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## What's Your Deepest Belief About Ultimate Reality?

What would you write if you were asked to prepare a short statement presenting your most deeply held belief about ultimate reality? Psychologist Deane Shapiro has surveyed people to find out their answers and invites readers to explore their own beliefs.

Assessing and stating deeply held beliefs may arouse fear of what others may think. Or you may find that a belief cannot be simply stated. How do you determine your deepest belief? Try thinking, imagining, or feeling it. Once you have stated your belief, compare your method and results with others.

The most commonly stated belief, Dr. Shapiro found, was in a "positive, benign reality," with a theistic approach. Only two people mentioned the issue of evil. The interaction of human effort and free will was part of a number of statements. Human efforts are essential in attaining the ultimate reality, according to some, while others recognized the element

of a universal power. Examples are "love is responsibility," "unity of God," and "belief in a just and compassionate God." Some beliefs were universal or true for all people; others were more personal. A few participants referred to the importance of a particular religious tradition.

Dr. Shapiro looked at what happens before one decides to deal with one's ultimate reality. Beliefs may come from a mystical experience, or a person may simply have faith that a particular belief is true. A crisis or a crossroads in life may trigger one to examine deeply held beliefs. Such beliefs have an effect on those situations which brought one to look at his/her ultimate reality, as well as establish a framework to deal with future events. A particular belief may provide a goal or an ideal for which an individual may strive.

Even though a belief is not a scientific "theory" in the usual sense of that term, a broad scientific framework is appropriate for evaluating

the use, effects, and consequences of that belief, according to Dr. Shapiro. Approaches to the question of whether one belief is better than another include studying the mystical experience as well as examining how well a belief helps a person evaluate conditions in his/her own life that preceded the determination of an ultimate reality. There is a relationship between beliefs and values and between values and future efforts toward change.

There are two areas where it is worth examining deepest-held beliefs about ultimate reality. One is the individual, who may assess beliefs for his/her own edification. The other is the scientific arena, because biases and assumptions are limitations that can distort research, in its conception and its findings.

Studying belief systems aids in understanding how and why people develop beliefs. Dr. Shapiro encourages the exploration of what happens before a belief is established, what a belief consists of, the purposes a belief serves for the individual, and how to recognize and evaluate beliefs. Probing deeply held beliefs is complex, and dealing with what is central to a person's own world requires sensitive consideration and compassion.

*Source:* "Exploring our most deeply held belief about ultimate reality." *ReVision*, Summer, 1989, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 15-28. Author's address: Deane H. Shapiro, Jr., Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, California School of Medicine, University of California, Irvine, CA 92717. (Digest by Bunny Starr, Fairfax, Virginia.)