

# Faith-Based Worldviews as a Challenge to the Believing Game

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Peter Elbow's believing game is, I think, one of his most original contributions to our intellectual life. It is a disciplined method designed specifically to counteract the weaknesses that Elbow perceives in the preferred academic method of radical skepticism, which he characterizes as the doubting game. Whereas skepticism requires the extirpation of self-interest, the believing game acknowledges that self-interest is ineradicable, and so, as Elbow explains, "you are given constant practice in trying to get the feel of your own self-interest and to adopt the self-interest of as many other people as possible" (172). Whereas skepticism attempts to remove all effects of "projection" of already held beliefs and practices onto newly encountered material, the believing game treats projection not only as inevitable, but as a valuable intellectual tool, whereby one learns to articulate the new with one's current mental categories, not distorting the one but enlarging the other. Elbow would like to see both intellectual methods employed in the academy, but only the doubting game still prevails, in spite of all post-modern anti-foundationalism can do to dislodge it.

Imagine, then, a hypothetical academic. I flipped a coin to determine his gender. The academic is a highly specialized creature, expert at using reason to solve problems. Logical argument is his trade, and he has been trained to be extremely difficult to convince—indeed, the more difficult, the more rigorous and intellectually respectable he is. He is the master of the doubting game. For the skeptical academic, emotions are comparable to grit interfering with the operation of a delicate machine. They are to be kept out of academic argument to the highest degree possible. Ditto, therefore, those aspects of human experience that tend to give rise to emotions, such as one's gender, sexual orientation, physical condition, family situation, race, ethnicity, and religion as these are socially constructed.

The academic can play the believing game up to a point. He can understand the concept of accepting the fundamental premises of a position and then tracing how logical consequences flow from them. For example, he can temporarily inhabit the discourse of a theoretical position with which he disagrees; indeed, he must have the ability to do so in order to argue against it effectively, as rhetoricians have always known since the ancient Greek Sophists promulgated their *dissoi logoi*. But what if he is asked to inhabit a position that arouses emotion in him? This is disturbing, by the very fact that emotion of any kind is being aroused—emotion is taboo—but even more so if the emotion is repugnance or fear. Yet the

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believing game asks him to go forward in spite of these emotions, indeed to open himself to them, to remain—in Peter Elbow’s terms—“flexible,” “yielding,” “more encompassing,” “cooperative,” “supportive,” and “nonviolent” (178–79).

I submit that this challenging iteration of the believing game confronts our professional skeptic acutely when he encounters a position of religious faith. Perhaps he will try to keep religious students’ religious arguments out of the classroom by arguing that they are inappropriate to the audience—a pragmatic argument—religious arguments won’t work because not everyone is born again. This strategy is problematic for several reasons, however. For one thing, a rather large number of the audience members in a particular classroom may in fact be born again, or for other reasons quite amenable to faith-based arguments. And there’s the additional problem that this line of argument clearly valorizes some kinds of thinking that resists the mainstream over others. Certainly traditional academic skepticism is not a mainstream view and does not immediately appeal to many audience members—whether students or other adults—but we usually tend to defend it and dignify it with the adjective “critical.”

Trying to use Elbow’s believing game to deal with religious faiths in the classroom may be the method’s greatest test. As Shannon Carter observes:

Teaching writing in the Bible Belt for the past five years has taught me . . . the limits of my own tolerance for difference. In fact, the evangelical Christianity with which a number of my students most identify functions—rhetorically, ideologically, practically—in ways that appear completely and irreconcilably at odds with my pedagogical and scholarly goals. (572)

Carter summarizes these goals in good academic-skeptical fashion as encouraging critical distance on one’s life situation, whereas she senses that evangelicals have accepted a conversion process that works in the other direction, to remove doubt and alienation and to immerse them in a world where the good and the true are known with certainty.

Carter is smarter than our hypothetical academic, though. He might frame this problem as one of reason contesting against unreason—certainly, a tempting position to take, not only in light of our own professional formation but also in response to the heinous crimes being committed around the world today in the name of religion. Carter, however, understands that this confrontation between her worldview and that of the fundamentalists reveals that emotion plays a very large part in her adherence to her unimpeachably academic attitudes and goals—that there are, indeed, what she calls “ironic parallels” between how she adheres to her beliefs and how they adhere to theirs (572).

