

PATTERNS OF BELIEF AND PATTERNED THOUGHT:  
RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND  
COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING

*A Senior Honors Thesis*

By

DANIEL CONOR SEYLE

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs  
& Academic Scholarships  
Texas A&M University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE  
RESEARCH FELLOWS

April 2000

Group: Psychology 2

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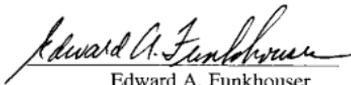
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Approved as to style and content by



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## ABSTRACT

Patterns of Belief and Patterned Thought:

Relationships Between Religious Fundamentalism and Cognitive Restructuring. (April  
2000)

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Previous research on religious fundamentalism has focused on correlating fundamentalism with a number of personality variables. Religious fundamentalism has been associated with low religious quest, high right-wing authoritarianism, prejudice, and authoritarian styles of child raising. Research on cognitive variables associated with religious fundamentalism has shown that it is associated with reduced cognitive complexity and lower complexity of thinking in problem solving. The overall view which has developed is one of religious fundamentalism as a very *rigid structure* of belief which emphasizes traditional interpretations and ways of viewing the world. It was the hypothesis of this study that this structure of belief would interfere in the ability to solve cognitive restructuring or insight problems, as these problems require flexibility in mental representation in order to be solved. Forty-four subjects were recruited from the Psychology 107 Subject Pool and given the Altemeyer-Hunsberger religious

fundamentalism scale and 10 cognitive restructuring problems. Analysis of the results using a Pearson's R show no significant results ( $r=.38$ ). However, when graphed the data show interesting patterns of uniformly high scores in cognitive restructuring in those who scored low in religious fundamentalism, and very high variation in restructuring scores in those who scored high in religious fundamentalism. Possible reasons for this are addressed, and directions for future research are suggested.

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## INTRODUCTION

When anthropologists and psychologists first began to look at religious behavior in a scientific manner, the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism attracted attention. As anyone reading the newspaper can attest to, religious fundamentalism is something which can drive people to behaviors that are sometimes monstrous, sometimes beatific, and often inexplicable. As scientists began to examine this phenomenon, the immediate question raised was: is religious fundamentalism simply an extreme of religiosity? That is, is religious fundamentalism an emergent property of simply believing very strongly in a religion, or is there something qualitatively different about fundamentalism that distinguishes it from simply an extreme of belief.

Interestingly enough, both anthropologists (e.g. Klass 1995) and psychologists (e.g. Altemeyer & Hunsberger 1992) examining this question have come to the conclusion that there is something significant about religious fundamentalism which distinguishes it from a simple extreme of belief (although religious fundamentalism does presuppose extreme religiosity). Both fields have come to similar definitions of religious fundamentalism, lending strong support to the conclusion that it is something distinguishable from other characteristics of religiosity such as strength of belief or even religious orthodoxy (Kirkpatrick 1993). The psychological definition of religious fundamentalism, as stated by Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992) is:

[Religious fundamentalism is] a structure of belief in which the devout believe that there is one set of religious practices handed down by a higher power in one set of religious teachings which contain the entirety of correct religious

This thesis follows the style and format of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association.

knowledge, that this truth must be followed according to past traditions, and that the followers of this teaching have a special relationship with that higher power.

This definition is applicable cross-culturally. The phenomenon of religious fundamentalism is not specific to any one religion, and in fact has been shown to have similar characteristics across religions (Hunsberger 1996). Because, as the definition states, religious fundamentalism is primarily a structure of belief with associated specific beliefs rather than a property inherent in any one set of religious beliefs, it can arise in any religion. That is, it is not so much what the devout believe that characterizes religious fundamentalism as the inflexible manner in which they believe it.

Researchers have looked at many of the personality variables associated with religious fundamentalism. One of the most robust findings has been the correlation between religious fundamentalism and prejudice (e.g. Kirkpatrick 1993, Hunsberger 1995). While there is a link between fundamentalism and racial prejudice, the strongest findings have been in the strong association of religious fundamentalism and antihomosexual prejudice (Maret 1984, Jackson & Esses 1997). Although this issue is confounded by the fact that many religions place a moral ban against homosexuality, the prejudice felt by people high in religious fundamentalism has been shown to be in excess of expected moral outrage (Fulton, Gorsuch, & Maynard 1999).

