

1. Questioning Assumptions about Religious Belief

Assumption 1. Believing Is the Focal Act of Faith

If you ask a group of college students for a definition of religion, nine out of ten will say, “Religion is belief in a divine being (or beings),” or something very like that. Such comments mirror the culture in general because this is the way most people think about religion. Why do most people think this way? Because this is what most people think. That may sound like a stupid thing to say, but it does reflect a real situation. We pick up our ways of thinking from the culture, and the culture is us. It is, to borrow a term from the computer world, the default setting of our minds. The fact that most people think this way is not, of course, a good *reason* for our thinking this way, but it is a relevant *cause* of our doing so.

We should realize how deeply ingrained this assumption is, in others as well as in ourselves. We should not suppose that it will be easy to change people’s minds about this very common and deep-seated belief. For reasonable people, such beliefs are changed only when they have good reasons to think otherwise. So, what kind of reasons can be given for questioning the assumption that *believing is the focal act of faith*? Something is religiously focal if it is both essential and primary. What follows are seven reasons for questioning that assumption.

A. Not All Religions Are Belief-Focused

When the term *religion* is mentioned to an audience of Americans and Europeans, we are likely to think about it in terms of what we know about Christianity since it is the dominant religion in most parts of Europe and the Americas. Consequently, it is easy for us to infer that “since Christianity

is belief focused, other religions are as well; it's just that they have different beliefs." I can remember making that assumption myself when, several decades ago, I spent some time in a Native American community (Yankton Dakota) in South Dakota. I was interested in their religious practices and ceremonies and got to know the tribal spiritual leader well. One day, I asked him, "Tell me about your religious beliefs." He smiled at me silently and shook his head. Finally, he said, "You have seen us dance, you have heard us drum and sing, you have heard our stories and prayers, you have eaten our sacred meal, you have even joined us in the sweat lodge, and you have shared in smoking the pipe." I replied, "Yes, and I thank you for allowing me to do all these things. But now I want to know about your beliefs." This time, he laughed out loud and said something in his native language that his friends also laughed at. "What does that mean?" I asked him. "You are suffering from white man's mind," he said. "We should do a healing ceremony for you."

He refused to talk about any beliefs. At the time, I was tempted to take this as a sign of his lack of theological sophistication, thinking, "He doesn't know the beliefs." It only later occurred to me to think, "He doesn't tell me the Dakota beliefs because there aren't any." Given more experience in Native American communities, I would now say that though there may be some beliefs, they are not an important part of the Dakota religion. If there are beliefs, they are not focal. In fact, to focus on beliefs, as I did, is an improper approach to the Dakota religion. The proper approach is singing, dancing, and taking part in the sweat lodge or a vision quest. For the Dakota, religion is a matter of participation, not theorizing. It is not a thing written about in books but a thing to be vitally experienced with others in the community.

Since that encounter in the Yankton Dakota community, I've come to notice other religions that do not have creeds (statements of belief) or theologies. Buddhism, at least in most of its varieties, seems to operate that way. If you ask Buddhists for a statement of belief, they will give you the four noble truths, none of which even mentions a divine being. If you press them beyond that, they may give you the same knowing smile that I received from the Dakota chief, indicating that you are asking the wrong question. Taoism is another Asian religion that seems to want to avoid belief articulations, warning that "the tao that can be spoken is not the eternal tao, the tao that can be named is not the eternal name" (Lao Tzu, 1974, ch. 1). Ancient Hellenic religion was rich in story and other artistic expression but did not articulate anything like a system of beliefs. Judaism is also an example of a

noncreedal and largely nontheological religion. Like the Dakota community, the focus for Judaism seems to be on being a community of practice: reading the stories, singing the songs, eating the meal, gathering as a community of remembrance. There are many more faith communities for whom belief is not religiously focal. It would make an interesting project to explore them.

B. Even Religions That Seem to Be Belief-Focused May Not Be as Much as They Seem

At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that we are inclined to think of religion as belief because of our exposure to Christianity as the paradigm that has shaped our thinking. Belief certainly does play a central and important role in Christianity. Most Christian worship services include reciting a creed as part of their process. If you visit a Christian seminary, you are likely to find thousands of books on theology, most of which are attempts to articulate a statement of belief central to the faith.

But belief is not focal for all Christians. If you visit a Quaker meeting and engage the participants in conversation afterward, you are likely to find a deep lack of concern about beliefs. It's not that those in attendance have no beliefs. What you're very likely to find is that they have the widest variety of beliefs imaginable. As one participant said to me, "Here you will find theists and atheists and agnostics, people with fairly traditional Protestant beliefs and people who have blended together Christianity and Buddhism or Shinto or something else. We tolerate a wide variety of belief and non-belief because we don't think it's all that important. What's essential for us is experience and practice."

Kathleen Norris, noted poet and essayist, recounts her coming back to church after many years of absence. The problem with her return to church was that she was sure that belief was necessary. In her book *Amazing Grace*, she writes:

Other people had it, I did not. And for a long time, even though I was attracted to church, I was convinced that I did not belong there, because my beliefs were not solid, set in stone. When I first stumbled on the Benedictine abbey where I am now an oblate, I was surprised to find the monks so unconcerned with my weighty doubts and intellectual frustration over Christianity. What interested them more was my desire to come to their worship, the liturgy of the hours. (Norris, 1998, 62, 63)

Later in the same book, Norris recounts her own struggles with the creeds she was called on to recite in church. She finally came to realize that the apparent unconcern of the monks for her beliefs and doubts was really bothering her. In some ways, she felt they were not taking her and her struggles seriously. It then occurred to her that this self-focus was the source of her problem and that worship was a way beyond it. She writes: “Praise of God is the entire reason for worship. It is the opposite of self-consciousness” (63).

