

IS THERE NO POINT IN TALKING SENSE TO ANOTHER?

Some say people only believe what they want to believe because they think there is no point in trying to help anybody change their mind. But their view is grossly absurd. It is really an excuse for laziness and an easy life where you don't speak out when you know you should. We can safely deny that desires and wishes control all our beliefs. And they have the audacity to say, "It is respectful to let people believe what they want!" But how do you know that other people believe their beliefs do not need a challenge? Maybe they need some drama and some criticism?

Who are you to say that it is respectful to say nothing? Your respect for belief is hypocritical. All it is good for is leading to stupid and bad and dangerous beliefs being allowed to run riot. Bad beliefs result in bad actions or standing by while evil triumphs. If your respect for belief is so great then why do you not respect those who say, "I believe in challenging the beliefs of others in love and politeness?"

The view is making out that people are not responsible for how they see evidence - belief is impossible if there is no evidence. If a person is in denial, they ignore evidence that contradicts what they want to believe and look the other way. Their denial masks the fact that they themselves suspect or know deep down that they are wrong. If you really think you are right then you will not be afraid of evidence that seems to contradict you. You cannot avoid seeing that 2 and 2 make 4 - but that is only because you let yourself care about truth. The view makes excuses for bad and malevolent beliefs. When we are watching a movie, we turn off the bit of our brain that tells us that it is not true. Then we think it is true until we leave the cinema. But we are still responsible. The phenomenon is the reason why the likes of William Lane Craig parrot definitively refuted Christian doctrine as if it were true when they actually have to know that it is wrong.

Others say even if you can change other's minds, you shouldn't try. That too is nonsense. It is worse nonsense. We should all be adults and willing to revise our views. In fact wanting people to believe in changing their minds is one of the foundational things we want to believe and want other people to believe. This is far more basic and important than any belief in God.

Even if it is true that people believe what they want it does not follow that we should not object to them doing so. If we believe what we want then it follows that we believe what we believe because we feel we want to and we twist the evidence to give our belief the semblance of rationality and realism. We do not believe out of respect for truth and evidence but to suit ourselves. We would be responsible for fooling ourselves. We would be fundamentally dishonest even as we pass for being honest. And we are being dishonest not just for ourselves but with others.

If we believe what we believe mainly or solely because we want to, then we have no real reason for the beliefs. We are covering this up when we give reasons. We are pretending that we really think they are reasons. Opposing or working against the beliefs of others is an unavoidable part of life. We do it every hour of every day. If we really think people should be left to believe whatever they want we are saying that truth does not matter and thus opening the door to insanity and chaos.

It would be bad enough to be a devotee of "let people believe what they want" in normal mundane life but it would be intrinsically evil to bring God and religion into it. It would be urging people to worship what you feel is true. But worship cannot be about what you feel is true. It is idolatry to adore a God you only feel exists. You must think he is a reality. God and religion involve going too far. God is not about you but about God. If you adore God because you want to and not because he wants to then you are manipulating the people who you encourage to worship God.

The saying is a product of human insincerity. Those who say it do not really think it is true - they do not mean it. Its an example of how many of us sometimes like to defend what cannot be defended or justified. Nobody believes that anybody and everybody should be allowed to believe what they want. Liberals are intolerant toward those who believe in encouraging serial killers or violent fundamentalists. Most don't worry that they have an intolerance based on moral objections to people who they consider to be very harmful. They do not see the intolerance as something regretfully necessary or a necessary evil but as something admirable.

Most people who advocate tolerance feel that tolerance 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. In other words, disrespectful acts must not be tolerated.

"Let people believe what they want" does not respect our appreciation for being challenged to rethink our views even though the challenge will be unwelcome and painful for a time. If we do not try to dialogue with others and encourage

people to check out their beliefs, we risk helping those beliefs produce harm for society. Beliefs may influence how you engage with others. If you brainwash your child to believe that Adam and Eve were made in the Garden of Eden a few thousand years ago, you are making sure that child will never get the chance to become a scientist.

If people should be allowed to believe what they want, then people should be allowed to believe they may gently but firmly present the truth to others.

People these days mostly say you can believe what you want. The correct view is that as there are so many things that we cannot prove, we have to do our best and work out what seems likely to be true. Belief is not full certainty - we must really think that something is probably true, that is what real belief is.

We must always be open to revising those beliefs - even if we do not like doing so or fear what we will find out. Otherwise we will be trapped by fear. We will fear anybody and end up hating who we think will disagree with us and that has led to sectarianism both in its atheistic and religious forms. If our beliefs are about what we want and not about truth, how can we trust others? We will think they are no better than us!

Feeling that something is true is not the same as thinking its true. The notion that you should believe whatever you want suggests otherwise. Also, nobody really believes in the notion. They forbid you to believe in murdering infants and eating them no matter how much you want to believe in it. Belief is not about what you want to be true but about trying to learn what IS true.

Some people say, "Let people believe what they want." But belief is not a choice. You cannot simply choose to believe that the sun will turn green in five seconds. Belief just happens and is caused by evidence - we all evaluate evidence differently which is why people never believe exactly the same things. We all believe stuff that we don't want to believe. We have to be mature and expect challenges every day. We are the one with the problem if somebody says something that offends us. Catholicism says it is a sin not to believe. It seems to mean that if you don't believe then you have not looked at the evidence and thought about it carefully so you are at fault for not believing. It would be odd to argue that letting people believe what they want shows tolerance for religion when it contradicts Catholic doctrine which says that faith is partly comprised of belief and belief comes from evidence and from opening your eyes with the help of God.

IN PRAISE OF A CHALLENGE

All who speak out to challenge the beliefs of others are to be praised for having an alternative voice. Honest people do not oppose the truth of their beliefs being examined. The world would long have perished in war if we all thought we should not be exposed to anything that makes us think differently.

The unsympathetic harshness towards believers that many unbelievers have is defeating their own purpose which should be to help people think. And those who are being nasty in return to them are adding to the problem.

And besides, atheism and evolution are important yes but surely encouraging people to be noble is far more important?

The honest and sensible person cares about what should be believed - not about what he wants to believe. If a cancer patient wants to believe he doesn't have cancer, and believes then he is not being honest and he knows it. Deep down he sees the truth. Believing what you desire to believe is the same as pretending to believe.

Some feel that those who believe stuff because they want to do so because they already sense what the truth is and find it too painful to think about. People can hide their fears and traumas. The person brought up with intense religion fears getting outside the box. They can conceal their pain in a smile. Helping them to face it is important which is why manners and respect are crucial.

FINALLY

We conclude that presenting evidence and facts to people can help them to change their beliefs. Their beliefs are more than just about wanting to believe. Giving people the benefit of the doubt means assuming they want to believe what the evidence says. That is the only time it is right to believe what you want.