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The Rabbi Who Believes in Zeus: Why All Intuitions of God Are Incomplete

Writing blogs for the Huffington Post's Religion section -- in which I often attempt to present a nuanced, personal understanding of God, and a defense of the inherent goodness in the impulse toward religion -- has been a challenging experience. I have discovered that for many readers the terms "religion", "God", "faith", and "belief", carry such negative images, predetermined parameters, and intricate emotions that the dialogue is stopped dead in its tracks. These are complex subjects that resist short explanations, and for which words themselves are often inadequate at best, and misleading at worst. For example, in response to a recent blog, "Can The Existence of God Ever Be Proven", one person wrote,

"Humans have worshipped thousands of gods throughout the ages. Which of these does this discussion refer to? Remember, they were convinced that they had it right too. Just as you don't believe in Zeus, I don't believe in your god."

There are two assumptions in this statement that I'd like to challenge:

First, not all religious people are convinced that they have it right. That is an assumption that simply is not based on facts. Unquestioned certainty is a fundamentalist position, but is not an inherent -- or even desirable -- quality in a spiritual life, and is not the position taken by a vast number of believers or by most theologians. There is a long history of debate in all religions about the nature of the Divine, the meaning of scriptures, and the purpose of doctrines. In Judaism, for example, the Talmud records vigorous debates between the most educated and dedicated Rabbis in order to remind us that disagreements in search of truth are holy acts, that simple answers are to be questioned, and that we must resist the lure of certainty.

Second, I do believe in Zeus.

No, I don't think that there is a huge bearded guy dressed in a toga sitting in a palace on a mountain in the sky, looking to hurl his thunderbolt or abduct a beautiful human woman. Such a literal view may have been taken by some ancient Greeks, just as some today read their religion's stories literally, but this was not how the great philosophers and educated people of that time saw

Zeus, and it is not the intent behind those who first described the many Greek deities. I believe in Zeus in the same way that Parmenides, Pythagoras, Plato, Heraclitus, and later, Plotinus, did -- as a poetic vision of a true aspect of the Divine. Plato makes this clear in *Phaedrus*, his mind-boggling treatise on the nature of the soul, where he wrote, "But of the heaven which is above the heavens what earthly poet ever did or ever will be worthily? There abides the very essence with which true knowledge is concerned; the colorless, formless, intangible spirit, visible only to mind, the pilot of the soul."

In other words, above the constructs that humans make to describe the spiritual realm is a higher, truer realm that is beyond our ability to adequately describe or fully comprehend. Zeus, Plato knew, is a symbolic manifestation of the essence of creative power, and those who followed Zeus sought to deepen these qualities, just as followers of Athena sought to partake of the essences of wisdom and judgment. These essences, Plato taught, emanate from the same Source, and are implanted in physicality. People who intuit these essences give them form, which may be human in characteristics, but these forms are not the essences. The pantheon of gods were human attempts to describe the spiritual experience in an anthropomorphic story.

Similarly, in the Hindu Chandogya Upanishad, written in the first millennium BCE, we hear, "In the beginning was only Being, One without a second. Out of himself he brought forth the cosmos and entered into everything in it. There is nothing that does not come from him." (Interestingly, this language is almost identical to the Medieval Jewish poem "Adon Olam" -- "Master of the World".) The myriad of Hindu deities are aspects of the infinite and indescribable One, Who imbues all creation. Ganesha, the human/elephant deity who rides on a mouse, is obviously not an actual physical being, but a symbol of the soul's desire to remove obstacles so that we can live free of attachment to outcomes.

Jewish mysticism teaches that the true nature of God is without limit, and completely beyond human comprehension. The Jewish mystics imagined an upside-down "Tree of Life", with roots in the heavens and branches pointed toward the earth, composed on 10 energy emanations -- "s'firot" -- such as Wisdom, Understanding, Beauty, Judgment, and Mercy. It is through these emanations that we can know and connect to God, but these emanations are not God -- only the shadow that is capable of being perceived by humans. The famous first sentence of the Tao te Ching makes this same point, "The Tao that can be named [known] is not the True Tao."

There are realms of reality for which our five senses, our frail physicality, and the current evolution of our minds are incapable of fully grasping. Access to the non-physical spiritual realm is through the gift of intuition, which is a dim remembrance of the world from which we came, and that "speaks" to us in images and metaphors. Like James Watson discovering the reality of the DNA double helix structure in a dream of intertwined snakes, we can access deep truths that appear as symbols and metaphors. There are those who, for a variety of reasons, will concretize these visions and insist that these images are literally true, but the initial vision that brought these visions to us, whether Zeus, a man/elephant, or a pair of snakes, are not descriptions of actual people or objects, but are mystical poetry that contain a truth.

In this way I believe in Zeus, as a human intuition of a true aspect of the Divine. One could ask if I also believe in Santa Claus or the Jolly Green Giant. The difference here is that every adult

knows that Santa Claus is an invention to please children, and that the Jolly Green Giant was designed to sell vegetables. Now one can then say that any image of God is also an invention to appease the childish part of our nature that is confused by the world and afraid of death, and that religion was designed to sell mind control and submission. These simple bromides, though, are not supported by the facts of history or people's real experiences. No adult has come to a belief in and develop meaningful connection with Santa Claus, while countless people have come to find truth and relationship in their tradition's interpretation of the unknowable realm of Spirit. And no one has ever struggled with the obligations to be charitable and compassionate as demanded by a can of peas, while billions are elevated by and supported in a religious community and tradition that feeds the poor, cares for the ill, and comforts the bereaved.

Throughout our history on this planet, humans have known that there is an invisible, higher, truer realm that gave birth to our reality, and those that have caught glimpse of this realm have attempted to describe their vision. Zeus, like all the representations of the Divine that humans have intuited, including the God of monotheism, is partial, incomplete, and flawed -- perceived in clouded and flickering glimpses. I love and honor this search, in its halting steps, imaginings of powerful deities, yearning heroes, and colorful stories, because it represents our highest yearnings.

Yes, terrible things, like child sacrifice and abuse of women, were done as "religious" acts to appease imagined gods, but these were acts of barbaric cultures disguised as spirituality, and have been -- and are being -- eradicated as we evolve. Like the process of science, art, and culture, our spiritual intuition matures as we mature, gains intelligence as we gain intelligence, and builds on the findings of predecessors. This process has been the force driving humanity forward toward a future in which we know more fully who we are and why we have been placed here.

Of course I could be wrong.