

How Do We Know What We Think We Know?

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Reading: from George K. Beach's "Introduction" to
An Examined Faith by James Luther Adams

"An unexamined faith is not worth having," James Luther Adams asserts, turning Socrates' famous dictum, "An unexamined life is not worth living," to his own, well-honed purposes. Having *some* faith, Adams holds, is a human inevitability. At the root of our existence we necessarily seek sources of confidence, resources of meaning and courage, something on which we rely. An authentic faith, then, will be experiential and self-reflective.

Throughout his life Adams has examined his faith . . . He has asked himself: What – in his own characteristic phrase – is "the response of responsibility?" By questioning the personal and social import of his own religious commitment, Adams invites us to do the same.

"A faith worth having is a faith worth discussing and testing," Adams continues. "It is something intelligible and verifiable." A healthy skepticism not only toward received pieties but also toward one's own biases opens the way to a more authentic faith. But a searching self-examination can scarcely be sustained by the individual in isolation; it needs the presence of others in a community dedicated to the process. An authentic religious community is one that constantly encourages and, indeed, challenges its members to examine their faith. This conception sharply contrasts with the idea that the church gathers people around a fully defined received faith. It also contrasts with the view that religion is a purely individual matter, or the cultivation of an inward spirituality. In Adams's words, "It is the community in which women and men are called to recognize and abandon their ever-recurrent reliance on the unreliable" and to deliberate and decide "What is rightly of concern to persons of free faith."

Sermon

Each year at our Fellowship's service auction, I offer a sermon topic to the highest bidder. This morning's sermon is the result of last Fall's bidding. I've spent some time talking with the winning bidder about what he was interested in hearing about, and he came up with a prospective title. Once I had the title, I let it capture my imagination, and I just went where it took me. I'm afraid I may have ended up neglecting some of the thoughts that came up in our conversations, but I hope I hit at least some of the major issues we discussed.

The title: "How do we know what we think we know?" The way the question is phrased ("what we *think* we know") suggests another, related question. That is, *do* we know what we think we know? So at the heart of my reflections are responses to the two questions of how we know things, and how accurate that knowledge might be. And those responses will lead to some other issues, such as faith, certainty, doubt, skepticism, interpretation, arrogance, and humility. And while these questions can be raised about all forms of knowledge, I will be focusing primarily on religious knowledge.

Let me begin with a story. An engineer, a psychologist, and a theologian were hunting in the wilderness of northern Canada. Suddenly, the temperature dropped and a furious snowstorm was upon them. They came across an isolated cabin, far removed from any town. The hunters

had heard that the locals in the area were quite hospitable, so they knocked on the door to ask permission to rest.

No one answered their knocks, but they discovered that the cabin was unlocked and so they entered. It was a simple place – two rooms with a minimum of furniture and household equipment. Nothing was unusual about the cabin except the stove. It was large, pot-bellied, and made of cast iron. What was strange about it was its location; it was suspended in midair by wires attached to the ceiling beams.

“Fascinating,” said the psychologist. “It is obvious that this lonely trapper, isolated from humanity, has elevated this stove so that he can curl up under it and vicariously experience a return to the womb.”

“Nonsense!” replied the engineer. “The man is practicing the laws of thermodynamics. By elevating the stove, he has discovered a way to distribute heat more evenly throughout the cabin.”

“With all due respect,” interrupted the theologian, “I’m sure that hanging his stove from the ceiling has religious meaning. Fire ‘lifted up’ has been a religious symbol for centuries.”

The three debated the point for several hours without resolving the issue. When the cabin’s owner finally returned, they immediately asked him why he had hung his heavy pot-bellied stove from the ceiling. His answer was short and to the point. “Had plenty of wire, not much stove pipe.”

That’s a cute story, but it also makes some useful points. First, as in the story, we must often operate with only partial knowledge of our world. And this is particularly true of our religious world. Religious truth, by its very nature, transcends the straightforward, objective judgments we might make based on our direct sensory experience. And so we make leaps of faith, extrapolating from our experience, to try and find meaningful ways of responding to fundamental religious questions like: Why are we here? Where did we come from? Where are we going? Who or what is really in control?

Our answers to such questions may make sense to us in the context of our life history and experience, and our way of thinking. But others, with differing life experience and ways of thinking may come to quite different conclusions, just as the psychologist, the engineer and the theologian did. An important lesson here is that, as human beings, we are limited and fallible. We don’t – indeed we can’t – know everything. We are continually faced with making decisions and acting based on incomplete, partial knowledge and understanding of our situation.

This is particularly true of religious knowledge, but it is instructive to recognize that it is also true in areas that seem simpler and more objective. Even our picture of the physical world around us requires us to connect the dots and fill in the blanks, which we do sometimes more successfully than others. Our senses do not apprehend reality directly. Rather they extract certain features based on how light is reflected or absorbed, how sound waves are propagated through the air and our ears, and how molecules interact chemically with taste and smell receptors. Our brain then combines all the bits of raw data into a coherent model of the world – an interpretation - which we hope corresponds reasonably well with the real world out there.

Our ability to cope with the world suggests that the model we construct is fairly accurate. But our senses can be fooled. We’ve all seen an assortment of optical illusions, which we may find rather startling in the way they call our basic visual experience into question. So what do we do? Do we give up in despair and discount everything we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell as illusory? Of course not. But we do maintain an awareness that things are not always what they seem. From a very young age we continually interact with our surroundings, testing the match

between our perceptions and reality. And our large body of experience builds our confidence in the validity of our perceptions.

I would suggest that we must use a similar process in the case of religious understanding and belief. But of course the blanks are larger, and the dots to be connected are farther apart, and the stakes may be very high. That being the case, I would encourage caution, humility, and an occasional dose of healthy skepticism. Likewise, I would discourage an arrogant attitude and a need for complete certainty. Our human limitations and fallibility demand humility and some level of doubt and uncertainty.

