

How Do We Decide What to Believe? Who Should We Trust To Guide Us?

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Introduction

How do we formulate belief? Why is human behaviour so often not consistent with belief? And in the end, who should we trust while making decisions as to how to behave? These questions could each give rise to books. All I will take here is a little poke at them.

Belief

Beliefs are not created in a vacuum. So lets start where we all do respecting these things. We are born somewhere, and inherit a belief system. History shows us that all belief systems change over time, usually as a result of a gradual realization that the system does not "work" in some way. Usually this is because it is shown to be out of sync with what comes to be accepted as "reality" on the basis of what science teaches us, and in other cases it is because the belief no longer meets the needs of the people in some other more practical way, such as what caused the belief that first the "united order" and then polygamy were necessary parts of religious life to be abandoned by most Mormons.

Social groups are created by various forms of necessity, and in order to form need to find ways to bind themselves together. These ways involve the acceptance of authority that has been based on all kinds of belief systems. The Incas believed their rulers were the literal offspring of god, which worked really well for the rulers. The traditional king's divine mandate is a staple of history. The common thread in this regard is that the people must believe in the legitimacy of the authority in order for it to work. If the authority is believed to have really come from god, it will work. If the authority is believed to come from a free vote of the people, it will work. If either god or the free vote are found to be bogus, chaos is likely to break out. That is why there was so much concern in the aftermath of the Bush election. There was a well founded concern that the margin of victory was not enough to make the American people governable. That is was is a testimony to the strength of the American democratic system.

Once the group has formed, it becomes an organism that has a life of its own in many important respects, and is subject to the laws of evolution. It will have a bias toward maintaining the control it has, and hence will exert a pressure to conform to group mores and beliefs on all members. This is a lesser of evils concept. Having the group believe any uniting falsehood is better than chaos. This, I believe, is the basis of Plato's philosopher king concept (the wise few have the duty to mislead the masses when it is in the masses interest to be misled). And in evolutionary terms, "truth" (which is the same as an absolute "best") is not required for long term survival and prosperity in either the biological or social spheres. All that is required is competitive advantage in

the biological, and in the social sphere, the perception of competitive advantage will do fine in the short to mid-term at least. That perception is most easily maintained by any organization by restricting information relative to the strengths of others as well as its own weaknesses. Hence, organizations (if left to their own means) tend to try to control the beliefs of those associated with them. Once I was equipped with the above point of view, my reading religious history in general and LDS history in particular became much more enlightening.

Much of the genius of the modern, democratic west is in the recognition that groups of people tend to behave as just indicated, and tend to take advantage of minorities and individual members of the group in the name of group benefit (see <http://www3.telus.net/public/rcmccue/bob/documents/out%20of%20my%20faith.pdf> at page 132 for a summary), and so need to be restrained in that regard by the enforcement of things like freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and a variety of other rights designed to protect minority and individual rights against the majority tendency to steam roll the individual. The inclusion of these rights in modern western democracies is what has made that system the most successful in human history.

The varying needs each of us has to remain connected to the social group creates intellectual pressure to see things as the group wishes us to. Recent psychological research indicates that women tend to be more influenced than men in this regard, but of course both individual women and men vary widely as a result of differing genetic characteristics and social circumstance. Those employed by the Church, for example, can be expected to have more difficulty seeing things respecting the Church as they really are than those who are not. Those with extensive family, social and business connections within the Church will be similarly affected, as will those in Church leadership positions. And we all know that there are no atheists (and perhaps jack Mormons) in foxholes. This is the same psychological phenomenon that explains the frequent parental inability to deal rationally with their kids, and why many a spouse has been the last to see obvious signs of philandering in his or her marriage partner. There is no doubt that our ability to process certain types of information is heavily influenced by both our genetic heritage and our circumstances.

Newberg et al in "Why God Won't Go Away" has convincingly shown the powerful and real nature of "spiritual experience". Those who have had those experiences and been conditioned to believe that their religious tradition, and only theirs, is "true" on that basis, can be expected to have their attitudes and behaviours and actions strongly influenced by this. See <http://www3.telus.net/public/rcmccue/bob/documents/out%20of%20my%20faith.pdf> at about p. 77 for a summary.

