

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# ‘Believing that’ or ‘believing in’ as we seek peace together

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I have now come home from an inspiring time at Cambridge University these past two months. My time there with the Woolf Institute, which pursues research and application of the interfaith agenda, has been most enriching. The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion always provides opportunity for stimulating talks and interaction with scientists who affirm their faith commitments.

At the conclusion of the term in Cambridge, I joined this year’s interfaith workshop in conjunction with our Templeton supported grant on an Abrahamic approach to science and religion. The theme, “Randomness in Science and Providence in Religion,” brought 30 science, philosophy and theology scholars from the three major faith traditions and from 13 countries to Macedonia for a week of interaction and sharing the results of their joint projects.

Many of the projects get too technical to discuss in this short column, but I was struck by a comment made, almost in passing, by one of the Jewish philosophers. She made the distinction between “believing that” and “believing in.”

She cited the story from Exodus of the Israelites after being saved from pursuing Egyptian armies at the Red Sea. The chapter ends with, “Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.” (Exodus 14:31)

“Belief in” God and in Moses is not merely belief that God and Moses exist, but reflects a trust in the persons, not just their existence.

Too often our philosophical and theological efforts are directed to questions of existence when we should instead concern ourselves with what and whom do we trust. The book of James in the Bible makes a similar distinction from a Christian perspective when we read, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder.” (James 2:19) “Believing that” is of some interest, but the real question is in what or in whom does one trust. Where do I place my confidence? Or, if you will, how will I live my life, what values will I seek to follow?

Putting trust in a relationship is critical to life in general, not just to one’s theological commitments. One doesn’t just believe that a person exists, but believes in that person, has confidence and trust in that person. It is the basis of a marriage, or family, or any important relationship that one has.

This distinction applies not only to personal relationships but also to other commitments and beliefs that one engages. My work this past decade reflects my belief in interfaith understanding, not just that it exists. I trust that

these efforts will contribute to better human relationships and peace. I am committed to working to know others better and to respect the way they see the world and their faith.

When the 17th century philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal died, his servant found a parchment stitched to the lining of Pascal’s coat. It recorded a profound religious experience that Pascal had years earlier and included the reference to the “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars.” Pascal was more interested in belief in God rather than merely the philosophical arguments for God’s existence.

As my interfaith work has progressed, I find this distinction more and more relevant to what I do. The philosophical arguments are of interest, but much more important for me has become what do I believe in. I believe that God can and does address humanity in various ways and traditions, but I have also come to believe in the person that my Christian tradition holds up as the one who most reflects God’s desire for what it means to be fully human.

It is not so much trying to speculate on “What Would Jesus Do” (remember that fad to wear the initials WWJD on a bracelet?), but seeking to follow Jesus in terms of what he did do. Call it WDJD — What Did Jesus Do?

As I read about Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman who wanted her daughter healed, I look to see what did Jesus do. She was not Jewish, she was of a different race and belief, but Jesus did heal her daughter.

I read of the centurion who was not only from a different nationality, but was part of the occupying forces. He asked Jesus to heal his servant. What did Jesus do? He healed the servant and praised him for his faith.

When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, what did Jesus do? In the book of John, it says the Jews had no dealing with Samaritans, who were considered heretics. What did he do? He conversed, asked her for a drink, and respected her without judging her past.

And what did Jesus do, when the young lawyer asked him what he must do to inherit eternal life? If there is an ultimate religious question, it must be that.

Jesus told him to love God and love his neighbor.

When pressed by the lawyer regarding who is my neighbor, Jesus tells the story of a Samaritan, again someone from that rejected tribe.

In each case, we don’t see Jesus discussing philosophy or theology. He doesn’t ask them to believe something abstract or agree to a creed. He expects them to believe in him and have confidence that he will act.

In our lives together in this increasingly diverse world, let us believe in each other and in the power of love to bring us to respect, acceptance and peace.

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