

## Reflections on *The Religious Case Against Belief*

by Carl von Baeyer, Unitarian Congregation of Saskatoon, Sunday 21 March 2010

Source: James Carse. *The Religious Case Against Belief*. Penguin Paperbacks, 2009.

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*He drew a circle that shut me out  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout  
But love and I had the wit to win;  
We drew a circle that took him in.*

- Edwin Markham (1852-1940)

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When I was a child and teenager my family attended the United Church of Canada in Ottawa and Vancouver. Sunday school was fun, for the most part, though a bit silly for my taste, but the adult services were very boring. My parents let me bring plasticine to play with while the minister droned on. Except there were two parts of the service that I loved. I got deeply attached to certain hymns, and they still give me a tingle in the spine. And at the end of the service, when the minister raised his arms over us and spoke the benediction, I often felt an astonishing, breathtaking, awesome feeling. I never tried to analyse this nice feeling too much when I was a child but just accepted what people said about the presence of God. Nowadays I understand it as probably some extra activity in my right temporal lobe that gives my left brain a little extra challenge to analyse and label. Reinforced by relief that the service was over!

As a young teenager I was rather devout for a United Church kid, trying to pray and reading my Bible. I even bought a brass cross to hang in my bedroom. My confirmation class teacher when I was 13 and 14 was a young seminarian at Union College at UBC. He had an interesting story. He had been an undergraduate astronomy major. In his junior year he had a dream in which he conceived of a new device to measure the infrared radiation from stars. When he woke up, he wrote it down and showed it to his professor, who told him that it would work and to patent it, which he did. It became a standard instrument for this purpose. However, he thought his invention was due to God's direct intervention in his life, so he decided to become a minister instead of an astronomer. He dropped out of astronomy and entered the seminary. Even at the

time I thought he was not giving himself credit for his own role in the invention.

When I was 16, I suddenly realized that the supernatural claims in the Apostles' Creed were preposterous. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth: And in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary: Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; The third day he rose again from the dead: He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty..." and so on. We were supposed to say this often at church, but suddenly my voice failed me. I could mouth the words but not say them with my voice. The conflict of this Creed with reason was too great. I stopped going to church altogether, until I found this congregation 12 years later. It was interesting to discover quickly that other Unitarians had had the same experience with their voice not working at church.

I will come back to these early experiences. I am going to try to present some of the key ideas in this book, *The Religious Case Against Belief*. James Carse is Professor Emeritus of Religion at New York University. He directed the religious studies programs there for 30 years. This book was published in 2008. I'll present a mixture of mostly direct quotes from Carse, my paraphrases of his text, and my interpretations.

Carse distinguishes between religion and belief. He agrees with critics of religious beliefs: they "have abundant material to target. So-called true believers -- those so convinced of the rectitude of their convictions they are eager to die, or to kill, for them -- have brought once

inconceivable havoc to the human community. ... For all of their righteous passion, however, what these critics are attacking is not religion, but a hasty caricature of it."

"It may come as a surprise that a thoughtful survey of the history of religion provides scant evidence for an extended overlap of [religion and belief]. Quite simply, being a believer does not in itself make one religious; being religious does not require that one be a believer. This... distinction has been hidden by the tenacious notion that religion is chiefly a collection of beliefs."

If we try to define what it means to be a Christian, or a Muslim, or a Jew, or a Hindu, we will soon discover that there is little agreement within each of these traditions as to what sets it apart or how it is defined. At the center of each... is a history they cannot fully comprehend; neither can they cease attempting to comprehend it. We must integrate the factor of ignorance or unknowability into each of our conceptions of religion.

History is difficult to live with, and for some even terrifying. It can often be comforting to hide our not knowing behind the veil of a well articulated belief system.... The certainties that led Christians to the Crusades, or Hindus to the imposition of a caste system, or Muslims to truck bombs, all constitute a repression of the religious tradition they claim as their own. Beliefs from other sources often present themselves as the equivalent of religion, taking on its trappings: American ideological nationalism, Nazi ritual, Mao's Little Red Book.