A change in belief requires that the inertia created by the above factors (social pressures; individual circumstances; personal spiritual experience linked to specific beliefs; etc.) be overcome. As noted above, in our modern era this has usually occurred at the macro level because religious belief finds itself in conflict with information produced by our scientific paradigm. And individual beliefs often change for the same

reason. However, a change in individual belief may also occur simply because a belief does not "work" for an individual. A person who is gay, for example, will be under tremendous psychological pressure to find reasons to disbelieve the basic tenets of Mormonism. From what I can tell, most people who leave Mormonism and other fundamentalist leaning religions do so as a result of a combination of personal discomfort with the demands of their belief system, and information that shows the system to be non-sensical. Which element comes first (information that sparks questions that result in discomfort; or discomfort that sparks questions that spark information showing the belief system to be non-sensical) is often hard to determine, even with the benefit of hindsight.

I was unaware of discomfort with my Mormon way of life until I came across information that caused me to start to question. As I questioned, I became aware of information that showed my Mormon beliefs to be silly, and opened my eyes to alternative ways of doing things that made my Mormon way of life feel uncomfortable and helped me to identify and understand certain of my Mormon-belief induced dysfunctional habits of which I had not been aware.

The degree of discomfort we will experience will depend upon how deeply engrained our beliefs and religious behaviour is. Some of my Mormon friends are what a Mormon leader once disparagingly described to me as "social Mormons". They hang out at Church, enjoy the social scene, and do as little as possible. They are occasional full tithe payers and temple goers, but in general do not take things Mormon seriously. This kind of person thinks statements like "The unexamined life is not worth living" are utter nonsense, and could live through a religious earthquake without being aware of it. Their beliefs are not that important to the fabric of their lives, and hence are unlikely to change. But their connection to the social scene is important, and this may make them into the most resistant of fully faithful Mormons when faced with a liberal Mormon friend or family member. They, oddly, interpret their own connection to the social scene at Church as spirituality; blithely assume that what the Church teaches is "true" (even though they have rationalized ignoring much of it); and are unlikely to be willing to examine anything that would upset the comfortable status quo. That last point is the key to understanding their behaviour - the importance of maintaining their connection to group drives all else. And so one who insists upon presenting them with information that disturbs that connection is likely to cut out of their life. This behaviour is testimony to the strength of the group mentality outlined above. It radically influences the ability of many to perceive reality.

It has been noted that much of the difference in the beliefs people hold comes down to which evidence they choose to emphasize. This is, of course, right. But it is my view that the manner in which our judgement is skewed by the factors mentioned above performs a much greater role in most cases than most of us appreciate. It is upsetting to human beings to face the reality that most of their judgement is flawed. We need a feeling of confidence and certainty to be able to keep putting one foot ahead of the other. This is true in all fields of human endeavour. I am listening right now to a CD on the history of genetics and microbiology (James Watson, "DNA: The Secret of Life").

What a fascinating story! And what an account of how some of the smartest people on the planet made one wrong turn after another as they worked their way through that maze. Many of those mistakes, it seemed to me, were made as a result of prejudices various scientists had because of the manner in which their training had conditioned them. And often, it was the young scientists who caused the paradigm shifts that have opened the door to the human genome project and other recent marvels. I note parenthetically that I heard this morning on the radio that scientists in Montreal and down in the US, working together, have discovered a gene which when "switched off" in mice stops the growth of breast cancer tumours and prevent new tumour growth. More such miracles await us. In light of the dogma induced stumbles scientists make while trained to proceed in a strictly rational manner, why are we surprised that in religious matters, our circumstances and conditioning often blind us to what is obvious to others with different points of view?

Just as has been the case with genetics, I am confident that it will eventually become clear that either one camp is right, or another respecting most of the major questions concerning Mormonism. We cannot prove anything with 100% certainty – not even math's most basic theorems as Godel showed. But we can reach high levels of certainty respecting many things. Here are a few related to Mormonism that are well within the reach of scientific and historical analyses: That JS often lied to induce people to do what he wanted them to; that Joseph Smith's sexual practises were immoral by the standards of his day as well as ours; that the Book of Mormon is a 19th century production; that the Book of Abraham was not translated from Egyptian; that Joseph Smith did not translate many other things he claimed to have translated; that under the guise of "faithful history" modern Mormon leaders have consistently and consciously mislead their followers as to the nature of Mormon origins and claims to authority; that the advice of modern Mormon leaders has consistently across a broad range of issues been worse (by their own eventually acknowledged standards) than that emanating from the scientific community; that the development of the Mormon church fits like a glove the pattern those who study such things would predict for a religion of its type; etc. It is my view respecting these and other issues, that as time passes it will become increasingly clear that the Mormon Church is not what it holds itself out to be. How that information is interpreted, and how people govern themselves in light of it will of course differ from person to person and from time to time. And the Church itself is not static. It will continue to reinvent itself to try to stay out of the cross hairs of its "enemies", as it has always done. The give and take between institutional and individual behaviour is part of what makes human nature so fascinating.

