

## Religion without Belief – God as Metaphor

by Andrew Hall

*If Subud is a religion, I think we should at least try to be a conscious religion, where we are modest and aware of what we know (very little) and don't encumber the sublime with too many rules (an unfortunate human tendency). This article begins to explore why I prefer to substitute religious belief with religious metaphor and wonder if Subud could agree on this.*

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When we say we believe something, what do we mean? For instance, some people in Subud say they believe what Bapak says. Before I continue, let me say I know there are many in Subud for whom believing in Bapak is not what it's all about. They are agnostic about Bapak, perhaps interested, and they may even agree with Bapak on some things and disagree with Bapak about other things. For these lucky people, belief is not an issue. That is probably a healthy adult relationship to have with Bapak.

Instead, this article is about people like me who grew up in a cultural context where belief was really the most important thing on the planet. I have tried to come to terms with belief during my time in Subud and now think that people should consider consciously abandoning belief.

However, leaving it behind me does not mean I am free of religious belief. I think about it a lot. I hope Subud members find this article interesting because they see some of what I am talking about going on around them.

So let's begin again. When we say we believe, what do we mean? Does belief mean different things to different people?

If I know something is true, I will usually say, for example - *I know I filled up the gas tank on Saturday* - or if there is some doubt, then I might say I think I did it.

When I don't know but I can imagine something, as in - *I imagine that John filled up the gas tank* - then I am moving away from knowing into possibilities, the world of the imagination - *It could have happened (John or someone else might have told me, or I might just assume John is the sort of person who would do that, so I can imagine that it happened but I'm not certain. There are many possible mental pictures that I can imagine.)*

Between knowing something at one end and imagining something at the other end, I have been thinking about where belief comes in. For instance, when my boys were young and roughhousing, something might break, and one of them might tell me his version of whatever happened, so I might have told him - *I believe you* - which also means something like - *I have confidence in you, don't worry because I know I can trust you.*

I am also implying that because I believe him that I probably don't believe his brother's opposing version. Am I am taking sides? Probably. So belief includes the implication that I am making a choice about whom or what to believe.

As for religious belief, I think choice is also involved - I am choosing to accept something as true on the basis of trust (or what many call faith).

But I also think religious belief is really about something more - it is about the two very human motivators, desire and anxiety. We desire to be loved and valued and are anxious about rejection or abandonment. Life at its most basic.

I think in my own experience that religious beliefs were usually motivated by these two very human

feelings. I wonder if the strong sense of certainty that religious belief makes possible and requires is because the motivators are desire and/or anxiety. Religious belief certainly doesn't seem to tolerate ambiguity that well, and that is probably the most damning thing I can say about it. As a parent of two boys, I eventually learned that what worked best for me was a judicious blend of bribes and threats. I think my impression of parenting is similar to the impression of religious belief that I grew up with.

Since other Subud members may come from a similar background to mine or have had a similar experience, they may share these same unconscious assumptions. I wonder how many see religious belief as I do, on the level of bribes and threats. It may be possible to see religious belief differently, but, so far, I have been unable to.

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I grew up in a small Protestant church in suburban Canada during the 1960s and 1970s where the word *belief* carried a lot of baggage, very heavy baggage. Just to give a taste, here are two quotes from the Bible - Jesus says "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth" (Mark 9:23) and his disciples say "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31).

As a child, I came to understand belief as central to salvation, almost a measure of religious worth, a sort of litmus test of whether you are worthy of, or likely or not to get divine assistance.

In this earlier time not so long ago, people would turn to each other and often ask what Holy Scripture has to say about a question - the reader may find it hard to imagine this, but I think most Canadians of my parents' generation, those born before World War II, would have lived in families and communities where reading the Bible was common.

I now wonder if this reverence for scripture is the same idea in Subud - that Bapak's talks have the answers we need if only we would take the time to look? Certainly, when I joined Subud, I think I was reading Bapak with the same frame of mind as how I learned to read the Bible and used the same unconscious assumptions that I picked up during my youth.

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Here are some of the unspoken rules, the unwritten beliefs that I can imagine I came to understand as a child (a good part of which came from hearing Bible stories):

- There is a hidden truth that underlies the reality we experience. Nothing happens that is isolated; everything is connected to everything else.
- Each of us has an inner spiritual life, and this is very important.
- Ancient holy books are literally true, and there is a hidden truth in ancient holy books, in fact, ancient holy books (can/might be able to) foretell the future.
- What we believe is important because God knows what we believe, and we cannot deceive God. In other words, we can't fake it.
- If you believe in God, then everything changes and works better for you
- Spiritual experiences and miracles are proof of how advanced or favoured one is spiritually. If you don't have these experiences, then how can you tell if you are advanced spiritually or not?
- This belief is important to make conversion possible. Christianity is about conversion, where the Christian narrative is being redeemed by God.
- Suffering is hard to figure out. How can a good God allow suffering? If I trust God will that just mean I'll have to suffer more? Will I be attracting more suffering to me?
- The prophets in the Ancient books all lived long ago, and it sure would make God more real if we had a living prophet today. The closer someone is to God, or to a prophet, the more likely you can believe what that person says.
- What we do now and how we live now will influence our chances of life after death. It can also influence what happens in this life.

