

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." -- James Randi

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Sincerity: An Overrated Virtue

by Lewis Jones

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This kind of move has made it more difficult to decide whether a given claimant is a conscious fake, or just a sincere but confused would-be benefactor. You may decide that your local aura-reader is just a pixilated little old lady, but nevertheless, all too often the verdict is that if she is sincere, that makes everything all right. I submit that sincerity, like patriotism, is not enough, and that the pixilated little old lady is a fraud. I am not concerned here with legal definitions, because these can differ from country to country, and I am not concerned with whether there is a deliberate intent to defraud. But I am concerned with the way in which "sincerity" is being used as an excuse for malpractice.

E. Haldeman-Julius, in *The Outline of Bunk*, spotted the danger back in 1929: "It is well to stress early this point about sincerity. It is a much overrated virtue. Sincerity, joined with ill thought and ill will -- sincerity that has no intelligence to guide it -- is one of the most dangerous things in this world.... When in other days a heretic was burned at the stake, it mattered not to the victim that those who lit the fagots were sincere.... When Voltaire was forced into exile, when his writings were destroyed, when he was assailed by all the forces of intolerance, it signified really nothing to him whether the bigots were sincere men or designing hypocrites.... Sincerity can be cruel, unscrupulous, outrageous, and fraught with the peril of passionate abuse."

If (to use Carl Sagan's example) I sincerely believe that by praying over your child I can cure her of a ruptured spleen, you are at liberty to write me off as a dolt. But if my claims manage to divert you from seeking the simple surgery the

child needs, "she's dead in a day," and I stand revealed as a public menace. The trouble with naked sincerity is that it sees its beliefs as above the need for testing. This is fatal to any attempt to discover whether or not those beliefs are true. As Antony Flew puts it (Thinking about Social Thinking): "Suppose someone professes to be in business in order, no doubt among other things, to turn a profit; or suppose that the captain of a cricket team says that he is playing, no doubt again among other things, in order to win. Then what credence could we give to these professions if there is no care to keep, in the one case, accounts and, in the other case, the score."

As Aaron Wildavsky points out in *But Is It True?*, in a world ruled by sincere but unfounded beliefs, "science as a search for universal truths would be replaced by personal testimony. 'What is true' would be replaced by 'what is personally authentic.' Science, in a word, would be replaced by sincerity."

Acting on sincerity alone is a sure sign of the amateur thinker. In philosopher Paul Feyerabend's terms: "[T]he distinction between the crank and the respectable thinker lies in the research that is done once a certain point of view is adopted. The crank usually is content with defending the point of view in its original, undeveloped, metaphysical form, and he is not at all prepared to test its usefulness in all those cases which seem to favor the opponent, or even to admit that there exists a problem."

Or, as John F. Kennedy put it more simply in his inaugural address: "Sincerity is always subject to proof."

If you still harbor warm feelings towards the purely sincere, imagine yourself in a jumbo jet just before take-off, hearing the following words over the intercom: "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. This is not your captain speaking. But I've just slipped into the captain's seat, and I'm all set for take-off. I haven't had any training for this, and I have no idea what all these little flashing lights mean, but I've always felt I was cut out for flying. You don't need to worry, though, because I really, really believe most sincerely that I can do this. Here we go."

Your first reaction might well be to see in a new light Oscar Wilde's assertion: "A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal." There is a common view that if a man's sincere but groundless belief should turn out to be true after all, this means he is off the hook. But not so: "It is an established maxim and moral that he who makes an assertion without knowing whether it is true or false is guilty of falsehood, and the accidental truth of the assertion does not justify or excuse him." So said Abraham Lincoln. Politicians don't always get it wrong.

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