

Dear People Whom God Loves,

BELIEFS-VALUABLE WITH A DARK SIDE

There are not only religious beliefs. We all have various kinds of beliefs. Beliefs are strong ways of thinking that gives us some direction and meaning in life. Our beliefs tend to keep us from allowing into our minds any information that does not fit with the beliefs that we have.

Beliefs can be positive or negative. They can help us be better or worse people. For example: I believe that I am worthless. I will only take care of #one (me) because I am afraid others won't?... or I am trying to be valuable at least to myself?.... I believe that I am valuable. I will be helpful to others because they are valuable too and I am able to see their value as I am comfortable with mine.

We might think of beliefs as ways of thinking that can be reasonable or unreasonable. They can cause us to resist any kind of change. I think that the reason beliefs are so resistant to change is that they give us something to hang onto. Letting go of them would shake up our lives. That can be very uncomfortable.

I would like to focus on religious beliefs. They seem to have the most tenacious power. Though I think that political beliefs have a lot of the same power.

The life of the apostle St. Paul is instructive for me. He previously had the name Saul.

Some background to understanding Saul/Paul.

The Jewish people had been conquered by the Persian Empire. Some of them were carried in captivity to Babylon. Some of the Jewish people remained at home. When some of the captives (descendants of the original captives) returned home in the sixth century BCE, they mingled with the descendants of those not carried off into captivity in Babylon.

This was a time of great religious struggle and renewal. They had to process two huge questions that were interwoven. How do we survive as a people? How do we explain that we were not protected by our God? As God's people we were supposed to be protected by God.

The first question about survival as a people: They were in the small Persian province Yehud. Jerusalem was in Yehud. They were surrounded by powerful empires that could destroy them. How would they survive? They had to form a very tight relationship with one another to have any hope of survival. This would understandably create a human survival mode.

The second question: Answering the second question of why they were not protected by God also gave them the answer of how to have that protection in the future.

The reason that they came up with was that they were not protected by God because they had not been faithful. They had not followed faithfully the law of Moses. It was their fault-not God's-that God didn't protect them. "I will be your God and you will be my people". They had not behaved as God's people.

Following the prescriptions of the law in every detail would bring about this survival as a people. Their nation was at stake. This can give us some understanding of the Pharisees. The Pharisees (who followed the law very strictly) separated themselves from the ones who didn't follow it the way they did. They at least were the ones, they thought, who would preserve the nation by total dedication to the law of Moses.

That brings us to Saul (the strictest of Pharisees) and his belief that enables us to understand his persecution of the followers of Jesus.

The early followers of Jesus were all Jews. As Jews they understood the value of the law of Moses and they continued to observe it. As this understanding of Jesus grew they began to doubt (at least some of them did) that following all of the prescriptions was necessary. They also began to wonder if the God they knew though Jesus was exactly like the God who demanded such strict observance as a condition of protection.

What then would be in the mind of Saul who was passionate about the importance of strict adherence to the law? He apparently saw these Jewish followers of Jesus as a danger to the survival of the Jewish people. The cleanliness and purity that came from following the law of Moses was endangered. Therefore, to eliminate these people was a duty a duty before God.

It even led to killing. As Stephen (a follower of Jesus) was being stoned to death the witnesses laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Saul was not a bad man (when we look at the big picture) but his religious belief led to persecution and killing.

We now turn to what happens when we allow our religious beliefs to be challenged (and I would say deepened) by new information. Paul is an example of this.

Paul in his early life as Saul believed in God. Yahweh was the sacred name that the Jewish people reserved for God. Out of reverence they would not speak the name. After his conversion Paul still believed in Yahweh. His belief was the same as always. With the new information he received in his conversion, Yahweh remained Yahweh but the way Paul thought of and experienced Yahweh changed dramatically. What I see is that he realized that Yahweh was not looking for external conformity to the law but rather a transformation of our hearts and minds. His experience with Jesus caused him not to give up his beliefs but to understand them in a new way.

In Mark's Gospel ch.12 Jesus quotes and brings together what was already in the Jewish scripture. When asked what was the first of all the commandments Jesus replies: "The first is this: 'Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

The scribe who asked the question understood what Jesus was saying. He agreed that this love was worth more "than all burnt offerings and sacrifices". Jesus said to him, "you are not far from the kingdom of God."

Jesus wanted to bring about the depths of the Jewish religion. That depth was forgotten by many of the Jewish leaders and other people of his time. I see that same forgetfulness in us who follow Jesus today. Many of us need the conversion that Paul had. I think that we have a lot of company in people of all faiths of the world.

