

Beliefs, Beliefs, and More Beliefs

In evangelical circles, we talk loosely about “believers” and “unbelievers.” These terms of course are with reference to Jesus, that is, belief in Jesus or not believing in Jesus. But in reality, all humans are believers in the sense that we all believe *something*. We’ve been made that way. And lots of beliefs are on offer in today’s Western world. That’s what this lesson is about.

Beliefs are based on certain presuppositions, most of which we aren’t aware of. . . but they’re there. And there basically are only two fundamental presuppositions: Theistic and non-theistic ones, that is, the God of the Bible exists, or that God doesn’t exist. Theistic belief is in a category of its own because it’s revealed in Scripture and it is really a loving commitment to a person, the Lord Jesus. We’ve been discussing that kind of belief for years and don’t need to pursue it here. (There exist two quasi-theistic beliefs, though, that I will mention.) This lesson will look at the non-theistic beliefs that abound in today’s world. Most non-theistic beliefs (at least those in the West) are stereotyped, which makes it easy to categorize and study them.

Some of the beliefs here might better be considered worldviews. Strictly speaking, a belief is not a worldview. A worldview is an all-encompassing perspective on the world and on life that results from reflecting on the meaning of our beliefs. But both overlap and interact so closely we needn’t distinguish them here. And a belief is not a religion either, although all these beliefs are religious in nature because they derive from a presupposition about God. A “religion” is really an entire set of beliefs (and practices), so we needn’t burden this survey with attempting to squeeze the beliefs into such categories.

Non-theistic beliefs come to us from various sources, such as family, friends, the people we encounter on social media, or from our culture. Not all people hold to their beliefs tightly, and in fact most people actually mix up their beliefs, often in illogical ways. For example, I know someone who holds tightly to naturalism, yet also hopes to be reincarnated after death. Is that logical? No. And people change their beliefs with surprising ease. Most of these beliefs are really opinions; rarely are they convictions. All non-theistic beliefs are human inventions; they are imaginary, speculations, fantasies. And they’re really *anti*-theistic, not merely non-theistic, that is, they represent or express our innate, inherent rebellion against God. They deliberately substitute for theistic belief.

The reason for this survey is, we’re to eschew what the world believes. I find it astonishing how readily people adopt the beliefs of others they know. So we ought to be aware of what the people in the world around us believe and be exceedingly careful not to share their beliefs.

Atheism. “I believe that there’s no God.” “Really? How do you know that?” “I can’t see Him or Her, I don’t hear Him speak, and you can’t prove that He’s there.” Such foolishness! Atheists pride themselves on being super-intelligent, using reason alone to decide things, yet they offer such a preposterous rationale for their belief. They logically have the burden of proving God doesn’t exist but, of course they can’t do that, so they divert the issue by demanding proof from the theist that God exists – and whatever the theist offers they summarily reject. Atheistic belief is really hatred of God masking as this absurdity. Agnosticism is simply another atheistic belief: “I don’t know if there’s a God or not, and no one can know.” But this claim of agnosticism is only to avoid a presumed stigma of being called an atheist; such people are in fact atheists. Atheists live as they please, according to their own desires and values. The significance of this belief for Christians is, God demands total commitment to Him, not merely two hours on Sunday morning. Most Christians pursue life as they please, according to their own desires and values, exactly as atheists do.

Nihilism. “I believe that I can have my own ideas for what’s right and what’s good. And nothing has real value.” The nihilist has no standard for anything in life. No norms. He presumes to be a little god, autonomous, able to determine absolutes by himself, on his own. “I believe that anything goes, nothing is right or wrong,” the nihilist asserts, without any ability to prove that what he’s claiming is true or valid. Foolishness! The nihilist is himself making an implicit value judgment in claiming what he does! Nihilism is irrational as well as amoral. If nihilism is true, no belief of any kind is valid. Why hold to rational beliefs, if rational beliefs are no more valid than irrational ones? Atheism, by the way, inevitably devolves into nihilism. Christians must realize they are toying with nihilism if they’re indifferent to God’s revealed and explicit will for their life. As Creator, God has the inherent right not only to set the standards and norms for our life but, in justice, hold us accountable to them.

