



The Uses of Credulity

L. Sprague de Camp

WE DEBUNKERS have long lamented the invincible willingness of our fellow primates to believe in the absence of evidence, or even contrary to evidence. Suppose we could teach everybody to think logically all the time and never to believe without evidence, thus slaying our pet dragon of pseudoscience once and for all. Would that be a good thing? Not necessarily. Our species is caught in a paradoxical dilemma.

All human societies above the hunter gatherer stage have ideologies, either religious or secular. All these ideologies contain irrational elements—tenets that must be accepted on faith, such as the Christian's belief in the divinity of Jesus the Nazarene, or the Buddhist's concept of reincarnation, or the Marxist's faith in the malleability and perfectability of man. Any of these beliefs might be true, but none can be scientifically demonstrated.

When a characteristic like human credulity becomes so widespread in a species, we must suspect that it plays a part in enabling the species to survive, even though we may not know what that function is. For example, people long thought that the bull mammoth's spirally curved tusks, crossing at the tips, were a useless excrescence, good for neither digging nor fighting. Then it was realized that they were useful as snow shovels to get at food in winter.

The same with ideologies. Men on the most primitive level seem actuated by two main drives, less compelling and more inhibitible than true instincts but still effective. One is the drive of self-interest, without which no species could survive.

The other is the altruistic drive—the drive to help and defend others of one's species. Some social drive or instinct is necessary for pack-

L. Sprague de Camp is a prolific author of science fiction, fantasy, and science fact and has written frequently about fringe-science. He is a CSICOP Fellow.

hunting species like lions and wolves; it is lesser or wanting in solitary hunters like tigers and foxes. Having spent millions of years as a pack hunter, man has a natural drive to form hierarchical, cooperative groups. However necessary the drive of self-interest, a certain minimum of altruism is needed to make any group, from a family to a nation, function successfully.

Natural or innate altruism, however, seems confined to one's kith and kin—that is, to the number of persons, usually several score, that make up a hunting band. Among primitives, where a tribe typically calls itself “the real human beings,” altruism usually stops at the band or tribal boundary. Those beyond, being thought subhuman, are considered fair game.

“Since some credulity is needed for a people to embrace an ideology, such credulity, up to a point, may be a survival trait.”

With the Agricultural Revolution of about 10,000 years ago and the subsequent rise of civilization, it became necessary to organize people in groups much larger than the hunting band. To persuade people to act altruistically toward persons beyond their own families and friends, ideologies were devised. After many centuries of ineffectual experiments by priesthoods, well-thought-out ideologies began to be devised about the eighth century B.C.E. by Isaiah and Zarathustra, followed within the next couple of centuries by Gautama, Mahavira, Confucius, and Lao-dze. All preached benevolence and altruism toward fellow human beings. Since it is a matter of universal observation that virtue is not always rewarded and that the wicked often flourish like a green bay tree, the prophets combined these commandments with promises of rewards for altruistic behavior in Heaven, or in the next incarnation, or in benefits to one's descendants, as well as with threats of punishment for acts they held wicked. Prophets have been at it ever since.

Most prophets have built their ideologies upon tribal myths and legends, which the priesthoods of early cities compiled and tried to rationalize and render self-consistent. That they were not altogether successful is shown by the first verse of Genesis, literally “In the beginning, the gods created. . . .”

A few prophets have composed secular ideologies, ignoring or denying the gods. The most successful have been Confucianism, Stoicism, and Marxism. Of these, the most effective in the long run has been Confucianism; but none has been conspicuously more successful in getting men to act altruistically toward all mankind than religious ideologies.

A completely rational ideology would leave its adherents free ruthlessly

to pursue their own selfish desires without scruple or limit. Many do so now; we call them criminals. If everybody did, we should have a *bellum omnia contra omnes* and life, in Hobbes's phrase, would be "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and shorte."

A realistic appraisal of the role of the irrational in ideology was made by the geographer Strabon, a contemporary of Augustus: "The great mass of women and common people cannot be induced by mere force of reason to devote themselves to piety, virtue, and honesty. Superstition must therefore be employed, and even this is insufficient without the aid of the marvelous and the terrible."

We must excuse Strabon's male chauvinism, since as a Classical Greek he could not help it. Niccolò Machiavelli voiced a similar sentiment, albeit more cautiously, since he lived in the days of the Inquisition. In *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy*, he said that rulers should foster the current religion and uphold its principles for the sake of the unity and good order of the state, even though they themselves did not believe it.

Since some credulity is needed for a people to embrace an ideology, such credulity, up to a point, may be a survival trait. Ideology is one of the lubricants, like liquor and hypocrisy, that enable men to live together in numbers vastly greater than those the species was evolved to cope with.

In view of mankind's demonstrated credulity and capacity for wishful thinking, the possibility that all men will adopt a coldly and selfishly rational viewpoint seems the least of our present worries. The greater danger is that an ideology will get out of hand and lead to self-destructive mass behavior, as when the Uwet of West Africa nearly exterminated themselves by poison ordeals, the Balengi of the same region killed off most of their tribe by executions for witchcraft, the Christians burned Serveto and Bruno among thousands of others, and the twentieth-century Germans set out to conquer the world on the basis of faith in Aryan superiority.

So we must continue to combat the more destructive irrationalities. The scientific debunker's job may be compared to that of the trash collector. The fact that the garbage truck goes by today does not mean that there will not be another load tomorrow. But if the garbage were not collected at all, the results would be much worse, as some cities found when the sanitation workers went on strike. ●

Copyright, 1986, L. Sprague de Camp.