At the point of her writing, Norris had become an occasional lay preacher in the Presbyterian church. She writes about her current way of regarding the creeds:

I came to consider that the creeds are a form of speaking in tongues. And in that sense they are a relief from the technological jargon we hear on a daily basis. Now when I am preaching . . . I usually select the Nicene Creed, because then no one can pretend to know exactly what it is they are saying. “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God.” It gives me great pleasure to hear a church full of respectable people suddenly start to talk like William Blake. Only the true literalists are left out, refusing to play the game. (206)

In another of her books, *Dakota: A Spiritual Biography*, Norris writes: “We go to church in order to sing, and theology is secondary” (91).

Another author echoes Norris’s view. Phillip Clayton, a contemporary theologian, writes:

Like many other people, I was taught that the only route to being a disciple of Jesus—and indeed, the only route to any serious Christian identity—was *believe, behave, belong*. . . . So we first sit down and try to believe the Christian propositions that people tell us we should believe. . . . Like many others, I have found these marching orders to be the cause of rather continuous guilt. (Clayton, 2009, pp. 39–40)

By contrast, Clayton goes on to say, “A postmodern understanding of religion in general, and of Christian discipleship in particular, reverses the order” (40).

C. Assuming That Faith Is Belief-Focused Narrows Our Vision

The first reason to challenge the assumption that believing is the focal act of religion is that it neglects and excludes many religions and many people

within religions. If we begin with the assumption that belief is focal, then we are very likely to exclude a lot of people who, like Norris, lack such beliefs. The exclusion may be enforced by the community, or it may be, as it was in Norris's case, self-enforced.

The second reason to question the assumption that believing is the focal act of faith is closely related to the first. If we assume that belief is focal, we may miss the importance of other activities and practices in the life of faith, such as storytelling, singing, dancing, eating the communal meal, smoking the pipe, and so forth. Kathleen Norris is, once again, an excellent example of this. As long as she saw belief as focal, her doubts kept her from participating in the activities of worship. As she puts it: "Though I was attracted to church, I was convinced that I did not belong there."

My estimate is that nearly all the once-churched people who do not now participate in religious practice do so because they assume, like Norris, that belief is focal and necessary and they cannot participate because they do not have it. If we could get rid of that assumption, people might be open to performing some religious experiments. Try sitting silently with the Quakers for an hour practicing receptiveness. Try (if you dare) participating in a Dakota sweat lodge. Participate in a celebratory meal remembering a story in the Jewish tradition. Read or hear or act out a sacred story, and consider how it might change the way you look at life and the world. Sing in a choir performing one of Bach's oratorio masterpieces. Dance, in your own clumsy way, at a friend's naming ceremony. Stand in a circle, holding hands around the grave side of a dear friend or family member. What you may learn is that the experience is moving and even life changing even though it may never result in any statement of belief.

When I was a grad student at Yale, I talked an atheist friend of mine into attending a Sunday service with me at the Yale chapel. I think the fact that William Sloan Coffin Jr. was the preacher had much to do with my friend's willingness to come. Back in those days, Rev. Coffin was getting a lot of media attention for his protests against the Vietnam War. My friend sat through the whole service, attending to what was said but showing little enthusiasm for it. The service ended with a baptism during which Rev. Coffin picked up the child and held her in his hands high above his head as he walked out into the congregation. He shouted out, "Please welcome Cynthia Marie, child of God, into the family." My friend sprang to his feet, leading what turned out to be a standing ovation. Afterward, he said, "That was beautiful—thanks for inviting me along. But I still can't believe all that stuff."

Assuming faith is belief focused can also limit the range of a person's reactions to stories he or she encounters. In 2006, when Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* was released, I got calls from three different journalists. Basically, the phone exchanges went like this:

J: Have you read *The Da Vinci Code*?

T: Yes, I have.

J: What did you think of it?

T: I thought it was an interesting mystery, a well-crafted story that held my interest all the way through.

J: Yes, but what did you think of the claims that were made about Jesus and Mary Magdalene and the Catholic Church?

T: It didn't, to my knowledge, make any claims about any of those things. It is a work of fiction.

J: In other words, you didn't believe what Brown said?

T: Look, Brown is a novelist; there's no reason to suppose that *he* believed the things stated in the novel. Why should I, or anyone else, regard these as claims to be believed or disbelieved if the author doesn't even regard them that way? It's a story. It should be read as a story and enjoyed as a story.

J: So, do you want to go on record as agreeing with Brown or disagreeing with him?

T: I want to go on record as refusing to answer your question because it is so stupid. A good journalist shouldn't . . .

J: Click!

Why were so many people upset and even made irate by Brown's novel? My guess is it has something to do with a widespread tendency in our culture to suppose that believing and disbelieving are the only alternatives when one encounters topics even vaguely related to religious matters.

I used to have an elderly landlady who wrote letters of advice to the characters in her favorite soap operas—for example, "Can't you see that he's not the right man for you? You should marry Tony, not that creep Edward." and "You'll never be happy with her. She's not faithful to you; she's just out to get your money. Can't you see that?" These were not fan letters to the actors; they were letters *to the characters*. For whatever reason, she did not seem capable of distinguishing between fiction and actuality. At the time, I thought this was

a harmless characteristic of a peculiar old lady. I now think it may be much more widespread, a confusion that is fairly common in our culture.