Religious fundamentalism has also been closely associated with high right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer & Hunsberger 1992, Wylie & Forest 1992), a style of political belief which is similar to religious fundamentalism in its inflexibility and dismissal of alternative points of view. The association of fundamentalism and right

wing authoritarianism has also been shown to be correlated with authoritarian styles of child rearing (Danso, Hunsberger, & Pratt 1997).

The overall picture which is drawn of individuals high in religious fundamentalism is one of very patterned individuals who have a reduced interest in viewpoints differing from their own. When speaking of religious matters, this is not especially significant; a part of fundamentalist belief is the belief that their religion is the whole truth, and that all other religious information is either incorrect or unnecessary. What is significant is that this same pattern of inflexibility is shown in other aspects: the prejudice against homosexuality goes beyond simple disapproval on moral grounds and into a rejection of something which the fundamentalist person sees as inherently *different*. In fact, an experiment which examined how two groups of people in the same congregation identified as high or low in religious fundamentalism compared on the NEO-Five Factor Personality Inventory showed similar scores across most factors but a large difference in the dimension of openness to new experiences. People high in religious fundamentalism were much less open to new experiences and novel ideas, not just in a religious context but in general (Streyffeler & McNally 1998).

This is fairly significant, as it shows that religious fundamentalism is not just an independent dimension of personality, but one which is correlated with other personality variables. The next question which was raised was if religious fundamentalism could be correlated with other less dispositional and more cognitive variables. Research on religious doubt suggested that people high in religious fundamentalism may be less likely to think in complex ways about religious matters and to engage in less critical

thinking (Hunsberger et. al 1996). Further experiments examining the relationship between religious fundamentalism and cognitive complexity showed that in fact high religious fundamentalism was a reliable predictor of low cognitive complexity (Edgington & Hutchinson 1990). This fits with the earlier picture of people high in religious fundamentalism as it is consistent with the idea that a highly religiously fundamental individual is less likely to look for novel interpretations or complex solutions to problems. A finding which runs slightly contrary to this is Pancer et. al's (1995) study which showed that religious orthodoxy was not strongly associated with lowered complexity of thinking except with regard to religious issues. However, this study only looked at religious orthodoxy, a variable of religiosity associated with but not identical to religious fundamentalism.

These characteristics (low openness to novel ideas and interpretations and a preference for simplicity of thought in problem solving) should indicate that people high in religious fundamentalism perform poorly on tasks which require the generation of novel ideas or tasks in which the simple interpretation of the problem will result in no solution. One set of tasks which fit this definition are restructuring or insight problems.

Restructuring problems are so named because the solution depends on the ability to reconceptualize the problem, drawing the solution not from a logical process from A to B to C, but from a change in the problem space itself (Dominowski 1995). That is, they are designed so that when read, they draw upon implicit (and incorrect) interpretations of word meaning to create a representation of the problem in it cannot be solved. In order to solve them, it is necessary to first of all identify the initial

representation as unworkable, recognize the implicit assumptions that were made, discard those assumptions, and create new interpretations which allow for a new representation in which the answer is easily found. For example, a standard restructuring task (Dominowski 1995) is: "Calendars made in England do not show Lincoln's Birthday. Do they show the Fourth of July?" The initial interpretation generated when this question is read often yields the incorrect answer "no." To solve this problem correctly, it is necessary to identify the misinterpretation of "Fourth of July" as not only an American holiday but a calendar date as well. The reliance of high religious fundamentalism individuals on traditional interpretations and simple problem solving techniques would seem to make this kind of task very difficult, as the identification and discarding of implicit assumptions which is necessary to solve the problem require processes not usually associated with high religious fundamentalism. In fact, Smith, Ward, and Schumacher (1993) found that an inability to overcome deeply entrenched ideas about the shape of animals (something which should be very evident in high religious fundamentalism individuals) had a strong constraining effect on open-ended creative tasks.

It is therefore the hypothesis of this study that people high in religious fundamentalism will be less likely to be able to perform tasks requiring cognitive restructuring, as they will be less able to identify and discard implicit assumptions, and as a result, high scores on a religious fundamentalism scale will be inversely correlated with performance on cognitive restructuring tasks.

## METHODS

### Participants

Participants (N=44) were recruited from the Texas A&M Psychology 107 Subject Pool. Participants were male and female undergraduates enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course who received course credit for participating. They reflected the ethnic makeup of Texas A&M (primarily Caucasian with several African American participants).

