

**SEARCHING FOR GOD:
(2) HOW DO WE USUALLY ARRIVE AT AN ANSWER?**

Jeffrey S. Carlson
February 8, 2009

PROLOGUE

Having trouble choosing your faith? Just go on the internet and use Belief-O-Matic™. Their (actual) advertizement reads:

Even if YOU don't know what faith you are, Belief-O-Matic™ knows. Answer 20 questions about your concept of God, the afterlife, human nature, and more, and Belief-O-Matic™ will tell you what religion (if any) you practice...or ought to consider practicing.

Warning: Belief-O-Matic™ assumes no legal liability for the ultimate fate of your soul.

On second thought. Maybe it wouldn't be should a good idea to rely on Belief-O-Matic™!

SCRIPTURE

Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15 NRSV).__

INTRODUCTION

Cable and satellite TV are so prevalent today that many younger people have no idea what it is like to struggle to get good reception. Nicky Gumbel, of the Alpha Course, writes of his childhood experience:

When I was a child our family had an old black-and-white television set. We could never get a very good picture; it was always fuzzy and used to lose its horizontal hold. We were quite happy with it, since we did not know anything different. One day, we discovered that it needed an outside antenna! Suddenly we found that we could get clear and distinct pictures. Our enjoyment was transformed.

Many people have a similar experience when it comes to faith, whether that faith be based on having a religion or not having a religion. Everyone has a kind of faith, even an atheist, and most are content with what they have, perhaps because they do not know anything different. But what if there is something more? What if there is something that is the equivalent of an “outside antenna” that could transform our beliefs and enable us to have a clear and distinct picture of life, the world and God?

This is the goal of the series on “Searching for God.” We are going to try to answer the question, “Why do we believe what we believe?” We will also consider how we can evaluate the validity of what we believe. I want to help seekers avoid the minefields of conflicting claims about religion and spirituality and help Christians realize their own spiritual style as well as better understand how we can help our friends find a faith that makes sense.

Last week we looked at the importance of searching for God. This week we are going to examine six ways that people usually use to arrive at an answer. Much of this is drawn from Mark Mittelberg’s book, *Choosing Your Faith*, which is a recommended companion to this series.

1. THE PRAGMATIC APPROACH.

The first approach is the pragmatic approach and is quite popular in American culture. According to the research of the Barna Group, adults in this country are three times more likely (71% to 26%) to develop their own set of religious beliefs rather than to accept the beliefs taught by a particular church. Beliefs and values are chosen cafeteria style based on personal experience. The key question such a person asks is, “What will work for me?”

Now a pragmatic faith can be useful in coping with the realities of daily living. It can be practical and down-to-earth.

G.K. Chesterton was a mystery writer from the era of classical detective fiction. He was also a popular Christian author and speaker. He was asked the question about what book he would like to have if he were shipwrecked on a deserted island. Most thought he would say, the Bible.” Some thought he would say, “The Book of Common Prayer.” But he said, “I think I should like to have Thomas’ Guide to Practical Ship Building.”

The pragmatic approach is also called the relativistic approach because values are relative to one’s own point of view. On the one hand, this produces a more tolerant attitude toward people of differing perspectives. Heaven knows we need more of this in our world. But, on the other hand, to say that everyone’s perspective is equally true is impossible to maintain. Of course, if you disagree with this statement, you actually prove the point.

The pragmatic approach has a tendency to say that truth is what fits each person’s individual perspective, so something can be true for you but not for others. But this approach is self-defeating, because if someone says that truth is limited to his or her own point of view, then the claim itself – that all truth is a matter of perspective – must itself be limited to the speaker’s point of view, and thus is not relevant to or binding on others. If it is relevant to or binding on others, then it’s the exception that proves that all truth is not a matter of perspective.

Truth is objective. Truth is a matter of the way things really are – whether you like it or not, whether you can prove it or not, whether you have a different perception of it from someone else, and whether you think about it or believe it. In other words, if you step in front of a moving bus it doesn't matter what your perspective is or what you believe about buses. The consequences will be real and objective.

Your faith needs to be based on something more than what you sincerely hope will work for you. You can be sincere, yet be sincerely wrong. Whatever is real in the spiritual realm was already real before you arrived. It does not depend on you. So set out to find what is truly real and then align your life with that reality.

2. THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH.

Most people in the world have come to religious faith by the traditional approach. They have simply adopted the beliefs and practices of their families and those of influence in their lives. Children from Christian homes tend to identify themselves as Christians when they become adults. Children from Muslim homes tend to identify themselves as Muslims. Children from Jewish homes tend to identify themselves as Jews and so on.

This method of “choosing your faith” is not so much a choice as it is a passive acceptance of what has been handed down. This is not necessarily a bad thing and much good can come of it. But just because something is a tradition does not make it true.

There was an older Baptist woman who was new to town and who happened to attend a Presbyterian Church one Sunday. To her dismay, the pastor was quite parochial and asked her why she was a Baptist. She replied that it was because her parents and grandparents had been Baptists. "Ma'am, that's not a good reason for being a Baptist," the pastor said. "Suppose your parents, and grandparents had been morons, what would you have been?" She thought a moment, then replied, "I guess I'd have been a Presbyterian."

Of course, this old joke can be told using various combinations of churches. It doesn't really say anything about Presbyterians or Baptists. But it does raise the question about how beliefs are passed on.

