

Theology: It's Not Etched in Stone

When I get excited about debating the merits or deficiency of a particular theological doctrine, my wife reminds me that theology is basically an exercise in intellectual gymnastics. We tend to forget that ultimately, God is a mystery. We all sense that there is something more than what we experience in our concrete existence. We sense that there is something transcendent, something beyond us, yet something that is also a part of us and helps define us. We refer to this presence as God. This God can perhaps be best understood as an energy, or essence, or spirit. Imagining God as anything more concrete than that reduces God to being very small. A God that encompasses the entire universe for all of eternity cannot be reduced to a concrete image. Unfortunately, as humans we cannot relate to the abstract image that I just portrayed. We therefore anthropomorphize God, referring to God as a person.

The very fact that God is a mystery precludes us from defining the absolute character and nature of God. What we say about God ends up being a reflection of personal life experiences, spiritual experiences, and worldview. Throughout time there are mystical men and women, men and women who appear to have an extraordinary ability to connect with that which is spiritual, who give us visions of how they see and experience God. However, these are still just people. Yes, people who may be filled with the divine, but still people with particular life experiences, and people imagining things through a particular lens.

The stories of Jesus are told by the Gospel writers 30 to 70 years after Jesus' lifetime. Each writer draws upon his own life experience and worldview in portraying Jesus. This is why we see Matthew's focus of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah (a Jew writing to a Jewish community) and Luke's focus on Jesus as the social justice prophet. Each writer paints a picture of Jesus, and the image of God we see through Jesus, based on his own bias, and agenda. A good example of this is the change that we see in the nature of Jesus over the 50 years during which the Gospels were written. In the earliest synoptic Gospel, Mark, Jesus is predominantly portrayed as a prophet, healer, and teacher. Approximately 50 years later, the last gospel, John, emphasizes Jesus the divine, the one who connects us to God. At the time of Mark, "the way" was still predominantly a Jewish sect, only beginning to spread to the non-Jewish community. By the turn of the first century, when John was written, Jesus' followers were now emerging as a distinctly separate religion, Christianity, in direct conflict with Judaism, paganism, and non-orthodox followers of Jesus (ex. Gnosticism). Therefore, it becomes more important to emphasize Jesus, not just as a prophet, but rather as God incarnate. No longer does Jesus simply teach a way of living that leads us to God, a way also taught by the Jewish prophets, but he himself becomes the way to God.

Essentially every Christian doctrine was likewise developed within a particular historical context by a group of people with a very specific worldview. It is unbelievably arrogant to think that traditional Christian doctrines on subjects such as atonement and heaven and hell, developed in ancient times, are the one and only way for people to imagine God and the importance of Jesus in leading us to God. It totally blows my mind to see ultraconservative churches state with absolute certainty that one must believe X,Y and Z about God and/or Jesus in order to belong to their community, and even more so, to

be acceptable in the eyes of God. It is exceedingly myopic to think that our faith tradition is the only one that can lead people to an experience of the mysterious, transcendent entity we call God.

Surely, it is entertaining to debate theology. I find theology fascinating and have read in excess of 1000 books, from all kinds of perspectives on the nature of God. But, I would never presume to think that my conclusions are the only answers to be found in the study of God and I presume that the way people will imagine God 1000 years from now will be quite different than I do now. I'm not quite sure why people are so frightened about the evolution of our perception of God. I guess there is a comfort for people to have life written in stone, but that is not the nature of life. It is not black and white, but rather filled with all shades of gray. If we can embrace life's complexities, it becomes more vibrant. Similarly, if we can embrace the mystery of God, rather than trying to lock everyone into specific, rigid doctrines, we might just experience a vibrant spirituality that connects us to each other and God in ways that are beyond what we could have ever imagined.