

## 17. Belief

We enter the world believing in mother. Mother enlarges to include home, and our family. We enter school and begin to acquire values we share with other pupils, taught as rules or by example.

We may be introduced into a religious community of some kind, and become more or less committed to the belief system around which it is built. But as we become aware of the other contrasting faiths that shape cultures elsewhere in the world, and now increasingly in our immediate neighbours, our adherence to any particular group tends to weaken.

For most people, that progression does not banish religion entirely from their nature, but blurs its precise shape. Most of us still want to believe in something, but far fewer remain true to any particular formal faith.

It seems to me that all - or nearly all - religions seek to express and serve much the same Ultimate. If language and intellect were able to express the entire truth, there would probably be only one religion. But we each hold a different part of the elephant, and consequently understand the nature of Elephant in different ways.

For health, you certainly need to believe in something. You have probably, like me, believed in different fundamentals at different stages of your life. Why do we move on? Either we find shortcomings in our existing idols, or we get a glimpse of something better. As I see it, we move towards a central core of values that will not let us down. Here are some:-

- Our common humanity. Extreme adherents of some faiths consider themselves special, but all agree that everyone who adopts the faith becomes equally special. The problem is always adherents of other faiths!
- Goodness, rather than evil or sinfulness. Again we may differ in what we mean by good. I consider it inextricably linked with living in health, even health itself; but you could say wholesomeness (tending towards wholeness), or loving, or

unifying, or shunning sin. These are just different parts of the same old elephant. There is not much here to disagree about.

- Life rather than death. Whether or not we have any notion of life beyond the bounds of existence on earth, we all believe intently in living. In fact, those most anxious to prolong life - at whatever cost and however poor its quality - seem also to be those with the least confidence in survival after death. (More of this in the next chapter.)
- Respect rather than Disrespect. This is the value most keenly appreciated at all levels of personal growth. It seems to be the glue that holds street gangs together. In the "gang" we call Society, Self-respect may be more subtle but remains the key: without it there is no social Order.
- Family. This follows from Self-respect, being its incubator. All Societies and cultures, across the world, hold a family structure in high esteem.

And there are some other values we do not agree about, and seem unlikely to:-

- Gurus and Prophets. All spiritual leaders throughout history may have been pointing to the same Truth, but it seems unlikely that ardent present-day adherents of any one religious leader will ever accept the equivalence of another.
- Self-sacrifice, repentance. All faiths require respect and love for others. Some seem to interpret this as being *instead of* oneself. This is not Self-respect, which values others *the same as* oneself. Realisation of this would considerably reduce the amount of repentance required, for which proper Self-respect might to some seem to be a more positive substitute.
- Nature & humanity. The scriptures of some faiths appear to justify the dominance of humankind over the rest of Nature. Many today would regard that doctrine as extremely dangerous.

- Gender equality. There should be no difficulty about the *equivalence* of men and women, in any faith group; but some seem to uphold the innate superiority or dominance of men. What troubles me is the strife over *exact equality* of men and women. That is patently absurd, if only for biological reasons. I consider men more comfortable with and competent in issues of quantity, and women far better arbiters and creators of quality. But I expect even that rather broad observation has upset somebody.
- Riches and poverty. It is axiomatic to politics that social inequality is bad, and that the difference in living standards between rich and poor is a social evil. However nobody has ever found a way to achieve these levellings, and I suspect they never will. People who are healthy tend to get healthier, and vice versa. With health come efficiency, foresight, diligence, self-reliance and so-on - all attributes that make their owners likely to prosper. The real problem that I see is under-estimation of the value of parenting, which leaves young people with little or no self-respect. I know of no cure for this that Society can provide. I am ready to be corrected, of course.

## The Truth?

It seems to me that health, as I have defined and described it, underlies all these issues. If we understand the existence of Essence as a realm of being over and above the world of Substance with which we are all familiar, then we know the paramount importance of quality. We understand that the glue, or attraction that holds Nature together is identical with what we call Love, which is health in action. We can identify love and health with creativity. And we can, each according to our particular perspectives, see the field of connections between all living things.

It is futile to try to explain all this in terms of quantities alone, an enterprise to which our sciences seem fully committed at present. But it is equally futile to uphold any one religious tradition as having all the answers. None does, that I can see.

And each shows a very understandable interest in self-preservation that bodes ill for any kind of reconciliation between them.

None of this is very comforting to dwell upon. The logical conclusion would appear to be that we are dismantling our qualities and so undermining the future of our entire world. Only the rest of Nature seems likely to survive, not humankind - and certainly not the most industrialised of our societies.

The glimmer of hope is, however, health itself.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a philosopher, cosmologist and Jesuit priest, may prove to be one of the wisest people who ever lived. I read his little book "Man's Place in Nature" fifty years ago, as my confidence in formal Christian doctrine was weakening. Here is how he put our modern dilemma.

*"Our century is probably more religious than any other. How could it fail to be, with such problems to be solved? The only trouble is that it has not yet found a God it can adore."*

(The Phenomenon of Man, 1959)

Most exciting was his vision of the future. Much of what I have expounded here parallels his thinking, and may well draw unconsciously upon it. He identifies Nature with Self-creation, for example.

He takes a sufficiently enlightened view of evolution to have called down the scorn of the immunologist Peter Medawar, who occupied in the 50s a place similar to that of Richard Dawkins today. That in itself should make us take notice!

For him, evolution has led Nature progressively towards greater and greater consciousness. The emergence of humankind created a species conscious of itself. We have reached a development he called the noosphere, which is the collective consciousness of humankind. He pictured it as a membrane, encircling the globe.

This makes possible, he says, a supreme consciousness that he coined the Omega Point. All aspects of consciousness converge there, realising and comprehending everything. He does not employ the language of wholeness and health, but what he describes is the creation of One Ultimate Whole, fully conscious of itself.

James Lovelock addressed the same issues a little later, from the perspective of the chemist and biologist. He coined the term Gaia to describe a fully Self-aware living globe, a supreme creature comprising all of Nature as we know it, the biosphere. He too encountered trenchant criticism, but he gets my vote. I subscribe whole-heartedly to the parallel visions propounded by these two luminaries. I go a little further, even.

If a being of pure love and creativity were to exist, what form could it take? Might it not need to create and love, just for the sake of it? If our own planet behaves like one great Creature now conscious of itSelf, might not the entire Universe be another, yet greater, Living Creation? A God, perhaps, that we may be able to adore?

So we can hope that the pull of the Omega Point, and the yearning of the Universe to create, may yet straighten us out. Put another way, health is extremely infectious. The vitality of each healthy creature is powerfully attractive to the other creatures that surround it. It is entirely possible for a groundswell of healthy motivation to overcome us at some point, and bring in a creative process stronger than the dissipating forces we have let loose in recent centuries.

Near the beginning of this account I showed how ontogeny, the embryonic unfolding of the individual, must be stronger than the material tendency for cells to regress to their primitive forms and functions. I identified health as the power at work in that creative drive towards organic complexity. Well, health is still at work in the Noosphere it has managed to create. It must still be stronger, potentially, than the forces of dissipation and decay. To believe in this, and live by its implications, provides the best hope for our children and grandchildren.