

BELIEF, PRACTICE, AND RELIGION

by *Ward H. Goodenough*

Abstract. How to reconcile belief in God with the worldview generated by modern science is a concern for those who see such belief as the essence of religion. Some religious traditions emphasize correct behavior, including observance of ritual, more than belief. Others stress individual pursuit of inner tranquility without prescribing particular beliefs or rituals by which that is to be achieved. Theological issues relating to “the God question in an age of science” are relevant to Christians, whose religious emphasis is on right belief as necessary to personal salvation; but science does not raise such issues for religion generally.

Keywords: belief; observance; practice; religion; science.

This paper addresses “The God Question in an Age of Science,” the topic of the conference at which it was first presented. The topic derives its significance for us from certain assumptions that characterize Christianity, though they are not peculiar to it. It is common among Christians to ask such questions as: Do you believe in God? What is your faith? Are you a *believing* Christian? It would, by contrast, sound odd to ask if someone was a believing Jew. The usual question is, Are you an *observant* Jew? In other words, to be a proper Christian is to be committed to certain beliefs, to a creed. To be a proper Jew is to be committed to certain ritual practices, to following the Law. So we distinguish between “nominal” and “believing” Christians but between “nominal” and “observant” Jews. It is not that there is no observance in Christianity or no belief in Judaism; but where the emphasis lies is clearly different.

The emphasis on belief in Christianity stems from the latter’s having had its beginning in the acceptance of Jesus’ prophecies that the Day of Judgment was at hand and the Kingdom of God about to be

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established on earth. The big question for people was whether they were to believe it or not. It made a big difference in how one was to understand the pathway to personal salvation. After Jesus' death, the community of believers rallied itself around the idea that the prophecy was still valid and that report of his resurrection and ascent into heaven was proof of that fact. Just when the prophecy might be fulfilled became more problematic with time, and what people should do in the meantime became the increasing concern. But the truth of the prophecy remained central. Thus Christianity was born in the commitment to a belief in the truth of a prophecy and in the divinity of the prophet as a "son" of the Jewish tribal patron god, soon to be redefined as the universal God when the possibility of salvation through belief in the prophecy was extended to gentiles. From then on, the first requisite of salvation was to *believe* in something. It availed nothing, no matter how exemplary one's behavior or observance of ritual, if one did not sincerely believe. This, I think, is characteristic of religious traditions that have been born in prophetic visions of salvation, of rescue from a demeaning life situation.

It is from this historical background that the question arises as to how one can believe in the existence of God—by which is meant the god of Christian tradition—and how one is to construe the nature of God in the light of present understanding of the evolution of the cosmos, the planet earth, and life within it as it is being revealed by scientific research. To have organized a conference entitled "The Place of Ritual Observance in an Age of Science" would not, I believe, have seemed relevant to the concerns of most of us. If ours were a different religious tradition, it might have seemed relevant, indeed.

Having pointed to two different orientations toward religion, one that emphasizes observance and the other that emphasizes belief, I would like to move a step further and look at what it is that is common to them both. That common something is that each in its way serves as an affirmation of membership in a community. To participate with others in the expression of a belief or to participate with others in the observance of a rite is in either case to declare oneself the kind of person who qualifies for membership in that community and to have one's credentials accepted (and thus validated) by the community's other members. Thus, profession of a belief and observance of a ritual are both formal public acts that establish, reestablish, or maintain a significant part of one's persona.

Such acts take their significance from the fact that who we are as persons derives from our relationships with others and from how we perceive ourselves in terms of the socially defined categories of age,

sex, competence, group affiliation, etc. We can successfully perceive ourselves in these terms only insofar as we are perceived and treated by others in the same terms. Acceptance by others as members of both formal and informal social groups is critical in the maintenance of ourselves as social and thus as human beings.

