

Paradoxicality: A Tool for Understanding Religion, the Bible, and God

Brian Zachary Mayer

Introduction, Etymology, and Some History

Paradoxicality. Chances are you aren't familiar with that spiritual-religious word. And that's understandable, given that it isn't used often. In fact, most dictionaries don't even provide a definition for it. Nonetheless, paradoxicality is one of the greatest tools for having an adult understanding of religion, the Bible, and God.

The word *paradoxicality* is, as you might guess, related to the word *paradox*, which stems from the Greek *para*, which means "contrary to," and *doxa*, which means "opinion." A paradox is something that seems contradictory but is in fact true. Paradoxicality is the state of being aware of, living in, or understanding paradox.

The word *paradoxicality* originated in the scientific assessment of mystical experiences*; it was used to describe the nature of an event during which there was a positive experience with no positive content—

an experience that is both something and nothing.

Paradoxicality is also the word used to describe the faith stage at which the world seems less black-and-white and more either-or. It's the stage at which it's realized that the opposite of a truth can also be true.

We are going to explore paradoxicality first with regard to faith stages and then examine it in more depth, starting

with simple explanations and moving to more complex ones.

But before we explore paradoxicality any further, recall this experience that everyone occasionally has: You read a word and it doesn't look right. Even though you know it's spelled correctly, although you know the letters are in order, it just seems wrong. That's a lot like the feeling you get after examining the concept of paradoxicality for a while—it just starts to feel a bit odd.

The Spiritual-Religious and Paradoxicality: Faith Stages

When paradoxicality is understood in the context of the following faith stages, people move farther in their quest for more understanding. Knowing how paradoxicality can be used as a tool in spiritual-religious practice normalizes people's experiences and gives them a place toward which they can strive.

As we get older, we change; in our changing, our understanding of the world changes and so does our understanding of God.

These faith stages are not

linear, concrete steps that every person goes through in a specific order. And we can be—in fact, most of us are—in more than one stage at a time.

Magic. When we're little, we believe in a world complete with fairies, demons, and monsters. Magic happens, and God is all-powerful. We don't understand what happens, and we are okay with that.

Reality. Then reality sets in. We learn about a grown-up world and start piecing it together. We still want to believe in magic, but at the same time we are fascinated by finding out what is real. Order is important, and we know that if something happens, then something caused it; we start seeing the world in terms of cause and effect. Consequently, God is involved in why things happen, although we can't express the connection very well.

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* In addition to paradoxicality, some other named attributes of mystical experiences include being ineffable (indescribable), being godly (nonspatial and nontemporal with a feeling of the holy or divine), causing someone to be noetic (receptive to an experience as a valid source of knowledge), and creating a sense of oneness or ego-loss.



Dependence. Getting older and better able to express things, we start to see God as we see our parents. Indeed, we see God as the ultimate parent. We long for relationships with adults who see, recognize, and guide us; we crave structure and rules. God is thus seen as the fundamental adult, the One who gives reason to be moral, the One who put forth the religious doctrines that we do or do not follow. Often, we perceive God enthroned in heaven. This is the classic image of God as Zeus—with white beard, throne, and thunderbolts. The dependence period peaks at around age twelve.

Independence. Most people who define themselves as “spiritual, but not religious” stagnate in the independence stage, when God becomes distant or nonexistent. By our late teens, we’ve found some authority within by which to make our own set of rules from those society has given us. We might have some spiritual bent to our lives, but by focusing on the historical reasoning for religious tradition, we deconstruct religion as utilitarian and claim no need for it. We disdain organized religion. We become demystification experts, seeking to intellectualize. Letting go and enjoying what we don’t understand is not for us. Faith in something un-understandable (the non-rational) just doesn’t seem adult. Statistically, more men than women are in the independence stage. (In rabbinical school, I epitomized the stage of independence—I became a storehouse of heretical facts like someone who buys magic tricks just to find out how they work.)

Paradoxicality. With some work, adults may find that they can be tolerant of paradoxical meanings of religious symbols. People at the paradoxicality stage long for community and, at the same time, permission to take their own paths. What makes the paradoxicality stage scary—and what keeps people claiming contentment in the previous stage—is the realization that all of what we “know” is a hunch, that others might have opposite views, and that is okay. Those in paradoxicality, as opposed to those in independence, no longer feel the need to see them-

selves as unique—a jump the ego is loathe to make.

