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THE NATURE AND ETIOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS CERTITUDE: IMPLICATIONS OF THE EI FRAMEWORK AND BELIEFS, EVENTS, AND VALUES INVENTORY

It infuriates me to be wrong when I know I'm right.

—Molière

In this time of globalization and collision of worldviews, the need for a deeper understanding of religious faith is more pressing than ever. Ideologies and religious systems that seem to contradict one's own beliefs often are perceived as a personal or cultural attack, which may lead to physical or relational violence against the perceived source of this attack (Silberman, Higgins, & Dweck, 2005; Tan, 2009). One does not have to look far to see examples of conflicts where the battle lines are drawn between those of different religious affiliations. A small sampling of recent examples includes the clashes between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Jews and Muslims in the Middle East, Christians and Muslims in Bosnia and Sudan, Hindus and Muslims in India, and Muslim extremists' violence toward secularized America and the "Christian West" (Paloutzian & Kirkpatrick, 1995). While it may be argued that these conflicts are also about politics, ethnicity, or economics in addition to religious faith, the question of why differences in religious faith often create the borders between friend and enemy still remains largely unanswered (Yiftachel, 2006). In other words, it seems that differences in religious belief often are linked to conflict between individuals and groups, but the *why* of this association still appears unclear.

In grappling with this fundamental question of "why," we examine a wide range of issues in this chapter including the psychology of religion, the nature of belief certitude, as well as the theoretical associations and empirical correlates that are related to these constructs. We then present findings from a large-scale assessment project, which examines the etiology of beliefs and values. Based upon the accompanying theoretical model (Equilintegration or EI Theory) and assessment method (the Beliefs, Events, and Values Inventory [BEVI]), we offer a series of data-based conclusions and recommendations that address the study of religious certitude specifically as well as the nature of belief certitude more broadly. Chief among these is support of agnosticism, along a larger Continuum of Belief, as an intellectually defensible and interpersonally advantageous framework on matters over which definitive conclusions—those that are

empirically, independently, and reliably verifiable—seem untenable. Finally, we translate this perspective into applied form by describing educational and psychological interventions that encourage critical reflective thinking about religious or nonreligious systems of thought, with a specific focus on cross-conviction dialogues. Through this comprehensive approach—which juxtaposes relevant literature with theory, data, and application—it is our hope that this chapter may help advance the overarching goal of facilitating greater understanding of why we believe what we believe regarding transcendental matters while offering possibilities for deeper and more constructive engagement with self and others on these fundamental matters that affect us all.

THE NATURE OF CERTITUDE

Certitude has been conceptualized in a number of ways (e.g., Arkin, Oleson, & Carroll, 2009), but for present purposes, is defined as the absence of doubt, which may result from a complex interaction among affective, attributional, developmental, and contextual processes, and is likewise associated with an inability to contemplate the potential legitimacy of another's perspective much less the potential shortcomings of one's own. The tendency toward certitude requires fidelity to an allied—and often unknown or unacknowledged—epistemological framework with its own set of assumptions (Shealy, 2005). Thus, without digressing too far into philosophical arguments regarding certainty, it may be helpful to highlight the dilemma that is inherent in claiming inviolability regarding one's own beliefs.

The problem of induction, for instance, challenges the assumption that we can deduce from our past experiences what will be certain in the future. For example, if a hot stove burned my hand in the past, I might be certain it will do so again in the future. However, this inductive logic assumes that the laws of nature are constant and uniform, while simultaneously ignoring the fact that additional variables must be accounted for as well (e.g., the fact that a stove burner may or may not be turned on). As an antidote to such linearity, philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, and psychologists such as Rollo May, have emphasized the subjective, phenomenological, and existential nature of human experience (Towler, 1984). From the standpoint of allied scholarship and practice in psychology, an individual may not necessarily "know" the complete and correct interpretation of reality, as if omnipotent, but should instead grant that multiple perspectives may be valid even if the apprehender regards them as improbable or even impossible (May, 1983; Spinelli, 2005).

On the other hand, even if someone may not be able to know something for certain, it does not necessarily follow that one concurrently may not have a high level of confidence that a particular proposition about the nature of reality is true (Van den Bos, 2011; Vickers, 1988). Some religious scholars have gone so far as to aver that one may experience legitimate certainty based on the assumption of supernaturally revealed ("a priori") truth. However, this sort of inductive logic appears sufficient only among those who concur on a particular religious source for their beliefs (Frame, 1987; Shealy, 2005). Though many are unaware of these epistemological nuances, we argue that reflection upon them encourages an informed yet humble approach toward competing perspectives. This line of reasoning has been popularized recently by works tailored to the broader reading public, such as *Being Wrong*, which essentially maintains that one's capacity to embrace the possibility of being mistaken is perhaps better viewed of as a sign of cognitive competence than human fallibility (Harford, 2011; Schultz, 2010).

Moreover, it is not just the religious who are subject to such processes, since the expression of certitude, which so often underlies religious belief, may be observed also in the attitudes and assertions of the avowedly "nonreligious." For instance, Richard Dawkins, a prominent atheist, has declared that the end of religious faith could solve many of the world's most pressing conflicts (2006). In contrast, others have pointed out the "religiousness" of such absolutist claims and their concurrent hostility toward the religious "other" (Haidt, 2007; Himmelfarb, 2012; Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999). Due to the apparent prevalence of these types of claims from a variety of ideological perspectives, some have concluded that the multiplicity of views present in our globalized world has created a "postmodern paradox," which has made the certainty provided by absolutist worldviews especially attractive (Dunn, 1998; Hogg, 2011; Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010). Regardless, whether the content of one's worldview is religious or nonreligious, it seems that both of these perspectives often are held with a sense of certitude that prompts rejection of or even attacks toward those who hold a conflicting perspective (e.g., Skitka, Bauman, & Lytle, 2009; Skitka & Mullen, 2002).

This situation is rendered even more complex when we consider that many people who hold such views often feel justified by a sincerely held belief that they are creating a better world (Silberman et al., 2005). The philosopher and political theorist Isaiah Berlin appears to have had this dynamic in mind when he observed:

> If one really believes that [an "Ultimate Solution"] is possible, then surely no cost would be too high a price to pay for that? To make such an omelet, there is surely no limit to the number of eggs that should be broken. . .If your desire to save mankind is serious, you must harden your heart, and not reckon the cost. (as cited in Murphy, 2012, p. SR12)

Essentially, then, claims that are certain regarding transcendental matters exist both within and beyond the bounds of organized religion. Why would this be? On the one hand, expressers of certitude—in a religious and nonreligious realm—may experience a high psychological need for closure (Brandt, 2010). From this perspective, closure requires an a priori disregard for the multiplicity of other competing claims, with a lack of sensitivity to the inherently ambiguous nature of truth claims in general, due to the security experienced by envelopment within one's perceived base of factual knowledge. Evidence for this phenomenon is provided by studies, which have found that an expression of certitude often is intimately connected with overt assuredness regarding the nature and impact of "truth" in the world (Brandt, 2010; Hogg, 2005; Van den Bos, Euwema, Poortvliet, & Maas, 2007). For instance, research illustrates that the degree to which one is able to acknowledge uncertainty predicts the amount of negative affect (e.g., anger) toward statements that strongly contradict one's own perspectives, including those of a religious nature (i.e., the higher the degree of certainty, the higher the degree of negative affect) (Van den Bos, Van Ameijde, & Van Gorp, 2006; Van den Bos et al., 2012).

Such findings beg the following questions: Is it possible to coexist peacefully with others who hold beliefs that contradict—sometimes vociferously—one's own? How can someone hold religious or nonreligious beliefs without becoming prejudiced toward those who do not grant legitimacy to one's own version of reality (Shealy, 2005)? Such questions are core to the psychological study of religion, as psychologists ultimately are concerned with increasing "people's understanding of themselves and others. . .to. . .improve the condition of individuals, organizations, and society" (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 2). From an ethical standpoint, the

following rationale for such an emphasis by psychology and psychologists—as well as allied scholars and practitioners should be clear: When people are unable to peacefully coexist with those who hold different or contradictory beliefs, they are motivated to attack the "freedom of inquiry and expression," instead of seeking to increase their understanding of the "other," which psychologists are expected to promote and preserve (p. 2; Silberman et al., 2005; Tan, 2009; Van den Bos et al., 2006). As Cilliers (2002) maintains, "It is only when [people] have a deep understanding of their own religious traditions and are willing to learn and recognize the richness of other religious traditions that constructive cooperation can take place between groups from different faiths" (p. 58). In this chapter, then, we contend that one's ability to tolerate uncertainty—and thus constructively engage those with religious perspectives that are different—is associated with a particular psychological structure, which has been formed over one's life span via an interaction of multiple formative variables (e.g., demographics, experiences, culture). Moreover, this self-structure is expressed through both conscious beliefs and values as well as through the activation of unconscious emotional schemas, which directly affect the holding and expression of one's religious beliefs—or nonreligious beliefs—in relation to others (Shealy, 2016).

PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIOUS CERTITUDE

Building upon this introduction to the construct of certitude, it may be helpful to consider how the psychological study of religion has informed our understanding of the nature of religious belief. In much of the scholarly literature, the term *religion* refers to "narrow, dogmatic beliefs and obligatory observances" (Wulff, 1996, p. 47). In this sense, *religion* may be distinguished from more intrinsic forms of religious belief (Fischer, Greitemeyer, Kastenmüller, Jonas, & Frey, 2006) as well as *spirituality*, which often refers to the "mysterious realm of transcendent experience" (Wulff, 1996, p. 47). For present purposes, unless otherwise noted, the term religion is used in its broadest sense, which encompasses both religion and spirituality. However, in order to have an accurate view of psychology's historical relationship with religion, while facilitating a more nuanced examination of religious certainty, it may be helpful to overview the major perspectives on religion that have dominated this field of inquiry over the years.

The earliest psychological conceptualizations of religion tended to be critical in nature, often seeing it as a defense against reality (Paragment & Park, 1995). For example, Freud perceived religion to be a form of "wish fulfillment," which was a product of infantile longings for a powerful and protective father figure, as well as an amalgamation of rituals, which were consistent with the obsessive symptoms of neurosis. Although Freud saw religion as being pragmatically useful in its ability to tame destructive human instincts, he also felt it tended to promote psychological servitude (Paloutzian & Kirkpatrick, 1995). Thus, Freud proposed that if people could abandon religion and courageously face the unknowns of their own existence, human civilization would be the better for it. Juxtaposing this perspective with our current focus, one might conclude that Freud believed that religious people needed courageously to accept noncertitude (Wulff, 1996).

In contrast to Freud's dynamic approach, the early behaviorists linked religious belief to environmentally mediated phenomena, such as "superstitious" behavior, which sought to impose order and predictability upon events and phenomena that seemed outside of an organism's control. In other words, they attempted to demonstrate that religious ideation could parsimoniously be explained by naturalistic and

behavioral laws. For example, B.F. Skinner conceptualized religion as a product of reinforcement by an individual's religious priests, creeds, and codes. In a well-known experiment to illustrate such processes, he conditioned pigeons to exhibit superstitious behavior in order to elicit pellets of food (Skinner, 1948). Another behaviorist, George Vetter, compared human religious belief to "superstitious behavior" in animals (such as pigeons and rats), which arises as a response to unpredictable or uncontrollable situations (Vetter, 1958). Along complementary lines, James Leuba demonstrated experimentally that he could produce a mystical experience in subjects through the use of psychedelic drugs. On the basis of this work, he concluded that spiritual experiences were naive illusions that are explained through physiological processes. It is interesting to note, however, that Leuba also saw this "spiritual urge" as an essential characteristic of human nature. Resisting the exclusivity of traditional religious expressions, he worked to found religious societies that used ceremony, prayer, and confession apart from the worship of a particular god (Leuba, 1925; Leuba, 1950).

