

Why People, Including Ourselves, Believe Weird Things

Today we are going to begin with an experiment.

I am going to say a word and I want you to notice your first reaction to the word when you hear it: your reaction may be physical, mental, or emotional. Whatever it is, I want you to hang on to that reaction for a moment and, then, I am going to come around with a microphone and, if you are willing, I would like you to speak your reaction so we can all hear it. Would you be willing to do that? You will have a reaction to the word, I promise.

Okay. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. I'm going to say the word. Notice and lock-on to your reaction. There are no wrong answers here. If your response is the same as someone else's, that's fine. Repetition in this case is helpful.

The word is: religion.

Can we do one more?

Again, I'm going to say a word and I want you to notice the first thing that comes up for you. So, close your eyes and take a deep breath.

The word is: Christian.

You can see what any teacher is up against if and when that teacher begins a talk with the phrase, “Let’s talk about religion.”

It is okay to talk about spirituality because, for many people spirituality is something that is kind of vague and misty and off “out there” somewhere. Whereas, when you talk about religion, it quickly gets personal.

Nonetheless, let’s talk about religion.

Years ago when Dr. Jim Bankston invited me to join the staff here, he wanted me to have an office here. I declined. For one thing I didn’t want to get involved in “church politics.” So many people experience such disillusionment when they work inside the institution and “find out how the sausage is made.” The other reason is that so many of the people I have worked with and continue to do so in either counseling or spiritual direction have such negative experiences with, as they would put it, “the church.”

Last week in saying that we live with the illusion that we are getting all this stuff worked out, whatever that means, I said that we today are not the people we were ten years ago now are we who we will be ten years out. If this is not true for you, the only thing left on your “to do list” is to be buried; because you are dead.

Mystical prophetic spiritual teachings are seen in what we also talk about last week as “the perennial philosophy.” A partial list of what the perennial philosophy consists of would contain things like, and we skimmed the surface of this last week:

if something is true it is always true - has been, is, will be;
there is something in us greater than we know, we are in something greater than we know and we are largely unknown to ourselves;

we have the perennial wisdom with us and, yet, we have to be open to receiving it.

Aspects of the perennial tradition also include -

All reality is one.

Nothing is to be taken literally in the spiritual world.

Matter is alive and the mirror in which we see ourselves and the Sacred.

Growth and becoming constitute purpose.

Though these things have always been true and will always be true, though newly and more deeply understood - hopefully, by each new generation, they aren't religious. In fact, an inherent aspect of all religions is that they tend to mitigate against the wisdom of ongoing growth and change, of evolution.

Though today and going forward I'm going to be speaking to, about, and from the edge of an understanding of the Christian religion, I will begin by speaking about religion in general.

John Dominic Crossan is the one who gave me the insight that the human species is “hard-wired” for religion. Crossan says we are hard-wired for religion just as we are hard-wired to speak a language. The language we learn to speak, of course, is the language of the tribe or culture into which we are born.

The earliest archeological evidence we have of humans is accompanied by evidence of religious rituals - usually related to death or to world conditions, like the weather or to agricultural concerns; that is, to food and survival.

What is religion? One definition is:

Religion is a range of social-cultural systems, including designated behaviors and practices, morals, beliefs, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organizations, that generally relate humanity to supernatural, transcendental, and spiritual elements.

Though there are over 10,000 distinct religions worldwide, four religions - Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism - account for almost eighty percent of how the “religious” of the world identify. There is a debate about whether the word “religion” means “to choose carefully” or “to bind together.”

The “go-to” scholar about religion is Huston Smith. His book “The World’s Religions” is just magnificent. He is an

interesting character in himself. The son of Methodist missionaries, he was born in China. He was just leaving his post as professor of philosophy at MIT when I went to Harvard. He came and gave lectures at the university and I got to hear him. The huge classroom was always packed for his lectures. He was at home in mysticism, Buddhism, Hinduism and very sympathetic to Native American religious traditions.