There are many different kinds of groups and categories to which people belong and through which they derive much of their personhood. They have no choice in regard to some, such as the family into which they are born, their sex, their ethnicity, and in some societies their caste, clan, occupation, or servitude. They have choice in regard to others. In large, complex societies the range of choice tends to be greater than in small ones. Where there are choices as to social categories or groups, people have to decide among them, and then they may have to show that they qualify for membership in them. In such cases, people make decisions about their own social personas and then work to bring those decisions to fruition. Thus they create who they are. To do this requires a commitment of self to a course of further construction of self. That commitment, once made, becomes, figuratively speaking, a matter of life or death for the self.

Membership in social categories and groups over which an individual has no choice can also acquire enormous importance as a central aspect of self. Such importance may be because others treat these categories as important. One's race and gender are of central importance in the United States for this reason. If no one made anything of them, a person's race and gender would be insignificant to who they are, to their personhood. The same can be said of one's caste in India. But membership in such categories may acquire enormous importance because these categories are the source of many gratifications in the course of one's life, especially in the course of growing up. Family can be the arena in which people have derived most of their sense of value and worth, in which they have had all kinds of rewarding experiences of self in the course of daily interaction.

The same may be said of the larger community and even the nation-state. I have grown up speaking American English, learning American ways of doing things, enjoying American food and American forms of entertainment. I am comfortable with all of these things, and they have provided the context in which, in other respects, I have come to be who I am. I am likely to take them and my being American for granted unless I find myself in another country or unless America seems to be threatened by other nations. Then, what I have taken for granted may acquire great value for me. I may

find the symbols of American identity, such as the flag and the national anthem, taking on new value for me. I may cease to be a nominal American and become an observant one. Being American may now become a self-conscious and active part of who I am, and not just a part of my background of self.

It is much the same with someone who has been raised as a participant in a particular religious tradition. She or he has been brought up hearing grace said at mealtime and regularly attending Sunday services in, let us say, the Methodist Church. On leaving the family, such an individual may continue to say grace at meals and go to church because not to do so would seem to be a violation of his or her sense of self. But this individual may cease to do these things as he or she achieves membership in other social categories and groups. The church affiliation of childhood, largely taken for granted, is allowed to atrophy as a part of the self. If it has not been taken for granted and has come to be a significant aspect of self, the achievement of membership in other social groups and categories of a very different kind, that promote views of self and world at odds with those promoted by the Methodist upbringing, may lead to a crisis of identity to be resolved either by a reaffirmation of the Methodist self or a renunciation of it. In either case, something akin to a conversion experience will have occurred.

This situation of conflict between different, important aspects of self that seem incompatible is, of course, what gives rise to the God question in an age of science as a matter of concern. The question does not concern those who have resolved the conflict by a commitment to the literal truth of the Bible, and who see that commitment as providing an avenue for self-fulfillment. Nor does it concern those who have committed themselves to science as the only acceptable approach to understanding their world and themselves within it and who see in that understanding an avenue for their self-fulfillment. The problem is for those who feel that self-fulfillment requires finding some acceptable way to reconcile their Christian or other religious heritage with acceptance of the revelations of modern science and all that those revelations seem rationally to imply both for them as individuals and for humanity as a whole.

As implied by what I have said, there are aspects of self that people come to value highly. People seek to maintain them, and they work to preserve the conditions from which they derive. People also value highly those activities in which they reexperience themselves in these valued aspects of self. Experiencing themselves routinely as members of right-believing fellowships is one way to do this. Experiencing themselves as reaffirming their membership in any community or

fellowship—regardless of whether it involves right belief—also does this for them, if participation in its activities provides the context in which things people value about themselves have been formed and are maintained.

Let me take as an example the celebration of Christmas. Those of us who grew up in families that observed Christmas as a special time—with its trappings, gift giving, feasting, and family reunion—experienced ourselves in very positive ways on those occasions. We felt good about ourselves and warmly secure in our membership in a mutually supporting family. Whether we believed in Santa Claus and the story of Jesus' birth or not made little difference. In later life, we have continued to celebrate Christmas in order to reexperience all those good feelings about ourselves and share them with our children and grandchildren, making such feelings a significant part of their experience of self as well. We have done so, whether or not we consider ourselves to be believing Christians, agnostics, or even atheists. It is the observance of Christmas that matters to us, not belief. We observe it "religiously" in that we would feel that something important was missing in our lives if we did not observe it.

