

The God who is there—despite the uncertainty

Jonathan Gallagher

The guy on the plane was direct, to say the least. “No, what I want is certainty. I’ve gotta know for sure. I can’t live my life based on possibilities. It’s got to be cast-iron certain, or it’s not for me!”

We’d been talking about God. Not in that doctrinal way, considering all the omni’s—omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient and the rest. No, God as real, real in your life and mine, not in the realms of philosophy.

But my thoughts were not going over to well with my seatmate. He was adamant that he had to know for sure. Without *absolute proof* he was not going to commit to a God he was not sure of. And I can understand that—for who wants to place absolute trust in a being you cannot see, hear, touch...? It’s a lot to ask. Plus you’d be wise to be cautious, and not simply believe everything someone on a plane was telling you...

Now before everyone starts picking up pen and paper for letters to the editor about how can we allow such doubtful heresy, allow me to state my total conviction regarding the existence of a loving, caring, trustworthy God. That’s not the issue. It’s about proving it, and what any proof would really mean. Stick with me here—this is not abstruse philosophy. In fact it really does matter, as we’ll soon see.

For how would you even prove God as he is anyway, not in the absolute scientific way? And if you could, what would that say about God, and you and me? And would you want a God you could not escape? A God who allows us the freedom to believe—or not—is surely more believable! As Frederick Buechner says, “Not the least of my problems is that I can hardly even imagine what kind of an experience a genuine, self-authenticating religious experience would be. Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.”

No room for me—or you! Such a God would be so intrusive and self-evident that freedom goes out the window. The God who showed up on your doorstep and in blazing glory revealed himself in a way that allowed no room for doubt would be a confrontational God demanding not belief but unquestioning recognition. “If God merely wanted to make His existence known to every person on earth, God would not hide, observes Philip Yancey. “However, the direct presence of God would inevitably overwhelm our freedom, with sight replacing faith.”

What if God really was there, visible to our sight? If God was so very obviously there that any uncertainty would be foolish? An undeniable God? What then? The more you think about it, the more problematic is the absolute proof of God. Maybe we think we could do with just a bit more evidence, something that would really prove the existence of the God we believe in. But what is the alternative?—a God who screams out his

existence and his rules, one who demands recognition and tribute, one who will not allow any other choice...

We need to think again. "So what would we do with a God who was indeed an absolute certainty, that no one could deny?" asks John Updike. "If we could get up every morning and point to God, and no one could question... What then? The more you think about it, the more problematic is the absolute proof of God. Yes, it does sometimes seem that we could do with more proof, that God can seem quiet, even silent. The sensation of silence cannot be helped: a loud and evident God would be a bully, an insecure tyrant, an all-crushing datum instead of, as He is, a bottomless encouragement to our faltering and frightened being."

As you think more about it, the only kind of God worth believing is One who would not force himself on his creation, who would allow of freedom and choice, even as to his very existence. That's not to say you cannot be very convinced about God and his character. Just that while you can point to certain evidence, that's not the same as absolute certainty.

I confess that I am prepared for some shocks in the kingdom. It may very well be that some of my cherished religious ideas are not true. That does not disturb me at all. In fact I could say there is only one non-negotiable—my conviction about the loving, caring, saving and utterly trustworthy nature of God. If that is untrue, I would wish to respectfully request not to be there in the kingdom of such a God. That is my "certainty"—but despite all the evidence I can point to that would endorse such a view, it is clearly not a foregone conclusion. Too many people in the world see God very differently, and interpret the evidence to mean something opposite. Strange to me, but clearly true.

But that only confirms me in my perspective in this God who I believe is there, but who chooses not to impose even the fact of his existence on his created beings. "God gives us just enough to see Him, and never enough to fully find Him," says Ron Hansen. "To do more would inhibit our freedom, and our freedom is very dear to God."

