

## This I Believe

This is the first time I've actually sat down and formulated on paper the beliefs I've carried in my mind since my teenage years. The CVUU class I attended a year or two ago on "build your own theology", was a help to me in clarifying my thoughts and feelings. I have to agree with Lynn Goodhart, it's not an easy task and called for a lot of rewriting and rethinking. Last night, I finally decided to stop tinkering with it. This is what I believe and how I got there.

When I was a child, my mother took me and my sisters to her church, which was Edgewood Baptist Church near Asheville, North Carolina. We attended services four times a week: there was Wednesday night prayer meeting, Saturday night prayer meeting, and twice on Sundays. Yes, I was frequently bored, but I was an eager pupil, both in Sunday school and during the congregational portion when various members stood and recited verses from the Bible which they had memorized. I loved memorizing and reciting verses! Not for me the "Jesus Wept" verses and a quick seat! I have to admit, I liked to show off my ability to memorize. There was a time when I had a memory like a steel trap. Today, unfortunately, it's more like a rusty sieve. I also liked the bible stories that were read to us in Sunday school: Daniel in the Lion's Den, Joseph and his Coat of Many Colors. I had some strong negative feelings about King David and the way he killed a man in order to marry that man's wife. I prayed frequently in those days, but never felt any kind of connection to any universal force. Everyone around me believed in the Christian religion, so I believed, too, just like I believed in Santa Claus until finding out differently. As I grew older, I began to question some of the stories. I was particularly bothered by the story of Job, a man whom god supposedly loved and who loved god. My memory of the tale is that god and the devil entered into a wager as to whether or not Job would continue to love and worship god if bad things happened to him. Job was a wealthy man and all his material goods and slaves were killed, then his family, and he was stricken with disease, himself. Through it all, he continued to love god. God won his bet with the devil. God made bets with the devil and human lives were destroyed because of it! At the end of the story, of course, god gave Job other and better goods and chattels and a new family. I had already noticed that god had his pets and other people didn't seem to matter. Wives and children could be killed as part of a wager. The Judeo-Christian god didn't seem to care very much about women and children. I wondered why god would care if anyone believed in it, or prayed to it or worshiped it. To grant people salvation based on whether or not they believed in god, was unworthy of divine power. God was supposed to be all-powerful, all seeing, all wise and all good; yet, it appeared to me that god was petty and vindictive and I wondered why anyone would love, or claim to love such a being or want to bow down before it. I could only conclude that it was fear, not love, that made these people bow down, for how could one love such a god?

More time passed and I questioned more and more. Again, I noticed the favoritism displayed by this god. I would read articles in the newspaper wherein people attributed their recovery from a devastating illness to the prayers directed by friends and family toward god to heal the sufferer. On the same page, there might be an article about a tsunami that had struck somewhere in the world and had killed 100,000 people or an earthquake that had killed thousands more, or millions who had starved to death. You

can bet that those people were praying to their concept of god with great fervor as the waves washed over them or the earth crushed them. I wondered why god would save one person, but allow millions of others to die. I wondered why god created microbes that invaded peoples' bodies and killed them horribly. I wondered why babies would be born with terrible diseases that tortured them and destroyed their innocent lives. I wondered why god would visit the sins of the parents on the children. None of it made any sense to me and I could not accept it. Of course, I'd hear from various sources that this was simply god's will that humans could not understand, and that we mustn't question god's will. We must accept that some died and others were saved. We must accept that god played favorites. I believed that this was a cop-out on god's behalf.

There was also the bugaboo of a devil upon which all the ills of the world were blamed. I wondered why, if god were all-powerful, that any opposing force could possibly defeat any of god's desires or plans and I wondered why god didn't simply destroy this devil. Then I began to think that if there really was a personal god and a devil, the two of them must be playing some kind of cosmic game that frequently involved the suffering of human beings. It seemed to me that people were only pawns in their contest.

Several years ago, I was driving from North Carolina to Connecticut. Spinning the dial on the car radio, I came across a station on which a man was talking about how he'd been separated from his wife for some time, but had reunited with her. He had strayed from god, he said and had been on the wrong path. Then his wife got sick and died. He believed that this was god's wake-up call to him. This man believed in a personal god that cared so much about the man, he would kill the man's wife to wake him up to god's plan for him. I felt an immediate surge of anger at the egotistical statement of that man. It reminded me of the story of Job. What kind of man, I thought, would want to believe in a god who would kill his wife in order to send him a wake-up call? What kind of man would love and worship a god that did such a thing? What kind of god would kill someone's wife to teach that person a lesson? Was god evil?

