

Empirical Evidence and the Life of Faith

My guess is many people regard religious faith as "belief in spite of evidence." Not so, declared prominent 20th century biblical scholar, Kirsopp Lake, who wrote that faith is "life in scorn of consequence."

For myself, I long ago resolved that the validity of my religious beliefs required, at least, that they not conflict with what we can know from the available empirical evidence (and, at best, that they be corroborated by that same knowledge).

Thus, given what we know about our planet and solar system, I do not believe in a three-story universe of heaven above, hell below, and earth in-between. Given what we know about gravity and centripetal force, I do not believe that Joshua made the sun stand still. Given what we know about biology, I do not believe that Jesus was born to a virgin, or that whatever happened in the experience we call the resurrection involved a reanimation or resuscitation of Jesus' corporeal body.

The same test applies in all other areas of life. Given what we know about ballistics, I do not believe Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, or even that he fired the bullet that killed JFK. Given what we know about physics and the properties of steel-frame high-rise buildings, I do not believe that plane impacts and fires were anywhere near sufficient to account for the global collapses at near free-fall speeds of the Twin Towers and Building 7 of the World Trade Center on 9/11.

How does one reach such conclusions?! Take seriously the incontrovertible empirical evidence. Apply basic physics principles. Resolve not to be in denial.

Empirical evidence is no respecter of politics or religion.

Billions of people, secular as well as religious, hold beliefs contradicted by the weight of evidence! Ignorance alone cannot explain this. What is really at stake in holding fast to unsupported beliefs that in all likelihood are untrue?

As a religious person I hope my world is relatively free of misconceptions, cognitive errors, unfounded conclusions, fact-defying dogmas. Much remains that I neither know nor profess to know. I've found insufficient evidence to confirm or contradict the multifarious possibilities that I continue to entertain.

My counsel is to follow the evidence wherever it leads! Aristotle might have called that an act of courage, I'd say it's also an act of faith. Don't worry, there will remain realities and mysteries that we have hardly begun to fathom.