

Beyond Belief, Cults, Healers, Mystics and Gurus— Why We Believe by Arthur Janov, a Book Review

By Marc-André Cotton

Abstract: *In this book published a year before his death, Arthur Janov examines the unconscious motivations that drive us to follow mystics, healers and gurus—and more globally, the impulses that lead us to believe. He discusses all of this by drawing on numerous patient testimonies, MacLean's triune brain model and his own research into primal health. This review was presented to the IPhA's Faith & Justice working group, on October 19, 2024.*

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Arthur Janov, who died in 2017, was a charismatic and controversial therapist who introduced Primal Therapy in the 1960s. For him, the non-fulfilment of fundamental needs in childhood and infancy generates suffering so intense that it activates the repression mechanisms at the root of neuroses. Through primal therapy, patients are gradually brought to feel these repressed sufferings and to access their childhood needs, thus reversing the neurotic process. In many ways, this approach reflected the prevailing attitudes and trends of the time. In the context of post-war uncertainty and the emergence of the hippie counterculture, the pursuit of happiness and the advent of the human potential movement offered the prospect of personal fulfilment and enlightenment. His first book, *The Primal Scream*, published in 1970, became a widely recognized and influential element of the cultural landscape as several celebrities, including pop singer John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono, publicly endorsed Primal Therapy.

Dr. Janov was an impressive writer and thinker but was criticized by some for his attempts to convert followers. From the outset, psychologists challenged the veracity of his assertions, citing the lack of empirical evidence to support the existence of primal pain and the absence of independent studies demonstrating the efficacy of his therapy. But the author of *The Primal Scream* remained undaunted and continued to write passionately about the power of Primal Therapy in addressing not only mental and physical issues but also societal problems. At its peak, the Primal Institute received 100 calls a day from potential patients and had branches in New York and Paris. While Primal Therapy has not rendered other forms of psychotherapy obsolete, it has retained its viability as a treatment option for patients well beyond the turn of the millennium.

Beyond Belief, the Book

In his last book *Beyond Belief*, published in 2016, Dr. Janov examines the unconscious motivations that drive us to follow mystics, healers and gurus—and more globally, the impulses that lead us to *believe*. He discusses all of this with numerous patient testimonies, while addressing the functioning of brain structure and the latest neurobiological research. Janov's liberal use of case studies of people who have been dramatically affected by their involvement in cults offers an extraordinary perspective on how belief systems can take hold and shape one's experience. His insight into cult leaders also shows how such people have been rejected and

unloved as children, suggesting that symbolic fulfillments of early needs drive both followers and leaders in a shared psychosis. Janov (2016) writes:

“The needy follower feeds on the leader, whose unfulfilled need is probably even more intense than that of the lowliest member of his flock. It is not an accident that many of the tyrants and demagogues of this world are typically products of broken, distorted childhoods, as are their most devoted followers.” (p. 291)

Belief can manifest itself in the ugliest ways, from the rise of Adolf Hitler to the mass suicide at Jonestown in 1979 or the murder of innocent civilians by Islamist jihadists, but also in the form of mainstream belief systems that keep us comfortable. One of the most compelling aspects of *Beyond Belief* is the author’s exploration of the neurological apparatus that help us cope with early feelings of helplessness through ideas and ideation. Janov (2016) explains:

“The thinking mind dealing with pain never rests. It sets in while we are trying to fall asleep and revs up the prefrontal cortex, the same cortex that gets into belief systems during the day, generating rumination and compulsive thoughts. Here the lower-level imprints generate higher level activity. It is another way we see how the deeply imprinted pain galvanizes the thinking brain.” (p. 80)

Considering several research studies, including his own, Janov emphasizes the importance of examining the physiological processes involved in pain management, particularly the cortical capacity to substitute ideation for feeling. For example, the belief in submission to a higher authority may facilitate the production of the painkillers necessary to achieve a state of calm. This dynamic begins at birth or even before, and gains strength as life progresses when the child is forced to submit to the whims of her parents. In later life, it can develop into faith in a religion that demands obedience and loyalty, or—in more subtle forms—into allegiance to a moral authority in whom one places an overwhelming trust.