Deism. “I believe in God, but not *your* God. My God doesn’t care how I live.” To a deist, God is at a distance. He may be asleep, or He’s gone off somewhere and abandoned His creation. God has created a cosmos that runs on its own, by its

own inherent natural mechanisms, and so He needn't supervise, rule, or intervene, and He's indifferent to how we live. Deists reject the Bible as revelation, claiming that we determine by experience what's a right or wrong way to live. The Deist god doesn't speak to us. Tragically, many Christians today unwittingly hold to Deism: To them, God is only relevant on Sunday mornings, but the rest of the week . . . Hey, God may as well not be there! And if we ignore His Word, that is, don't allow it to control our minds and our lives, what's the difference between us and the Deist?

Quasi-Theism. "I believe in God! But don't make me do anything about it!" In this category of belief we can lump most people who hold to Christian Nationalism, most assimilated (ie, non-Orthodox) Jews, many Catholics, and almost all liberals who still hold to Christianity. This is belief in the biblical God, but not the God of the Bible. It's belief in a god who is invented, who has some of the characteristics of the God of Scripture, such as, for example, being good, loving, and transcendent, but not the characteristics that matter. Their god, for example, doesn't demand any repentance from sin, doesn't extend the offer of salvation, doesn't invite anyone into personal relationship, doesn't care if anyone knows Him or not, doesn't demand holiness, and doesn't judge anyone. Christians are dangerously vulnerable to sliding into this belief, if they aren't already half-way there.

Materialism. "I believe that this physical world we live in is all that there is. So I'm here to enjoy this life however I choose because there isn't anything beyond death. So, I live to be happy." This belief is in two parts: that which is also called naturalism, namely that nature is all that exists; there is nothing supernatural. And the second part is as old as the hills, namely this existence is all there is so we might as well live it to the max, seeking wealth, fame, power, whatever. It was science that supplied the first part of this belief, because if science can explain the natural or material world, and science does so well at explaining everything in it, then all that exists must be the natural or material world, and that's all. So the world we live in is amoral, mindless, purposeless, valueless, meaningless, and loveless; it's nothing but molecules being moved about by invisible subatomic forces. What's right or wrong, good or bad are just arbitrary societal constructs. So, sure, if we're here in such a world, we'll just live for whatever pleasures can be found in it. Life is to be enjoyed, because that's all there is to existence. Gain lots of possessions? Seek power over others? Desire fame? Be violent? Why not? The lifestyle of the materialist is consistent with his belief. It's unlikely any Christian would agree that there's no supernatural element to our world, but the lifestyle . . . Hey, why not? If life is to be enjoyed, live it up! But, I ask, where in Scripture does it say that life is to be enjoyed?

Pantheism. "I believe that God is nature and nature is God. The cosmos and everything in it is God. And I live my life based on that belief." Pantheists reject God's self-revelation in the Bible that He's a transcendent, infinite, personal Being. They believe instead that "God" is everything that exists. So the pantheist is god, the earth is god, and history is god (or to some pantheists, "part" of god), etc. Pantheism is extensive in the Western world. It's not just an Eastern view (Hinduism, for example), although most pantheists aren't consciously aware of their belief. All Marxists are pantheists because of their core assumption that history is god, and so for them history is always progressing toward something better and their obligation as part of divinity is to help history along. Environmentalists are pantheists. Evolutionists are pantheists because they ascribe creative ability, something only God does, to the natural world. It would seem that Christians could never be vulnerable to this belief, yet our own theologians are turning *en masse* to evolution as the explanation of origins, impugning the Creator God and indulging themselves in grotesque and idolatrous heresy.

Mysticism. "I believe that God speaks to me, personally, privately. He tells me everything I need to know about spirituality and my Christian life. I don't need the Bible. I don't need to know theology. I have the Holy Spirit in me, teaching me and guiding me thru life." Perhaps the term I use here, mysticism, isn't the best, but it'll do. Christians who hold this belief don't realize that they're engaging in a subtle form of idolatry, ascribing to a god of their own invention (the internal voice of the "Spirit") the works of God (revelation). Even when people who hold this belief read the Bible, they find in the text their own particular, individual meaning, thus nullifying the intent of the Spirit who gave us that text. God has intentionally given us the Scriptures as an objective revelation, and the Holy Spirit who indwells Christians uses that Word of God to guide and teach us; it's our responsibility to obey the Word. It's tempting however to hold this belief because it amplifies one's ego immensely to suppose that God speaks directly and uniquely to that person. The subjectiveness of this belief is ghastly.

