
Believing, Behaving, Belonging— Exploring a Larger View of Faith

by Richard Rice

As one of Tom Stoppard's characters puts it, "There is presumably a calendar date—a moment—when the onus of proof passed from the atheist to the believer, when, quite suddenly, secretly, the noes had it."¹

Progressive faith is faith under pressure—pressure that originates both internally and externally. Furthermore, such faith is a precarious faith. The effects of pressure on faith can be either positive or negative. Happily, the nature of these effects is something over which we have a good deal of control.² I will expand on these three basic points about faith.

Progressive Faith Is Faith Under Pressure

The pressures that generate change come to bear on faith from a variety of sources. We are probably most vividly aware of the pressures on faith that arise from our contemporary cultural climate.

One is a general shift in the outlook of the West during the past hundred years or so toward skepticism and doubt in matters of religious belief. From very early in the history of the church, Christians—particularly in the West—felt the

force of two obligations. One was to think, or to reason; the other was to trust, or have faith. For much of Christian history, people found believing to be more natural and more important than understanding. The validity of faith was taken for granted, the status of reason was problematic. This view prevailed during what is variously referred to as the Middle Ages, the Age of Faith, or the Dark Ages, depending on your perspective.³ In that era most people accepted religious claims as a matter of course, and the burden of proof lay on figures like Thomas Aquinas who had a high regard for reason and sought to make use of philosophy within Christian thought.

At some point in time, however, the burden of proof shifted to the other side. In the prevailing attitude of people today, the importance of rational inquiry is unquestioned; the status of faith is problematic. Faith must give account at the bar of reason, not the other way around; and if tension between the two becomes intolerable, it is faith, not reason, that has to go. In the modern world, supporters and critics of religion agree that the most pressing obligation Christians face is to show that they are intellectually responsible.

What is sometimes called the "ethic of belief" that prevails in the modern world gives forceful expression to this commitment to rationality. We see this ethic in statements like these. John Locke states that the mark of those who love truth for truth's sake alone is not to entertain "any proposition with greater assurance, than the proofs it is built upon."⁴ David Hume declares, "A wise man . . . proportions his belief to the evidence."⁵ A 20th century philosopher says, "Give to any hy-

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pothesis that is worth your while to consider just that degree of credence which the evidence warrants.”⁶ According to such statements, people who are intellectually responsible always insist on adequate evidence for their beliefs, and until they get it, they suspend judgment.

The effects of this “ethic of belief” on faith are not hard to see. In the area of religious beliefs, supporting evidence is notoriously scarce. Unlike scientific proposals, which rest on carefully developed empirical evidence open to public examination, people do not come to religious faith through a process of rational investigation, and religious convictions are peculiarly resistant to public inquiry. As a result, many people question their validity.

Some take religious claims seriously but cannot find evidence to support them. This was the view of Bertrand Russell, the great agnostic. Someone asked him once what he would do if he died and found out that God existed after all. What would he say when God asked him why he had never believed in him? Russell answered, “Not enough evidence! Not enough evidence!” Others conclude that religious beliefs do not deserve serious considerations at all. At best, they are matters of private preference or personal opinion, but they do not belong among the settled beliefs of thinking people.

Along with the ethic of belief that pervades the modern intellectual atmosphere, certain religious beliefs, or fundamental articles of faith, have been singled out for particular criticism. The most important is no doubt belief in God. There have always been individuals here and there who denied the reality of God. But contemporary atheism is different from its historic precedents “both in its extent and its cultural establishment.” Atheism is a widespread and respected intellectual position today—something that was never the case prior to the 19th century. And even more significantly, it is a pervasive social phenomenon as well. According to Schubert Ogden, the reality of God is now expressly denied on an unprecedented scale.⁷ Another scholar observes, “the rise of a radical godlessness” is “as much a part of the consciousness of millions of ordinary human beings as it is the persuasion of the intellectual.”⁸

Another distinctive feature of our time is the radical nature of the atheistic challenge to faith. It consists in the view that language about God is, quite literally, non-sense. It does not satisfy the minimal criteria of cognitive meaning. The secularist response to Christian faith is not to say, “I

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In the human sciences, scholars generally accept naturalistic accounts of religion. They interpret religious beliefs as the product of various psychological and social influences; they do not point to the presence of a supernatural or divine reality. Indeed, it is safe to generalize that God does not serve as an explanatory factor in any scientific enterprise today. If asked about the function of God in his scientific work, a modern scientist would undoubtedly offer a version of LaPlace’s famous statement: “I have no need of that hypothesis.”