Unity. The final stage represents the true realization of the unconditional relatedness of all things. Paradoxicality gives glimpses into unity. When we hit unity, which many of us do from time to time, we notice that ego disappears, and we see God in everything and realize that God is everything. This is a state of oneness, of peace, of acceptance, of harmony, of God. (Words, obviously, can’t completely describe this stage, but I hope you’ve had a taste of it and understand what I’m talking about.)

You and the Faith Stages

Now take a moment to think about yourself and your life. You’ll probably recognize that you’ve spent time in each stage—and that you are currently in more than one of them.

In a moment, I’ll ask you what percent of you is in each stage. But before I do, let me remind you that this

is purely subjective, and there are no right or wrong answers. (Actually, the only “wrong” answer is 16.67 percent in each stage—that’s a cop-out.) Let me point out that, for whatever reason, people tend to find it easier to focus on where they used to be or where they think they should be rather than determining

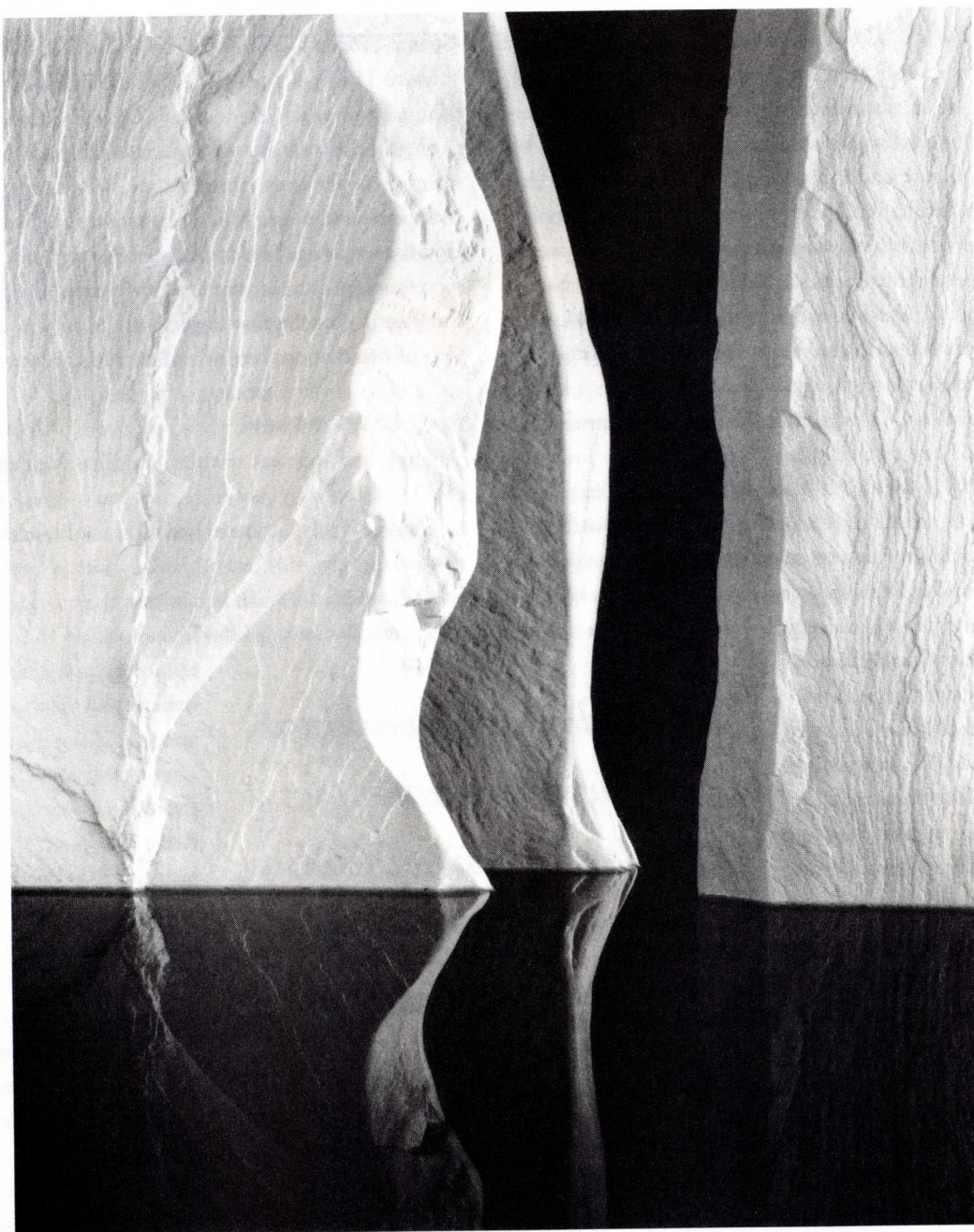
where they are now. I would like to remind you to look at where you are.

