

Belief Patterns #4 "What Kind of God?"

Mel Lawrenz, Senior Pastor, Elmbrook Church

Retrieved 5/20/2002 at: <http://www.elmbrook.org/patterns>

– for ease in reading, print a hard copy and feel free to forward to a friend –

Deism? Polytheism? Pantheism? Atheism? Theism? What kind of God do you believe in?

After Blaise Pascal, the famous French mathematician and philosopher, died in 1662, they found a piece of paper in the lining of his coat. So important were these words to him (which he had written eight years earlier) that he kept them close to his body day after day. The scrap, which contained his central convictions, read: Dieu d'Abraham, Dieu d'Isaac, Dieu de Jacob, non des philosophes et savants. (God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the learned.) And then these words follow: Certitude. Certitude. Sentiment. Joie. Paix. (Certainty. Certainty. Feeling. Joy. Peace.)

It was not Pascal, however, who invented this attribution for God. It was as Moses stood before a mysterious bush on fire that was not consumed that he heard his name "Moses! Moses!," and then a name for God, a grand introduction at a watershed moment in history: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," and Moses hid his face (Exodus 3:6). Had God not said that, perhaps Moses would have thought of him as "the god of mysterious fire," or some other magician-like label.

Why, when God opened the door of revelation to Moses, did he present himself in this way? What do Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, have to do with the essential character of who God is? And why did Jesus quote this passage, drawing attention to this unique revelatory moment? Across the ages and around the world there are just a few basic concepts people have had about God, or gods, or no-God. They answer the question: just what kind of God do you believe in?

Atheism, or materialism, is the view that there is no God. As a dogma or philosophy, atheism says that the simplest and best explanation for what is and what happens is that there is a physical universe, and nothing else. Belief in God is a weak-minded explanation or naive wishful thinking preventing people from standing on their own two feet. Some people are what you could call "practical atheists." They may not claim a dogmatic philosophy in which there is no God, but God never figures into their thinking, so they might as well be atheists.

Polytheism is the belief that there are many gods. It is to say that there appear to be supernatural forces at work in the world, and that the diversity of good things and bad things that happen naturally points to a plurality of divinities whose interactions and competitions impinge upon the matters of the earth. A god of thunder, god of water, god of love, god of war, god of intellect, god of revelry—the possibilities are endless. The simplest way polytheism develops is when people think: "in our tribe we worship this god, but you live on the other side of the river (or across the ocean, or in a different culture), and you worship a different god. We choose to accept that diversity because we're not about to believe in your god, and we don't care a bit if you believe in our god." It is a convenient arrangement, a trial and error way of inventing gods. And there never is any absolute God to whom you are fully accountable.

Pantheism holds that there is a divine nature in the universe, but it is part of the physical universe itself. God is not separate; God is what is. God is "it," not "he" or "she." God may not even be an "it," but rather a divine quality that pervades the cosmos. Pantheism deifies the earth, and the self. If we have within us an urge to find the divine, it is because we are divine, and part of a spiritual unity that binds together all reality. Pantheism offers this: your search for God doesn't need to stretch any further than what you can see. What it does not offer is a God who is better than us, higher than us, stronger than us.

Deism is the belief that there is a God who created the universe, but then stepped back from it all and has no controlling influence over or involvement in the world. It is a way of acknowledging that there appears to be design in the creation, and we benefit from recognizing both the beauty and the order of that design. One can even believe in providence, that there is a purpose and destiny for the human race. But don't expect God to intervene in any way in your life today. There are no miracles—never have been. There is no word from heaven—never has been. The Bible is a human book with spiritual aspirations, but try to ignore the miracles (including the resurrection of Jesus) because we know better than that today.

And that brings us to theism. A note sewn into a true believer's coat. A confidence that when you pray, there is a God who hears you. An anticipation about what new movement God is going to initiate in the world today. An attentiveness to the voice of God. A confidence in divine love. A belief that God acts with intelligent purpose. Theism is the belief that there is a God: singular, transcendent, all-powerful, consistent, wise. And he is personal.

Now by saying that God is a "person," which Christians have said since the early days of Christianity, is not to say that he is a human being, or an isolated individual. One of the defining characteristics of a person or personality is the ability to engage in relationships. Persons talk to each other, they seek to understand each other, they make choices that shape their relationships with each other. Persons have faces, or public presentations of themselves (the Latin word *persona* literally means "mask"). Unlike rocks or water or trees, there is a dynamic interaction between persons. Persons know other persons—not just knowing about, or storing information, but comprehending, caring, and committing.

Though God does not have a physical face, he does dynamically interact, as when, in the desert of Sinai, he introduced himself as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." This is no ethereal description of a divine force, no abstract set of metaphysical (above the physical) characteristics. God said to Moses: I am the one who came to people like Abraham, called them, motivated them, instructed them, fed them, corrected them. I am the one who made promises and entered into covenants, who had compassion when they suffered, and who stood with them against evildoers. I am a personal God which is why you can trust me.

God is the "I am," and would soon tell Moses to tell the people that "I am" had sent him. How the modern world would be different if human beings stopped thinking of God as an "it" that they are trying to discover like some new astrophysical phenomenon, and realized that "I am" is searching us out. What Moses didn't know is that this introduction was the prelude to a whole new phase of divine activity in the world. God was about to move! And Moses would be his chosen servant. This Person-God was about to snatch a people out of bitter slavery. He was about to bring them to a mountain representing his unchanging nature and there to dictate thousands of words of law and grace, ceremony and celebration, truth and order. Moses, the meekest man on earth, as he

was called, was about to be swept up in a great divine saving movement.

So if you are inclined on this day to ask yourself, "what kind of God do I believe in?" then don't think you're just deciding which "-ism" you hold to. Nobody is going to give you an exam on which you have to write an essay today. The question is, if you were to write your central conviction on a scrap of paper, and sew it into your everyday garment, held close to your heart, what would you write on it?

Here is something worth wearing close to your heart: I believe in a God who is above all and with all, powerful beyond all measure and personal beyond all imagining. I believe in a God whom I can talk to, and a God who speaks to me. I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And I believe in this same God who became a Face, a true Face, when he came in the person of Jesus Christ.

That scrap of paper in Pascal's coat goes on with the words:

This is eternal life, that they know you, the one true God, and the one that you sent, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. I left him; I fled him, renounced, crucified. Let me never be separated from him.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

1. Why is it easier sometimes for people to think of God as an "it"?
2. How has your view of the kind of God you believe in changed over the years?
3. When God showed his "face" to Moses, that is, when he confronted him and spoke to him as a personal God, Moses hid his own face. How can we come from hiding our faces, to speaking with God face to face?
4. Where do you think God is moving today?

copyright (c) Mel Lawrenz, May 9, 2002

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, from the New International Version.

BELIEF PATTERNS is a weekly essay exploring the construction of a faith you can live in. Comments are welcome: patterns@elmbrook.org