

This I Believe

Jonathan Sauder, November 25, 2018

I believe that faithfulness to tradition includes challenging many forms or practices of the tradition itself. This I believe because of my formation in Christian traditions which are themselves products of fermentation in Jewish traditions.

The Talmud regularly records not only the rabbis' majority opinions, but also the dissenting opinions of those who were voted down, thus preserving the seeds of self-criticism within the canon itself. One Talmudic story shows how healthy tradition needs open ended community discernment rather than authoritarian announcements. After a long, inconclusive debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, Eliezer demonstrated that he had right on his side by uprooting and moving a carob tree a hundred cubits, just by commanding it to move. Next, he made water flow uphill. Then, he successfully ordered the schoolhouse walls to start tilting until the building nearly collapsed. Yehoshua rebuked the walls by saying the debate was none of their business. They immediately stopped moving for his sake, but are still tilted out of line to this day because of their respect for Eliezer.

Finally, Eliezer appealed to Heaven to vindicate him. Immediately a voice sounded forth from Heaven rebuking anyone who would disagree with Eliezer,

announcing that his position aligned with the law. Yehoshua jumped to his feet and quoted Deuteronomy 30, verse 12, which says that the law is no longer in heaven. He refused to allow divine interference in the due process of community discernment.

By the time this debate took place, the prophet Elijah had already been living near God in heaven for several centuries. Rabbi Nathan met Elijah one day and asked him “What did the Holy One do at that moment?” Elijah replied, “He laughed and said, ‘My children have overcome me, my children have overcome me.’”

The Christian traditions were produced and energized by mutual disagreement over who Jesus really was and what following him should really look like. In the New Testament, the Greek word *paradidomi*, meaning “to hand down” or “hand over,” is sometimes translated into English as “tradition,” and, in other verses, is translated as “betrayed.”

In my own life journey, integrity has meant challenging oppressive Christian doctrines in the name of Christianity itself. I was raised in a very sectarian tradition. My beloved elders felt personally betrayed when I challenged the idea that truth is timeless and that every Biblical image of God is equally accurate. For this doctrinal deviance, I was formally excommunicated from the brotherhood.

Sometimes I learn what it is that I believe by hearing myself admit it to someone else. In his pain at my betrayal of my tribe, my Dad once asked me, with genuine concern, “What do you want for your daughters?” In recalling, later, my immediate response to that question, I realized how deeply I believe in the baptismal formula quoted by Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:28. What I said to Dad, in that moment of patriarchal interrogation, was, “I want my daughters to feel at home in the cosmos, and not to feel like guests in a man’s world.”

These days, I am coming to suspect that Paul himself refused to believe and practice the reversal of Genesis 1:27 that that pre-Pauline baptismal vow requires: In Christ, there is no longer male and female.

My membership in a congregation that is annually trying to become more radically welcoming of humans is a direct implication of my commitment to that first-generation Christian challenge to binary gender identity.

I believe in listening closely enough to tradition to be able to hear it correcting itself. Ancient and orthodox Christian theories of trinity offer us a God whose personality is neither unitary nor binary. I have found that sincere wrestling with trinitarian traditions is great preparation for recognizing that such a queer God is easily creative enough to lovingly give birth to an endless variety of

humans who are divinely beautiful precisely by challenging our oppressive habits of categorization.

I believe in timeful truth and in God's ability to hear us forward into new discoveries. And, when, in time, the children I have worked so hard to nurture find the courage to live out my deepest hopes for them by creatively betraying the toxic components of my own sincere beliefs and practices, I pray God herself will give me the courage to laugh with gratefulness.