonance (Miller, Clark & Jehle, 2015). According to Festinger, there are three strategies for reducing dissonance: (1) the change in cognitions, which decreases the amount of dissonant cognitions; (2) the creation of new cognitions; and (3) the minimization of the importance of dissonant cognitions, and/or increase of importance of constant cognitions (Harmon & Jones, 2000 as cited in McGrath, 2017).

A Case Study on Dissonance

In 1934, Eva Mozes Kor and her twin sister Miriam were born into a religious Jewish family in Portz, Romania. A few years before the beginning of the World War II, Hungary annexed the part of Romania where the Mozes family resided. Facing anti-Semitic harassment from their neighbors, the Mozeses were forced to move into the Cehei ghetto in Silvaniei, Romania in 1944. A few months later, the Mozes family and the rest of the ghetto were squeezed into cattle cars on a train to Auschwitz. Eva Kor accounts her experience in the following excerpt:

To look back at my childhood is to remember my experiences as a human guinea pig in the Birkenau laboratory of Dr Joseph Mengele. To recount such painful memories is to relive the horrors of human experimentation, where people were

used as merely objects or means to a scientific end. I envision the chimneys, the smell of burning flesh, the medical injections, the endless blood taking, the tests, the dead bodies all around us, the hunger, and the rats. Nothing that is close to human existence existed in that place...

No one explained why we were in Mengele's "laboratory,"... In fact, we were there for one reason: to be used as experimental objects and then to be killed...

... about 3 months after my arrival, I was injected with some kind of deadly germ. After a visit to Dr. Mengele's lab, I became ill with a very high fever... a team of five doctors, including Mengele, came to study my case. They looked at my fever chart and then Mengele said sarcastically, "She is so young. Too bad. She has only two weeks to live."

... when it appeared that I would not die, Miriam... was taken back to the lab, together with all the other twins, and was injected with something. When I got back from the hospital, Miriam was very ill... To this day, we do not know what substances were injected into us when we served as Mengele's guinea pigs...

Many years after the World War II, Eva Kor began her mission of educating people about the atrocities of the Holocaust. In 1993, she met a Nazi doctor, Dr Muench, who agreed to testify on the crimes committed during the war. In return, Kor decided to write a simple letter of forgiveness to Dr Muench, which evolved into a letter for Dr Mengele as well. On the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in 1995, Eva Kor returned to Auschwitz with Dr Muench, where he signed an affidavit testifying about what went on in the concentration camp. It was there that she read her own personal statement of forgiveness directed towards all the Nazis, specifically Dr Mengele (Kor and Buccieri, 2009).

"Immediately I felt that a burden of pain had been lifted from my shoulders, a pain I had lived with for 50 years: I was no longer a victim of Auschwitz, no longer a victim of my tragic past. I was free... Anger and hate are seeds that germinate war. Forgiveness is a seed for peace. It is the ultimate act of self-healing" (Kor and Buccieri, 2009, p. 133).

Although she returned to celebrate the liberation of Auschwitz, her true liberation came from within. Considering the circumstances that Eva Kor grew up in—with no control over anything that had happened to her—the decision to choose forgiveness was her moment of power; as this was one thing that only she could give or take away. In this case, the cognitive dissonance was rooted in the decision of continuing to live with the burden of the Holocaust, or finally coming to terms with what had happened. It was found in the very idea of forgiving the perpetrators who committed horrific crimes against her and humanity. This brings us to the question, how is it that she was able to resolve two contradicting ideas, the first being the preconceived notions of hate and anger towards her perpetrators, and the second being forgiving her tormentors and oppressors for the crimes they had committed and finally moving on? In the painful, extraordinary, and ultimately inspiring story of Eva Mozes Kor, we see the combination of two strategies of dissonance reduction: the creation of new cognitions, and the minimization of the importance of dissonant cognitions and increase of importance of constant cognitions.

Kor's original constant cognitions consisted of purely negative emotions, thoughts, and feelings for her childhood and towards the perpetrators who caused her pain and suffering during the Holocaust. Her dissonant cognitions consisted of her decision to forgive the Nazi perpetrators and accept her suffering. For over five decades, Auschwitz was the earthly hell that she had been forced to endure and remember. Her journey back to this place of tragedy brought the creation of new cognitions to support her dissonant cognitions, transforming Auschwitz into something that no longer held fear or any other negative for her. Her return to Auschwitz with Dr Muench was the pivotal moment in which her new cognitions were created to support her developing idea of forgiveness.

The strategy of minimization of the importance of dissonant cognitions and increase of importance of constant cognitions was used as she dismissed her anger and hatred, and developed her own understanding of forgiveness, which became her new constant cognitions. Eva Kor explains her testimony of forgiveness saying, "*My forgiveness ... has nothing to do with the perpetrator, has nothing to do with any religion, it is my act of self-healing, self-liberation and self-empowerment,*" ('It's For You To Know That You Forgive,' 2015). Having minimized the importance of her original cognitions, she no longer stew in negativity. However, it must be noted that Kor has stated in many interviews that she does not downplay the scale of the crimes committed during the Holocaust; rather, she demands accountability on the part of the perpetrators. The increase of importance of her new constant cognitions is manifested in the way she has transformed from someone filled with hate and anger into an advocate of forgiveness and ultimately, responsibility.