In a pioneering study, Price and Gardner highlight that the roots of submission are already present at the deepest level of the brain—the *brainstem*—according to MacLean’s Triune Brain Model (Price and Gardner, 2016). The basic tendency of almost all animal forms to submit to a higher authority helps to prevent further aggression and encourages a kind of equilibrium within the group, where everyone knows their role. The authors challenge the assertion of some contemporary religious groups that submission to their respective deities mitigates depression and anxiety, thereby promoting peace and joy. They cite the examples of two ancient heroes who initially refuses to submit to their gods but subsequently experienced symptom relief once they did. This evidence suggests that voluntary submission to a supernatural entity can indeed result in the alleviation of a depressed mood.

Janov's view is that those experiencing depression do not surrender to a deity, but rather to their own destiny or fate as they cease to resist. At birth, the neonate is stuck in the parasympathetic stage, where further struggle is life-endangering. This imprint is tantamount to reptilian surrender and the basis of later severe depression. Also referring to MacLean’s Triune Brain Model, he points out that current events can trigger off the primordial feeling through a process of resonance, plunging the depressed into further feelings of hopelessness and depression. He explains (Janov, 2016):

“The trouble is that the basic mechanism of neurosis itself leads us to believe that we can think our way out of neurosis. So we produce more and better thoughts which help reroute the pain. And when we falter—when we begin to be nagged by the undefined tormentors within—we resort to alcohol, drugs, a bodybuilding kick, the latest magical diet, a new wilderness adventure, a ‘special friend’ who ‘channels’ cosmic information and convinces one (for now, at least) to love oneself and have hope. (p. 107)

The Physiology of Belief

Janov likens primal pain to geological fault lines that are embedded in our subconscious from an early age. To counter and alleviate this pain, we are inclined to grasp at ideas that may not be entirely relevant or realistic. What matters is how these can help us to release, channel and absorb the energy of the pain. He suggests (Janov, 2016):

“Hope functions as a painkiller; to be more specific, the early imprinted hopelessness (of getting love) elicits the production of its opposite—hope—through the secretion of repressive chemicals such as serotonin and endorphins.” (p. 73)

When a newborn baby is left alone for an extended period in an incubator or is not breastfed adequately during the first months of life, and more generally when her basic needs are not met by a loving and attentive caregiver, the resulting aloneness can have a significant and potentially life-threatening impact on the infant’s physiology. The intensity of this massive electrical input to the vulnerable brain is so significant that the body’s natural defenses are triggered to suppress the pain. Janov (2016) exemplifies:

“Someone criticizes your city or country, and your defenses rise as if you are being personally attacked, because civic pride or patriotism serves to defend you against a feeling of not belonging. Instead of feeling alone, you feel like an integral member of a group. It is for that reason that some people join cults.” (p. 81)

Indeed, Janov maintains that children who are deprived of care and attention often become adults who are prone to emotional distress. It is essential that a child feels loved and safe to be able to thrive. This can be achieved through physical touch, such as caressing and soothing, which help to establish a sense of security. When she expresses feelings, she needs parents able to empathize with those feelings. If these essential needs are not met, she is likely to develop a personality that will lead her to embrace a belief later in her life. An individual with such a high need for approval may invest in a deity who promises full consciousness, nurturing and protection to fulfil unmet needs over several years. One key biochemical reason for this is that love increases the secretion of oxytocin and serotonin—two endorphins that suppress pain and maintain comfort. Put simply, a lack of love correlates with a lack of these biochemicals, a lack of pain relief, and ultimately, the formation of beliefs to compensate for the denial of early needs. Janov (2016) continues:

“One way that defensive belief systems come into being, even fairly early in a child’s life, is when that child is taught not to express feelings, not to speak thoughts that are unacceptable, not to express resentment, jealousy, or other negative thoughts, not to speak badly of others, and never to say what is in her heart. Once installed, the censoring process continues automatically, the child comes later on to substitute ideas for what he or she really feels. Having unreal ideas as an adult is just a logical extension of what happened in early childhood.” (p. 116)

How Feelings Transpose into Ideas

Originally, feelings follow evolution and move from brainstem early memories of survival toward prefrontal cortical connection and integration. As the prefrontal cortex comes into play, the lower feeling areas of the limbic system, comprising the amygdala and hippocampus, decrease in activity. These sensory, emotional and thinking brains—that Janov respectively coins as first, second and third level of consciousness—are specific developmental stages with specific timelines of maturation acting as enhancement to each other and allowing increased awareness of both internal and external environments. But when trauma is imprinted

very early in life, it sets a deviation of key structures in the brain. A system of gating is being set up between the brainstem and the limbic system—that is the first and second levels—as well as, on the third level of consciousness, between the right and the left hemisphere of the neocortex, which broadly encompass visualization of feelings and ideation respectively. Janov (2016) goes on:

