

"Believing" Can Be Deadly  
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Human beings, unlike most lower species, are not governed much by instinct. The birds that return to Capistrano each year do not have travel choices. Monarch butterflies are programmed with two destinations: winter and summer groves, thousands of miles apart.

Religious systems fall into the category of "beliefs," that is: accepting by tradition certain ideas that cannot be confirmed by reason alone. But even religions hold each believer capable of rational thought: doing right and avoiding wrong. Faith systems tell us that if we deliberately do evil, we will be punished in the afterlife. When religions are allied with the state, however, they do not wait until the afterlife for punishment. Not only bad behavior but even bad thoughts (disbelief) are punished.

Most modern countries, backward Muslim states excepted, have chosen secular rule to provide for order and justice. We like to think of ourselves as rational, discerning truth from lies, and expecting citizens to think. Alas, we cannot depend on many of our fellow citizens being thoughtful. As H. L. Menken, the mid-20th century satirist noted: "No one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public."

I have a kinder view of Americans' usual good sense. But, as Peter Funt (Candid Camera TV documentary "Outvoted") noted, "the constant assault by social media, certain cable TV hosts and the guy in the White House is testing that"

Funt's hilarious commentary: "Candidly, voters are easily confused;" filmed, during the last election, a fellow dressed up like a Cossack Russian offered people in the street payment for their vote. Some were amused, others ready to switch to vote for Trump if the price was right. The price was made in 10-ruble notes.

The fake Russian was Elijah Morgan, an actor who told people he was with the R.F.B.A (Russians for a Better America) offering cash for voters to vote for Bernie Sanders in the primary and then switch to Trump in November. What surprised Funt was that nobody expressed outrage that a Russian was trying to corrupt our election. One college student (whom we would hope could think) listened to the spiel and then said: "That's so cool!"

We can laugh at this gullibility, but history illustrates how epidemics so panicked the public that they heeded lies and went on lynching sprees. Medieval Jews were accused of "poisoning the wells" during the Black Plague, even though as many Jews as Christians were dying from it. Witches (any old woman living alone) were accused of casting spells to cause plagues or other ills. In parts of Africa today, the witch hunts (real hunts for imagined witches) go on even today in times of stress.

As late as the early 20th century, Chinatowns were burned down when epidemics came, because of the belief that the Chinese themselves, not the rats or tainted water found in crowded communities, were to blame. In today's pandemic, non-thinkers avoid Chinese restaurants, and our President praises his own wisdom in banning travel from China.

Families that should trust medical experts that childhood inoculations are necessary and safe, instead believe discredited studies on the internet that such medicines cause childhood autism. Ignorant, gullible Pakistani villagers who believe their clerics that the polio vaccine is a CIA plot to make their children barren now have crippled or dead children. Religious "true believers" who congregate for "worship" now overwhelm hospitals with sickness and death.

The Pandemic crisis revealed how little public trust there is in the Trump Administration's incompetence and the President's stream of misinformation. His experts are now stepping up and the President alternates reluctant support with resentment. Trust depends upon reliability and truth, not self-congratulation and contradicting experts. Trump's dog-and-pony shows are getting old.

Serious people are still trying to determine whether their information is true or is baloney. Happily, there is a growing industry of fact-checkers: The Better Government Association, PolitiFact, the Poynter Institute, NPR's "Disinformation 2020: Can you believe it?" and the Associated Press "Fact Check" columns are sources that one can trust. These sources are non-partisan and should get wide public

attention. We need broad publicity on this.

686 words.

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