D. Believing Is Not an Intentional Activity

We often enjoin and encourage people to take their religion seriously. Godparents in many Christian communities promise to encourage and enable the faith development of the children they sponsor. We promise to bring them to church, to encourage their reading of Scripture and their participation in the sacraments, and so forth. All of these things we can enjoin and encourage the young person to do. What we cannot sensibly do is enjoin them to believe. Believing is not something that can be done intentionally and deliberately. I can't say, "Tomorrow I will change my beliefs. From then on I will believe in the meaninglessness of life and the universe." I either believe that or I do not. I can't say, "Beginning tomorrow, I will believe that Zeus made my daughter pregnant." No matter how many rewards or threats someone presents me with, I just can't believe that.

Lewis Carroll, in his masterpiece "Alice through the Looking Glass," presents us with the following bit of sublime nonsense:

"Let's consider your age to begin with—[the Queen said] how old are you?"

"I'm seven and a half, exactly [said Alice]."

"You needn't say 'exactly,' the Queen remarked, "I can believe it without that. Now I'll give you something to believe. I'm just one hundred and one, five months and a day."

"I can't believe *that*," said Alice.

"Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."

Alice laughed, "There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I'd believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

One can't believe something by deciding to do it. One can't believe by trying hard to do it, not even after taking a long breath and closing one's eyes. Martin Luther, in his Small Catechism, states, "I cannot by my own power or strength believe in Jesus Christ nor come to him. But the Holy Spirit has

called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts.” Beliefs, like doubts, are not really something we choose. We “find ourselves” believing or doubting in spite of our wishes and intentions. It might be appropriate to talk about “falling into belief” or “falling into doubt” as we do about “falling in love.” We don’t really have much choice in the matter. Since belief is not chosen, one cannot really be blamed for the beliefs or doubts one has. One may be blamed for believing on bad or insufficient reasons. But if someone I know finds something unbelievable, there is no point in my saying, “But you ought to believe it.” I may, however, give a person reasons to believe something. It is the force of reasons (or the lack thereof) that moves us to belief or doubt. So, we find ourselves saying, “I used to believe X but then I discovered Y. I now find X no longer believable. I may wish to believe something but find it impossible to do so.” Religious practice, on the other hand, is intentional. I can promise to read a sacred text and then do it. I can promise to partake in a religious ritual and then do so. But I can’t promise to believe something. Either something is believable to me or it isn’t. The supporting reasons make something believable, not my act of will.

So, propositional believing is neither an intentional nor a willed act. Yet faith, at least to some degree, seems to be such. May we conclude then that faith is more a mode of participation, association, and practice than it is a mode of belief?

E. Believing is Too Cognitive and Too Logo-Centric to Be the Focal Act of Faith

I often ask my students how many believe that zagruks scapulate glaucously. None raises a hand. So I teasingly conclude, “So, you all *doubt* that zagruks scapulate glaucously?” Usually, some student will point out the stupidity of my assertion by saying, “We can’t either believe or doubt a proposition we don’t understand.” She will, of course, be right. What this implies is that if belief is religiously focal, so is understanding. If I lack understanding, I can’t have faith. Understanding is, at least, a necessary condition for propositional belief.

If I claim to believe in the communion of saints, I need to be able to explain to someone what this means. If I claim to believe that God the father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are all one being in three persons, I need to be able to explain what, exactly, it is I am believing. In other words, explicit theology

is a prerequisite of propositional belief. If belief is, in turn, the focal act of faith, then a level of theological education is a prerequisite of faith. If belief is the focal act of faith, then systematic theologians are the paradigm case of the faithful. But most people, many theologians among them, think that's ridiculous. Can't simple and uneducated people and children be exemplars of the faith? I would certainly say so. If we think of the inspiring exemplars of the faith, who are they? Theologians? Doctrinal historians? Not likely. Beliefs are too propositional, too logo-centric, and too cognitive to be the focal act of faith.

The problem with being belief focused is that we are likely to regard every statement as something we either believe or doubt, that is, as either credible or incredible. The other possibility is that the statement is noncredible, that is, that some other response than belief or doubt is called for. I may be inspired by a poem from Mary Oliver. I may be provoked to deep questioning by a short story from John Updike. I may have my life transformed by a novel from Dostoevsky. And all of these things may happen without raising the question of whether to believe or to not believe what I am reading or hearing.

F. Many Serious Thinkers Have Suggested Other Things as Being Religiously Focal

Many different thinkers could be provided to illustrate this point, but it should suffice to give a few brief examples.

First, Søren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth-century Danish Christian thinker, argued that faith is not the opposite of doubt but something that actually requires doubt. Doubt, as well as cognitive confusion, actually lights and feeds the existential passion of faith, which Kierkegaard understood as a kind of ultimate life commitment. For Kierkegaard, belief is neither focal nor required for faith but, in a sense, stands in the way of it. What is required on the part of the Christian writer, Kierkegaard maintains, is not to make Christianity more believable but to focus and inflame the passion of faith.

Second, Paul Tillich, a twentieth-century German American theologian, defined faith as ultimate concern. Many people who have ultimate concerns (justice, equality, truth, authenticity) do not consider themselves religious. Tillich, however, is willing to take them, rather than many "religious" persons, as the paradigm of faith.

Third, Frederick Ferré, a twentieth-century American philosopher, argued that the defining genus of religion is valuing. Religion is intensive valuing of comprehensive values. “Intensive” describes the subjective side of faith, that is, how we value something religiously. “Comprehensive” describes the objective side of faith, that is, what it is that is valued. If we lack the first, our valuing is indifferent and apathetic. If we lack the second, our valuing may be intense but trivial, like a hobby or an obsession.

Finally, Louis Pojman, the twentieth-century American philosopher cited in the preface, suggests that hope, rather than belief, may be the religiously focal activity. While hope requires a belief in the possibility that something can be true, it does not imply a belief that it will be true; in fact, hope requires a high degree of uncertainty. Moreover, hoping requires the making of a commitment, it is motivational, and it requires the willingness to run some risk. Pojman thinks these features of hope resemble much more what we admire in the religious person than believing does.

