

**Faith Based Religion**

by

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## Faith Based Religion

I used to think that the central question to ask people about their religion is what they believe, and I thought that asking people what they believe was to engage them in an intellectual discussion about their religion, perhaps leading to a heady discussion of theology. Oh well. We all make mistakes.

I realized I had made one, when I noticed something important. The first Latin word of the Roman Catholic creed is, appropriately enough, *credo*, which is usually translated as “I believe.” That’s an accurate translation, as far as it goes. The problem is that it doesn’t go far enough. The contemporary English word *to believe* has lost a great deal of the oomph of *credo*. *Credo* comes from a Proto-Indo-European root that means heart. In fact, the English word *heart* comes from the same root, as does our word *courage*. Belief, in its religious sense, seems to have something to do with the heart and with courage.

Further, my American Heritage Dictionary also suggests that this Proto-Indo-European root was once combined with another root which meant “to place,” and formed a distinctly religious term that literally meant, “to place in the heart.” It indicated a religious form of trust. Belief, in the religious sense, seems to have something to do with putting something in one’s heart and giving it a deep trust. It has to do with the courage that arises from that deep trust. This is a long way from a heady discussion of theology.

What about that good old English word, *to believe*? My American Heritage Dictionary, and what do you know! *Belief* comes from another Proto-Indo-European root that means to love and also has the flavor of—you guessed it—trust. There’s that idea again. The core of religion seems to be a profound trust that is laid in the heart and grows from love.

So what about *trust*? Where does that word come from? Interestingly enough, it shares a root with the word *truth*, a root means firm or steadfast, which turns us back to another religious word, *faith*. The word *faith* comes from the Latin word *fides*, which also means trust. So *trust* indicates that in which we hold ourselves firm, steadfast, that in which we place our faith.

Now, if you look at your order of service, you will see an epigram:

I take refuge in the Buddha;

I take refuge in the Dharma;

I take refuge in the Sangha.

These are the so-called Three Jewels of Buddhism, and it is the shared core of all branches of Buddhism. This morning I’m not interested in exploring the

Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. What I am interested in is the notion of taking refuge. What does it mean to take refuge in something?

A refuge is that which gives help, comfort, and protection in times of trouble or danger. It is that to which we turn and we know in our hearts will not fail us, even when all else has deserted us. When we lose our courage, it is that to which we turn to find that courage once more. It is shelter; it is inspiration; it is insight and renewal. To begin weaving these threads together, our refuge is that in which we place our deepest and fullest trust. Our refuge is that in which we have faith—not a blind, uncritical, and shallow faith, but a profound and existential faith. Our refuge is that which we trust with our very selves, with our integrity, that which gives us the courage to exist, to be in the world. Our refuge is where our heart is, and where our heart is, there we are, also.

To give an example, there are many Unitarian Universalists who take refuge in the Rational. I do not think that they mean what used to be called ratiocination, the rational faculty of the human mind. Rather, I take them to mean that they believe that there is an order that pervades the universe and that this order is comprehensible through the exercise of human reason, which exercise finds its most exquisite expression in science and mathematics. These people find inspiration, comfort, shelter, confidence, courage, and trust in the Rational. They place their faith in the Rational, and it founds their religious lives.

I am not interested in debating whether or not they are right about this. Indeed, I do not understand what it would mean to be right—at least in any prescriptive sense—nor do I understand what it would mean to be wrong. It is just so; it is just the case that these people place their faith, take their refuge, in the Rational, just as Thich Nhat Hanh places his faith and takes his refuge in the Buddha. I would not try to argue Thich Nhat Hanh out of his faith in the Buddha, and I would not try to argue a Humanist out of his or her faith in the Rational. Why would anyone try to drive another out of his or her refuge, to steal their faith? To do that is, it seems to me, the ultimate admission of a lack of faith, a lack of trust, a lack of courage, a lack of heart.

I begin to think that the central question to ask of someone is not “what do you believe?” It is rather, “In what do you have faith?” Remember how James Fowler paraphrased that question?

On what or whom do you set your heart? To what vision of right-relatedness between humans, nature and the transcendent are you loyal? What hope and what ground of hope animate you and give shape to the force field of your life and to how you move into it?

