

"People Believe What They Want!"

Richard Swinburne, Faith and Reason page 24, "In general, a person cannot choose what to believe there and then. Believing is something that happens to someone, not something that he does. I believe that today is Monday, that I am now in Oxford, that Aquinas died in ad 1274, etc. I cannot suddenly decide to believe that today is Tuesday, that I am now in Italy, or that Aquinas lived in the eighteenth century."

THE ESSENTIALS

Belief is holding that something is probably true. You soon end up acting and thinking as if you know it is true. You end up feeling it is a fact when you don't know it if is - that is bad if it is wrong. Belief then in itself appeals to your wish to feel certain and you enjoy the arrogance of thinking you know what you do not in fact know. It relieves the confusion and fear that comes from realising that there are many things important to you that you do not in fact know to be true. We feel in control as well for belief functions like a filter that affects how we see things and colours how we judge things. If you believe that God treats you as somebody special, you will feel that if you get cancer that it is like a joke and he intends to take it away so you may not worry about it. Your belief serves you.

We see that belief can trigger emotional reasons for holding on to belief. Belief therefore can enslave a person. If you care about belief more than truth then you are open to misleading others. So it is important to challenge belief so that people believe for the sake of truth and do not become bigots.

Now it does not follow that we only believe what we want to be true. You can search earnestly for truth and struggle to accept it and then after that reap emotional benefits.

Religion does not teach that people must believe what they want but to research and decide what is best to believe and see what appears to be true. It does that officially but in practice it is a different story. It only teaches it because it cannot avoid doing so. A religion that teaches people must only care about what they want to believe cannot survive. The claim that people must be allowed to believe what they want and encouraged to seems on the face of it to be respectful to religion but it is not.

Some people claim that people only believe what they want. But belief is about grasping out for truth not about what you want. They are talking about themselves aren't they? Yes.

Talk about people believing what they want arises only in the subject of religion. That is significant.

It would be very serious if you were to say, "God uses the evil we make to overcome it and produce good from it" or "Nobody should be damned to Hell forever but if you choose it you should be there and you deserve it. Just as we don't praise people for doing their duty we have no warm feelings for those who go there" when you are talking about what you want to believe. Those beliefs are so terrible that you would need to be confronted with overwhelming evidence that they are true and believe them kicking and screaming.

If religious people only believe the religious things they want to believe, then when they pass their faith on to their children and others this can only be classed as pure exploitation. The honest person does not promote beliefs to you because she wants you to believe. That would make her motivation suspect. She would be biased. The honest person gives you the tools to make up your own mind and keeps her feelings and biases out of it. She may not succeed completely but trying is what counts.

If you believe something because you want it to be true, that is not belief. All belief needs some evidence or what is perceived as evidence. Belief means thinking something to be probably true and you need evidence to think it. If you really believe something then it is not just because you want it to be true.

If you really believe what you want, you are saying that you choose whatever tells you the belief may be right and dismiss and ignore whatever may challenge or refute it. This is the dishonest selection of evidence.

Instead of talking about letting people believe what they want, we should direct them to what real belief involves. Give them an appreciation for evidence and if they comply they will start searching for truth and be open to it.

GOOD NEWS FOR AUTOCRATS!

If people only believe what they want to believe then this opens the door to totalitarianism. You can make it worth their

while say to believe in God by giving them money and fancy houses etc or threatening them with jail if they do not want to believe and refuse to. You can make them believe by making them want to believe. Or you can try.

If you leave people to think for themselves you give up control and totalitarianism is impossible and totally out of the question.

A DEEPER EXAMINATION

Some say that people mainly or only believe what they want to believe. Others say they have a right to believe whatever they want for policing people's views and opinions would be totalitarian and harmful. This is wrong though it is right to say that policing opinions would be bad. People do not have a right to believe what they want at all. They have a right to believe whatever seems true to them. Believing and desiring are two different and distinct functions.

Feeling that something is true is not the same as something seeming to be true.

It is not true that people always believe what they want to believe.

You cannot make yourself believe that cheese is bread not even if you will get a million dollars if you succeed.

Do all besotted wives deny the evidence and proof of their husband's infidelity? Some do and some don't. Those that don't, believe what they really do not want to believe. They don't want to believe their husband is a rat but they believe it anyway.

Often people feel things are true and mistake this feeling for believing. But you can feel omnipotent though you know or believe you are not. You want to believe you are omnipotent - you want to believe this more than anything else. But that will not make you believe it.

If you believe things because you want to, then it follows that when you give reasons for your belief you are lying.

There is a word for a person who only believes what he wants - psychotic is that word. No peer journal argues that our beliefs are really about what we feel and not about reasons. Feelings influence our interpretation of evidence but that does not mean our beliefs are wholly explained by our feelings.

EXAMPLES OF BELIEVING BECAUSE YOU WANT TO

If somebody takes a "leap of faith" what they are doing is taking a leap into the unknown and hoping for the best. It is not a leap of faith for they cannot be sure if they are doing the right thing or not. It is a leap of hope. The leap of faith does not exist. The leap of hope is what people are talking about!

We are often given the examples of people freely getting married and developing self-confidence as examples of people who choose what they are going to believe and trust. How self-confidence could be given as an example of a belief you choose is incomprehensible. And the marriage example is a terrible one too considering that to marry properly, you have to ask yourself if you believe the other person is worth marrying and being with for the rest of your life.

