
True Believers? True Lovers!

**An article for *The Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler, *Dean of the Cathedral***

One of my favorite stories (and I believe it is true) is about Alfred North Whitehead, the esteemed philosopher, who was delivering a lecture about cosmology, the study of the world. Cosmology seeks to explain where the world comes from, in both scientific and philosophical terms. After the lecture, an earnest listener came up and said, "Dr. Whitehead, what you have said sounds nice; but I know otherwise. The world, the earth, really rests on the back of a giant turtle."

"Oh," responded Dr. Whitehead, "What, then, does that turtle rest upon?" The man replied, "well, the turtle rests upon the back of another turtle!" "Really?" Dr. Whitehead indulged him, "How about that second turtle? What does he rest on?"

"Oh, Dr. Whitehead," the man responded gleefully, "you can't fool me! It's turtles all the way down!"

I think of that story whenever I encounter a "true believer," someone who is simply unable, or unwilling, to consider another point of view. I have engaged true believers since I was a child, and they are especially prevalent in churches. After all, church is the place where we hear so many stories that are hard to prove scientifically and empirically. Thus, churches can be places where people are often given license to be true believers. I have learned in church, however, that "true believers" can be dangerous, even destructive.

Yes, I learned about the danger of true believers in church, but I also learned about true believers in the county fair. Outside the tent at the county fair, I saw people mesmerized by the carnival barker, seduced by the allure of easy prizes, moved by the unthinking energy of the crowd, and generally wasting their time and their money.

I learned more about true believers when I read the excellent little book, published in 1951, with that title: *True Believers: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*. It was written by Eric Hoffer, and it bears re-reading, time and time again. He was writing just after the mass movements of fascism and communism around World War II. But he also described the similar kinds of unaware brainwashing that occurs from generation to generation, such as in the French Revolution and in the medieval Church. The mindset of true believers is not deterred by facts or reason. "It's turtles, all the way down," and nothing anyone can say can change that.

I am sensitive to the "true believers" phenomenon because I serve in the religion field. Religion has always contained these types of personalities. Maybe because religion appeals to an unknown, religion can sometimes even pride itself by being unreasonable. And religion certainly deals in absolutes. That, too, can mean that religion is vulnerable to rabble-rousers and carnival barkers and fanatics.

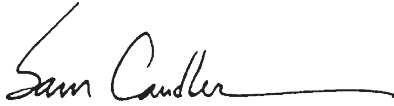
Back in 2011, Frank Bruni wrote about the intransigent, and even naïve, obstinance of "true believers." (see "True Believers, All of Us," by Frank Bruni, *New York Times*, 6 August, 2011). He correctly observed then that such narrow-mindedness occurs on the right and on the left, in the religious and in the not-so-religious.

Eric Hoffer proposed that mass movements give true believers both a way to deal with their anger and also a sense of purpose. "Their innermost craving is for a new life — a rebirth — or, failing this, a chance to acquire new elements of pride, confidence, hope, a sense of purpose and worth by an identification with a holy cause... Passionate hatred can give meaning and purpose to an empty life ... Thus people haunted by the purposelessness of their lives try to find a new content not only by dedicating themselves to a holy cause but also by nursing a fanatical grievance."

"Craving for a new life?" "a rebirth?" These are religious phrases! I get that part of the religious phenomenon, too. In my experience, true believers — whether conservative or liberal — are rarely persuaded out of their

mindset by reason, or even by law! The way that people change their belief is by conversion. Yes, the good old religious word, "conversion." We are not converted by being out-argued or out-reasoned. We are converted when we experience truth and morality and love in a new way.

Friends, that is why I belong to the church. Our role is indeed to convert, to show people a new way of life with our hearts, with the way we act, with the way we love. I do not mind true belief when it is founded in true love. I want to be a true lover first, and then a true believer.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
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