

MORE THEOLOGY – FAITH AND BELIEF

Sorry. I'm in the process of taking a course in Christian Theology while at the same time exploring the meaning of the "shitstorm that is my life", so I'm somewhat preoccupied with theological and metaphysical matters.

Don't worry. I have a tremendous backlog of more traditional material to write about and I'll get to it shortly. But, in the meantime...

Many religious people subscribe to specific beliefs. These are not creeds or catechisms, but are acceptance of the literal truth of ancient events, particularly those incapable of verification. The Creation, Adam & Eve, Noah and the Flood, the Exile in Egypt, Moses and Pharaoh, Sodom & Gomorrah, the Virgin Birth, perhaps even the Resurrection. For some, the literal truth of these events is absolutely essential to their spirituality. I feel sorry for them. They confuse belief and faith.

I found the following piece by David Miller from his book *Gods and Games* very interesting and close to my view of faith in light of the literal truth of ancient events. [I have added some formatting for clarity, otherwise this is a literal reiteration of his work.]

"So, then, what is faith? Consider these two stories.

The noted anthropologist Leo Frobenius tells about a colleague of his at the university:

A professor is writing at his desk and his four-year-old little daughter is running about the room. She has nothing to do and is disturbing him. So he gives her three burnt matches, saying, "Here, Play!" and, sitting on the rug, she begins to play with the matches, Hansel, Gretel and the witch. A considerable time elapses, during which the professor concentrates upon his task, undisturbed. But then, suddenly, the child shrieks in terror. The father jumps. "What is it? What has happened? The little girl comes running to him, showing ever sign of great fright. "Daddy, Daddy," she cries, "take the witch away! I can't touch the witch any more!"

The second story is very much like the first. A father was awakened in the middle of the night by the screams of his three-year-old daughter. He rushed into her bedroom and asked what was the matter. Sobbing, she pointed in the direction of her dresser and whispered, "A monster! A monster!" The father looked. The street light was reflected through trees and windows in such a fashion as to transform the dresser drawer knobs and mirror into a fearsome sight indeed.

So the father simply flicked on the bedroom light, with the reassuring words, "See, Honey, no monster, just your dresser. OK?" She assented. It was OK. The father kissed his daughter good night and left the room, flicking off the light as he went.

No sooner had the light gone out, however, than the screams returned. The monster was back.

The point is simple, as simple as the wisdom of a playful child. Faith is being gripped by a story, by a vision, by a ritual (game). It is being seized, being gripped by a

pattern of meaning, a pattern of meaning that affects one's life pattern, that (sic) becomes a paradigm of the way one sees the world. It is not belief.

These kids do not believe in this business, at least they do not believe in thoughtful reflection when the mind's light is on.

But neither does (sic) the efficacy and the meaning-function depend upon their believing in the truth of something. Belief is beside the point. Faith is not belief. It is not intellectual assent. It is not some ritual played so that something will happen.

Faith is being turned on by an incredible vision. It is make believe. Questions of truth and falsity remain irrelevant. Belief and disbelief are transcended in authentic faith.

Faith is make believe. It is playing as if it were true. It is not that the religious story is not true. It is simply that questions of truth are irrelevant whilst in the midst of make believe, while in the midst of faith.

In studying the theology of Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas recently, the professor spoke about their respective treatment of Biblical events. I interrupted to ask whether he was speaking from their perspective or from the perspective of a contemporary theologian and, if he was speaking as a contemporary theologian, wasn't it the case that few respected contemporary theologians believe the Biblical stories, instead seeing them as allegorical. He conceded that he was speaking as a contemporary of these great thinkers, not as a 21st Century theologian.

My point was that belief is irrelevant to the essence of the Biblical stories. Just as Shakespeare's Hamlet loses none of its impact simply because it is fiction, the Bible's value does not turn on its factual truth. Those who see it as a static account of historical events and the acts and edicts of a historical God are believers, but they have no faith, (other than the faith in their belief). When they leave the pews and walk out the doors of the sanctuary, they leave their belief behind and, lacking true faith, are unable to bring the Kingdom of God into the world.

This wouldn't be such a problem if the confusion regarding faith and belief did not lie at the heart of Theism – the existence of God. Moderns and Post-Moderns want proofs, logical proofs, for the existence of God. And there aren't any. Indeed, there cannot be any. As I pointed out in class, Kurt Godel's famous incompleteness theorem (which provides that the axioms of a system cannot be used to prove the system itself or anything outside of the system) is as applicable to theology and cosmology as to the theoretical mathematics to which it was directed. Debating the existence and nature of God is a total waste of time, as these are things that mortal humans can never know in this life. For me, this means that God is not necessarily subject to Werner Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle¹ and He knows, or is capable of knowing, the fate of Erwin Schroedinger's famous cat² without His observation affecting the result.

As an aside, I feel sorry for the professor. Teaching theology to students with insufficient background in classical philosophy, theoretical mathematics, quantum mechanics, relativity theory and cosmology must be incredibly difficult. The students do not have to have mastered these subjects (I certainly haven't), but need to have at least a passing familiarity with them.

¹ “The more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the momentum is known in this instant, and vice versa.” Heisenberg, 1927).

² A cat is placed in a box, together with a radioactive atom. If the atom decays, and the Geiger-counter detects an alpha particle, the hammer hits a flask of cyanide, killing the cat. The paradox is that a cat can only be alive or dead, nothing in between. Before the observer opens the box, the cat's fate is tied to the wave function of the atom, which is itself in a superposition of decayed and undecayed states. Thus, said Schroedinger, the cat must itself be in a superposition of dead and alive states before the observer opens the box. Once the observer opens the box and looks at the cat, the wave function of the atom collapses and determines the cat's state. The simple act of observation determines the quantum state and the fate of the cat.