A smoker is an example of a person who allegedly believes what they want. The smoker underestimates the risk and exaggerates how good her or his health is. But the smoker must believe it is dangerous when he or she finds it necessary to underestimate and exaggerate. If it is a genuine mistake then the smoker is not an example of a person who believes what he or she wants. Rather than believing what he or she wants, the smoker is just faking a belief he or she does not have.

The notion that people only believe what they want is wrong in general. But there are areas in which it seems to be true. It seems to be the case that belief in supernatural events such as miracles and belief in a supernatural God may be down to desire and not because the person values truth. A religious person can only be heeded or taken seriously when they advocate religion and evangelise if it is clear that they accept the supernatural while doing all that is reasonably possible to keep feelings and desires out of it. We must remember that some people fear the thought that there might be no supernatural and that everything is natural. At least if there is a supernatural they feel they can hope that it might look after them and save them from the impersonal cruelty that is the uncertainty of life. Fear is no basis for faith. It only leads to bigotry.

Miracle promoters do not emphasise evidence - they just want to get people to give them the compliment of taking their word for it that they have seen a miracle or have reason to believe in the claims of somebody else who has allegedly witnessed a miracle.

We get through life by idealising our future. We don't know what tomorrow will bring but we program ourselves to think it will be good or fine or that we will handle it if it proves a challenge. That is one example of believing something because you want to. Just be aware of the

bias. But do not base faith in God on it. Many mistake the bias for faith in God!

If I believe something because I want to, what I do is remind myself of the experts or people perceived as experts who believe it or say they do. I dump the responsibility for checking it all out and getting to the truth on them. Many believers in God who suspect God is rubbish console themselves by simply seeing - not reading - books that defend belief in God. Their faith rests on the precarious grounds of the opinions held by others.

CAN YOU KNOW WHY EVERYBODY BELIEVES SOMETHING?

Suppose you want to believe that others only believe what they want because they want to. What does that then say about you? It is worse if you believe that because you want to! You cannot know all other people. You cannot know enough about them to justify accusing them of believing only what they want because they want to. It may be that the person who believes only what they want is you - the one who accuses others of it. If you only believe what you want to believe, then it follows that it is not truth that matters to you but what you want. So you cannot be trusted and are up to your neck in self-deception. You call things the truth when you really mean, "They are what I want to believe not the truth." When you are right it is only because of luck and not because you are trying to be right.

Wanting to believe what you believe does not mean you believe it partly because you want to, or chiefly because you want to, or only because you want to.

There is more to belief than wanting to believe. If belief is about what you want to believe then it is not belief. It is not sincere.

To say people only believe what they want to believe is to accuse them of pretending they care about evidence when they do not. It accuses others of being selfish and dishonest hypocrites. Even the altruist who only believes in altruism because she wants to would be selfish for she does not care about truth or evidence and by definition the wellbeing of others. Though she does them good it is not about really doing them good.

Undoubtedly, there are people who want to believe something and who may claim that they believe it because they want to. But can we trust them? It is not honest to try to believe something because you want to. Belief is about truth and not about what you want. It is easy to go to Church and feel you believe in all and then as soon as you are out the door you remember that you know it is all bollocks.

It is not true that belief and opinion are about you making up your own mind. Your mind makes itself up. It happens to you. You may push buttons to manipulate the process but your mind always makes itself up.

THE BEST VERSION

While I hate the advice to believe what you want, the following isn't the worst version of the advice,

"Believe as you wish. But until you have the evidence to justify that your view is true and all other views are false, you should not live as if your view is true and all other views are false. We should all humbly acknowledge and respect each other's religious and non-religious views. Be tolerant."

TOLERANCE

Nobody believes that anybody should be allowed to believe what they want. People who claim to be liberals say they do but they are lying. Liberals are intolerant toward the beliefs of serial killers. Most don't worry that they have a morally objectionable intolerance to people who have different life plans to their own. Liberals tend to hate religious fundamentalists.

Most people who advocate tolerance feel that it is the only attitude that is respectful to other people. But if a respectful attitude is what people are trying to achieve, then tolerance must have its limits. Commitment to tolerance cannot be absolute.

FINALLY

Belief is about the truth not you. Take care to avoid letting your feelings determine what you believe and think.

Some beliefs are impossible to have no matter how hard you try to have them or how much you want to believe. To force yourself to believe what you know contradicts the truth shows you don't believe at all deep down.

If you refuse to have the beliefs you like the best then what? At least you show you try to let evidence speak to you instead of being brainwashed by desires and emotions.

You have a partner who you adore. Do you believe the best you can about that person because you want to believe it? Or is it because you want the best about them to be the truth? If so, then it is not that you want to believe terrible things about your enemies, it is that you want the terrible things to be really the truth.

We all know that what we believe and have opinions about mean nothing or little in the face of truth. There is no point in believing somebody bad for that is not going to necessarily make them really bad. Only the truth can do that.

We cannot change beliefs at whim. Why then do we seem to act as if others can? That is our temptation to intolerance showing!

People accept beliefs they do not choose them. That is why it is so vital to look at how a person arrives at beliefs as opposed to anything else. People need help in discerning how they arrived and why and they need encouragement or help to reevaluate and criticise those beliefs.

What you want to believe can influence what you believe but it is not what it is all about.

What if, "People do not believe in things because of the evidence. They believe what they want to and after that they try to justify their beliefs. So the cart is before the horse" is true? But these people fail to justify their beliefs. If you won't use evidence properly you don't really care about it and are only using to make it look like you care about truth.