

UUMAN Sunday Service: The Rationality of Faith

Words to Enrich the Spirit

“Faith isn't a feeling,” she said, “it’s a set of actions. Get off your duff and pray every day. On your knees. Morning and night.” I balked, “What kind of God requires me to grovel that way?” “You don't do it for God,” she said.

– Mary Karr

Reading “Faith Through Absurdity”

Thomas Merton, *The Pocket Thomas Merton*, p106

Absurdity is the anguish of realizing that underneath the apparently logical pattern of a more or less “well organized” and rational life, there lies an abyss of irrationality, confusion, pointlessness, and indeed of apparent chaos. This is what immediately impresses itself upon the man who has renounced diversion. It cannot be otherwise; for in renouncing diversion, he renounces the seemingly harmless pleasure of building a tight, self-contained illusion about himself and his little world. He accepts the difficulty of facing the million things in his life which are incomprehensible instead of simply ignoring them. Incidentally it is only when the apparent absurdity of life is faced in all truth that faith really becomes possible. Otherwise, faith tends to be a kind of diversion, a spiritual amusement, in which one gathers up accepted, conventional formulas and arranges them in the approved mental patterns, without bothering to investigate their meaning or asking if they have any practical consequences in one’s life.

(End of Reading)

Message: The Rationality of Faith by Dave Dunn

This sermon was purchased at our annual Harvest and Holiday Service Auction by Bob Mihalik. Included in this package was lunch however in this case, we decided to have brunch together at a place Bob frequents, a New York styled deli called Bagelicious located in East Cobb. Since Bob and I live near one another, I picked him up and we were off to Bagelicious.

The décor of the place could best be described as “New York Yankee.” New York Yankee photos, memorabilia, and other mostly baseball items were pretty much everywhere you looked. I asked Bob as to whether he was a baseball fan. He said that he was...and is. He’s the guy you might see at a Braves

game actually keeping score...using a scorecard! He's the guy who still knows how to keep score on one of those things I find completely incomprehensible.

As a baseball fan myself, we talked about miscellaneous baseball stuff for about half an hour or so. Finally, in the middle of our meal and amidst the baseball talk, I worked in the question, "So, you paid some money for a sermon. Thank you! On what topic would you like the sermon to be?" Silently, Bob pulled a pen from his pocket, uncapped it and wordlessly began to write in capital letters on a napkin five letters....F...A...I...T...H. He then wordlessly capped his pen, put it back in his pocket...and then.... we continued to talk about baseball some more. (smiley face!)

When Bob was writing those capital letters on the napkin.... When I saw him write the letter I, I knew where he was going.... And as he wrote those remaining letters, I instinctively shouted to myself, "Faith! Faith!....My Faith...!," the words of the hero or antihero of the Nathaniel Hawthorne short story "Young Goodman Brown" – a story that we all likely read (the Cliff Notes for) in 10th grade. In the story, Young Goodman Brown's world crumbles about him as he sees his wife, aptly named Faith, be the latest in a long line of seemingly upright and God-fearing townspeople who essentially make a deal with the devil in a midnight ceremony deep in the woods.

"My Faith is gone!" cried he, after one stupefied moment. "There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil; for to thee is this world given." (Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown").'

Hawthorne seemed to think that humanity was inherently evil and many of his themes revolve around the battles between good and evil.

A battle between good and evil, God and the Devil plays out in the book of Job. The Devil challenges God that the blameless and upright Job will desert his faith when tested with misery and suffering. Despite the suffering, Job remains faithful and he's later told by God that it's not for him to know the cause or the nature of suffering. After hearing what might be characterized as a less than sufficient response from God, I've often wondered whether Job would continue in his faith if besieged with such suffering at some future time.

In the somewhat-troubling 2005 movie "Constantine," a modern-day battle between good and evil, between God and the Devil, plays out with the soul of humanity at stake. Faith also seems to be a

character. After the main character explains this battle between God and the Devil to his friend she says, "I don't believe in the Devil." He responds, "You should.... He believes in you."

Faith.... a very tricky word...a very loaded word. Many Unitarian Universalists seem to be afraid of the very word. Faith.

I spoke about Christian fundamentalism a few weeks ago.... that if one only has faith that Jesus was the son of God who died for your sins, you'd be saved. You only need faith in that. Not having faith in any part of that means not salvation but damnation. I said that this fundamentalist view relegates Christianity to a binary.... salvation or damnation...right or wrong...black or white.

I mentioned in that sermon that many UUs have abandoned their Christian past because they've allowed fundamentalists to reduce Christianity to this binary view. In similar fashion, I believe many UUs have abandoned faith because they continue to associate it with a fundamentalist, binary definition. However, in this case, we may be the fundamentalists. We may be the ones who define faith as a fundamentalist binary.

I've heard many UUs say, "Faith is belief in something one knows not to be true" and "faith is belief in something that can't be scientifically proven;" with the subtext being, "if it hasn't been proven scientifically, it's not reasonable, and if it's not reasonable, it's folly - you'd be a fool to have that faith." This is UU fundamentalism.

So...is there a way forward? How do we come to know what we know? What constitutes proof? In light of our answers to these questions, might religious faith be entirely rational?

I'm not a philosophical expert. I never obtained a degree in philosophy so forgive me if I leave out some of the nuance but I'd like to set the stage for our investigation as to the meaning of faith by relating the sordid details of a philosophical drama.

Starring in this philosophical drama are the Logical Empiricists and the Postmodern Deconstructionists. For our purposes, these names are unimportant. The philosophy of the Logical Empiricists was most popular in the first half of the 20th century and it became all the rage. Their philosophy hinged on the idea that any meaningful statement we can make about the world had to be verifiable by our inner

experience and proven through logical mechanisms.

