

Is PCT a religion?

A post to CSGnet by Mary A. Powers, September 1994

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The short answer is no, but it might be worth expanding on further.

It's not a new question—it usually comes up when someone (like Rick [Marken], for example) shows that he is passionately engaged with PCT.

Having one's emotions involved in a systems concept, whatever it is, usually provokes this question, unless of course it is a religion, in which case it is sort of obvious.

But laying the blanket term “religion” on any systems concept is, I think, confusing a general concept with a particular manifestation of it.

I think systems concepts are to be characterized by the apparent fact that challenges to them arouse intense emotions, and any change is powerfully resisted.

The conventional view of a scientist is based on an assumption (a wrong one, I think) that the logic level is the highest brain function, and that therefore doing science is a very cool enterprise.

People who attend scientific meetings of any kind—linguistics, geology, astronomy, physical anthropology (to name a few in which the arguments are notably intense)—can tell you this is hardly the case. Passions run extremely high. There is far more at stake than comparing different conclusions from the same data and coming to polite arrangements to agree or disagree.

And what is all the ruckus about? A belief, a faith, in a systems concept (such as PCT). There's nothing wrong with that; it's the source of motivation to continue exploring it (and endure considerable personal setbacks and sacrifices to do so).

Just like a religion, you might say. Yes, they are at the same mental level. But science has different rules (or should) from religion. Religion says “don't ask, believe,” and values the strength of that faith against anything that might contradict it. Science, presumably, says “challenge it, test it, try to find something wrong with it, try to come up with something better.”

These days we are swamped with pop science books (mostly by physicists—perhaps because they lost their big toys like the Supercollider and want them back?) that purport to answer religious questions about the beginning and the end and the reason for everything. Mary Midgley is a good antidote for that. But these people aren't doing science (gathering data, running experiments, testing hypotheses) when they write these books; they are expressing their beliefs.

PCT is as fundamental in the lives of some people as religion is. It makes emotional as well as intellectual sense for some people in that it seems to explain human nature in a satisfying way, be a source and rationale for a system of ethics, and lots of other high-level stuff. As such, it is not a religion, although it shares those functions with religions. It isn't a science either, at that level, but it generates science, and it may be the path to learning more about ourselves than a lot of people care to imagine (because people resist knowledge that they fear will enable somebody to control them).

In his book, *Descartes' Error*, Damasio talks about people with brain damage at the highest level, who seem to have lost, through accident or disease, the ability to have feelings about beliefs. One patient could talk about ethics, for example, knowing right from wrong, but it was no longer important to him—there was no value attached. Importance, value, believing—these are words we use to talk about the highest level, and they all carry an implication of the deep physical involvement we call emotion. Systems concepts matter.

But that doesn't make them all religions.

I want to add that I know that here I am indulging in HPCT theories that are a long, long way from experimental proof or disproof. I think, however, that they are consistent with the general model.