Pelagianism. "I believe that I'm a good person." Although the Church condemned Pelagianism as a heresy over 1500 years ago, it lives on today, perhaps stronger than ever. Pelagus claimed that people are innately good; there's no such thing as original sin. We have, he said, total freedom to do good or do evil, to believe in God or not, to trust Christ or not, as we choose. Heaven, he said, is our reward for living a good life. Christians who hold to this belief have the added assurance of forgiveness of sins, but that's only a layer of grace on top of our own inherent goodness. We are saved, we

suppose, because we chose to love God and to believe in the Christ. An essential corollary of this belief is self-righteousness: “If Christianity isn’t really all it claims to be, it doesn’t matter; I’m still basically a good person deserving of eternal life.” I ask those who hold this belief, Why the cross? This belief is deadly, yet it’s probably extensively held in the church.

Individualism/Collectivism. “I believe in myself, I look out for me and my interests, and I don’t interfere with other people. I mind my own business and expect others to do the same. I care about my needs; I don’t really care about yours.” We in the West are imbued with a powerful sense of self. We love ourselves. Self is Number One in our life. We think we’re self-sufficient, and we cherish our freedoms. Believers in individualism eschew the submission to the control of others necessary in communitarianism. Individualists are continually striving to distinguish themselves from others, making their life complicated. Individualism is thick in the church (and ugly). Individualists actually resent the challenge by Christ to deny self. How can we love God and others as we’ve been commanded, if we love self so deeply? We can’t. This is why the Holy Spirit has to enable us to deny self, if we yield to the Spirit. The love of self, sadly, means we not only fail but refuse to help others with their needs or to evangelize the lost. The love of self is something that only God is able to overcome, if we want it, so that we can care about others and so fulfill our creational responsibility and glorify God.

“I believe in being identified with my people; we’re a society and we live and work together with common values, goals and ideals.” Communitarianism had been an alien belief in the West, but it’s increasingly held by young people indoctrinated during their schooling with socialism. To identify with the group has very real advantages: No accountability, for example, for wrong doing; there’s no need to bear individual responsibility. People find virtue in being identified with others, with having concern for one another, with being loyal to a group. Believers in community eschew the seeking of power or fame by individualists because, they believe, those can come only at the expense of others. The problem is, God holds us *as individuals* accountable to Him, there’s no hiding from God, no safety, within a group. Yes, Christians are to identify with one another as the Body of Christ, but with this distinctive: it’s to be in love.

Modernism. “I believe that everything people invent to make life today interesting and enriching are all good and to be enjoyed.” This person has in mind movies, songs, all kinds of performances including sports, games, the latest technological gadgets, new ideas even, and lots, lots more. We’re obsessed with, in love with, what’s novel. We want to know and, better, experience the latest thing that comes along. We want desperately to be up-to-date on everything. The internet facilitates all of this. But it’s a massive distraction for the Christian. The only important issue for anyone anywhere is Jesus: What do we do with Jesus? How do we relate to Him? If we suppose that merely because we abhor pornography, abortion, and homosexuality, we eschew modern culture and are immune to it, we miss how deeply Western culture is able to grip us. We need to deliberately and carefully cultivate a loving relationship with Jesus and be totally committed to obeying Him, or we fall into culture’s gaping and tantalizing maw.

Nationalism. “I believe that America is the greatest nation ever to exist on earth, and I’m proud to be part of it, to support it, and to love it.” Patriotism is supposed to be a desirable value for any people anywhere. The problem is, in reality, all humans are one race. We all derive from Noah. We exist as separate nations only because God judged our rebellion at Shinar and divided us up in order to mitigate the effects of human sinfulness. Nationalism is therefore a celebration of sin. That Christians should be involved in it—and they constitute a majority of its participants—is not merely misguided, it’s crass idolatry. For many, the desire to see America “great” is a reaction to the progressive movement which despises America and seek its annihilation, but that’s not sufficient reason for Christians to be engaged in politics.

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Lots more beliefs are on offer in our modern society’s supermarket of ideas and opinions. For example, there are these two, **Churchism:** “I attend church fairly regularly, and I believe that that satisfies my Christian obligation.” And **Christian Reductionism:** “God is love, and I believe that’s all that matters. There’s no hell to worry about, no need to proselytize, no need for any ‘changed life,’ no need to know the Bible.” We can’t possibly look at them all, there are so many.

It’s all these beliefs and the expression of them in our daily lives that constitute the “world.” We must carefully examine ourselves, that is, our thoughts and motives, our loves and desires, to be sure that our own beliefs are biblical. We need to know the Word and reflect deeply on it, continually, because if not, we’re certainly going to encounter and adopt a worldly belief, they’re so prevalent and so compelling. We need to be obsessed with Jesus, and keep things simple so as to be able to serve Him effectively and faithfully.