Four Outcomes of Pilgrimage

The altering of perspectives by cognitive dissonance can be found in a multitude of circumstances, not necessarily limited to extraordinary situations such as that of Eva Kor. Pilgrimages serve as channels in which people are able to resolve their unease, whether spiritual, emotional, or mental. In other words, people's reasons for going on pilgrimages may unconsciously be to reduce dissonance. Given this, we can name four outcomes of pilgrimage: (1) Pilgrim to Pilgrim, embarking on a journey with specific intentions and receiving successful results, (2) Pilgrim to Tourist, embarking on a journey with specific intentions and receiving unsuccessful results, (3) Tourist to Pilgrim, embarking on a journey without any intentions and receiving unexpected results, and (4) Tourist to Tourist, embarking on a journey without any intentions and ending unchanged.

Pilgrim to Pilgrim

This paper's first author had the opportunity to take a trip to Europe, a few weeks after graduating high school, to visit the most famous and magnificent churches of the Roman Catholic faith. As a devout Catholic touring Vatican City, there was nothing more gratifying for her than seeing the landmarks of her faith actualized. On a personal pilgrimage, she travelled to holy sites; one of which was the Scala Sancta, a place that she had aspired to visit since she was a child. The Scala Sancta or the Holy Stairs is situated near the Basilica of Saint John Lateran in Rome. According to Christian tradition, Saint Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, transferred the steps from the palace of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem to Rome. The Scala Sancta

is believed to be the steps that Jesus had climbed hours before his crucifixion (The Holy Stairs, n.d.). It is a Catholic belief that praying and meditating on Christ's passion while climbing the steps gives one a plenary indulgence. She fulfilled this task by climbing the stairs on her knees and kissed Jesus' blood stains to venerate the Passion, with the result that she felt stronger in her faith with renewed fervency in her love for God.

Pilgrim to Tourist

For this particular "change," let us consider a hypothetical situation: someone visits a pilgrimage site with a view to fulfilling a task for the healing of a loved one. The *Catedral de Sal de Zipaquirá* (Salt Cathedral of Zipaquirá) comes to mind as a place of tourist and pilgrimage in Cundinamarca, Colombia. In the guided tour to this cathedral, mention is made of pilgrims who walk the path on their knees to pray for the healing of a loved one.

This paper's second author has, from a young age, always found the idea of prayer a conundrum: assuming that god does exist and has perfect knowledge of what has happened and what will happen, does it follow that prayer is the human's arrogant attempt to tell god what to do? In his exposure to pilgrimage studies, he has come to refine the question somewhat: why do some people believe that they can bargain with a supposedly all-powerful god using physical feats?

To continue with the hypothetical situation, let us consider the possibility that the loved one who is hoped to receive healing does not receive it, and in fact, takes a turn for the worse and dies. Does this event set the stage for the pilgrim's loss of faith, or does cognitive dissonance set in, with the usual bromide of "god's plan?" These questions are admittedly difficult to ask, and even more difficult to answer, especially where the issue of loss of faith is concerned.

Tourist to Pilgrim

Travel has allowed this paper's authors the opportunity to visit museums in different parts of the world. While in Washington D.C., this paper's first author visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), a "living memorial" to the Holocaust (About the museum, n.d.). The museum exhibitions feature artifacts and possessions of those in concentration camps, video testimonies and personal stories of the victims, and photographs of the events that happened during the World War II. She entered the museum, simply with the intention of learning about the Holocaust; however, the outcome proved to be more profound. As a teenager, it was the first time she realized the ability of man to degenerate into inhumanity, allowing her to understand the fecklessness of society, and the reality of the atrocities of war. The USHMM tour served as a pilgrimage to find humanity amidst the anguish the war brought to the Holocaust victims. The same theme can be seen in the Sydney Jewish Museum, which has been visited by this paper's second author. Despite the memories to be found and artifacts to be seen in both museums, they can never quite compare to Auschwitz, with its *Arbeit macht frei* (Ger. Work sets you free) a stark reminder to prevarication and cruelty that words can never quite describe. If Auschwitz does not turn a tourist to a pilgrim, nothing will.

Tourist to Tourist

Perhaps an approach that has served the paper's second author in his travels well is to not expect too much, so that any disappointments are initially and ultimately expected, and any surprises are pleasant ones.

Mount Tai in Tai'an, Shandong, China has been described as a mountain of historical and cultural significance, the eastern mountain of the Five Great Mountains of China. Climbing the mountain on foot is said to take four hours. Such is the inspiration that the mountain is said to have afforded its visitors the inspiration to write music and poetry.

No such inspiration came to the paper's second author, even as he enjoyed the climb and the sub-zero temperatures at the time. At the risk of being overly graphic, it was difficult to derive inspiration from a place that had throngs of people spitting onto pavement and relieving themselves into open-pit toilets. His conclusion, which is still subject to refinement and reconsideration, is that pilgrimage is a state of mind, neither *a priori* nor *a posteriori*. A pilgrimage can be found in the most unexpected of places, such as the streets of Dhaka, Bangladesh; on the other hand, a vaunted pilgrimage site may not fulfill a traveler's expectations.

Could We All Be Wrong?

Both paper's authors, in spite of their differences in religious opinions, agree on one thing: it is excruciatingly difficult to even begin to consider the possibility that one may be wrong. Nowhere is this agreement more apparent than in the matter of travel and pilgrimage. Is the disappointed pilgrim going to be candid enough to admit such disappointment? If a tourist had no expectations to begin with and ended up pleasantly surprised, will said tourist admit to such a change of mind and spirit? We conclude this paper with openness to exploring the hard questions, as it were, even if it means that we direct the lenses of our inquiry to ourselves.

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