So if religion and belief are different, what defines beliefs? **Belief thrives on conflict, creates strong boundaries, relies on authority and power, rejects uncertainty.** All of these are hostile to religion.

The essence of all religions, on the other hand, is mystery, uncertainty, unknowability, poetry, wonder, awe -- and an irresistible urge to express and talk about and try to understand these experiences.

That is Carse's case in a very small nutshell.

The first hundred pages of the book are an analysis of beliefs. Carse defines three kinds of ignorance. The first kind is ordinary ignorance. It is simply a lack of knowledge: what the weather is in China right now, or how many species of lilies there are. In principle, these bits of ignorance can be replaced with information.

The second kind of ignorance is subtler and far more dangerous. Carse calls it wilful ignorance. It is a paradoxical condition in which we are aware there is something we do not know, but choose not to know it. Creationists deliberately close their minds to theory and findings in evolution. A bomber pilot wilfully focuses on the technical side of his task, because if he thought about the devastating effect of the bombs, it would reduce his effectiveness. Carse describes how Galileo, after discovering the moons of Jupiter, asked his colleagues at the University of Padua to look through his telescope themselves. Some of them refused; others reported that they saw no moons while looking right at them. They sustained their own wilful ignorance because the Aristotelian understanding of the world that they had labored for years to acquire was at stake.

There is a third kind of ignorance that Carse called higher ignorance, or learned ignorance. This is not just the awareness of the many things we do not know; that is ordinary ignorance. Instead, higher ignorance requires contemplation and study. Philosophers have dwelt on this at length. Kant said that the ultimate nature of the world is inaccessible to the rational mind. Heidegger wrote that the question no thoughtful person can avoid -- why is there something rather than nothing? -- is perfectly unanswerable.

Carse says that this higher ignorance has its most natural home in the great religions. For example, Buddha held that enlightenment is impossible without suspension of the speculative mind. Brahman, the sublime deity of Hinduism, is so transcendent that it cannot be defined except to say it is "not this and not that" (neti neti).

At this point I'm going to leave Carse for a moment to quote the late Roger Pavey, the eminent rabbi emeritus of our local Jewish congregation and a faculty member at the University of Saskatchewan. He gave us another take on that higher form of ignorance:

"... Faith is an attitude of being that makes no claims to know but impels an eternal quest to discover. ... Faith involves trust: the trust that real meaning may be unattainable in practice but that the pursuit of it is what human beings must do to fulfil their humanness. Trust does not assume answers; it assumes that the search for answers is what life is for. ... Trust means being aware that we are incomplete and always will be, but the search for completeness gives richness, meaning and ever-renewed hope to life."

(Rabbi Pavey, *Bulletin*, 2007, Vol. 17, No. 6).

Obviously there is no direct conflict between these different expressions of higher ignorance. So where does so-called religious strife come from?

Carse says every major conflict on earth involves the collision of one belief system with another. Hindus and Muslims in India; Christians and Muslims in Nigeria; the Falun Gong and Communist government in China; Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka; Israelis and Palestinians; Muslims and Christians in the Sudan; and so on. The history of the past centuries is one of horrifying bloodshed between bodies of believers.

These excesses are rightly criticized. However, Carse says the critics have not been effective. Scientific critics of beliefs rooted in religion often suggest that the solution is more education and science, the only way of "breaking the spell" that the false claims of religious beliefs hold over people.

The problem is that beliefs are stunningly resistant to correction by facts and logic, precisely because of the wilful ignorance of the committed believers. Whatever happens only confirms the truth of what they believe. When we present believers with contrary evidence, we only prove to them that we are outside the realm of faith and therefore unable to see the world as it is. For this

reason, beliefs are not only impervious to opposition, they thrive on it. Such arguments can only defeat themselves.

