



THINKING AND BELIEVING

Freethought and Freethinking deliberately juxtapose thinking and belief when it comes to “religious questions.” It is not that Freethinkers don’t believe many things. We do. What distinguishes us is how and in what way we believe or, at least, how and in what way we aspire to believe, how and in what way we conceive of the task of forming and managing our beliefs.

Two simple sayings help to shed light on this:

You can’t think when you’re believing.
and
You can’t believe when you’re thinking.

Now this is not an all-or-none choice. One cannot think without “believing in” the principles of which thinking consists. Nor can one believe without having some basis – whether it is recognized and acknowledged or not – for believing. The philosophical discipline that has to do with the nature and justification of knowledge is “epistemology.” Another relevant term is “doxastic,” which refers to a branch of modal logic concerning the nature of belief.

Nevertheless, the applicable use of the terms “thinking” and “thought” here is the active questioning and doubting of beliefs, including even the beliefs that underpin thinking, to the extent that that is possible. The thinking that contrasts with believing is not the sort of “I’m thinking of a number between one and ten,” or, “I’m thinking of what I had for lunch yesterday” and so on. Likewise, the sort of believing at issue involves beliefs about the world outside of our own heads, not beliefs such as “this broccoli tastes terrible” or “playing that video game made me feel nauseated.” Of course, thinking often involves the imagination when we consider how things might be and “what ifs” that could turn out to be supported by facts.

The problem with beliefs are that people taken them to be “the answers.” Everyone likes to have answers, of course, which they equate with “the truth” or “the way things really are.” But belief that one has “the answers” is also a hazard because, as can be shown from many examples, what people believe may be wrong. This is made all the worse when people fail to doubt or question beliefs. Why should they since what they believe is the truth? If beliefs are not the truth then why would we have them?

Certainly, we should be careful not to give up our beliefs too easily, especially beliefs that are well-founded. It would be foolish, for example, to doubt that Canada is situated to the north of Mexico. But at times our beliefs may not be as well-founded as we suppose and in these cases we should not lose an opportunity to revise, improve, or exchange our beliefs for new ones. At the very least we become better-informed about the grounds of our beliefs when we are open to reviewing them. This is one reason why teaching others about something, even when we may know it very well, helps us learn more about it ourselves.

The juxtaposition of believing and thinking draws attention to their (at least semi-) incompatibility. It should also put us in mind of the irrelevance of unbelief as such. That is, contrary to what some claim, unbelief does not stand on a level with belief, at least not when the unbelief is not itself a positive commitment. So, for example, a Christian’s unbelief in reincarnation is a necessary requirement of Christian doctrine but a Christian’s unbelief in the sun revolving around the earth is not. At least it’s not any longer. And all believing and thinking goes on against a background of innumerable unbeliefs, none of which require the slightest effort to hold.

Does all of this mean that believing is a bad thing? Not at all. But we ought to be parsimonious about believing. We should reserve our belief commitments to what it is necessary to believe and regard other ideas with caution. There is no harm in being aware of and interested in many

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possibilities. Maybe extraterrestrial life and even intelligent extraterrestrial life exists. Maybe there is a single treatment that would cure all cancers. And so on. But we should limit our important beliefs to ideas that, as William James put it, have a "cash-value in experiential terms," which are those ideas "that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify ... that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known as."

I BELIEVE IN FATHER CHRISTMAS
(song by Greg Lake of Emerson Lake & Palmer)

They said there'll be snow at christmas
They said there'll be peace on earth
But instead it just kept on raining
A veil of tears for the virgin's birth
I remember one christmas morning
A winters light and a distant choir
And the peal of a bell and that christmas tree smell
And their eyes full of tinsel and fire

They sold me a dream of christmas
They sold me a silent night
And they told me a fairy story
'till I believed in the israelite
And I believed in father christmas
And I looked at the sky with excited eyes
'till I woke with a yawn in the first light of dawn
And I saw him and through his disguise

I wish you a hopeful christmas
I wish you a brave new year
All anguish pain and sadness
Leave your heart and let your road be clear
They said there'll be snow at christmas
They said there'll be peace on earth
Hallelujah noel be it heaven or hell
The christmas you get you deserve

PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
"WELCOME TO THE FUTURE: 2014!"
>>> Sunday, January 5th, 2014 <<<
SHERATON GRAND DFW AIRPORT
SE CORNER OF 114 AND ESTERS

YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED, APPRECIATED, AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or through our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at: - www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought - **JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!**

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Golden Corral Buffet and Grill in Grapevine, located just across from the Grapevine Mills Mall, at 2605 E. Grapevine Mills Circle, phone (972) 874-7900. To reach Golden Corral from the Sheraton, cross over the freeway and make a left onto John W. Carpenter Freeway (114) going west. Then take the first exit RIGHT onto International Parkway (121), then Grapevine Mills Parkway exit. Turn LEFT on Stars and Stripes Way, continuing on to E. Grapevine Mills Circle.

Freethought Salon: Get together to discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest for Freethinkers. Most Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM; see the meetup site!

Game Night: The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

"New Year's Eve is like every other night; there is no pause in the march of the universe, no breathless moment of silence among created things that the passage of another twelve months may be noted; and yet no man has quite the same thoughts this evening that come with the coming of darkness on other nights."
- Hamilton Wright Mabie (1846-1916)



DFWCOR

Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason

The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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