In addition to skepticism about the ability to believe, traditional interpretations of numerous biblical passages are now highly problematic. The accepted views among various academic disciplines concerning matters such as the origins of life and the age of the earth conflict with the way in which Christians, particularly Seventh-day Adventists, have traditionally interpreted important biblical passages like Genesis 1-3. Scholars in the natural sciences such as biology, zoology, and geology generally believe that life has existed on the earth for millions of years rather than several thousand, and that higher forms of life gradually evolved from lower ones.

Scholarly approaches to other issues also exert pressure on a faith nurtured in an Adventist context. A careful exegesis of various texts in the

books of Daniel and Hebrews raises questions about the biblical support for the traditional denominational position on the sanctuary. Historical inquiry into Adventist origins challenges traditional denominational accounts and refuses to confirm the familiar pious portraits of our pioneers. As evidence continues to accumulate, the story of early Adventism becomes much more complicated and more earthy than the versions we heard at camp meetings and in academy religion

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classes. Early Adventist figures now seem at once strangely different from and strangely like ourselves—both in disturbing ways.

While external sources of pressure on faith are readily apparent, internal sources are often overlooked. Yet besides the various factors in our intellectual environment that make religious change unavoidable, there is an impetus to change that inheres in the nature of faith itself.

For example, various passages of Scripture describe growth in knowledge as an important element in the Christian life. The New Testament letter of 2 Peter, for example, exhorts its readers to “make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge,” and so on.⁹ In Philippians, Paul prays that his readers’ love “may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.”¹⁰ The letter to the Colossians contains the similar prayer that its readers will “be filled with the knowledge of [God’s] will, . . . bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”¹¹

There are also passages that take Christians to task for inadequate development. The letter of Hebrews, for example, bemoans its readers’ apparent failure to advance beyond a rudimentary grasp of the principles of God’s Word, and urges them to go on to maturity.¹² Similarly, Paul refers to Christians in Corinth as “babes in Christ,” be-

cause they are still of the flesh, and therefore unready for solid food.¹³

The New Testament also contains several indications of what the role of understanding should be in the Christian life. Understanding leads to fruitful activity, contributes to the general upbuilding of the Christian community, and strengthens faith. Intellectual activity increases comprehension, and increased comprehension deepens religious commitment. Colossians 2:2 links together the ideas of knowledge, understanding, and confidence, expressing the author’s hope that his reader may, as the New English Bible translates it, “come to the full wealth of conviction which understanding brings.”

Ellen White also described faith in dynamic terms. She insisted that personal religious development is the only way to keep pace with the advancement of truth itself. “We must not think,” she admonished, “‘Well, we have all the truth, we understand the main pillars of our faith, and we may rest on this knowledge.’ The truth is an advancing truth, and we must walk in the increasing light.”¹⁴ She speaks of heaven as a school where education will continue for eternity, with “new truths to comprehend”¹⁵ always arising.

Faith is under pressure to change, then, fundamentally because faith is a living, dynamic reality, and change is a characteristic of all life. Furthermore, the impetus for faith to change is both internal and external. Faith develops in harmony with its own nature and in response to its external environment. In the nature of the case, religious commitment seeks to become more than it is, to increase and to develop. In addition, faith always exists in an environment. Because religious commitment involves the whole person, it affects people in the concrete social and cultural relationships in which they live.

Progressive Faith Is Precarious Faith

This brings us to our second point. A progressive faith is a precarious faith. Its future is open and its destiny is undeter-

mined. Change of one sort or another is inevitable, but which direction change will follow is uncertain.

As we noted earlier, the secularist outlook of the modern world puts enormous pressure on faith. It may be more difficult now than ever before in history for people to maintain a religious commitment. No one has captured the tenuous situation of religion in the modern world more effectively than the British poet Matthew Arnold. In the somber verses of "Dover Beach," Arnold surveys the "Sea of Faith" and hears its "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar." What Arnold foresaw on the broad scale in Victorian society repeats itself in the experience of many Christians on an individual level. Little by little, like the ebbing of the tide, personal faith seeps away. And what may once have been a surging religious commitment eventually gives way to barren strands of unbelief.

The faith of educated people seems to be particularly at risk. I don't know if this is because religious belief is less typical of educated people than of the general population, or because their clearly expressed unbelief is simply more conspicuous. But the perceived frequency of this experience among educated people leads some to conclude that a loss of faith is the inevitable consequence of advanced intellectual activity. They feel that it is virtually impossible to combine rigorous inquiry with genuine religious commitment; a person has to choose between serious scholarship and a positive relationship to God. One or the other has to go.