Let's return now to one of our original questions: How do we know things? Or, at least, how do we come to think we know things? I'd like to mention four ways, although I will acknowledge my list is not exhaustive. The first way is through instinct. That is, there may be aspects of our religious understanding that are innate, a product of our evolutionary development. A recent book, *Why God Won't Go Away* makes that argument; that is, that the religious impulse is rooted in the biology of the brain. The authors write that

Evidence suggests that the deepest origins of religion are based in mystical experience, and that religions persist because the wiring of the human brain continues to provide believers with a range of unitary experiences that are often interpreted as assurances that God exists. . . [We] believe that evolution has . . . favored the religious capabilities of the religious brain because religious beliefs and behaviors turn out to be good for us in profound and pragmatic ways.

And so it may be that we are naturally inclined by the nature of our brains to embrace some concept of God or transcendence. But as the authors note, that inclination is subject to interpretation, which of course may go in many different directions. They also note that the existence of such natural inclinations and their interpretations says nothing about how closely the resulting religious beliefs correspond to reality.

Another source of our religious knowledge is our own, non-mystical, experience. For instance, our sense of ethics may develop, in part, through our observations of the effects and effectiveness of various types of behavior. Similarly, we note the results and effects of our own attempts at spiritual practices like prayer, meditation, yoga, etc. We also observe the kinds of behaviors exhibited by people who espouse various religious beliefs, and draw conclusions about the validity, or at least the value, of those beliefs.

A part of our religious world-view also comes directly from others in the form of religious instruction. That may mean parents, Sunday School teachers, the Bible or other scriptures, or self-appointed proselytizers. We may or may not swallow such instruction whole, but it does provide part of the array of raw data which we must filter through our rational faculties to produce what we hope is a coherent interpretation of reality.

The final source of religious "knowledge" that I'd like to mention is pure invention. Sometimes we just make things up. Maybe to fill in some of those ever-present gaps. Maybe to make sense of seemingly contradictory experiences. Maybe just to exercise our imaginations. Here's one example of mine. I've had so many close brushes with death, that it's hard for me to believe that I'm actually still alive. And so I've come up with a hypothesis, similar to the many-worlds interpretation of quantum physics. The idea is that at every instant reality splits into several different paths, along some of which I survive, and along some of which I don't. So when I snap back from dozing off while driving, my consciousness continues along a path where

I survived, but there may be another path that led to a fatal accident and an end of consciousness. The important point here is that I understand that there is no evidence for my hypothesis. I certainly wouldn't bet my life on it, and I'm happy to acknowledge that it's totally far-fetched.

I reserve my right to entertain such notions in my own mind, but I claim no right to assert them with certainty and insist that you accept them as well. I understand that my beliefs and convictions (and speculations) grow out of my experience, and my way of thinking, and those may differ from yours or from anyone else's. And that leads me to the question of certainty versus doubt, with which I'd like to conclude my message this morning.

One very painful experience, that many of us have had, is being faced with religious certainty on the part of someone we love or admire – a certainty that we don't share, and that may even directly contradict our own religious convictions. What do we do when we're told by such people that we're going to hell, or that they're praying for us to see the light? Do we argue? Do we pretend to go along for the sake of peace and harmony? Do we cut ourselves off from them? Or what?

I would not presume to suggest that there is one right course of action in all such cases. But I think that most often the way to go is something like this: First, try to understand where the person's views and beliefs come from, how they evolved. Second, hold and express your own faith firmly, but gently. Acknowledge your *lack* of certainty, modeling the humility you would like to see in others. And emphasize those values and interests that you *do* share in common. Don't be the one to withdraw from the relationship because of your differences. Always be willing to keep the lines of communication open. And always be willing to at least consider the possibility that they may be right and you may be wrong.

I'd like to repeat a story I've used before from the Rev. Meg Riley. She recounts a chance meeting with an old neighbor of hers who had been a devout Mormon, but who had recently left the church. Meg writes:

I asked her to hear the long version of the story and she said two things that stick with me and haunt me.

First, when I asked her if she missed the church, she replied, "To my astonishment, what I have found is that the overwhelming difference in my life since leaving is an absence of fear and an absence of guilt"

Second, she said that what happened for her was that she asked a new question. She'd always asked herself, when things seemed wrong or closed or stifling about the church, "If I leave, can I live with my entire family being damned to eternal hell?" and suddenly one day in prayer a new question arrived, "What if what they're saying isn't true?" Just allowing herself to consider this new question led her down a new path, which at the moment, is extremely anti-religious and anti-God but which has her looking as radiant as a new bride! She positively gleams!

So I asked her – would there have been anything that someone like me could have ever said to help you ask that second question? She thought for a long time and said, "No, not really, because anything you would have said would have been corrupt. BUT," she said, "your kindness to me and comfort with your own path to salvation is one of the things that started me wondering, What if they're wrong?"

You see, you never fully know the effect your life can have on that of another. So live your faith firmly, but gently, using it not as a weapon, but as a gift, a means of connection. And when faced with religious attacks, be like a tree in the wind, bending but not breaking. As religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs pointed out, it does matter what we believe. And the kinds of beliefs to cultivate are those that are expansive, that “open wide vistas for exploration,” that “are pliable like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.”

And while it is important to have beliefs and convictions, never let them become stale, rigid, and unquestioned. The Rev. Robert T. Weston tells us that “A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error, for there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief. . . . Those that would silence doubt are filled with fear; their houses are built on shifting sands.” May we heed James Luther Adams’s advice to regularly examine our faith with a healthy openness and skepticism even toward our own biases. “A faith worth having is a faith worth [examining,] discussing and testing.”

May it be so.