Although some behaviorists might have granted that religion could have social benefits, it was seen as far better for "believers" to lead principled and meaningful lives without needing the proverbial crutch of supernatural beliefs (Skinner, 1987). George Vetter (1958) asserted this viewpoint in his work, *Religion and Magic: Their Psychological Nature, Origin, and Function*:

> The priesthoods of whatever stripe can never live down, nor make amends for, their disgraceful role in retarding the development of modern science during the past millennium in Christendom. . .Supernaturalism is, in its social functions and consequences, a dangerous opiate. And, what is perhaps even worse, it discourages objective attempts at intelligent social trial-and-error, planning, and even research, and undermines man's faith in his own resources. (p. 515)

Although many were quite critical of religion, other early and nonbehavioral psychologists apprehended religion in a more favorable light. For example, in his seminal *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (1902) agreed that for some people, religion could be dangerous and a sign of naiveté. However, through his observations of a wide variety of religious persons, he concluded that when religious belief was combined with intellectual rigor (which he referred to as "healthy-minded" religion), levels of "human excellence" could be achieved, which could not otherwise be reached.

From an alternative but no less sympathetic standpoint, Carl Jung saw religious experience as being rooted in "archetypes," which are part of a universal human psyche that he referred to as the "collective unconscious." Such experiences, and their expression through participation in religious traditions, were central to an individual's process of individuation and self-realization. According to Jung, modern humans were vulnerable to experiencing conflicts regarding the complexities and seeming contradictions of religious belief, which might lead to a loss of a transcending perspective on life. This conclusion was due largely to his experiences as a clinician, where he observed:

> It is safe to say that every one of [my patients over the age of thirty-five] fell ill because he had lost what the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook. (Jung, 1933, p. 229)

As such, Jung proposed that religious experiences should be explored and facilitated in order to promote higher levels of *human consciousness*, which could allow the successful navigation of the individuation process apart from the boundaries of traditional religion. In this way, Jung sought to introduce an inclusive religious system, which would transcend the divisive certitude of traditional religious perspectives. Jung's theory largely has been ignored by the field of psychology due to its esoteric leanings as well as attendant difficulty with the empirical investigation of its central constructs. However, his views have contributed to a more positive valuation, by psychologists and nonpsychologists, of spiritual/religious experience in human development and functioning. (Wulff, 1996)

Like Freud, Erik Erikson (1950) saw correlations between one's religious convictions and early developmental experiences and needs. However, instead of perceiving this linkage as evidence for the problematic substitution of religion for unmet infantile needs, he saw religion as potentially aligning with the most basic yearnings of the self. More specifically, the religious inclination was a manifestation of deep human needs to experience a sense of "trust" that life ultimately is benevolent. Erikson also believed that religion could facilitate wisdom, which was a focus of his final stage of human development—ego integrity versus despair—and relevant to one's ability to accept the inevitability of his or her own death. Like other theorists, Erikson warned that religious belief could be associated with abuse and exploitation; however, he perceived religious experience to be an integral component of mature human development, arguing that healthy adults recognized and nurtured their spiritual inclinations (Kiesling, 2008; Wulff, 1996).

From the perspective of humanistic psychology, Erich Fromm conceptualized the impulse toward religion as an attempt to resolve the existential anxiety, which derives from humanity's experienced separation from other creatures due to our unique capacity for self awareness. Moreover, he defined "religion" as any system of thought or action that was shared by a group, provided an object of devotion, and fostered an orientation toward meaning making. He also separated religions into two broad types: *humanistic* (God as an example of the ideal person; focused on self-realization; loving; joyful) and *authoritarian* (God possesses all of the ideal yet unachievable human qualities; people are limited in their power; guilt is a primary experiential state) (Awad & Hall-Clark, 2009; Fromm, 1950). Fromm's ideas have received some empirical support, including a study, which found that religious commitment was associated with increased levels of personal growth when the death of a close friend was attributed to a loving god (Park & Cohen, 1993). In some ways, Fromm's division of religion into authoritarian and humanistic types parallels the difference between religious convictions characterized by a sense of certitude versus those that are held in the context of a personally empowering quest for spiritual meaning making.

Another important conceptualization of religion from a humanistic standpoint was that of Abraham Maslow (1964), who distinguished between religious people who had experienced a "peak experience" and those who either had not or had become defended against such a state. For Maslow, a "peak experience" was a period of intense feelings of wholeness and fusion with the world in which one feels fully alive and becomes aware of absolute values such as truth, justice, and beauty. According to Maslow, religious people who had not experienced a "peak experience" were looking to a religious system which was meant to preserve the "peak experience" of someone in the past, with the lamentable consequence of preventing present-day followers from actually encountering such an experience for themselves. More specifically,

> What happens to many people. . .is that they simply concretize all of the symbols, all of the words, all of the statues, all of the ceremonies, and by a process of functional autonomy make them, rather than the original revelation, into the sacred. . .In [this] idolatry the essential meaning gets so lost in concretizations that these finally become hostile to the original mystical experiences, to mystics, and to prophets in general, that is, to the very people that we might call from our present point of view the truly religious people. (Maslow, 1964, pp. 24–25)

One substantive critique of Maslow was that his views were based in part on the traits of figures that he saw as historical exemplars of self-actualization (such as Martin Luther King and Jesus) without empirical data to support his hypotheses (Wulff, 1996). Nonetheless, Maslow's basic propositions have received considerable interest by psychologists and nonpsychologists. For present purposes, it may be hypothesized that someone who experiences a high degree of certainty in their religious convictions would have less capacity or inclination for the transcendent "peak experiences" that Maslow described.

From another vantage point, aligned with the theoretical postulates and applied interventions of the psychodynamic school, attachment and object relations theorists often maintain that the ways we interact with our experience of God are associated intimately with our historical experiences as well as the ways in which we interact with others. In other words, if our approach to the divine is shaped by an attitude characterized by certitude, then this same attitude may well characterize our encounters with the "other" (e.g., resulting in less capacity or inclination toward understanding and the ability to experience and express a full range of emotions within interpersonal relationships). One exemplar of this perspective was Donald Winnicott (1953, 1971), who saw religion not as a universal neurosis as viewed by Freud, but rather as a relationship with the divine that is tied to an individual's internalized structure for relationships. Therefore, one's relationship with God could either be beneficial or detrimental depending on the level of object relations maturity through which such relationships were experienced and expressed. This hypothesis is still being explored, with at least one study concluding that there is a strong correlation between the quality and maturity of a person's relationship with God and the maturity of his or her relations with others (Hall, Brokaw, Edwards, & Pike, 1998).

Attachment theorists also have hypothesized that religious commitments to God may be a form of attachment relationship. Examples of such putative phenomena include pursuing God through prayer and rituals, using God for comfort during times of distress, and experiencing God as a secure base for approaching the unknown. Furthermore, it has been suggested that individuals with secure attachments experience relationships with a loving god, while individuals with insecure attachments are more likely to perceive God as distant—or to avoid forming a relationship with God at all. Evidence for such processes has been found in cultures where parenting style correlates with the overriding cultural conceptualization of God (Rohner, 1986). Along similar lines, Granqvist (2007) found that experiences with insensitive parents (e.g., rejecting and/or role-reversing) were associated with changes in religious orientation in response to life stressors. Likewise, Davis (2009) found a correlation between attachment anxiety and avoidance vis-à-vis one's experience and perception of God.

Along similar lines, other scholars have found evidence that some may use their relationships with God as a compensation for previous insecure attachments. For instance, Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) found that people who grew up in relatively nonreligious families, and reported avoidant attachments with their caregivers, were more likely to be religious as adults (when compared to other attachment styles).

Also, regardless of the religiosity of their parents, those categorized as avoidant experienced the highest rates of sudden religious conversions among the various attachment styles. Regardless of whether one is reenacting or compensating for an attachment experience, such studies seem to support the hypothesis that one's religious experience may be correlated with attachment style, life experiences vis-à-vis caregivers, and the basic human needs that attachment relations are designed to meet (e.g., Shealy, Bhuyan, & Sternberger, 2012).

At first glance, it might seem that a securely attached adult would be certain of his or her relationship with God, whether affiliating or disaffiliating. In deference to Erikson (1950), however, it is important to remember that secure attachment is characterized more by the experience of trust in others and the larger world than is insecure attachment. This observation suggests that a more securely attached individual might be more capable of tolerating a lack of certainty, which may emerge in a variety of spheres (e.g., Spaeth, Schwartz, Nayar, & Ma, 2016). For example, interpersonally, such individuals would arguably be able to tolerate the inherent uncertainties that characterize intimate relationships because they default to a trusting attitude toward the "other" (regardless of whether that "other" is perceived as a physical or a spiritual being). In contrast, an insecurely attached person might be more inclined to adopt a perspective—and seek to experience physical and/or spiritual relationships—grounded in certainty. In some ways, through such relational "foreclosure," they might succeed in freeing themselves from the uncertainty of trusting in the reality of one's spiritual experience by "faith and not by sight" (e.g., as articulated by the Christian apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthian church). On the other hand, as Mikulincer and Shaver (2001) found, when one's secure attachment schema is activated by the subliminal presentation of words that exemplify it (e.g., love, support), there is a tendency to exhibit increased tolerance for out-groups, even when the perspectives of such groups challenge one's own belief system.

Historically speaking, Gordon Allport was one of the most prominent and enduring thinkers regarding the conceptualization and psychological study of religion. At the core of his approach was the construct of the "mature religious sentiment," which he described as a well-differentiated and complex faith, which is relatively independent of its origins in childhood needs, and consistently directive of a person's ethical standards, even though it is held with some level of uncertainty or doubt. According to Allport (1969), such a framework "never seems satisfied unless it is dealing with matters central to all existence" (p. 78) and faces this profound calling "without absolute certainty. . .[as] the mature religious sentiment is ordinarily fashioned in the workshop of doubt" (p. 83). A person who holds this "mature religious sentiment" sees his or her faith as a working hypothesis, which gives a basis for values and infuses one's life with energy (Wulff, 1996), a perspective that perhaps is consistent with the Biblical declaration that "faith is an assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). From this perspective, faith is seen as an end in itself, in contrast with expressions of religious belief that are used instrumentally to attain other psychological, political, or social ends (Flere, Edwards, & Klanjsek, 2008). Allport labeled this first type of religious belief "intrinsic," hypothesizing that it was associated with positive psychological outcomes (Pargament & Park, 1995). Allport regarded the second type of religious belief "extrinsic" or "immature religiosity," which seemed to accommodate psychological needs for security and comfort and/or to legitimate one's particular political or group identity (Awad & Hall-Clark, 2009).

In addition to congruence with other theorists noted previously, echoes of attachment theory resonate here, in that religion is understood again as a means to pursue existential comfort and security. According to Allport (1969), extrinsic religion

can address these psychological needs by defining one's particular religious group identity against other groups through an attitude characterized by certainty. Intrinsic religion, on the other hand, sees religious belief as a value unto itself—an appreciation of one's subjective experience of God rather than an investment in ensuring that others validate that subjective experience. Rather than seeking to alleviate the existential anxiety that comes from a lack of certainty, intrinsic religion revels in the experience of faith itself. This extrinsic/intrinsic dichotomy parallels the previous proposal that while certitude may be associated with interreligious conflict, faith results in self aware and humble conviction, which is capable, even desirous, of dialoging with those who hold differing religious beliefs and values (Awad & Hall-Clark, 2009; Pargament & Park, 1995; Wulff, 1996).

Religious Certitude and Prejudice

Consistent with this central proposition regarding intrinsic versus extrinsic religiosity, it also was Allport's (1969) hypothesis that extrinsic religiousness was the source of prejudicial and authoritarian attitudes, which historically have been associated with religion. Although many studies have found a correlation between religion and prejudice in the past, this apparent connection has proven to be complex. For instance, along with nonreligious persons, highly committed religious persons also have been found in some studies to be among the least prejudiced groups in society (e.g., Ford, Brignall, VanValey, & Macaluso, 2009; Gorsuch & Aleshire, 1974; Kirkpatrick, 1993; Laythe, Finkel, Bringle, & Kirkpatrick, 2002). Allport's dichotomy offers plausible illumination regarding this potentially confusing relationship between religion and prejudice. For instance, studies have indicated that intrinsic religiosity is associated with less prejudice toward gays, lesbians, and ethnic minorities than extrinsic religiosity. So, it seems possible both to be highly committed from a religious perspective but also highly intrinsic, and thus less prejudiced toward others. On the other hand, it may be that highly intrinsic religious persons may simply be more motivated to hide their prejudice (Awad & Hall-Clark, 2009).

