

The Question of Authority  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Montgomery, September 25, 2005  
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Most people think of authority has something that is external to ourselves—our civil laws, office policies and procedures, spouses and partners, etc. Of course, for most organized religions, the church considers itself an authority along with the Bible or some other sacred text. Unitarian Universalists, however, insist that the final authority on moral issues is internal; in short, it rests with you. So, a newcomer may wonder how one obtains guidance on difficult moral questions by coming here. In large part, the answer to that question is expressed in our covenant to encourage each other to spiritual growth and to the engage in a free and responsible search for meaning. Ultimately, it is you who have to live with the decisions you make, and it is through worship, programming and fellowship, we hope we can create a community here that will help you to make those choices

This morning, I am going to address four broad areas of authority commonly associated with moral decision-making: tradition, scripture, reason and experience.

Tradition refers to the teachings of a faith group. If you come from another faith group, it probably had something with a title like Book of Worship or Book of Discipline or Catechism, and it probably had a long list of publications that bore the group's seal of approval as representing church teaching.

Unitarian Universalism also has a tradition, but as you might guess, one that is not nearly so organized or orthodox. If you've been with us for very long, you've probably already figured out that we have no Book of Discipline. We do have an increasingly large collection of Statements of Conscience, Actions of Immediate Witness and other types of resolutions adopted by UU delegates at our General Assemblies. Of course, we are not bound by those positions, either individually or as a congregation. Still, if you were struggling with something that you know like-minded people have thoughtfully considered, you may choose to give some weight to what they have said.

Likewise, any library purporting to represent the Unitarian-Universalist tradition would include the collected works of Ralph Waldo Emerson as well as the writings of the Thoreau, James Luther Adams, Henry Nelson Weiman, Judith Sargent Murray, and Rev. Olympia Brown, to name a few of about 100 people that I could name. This is not to say that you are discouraged from reading biographies of the Saints or the latest book by Thich Nhat Hahn or Dr. Phil, which brings me to scripture.

One thing that distinguishes Unitarian-Universalists from other faith groups is that we do not collectively embrace a single text as the unique revelation of truth. We take the truth where we find it, and we find truth wherever human worth is affirmed and wherever love and peace and compassion are exalted.

Now, let's talk about the Bible for a moment. Historically, Unitarian-Universalists have regarded the Bible as a human document, subject to the same limitations as any other human document. It is not enough to start with a position and then pick and choose verses that support one's pre-conceived ideas. We must be able to articulate a principle for reading sacred texts that is not issue specific.

William Ellery Channing, who is considered the father of Unitarianism in America, addressed this subject in 1819. He notes that some portions of the Bible seem to be, in his words, "confined to general truths" while others "refer perpetually to the times they were written." So, using my words, Channing is telling us it is OK to use reason to separate what speaks to us as eternal truths from those passages that reflect the knowledge, culture and times in which they were written.

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To say that science has proved some part of the Bible wrong—that, for example, the Sun could not have been stopped in the sky during the battle of Jericho to give the Israelites more daytime in which to fight—simply is to make an observation. It is not a thoughtfully considered statement of moral authority.

This is not how I would say this speaking only for myself. But, here is how I might articulate such a statement to a family member or friend whose world view and language reflects the dominant religious culture we live in. I believe that throughout history, God has spoken to and through God's prophets and God's people, whose stories have been collected in sacred texts, and that God continues to speak to us through God's gift of reason and that we are expected to use that gift to assess those writings in our times through our lenses and claim for ourselves the truth as God continues to reveal it to us. I can say that with integrity because I know that I am not compromising on my image of the ultimate reality. I'm just trying to speak the language of my listener, just as if I was trying to speak French or Spanish to a native speaker of those languages. Speaking of foreign languages, let me translate what I just said from religious language to more secular language. I believe that throughout history, certain individuals and communities have discerned truths and that these individuals and communities have collected these insights into writings that we may study for our own enlightenment, and as nature continues to yield its secrets to us through increased knowledge of the world, we may use that knowledge to separate the timeless truths of those stories from the cultural contexts in which they were written.

What I've done here is offer different ways of articulating how we read inspirational texts. My challenge to you is not simply to accept my formulations but to write your own.

Already this morning I have mentioned the use of reason. The idea that we should use reason or critical inquiry in moral-decision making comes to us easily, but we shouldn't take it for granted. We look at religion skeptically and in our more cynical moments, we say, look what it got us: the Crusades, the Inquisition, war after war, Pat Robertson and Tammy Faye Baker. Yet, at the other end of the spectrum, some say, look what reason got you: the atomic bomb, toxic smokestacks, and more coverage of Paris Hilton than our own Congress. It was one of our own, Henry David Thoreau, who said "Technology is an improved means to an unimproved end." How many of you women out there were ready to throw up your hands when the FDA reversed 30 years of advice on hormone replacement therapy? For my part, if the proverbial "they" ever say that oatmeal causes cancer, then I'm just giving up on science.

It is a legitimate question to ask whether knowledge is relevant at all. This is hardly a new question. In the early years of the Christian church, reason was dismissed. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Tertullian asked the rhetorical question, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" In modern language, his question was, what does science have to do with religion?

