

Holy Curiosity

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Text: Acts 17:22-27.

“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.” Albert Einstein.

“The first key to wisdom is assiduous and frequent questioning. For by doubting we come in enquiry and by enquiry we arrive at the truth.” Peter Abelard

“Never lose your curiosity about God, for once that happens, you become dead inside.” Oscar Hijuelos.

Disassembling Clocks and Cat Fatalities

I am, I suppose, a curious person.

Like the time I took the family clock apart. It seemed that my protestations that I was only seeing how it worked did not cut much ice. My father’s caustic comment was that if I was curious enough to know how it worked I should at least have been curious to learn enough to be able to put it back together. A five-year-old doesn’t usually think that far ahead...

Or the time I tried to perform a chemical analysis on some old fireworks. My curiosity as to what chemical gave what color nearly blew my hand off.

Or the time I decided to indulge my curiosity and follow a rabbit trail over a cliff...

I’m grateful that I lived long enough to put my curiosity to better uses. For it is an important trait that serves the mind well, though the inquiring mind does not always receive the best help from overwhelmed parents. My mother frequently would observe that “curiosity killed the cat” in reference to some of my more outlandish adventures in curiosity.

(Thankfully our cat died while we were away and so I could not be blamed for that... I still feel sad that curiosity is so often undervalued—likened to dead cats. For it’s curiosity that drives us to discover, to question, to develop mentally. It almost seems that education and the attitudes of society are programmed to eliminate such curiosity and replace it with blind acceptance of what is. More on this later.)

The curious questioning, the asking “why?” and the interested observations of life, lead to who we are and what we think and believe—even if at times children’s questions may seem strange to parents!

Like the day my wool sweater shrunk in the wash. It came out two sizes smaller and I couldn't get it over my head. I pointed this out to mother, who told me that was what happened to wool. She just shook her head oddly when I asked why sheep didn't shrink when it rained.

My wondering mind was often classified as wandering. In science class I was looking out the window and was called to explain my actions, when I should have been working on my physics problems. The teacher seemed upset when I explained that I was only thinking about what would happen if you were in a car traveling at the speed of light and you turned the headlights on.

Visiting my aunt, she asked me if I'd slept well. She seemed to find it funny when I replied "Not really. I'm still learning how to." I remember a LONG discussion with my father on why we call two airplanes almost colliding a "near miss." As far as I could see they nearly hit.

I was often told off for being curious. My response was that I didn't see anything wrong in being curious. In fact, as I announced, I had read the ten commandments, and it didn't list curiosity at all. And while, I suppose, having to answer too many questions and to deal with the results of intense curiosity can be a challenge, I still believe my instinct was right—use your curiosity, because that's how you really learn. Sometimes the hard way, to be sure, but you learn!

Einstein

While Albert Einstein may not be a representative model of faith, his observations on the importance of curiosity and investigation illuminate the importance of "making sense," especially of the God who makes sense.

An unpromising student at school, he attributed his later success to dogged curiosity. He wrote of this motivation for his life work in spiritual terms:

"The most beautiful and deepest experience a man can have is the sense of the mysterious. It is the underlying principle of religion.... He who never had this experience seems to me, if not dead, then at least blind. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness....one cannot help but be in awe when (one) contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries to comprehend a little of this mystery each day. Never lose a holy curiosity."

The man who determined that $e=mc^2$ and the whole theory of relativity that so completely revolutionized our understanding of the physical universe was driven by what he called "holy curiosity." More:

"I am of the opinion that all the finer speculations in the realm of science spring from a deep religious feeling." And "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.... True religion has been ennobled and made more profound by scientific knowledge."

Einstein's curiosity about the universe—its operations and origins—led him to his investigations and his theories. He wrote: "I want to know how God created this world. I am not interested in this or that phenomenon, in the spectrum of this or that element. I want to know His thoughts; the rest are details."

Again he observed:

"My religion consists of a humble admiration of the unlimitable superior who reveals Himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God."

Notice that Einstein is operating from logic and reason—he wants to make sense of what he observes, what he has already discovered. He wants the universe—and God—to make sense!

Most significantly for this discussion Einstein declares, "*The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing.*"

Einstein rejects such a dismissal of curiosity, holding up such inquiry as holy and essential—as what is truly needed:

"Don't stop questioning, exercise your curiosity!"

Curiosity about God

Especially, we may add, when it comes to matters of religion and faith. For curiosity is essential when it comes to what we believe.

