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SPIRITUALITY IN A LOCAL WORLD

Beyond the Divide of Theism/Atheism

By Paul Waldau

I am what some people refer to as an “atheist” since I have never had experiences that would lead me to theism. This absence of theistic experiences has prevailed despite the fact that, for more than five decades, I have immersed myself in the study of religious traditions and communities, obtained three degrees in the study of religion, talked with countless others interested in this vital topic, and written a number of books that address religious traditions squarely. As I study religion, I use a perspective on the admittedly popular issue of “theism versus atheism” that may seem unusual to both theists and atheists alike. In summary, I prefer to get beyond the atheism/theism division.

This desire to get beyond the theism/atheism divide led me to pursue various aspects of the Spiritual Exercises with Tom Colgan, S.J., at Canisius College. Over time, Tom and I became good friends through sharing freely. On my side, I felt free to share my experiences of love found in family, a committed marriage, and friendships with people around the world. I was also able to share what I have learned from involvement in social causes that affirm the dignity of human lives and through writing and lecturing publicly about ethics and the importance of caring about the natural world and our nonhuman neighbors.

As I embarked upon my exploration of the Ignatian tradition with Fr. Tom, I recognized that what is at stake for many others who embark on this journey is not what was at stake for me. I respect that it is normal that theists seek in these Exercises an affirmation of their belief in God. I suspect, too, that what is at stake for non-theists who pursue this or any other wisdom tradition is something parallel – namely, an affirmation of their existing view.

But as I worked with Fr. Tom, I sensed that something else can be achieved through the Exercises and that this alternative achievement is separate and apart from an affirmation of one side or another of the stark dualism inherent in a “theism versus atheism” framing of our human search for

meaning. For me, what is at stake in pursuing a wisdom tradition is something immediate about human life - this is our inevitable encounter with what drove Fr. Thomas Berry’s observation that “[i]ndeed we cannot be truly ourselves in any adequate manner without all our companion beings throughout the earth. The larger community constitutes our greater self.

”I think that both theists and atheists encounter this aspect of our lives but sometimes fail to notice it or, if they do, to take it seriously. Berry’s insight is embodied in an equally important observation made by Viktor Frankl in his *Man’s Search for Meaning*: “self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence.”

The Exercises, in my experience, repeatedly open one up to self-transcendence and the more-than-human world because, borrowing a phrase from Walter Burghardt, S.J., they immerse one in “a long, loving look at the real.” It takes Ignatian patience and humility, I think, as well as both generosity and a willingness to respect, to see other beings for who and what each really is. With this approach, one can discern the actualities of both humans and nonhumans only if one is willing to set aside one’s preexisting expectations and beliefs about the profound realities that surround us every day of our lives.

Although I sometimes fail in my efforts to live out these insights, I am deeply thankful for those features of the Ignatian spirituality tradition that prompt me to recognize that there are more foundational questions for me to ask than whether someone I encounter is an advocate of theism or atheism. Foremost among the questions I ask each day as I try to negotiate our extraordinarily complicated and frictiony human societies are “Does this person care about and help others?” and “If so, who are those others?” ■

Paul Waldau teaches courses on anthrozoology, animal law, and the ethics of human/animal relationships at Canisius College and Harvard University.