

Skepticism vs. Denierism

What frustrates me to no end are critics who deny certain truths in the face of incontrovertible evidence to the contrary. When faced with an idea or concept that contradicts an aspect of one's current belief system, a logical approach towards resolving the issue would be to examine the evidence presented and evaluate it as objectively as possible. You might then decide to reject the new idea on the basis of the evidence, or remain skeptical because you believe the evidence is insufficient, or change your opinion based on the validity of the evidence. If you still hold to your original beliefs, after examining the evidence, the result will be a strengthening, not a weakening, of your original beliefs. Healthy skepticism is critical to the process of discovery and learning, for two reasons. First, healthy skepticism prevents us from dismissing new ideas out of hand and opens us to the possibility of better and more helpful ideas. Secondly, healthy skepticism serves to strengthen our current belief system if the evidence for the new idea proves to be invalid.

Ideas that are accepted or rejected without examining the proof can be very harmful to our well-being. For example, most climate change deniers have not examined all the evidence. I personally believe this to be the case, because the overwhelming majority of scientists who have examined the evidence believe that it is real. Scientists who don't believe that climate change is real are in the extreme minority. If politicians continue to deny its existence, and take no action to mitigate the potential damage to our ecosystem and societal infrastructure, the result will be catastrophic.

Many books have been written in support of Christian Universalism. Some of the authors believe in the inerrancy of the Christian Scriptures, while others espouse a more liberal view. Nevertheless, from both points of view, the arguments in favor of the Universalist position are extremely convincing. In a typical conservative Christian congregation, however, you are not likely to find a single individual who has read even one book on the subject. You are just as unlikely to find a single conservative Christian pastor in your town or city who has done his homework and read-up on the subject. Instead of healthy skepticism, the idea of Christian Universalism is usually met with vehement denierism, which I would define as rejecting an idea out-of-hand, without examining the evidence for and against it.

The reasons for this state of denierism are quite understandable, and in some respects even admirable. Christian Universalism denies the primary tenet of Conservative Christianity, that without a saving relationship with Christ people are doomed to spend eternity in Hell. Because Christian Universalism rejects this idea, Christian conservatives believe that Universalism is not Christian at all, and for that reason does not deserve even cursory consideration. Interestingly, most Christian Universalists actually do believe that a person may only be saved through Christ. Many Christian Universalists subscribe to orthodox Christian beliefs in absolutely every respect, including the doctrine of the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the Substitutionary Atonement, and the inerrancy of the Scriptures. The only doctrine on which they would take issue is the eternal duration of punishments in Hell, and the possibility of post-mortem conversion. Interestingly, universalism was the predominant view of almost all of the leaders of the early Christian Church during the first five hundred years of the Church's existence.

Most denierists subscribe to their current belief system, not as a result of careful investigation of the evidence, but instead by having succumbed to the influence of authority figures in their lives, in whom they have uncritically given their allegiance. Instead of thinking for themselves, they let these “authorities” do their thinking for them.

It is my belief that this denierism mindset, which is characteristic not only of religious fundamentalism, but also many other conservative political and social institutions, will eventually result in the demise of those same institutions. Critical thinking and new ideas eventually find their way into the cultural mainstream. History has borne this out. Most modern societies have emerged from very ugly pasts, after enduring extreme amounts of war and civil unrest. Progress comes slowly because conservatives tend to hold most positions of power and authority. Gradually, however, conservative institutions do give way to change, with positive moral and ethical values still very much intact, even enhanced.

The gradual establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth will result, not from mindless conformity to negative belief systems, but instead from the awakening of hearts and minds to new possibilities. Over time, more and more hearts and minds will awaken to the possibility of achieving Heaven on Earth, rather a Heaven that can only be experienced after death by a very limited number of privileged initiates.