Although a number of conceptual and psychometric problems with Allport's intrinsic/extrinsic categorization have been illuminated (such as its ambiguity and presupposition of particular religious commitments), his framing of the complex differences in how people experience and express their religious beliefs continues to influence our understanding of these phenomena (Wulff, 1996). In any case, regarding the relationship between religious belief and prejudice, definitive conclusions remain elusive, mainly because it appears that the type of religious engagement people experience (e.g., intrinsic versus extrinsic) may mediate the degree of prejudice that is experienced. Such complexity is compounded further by the fact that religious commitments may range from very strong, to very weak, to nonexistent. Hopefully, the current investigation of such processes vis-à-vis belief certitude will provide a helpful frame for differentiating between religious expressions that impede—or facilitate—authentic intergroup communication and understanding regarding matters of religion.

Religious Quest Versus Religious Fundamentalism

Although Allport (1969) saw intrinsic and extrinsic religious inclinations in dichotomous terms, they have not been shown to be well correlated in this way. In fact, some research has supported the possibility that spiritual, psychological, and social

motivations do not necessarily contradict one another (Pargament & Park, 1995). In an attempt to address these complex interactions, Daniel Batson (1976) added a third orientation, "quest," which includes constructs such as doubt, complexity, and openness to perspective change. Reminiscent of the previously mentioned ideas of Immanuel Kant and Rollo May, the quest orientation has been described as "honestly facing existential questions in all their complexity, while at the same time resisting clear-cut pat answers" (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993, p. 166). Thus, those with a "quest" orientation perceive that they may not know the absolute truth regarding spiritual matters; however, they also maintain that asking questions and searching for answers are important aspects in the process of believing. Previous studies have correlated a "quest" orientation with self-acceptance, open-mindedness, flexibility, helpfulness, and responsiveness toward others, while also being inversely correlated with prejudice (Batson et al., 1993; Hunsberger, 1995; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). However, such conclusions have been questioned on grounds similar to the intrinsic/extrinsic orientations. For instance, one study found that while the quest scale might be partially valid in Christian settings, it may not be for Muslims (Flere et al., 2008). Another study concluded that the prevalence of a quest orientation declines with age (Wulff, 1996). Regardless, it is not difficult to apprehend the similarities between this orientation and the hypothesis that a relatively open and inquisitive inclination to grapple with one's own religious commitments would be associated with a resistance toward the certainty that "final answers" provide.

As a point of contrast to the quest framework, an orientation toward religious fundamentalism also has been proposed to explain processes of certitude. From this perspective, fundamentalists of various faiths typically are distinguished by the following deeply held beliefs; (a) one's particular religious perspectives are the only inerrant truth; (b) such truth is opposed by evil forces which must be fought; (c) such beliefs must be followed today the way they were perceived to be followed in the past; and finally (d) those who endorse and follow such beliefs have a special relationship with one or more deities (e.g., see Altemeyer and Hunsberger, 1992; McFarland, 1989; Shealy, 2005). In fact, Altemeyer and Hunsberger have found a strong negative correlation between these two orientations. Although someone with a quest orientation may share many of the same doctrinal perspectives as a religious fundamentalist, he or she arguably would differ in the level of certitude with which these perspectives are held. In short, the quest orientation—with its focus on doubt, complexity, and openness to a change—is representative of a less "certain" holding of one's faith. Religious fundamentalism, on the other hand, is aligned highly with certitude regarding the inerrant truth of at least some of its religious teachings as well as resistance toward any change in the way that this "truth" is understood or followed (Tan, 2009).

Some studies have pointed to religious fundamentalism as the religious manifestation of Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Hunsberger, 1995; Laythe, Finkel, & Kirkpatrick, 2001). Among other levels of analysis, this perspective is interesting in terms of the interface between religion and governance (e.g., how some oppressive Central American regimes encourage Christian missionaries to evangelize in their countries). Such findings are consistent with data demonstrating that people are less likely to question the government after an experience of religious conversion (Pargament & Park, 1995). Of course, such scholarship has strong historical roots. For example, and consistent with Freud and Skinner, Karl Marx saw religion as an "opiate of the masses," which militated against social unrest. Along similar lines, Niccolò Machiavelli

emblematically suggested that leaders should maintain the religious structures of their countries in order to keep the people "well conducted" (Silberman et al., 2005). As suggested previously, a religious perspective of certitude generally would be associated with resistance to political changes within authoritarian-leaning regimes, along with their theological concomitants, as well as the inevitable cognitive and emotional disequilibrium that these changes would foster. Although we have highlighted two perspectives of religious "quest" and religious "fundamentalism," it should be noted that these are not necessarily incompatible or mutually exclusive. In other words, overlaps and variations in the two extremes also exist. For example, a believer may hold fundamentalist attitudes in relation to certain doctrines, while remaining open to learning about new or alternative perspectives regarding other doctrines (Tan, 2009).

Religious Certitude and Religious Orthodoxy

As with most psychological constructs that bear on the interaction of religiosity and other attitudinal phenomena, such as prejudice, correlational trends are complex, but discernible. For example, Kirkpatrick (1993) found that religious fundamentalism was associated with five different forms of prejudice, while Christian orthodoxy either was inversely related or unrelated to each of these same scales. For this reason, some researchers have looked to Christian orthodoxy (the degree to which someone has internalized traditional Christian tenants) as a useful measure for differentiating the effects of RWA and/or religious fundamentalism from actual religious beliefs (Ford et al., 2009; Hunsberger, 1989; Laythe et al., 2001; Laythe et al., 2002). Christian orthodoxy has in fact been shown to correlate with less prejudicial attitudes in a number of analyses. For instance, one study confirmed that religious fundamentalism and RWA predicted negative attitudes toward homosexual people. However, the same study found that Christian orthodoxy predicted positive attitudes toward members of this group (Eunike, 2009; Ford et al., 2009). These findings seem to support a central tenet, that prejudice may be related to authoritarian attitudes of certitude, rather than the doctrinal content of one's religious belief. Furthermore, recent work on religious fundamentalism suggests that it too may vary in terms of intensity (i.e., on a continuum from high fundamentalism to low fundamentalism), with associations to related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes. For instance, although an individual otherwise inclined toward fundamentalism may not approve of a certain behavior (i.e., homosexual sex), he or she may still express positive feelings toward gay people if able and willing—affectively and cognitively—to "separate the sinner from the sin" (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005).

Religious Certitude and Identity Closure

Other research has attempted to differentiate religious persons by building on Marcia's (1966) emphasis on exploration and commitment vis-à-vis identity development. In particular, Kiesling (2008) suggested that spiritual identity could be understood through the dimensions of "role salience" (the importance of spirituality to one's sense of identity) and "role flexibility" (the extent to which one has considered changes in his or her spiritual identity). In this study, the "foreclosed" group was composed of individuals who expressed a high commitment to their faith, but

without much exploration of other options. For these people, spiritual change consisted of deepening their current faith. Such individuals showed few signs of reflection or doubt, and tended to emphasize their relationships with God as their primary religious motivation. The second, "moratorium" group reported high levels of religious exploration, but had not arrived at a place of commitment. These individuals often reported challenging experiences, which were associated with serious questions and doubts. They saw themselves as arbiters of truth as opposed to authorities, and typically came from families that did not participate in religious practices. The final "achieved" group had navigated a period of religious exploration that had culminated in personal religious commitments. Such individuals were able to describe their spiritual identities clearly and specifically, emphasizing an enhanced capacity to relate with others, which they attributed to their religious experiences and commitments. Such individuals were also highly reflective about their religious ideation in the past, and expected to remain so in regard to their faith in the future. However, they had experienced attenuation of their previous religious crisis, and now understood themselves as being more settled and spiritually at ease (Kiesling, 2008). Thus, among other implications, if high fundamentalism is associated with prejudice, one potential antidote may be the cultivation and valuation of an ongoing open and reflective religious framework as a person develops, rather than seeking to "foreclose" religious identity via the inculcation of unshakable certitude (e.g., Spaeth et al., 2016; Tan, 2009).

It should be emphasized that a belief in spiritually revealed truths or inspired texts may well occur for individuals who otherwise lack a sense of certitude regarding these truths or texts. As studies of Christian orthodoxy have illustrated, one may hold traditional religious beliefs in a fundamentalist/authoritarian manner, characterized by a form of certitude that is associated with prejudice and intergroup conflict. However, one also may hold these traditional beliefs in an open/reflective manner, characterized by an appreciation of the apparent elusiveness of absolute certainty in regard to any truth claim (whether it be "religious" or "scientific"). Furthermore, these reflective beliefs seem to be associated with greater interest in, and acceptance of, those who hold different perspectives. In short, consistent with such scholarship, the fact that James, Leuba, Maslow, Jung, Erikson, and many other thinkers grant that a faith journey and faith commitments have the potential to facilitate generative purposes at individual, group, and societal levels makes a case against throwing the proverbial "baby" of religious belief out with the "bathwater" of certitude.

Religious Certitude and Neuroscience

As a final consideration along these lines, recent perspectives rooted in neuroscience have added an entirely new level of analysis to the study of religious certitude. For example, Bargh and Chartrand (1999) have provided evidence that nonconscious processes, rather than conscious beliefs, mediate much of our behavior, religious and not. In other words, deep emotional responses in the brain, rather than abstract religious principles alone, may more parsimoniously explain why people behave as they do toward others (e.g., Haidt, 2007; Newberg & Waldman, 2006). Such findings lend support to the central contention here that it is necessary, but by no means sufficient, to understand the content of religious belief. Of potentially greater importance, particularly in relation to understanding the dynamics of interbelief conflict,

is the certainty with which beliefs are held as well as *why* such beliefs have been internalized with such certainty in the first place. In other words, to understand why some individuals are more inclined to experience and express certitude in regard to their religious beliefs, we may need to account for formative variables (e.g., life history, demographics) that are associated with the likelihood of certitude, or the lack thereof, as well as allied affective, biological, and cognitive processes that may mediate or at least covary with the relative degree of religious certitude that an individual expresses (Shealy, 2005). By accounting for such complexity in real time, taking into consideration individual differences among us, we may be better able to "make sense" of the messy complexity that culminates in a relative degree of religious or nonreligious certitude.

EXAMINING RELIGIOUS CERTITUDE THROUGH THE EI MODEL AND BEVI METHOD

Accounting for the origins of religious certitude—through an interdisciplinary, measurable, and nuanced understanding of the etiological factors associated with religiousness—has been called for in the scholarly literature (e.g., Bloom, 2007; Paloutzian & Kirkpatrick, 1995; Pargament & Park, 1995). By utilizing such an approach, it may become feasible to parse cause and effect vis-à-vis religious certainty, and reliably apply such understanding to the individual case. Consistent with such a call, but eschewing any definitive claims, an overview of the three main components of the present approach—Equilintegration (EI) Theory, the EI Self, and the BEVI—may be helpful at this juncture (see Chapters 2, 3, and 4 for a full explication). Essentially, Equilintegration (EI) Theory seeks to explain "the processes by which beliefs, values, and 'worldviews' are acquired and maintained, why their alteration is typically resisted, and how and under what circumstances their modification occurs" (Shealy, 2004, p. 1075). Derivative of EI Theory, the Equilintegration or EI Self explains the integrative and synergistic processes by which beliefs and values are acquired, maintained, and transformed as well as how they may be linked to the formative variables, core needs, and adaptive potential of the self (Shealy, 2016). Informed by scholarship in a range of key areas (e.g., "needs-based" research and theory; developmental psychopathology; social cognition; affect regulation; psychotherapy processes and outcomes; theories and models of "self"), the EI Self seeks to illustrate how the interaction between core human needs (e.g., for attachment, affiliation) and formative variables (e.g., caregiver, culture) often leads to particular kinds of beliefs and values about self, others, and the world at large, that are internalized over the course of development and across the life span.

Concomitant with EI Theory and the EI Self, the BEVI is a comprehensive analytic tool in development since the early 1990s that examines how and why we come to see ourselves, others, and the larger world as we do (e.g., how life experiences, culture, and context affect our beliefs, values, and worldview) as well as the influence of such processes on multiple aspects of human functioning (e.g., learning processes, relationships, personal growth, the pursuit of life goals). For example, the BEVI assesses processes such as: basic openness; the tendency to (or not to) stereotype in particular ways; self- and emotional awareness; preferred strategies for making sense of why "other" people and cultures "do what they do"; global engagement (e.g., receptivity to different cultures, religions, and social practices); and worldview shift (e.g., the degree to which beliefs and values change as a result of specific experiences).