Well, to answer that question, I again turn to William Ellery Channing and that same sermon from 1819 that I quoted earlier. Elsewhere in that sermon, he wrote, "Say what we may, God has given us a rational nature, and will call us to account for it. We may let it sleep, but we do so at our peril." Whether you believe that or not, we all probably would accept this formulation: Intelligence is an evolutionary trait. By our very nature, humans are compelled to not only sense but also to interpret their

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environment and to deny humans this capacity is to deny what makes us human. Thus, we embrace the principle of critical inquiry, and we do not hesitate to challenge even the most long-standing assumptions about difficult moral questions. Perhaps, though, we should hesitate a little more, which brings me to experience.

Experience is the most dangerous of the sources of authority. There is something self-correcting about tradition, scripture and reason. Each of those three is produced in community and to varying degrees can be corrected. It may have taken 500 years, but the Catholic Church did finally admit that Galileo was right. To point out the downside of experience, one need only recall how many people who lost everything in Katrina said, "Because we made it through Camille, we thought we could make it through anything."

As a general rule, organized religions tend to discredit personal experience because, in my humble opinion, it undercuts the power of the religion to impose its own moral agenda. Eastern religions suggest that it may take many years or even lifetimes before one discerns the ultimate truth. In the Western traditions, of course, the human capacity to discern truth from experience is hopelessly corrupted by original sin. But, the Unitarian Universalist tradition—there's that word tradition again—has taught for hundreds of years that humans are capable of discerning truth in the here-and-now world in which they live.

This best articulation of this view that I have studied comes from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay titled *Self-Reliance*. One of the themes of this essay is that our creativity and our capacity for discernment are too stifled by culture and orthodoxy and whatever powers that be. "The centuries," he writes, "are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul." We should have more confidence in ourselves. Emerson reminds us that the people who created Greece and Rome and the Renaissance were ordinary people of their times, just as we are. Quoting again, "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages." Elsewhere he writes, "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind."

There's great wisdom in Emerson's words, and I would qualify them in a way that I believe he would support. Experience needs to be interpreted and that interpretation needs to be checked in some sort of community, such as this Fellowship. If I said that my experience with gays and lesbians validates their inherent worth, you would agree. A friend once told me, though, that his experience working in an inner-city school taught him that Blacks were just lazy criminals. We'd all be very quick to deny that experience. It's easy to take on the examples and show the wisdom of my experience and the folly of my friend's. My challenge, and you should expect this by now, is to articulate in a more principled way how we use personal experience in our moral decision-making. What weight should it be given? What limits are there?

From these examples of tradition, scripture, reason, and experience, I hope you can see that all sources of authority are interconnected. I've yet to see any faith tradition with only one source of authority. Yet, the hierarchy may differ. For Catholics, primacy is given to church teaching, and for Protestants, it is given to the Bible. Yet, for other traditions, primacy is given to personal experience.

In Unitarian Universalism, the hierarchy stops with you. We affirm your capacity to discern the truth for yourself, giving whatever weight to whatever sources you find enlightening. For those of you who can't remember all of this, the Cliff Notes version of

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this sermon is expressed in our sources. We forget we have those. We all know about our principles—from inherent worth and dignity to the interdependent web of existence. But our tradition has attempted to articulate where and how we Unitarian Universalists draw our moral guidance. These sources are reprinted in many of our publications. For now, everyone take out a hymnal and turn to the second un-numbered page after the Preface, on the back of the title page. At the top of the page are our principles, and at the bottom are our sources. If you look closely, you'll see in those statements elements of the four areas I have addressed: direct experience, words and deeds of others, wisdom from other traditions, and the guidance of reason and so on. FYI, a sixth source was added in 1995, after the hymnal was printed which reads, "Spiritual teachings of the Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature."

I suppose I could have saved us all a lot of time by simply reading those sources and stopping. I don't want us to be like some we know who simply regurgitate this stuff without understanding or thoughtful reflection. In fact, I don't want you take any of this at face value. I suspect most of us would embrace most of those sources, but we may articulate them differently, and, of course, we would assign our own value to each of those six sources.

When we say that we are about love and not doctrine, we are making a statement about doctrine. And, the reverse is true as well. When we say that the ultimate authority on moral decisions rests with the individual, it's not just a theological statement. We are saying, too, that when you have to make the gut-wrenching, life-altering decisions that come with being human, we will love you, no matter what.

Our covenant to respect the authority of the individual on moral issues is not absolute or unqualified. I'm not going to affirm anyone's decision to start taking cocaine. That's not moral decision-making, though, that's just self-destructive behavior. How we relate to others in those situations is a whole other topic. Yet, I will say this much about supporting each other.

When I was a chaplain, I met a lot of people who felt abandoned by their churches because of the decisions they made regarding marriage and divorce, an unplanned pregnancy, end-of-life care and treatment, or how they responded -- or didn't -- to some issue of social justice. For those who come here in good faith and make those tough decisions thoughtfully, I make this promise: whatever your decision, we will not abandon you.

We are not here just because we are nice people, though we are. Despite a few jabs I've taken this morning, I think there are lots of really nice people in places of worship all over this city and lots of nice people who would never go near a place of worship. We are here because we are Unitarian Universalists and we have a message of hope, affirmation and inclusion that we seek to embrace for ourselves and to carry into our community.

May it always be so. Blessed Be.