When I first heard him the country was still reeling from or adjusting to all the revolutions of the Sixties; experimenting with all sorts of things. It was in that light, when people were dabbling in all sorts of religious expressions and cobbling together whatever made them feel good, that Huston said, “It is better to dig one well sixty feet deep than ten wells six feet deep.” What he meant, of course, is that if you are going to have a religion, go as deep into that religion as possible.

I like to give titles to the talks in here. I’ve called today’s *Why People, Including Us, Believe Weird Things*. I started to call it “The Dangers of Home Cooking.” I got that idea from something one of my teachers once said. “The one who does not travel thinks mother is the only cook.”

It is easy to think that the beliefs we have been given by the tribe in which we were birthed and where we have gotten older - I didn’t use the phrase “grown up” because that implies maturity and clearly we are a society of adolescents - it is easy to think

that what we have been given by our tribe is the absolute and “god given” truth.

For example: Our country has a psychosis about guns. As a culture, we love guns more than people and communal well-being. That’s sick. I heard someone on the news say recently that the right to own a gun, meaning a military style killing machine, was a “god-given right.” Really?

It isn’t God who gives so-called “rights” about guns. Nor does God doesn’t dole out religions making sure that there is only one “right one.” Who would want anything to do with such a “god”?

You did hear me acknowledge early on today that religions can harm and do hurt.

Religions have also done and do remarkably wonderful things. This gathering is the offering of a religious institution.

Regardless of whether a religion harms or heals, no religion comes down from above. All religions are the product of the human societies where those religions are practiced. All religions use the symbol system of the culture in which they are created to express and experience the Sacred. In the sixth century a Greek philosopher, Xenophenes, wrote, “If horses had gods, they would look like horses.” So what became the monotheistic religions - Judaism, Islam, Christianity - reflect the

tribal myths and values of the tribal cultures in which they were created. Eastern religions have many gods reflecting the beliefs about ancestors and family. Indigenous peoples' religion reflects the close ties to the word of nature and animals. And so forth. It isn't a matter of one being better than another, just different.

What about that is referred to as "The Christian Religion"?

Well, there isn't one.

If you go to the Wikipedia article on Christianity, you will read a general definition of Christianity as a religion that is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion that is based on the life and teachings of Jesus. Then it goes on to say, broadly, what it is assumed that all Christians believe - that Jesus was the Son of God, who was the Messiah prophesied by the Hebrew Scriptures and whose life is told in the Christian Scriptures.

The article says that Christianity began in the first century. I would dispute that because before 325 there was no one expression of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. This is not a matter of opinion. This is a historical fact.

There was no "Christianity" as we have come to think of it until 325. This is when Constantine got the leaders of various communities of Jesus followers together and got them to agree on one statement of faith that could define and, then, unify the

Roman Empire. If getting rid of everyone who disagrees with you is what unification is, that was a success. A bloody one.

There was no Christianity until 325. That is when the Nicene Creed was born which was about the divinity of Jesus.

This is incredibly important because at this time there was a shift from how people behaved and related to what people believed. There is nothing in either of the two major creeds that the church uses that says anything about what Jesus taught or did. In fact, in the Apostles' Creed, which pre-dates the Nicene Creed, Jesus' life is reduced to a comma. “. . . was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate . . .”

I want to say two things about this before we delve deeper into the Sacred Stream.

Number one: psychology was not factored into the discussion when the creeds were composed. The science of the mind was uncharted territory because none of the disciplines of modern science had been born. Cosmology as we now understand it was something that would eventually be declared heresy.

Number two: the definition of things like “faith,” “belief,” and “factuality” were very, very, very different from our current understanding of these things.

The Apostles Creed, which is used in this church's liturgy is even older. This doesn't make it better. Just further out of touch with our understaffing of faith, belief, and how the world works.

Yet almost all understandings of what it means to be Christian are based on these creedal statements that come from the fourth century - or earlier. And, the church wonders why no-one thinks that it is relevant. The church has spent more time on developing and then arguing about what the creeds mean than on the teachings of Jesus.

