

## WHY WE BELIEVE WHAT WE BELIEVE

Summary of monthly discussions January 2016 - March 2017

This is a summary of the logical progression of our discussion, with a focus on what lessons we may have learned.

We began our program with a very basic discussion of what it means to say "I believe," using examples such as:

I believe . . .

- ... in being kind whenever possible
- ... in fairies
- ... man is descended from simpler animals
- ... in God
- ... in eating lightly before bedtime
- ... in you

(See more detailed "[I Believe](#)" checklist on our Web page.) We discussed general [Concepts related to belief](#), such as what we mean by "faith" in different contexts, and the differences between skepticism, agnosticism, and atheism. We reviewed [what various famous people have said](#) about belief.

We went on from there to discuss what factors might cause us to believe anything we are told or that we read, including factors relating to the source of the statement (has he/she/it lied to me before? proven reliable in the past?), the inherent likelihood or unlikelihood of the statement, possible sources of verification, and possible motivations for making the statement if it is true, or if it isn't. (See "[Some Factors Counseling Belief or Disbelief](#)" document.)

We noted that all these tests should be applicable to anything from an apparently factual statement in the newspaper to an obscure comment in Scripture, but different tests will be more useful in some contexts than others. The result often will not be definite proof that the statement is true or untrue, but it may still be of value to decide whether it is more or less *reasonable* to believe it, or *how confidently* we are inclined to believe it.

We also noted that short of a statement being unequivocally *proven* true or false, there may be valid personal reasons to prefer to believe or disbelieve it (such as how we will behave if we accept the statement rather than rejecting it). In connection with this, we noted the article "[The Will to Believe](#)," a section of the longer study "The Varieties of Religious Experience," by William James.

We studied a range of examples of statements we are asked to believe in commerce and the media (see "[Things we believe: Introductory examples](#)"). Examples included the following:

### What we're asked to believe

### Considerations and lessons learned

Himalayan salt - "the purest salt on earth" (real sample, not in attached documents)

- If it is pure, why is it varying pink, rather than white or clear?
- What does "purest salt" mean? Note that it does not say sodium chloride; other salts are various colors. (But since it is for cooking, implication is that it is pure sodium chloride, which in fact is clear in crystalline form, white if ground or abraded.)
- What does "on earth" mean? As mined, without processing?
- Why is the statement made? To get you to buy the product.
- Is it a lie? Debatable; depends on what the customer is supposed to believe from it.
- Consensus: we're not sure we believe this statement, whatever it is supposed to mean.

Ivory Soap - 99-44/100% pure - it floats

- Pure what?
- Does "it floats" logically imply purity? Not necessarily; it only necessarily implies that it has air whipped into it.

- The 99-44/100% number actually has some scientific basis, related to what chemical ingredients are found in what a chemist would call "soap"
- Why is the statement made? So you will buy the product!
- Has the source lied to you before? Advertising industry in general has; can't be sure about this specific source.
- Could the statement be made on a product label if it were untrue? Maybe; consumer protection laws are obscure.

### The Pythagorean Theorem

- This is a mathematical relationship. Its truth relates to mathematical constructs. (But it also relates to triangular items in the real world.)
- It is mathematically provable, not a matter of opinion.
- Pythagoras never lied to you before and has an historical reputation for honesty.
- The statement requires no special knowledge or acceptance of any extrinsic evidence to understand why it is true.
- Belief in it does not require faith in anyone else's expertise or honesty.

### $E=MC^2$ , derived from the Special Theory of Relativity

- Also a mathematical relationship, but strictly related to a real-world phenomenon (the propagation of light).
- Nonetheless it is an unequivocal statement of fact, and so logically either true or untrue, not a matter of opinion.
- There is considerable logical reason to believe it is true, and no reported evidence against it; but it takes considerable specialized knowledge and analysis to evaluate the evidence and form an intelligent opinion.
- Thus, for the average person, belief in it requires some faith that all the experts wouldn't be lying to us about it.

### "General Black Jack Pershing" article

- Appears scholarly -
  - chronology of events
  - neat, professional layout
  - format resembles typical inset boxes in school history books
  - nothing intrinsically improbable about the story\*
- \* We debated whether the story appeared improbable; members' opinions varied widely, based on our individual perspectives on US military history
- Revealed that the source was a Web site, which has no particular reputation for honesty (may have lied to us before) and no reliable tests for trustworthiness.
- Revealed that there was no historical support for it, that it is inconsistent with Pershing's demonstrated policies and views, and that in fact some of the statements in it are obviously untrue if examined ("next 42 years," etc.).
- So why would anyone go to this trouble to lie? Less than obvious but probable reasons: It supports the beliefs that Islam-based terrorism has long been a problem for the world, and that fighting terrorism with cruelty (a) succeeds and (b) is a practice adopted by people worthy of your respect, so that it is a valid choice.
- Revealed that this was reported orally and "re-Tweeted" by then-candidate Trump: on this basis alone (the source), people were far less inclined to believe it. ("He has lied to me before.")

