

What do you mean by "I believe"?

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My favourite subject is Bible stories, and how to make sense of them. Since it's the Bible, the question of belief often comes up. Are we meant to believe those stories? Do we believe in them, whatever that means? Were they put there simply to baffle Unitarians and Un-believers? I'll be taking a careful look at Beliefs, from everyday beliefs to religious ones. And I'll try to work out just how useful Belief can be to a reasonable person. Finally, I'll take two Bible stories, and see what sense I can make of them.

My real start is with a true story, not from the Bible. One fine day the Duke of Wellington was walking in the middle of London. A well-dressed gentleman paused, raised his hat, and said, "Mr Jones, I believe?" The Duke stared at him, and replied : "Sir, if you believe *that*, you'll believe *anything*."

How do we react to this? Perhaps you think the Duke was arrogant, seeming to expect that everyone would recognize him as the Iron Duke; after all, this was long before TV and news broadcasts, and even before photographs in the newspaper. But we're not told what tone of voice he used. Perhaps he had just been pestered by a blackmailer, the same person to whom he made another famous reply : Publish and be Damned. Or maybe the contrast between "Mr Jones" and "Your Grace," or My Lord Duke, was so extreme that Wellington couldn't help laughing, and made a joke of it. (American version : "Boy, did you get a wrong number!")

But I want to focus on what was actually said, and use it as my launch pad. "Mr Jones, I believe." That's a good example of what we expect I Believe to mean, in normal circumstances: the speaker is uncertain, polite, feeling his way like a blind man. Quite different from "You're Harry Smith, I'd have known you anywhere." When you say I believe in that tone, you expect to be set straight; you may even convey some hope about the result ("I believe she loves me")--or expect the worst ("I have no reason to believe...").

The essence is uncertainty : and if that can be cleared up, by means of what we now call a "reality check" (confronting the visible facts), we can shift from "I believe" to "I know." (You're not Mr Jones, after all. Forgive me.) Maybe we should go further, and recognize that uncertainty is a necessary ingredient, a way of telling the difference between Belief and Knowledge. Robert Browning has one of his characters say,. "you must mix some doubt With faith, if you would have faith be." Clearly, he means faith (or Belief) is never Knowing for sure; but even so, he doesn't seem to think it's pointless. "If you would have faith be": sounds as if it is worth having.

But thinking it over, we'd have to admit that some people say "I believe" without a trace of uncertainty. "I believe the truth is staring you in the face." That man won't accept any argument; he's saying, practically boasting, that his opinion is unshakable. Then why isn't he saying he Knows? Well, he may be tired of arguing: "Yes I know this is a matter of

opinion, but I want you to know I've gone all the way through it, miles ahead of you, and I know what to believe and why. So don't bring it up again." Or he might be reacting deep down like that chorus of blokes in Monty Python, wearing handkerchiefs on their heads and wailing, "My head hurts"; or occasionally, "My brain is full." And that may point us toward some real difficulties when we start asking How to Change Beliefs--in other people, or possibly in ourselves.

Meanwhile here's another oddity. We may have noticed that, with some people, the I Believe grows more & more positive as the content of the belief grows more incredible. We've already heard from the White Queen, bragging that she has "believed 6 impossible things before breakfast"--& telling Alice she should learn to do that too. We should remember that Lewis Carroll's jokes usually turn out to have a serious point, and that his strangest creatures turn out to be quite human in unexpected ways. So we'll save the White Queen for later.¹

We're already treading on the other half of Wellington's reply : "if you believe that, you'll believe anything." What does the Duke mean? Clearly, that believing in something untrue ("contrary to fact") makes you not just ignorant, but gullible (you'll believe Anything). Implication is, being gullible could be dangerous, & should be avoided. Further implication : gullibility can be avoided (or the Duke couldn't blame you for it) . Get to know the facts, & you'll be better off. Good advice, no doubt. But I'm struck by his emphasis : "you'll believe anything." That re-minds me of something I know from experience (clearest no doubt to teachers) : namely, some people DO believe anything. For example (for several examples) :

Some believe, even now, that the earth is flat. Well, it looks that way, feels that way, doesn't it? Yes there are slopes and even cliffs, but they don't go on for ever. I figure the world doesn't go on for ever, either; at some point it stops, and there's the Edge.