### Materials and procedure

All participants were given the Altemeyer-Hunsberger Religious Fundamentalism Scale, an accepted measure of religious fundamentalism (Altemeyer & Hunsberger 1992). This is a Likert style self-report questionnaire composed of 20 statements scored in agreement from 1 (completely disagree) to 8 (completely agree), giving a total composite score for religious fundamentalism ranging from 20 to 160. Ten items are scored in reverse to avoid bias from response sets. The religious fundamentalism scale was embedded in a locus-of-control scale in order to partially disguise the focus of the experiment and help keep the responses unbiased (see Appendix 1).

Participants were also given 10 cognitive restructuring tasks, including 8 verbal and 2 nonverbal tasks (see Appendix 2). Responses were identified as either exhibiting or not exhibiting restructuring, giving a score for restructuring ranging from 0 to 10.

The order of presentation of the RFS and restructuring tasks was counterbalanced, with 20 participants receiving the RFS first, and 24 receiving the restructuring tasks first.

## RESULTS

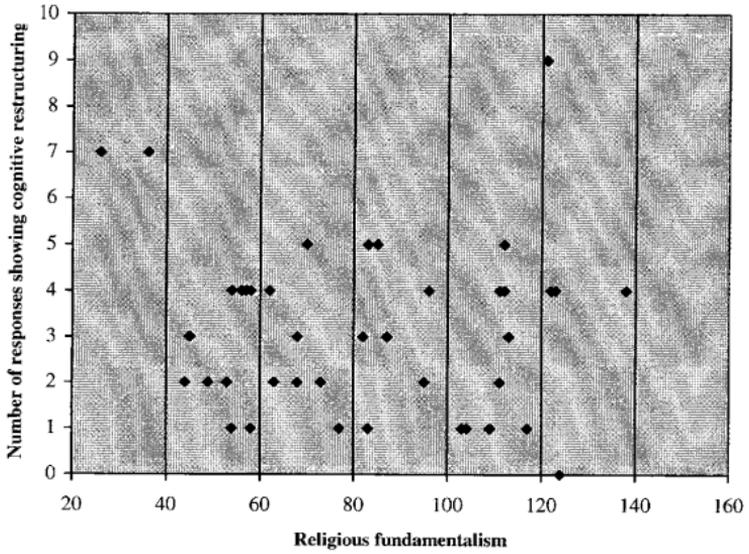
A Pearson's R was generated to calculate the correlation between the scores for religious fundamentalism and restructuring. No significant correlation was found ( $R = -.046$ ,  $r = .38$ ). There was no strong linear relationship found between religious fundamentalism and restructuring ability.

There is a range limitation in that there were no individuals in the sample who scored at the extreme highs of religious fundamentalism. The highest score on the religious fundamentalism scale was 141, which, while high, is not comparable in degree of response to the lowest score of 26.

When the data are graphed in a dispersion pattern some patterns become visible (see Table 1). The majority of the responses fall in the middle of both religious fundamentalism and restructuring ability, accounting for the null result. However, there is very low variability in restructuring scores for those participants responding at the lowest levels of religious fundamentalism. Restructuring scores for low religious fundamentalism individuals were uniformly high. The opposite was found at the highest levels of religious fundamentalism, with a large degree of variability in restructuring found. Both the highest and the lowest scores for restructuring were found in the highest responses for religious fundamentalism.

TABLE 1

## Dispersion Pattern



## DISCUSSION

The results of this study are difficult to apply directly to the hypothesis of the study, as the study was primarily interested in individuals very high in religious fundamentalism, and there were none in the sample. However, with the results that were found, the hypothesis was not supported. Some individuals high in religious fundamentalism were also very high in restructuring ability. These findings support those of Pancer et. al.'s (1995) study.

It is a possibility that the scales used did not accurately measure either religious fundamentalism or cognitive restructuring, but unlikely, as the Altemeyer-Hunsberger Scale is a generally accepted measure of religious fundamentalism (Hunsberger 1996) and the restructuring tasks were drawn from past studies of restructuring (e.g. Weisberg 1995).