To Fowler’s questions I would add these:

What gives meaning and purpose to your living? Where do you find comfort and strength? What has the power to still your fear and to open your heart to the living of your life?

It is important to note that the answer to any of these questions may or may not be anything that is conventionally religious, though I would suggest that whether or not your answer is *conventionally* religious, it is, in a deeper sense, in fact, religious. It is, by definition, religious—or, if you prefer, spiritual. (Arguments about the religious versus the spiritual leave me cold. Our spirituality is nothing more nor less than our ability to discover our refuge and to move back and forth from refuge to living, from faith to life. And I think that this is what religion is about, too. So what's the fuss?)

Here is why all this is important. We have all left the Garden of Eden behind, some of us long ago. We have discovered that there *is* evil in the world and that we are, each and every one of us, quite capable of doing evil things, even with the best of intentions. The world *is* a frightening place, sometimes. Living is a beautiful thing, but it also hurts sometimes. We really will experience suffering, pain, and death. When we discover this truth, it is inevitable that we also discover the fear of living. And what are we going to do about it? And where will we find refuge? Where will we find the strength to trust our lives and the lives of other people? How will we open our hearts once again to the love and the beauty that also dwell there?

When we look backwards and see that angel brandishing the Flaming Sword at the entrance to the Garden and we know that we will never dwell there again, there is a terrible temptation to allow the heart to shrivel in fear and to give in to a mourning that will never find comfort. There is a temptation to try to control the world around us so that our pain can be covered in a great cloud of power and isolation. But I tell you, that will not work. It is an illusion. There is no comfort to be found in isolation, in separating ourselves from the world that has hurt us and turned our hope to fear. There is no refuge in walls that divide and drive hearts asunder.

It is not important to me how you think about and talk about your faith, though it should be vitally important to you. It is not important to me how you find the comfort to open your heart again to the love and the beauty that pervade this universe, even in the face of the pain and sorrow that also fill it. It is not important to me whether your faith is in the Rational, or the Buddha, or whatever else. What *is* important to me is that you find your faith and give yourself to something that is so much bigger than you that it can hold you and assure you that you are not alone, that you do not have to heal the brokenness of

any heart save your own, but that in healing your own heart you will necessarily touch the hearts of every being in the universe.

What else could Jesus have meant when he said that to love God as we ought, we must love our neighbors? And what else could The Buddha have meant when he said that the only cure for hatred is love? And what else could Muhammad have meant when he said that the essence of faith is love for one another?

Faith. Trust. Courage. Refuge. Love. They are the same thing, and they are profoundly important in our lives. It is only by finding them and giving ourselves to them that we can discover the strength to live the lives we are given.

### **And Now**

And now the world turns as slowly as life.  
Morning drifts into noon and wanders into evening  
Like smoky fog drifting in from the sea.

And now the sky opens as mysteriously as life.  
Milky light dissolves into deep blue  
And stars are scattered like dew on a cobweb.

A Presence stands behind this world,  
Beneath it, within it, still, and as patient as grass,  
A Presence that knows neither pain nor sorrow,  
Neither joy nor laughter, but dances in the twilight  
To a music so faint and quiet I cannot hear it.

And now my heart fills with light as if  
I am standing in water falling down a mountain  
And dancing across the early morning stillness.

### **The Peace Benediction**

Peace.

Between nation and nation,  
between faith and faith,  
between culture and culture,  
Be peace  
in the love of life.

Peace.

Between friend and stranger,  
between heart and heart,  
between lover and beloved,  
Be peace,  
in the love of life.

Peace in the soul;  
Peace in the hand;  
Peace in the eye.

Peace in the voice that sings;  
Peace in the arms that embrace;  
Peace in the lips that smile.

May there be peace in our homes;  
May there be peace in our families;  
May there be peace in our world.

Peace.  
Above all  
Peace.

This benediction was inspired by a prayer in Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, a collection of Celtic prayers gathered in the Hebrides and translated by Carmichael in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most are heavily Trinitarian, but one moved me enough that I altered and changed it to meet my needs.

–KWC