A larger number of modern people, usually age-challenged, believe in an obese caribou driver who makes it down every chimney in the civilized world, in one night. Or think of a girl-child who owns the latest model of Barbie -- a brave single mother with an apron and a tiny infant, supplied in the kit, with a sterilizable plastic bottle (Ken is now a country music star, gone to Nashville). Ask the child what's happening, and she replies "I'm feeding my dolly." How should we react? Of course you are, little twit? Why not?

Apparently (a news report last Monday) Warren Beatty firmly believed he was the most beautiful young man in creation. The director of one movie had to have all the mirrors covered in burlap, because Warren spent so much time there.

And to keep the sexes balanced, there is an elegant woman of good family who believes that Ernie Eves, with his voice like a rusty lawnmower (to mention only one feature), is not just the big cheese in Ontario but a fashionable escort--in public and even in private. (Some people will believe Anything.)

As I add to this list of truly strange beliefs, I invite you to find reasons why they are believed; and also, after that, how we might help to cure them.

Some people in modern churches, and not just in Saskatchewan, believe that God is in charge of the weather -- not a god, not Thor, not Jupiter, but the Christian God, who doesn't have any children (well, one at the most) so He must handle all the chores himself. And they pray to him for rain, or in wet years for sunshine. Spanish speakers have added an extra weather god with distinct habits, and called him The Kid (el niño). He may actually be monstrously big, but he's touchy, so it's best not to ride him. (By the way, do you remember Al Neeno?...1)

Christians no longer believe in witches, at least not in public; but not so long ago they did. The charge was made against flighty or attractive girls (maybe a version of the Muslim belief that all women are a temptation & should be covered up). Older women were also accused, especially if they lived alone or with a cat; likewise fortunetellers & gossips; and sometimes men, of similar habits. Who accused them? Usually churchmen, who were of course experts. Or ordinary married folk, Christian husband and obedient wife, who thought everyone else should carry the same burdens they did. The cure, or punishment or defence against witches? Either burn them, or drown them. For a quick test of their guilt, throw them in the nearest pond : for as everyone knows, witches sink and stay sunk (sometimes they may melt). If they turn out to float but drown anyway, they are innocent but never learned to swim : put them down as Collateral Damage.

Some folks believe that if they strap bombs to their bodies and snuggle up to Israelis before exploding themselves, they (the bombers) will get into heaven, Muslim style. (Defenders of Islam have pointed out this is not in the original Koran, only in the special Saudi version).

Some folks on the Christian side have held an official belief even more remarkable than this : non-Christians or heretics or doubters in their midst were not merely Wrong, but Criminal, & deserving of punishment--namely, by being burned alive, in public. (It happened to a Unitarian, back in Geneva). This was called in Spanish un auto da fe : it means not a fancy BMW, but an act of faith. What kind of faith? Not really sadistic, it seems : for the slow burn would give enough time for a heretic to change his mind, and see the light. So it might be an act of faith by the Inquisition as sponsors of the show, or even a solo act by the heretic. If the heretic changes his belief he is Saved, and will not be punished further. Since only God would know that he'd seen the light, there was no point in keeping a supply of water on hand.

There are tribes in New Guinea still who believe that if you eat an enemy's flesh & drink his blood, you acquire his strength & courage. There is likewise a tribe who believe that if you eat your God's flesh & drink his blood, it will do you even more good. We'll save that for our Bible reading.

There are people who commit some naughty act & claim the Devil made em do it (they are mere victims of the Axis of Evil). Curiously enough, there are folks on the other side

who are sure they're so rotten that they could never do a good act, unless God were there to tell them what it was. (My own belief, if you want it, is that God won't be there at your elbow; he has bigger things to do, and he's busy doing them.)

And finally, a lot of Christians tell each other over and over again, that they believe :
"in God, the Almighty. And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord, who was born of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary; who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried; on the third day rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, whence he will come to judge the living and the dead."