The patterns which are visible at the extreme ends of the dispersion pattern raise interesting questions, although no conclusions may be drawn from them due to the small amount of data involved. Although the study did not hypothesize anything about persons low in religious fundamentalism, the uniformly high restructuring scores among very low scorers on the religious fundamentalism scale are interesting. They are especially interesting because the scores on the scale are close to the lowest scores possible (the lowest scores were 26 and 36, with the lowest possible being 20). In order to reach this score, the participants must consistently answer that they "completely disagree" with the fundamentalist response. This is, in effect, a complete rejection of the fundamentalist view and not just disagreement with particular ideas. These findings may

suggest that many people very high in restructuring ability and therefore mental flexibility consciously reject the rigidity of the fundamentalist view, or that high restructuring ability is one of a set of personality variables incompatible with fundamentalism. This also supports Hunsberger et. al.'s (1996) finding that individuals low in religious fundamentalism tend to think in more complex ways. However, it is necessary to note that the highest restructuring score found in the sample fell into the area of high fundamentalism, suggesting that restructuring ability by itself is not incompatible with fundamentalism and implying other factors must be a part of the low fundamentalism scores for the other participants high in restructuring.

The very high variability shown at the opposite end of the scale is also interesting. While the data do not support the hypothesis, the fact that both the lowest (the only 0) and the highest (the only 9) restructuring scores are associated with high religious fundamentalism may be significant. Whereas not too much can be read into what is really only a few data points, it is possible that this high range may reflect differences within religious fundamentalism. One possible explanation is that this could reflect a difference between individuals raised in a highly fundamental environment who had this pattern of thought ingrained from an early age and individuals who came to a fundamentalist belief as a conscious decision.

Future studies in this area should work to address the questions raised by the extremes of the current data. One obvious step is to use a sample prescreened for high and low religious fundamentalism and attempt to determine if the results attained at the extremes of the current data bear out across a larger sample. Once it has been determined

if these findings are real or not, potential explanations for the variation can be explored. Studies should focus on the interaction of fundamentalism and restructuring and attempt to discover what factors of are associated with both the antifundamentalist stance and the variation in restructuring ability within highly fundamental individuals.

Causal designs should also be explored, to see if can be determined if it is in fact something about the fundamentalist mindset which inhibits complex thought, or if there is a self-selection process acting where those who feel more comfortable with simple answers gravitate toward a fundamental style of belief. It may even be possible to induce a mindset similar to fundamentalism in a laboratory context by adopting a very authoritarian style of running the experiment, with harsh punishments for deviations from arbitrary and inefficient rules given to the participants.

## CONCLUSION

Religious belief and behavior is something that all of us as humans must deal with in our lives. For some people it is an afterthought, and for others the defining aspect of life. No matter what an individual's personal take on the issue is, he or she cannot escape being affected by religion. Because of this, any effort to understand the world or a person's behavior in it must take into account at least minimally the effects of religion.

Religious fundamentalism especially can have profound effects upon both the devout and those who interact with them. A greater understanding of the phenomenon will lead to a greater understanding between those who are fundamentalist and those who are not, and perhaps a minute narrowing of the rift which sometimes seems to gape between people of differing beliefs. If we can learn to see what aspects of belief are common to all and acknowledge where the differences in interpretation and belief structure arise, cooperation may be made easier. Failing that, at least we will be able to point out with some certainty where the disagreements will arise.

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## APPENDIX A

## Locus of control scale with embedded Altemeyer-Hunsberger religious fundamentalism scale

RFS items are marked with \*

Numbers 4, 6, 12, 16, 18, 27, 32, 40, 44, & 49 are scored in reverse.

1. Personality is mainly the result of genetic makeup.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
- \*2. God will punish most severely those who abandon his true religion.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
3. Success comes through hard work, not chance.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
- \*4. "Satan" is just a name that people give to their own bad impulses. There is really no such thing as a diabolical being which tempts us.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
5. Something will happen to mess up any plans are made.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
- \*6. No single book of religious writings contains all of the important truths about life  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
- \*7. God has given mankind a complete, unailing guide to happiness and salvation, which must be totally followed.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
8. It is not possible to get ahead in life without being in the right place at the right time  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
9. You cannot change your basic personality.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
- \*10. Whenever science and sacred scripture conflict, science must be wrong.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
11. Everyone has a fixed destiny.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

