

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Going beyond the need for certainty, to simply trust



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The desire for certainty is natural but likely beyond our limited human capability. In earlier Interfaith Insight columns, we explored its limits in science, the dangers in the political arena and the potential challenges in religion.

It can be seen as idolatry when we make it absolute. As we discussed last week, seminary professor Peter Enns even calls it “The Sin of Certainty” and wrote a book with that title.

Enns sees trust as the goal even — or especially — when doubt emerges. He writes, “Trust is not marked by unflappable dogmatic certainty, but by embracing as a normal part of faith the steady line of mysteries and uncertainties that parade before our lives and seeing them as opportunities to trust more deeply.”

He discusses the challenges to his own faith when family and professional circumstances made him re-evaluate his confidence. He could identify with the prayer of Thomas Merton, a theologian and Trappist monk who wrote more than 70 books on spirituality and social justice. Merton prayed:

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. ... But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. ... And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

As a student at Harvard Divinity School, Enns noted that the most spiritually challenging experience was not some of the liberal professors who challenged his ideas, but the non-Christians who were some of the nicest people he ever met. The question to his own certainty was “the simple act of living and working with people outside of my familiar tribe.” In discussing the Bible with some of the Jewish students, he found that his own parochial ideas he brought to the text were exposed. He “came to appreciate firsthand the richness and depth of that tradition. I also felt some shame for never really being exposed to it before, even in seminary.”

He shares a conversation with a Jewish student from Israel about the story of Adam and Eve. Enns mentions the fall of humanity and the original sin passed from parent to child that was caused by the sin. The Jewish student said he never heard of it, because original sin is not in the text. But then Enns asks, what about Satan tempting Eve, to which the other student responds, “Satan isn’t in the story. We see a serpent, and he is clearly identified as the craftiest creature made by God — not a supernatural foe of some sort.” Enns concludes: “What I ‘knew’ the story of Adam and Eve to be about wasn’t what the story actually said, but something I had brought to the story from

my own Christian tradition.”

Enns realized that his preconceptions, even about the Bible text, are not necessarily absolute truth. He concludes: “Maybe my purpose on earth isn’t to be the thought police first and love others after all their ideas line up as they should. Maybe my first order of business is to risk my own sense of certainty about God and love others where and how they are, no matter how they do on my theology exam.” He realized that love often means letting go of something that might seem clear and even dear to him. It’s not about being right or winning an argument.

He also notes that the Jewish Scripture (or Old Testament) was written over a span of several hundred years and recounts the many ups and downs of the faith journey.

“One of the great comforts of Israel’s epic is that it contains raw expressions of fierce doubt and lack of trust in God embraced by the ancient Israelites as part of their faith. I am thankful to God for this Bible rather than a sanitized one where spiritual struggles of the darkest kind are brushed aside as a problem to be fixed rather than accepted as part of the journey of faith.”

He writes of the Jesuit philosopher John Kavanaugh, who went to work for three months with Mother Teresa at the Home for the Dying in Calcutta, India. The first morning when he met her, she asked, “What can I do for you?” He responded that she could pray for him. “What do you want me to pray for?” she asked. He responded with what he thought was perfectly reasonable, “Pray that I have clarity.”

Mother Teresa declared: “I will not do that.” But Kavanaugh wanted to know why, in light of the fact that he had travelled thousands of miles for this purpose. Mother Teresa responded, “Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.”

He replied that she always seemed to have clarity. Mother Teresa laughed. “I have never had clarity. What I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.”

Kavanaugh was clinging to clarity; he wanted it diagnosed so he could fix it and move on. Mother Teresa challenged him to trust in God, rather than his own certainty or clarity.

“Rather than defining our faithfulness as absolute conformity to authority and tribal identity, a trust-centered faith will value in others the search for true human authenticity that may take them away from the familiar borders of their faith, while trusting God to be part of that process in ourselves and others.”

We are all called to a much bigger God, not the God of our own clarity or certainty, but a God who is more interesting, more caring and more trustworthy. Let this be our challenge.

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