This is the oldest form of the Creed (from the Latin credo, "I believe"). I put it in my list not to be rude (some people will believe Anything), but as an example of a formal statement of belief, and a remarkably full one.

We could all go on adding to this list. But I think 12 examples will do for today; and I promised to use them, first, to glance at how such beliefs get started; & then at how we lose them, or improve them, or (maybe) cure them.

I've already suggested why people can believe the world is flat. For practical purposes, it is. We make exceptions for the Rockies and Alps and the ocean shore. But overall, it's Flat. Imagine a solitary South Sea island inhabited by a tribe of fishermen. Island, lagoon, coral reef : and outside that, shining flatness. One day your buddy says he's taking his dugout canoe a bit farther out, to see if there are more fish there. Don't go, Juley, you'll fall off. But he goes, and you watch him gradually sink from view. Out of sight : goodbye Julius. And when he comes back at sunset with fish, what exactly have you learned? That the Edge is farther out than you thought, period. As we smile at this poor savage, tell me how we might persuade him of our sophisticated modern belief : that it's a rilly big round Ball, see, with people all over it, and they're all pointing upwards instead of falling off. A likely story. Happy dreams, and a quick prayer to the Law of Gravity, whoever he may be.

People, young ones, believe in Santa Claus because there's a conspiracy to mislead them : parents, teachers, Sears, Clement Moore, and Disneyland. The chief blame falls on Dad, who will even buy a red suit & white beard to help deceive his own offspring. And when they come home from the Mall crying foul, I just saw Sanny Claws sitting in 3 different places, the trauma can be severe. Daddy is a fink, he's been lying to me for years, & I'll never believe another thing he tells me. Where did you think the Generation Gap started?

Of course we all hope that when we grow up together, we'll see that the Santa myth (despite Rudolf and the Elves and video games under the tree) is a kindly fable about how our parents love us (and show it, once a year), and how giving is better than receiving, and everybody else by extension feels the same warm sentimental glow.... There may be a clue here to something useful. We stop believing in something because it ain't factually true; but in a way it's about something true, and may even carry a valuable message. That is the Truth of Fables.

The little girl who says "I'm feeding my dolly" will bring this into clearer focus. We do not answer, sure you are, you poor sap. The girl is perfectly clear that she's not (not a sap, not feeding) : she knows it's a plastic bottle for a plastic mouth. If she said "I'm feeding my baby," and stuck to that story, we might take a closer look at her, maybe cart her off to the shrink. But no belief is involved. She knows it's a doll, and she knows she's playing a game called Let's Pretend, which has been central to growing up since we climbed down from the trees (it's still played by our cousins the chimpanzees): imitation is the earliest form of learning. And the idea of Let's Pretend may prove very useful to us : aren't there times when saying "I Believe" is a way of saying "Let's Pretend"?

I don't know how to help Warren Beatty. If he really believes he's the yummiest guy in the world, what kind of reality check can we find? He's not doing any harm, after all. And if he's really saying, You have no idea what hell it is, having Shirley MacLaine for a sister, who can disagree? No, seriously : worshipping your own image is the best recipe for a wasted life--but it could take thirty years to learn.

The same goes for the lady who believes that Ernie Eves is the answer. It would be ungentlemanly to ask What was the question? And just suppose what she truly means is "He's the best I can get, at my age"—what can we do but weep?

What about those Weather-Gods? The South Americans who invented El Niño are just keeping up the old Invent-a-God tradition —anything we can't explain must have a supernatural power behind it. And by calling him the Kid, they're probably telling us it's a case of Let's Pretend, hey señor?. But when Christians assign weather control to their Lord Almighty and ask him for rain/drought as required, they get into trouble. There is no God but God, and Dave Devall is his Prophet? Far better to follow Phil Curtis into chaos theory and the butterfly effect; or to keep changing the forecast, every ten minutes on the Tens, as they do on The Weather Channel. We won't be able to write Case Closed on this one until we decide who we're praying to.

Witches. As we've seen, branding someone a witch may have been a handy way of dealing with social deviates; though it makes the persecutors look pretty sick. But the image has changed. With the TV series "I married a Witch", the movie Bell Book and Candle (when Kim falls in love, she loses her powers : hmmm, if you believe that...), and Sinatra singing Witchcraft, witches have become embraceable. And when they try a strong countermove by preaching Wicca (New Age or Old Age), they bring back some old beliefs that can help us all.

