

Faith: The Final Frontier

Rev. Deane Oliva ~ October 28, 2007

Blaise Pascal was a seventeenth century mathematician, physicist and religious philosopher. He felt that there was no way that one could “know” whether or not God exists and that reason is inconclusive. However, decision theory could offer us a best bet. Pascal’s Gambit, as his proof became known, is one of the most famous models in the philosophy of religion.”¹

Pascal posed two arguments of note. The first is the Superdominance argument which briefly says that if you wager for God and God exists you win and gain everything. If God exists and you wager against God, you end up miserable. On the other hand, if God does not exist, no matter how you bet, you lose nothing. Therefore, to bet on God trumps all the others, for the worst outcome associated with betting on God is the status quo which is at least as good as the best outcome if you wager against God, which is also the status quo.

Pascal’s other cogent argument is The Argument of Generalized Expectations. It is well-known as Pascal’s Gambit. There are three parts. First, it states that the existence of God is a probability. Second, it makes statements about consequences. If there is a God, a wager for God results in an infinitely happy life. If there is a God and you wager against God, you will go to hell, an infinite loss. If God doesn’t exist, whether you bet for or against God, your gain or loss is finite and therefore negligible.

Given this matrix, rationality suggests that you should bet that God exists. The arguments can be pared down to one statement: Simply put, wagering that God exists is the best bet.

Now please note, the wager concerns whether or not God exists, not whether or not one should believe in God.

Thomas Aquinas expounds a fivefold argument for the existence of God.

- 1) Motion – Nothing can move itself. If something is in motion, something started it. The ultimate source is “God.”
- 2) Similarly if no object can cause its own existence then something else caused it – God.
- 3) There are two types of beings: necessary and contingent. Contingent beings are caused. There must be a necessary being that causes the contingent ones. That being is God.
- 4) We compare similar items deciding which is better than or prettier than the other; therefore there must be a perfect specimen for the ultimate comparison.
- 5) One can see the order of nature and the laws of the world; therefore there must be an intelligent designer. God.

William Paley, was also a prominent authority on St. Thomas Aquinas’s last argument for the existence of God, design theory. His watchmaker thesis of 1602 clearly posited the view that nature shows tangible signs of having been designed by a preexisting intelligence. Yet his arguments were so vague that they were easily criticized.

Whereas Paley saw a finely tuned world, Charles Darwin, through his own work, was able to point out the world’s imperfections. Darwin’s theory of natural selection was extremely controversial, but soon became seen as the primary basis for theories of evolution. The notion of God was

¹ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy “Pascal’s Wager: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pascal-wager/>.

reevaluated. With time and further scientific development, however, it became clear that Darwin's theory was too simplistic to fit the complexity of emerging facts and it underwent major modifications.

Some scholars revisited design theory, renaming it Intelligent Design. Instead of attempting to infer the existence of God from the natural world as Paley did, they reverted back to an Aquinas like response stating that "intelligent causes are necessary to explain the complex, information-rich structures of biology and that these causes are empirically detectable."² The concept of God was placed into the new historical context.

These are a few of the myriad methods of explaining belief in the existence of God. They are arguments that can be made from many faith traditions from polytheistic to monotheistic. Yet, despite much theoretical and theological discussion, there has never been any proof for the existence of God. It has always been a matter of faith. For many generations this faith assisted folks in deciding how to live their lives. But our world is not static. Most of these explanations were born of a different age and they answered different questions than we ask now. For me, how we understand faith now is of particular importance to Unitarian Universalists. So we will jump to newer ways of looking at faith.

I begin this section by noting my indebtedness to the eminent religious scholar, Dr. Marcus Borg³ and the well known evolutionary evangelist, the Reverend Michael Dowd.⁴

Dr. Borg in his culminating article on the subject of faith and belief, written in 2002, outlines how the terms faith and belief have changed in meaning over the past few centuries. First, he notes the importance of faith to Christians, particularly Protestants. During the Reformation faith became more than the belief in God's existence. The slogan "justification by faith" or "we are saved by faith, not works" became a principal tenet. As the protesting groups generated new denominations, they differentiated themselves from each other by defining what they believed, delineating the specifics of their faith. The Roman Catholics followed suit, stating their beliefs in comparison to the Protestant groups. Each sect had their own beliefs and to be a believer in a particular faith tradition meant to follow a specific ideology. Thus, faith and belief became synonymous or, said in a different way, faith began to mean believing the RIGHT things.

A second path in this transition of faith and belief was the emergence of scientific ways of knowing. Before this era, the era of modern science, faith was effortless. Given the status of knowledge of the universe, folks simply believed in the myth stories of their tradition. There was no reason not to. But in the modern era, truth became equated with factual, with verifiable. Borg notes that "modern Western culture is the only culture in human history that has ever identified truth with factuality." Thus, during this new period the "facts" of the Bible came into question. Faith became believing things that through science and reason had become questionable, believing stories in spite of reasons to think otherwise. Belief became a contrast to knowledge. Belief became what one turned to when knowledge ran out or when there were opposing viewpoints. So, when you don't "know," you "believe," you take on faith. Faith is believing in spite of difficulty. In some sects, particularly ones in which you are saved by faith, having doubts can be perceived as sinful and cause much distress.

