



# BULLETIN of THE NORTH TEXAS CHURCH OF FREETHOUGHT

The Fellowship Of Unbelievers

Championing Doubt Over Faith Since since 1994

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## WHAT DO WE REALLY KNOW?

Like the answer to so many questions, the answer to this one depends on what is meant by, in this case, the word and the idea of knowing, knowledge, truth and belief. What we know, how we can know it and what we mean by these things fall into the category of philosophy called epistemology. Most people may not give this much thought. Believers and their leaders, in particular, seldom consider it except when they may insist that even scientific knowledge must be “believed on faith.” But these issues are of great importance to Freethinkers because the essence of their outlook as rationalists is that it is not so much the content of belief that matters but the how and why of coming to beliefs. And everyone has an epistemological perspective and assumptions whether they realize it or not. Some examples include such ideas as that:

- If we see it with our own eyes it's true: “seeing is believing.”
- If we “feel it in our gut” or “sense it in our heart,” it must be true.
- If a machine recorded it, it must be true.
- If scientists say it, it must be true.
- If it's on TV, or in the newspapers, or on the internet, it must be true.
- If the government says it, it must be true.
- If our friends and family believe it then it must be true.
- If we remember it, it must be so.
- If [TRUSTWORTHY SOURCE] saw it or remembered it, it must be true.
- If it's in the [HOLY BOOK], it must be true.
- If God tells me something, it must be true.

We could easily think of many more such rules and of many instances of people relying on such rules or ones like them. We could as easily think of how such rules can be specified in more or less detailed terms, qualified or even reversed, combined in a variety of permutations and weighted with and/or against each other into many different composites. On

top of this there are subjective factors of interpretation that come into play as the same principles may be applied differently. Even scientists do not all agree about everything. And it is only too obvious that followers of the same “holy book” can disagree violently. One's epistemological approach may also vary or be applied in different ways – without this being necessarily hypocritical – depending on the subject or type of belief at issue. Indeed, all of the above epistemological rules have some applicability depending on what is being considered.

So when someone asserts or believes in something, they are really just making a judgement based on an epistemological process or rule. When it is said, for example, that “the earth is round,” what may be meant is that “multiple lines of evidence, from ships at sea disappearing over the horizon, to the shadow of the earth on the moon during lunar eclipses, to actual direct observation by astronauts and photographs taken from space, show that the earth is round.” And when it is asserted that “homosexuality is a sin,” there is typically an interpretation of some portion(s) of a “holy book” that is meant.

It would be helpful if people expressed themselves in such a way as to make clear what epistemological approach they are relying on. This will usually be impractical but sometimes it is done when, for example, it is said that a particular person or news source has said or reported something. More often, people may not even remember – or may misremember – where an idea or opinion came from or on what it is based. Worse, many people don't seem to care about such things. They often care more about how an assertion or belief identifies or aligns them socially or politically. It is true, of course, that many settings are not suitable for debate. But when an opinion or belief is asserted that invites objections if not debate, it remains a fact that the assertion is simply that: an assertion. To not take issue with it does not mean agreement, though to avoid confusion it can be helpful, at a minimum, to say: “I don't agree but it's interesting that you believe that.”

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When possible, it can be very worthwhile to ask where an opinion or belief comes from and why someone offers or holds it. Many Freethinkers are curious about such things. Indeed, many became Freethinkers after beginning to consider the grounds of their beliefs. Freethinkers can help others do this by playing the role of a street-corner epistemologist. The idea is to ask, in a non-confrontational and non-argumentative way, about how and why people came by their beliefs and cooperatively explore the implications of that. This has been promoted by Peter Boghossian in his book [A Manual For Creating Atheists](#). It is nothing new inasmuch as Plato's many dialogues had the philosopher Socrates engage in such questioning. But "The Socratic Method" will be new to many not familiar with this established technique for teasing out the real issues connected with a subject and, often, to show the inadequacy of "common sense" ideas and beliefs. There are already numerous videos on youtube that show street epistemologists in action.

Thinking about and questioning the grounds of belief can also help us appreciate that our beliefs and opinions are not body parts with which we must make do. Rather, our beliefs about what is true and not true are acquired from many sources and are continuously altered, modified, enlarged or rejected as we grow and learn, often without much awareness of it. Of course, most everyone clearly has a sensitivity to being wrong and for good reason: we should hate to be in error because it keeps us from believing what is true. Being aware of the grounds of our beliefs can help us to become less attached to our beliefs, to think of them as suppositions, expectations and "what appears the best explanation for now." The search for truth with a capital "T," for knowledge without an evidential-epistemological context, leads us astray. As the French philosopher and Freethinker Voltaire put it: "Doubt is not pleasant, but certainty is absurd."

It will come as a shock to some that there really is no need to believe anything at all. It is our cultural context that is a hindrance to appreciating this. For our civilization has been heavily influenced for centuries by the idea that unshakable belief, especially faith-belief, is a virtue. Doubt, by contrast, is thought a difficulty, a weakness, or even a crime, which at times has been punished by auto-da-fé (burning at the stake).

Not believing in anything is not the same as nihilism, relativism or any other alleged threat to society and morality. Nor is it a symptom, much less a cause, of despair. It is simply the realization that knowledge and understanding are tools that should serve humanity and not the other way around. Within their context our beliefs make us the masters of our fate. But outside of it they can make us victims.

**All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar, or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at: - [www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought](http://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 Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of I-635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

**Freethought Salon:** Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums on most non-first Sundays of the month, over breakfast/coffee (or not), in the atrium of the Embassy Suites DFW Airport North – on Bass Pro Drive in Grapevine beginning at 10:00 AM.

**Game Night:** Most Friday nights 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 Imperial 2030, Dominion, Evolution, Le Havre, Ticket To Ride, and other fun games!

**Have Another Idea?** Email or call! Read bulletins & presentations and post on the FORUM at [www.churchoffreethought.org](http://www.churchoffreethought.org) LIKE US at [www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/](https://www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/) and sign up for our Twitter feed at [www.twitter.com/ntcof](https://www.twitter.com/ntcof) !

## PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH: "ANSWERING THE FIVE CHRISTIAN CLAIMS"

**Guest Speakers Rex Burks and Owen Younger  
> Sunday, September 2, 2018 <  
COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH  
(Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then take the frontage road east just past the Best Western; service starts at 10:30 but come early for coffee and snacks - you can bring some! - and conversation)**

**THANK YOU !!  
FOR YOUR GENEROUS  
DONATION OF TIME & FINANCIAL  
SUPPORT to the NTCOF !!  
It is needed, appreciated and  
Tax-Deductible !**

### The North Texas Church of Freethought The Fellowship of Unbelievers

Pastor (It's a job description, not a title!)..Tim Gorski  
Presenters (how about YOU?).....Tim Gorski  
Social Media Czar.....Aaron Kelton  
Welcome Coordinator.....Mark Barnick  
Videographer.....John Gauthier  
Webpage Management.....Saturn Consulting

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