As far as belief in Mormonism's foundational claims is concerned, it really comes down to this, in my view: Can we trust Joseph Smith? Mormon behaviour is dominated by things we do to obtain the benefit of promises he made to us in god's name about what will happen after death, including most importantly that we will live with our families in a place that is so wonderful we can't now comprehend it, and that any earthly sacrifice (giving our wives to Joseph Smith for sexual purposes; leaving our families for years at a time to serve missions; handing over all of our property; destroying our marital intimacy by taking multiple wives or sharing our husbands with other women; sending

our kids to dangerous places for years at a time to recruit new members; giving up what in many cases is the most vital part of our retirement and the joys of being with grandchildren etc. during that time in order to seek new recruits; giving up most of our discretionary time and money throughout our lives; wearing odd underwear; modifying our sexual practises; etc.). If he was misleading us (intentionally or otherwise) respecting what will happen after death, we have wasted much of the effort we put into Mormonism and hence much of our lives. And when I add up the reliable evidence I have respecting Joseph Smith, the picture that comes clearly into focus is that of a man who would do and say almost anything to control the behaviours of those around him. And he has been proven false in so many cases where he was trying to control others, that I would consider myself foolish to believe the most spectacular of his claims for which the proof offered should be strongest. Most Mormons are either blissfully unaware of the evidence, or because of the psychological and sociological factors noted above, believe that it is not reliable enough to have much weight put on it. And, as I note below, belief and behaviour are two different things. I am reminded in this regard of something the prominent French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu taught, as summarized by David Swartz:

Bourdieu takes his argument to a more general level by arguing that not only is all action interested [as in motivated by concerns related to advancing the personal or group interests of those who engage in the actions] but that much action can be carried out successfully only if its interested character goes unrecognized. He argues that a great many practices could not be performed if they were recognized as emanating from the pursuit of self interest. [Bourdieu wrote:] 'The operation of the gift exchange [an social custom in a primitive group he studied that involved the regular giving of "gifts" that performed the function of the market economy in our society], for example, presupposes individual and collective misrecognition of the reality of the objective reality of the exchange. Action occurs as if actors pursue their self-interest for this is the way it appears to the outsider sociologist who is able to calculate the statistical regularities of behaviour. It is as if the actors conspire to conceal from their own eyes the self interested character of their actions.' (David Swartz, Culture and Power - The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, p. 91)

Much the same could be said of many aspects of Mormon culture. Mormon behaviour only makes sense if the reality of the foundations of Mormonism is unrecognized. To fully apprehend those foundations causes a questioning in most cases of at least the connection of current Mormon leaders to the posited source of authority (god and his communication to Joseph Smith), and in many causes also causes questions respecting the existence of god him/her/itself.

Swartz goes onto say:

Bourdieu understands ideology, or "symbolic violence", as the capacity to impose the means for comprehending and adapting to the social world by representing economic and political power in disguised, taken-for-granted forms. Symbolic

systems exercise symbolic power 'only through the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it, or even that they themselves exercise it'. In using the term "symbolic violence" Bourdieu stresses how the dominated accept as legitimate their own condition of domination. But symbolic power is a legitimizing power that elicits the consent of both the dominant and the dominated." (David Swartz, Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, p. 89)