Yet, faith as believing certain things to be true has very little transformative power. For Borg better definitions of faith rely on their relational qualities. He views faith as relational. Borg uses the Latin roots of fidelitas, fiducia and visio to characterize these meanings of faith. In fidelitas,

² William A. Dembski, *Intelligent Design* (Downer's Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1999), p. 106.

³ Borg, Marcus "Faith, Not Belief" <http://www.explorefaith.org/bio.borg.html> 2002

⁴ Dowd, Michael *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World* (Council Oaks Books: San Francisco, 2007).

we have fidelity. It is the view of faith as loyalty in a relationship, as faithfulness to one's relationship to God, as being in relationship to God.

Fiducia refers to faith as trust, specifically as trust in God, perhaps even a radical trust. Like fidelity it is not associated with beliefs; it is not trusting your beliefs about God. It is trusting in your relationship with God. It is a trust that results in peace and a lack of anxiety. Deepening trust transforms life and makes us less and less anxious. Borg notes that if you want to know how to measure the amount of faith as trust that you have in your life, you can measure the amount of anxiety in your life. So take a moment and reflect on your anxiety meter.

Visio is the last meaning of faith. Here is a way of seeing the whole, a vision of what is. H. Richard Niebuhr in *The Responsible Self*⁵ speaks of three ways of seeing the whole, each of which shapes our responses to life. The whole can be viewed as hostile and threatening, indifferent or life-giving and nourishing. If one chooses the first way, hostile and threatening, one is likely to respond from a self protective position. If one sees the world as indifferent one might enjoy life while taking some precautions. If one sees the world as life-giving and nourishing – if one sees the whole as gracious – one is freed from anxiety. It can lead to the self-forgetfulness of faith, of selflessness, giving one the freedom to love and to be compassionate. It leads to lives like those of Ghandi, Martin Luther King, or Olympia Brown.

These three meanings of faith – loyalty, trust, and a gracious view of the world are not belief statements. They are relational. Now Borg's religious tradition is Lutheran and he mostly speaks in God terms, but in his brand of liberal theology he states,

“For me, the most adequate way of thinking about God is thinking about God as a non-material layer or level of reality that is all around us, as well as within us, not God as a person-like being out there. . . . So I'm not talking about a particular way of believing in God, but that foundational root affirmation, that there is a more... The second element that I would say is central to Christian faith is the utter centrality of Jesus... I don't mean to say that believing in the Trinity is essential for Christian faith. I know many Unitarians who are Christians, and do not believe in the Trinity. We can say that Jesus is for us as Christians the decisive disclosure of God, without needing to say that he's the only one or the only adequate one.”

For Christians faith also means a commitment to the Bible as the foundational identity document, but it does not mean a commitment to a particular way of seeing the Bible. (As an aside, for those interested, I suggest that you explore a book entitled *Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers and Religious Liberals* written by our former Unitarian Universalist Association president John A. Buehrens. This book provides an introduction to the Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures for skeptics, seekers, nonbelievers, and those of a liberal and progressive outlook. As Buehrens states, “If you can't or won't understand the Bible, others will surely interpret it for you.”)

Borg suggests that instead of being saved by faith, instead of being saved by works, faith becomes the great work. Part of that work is seeing Christianity as something that makes compelling sense. Knowing that one cannot give one's heart to something that the mind rejects, one must work to find that integrity of self. He feels that believing is an activity of faith; in an early and enduring sense, it is a derivative of love.

⁵ Niebuhr, H. Richard *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1963)

Now hold that thought. We have just reviewed faith and belief from a liberal Christian perspective. Listen, if you will, to another view, one that is not necessarily Christian, one that employs faith without necessarily employing God.

“Accepting what is and being in integrity is another way of doing what most other animals and species do naturally, without effort, and without hesitation or foreboding...They don’t tell themselves that this or that should or shouldn’t have happened. They just accept whatever is real, whatever happens to them and to the world, and then they make the best of it. For us humans to attain a similar freedom from judgment and regret we must begin by trusting the Universe, fostering faith in God, *making life right*. These are three ways of saying essentially the same thing. Each approach nurtures a peaceful heart and mind, which in turn allows for clear communication between us and the larger Creative Reality in which we live and move and have our being. It’s trusting that the same wisdom and intelligence that has brought the Universe along for 14 billion years is still at work. And it’s trusting that all the difficult, painful, or discouraging experiences in our own lives, and in the world as a whole, are nevertheless part of the creative process and can be embraced by the arms of faith. What this means for me is that now when something painful or traumatic happens, or when something frustrating occurs, the first thinking I do is stop and really feel my feelings. Then I act as if both my feelings and the triggering event are gifts and blessings in disguise—that the Universe is conspiring on my behalf. Whether this is true or not, I cannot know. It really doesn’t matter. This way of perceiving is transformational and empowering. “The Universe can be trusted” is a very useful belief. When I act as if “all things work together for the good of those who love Reality and are called to serve a higher purpose,” I love my life! What more could I want?”⁶