I am not being Chicken Little when I say what you are about to hear. And, I'm not the first to say it. John Shelby Spong whose works have been the basis for a lot of talks in here done by me and by Dr. Holly Hudley and me together and who has spoken in this very room at least on two different occasions came out with his book "Why Christianity Must Change or Die" This book was published twenty-five years ago! I personally think that the failure of mainline churches to heed what Spong was saying has led us to the current crisis today that is threatening to leave us at the hands of people who call themselves "Christian Nationalist." This so-called form of or understanding of "Christianity" is about as far from the teachings of Jesus as one could get.

I predict that, without massive change, within two generations, mainline expressions of Christianity in this country

will be what they currently are in Europe. Dead and/or dying. Many denominations, the UMC included, now have agencies or boards within them to help dying churches know how to repurpose their property.

If people don't know about their religion and the human role and responsibility in shaping it, is grows old, gets sick and dies.

Most people think that being Christian has to do with what a person believes. Show me in his teachings where Jesus ever said, "Now, this is what you need to believe."

I am not a person prone to scream or anger. But I approach both when I get to this subject. I want to scream in anger at the Fundamentalists in all religions and at Christian Nationalists in particular, "Would you please just grow up! And, would you shut up while you're doing it? Go do your work. Put in time like this. Dig a well sixty feet deep."

The purpose of religion is not to maintain institutions - though institutions are important to contain them. The purpose of religion isn't to police correct belief systems. The purpose of religion is to sustain in the human community the zest for life by providing meaning and direction for living. Just as all religions have come into existence as a product of human development, just so they will survive into the future by a process of continuing growth and development.

Let me say it again: Religion is not due to some special revelation or intervention. All religions are the result of a natural process of development. There is no way to go deeper into the Sacred Stream without letting go of the bank. That is to say without dying to one way of life or one world-view and going through the darkness that always precedes being born into a new way. There is no path that avoids these struggles. Remember: the opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty.

So, with your permission, and I may be entirely without it, let's revisit what "faith" and "belief" mean. Understanding this may help us understand why people "believe weird things."

First, faith.

For many people "having faith" means "believing something to be true." Someone might say, "I have faith in the Bible" or "I have faith in Jesus" or "I have faith in the virgin birth."

By experience I can tell you that you put your relationship with a person who says things like this at risk if you ask them to explain what they mean or what it is they want you to believe if you join them in having this faith. Actually, this definition of faith is very recent historically. It grew out of the movement called The Protestant Reformation where the battle cry was "the just shall live by faith." It means to believe certain things. "Are

you a Methodist?” And, if the answer is “yes,” you list the things that Methodists believe that make you a Methodist.

Sadly, one of the offshoots of this definition of faith was that some “faiths” turn out to be superior to other faiths. Then, tests of orthodoxy follow.

Then, after this faith came to mean a belief that we couldn’t prove to be true. For example, in ancient times it took no effort at all to believe in the world-view or cosmology of the Bible. Since Copernicus, not so easy. Yet, if you are a “Bible-believing Christian,” there are things you have to believe, or say you do, whether it makes sense or not.

I just want to stress that this definition of faith is very recent historically. It implies that what God is most interested in is in what we believe and not how we behave. Progressive, main-line Christianity participates in this by asking to people to affirm their faith in a creed that doesn’t make sense any more.

Another understanding of faith is close to what it sounds like - faithfulness. I am faithful to my marriage partner. Which not only means I don’t commit infidelity but that I make her feel safe, put her first. So here a lack of faith is not a lot of belief it is adultery.

Very often Jesus referred to the people of his time as “an adulterous generation.” He didn’t mean they were having sex

orgies (maybe they were) but that they were not being faithful to God's vision of the world.

In Judaism this lack of faith is referred to as idolatry

A third meaning of faith is "having trust." Here we are not trusting that something is factually true but, rather, that the values lived and taught by, in the case of Christians, Jesus are how to live. These are the values of love, truth, freedom, and justice.

