

A NEW SERIES OF ARTICLES
Rector's Reflections on the Book
God's Human Future
by David Galston, Ph.D.
Introduction - August 27, 2017

PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

Once or twice each month, the rector will publish a two to four page reflection on a small portion of the book, *God's Human Future: The Struggle to Define Theology Today*, by David Galston, Ph.D. This reflection will be published in "The Weekly Magazine," the parish website and Facebook page.

[**About David Galston:** David Galston is the Executive Director of the Westar Institute and the Ecumenical Chaplain at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, where he is also an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy. David holds a Ph.D. in the Philosophy of Religion from McGill University.]

PURPOSES OF THIS PROJECT:

The purposes of this project include (1) to expose members of our congregation to a sample of the thinking and discussions taking place among 21st century theologians in a greater depth than can be accomplished in a Sunday morning sermon, that is, to reduce the distance between the pew and the academy; (2) to provide a venue in which the rector can be open and honest concerning his thinking about Christianity and the nature of religion; (3) to promote respectful and thoughtful conversation concerning the changing Christian theological landscape and the possibility (and perhaps the cultural necessity) of interpreting the Christian tradition without using either traditional/popular assumptions, anthropomorphic theism, or supernaturalism; and (4) to construct a presentation which can be delivered during 2018 in a public venue such as the Park City Public Library.

INTRODUCTION:

Every Thanksgiving, a certain family would visit grandma's for a wonderful Thanksgiving Day feast. The younger family members noticed that grandma always cut the legs off of the turkey before putting it in the oven. When they asked about that tradition, grandma replied, "Because that is the way I was taught to cook a turkey. It's family tradition so that is the way it should be done." A little research discovered that in earlier generations, food was cooked in much smaller, narrower ovens. Often, to cook a large animal, the animal had to be cut into pieces that would fit in the oven. If the animal was a turkey, the legs would have to be removed to narrow the bird. Now that ovens are much, much larger than in those earlier times, a full turkey would easily fit....but tradition dictated that the legs had to continue to be removed.

I was raised in a religious culture that relied on everyone buying into (or at least saying they bought into) a long list

of traditions; a long list of assumptions about reality that were really not open to much challenge or reexamination. Some of these were (1) the Bible is a supernatural book, unique in all the world, "revealing" the thoughts and desires of the one, true God; (2) the contents of the Bible are historically accurate and are always literally true and/or wise; (3) God is an invisible supernatural parent-like being who created everything, knows everything and is perfect in every way; (4) God is the supreme being above all beings; (5) God exists beyond space and time, but acts within space and time to intervene in the affairs of the Earth; (6) Jesus was God in human form; (7) God arranged to have God's human form murdered in order to take the place of everyone that God would be forced to reject and condemn (because they did and said things repulsive to God's perfect nature); (8) the Church always tells the truth because it is the guardian of "Truth;" (9) the Church is committed to the search for truth; (10) committed Christians are more loving and morally developed than agnostics, atheists and people of other religions; (11) God approves of only those who accept all of these assumptions without significant protest; (12) we have religious/spiritual experiences and we know and accurately understand the origins and realities generating these experiences, i.e., we have no reason to doubt that the interpretations we attach to our interior experiences are the best explanations; (13) our spiritual intuitions constitute reliable knowledge and can serve as the basis of truth claims; and (14) to be a Christian means that you accept these assumptions and set aside any and all nagging questions and contradictory information "by faith."

All of these assumptions and others became deeply ingrained within my mind during the first twenty years of my life. They were closer to me than my own breath. My identity was inseparable from believing all those ideas to be unquestionably true. But that was 42+ years and five university degrees ago.

Today, I think I have good, rational reasons to question all of these religious assumptions with which I was raised. Today, my thinking has changed and I no longer think that the religious tradition I was taught in my youth is either historically literal and accurate in nature or, in many areas, sane and rational. Today, as a Christian pastor I find myself struggling every day to discern my role within an institution that, while relatively "liberal" compared to other Christian communities, continues to act as if it would prefer to continue to saw the legs off of the turkey rather than have an open and honest conversation about the origins of that practice and ask if it makes sense to continue it.