Carse emphasizes the failure to distinguish the religions themselves from the beliefs with which they are often identified. For example, there are scores of orthodoxies and hundreds of creeds associated with Christianity, none of which has ever succeeded in permanently closing down debate over proper belief. They have not succeeded because there is a deeper vitality in the Christian faith, as in all the great religions, that no single belief system can fully represent. In any case, some religions are all but free of beliefs, like Buddhism, and there are beliefs such as fascism and Marxism that can hardly be considered religions.

The beliefs that Carse is concerned with present themselves as rational and comprehensible, while answering to a final authority (a person, a text, or an institution). They have a distinctive historical narrative, a strong sense of community, a pantheon of heroes and martyrs, an array of symbols, rituals, sacred sites, and monuments. On top of all this is an absolute certainty in the truth of their beliefs. They see themselves surrounded by treacherous unbelievers who wish nothing but their demise.

Thus the vast, organized, and savage criminality of the last centuries is the result not of religion, but of belief. Carse identifies the close association of beliefs and military systems. The military sees itself in religious terms: armies are sent on "missions." They conduct Crusades. They are in a hierarchy to which they are faithfully obedient. Military heroes are celebrated by statues that could serve for the Olympian deities. The Purple Heart is a common icon in the Catholic Church and in the US military.

Here's another analogy that helps to understand Carse's viewpoint: **beliefs depend on boundaries as much as the religious impulse relies on horizons.** A boundary is clear-cut and permanent. A horizon alters every time you walk toward it.

Another way to say this is that religions, at their core, do not make empirical or testable

claims. Yes, the Bible and other scriptures are full of specific claims and admonitions, but none of these define the religion. For example, most Christians and Jews nowadays pay no attention to most of the behavioral prescriptions in Leviticus, such as burning prostitutes alive or how to kill different types of animals for sacrifice.

Thus belief marks the line at which our thinking stops, or the place where we confine our thinking to a carefully delineated region. It takes wilful ignorance not to realize that as believers we have stopped real dialogue with others. We have passed from a conversational to a declarative mode.

By contrast, poets are not focused on disproving belief, and poetry does not come with arguments. It does not translate into belief or into rational thought of any kind.

Believers may be alarmed by an unexpected idea that does not fit into their belief system, but they cannot attack it directly. To attack these revelations or oracles or visions is to stab at smoke. A common strategy for repelling them is the attempt to convert them into a belief system and then reject them. For example, believers felt threatened by what they thought Darwin was saying, and in fact created a kind of Darwinian ideology that they then simplified and made suitable for scorn.

The great religions, as long as they are distinguished from the beliefs that have tried to contain them, are thoroughly poetic. As richly verbal as religions are, like poetry they say nothing. There is no point to any of them. They are just meditations on the mysteries that stir us.

**So if belief is where thinking stops, then religion is where wonder starts.**

In the context of trying to define religion, Carse presents the surprising conclusion that it is ignorance and not belief that is the source of any religion's vitality. Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and Jews have been talking avidly among themselves for thousands of years and they have not yet figured out how to define and contain their respective religions. Yet they remain as unified peoples. Each of these religions has a genius at

sustaining itself over many centuries in the face of often horrifying opposition. Whether the beliefs of members of these religions are true, or valid, or accurate, or verifiable, or questionable, or generally agreed-upon, is irrelevant to the survival of the religion.

On that topic of people talking avidly among themselves: Carse uses a nice phrase to characterize the great religions: exuberant orality. Religions are full of stories, decrees, messengers, teachers, poetry, confessions, gospel, commandments, prophecies, prayers, blasphemy, speaking in tongues, interpretations, betrayals, pleadings, inscriptions, chants, prophecies, pronouncements, songs, sermons, and so on. Millions upon millions of words.

Why do we get swept up in this torrent of exuberant orality? Carse says the religious traditions grow up around inexhaustible mysteries that arise from our humanity. Death, evil, the purpose of being alive, why is there something rather than nothing, what do we owe to others: we press these vexing questions against the religions to see how they meet our concerns.