“When the imprint is of a certain force or magnitude, it can lead to the activation of the gating system and consequent shutdown of feeling. *Suppression* of feeling is the most common expression used for this situation. This mechanism not only responds to specific traumatic events, but responds to accumulated pain (lack of love) over time.” (p. 146)

Although this mechanism shuts off imprinted pain that cannot be resolved, the feeling is only locked away and never disappears. As gates have limited capacities, feelings seep into higher levels to create attitudes and beliefs. We may be anxious or have panic attacks, that is pain and terror rising unabated to the third level of consciousness where we have no idea of their origin. As adults, we have mature brains that allow us to have feelings and thoughts, and we use these tools to cope with our world. But the thinking brain cannot resolve the overload of pain that has been created when only the brainstem and its sensory language was the primary functioning nervous system. According to Janov, the inability to understand the pain from this level, to think it through clearly and to resolve it, is what drives us mad. And the same is true of the pain overload that occurs during the second critical stage of development.

Traumatic events that occur during the first two stages of brain development have their own language. They can be locked away from the thinking brain or third level of consciousness. The memories can be so well hidden under layers of repression that the beliefs seem to have a life of their own, with no connection to anything else. This is the process by which the gating of pain occurs and the way in which feelings are diverted and transformed into beliefs. Janov (2016) insists:

“Let me state that again: The basis for later ideation can lie in pre-ideation, preverbal experience. Early experience becomes intertwined with later experience in childhood, which finally finds its voice decades later. And indeed, what I have found is those fervent believers most often have catastrophic very early lives; a mother who was sick right after birth and could not see her baby for weeks, that kind of thing.” (p. 150)

The Left and Right Brain

Another groundbreaking study reported by Wagner *et al.* found that faith in a placebo is related to decreased activity in pain-responsive areas of the brain (Wagner, 2004). Simultaneously, placebo analgesia increases prefrontal activity in anticipation of painful shock suggesting that expectation of relief mediates the experience of pain by triggering opioid release in the midbrain. In other words, *thoughts* are now in charge of the secretions of painkillers and the same can be true with painful realities from childhood. Janov (2016) suggests that those who adopt neurotic belief systems or join cults self-inject tranquilizers to suppress this inner reality, as ideas literally change biology. He warns at the same time:

“But never believe that the childhood pain isn’t churning away below. The ‘peace’ we find in the mantra is spurious. We’ve got bleeding gums and open wounds from childhood, but we feel nothing. That’s what ideas can do for us. Now we begin to see how people like Hitler come into power. Their words are literally tranquilizers to which followers become addicted.” (p. 154)

Indeed, the truth about the childhood experience of pain can be agonizing and the neocortex is there to block it. But some people feel so miserable that eventually their belief system does not cover the misery—engaging cult-like groups to contemplate death as a means of avoiding any more pain. In general, the more bizarre the idea, the deeper in the brain it originates, and in the deep pain lies the terror of death to be embraced. In this case, the right frontal cortex is fully involved in dealing with the pain and the left hemisphere can't help, Janov explains.

But how do the two sides of the brain function and interact? In very simplified terms, the right side is the emotional and creative hemisphere, while the left side is more verbal, analytical and organized. The right brain also has deep connections with the feeling center of the limbic system and develops earlier—from the last three months of pregnancy to the end of the second year of social life. Between the two hemispheres lies the *corpus callosum*, a neurological cable that transmits over 80 per cent of all emotions emanating from the right frontal cortex. When this connection is impaired by early trauma, messages take circuitous routes resulting in misinformation, delusions and bizarre ideas.

In the early period of life, a loving mother literally shapes her child's brain by holding the infant, caressing her, looking at her with warm eyes and paying attention to her moods, as Allan Schore points out in a compendium of research on the effects of a secure attachment on the development of the right brain and limbic system (Schore, 2001). According to Schore, the mother helps to establish the set-points for various hormones in the baby and, conversely, a lack of love leads to higher levels of cortisol secretion and stress. Janov (2016) adds:

“There is a strong correlation between love and lack of inner stress, and that applies for a lifetime. And when there is love there is an optimum amount of dopamine secreted. This chemical is often known as the reward one. It is also the one that is very low in the drug addict.” (p. 177)

A Split in Consciousness

At this point, Janov sets out to examine various forms of sectarian organizations to identify common dynamics: a charismatic leader, promises for love and paradise for his followers, a mission to be fulfilled—and a paranoia that sets in when the mission fails. Although cults come in many guises, the dynamics never change and can be extended to politics when a government, which is run by an arrogant elite, claims to know what is best for everyone. The military is also an organization that tells you what to wear, how to behave, when to go out for a leave and so on. It attracts obedient followers in the same way that cults do, and always focuses on the enemy outside, not the suffering soldiers inside.