Our freedom is very dear to God! That's an amazing concept. That the Almighty Creator of this vast universe chooses to take such risks in giving us so much freedom, and does not want to restrict this freedom in our beliefs and choices, is utterly incredible! But it is amazingly true, and makes God the more wonderful. For as we look out at the stars that this self-effacing Creator has hung in nothingness, as we begin to learn just a little of the vast design and the incredible beauty of both outer space and inner space, as we realize that there is indeed structure and meaning and purpose in the cosmos, and not chaos—then our freedom to decide comes as an even greater gift.

I love that God chooses to intrigue us. He leaves no heavy footprints, but rather light traces, tendrils of evidence to touch our minds. It is enough, even though we surely want more, as Blaise Pascal indicated: "We will always see too much to deny and too little to be sure."

For that is the plan of God. To draw us on to belief, not to force it upon us. To find out God

It was one of Job's rather comfortless comforters who wondered whether by searching you can find out God. The implied response is negative. But the rest of Scripture point to a God who wants to be searched for, who waits to be found.

Paul describes this respectful God who does not force himself upon us, but who delights to be discovered: "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." Acts 17:28 NIV.

It seems a long-drawn-out, even tortuous process. Philip Yancey again: "God has always chosen the slow and difficult way, respecting human freedom at all cost." God allows us to ask, seek, knock. But he never intrudes. He invites, but never goes where he is not invited. He will sometimes tap on the shoulder, or even shock. But not to the extent of imposition.

"The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God." "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." Psalm 14:2, Deut. 4:30 NIV.

This is the God who invites us to come, to think, to reason together with him. This is no compelling God, no divine tyrant, as the Accuser has described him. Rather this is a God who illuminates because of his presence, his loving nature, his character. This is no dry doctrine, but a living experience, one full of meaning and purpose and passion.

"Those who say that they believe in God and yet neither love nor fear Him, do not in fact believe in Him but in those who have taught them that God exists," observes Miguel De Unamuno. "Those who believe that they believe in God, but without any passion in their heart, any anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of despair even in their consolation, believe only in the God-idea, not in God."

Ellen White is eloquent here: "His [God's] own existence, His character, the truthfulness of His word, are established by testimony that appeals to our reason; and this testimony is abundant. True, He has not removed the possibility of doubt; faith must rest upon evidence, not demonstration; those who wish to doubt have opportunity; but those who desire to know the truth find ample ground for faith." {Ed 170} "If you refuse to believe until every shadow of uncertainty and every possibility of doubt is removed you will never believe. The doubt that demands perfect knowledge will never yield to faith. Faith rests upon evidence, not demonstration." {5T 68}

Nor is this a "wait and see" option. You know—I'll decide about God when "all the data is in." You'll never decide, because the data is never all in. Some things remain indeterminate, undecided. Don't put it off—look and decide now. You already have

enough evidence to make an informed choice, God has seen to that. Yes, it's all in process. Yes, we need more time. Yes, we should be more prepared ourselves, more observant, more ready to make those right choices, especially about God. But we can't wait. "When we get our spiritual house in order, we'll be dead," says Flannery O'Connor "This goes on. You arrive at enough certainty to be able to make your way, but it is making it in the darkness. Don't expect your faith to clear things up for you. It is trust, not certainty."

Francis Schaeffer wrote a book entitled "The God Who is There." But I want to add, "believably." I don't say maybe or perhaps or possibly, because that may seem to some too doubtful. But we need to understand and admire God's graciousness in this also, giving us the opportunity to choose. He is the God who permits our uncertainty, and allows us to believe.

I absolutely believe in this God, this God who is for me so very much and unquestionably *there*. I do truly believe. But the uncertainty must be there for us to be able to choose. The God I believe in is the One, who though very much There, gives us all the time and space we need to decide. To decide to ignore him. Or to reject him. Or to come to him and find that life, life abundant, eternal life, in the presence of the God who is there—the God who is there for each and every one of us.

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