Many Faiths or One Faith?

by Sarah Voss

Today, more than ever, individuals can choose from a wide range of religious options -- a fact that challenges theologians even as it leaves virtually everyone else with a discomforting proximity to contradiction. Whose faith is right? The religious exclusivist says "mine is." The inclusivist says that lots of them appear to be right, but that they are all included in one "real" way to salvation/liberation. The pluralist says "you can have yours and I'll have mine, and that's just fine."

Yet anyone who dabbles in rational thinking has to feel just a little squeamish about the unanswered questions lurking underneath the adoption of any one of these three positions. And anyone who desires a peace-filled new millennium will have to wonder if the fundamentalist religious-righters really are right, or if such an exclusivist view can only lead to all-out religious warfare. Unfortunately, history and human nature suggest the likelihood of the latter path. It's time for a change!

Studies show that we often get what we expect. If we expect to go to college, we tend to go to college. If we expect to be beaten by our spouses, we tend to be beaten by our spouses. If we expect peaceful co-existence, we get peaceful co-existence. How, then, do we set up our collective religious expectations so that we optimize our chances that the 21st century will offer humankind a nice place to live in? This is not to deny the possibility of divine interaction: God's grace is beyond our calculation. But the God I know seems to expect us to take on a bit of responsibility for our own futures.

My suggestion is that we add a new model to our list of possible resolutions to the many faiths/one faith dilemma. Exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist... to these I would add a Cantorian perspective. I'm not talking "Cantor" as in the Jewish singing tradition, but as in the mathematical tradition of Cantorian set theory.

Is mathematics a strange place to search for religious direction? Not really. The ancient Greek Pythagoreans held that "Everything is number," and philosophers, theologians, metaphysicians, and ordinary individuals have been looking to mathematics ever since to find spiritual insight. One possible reason is that new ways of thinking often crop up *first* in mathematical theory. Consider the holographic theory, thoroughly in place in mathematical texts twenty years before science developed the laser techniques which eventually put holographic images on our credit cards. It was another ten years or so before philosophers began adapting the possible implications of the mathematical theory to "holographic" views of how our world works.

So, too, with Cantorian set theory, named after Georg Cantor, a deeply religious man who developed theories about infinite sets that rocked the mathematical establishment in the late 1800's and early 1900's. For example, Cantor showed that the set of all counting numbers {1,2,3,4,5,...} is "equivalent" to the set of all even counting numbers {2,4,6,8,10...}, a concept disturbing to those who doubt that a part can ever be equivalent to the whole. Equivalence, in the Cantorian sense, refers to the fact that the set of all counting numbers can be matched

element for element with the subset of the even numbers.

To give another illustration of such one-to-one correspondence, mathematicians might note the "topological" equivalence of, say, a book and a child's rubber ball. The ball can, at least theoretically, be shrunk and stretched into the shape of the book. Yet neither object is equivalent to, say, a doughnut, because there is no point of correspondence between the hole in the doughnut and any point on either the book or the ball. Equivalence between such seemingly unequivalent entities is readily accepted by today's mathematical community, thanks in large part to Cantor's ground-breaking work. Indeed, modern mathematics can trace its roots back to many of Cantor's "heretical" views.

When we use Cantorian set theory as a metaphor for a new way of thinking about our contemporary religious pluralism, we find a wonderful precedent for accepting the "unacceptable" contradictions inevitable in any discussion of "right" faith(s). In this way of thinking, the "part" may have the power of the "whole." In other words, many different religious traditions are "equivalent" to the one whole truth. Other possible implications of this Cantorian metaphor include the notion that the Divine may be infinite but in some way bounded and that incompleteness is intrinsic to the structure of *any* religious tradition.

Such possibilities stretch the faith assumptions under which we normally operate and, if they do nothing else, offer us a new arena in which to engage the many faiths/one faith dialogue. In a world which has technologically shrunk to a village of unprecedented diversity, we badly need new models of relationship. If such theories work in mathematics, maybe, just maybe, they'll work in real life, too.

_____

An edited verison of this essay was published as "Viewpoint: The Many Faiths or One Faith Question," *Publishers Weekly Religion BookLine* 1(20) 2, November 1, 1996