For example, just as hopelessness and despair are at the heart of depression, being *born again* is a belief that comes to the thinking mind when life is at its worst. To keep away the agony of early childhood pain, we invent the idea that God will save us if we obey, while really obeying our feelings. This is a symbol of the real birth trauma that lies behind many cases of alcoholism and drug addiction. During Primal Therapy, the levels of cortisol and stress hormones drop significantly after a real release of birth trauma, suggesting that the initial pain of a newborn baby stuck in her mother's birth canal and deprived of oxygen is indeed unbearable. It can fuel the hope of being reborn decades later, to release the trauma from the system. Janov (2016) explains:

“We systematically measure the vital signs of each patient before and after a session. The depressives usually come in with very low blood pressure, heart rate and body temperature: this is accompanied by commensurate ideas. [...] All of the low readings

normalize after the session. And the ideas change to a less depressive tone. This does not happen with pure crying or screaming without context.” (p. 189)

According to Janov, an episode of psychosis could also be defined as too much access to imprinted pain as the gating system breaks down and the person is flooded by the past. It is not repressed as in the lesser pains of neurosis. The belief in *channeling*, for example, involves a neurological reality in which preverbal trauma literally floods into the neocortex from below, fueling all sorts of symbolic ideation. In this case, the midline thalamus—which normally functions as a relay station filled with opiate receptors—is overwhelmed and cannot stop the flow of energy as ideas become exuberant and obsessional. Thinking that one has lived past lives can reflect an inability to relive one’s life in the past, to skip over that painful reality and land a few centuries earlier. These individuals slide from their own experience of pain into an idea that defends against it. But this reality can never be erased, even though we have a biological system designed to reduce consciousness so that we can get on with our daily lives.

Janov then goes on to explore why the devoutly religious are more likely to embrace right-wing politics and anti-human attitudes. If we are not guided by feelings, we are more susceptible to being seduced by any belief system that renounces personal needs and has no frame of reference other than that of authority:

“One’s life becomes ritual, catechism and obedience. It is how the military works—blind obedience aims to get soldiers used to marching and turning on orders so that obedience is stamped in. There is no questioning, no independent ideas, just wanting to be ‘good’. [...] It is what the true believer, the military and the religious have in common: Rules and laws and unquestioning loyalty.” (Janov, 2016, pp. 197-198)

Beliefs Borrowed from the East

We have seen that the neocortex produces the means by which we can avoid reality through symbols, projections, denial, repression, fabrication of lies or alternative facts. Today, the proliferation of new belief systems and the resurgence of religious fundamentalism reflect the anxieties generated by the confusing evolution of our societies, which are faced with unprecedented dangers. This transformation began in the 1960s when traditional values such as the family, mainstream religion and political institutions no longer seemed valid to many young people. Unsusceptible to the temptations of the American Dream that had gripped their parents, some formed a subculture of people who turned their attention from an intransigent world to their inner reality about which knowledge was scarce if not totally non-existent.

The urgent need for new beliefs that would prove to be defensive against such anxieties included technological approaches such as LSD and other vehicles drawn from Eastern mystical traditions, while popular music added a crucial flavor to this magic, re-shaping the inner landscape of millions of people. Myriads of supernaturalisms were incorporated into a common language of auras, chakras, pranas, and universal life energy. But instead of integrating consciousness by making the arduous descent down through the lower levels where traumas reside, the desperate seekers of truth swallowed fancy theologies borrowed from the East. Janov (2016) observes:

“With unfortunate facility, they proclaim their aim to fuse atman, the ultimate unity of the psyche, with Brahman, the divine crystallization of positive energy. In fact, resorting to Eastern religious abstractions in order to explain our neurosis is part of what I call the retreat from reason, part of our defensive response to high-valence pain.” (p. 204)

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON)—known to the public as the Hare Krishnas—provides a vivid illustration of this unconscious process, Janov continues. Within this religious group, the rules to be remembered seemed to be infinite, limited only by the imagination of the leaders and never questioned by the followers. On a neurological level, they served the purpose of repression, because one was entangled in the left-brain fabrication of rationales to contain feelings. A disciple named Joan testifies:

“I was unhappy about the lack of sleep and the lack of food. Years later, I found out that that’s part of the brainwashing technique all cults use. [...] They had other rules, like no outside books, no television, no outside music. You’re only exposed to paintings of Krishna and Krishna’s incarnations in the temple room. No outside art. No outside anything. [...] Food is offered to Krishna, Radha and Krishna through a ceremonial service on a daily basis.” (Janov, 2016, pp. 219-220)

Incidentally, this disciple came from a very abusive household as her father, a WWII veteran with PTSD, routinely threatened to kill his children and later blamed them for their mother’s death. Joan was raped by her and witnessed domestic violence. As a young teenager, she met some anarchists in their twenties who offered her the only kindness she had experienced from adults. Eventually, she joined the Flower Child movement and came across Hare Krishnas with whom she formed a surrogate family. The only message she had internalized from her father was that he hated her and wanted to see her dead—the end of hope for a small child. Joan was now a prisoner of need and pain, and her acting out within the ISKON movement amounted to a desperate search.

In a recording in the People’s Temple archives of Jim Jones talking about his youth, the cult leader and self-styled messiah also recalled a very abusive childhood. Like Joan, his father was a traumatized war veteran and possible KKK member who tried to kill his son and regarded him as the scum of the neighborhood. A deeply alienated child, Jones was prepared to kill to cope with his fear of abandonment. Decades later, believing that his empire was collapsing, and his followers were about to leave, he led a pre-emptive mass suicide, choosing death over pain for his flock and himself. Janov (2016) concludes:

“Both Joan and Jones could talk about their childhood deprivation. Their stories reflect how similar types of childhood experiences often create leaders. They also convey the way our lives gain momentum away from reality and toward unreality. [...] We are prisoners of our childhood, reacting to realities that no longer exist [...]. We can forever believe in karma, engage in talking therapies, talk about our past traumas, and recruit other deprived souls into our madness, without ever going back down through the levels of consciousness and facing the imprint squarely.” (p. 226)

Merchants of Hope

In *Beyond Belief*, Janov also shines an innovative spotlight on contemporary televangelists, spiritual counsellors, psychic healers and other business gurus who are currently selling like hot cakes as the market for hope diversifies. From his headquarters in California, cable TV evangelist and born-again Christian Benny Hinn preaches the Bible in a straightforward way, cajoling, screaming, shedding tears at strategic moments in front of a gazing audience: “Don’t forget, Jesus loves you.” In her bestseller *The Secret*, Australian television writer and producer Rhonda Byrne claims that, according to the law of attraction, your dreams can come true if you think hard enough. The Canadian prophet Rael formed a religious group pretending that scientist from another planet created life on earth and were soon to return to their homebase to help perform cloning on humans with the followers donating their

eggs. New Age wise-women Shirley MacLaine or former cable TV industry executive J.Z. Knight even use *channeling* to attract a hopeful audience as the former contacted a disembodied ancient spirit, and the latter a thirty-five-thousand-year-old warrior who preempted her body to promote a message of love and hope including knowledge of an extraterrestrial presence on our planet. On this seemingly endless list of ideas proffered by charismatic personalities with no semblance of reality, Janov (2016) concludes:

“Traumatized individuals now have a wide range of choices in the market of hope. If you no longer want to use booze or drugs to kill your pain, just follow one of the Pied Pipers out there. These merchants of hope turn up at the service of repression. Rather than heal us, they divert us from our sickness, transport us to worlds far from our real feelings. Their music will carry you far away from your pain.” (p. 266)

A crucial reading and a unique contribution to understanding our most intimate convictions and pathos, *Beyond Belief* casts an eerie light on the deceptive manipulations we impose on ourselves to keep our suffering at bay. Once the truth of a bad childhood is no longer denied, we do not need to search for meaning in life, because these repressed feelings are recovered and acknowledged. And with them comes the ability to feel joy and love.

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Author’s Bio:

Marc-André Cotton, MA, the President of the International Psychohistorical Association, and an International Member of the Psychohistory Forum, is a teacher and counselor, independent scholar, and director of the French website *Regard conscient* (regardconscient.net), which is dedicated to exploring the unconscious motivations of human behavior. He authored the French psychohistorical book *Au Nom du père – Les années Bush et l’héritage de la violence éducative* (*In the name of the father – The Bush years and the legacy of violence in education*), published in 2014 by L’Instant présent (Paris).

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