"USA crime statistics" poster

- Layout appears similar to inset boxes in some news reports from credible media, though a bit sensationalistic
- Cites an apparently official and probably reliable source
- Revealed that:
  - the numbers radically disagree with US Justice Department figures; and
  - the cited apparently official source does not exist. This suggests willingness and intent to deceive.
- So why would anyone go to this trouble to lie? Hard to tell. Simple racism?
- Revealed that the original source was a virulently and explicitly Nazi Web site in England.
- Revealed that candidate Trump had "re-Tweeted" this as well. Why? Probably not a specific desire to promote the Nazi organization, but extremely careless about checking sources. Why would he pass on this information as true without checking?
- Less than obvious motive: it supports the idea that the white US majority is under attack from other ethnic groups, so that there is a rational basis for willingness to take harsh law enforcement positions against groups defined by ethnicity – a factor distinguishing one political campaign from another.

Later we discussed the news article in Atlantic Magazine online that presented unusual opportunities for testing the veracity of a story that was also of interest for its substance. (["The Unbelievable Story of Jesus' Wife."](#)) The article traces the author's efforts to discern whether the various individuals supporting the "unbelievable story" – some probably far more sincere than others – were careless with the facts or deliberately lying, and the possible motivations of each for knowingly promulgating such an unusual story without being convinced it was supported by real evidence. We discussed the important difference between knowingly lying, on one hand, and accepting the truth of a story and promulgating it without really giving it the scrutiny it deserves, on the other. We noted that a lot of misinformation is the result of honest people reporting in good faith what dishonest (or careless) people have told them. We referred back to instances (some of them noted above) in which politicians have apparently not bothered to check if an inflammatory item of "news" is credible because it suits their political goals, and they are willing to use likely dishonest stories rather than check.

We then turned to Scriptural writing, beginning with a familiarization with what we consider to be the characteristics of Scriptural writing in general, and its special kind of credibility. We compared texts from different sources that appear consistent with (for instance) the King James Version of the Bible, but in fact included (along with a selection from Joshua) selections from the Book of Mormon and from the Quran. In regard to the last, we found nothing more objectionable or inherently incredible about the selected text itself than about texts from the Gospels, but members were inclined to become more suspicious when they learned the source. (Of course other particular selections might have generated different reactions on first reading.)

In regard to the selections from the Book of Mormon, we noted that the mere fact that it was written in 1830 in New York state, yet the language much more resembled that of the KJV than the current vernacular, was itself an indication that the work was contrived to be convincingly "scriptural"; the attestations by "witnesses" were also signs of the intense effort given to making the divine origin of the book appear credible. We compared this to a selection from Mary Baker Eddy's [Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures](#), which was written in simple and unadorned English of its time, with no literary devices used to enhance its credibility; it also tells no ancient history but only (explicitly) the writer's own thoughts. The impression is that Eddy's writing is meant to be convincing only to the extent that what it says is persuasive by its logic, while the other is meant to persuade by attribution to a divine source. Thus, while we may believe or disbelieve either, any doubts would be more likely based on our doubts of the sincerity of the writer in one case, but only of the accuracy of the writer's analysis in the other.

We turned to selected Old Testament episodes, such as the Creation; the story of Jonah; the story of the slavery in Egypt, the Exodus, and the Ten Commandments; and the incident of Joshua making the sun stand still. (We compared this last to the version in the H.G. Wells short story *The Man Who Could Work Miracles*.) We discussed the fact that we do not have the original source of any of these stories, and do not know the circumstances of their

composition; but in view of their antiquity, there is no evident reason to doubt the *sincerity* of the writers, though from a skeptical modern perspective there may be reasons to doubt their literal accuracy. That is, it is a lot easier to believe that the original writer of the Creation story honestly believed it to be literally true than (for instance) that the writer of the Book of Mormon honestly believed his histories of personages in the generations soon after David to be accurate (assuming they aren't).

In addition, as to some of the stories it is not clear whether the writers (of the original version, or of the version that has come down to us) actually *intended* them to be read as literal history, rather than as legends that convey a message.