- Not all adults know what is going on. The trick is to figure out who is telling the truth.

I think I have encountered some of the same or similar beliefs or assumptions in Subud. By the time I joined Subud as an adult, I was, of course, more sophisticated in my thinking than as a child. At least, I liked to think so. The Holy Grail for me was to find a way that I could honour and explore my religious impulse and not feel guilty about surrendering my intellectual integrity. That seemed to me to be the dilemma for many thinking Christians like myself who came from more fundamentalist backgrounds.

During my youth, there was a fair debate in middle-class Canada about the relevance of religion, and the intellectual certainty for me of belief based on scriptural infallibility was thrown into question the more I learned that the Bible was a creation of variously motivated scribes, authorities and church meetings. A related controversy was the growing certainty that the historical Jesus was almost certainly different than the Jesus portrayed in the Bible.

Looking back at my life, the assumptions I have about religion have definitely been unfinished business for me. The past five years with Subud Vision have spurred me to identify what parts of Subud I can identify with and those parts of Subud belief that I find troublesome. Encountering Subud seems to have brought me full circle and let me work on coming to terms with this personal boogeyman I wrestle with - religious belief.

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Life is a funny business. We spend a long time, probably the first 20 years or so, trying to learn what is going on. We can then spend the next 40 years trying to unlearn what was learned during the first 20 years, which is the pattern I see in my own life.

We tell children a lot in their search for answers. Some of it is even true, but all of it is made up. Children are exposed to everything - to magical thinking, to irrational prejudice, as well as how to use their critical judgment and how to use their intuition. How do they make sense of it all?

Some see the child's understanding develop by trying to reference and link the unknown to what the child already knows. We grow up in a world where there is a constant search for patterns in the unknown. This search for patterns continues through our life. It becomes abstracted and generalized, and age is no barrier. Aboriginal elders in New Zealand ask themselves what came first - the darkness or the light - and I think children wrestle with similar metaphysical questions.

When my 6 year old son, and then years later my 5 year old granddaughter, tell me out of the blue that "God's the real boss" and say it with the utmost sincerity and certainty, I can see that children take life deadly seriously, powered, I think, by this human fascination to link things together and identify new overall patterns. How else did we as children, or do children today, ever figure out how the world works? How do I begin to tell a 6 year old about the importance and necessity of ambiguity and uncertainty, that Truth is a trackless land? How do I talk about the richness that she or he can encounter with the Unseen Energies? All I could think to say to my granddaughter at the time was, "Well, I wish someone would tell God to do a better job."

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I think it is normal and healthy for children to show keen interest and passion in finding out how things link together. I think we humans delight in detecting a hidden pattern, in discovering how and why things work. It seems to be almost a compulsion for our human species to behave like this, to want to figure things out, to insist on linking everything together, to even playfully imagine linkages where they may not exist.

It begins with our being dependent on others to tell us what is happening. We are all born into an ongoing narrative in our family and culture, where the stories, the rules and all the characters are unknown to us in the beginning. We do not even know our own identity. We are partially given one, and it takes time for us to take it on and make it our own.

Our sense of self, the self awareness we all have, is constructed over time through our early childhood. Our

sense of self is all we have, our personality or identity is learned, as we learn language within our family and began to comprehend the wider culture.

Over the past five years, since about the time I have been active with Subud Vision, I have been heavily influenced by my reading of developments in cognitive neuroscience and linguistics. It has been an exhilarating time of discovery in this research area. The scope of advance in cognitive research over the past 30 years has been perhaps on par with the advances made in quantum mechanics during the 1920s.

The major focus during the past few decades has been the correspondence between mental states and the activation of certain patterns in the brain's neural network. This research has been made possible with the invention of magnetic imaging in the 1970s. The science that has developed has focused on teasing out the regularities governing the unconscious processes in the brain that structure our thinking and comprehension.

Readers may find interesting the following books: *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (George Lakoff and Mark Johnson; 1999), *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson; 2003), *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier; 2003) and *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language* (Turner; 1998).

From reading these books and others, I now have a new perspective - that the unknown boundaries of reality that we call the human adventure are largely encountered in the physical-based cognitive structure of our own psyche - and also in the language and literature that make our thinking possible.

These four cognitive scientists - Lakoff, Johnson, Turner and Fauconnier - have developed an approach that identifies metaphor as the crucial action, the mental inference that makes thinking and the imagination possible.