The fact that some noted thinkers do not make the assumption that belief is religiously focal does not prove that the assumption is wrong. But it does provide us with a reason to question it. Very often, we make assumptions because we can't think of any other way things might be. This section bears testimony to the fact that there are other ways, some of them quite interesting.

A Thought Experiment

When I was at Oxford University in the 1970s and 1980s, there were a number of odd organizations. One I remember in particular was the Society for the Pursuit of Lost Causes. They met every fortnight planning strategies for the recovery of Britain's lost American colonies. Another I encountered was a small group of persons who had in common that they shared a particular belief—that humans came to this planet from another place in outer space.

All members of the latter group shared that belief, though they disagreed somewhat about the details. Most members believed that this human earth colony was one among several experiments sent out to habitable planets and that those who sent (or brought) us here at least periodically observe us. There was a good deal of disagreement over whether these beings constantly observe us, like psychology students observing rats in a lab, or only occasionally observe how we're doing—for example, once every century or so. There

was also some disagreement about whether those who sent us here are themselves human or some kind of super race. A couple members related to me that they believed that our cosmic observers place bets on our survival and development. On the great stats board in the cosmic equivalent of Las Vegas are some interesting questions: “How long until the human race annihilates itself?” “How long until they use up all the earth’s nonrenewable resources?” “Will they learn to live peacefully with one another or is war part of the permanent human condition?” “How long until they discover that we’re observing them and begin to communicate with us?” Bets are placed daily, and the odds change correspondingly.

The Oxford group was somewhat diverse. Most of the members were male academics ranging in age from twenty-five to eighty years old, though there was also a smaller group of women (mostly in their forties and fifties) and quite a few “townies,” including the deputy chief constable of the city of Oxford. Two of the members were from Africa, and two were from India. The group met monthly to debate and discuss and then retire to a local pub for a pint of beer. On the few occasions when I attended, vigorous debate addressed what the group should be named. All seemed to agree that the previous name, the Colonists, was no longer appropriate.

The question I would like you to consider is this: is there any reason to think that this group is a religion? It is certainly a group focused by a common belief, and the belief has something to do with the human genesis, the human story, extraterrestrial beings, and our relation to an otherworldly reality. Why would we doubt that it is a religion? What is missing from it that, if present, would incline us to call it a religion? I’d like to call attention to the absence of four things.

First, there is no sense of the sacred. There is no sacred place, no sacred object, no sacred times, no holy days, no pilgrimages, no focus for worship or contemplation. There is no symbol or sacred text either. Some suggested that the ancestors, or “the initiating generation,” is, in some sense, worshipped, but I don’t think that’s so. Most of the members simply regard them as a group that brought us here as an experiment. These “founders” are not assumed to be beneficent or praiseworthy, just curious enough to run an experiment, and we are it, or at least part of it.

Second, the focal story this group tells does not seem to have any transformative power. It is not a paradigm for understanding the world or life. It is not expected that people hearing this story will live transformed lives.

Also, there is no ritual. There are no hymns, no celebrations, no holidays. The only thing performed regularly is the reading of the minutes of the last gathering, which consist almost entirely of the topics that were discussed and which pub all retired to at the end. The drinking of the pint may be as much ritual as this group can manage.

Finally, there is no ethic. The story does not inspire a particular pattern of responsibility or behavior (except drinking beer) or a particular appreciation for the earth or for other humans either. There is nothing the members are obliged to do or obliged to avoid doing. The only requirement is believing that the human race came to this planet from another place and that there are humans (or humanoids) elsewhere in the cosmos observing us.

If any of these four conditions were present, there would be some reason to think that a religion was being practiced. If all of them were present, there would be, I think, sufficient reason to draw such a conclusion.

What is the point of this reflection? It is to demonstrate that a set of beliefs—even a set of beliefs about our beginnings, our cosmic situation, our future, and even an otherworldly reality related to us—is not sufficient to make something a religion. Something moves toward being a religion when the set of beliefs or the informing story starts to shape our understanding of ourselves, the world, and others. A belief or story becomes religious when it informs a way of seeing that informs a way of living. A religious story is not just a believed story; it is a life-informing story.

James Carse on the Religious Case against Belief

James Carse, in his 2008 book *The Religious Case against Belief*, wants to distinguish clearly between the human interest in religion and the human inclination toward systems of belief. He characterizes religion as a *communitas*, a culture, as opposed to a *civitas*, a political system, structure, or institution. He says that *communitas* is characterized by the fact that it endures for centuries, sometimes even for millennia, and that it seems to tolerate and endure many particular social and historical manifestations.

Religions, he argues, are to be distinguished from belief systems in several respects. First, belief systems always spring up as opposed to some other belief system. If the opposing system dies out, so does most of the eros of the belief system. Religions do not arise in this way, nor are they dependent on others to which they are opposed. Carse writes: “[Beliefs] are essentially dyadic. Every offered belief has its distinctly objectionable opposite. . . . For

that reason, questions, even when genuinely asked, seem to be little more than triggers for answers already prepared” (2008, 186).

Second, religions embody the perennial posing of the deepest questions. They are what Carse calls “a conjunction of questions” (191). Belief systems are attempts to answer these questions. Third, belief systems end a conversation. Religions are a conversation. Fourth, belief systems are explicit verbalizations. Religions continually point to what lies behind language. Fifth, belief systems are formulated. Religions are sung, danced, and expressed architecturally and artistically. Just like a great poem often moves us to write a poem in response, so religions call forth and enlarge our creative capacities, to perform an act of interpretive resonance with the tradition. Beliefs call forth repetition, not creative interpretation. Interpretation, or “revisionism,” is anathema to the true believer.

