

# Reason is Useful in Religion

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The Divine is Love, Everyone Matters, Reason is useful in religion. Three central tenets of our community and not a bad summary of Unitarian Universalist history and theology. All three, in their own way, are wonderfully subversive thoughts that fly in the face of centuries of tradition that preach a very different view.

Many of us grew up in religious settings where we were taught that God's love comes with very specific demands, that some are not accorded that love due to variations in belief, practice, or lifestyle, and with the implicit message that questioning is not appropriate and reason is dangerous to faith.

Many of us found our way to Unitarian Universalism because at a deep level we intuited, knew that damnation and Hell were not part of the Universe's deepest truth, as Amanda talked about: the divine is love and overcomes all.

Many of us came because we discovered that which separates us is never more important than what bonds us together as human beings sharing one beautiful, fragile planet and that none of us will ever be truly free when so many are imprisoned by racism, sexism, ageism, consumerism, homophobia or simply by poverty and ignorance or Fox News. Or as Roger talked about, everyone matters. Likewise, many here and in our congregations across the country, across the world and across generations, have come to Unitarian Universalist communities because we believe that the careful use of rationality is integral -- not antithetical -- to genuine spirituality.

One thing I want to lift up is the consistency of our beliefs over centuries. I fear that we don't know our history terribly well. Those of us who make our way through the forest leading to ordination read quite a bit of Unitarian Universalist history. Ministers aside, how many here today have read a book on UU history?

So UU Thought 101. Do we believe in Original Sin? No, and let's start here as we look at the role of reason in our faith and our historical emphasis on rationality.

On some level, our predecessors' rejection of original sin created a space for the role of reason in religious life. Even the noted early humanist Erasmus wrote, "Faith cures reason, which has been wounded by sin." People believed that we just weren't clean enough to think well. Until we freed ourselves from the spectre of the depraved, enfeebled status of humanity following the fall from grace by Adam and Eve, reason could not stand on its own as a valid arbiter of theological propositions. This is still a reason some faithful people distrust science and human wisdom—we are too inferior, too weak on our own, and so we turn to the supposed Word of God rather than the Power of Humanity to explain our universe. I think this is a tremendous mistake and leaves us reliant on outdated information. Rev. Michael Dowd speaks of this when he says that relying on texts like the Bible as a source of factual knowledge is like not having updated your GPS in 200 years and still thinking that the Oregon Trail on horseback is the way to go. We need current maps to help us make the post-modern journey in a complex, multicultural, deeply polyvalent world. Or as Galileo put it, "The intention of the Holy Spirit is to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how the heavens go."

We heard Julia read several quotations about the use of reason. There have been so many heroic figures in the on-going conversation about reason and religion. Galileo, Thomas Paine, Abigail Adams, Jefferson, Emerson. What binds them all together, theist and atheist alike, is the core belief that, however we came to possess this gift called reason, the ability to look at a proposition and determine its value to us, the ability to set aside our passions and consider facts and realities, however we have come to it, reason is a glorious faculty and one that should be celebrated not dismissed when it raises an inconvenient hand in the back of the class. Reason is not the enemy of faith. Reason is not the enemy of faith, indeed it is its salvation. For to believe anything which cannot hold up to simple reason is to live in willful ignorance. And here it is, the core of what I believe we mean when we say that “reason is useful in religion,” that we covenant with each other not to believe specific propositions, but to be intrepid explorers of truths, especially our own. That revelation, whether from Jesus, Buddha, Darwin or Einstein, revelation is the FIRST step, not the last step. Truths presented to us by any prophet-scientist or poet-detective are handed to us for our own examination of relative benefits and defects. Someone out on the cutting edge “discovers” some new land, a fresh vista to explore. But we must make our own home in this new world. In matters of spiritual, and for that matter scientific, truth, we should avoid being armchair travelers—reading exciting accounts from the safety of our current position, but never venturing forth to see for ourselves. And, we do this too often in our tradition. Coming to church should not be your only spiritual practice. And the use of reason can be one such practice—seek out new ideas and challenges to current beliefs. Do not be satisfied with your current understanding.