I think the most important parallel is the role played by emotion in cementing adherence. Emotion is presently under-theorized in our study of rhetoric. As Daniel Gross has pointed out, even when rhetoric is approached as constitutive or epistemic, emotion tends to be treated merely as a device the author or orator can manipulate to influence the audience (9–10). Gross argues that a culturally enriched, “psychosocial” conception of emotion, which he derives from Aristotle, was snuffed out in the Enlightenment, although traces of it linger, and his history of how this came about in the early modern period contributes to understanding emotion as other contemporary theorists are taking it up—an enriched understanding that we must have in order to test the scope of the believing game. Therefore,

I want to spend some time here exploring the complexities of emotion in relation to rhetoric.

Some important work on emotion has been done in feminist theory by Lynn Worsham, who defines "emotion" thusly: "the tight braid of affect and judgment that is socially and historically constructed and bodily lived" (105). Worsham questions the identification of emotion with the feminine insofar as this has worked to marginalize emotion. She explicitly contests the view that emotion is "reason's other," and, like Gross, she faults contemporary rhetorical studies for focusing "much attention on logos in an attempt to show that reason is rhetorical and that knowledge is politically interested, while . . . [ignoring] pathos, or emotion and emotional appeal, altogether" (105).

In contrast with this view, Worsham argues that all ideologies "are properly understood, at least in part, as ideologies of emotion" that "provide the conditions in which a primary affective mapping of the individual psyche occurs, one that sets the stage for all subsequent socialization" (105). For example, "racism is not only the result of 'incorrect' [or illogical] thinking that can be remedied through, say, multicultural education; rather, racism is first and foremost a profound fear and loathing of the racialized other" (105). Affect is so tightly braided with judgment that the mere production of logical counter-arguments cannot dislodge the links. Incidentally, this analysis suggests why our hypothetical academic is likely to be disappointed if he thinks his skeptical logic can dislodge what he regards as students' unreasoning prejudices.

Sharon Crowley has explained in detail how Worsham's "tight braid" of affect and judgment works, drawing particularly on the work of Chantal Mouffe. Crowley says, "While persuasion can of course be effected by means of reasoned argument, I posit that ideology, fantasy and emotion are primary motivators of belief and action" (59). Crowley morphs the term "ideology" into "ideologic" to describe the over-arching structure whereby emotions, including those emotional yearnings she terms "fantasies," are organized into a belief system. Following her sources, she uses the term "moment" interchangeably with "position," understanding that these terms refer not only to cognitive content but also to affective valence attached to belief. Here is Crowley on how the system works (I'm going to quote her helpful analysis at length):

For example, a worker who defends capitalism has taken up a position, has articulated (in the sense of "formulated") a discursive moment. . . . He or she can then deploy a familiar ideologic, articulating (in the sense of "connecting") this moment with others. A common move in the defense of free-market capitalism, for instance, is to connect belief in it to the belief that poor people are so because they are lazy. . . . (60)

It will be seen that the activity of "articulation"—both formulating and connecting—is important in Crowley's analysis, and she explains it further in this way:

The moves I designate as "articulations" are not equivalent to what liberals mean by "reason." Liberal reasoning is grounded on observations or perceptions. Moments of ideology, on the other hand, occur as beliefs, while moments of desire are staged as fantasies. . . . One difference between ideologic and reason,

then, has to do with the sources from which its positions (moments) are drawn—belief, passion, values, desires—rather than empirical evidence. (61)

Another way of phrasing this point would be to say that Crowley's account of "articulations" considers the many factors involved in human decision-making and motivation, not only rational argument—indeed, a full range of factors that rhetoric has traditionally considered via attention to ethos and pathos as well as logos. Crowley also understands that articulated positions connect to one another via many means, not necessarily logical links. As she says:

ideologic also entails more means of making connections than are acknowledged in liberal accounts of reason. For one thing, an appeal to a belief can stimulate an emotional response that in turn can activate other, closely related beliefs. For another, ideologic means of connection include webs of analogous and/or metonymic historical associations (that is, articulations) built up over time. (61)