About the suicide bombers in Palestine (or New York, or anywhere). The cover story that justifies what they do is this : they believe so passionately in the rightness of their cause that they're ready to die for it. (If it's wartime, they get extra credit for taking a few hated enemies with them, whatever age. In some jurisdictions, their act is a direct ticket to Heaven. Talk about Air Miles.)

If you can skip the fringes, you see that the essence of such a belief is simply Martyrdom : martyrs are people whose belief is so strong that they'll die for it. That includes

Christian martyrs burnt at the stake, Buddhist monks who set fire to themselves, those hanged or shot by firing squads, etc. Those who die on T-crosses (the Roman design; saves on lumber) include gladiators as well as Christ (though there was a special clause in his case).

What can we say about martyrs? We decided a while back that uncertainty was at the centre of "I believe"; we'd have to admit that here, the uncertainty vanishes. The martyr virtually knows he's right (or she; I don't mean to be sexist), that his death will mean something, and that he'll resume existence elsewhere. And what will his death mean? The skeptic has some opportunities here. A martyr's death is a PR stunt, part of a campaign, to attract others to his Holy Army? Well, some of the spectators are bound to say, If that's part of the deal, thanks, but no thanks. Others might observe that his glorious exit saves a lot of tedious field work, specially when he knows that Paradise awaits. A suicide is a quitter, in one sense at least. If you're so brave, try living.

When we move on to the Inquisition and its acts of faith, we notice some clear differences. The Believers are in charge; indeed, the accused is being grilled because he's not a Believer. Everyone Must Believe : that's an order. So their belief comes very close to certain knowledge (of what? of things they cannot prove, but take On Faith alone). It must come close to certain knowledge, or they'd surely take a moment to wonder whether they can justify killing in its name. They might also remember that a central command of their God was to love one another, no exceptions. When they start the cunning argument that this provides God with a chance to show his love (if the heretic gives in); and that the heretic who dies for his faith is not a martyr--because he's Wrong, he belongs to the Axis of Evil and his soul is worthless--well, count me out.

No. 10 referred to New Guinea cannibals who ate their dead enemies and drank their blood. I drew a parallel with the Christians who eat and drink their God on Sunday. This connects with the Last Supper, in our Bible Study. So we'll get back to it soon.

"I was bad, but the Devil made me do it; God makes me do it right." You see the problem? The claims are equal, because by blaming Satan or praising God, we deny our own responsibility. The cure is, Grow up. You did the shabby or evil things yourself; don't shift the blame. If you believe it's because you're rotten to the core (Original Sin), don't overrate yourself : you're small fry, an average bush-league sinner. Stop bragging and take your knocks. And if you do your little Good Deeds because God makes you, or threatens you, you are not being good, you're being obedient. Does that truly deserve eternity on Cloud 9? Grow up, again.

And by the way--what kind of afterlife is Cloud 9? Recent commercials suggest that when the novelty wears off you'll start hankering for cream cheese. (Commercial Ads are our Mythology, Think about that : instead of Zeus & Poseidon & Aphrodite & Apollo & Athena and all their adventures, we have a sexy little consumer in her angel outfit, dreaming of cream cheese.)

This was the really big belief on my list, the Creed. What I find most notable is not the content but the Style. It's communal. We do it in a crowd. This means making a commitment : when you stand up in a public place (a church., say) and tell the world what you believe together, the way believers do, it's a serious step. (They do it in trade union meetings, and sing Solidarity Forever.) Try to imagine how it would be if you did it one by one. Your turn, MaryLou, let's hear Your creed. In front of the whole class, Teach? Hmm, thanks Marylou. Now who's next? Duhhh.... No Wayne, try harder. It starts "I believe".

Why does a creed have to be spoken solemnly, as a group? Because each member gets comfort from the others : we're all in this together, there's no time to think. That may give you strength when you reach one of the far-out bits. But this means each member also gets boxed in. You don't come back next week and say, Um, I think I've changed my mind about item 3-- you'd never live it down. But again, if by repetition our firm belief becomes a stubborn belief, a near-certainty, where are we? Our Creed (meaning Credo, I Believe) is in a very different ball park from "Mr Jones, I believe."