This is an exaggeration, of course. But it is true that higher education can place considerable pressure on religious commitment. People react to these challenges to faith in a variety of ways. Some capitulate to it, some defy it, and some just try to ignore it. The first response is rationalism. The rationalist insists on the highest standards of evidence for everything he believes. Religious beliefs do not meet these standards in the thinking of many people, so the rationalist dismisses them as untenable, and religion ceases to be relevant to him.

The opposite response to intellectual pressures on faith is fideism. Fideists react to the challenge

of reason by refusing to submit their religious beliefs to rational arbitration. They simply withdraw them from intellectual scrutiny. According to fideism, religious beliefs are self-authenticating; they contain their own reasons for being believed. Fideists often minimize the significance of the challenge. Sometimes they ridicule it. But they never try to formulate an answer to it. The fideist's position is roughly this: God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.

A third response to rational pressures on faith is more social than intellectual. Many Christians have serious reservations about the religious beliefs they grew up with; nevertheless, they maintain strong ties to the church. For a number of reasons they are unwilling to sever their connections to the religious community of their early years. We might call such people "communal Christians." Communal Christians participate in church activities, support the church financially, and often serve the church in various positions of leadership. But their religious experience contains a strong element of nostalgia. A vibrant personal faith, deep religious conviction, is something they may recall from the past, but it is not a present possession. They have nagging reservations about religious beliefs, but they try to ignore them.

Each reaction is unique, but they all share the view that faith and reason are inherently opposed to each other. They assume that you have to give up either faith or reason, or try to keep the opposition between them from disrupting your life. But there is no way to reconcile the two.

These responses all seem to focus on the external pressure that impinges on faith, and they seem to assume that its results are consistently negative, so the best we can hope for is to hold this pressure in check. However, such a perspective is simple-minded. It ignores the fact that there is an impulse or impetus for change within faith itself—what we have called internal pressure on faith. At the same time, it would be just as simple-minded to assume that all change in religious experience is positive as it is to assume that all change is negative, that the best we can do is put matters of faith under some form of intellectual quarantine.

In describing progressive faith as "precarious,"

I do not mean that change automatically threatens to bring religious experience to an end. I mean that religious commitment is capable of changing in more than one direction. So, we should not assume when change is apparent that things are necessarily getting either better or worse. We can only assume that both are possible. Consequently, a progressive faith admits of two possible characterizations.

One is the view that progressive faith is faith at risk, if not in retreat or decline. A progressive

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faith represents an attempt to pull off a compromise that is doomed to eventual failure between traditional religious commitment and modern ideas. From a contrasting perspective, progressive faith is robust faith, a faith willing to accept challenges and run risks. It is not timid, retreating. It is expansive rather than defensive. It views the possibility of change as an opportunity for growth rather than a threat to security. One sees change as an expression of uncertainty; the other, as a manifestation of confidence. My point is that either characterization of progressive faith may be accurate. Which one applies to our experience is something for us to determine.

We Can Give Our Faith Direction

This brings us to our third and final point. To a significant extent, we can control, or at least influence, the effects of pressure on our religious experience. In brief, we can give our faith direction. To ensure that the changes that comprise our religious development are constructive and positive, there are several things we should keep in mind.

The first is the fact that Christian faith at its

most authentic has always been progressive. The history of the church at its best is one of interaction with its socio-cultural environment in constructive and creative ways. The original, and originating, documents of Christianity emerged from the confrontation between Palestinian messianism and the Hellenistic world. Jesus expressed his message in the language and concepts of first-century Palestinian Judaism. But the New Testament is a collection of documents in the Greek language. It represents the attempt of Jesus' earliest followers to express the Good News within the social and cultural environment of the Hellenistic world.

People sometimes think of this process as one of simple translation, but it was much more complicated than that. There was transformation, too. And although this is often thought of as something negative, there were positive aspects as well. The familiar view is that the use of Greek language and concepts resulted in the Hellenization of Christianity. But there are also those who believe that it represents the Christianization of Hellenism. The early theologians of the East used Greek terms but they did so in distinctive ways and thereby created a new and profound conceptual framework.

Of course, not all change is progress. Certain transformations threaten the essence of faith. But the history of dogma reveals that over the centuries heresy has been the single most important stimulus to the growth of doctrine within the Christian church.