Most everyone agrees that, at the very least, Jesus of Nazareth was one of the greatest teachers of all time. He often challenged his listeners' uncritical acceptance of hand-me-down beliefs. He was not against all traditional beliefs but was opposed to the blind acceptance of religious substitutes for the real truth of God.

3. THE AUTHORITARIAN APPROACH.

The authoritarian approach can be similar to the traditional approach in that it is usually passively received. But it is different in that it based on submission to a leader, teacher or organization. This approach says, “You had better believe it!” It claims that truth consists

of the ideas espoused by religious leaders - past or present - with whom you are to be in compliance.

The problem is, you will not know for sure if those ideas are true unless you critically examine them yourself. Your research may confirm the validity of what you have been taught. But it is also possible you will find information that takes you to better conclusions and a wiser choice of faith.

4. THE INTUITIVE APPROACH.

People who take the intuitive approach tend not to trust their intellect or even their senses but their instincts, feelings or so-called “street smarts.” Many examples can be given of people who have been guided by “gut feelings” or specific hunches about who to trust or what to do. If it is true that we have been made by an unseen Creator then it should not surprise us that we may possess the ability to perceive things that go beyond our five senses.

When my father joined the Merchant Marines during WWII he went aboard one vessel and immediately became uneasy. Something told him he needed to get off and so he got off that vessel and went on board another. He got into trouble but was allowed to stay on the second vessel. Later he learned the first ship went out to sea but never came back. It had been torpedoed and all hands lost.

Stories like this really make you think about the power of intuition. But the problem with trusting our intuition is that examples can also be given in the other direction - people who felt sure something was going to happen but the “something” never did happen. Many people’s lives have been shattered by following their intuition alone. These examples are usually forgotten more quickly and discussed less frequently than the positive ones leaving the impression that intuition is more reliable than it actually is.

It may be best to think of intuition as a kind of warning light. By itself it does not tell you a whole lot. Rather it is inviting you to make an investigation, and check things out. Look into the reasons behind what you are perceiving. Use your feelings as a guide to the truth but not as confirmation of the truth. For that we also need the lights of reason and evidence.

5. THE MYSTICAL APPROACH.

The mystical approach, in which people believe they gain spiritual understanding through direct communication from God or his messengers, has been around a long time. It can be powerful but it can also be misleading. Some of you know the story of an acquaintance of mine from college. He went up to a young woman and told her that God had spoken to him and said the two of them were to get married. The problem was God had apparently forgotten to tell her about it and so she did not want any part of it.

It is possible to have spiritual feelings that, although sincerely experienced, do not truly

reflect God or his will. History and the daily news are filled with examples of people who thought they had heard from God but said and taught things that were clearly misguided. So be careful not to assume that real feelings always represent genuine spiritual realities. But even if what we feel is a spiritual reality it does not necessarily mean it is good or from God.

Jesus repeatedly warned against teachers who would do miraculous signs and wonders but were actually false prophets and enemies of God. Paul acknowledged that God can speak through supernatural means, but he also advised us to "test everything."

The importance of testing spiritual experiences flows from common sense as well as from biblical instruction. It involves comparing what we have experienced to what we already know to be true—from facts about the world and from Scriptures that have already passed the test of having reliable credentials of truth.

6. THE EVIDENTIAL APPROACH.

The evidential approach is from Missouri. It is the "show me" approach. It says, "I've got to see it to believe it." Some who use this approach may claim that truth can only come from information you gain through your five senses. They are not open to the idea that one can gain knowledge about truth through supernatural means as well as natural ones. By limiting the ways in which this approach seeks truth, it severely limits the amount of truth toward which it leads.

But, apart from that, the evidential approach does stress the importance of logic and experience, which can prove valuable, even essential, in discovering truth. When we apply these tools to the realm of faith, logic becomes a test by which we can eliminate self-contradictory spiritual claims. For example, the statement that says Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem and the statement that says Jesus was never crucified but traveled to India and died in Kashmir cannot both be true. They could both be false but they cannot both be true.

Sensory experience is the element that wields facts and evidence, including information from history (the experiences of others, reliably recorded) and that which can be directly observed. Sensory experience can be used to investigate faith claims. For example, it can tell us when a faith claim is built on myths or based on mistaken teachings about the world, or when it endorses leaders who made prophecies that were purportedly from God but failed to materialize within their predicted time frames. Such an investigation can also be used to build a positive case, as many teachers, writers, and speakers have done, by showing the facts and evidence that back up the Bible and the Christian faith.

The evidential approach tells us logically and empirically that there is one set of truths—based on actual reality—that we need to discover and let inform our choice of faiths. We can use these tools to test the content of the multi-truth claims of pragmatism, traditional

teachings, religious authorities, intuitive instincts, and mystical encounters.

CONCLUSION

Life is full of choices, most of which are of little significance, such as what brand of laundry detergent to buy. But there are choices which carry great weight, choices that have to do with the meaning of life and how to live it, choices that can have an impact even beyond this lifetime.

When it comes to searching for God, we usually make choices about what we believe based on one or more of these approaches: pragmatic, traditional, authoritarian, intuitive, mystical or evidential. Examining these approaches can help you answer the question, “Where did you get your beliefs?” But a more pressing question is, “What are your reasons for holding on to your beliefs?” If you cannot come up with good reasons for holding to your beliefs or you are not sure what you believe then you owe it to yourself to further the search.

Next week we will consider how we can choose a faith that is practical, time-honored, compelling, meaningful, spiritual and matches reality - in other words, a faith that makes sense.