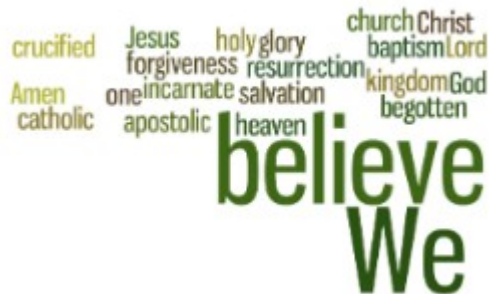


Believe it or not: My struggles with the creed

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [February 4, 2015](#) issue



Long before I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church, I told my priest that I had no problems with the Nicene Creed except for those two little words at the beginning, “We believe.”

I loved reciting “God from God, light from light, true God from true God.” I liked saying “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” because that claim seems to fly in the face of all our disagreements and declare an impossible but longed-for unity. I joined the church I did because of its connection to historical Christianity, but also because it was drawn together less by theological doctrine than by the worship tradition of the Book of Common Prayer. I felt the church would challenge and root me, but also offer freedom.

Yet I have struggled to make sense of the words “we believe.” When the congregation reaches the point of reciting the creed, I am reminded of the moment in a dance concert where the dancing stops and the director steps out on the stage to explain what the audience is experiencing. The people may or may not care to have their experience explained.

Many liturgists have argued against reciting the creed during the liturgy for just this reason. Gordon Lathrop quotes a German Lutheran, C. W. Mönnich, who argues that the creed belongs in the celebration of baptism but not in the usual Sunday liturgy, where it too easily becomes “a sort of shibboleth of stagnant orthodoxy.”

In her book *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles says she was astonished to discover that most Episcopalians say the creed every Sunday. That wasn’t the practice at her

parish, St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco. Her friend Paul Fromberg, the priest at St. Gregory, described the creed as a “toxic document” intended to police heresies. Miles found the experience of reciting the creed something like “saying the Pledge of Allegiance in the third grade.”

I have not exactly found the creed toxic, but it does give me pause. The minute the congregation starts reciting the creed, I either start arguing with it in my head, parsing individual phrases and wondering if I do in fact “believe” them, or I zone out and stop listening. In an otherwise full-bodied liturgical experience, the creed is a blank spot for me.

I wondered if Miles had come to any new conclusions about the creed or about the recitation of specific beliefs. “What do you make of belief as a part of the Christian faith?” I asked her.

“Belief,” she answered, “is the least interesting part of faith. I can believe all kinds of stuff, whatever I choose—but what I believe isn’t the point. The point is to live in a relationship with God that’s not controlled by my own ideas. Faith is about putting my heart and my trust—my whole life—in God. Christianity is at heart about relationship—and the nature of my faith rests in relationship rather than belief.”

That makes sense: belief is just one part, perhaps a small part, of Christianity.

Still, the belief part puzzles me. I keep wondering if other people are doing something when they recite the creed—making some kind of internal movement of consent or aligning their hearts and minds around these words—that I am unable to do.

What exactly is belief, anyway? The more I pondered it, the less I understood it.

Andrew Newberg, a medical doctor, neuroscientist, and author of *Why We Believe What We Believe*, says that beliefs are connections between different neurons in the brain. Beliefs have many different origins: cognitive, emotional, social. And they are maintained, in part, by repetition.

Newberg defines belief as “any perception, cognition, emotion, or memory that you consciously or unconsciously assume to be true.” Conscious and unconscious beliefs are woven into every word we speak and every action we take. Neurologically speaking, no one can make the choice not to believe. Not to believe anything would

land us in a vegetative state in which neurons stop connecting with one another.

The implication for religion is significant, especially for someone raised in a particular religion as I was. “Religions are so effective in instilling certain sorts of beliefs [because of] the repetitive nature of the stories, the repetitive readings and prayers,” says Newberg. “The more you focus on a particular concept, the more you come back to it, the more those neural connections strengthen and form in your brain. And that becomes the way in which you see the world and the way in which you believe the world works.”

Beliefs are formed, according to Newberg, in part through the workings of dopamine, a pleasure chemical in the brain. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter—it helps neurons find other neurons. It makes connections. The more pleasure we have in a particular experience that is accompanied by a certain belief, the more likely we are to develop that set of connections and beliefs.

This explains why changing one’s beliefs can be very difficult. Newberg says, “Neurochemicals and neurons firing in particular ways make it difficult to break beliefs. Whenever someone comes up with information or data that is contrary to our beliefs, the usual first reaction is to dismiss it either cognitively or emotionally. We gravitate toward information or data that support our beliefs. That’s why conservatives watch Fox News and liberals watch MSNBC.”

Newberg’s account does a much better job explaining belief than explaining my struggle with belief. If Newberg is right, shouldn’t all of these years of repeating the creed in church have reinforced the creed-related neurons and created a believing brain in me? What seems to be happening instead is that reciting the creed reinforces doubt. I recite the creed and I doubt it at the same moment. The creed asks for conscious assent. When I recite the creed, I am implicitly saying yes to something very specific. And yet I find myself also saying, “no,” “maybe,” and “it depends.” The creed makes a demand, and that conscious demand makes me uncomfortable.

The problems I have with belief as an act of cognition fall into two categories. One we might call the modern problem, the other the postmodern problem.

The modern challenge to belief comes from the methods of science. Does science warrant my beliefs? I asked a scientist to help me understand how I believe, but through much of modernity people have asked science to evaluate what they

believe. This puts us in a different position from that of our ancestors who wrote the creed. Once science has trumped religion as the path to truth, beliefs give way to theories which must be tested endlessly by the scientific method. And almost nothing of my spiritual life holds up in relation to the scientific method.

