

I'll be dealing with two questions in this week's Readers Mailbag, both dealing, as it turns out, with issues related to psychology and the early Christian movement: one has to do with why the followers of Jesus didn't simply give up and disband when the end-of-the-world-apocalypse they had been anticipating didn't happen (so that they were proven to be *wrong*) and the other about whether Jesus was, literally, crazy. Interesting questions! If you have one you would like me to address, just ask in a comment on any of my posts.

QUESTION

I get that when the Apocalypse didn't happen as the apocalyptic Jesus had predicted that a kind of reinterpretation of events including the resurrection took place. But why? Why didn't the fledgling fringe then Jesus-Jewish (my term) sect simply die out?

RESPONSE

Ah, this is a meaty question that someone could write a book about. In fact, people have written books about it! I won't give a definitive answer here, but will instead mention just one book - now a classic - that addresses the issue, and in a very interesting way.

John Gager was for many years a professor of Religious Studies at Princeton University. He was there the whole time I was doing my graduate work across the street at Princeton Theological Seminary, but, idiot that I was, I never took any classes with him. I did meet him though, and came to know him a bit later after I was at Chapel Hill

One of his most important books is called Kingdom and Community. It deals with just this question. Why didn't Jesus' followers disband when they realized that his predictions of the imminent appearance of the kingdom of God simply were not true? Jesus said the "end" would come within his generation, before the disciples had died (e.g., Mark 9:1; 13:30). But they died, and it didn't come. So why didn't the earliest Christians just realize that he, and they, had been wrong and revert to their original religious views (whether Jewish or pagan)?

Gager takes a very interesting approach to the question, one that might not occur to you. He appeals to an intriguing study of modern-day groups who expect the UFO's to come.

There was a fascinating book, which everyone ought to read, written by Leon Festinger, called When Prophecy Fails. In it Festinger develops a theory of social-psychology that is called "Cognitive Dissonance." Cognitive dissonance refers to a phenomenon that most of us have experienced: when something we deeply think proves to be completely wrong, rather than admit it, we refuse to think we were completely wrong (for psychological reasons) and argue more strenuously for it to ease the conflict between our views and our reality.

Festinger established the theory by looking at "UFO cults," that is, groups of people who expected the world to be invaded by UFO's. When the UFO's didn't appear as expected, what did members of the group do? Rather than disband, people in these groups typically re-explained the non-event to themselves and then expected it with even *greater* fervor. And they promoted their views even more vigorously. The "dissonance" (that is, the fact that reality did not coincide with their expectations) in their "cognition" (their thinking) led them not to reject their views but to affirm them more vehemently by getting others into

their movement. This eased the discomfort of the dissonance because it showed them that others - even more people - shared their views

For cognitive dissonance to work, you need the following situation. A group of persons has a very firm view about something. The view is so concrete that reality can, in fact, disconfirm it (show that it's wrong). Then the view is in fact disconfirmed. And that's when cognitive dissonance (the mental confusion that comes when a firmly held belief is disconfirmed) kicks in. By becoming more evangelistic about the view, people in the group convince others to join them and adopt their views. The more who join, the more moral support the people of the group receive: Hey! All these other people agree with us! We must be right!

And so if the UFO's don't appear on February 3 the way you thought, you say that you made a slight miscalculation - they are supposed to appear on August 28. And you convince more people. And the support you get in the group allows you to believe it even more fervently the next time.

Gager applies this theory of cognitive dissonance to the early Christians. They thought the Kingdom of God would arrive in a cosmic display of divine power within the first generation. They really thought that. But it didn't happen. Their belief was disconfirmed. And so what did they do? To resolve the psychological tension the non-appearance of the kingdom created, they became more fervently missionary, converting others to their cause. They did so by insisting that the end was still to come "soon" - and they came up with excuses for why it had not happened yet: for example, some of them might say: God had delayed the end to give people more of a chance to repent. Or: Jesus hadn't really meant it would come while his disciples were alive, he meant it would come while their memory was still alive. Or: when God said it would come "soon" he meant by his divine calendar, not by a merely human calendar. And so on.

The failure of the kingdom to come, then, is what led to the growth of the Christian community. It was all a matter of cognitive dissonance.

I'm not saying I completely agree with this theory. But I think it is a brilliant take on the early Christian movement.

QUESTION

Long ago, I read Albert Schweitzer's 1911 classic book entitled "The Psychiatric Study of Jesus." One of the weaknesses of the book is that psychiatry was in its infancy in 1911 and diagnoses have markedly changed in the past 100 years. My question: Do current scholars ever discuss whether or not Jesus was mentally ill and, if so, who can I read about this matter?

RESPONSE

In a sense this question is along a similar line as the one preceding, but now the question is not about the psychological state of Jesus' followers but of Jesus himself. Here I'll give just a very, very brief response: To my knowledge there aren't any serious scholars of the historical Jesus who have questioned his sanity.

I suppose one main reason for that is that the vast majority of historical Jesus experts (not

quite all) are themselves Christian, and they simply are not going to go there. But there's actually a much better reason. Everyone realizes that the historical Jesus cannot be understood unless you situate him fully within his own historical context, and understand his teachings in light of what people thought and believed in his day. That makes the most enormous difference to how one evaluates his psychological state.

The reality is that a lot of people today who are predicting the imminent end of the world may have a few screws loose. But the kinds of expectations that Jesus had about the coming kingdom of God in a cataclysmic display of divine force were not "weird" or "way out there" or "psycho" in his day. They were fairly common. Unless you want to say that all apocalyptic Jews were clinically crazy, I don't think you can say that Jesus was.

But what if he really thought he was God? Wouldn't that be crazy? Yeah, it might well be. But I don't think for a second that Jesus thought that about himself. He did think he had a close relationship with God. But so do billions of people today (many of them on a first-name basis with Jesus) - but they're not all crazy. And he may well have thought (I think he did think) that he would be made the messiah in the future kingdom. That may have been a rather exalted view of himself, but I don't think it makes Jesus crazy. It makes him an unusually confident apocalyptic prophet. There were others with visions of grandeur at the time. I don't think that makes him mentally ill. It makes him a first-century apocalyptic Jew.

If you belonged to the blog, you could get meaty posts like this 5-6 times a week. Why not join? It doesn't cost much and all the funds go to charity!



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