

A Question of Faith – What Is Essential and What Is Variable in Religious Faith?

In reporting on a Université de Montréal symposium, Gazette reporter Harvey Shepherd wrote on February 28th 2004 a reflection on the nature of faith. He drew varied remarks from professors who spoke at the symposium and other sources. His reflection on faith prompted me to respond. John Paul II is known as a phenomenologist, having published philosophical works in his own right such as "The Thinking Person" and "Love and Responsibility". He applied this phenomenological approach in "The Theology of the Body. Human Love in the Divine Plan.", and in his preaching.

I refer to these only to start with the focus that we can approach even faith in how it works as a human experience - with some clarity that is understandable and reasonable - and then see how that plays out in reality. As a practitioner who can think rather than as an academic philosopher who wonders about faith practice, I observe that faith involves several players: deity, humanity, and individual human persons. All three players contribute variables to faith and how it develops.

If we treat all deities equally and compare them, it is reasonable to state that most of them are tight-lipped about themselves and their original relationship with the universe, limiting their lore to mythical stories involving human or superhuman players with whom they interact and make certain points about what is expected of humanity, sometimes designating a human being that actually lived and died as a benchmark spokesperson. Examples of such spokespersons are Confucius, Buddha, Moses, Paul of Tarsus, and Mohammed. For the most part, the veil remains unlifted and we observe a great variety of deities in terms of number, nature, and characteristics.

The only two exceptions seem to be Judaism and Christianity, whose sacred texts show quite consistently a deity eager to lift the veil and reveal something of the mystery about the divine nature and intentions as well as the deity's original relationship with the universe. If a deity is only a fiction conceived by an inspirational thinker, writer, speaker, or leader, then what these claimants to the role of human intermediary have produced is just poetry or prose that may or may not be inspirational. If the deity is real, with its own thoughts and intentions and actually communicated something of itself to real people, then the very existence of recorded accounts of these communications has entered the domain of factual reality that is open to scientific examination and scrutiny. There is an additional variable. The deity may be real, but it may in fact not have communicated anything to the claimant to the role of human intermediary. A human being can be sincerely deluded into confusing personal thoughts – which may or may not be inspiring for anyone else – with an actual communication by a deity. This kind of mental or psychological confusion is scientifically established as quite common and too often a symptom of a pathological condition.

The second player is humanity, which can be taken as a whole, a nation, a religion, a local church or community, a clan, a household or family, or a spontaneous gathering of individuals. The variables contributed here are both many and varied. Even in a tight-knit group there are inevitable variations, however small, from one subset group to another and from one person to another. If each group and individual remain free to define their own terms of reference, then no dialogue is possible because there is no way of knowing that any experience or word referring to it means the same thing for another. Commonality can be established with agreement on the authoritativeness of a common experience, event, spokesperson, or sacred text, or of a deity's name or word or action, or at least on basic principles. Thus it was possible for world religious leaders to accept John Paul II's invitation to gather at Assisi to discuss and pray for peace in the world on October 27, 1986. Disagreement on the nature of the deity precluded them praying together, but they gladly prayed – each to a god they recognized – in one another's presence. They all agreed this was a meaningful action for the world.

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The third player is the individual human person. The variables contributed here are virtually unlimited. Some religions and religious groups care very little about “quality control” over what the members understand about the common faith, how they experience it, or how they may speak about it. Others exercise various degrees of quality control through the definition of doctrinal definitions of essentials and elements of the faith rooted in its origins, and through various efforts to teach and pass on these doctrines. For some, simple adherence to the full and correct set of doctrines is seen as sufficient; whereas for others, the doctrines are only useful as guides to be employed by individuals in order to replicate in themselves the foundational religious experience or to experience themselves in the present a vibrant and life changing encounter with the deity.

As a Roman Catholic who continues to be a student of our religious history, I can affirm that our religious tradition, the Roman Catholic Church, has always seen itself in the latter category. The membership is called to enter into a real relationship with the living God today, and they are called to follow the guidance of the consistent authoritative teaching of the entire body of their pastorship from the time of Jesus to the present; as this living body of interpretation, teaching, and guidance is offered them in the persons of their current bishops in good standing under the leadership of the Bishop of Rome. It is always true that in any time and place this leadership is part of the worldview and culture of its own time; so that the sanctions imposed on those who wander away from authentic dogma and discipline have varied from very severe to quite loose, as in our time.

So then, when we talk about faith, I am convinced that these three players have considerable impact on exactly what faith reality we are talking about. Whether there truly is a deity or not makes a big difference; so too whether this deity truly communicated or not. Was the claimant to the role of human intermediary deluded or truly chosen? If she or he was truly chosen by a real god who did communicate with them, how accurate and reliable was their memory and reporting of the message? How exact and reliable are the currently existing documents that reproduced these messages? These are among the questions investigated by the Alpha Course in the talk given the first of ten weeks entitled, “Who Is Jesus?”

Once this first player is established, then come the other two. As we can casually observe in our time, there is considerable variance in the way groups interpret and apply even the messages they agree are authentic and commonly accepted. Further, within each church or local group, there is variance in how individuals understand and practice what they commonly see as true and reliable. Some religious believers adhere to their own religious tradition, with a set of authoritative teachings and applications. Others act out of our secular and individual culture and set their own parameters, concocting a personal “new age” religious cocktail of a little of this and a little of that. If they have no authoritative guidance, what can keep them from deluding themselves or being fooled or even exploited by others? Individuals require guidance, and churches need quality control.

Differences are sharpest in the way groups treat objectors in principle or practice. Whole populations may support a religious leadership that imposes the most severe sanctions on those who deviate in the slightest way from the established standard practice. Others consistently try to affirm authorized interpretations and teachings, while allowing members the responsibility and freedom to adopt the personal discipline that will – in time – allow them to become congruent with their beliefs and ongoing relationship with the living God. This “middle way” of the Roman Catholic tradition, in spite of temporary deviations, however prominent, persists in local pastorship and membership, together with the role of Peter, which steered the course even when others temporarily got lost. This is the main reason John Henry Newman left Anglicanism to embrace the tradition maintained by the worldwide pastorship taking its cue from the Bishop of Rome and his officials. Faith is not isolated.

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