

CREDO: A Statement of Belief
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It seems to me that as one approaches his/her seventh decade one ought to be able to say what he/she believed. This has not been the case for me, at least not easily. Fifty years ago I could tell you what I believed very easily. In fact, I was so sure of it I planned to become a minister so I could tell everybody what they should believe. My educational experience, I like to think of that as a lifetime endeavor, has made me much less certain. Can it be that I knew more fifty years ago than I know now?

Several papers and the ensuing discussion here over the last several years have made me more bold in an attempt to define what I believe – at least what I believe now as I write this paper. What I believe when I present it this evening may not be the same thing and what I believe after discussion may be more different yet. I tend to be a philosophical minimalist, i.e. I don't think much about what I think.

In writing down what I believe I do so with at least two objectives:

1. Can I say it simply? More often than not I find sophisticated argument and philosophical erudition confounding. I am often at sea as to what we're talking about and I sometimes have wondered if anyone else knows either. Can a statement of belief be made simple?
2. This is a "biggy!" Can I state what I believe in a few areas without denigrating what anybody else might believe? I got so tired of Harris and Dawkins sneering superiority and the trashing of others religious belief that I did not even finish Dawkins. Both, it seemed to me, spent more ink on deriding what they found unbelievable than they did on how their reason and experience lead them elsewhere. I wish to make a positive statement without the derision. Having said that, I make no apology to any with faith or belief so frail that any alternative is considered threatening.

This paper is divided into several brief parts including: god, ethics, behavior, spirituality, death, and, finally, a section I call "uh oh!" I'll define that more later. Some of what you will hear you have heard before as I've offered it up in discussion or spoke to it in a previous paper.

The most reasonable attitude toward the matter of god is, I believe, atheism. Calling oneself an atheist may not be saying much for I find I find that there are as many varieties of atheist as there are Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, or any other religious belief system. In fact I discovered that there are Christian atheists and Jewish atheists! I didn't explore this and cannot imagine what they are. Suffice it to say that my

spin on atheism is the affirmation that there are no supernatural beings, powers, or influences on our universe, in our world or in our lives.

The arguments for the existence of god or gods are many, varied, and quickly become dizzying in their complexity and redundancy. In my view, there is no argument that proves the existence of god nor can I or anyone else provide arguments proving that there is no god. Some years ago I presented a paper on truth in which I concluded that truth is a choice or belief arrived at by a reasoned synthesis of learning and experience.

My choice of atheism is just that, a choice of belief, in fact, a kind of faith statement. I am largely persuaded in this view by a very old philosophical and theological chestnut, i.e. the problem of evil. The presence of such incredible suffering as is commonplace with war, pestilence, famine, and disease is inconsistent with any conceivable notion of an all powerful, merciful, and caring god. While this may seem stunningly superficial, for me it is enough.

Do we need god to be good? This is one of the very first questions to come up when atheism is mentioned. Obviously, I believe that we do not need god to be good. Indeed, the opposite may be true. Think how many nations you know that claim supernatural devotion of one kind or another and are at each other's throats. Behavior precedes belief. Paul Krug develops this theme in his book The Forbidden Fruit.

People cluster together (we are pack animals you will recall) for protection, comfort, and the meeting of common needs. Relational values emerge enabling community. These values are assumed by religion and then become moral absolutes. Do you think Moses came down from the mountain with ten brand new ideas on how to get along? I don't think so. Transcendental moral values are simply the mirror image of commonly learned behaviors that enable us to live together. These include, integrity, trustworthiness, benevolence, and fairness.

Quoting Krug, "...these common moral decencies...have a cognitive and independent ground. These principles are justifiable by rational considerations and are based on practical ethical wisdom. Indeed, they express the deepest wisdom of the human race."

So, we are hung with the responsibility of not only choosing how to behave but with accepting the responsibility for the consequences of that behavior. Atheist morality is not just a rational construct but also an empathic one which includes concern for others.

Baggini in his book Atheism: A Very Short Introduction embraces as good a guide for interpersonal behavior as any: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" an utterance already centuries old before Christianity appropriated it.

Morality without god; without the promise of salvation or damnation...? Absolutely, or to paraphrase the words of one of our very own philosophical brethren long since departed, "We can be good for nothing."