If we consider that people derive religious value from actions that give them this kind of experience of reaffirming things that make a positive difference in how they feel about themselves—in their very being—then, in keeping with what I have argued before (Goodenough 1988), we must conclude that the celebration of Christmas can be a religious act for its celebrants, even if they have lost belief in the existence of God, in the divinity of Jesus, in any form of afterlife, or any of the other articles of faith to which Christians are expected to subscribe.

What I have said about the observance of Christmas can equally well be said about the observance of Jewish rituals by many Jews. I have Jewish friends who admittedly do not believe in God but who attach great importance to affirming their lifelong identity as Jews by regularly observing the rituals of the major Jewish holidays.

The many rituals associated with colleges at the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, including wearing a gown on specified occasions and properly passing the wine at the high table, are all scrupulously observed by their fellows, or at least a significant number of them, as daily affirmations of their membership in an elite company. Such membership is an aspect of self that is obviously of great importance to them. We see these rituals functioning for them in a way similar to traditional religious rituals as religious acts of self-maintenance and self-affirmation.

One may argue that it is their *belief* in the correctness of British

institutions and the elite state of being an Oxbridge don that gives religious value to their observance of these rituals. Indeed, ritual cannot have such value if one does not have a view of the world that gives eminence to those aspects of self that ritual helps to affirm and maintain. But this view of the world need not include a belief in the existence of a god or of any kind of supernatural being.

What I am leading up to is the proposition that belief in God can be viewed as functioning in a similar way. It may be no more than a feature of the worldview that we grew up with, a given part of the reality providing the context within which religious acts of self-maintenance and self-realization get defined. To question the existence of God under such circumstances is to question the taken-for-granted background from which significant aspects of the self have emerged and in terms of which those significant aspects are given symbolic expression. As long as the existence of God is not questioned, however, belief in that existence has no more religious significance in itself than belief that the earth is round. Once it is questioned, then we are confronted with a choice: to believe or not to believe. If many of the ritual and other activities in which we participate and through which we maintain and realize ourselves are premised on the existence of God, then we are likely to choose to believe. Adhering to that choice becomes in itself an act by which we maintain ourselves. Since the alternative continues to exist, we feel impelled to justify our choice to ourselves, and we seek the company of others who have chosen similarly and who help reinforce our choice and our justification of it. Our regularly communing together in reaffirmation of that belief becomes another ritual through which we maintain valued aspects of self.

With the foregoing in mind, let us consider what I am trying to do in the ethnographic account I am preparing of the pre-Christian religious life in what is now called Chuuk (formerly Truk) in Micronesia. In that account, I am treating the existence of various kinds of gods and spirits as being part of the worldview that was shared by Chuuk's people before Christian missionaries and other Europeans intruded upon them. Belief in their existence was not in itself a part of the pre-Christian religion but formed the background of understandings about the world and the place of people in it on which the religious practices of Chuuk's inhabitants rested. Thus, their religious life involved a variety of ritual practices that made sense within the framework of their worldview, but acceptance of the truth of that worldview was not a religious act and hence not a religious belief. Chuuk's people were not aware of any alternatives. They could and did adopt Christianity in the understanding that the

