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Finding the divine in challenging conversations

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Finding the Divine in Challenging Conversations

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This reflection is part of a collection of responses to the theme: "What is Theology?"

By Nick Rodriguez

When I was an undergraduate, I always somehow found myself wrapped up in philosophical conversations. These conversations ranged from topics as diverse as what it means to die, to what an ideal society would look like, to what could be seen as a genuinely good life and whether or not perfection was an inherent good. Many times, we would talk in the common spaces of different

residence halls on campus and sometimes these conversations occurred over drinks at bars. At first, such conversations were terrifying, but overtime they became electrifying. They became life-giving as there was something more to them.

When I was a sophomore, I often engaged in conversation with a friend in engineering who despised religion and especially disliked Christianity. We were seen as a scourge upon the planet, a remnant of broken philosophical ideas and narratives. My personal identities and perspectives were nothing more than another expression of this inherent brokenness that could be unraveled by simple questions of logical coherence. Because of their views, whenever I engaged with this friend, I held in tension within myself the threat of nonbeing upon who I was and the identities I held. There, in the midst of conversation, was a visceral vulnerability to the possibility that my identities truly were a scourge and perhaps I should not exist as I do.

But, nonetheless, whether due to a morbid curiosity or a genuine love of my fellow human beings, I continued conversing with this friend. I learned very quickly that, although this individual had some very narrow ideas of what it meant to be a Christian, their perspective was justified. They were a member of the LGBTQIA community and had experienced harm in relation to their identity at the hands of religion.

At some point, we began finding areas of common ground – and in conversation we found that there were many places where we shared goals, views, and perspectives. We also found that our points of tensions sharpened each other and that this was a good thing. In conversation, I gained new insights into how I could interpret my own theological lens, and my friend found new empathy for people groups they despised. In the middle of the year, my friend asked to join me on a Sunday morning to visit the church I was going to – they wanted to experience this space that was foreign to them in order to find common ground and break down their own biases and assumptions, and that is exactly what they did. In conversation, we both gained newfound appreciation for our mutually different perspectives.

In the vulnerabilities of our engagements in conversation and dialogue, we found life and an imbuing of greater meaning. When my sophomore year was ending and my friend was moving on out of BU and graduating, I remember fondly giving them a hug, and saying, “It’s the end of an era.” It indeed was, and that moment, I genuinely believe I was embracing not only my friend but the Divine. In someone so different – so other to me – I found God.

The Genesis story where Jacob wrestles with the angel in the valley at night is relevant to the topic of engaging with those who are different to us. In this story, Jacob was blessed only because he strove with God and with humans (Genesis 32:28, NRSV) – he wrestled with the tension of his finite human existence and the infinite reality that grounds his existence. To have prevailed is to have moved towards acceptance of his own fragility. When Jacob says, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (Genesis 32:30 NRSV), he is denoting his engagement and wrestling with the threats of nonbeing that arise from his fragility, and the experience of divinity within this engagement; God’s face was in the struggling.

During the spring semester of my junior year, I decided to get drinks at the BU Pub with a new acquaintance who I met through a mutual friend. He served abroad in the military, held mildly conservative political views, and was a very machismo individual. We were radically different.

That night, we ordered bourbon and talked about life and, for some reason, our conversation quickly turned towards the philosophical. We held very different perspectives; this friend believed that human beings were inherently evil and that any work of justice or equity was fruitless. Because people were so

bad, there was no point to trying to bring any kind of meaningful change. Thus, why not simply try to obtain as much as you can for yourself? He could not in any way understand my own more liberal leanings, and he pressed against my own personal ideals of a life of service, work, and hospitality to others.

Because he took a very nihilistic viewpoint, he was shocked when I was sympathetic to his perspective and tried to understand where he was coming from – despite the assumptions he had about me being this intern at the Chapel who held views fairly antithetical to his. Our conversation turned towards the comparatives of different world religious traditions. Despite our different views, we agreed that there was indeed merit to these different perspectives and it depended on the particular moments that these perspectives responded to. I found value in how he framed ideas and found that he was catching things that I missed about our world. More bourbon was poured on the rocks, and on that night began a deep friendship.

A moment from that night I recall so viscerally and deeply came at the end, and I think it shows the power that can come from humble and authentic engagement with individuals of different perspectives. After all that we discussed, I remember pressing one last time about some of his views. I turned to my friend and asked again, “Do you really think change will never occur? That injustice cannot be stopped? That our societies cannot be made a little better?” He responded to me, “Oh, I don’t know,” as he swirled his glass. Then, he looked at me and said, “maybe, but only because of people who think like you.”

In that moment of depth and tension, I felt something more to the conversation. I felt the voice of God and a calling. And it was coming out of a conversation with someone who I was so deeply different than. There was divinity imbued in the tension between our different particularities, and in the tensions and vulnerabilities that arise when we drop our sense of secure certainty.

Nick Rodriguez is a second year Masters of Divinity student and the Marsh Associate for Outreach and Engagement at Marsh Chapel. He is also the Treasurer of the STHSA, the School of Theology’s student government, where he created the collaborative fund and a new initiative to deal with underspending in a sustainable way through permanent projects and improvements for the community.

1 Comment

1. **Kathy** says:[November 22, 2019 at 1:05 pm](#)
Thank you, Nick, for sharing these stories and for leaning into those hard conversations.

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