I could pretend there was no such thing as the Enlightenment, try to reach back behind it and believe as my spiritual ancestors did, but that seems like an exercise in nostalgia. All I have is an imagined “ancient” Christianity. While I can draw on the resources of ancient Christianity—indeed, I have no choice but to do that—I can’t actually possess them.

The second, perhaps larger belief problem is a postmodern issue. I can perhaps too easily accept that science and religion function differently—they are different pursuits attempting to answer different questions. In the postmodern moment, truth has lost its capital-T-ness. I have traveled the world, encountered a multiplicity of world-views at every turn, and come to see my own worldview as partial, contingent, and subject to interrogation.

The creeds were written to try to bring order to a diversity of belief and opinion. They were the result of great battles of the meanings and interpretations of experience, scripture, and tradition. They helped to create a church of great beauty, but the makers also created lists of people to anathematize. They delineated heresies, perhaps because it helped them grasp Truth. But they didn’t live in my world, where I go for a jog with a Buddhist-Jew at six o’clock in the morning, have breakfast with my agnostic husband, converse with my Muslim friends over e-mail, talk to a Benedictine spiritual director, and plan a trip to visit a *santuario* in rural Mexico.

Perhaps the example of my husband is the one that offers the deepest look at this puzzle for me. My husband and I were raised in similar realities. His parents were deeply committed Baptists. Mine were Presbyterians. In his late teens, he decided that he did not believe in his parents’ religion. He looked around and saw that he could live a life of value and meaning without being a Baptist or indeed a Christian. Once he made this determination, he has never wavered from it. He is not a Christian. I, on the other hand, through a different process with a different set of questions about meaning and truth find myself in church almost every Sunday.

On the surface, he and I are different. It might appear that we do not share the same worldview. But in the course of 20 years of marriage, I can count on one hand the number of times that this difference of “belief” has been an issue for us—and it usually has had something to do with a public act of some kind. (Our wedding and my desire to baptize our son are the two that come to mind.) Beyond that, it almost never comes up. How much difference can belief make, I often ask myself, if it makes no difference in my most intimate relationship?

Occasionally, I wish that my husband would appreciate the beauty of the *Phos Hilaron* or that he would have some clue why I pray. But he wishes that I would pick a Premiership team to support and that I could lope up mountains with him.

Both the ancients and the moderns thought they had to claim Truth, not only for themselves but also for others. For me, a postmodern believer, any small-t truth I come to is immediately challenged by other truths. The creed looks like a big-T Truth. It was a big-T Truth for those who wrote it and those who rejected it. The creed writers entered political battles not on behalf of their personal beliefs, but on behalf of the church or of humankind. When I say the creed, when I put its writers’ words in my mouth, what exactly am I doing? Am I making a personal statement? Am I assenting verbally to something I cannot assent to cognitively? Am I going along with this just to make my life easier?

Yet I also know that belief isn’t just cognitive assent but sometimes is emotional assent. If the creed were a simple matter of cognitive assent, it would be easy to stop saying it and stop participating. But that little word we has tremendous power in the recitation. When I say the creed, I am binding myself into a community. As I recite the ancient words, I connect to believers both horizontally across continents and vertically through time. I am believing along with others. I am linking myself to these people standing around me—to Gary, who I am guessing is as baffled as I am; to Judy, who doesn’t even try to say the words, but sits with a look of beatific gratitude on her face and her oxygen tank beside her hissing softly; to Lisa, who says the words with me and remembers her family as she does so, a rambunctious group of brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents all living far away in Kansas. The creed is one of those “ligs” in religion, or *religio*, a word that refers to the ties that bind.

I do say the words of the creed, but I have not mastered them. If anything, I participate because I hope that I am being remade, both through my recitation and

through other aspects of the liturgy. My doubt suggests that I am still wrestling with basic elements of this Christian faith that I have attempted to claim. If I am honest, I acknowledge that it has far more often seemed to claim me. I am suspicious of the part of me that wants to reject the creed. Thousands of people have sought refuge in it for thousands of years. For me to give in to the argumentative part of myself lacks the necessary humility that I long for.

In *Christianity After Religion*, Diana Butler Bass writes that modern Christians have imagined that belief must come first in Christian identity. First I believe, then I enter a community of faith. She proposes that the reverse of this is more meaningful for contemporary people. First I enter the community, then I engage its practices, finally I come to belief.

But can belief and belonging be teased apart like this? Do not truth claims come together with identity claims? When I believe, I belong. When I belong, I believe. We set out on the risky path of faith together, learning to trust together, learning to find one another amidst the questions.

In this understanding, the emphasis in my recitation is on the “we” of the “we believe.” Even if I can make no sense of the “believe” part, I can claim the “we” and allow the community to believe along with me or even for me. “We believe” is something we do collectively, not individually. I commit to this community and to its worldview, which I gradually understand over time.

It would be so easy to dismiss the need for the creed in the liturgy, to move on without its difficulties, and to allow us each to slip into a private realm of belief or unbelief, reciting our individual creeds as we will or, more likely, will not.

For me, the ongoing challenge is to continue in conversation with the creed, to wrestle with both the “we” and the “believe.” Two mistakes seem possible. One is to stop saying the creed, and so forsake the challenge it presents and the claims it makes on me. The other is to let the creed replace my longing for all that it does not and cannot say.

Butler Bass points out that the English word *believe* comes from *belieben*, which is from the German word for love. Instead of referring to something like “an opinion one holds to be true,” *belieben* refers to something treasured or held to be beloved. What one believes is what has been invested with one’s love. If we were to stand up and say, “We be-love God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth,” we

might inch closer to an understanding of my own way of believing.