Do you hear in this piece the same choice as Neibuhr’s response style of choosing a life giving and nourishing universe? Here there is a faith whether in something we choose to call God, or in the universe itself, or in a moral code of making life right. Dowd emphasizes that to have a powerful relationship with your own intuition and instincts is to have a clear channel of communication with the creating, sustaining life force of the universe whatever you may choose to call it. He notes that “having faith and being in integrity means trusting that each and every one of us is doing the best we can, given what we’ve got to work with at the time. It’s trusting that, from the perspective of the Universe everything may be “right on schedule.” This is faith. It is a powerful way to live, and it need not diminish the urgency to act and to be of service in the world. He states that a trusting attitude will actually strengthen the urge to be in action, because we know that the Universe works through us, too, through our own deeds...We can trust that those who oppress others are less evil than they are ignorant, and at the same time we can do everything within our power to ensure that freedom and justice prevail. Thus, trusting the Universe also means trusting that the anguish and anger that we sometimes feel over what is happening to the oppressed and to our world, and the yearnings we have for a more just and sustainable society, are part of the Universe too, and are meant to propel us into action.”

And here I might add the sentence that I have reflected on a lot lately, “The arc of the universe bends toward justice,” stated first by our Unitarian Universalist forebear, Theodore Parker, and then quoted by the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

We are urged to have faith, to have a vision of a whole that is nourishing, to trust and be loyal to this faith. What is the basis of that faith? What are we to assent to? Dowd would point us to the continuous creative evolution of the Universe. But is it based on the credal belief of a particular tradition. No, faith is beyond religious tradition. It speaks to what is most profoundly important to

⁶ Dowd, *op.cit.*, p. 50.

each of us. It speaks to our responsibility to find out what is meaningful; it speaks to finding our individual spiritual path.

As Marcus Borg spoke of the effortless of faith in a world where little was scientifically explainable, Michael Dowd speaks of “flat-earth faith” versus “evolutionary faith.” Flat earth faith refers to any perspective in which the metaphors and theology still in use came into being at a time when peoples really did believe the world was flat—that is, when there was no reliable way for humans to comprehend the world by means of science based public revelation. When interpreted literally many religious traditions become flat earth faiths. Today many Christians must translate the prayers and rituals of their tradition to make them palatable. As Borg points out, can the heart accept that which the mind rejects? Dowd might say that one must check one’s feelings in order to make sure that heart and mind are in sync.

Dowd promotes the necessity of faith with the following statement: “Sanity, health and ecological sustainability (salvation!) all lie in the direction of faithfulness to God understood not as a Supreme Being outside the Universe, but as a holy name for the Whole of Reality. One must honor the past, be faithful to the present and take responsibility for the future. Are you beginning to feel like you’ve come home? Are these not sentiments that we Unitarian Universalists choose to believe, - to hold dear?

Faith is an important concept to me. Without trust there is no peace. It is the wisest choice one can make. Thus, it is no surprise that faith is at the heart of every religious tradition. Dowd notes that Faith and trust are synonyms: faith and beliefs are opposites... Trust is what most other animals do pretty much instinctively. When some difficulty occurs in nature—a drought, flood, or hurricane—other creatures don’t make it mean anything. They don’t say to themselves, “Damn, why did this have to happen to me?” They just accept the situation as it is (trust) and then make the best of it by being in action. Faith helps us reclaim our birthright as animals.” Reflection is a gift to humanity as well as a poorly understood tool. In this time of analysis and introspection faith is no longer automatic. It needs to be nurtured.

“Trusting the Universe” or “having faith in God” means that everything is as it is. But it also means that we trust the anguish and anger we sometimes feel for what is happening around us, and that we trust our yearning for a just and sustainable society, for they are part of the universe too. They are calls to action. As Patrick Overton said:

“When you come to the edge of all the light you know, and are about to step off into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing one of two things will happen: There will be something solid to stand on or you will be taught how to fly.”⁷

In the end, we do not know whether or not God exists. We may not even choose to bet on God’s existence. In the end, we cannot prove meaning in life. We must make meaning. We must find peace. In the end, faith is all there is. It is the final frontier. Let us embrace the search; let us help each other in community and let us be open to the continuous revelation that comes from open minds and open hearts.

In a world without end, may it be so.

⁷ In Dowd, *op.cit.*, p. 184.