The opposite of this kind of faith is anxiety. As we get further into the teachings of Jesus, we will hear and hopefully learn that his most frequent teaching is "fear not." This was at the heart of mystical, prophetic Judaism.

Another way of understanding what it means to have faith has to do with how we see. Faith is a way of seeing. How we see determines how we respond to life. We see the world not so much as it is but, rather, as we are. Remember: How we see is central both in the practice of and the content of our daily spiritual practice.

My point today is that faith is not about believing certain things to be true but about having a stance in life that can lead to transformation. I keep remembering something Jim Finley teaches. If we were to enter into a deep and transformative spiritual practice to the point that when we emerge from it, when we

opened our eyes, and would then see as Jesus saw; what would be see? We would see God - in everything and every one.

So why is it that we live in a culture and in a world where so many people believe weird stuff?

I can think of lots of reasons.

It's fun. It gets you attention. It make a person feel special.

By the way, when we get into the Jesus narrative, we are going to encounter what is likely one of the most historically accurate episodes in the life of Jesus. His mother and siblings think he is nuts. So, if you want to be like Jesus . . .

People believe all sorts of weird things - religious beliefs, political beliefs, cultural beliefs. People flew planes into the World Trade Center buildings out of religious and political beliefs. Some people believe it is God's will that Trump be president.

Once someone embraces a belief that matters to them, for whatever reason, they will use what is called "motivational reasoning" to fend off any evidence that their strongly held beliefs are wrong.

I used to say when beginning these talks: I'd like to invite you to open your minds today. Take out your beliefs. They are

all human constructs. When our time is over, you can put them all back. My goal is to warp the door to your mind so that it won't firmly shut again.

You are likely familiar with the Zen teaching story of the man who goes to the spiritual master and says, "What truths can you teach me?" The master replies, "Do you like tea?" The man says, "Yes." So the master pours him a cup of tea. The cup fills but the master keeps pouring. Tea spills. The man protests, "Stop, the cup is full." The master responds, "Return to me when you are empty."

I had lunch with a dear friend recently. We haven't had a chance to visit in a long time. In commenting about our current political situation he said, "I can't understand how any thinking person . . ." A lot of people don't think. We are constantly looking for things that confirm what we already believe.

We are meaning seeking animals and we live in a quirky, complex and contingent world where things often don't make sense. So we make up stuff to help us "make sense" of things. It is easier to see this if you go back in history. For example, at one time people didn't know where lightning came from. So, they made up a story about the god Thor throwing lightning bolts down from the sky above. Magical thinking is part of our make up.

People also believe falsehoods.

Alien abductions are falsehoods. Back before the invention of the iPhone, which gave everyone a camera, there used to be frequently reports of “flying saucers.” Usually these came from some “good old boy” in Georgia. Not so much anymore.

There is no one here who does not remember the death of George Floyd. Here is how the Minneapolis Police Department reported the incident at first:

“Two officers arrived and located the suspect, a man believed to be in his 40s, in his car. He was ordered to step from his car. After he got out, he physically resisted officers. Officers were able to get the suspect into handcuffs and noted he appeared to be suffering medical distress. Officers calls for an ambulance. He was transported to Hennepin County Medical Center by ambulance where he died a short time later.”

Had it not be for a cell phone video, that’s the story. Not true. But, it would have been believed.

By the way, it is easier to see other people’s weird beliefs than it is to see our own.

Further, people believe weird things because they reject a truth.

I personally cannot get my mind around the fact that there are people who believe that the Holocaust never happened.

I have not talked to you much, if any, of the work of Jim Marion. We will get to his influence on me and relevance for what we are trying to do here as we move deeper into the flow of the Sacred Stream. His book on Christ Consciousness was inspired by his study of Carl Jung. His book “The Death of the Mythic God: The Rise of Evolutionary Spirituality” is important to know about. His book “Putting on the Mind of Christ” has been especially enriching for me.