Now a quick glance at the content, what they Believe In. "We believe in God the Almighty, and in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord, who was born of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary; who was crucified under Pontius Pilate--" (Huh? No, Wayne, not Under him.) And so on. Would it amaze you that this is what Lewis Carroll meant by "believing 6 impossible things before breakfast"? For Lewis Carroll was really Charles Dodgson, a wise and witty young man skilled in maths and logic, who was asking himself whether he should train as a clergyman in the Church of England. The Creed was why he couldn't, the 6 impossible beliefs. "Before breakfast" makes it seem a light-hearted joke -- but it has a hook in it : things you believe before breakfast are part of your normal armament to face the day, including no choice of tie.

Now for our Bible stories. The Temptation in the Desert comes first, then the Last Supper. You remember hearing from St. Matthew 4, about Jesus "being led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil." First challenge, "You're hungry; but if you're the Son of God, you can change these stones into bread." Number two, a flying trip to the temple at Jerusalem, on the roof : "so prove you're the Son of God, by taking a big jump; the angels will catch you." And so on.

What I do with a story, any story, is to ask, what is its point? which way do the details lean? what message or attitude does it offer me? why tell it? Try that here. A devout Christian might say Goody, the Devil did NOT make him do it; Jesus dodged every trick. Okay, then tell me : why did the Devil pick these 3 challenges --just for the hell of it? Why do it in the desert? Why does Jesus dodge them? Why doesn't he prove he's the Son of God, as we all know him to be?

I have an advantage over that Christian : I am not devout, so I don't know in advance what to look for. If there are no answers given to my questions, I'll have to look back to when and where the story was told. For example, taking off into the wilderness was a common event, not for fitness but to be alone with your problems, far from the chatter of

the crowds. In Jesus' younger days, the crowds were often talking about the Messiah, and hoping he would arrive soon. Where does this idea come from? It looks back to the glory days of David and his son Solomon the temple-builder, kings in Jerusalem : long before the Babylonians deported Israel, long before the Temple was destroyed and the Romans took over the world. The Jews were promised by their priests that their God would make up for the exile and desolation, by sending them a leader, a chosen one, even perhaps a Son of God. Details were vague. He might be a king (but not likely in Caesar's time), or some other kind of leader. Indeed, when Jesus went about offering his free course in ethics, some of his listeners were so impressed with his preaching that they wondered whether he himself might be the chosen One.

What does a thoughtful young son of Israel, deeply concerned with righteousness and God, do when he hears this? He hasn't yet made any firm plans about a career. [Praise be to God, he doesn't enrol at Brock, where the slogan is Careers Begin Here.] There's no guidance counsellor to tell him he has Leadership Potential; but he does have some sense of his powers. Should he take Accounting and go into business? No, he dislikes seeing the bankers and money men setting up tables in the Temple; there are more important things. His skill in healing is already well known, and people who've been fed at his camp-meetings call him a miracle-worker : should miracles, magic, show-business be a full-time concern? Or should he go into politics (Caesar won't last for ever), and perhaps achieve great things? Maybe, deep down in his heart, there's a tiny question bubbling & nagging : suppose, just suppose they're right and I am meant to be the Messiah? Our God works wonders, we've seen them. But will He ask me to apply, or at least let me know; and what would the precise job-description be? Son of God is an expression I've used, teaching; but come on, I never thought of taking it literally. If God is our Father in heaven, isn't everyone a potential son of God?