The religions come to us not only in words but in a culture that embraces many forms of interpretation and expression: we see Christianity through the architecture of the great cathedrals, Russian icons, Bach's Mass in B minor, Michelangelo's sculptures. Muslims see Mohammed through the Dome of the rock, Sufi dancers, and the names of the stars. A great religion focuses our collective attention on mysteries that cannot be solved but that we cannot stop exploring and interpreting and expressing.

Carse concludes the book with a section called "For the Recovery of Wonder." I have to quote his last paragraph: "It must be said, however, although I can offer no statistical basis for it, that the world is far more attracted to beliefs than to religion as I have described. Nonetheless, poets will always rise in their midst, [...] knowing they lack every form of worldly power, hoping only that their singing will outlast them. But if it does, even if it is long remembered, finally there is only oblivion. Why

then do they continue to sing? They have no choice. They know they are ignorant."

The big questions of life are so complex that clear, logical language is inappropriate to deal with them. For something like morality, only the complexity, ambiguity, multi-valuedness of a poetic work like, say, King Lear, can create an adequate image or representation. As my physicist brother Hans says, "Religion is a way of connecting the mystery inside yourself to the mystery of the universe." The exuberant orality of religion is necessary to try to express and understand the exquisite complexity of human nature. For falling stones, as Hans says, algebra suffices.

Some of you might think that this is quite a radical new perspective. In fact, Carse's views are part of a liberal tradition that goes all the way back to Erasmus, in the 16th century, who thought of faith evolving along with knowledge rather than being fixed like a pinned butterfly in a museum case. A recurring pair of images is the closed book and the open book: the closed book contains canonical beliefs. Closing the book shuts off further inquiry. The open book signifies openness to growth in understanding, and a refusal to let our inquiry be bounded by old, outmoded or irrational answers.

When I discussed Carse's and other books here last year, Bryan Carroll provided an important critique which I agree with. If I may paraphrase Bryan, he believes that James Carse and other modern theologians like him, such as Karen Armstrong, are describing a very abstract concept of God and religion that is limited to an elite group of theologians, philosophers and other intellectuals. In contrast, he says the common people who actually make up most religious communities, now and in the past, take sacred texts and creeds very literally. Heaven, hell, sin, sacrifice, salvation, miracles, and so on, are perfectly real for these people; they are not simply mysterious symbols or passages of poetry. Fair enough. We Unitarians have always felt that we have access to a higher form of truth and questioning that subsumes Judeo-Christian traditions along with just about everything else,

and my talk today is part of that Unitarian tradition. Exuberant orality, if you like.

Now I can come back and relate all this to the prosaic early experiences that I started with.

I think Carse might have been saying in a way that I got the hang of religion when I was 10 but lost it when I was 16. In other words, the tingle in the spine that I still get when I hear certain hymns, and the transcendent feeling I got during the benediction, might have been closer to the true religious experience of wonder and awe than my later logical, scientific debunking of the supernatural and contradictory babble in scriptures and creeds. You remember my 'discovery' at age 16 that the Apostle's Creed was preposterous. I guess I understand now that many Christians might achieve a sense of that transcendence when they contemplate those mysteries, rather than being stuck in the details of what Carse calls the claims of belief systems.

My confirmation teacher, the former astronomy student, perhaps lacked a way to think about his own religious experience in a way that would be compatible with his being a scientist. His beliefs about the source of his dream about the infrared device made it necessary for him to drop out of science.

I have friends, a married couple who are world-famous basic scientists and who are also deeply Christian -- Presbyterian in their case. In their annual Christmas letter, they always refer in their own words to New Testament figures and lessons that relate to the successes and tragedies of their past year. Until now I have found this puzzling: how could such smart people fall for that nonsense? Looking at it from Carse's point of view, I now think they "get it" better than I have: they are inspired and supported by the poetic imagery and the mythic heroes of their religion, and they confront the fundamental non-scientific questions of life that Carse identified, admitting to a higher ignorance rather than just dismissing the questions as out of scope as I have.

May we find and cherish our connection to these mysteries as we seek for enlightenment together. Amen.