Christian view of the world was essentially like their own. They equated the Christian God with the god they called "Great Spirit," Satan with the god they called "Stamper," and Heaven with the traditional abodes of spirits of the dead in the sky; and they saw missionaries as the most recent in a line of mediators with the spirit world who had brought people useful rituals through which to maintain themselves in positive relation to it. Their decisions to give up previous ritual practices that were condemned by the missionaries or continue them were made in the same way as their decisions to give up or continue their folk medical practices, which were also condemned by westerners. Christianity and western medicine both offered an additional kit of resources for self-maintenance and a sense of well-being, both psychologically and physically. They were to be used as such. In time, because of the insistence of missionaries, self-identification as a Christian or a pagan became an issue for some people; but for many of Chuuk's people, what continues to be important, as it seems to have been in pre-Christian times, is maintaining one's identity as a self-respecting male or female member of one's community and clan and one's sense of security in that membership. Christian ritual now serves importantly as a vehicle for helping reaffirm self-respecting community membership, while those pre-Christian rituals that were tied to family and clan membership continue to be widely practiced. Thus, we can see contemporary participation by the same people in both Christian and pre-Christian rituals as reflecting very largely traditional concerns regarding maintenance of the self in the context of the cultural structuring of social relationships and of individual selves in traditional Chuukese society.

Deborah Tooker (in press) provides us with an example of people in Southeast Asia who establish and maintain their community membership and local ethnic identities by observing the rituals and other ways of life that form that community's distinctive traditions. If persons who have moved into a community continue to observe the rituals and customs identified with their community of origin, they remain outsiders; but if they adopt the customs and take part in the rituals of their new community of residence, they come to be perceived as members of the community and as having an ethnic identity as such. Each community has its own distinctive traditions, including spirits and rituals relating to them, just as each college at Oxford has its own distinctive traditions. Members maintain the distinctive identity of the community, like the distinctiveness of the Oxford college, by honoring the community's traditions and by observing its rituals. Whether one takes them seriously or otherwise,

or privately regards them as quaint or even silly, is not at issue. To observe them is to show one's commitment to the community and to one's membership in it. It is this sharing of commitment that sustains the community, and observing the rituals which help sustain what one has committed oneself to also serves to maintain what has become a significant aspect of one's self.

In my view, then, the God question in an age of science is meaningful only within the framework of a religious tradition that has made sincere profession of a belief in a body of doctrine about something called "God" and its relation to humans the sine qua non of membership in a select community, a membership that provides the only possible pathway to personal salvation. There are sectarian offshoots of that tradition, of course, that put little emphasis on belief, emphasizing instead the search for personal enlightenment and the maintenance of mutually supportive fellowship in the conduct of that search. But the tradition of belief in the existence of a divinity as the source of enlightenment or salvation persists—however that divinity is to be conceptualized, if at all—as does its corollary that without such belief no genuine enlightenment or spiritual self-fulfillment can be attained. For people who have grown up within this tradition and for whom this tradition has provided the terms and symbols of vitally important aspects of their selfhood, how to understand the nature of divinity in the light of modern science is inevitably an important religious concern. But the "God Question" cannot be such a concern for people who have grown up in traditions where the emphasis has been on observance rather than on belief or on the quest for harmonic attunement within oneself. For these people, acceptance of the understandings of modern science need not detract from the value of the observances through which they maintain cherished aspects of self and seek personal salvation. For them the problem of conflict may arise if their observances include practices that scientific research has shown to be deleterious to physical health, such as the use of psychedelic drugs or some forms of asceticism.

I do not propose to conclude this presentation by offering answers to the God question in an age of science. Each of us must find his or her own answer to that question. What I would like to suggest is that one way to deal with it is to look upon it as a question that does not need an answer. We can see ourselves as acquiring our selfhood through being in touch with (among other things) an accumulating body of knowledge of the world, of ourselves as persons, and of how we and the world work. We can see ourselves as expanding our beings by relating our own experiences to the wisdom that people before us (including great religious teachers) have distilled from their expe-

riences, and by working to incorporate our expanding insight and wisdom into how we manage our lives and our dealings with others. We can see ourselves as also sustaining our being through participation with others in activities, including ritual, that contribute to and affirm our commitment to becoming the kinds of persons that, in moments when we are free of inner conflict about ourselves, we feel we truly want to be. I recognize that there are, indeed, religious traditions so constructed that they require theology; but as other traditions seem to show us, theology may not be necessary to religious life.

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