In regard to the Joshua story, we discussed on the one hand the possibility that God would choose to work such a miracle, for the purposes stated; and on the other, the motivations that the writers might have had to tell a story that lends the mark of divine approval to the military conquest of an inhabited land. (We also noted the possibility that the version we now have actually reflects an honest misunderstanding of what was already legend, told and retold, before it was ever written down.)

Finally we turned our attention to New Testament stories. We focused especially on selected miracles of Jesus, and found differences in regard to what purpose they serve in the story. Some (the virgin birth, the resurrection) are fundamental to the concept of Jesus as the Son of God; others (healing the sick, the Loaves and Fishes, walking on the water) illustrate his divine power, but are not essential. That is, one could easily believe in his divinity if he did not have occasion to walk on the water, but it would be more difficult if he died and was buried like anyone else.

This led us to discussion of why the various miracle stories would be recorded and preserved even assuming they are literally true. We noted that from this distance in time, and in the context of the spiritual lessons in the Gospels, we would not necessarily believe in the divinity of Jesus much more or much less depending on whether each of the miracles were reported; but on the other hand, at the time they may have been essential in order for his words to be heard and fully appreciated. Thus we may be more or less inclined to believe in the essential truth of miraculous (or otherwise unprovable) events there depending on whether we think *the most probable* explanation is that:

- Jesus would likely have performed them in order to get attention;
- Jesus would likely have performed them because it was only natural (if you had the power to cure people, wouldn't you do it?); or
- the only reason to think he performed them at all is because writers a generation and more later reported that he did, for whatever *their* reasons were.

Only as to the last option, then we can fall back on the analytical tools we use to assess any other questioned assertion, including:

- Are the miracles inconsistent with my perceived reality? (That is, do I believe miracles are part of reality, aside from in these stories?)

*Note that we really don't know that any miracles do happen merely because there is no obvious logical or scientific explanation for the event; but on the other hand, we don't know that they don't happen all the time. Any apparently normal; recovery from a disease, or any given conception and birth of a child, might have been doomed to failure if not for divine intervention.*

- What is the source of the statement? Do I know anything about the writer? Do I have any reasons for believing or disbelieving the writer aside from the content of these stories?

*Apparently not, as to the writers of the Gospels. We know nothing about them at all.*

- What is the form or presentation of the statement? Does the language and structure seem to convey an intent simply to set forth what the writer believes to be true, or are there signs that it was contrived to be persuasive?

*Very hard to analyze, at this distance in time, geography and culture; there is little to compare it to.*

- Is there anything in it that I can test for veracity against other sources?

*Almost nothing – maybe Josephus, maybe not even that.*

If not, does the absence of corroboration imply that it is probably untrue, because if it were, there would be other more or less contemporary references?

*Possibly, but again hard to tell – what is the likelihood that these events stood out sufficiently in the Roman world in Judea so that they would have been reported in some objective (non-religious) work that would have survived? Is it unreasonable to think (for instance) that if these events occurred just as described, no Roman would necessarily have made an official record?*

- Can I see a likely motivation for making the statement if it is true?

*Surely; this would be extremely important news.*

- Can I see a likely motivation for making the statement if it is untrue?

*Yes, various possibilities: for instance, much of the story can be explained if the authors were motivated by self-aggrandizement, anti-Roman politics, or anti-Priestly politics. Also, if the teachings of Jesus were honestly reported, the authors might have added miracles – and even, possibly the idea of his divinity – in order to attract attention to and enhance the credibility of his teachings. It is possible that the authors were sure he was divinely inspired, but were afraid others would not believe it.*

- Do I want to believe or disbelieve it? Why? How does that color my analysis?

*Yes; it is appealing to believe what your parents and other respected people have taught you, especially if it coincides with your own idea of what is right and good. The stories are inspiring. If Jesus' lessons were contrary to what we perceive as a good basis for societal norms, we might be a lot more suspicious of the indicia that they are divine in origin.*

*Also note that some of his teachings do run contrary to many people's perceptions of self-interest; for those who want to follow all his words, following the teachings is far easier to justify to others on the basis that God said it than trying to find one's own rationale. Kindness and compassion often seem foolish; we know that "nice guys finish last." (But at the same time, we like to be kind, and to be seen as "nice guys.") Those who do not believe in fighting even a "just war" may be afraid that their reluctance is partially a matter of cowardice – but this is not a concern to one that believes he has been divinely instructed to "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemy."*

**General conclusion:** There are critical analytical tools that can be applied to all beliefs, even spiritual ones. This does not mean that factually unsupported beliefs are unreasonable to continue holding if we find that the analytical tools do not support them well – but *some are more reasonable than others*. In all events it is important to recognize when your belief (or doubt) is at least as reasonable as *something that others would like you to believe*, and when further analysis is indicated.