BEVI results are translated into reports at the individual, group, and organizational levels and used in a variety of contexts for applied and research purposes (e.g., to track and examine changes in worldviews over time) (e.g., Brearly, 2012; Hill et al., 2013; Shealy, 2004, 2005, 2016; Shealy, Bhuyan, & Sternberger, 2012; for more information about the BEVI, including a description of scales, see Chapter 4).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESULTS

This study is exploratory in that we are attempting to understand the relationship between formative variables (e.g., life history, demographics), mediators (various scales on the BEVI), and outcomes (e.g., self-reported religious or nonreligious affiliation) in a manner that is consistent with other analytic work with this measure. Analyses were developed on the basis of a large dataset (N = 2331) collected during 2011 to 2012 from the Forum BEVI Project, a multi-institution, multiyear project coordinated by the Forum on Education Abroad (www.forumea.org) and the International Beliefs and Values Institute (www.ibavi.org). Participants primarily included undergraduate students (96.7%), although a small sample of graduate students (3.3%) also was included, all of whom were recruited through a range of learning experiences (e.g., study abroad, residential learning communities, general education courses with a focus on transformative/multicultural learning). The sample ranged between the ages of 17 and 62, with an average age of 19; 3.9% fell into the age range of 26 to 62, with another 0.9 % falling into the range of 12 to 17, and the majority falling between the ages of 18 and 25. Although the majority of participants reported as U.S. citizens (93.3%), non-U.S. citizens also were included in the sample (6.7%) resulting in representation from 38 different countries of origin. Of the sample, 79.1% reported as Caucasian with 20.9% as non-Caucasian (6.6% Black or African American; 0.9% American Indian or Alaskan Native; 7.4% Asian or Pacific Islander; 2.9% Hispanic/Latino; 3% Other). Finally, from the standpoint of gender, 40.8% of the sample was female, with 59.2% male. All participants were required to provide informed consent as determined by multiple Institutional Review Boards processes, and participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were not required to complete the BEVI, and could elect to discontinue participation at any time. Analyses were conducted via Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and MPLUS, and consist of analysis of variance (ANOVAs), regression analyses, and structural equation modeling (SEM). More information on the Forum BEVI Project is available in Chapter 4 and at www.ibavi.org/content/featured-projects. Our data analyses for this exploratory study will focus on addressing five interrelated questions: (a) how does the BEVI operationalize religious certitude; (b) who is most likely, from a demographic standpoint, to score highly on the BEVI's measurement of this construct; (c) how does the BEVI's measurement of religious certitude relate to other BEVI scales; (d) what variance in religious certitude exists both within and between religious groups; and (e) to what extent do specific formative variables (e.g., family history) predict religious certitude.

Question 1: How does the BEVI operationalize religious certitude?

On the BEVI, the Socioreligious Traditionalism scale likely is related to "religious certitude" as discussed, as it consists of items indicating strong, traditional religious beliefs, a relatively unquestioning stance vis-à-vis one's faith, assuredness regarding

God's tangible role in this life and the hereafter, and a fundamentalist sensibility regarding sociocultural issues. Sample items include:

God's word is good enough for me.
I am a religious person.
Sometimes bad things happen because it's God's will.
Homosexuality goes against God's design.
I know that evil people go to hell when they die.

Therefore, it is our hypothesis that high scores on this scale will be related to this common form of religious certitude. Such perspective should be delineated from certainty regarding transcendental or spiritual inclinations more generally, since this scale is not a criterion-based measurement of the "religious certitude" construct. Rather, given its Likert-type structure (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree), this scale is hypothesized to vary according to the content of one's religious belief as well as the certainty with which one holds such beliefs. In short, for present purposes, the higher the degree of "Socioreligious Traditionalism," the greater the degree of "religious certitude."

Question 2: Who is most likely to evidence a greater degree of Socioreligious Traditionalism on the BEVI?

As Table 10.1 illustrates, for this sample at least, regression analyses suggest that there are a number of significant differences on the BEVI regarding who is most, and least, likely to score highly on Socioreligious Traditionalism.[1] Of particular note, at an initial level of analysis (i.e., other variables also differentiate these groups), individuals who report that they are Republican, Christian, or Islamic all are significantly more likely to endorse a high degree of Socioreligious Traditionalism, whereas

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[1] Other marital status refers to marital status other than "Divorced," "Married," "Single," and "Widowed." Paying college education by oneself refers to the source of college education payment (1 = paying college education by oneself; 0 = someone rather than oneself paying for college education). Years of foreign languages learning prior to college or university indicates the years the participant spends on learning foreign languages before attending the college. Speak French simply indicates that the respondent speaks French as a foreign language; likewise, to answer how many days of a week the respondent reads a news magazine, or uses an online social network during study abroad, the respondent simply provides an estimation of days or hours respectively spent per week. To ascertain interest in international education or study abroad, the dependent variable is a student's level of interest. The question is as follows: "On a scale of 1-7, with 1 being 'extremely low' and 7 being 'extremely high,' please indicate your level of personal interest in international education or study abroad experiences." The independent variables are demographic and experiential variables. Several of the independent variables are dummy variables: gender (0 = male, 1 = female); "parents paying for international experience" (0 = parents do not pay, 1 = parents pay); "university provides orientation for international experience" (0 = university does not provide, 1 = university provides); "plan to travel abroad" (0 = no plan to travel abroad, 1= plan to travel abroad); "plan to take an internationally focused course" (0 = no plan to take a course, 1 = plan to take a course); and, "speak a foreign language other than English" (0 = does not speak a foreign language, 1 = speaks a foreign language). Another independent variable, the "highest academic degree intended to achieve" is coded from 1 = associate degree, 2 = bachelor's, 3 = master's, 4 = specialist (e.g., Ed.S.), 5 = professional (e.g., law), to 6 = doctoral degree. Also, participants are asked about the number of foreign countries they have previously visited (e.g., respondents indicate the actual number of countries they have visited). Background variables include "mother's education" and "family income." "Mother's education" indicates the highest academic degree of a respondent's mother, which ranges from 0 = some high school or less to 8 = doctoral degree. "Family income" is an ordinal variable that reflects the average annual income of a student's parents/guardians regardless if the student receives financial support from them. Income ranges from 1 to 10, 1 = < \$10,000 to 10 = > \$175,000.

TABLE 10.1

Background Characteristics of Individuals Who Score More Highly on Socioreligious Traditionalism

SCALES	UNSTANDARDIZED COEFFICIENTS		STANDARDIZED COEFFICIENTS		
	B	STD. ERROR	BETA	T	SIG.
Constant	2.069	0.068		30.547	0.00
Other marital status	−0.302	0.115	−0.044	−2.627	0.01
Political orientation is Republican	0.314	0.033	0.171	9.608	0.00
Religious orientation is Atheism	−0.303	0.062	−0.114	−4.901	0.00
Religious orientation is Agnosticism	−0.398	0.065	−0.139	−6.157	0.00
Religious orientation is Christianity	0.707	0.049	0.387	14.304	0.00
Religious orientation is Islam	0.845	0.177	0.083	4.783	0.00
Personal interest in international activities	−0.026	0.009	−0.051	−2.85	0.004
Paying college education by oneself	−0.061	0.029	−0.035	−2.077	0.038
Years of foreign languages learning prior to college or university	−0.033	0.007	−0.082	−4.605	0.00
Speak French as a foreign language	−0.081	0.036	−0.038	−2.226	0.026
Days of a week read a weekly news magazine	0.041	0.017	0.043	2.478	0.013
Hours per week using an online social network during study abroad	0.011	0.004	0.052	3.033	0.002
F	109.379***				
R-squared	0.373				
Adj. R-squared	0.370				

Note. ***$p < .001$.

individuals who report that they are atheists and agnostics are significantly less likely to endorse a high degree of Socioreligious Traditionalism. Such characteristics, combined with the correlation matrix findings presented next, provide insight into what this particular factor of Socioreligious Traditionalism is measuring on the BEVI.

Question 3: How is religious certitude on the BEVI related to other belief/value structures?

As indicated, one of the more complex but salient dimensions of religious certitude is how it is, or is not, related to other aspects of how people experience self, others, and the larger world. For example, as previously mentioned, there is a distinction between religious fundamentalism and religious orthodoxy, with those scoring high on the latter construct tending to exhibit less prejudice and intolerance than those who express high levels of religious fundamentalism. Given these previous findings, what might Socioreligious Traditionalism on the BEVI illustrate about the relationship of its particular form of religious certitude to other belief/value constructs and processes? As Table 10.2 illustrates, correlation matrix findings from the BEVI show the following relationships between Socioreligious Traditionalism and other BEVI scales.[2]

How do we interpret these findings? Essentially, those individuals who score highly on Socioreligious Traditionalism also tend to be:

- *Much less likely* to be interested in and open to cultures and cultural practices that are different from their own (Sociocultural Openness)
- *Much less likely* to be concerned about environmental processes such as climate change or the degradation of natural resources (Ecological Resonance)
- *More likely* to deny basic thoughts, feelings, and needs that are common or typical for most human beings (Basic Closedness)
- *More likely* to express traditional and conservative beliefs about who men and women are and should be (Gender Traditionalism)
- *More likely* to indicate that basic needs were not met in a good enough way during their upbringing (Needs Closure)
- *More likely* to report that they have few doubts or regrets and are seldom caught off guard (Hard Structure)

TABLE 10.2

Correlation Matrix Findings of Socioreligious Traditionalism and Other BEVI Scales

Scale 15. Socioreligious Traditionalism

Sociocultural Openness (−.62)
Ecological Resonance (−.53)
Basic Closedness (.34)
Gender Traditionalism (.34)
Needs Closure (.31)
Hard Structure (.27)
Identity Closure (.24)
Emotional Attunement (−.20)

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[2] These data represent interfactor correlations among BEVI scales. More information about the BEVI, including EFA parameters as well as correlation matrix data, is available at www.thebevi.com/aboutbevi.php.

- *More likely* to express confusion or "stuckness" regarding who they are or where they are going in their life (Identity Diffusion)
- *Less likely* to have access, and/or be responsive, to their affect or the affect of others (Emotional Attunement)

Overall then, the *more likely* it is that one experiences certitude regarding the beliefs represented by the Socioreligious Traditionalism scale on the BEVI, the *less likely* it is that this same individual, on average, will be open to or interested in different cultures, environmental issues, and other important aspects of self, such as how and why we and others function as we do.

Question 4: What variance in religious certitude exists both within and between religious groups?

This complex question is perhaps one of the most important to answer if we are to understand the explanatory value of grouping people by their particular religious or nonreligious demographic category (Christian, atheist, agnostic, etc.). For example, as the previously reviewed data suggest (e.g., regarding the differences between self-identified Fundamentalist Christians and Orthodox Christians), groups that self-identify with the same overarching category (in this case Christian) appear at times to differ tremendously from one another in terms of their basic experience of self, other, and the larger world. By extension then, could it be that some individuals who self-report as Christian might have more in common with individuals who do not identify as Christian? For example, might it be possible that some atheists and Christians actually share more in common than they do with agnostics, who presumably are open to the possibilities of either category, and thus are less likely to express certitude regarding transcendental matters? Although preliminary and necessitating further investigation, several BEVI analyses offer intriguing findings along these lines. Consider Table 10.3, which addresses beliefs regarding the economics of social welfare, as well as Table 10.4, which deals with basic openness toward or interest in cultures that are different from one's own.