All too often it seems that the approach to religion is "don't ask any questions—just believe." Faith, according to such an attitude, is to be accepted as unquestioned truth, and to not open to investigation or inquiry.

That does not fit with my curious, inquiring mind. Yes, when it comes to God, there are clearly many things my finite mind will not be able to comprehend. But is it an offence to ask the questions?

The ability to ask the questions is a truly divine gift. Here we see the God of freedom demonstrated—that created beings are able to think and to decide, to ask questions—even the most "offensive" ones. As James Thurber observed, "***It is better to ask some of the questions than to know all of the answers.***" The divine image is most reflected in this—the ability to think and to do—the free moral agent. "No man really becomes a fool until he stops asking questions." Charles P. Steinmetz.

God does not force belief, but he does provide evidence without removing the possibility of doubt. So when God declares, "But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul." Deuteronomy 4:29 NIV. The curious questioning, the interested seeking out, the deep desire to know—these must be there as part of the religious experience, of wanting to know God as he is.

“With all your heart and with all your soul.” This theme is mentioned seven more times in Deuteronomy and reveals what God truly desires. Heart in Hebrew concepts is not the emotional center, but the place where thinking is done. (The mental center is the heart, the emotional center is the bowel!)

Children are very ready in their questioning, in their curiosity about God. For example:

- What is God like?
- Where does God live?
- Who created God?
- Does God know what will happen before it happens?
- Is God more powerful than Superman?

And so on...

Such curious questions are there from the earliest age. In fact, as Edmund Burke concludes, “The first and simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind, is curiosity.”

So why try to remove or dull such a creative and useful faculty? For it is essential for true education: “Curiosity is the wick in the candle of learning,” says William A. Ward. The more so when it comes to religious belief. Though some priests and clerics may wish it differently, the best students of religion are not those who accept without question but those who use their inquiring minds and examine the truth of any claims. “Curiosity is one of the permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous mind,” commented the wise old Samuel Johnson.

In examining religious claims more than any other, we should be using the minds God has given us. As Cicero wrote, “It is a shameful thing to be weary of inquiry when what we search for is excellence.”

Killing curiosity?

Yet, as noted above, some believe curiosity, especially in religion, is dangerous. They follow the “do as you’re told, don’t ask questions” school of thought in which curiosity has no place and should be killed. As just one example, take this extract from sermon by Cardinal John Henry Newman:

“Let us mortify our curiosity... Knowledge is no food. Religion is our only food. Here then is another mortification. Mortify your desire of knowledge... Again, mortify your reason. In order to try you, God puts before you things which are difficult to believe... Believe what you cannot see, what you cannot understand, what you cannot explain, what you cannot prove, when God says it.”

Is this so? Is it essential to mortify (kill) curiosity, desire for knowledge, and reason? On what basis can one make any choice between religious claims and counter-claims if there is no possibility of using reason? We may believe what we cannot see when God says so, but only once we have determined that God is trustworthy, and that can only be deduced from the evidence.

Recognizing the fondness of religion to reject the logical process and believe without evidence, Gary Zukav wrote tellingly: “Acceptance without proof is the fundamental

characteristic of Western religion; rejection without proof is the fundamental characteristic of Western science.”

Interestingly, the simple acceptance without examination is rejected by Buddha:

“Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. Do not believe anything because it is spoken and rumored by many. Do not believe in anything because it is written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and the benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.”

When the early Christian Paul met with the Greek philosophical thinkers on Mars Hill in Athens, his appeal was to logical thought based on their presuppositions. It’s interesting to look at exactly what he said:

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

“Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill.” Acts 17:24-29 NIV.

A clear depiction of the God who makes sense—for why would the Creator of the world need a human-made home? And why would he need anything, if God truly was the all-powerful Creator? This same God invites investigation, that we should seek him out, and “find” him—even though he is not far away! For if he truly is our Creator, then surely he is the source of all we are, even life itself. So forget the images!

A logical, rational invitation to examine God—from foundational principles of logic. The God who truly must make sense, having agreed to the hypothesis that God exists.

The God who wants to be found

For these same reasons, the God portrayed in the Bible is revealed as a God intimately concerned with his created beings, wanting us to investigate him and get to know him, since he knows us so well:

“The LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you.” 1 Chronicles 28:9 NIV.

“The LORD is with you when you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you.” 2 Chronicles 15:2 NIV.

“Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.” Psalm 9:10 NIV.

God is a “findable” God. He is there, he is real, he is available. This is no deistic concept of a God who wound things up and then left. This is an involved God who seeks to be found, like the one who calls out to the searchers “I’m here” in a game of Hide and Seek.

God himself looks for the seekers, wanting to be found and to be understood for who and what he is:

- “The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.” Psalm 14:2 NIV; see also 53:2.
- “I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me.” Proverbs 8:17 NIV.

The response from us, the searchers, is a commitment to holy curiosity, to wanting to find the God who is there, waiting for us. This is no dry, academic exercise, but a desperate, heartfelt seeking after truth in the parched desert of untruth:

- “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” Psalm 63:1 NIV. For:
- “My heart says of you, ‘Seek his face!’ Your face, LORD, I will seek.” Psalm 27:8 NIV.

Seeking God, looking for understanding, examining the evidence—and coming to a conclusion. That is the discovery of the God who makes sense.

This is direct contrast to the “gods” of the past, so diplomatically yet clearly dismissed by Paul on Mars Hill. Gods who, as we have already seen, hardly are worth believing at all; gods who are made in our own evil and sinful image.

Pandora

According to the Greek myth, the Titan Prometheus stole fire from the gods to help mankind. Supreme god Zeus was angry at such a “crime,” punished Prometheus and determined to take vengeance on the beautiful and perfect human world.

Zeus ordered Hephaestus, the smith god, to make a woman as a “gift.” Pandora (meaning “all-gifted”) was sent to Prometheus’s brother Epimetheus. Knowing what Zeus might be planning, Prometheus warned his brother not to accept any gift from this god of gods.

With her Pandora carried a large jar (or box) that she was warned never to open.

Epimetheus ignored his brother’s advice and welcomed the beautiful Pandora into his home along with her “gift.”

While Pandora resisted the temptation to open the jar, eventually her curiosity overcame her and she lifted the lid.

At once all the ills and evils the gods had placed in the jar swirled out and infected the world. Pandora tried to shut the lid, but it was too late. All the sorrows and tragedies had escaped.

No longer full of harmony and happiness, humanity descended into its current state of evil, sadness, pain and death.

What does such a story say about “god” and his view of human curiosity? A divine being who seeks vindictive vengeance, uses dirty tricks, willingly inflicts sadness and pain, exploits human curiosity for evil, and reveals his own debased and defective character?

Curious for the truth

So what does such a story say about God’s attitude to our wanting to learn, discover, investigate? In damning Pandora’s curiosity, it is as if God is saying, “Don’t use your mind, just do as you are told. No questions!”

On the contrary, the *true* God invites the questions, values curiosity, and gives freedom to think. He denies “blind credulity” and wants us to investigate the truth for ourselves. “Prove all things, hold fast that which is good,” is the message. Find out what is right and wrong, and make your decision, says God. Truth is the central aspect of God.

God first invites us to use our curiosity about him. He invites experiment. He wants us to discover for ourselves: “Taste and see” (Ps. 34:8) he tells us—for how can you ever convey the sensation of taste to another through mere description? This has to be experienced personally!

Then God invites us: “Come let us reason together.” (Is. 1:18). He wants us to explore him and his ideas. He wants dialogue. He wants a relationship with us, one that is based on things that make sense!

So we are not to assume what is right, to take another’s word for it. We are to use our minds, not simply believing the assertions of others, but investigating for ourselves what is correct. Before we believe or not, we are to examine the evidence carefully and draw our own conclusions. We must study the truth for ourselves. We must use our curiosity:

“Curiosity may have killed the cat, but where human beings are concerned, the only thing a healthy curiosity can kill is ignorance.” Harry Lorayne.

“We keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things, because we're curious and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.” Walt Disney.

“Life was meant to be lived, and curiosity must be kept alive. One must never, for whatever reason, turn his back on life.” Eleanor Roosevelt.

This means using a holy curiosity to examine the evidence in religion, the methods used, and the principles derived. Our goal is to come to a knowledge of God—not just by studying, but by experiencing him our daily lives.

God is interested in us. We should be interested in him. He invites us to come and reason together with him. In the end, as John Newton said, **“Only God is permanently interesting.”**

Those of you who leave today, heading out into a new life experience, and to each of you as you continue your learning, **never lose your holy curiosity.**

I hope that every day you wake up curious, and most of all, curious about God. And the God who gave us this holy curiosity will lead us back to him.

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