

## Four Faiths (Part 4): Theism

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With today's service we complete our series on the Four Faiths – the four distinctive liberal religious paths laid out by Fred Campbell in his book, *Religious Integrity for Everyone*. As a reminder for those of you who have been here for the entire series, and as a brief tutorial for those of you who haven't, let me summarize Campbell's message.

First, he explains how he understands the phenomenon of religion – what religion is. He puts it like this:

Religion is what individuals and communities do with the fact of individual solitariness. The religious response to solitariness deepens and enriches our human knowledge of self, how we need and are involved in community, and are embedded in the creation and creativity of our Universe. Religion is how human beings live within that which transcends them.

“That which transcends them.” What exactly is that? Well, as it turns out, there are different responses to that question, and how you answer it will greatly influence the nature of your religious or faith path. Campbell's years of experience with and observation of religious liberals has led him to describe four faith paths. Each emerges from a distinctive response to that question of “what is it that is transcendent?”

Humanism is the path for those who find transcendence in the human community. It is from that source that humanists draw their values and find the meaning of living. Naturalism understands human living as participating in and dependent upon the natural world. It is the natural world as a whole that provides the transcendent source of values and meaning. Mysticism as a faith path grows out of a particular quality of religious experience, an experience of union with the transcendent, a sense of being one with the universe, of having a direct connection with the spiritual realm. Those three paths we have explored in past weeks. Today we complete the journey with a look at the fourth path: theism.

Fred Campbell describes theism as a faith

in which human beings have experience of a presence known as a ‘THOU’ [as in Martin Buber's *I and Thou*]. They name this presence God. [He goes on to say:] Looking at any theist tradition which has served to bring meaning to human living over many generations, one will find layers and layers of meaning and interpretation of the being or concept of God. Each generation has added to what the previous ones have revealed. God for theists points to a transcendent flowing pattern of events that the individual trusts and knows his or her profound dependence upon. The dependence and trust are known from direct experience.

Now that last statement is very important for our discussion this morning: The dependence on and trust in God are known from direct experience. Not everyone who believes in God has necessarily experienced God. There are a variety of bases on which to ground a

belief in God, such as trusting the word of an authority figure or a sacred text, or being persuaded by a philosophical argument. But for us as religious liberals, and for Fred Campbell, it is important that one's religious path grow out of and be compatible with one's own experience. It's part of our requirement that religion make sense.

I guess because of our strong streak of rationality, we often get caught up in debates or arguments, based on logic or rationality, about whether or not God exists. I'll say just a few words about the history of such arguments, leading to one recent philosophical argument that I find relevant for today's discussion.

One of the classical "proofs" for God's existence is the Argument from Design. The basis for the recent Intelligent Design theory, this argument asserts that the enormous complexity found in nature can only be explained by the presence of a cosmic designer; that is, God. Another classical argument is the necessity of a "first cause" or "prime mover" of the universe, a being who created the universe out of the nothingness that preceded it. Then there is the ontological argument that basically comes down to the assertion that, if we can conceive of a God, then he must in fact exist.

I won't take the time to refute these arguments, but they have been successfully refuted to most people's satisfaction. Their refutation, however, is not grounds for concluding, "therefore, there is no God." It simply means that there is likely no rational argument that can *prove* God's existence. The more recent philosophical argument that I want to mention cautions against leaping from the lack of a rational argument for God to the conclusion that a belief in God is, therefore, irrational. The argument is made by Alvin Plantinga, who defends the rationality of theistic belief not based on argument.

Of course I don't have time to explain his position in detail, but I'll try and give the gist of it. If you're intrigued, I can tell you where to learn more. Plantinga begins by maintaining that if it is rational to believe in the existence of other minds besides one's own, then it is rational to believe in God. He also maintains that if rationality demands acceptance only of those beliefs based on evidence, then we are all irrational because we hold many beliefs not based on evidence. Example: there is no proof that the world was not created five minutes ago with built-in memory traces in our minds. And yet, even lacking such proof, we consider it rational to believe that the world has existed for more than five minutes. Even such a rational structure as geometry must begin with and accept some set of unprovable axioms and postulates.

Plantinga maintains that humans have an innate, natural capacity to apprehend God's existence, analogous to the natural capacity to accept truths of perception, like "I see a tree." Such apprehension of God's existence may be manifested through moments of guilt, or gratitude, or a sense of God's handiwork in nature. At the root of Plantinga's argument is the distinction I'd like to make between "believing in God" and "experiencing God." He doesn't see the basic proposition "God exists" as the most important component of belief. Rather, belief comes more naturally in the form of "God is speaking to me" or "God is giving me strength." As such it is a part of the framework for understanding and giving meaning to experience, rather than simply being a philosophical abstraction.

Now, let me confess right here, that I am not a Theist. Of the four faiths we've talked about, this is the one that really doesn't resonate with me. I guess I might consider myself a mystical, naturalistic humanist if I have to have a label. I do have various ways of thinking about and conceiving of God or divinity that do resonate with me, but none of them include the notion of the personhood of God. That is, I don't feel the ability to communicate back and forth with God as if he/she were another person. My concepts of God are more like "the ultimate ground of

Being” or “the sum total of all natural laws” or “the glue that holds the universe together” or the “source of love and creativity” or simply “the mystery at the center of things.”

