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In Doubt We Trust: Cults, religions, and BS in general

Robert Anton Wilson

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*Can we actually “know” the universe? My God, it’s hard
enough finding your way around in Chinatown.*

Woody Allen

Last week, I happened to see two TV shows about “cults” — “Scientology” and “Heaven’s Gate” on A&E’s *Investigative Reports* — and they got me thinking. Each show had at least one galoot remarking that the line between “cult” and “religion” seems fuzzy at best, but each show also had a majority of folks who were quite sure they could distinguish a “cult” from a “religion” by the institution’s degree of “mind control” or “brainwashing.” I think both groups were confused.

There are two clear-cut and empirical lines between a “cult” and a “religion”: [a] membership (voters) and [b] bank account, [b] being a function of [a]. If a group has enough members to influence elections, it will also have a large bank account, and these two factors will guarantee that the politicians, the cops and the corporate media will treat it with respect, as a “religion.” With few members

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and little money, the same group could be called a “cult” and treated accordingly, even to the extent of toasting, roasting and charbroiling, as in Waco.

This line remains obvious and visible to all observers. The only problems arise when people try to draw a less “materialistic,” more metaphysical distinction between one gang of True Believers and another. Materialistic questions can be answered, e.g., “Does that matchbox have any matches left in it?” Metaphysical questions about “mind control” or any other immeasurable “entity” or “essence” cannot be answered, and the best that can be said is that arguing about them has provided a certain amount of intellectual entertainment, or combat, for a few thousand years. At least for those who enjoy that kind of pastime. Sort of like chess, you know.

I have no commitment to materialism as a philosophy that explains everything, since no correlation of words can ever do that, and a philosophy is never more than a correlation of words. But restricting myself to the “materialistic”/scientific *method* of asking questions that have definite experiential answers, I observe no difference in operation between “cults” and “religions.” Catholic nuns and priests vowing celibacy seem no more or less weird than Heaven’s Gate members who also make that choice. Mormon extraterrestrial cosmology seems as goofy as Scientology, etc. Religions and cults all use the same techniques of brain damage, or “mind control,” i.e. they all instill BS — Belief Systems.

BS contradicts both science and ordinary “common sense.” It contradicts science because it claims certitude and science can never achieve certitude: After all, science can only say, “This model — or theory, or interpretation of the data — fits more of the facts known at this date than any rival model.” We can never know if the model will fit the facts that might come to light in the next millennium or even in the next week.

But BS has an even more total incompatibility with what I loosely called “common sense.” Except when we get dragged into a metaphysical, or ideological, argument, we all know damn well

how fallible we are. We know that our sense impressions can mislead us, for instance. If we see somebody who looks like Joe across the street, we are aware that it may be Joe or it may be some ginkus who looks a lot like Joe. We examine him empirically lest we classify him too quickly as Joe or not-Joe. We have learned that slow, tentative judgements are safer than rapid certitudes.

After all, the Earth *looks* flat. Worse yet, if ten witnesses at an accident are questioned, ten slightly different stories always emerge — and sometimes the differences are huge, not slight.

I have performed the following experiment in workshops for nearly 40 years now: Everybody in the class is asked to describe the hall they passed through to get to the classroom. I must have tried this several hundred times by now, and I have never encountered two people who agreed totally about what was or was not in the hall, the color of the walls, or any similar data. We do not walk through the “same” hall: we walk through a reality-tunnel constructed by our imprinted, conditioned and learned brain circuits.

The same experiment works with hearing, and other senses, as well as with vision and memory. Try it with a half-dozen friends. Let somebody with a watch say “Go!” and then all of you be silent and listen for one full minute — 60 surprisingly long seconds. You will all hear some sounds nobody else hears and miss some sounds everybody else caught.

Human brains are as individualized and unique as human fingerprints. We all live in different sensory universes, and nobody has a guarantee that his/her universe corresponds more exactly to the alleged “real universe” than anybody else’s.

But if our perceptions are somewhat uncertain, then all of our ideas, which are deductions or inferences from perception, must also remain somewhat uncertain.

The late, great Dr. Timothy Leary used to put this in terms of a baseball metaphor: the best batters all had a lifetime batting average below .333. That means they missed more than two out of three

times they swung. Now, maybe you are vain enough to think you are more than twice as good at philosophy as Ted Williams was at baseball, but even then you'd only have an average around .600. To assume an average of 1.000 is to assert that you are more than three times as smart with words as Babe Ruth was with baseballs — rather a conceited view, *nu?* — and yet that's what every Belief System (BS) claims.

The function of religions and cults, including the political or ideological ones, is to short-circuit the normal “common sense” process of doubt, investigation, further doubt, further investigation, further doubt, etc. The person with BS knows the “right answer” at all times and knows it *immediately*. This makes them very happy, and very annoying since most of their “right answers” don't make sense to the rest of us.

Common sense and/or science require investigation and revision, etc. BS only requires a Rule Book — sacred scripture, *Das Kapital* or whatever — and a good *memory*.

People with “faith” represent mental health problem #1, because memorizing rule books cuts you off from sensory involvement with the existential world. It also creates the kind of intolerance that produces witch hunts, Inquisitions, purges, Holocausts etc.

Belief Systems, “faith,” certitudes of all sorts, result from deliberately forgetting the fallibility of human brains, especially the brains of those who wrote your particular rule book. Paradoxically, this leads to a rejection of the best functions of the brain — namely, its ability to rethink, revise and correct itself. It also physically exhausts you, as Ezra Pound noted in Canto 85:

Awareness restful & fake is fatiguing

If the world seems to be full of stupid, crazy and half-asleep people, that is because it is still dominated by Belief Systems. Whether this BS operates under the label of religion or cult or Political Correctness, it shuts off all brain functions except memorization and represents the suicide of intelligence.