

What Does It Mean to Focus Our Attention on God?



God doesn't demand to always be the center of our conscious attention! Is that true? Clearly the statement needs some clarification and nuance. On the one hand, there's a certain freeing-up inside of us that comes from hearing this said, given that most of the time God is not in fact the center of our conscious attention and, this side of eternity, will most likely never be. But, on the other hand, the consolation we feel in hearing this flies strongly in face of the clear challenge that comes to us from scripture, our churches, and spiritual writers warning us against losing ourselves in the ambitions, projects, anxieties, pleasures, and distractions of this world, of letting our focus on this life eclipse the wider horizon, God and eternity. Countless spiritual writers warn us that it's dangerous to be so immersed in this world so as to lose sight of anything beyond. Jesus too warns us of this danger.

And yet all of us know a lot of people who seem so immersed in this life, in their marriages, their families, their jobs, in entertainment, in sports, and in their daily concerns that they don't seem at all to have God as center of their conscious attention for any significant portion of their daily lives. Indeed, sometimes these people do not even attend church and often have very little in terms of a formal or private prayer in their lives.

But, and this is the seeming-anomaly, they're good people, people whose lives radiate a basic (and sometimes very generous degree) of honesty, generosity, goodness, warmth, and healthy concern for others. Moreover they are often robust and witty, the ones you want to be next to at the dinner table,

even as they seem to be living and dying merely as devoted children of this earth, not much given to abstraction or religion. A good family gathering, a win by the home team, a good meal or drink with a friend, and a healthy day spent working, are contemplation enough. Their default consciousness focuses on the things of this world, its joys and its sorrows. A shift in consciousness would need to occur for any explicit notion of God to enter their lives. For these people, good people for the most part, ordinary consciousness is mostly agnostic.

How bad is this? Does this dangerously shrink one's horizons? How badly does a one-sided focus on the things of this life choke out the word of God or render it shallow and extraneous? Are we going to hell in droves because we can't give God more of our conscious attention and because we can't be more explicitly religious?

By their fruits you will know them! Jesus said that and it must be our criterion here: If people are living inside an honesty, generosity, goodness, warmth, health, solicitousness, intelligence, and wit that is life-giving, can they be much out of harmony with God? Moreover, we need to ask ourselves: If we are born into this world with such a powerful, innate gravitation towards the things of this earth, if our natural (default) consciousness wants to fix itself more upon matter than spirit, and this seems to be the case for most people, how then do we read the mind of our Creator? What divine intelligence is manifest within the natural instinct to give ourselves over to this life, even as we carry a faith that gives us a vision beyond this world?

Perhaps God is mature enough to not ask for, or want, our conscious attention most of the time. Perhaps God wants us to enjoy our time here, to enjoy the experience of love and friendship, of family and friends, of eating and drinking, and of (at least occasionally) seeing our favorite teams win a championship. Perhaps God wants us, in the famed-words of Yogi Berra, to sometimes just to sit back and enjoy the game! Perhaps God is like a blessing old grandparent; perhaps we pray in an inchoate way when we healthily enjoy the gift of this life; and perhaps there are less-conscious ways in which we can be aware of God.

Like the woman whom I quote above, I also don't know how this all plays out theologically, but it needs to be said.

Ron Rolheiser, OMI