When I pray, my understanding is that I am communing with the inner core of my own being. But the mystical side of me does not discount the possibility that I am also tapping into some spiritual reality beyond my own self. While there may be no rational basis for that, I don’t see it as irrational either. It’s non-rational. There is no proof that the way I explain my existence and my experience is correct. But there is no proof, either, that it is incorrect. It is through that kind of understanding that I, as a non-theist, can recognize and accept the path of theism as legitimate for those for whom it makes sense and feels right. My acceptance – my tolerance – wanes only when a particular brand of theism – or any religious path – leads to beliefs and actions that I do find irrational, unhealthy, or downright harmful. Short of that, I’m willing to grant that your understanding of religious truth is just as likely as mine to capture the essence of reality.

Because I cannot speak to you authentically from within the framework of theism, I would like to use the rest of my time to share with you a number of voices who do speak from that path. I’d also like to thank Lois for her sharing this morning, which I think makes clear that a theistic understanding holds a legitimate place in the context of our liberal religious community. Thank you, Lois.

The pieces I’ll share with you come from a variety of religious traditions. They all were published in last summer’s edition of the magazine, *Parabola: Tradition, Myth, and the Search for Meaning*. That whole issue was devoted to the topic of God. The first short piece is by British philosopher Walter T. Stace, and it captures some of what I’ve tried to express so far:

To ask for a proof of the existence of God is on a par with asking for a proof of the existence of beauty. If God does not lie at the end of a telescope, neither does he lie at the end of any syllogism.

The next piece comes from the Greek-Armenian mystic and spiritual teacher G. I. Gurdjieff:

We are made in the image of God, and God’s attribute is immortality.  
If God wishes us to live he has shared that wish with all of us. He has also provided the means by which that wish to live may exist forever. . .  
The representative of God in any individual is that which tells him how or what God would do in any situation.

From the Hindu tradition comes this passage from the Svetasvatara Upanishad:

Thou art the fire,  
Thou art the sun,  
Thou art the air,  
Thou art the moon,  
Thou art the starry firmament,  
Thou art Brahman Supreme:  
Thou art the waters,

The creator of all!

Thou art woman, thou art man,  
Thou art the youth, thou art the maiden,  
Thou art the old man tottering with his staff;  
Thou facest everywhere.  
Thou art the dark butterfly,  
Thou art the green parrot with red eyes,  
Thou art the thunder cloud, the seasons, the seas,  
Without beginning art thou, beyond time, beyond space.  
Thou art he from whom sprang the three worlds.

From the Native American tradition comes these words from Black Elk,  
Medicine Man of the Oglala Sioux:

I am blind and do not see the things of this world, but when the Light comes from Above, it enlightens my heart and I can see, for the Eye of my heart sees everything. The heart is a sanctuary at the center of which there is a little space, wherein the Great Spirit dwells, and this is the Eye. This is the Eye of the Great Spirit by which he sees all things and through which we can see Him. If the heart is not pure, the Great Spirit can not be seen, and if you should die in this ignorance, your soul cannot return immediately to the Great Spirit, but it must be purified by wandering about in the world. In order to know the center of the heart where the Great Spirit dwells you must be pure and good, and live in the manner that the Great Spirit has taught us. The man who is thus pure contains the Universe in the pocket of his heart.

From the Sikh tradition comes the following passage from its sacred text, the  
Adi Granth:

Why do you go to the forest in search of God?  
He lives in all and is yet ever distinct;  
He abides with you, too,  
As fragrance dwells in a flower,  
And reflection in a mirror;  
So does God dwell inside everything;  
Seek Him, therefore, in your heart.

From the tradition of poetry, I offer this from Mary Oliver. It's called "Li  
Po and the Moon":

There is the story of the old Chinese poet:  
at night alone in his boat he went drinking and dreaming  
and singing,

then drowned as he reached for the moon's reflection.  
Well, probably each of us, at some time, has been  
just as desperate.

Not the moon, though.

If it is the moon we seek, we must be cautious not to be misled by the reflection of the moon, or the shadow of the moon, or the finger pointing at the moon.

I have enjoyed laying before you the paths of humanism, naturalism, mysticism, and theism. Those do not exhaust the possibilities that make up the religious quest. But I hope they at least give you a starting point for your own exploration. And to wrap up this part of our communal exploration and quest, I would like to leave you with the words of my friend and colleague, the Rev. Fred Muir. He writes, in his book, *Heretics' Faith*, the following:

The quest for an enduring center is at the heart of religion. And the religious urge, I believe, is at the heart of every person – we are all religious. How we choose to express this religious life, whether or not we choose to do anything with it and about it, whether we choose to waste it, abuse it, or ignore it are decisions we all must make. When, how, and why we make the choices we do are determined by age, context, experience, and need. There can be many reasons that we come out in one place and somebody else in another. It won't always appear to make a lot of sense. But about this I am clear: that while the choice to honor our religious urging will take on unique, individual expression, the presence of the religious spirit is as integral to our being as is the color of our eyes or the prints on our fingers.

For some this center has been found in the laws of science, for others in the love of a companion; for some this center has been realized in the interdependent web of the natural world, for others in the visual and performing arts; for some this center has been found in the God of their mothers and fathers, and for some in a God as unique and different to every person as is every grain of sand on every beach in the world; for some this center is unknown, unnamed, and untouched, and for others it is as personal and present as the air that sustains living; for some this center is a cruel hoax, mumbo-jumbo semantics, meaningless information, and for others it is a gift, it is the life that makes all things new.

The search for an enduring center can last a lifetime. It is and always has been a religious search – regardless of the name it goes by. May your search be one of depth and meaning.

So be it.