Sixth, for religions, the fundamental texts are deep and open. For belief, texts are narrow and limited in meaning. Using Islam as an example, Carse writes: “Suppose, however, that Muslims come to a broad consensus on how the Qur’an is to be interpreted; were they to do so, they would have substituted the consensus for the text itself. The Qur’an would then have become dispensable. At best it would serve as a proof text for one or another of their beliefs” (203).

Finally, the ideal case of a belief system is the achievement of orthodoxy. The ideal religion, on the other hand, is the one that nourishes the richest range of disagreement within itself. “Believers,” Carse states, “are terrified by genuine expressions of religion” (206). Carse congratulates both Judaism and Christianity for the ways they have made that possible and, of course, also condemns them for those times in their history when heterodoxy has not been allowed. He fears that Christianity is now entering such a time. He states: “It is less a religion than a belief system. Where are its poets?” (207). About Buddhism, Carse writes:

When the dying Buddha assured his grieving friends that his body would decay . . . he was asked whether he would live on after death. He answered in effect: we cannot say the Buddha lives on; we cannot say he does not; we cannot say he both lives on and does not. On the one hand he emphasizes the reality of his death, on the other the utter impossibility of understanding it. This open-ended, or what I have called horizontal, way of thinking then penetrates every aspect of Buddhism (p. 209).

Carse notes that almost all contemporary authors who attack religion attack it as if it were a belief system. They alone cannot be faulted, however, because many of the defenders who argue back make the same assumption, as does the general culture. As Carse admits: “The world is far more attracted to belief systems than to religion as I have described it” (209). Yet he is borne up by the hope that there will always be poets and that they cannot help but sing.

G. The Term *Believe* Is Not Univocal

You may have heard the story about two Harvard philosophers, Josiah Royce and William James, walking along a country road having an argument. As will happen with philosophers, one topic led to another until finally they were talking about matters theological and what the common man believed about such matters. At that moment, just such a man, a Yankee local, came over the hill walking toward them. The philosophers said to him, “Please, sir, if you would answer a question for us you could help us settle an argument.” The man stopped and nodded assent. “Tell us, do you believe in infant baptism?” The man looked them over with a puzzled eye and replied, “Believe in it? Shucks, I’ve even seen it happen.”

One can imagine other humorous miscommunications based on the confusion of senses of the word *believe*:

“Do you believe in premarital sex?”

“Yes, in fact I think it’s quite common.”

“Do you believe in horoscopes?”

“Sure, there’s one in today’s paper.”

Sometimes one may hear a question about belief and not know which sense is being asked about:

“Do you believe in acupuncture?”

“Do you believe in romantic love?”

“Do you believe in universal health care?”

Clearly, there are different senses to the word *believe* and different ways in which someone may believe something. The philosopher story would provide

us no entertainment if that were not so. But even though sophisticated people realize this, they still frequently confuse themselves and others by not clearly distinguishing among different senses of the word *believe* and the differing acts we call believing.

The assumption that believing is religiously focal often overlooks the fact that *belief* and *believe* are not univocal. In fact, a wide range of actions falls under forms of the word. Let us consider a few different uses and meanings the term has in order to show what confusion can occur if these meanings are not distinguished.

Belief-That and Belief-In

The most common differentiation is between “belief that” and “belief in.” In the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries, I had several acquaintances who were supporting the candidacy of Ohio congressman Dennis Kucinich. They liked his values, they trusted him, and they were willing to commit their money and efforts to his campaign, yet not one of them *believed that* he was going to win. *Belief in* seems to have a variety of species, trusting, valuing, and hoping among them. Of course, Kucinich’s supporters also had *beliefs that*: they believed that they knew what he stood for, they believed that he wouldn’t suddenly change his fundamental values, and so forth. Usually, we distinguish between these two kinds of believing without confusion. But sometimes *beliefs in* get expressed as *beliefs that*. At a political convention, a person may be nominated for office. The person making the nomination may say, “I am proud to place in nomination the next governor of the glorious state of Ohio, Squeaky Clean.” The person may nominate Ms. Clean without actually believing that she will become the next governor. Introducing her in that way is meant to help convince the audience to get on the bandwagon for her. The nomination, which I take as an articulation of a *belief in* this candidate, is expressed as though it is a *belief that* she will win.

The fight song of my college alma mater has a line that goes “Maroon and gold, our colors, [will] see victory today.” My guess is that many thousands of supporters have sung that song over the years without actually believing that their school would win. We *hope* that we will win, we *believe in* the school, showing support for it in a variety of ways, but that doesn’t imply that we *believe that* it will defeat every opponent it encounters.

I believe in my doctor. I trust him to take care of me. That does not imply that I believe he will always cure my ills or that he will never make a mistake.

My belief in him is a belief in his values and that my welfare is among those things he cares about.

The Declaration of Independence contains the following lines:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

Here we get the clearly stated belief that all men are created equal. What sort of thing were the founders doing when they claimed to believe this? They make it perfectly clear that there is no doubt about this. The proposition is so clearly true as to be “self-evident.” It is also so firmly believed that they are willing to put their “lives, fortunes, and sacred honor” at risk by signing on to this document. Yet, I am quite sure that if you asked any of the men signing this document whether they thought that all men were equal in any measurable way they would have admitted that we are not. We are unequal in size, unequal in wealth, unequal in intelligence, unequal in talents and gifts, unequal in strength and health. Since they all certainly knew this, what were they affirming by making the “self-evident” claim that all men are created equal? Are they claiming that this should be true, even if it is not? I doubt it. The presence of many inequalities make our society richer, stronger, and more flexible. A society of clones was not the founders’ goal. What then did they mean?