Furthermore, Crowley explains that as chains of articulations are assembled, the positions tend to reinforce and intensify one another. She calls this phenomenon "resonance." Its power varies across ideologics or belief systems depending upon the degree to which a system is totalizing, that is, the degree to which a belief system attempts to fully account for every aspect of its adherent's experience. Some ideologics are more "tightly woven," to use Crowley's metaphor, than others. For example:

a skeptic need not necessarily abandon her skeptical worldview (or her friends and family) when she changes her mind about a religious or political issue [because her ideologic is less tightly woven]. Unlike skepticism, a densely articulated ideologic "explains everything," and so its disarticulation is very costly to a believer. Many other beliefs must be given up, and others rearranged, in order to abandon one. (79)

The particular "densely articulated ideologic" that Crowley's interested in here is fundamentalist Christianity.

Thus Crowley's complicated argument helps us not only because it advances our rhetorical understanding of emotion but also because it brings the analysis to bear precisely on my test case, the application of the believing game to religion. It seems to follow that to enter fully into a religious worldview, one must do much more than perform a skeptical thought experiment in which consequences are deduced from premises. One must employ the full emotional and imaginative resources that Elbow calls into play for the believing game. One must even, perhaps, engage oneself in a powerful web that seeks to impact every aspect of one's life. As Crowley says, perhaps a skeptic can "change her mind" about "a religious or political issue" without having to abandon her worldview, but fully inhabiting the worldview of the religious believer involves much more than the rational assessment of a single ideological position.

Furthermore, both Crowley and Worsham will not allow us to view the believer in a densely articulated ideologic simply as a person in need of psychiatric

attention. Worsham condemns our contemporary “therapeutic culture,” as she terms it, for “depoliticiz[ing]” all emotional commitments (107). Also, like Crowley, drawing on Chantal Mouffe, Worsham argues that “passion is what moves people to act in politics” (110). This is important to her because she wants to figure out how to harness the rage of those afflicted by social injustice in the service of progressive social and political change. Crowley is certainly sympathetic to this goal and devotes the final chapter of the book from which I have been quoting, entitled *Toward a Civil Discourse*, to devising strategies for intervening in the ideologics of fundamentalist Christians who, she fears, are advancing pernicious political and social agendas. Worsham and Crowley both want to figure out, not how to evacuate emotion from political discourse, but how to use it to forward political goals they support. To solve this problem, they need to understand the emotional lives of the folks they are trying to persuade—a complicated task, as they have shown, and one in which one might imagine that the believing game could be helpful—if and only if it is up to the task.

Worsham and Crowley help us see, however, just how daunting that task is. Is it really possible for the academic skeptic to inhabit a densely articulated web of belief that initially seems diametrically opposed to his most cherished intellectual values? Do religious worldviews stymie the believing game? Before I draw that conclusion, I want to return to the exemplary work of Shannon Carter. Carter is well acquainted with the emerging scholarship on dealing with religion in the composition classroom, and she has also noticed that many of the recommended approaches, however tactful, tend to seek to convert students from their fundamentalist faith to academic skepticism, therefore—naturally!—tending to generate responses “more defensive than reflective” (574).

Carter advocates instead the cultivation of what she calls “rhetorical dexterity,” which has the avowed goal of allowing students to maintain “both their faith-based and their academic literacies without being required to substitute one for the other” (574). Carter’s approach encourages a view of literacy—in line with the work of Brian Street and others—“as a matter of reading and negotiating various contextualized forces that are deeply embedded in identity formation, political affiliations, material and social conditions, and ideological frameworks”—and emotions, she should add (579)! As Carter notes, this approach “flattens hierarchies among literacies” so that one is not valued over another but all are assessed in terms of appropriateness to the given rhetorical situation (579). The outcome for evangelical students may well be that they cannot use their Bible-based knowledge in their academic work because it is inappropriate to the academic context, not because it represents “false consciousness” or downright “ignorance,” as some of her students have been told by other professors (579-80).