So exactly how does someone who values the search for the true, the reasonable, and the rational find a home in an institution that, in most places, seems to value the comforts of an unquestioned tradition over all else? How

does a lover of learning, philosophy, and science function within an institution that sometimes seems frightened of the exercise of examining its assumptions in the light of new (and old) discoveries and insights? delete

Part of the answer is staying focused on my conviction that religion can play a constructive role within the human community; that healthy, humanistic, love-oriented religion points to something of great importance. Noted priest and author the Rev. Richard Rohr recently wrote, "As disappointed as I get in religion, I can't give up on it because only healthy religion is prepared to point you beyond the mere psychological to the cosmic, to the universal, to the absolute. Only healthy religion is prepared to realign and reconnect all things and reposition us inside of true community instead of mere individualism." And Rabbi Jonathan Sykes put it this way on page 6 of his text, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion and the Search for Meaning*, "Science is about explanation. Religion is about meaning. Science analyzes, religion integrates. Science breaks things down to their component parts. Religion binds people together in relationships of trust. Science tells us what is. Religion tells us what ought to be. Religion beckons, summons, calls. Science sees objects. Religion speaks to us as subjects. Science practices detachment. Religion is the art of attachment, self to self, soul to soul. Science sees the underlying order of the physical world. Religion hears the music beneath the noise. Science is the conquest of ignorance. Religion is the redemption of solitude."

I stay in the Church because I largely agree with the Rev. Rohr and with Rabbi Sykes. The "religious" or "spiritual" aspect of our humanity urges and cajoles us to entertain questions that mostly lay beyond the domain of the natural sciences. Healthy religion provides a context of discovery that is humanistic rather than either scientific or supernatural. It invites us to think of the great impossible possibilities of the universe and our existence in it: a human community dominated by love and forgiveness instead of selfishness and war; the discovery of individual and collective meaning and fulfillment; the ordering of a political culture of mercy and concern for human flourishing rather than power and limitless material wealth; each person's need for love, creative expression, and a sense of positive contribution; and the natural human impulse to celebrate life, beauty, the arts and our spiritual connection to and interdependency with all living beings. These are not the interests of the physical sciences, but that does not mean they are unimportant to human flourishing.

So this series of articles is my attempt to think out loud in the presence of my religious community. I offer these reflections in an attempt to be open, honest and as transparent as I know how. I offer them with the hope of speaking to those men and women who are ready, eager and secure enough to carefully examine what may or may

not be true and wise about traditional understandings of Christianity and what may or may not be knowable, verifiable and/or forms of magical thinking. If religion is to be respected and valued, it must be a cheerleader for not only love, compassion and mercy, but also for the search for truth and the courage to go wherever that search leads.....perhaps especially when it leads to the questioning and rethinking of religious assumptions and claims of certainty.

Just as within the scientific community, within mainstream academic religion departments the principle of theory adjustment or theory development, that is, the affirmation, rejection or modification of a theory in response to new information and insights, has been in practice for at least a couple of centuries. The institutional Church, however, has maintained a separation between what is discussed within academia and what is taught in pulpits and parish classrooms. The rationale has always been that such separation is necessary to "protect the faith of the people in the pew," i.e., ordinary Christians cannot make the same adjustments in their thinking that academics make routinely; ordinary Christians are too intellectually fragile or religiously insecure to know what is really going on among professional religious scholars. I think that rationale is toxic and has born damaging fruit. I will not buy into it any longer.

It seems to me that, if the Church is to be relevant and vital in an age of science, technology and the explosion of accessible information, we have got to get real about the reasons and the evidence for our fundamental assumptions concerning the validity, meaning and role of Christianity. This means we must ask the hard questions and be willing to leave no stone undisturbed. We have to stop fearing exposure to complexity and uncertainty. We have to be open to questions and new insights about the the origins and nature of the Bible, the meaning of "God," the meaning of Jesus' life and death, and the problems related to claims of religious knowledge. It means, as the Rev. Matthew Fox, Ph.D. has written, wrestling with how the Christian community can consistently act as a "midwife of grace" in and for the world rather than the guardian of knowledge-claims that cannot be questioned.

I will, therefore, as a way of thinking out loud about these kinds of questions, share my reflections on *God's Human Future*. In the end, my hope and intention is that all of us who are willing to engage these questions will have a firmer, deeper, more assured understanding of what it means to be a religious person and a follower of Jesus in the 21st century. Next reflection coming soon. In the meantime, let me know if you have any questions or would like to have a conversation. I'm easy to find. :)

Respectfully,
Charles+