What may we observe about such findings? Due to their relatively large sample size, let us focus on atheism, Christianity, and agnosticism. First, although mean differences among groups are not large, atheists and Christians from this sample appear to believe similarly on both of these items regarding social welfare and cultural understanding. Second, agnostics are significantly more likely to agree that there is too big a gap between the rich and poor in our country, and that we should try to understand cultures that are different from our own. Such findings are interesting at a number of levels, including the seemingly salient fact that a central tenet of Christianity is that the plight of the poor should be prominent in the thinking of Christians (Singer, 2009). It should be emphasized that all three of these groups for this sample—of university level students—are inclined to agree with both statements. Also, some of the variance in the rich/poor item might also be related to the moral attributions one makes about the existence of a large rich/poor gap (e.g., some might argue that it is not the size of the gap that is immoral, but rather the lack of care for the poor that is morally reprehensible). That said, such findings are surprising nonetheless, and worthy of further consideration. Most notably, the intriguing if not ironic finding that agnostics are more likely to endorse both beliefs, particularly regarding the issue of rich and poor, raises the question of whether this group may be more inclined

TABLE 10.3

Comparisons Among Atheists, Agnostics, and Christians on the Following BEVI Item Regarding the Rich and Poor: "There is too big a gap between the rich and the poor in our country"

SOURCE	SUM OF SQUARES	MEAN	DF	MEAN SQUARE ERROR	F	SIG.
Corrected Model	17.891		7	2.556	4.275	0.00
Intercept	19951.125		1	19951.125	33369.71	0.00
Religious Orientation	17.891		7	2.556	4.275	0.00
Atheism		3.045				
Agnosticism		3.132				
Buddhism		3.189				
Christianity		2.9				
Hinduism		3.154				
Islam		3.176				
Judaism		2.968				
Other		3.019				
Error	1358.984		2273	0.598		
Total	21328		2281			
Corrected Total	1376.875		2280			

Note. $R^2 = 0.013$ (adjusted $R^2 = 0.010$).

toward a basic tenet of Christianity than are self-reported Christians. Likewise, the finding that atheists and Christians are similar in their level of openness toward the "other" (i.e., both groups are less open than agnostics) might be surprising, particularly in light of Dawkins' (2006) assertion that atheism is the solution to many of the world's most pressing conflicts (e.g., we'd be better off and less conflictual if we'd but abandon religion), his negative beliefs about Christianity, and his skeptical views of agnosticism.

Additional context from this perspective may be helpful at this point, since Dawkins (2006) has much to say about agnostics, dividing them into two types. "Temporary Agnosticism in Practice" (TAP) is defined as "legitimate fence-sitting where there really is a definite answer, one way or another, but we so far lack the evidence to reach it" (p. 47). In contrast, "Permanent Agnosticism in Principle" (PAP) "is appropriate for questions that can never be answered, no matter how much evidence we gather, because the very idea of evidence is not applicable" such as whether "you see red as I do." That is because, "Maybe your red is my green, or something completely different from any color that I can imagine. . .philosophers cite this question as one that can never be answered" (p. 47). Dawkins appears to be arguing that the only legitimate form of agnosticism vis-à-vis a belief in God is the TAP form.

TABLE 10.4

Comparisons Among Atheists, Agnostics, and Christians on the Following BEVI Item Regarding Knowledge of Other Cultures: "We should try to understand cultures that are different from our own"

SOURCE	SUM OF SQUARES	MEAN	DF	MEAN SQUARE ERROR	F	SIG.
Corrected Model	11.601		7	1.657	4.046	0.00
Intercept	26815.29		1	26815.29	65464.98	0.00
Religious Orientation	11.601		7	1.657	4.046	0.00
Atheism		3.382				
Agnosticism		3.578				
Buddhism		3.568				
Christianity		3.378				
Hinduism		3.692				
Islam		3.588				
Judaism		3.563				
Other		3.4				
Error	942.109		2300	0.41		
Total	27769		2308			
Corrected Total	953.71		2307			

Note. $R^2 = 0.012$ (adjusted $R^2 = 0.009$).

Thus, from his perspective, "even if God's existence is never proved or disproved with certainty one way or the other, available evidence and reasoning may yield an estimate of probability far from 50 per cent" (p. 50). Here is not the place for a full exploration of why Dawkins would express such certitude regarding his own presentation of "available evidence"—much less his own "reasoning"—except to say that many scholars from across the interdisciplinary spectrum question absolutist rational atheism of the very form promoted by Dawkins, by noting its unacknowledged assumptions, privileged methodologies, underlying epistemologies, and internal contradictions (e.g., Eagleton, 2006; Keller, 2008; Nagel, 1997; Plantinga, 1993). Setting such ongoing debate aside, it suffices to say that abundant evidence suggests we all should exercise due skepticism of our own reasoning, as it appears subject to many empirically demonstrable biasing factors (e.g., Aronson, 2012; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). From such a perspective, certitude about the indisputably false status of religious beliefs is no more defensible than certitude about the indisputably true nature of such beliefs. As Shealy (2005) observes, "believing something to be 'the real truth'—even vehemently—has no more power to make it so than nonbelief has the power to make it not so" (p. 84). Moreover, pertinent to fervent believers in religion and nonreligion,
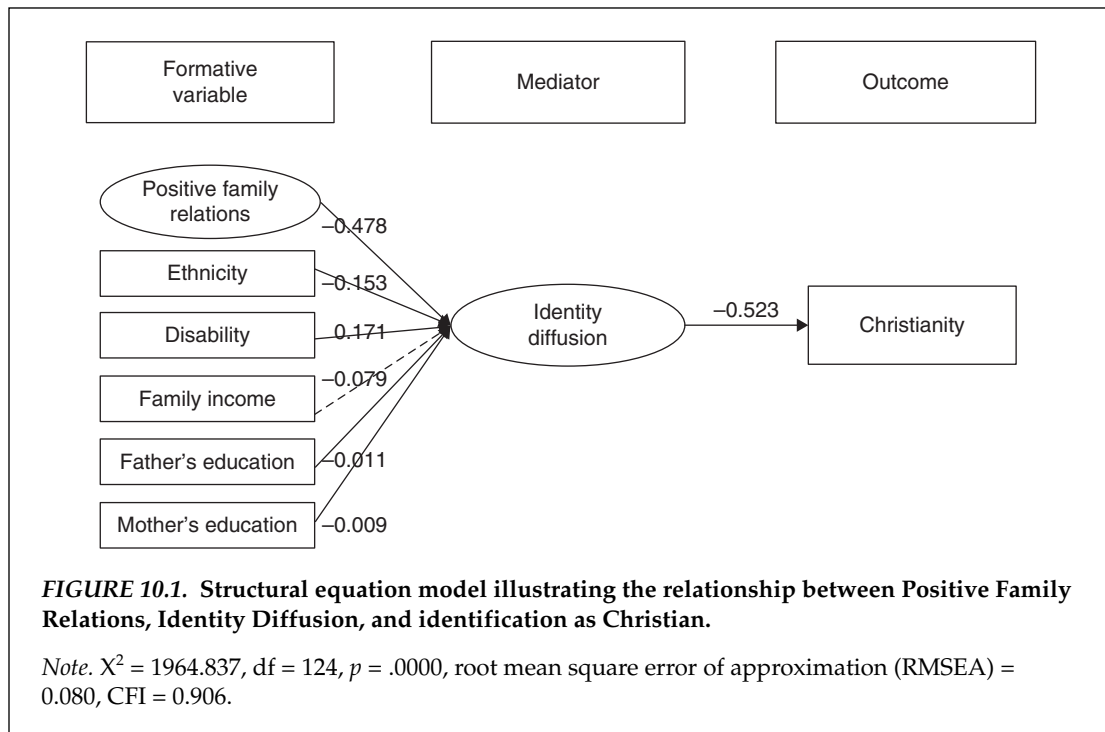
. . .the fact that we all possess beliefs and values is not sufficient to confer legitimacy upon them; that is to say, beliefs and values are not necessarily true, right, or better simply because they are held to be so. . .To insist otherwise is like asserting that English is superior to French simply because you speak the former, as do your parents, children, and most everyone else you know. Although the absurdity of such logic (the non-logic) should be painfully apparent to us all, our history as a species indicates it is not. Instead, what we too often seem to 'know for sure'—with a steely confidence that belies the fanatic in us all—is a tautology that our beliefs and values are right by virtue of the fact that they are ours. (p. 102)

In short, despite all of the emphasis on the putative differences between Christians and atheists (Dawkins, 2006), such differences are not clearly found in the present analysis, thus creating important questions regarding the utility and validity of perceiving entire groups of people (e.g., Christians or atheists) either as ineluctably different or similar in their beliefs and values. Moreover, from the standpoint of religious certitude, it would appear that individuals who theoretically would appear to be least inclined toward certitude—agnostics—are also more inclined to believe there is too large of a gap between the rich and poor, and that there is value in understanding cultures that are different from their own. These findings are consistent with the present correlation matrix data, which suggest that individuals high in Socioreligious Traditionalism—our proxy for religious certitude—are less likely to express a sense of interest in or openness to issues and groups that are different from one's own (e.g., Sociocultural Openness, $r = -.62$).

Question 5: Are specific formative variables associated with a higher degree of religious certitude as expressed via Socioreligious Traditionalism?

Finally, as we conclude our analyses, an even more basic question may be asked, which has to do with the etiological and mediational factors that are associated with a relative degree of openness in general, and certitude in particular. More specifically, what life experiences appear to be associated with a relative degree of socioreligiously traditional certitude or lack thereof? On the one hand, mild to moderate evidence from the BEVI suggests that individuals who report a greater degree of Negative Life Events tend to be more likely to report a higher degree of Socioreligious Traditionalism. Such a conclusion is based in part upon the present correlation matrix data, which indicates a significant (.0001) and positive (.31) correlation between Socioreligious Traditionalism and Needs Closure, a scale that measures the degree to which individuals report distressing life experiences associated with core needs not being met.
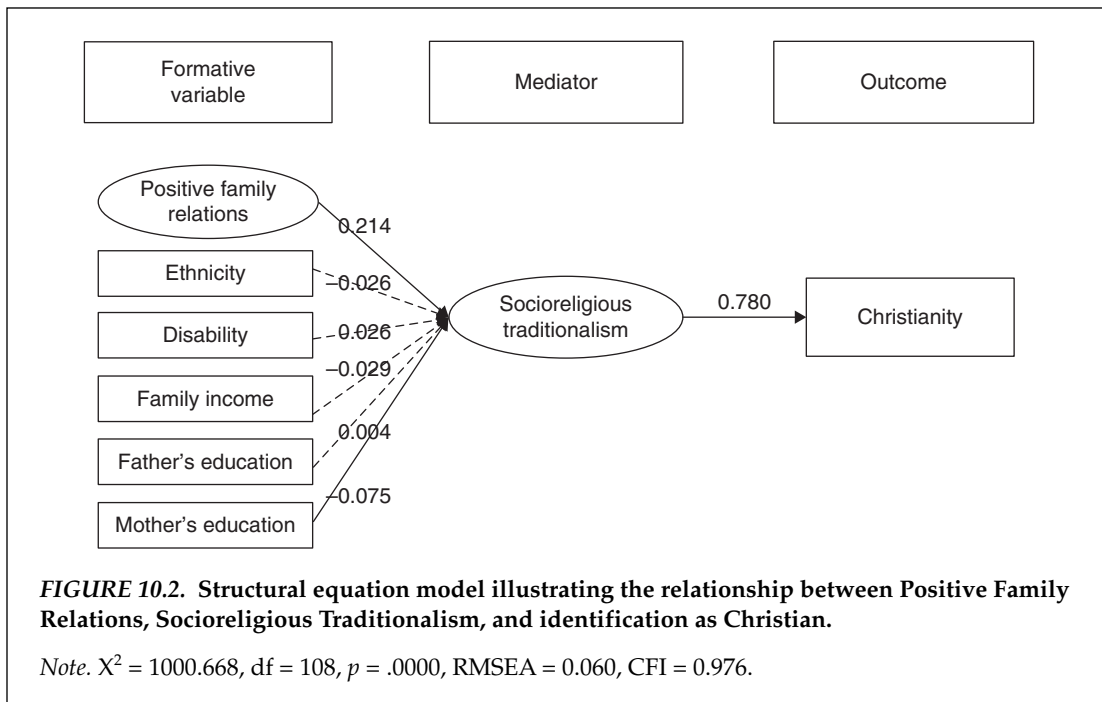
Despite such findings, the nonlinear nature of such causal processes should be emphasized, as illustrated by the following structural equation models, which demonstrate that the mediators of Socioreligious Traditionalism and Christian identity are complex and worthy of further study. Consider Figure 10.1, which examines the relationship between Positive Family Relations (the degree to which individuals report a happy upbringing and positive relations with their caregivers), Identity Diffusion (the degree to which individuals report feeling stuck, confused, or lost in

FIGURE 10.1. **Structural equation model illustrating the relationship between Positive Family Relations, Identity Diffusion, and identification as Christian.**

Note. X^2 = 1964.837, df = 124, p = .0000, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.080, CFI = 0.906.

terms of who they are and whether they have agency to move forward in life), and the outcome variable of Christianity (i.e., those who self-report as Christian).[3]

What do such findings suggest? Essentially, individuals who report that they experienced Positive Family Relations—and report Caucasian ethnic status, a higher family income, and no disability diagnosis—are *less* likely to report that they are confused, stuck, or lost. At the same time, individuals who are high in Identity Diffusion also are less likely to report that they are Christian. These findings are interesting at several levels, but perhaps mostly because they suggest that Positive Family Relations may in fact be associated with a propensity to self-report as Christian when one does not feel a sense of being lost or confused about one's own identity or life. In other words, Positive Family Relations may be associated with a higher degree of clarity about one's own self and life purpose, which may—for families that are inclined toward a Christian orientation—be further associated with such status. But do such findings apply only to Christians in general or also more specifically to those

[3] From an interpretive standpoint, Positive Life Events is a Confirmative Factor Analysis (CFA) derived factor comprising items regarding how positively an individual reports their upbringing and family environment were (e.g., a positive value indicates a greater degree of positive life events). Ethnicity is a dummy measured variable; value "0" indicates the respondent is a minority, and "1" means the respondent is a Caucasian. Disability also is a dummy variable; "0" indicates the person is not eligible for services for students with disabilities, and "1" means otherwise. Family income is measured by a series of numbers indicating the respondent's annual family income. It ranges from "1" (Less than $10,000) to "10" ($175,000 or more). Both father's education and mother's education are ordinal measured variables. They range from "0" (Some high school or less) to "8" (Doctoral degree). Finally, we used weighted least squares means and variance adjusted (WLSMV) as the estimator for all the structural equation models because the variables have ordinal or dummy measures.