As we confront the most forceful external pressures on faith in our own intellectual environment, it will be helpful to develop a response to the ethic of belief that prevails today. According to this ethic, as we noticed earlier, any claim to knowledge should be directly proportional to the strength of the supporting evidence. A famous expression of this "rational ideal" appears in an essay entitled, "The Ethics of Belief," by W. K. Clifford, a 19th-century Englishman. "It is wrong," Clifford insists, "always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."¹⁶

Clifford supports his thesis with a memorable illustration. He describes a ship owner who per-

suaded himself that a passenger vessel was seaworthy without examining her sufficiently before a voyage. Reluctant to pay for the ship to be overhauled, he assured himself that her past successes and the protection of divine Providence would insure her safety. Consequently, he watched her departure with a light heart, and collected his insurance money when she went down in mid-ocean.

Even though he sincerely believed that the ship was sound, Clifford asserts, the owner was “verily guilty of the death of those men,” because he had no right to his belief on the basis of the evidence before him. He acquired his belief, not by careful investigation, but by stifling his doubts. According to Clifford, we have no right to say “I know” without sufficient evidence. Otherwise, our “pleasure is . . . stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind.”¹⁷ Clifford’s central point is clear: you are not entitled to beliefs that you can’t support. Responsible people believe nothing on insufficient evidence.

If this is the model of intellectual responsibility that critical thinking involves, then the task for believers who wish to be intellectually responsible seems clear. We need to accumulate evidence to support our religious beliefs. We need to construct proofs for things like the existence of God. But this is exactly where traditional attempts to bolster religious faith have run aground. Proving religious beliefs is notoriously difficult to do. For one thing, the evidence is always ambiguous. It is very difficult to show that the evidence for clearly outweighs the evidence against. For another, the “god” that proofs always seem to wind up with is a pale imitation of the real thing. People like Pascal insist that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not the God of the philosophers.

In addition, the whole business of constructing arguments and proofs seems out of harmony with the experience of personal trust in God. In the thinking of many Christians, not only do proofs for God’s existence fail, but faith would be even worse off if they succeeded. Finally, the whole endeavor of accumulating evidence and constructing arguments is ineffective in producing personal conviction. At times, in fact, it seems

downright counterproductive. It leaves us less confident than ever of our beliefs. One religious apologist declared that his sense of truth was never so weak as when he had successfully vindicated it.¹⁸

Consequently, the best way to show that faith is intellectually responsible may not be to prove and argue for what we believe. A better way would be to show that discursive thinking is not an adequate model for the general process of belief. The experience of coming to belief is more subtle and complicated than the rational ideal implies. This ideal is attractive because it upholds the importance of intellectual responsibility and because it emphasizes the importance of evidence for knowledge, but as a practical account of belief it is inadequate. It overlooks the important role that nonrational factors inevitably and appropriately play in our knowledge.

A well-known account of this role appears in William James’s essay “The Will to Believe,” in which he responds to W. K. Clifford. As we have seen, Clifford insists that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”¹⁹ James admits that it is important to avoid falling into error. But he

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insists that we also have an equally important obligation to know the truth. As Roderick Chisholm observes, we could fulfill either obligation by itself quite easily, either by doubting everything or believing everything.²⁰ The trick is to balance the two. As James sees it, Clifford fails to do so. His ethics of belief protect us from error, but the price is too high. In certain situations it is preferable to run the risk of embracing error than to miss all chance at truth. According to James, “worse things than being duped may happen to a man in this world.”²¹

According to James, it is appropriate in special circumstances for us to let our “passional nature” influence belief when intellect alone leaves an

issue undecided.²² This is true when the option before us exhibits three important characteristics. It must be living, momentous, and forced.²³ When these three conditions obtain, James argues, we are rationally justified in allowing our passionate nature to influence our beliefs.

James's observations have great significance for the relation between rational inquiry and

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Christian faith. Is religious belief intellectually responsible? Can thinking people believe in God? Not if you set the standard of reasonable belief too high. The history of Western philosophy is strewn with the wreckage of ill-fated attempts to construct arguments for the contents of faith that would satisfy an impossible standard of intellectual responsibility. A better approach is to expand the category of responsible belief. A reasonable belief is not necessarily rational in the narrow sense of the word. It is unrealistic to insist that we are only entitled to beliefs that we can fully establish to everyone's satisfaction by formally valid arguments on the basis of publicly accessible evidence.