What impresses me most about Carter’s analysis, I think, is that she manages not to offer her discursive solution in a patronizing way. She has taken the trouble to discover that religious people themselves are aware of the potential conflicts between the faith-based worldview and the academic one, and they have devoted serious thought to working out a *modus operandi* between these worldviews; she cites helpful sources on this. She also tells about visiting an evangelical worship service, where she was willing to open herself to an experience that made her feel “uncomfortable” and “utterly aware of my lack of belonging” (589). In a recent discussion of the believing game, Elbow says that students can be assisted to practice it by writing a story or poem about or from the perspective of some-

one who believes the worldview they are trying to enter: “where doubting thrives on logic, assenting or believing thrives on the imagination and the ability to experience” (“Bringing” 395). It seems that Carter has demonstrated a willingness to try to imagine and experience the religious life of her evangelical students, and thus comes pretty close to employing the believing game for the sake of understanding and helping them.

I say “pretty close,” but not, I think, more than that. Ultimately, much as I respect Carter’s work, I don’t think it entirely solves for us the dilemma religious faith poses for the believing game, and for academic work generally. Carter’s own religious faith, or lack thereof, is never brought into play in her analysis (she informs us only in an endnote that she is a “fallen-away Catholic” [592] ; and while I’m on the subject, I’ll just mention that Crowley, in her brilliant book analyzing the fundamentalist world view, says nothing at all about her own religious life). It seems to me that full immersion in that dense braid of affect and judgment that Worsham names and Crowley articulates is not risked here; and without full immersion, can the believing game be said to be practiced in good faith?

Looking at the trend of Carter’s argument for how believers should handle their faith while in the academy—basically, to bracket it as inappropriate in most academic situations—I’m reminded of the kinds of arguments that were made about “students’ right to their own language.” We composition scholars were careful, once upon a time, to argue that no one form of English was essentially better than any other; instead, we urged students who did not know the form favored in the academy to learn it so that they could use it with us while reserving their native forms for other fora. You will recall what happened to these arguments about appropriateness: they came to seem inadequate. For one thing, students quickly caught on that a language they were not allowed to use in school was not valued by school, no matter what polite words the teacher said about it. This was not empowering. For another thing, both students and teachers discovered that there was intellectual work to be done that could be done only if a wider range of languages was employed than Standard Edited English. Gradually, we have seen the emergence, at least in published scholarship, of a range of effective Englishes—for example, in the work of Geneva Smitherman, Keith Gilyard, Suresh Canagarajah, and Victor Villanueva. Most likely, such a wide range is not yet accepted in undergraduate work at most schools, but at least it is theoretically acceptable.

To advance this theory, Kristine Hansen has put forward a more philosophically sophisticated set of considerations for dealing with faith-based discourses in the classroom. She argues that students should be permitted to experiment with these discourses within expository writing for four reasons. One, they have a constitutional right to do so (the right to free speech). Two, we now understand the theoretical inadequacy of philosophical liberalism and liberal monism, which guarantees only the right to free speech; instead, says Hansen, “we have to take seriously not just people’s *right* to assert their *beliefs*. We must also take seriously their beliefs” (30; emphasis in original). Three, we should acknowledge that faith-based arguments have served progressive political and social causes throughout American history, for example in the nineteenth-century movement to abolish slavery and the twentieth-century movement to guarantee civil rights to people of color (and I might add, are still doing so, witness religious opposition to the war in Iraq). Fourth and finally, religious discourses are still operating

powerfully on the political and social scene today, witness Reverend Huckabee's quite viable, if ultimately unsuccessful, campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, and so it behooves us to help students learn to deal with them if we claim to prepare them to be effective citizens.

As we are trying to do with diverse forms of academic discourse, will we be able to accommodate the faith-based discourses that mean so much to so many of our students—and if truth be told, to many of us as well? What if there is intellectual work to be done that can only be done by what Carter calls the “Christian mind”—or Jewish, Moslem, or Buddhist mind? Permitting such a development will require academic discourse to come to terms with emotion yet again, big-time, as we are still struggling to do when other emotionally charged topics come up, such as those relating to race and gender. We haven't figured it out yet. But that's not surprising. Believing, after a certain point, is not a game—but Peter Elbow's imaginatively, emotionally engaged believing game may assist us in this task. ☹

### Works Cited

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