

## *From the Kitchen*

3 August 2011



Who shapes your beliefs?

Do you follow your parents' beliefs or are your beliefs a protest against theirs?

Are your beliefs heartfelt or based on external evidence?

Do you use your beliefs as a tool or as a weapon?

How sure are you of what you believe? Are you open to change? Are you committed to convincing others that your beliefs are correct?

Have you ever asked yourself any of these questions?

Are you comfortable having a belief no-one else shares?

I presume you believe the Earth to be a spherical object floating in a predominantly empty space, travelling around another spherical (very hot) object. If this is your belief, what do you base it on? Is it general knowledge? Did you learn it at school? If scientists discovered that the Earth is, in fact, a hollow doughnut-shaped object and only appears to orbit the Sun through a quantum effect, how long would you resist?

Would you become a member of the Spherical Earth Society and would you do so against all the available evidence?

We have a great deal of difficulty making sense of the world and satisfactorily explaining everything we experience. We welcome the stories told by others, which appear to give explanations which help us make sense of ourselves and of what is around us. Through these stories and our own experiences and mental processes, we create a cosmology which satisfies us to some extent – for some people it does so completely.

Think for a moment about the term 'making sense'. It indicates that we decide how the world is through our senses, through our experience. Many of the stories that we accept about our world create a world which we cannot apprehend entirely through our senses. Our cosmology (the total set of beliefs we have about the universe) relies on accepting what others believe or would have us believe. This has always been the case for the majority of people.

Most religions create a cosmology which its adherents accept, without their having any direct experience of the 'truths' believed in. In fact, many religions ask their followers to take their teachings on faith.

So, what do you believe?

There is almost daily discussion in the media about global warming. There are experts warning us of impending disaster if we don't change our ways; yet others maintain that any changes we observe are part of natural cycles. Where do you stand on this, and why? Why do some governments make decisions on the basis that the threat of global warming is real and others refuse to do so?

When authorities warn of the possibility of a bird flu or swine flu pandemic with millions of deaths, do you believe them? Do you rely exclusively on information disseminated through the daily media, or do you do some research yourself?

What *is* your response to such predictions of calamity?

These are huge questions on huge issues. But there are many less momentous questions, the answers to which dictate how you live your life. In many cases you will not even be aware that the questions exist and that you have answered them through your actions.

Examples may be the clothes you wear, the food you eat, where you work, where you go on holidays, where you worship (if, indeed, you worship).

Increasingly, our beliefs about the world are based on what others tell us, rather than our own immediate experience. With global communication now ubiquitous, we appear to know as much about events in places on the other side of the world as we know about events in our neighbourhood. We have no direct experience of these distant events, yet we discuss them as if we did.

There are many examples of events we only know of through the retelling, because we weren't there. Why would any controversy have developed around the Apollo moon landing, if there weren't people who distrusted the information on which our knowledge of this event is based? Or, maybe, they merely wanted to create such a controversy for the fun of it. If you were aware of the 'Moon landing is a hoax' debate, did you take any interest in it? Did it sow any seeds of doubt in your mind? Does it really matter whether men actually went to the moon or that it could have been a hoax? What difference does it make to you?