

## Believers and Believers in Belief

Some years ago, a dialogue between Umberto Eco and the Cardinal Martini was published under the title *What does a non-believer believe in?* My opinion is that we should ask even more urgently, *What does a believer believe in?* To the Catholics, the answer seems simple: it suffices for them to repeat the Creed. However, if you submit the rather lean text (211 words, “amen” included) to the average believer, it turns out that a significant number of them, up to 75%, do not understand the meaning of many expressions therein. Yet they still proclaim their belief in those expressions, and—for precision’s sake—locate in them their hopes for this life and the next.

It would be no less interesting to ascertain how many people believe in things that are perfectly understandable, rather than in things whose believability is based on “fine, whatever, who knows anyway”. Think of the resurrection: who does not understand what that is, and who would not like it to happen. Still, a whole lot of believers consider the resurrection to be an edifying myth, something like Isis and Osiris, the Moon and the Sun that die and are born again and again. Those believers (those self-styled and, as a matter of fact, believers in belief itself) do not put that much faith in their own afterlife. This is made clear if you think of how much they, like anybody else, fight to keep on living in *this* life—by undergoing regimens, restrictions and diets that, if they truly had some hope in afterlife, would be thrown into the sea along with gym machines, nicotine patches, and non-alcoholic beer.

The question, or rather the inquiry, could be systematically extended—although, I grant it, it would be rather annoying—as a kind of exit poll in front of churches at the end of Mass by asking about matters of faith, starting from very simple things (as usual, the resurrection of the dead), to more difficult issues (for instance, the dogmatic base of papal infallibility).

And in case, after the *ite missa est*, the exit poll turned out to be too invasive and garrulous, one might still think up a summer quiz to be published in the glossies and the Sunday papers, which could be filled in on the beach. The usual multiple choice format would do. Obviously one would not be asked to choose among the Father, the Son, or the Holy Ghost, but rather to tick the right answer to questions such as: What does ‘Immaculate Conception’ mean? (a) ‘conception without sexual intercourse’, (b) ‘conception that does not transfer the original sin’, or (c) ‘faultless reasoning’.

There would be a lot of bizarre answers, I bet. And it would be troublesome to even simply ask whether Christ is actually or just metaphorically present in the Host. And since we are at it, my benevolent reader, what do *you* think about this? Any idea? Maybe you think it is a just metaphor? If so, you are a heretic. Do you think, then, that there is a real presence? Good, because this is actually the case according to the Catholics. Now, I can foresee what you are about to tell me, and I can’t blame you: you know a great deal of Catholics who do not believe in the real presence of Christ in the Host, or who have perhaps never thought about it. Still, they do not even faintly doubt their belonging to the church, nor do they consider themselves heretics. And how could we deem them wrong. Still, by the same token, how could we deem them right?

In front of the Church after Mass, then, or on the beach filling out the summer quiz, we will gather all kinds of weird answers, or—more exactly—we will find ourselves in a luxuriant wood of Nestorians, Monophysists, Arianists, Catharists, and followers of Melanchthon, Zwingli or Karlstadt. There may also be Docetists, and spontaneous Montanists, although probably neither Ophites and Naasseni, nor Cainites—since a Christian may well be unprepared, but not so much as to ignore that it is not orthodox to worship the Snake or Cain. And this theological Babel would not manifest itself in people who declare to have their own sense of the divine, but in people who proclaim themselves Catholic, Apostolic and Roman.

Obviously, this fact is not irrelevant, because it means that the object of faith, its reference—what philosophers call the *Bedeutung*—is an utterly obscure thing, for many believers at least. He who says ‘I believe in God’ is stating—in many cases, maybe much more than one would believe—something whose meaning is not under his control, and which by definition refers to something unknown; roughly, as if they were claiming ‘I believe in the Elf’. I understand that it is one thing to believe in a rather vague, obscure, but nonetheless *finite* object, such as an Elf who dwells somewhere in the woods, and quite another to believe in an object that is vague and obscure perhaps, but that is *infinite*, such as God. However, this defense is weak indeed, because it is like saying that he who believes in an infinite thing believes in *anything*.

The circumstances urge a reflection. The fact that nowadays heretics are not burnt anymore is neither a consequence of an enhanced religious tolerance, nor is it due to a deploring lack of sensitivity towards alternative energy sources; it seems to depend chiefly on the absence of the professional figures able to find out the heresies. And there are none among the ordinary believers, the priests, theology scholars, not even the Princes of the Church—because the bottom line is, I suspect, they do not believe in such things themselves, and maybe they do not care a fig (an Evangelic fruit).

Claiming that religion in the modern world survives mainly as moral guidance, is pretending not to see the fact that religion is essentially *not* moral guidance; it is, or it should be, something more, or at least different: a vision of the world that, if taken seriously, could clash heavily with reason, and with science and—why not?—with the current morality (what judge would not withdraw child custody from Abraham, if he were to know that the man didn’t slaughter his son only because he was stopped by an angel?). And it is exactly for these reasons that religion is not taken seriously and is reduced to a source of moral guidance, which is faint and unobserved, antagonistic with many others, or which maybe even serves as a surrogate for something else (seen typically in the “return to religion after the crisis of ideology”).

As for behavior, it seems to me that there are millions (or at least a couple) of good reasons to behave and form a good conscience, from the penal code passing through to good manners; and all those reasons have nothing to do with the existence of an afterlife, nor *a fortiori*, with the existence of a guarantor, who is transcendent and unknown to most. The fact that most of the present global conflicts involve Abrahamic religions, armed one against the other, suggests, I think, that if in order to

behave well we have to constantly quarrel, then maybe it is better to behave badly. But then, good and bad with respect to what?

Actually, amongst the sources of my discomfort towards religion, there is an admonition that my grandmother used to give me when I was around six: “Please behave, because the Lord will take offence if you don’t”. I avoided the admonition by asking, embarrassingly, “And who is the Lord? Mickey Mouse?” Actually, I was not that wrong: who indeed was this enigmatic lord so unlike other authorities such as parents, grandparents, masters and directors, and who took offence at my misbehaving at the dinner table? Indeed, who exactly was he? And what did he have to do with my behavior and my family? And how much did my grandmother really know about it all? I do not think I have been the only child who has raised these questions, but I do think that a believer should raise them more often, or at least once in his or her lifetime.