

Tracking the evidence of ideas

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The Humanist Association of London and Area is guided by ethical principles outlined in the 2002 Amsterdam Declaration of Humanism. Most of these 12 principles are acceptable to both secular and religious adherents. In fact, one of my Christian friends stated previously in a *Free Press* column that humanistic principles are as easily accepted as “motherhood and apple pie.”

There is one of the 12 principles however, that causes religious believers to hesitate and sometimes to reject it: “A fundamental principle of humanism is the rejection of beliefs held in the absence of verifiable evidence, such as beliefs based solely on dogma, revelation, mysticism or appeals to the supernatural”.

In assessing this 10th principle, it is important not to overlook the word “solely.”

Some of the world’s leading theological thinkers — such as Martin Buber, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr — sought verifiable evidence to support their religious beliefs and it is important that they did so.

Sometimes verifiable evidence comes from science. It may also come from first-hand witnesses of events or from scholarly studies of historical records or from the rejection of positions taken to be logically inconsistent with competing verifiable studies.

When followers of Roman Catholicism are considered for sainthood, such as in the case of Mother Teresa, the Pope looks for as much verifiable evidence as can be found in keeping with the traditions of sainthood. He does not easily accept that mysticism, revelation or dogma, nor even prayer offered to God, will provide sufficient evidence or proof to justify sainthood.

The best theological leaders in history did not rely solely on dogma, revelation, mysticism or appeals to the supernatural.

In philosophy the study of how can we really know that we know something accurately is called epistemology. Epistemology concerns whether or not evidence is sufficient to confirm an opinion as a proven fact.

In everyday life we often come to accept many ideas as true because of convenience or because we find that much of the time they work for us. Our experiences with things we see or hear help to confirm our beliefs. Our normal experiences with people and events give us clues that we often rely on. Much of the time we conduct our lives by relying on commonly held opinions and we don't worry too much about hard evidence that can lead to absolute proof.

Many ordinary religious believers operate on the commonly held customs of our society. But when the stakes are high, we often have to rely on hard evidence.

For example, do we really have climate change and global warming?

One hundred ninety-six countries now agree we do have this human-made problem. In December 2015, these countries pledged to change their previous ways of doing things in response to current evidence. Many world leaders, including Pope Francis, have come to think that hard evidence indicates global warming is a fact that requires changes in our human behaviour. A combination of his formal studies in chemistry and philosophy combined with theology enable him to take an informed view on this important matter.

Similar questions are of such importance to humanity that we need to act on as much hard evidence as possible. For example, can the atomic wastes from nuclear power plants be stored safely for thousands of years by depositing such wastes deep into layers of limestone rock? These are questions that require as much concrete evidence as possible prior to taking action.

Our greatest theologians in the past were people who felt compelled to question opinions of common faith. Wherever possible, the best religious leaders included as much evidence as possible in searching for proof.

Thoughtful religious believers do not rely on beliefs based solely on dogma, revelation, mysticism or appeals to the supernatural. Such loose thinking, or lack of thinking, can do harm to humanity.

If the best religious leaders can accept the humanists' 10th principle, surely this can encourage ordinary religious adherents to do likewise.