

**WHAT SHOULD I BELIEVE? AN
INQUIRY INTO THE NATURE,
GROUNDS AND VALUE OF THE
FAITHS OF SCIENCE, SOCIETY,
MORALS AND RELIGION. [1915]**

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By *GEORGE TRUMBULL LADD*

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PREFACE

THERE are no questions bearing on the conduct of life which are more frequently asked, or with greater perplexity, than the one that has been chosen for the title of this little volume. All over the world millions of inquiring minds, some of them sincerely anxious to know the truth, are daily propounding this question to the newspaper, not only to its columns of alleged news, but chiefly to its advertisements and its editorials. The man of business, however little speculative, does not expect positively to *know* in what direction the market will move along the line which constitutes his principal interest; but he seeks for as persuasive grounds as it is possible to attain, by which to regulate his *beliefs*. In a critical case, the physician watches the symptoms of his patient, not so wisely with the hope that he may make his predictions of recovery or of speedy death as certain as those of the return of daylight or of darkness at the

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hour announced by the almanac, as that he may guide his behavior in meeting those symptoms according to the faiths rendered most reasonable by his medical science. And the question asked with the most insistent anxiety by the relative or friend of the patient concerns the amount of "trust" which can be properly given to the word and the skill of that same physician. In all these relations, the question, What shall I most reasonably believe? is the one kept prominently before the mind.

We do not need to be told how prominent are the perplexities of doubt and trust in all courts of law. Here it is credibility of belief rather than certainty of knowledge which invariably plays the leading part. This is not simply or chiefly because there are so many lawyers and witnesses who do not hesitate over a trifle of deceit or a modicum of deliberate lying; or even because our very latest and most purified means of administering justice have not freed us of judges capable of being influenced by the many ways of indirect as well as of open bribery. It is the rather because the conduct of the public justice is essentially and always concerned with, and dependent upon, the beliefs and not the knowledges of

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those who take part in it. It is not without deep significance, then, that the witness swears to testify to the truth according to the "best of his *belief*" as well as of his knowledge. Honest and thorough as the best of witnesses may be in his intention, it is much more of credible impression than of certainty which he puts forth in answer to his oath to tell "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

We might be tempted to think from the talk of some of its advocates (the so-called "scientists") that science is, since it has more clearly recognized the nature of proof and has taken the modern experimental turn, almost or quite independent of the influence of general or more particular and individual, not to say eccentric and highly peculiar, beliefs; that, in fact, it has at last succeeded in making the whole compacted body of its conclusions so transparent that the light of the truth of reality now shines right through it, revealing its bony structure, systems of circulation, of digestion and of propagation, in every detail of their anatomy and of their functions. But even the novice who reads its literature or attends — listening thoughtfully — any of the stated meetings of its various learned societies, knows

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that the case is not so. And no confidential converse with any of the most judicious and really distinguished of its representatives is possible which does not make clear the fact that they at least do not claim that it is so. They only claim to be trying to reduce a great and confused mass of conflicting opinions and beliefs to terms of scientifically verifiable knowledge.

When we come to examine matters of political and social theory and practice, we need not be long in discovering that the strongest forces controlling here are the beliefs rather than the science of mankind. Debates in representative bodies the world over are not statements of truths verily known and accompanied by their proofs; they are more largely muddles of unanalyzed beliefs and crude unverified opinions. Of the causes of these opinions those who hold them can give little account; and the reasons for them have never been subjected to any thorough examination or prepared for legitimate defence. In the less deliberate and guarded forms of the social maxims and social customs, the beliefs rather than the knowledges of the human beings who compose the social factors have much the larger sway.