I want to emphasize that our religious beliefs (especially the core ones) are extremely valuable in giving us meaning and direction for our lives. At the same time we need our religious beliefs to be open to new information. If we don't do that, we run the risk of not being able to communicate our beliefs to others and also of not being able to believe ourselves... Our beliefs often change because growth is essential to our human experience and over time transformations occur in the way we experience our beliefs.

Let us look, as an example, at our religious belief that God is the creator. This can help us to see what is meant by holding on to our religious beliefs and at the same time be open to new information.

The book of Genesis is a belief story which is familiar to most of us.

- God is a powerful being who lives in the heaven far above the firmament (sky).
 - God makes the firmament to separate the waters above the firmament from the waters below.
 - God gathers the waters below into a single basin so there would be dry land. God calls the dry land earth and the basin of water the sea.
 - God has the earth bring forth vegetation: all kinds of plants and fruits.
 - God places lights in the firmament (sky). Sun to light the day and stars to light the night.
 - God makes the birds and the fish.
 - God makes the animals on the earth.
 - God makes humans in the divine likeness.
- It takes God six days to do this and God rests on the seventh day.
- God sees that all he made is good.

What is the Genesis story teaching us as a belief level that is deeper than the cosmology that the writers knew?

- God is the source of everything that exists.
- God is interested in everything that has come from Him.
- God alone is the source. Creation from nothing.
- Humans are special because they are made in the divine likeness.
- Creatures are not to be worshipped. We are to worship God alone.
- Creation is good.
- Creation has a beginning.

The universe that today's science has discovered is very different from what was known when the book of Genesis was written.

- We know now that our universe was not made in six days.
- We know now that our universe is about 13.7 billion years old.
- We know now that our universe began with the "Big Bang".
- We know now that the universe has been evolving since the beginning.
- We know now that when our planet earth began there was no life on earth.
- We know now that life came on earth long after the earth was formed.
- We know now that life continued to evolve from rudimentary beginnings.
- We know now that life evolved through many starts and stops into vast forms of life.
- We know now that it was only about 150,000 years ago that humans evolved.

We must now tell our story of God and creation (if we are to be credible) using what we know of the universe today. I surmise that in the future as our knowledge of the cosmos grows, we will have to adapt our story again.

The purpose of our Christian story is not to tell us what happened. That is what science is able to do. The purpose of our story is to lead us into a kind of knowing which is reasonable (but beyond rational) which will give meaning and purpose to life. A life without meaning is hopeless. When we don't find meaning at some point we will say (no matter how successful we have been): is that all that there is?

This knowledge of mystical knowing doesn't mean visions and ecstasies (though that might happen for some). It is more like a knowing with the heart. We don't really know God as much with our minds as we do with love.

If we tie our story about God to the knowledge of the cosmos at the time that Genesis was written, we will likely do one of two things.

- We will either cling tightly to the science of Genesis and try to shut out science of today in order to maintain our belief in God.
- Or we will lose our belief in God because we know that the science of Genesis is false.

Fortunately, we aren't confined to those two options. What is embedded in the Genesis story that is also in our story of God today. Some examples:

- God is the source of everything. Without the action of God there would be God and nothing else.
- The universe had a beginning.
- Creation is good. We don't have to despair because of all the things that go wrong.
- Everything in creation is connected. Specifically, all of us humans are connected to one another and connected to the rest of creation.
- Humans have a special quality because made in the likeness of God.
- Women and men share the same humanity.
- Creatures are important to God.
- We humans need rest as well as work.
- We humans need to grow in taking responsibility for the way we live.
- When we don't live well there are consequences.

To recap. It is important for us to have beliefs (religious or non-religious). Our lives would be chaotic without them. They help us to live without having to think through every little detail that comes to our attention. They are something like habits of our mind.

Because we are humans, our beliefs (even when true) are not the whole truth. Only God has the whole truth. As we listen to new information our beliefs are not destroyed. They are deepened.

When we listen only to people who believe like we do, we are comfortable but are not challenged. Consequently, we will remain stuck in our own partial vision. And we will think that we have the whole truth.

I have to ask myself. When it comes to religion: do I listen to and read only what confirms the way I see things? How open am I to understand different points of view. Am I afraid of different points of view?

I have to ask myself the same question when it comes to politics.

I hope that I will learn to do that better.

I see this as a serious problem for religion and all the other units of society. There is so much in us that sees "my way or the highway". I am glad and surprised that I am becoming more willing to let the great Love (God) transform me.

Smile, God Loves You,
Father Clay