FIGURE 10.2. **Structural equation model illustrating the relationship between Positive Family Relations, Socioreligious Traditionalism, and identification as Christian.**

Note. X^2 = 1000.668, df = 108, p = .0000, RMSEA = 0.060, CFI = 0.976.

Christians who are high on Socioreligious Traditionalism? Figure 10.2 offers an intriguing look at such complexity.

What does this model suggest? Essentially, it appears that Positive Family Relations may indeed be associated with a higher degree of Socioreligious Traditionalism, which in any case, is strongly associated with the tendency to self-report as Christian. Interestingly, from the standpoint of formative variables, it should be also noted that the higher the degree of education the mother is reported to have, the lower the degree of Socioreligious Traditionalism individuals tend to report, which is an interesting variable worthy of further study (e.g., why would mother's education, but not father's, be associated with a lower degree of religious certitude as expressed via Socioreligious Traditionalism?).

CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIOUS CERTITUDE

These findings suggest five concluding points. *First, in exploring certitude generally, and religious certitude in particular, it is important to operationalize our definitions.* As with all macrolevel constructs—such as love, intelligence, or certitude—from the standpoint of measurement and research, an item level of analysis should be the first point of inquiry. Much confusion occurs in the scholarly literature due to the fact that different item constellations are used to define similar constructs; therefore, it is important that researchers carefully consider the content of the items used in order to properly contextualize the applicability of their conclusions. Future research investigating the correlations between Socioreligious Traditionalism on the BEVI and other existing measures of religion/spirituality and certitude might help to better elucidate

these dynamics and consolidate existing findings. Hopefully, the included sample items will provide a clear understanding of how religious certitude is operationalized on the BEVI, which may facilitate further such research.

Second, psychological constructs may be understood better by researching who is, and is not, likely to embody them. In the current analysis, we learn, for example, that Christian Republicans are more likely to score high on Socioreligious Traditionalism, which would perhaps be expected, and offers important information regarding the meaning and validity of the construct. Along these same lines, however, and perhaps more telling, individuals who self-report as Islamic also demonstrate heightened scores on Socioreligious Traditionalism, suggesting that this construct may capture psychological processes vis-à-vis religion beyond those of a Christian population.

Third, a tendency toward socioreligious certitude appears predictive of a wide range of self-structures. As the correlation matrix data illustrate, if one knows something about an individual's beliefs along the lines of Socioreligious Traditionalism, it is possible to derive empirically informed hypotheses regarding how these same individuals are likely to regard other cultures or be disposed toward environmental issues as well as how inclined they may be to acknowledge basic thoughts and feelings in self or other. Such awareness also suggests that it is important to regard the "self" as a complex and interdependent whole that is greater than the sum of its discrete parts, including but not limited to one's religious faith or lack thereof (see Chapters 2 and 3).

Fourth, within-group differences may be greater than between-group differences, which suggests the need to eschew stereotypes about religious and nonreligious people. On the one hand, the present data do suggest that people who are high on Socioreligious Traditionalism may also be less open to other cultures, less concerned about the environment, and so forth. However, that tentative conclusion is very different from concluding either that all Christians are high on Socioreligious Traditionalism, or that all atheists are more open to other cultures than all Christians. Although this point may seem evident, scholarly and popular discourse (e.g., painting all Christians or all atheists with the same brush) suggests that such affectively laden labels are highly subject to stereotyping if not prejudice, which Aronson (2012) astutely defines as a "negative attitude toward a distinguishable group on the basis of generalizations derived from faulty or incomplete information" (p. 299). From that perspective, popular scholars such as Dawkins (2006) would appear prejudicial *against* at least two groups—Christians and agnostics—and prejudicial *toward* another—atheists—by erroneously ignoring both the differences within all of these groups, and overstating the differences between them. A more sophisticated understanding of the variables that are associated with particular self-referencing categories is likely to go beyond a descriptive level of analysis (e.g., whether one calls oneself an atheist, Christian, or agnostic), instead seeking to understand to what degree, and under what circumstances, such self-reporting labels apply. In short, questions of *how and why we believe as we do* are at least as, if not more, important than questions of *what we believe* if we truly are to apprehend the complex and interacting factors that culminate in "certitude" of whatever stripe.

Fifth, the relative degree of religious or nonreligious certitude an individual expresses may be highly determined, but in a complex, interacting, and nonlinear manner. On the one hand, individuals who are higher on Socioreligious Traditionalism are more likely to report a strong commitment to a religious tradition (e.g., Christianity). Moreover, unhappy life experiences associated with a lack of Needs Closure also are associated with a higher degree of Socioreligious Traditionalism. However, as SEM results

suggest, unhappy life experiences are neither necessary nor sufficient antecedents to the development of religious certitude, since a subset of Christians, who also report Positive Family Relations, are inclined to be higher in Socioreligious Traditionalism. Thus, a high degree of Socioreligious Traditionalism may occur in families that are experienced as positive or negative, although such status may be more likely with backgrounds that are of the latter (more negative) variety. At the same time, the tendency to self-report as Christian does not appear to be associated either with a negative life history or a confused or lost sense of self. In short, although a lack of Needs Closure related to early life events tends to be associated with a greater degree of religious certitude vis-à-vis socioreligious traditionalism, such reported experiences are neither necessary nor sufficient in terms of predicting this belief constellation. Thus, in attempting to understand the etiology of certitude, we must account for complex interactions among a range of formative variables, keeping individual differences forefront, and thereby avoiding a "one size fits all" mentality.

AGNOSTICISM AND THE CONTINUUM OF BELIEF

We began this chapter by observing that one's tendency toward certitude regarding religious matters appears to be among the chief causes of conflict between individuals and groups. That is likely because if and when individuals are "sure" of their beliefs and values, they are less able to tolerate the possibility that they may be wrong, or not completely right, thus militating against empathic engagement with another's perspective (Shealy, 2005). In our view, the data that we have presented here affirm and deepen this perspective, by illustrating that we know relatively little about someone based on his or her endorsement of a general term to describe who he or she is, such as Christian or atheist. This observation emerges from the finding that, from the standpoint of the BEVI, religious designations may encompass more differences than similarities among adherents in regard to how they interact with self, other, and the larger world. For example, some Christians ironically may share more in common from a self-structure perspective (e.g., their capacity and inclination to experience and express affect) with their atheist peers than with those who tend to experience less religious certitude, such as many agnostics. This vexing conclusion likely represents an especially exasperating reality for a subgroup of individuals who self-identify as Christians, since from this perspective they may have less in common with their brethren than those who do not self-identify as Christian.
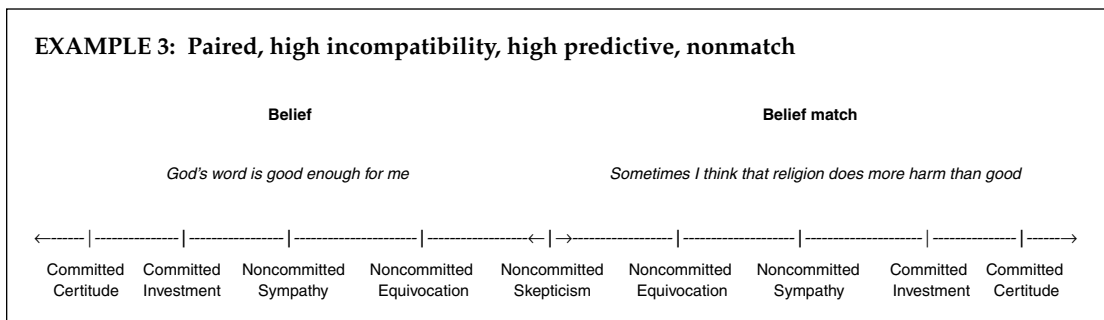
In other words, a lack of certainty in one's belief regarding transcendental matters (whether that belief be most akin to Christianity, agnosticism, atheism, or any other label) seems more predictive of one's ability to interact openly with those who hold other perspectives than any particular religious/nonreligious group affiliation. Thus, although preliminary and subject to further study, it may be that self-identified Christians and other believers in a specific religious system who hold their faith without a sense of absolute certainty (e.g., which could perhaps be referred to as "Agnostic Christians," "Agnostic Hindus," etc.) might in fact be quite open in relation to other members of their religious group. Along the same lines, atheists who avowedly are nonagnostic (which could perhaps be referred to as "Fundamentalist Atheists") may have much in common—from a certitude perspective—with "Fundamentalist Christians" who also are avowedly nonagnostic. Thus and again, it behooves us to be careful about concluding anything regarding the basic psychological structure of individuals who reportedly adhere to a specific religious or nonreligious affiliation

without knowing much more about their formative variables and larger belief/value structures, since the differences within such groups may be much larger than the differences between them.

Overall, then, what may we conclude from such an analysis? From our perspective, an agnostic approach that lacks certainty regarding transcendental issues may represent the most intellectually defensible framework on matters over which scientifically definitive conclusions—those that are empirically, independently, and reliably verifiable—appear untenable, while offering an aspirational framework that militates against shrill diatribes and destructive behaviors toward individuals and groups who "believe" differently. As Shealy (2016) observes in relation to belief, religious and otherwise, via the "Continuum of Belief,"

> one may be *sympathetically noncommitted* (i.e., inclined to believe but ultimately noncommittal) or *skeptically noncommitted* (i.e., inclined to disbelieve but ultimately noncommittal). From the standpoint of the Continuum of Belief, then, "agnostic" encompasses any of the "noncommitted" designations, which is consistent with the scope and intent of the term, "agnostic," meaning "without" ('a') "knowledge" ('gnosis'). *Thus, to declare oneself agnostic is to concede the inability to assert unequivocally the certainty of knowledge*. (p. 54)

By way of illustration, consider "Example 3" from the "Continuum of Belief" as it relates directly to our discussion (see Chapter 2).

