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Religious beliefs don't rely on the 'existence' of God

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Do you believe in God?

A simple "yes" or "no" response to that question provides little information about your theology but calls for much more extensive dialogue. Even if you doubt or deny the existence of God, full understanding requires more information about the God whose existence is questioned.

Strange as it may seem, "existence" may not be among the most important attributes of God. That seems counterintuitive. Why waste time discussing something that doesn't even exist?

I happen to believe that the question of the existence of any particular deity is ultimately undecidable. On the question of the existence of God, I'm an agnostic.

For me, the more important question is: "If there were a God underlying the reality within which we live, what would that God be like?" And what implications would that have for how we live?

I'm reminded of the famous newspaper editorial, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus." The point is that the values and ideals represented by the being in question do exist and they do inform our decisions about how to live.

God is often discussed in terms of lofty abstractions such as transcendence and power. But any meaningful concept of God must somehow touch real life and be compatible with actual experience.

Diana Eck, in her book "Encountering God," points out that in many traditions, "people speak of the Divine as both ultimate and personal, beyond and yet within, transcendent and yet near."

God must have the quality of transcendence to be the ultimate source of order in the universe. And yet we also attribute to that impersonal abstract being qualities that hold meaning only in a deeply personal way -- qualities such as love, justice, mercy, forgiveness. In so doing, we give God a face we can recognize in human faces.

Theology is so much more than postulating a personal deity with some set of ideal human qualities. According to Eck, theology is the "task of bringing to the surface and examining the ideas of ultimacy and reality that we already employ and in terms of which we live our lives. ... It undergirds the way in which we think about all questions of value."

Consider another question: "Does beauty exist?" Can you prove it? Where is it? Where did it come from? Who or what created it? Somehow, those seem like the wrong questions to ask. Sort of like "Do you believe in God?"

We all know that beauty exists, because we have experienced it. But beauty is not a physical object. It is a quality of sensory experience, a pleasing sense of symmetry, or order, or color, or ... something. We attribute beauty to objects, but we don't all agree on which objects are beautiful. Beauty inheres not in the object but only in our experience of it.

Perhaps there is a theological lesson here. Perhaps God, like beauty, has meaning only within the context of our experience. Perhaps it is only in our experience of life and the world that God manifests. Or at least perhaps those are the only manifestations that are worth our time and effort to understand.

It is in our consciousness, and in our experience, that beauty and God find their hold in the world.

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