My sister and I used to talk about religion on occasion. She was a believer, though she didn't attend any church. I told her that I had serious doubts that there was such a thing as god. Her response was "Then what's the purpose in living?" I was puzzled. It seemed to me there was plenty of purpose in living. First of all, one could develop one's talents and one's mind as much as possible. One could get in touch with one's inner self. One could develop a relationship with spouse, co-vivant, or significant other so that the heights of a loving bond might be attained. One could enjoy the beauties of nature. One could love her children and try to raise them to be decent human beings. One could give back to the community, cherish the environment and help other people. One could go into the world and try to help other societies whose members were suffering. And on and on and on. Then I thought, "what's the purpose in living if there **is** a god? Is it to be born, to live, to suffer, to die in pain, and to go to heaven or hell, probably the latter? What would be the point in that?"

Shortly after 9/11, I was talking by telephone with that same sister. I don't know how we got on the subject, but she told me that she believed that the people who were killed on the two planes that hit the twin towers, the plane that crashed into the Pentagon, and the plane that crashed in the field in Pennsylvania, were meant to die that way. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Are you saying that god purposely put those people on

those planes in order to smash them into buildings or into a field in Pennsylvania?” “It sounds awful,” she said, “but that’s what I believe.” Here I am, a long-time agnostic, and I was appalled, and totally flabbergasted that she or anyone else in the modern world could believe something like that and still believe that this god should be worshipped, prayed to, and loved. “If this were true,” I said, “that would mean that god is evil.” “Well, maybe god is evil,” she responded. I didn’t know what to say, except to realize that this is how religious “truths” develop.

I know there are millions of people who seem to have a need for an agency outside themselves and outside their world that they can lean on. My oldest daughter is one of those people. For several years she was in an extremely strong religious phase and wanted to talk about her concept of god all the time. She had been having serious problems with alcohol and didn’t believe she could conquer it by herself. So she did a lot of praying on her own and consulting preachers and praying with a Mennonite neighbor until she somehow got this feeling of religiosity. She told me one time that it didn’t have to be true that there’s a god; she just has to believe it’s true. I have to admit that I don’t feel this need and have a hard time understanding it, although I accept it and respect it.

To me, the religiosity many people experience is a lot like hypnotism. Prayers and talk are repeated over and over until you believe, just like the hypnotist repeats certain suggestions over and over until you believe. With religion, the prayers, the swaying in some churches, and the music, all provide a hypnotic atmosphere so that the voice of the preacher is more readily received. Friday night, Peaceworks showed a film here at CVUU entitled “Constantine’s Sword. The writer and narrator of the documentary visited Ted Haggard’s megachurch and the film showed the congregants as they stood and swayed from side to side with their eyes closed and their arms stretched out above them. They looked to me like they were in a hypnotic trance. At the same time, I could picture young boys in a madrassa as they swayed back and forth, memorizing the Koran.

Terrible things have been done in the name of Christianity throughout its history. The attitude was that if you didn’t believe what the Church fathers said was true, you deserved to die and must die. Inquisitions, witch burnings, crusades: much evil has been committed in the name of Christianity through the centuries. Yet, there are millions of good, and I do mean good, people who are Christians. Many who are filled with love and loving kindness toward their fellow beings. Many who are far, far better people than I could ever hope to be.

Terrible things are being done today in the name of Islam. There are millions of Islamists who believe that anyone who doesn’t share their beliefs should be killed. Yet, there are many good, and I do mean good, people who are Islamists. Many who are filled with love and loving kindness toward their fellow beings. Many who are far, far better people than I could ever hope to be.

I don’t know the Islamic belief about heaven and hell, but the Christian tenet is that you’re doomed to writhe in torment in a pit of fire if you don’t believe in the Christian god. I could not accept an all-powerful, loving god that would allow his children to be burned in a pit of fire for eternity. My feeling is: why should god care whether you believe or don’t believe? It makes no sense to me. It makes the creative force, which is really beyond human conception, seem weak and low. I don’t want to believe in a god that’s capable of envy, jealousy, spite, anger, favoritism, and murder or

that wants to be worshipped or prayed to, which are attributes of the god I read about in the Christian Bible. Those are negative, human attributes and many of them violate the ten commandments purportedly delivered by god to Moses for the benefit of his people. I don't believe in a personal god. If I did, I would have to believe that it is responsible for all the ills of the world and I would hate it. If this god creates humans with the capacity to do the horrible things to each other that people sometimes do, then god is responsible for those actions. Afterall, it didn't have to create humans with that capacity or desire.

I don't believe in an afterlife. I believe there is a creative force that creates and, having created, moves on. What that force might be and whether or not it is sentient, I don't know and don't believe anyone else knows. I also don't believe that it matters whether we know or not.