EXAMPLE 3: Paired, high incompatibility, high predictive, nonmatch

Belief	**Belief match**
God's word is good enough for me	*Sometimes I think that religion does more harm than good*

←------ | --------------- | ---------------- | --------------------- | ----------------- ← | →---------------- | ------------------- | -------------------- | -------------- | ------→

| Committed | Committed | Noncommitted | Noncommitted | Noncommitted | Noncommitted | Noncommitted | Committed | Committed |
| Certitude | Investment | Sympathy | Equivocation | Skepticism | Equivocation | Sympathy | Investment | Certitude |

From the standpoint of the EI model and BEVI method, recall from Chapter 2 that,

> beliefs typically exist in a synergistic relationship to one another in that a belief stated in one direction typically is matched by one or more counterpart beliefs that exist in relative degrees of opposition to it. Moreover, each belief may be designated as (a) solo or paired (i.e., indicating whether an opposite match has been demonstrated statistically); (b) predictive at the high, medium, or low level (i.e., essentially indicative of correlative strength in the positive or negative direction); and (c) predictive of a match or nonmatch (i.e., whether two beliefs, and two or more individuals holding them, are likely to be "compatible—matched" or "incompatible—nonmatched"—in terms of worldview). (Shealy, 2016, p. 52)

So, one may hold a belief (including, but not limited to religious) with relative degrees of agnostic commitment up until the state of certitude. As previously noted, this point is illuminating in relation to the putative dichotomy between atheism and Christianity because the labels of "Christian" or atheist" offer little by way of explicating where someone actually may fall within these self-reported designations. Since within-group differences often are greater than between-group differences vis-à-vis beliefs and values, it is very important to ascertain where individuals and groups actually reside along the "Continuum of Belief." Revelatory of individual differences among us, and by way of explication,

> consider Example 3 in relation to Huan, Eleanor, and Ana. Recall that the two beliefs of Example 3 are strongly and negatively correlated (i.e., paired, but highly incompatible and highly predictive of a nonmatch between two different believers). Let us say Huan strongly agrees with the belief, *God's word is good enough for me*. Statistically speaking, Huan therefore is highly likely to disagree strongly with the belief, *Sometimes I think that religion does more harm than good*. Likewise, now consider "Eleanor," who represents the mirror opposite of Huan, strongly disagreeing that *God's word is good enough for* me and strongly agreeing that *Sometimes I think that religion does more harm than good*. On the Continuum of Belief, if other item pairings follow this same pattern, which is statistically predicted, both Huan and Eleanor likely fall under "Committed Certitude" on opposite ends of the Continuum of Belief. Now consider a third example from "Ana," who disagrees that *God's word is good enough for me* AND disagrees that *Sometimes I think that religion does more harm than good*. Where would Ana fall along the Continuum of Belief? Probably not under "Committed Certitude," and more likely under "Noncommitted Equivocation." Consistent with BEVI data presented later (e.g., correlation matrix and structural equation modeling), the fact that Ana appears to hold complexity in this way—disagreeing that "God's word is good enough" BUT also disagreeing that "religion does more harm than good"—suggests that she is grappling with fundamental questions regarding her own beliefs vis-à-vis religion and spirituality, and remains open to a range of possible "truths." (Shealy, 2016, p. 53)[4]

Among other implications of this scenario, it is important to understand that both a strong atheist commitment *and* strong religious commitment—that of Eleanor and Huan respectively—are expressions of belief. To be clear, then, "atheism is not nonbelief" (Shealy, 2016, p. 55).

Some atheists may contend, for example, that a belief in God is false, but from the standpoint of the larger definition of belief provided here, such a contention is

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[4] Of course, all manner of variation may occur along this continuum when we juxtapose beliefs at an item level of analysis. Consider "Luis," for example, who agrees quite strongly that *God's word is good enough for me* AND agrees somewhat less strongly that *Sometimes I think that religion does more harm than good.* Perhaps on further qualitative inquiry regarding how Luis justifies his seemingly contradictory position, he might express his belief that "God's word" contains some real truths, which have stood the test of time, but that difficulties and abuses of interpretation and application have led to situations where religions sometimes seem to do more harm than good. Where would Luis fall along the Continuum of Belief? He seemingly would fall at Committed Investment on one side (*Sometimes I think that religion does more harm than good)* and Noncommitted Sympathy on the other side (*God's word is good enough for me*) of the Continuum of Belief for these paired items.

still a belief that there is no God. For the foreseeable future then, just as proof for the existence of God or some other transcendent reality seems improbable (e.g., empirically, unequivocally), so also does proof for the nonexistence of such an entity or phenomenon. In short, it is our sense that agnosticism most closely approximates the apparent reality that in fact, it is extremely unlikely that the existence or nonexistence of God will be proven in a way that would be empirically and unequivocally valid for all human beings who grapple with this fundamental question. We therefore endorse alignment with agnosticism, broadly defined, as Agnostic Christians, Agnostic Muslims, Agnostic Atheists, Agnostic Agnostics, and so forth.

In the final analysis, there are at least two advantages of such a stance. First, through an attitude of agnosticism writ large, we have the best chance of achieving openness toward the potential truth or goodness contained in a given worldview, while simultaneously not eliminating the possibility of learning from other worldviews that may, on the face of it, seem irreconcilable with our own. Second, this agnostic stance hedges also against the perilous human tendency toward certitude, by granting that the beliefs and values we acquire largely are due to deterministic formative variables and extant contingencies of which we may have little awareness (e.g., Aronson, 2012; Shealy, 2005). By resisting the foreclosed security provided by certitude, we might live more honestly in terms of the complexities we face (i.e., not knowing for sure, "one way or the other"), while simultaneously recognizing that human perceptions inevitably are inclined toward error—thus abiding in accord with Saint Augustine's timeless adage, "I err, therefore I am." In short, experiencing and expressing a spirit of agnosticism along the Continuum of Belief may be the least divisive and most conducive approach to interfaith dialogue, since it declares neither that the other's beliefs certainly are wrong nor that one's own beliefs certainly are right.

Thus far, it has been implied but should be explicit that our support for an agnostic perspective is based in an agnostic theory of knowledge, which subsequently leads to a commitment to agnosticism in our beliefs (i.e., we should recognize that the validity of all knowledge claims rely on a priori assumptions). Moreover, it is our sense—although subject to further inquiry—that "absolute certitude" of a religious variety probably is more akin to a fundamentalist, rather than an orthodox, worldview in most cases. This perspective is supported by the previously reviewed evidence regarding the relative degree of nonprejudicial beliefs espoused by the latter group of religious adherents (i.e., Christian orthodoxy, when separated from fundamentalism, seems to neutralize and in some cases reverse religion's lamentable association with prejudice). Finally, we must neither ignore nor devalue the associations between religious belief and positive statuses at a range of levels (e.g., emotional well-being). In fact, strong convictions regarding religious doctrines that value engagement and appreciation of an individual's experiential self may lead to more positive outcomes related to psychology's goal of preserving individual "freedom of inquiry and expression," broadly defined (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 2; Silberman et al., 2005; Tan, 2009; Van den Bos et al., 2006). Further, it is also possible that high levels of certitude may actually promote a "believer's" relationship with others, at least within a similar sphere of belief, as the preceding SEM data imply.

So, while religious certitude seems related to intergroup conflict and violence when it propositions against respect for an individual's internal experience and autonomy, such an outcome is not necessarily inevitable. Some less severe forms of religious belief may motivate a believer to avoid shrill diatribes and demonstrate constructive (rather than destructive) behaviors toward people of a different faith.

For example, it is possible for a Christian who strongly believes in the doctrinal impetus to "love your neighbor as yourself" also to be more fervent in this regard than an agnostic who feels less certitude in his or her obligations and affinities toward fellow human beings. Perhaps it is the case, then, that high levels of nonabsolute certitude—when coexisting with an agnostic theory of knowledge—may best be expressed through the term *investment* as indicated in the Continuum of Belief. This term delineates such inclinations from absolutistic certitude, and allows room for the valuing of each human's authentic experiential self, which an absolutistic certitude may see as corrupting of or antithetical to its "truth."

In the end, our preference for an agnostic stance vis-à-vis transcendental matters is bolstered by the fundamental point that it appears possible to be invested in one's beliefs while still retaining a nonrejecting and nonprejudicial stance toward those who believe differently. Certainly, from the standpoint of the BEVI, profiles are not uncommon in which people are very high, or very low, on Socioreligious Traditionalism—a common expression of high or low religious certainty—and still evidence openness or closedness to other ways of experiencing self, others, and the larger world. The existence of these "outliers" is one of the central reasons why it is important not to overgeneralize from religious or nonreligious beliefs. Even though such beliefs are among the most powerful (i.e., highly predictive of other worldviews on the BEVI), it still is common to have all manner of variation at the individual, or even group, level in terms of differences and similarities in worldview, a point that should be recognized when assessing and interacting with people of different religious or nonreligious sensibilities.

Real World Implications and Applications: Toward Cross-Cultural Religious Education

In light of the present theory and data, how do we address such complexity—the promotion of agnostic openness and investment in religious/nonreligious meaning making, as opposed to certitude—in the real world? Overall, we recommend educational and psychological interventions that encourage critical reflective thinking about the religious or nonreligious systems of thought to which each of us is exposed. As noted previously, from our perspective, commitments both to religious (e.g., major religions of the world) and nonreligious (e.g., atheism) systems of thought are forms of faith, to the degree that their adherents profess a belief in the fundamental but nonprovable tenets that underlie them. In other words, both a fundamentalist Muslim and a fundamentalist atheist are expressing their "faith," since in both cases it appears that the system of belief to which they adhere cannot be proved in any definitive and unequivocal manner. Keeping with our emphasis on an agnostic theory of knowledge, as opposed to certitude of whatever stripe, this stance is not meant to discredit or privilege any particular perspective but rather to equip ourselves with the skills for reflecting at a meta-level on why we believe what we believe, in order to facilitate growth, dialogue, and understanding over time. The aim of interventions that align with these goals is to discourage any form of religious or nonreligious certitude (which appears to lead to prejudice and conflict among individuals and groups), while simultaneously fostering a culture of open-mindedness, curiosity, and exploration across the variety of perspectives regarding transcendental matters (Tan, 2009, 2010). Practically, our aim would be to

encourage people to "reflect critically on the committed perspective into which they have been nurtured," with the goal of expanding their ability to take on personally authentic convictions (Thiessen, 1993, p. 255). For example, adapting suggestions by McLaughlin (1984, p. 81), an educator, leader, clinician, or parent might consider fostering an environment that supports the following processes and attitudes:

- Encourage people to ask questions, and also be willing to respond to questions honestly and in a way that respects each person's cognitive and emotional development.
- Help people reflect on what parts of their perspectives are a matter of faith rather than universally agreed upon absolutes.
- Encourage attitudes of empathic patience and understanding in relation to religious and nonreligious disagreement.
- Propose that morality is not exclusively dependent upon religious belief.
- Be cognizant of the affective, emotional, and dispositional aspects related to the development of conviction in tandem with the cognitive aspects of that development.
- Respect each individual's experience by encouraging the pursuit of his or her developing convictions, while encouraging reflection on any facets that may not allow space for respecting the convictions of others.

Interventions that seek to foster this type of environment generally benefit from utilizing a dialogical approach that aims to balance both openness and rootedness (Tan, 2010). Consider one such example, as illustrated by the Muslim "Tolerance and Appreciation for Multiculturalism" program, which has been implemented at the Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta, Indonesia (Tan, 2011). This initiative aims to "develop arguments for multicultural Islam based on theological, philosophical and Islamic jurisprudential precepts, using these to legitimate the concept of multicultural Islam, and to promote religious tolerance towards the multicultural society" (Baidhawy, 2007, pp. 22–23). Especially noteworthy, this program is grounded in Islamic teachings that are held firmly by many Muslims. These beliefs include *tawhid* (the unity of the Godhead), which focuses on the unity of humankind that is derived from God; ummah (living together), which teaches the peaceful co-existence of all human beings; and rahmah (love), which promotes caring human relationships based on the attributes of "God the Merciful and the Benevolent." Typically, programs such as these have been advanced within and across communities of religious believers. However, we see every reason for those who adhere to an atheistic worldview to participate as full and equal partners in similar sorts of cross-conviction dialogues, which might be understood as three overlapping and mutually reinforcing levels—preliminary dialogue, practical dialogue, and critical dialogue—which we describe next (Tan, 2010).

First, *preliminary dialogue,* as the name implies, focuses on preliminary or basic inter-religious engagement that does not require direct dialogue or interaction between people of different faiths. Rather, it emphasizes learning about a faith through symbolic acts of interest and support towards another religion, such as visiting a place of worship or observing a religious celebration. This form of dialogue is recommended as an initial step to learning about another faith as it is the easiest to achieve, but is limited in its capacity for promoting inter-religious understanding and correcting misconceptions. To include atheists within such a paradigm, we might

suggest that religiously convicted people of whatever faith consider attending various atheistic venues, such as a "freethinkers" (see www.nobeliefs.com) or an "American Atheists" (see www.atheists.org) event. Likewise, atheists might consider respectful engagement with people who profess religious leanings within their various venues.