Some people would say that although the statement sounds as if it is affirming an empirical claim—that all men are, in fact, created equal—it is not. To regard it in such a way is to misunderstand it. Instead, the statement is making a religious or metaphysical claim: that all men are equal in the eyes of God or in the eyes of the law or in the domain of human rights, and so forth. They are claiming the self-evident truth of this statement in some domain that is not empirically verifiable, a domain that serves as a foundation for ethics and politics. From this truth, many things will follow, including an argument for representative democracy, a bill of rights, the eventual end to slavery, the eventual enfranchisement of women, and so forth. So the domain that is being talked about is not an unimportant one, but neither is it an empirical one.

Are religious statements of belief like this? There is some reason to think so. Very often, religious beliefs are unshakably held in spite of what seems to

be much contrary evidence. Socrates affirms: “No harm can come to a good man either in this life or the next.” Yet, he is on the verge of being imprisoned and put to death. Does he mean that no harm can be done to the *soul* of a good man? Where is this carried out if not either “in this life or the next?” In what world, in other words, is this statement true? St. Paul states: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:25). Does the suffering and death of the Christian martyrs not count against this? In what world is St. Paul’s claim true? About what domain is the Christian speaking when he affirms this? What exactly does believing this amount to?

Beliefs—Epistemic and Pragmatic

One possible response to these paradoxes is to point again to the different meanings of the word *belief* and the different senses in which something may be believed. It should at least be clear that some confusion exists about this and that care must be taken in using this term. Besides the distinction between “belief in” and “belief that,” there is another distinction that is no less important—the distinction between epistemic and pragmatic beliefs. *Epistemic beliefs* are beliefs in the truth of a claim or proposition. *Pragmatic beliefs* are beliefs we act on. We can tell a person’s epistemic beliefs by hearing what she says; we see a person’s pragmatic beliefs by seeing what she does.

Martin Luther comments in one section of his “Table Talk” that if he were to find out that the world would end tomorrow, he would in spite of that go out today and plant a tree. This action would be unremarkable if he did not believe (epistemically) that the world would end. If, on the other hand, he believes what he is told, then his action is a testimony to a radical hope that he expresses by the way he lives.

A few weeks ago, I was interviewed by a visitor to our campus. She asked me why I felt a calling to be a teacher. Among my comments was that I teach in order to help my students become more critical thinkers, and I do that because I think the world desperately needs more critical thinkers. If one looks at the behavior of humans in the last century, one sees a horrible series of wars, fueled by nationalistic, ethnic, class, and religious chauvinism, plus environmental destructiveness and waste on a global scale. We desperately need to question the assumptions by which we’ve been living and acting. The interviewer asked, “So you believe that the human species is capable of the change necessary in time to avert global destruction?” I answered, “No, I’m

not at all optimistic. Ever so many evidences point toward our not learning how to live sustainably and peaceably. Greed, chauvinism and war seem to be hardwired into our nature.” She responded, “But then why do you continue to make the effort?” I quoted Luther’s comment and stated, “Even if I believed that the human race was doomed to destroy both itself and the planet, I would still continue to teach critical thinking.”

William James, in his famous essay “The Will to Believe,” uses the example of a man caught on a mountainside in a blinding snowstorm. The man doesn’t know the way down the mountain and can’t see more than two steps in front of him. He has no grounds for belief. He does not know the way, and he doesn’t know if he will survive. Yet, he knows that if he does nothing and stays where he is he will freeze to death. Epistemically he is filled with doubt, yet pragmatically he courageously walks on.

College friends of mine who worked as ambulance drivers and medics told many stories about picking up auto accident or shooting victims. They treated and transported them without much hope that the victims would survive the trip to the emergency room. They said, “But we always act on the assumption that we’ll get them there in time to be treated and saved. What we believe [epistemically] is irrelevant.”

In our courts of law, we make the presumption of innocence—that is, we presume that an accused person is innocent until he or she can be proven beyond reasonable doubt to be guilty. Many times, we do that in spite of the fact that we may believe the accused to be guilty. The police may believe it, the prosecuting attorney may believe it, even the judge and the defense attorney may believe it, but all of them must act on the presumption of innocence. It is not a requirement in any case that the defense attorney believe (epistemically) the accused. But it is a requirement that he or she acts (pragmatically) on such a presumption.

Epistemic beliefs are defended by giving reasons to think the belief is true. Pragmatic beliefs are defended by talking not about evidences or probabilities but about actions and ways of living. Epistemic beliefs are about what we think is true in the world. Pragmatic beliefs are expressions of our deepest values, hopes, and concerns as well as our personal identities.

I recently received as a gift a book titled *This I Believe* (2004). It is a collection of short essays, some of which were originally radio broadcasts back in the 1950s. The series was revived by National Public Radio just a few years ago. The book contains statements by Albert Einstein, Martha Graham,

Leonard Bernstein, and Eleanor Roosevelt as well as by such significant contemporaries as Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, and recent presidents. As one reads through these two- to three-page pieces, it becomes obvious that almost no one is writing about epistemic beliefs, that is, about some proposition they believe to be true. Everyone writes about what motivates and orients their lives, that is, their pragmatic beliefs:

“I believe in people and the good people can do.”

“I believe you are what you give. It’s by spending yourself in love that you become someone.”

“I believe that with gifts and good fortune comes a responsibility to give back to the world.”

“I don’t believe in boredom. The world is infinitely rich. The person who doesn’t know that is the one who lives in poverty no matter how much he/she possesses.”

