

Why believe?

Don Bolen

AFTER THE SECOND World War, W.H. Auden wrote a poem that spoke the question of the age, a question of the meaning of time, history, human existence. It begins:

Time will say nothing but I told you so.
Time only knows the price we have to pay.
If I could tell you I would let you know.

In a sense, it is the question of every age and time in human history, though asked in different ways and with differing levels of urgency. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* asks it this way: "We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or only just happened." Annie Dillard, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, refers to "one of the few questions worth asking, to wit, 'What in the Sam Hill is going on here?'" She goes on to speak of our life as "a faint tracing on the surface of mystery."

To what extent does the existence and design of the universe, the earth, human life, suggest the necessity of a creator? The question arises from the very fact of creation, and the fact that there is someone to ask it. It arises from our growing knowledge of the universe (for instance that the diameter of the observable universe at present is at least 93 billion light years, a light year being just under 10 trillion kilometres), and from our increasing understanding of the complexity of our planetary home and of human existence itself. It also arises from both the glory and the suffering which are a part of human life. The experience of beauty and wonder, of new birth and love, of meaning and purpose within time, forge the question of origin and destiny within us. Likewise, the clash of finitude and desire, the experience of brokenness and loss written into creation, the fact that the basic coordinates of time and space—bearers of countless gifts which give shape to our

lives—also bear with them decay, discord and death, often leave us wondering what's going on here.

Our existence is shrouded in mystery, yet it demands a response—in the first instance, an existential response—the response of our lives. But because we are relational beings who communicate primarily through language, it also invites a verbal response. To say "I believe" ("*credo*"), is to take a stance in relation to reality, but it also begs the question: *what* is it that I believe in? Likewise, "I do not believe" beckons other questions: *what* don't I believe in, and what beliefs underlie the conviction of my disbelief?

These questions and responses are deeply personal, but they also arise from, and place us within, a community. In a pluralistic society, we encounter diverse communities who, in differing ways, are formed around shared convictions. To be a part of a community is to hold our "I believe" within a community that holds affirmations (and perhaps questions) in common.

From a Christian perspective, the created universe points to a creator. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul argues that this should be evident even to one who hasn't heard of God, since God's eternal power can be grasped and seen "through the things he has made" (Romans 1:20). The thirteenth-century Franciscan theologian, Bonaventure, whose writings expanded on this notion, suggested that the created world contains vestiges or footprints of God, and urged his hearers to see creation as a lens through which we can begin to know the nature and purpose of God. Thomas Aquinas, writing in the same century, points us towards three "books" through which God is known: creation, the scriptures, and human experience. Both the natural world and fundamental human experience can set us on a path towards belief.

But it is the experience of Jesus Christ that allows Christians to say with conviction, "I believe." And that belief is not so much a believing in something as it is a believing *in someone*. Anglicans and Catholics rejoice in being able to affirm together their belief that in Jesus Christ, God has come in search of us; that he is the unique mediator between God and humanity; that in him we find the fullness of life.

What is it that allows Christians to say, both alone and together, "I believe in the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit," "I believe in Jesus Christ"? For some it is the experience of being confronted by Jesus' word, a word that resounds with truth as it challenges and stirs within the human heart. Others hear what he says about God and the human person as answers to the deepest questions within, and sense an inner coherence between the Christian message and what they have experienced of human life and the created order. Some hear in the gospel message a path for living a fully human life, and the values for building human community in a way that is sustainable and life giving. Others find a source of strength and hope in the community that gathers in his name, and sense his living presence there through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Above all, it is in Jesus' death on the cross that we witness the boundless depths of God's love for us. And it is in his resurrection from the dead that we encounter an ultimate foundation for hope, as love is shown to be stronger than death, as the most unfathomable darkness gives way to an inconceivable light. His death and resurrection give a foundation for believing that everything he taught

about God, everything he did which witnessed to God's mercy, everything he promised about God's kingdom, is trustworthy. All of this allows us as disciples of Jesus to say "I believe."

Belief does not put an end to human questioning, nor does it preclude living with a certain doubt. But with the father who approached Jesus asking healing for his child, we are invited to come before the Lord saying, "I believe; help my unbelief."

Jesus gathered his disciples into a community, and there is a belonging that flows naturally from the profession of faith in him. It is not a perfect community, not a community without deep divisions; but it is nonetheless a community bound together by an abiding hope, by a common trust in God's work in our midst, by a desire to live deeply the way of life opened for us by Jesus' life, death and resurrection. When divided Christians together profess, in the Apostles' or Nicene Creed, that "we believe," we come to know in experience what we already know in theory, that despite our wounds, we are a part of one body of believers, one body in Christ, called ever more to live as one body. Already now we are bound together in a real communion, even if that communion is not yet complete.

We were made to be a part of something larger than ourselves, and we believe—and belong—by grace of the God who eternally desires that we find abundant life in him.

Don Bolen is the Roman Catholic Bishop of Saskatoon.

Questions for discussion

1. Do you spend much time thinking about the meaning of the universe?
2. What difference does it make for you to believe in someone (or something)?
3. How do you integrate what you believe with your experience of life?
4. What in your life nudges you toward or away from belief in God?