



of THE NORTH TEXAS CHURCH OF FREETHOUGHT

The Fellowship Of Unbelievers

25 YEARS OLD!

The Religion of Peace of Mind Since 1994

Volume 25 Number 6

Sunday, June 2, 2019

BELIEF: WHAT IS THE BIG DEAL?

Belief plays an enormous and important role in human society and culture. And certainly the most deep-rooted form of belief is connected with religion and, especially, religious supernaturalism. It may even be that religions of “big gods” was a pivotal innovation in the formation of large-scale human societies.¹ Belief remains centrally associated with religion. But as the doctrines of traditional religions were shown to be wrong, an increasing emphasis and worth have become attached to the idea of “faith.” This is not the faith of the New Testament, of trust in deities that few doubted. Faith in its modern meaning is, rather, an uncritical acceptance of supernatural dogmas. This is then extolled as a wonderful virtue in order to conceal its vulnerability to doubt, questioning, and critical analysis. It is even insisted that any such criticism is the very opposite of virtuous faith-based belief and, in fact, is insulting, derogatory and disrespectful of people's most cherished values. This is troubling and dangerous, the more so because belief concerns so much more than theological superstitions.

“Fake news” is not new, to take one example. Rulers and others aspiring to authority have long sought to control public opinion. Adolph Hitler observed that:

“in the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus in the primitive simplicity of their minds they more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie”²

The Nazi Reich and many other regimes, with the aid of mass media, raised this to a systematic and, one might even say, a scientific level. In the 1950's the concept of brainwashing, the forcible imposition of beliefs and manipulation of attitudes

and behavior, appeared. It was during these years and into the early 1970's that the famous CIA MKUltra program investigated such methods. In 1988, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky argued in their book, Manufacturing Consent, that the mass media functions as an effective propaganda tool to make it appear that established institutions and the policies of the ruling class enjoy popular support. A natural consequence of all this has been the manipulation if not “weaponization” of all channels of news and information and the use of “spin,” half-truths, outright falsehoods and outrageous lies to influence elections and public policies across the globe in the service of anyone who stands to be affected, for better or worse, by people's beliefs.

Meanwhile, people's beliefs have become of critical importance to anyone and everyone with a product or service to sell. Vance Packard's 1957 book, The Hidden Persuaders, was among the first to draw attention to the use by advertisers of sophisticated psychological techniques to create demand for whatever they sell. In his 1964 book, The Naked Society, Packard presciently warned of the dangers of the use of private information in the service of corporate profit. In the 21st Century this is a simple fact about which few people seem to care.

These facts highlight what pragmatist philosophers realized beginning in the 19th Century, that a belief can be understood as “a disposition to act.” That is, it is what one believes that governs one's behavior, from what one will do in the case of illness, how one will choose to go from one place to another, whether one will take an umbrella in doing so and so on. And when it comes to gods, if one believes that such gods command the burning of heretics, the hanging of witches and the prohibition of certain forms of medical care and treatment, then one will do such things. Beliefs may even cause people to fly airplanes into buildings. As

(continued from page 1)

Voltaire pointed out:

“Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities.”

There is at least some awareness of these dangers. Nonsense and lies circulate on the Internet but so do sources of information that expose them if one goes to the trouble of looking. “Truthiness” has entered popular discourse and “post-truth politics” draws attention to the ways that voters are encouraged to discount facts and respond emotionally. And this surely also relates to the post-modern notion that facts are just self-interested opinions or even propaganda disseminated and defended by authorities in service of their own power.

Elected and other government officials are also susceptible to false and irrational beliefs. What happens when the laws themselves become predicated on baseless, irrational and even supernatural beliefs? Lawmakers have already been expanding exemptions for such important public health measures as immunizations, prohibiting the use of scientific projections of sea level rise and, notoriously, banning abortion, requiring that physicians transplant tubal pregnancies into the uterus and preventing medical insurance from covering birth control that may interfere with implantation, which includes just about everything but barrier methods such as condoms.

The courts may be relied on to some degree to strike down laws contrary to the Constitution or to facts, reason, and prior precedents. But such reliance may be ill-advised. For judges, too, can and do come to believe the same things that motivate legislators and that are generally prevalent in society. Under democratic institutions, this is unavoidable. Even the Bill of Rights is little protection when a Supreme Court Justice, the late Antonin Scalia insisted that “there's no right to privacy in the Constitution!” Founder Alexander Hamilton, in contrast, said that in establishing the Constitution “the people surrender nothing [of their rights], and as they retain everything, they have no need of particular reservations [such as the Bill of Rights].”³

The only hope, for now, is in making some headway, if not prevailing, against wrong and irrational beliefs in “the marketplace of ideas.”

(1) Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict by Ara Norenzayan, Princeton University Press 2015

(2) Mein Kampf, v1, ch10

(3) The Federalist No 84

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 - 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 LIKE US at www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/ and sign up for our Twitter feed at www.twitter.com/ntcof !

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
“HAPPY BIRTHDAY
USA”**

**> Sunday, July 7, 2019 <
HERE at the Hawthorn Suites
by Wyndham Hotel
DFW Airport North 10:30 AM**

**THANK YOU !!
FOR YOUR TIME and
FINANCIAL SUPPORT
of 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.....Tim Gorski
Social Media Czar.....Aaron Kelton
Welcome Coordinator.....Mark Barnick
Videographer.....John Gauthier
Webpage Management.....Rusty Nejd

**mailing address: 1001 N Waldrop Dr #815
Arlington, TX 76012
(214) 702-2050**

**www.churchoffreethought.org
info@churchoffreethought.org**