“I don’t believe in going half way. If something’s worth doing it’s worth my full effort.”

Are religious beliefs like this? Are they more like pragmatic beliefs than like epistemic beliefs? If so, why do we continue to challenge and defend them as if they were epistemic beliefs? Why operate on such an assumption? Do we suppose that pragmatic beliefs are worth very little and that only epistemic beliefs are important and worthy? Where would we have gotten such a prejudice?

“Believe” Has Not Always Meant What It Most Commonly Means Now

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his book *Faith and Belief* (1979), tells us: “Literally and originally, ‘to believe’ meant ‘to hold dear’: virtually to love. . . . This is what its German equivalent *belieben* still means today. . . . *Belieben*, then, means to treat as *lieb*, to consider lovely, to like, to wish for, to choose” (104).

Belief has come over the years to mean something more like “to consider or judge to be true.” Now we can easily imagine the confusion that can occur—even for one who, like Kathleen Norris, attempts to be a believer—for someone who supposes that belief can be understood only in the “to think

true” sense when originally it may have meant something more like “to hold dear,” or “to commit one’s life to.”

There are many things that I hold dear and that have shaped my life that I do not consider to be true. There are works of fiction or characters in fiction that have shaped and changed my life. This has occurred in spite of the fact that I have all along known them to be works of fiction. I needn’t consider a story to be factual or a character to be historical for that to occur. Gulley Jimson has, and continues, to influence my life, yet I have known from the beginning that he was a creation of the imagination of the author Joyce Cary and later of the actor Alec Guinness. If some historian were to provide incontrovertible proof that the Socrates of Plato’s dialogues was nothing like the historical Socrates, that he was a creation of Plato’s imagination, it wouldn’t bother me. It is not the historical Socrates I believe in, but the one Plato so vividly presents us. So obviously, to say that I am a believer in Socrates is not to say that I believe the dialogues to be historically accurate. For the kind of belief I have, that is beside the point. I can imagine someone saying something similar about Gautama Siddhartha or Jesus or the prophet Amos, for example.

Many Christians are very concerned to say that they believe their religious statements in a literal, factual, and empirical sense. To say that this sense may not be focal and that it is unnecessary is to ask them to give up what seems to them the very essence of belief. For many, the only sense of *believe* that’s worth talking about is the literal “believe that” sense, and the only kinds of things worth believing are things that are true in the empirical, factual sense. Although I know that this occurs and perhaps is even very common, I just do not understand it. It isn’t so much that I doubt it as that I just don’t find it very interesting. I am much more interested in the religious beliefs that guide and shape a person’s life than I am in what scientific or historical or otherwise factual proposition they judge to be true.

How Should We Handle This Problem?

Earlier in the writing process, I had considered titling this section “Is Believing What Believers Really Do?” I liked the way it focused the issue, but I decided it might occasion more confusion than necessary. How do we handle the confusions about belief and its role that we have uncovered here?

We could go a couple of different directions. We could stop talking about belief when we mean to talk about faith. We could stop assuming that faith

equals belief and stop asserting that belief is the basic and focal act of faith. Or we could distinguish between different senses of *belief* whenever we use the term and make it perfectly clear which of several senses we intend to use. Do we mean “belief that” or “belief in”? Do we mean belief in the epistemic sense or belief in the pragmatic sense? Or do we intend to use *belief* in some other sense altogether?

Whichever of these paths we take, I think there are certain guidelines anyone doing philosophy of religion should follow:

- We should stop making the assumption that belief is the focal or crucial act of faith. If we wish to contend that belief is or ought to be focal, we need to realize that an explanation needs to be given and an argument needs to be made. We can’t any longer just presume that belief is the focal act of faith.
- We should be aware that faith may not be exactly the same in different religious traditions and that in some of them belief plays hardly any role at all.
- We should be aware that the word *belief* had and still has a variety of uses and meanings and that it is very easy to use it in one sense while assuming one is using it in another.
- We should be open to the possibility that something other than belief in the epistemic sense is and ought to be the focal act of faith. Believing may not be the best description for what believers do.

FROM THE CLASSROOM: STUDENT QUESTIONS & RESPONSES

Q. I have trouble even imagining what faith without belief would look like. I would say that belief is at the very foundation of faith, and I think many people would agree.

R. I’m sure you’re right about what many people would say. We have been brought up to think this way influenced in large part by the dominance of Christianity in our culture. But reflect for a moment about what believing is. Isn’t it, for a Christian, some combination of thinking about Jesus, having a vivid image of him in one’s mind, recalling the things that he did, reflecting on the things that he taught, perhaps reciting prayers, psalms, passages from Scripture, and parts of the liturgy? These are the things that we do when we

talk about believing. But of course they are not believing in the narrow sense of the word. They are, however, most certainly an important part of the life of faith. Although it sounds kind of stupid to say it, I think there's some reason to doubt whether believing is what believers actually do.

Q • What are we supposed to do with the doubts that we have? Silence them? Stifle them? Deny them? Try very hard to refute them? Those are the answers my pastors and teachers at church have urged on me. But I have found they don't really work. What are you saying—that doubts are OK?

R • I would say that asking hard questions is part of the life of faith. Faith is not inimical to critical thinking, openness, imagination, and doubt. All of these can occasion tremendous personal growth, and that is part of the life of faith. Any faith that makes us become smaller, narrower, more two-dimensional persons should be suspect. Faith is not pretending that we have no doubts.

Once having admitted our own doubts, then maybe we can go on to see that belief is not the main part of faith, particularly if it's a belief that has to be, in a sense, forced on a person. I hope you'll come to see that in the process of reading this text.

