

Charlatans, frauds and fools

By Dr. Jim Williams

Be very wary of assuming the moral high ground next time you hear someone you know has been taken in by what is clearly an implausible scam. For as Jim Williams so pertinently pointed out in this thought-provoking presentation – 1) No idea is too stupid to be believed and 2) No-one is immune.

To illustrate his first point, Williams took us on a historical journey via a mind-boggling array of names associated with scientifically-disproven theories such as the world is flat or the world is hollow. He began on a sensible note by setting them into context using the example of Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan – who, though he did not complete it, proved in an economically-driven expedition to the East Indies that the earth is spherical.

He then cited a succession of charlatan propagandists, dictators, religious zealots and thieves – Samuel Birley Rowbotham, John Alexander Davie and Wilbur Glenn Voliva – all of whom argued that the world was flat. His final example, Englishman Samuel Shenton (1903 – 1971) believed the theory so absolutely that he founded the International Flat Earth Society. Like Shenton, his supporters suggested that the planet's seas were held in place thanks to a layer of ice.

Williams' second example, that the world is hollow, began in the 17th century with Astronomer Royal Edmond Halley, whose ideas were based on scientific hypothesis. Halley posited that the Earth was composed of nested, hollow spheres. His model included a central core surrounded by multiple spherical shells, with luminous atmospheres and potentially habitable spaces between them. He argued that the Earth's magnetic poles were not just a single pair but that there were four in total, suggesting a need for his hollow interior model.

Adherents to this second proposition included John Cleves Symmes Junior and Admiral Byrd, who claimed there were holes at the Earth's poles, through which humans could gain access to the centre of the earth. The inhabitants of this hollow world, they suggested, were The Ascended Masters, including refugees from Inner Space, Atlantis and even Nazis.

The idea was further developed by Cyrus Koresh Reed Teed, who was in the medical profession in the 19th century and became involved in investigations into how electricity could be harnessed in medical applications. After a severe electric shock, Reed Teed decided he was the Messiah and founded the cult religion (also known as cohort organisations) Koreshanity. He and his followers were convinced that the world was hollow and that humans lived on the inside, with the sun at the centre. Gravity did not exist, stars were an optical illusion and centrifugal force kept everything in place.

To amplify his second point, that no-one is immune, Williams recounted the tale of the Cottingley Fairies in the early 20th century. The story focused on two girls, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, who claimed to have been photographed with fairies at

Cottlingley Beck, near Bradford. They were aided by one of their fathers, who was a photographer.

Their fanciful tale was believed at the time by none other than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a medical doctor, author, investigator and creator of detective Sherlock Holmes. He was supported by Edward L. Gardner, the general secretary of the Theosophical Society, one of three experts called in to validate the proposition. During his investigations, Garner allowed the girls to go and create new photographs to back their claim, so his credence proved absolutely valueless.

In an effort to explain why humans are so susceptible to believing far-fetched ideas, Williams quoted the phenomenon of Communal Reinforcement, which is based on humans' innate character as social animals, and has three main principles:

- Following the crowd is easy and a potential solution to difficult questions. We can't be expected to investigate or read everything, and have to rely on second-hand information.
- Disagreeing can be dangerous, and can result in social exclusion, having family taken away or even death. Can trap people into following the ideas of a particular group.
- Failing to imagine or investigate alternatives. We can avoid conflict by not thinking about alternatives.

Williams illustrated these principles in action by posing the question 'Does God exist?'. He suggested most people would answer 'yes', 'no' or 'don't know', but concluded that the correct response would be 'Which God do you mean?', as there are literally thousands of Gods that could be believed in. He also quoted the example of Mitt Romney, a multi-millionaire venture capitalist, US Presidential Republican candidate and Mormon, whose ideas impressed 47 per cent of the American electorate when running against Barack Obama in 2012.

Charlatans, claimed Williams, are particularly adept at exploiting the principles of Communal Reinforcement to enable the most preposterous of ideas to gain general purchase, and we should be constantly on alert to combat their subtle influence. "Communal Reinforcement is an extremely practical tool, but packed with serious hazards," he concluded. Looking at the numerous examples of charlatans, frauds and fools who have gained prominence in the past and who continue to exert their dubious influence in the present, it's hard to disagree. So, lots to digest and debate for anyone fascinated by how beliefs, ideas and ideologies – both true and false - become common currency.

A lively Q&A session spanned the power and persuasive qualities of dictators, social media and influencers and even touched on the controversial topic of assisted dying. Chair Jill Murphy brought proceedings to a close on a slightly lighter note by observing that from now on she would be more aware of persuasiveness in society, would reflect more deeply on the important issues facing the human race...and would withdraw her membership from the International Flat Earth Society. As for me, I'm definitely avoiding that moral high ground!