If you were to take a snapshot right at this moment, what would it look like?

Magic (Magical thinking): _____ %
 Reality (Cause-and-effect thinking): _____ %
 Dependence (God as celestial parent): _____ %
 Independence (God is dead; religion is a crock): _____ %
 Paradoxicality (Either-or / both-and thinking): _____ %
 Unity (At-one-ness): _____ %

If your total doesn’t add up to exactly 100 percent, don’t sweat it—the spiritual-religious is more art than rocket science. If you haven’t written anything, I’d like you to

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"Untitled 10" — Nick Johnson

pause for a moment, get a writing implement or address whatever was stopping you, and actually do the exercise. If, in the process, you experience self-castigation, doubt, false certainty, desire to look good, or other hesitancy, just notice it. That's part of your process, not cause for alarm. And remember, any answer you put down is only for this moment. Your answers when you have finished this article and your answers in ten years might be totally dif-

ferent. (My answers at this writing are as follows: Magic 5%; Reality 10%; Dependence 15%; Independence 20%; Paradoxicality 40%; Unity 10%.)

We change as we live. Accordingly, our concept of God and our relationship to that God-concept is going to change. Paradoxically speaking and with regard to our understanding of God, change is the only true constant.



Beginner Paradoxicality

Two years ago, my wife Jane badly injured her back. As she slowly recovered, I took on a few of the household tasks that she usually does, like laundry.

Imagine this: I'm in the laundry room. On the left of me, a large, spread-out pile of dirty clothes litters the floor. Over time, that pile gets smaller as I run through loads. On the right of me, there grows an ever-increasing pile of clean clothes. What I didn't know is that one should fold clothing as it comes out of the dryer to keep it from wrinkling. What I figured was that I would finish washing and drying all the clothes and then fold everything at the end. The pile on the right, if you didn't smell it, looked very much like the pile on the left, which it now dwarfed.

Jane, having recovered enough to walk, saw the piles of clothing. From her perspective, I hadn't even started the laundry—why else would everything still be in piles, instead of being one pile of dirty clothes and one folded stack of clean clothes? She became angry with me for not starting the laundry. Then I got angry with her for insinuating that I was lying and for not being appreciative of what I had done.

Paradox is defined as a statement or situation that seems to be contradictory but in fact is true.

Was Jane right in thinking I hadn't done the laundry? Yes.

Was Jane wrong in thinking I hadn't done the laundry? Yes.

Was I right in thinking I had done the laundry? Yes.

Was I wrong in thinking I had done the laundry? Yes.

How did the story end? We had a laugh. And I learned that if you put clean-but-wrinkly clothes in the dryer with a wet hand towel for a cycle, the wrinkles come out.

Intermediate Paradoxicality

Think about things that might be blessings, like being the happiest person you know or having perfect pitch. Blessings, right? Well, they're also curses.

How? If you are the happiest person you know, then everyone you meet will be less happy than you. If you have perfect pitch, far fewer tunes will sound passable to your ear. Blessings can be curses.

And curses can be blessings: I've known many people for whom a life-threatening disease has been a wake-up

call to appreciate life and start living.

Curses can be blessings and blessings can be curses. Paradoxicality.

This is hard for children to understand—that the opposite of something that is true might also be true. While this may fly in the face of what we think of as real logic, it's true nonetheless. Good can be bad, and bad can be good.

Paradoxicality is also found in language; words can be used to mean both one thing and that thing's opposite. For example, *fast* means both "moving quickly" and "fixed firmly in place"; *cleave* means both "to adhere" and "to cut apart"; and *dust* means both "to remove fine particles" and "to add fine particles." We colloquially use *bad* to mean "good" or *smart* to mean its opposite. In Hebrew, the verb *kerb* (*B'R'Ch*) can mean both "blessed" and "cursed" (Job 1:5, 1:11, 2:5, 2:9, and elsewhere; yes, this can make biblical interpretation tricky).

