

## Beliefs of the Earliest Christians

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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 serve as the beginning of the story God has revealed to mankind concerning his existence, our existence, and the existence of this world. He does not set out to prove his existence, our existence, or the existence of the world. Rather, his existence, our existence, and the existence of this world are 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 discipline of philosophical discussion or the science of logical argumentation before he or she can be sure of the truth of his or her beliefs? If this is the case, then most of the human race is walking around in a state of technical irrationality. Aristotle's so-called "law of rationality" states that one should draw only such conclusion as are warranted by adequate evidence. When does one have "adequate evidence" to justify his or her conclusions? Our presuppositions are those conclusions we have come to believe through a combination of data reported to us and our experiences. When presented with any statement or proposition we desire to evaluate as true or not true, most of us simply accept it as true *if there is 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 have been confronted with the same issues as a person of this century. The first century Christians were not likely concerned with the "theism verses atheism" debate. They may assume, without fear of challenge, that the existence of God was "a given" (i.e., granted as true) to most people of their world; which would not be "a given" in this century among most cultures of the earth. The question for these early Christians would not have been whether God exists, but which god exists, or which god is the most powerful god or the god most deserving of devotion and worship. These people of the first century Mediterranean world would not have been confronted with the challenges of atheism; rather, their challenge would be that of polytheism (i.e., the belief in many gods).

With few exceptions, those who called themselves 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 were Jews and would have been strict monotheists. For the gentile (*hoi ethnoi* - the nations) 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 believed in many gods). The rare exception would have been the gentile godfearer (*theosebes*), which in the NT is a gentile who had come to believe in the God of the Jews and the truth of the sacred writings of the Jews. These were gentiles who had been impressed 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 have

had no difficulty acknowledging the existence of a myriad of deity figures. The problem here was not the issue of the 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 who followed 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, verbal data spoken or written. Someone tells us something, verbally or in writing, 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 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 one comes to possess knowledge), but it is a definition to which most of us can relate, as was the case with the Christians of the first century. The more our experiences and testimony informs our thinking, the greater becomes our belief system.

## Presuppositions and Beliefs

As the data we accept develops, we come to have a body of beliefs that make up our "belief system." This is, essentially, a body of beliefs out of which we do all of our thinking. We believe something to be true and that belief becomes a truth we assume as an established fact from which we may judge all new information. These are our "presuppositions." A presupposition is something we assume or presuppose to be true without feeling the need of further proof beyond what we already know. It may or may not be the case that

our presuppositions are true, but the assumption that they are true is a "presupposition" to the extent that the believer of the presupposition does not allow for the possibility that it is not true. From our presuppositions every consideration of additional experience or testimony proceeds.

## Divine Causation

In the debate concerning the existence of God there are major presuppositions held by people on both sides of the issue. The one believing in God presupposes divine causation as a given truth from which he or she can know God as the creator of the universe. Since every effect must have a cause adequate enough to have produced it, the realm of existence we call "creation" (i.e., the effect under consideration) must have a cause adequate enough to have produced it. The only cause the believer can imagine adequate to have caused the universe is something beyond anything we know belonging to what is called "natural phenomena." An otherworldly cause then becomes the only believable explanation for the existence of the universe. The presupposition of "divine causation" is the belief out of which the whole reasoning process precedes that leads the believer to certitude of mind concerning the existence of God.

The one not believing in God, however, does not accept divine causation as a given or presupposition. His or her rejection of divine causation leads him or her to look for other possibilities as to the cause of the universe. Since the cause must be adequate to have produced the effect under consideration (i.e., the universe), the task becomes far more difficult than for the one believing in God.

The rejection of divine causation forces one to come up with a cause other than God to account for his or her own existence, the existence of this world, and the existence of the greater universe. To the one finding the explanation of divine causation believable, belief in a Creator very naturally follows. Most of the human race for century after century, from civilization to civilization, for thousands of years has found divine causation the most believable explanation for our existence. This makes it very easy for the believer to find the

testimony of all preceding centuries and civilizations believable. He or she thinks there is good reason to believe this collective testimony and no good reason to reject it, thus, one's confidence that his or her presuppositions are true.

## Beliefs of the Earliest Christians and Our Beliefs

The typical presentation in discussions of the existence of God usually consists of the theistic arguments: the cosmological, the teleological, moral, and ontological 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 some of the most respected minds of the Hellenistic world. It is doubtful, however, that they were the basis of the beliefs of most of the Jewish and Christian believers of the first century. 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 been produced only 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 this century have most in common with the Christians of the first century. We share the same presuppositions with reference to the believability of the principle of divine causation. The assumption of the first century believer in this matter is the same as that of the modern-day believer; *viz* the presupposition of divine causation (i.e., there is a divine cause lying behind everything in existence). The very fact of creation suggests that there must be a creator who is the cause of all that that we know to exist.

From this, it is easy to move to the belief that this Creator is a supernatural being, deity, or god. With the appearance of chosen men claiming to have received communication from such a being, who revealed his name, 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 fits 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 world.

The simplest reasoning tells us that such a being must be there and 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, and that testimony comes from sources we consider unimpeachable, then we have every good reason to believe this testimony and no good reason to reject it.

The question for the unbeliever is this: "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 of the cause of our universe, then why has science not produced the data that proves this; especially, since empirical proof is an essential in all they accept as true?" 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 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 good reason to believe the presupposition of divine causation and no 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?