Second, *practical dialogue* brings believers of different faiths together through social projects that may not be explicitly religious in nature. This provides an opportunity to learn about essential differences in beliefs and practices in an informal and collegial setting (Leganger-Krogstad, 2003). One goal of such dialogue is to decide upon a project that reflects shared values, and then, collaborate together in taking action (e.g., working with a local food bank; participating in a Habitat for Humanity building project). This approach emphasizes that common values (e.g., harmonious living) are core not only to various religious creeds, but are shared also by atheist believers, as exemplified by the "secular humanism" movement, which aspires to be a transcending framework for all these perspectives (e.g., https://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php).

Another example of this type of approach is advocated by an Islamic research center in Britain, which explicates how a "civic morality" may be established between Muslims and non-Muslims, based upon shared principles. This requires a demonstration of civic morality that affirms mutual respect and rejects discrimination against others. As noted in a report by HRH Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre of Islamic Studies (2009), civic morality implies that "Muslims should treat non-Muslim individuals as equal in the domain of social interaction, regardless of religious or doctrinal disagreements" (p. 12). The report adds that this framework, from the Islamic point of view, is premised on the body of principles outlined in the Qur'an and Islamic traditions, including good neighborliness, charity, hospitality, non-aggression, honoring of commitments, and doing good. Such a framework is transitional between practical dialogue and critical dialogue, since the latter perspective respects and values commonalities (as the above center constructively aspires), but ultimately focuses deliberately upon the teachings of a particular faith.

Third, *critical dialogue* involves deliberately planned encounters in which participants discuss religious issues based on theological similarities and differences. This form of cross-conviction dialogue represents the deepest type of encounter among believers of various stripes, as it challenges participants to delve intensively not only into the content of their respective creeds, but also to explicate fundamental issues of meaning and purpose that are associated with them (i.e., why one believes what one believes). Essentially, critical dialogues regarding religion should emphasize the commonalities we share across communities. Such values are integral to, but also transcend any particular religion. These values include humanity, care, respect, trust, and working together for the larger good. Therefore, as previously suggested, it seems that one need not abandon strong religious or nonreligious commitments to avoid prejudice and promote harmony.

One common approach for engaging in critical dialogue is found in "interfaith dialogues," which are based upon the common understanding that diverse moral traditions and legitimate moral differences exist across faiths (Runnymede, 2000). In concert with this theme, the overarching goal of these dialogues is to underline ambiguous and/or controversial aspects of a given belief tradition in order to develop religious literacy, interfaith relations, greater self awareness, and active citizenship (Erricker, 2006; Ipgrave, 2003). Without a direct consideration of the underlying assumptions of various belief traditions—as well as their related commitments,

suspicions, and grievances toward other religious and nonreligious traditions—interfaith dialogue exercises remain superficial. Although universal agreement may be reached (e.g., as described under practical dialogue), deeper encounters regarding ethical, metaphysical, anthropological, or theological content likely will remain elusive without an in-depth examination of the most basic convictions of believers across the spectrum (Lindholm, 2004, as cited in Van Doorn-Harder, 2007).

For critical dialogue to be successful, we suggest that religious/nonreligious believers seek to set aside any form of certitude that may hinder interreligious (and nonreligious) understanding. Guided by an attitude of quest (perhaps fostered by the relational connections created via the preliminary and practical dialogues as previously described), participants may be capable of coming together to explore alternative perspectives and interpretations for contested issues in and between various faiths (religious and nonreligious). Examples include, but are by no means limited to, competing claims or beliefs regarding reason, knowing, truth, contemplation, meaning, causation, purpose, love, care, compassion, ethics, morality, science, death, the afterlife, God, salvation, religious conversion, and the need—or lack thereof—of a religious sensibility to live and promote a life worth living for self, others, and the larger world. The objective in these dialogues is to learn and empathize rather than to debate, judge, and "win the argument." To achieve this goal, it is essential for adherents of different faiths to be given the opportunity to share and justify their views, and for all parties to listen respectfully and agree to disagree, if necessary.

In preparing participants to reflect critically on another belief system in a productive manner, it is helpful first to foster a degree of understanding and empathy with that system, which may attenuate critical comments that are based upon false stereotypes or prejudices. While it may be salutary for participants to question and even challenge the assumptions of certain religious beliefs and practices, discussants should avoid inflammatory statements or postures in general. In short, participants need to know that freedom of speech requires responsibility and accountability, and should be provided with guidelines regarding how, whom, and what to question in a socially acceptable and constructive manner, while also avoiding "political correctness" (e.g., hypersensitivity; affective flatness; denial of difference; an "everyone is right" sentiment), since such processes ultimately undermine honesty and depth, tend to be superficial and conflict avoidant, and are unlikely in any case to achieve substantive outcomes at an individual or group level. One specific model that may be useful in this regard is the "intergroup dialogue" methodology, which thoughtfully and strategically brings together equal numbers of "opposing" perspectives and/or representatives of "different" facets of an issue (see http://igr.umich.edu/about/institute). Moreover, explanation and discussion of perspectives articulated earlier in this chapter (e.g., the difference between fundamentalism and orthodoxy; what the "quest" perspective implies; the meaning and implications of the "Continuum of Belief") also may provide the terminological heuristics and conceptual scaffolding that are necessary to facilitate such meta-level reflection. Whatever the method or approach, achieving balance between appropriate sensitivity and honest conviction is key to achieving both depth and integrity vis-à-vis processes of critical dialogue. Concretely, participants may be encouraged to reflect upon the nature of different religious and nonreligious beliefs (e.g., the content of the belief system), the foundation of such beliefs (e.g., the etiology of such beliefs and why they are promulgated), and the perceptions of the adherents to such beliefs regarding their validity (e.g., why believers contend that their belief system is good or true).

For example, in addition to contemplation regarding the various big picture concepts previously noted (e.g., meaning, purpose), participants might bore down further by comparing the various and competing interpretations of "jihad" used by Islamist groups to justify terrorist acts, and by others (Muslims and non-Muslims) who condemn such acts. An exploration of this concept might help participants obtain a more critical and reflective understanding of the varieties of Muslim religious expression. Alternatively, the origins and potential dilemma of the faith-based claim by both Christians and Muslims that their leader (Jesus and Mohammed, respectively) is the primary representative of God, as opposed to any other such figure in the past, present, or future may be a fruitful source of discussion, as can an analogous point of contrast with Hinduism (many gods, but perhaps from one source) or Buddhism (in which the Buddha explicitly disavowed inimitable status, despite such reverence often shown him by devotees). As a final example, an examination of the fundamental atheist belief that there is no God and no need for God—along with an attendant observation regarding how much destruction has been done in the name of God—can be a useful point of contrast and discussion when facilitated respectfully and constructively. Again, the point of such critical dialogue is not to convince others, although such outcomes may occur, but rather to reflect deeply and honestly not only about *what* one believes and values, but *why* such convictions matter in the first place, as well as *how* an experience of certitude may present a source of comfort and/or conflict for self, others, and the larger world.

Reflecting upon the importance of such critical dialogue from an Islamic perspective, Noor (2003) urges fellow believers to "re-learn the norms and rules of dialogue and communication" (p. 325) in a spirit of intelligence, honesty, and compassion:

> Recognizing the multiplicity within ourselves opens the way for us to recognize the multiplicity of the other as well. It would mean that we would be able to look at the West (and the rest) for what it truly is: a complex assembly of actors and agents, interests, beliefs, values, and ideas that may not be completely in harmony with each other. It may also help us realize that in the midst of that confusing and complex heterogeneity that is the other are also values, beliefs, and ideas that are common to ours. . .We need to remind ourselves continually of the fact that the Western world is far from uniform and that there exists a vast array of Western thinkers, leaders, activists, and citizens who care for Muslims as much as they do for their own. These are our real allies and friends, and we must never abandon or disregard them in our pursuit of justice and equity. (p. 327)

The three types of interreligious dialogues previously discussed may be implemented sequentially, progressively, or concurrently, depending on specific needs and objectives. In the end, what seems important is to encourage dialogue in all contexts (i.e., not just formal but also nonformal and informal), while emphasizing authentic relational connections with those who hold differing beliefs and values. If dialogues such as these involve the key stakeholders from all segments of a society—such as schools, religious institutions, social groups, and of course the state and its attendant political structures—outcomes over the long term may be moving and salutary, if not transformative.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

At the outset of this chapter, we proposed that the need for a deeper understanding of religious faith is of great relevance in our increasingly globalized world, as religious systems that seem to contradict one's own beliefs and values often are perceived as a personal or cultural attack, which may lead to conflict or even violence toward the perceived source of this attack. From this point of departure, we considered certitude, a construct defined as the "absence of doubt," in adherents of religious and nonreligious beliefs, whether they be the fundamentalist versions of various religious faiths or the strident truth claims proposed by some advocates of atheism. We then noted that the tendency toward certitude requires fidelity to an allied epistemological framework with its own set of assumptions, before turning to an overview of various psychological theories and theorists, who have expressed negative (e.g., Freud, Skinner), positive (e.g., Jung, Maslow), and contemporary (e.g., the role of human attachment in relation to religious inclination) perspectives regarding religion and spirituality.

From there, we examined the complexity of religious certitude in relation to prejudice, including the intriguing finding that religious belief in itself may not necessarily be associated with antipathy toward "the other," but rather depends upon how beliefs subjectively are held by believers (e.g., the difference between fundamentalist and orthodox experiences of religious ideation, with the former group showing higher, and the latter group lower, degrees of prejudice overall). Along these lines, we considered the various forms in which religious ideation may be held by its adherent, with a specific examination of the broader "quest" orientation, which apprehends religious commitment as an ongoing process that is worked out and understood over time, in concert with the evolution of one's identity (i.e., one may grapple with one's religious/spiritual perspectives over the course of one's life). Among other aspects related to the etiology of certitude, we examined those from neuroscience, which offer tantalizing clues regarding the affectively mediated bias that seems tied to a sense of certainty regarding one's religious or nonreligious beliefs.

At this point, we turned our attention to the overarching model and method that represented the investigative core of this chapter, first by providing a brief overview of Equilintegration (EI) Theory and the EI Self, as well as the BEVI. Following this overview, we offered a series of data-based findings from a multi-institution assessment of learning project, which resulted in five concluding points. First, in exploring certitude generally, and religious certitude in particular, it is important to operationalize our definitions carefully. Second, psychological constructs may be more deeply understood by researching the characteristics of who is, and is not, likely to embody them. Third, a tendency toward socioreligiously traditional certitude generally is tied to a wide range of other belief structures (e.g., regarding other cultures as well as the natural world). Fourth, within-group-differences may be greater than between-group differences when dividing people by religious/nonreligious identification, which suggests the need to eschew surface level analyses of religious and nonreligious people both in scholarly and lay discourse. Fifth, the relative degree of religious or nonreligious certitude an individual expresses may largely be determined by a range of formative variables, but in a complex, interacting, and nonlinear manner. On the basis of such findings, and in light of the original goals of this chapter, we suggest that an agnostic stance along the "Continuum of Belief" may represent the most intellectually defensible framework regarding matters over which scientifically definitive conclusions—those that are empirically, independently, and

reliably verifiable—seem untenable, while offering an aspirational framework that mitigates against shrill diatribes and destructive behaviors toward individuals and groups who "believe" differently.

Finally, in rounding out our discussion, we attempted to translate this perspective into applied form by describing educational and psychological interventions that encourage critical and reflective thinking about religious or nonreligious systems of thought, with a specific focus on cross-conviction dialogues, which may be divided into three overlapping and mutually reinforcing levels: preliminary, practical, and critical. By providing descriptive information and examples of each of these types of cross-conviction dialogues, it is our hope that this chapter may help advance the overarching goal of facilitating greater openness, reflection, and understanding among the adherents of various belief systems, whether they be religious or nonreligious.

In the final analysis, what is recommended most is the cultivation of a culture of humble curiosity and respectful exploration in which individuals may interact with those who hold a different religious or nonreligious perspective in an honest, authentic, inquiring, and intellectually responsible manner. Perhaps, if we strive to nurture psyches that are less inclined toward certitude, human beings will be freer to exercise religious faith or nonreligious faith on the basis of a richly earned awareness of why one does or does not believe as one does. By bravely accepting that definitive claims seem untenable—particularly regarding matters that appear to transcend the bounds of empirical reasoning—we may best be prepared for open engagement with self, others, and the larger world. Hopefully, such a caring, candid, and committed stance may help us to navigate more authentically the mysteries that are integral to our lived experience together.

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