Q • Is it really true that we cannot believe a statement that we don't understand? In many of the science classes I've taken, I have been told things by textbooks and teachers that I didn't completely understand, yet I believed them because they were being taught me in the science class.

R • Fascinating comment! It points to an interesting muddle in our language. If someone asked me whether I believe in Boyle's law, I might just answer that I do even though I cannot remember precisely what Boyle's law is. I may remember only that it had something to do with the pressure of gases. Under those circumstances, I think it's a mistake to say that I *believe* Boyle's law. What I probably should say is that I have confidence in my teacher or in the science education I received. I may also have confidence that *if* I understood Boyle's law, I would believe it. That may be what's going on in a religious context as well. I may say, "I believe in the communion of saints," and really mean by that, "If I understood the statement, I think I would believe it."

Q. Why do you refuse to believe that virgin births and coming back from the dead really happen?

R. Thanks for asking this question because I hope it will be an occasion to clear up a confusion that many readers may have at this point. First of all, I don't recall ever claiming that such things never happen. We live in a world where a lot of really weird things happen. So, you are making a large assumption in your question. But, more important, the fact that really weird things can happen is not the focal part of religious faith. The question is, do such occurrences have a religious significance? I can believe that a twelve-year-old girl who has never had sex suddenly finds herself pregnant. In fact, I know of a case like that. But I don't see this as necessarily a miracle or as the heart of a life-orienting story. I just see it as a really unusual event. The mistake is to assume that this is what religious people believe, namely, that really unusual events occurred. Faith begins, it seems to me, in our seeing the will and love of God manifest in an event, whether that event is something usual or something unusual. When I see the world shaped by such a revelation, then something religious has occurred.

Resurrection becomes a focal part of faith, not for someone who believes that weird events occur but for someone who, like St. Paul, saw in Jesus dying and rising the theme and pattern for his own daily dying and rising. Paul's faith changes the way he sees his own life. For him, resurrection is not only a past event but also one that occurs in the present and future tenses. A mere belief that Jesus survived his crucifixion does not do that.

Q. When I have told my friends about your argument, many respond that belief is absolutely essential to faith and is the largest part of it. Are they just wrong? Don't they themselves know whether belief is what they do? You mention posing the question "Is believing what believers really do?" That sounds like a really dumb question, and it sounds like the answer is obvious, in fact true by definition. So how could anybody be so bold as to suggest otherwise?

R. I have to admit that it appears to be an outrageous idea. But, having admitted that it sounds very weird, I still think it's not at all obvious that "believing" in the propositional, epistemic sense is at the heart of faith. All I ask is that people stop and question this very common and widespread assumption.

But your question raises a deeper issue: do we always have a clear idea about what we ourselves are doing? Let me suggest an analogy. If you ask someone to explain how to balance on a slow-moving bicycle, you will get a lot of very bad answers. People will say things like “You switch your weight from side to side and maintain balance,” or “You balance by moving your shoulders up and down,” or “You balance by swinging your butt from side to side.” None of these are the true description of what these people really do. People can balance the bike in practice, but they can’t accurately describe what they are doing when they do it.

A friend of mine worked for a trumpet company in Chicago. Her job was to record what the craftspeople did in the complex process of making a horn—bending tubing, spinning a bell, building the valves, brazing the joints. She found that, although these people were excellent and experienced craftsmen, they couldn’t tell her very accurately what they did. They knew how to do it but had never bothered to examine closely exactly what they were doing or how they did it. They had a kind of embodied know-how, but they had a hard time translating it into a coherent account.

Something similar happens in the life of faith. If you ask people what they are doing, the majority will say “believing.” But what does this really amount to? My thesis is that there is a better answer, one that is both more helpful and more accurate.

QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL REFLECTION

1. This section mentions that the assumption of most classes in philosophy of religion (and by most members of our culture) is that belief is the essential part of faith. Why do so many people believe that if there are considerable reasons for thinking otherwise? Why is that assumption so common?

2. Phillip Clayton remarks that making belief primary simply results in making a lot of people feel guilty about not believing. Does that square with your experience? Does “reversing the order” of believing, behaving, and belonging help to solve this problem?

3. Do you know of any religions other than those cited in this chapter that do not seem to be belief focused? Even if most of the religions of the

world were belief focused to the degree that Christianity is, would that settle the issue? Can you speculate about why Christianity is so belief focused? Why does it, of all religions, have a number of creeds, definitions of what beliefs are heretical, volumes of theology, and so forth?

4. What was your reaction to Norris's "crisis of belief"? Do you think she was right initially in supposing that if she didn't believe all the right stuff then she had no business in church? Were the Benedictine monks right in urging her not to worry about it?

5. Can we believe the Nicene Creed without understanding it? Are we being intellectually dishonest if we speak it as if we understood and believed it when we do not? Would we be better off just remaining silent when the creed is spoken?

6. Do you agree that there are lots of people who have left church or other places of worship because they have found they no longer believed its creeds? Should they, like Norris, give it another try? Would it make a difference if, like Wilfred Cantwell Smith in this chapter, we came to think of belief as "holding dear"?

7. Can small children or people of diminished intellectual capacity be among the religiously faithful? Is the paradigm case of faith the highly educated theologian?

8. Why does Carse think that belief is religiously inappropriate and that a religious case needs to be made *against* belief? How does he understand the term *belief*? What does he think is at the heart of being religious if not belief?

9. What conclusion follows from the discovery that the term *believe* is used in so many different ways? Is that a good thing or a failure of language?

10. Is not knowing exactly what one believes a failure or a virtue? Should each of us annually try to write out a credo for ourselves so that we can clearly answer the question "What do you believe?" Or is it okay to leave such things vague and ambiguous?