

Belief in God

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The Scriptures begin (Genesis 1:1-3) with three basic assumptions: (1) God, (2) the beginning (time), and (3) the creation of heaven and earth (space, matter, time, and energy - the universe). What is more, it is all spoken of as having happened at the command of God. This fact is explicitly stated in Psalms 33:6-9. All things came into being at the utterance of God. He spoke our world, "the universe," into existence. These assumptions are the beginning point of the story God has revealed to mankind concerning his existence, our existence, and the existence of our world. He does not set out to prove his existence, our existence, or the existence of our world. Rather, his existence, our existence, and the existence of our world is assumed or presupposed.

We all come to the things we believe the same way and we all presuppose the things we believe to be true. It is only when our presuppositions are challenged that we return to them for investigation or examination. Must one be schooled in the art of philosophical discussion or the science of logical argumentation before he can be sure of the truth of his beliefs? If this is the case, then most of the human race is walking around in a state of irrationality or unintelligible gullibility. Our presuppositions are those things we have come to believe through very simple process of thought. When presented with any statement or proposition we are expected to evaluate as true or not true, most of us simply accept it as true *if there is every good reason to believe it and no good reason to disbelieve it*. This is, in all probability, how most of our beliefs (whether called assumptions, presuppositions, matters of fact, or truth) originate, and is very likely how the earliest Christians came by their beliefs.

Early Believers and Their Beliefs

In discussing such a subject as "the beliefs of the earliest Christians," one must acknowledge that some of their beliefs did not come to them the same way as ours. The major difference lies in the different worldview of each group. A person of the first century Mediterranean world would not be confronted with the same issues as a person of the 21st century. The first century Christians were not likely concerned with the "theism vs. atheism" debate. They may assume, without fear of ridicule, that the existence of God is a given to most people of their world; which would not be "a given" in the world of the 21st century Christian. The question for these early Christians would not be whether God exists, but which God exists, or which God is the most powerful God or the God most deserving of devotion and worship. He would not likely be confronted with the challenges of atheism; rather, his challenge would be that of polytheism (i.e., the belief in many gods).

With few exceptions, the early Christians would have been monotheists. Some of the early Christians believed in dualism (i.e., as in Gnosticism), but that is a discussion for another time and place. The first Christian converts came from Judaism and would have been strict monotheists. For the Gentile converts it would have been different. The greater part of the Gentile world of the first century Roman Empire would have been polytheists (i.e., they would have believed in many gods). The rare exception would have been the Gentile *theosebēs* (godfearer), i.e., a Gentile who had come to believe in the God of the Jews. These were Gentiles who had been impressed with the beliefs of the Jews; especially, their monotheism, their moral beliefs, their loyalty to their fellow sons of Abraham, and their passion for their religion. Those who made up the greater part of the Gentile world, however, would have had no difficulty acknowledging the existence of a myriad of deity figures. The problem with which we are confronted here is not the issue of the non-existence of God, but the exclusive existence of the God of the Hebrews, the God who had revealed his name and his divine nature to the ancient fathers and to Moses and the prophets after him.

How We Acquire Our Beliefs

Before entering into a discussion of the early Christians belief in God, we should first give some thought to how anyone comes to believe anything. There are two primary sources of our beliefs: experience and testimony. Our experiences lead us to draw certain conclusion about the way our world works. This usually concerns cause and effect relationships and we will say more about this later. The other source from which we draw our beliefs is testimony. Someone tells us something and we either believe it or we do not believe it. The reason for belief, as opposed to disbelief, is usually due to the credibility of the testimony. If what has been told us is believable (i.e., there is every good reason to believe what has been said and no good reason to doubt or disbelieve it), then we believe it. This is too simple an explanation for the science of epistemology (i.e., the study of how we come to know), but it is a definition most of us can relate to, as well as the Christians of the first century.

The more our experiences and testimony informs our thinking, the greater becomes our "belief-disbelief system." Disbelief is not necessarily the same as not believing something. Disbelief is, itself, a belief; i.e., a belief that something **is not true**. For someone to say they do not believe something is simply saying that they are not convinced that what is being said is true. They think the evidence given is not adequate to convince them or, perhaps, they question the credibility of the testimony. This is simply **not believing** something! To **disbelieve**, however, is to say that something we have been told is true is, in fact, **not true**.

Presuppositions and Beliefs

As the body of testimony we accept develops, we come to have an array of beliefs that may be called our belief-disbelief system. This belief-disbelief system is, essentially, a body of beliefs out of which we do all of our thinking. We accept or believe something to be true and that belief becomes a truth that we assume to be an established fact from which we may judge all new information presented to us. These are our presuppositions. A presupposition is something one

assumes or presupposes to be true without feeling the necessity of proving it true. It may or may not be the case that our presupposition is true, but the assumption that it is true is presupposed to the extent that the believer of the presupposition does not allow for the possibility that it is not true. From these presuppositions (i.e., beliefs) every consideration of addition experience or testimony proceeds.