No principle however, no matter how wonderful, can be safe from misuse. The use of reason is no different. We have to be careful not to elevate reason so that it becomes an end in and of itself. When we raise rationality above all else, we run the risk of reductionism. I went this way myself in graduate school and am having a very hard time stepping back from it. I was talking to a friend about this problem once and she asked me to give an example. After a moment of thought, I said the excessive use of reason, especially in matters of spirituality and art, can leave you in a situation not unlike someone who loves their dog tremendously, and decides the best way to love the dog even more is to dissect it to see if you can discover what makes the beloved animal so adorable and friendly. At the end of the process, you know more, but you may have killed what you loved and likely haven't gotten the answers you thought you were looking for. Rationality is a fantastic tool and one that should be rigorously applied to most lines of inquiry, but to seek justification for all faith positions in terms of scientific evidence is to subject spiritual beliefs to a level of scrutiny rarely, if ever, applied to other beliefs. No one asks you to justify exactly why you like Jazz over Classical or Indian over Mexican for dinner. As French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal said, “The heart has reasons that the head knows not.” And some evidence suggests that, in many things, we make a sudden, snap, intuitive judgment first about many issues and then find evidence to support our position. I think there are limits to faith—especially in the public sphere, but there should also be some modest boundaries on pure reason. It would be a poorer world if there were no room for intuition and personal experience.

And so, one thing I want to decouple from Reason is Atheism. The two are not necessarily synonymous. To make them so is to risk making the wide varieties of theistic faith a mere caricature—to believe in any god is to be a fool. There are certainly proponents of this equation, that to be truly rational, one must abandon all conceptions of a transcendental power or divinity. While I think that a strong rationality renders inedible almost any traditional conception of divinity—no old white man in the clouds, no jealous angry god micromanaging our daily lives,

no pearly gates, fiery pit---rationality does not render all ideas of god defunct. I'm thinking here of theologians like the lesbian, feminist, Episcopalian Carter Heywood, who writes in her book, *Saving Jesus from Those Who are Right*, "I am not much of a theist," but goes on to speak of "godding," the finding of sacred reality in the holy relationship between two beings. She also says, and I wholly agree, "the primary aim of theology--[is to] generate the passion and the intelligence, the commitment and the vision, to help us make history in just and compassionate ways."

Although I tend toward the agnostic, I don't have any problem with a belief in god or gods or goddesses for that matter. I don't take issue with beliefs in an afterlife or reincarnation or transmogrification of the soul onto the next vibratory level of cosmic existence. I enjoy speaking with people who believe all sorts of things that I do not. As a hospital chaplain or when I'm acting, as I am today, as a parish minister, I value the diversity of human belief. It gives me a tremendous range of metaphor and analogy to draw on in both my ministry and my life. As most of you know, I lean more toward Buddhist conceptions of reality, but happily receive communion when offered, adore Islamic poetry, and will chant with Hare Krishnas or the Benedictine Sisters I'm friends with up at Benet Hill. I am of a like mind with Thomas Jefferson when he said, "...it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." I hope to be an honest agnostic acknowledging that I can no more prove the non-existence of any particular deity than anyone can prove the existence of said being. There is no argument for or against that is truly convincing and I no more expect someone to prove the existence of their god as a predicate for respect than I demand someone prove their love for their spouse or a particular artist. I believe that human beings have an incredibly broad set of options when it comes to explaining basic reality.

All that said, I do draw a line—and I think it is one that we, as a faith community, must stand up for. I reject the use of religion as a basis for policy decisions that affect anyone who is not a willing participant in that faith. The beliefs some Christian hold about the age of the earth and the origins of life are not to be taught in schools to our children--except as cultural studies. There is no reproducible observable proof to substantiate the creation story of Genesis. And I do not accept the Bible as being any more authoritative about factual matters than other great works of literature. I adore *Moby Dick* and *Winnie the Pooh* and believe they both contain honest, valuable wisdom--but I don't think they are useful texts on either whale or bear biology. "Pooh?" "Yes, Piglet?" "I've been thinking..." "That's a very good habit to get into, Piglet." Any set of cultural ideas more than fifty years old needs serious review from time to time. The ethics of the Bible have some use, and their lasting influence cannot be denied, but I don't accept stoning as punishment, the moral dangers of eating shrimp or pork or the catastrophic quality of a couple of guys kissing. And I'll let you guess how many times Julia has "submitted to my authority" in the past 15 years.

