

Monday, May 09, 2005

I Don't Believe It

It's not that I *want* to disbelieve what the religionists tell me. It's not that I *want* it to be untrue. It's just a simple fact that I *don't* believe it. And I don't believe because I don't think it's true.

I don't believe the universe was created by conscious activity. I don't believe that the flora and the fauna were "designed" by some conscious overseer. I don't believe that the entire earth was covered in water as the result of a vengeful act of a consciousness unhappy with its creation. I don't believe that my life would be meaningless if there were no "infinite mind" or "absolute person" which they tell me meaningfulness needs. I don't believe it.

I don't believe that this "infinite mind" incarnated itself and walked the earth some two thousand years ago. I don't believe anyone back then was born a virgin, even though many religions in the day taught this about their savior-gods. I certainly don't believe the earth is flat, which is what the biblical authors obviously believed. I don't believe there's a magic kingdom called "heaven" where some people's consciousnesses go when they die. I don't believe there is any conscious experience after a person dies. Why would I believe such things? I don't believe it.

Now, this unbelief of mine bothers some people, because they apparently want these things to be true. And I say this - that they want these things to be true - because their actions overwhelmingly suggest this. Just observe how strenuously Christian apologists try to defend their religion's claims. Indeed, it is not unusual for apologists to resort to name-calling and other childish antics when engaging with "stubborn" non-believers like me. I've been called an "ass," a "moron," a "fool," et al. If not believing stories about an invisible magic being which directs every event in the universe means I'm a "fool," well I guess I have to consider the source of such epithets. But what could account for this behavior other than the believer's desire to vindicate his confessional commitments? Christians want to cite I Peter 3:15 as the source of their standing instruction to "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh [them] a reason of the hope that is in [them] with meekness and fear." But resorting to name-calling does not suggest either hope or meekness. On the contrary, such behavior only suggests desperation and conceit.

Many believers have tried to take my non-belief to task by asking whether or not I believe other historical accounts, accounts which are commonly accepted as true or probably true by historians and other scholars. For instance, the believer might ask "Is it true that Socrates drank the hemlock?" referring to the story of the ancient philosopher's execution by the state. And while I was not there to observe the event firsthand, it is a story that is repeated in the history books, and I know of no reason to dispute it. This story does not contradict any knowledge that I have validated, so there's no *prima facie* reason to reject it. Regardless, I suppose it happened, but it's not very important to my life if in fact Socrates escaped from prison and joined a circus. But I will point out that the story of Socrates drinking the hemlock does cohere with what we know about hemlock: it is poisonous to the human body, and the story holds that this is how Socrates died. But if the story said that Socrates was a Christian (some 400 years prior to the purported time of Jesus' life) and that because of his belief in Jesus the hemlock did not harm him (per Mark 16:18 - "if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them"), I'd suppose it was legend at best - indeed one applied retroactively - and thus not at all reliable. Likewise, if the story told us that, upon drinking the hemlock, Socrates turned into a condor and flew away, I wouldn't believe that, either. Does the Christian think I should believe such a story? After all, on his Christian premises, how could he dispute it? On what grounds would he be able to reject it, unless he borrowed from my worldview?

But if Christians still insist that I believe their claims, perhaps they could start by demonstrating the truth of Mark 16:18 for me. Indeed, it claims that drinking deadly substances will not harm those who believe the gospel. Perhaps while they're at it, they can explain the causality behind this: how does the content of one's beliefs immunize his body from substances that are otherwise lethal to human beings?

You see, apologists, I don't believe these things. But I encourage you to continue trying to convince me, at least in the interest of sport. Perhaps in the process, you might convince yourselves, but I doubt even that will happen. To be on the safe side, I'd recommend that you have a phone nearby if you take a sip of hemlock as you try to prove the truth of Mark 16:18 - be ready to dial 911 ASAP, because I think you're going to need emergency medical help after your first swallow. But maybe I'm wrong and you're right. I know of only one way to settle this dispute, so bottom's up!

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [5:55 PM](#)

2 Comments:

[mrtruth](#) said...

I totally identify with this post...I simply don't believe. I can't MAKE myself believe, even if I wanted to. I did 'believe' the Christian story most of my life, but only because I was raised that way. Just like most people in India are Hindus, and most people in the middle east are either Jewish or Muslim.

I'm examined the evidence, the arguments, and my own 'personal experience,' and it just doesn't add up to belief. So, am I going to burn forever because I don't believe? Nothing I can do about that, I guess.

[May 10, 2005 10:17 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

NR: "I can't MAKE myself believe, even if I wanted to."

Right. I cannot honestly affirm that some claim is true when I don't think it's true. Before I can say "That's true!" I would have to think "that is true." This mental state of affairs does not happen simply because I choose it to be the case. I cannot pick and choose which statements are true, and which are not. Such a procedure would not only reduce to subjectivism, it would also be dishonest. I'm too honest to be a Christian. In my worldview, things are not true because of someone's wishing. Rather, statements about the real state of affairs are true because they correspond objectively (i.e., independently of someone's wishing) to what is actually the case. And I discover what is actually the case by means of reason.

There was a time when I was taught to believe what religion teaches. There was a time when I was told that it is virtuous to be "born again." Now I understand what the real virtue is: Being honest.

Why be born again when you can simply grow up?

[May 11, 2005 7:44 PM](#)