A classical Jewish spiritual-religious practice attributed to Rabbi Simcha Bunam of P'shis'kha is that every person should carry two paper scraps, one that reads, "For me the whole of creation was made," and the other that reads, "I am but dust and ashes" (Job 42:6).

Both—while contradictory—are true.

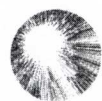
For a similar example, read the following two sentences: "The most can be had from the world by approaching it rationally" and "The most can also be had from the world by approaching it nonrationally." (Note that there is a difference between nonrational and irrational. Enjoying a sunset is nonrational; jumping off the top of a building to become part of the sunset is irrational.)

While each of the above sentences seems to be opposite, both are true. By approaching the world rationally—buying and selling the right stuff, for example—you can get the most from the world. And by approaching the world nonrationally—savoring a meal—you can get the most from the world.

It's not that one is true and the other isn't. Both are true at the same time. Paradoxicality.

Advanced Paradoxicality

Read the next paragraph. It's a quotation by fourth-century BCE philosopher Chuang-Tzu. (It's really deep, so give yourself some time with it.)



Everything has its “that,” everything has its “this.” From the point of view of “that” you cannot see it, but through understanding you can know it. So I say, “that” comes out of “this” and “this” depends on “that”—which is to say that “this” and “that” give birth to each other. But where there is birth there must be death; where there is death there must be birth. Where there is acceptability there must be unacceptability; where there is unacceptability there must be acceptability. Where there is recognition of wrong there must be recognition of right. Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way, but illuminates all in the light of Heaven. The sage too recognizes a “this,” but a “this” which is also “that.” A “that” which is also “this.” The “that” has both right and wrong in it. So, in fact, does the sage still have a “this” and “that”? Or, in fact, is there no longer a “this” and “that”? A state in which “this” and “that” no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Way. When the hinge is fitted into the socket, it can respond endlessly. Its right then is a single endlessness, and its wrong too is a single endlessness. So, I say, the best thing to use is clarity.

Paradoxicality, as you see, runs counter to the childish human desire to keep it all very simple—that this is simply this and this is not that. We might prefer that there be a simple right and a wrong, a this and a that, but it doesn’t work that way. (Or this way?)

Good is never just good and bad is never just bad. Our society would rather pretend that the world is “black and white,” “good and bad,” “us and them.” But, it’s not—and we know that.

Jewish and Christian Examples

Let me provide examples from organized religion that I use to help people understand the idea of paradoxicality: the wine of communion and the matzah of Passover. (I find that because of spiritual-religious baggage, Jews can better understand the Christian example and Christians the Jewish.)

Catholics maintain that communion wine is transub-

stantiated into the blood of Jesus, while participants in a Passover meal eat unleavened bread because they were slaves in Egypt.

Scientifically, rationally, empirically, and cognitively, we know that the communion wine doesn’t really become the blood of Jesus and that the people sitting around tables today weren’t actually slaves in Egypt. But to the religious person who understands paradoxicality, while these things aren’t really true, they also are true. The communion wine isn’t the blood and, at the same time, it is the blood. And I eat the matzah knowing that I was and that I never was a slave in Egypt.

The Spiritual-Religious and Paradoxicality

How does paradoxicality relate to spiritual-religious practice? My grandfather used to say, “If two people in business always agree, one of them is not necessary.” The tension between two points of view can lead to a third, unexpected one.

Paradoxicality requires us to step outside the box of established perception. To what end? To see that there is more than we thought

was there—and that most of what we think “is” is not much more than opinion. (Buddhism and Zen are sometimes taught through paradox because paradox is beyond linear thought and the practice of playing with paradox helps refine the skill of letting go of thinking.)

Wisdom begins with unlearning that which we thought we knew. If you are going to come to a new, adult understanding of religion, you are going to have to loosen up what you thought you knew.

If we are certain that “there is no God,” then we have, in a sense, made a god out of not-God. When we are certain that God is love and good, do we preclude hate and evil from being in God’s world? If we believe that the Bible is true, does that mean that it can’t also be not-true? Is there no space for middle ground?

Not this, not that, but both this and that.

And neither.

We have to open our minds beyond their limits and see that while we are limited, we are also unlimited. ■

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