Thankfully, our modern society is pluralistic enough that we can leave the group and survive nicely once we have access to the information required to see the reality of our situation. Hence, to the extent that the group maintains its competitive advantage by information suppression instead of offering a better way of life from my point of view (better is determined by the values I hold and how well what the group offers advances those values), I can improve myself by leaving the group. That does not mean I have found absolute truth, but that that in classic Popperian terms, I have "falsified" one thing on the basis of the evidence available to me and my assessment of the relevant probabilities, and moved on to something that seems likely to better accomplish my objectives (advance what I value). We all use in this regard the critical evaluation tools that evolutionary psychologists tell us we are equipped with to decide that one thing is better than another, with "better" again being determined on the basis of what we value. Some will value continuity with the social group more than others, for example. Those tools, in the case of many faithful LDS people, are disabled by a combination of the absence of information and the social pressures referred to above. As soon as I had access to the relevant information, the LDS house of cards (in terms of belief) came crashing down around my ears in spite of my best attempts to shore it up. And I hasten to note that if new evidence were forthcoming as to the existence of the golden plates, the nature of their translation, god's communication with Joseph Smith, Gordon Hinckley etc., I would be happy to consider it. As I told my father recently, in many ways it would be far easier for me return to the Mormon Church than to continue as I am. But I refuse to do that as long as the evidence respecting what it does and is continues to be as it now appears. For the same reason, I would not subject myself to a witchdoctor's healing techniques, and nor would I spend the next ten years of my life trying to learn how to self levitate or time travel. The evidence available to me strongly suggests that these uses of my time and resources are unwise relative to other uses.

Look at Europe. Religion as we understand it plays very little role in entire countries over there. North America is different as a result of social forces that can be clearly seen in our history and contemporary environment (See the Values Map found at <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org> for example). This, in my view, is no different than observing that in some African and Latin American countries faith healers and witch doctors still provide a large percentage of medical services. This behaviour is based on ignorance of much relevant information combined with the inertia of certain social customs. North American religious behaviour in general, and Mormonism in particular, is a manifestation of the same phenomenon in my view.

It is also my view that as the world continues to modernize and our paradigm becomes increasingly scientific and access to information oriented, the "brand" of religious belief currently sold by the LDS church will occupy a smaller and smaller slice of the human bandwidth, and questions of the type we are discussing here will seem quaint.

Behaviour

I think we should be careful when linking continued association with the Church to belief. I know people who taught for many years at BYU while having views respecting the Church that are similar to mine right now. They enjoyed, and continue to enjoy as far as I know, LDS intellectual society. They valued the LDS family oriented life style. They picked and chose the Church callings they took, lied or rationalized their way through temple recommend interviews, felt that Joseph Smith was inspired to an extent and an unreliable fraud and liar many ways, and revelled in the "paradox" of their spiritual life. The manner in which they dealt with this paradox branded them as members of the Mormon elite. All the while they wrote books for and/or taught classes to people who believed them to have wonderful "testimonies" despite their erudite, academic standing. Hence, the faith of the ignorant is often based on a presumed, but in fact non-existent or at least very different, faith of the more knowledgeable. My former history professor Dad still bases his faith at least in part on Hugh Nibley, who I am convinced is a classic academic playing a game that is completely divorced from reality. But because Nibley never openly challenged the Church and continued on the payroll at BYU while playing his game, Dad assumes him to be "faithful", and "if it is good enough for a genius like Dr. Nibley, it is good enough for me".

While I am not certain of this, what I have read and heard about Leonard Arrington causes me to believe that he was a closet fringer, whose view of Joseph Smith and the Church's leadership would have shocked the faithful had they been expressed publicly. He was the first to rush to and emotionally congratulate Lavina Fielding Anderson just over ten years ago when she presented a paper at a Sunstone Symposium respecting the dysfunctional nature of modern Mormon leadership that eventually resulted in her excommunication. He was also clearly a post-modernist (we can't know anything for sure, so within a broad range of possibilities one approach is as good as another) and was raised during a epoch of Church history that was dominated by people like Hugh Brown, David McKay and others who taught intellectual freedom and believed that the truth would eventually win out and we should not fear it. Arrington was also a consummate politician who believed that he could do great good by reforming the Church from within as he gradually gained permission to tell its history in a responsible fashion, and he had to toe the party line to stay in that game. Unfortunately, he was unsuccessful in his campaign, and we were deprived of what I suspect would have been a compelling, enlightening voice because of the manner in which he chose to try to make his contribution to Mormonism. He might have been a "prophet" of Mike Quinn or Sterling McMurrin proportions had he proceeded differently.