The common stereotype is that a metaphor is something imaginary and not real. On one level this may be true, but at the level that people like Turner and Lakoff and their colleagues are working, metaphor is, literally, everything. It is the basic working cognitive unit of our minds and it is by using metaphor that all our concepts are formed and learned.

Let that sink in. It means we only understand reality, what we call reality, through metaphor. Metaphor is how our language and thought is constructed and is how we unconsciously think and create our speech. The consequences of this new perspective are vast.

To summarize, how we understand anything is due to the human fascination with narrative and our magical ability to suspend belief (sic) and imagine the unseen. The basic cognitive mechanism and/or linguistic function that we use to think and imagine is metaphor.

What does that say about how people in the West have come to Subud? I think it means Subud members may have understood what they have encountered in Subud, as I think I have done, using concepts and ideas that many people in the Christian west unconsciously carry.

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Let me return to the level of the child, specifically the child that I once was and who is still part of me on some level.

I was certainly not born a sceptic. My own agnosticism--a reluctance to believe and a determination to believe as little as possible--has been hard won. By contrast, as a child I innocently believed everything I heard and gave no thought to the idea that God might not be real.

My family went to the church three or four times a week. Church life was the focus for many people's lives at our church. The young families of my parent's generation were part of the urbanization of our eastern Canadian city after World War II. Almost all had come from rural areas. While they fitted into the uncertain pattern of life in the city, the church was where they came to get excited and feel safe. This upbringing left

me with the indelible impression that religion is about big, important stuff.

I wonder if this might explain the attraction that ideas and pictures about God have for me, or perhaps the draw of this archetype is more common than just my own particular background. I don't know. But I certainly can understand on a visceral level how the story of God, a never-seen guy who is in charge of everything, can be a very powerful image and a powerful narrative for a child. While I freely admit to my continuing fascination with the idea of God, as an adult I have reached a point where I think the focus on religious belief needs to be jettisoned, and God is best understood as something that certainly involves the imagination, but is not about rational belief.

In my childhood world the Bible was interpreted literally and religious belief was effectively a demand that critical judgment be suppressed. As a result, religious belief taints the very idea of God for me. I wonder if this may explain why God has become a problematic and vexatious word for more and more people in our culture over the past few centuries.

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Because I was finding this idea of belief - a test of religious sincerity, requiring unquestioning belief in the unseen as real - to be very problematic, I looked up the origins of the word 'belief'. Imagine my surprise to find it fraught with so much baggage because it has only been a word in our English language for the past 800 years, and its meaning has evolved over this time.

The online etymology dictionary says the word "belief" first appeared in English around 1200, taken from an Old German word that connoted love. Originally, "belief" meant "trust in God", while "faith" meant "loyalty to a person based on promise or duty." By 1500, the word "belief" had developed the idea of mental acceptance. I find it interesting that the meaning of belief progressed from "things held true as a matter of religious doctrine" to "mental acceptance of something as true".

While for some the idea of religious belief may still work and serve a purpose, count me out. As far as I can see, belief has been too often used to evade and avoid responsibility. It has been used to promote guilt, to scare people and to prevent them from exploring and enjoying life. Is there an upside I'm missing about belief?

Ah, good, some of you might be saying...no belief, then no God. That's not where I am heading. While I dismiss belief as a religious dead-end, I want to suggest that there is more to God than an objective Being whose existence we can argue about.

If I approach the idea of God as a metaphor, as the cognitive scientists that I referred to earlier do, that makes sense to me because I am thinking about the unknown, or imagining it, using metaphors that link to what I already know.

One of these cognitive scientists, George Lakoff, in the 2001 Gifford Lectures, *The Nature and Limits of Human Understanding*, lists three major types of metaphorical conceptions of God.

1. God as parent, either a nurturing and loving parent, or the strict, punishing parent. A favourite variant of this in the Bible is the Shepherd, as in Psalm 23 "The Lord is my shepherd."
2. God as the Infinite, something that is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good or the First Cause
3. God as all of Creation, central to the traditions of pantheism and naturalism

Lakoff prefers metaphor 3, where the world and existence itself becomes sacred. I am attracted to this, but I also find metaphor 2 attractive. To me, God as metaphor 2 is probably the grandest idea ever conceived by the human mind: a power that animates creation; a something-beyond that is responsible for this bizarre and mysterious universe; a divine purpose; something beyond comprehension that lies behind our existence. This has been a very durable meme in our culture, and one that I don't think is going to go away.

Does God exist? How do we know? Just to answer this invariably depends on using a metaphor to describe God that is understood here at this level of creation. Do we sit in judgement? Can our human understanding and words ever fully comprehend the Universe? I find that hard to imagine.

