

GRIST

Diocese of New Ulm Social Concerns Office June & July, 2011

BELIEF

There are Bible scholars who maintain that atheists don't exist: there are only believers and idolaters.

Saul Bellow

The man who cannot believe his senses,
and the man who cannot believe anything else,
are both insane.

G. K. Chesterton

Belief is the hinge upon which so much of human activity and human nature swings. You are to an extraordinary degree guided by, or misguided by, what you believe. If you're a racist, that is a result of what you believe about race. If you're a jihadist, that is built on what you believe about the Koran and supremacy of Islam. So belief is doing most of the work humans do. And it's an engine of conflict and reconciliation, so it really matters what people believe. *Sam Harris*

Reason's light comes from the *prima lux*, which is God. Human reason is a participation in the divine and uncreated light. But there is more light available to us than our reason can supply. This further light comes from the same source that reason gets its light. This further light is the wisdom of faith. There is "the humble surrender of our own light to the self-revealing uncreated Light" that brings us to "a learning and receiving of divine things" (Bernard Lonergan). This further wisdom does not disdain but only intensifies what the light of reason can understand, thus enabling us through Revelation to see the deeper Reality. Although the Holy Spirit is never an absent partner to an intellect in its quest to know the true and the good, its assistance has several levels to it, culminating in time with the gift of wisdom and in eternity with the beatifying vision of the Reality that is God. Faith and reason need each other. One without the other is impoverished and enfeebled. We are at a particularly dangerous moment in history if faith doesn't have to submit to the bar of reason and reason to the bar of faith because of the fundamentalisms, both secular and religious, that threaten whole peoples and civilization itself.

John Haughey, S.J.

I have trouble saying the Apostles Creed, that brief list of things I'm supposed to believe. But I think belief is possible. I try, in church, to say the creed, even though I usually have to stop after two words. Yet I can say those two. *I believe*. After that, the list gets too

particular. I need more information, and I have a lot of questions. I can't stand and swear to the details, have had trouble with them since I was twelve.

Nevertheless, *credo*. That much won't satisfy a church, but it's a start. I can say it without a shred of doubt. And I look for completion of the predicate. That's one good thing about incomplete belief: it keeps me awake and on the lookout. If I did not believe, I wouldn't be expectant, as I am at every moment, of encountering the object of that verb. The avenues are open; I may turn a corner and happen on truth tomorrow, or today, or now. Even daily life, the small domestic world I inhabit, is charged with anticipation. I feel not like the stout explorer coming suddenly upon the Pacific, but like the one who isn't there yet. Something is over the rise, something clear and immense, and I think I can get to it.

Josephine Humphreys

The earliest Christian theology was apophatic. Apophatic theology – the theology of the original, Greek-speaking Christian church – was "naysaying" theology, a kind of religious language whose difficult task it was to acknowledge in human language the very inadequacy of human language. Whatever it said, apophatic theology immediately took back, and then it took back the taking back. Ordinary language – the language of evidence and inference, of instance and generalization – was fine for ordinary matters. But to confess the universal human experience of a final failure in this language is to take back the confession. It is to lose the game before it begins. Rational and then quasi-scientific Newtonian theology rose to replace apophatic theology in early modernity. When others were recognizing this as a mistake, fundamentalists tightened their embrace of it. And, in the wake of the passing of modernity and the failure of both its theism and its atheism, postmodern theology may point toward the recovery of what was lost. A god whose existence you can prove is a god to whom you cannot pray, postmodern theology argues, and prayer – not proof – is where religion rises or falls.

Jack Miles

I presume that you assume that the future is real. The future is an immaterial entity. It's composed entirely of possibility. So your belief in it is an axiom of faith.

Jordan Peterson

Have you ever remained silent, though you wanted to defend yourself, though you were treated unfairly? Have you ever forgiven, though you received no reward for it and people took it for granted? Have you ever obeyed, not because you had to or else there would be some unpleasantness, but simply because of some mysterious, silent, unfathomable reality inside of yourself? Have you ever made a sacrifice, without receiving thanks, without recognition, without even feeling satisfaction inside? Have you ever been absolutely lonely and, within that, had to make up your mind to do something purely for the sake of conscience, from a place beyond where you can describe, from a place where you are deeply alone, and where you know you are making a decision for which the responsibility will be yours alone, always and eternally? Have you ever tried to love when no wave of enthusiasm was carrying you along, where you could no longer confuse your own needs with love? Have you ever persevered without bitterness in doing your duty when that duty looked like death, felt like it was killing you, looked stupid to those outside, and left you helpless to not envy those who have chosen a path with more pleasure? Have you ever been good to someone from whom no echo of gratitude or comprehension came back and where you weren't even rewarded with the feeling that you had been good and unselfish?

If you've ever had any of these experiences, then you've experienced God and know that there's a deeper ground beneath the one on which you walk.

*Ron Rolheiser, OMI
paraphrasing Karl Rahner*

Atheism is as much a faith-based creed as the most orthodox of the religious variety. Atheists display a credulous and childlike faith. They worship a certainty as yet unsupported by evidence – the certainty [for example] that they can or will be able to explain how and why the universe came into existence. (And some of them can behave as intolerantly to heretics who deviate from their unproven orthodoxy as the most unbending religious Inquisitor.) Faced with the fundamental question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” atheists have faith that science will tell us eventually. They have no evidence – and certainly no proof! – that science will ever solve the question of why there is something rather than nothing. Just because other difficult-seeming problems have been solved does not mean all difficult problems will always be solved.

Ron Rosenbaum

Religions encompass claims about truth and rules of conduct but cannot be reduced to doctrinal propositions or ethics. Religions involve orientations toward reality handed on in stories, rituals and paradigmatic figures as well as in creeds. Religions are embodied in

communities and shape distinct ways of life.

Peter Steinfeld

I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial.

Charles Taylor

Religion is a fact one cannot escape. I've always been sure that it's an illusion to think that one can do without it, or has not been indelibly influenced by it... Exile is always painful, but in some ways it's the most classic human condition. The sense of exile experienced by the victim of persecution, by a poor man who flees poverty, or even by someone who simply feels uneasy living where he was born is a metaphor of the exile of the human condition... I admit that I almost always pray when I'm trouble. When I feel stronger and more serene, I express gratitude for life, the most wonderful gift there is... I think that each of us, leaving aside whatever our conviction may be, feels in his inmost self the sense of something infinitely greater. Faith offers us a key, or rather a way...

Derek Walcott

[Ours is a] culture of perfect intellectual confidence, in which everything is sooner or later penetrated and unmasked – a culture of explanation, in which all the ancient problems are either solved or scorned, and every obscurity of human life, every fog and every cloud, is just a research paper away from satisfactory clarification. There is no riddle of existence that cannot be resolved, or robbed of its sting. We are lucid now, and efficient; we are the quickest studies who ever lived. We throw no shadows. We know how things really work. We have the definite measure of everything. (Happiness, for example, is defined for us by social science; is an objective of public policy). Even as we cozily admit our fallibility, we exempt nothing from our brilliance. We dispel inwardness with our analysis of it. Hurriedly and without any suspicion that precious things are being driven away, we march smartly through all the pains and all the perplexities, and we call this dream of transparency, this aspiration to control, this denial of finitude, reason.

Reason is precisely what it is not. Reason is more provisional, more modest, more patient. Reason is not a festival of ideas or a catalogue of best practices. It is also not an omniscient narrator.

Leon Wieseltier