Something like this must have happened, I believe, to a real Jesus (Yeshua ben Yoseph) in a real Judea. Of course the editor, the one who is preparing material for a new Christian Bible, under the code name of St. Matthew -- he cannot possibly tell the story this way. His faith, backed up and solidified by all the Creed-speakers since the cave was found empty -- his faith insists that this was no strolling preacher but beyond any doubt Jesus the Christ, a.k.a. the Son of God, who must have known exactly what he was (at least since he was baptized by John). The editor's only way to cope with these wild ideas in Jesus' mind is to assign them to the Tempter. (Tempter is the code name not exactly for the Devil, but for the Satan we met back in Job. His specialty is not being Bad, but challenging God). What are the motives for his challenges here? (Son of God, hey? How about proving it, sonny boy?) It looks rather like the Test-of-Faith scenario that the Jews, and the Christians after them, use when facing difficult questions about God. Jesus solves these challenges by quoting scripture, the word of God. When Satan quotes Scripture himself ("it is written, He shall give his angels charge of thee"), Jesus comes right back with "It is also written (that thou shalt not tempt the Lord." I have always suspected that he must have a sense of humour; but the editors want to make a stronger impression, so they try to hide the evidence.

The last supper, which later becomes Holy Communion, is easier to make sense of--if we keep in mind the little girl feeding her dolly. Jesus was a teacher first and foremost; and the method he liked best was the parable -- a metaphor, a story about something in everyday life that clearly stood for something more important. The sower and his seed becomes the preacher and his words. In Mark chap.12: 22, we get this : "As they did eat, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and broke it, & gave it to them, and said: "Take, eat; this is my body." [Sounds just like a Jewish joke: so, eat already.] He took the wine cup, blessed it, and made them all drink : 'this is my blood, which is shed for many.'" St. Luke's version (22: 15) is less stark : "I have desired to eat this passover with you" (reminding them of another symbolic meal in their tradition). The wine comes first, no mention of blood; and giving them the bread, he says "This is my body which is given for you : this, do in remembrance of me."

The disciples are always a bit slow with parables : but this metaphorical supper should not puzzle them, especially as Luke tells it. This is our last meal together. Food is not the most important gift, but it is a gift and deserves thanks. When I'm gone remember me, and remember what I taught you. To make it more solid in memory, think of this bread as my body (and my life), which was given for you.

Does he say, when you eat bread, you'll eat me; when you drink wine, you'll drink my blood? That's no way to treat a metaphor : which is not a literal command, but in this case a plea to remember his teachings every time they sit down to eat. (Because that's the only way he can be there.)

Did Jesus ever imagine that one day this supper might be a ritual act in church, and at one time it would be so important that Christians killed each other over it? What caused the quarrel was their belief that at a special moment Zap the wine & biscuit offered by the priest would magically become the body and blood of the Jesus they believed in. That's a kind of magic quite different from the stone age cannibalism of New Guinea (they haven't read Aristotle). They called the process "trans-substantiating"; a neat trick, because turning one substance into another is not your everyday lab experiment. But if there's a word for something, the thing must exist, Right? And if we Believe, we can do better still : find the magic word and whisper it, and behold: the word is made flesh...

It won't work for teenagers, who have only two words (Like, and Yknow). It won't work for me, I'm on a diet. And the belief that we can get spiritual sustenance from a symbolic snack where you eat your God -- it's not just Far Out, it's primitive. Some beliefs are better than others (nobler, grander, wiser, more reasonable, more grown-up). "Eat Me" belongs in Wonderland. And I've already suggested that blaming the devil for your vices and obeying God for good marks is advice for young dimwits. Try another: "O lamb of God, who takest away the sins of this world..." They've got the wrong animal : it's a goat, a scapegoat, on which you load all the pettiness and backbiting and shafting, and drive them out of the village. A metaphor that made sense in the old tribal days, a road to everyday mental health. But if it's twisted to mean that we can shuck all our crimes on to Jesus's shoulders and let him take the rap (that's his job, he's the son of God), it's not

Christian : it's a pathetic cop-out.

Vaya con Dios, amigos; and never tell me How Much you can believe, but how, and why.

Notes:

Read in the service as Story for Children. See "Through the Looking Glass", chap. 5.

It's reported that his name was listed in the San Francisco phone-book; and that when the weather turned strange, people kept calling to say "Al Nino? Hey, lay off, will ya?"

Scientists likewise tell us that Newton's simple maths work fine, close to home. Only out in deep space (and moving fast) do we need Einstein.

This was also given earlier in the service, as a reading. See Matthew Chap. 4, verses 1-11.