Humanity is a speck in the immensity of Creation. We have been around for probably a few hundred thousand years at most, and we have had language for only part of that. Where do we get the conceit that we can adequately describe God?

I side with the Advaita sage Sri Nisargadatta that all we really have a handle on is our own consciousness. All the limitations and limitless possibilities of our human journey derive from that.

God is a metaphor, a creation of our language and culture. The God meme has been a very durable creation but it is a human creation all the same.

As a side note, I think it important to recognize that people may very likely be using different metaphors when they talk about God. For instance, if a Subud member is imagining God as metaphor number 1 and a nurturing parent, it is certainly difficult to ask them to deny this.

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I now understand that our culture and language create reality by generating and experiencing metaphor and myth. As I am sure everyone experiences, once something is in your mind, you begin to notice it everywhere, and this has been happening with me and my discovery of the pervasiveness of metaphor.

Here is one example. I discover *Words with Power* (Northrop Frye; 1990) written by the Canadian literary theorist where he begins by saying that metaphorical and mythological thinking forms “the framework for all thinking.” Frye said metaphor derives its power from identification. As I understand it, Frye says the way we think allows us to merge identities, and that is why metaphor works. To me, identification sounds similar to the idea of conceptual blending, where one metaphor is mapped to another metaphor to create a new level of meaning, which is the mental process that the cognitive scientists Lakoff, Turner et al talk about.

This work by Frye was written in the late 1980s, at the end of a long and distinguished academic career. Frye taught almost all his life in the English Department at the University of Toronto and first made his reputation with a critical analysis *Fearful Symmetry* (Frye:1947), of the English romantic poet William Blake. Frye laid out an interpretation of Blake’s poetry in terms of metaphors and myths or stories taken from the Bible and from John Milton. Who knows, perhaps Blake was right that God is a metaphor for the human imagination?

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What about religious faith? I think the majority of people understand belief and faith as meaning essentially the same thing. But are they? While the Bible doesn’t provide any precise definitions about belief, always implying (to me) that belief is about knowing - Jesus saying, “Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe” (John 4: 48) - I think it does talk about faith differently.

One of the most famous verses in the New Testament is attributed to St. Paul - “Now faith is the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things not seen” (Letter to the Hebrews 1:11) As I understand it, this Bible verse is saying that faith consists of two parts - one part is the imagination - this is the proof of things not seen, and the other part is hope - which is the motivator of desire that I referred to earlier. In my previous Subud Vision article, *The Latihan as Spiritual Adventure*, I offered my own restricted definition of faith, as about taking action in the world, and the impetus to do this requires both your imagination and your desire.

I think the popular understanding has largely corrupted St. Paul’s understanding of faith by ignoring the part about hope and fastening onto the imaginary, and faith understood this way becomes the schoolboy definition of faith, being nothing more than believing what you know ain’t so. Faith (or belief) put in these terms is thus essentially delusional, and probably not something an intelligent person wants to be caught doing. Small wonder that I and many others in my generation who grew up in a fundamentalist church have

struggled with the feeling that religious belief compromises your intellectual integrity.

Having ditched religious belief as a dead end, I, however, want to rehabilitate and reinvigorate the idea of faith. I suggest faith, to use a metaphor, is the belief that when one steps forward, the body will move forward. If a sinkhole opens up, faith is shaken. Faith is the ongoing belief that what has happened in prior similar circumstances will probably happen again and that we understand our circumstances. Faith is why we 'boldly go'. To not have faith is to be paralyzed.

I suggest we need faith as a natural and healthy part of our life. We can see it in the basic optimism in the way an infant explores and also in how our culture generally works. The two basic unconscious assumptions that we seem to share most of the time are (1) it is possible and (2) worthwhile to make sense of the world.

## **Conclusion**

I think the idea of religious belief has evolved into a religious dead end that demands people believe as proof of their sincerity. This is not working for me. I am sure I am not alone and this language of religious belief used in a Subud context may be turning people off Subud.

I suggest that God and the other names for the Divine are metaphors. This is not meant to restrict or diminish the meaning of God, but to liberate God as something that cannot be processed by our logical reasoning. My childish wish is that this be the common understanding in Subud that we all share.

The meanings of words change and evolve all the time. While these magical cultural creations that we call words can be remarkably durable and yet innovative about what they mean to us, beyond the level of concrete things, things that we can see, there is the vast unknown where we humans manage to navigate by using metaphor.

If I see my life (and my body, perhaps) as a Temple, then perhaps God is the Inner Sanctum, where the mind cannot go, where I experience the transcendent or sublime, the Cloud of Unknowing. This is a metaphor that I think is worth exploring.

Much of human culture and much of religion has been about the value of transcendence, the search for transcendence, and ways to experience transcendence, and for most of human history this has been usually talked about (or understood) in terms of God. I think this search is still worth pursuing.