At the request of a family member, I had a couple of long conversations with one man who is perceived as a "faithful" but questioning intellectual. I found during our

conversations that he served as bishop of a student ward while believing very much as I do now. Were it not a condition of his continued marriage to a woman he loves, he would have left the Church decades ago. Continuing to hold a temple recommend is a condition of his marriage. I cannot imagine such a hell. He is a well educated, refined, wise man, who has been as inactive as it is possible to be while holding a temple recommend for most of the past 30 years. He was shocked when called as bishop, but after a frank discussion with his stake president and strong encouragement from his wife, he accepted the calling and feels that he did a lot of good for the students he served. And I suspect he did in many ways. He is a good counsellor, and I am sure he gave lots of good advice. He also, unfortunately, must have left most of his ward members with the impression that he was a believer, although he assured me that during his two year tenure as bishop he did not once bear his testimony. His stake president knew of the degree of his disbelief, and also that he would not interfere with the faith of the ward members and would run a good ward. The area of the Church in which this occurred is not one that has a surplus of talented leadership.

So what of people like a few of my friends who are well informed and choose to continue in relatively close affiliation with the LDS Church? I first observe that they are not "true believers". I doubt that they would do the kinds of ridiculous things I did in terms of sacrificing myself and family for Church callings, for example. And if they understand what the Church is realistically able to do for them, and how it can hurt them and their families if they allow it to, and on that basis find that it "works" for them, who am I to be critical of their choice? They are fully informed, intelligent and have exercised their free will. I might speculate as to whether their behaviour would be different if they were not surrounded by Mormons within their families and communities and had easy access to a relatively vibrant network of "fringe" Mormons, but I cannot be critical of them. I am, however, highly critical of the institution that continues to try to maintain the perception of a competitive advantage that does not exist in order to control those that it purposefully keeps in ignorance.

And what of my bright friend who left the Mormon church and immediately adopted evangelical Christianity, and has angrily upbraided me for my "atheism" (his word, not mine - I am more agnostic than atheist)? He has falsified Mormonism, but has had powerful religious experiences of the Christian variety and does not wish to critically examine its foundational claims. He loves his association with a group of people who believe as fervently as did his Mormon friends. His Christian tradition is not susceptible to the clear "falsification" that his Mormon tradition was, but are subject to the same criticisms unless interpreted metaphorically, in which case they work just fine. He is not, however, content with metaphor. And his new church is no where near as controlling as was his Mormon belief. It encourages him to "feel god's call" and then do what he is inclined to do. Hence, it is a much more healthy belief system in that regard. But, he is violently intolerant of my position because I refuse to agree with his. I believe that his spiritual decision making machinery and why he behaves as he does is nicely explained by what I have outlined above.

Who Can We Trust?:

As one of my friends recently put it, "quite simply, no one but ourselves". No one else can reasonably be expected to take care of us as well as we will, and that is not to suggest that we will go a great job of this. But no one can be counted on to do better, and most will do much worse because as is the case with the Church, they are driven by imperatives that differ from our interest. This knowledge has enlivened me as nothing ever before. I am now vitally interested in all of life, and am learning at a faster rate than ever. This is an exciting, wonderful change.

I carefully consider the advice of those who have proven trustworthy, but I never completely trust anyone. In particular, I do not trust anyone who seeks my uncritical obedience, or who is not self aware enough to warn me of their fallibility. I am always ready to be proven wrong myself, and to see those I listen to most carefully proven wrong. I am aware of how many things I have "misrecognized" in the past and the social and psychological forces that are aligned to encourage me to continue to do that in many ways. My religious experience is no more than an example of how this behaviour dominates our perception of the world, and so I am trying to become more aware of my surroundings. Hence, I am constantly scanning the horizon for new ways of looking at things that will enlighten me. Most of the best I have found so far come from those with the scientific inclination to collect large amounts of data and sort through it looking for explanatory patterns.

I can imagine no better way to proceed through life than what I enjoy at the moment, but am open to any further improvement that I may be fortunate enough to find. This worldview will be my greatest gift to my children. And here is the key: This attitude is born of necessity. It cannot be held by one who believes that there is an oracle who must only be consulted in order to know the nature of reality and what we should do. One of the many things of love about the Matrix series is the nature of the Oracle there posited.

If there is a secret to "the good life", I humbly and ignorantly suggest that it may be found in this paradox: That the threshold of responsible adulthood is crossed when we act consistently with the idea that we can uncritically trust no one and hence are our own best guides, while never losing sight of the fact that both man and nature are inherently good.