- \*12. It is silly to think people can be divided into "the Good" and "the Evil." Everyone does some good and some bad things.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
13. It is never possible to make everyone happy.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
- \*14. God's true followers must remember that he requires them to *constantly* fight Satan and Satan's allies on this earth.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
15. If you set realistic goals, you can succeed no matter what.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
- \*16. People should encourage their children to study all religions without bias, then make up their own minds about what to believe.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
17. Bad or good luck can really follow you around.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
- \*18. *All* of the religions in the world have flaws and wrong teachings.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
19. Many people lead miserable lives because of their parents.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
20. How you behave and who you are are the most determining factors in your interactions with other people.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
21. Someone is a happy-go-lucky person because he/she has had an easy life.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
- \*22. Of the people on the Earth, one group has a special relationship with God because it believes the most of his truths and tries the hardest to follow his laws.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
- \*23. The long established traditions in religion show the best way to honor and serve God, and should not be compromised.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

24. If I study hard enough, I can succeed any exam.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
25. Many bad things in one's life happen just because of bad luck.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
26. Most accidents result from one's clumsiness and lack of skills.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
- \*27. Religion must admit all its past failings and adapt to modern life if it is to benefit humanity  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
28. A person is responsible for her/his own actions, good or bad.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
29. One can hardly lead a healthy social life after being rejected by peers as a kid.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
30. One can overcome the painful childhood memories and diminish their impact on one's behavior, thinking, and emotions.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
31. I can complain about politics, but that's about all I can do.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
- \*32. There is *no* body of teachings or set of scriptures which is completely without error.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
33. Relationships turn sour because the partners/friends don't do enough to make them work.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
- \*34. When you get right down to it, there are only two kinds of people in the world: the Righteous, who will be rewarded by God, and the rest, who won't.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
35. People get fired because they don't do their job properly.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
36. People are out of work because they don't have the necessary abilities.  
Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree
37. One can fail at something just because she/he is having a bad day.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

\*38. There *is* a religion n this earth that teaches, without error, God's truth.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

39. Incompetence and ignorance can explain a lot of misfortune in the world.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

\*40. Different religions and philosophies have different versions of the truth, and may be equally right in their own way.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

41. People get hurt because they don't pay enough attention.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

\*42. The basic cause of evil in this world is Satan, who is constantly and ferociously fighting against God.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

43. A person can change his/her personality and behavior patterns.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

\*44. It is more important to be a good person than to believe in God and the right religion.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

\*45. To lead the best, most meaningful life, one must belong to the one true religion.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

46. Being in a good mood makes it easier to be liked by others.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

47. A person cannot rise above his/her background.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

48. Crime and violence can be abolished if people set their mind to it.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

\*49. No one religion is especially close to God, nor does God favor any particular group of believers.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

50. Sudden bursts of emotional or spiritual energy can push you huge steps ahead.

Completely disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Completely agree

## APPENDIX B

## Cognitive restructuring tasks

1. A man got on to an airplane and saw that he knew the pilot. He greeted the pilot by name. Although the man was not a criminal and had broken no laws, the police arrested him immediately. Why?
2. An antique dealer was approached by a man offering to sell him an ancient coin. The coin is stamped with the head of the emperor on one side and the date 544 BC on the other. The dealer examined the coin and called the police. Why?
3. A prisoner was attempting to escape from a tower. He found a rope that was half long enough to reach the ground. He divided the rope in half and tied the two halves together and escaped. How?
4. In the summer, lotus flowers double in area every 24 hours. At the beginning of the summer there is one lotus in the lake. It takes 60 days for the lake to be covered with lotus flowers. On what day is the lake halfway covered?
5. Is it possible to connect all nine dots below by drawing four straight lines without lifting the pencil from the paper or retracing any line?



6. Calendars made in Great Britain do not show Lincoln's Birthday. Do these calendars show the Fourth of July? Explain your answer.
7. A man was shot in Texas. 53 bicycles were spread out around him. Why was he shot?

8. Is it possible to make this triangle point downwards by only shifting three numbers? If so, which ones?

1  
2 3  
4 5 6  
7 8 9 10

9. A man in town married 12 different women. All are still alive, and he has never divorced any of them. Polygamy is illegal, but he hasn't broken any laws. How is this possible?
10. There was a boxing match last week scheduled to go twelve rounds. One boxer knocked out the other and the match was stopped after six rounds. It was not a kickboxing match, but no man threw a punch. How is this possible?

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