

Southport Pips

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An Exercise in Epistemology: Belief in Jesus or Belief in Qanon?

Presented by
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It has often been noted that nearly all QAnon believers are Evangelical Christians. Great concern is expressed by many Europeans and some Americans when open QAnon supporters are elected to the US Congress and Senate. But the US legislature is already full of Christians, so which belief system is more credible?

Not all Americans are unaware of this issue. Please watch the following video by the very well respected satirist and political commentator Bill Maher, on HBO:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhTbtqOJA08>

A programme of this nature, on HBO, would have been unthinkable when I lived in the USA 30 years ago, which at least shows some hope of moral progress. However, I expect most Pips members will be annoyed by the mocking tone of Bill Maher's presentation and his use of the daftest bits on the New Testament - I certainly am. So, I would like to take a proper look at the epistemology of belief in QAnon and belief in Christianity.

In the following definitions I have avoided extremes and have taken a very moderate line. For example, I have not included the 50 million Americans who believe in the Christian rapture or, at the other extreme, the fact that some Anglican priests don't actually believe in God. Similarly, I have ignored the crazy lady who told a BBC presenter that the ground beneath her feet is full of babies waiting to be eaten by Prince Charles. I have also adopted the Roman approved view of the teachings of Jesus rather than the entirely different perspective from the Gnostic and other gospels.

Definitions

1. Mainstream QAnon believers maintain that there is a Global Coordinated Paedophile Conspiracy, involving high ranking politicians and public figures; and Donald Trump is sent by God and is heading up a secret war against the conspiracy.

2. Mainstream Christians believe that an all knowing, all powerful, all good creator god sent his only son to earth where he taught us how we should live, committed miracles such as raising people from the dead and was crucified and resurrected for the forgiveness of our sins. People who believe this will go to heaven forever when they die and those who do not will burn in hell forever. The church of Jesus provides the highest possible moral leadership and guidance.

How do we know what is true?

There should be evidence based on empirical fact (or extrapolations based on logic and / or mathematics). Ideally the facts will be testable and reproduce able by independent observers. If not, then there should be either irrefutable technology based evidence and / or a wide range of independent first hand witnesses whose observations were recorded at the time or shortly afterwards and, ideally, who can be cross examined about the veracity of their claims. Hearsay should be treated with the greatest suspicion. Witness statements should be reviewed with a full understanding of the limits of human perception, psychotic states and sinister motivation. All other possible explanations should be considered and extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. According to David Hume:

“When anyone tells me that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself whether it be more probable that this person should either deceive or be deceived or that the fact which he relates should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other and according to the superiority which I discover, I pronounce my decision. Always I reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous than the event which he relates then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.”

Things which are true work. So, the statement that penicillin can cure some diseases is true because penicillin works. The statement that prayer helps the recovery of heart disease patients is not consistent with evidence gathered to the highest possible standards in double blind clinical trials: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16569567/> Therefore, the belief that prayer helps the sick, or at least helps heart patients, is untrue.

For something to be true it must not be contradicted by high quality evidence and empirical data. For example, Jesus said that prayers would always be answered (Matthew 21.22 & many other statements found in the bible). So, we must conclude that the bible is misleading, or that Jesus was lying.

Occam's razor is often useful: the simplest explanation that fits the facts is the one most likely to be true. We do need a sufficient number of facts, of course, but unnecessarily grandiose explanations are almost certainly false.

Analysis of Qanon

There is plenty of evidence for institutional child abuse involving some of the worlds most influential organisations and people. We know that large organisations such as the Catholic Church and the C of E have had massive child abuse activities, and have covered them up at the highest levels. The Catholic Church still refuse to cooperate with a UN investigation or the UK child abuse enquiry:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/05/un-denounces-vatican-child-abuse>

Cardinal Nichols was described by the UK enquiry as a man with a lack of compassion for children and no commitment to reform his ways:

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/cardinal-vincent-nichols-put-catholic-church-ahead-of-sex-abuse-victims-inquiry-finds-g7pcmkrxg>

C of E Archbishop Carey was shamefully dismissed:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-48214957>

Prince Charles (Son of the Defender of the Faith) consistently defended and supported his great friend and spiritual guide, the jailed abuser Bishop Ball (C of E) of Gloucester. Recently there have been revelations about high-ranking academicians and intellectuals in France. And then there is Jeffrey Epstein and Jimmy Saville – a Papal Knight of the Catholic Church. It is also reasonable to think that President Trump acts against such criminal activities through his leadership of law enforcement activities. Moreover, many such activities will be secret. He may have paid off a few prostitutes, but he hasn't sunk to the moral depravity of Jeffrey Epstein or the Church.

Where QAnon falls apart is that there is no public credible evidence of a global coordinated conspiracy. However, we have seen our own police investigating conspiracies in our government: for example the false evidence given by the vicar's son, Carl Beech, which drove a massive investigation. It is only a small step to believe in global coordinated child abuse organisations. In fact, the only crazy part is belief in the *special role* of Donald Trump. No doubt President Biden is at least as determined to stop these crimes, but QAnon supporters would not agree.

Analysis of Faith in Jesus

Against the criteria presented above there is not a shred of credible evidence and yet the claims are the most extreme possible. The bible contains vast contradictions and horrible examples of immoral acts by the all good God. And that is before we consider the unpublished gospels and sources. There is no independent account of Jesus's life and not even vaguely acceptable verification of any of the stories. The problem of evil makes any thinking person, including Archbishop Welby, doubt the existence of this God. The history of the church is full of appalling atrocities against even its own members, not to mention science. Prayer is useless. In short there is no credible evidence for belief in Jesus and plenty of evidence to show that such belief is damaging to society, counterfactual and irrational.

Conclusion

Belief in QAnon is crazy but nowhere near as bonkers as Christianity. It is therefore not surprising that evangelical Christians make the small step to Qanon; they are, after all, people of faith. Bill Maher is correct.

So, convince me otherwise.

David.