Divine Causation

In the debate concerning the existence of God there are presuppositions held by people on both sides of the issue. The one believing in God presupposes that divine causation is a given truth and from this presupposition he reasons that the very fact of creation suggests a creator. Since every effect must have a cause adequate enough to have produced it, then creation (i.e., the effect under consideration) must have a cause adequate enough to have produced it. The only cause the believer can imagine which is adequate enough to have caused the universe is something beyond anything he knows to be a part of his world. An otherworldly cause then becomes the only believable explanation for the universe. The presupposition of "belief in divine causation" is the belief out of which his whole reasoning process proceeds.

The one not believing in God, however, does not accept divine causation as a believable presupposition. His rejection of divine causation leads him to look for other possibilities as to the cause of the universe. Since the cause must be adequate enough to have produced the effect under consideration (i.e., the universe), his task becomes far more difficult than for the one believing in God. His rejection of divine causation forces him to come up with a cause other than God to account for his own existence, the existence of his world, and the existence of the universe. To the one finding the explanation of divine causation believable, belief in God very naturally follows. The fact that that most of the human race, for century upon century, from civilization to civilization, have found divine causation the most believable explanation for our existence makes it very easy for the believer to find the testimony of these centuries and civilizations believable. He thinks he has every good reason to believe the

testimony and no good reason to reject it, thus, his confidence that his presuppositions are true and stands without serious challenge from those who do not accept his beliefs as true.

Beliefs of the Earliest Christians and Our Beliefs

The typical presentation in the discussion of the existence of God usually consists of the theistic arguments: the cosmological, the teleological, moral and arguments. All of these arguments are legitimate and very convincing from an apologetic or philosophical point of view. In fact, these arguments were used by many of the ancient philosophers of the Hellenistic world of the Mediterranean Basin. It is doubtful, however, that they were the basis of the beliefs of most of the Jewish and Christian believers of the first century world. The common sense belief that something cannot cause itself nor can it be caused by something not having the power or ability to have caused it is a belief easy to accept. The belief that something as wonderful as human life could have only been produced by something of greater wonder is a belief that goes without serious challenge to most of the human race.

Conclusion

It is here that we of the 21st century have the most in common with these Christians of the first century. We share the same presuppositions as them with reference to the believability of the divine causation. The assumption of the first century believer leading him to his belief in God is the same as that of the 21st century believer - the presupposition of divine causation (i.e., there is a divine cause lying behind everything in existence). The very fact of creation suggests to us that there must be a creator who is the cause of all that that we know a creation.

From this it is easy to move to the belief that this Creator is a deity, or is God. Then, with the appearance of chosen men claiming to have received communication from such a being, who revealed his name to them, told them who and what he was, and informed them that he was in fact their Creator, the association of this with what was

already presupposed about a divine cause, fit so beautifully together that it is virtually impossible for most people not to believe that man and his world is the creation of a Supreme Being, who, by very definition, is a supernatural cause adequate to have produced the effect we know as our universe; *viz*, divine causation. The simplest reasoning tells us that such a being must be there. If such a being does exist, then it is not difficult to believe that he would have the ability to communicate with us. If we have testimony that confirms both of these presuppositions, then we have every good reason to believe this testimony and no good reason to reject it.

The question for most of us is, "If there is good reason to doubt supernatural or divine causation, what is that reason?" To this must be added, "If there is good reason to believe that natural causation is more believable than supernatural causation as an explanation as to the cause of our universe, then why has science not produced that explanation?" The fact is that within the realm of natural phenomena, there is no known or conjectured cause adequate enough to have produced the effect we know as the existence of this universe. To those who would find it difficult to believe in the concept of divine causation, the cause of our existence is a complete mystery and, in essence, there is no known cause. It can reasonably be said that there is no good reason to believe such a presupposition and every good reason to doubt it. There must be a cause if there is an effect, and our very existence is such an effect.

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Questions For Discussion

1. Do you think the earliest Christians would have been concerned about proving the existence of God? If so, why so? If not, why not?
2. Why would the earliest Christians have been monotheists?
3. How do we come by our beliefs? What role does our experiences play? What role does testimony from others play?

4. Should our beliefs be "believable?" If so, what does it mean for something to be believable?
5. What is a presupposition and why is this question important in a discussion of belief in God?
6. Do we all have presuppositions? If so, where do we get them?
7. In determining the truth of anything we are told, what role does our presuppositions have in the conclusions we draw?
8. What is the principle of "divine causation" and why is this concept so important to belief in God?
9. If one does not accept divine causation as a possible explanation of his existence and the existence of his world, what alternatives to divine causation does he have?
10. What do you think of the concept of accepting as true that for which there is every good reason to accept it and no good reason to reject it? What is good or bad about this way of evaluating the things we believe or disbelieve?