We can also help to give the progress of faith positive direction by paying careful attention to the "configuration of belief." This refers to the way in which we perceive and arrange the contents of faith, and it involves two somewhat contrasting activities. One is to differentiate between central and peripheral, or primary and secondary, aspects of our faith. The other is to affirm and appreciate the full scope of our religious tradition.

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cance. If everything we believe has exactly the same importance to us, we are in trouble. In that case, questions about any elements of belief undermine the entire body of faith. A threat to anything becomes a threat to everything. I once heard a mother argue against a minor change in a junior academy dress code on the grounds that it would destroy her daughter's confidence in the teachings of the church. If what she had been led to believe about sleeveless dresses was wrong, then how could she be sure of the other things her teachers told her? The existence of God, the divinity of Christ, the possibility of life after death—it could all be a mistake if this rule changed.

We need to make some distinctions about what we believe. People do not tear a house down if there is a leak in the roof, or junk the car just because it gets a flat tire. It is not necessary to abandon our faith because a question comes up here or there. But this is exactly what can happen unless we give careful thought to the configuration of our beliefs.

Not long ago the graduate of an Adventist university described some of his classmates who had been devoutly religious during their college days. Now they are in the professional world, practicing medicine and law, or pursuing careers in business, education, and so on. But they have given up religion entirely. According to his account, this change resulted from the questions that arose several years ago about the way Ellen White used sources in some of her writings. His classmates could not reconcile what they were hearing with what they had always believed, so they abandoned their religious heritage. Unless we can distinguish between what is central and what is peripheral to our faith, we are candidates for similar disillusionment.

On the other hand, knowing what is bedrock about what we believe can provide tremendous spiritual confidence. For several years a good friend of mine went through great difficulties. But during a recent visit he told me about a remarkable shift in his outlook. "Several months ago I was in terrible shape," he said. "Everything was bleak and depressing. I was angry at God. I blamed him for my problems. I wanted to know why he hadn't

treated me better. But recently," he continued, "everything has changed. I have gained new confidence in the basic, fundamental truths of Christianity. I am more certain than ever of God's love for me." His spiritual life turned a corner when he caught a new vision of what was absolutely basic to faith.

My friend's experience reminds me of what the apostle Paul said in summing up the course of his eventful life. In his last letter he exclaimed, "I know who it is in whom I have trusted, and am confident of his power. . . ." ²⁴ Paul's ministry was difficult and his theology is complicated. But when he reached the point where he had to put it all together and face the end of his life, he did not recount the controversy over circumcision, or review his position on meat offered to idols. He talked about the indispensable significance of Christ, about Jesus and what he meant. He was clear and confident about the center of his faith.

While it helps us in dealing with the pressures on faith to differentiate between central and peripheral aspects of belief, it is also helpful to affirm the full range of our religious heritage. As we noted, it is important to identify the interrelations of our various beliefs, and to fit together the different parts of the theological system so the relative significance of each element is clearly perceptible. At the same time, we must not commit ourselves to a purely mechanical model of belief, or to the notion that our beliefs are so tightly connected that they have no degree of independence. Distinctions between center and periphery are helpful. But they should not lead us to adopt a rigid, foundationalist view of religion in which the entire edifice of religious experience stands or falls on the validity of certain basic affirmations. In the complexity of religious communities, different elements often take on a life of their own. They may operate in relative independence of each other. And, most important, their capacity to speak to us is not necessarily dependent on any one intellectual rationale for their existence.

The best example of what I have in mind is the fresh approach to the Sabbath many Seventh-day Adventists have taken in recent years—a development that may be traceable to a visit by Abra-

ham Joshua Heschel to the Claremont Adventist Church in the early 1960s and one that is reflected in a number of articles and books since that time. This revisionary perspective on the Sabbath, that emphasizes its potential as a resource for modern human beings, reveals that we can affirm a traditional element in Adventism in nontraditional ways and for reasons that may never have occurred to our denominational forebears. New data often make it necessary to revise traditional beliefs, but they can also give us new reasons for making time-honored affirmations.

Finally, to give religious experience a positive direction, we need to appreciate the role of nonrational factors in the experience of faith. This is true both of faith in the narrower sense of giving assent to certain affirmations and in the broader sense of religious experience generally. Faith is never the matter-of-fact result of an investigation, or the only logical conclusion to an argu-

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ment. So, even though reason can contribute to faith in important ways, faith is never the product of rational inquiry. No matter how much evidence there is, in the last analysis people are always free to decide whether or not they will trust in God. Faith can never be an automatic response to the right stimulus.

