

The Earth is flat.

This is a belief I hold as the beginning of an ongoing search for truth and certainty. It is a starting point – an intellectual foundation on which I feel further knowledge can soundly be built. Much as Descartes did in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, I wish to start from a place of certainty and build upon it. The Flat Earth is an obvious truth to me now. My senses show me and my reason confirms it.

However, my belief that the Earth is flat is not a popular one and it is not a belief I have always held. Like most people, I was taught from an early age that the Earth is a rotating sphere which, along with a collection of other spherical bodies, revolves in an elliptical orbit around our Sun. To most of you, this will seem like an obvious and unarguable fact. It is something you have been told by teachers. Told by parents. Told by textbooks. It is something you are utterly sure of. And, more than likely, it is something you have never truly investigated.

It isn't surprising, then, that people believe so strongly that the Earth is a sphere. We are bombarded every day of our lives with information. Television, radio, books and the Internet all compete to tell us things. Society agrees that some ideas are worth debating and that others are not. The idea of a spherical Earth falls into that second category. At some point, our society decided with great certainty that the Earth is a sphere and, consequently, that further consideration is unnecessary and anyone holding an opposing viewpoint is unworthy of debate. That the Earth is spherical is a 'fact' and we are, from an early age, told to accept it without question and in the face of our own first-hand experience. But as 16th Century mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace stated, "The weight of evidence for an extraordinary claim must be proportioned to its strangeness." The Spherical Earth model is truly extraordinary and runs contrary to all of our senses. Consequently, the burden of proof is extraordinary – and this burden has never been met. But, because the idea is so firmly ingrained in our culture, few of us bother to hold the Spherical Earth model to account.

This tendency to firmly maintain beliefs while intentionally disregarding opposing evidence – particularly evidence in the form of first-hand experience – is intellectually dishonest and unscientific. Man's quest for truth is furthered only through experience and reason. During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Samuel Birley Rowbotham pioneered an approach to astronomy called Zetetic Astronomy. Zeteticism stresses the importance of reason and experience over the trusting acceptance of dogma. This emphasis on experience as the only source of true knowledge dates back to ancient Greek empiricists such as Aristotle and was also prominent in the more recent British empiricism espoused by John Locke. In his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke states, "No man's knowledge can go beyond his experience." While second-hand 'knowledge' is often a useful tool for dealing with practical, day-to-day tasks, it should not be mistaken for truth and certainty.

Empiricism forms the foundation of the scientific method, a tremendously useful tool for learning about the world. One of the scientific method's greatest strengths – when it is practiced honestly and sincerely – is its willingness to

engage opposing data. In the preface of his book *Zetetic Astronomy: Earth Not a Globe*, Rowbotham makes the Zetetic dedication to this principle clear:

I advise all my readers who have become Zetetic not to look with disfavour upon the objections of their opponents. Should such objections be well or even plausibly founded, they will only tend to free us from error, and to purify and exalt our Zetetic philosophy. In a word, let us make friends, or, at least, friendly and useful instruments of our enemies; and, if we cannot convert them to the better cause, let us carefully examine their objections, fairly meet them if possible, and always make use of them as beacons for our future guidance.

Despite its frequent criticism from mainstream science, the Zetetic approach to science is happy to take on board objections from its opponents because those objections will ultimately be used to strengthen the Flat Earth position.

The modern Flat Earth Society has its roots in Zetetic Astronomy. After Rowbotham's death in 1884, his followers formed the Universal Zetetic Society and continued to publish Zetetic literature in the spirit of Rowbotham's *Zetetic Astronomy: Earth Not a Globe*. In 1956, the Universal Zetetic Society became the Flat Earth Society. While the Society's focus became more religious throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Zetetic underpinnings remained intact. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Flat Earth Society is returning to its original scientific focus and, despite its presently diminished size, is stronger than ever. We are patient because we know that the truth will ultimately be realised. Again, from Rowbotham's preface to *Zetetic Astronomy: Earth Not a Globe*:

In all directions there is so much truth in our favour that we can well afford to be dainty in our selection, and magnanimous and charitable towards those who simply believe, but cannot prove, that we are wrong. We need not seize upon every crude and ill-developed result which offers, or only seems to offer, the slightest chance of becoming evidence in our favour, as every theorist is obliged to do if he would have his theory clothed and fit to be seen. We can afford to patiently wait, care-fully weigh, and well consider every point advanced, in the full assurance that simple truth, and not the mere opinions of men, is destined, sooner or later, to have ascendancy.

IN VERITATE VICTORIA.

Daniel Shenton

The Flat Earth Society