At any rate, and this is one of the reasons I want to scream “grow up” to some folks, he has a useful model for helping us understand the evolution of the human person. Though you have heard of numerous models of human growth and development, this is likely one you have not heard of.

First, there is what he calls “archaic conscious.” This stage begins with the infant’s differentiation of its own body from that of the mother and, then, the differentiation of the infant’s emotion from those of the mother. We are born experiencing wholeness but our encounter with reality fractures this original unity because our demands begin to be rejected by the world. The child is rejected from paradise.

Next is “magical consciousness.” This is usually the person between two and seven years of age. This is the place where all tribal cultures live.

Then, there is “mythic consciousness.” This usually lasts until we are around fourteen. Here we begin to understand general rules and the importance of roles. This is the conformist “law and order” stage of development. Here is where Santa Clause, the Easter Bunny and the “sky god” live. They can rearrange the world, work miracles and, if necessary, punish.

People who are stuck at this level religiously see people of other religions as evil, as heretics, or merely as “wrong.” Marion says this is where monotheistic religions are stuck.

Then there is “rational consciousness.” To get here requires both work and a willingness to die to the former world view. It can be difficult. Most, but not all, people who have graduated from some institution of higher education have gotten here. They are accused by people who have not made this journey of “living in ivory towers” and “not understanding the ‘real world.’”

Then there is “vision-logic consciousness.” Here people are more grounded within themselves and have what we might call a “global consciousness.” Things like race, skin color, gender, sexual orientation, or national origin don’t concern these folks. As a matter of fact they delight in diversity.

After this, there is “psychic consciousness.” This is the level the mystics refer to as “the awakened self.” Jim Finley refers to it as “mystical knowing.”

Finally, according to Marion’s model, there is “christ consciousness.” This comes on the other side of what Christian mystics refer to as “the dark night of the soul” or that I talked about last week as “the temptation of Jesus.” This is the place Meister Eckhart prayed to be when he prayed “God, rid me of God.”

I don’t know where you are on this model. I would hope we are all at “vision-logic” level. We all like to think we are higher than we are. We all like to think we are “above average drivers.”

The reasons that we don’t move further out and into the Sacred Stream, the reasons we believe “weird things” is because of fear and of “not belonging.”

Now, here is the thing.

Up until the time that the Jesus movement became a “belief system” and Jesus got reduced to a comma, Jesus was not considered the great exception to humanity but the identity of every person who makes the journey in love. Jesus was not someone to believe in but, rather, to be like. One’s relationship to Jesus didn’t keep that person out of hell but, rather,

empowered that person to create and live in a “heaven on earth.” He called such communities of empowerment “the kingdom of God” - which we are only beginning, I believe, to rediscover and re-understand and re-imagine in our own time.

One thing is true of every one of us. We all get acclimated to our context, to the beliefs, values, practices of our tribe to the point that we become unmindful of what we are doing or how we are affected by what we are doing. I’ll give you an example.

Every time Christians gather to worship or when you go to a wedding or a funeral or, sadly, even occasionally to a high school sporting event, people pray The Lord’s Prayer which contains the phrase “thy will be done, thy kingdom come.” I wonder if people have any idea what that means? Do we really want God’s will done in our lives? Do we even know what that means?

We show up here some Sunday and notice that Wayne isn’t here. “Where is Wayne?”

“Oh, didn’t you hear? God’s will was done in his life.”

“Oh, my. Poor fellow. I just saw him here last week.”

“Yeah, me too. And, he seemed like such a nice guy. You just never know.”

What is God’s will?

Well, if we take our clues from evolutionary cosmology it is to recognize the unity of all that is and live in harmony with that. It is to realize that we are the cosmos given the ability, in our tiny corner of things, to reflect on the meaning of it all and to do the work of of harmonious integration. Or, in the language of the Jewish mystic, Jesus, who was in the prophetic tradition of his religion, “To love one another as I have loved you.” A religion that leads us in this direction is worth pursuing.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: You carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.