As I have said before in this company, religion gets far too much credit for good and far too much blame for evil. I think it was Harris who speculated that without religion we will likely fasten on some other notion and it may engender the same chaos that faith has. Atheism does not deliver us from that evil. The problem, as I see it, is not religion (or the lack of it): it is US, the human animal. We will behave as we wish and find a reason for having done so. In fact, the only thing that exceeds our capacity for

meanness and mayhem is our capacity to justify it. Again, behavior precedes belief. I do not care what you believe, I care how you behave. A religion or ethical system including that of the atheist are all human constructs to justify behavior. No less a philosopher than Stokely Carmichael said, “Don’t tell me what you believe, tell me what you do and I will tell you what you believe.”

“Actions speak louder than words” is an old saw that speaks truth for me. My life view is that daily behavior requires a constant application of the processes and principles of one’s belief. There can be no justifiable inconsistency. Collectively, that is a far more difficult road to community, to peace with our neighbors or in the world than following the precepts of any religion that I know.

Can an atheist appreciate a spiritual experience? I believe I can although it may depend on what we mean by spirit or spiritual. In my perception there is no dualism in any person, place, or thing, i.e., no separate spirit or soul. It’s all one – what you see is what you get.

But, my experience of any person, place, or thing, once or many times, is filtered through my learning and that which emerges is what I call spirit. This emanation or evocation is not some wispy thing swirling in the ether, it is a construct of our own mind with elements both rational and irrational. Thus, my spiritual experience will inevitably be different than yours on encountering the same stimulus.

My world view is a pretty physical one. The mystical, the spiritual are present as the expression of a physical process, i.e., something that happens in the body, in the brain. To me this does not make it any less important and certainly no less real. It does not diminish my feelings of awe when I see a beautiful sunset to have some vague understanding of its physical components.

Now, my wife thought the paper was too short and that someone would surely ask about death. So here’s a few lines about that.

As Albert Ellis said, “When you die you die, die, die!” It’s over, there is nothing beyond.

The only immortality we may enjoy is in the memory of those that know or love us; our parents should they survive, our friends, loved ones, our children, perhaps grandchildren. Unless of course, like Abraham Lincoln, Genghis Kahn, Martin Luther King, or Adolph Hitler we do something really astonishing, but, in fact, most of us won’t.

I conclude with a brief paragraph or two that I can only call “Uh Oh!” Uh ohs occur when I “...meet myself coming round the bend.” I’m rarely sure how to handle these things.

Once again, we are to make behavioral choices through a reasoned synthesis of our learning and experience. I believe everyone should do that. But what if your reasoned synthesis of learning and experience leads you to conclude that you must take orders from on high? And what if those orders are diametrically opposed to the behavior that I have chosen as the best response to a problem? These issues are difficult to resolve – in fact may be irresolvable.

In one capacity or another, I spent over thirty years of my professional life in the field of reproductive health, an area not without some controversy. Once, at a statewide gathering of my reproductive health colleagues (this included, family planning, planned parenthood personnel, clinic physicians, nurses, social workers, etc.) I invited a theologian from John Carroll University to share his perceptions on the issue of abortion.

We had pretty thoroughly vetted one another and there was an air of genial comfort throughout the day despite clear differences. Indeed in hindsight, that may be the most important lesson of the day. He said, among other things, that abortion may be one of the few truly irresolvable conflicts of our time.

Uh oh, how do we live together in peace in the presence of irresolvable conflict?

As a teenager I was a fervent believer in the ecumenical movement. I believed that if we all got together we'd discover how similar we were and differences would fade away. I was instrumental in forming the North Canton Christian Youth Council. It was euphoric. Us kids had a grand time while a couple ministers did not. Our brief lived coalition died because adults could not agree on a few points. I remember thinking, "If 4-5 Christian churches cannot agree on what matters how would we ever reconcile with Jews or Muslims?" Not that there were any Jews or Muslims in North Canton at that time that I knew about. Roman Catholic youth never joined us but it was assumed that with a rational approach they could be brought around.

Well, fifty odd years later I find that such ecumenical interests have faded as not only being impossible but not even necessarily desirable. In fact, I don't even want to ever get mixed up with some of the religious "nut cases" that abound in this world. Uh oh!

I simply set out to define and put on paper what I believed about a few things and in the process discovered and painfully concede that I may not be the thorough going religious liberal that I've always imagined myself to be.