It is well known that very few people come to faith as the result of rational investigation. In contrast to logical exercises, the most influential factors in establishing faith are largely nonrational in nature. They include the subtle influences of other persons, emotions that accompany certain experiences, or vague impressions we are not fully aware of. As Jesus said, "The wind

blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes, or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.”²⁵ The origins of faith, or the precise manner of its arrival, are inscrutable.

If this raises the specter of intellectual irresponsibility, it is important to remember that there is an element of risk in every significant undertaking. We all have to make life’s major decisions with-

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out guarantees. And there is also an element of mystery in every important relationship, including our relationship with God. So it should not surprise us to discover an element of doubt in even the strongest religious experience.

It is also helpful to remember that satisfying answers to religious questions often come from action rather than reflection. The ultimate test of Christian faith is not intellectual but practical. It is not whether or not our beliefs make perfect rational sense, but whether or not we can live them, that really counts.

In an essay entitled, “Is Life Worth Living?” William James makes this illuminating statement: “Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.” There is a place for serious thinking in the Christian life, but reflection can only accomplish so much. The time comes when we must act. Careful investigation can show that faith is a reasonable choice, but it cannot prove that it is the right choice. Only the exercise of faith, the act of commitment itself, gives us the answer to this question.

Besides revitalizing the role of reason in relation to belief, it is also helpful to remember that belief is only a part of religious experience in its entirety. In the summer of 1988, during a study tour that a colleague and I regularly lead to the Middle East and southern Europe, I had a memorable conversation in Jerusalem with a Jewish rabbi who was also visiting Israel and who co-

pastors with his wife a thousand-member Conservative Jewish congregation in a large Midwestern city. His own religious orientation, he said, was Reconstructionist Judaism, which he described as more liberal theologically than Reformed Judaism and more conservative in practice and observance than Conservative Judaism. To say the least, I was intrigued with this combination, since I unreflectively assumed that theological and practical liberalism went together, as did theological and practical conservatism. For him, obviously, these did not exhaust the possibilities.

My interest in his insights deepened when we broached the topic of communicating a religious heritage to young people—a major challenge to adherents of every tradition, and one that I feel keenly as a college religion teacher and the father of two teen-age children. The rabbi indicated that he identifies a triad of elements in Judaism when he describes what it means to be a Jew, especially to an audience of young people. They are *believing, behaving, and belonging*. Participating in Judaism involves all three factors, but belonging takes priority. To be a Jew is to become a part of the Jewish community, to appropriate the community’s tradition as central to one’s self-understanding. On a secondary level, it involves observing the community’s forms of ritual and worship, and then, perhaps on a tertiary level, it involves believing—giving intellectual assent.

As he talked I could not help contrasting his description of these three elements in Judaism with the places I would instinctively assign them in Adventism. For Adventists, surely, believing traditionally occupies a position far ahead of any other element in our experience. To be an Adventist is first and foremost to affirm the truth of various propositions, or fundamental beliefs. Doctrinal orthodoxy occupies a place of paramount importance in our conception of religious experience. Behaving, in the sense of following various guidelines for diet, dress, and such things would no doubt be second. Traditionally, belonging would come in a distant third, if it figured in the picture at all.

And yet recently, when I asked one of my honors students in a world religion class about her

own religious situation, she described herself as “searching.” She said she did not have any particular problems with the doctrines of the Adventist church; that was not the area of her concern. What she sought was a community or a worship experience that met her needs on a personal level. Her concerns were clearly related to belonging rather than believing.

As a theologian, the last thing I would like to see is an attempt to downgrade the importance of belief. But there are other, complementary, aspects of religious experience that richly deserve our attention. I suggest that we give believing somewhat less emphasis and, in our concept of what it means to be an Adventist, we give much greater emphasis to belonging.

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2. By the way, in the following discussion I shall use the word *faith* in a very generous sense, as roughly synonymous with “religious experience.”

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19. W. K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” p. 186.

20. *Theory of Knowledge* (2d ed.; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977), p. 15.

21. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1965 [reprinted by Peter Smith]), p. 19.

22. In James's words, “not only as a matter of fact do we find our passional nature influencing us in our opinions, but . . . there are some options between opinions in which this influence must be regarded both as an inevitable and as a lawful determinant of our choice” (*Ibid.*). This is the thesis of his essay: “Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds” (*Ibid.*, p. 11).

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 4.

24. 2 Timothy 1:12, NEB.

25. John 3:8, RSV.