

Today's topic is "This I Believe". My dictionary suggests that "to believe" is to accept as true, without positive knowledge or proof, some alleged fact or body of facts. I don't believe that! I see at least two problems. First, I think we ACCEPT facts which may be provable, but we BELIEVE ideas and the concept of proof just doesn't seem to apply to them. Second, this seems to require a yes-I-do-believe or no-I-don't-believe answer just as a switch is either "on" or "off" or the politics of a state is either red or blue. ... Our ladies, of course, are wiser than that. If pressed to answer "yes" or "no" they often reply "no" fully aware that what they really mean is "maybe". (Thank heavens for the wisdom of our ladies.) .... And think of our friends in other churches this morning who repeated the Apostle's Creed which begins "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth ..." Do you think even one of them thought "This is a matter on which I have neither knowledge or proof, and that is why I believe it."

Surely there are degrees of belief. Consider this progression. When I say I believe in motherhood, in the American flag, and in apple pie, I feel I am walking on rather thick ice. ... When I say because of her smile I believe she finds me a most attractive fellow, I am walking on very thin ice for it is likely she smiles only to suppress her laughter. ... Finally, if I were to believe much of what the religious leaders offer me, I feel I would be trying to walk on water. ... In the first place they delight in using words whose meaning is seldom clear to me, words such as: soul, karma, the way, truth, salvation, bodhisatva, God, and spirit. When they talk about "the power that infuses creation with reality", I am baffled. The only words I think I truly understand are "the", "that", and "with".

Still, talk about religious topics does pique my interest. I have read and own books on the synoptic gospels, the life of Jesus, the Bhagavad-Gita, Confucianism, Buddhism, three versions of the Tao Te Ching, Huston Smith's *The Religions of Man* (which discusses 7 religions), Robert Seltzer's *Religions of Antiquity*, and a variety of similar books. Also there are similar books I have read and discarded. I have no copy of the King James translation, and I apologize for being so parochial as to have less interest in the ancient religions of the Scandinavians, the north-, middle-, and south-american indians, the africans, the Greeks, and the Romans. (Perhaps if I should grow more mature ...) ... Why have I read these books? Because I am fascinated by the beliefs of those men who lived so far from me in time and space.

Somehow I have come to feel close to them. Some of them still speak to me through my Portable Library edition of the World Bible edited by Robert Ballou in which he presents brief discussions of 7 religions and includes lengthy excerpts from their scriptures. I want to learn what questions they asked and how they answered them. And I am particularly curious to learn how those questions and answers changed through the years.

In early polythesistic times religion's main function was to propitiate the gods and spirits through sacrifices, ceremonies, and rituals in the hope that supernatural protection and favor would be bestowed upon the worshiper. Then almost suddenly (between roughly 800 and 500 B.C.E.) came the greatest of all religious eras. From India, China, Persia, and Israel there was injected into human thought a new force which has persisted

virtually unchanged to the present day and which has determined almost every statement of idealistic purpose to which we now pay homage. ... It brought changes not only in the god-concept but also in the goals of human conduct. In India Hinduism wished to end the endless cycle of rebirths by a mystical union with Brahma and Buddhism sought to attain this release through Nirvana. The goal sought in Confucianism, Taoism, and Judaism was good life on earth. In Persia Zoroaster hoped for Paradise after death. But in each of these religions the goal was to be achieved only through individual purity of heart and mind, good work, and working for the welfare of mankind. It was in these days, rather than in those which made Bethlehem of Judea famous, that the principle of "peace on earth, goodwill to men" first began to sweep across the world like a cleansing wind.

All this and more I want to pour into my intellectual sieve.

Aren't you amazed at what a clever device your kitchen sieve is? It knows exactly how to treat what you have cooked and poured into it.

If you cook pasta, it holds the pasta back and lets the cooking water escape. If you cook soup, it lets the puree pass through to be saved while holding back the soup bones and bayleaf to be discarded.

As I was saying, when I pour all these ideas into my intellectual sieve, it will retain for me those ideas which are common to many religions and will pass through those ideas peculiar to only a few religions. Although both are worth studying, I am particularly attracted to the common ideas caught in the top of the sieve. As I examine this wonderful mix, I see ... what I see is that I have almost run out of time. I must get to my closing remarks.

Need I remind you that religious ideas are not the sole property of the theologians. At times poets have an interesting way of saying them.

...A dear friend of mine, who in her later days lived as a recluse, liked to jot down bits of poetry and squirrel them away in odd corners of her room. After she died, 1775 of them were found and have since been published. I want you to hear one of them. She offers no proof, just states her simple belief (which may be common to many of us). ... Did I mention that her name was Emily Dickinson?

IF I CAN STOP ONE HEART FROM BREAKING  
I SHALL NOT LIVE IN VAIN  
IF I CAN EASE ONE LIFE THE ACHING  
OR COOL ONE PAIN

OR HELP ONE FAINTING ROBIN  
UNTO HIS NEST AGAIN  
I SHALL NOT LIVE IN VAIN

Robert A. Lufburrow