And this is where our stance on rationality needs to have some teeth. The private world of the believer is theirs and I will deny no one the right to their own conception of reality---as long as it doesn't hurt me, my community, or my planet. The Second Coming is not a plan for solving a global environmental crisis. "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it" is not a basis for human rights. American exceptional-ism, if it exists, stems from the brilliance of the ideals we once held to, not the providence of some divinity.

And here is my problem -- my paradox. I genuinely celebrate diversity—religious no less than racial, cultural, sexual, or musical—but I kind of hear myself saying, "believe whatever you want, just don't let it influence how you vote, act, or organize your life or community." How can

someone be a dedicated Christian, believe the Bible—even if not literally, then at least seriously—and be willing to comply with my demand not to carry its tenets into the world? They can't—and it is unrealistic to think it ever was or ever could be so. I have every interest in advancing the gospel of science and the embrace of reason, but I have no interest or intention to force people to follow such a path. And so we cannot cede the public stage to those who dismiss good science or pander to willful ignorance. We must be, individually and corporately, a voice that proudly claims that reason is useful in religion. I agree with the Book of John, 8:32 “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

We represent a deeply American religion, imagined as Jefferson, Adams, Franklin and others wanted. Any idea is welcome to the stage, but it must be willing to submit to careful examination and defended not on the basis of its age, but on its merits and its ability to help humanity. The public interest must overwhelm private enthusiasms. I like the fact that no part of my mind has to be left behind in submission to any particular piece of theology. I can look closely at every part of my Unitarian Universalist faith. And if the principals are a bit bland, they are not unreasonable, unacceptable, or irrational. We can allow for private differences in belief while keeping our public sphere of common faith acceptable to all. We are the model for how interfaith dialogue can and should happen--allowing for particularity while reinforcing and celebrating commonality. What we lose in certainty and uniformity, we make up for in inquiry and courage. The fire of reason, the energy of reflective inquiry that we Unitarian Universalists value keeps our beliefs from stagnating and becoming so inflexible or brittle that we must defend them at any cost—including sacrificing human life or dignity. We must keep these fires BLAZING—always willing to ask difficult questions of ourselves, of each other, of our community, of our government, and of our faith. When new discoveries are made in the fields of evolutionary biology, psychology, physics, and poetry we must be there, learning from those who have traveled bravely to the frontiers and brought back images of new vistas. We must fear nothing new, deciding for ourselves after careful and honest study what serves our goals of wisdom, freedom, and equality.

Minister and historian of Unitarian history Earl Morse Wilbur, who wrote what is still perhaps the definitive history of Unitarianism, proposes that what has characterized Unitarianism over the centuries has less to do with theology and more to do with a commitment to three themes: complete freedom of religious thought, tolerance of differing views and practices, and the unrestricted use of reason.

Reason used in the service of love and toward the end of justice and equality is what we strive for. We must be the first modern religious community to truly embrace change and growth. We must embrace the paradox of holding nothing and everything sacred. We must worship no idols whether they be of gold or comfortable myths. We are Unitarian Universalists, and we embrace diversity. Others have the right to have their own opinions, but they do not have the right to their own facts<sup>1</sup>. Science and rationality have been and will continue to be the best hope for human progress and justice. Not a sterile cold inquisition, but a brave, creative inquiry into the world in here and out there. The meek may some day have the earth, but the rest of us will go to the stars. And reason, yoked together with love and justice—and then carried out into the world, will take us there.

Quotations read by Julia Mesnikoff, Worship Associate

"Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumored by many. Do not believe in anything because it is found written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find anything that agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it."

--Buddha

I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with senses, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use and by some other means to give us knowledge which we can attain by them. --Galileo

Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because if there be one he must approve of the homage of reason more than that of blindfolded fear.

--Thomas Jefferson, letter to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787

I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.

All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise; they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine. But it is necessary to the happiness of man, that he be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe. --Thomas Paine The Age of Reason

I've always felt that a person's intelligence is directly reflected by the number of conflicting points of view he can entertain simultaneously on the same topic.

Well, knowledge is a fine thing, and mother Eve thought so; but she smarted so severely for hers, that most of her daughters have been afraid of it since. --Abigail Adams

Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world. --Emerson