Again, the Logical Empiricists said that any meaningful statement we can make about the world had to be verifiable by our inner experience and proven through logical mechanisms.

Then the Postmodern Deconstructionists came along and essentially said, "Prove it!"

The Logical Empiricists were stunned. They had no answer to that challenge...and they knew it immediately. The philosophical skyscraper they had been building with experience and logic came crumbling down spectacularly.

They had no answer to the application of their own criteria of meaning to their own criteria of meaning. As a result, and by their own criteria of meaning, their own philosophy had to be meaningless. It was self-referentially incoherent. (*Oops!*)

The reason I present the sordid details of this philosophical drama to you is because there are some who believe that a similar drama is taking place on a theological stage. It has implications for religious faith.

Professor Phillip Cary, professor of philosophy at Eastern College, presents this theological drama in some lectures that are part of the Great Courses series entitled "Philosophy and Religion in the West."

Essentially, how we come to know things philosophically in the West has been built up by the Greek thinkers (e.g. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) and others. Seventeenth century British philosopher John Locke believed that everything we know and believe about the world must come from a foundation that was absolutely certain and true. This is called "Classical Foundationalism" and, like a skyscraper with a solid narrow foundation, upon that foundation much, but not all, of western philosophy was built. Theological and religious ideas have also been scrutinized using the tools, methods and criteria of that foundation. But like the Deconstructionists, there are those in the theological world who look at that foundation of meaning and say, "Prove it." Might that foundation be self-referentially incoherent?

These theologians call themselves Reformed Epistemologists. Epistemology is fancy word philosophers use to indicate the nature of knowledge - how we come to know what we know. Reformed Epistemologists believe that what you know theologically, rather than being built like a skyscraper, with

a solid, narrow foundation, might be better off described as a pyramid – something with a wide base where the entire structure itself can still stand despite the eventual addition and removal of pieces. Reformed Epistemologists believe that religious faith is entirely rational.

Professor Phillip Cary says that that evidence for a belief to be rational is a continuum; not a binary. As a minimum, a rational belief seems to align with your other beliefs about how the world works. As a maximum, a rational belief is supported by evidence you can trust (Phillip Cary, “The Great Courses: Philosophy and Religion in the West,” p157).

Many people, many UUs, believe in the skyscraper, with the solid yet somewhat narrower foundation where the binary definition of faith is not required because everything you know is built upon a foundation that is absolutely certain and true. There is no need for faith. Nothing gets in to the foundation unless it’s absolutely certain and true.

A question for you, raise your hands: How many people here believe that humans are causing what we call “climate change?”

Now, how many people here actually engage in the scientific work of climate change?

With most everyone here believing that humans are causing some sort of climate change yet aren’t engaged in the scientific work of climate change itself, we are essentially believing in something that is beyond the realm of our personal experience.

With this, what we are saying is that we are entrusting the knowledge of climate change to sources outside our experience. We do this all the time. We rely on others to provide information and conclusions for us. And when the knowledge and conclusions seem to coincide with our unscientifically proven experience (e.g. It seems to feel hotter now than it used to) we take another’s conclusions and make them our own.

Again, we do this all the time. How many people believe that Antarctica exists? How many people have actually been to Antarctica? How do you know it was actually Antarctica? Is belief in Antarctica an act of faith? And more importantly, might such a faith be entirely rational?

Is this faith, our faith, the one represented by the binary that I described earlier where everything must be proven by us? I don't think so. Maybe faith, like I said about Christianity in an earlier sermon – like just about anything – doesn't have to be this binary, this skyscraper. And maybe having such a faith could be seen as completely rational.

How many planets are in our solar system? When I was a child, and even up until a few years ago, you'd be crazy to think that there was anything other than nine planets. Then some scientists began to question as to whether Pluto was a planet. Arguments went back and forth. Now, I don't even know how many planets are in our solar system.

As a child, how many of you, at one time or another, believed in Santa Claus? How many of you now believe in Santa Claus? When you were a child, it was entirely rational for you to believe in Santa Claus, you trusted your parents as reliable sources. They generally told you things that were wise and reliable. "Don't put your hand on a hot stove?" "Look both ways before crossing the street." As you matured, your parents and others told you that Santa Claus didn't really exist and that based upon what you knew about Santa Claus - where he supposedly lived and what he supposedly did each Christmas - belief in him no longer seemed rational.

We can remove the "Santa Claus" and the "Planethood of Pluto" blocks in our knowledge foundation yet our entire knowledge structure need not crumble. It can be entirely rational to have a knowledge structure that is more like the pyramid with a wide base rather than the rigid structure of a skyscraper. Why? Because the structure of our knowledge of the world, in reality, IS more like the pyramid than the skyscraper. Our knowledge pyramid is comprised of all kinds of rational beliefs we accept based upon the information and conclusions of others that we've then made our own (i.e. rational beliefs taken on faith). When these blocks of knowledge no longer seem rational, we remove them yet the structure can remain in place.

Although we may never come to know whether certain beliefs we have are "true," Reformed Epistemologists believe that religious belief held in faith can be completely rational.

So...what potential does this offer us?

What can the rationality of religious faith offer us when combined with, for example, pragmatic

philosophy. Again, I'm not a philosophical expert and I don't want to engage in deep explanation of pragmatic philosophy yet let me simply say that pragmatic philosophy isn't specifically interested in truth per se, as we may never come to know the truth about certain things. Pragmatic philosophy is essentially interested in the effects our faith and belief have on us.

Pragmatic philosophers aren't particularly interested in your arguments for your faith in God, but are interested in how that faith in God affects your life. They're not particularly interested in your arguments for your faith in the interdependence of all things, but in how that faith informs how you treat and care for that interdependent web. They're not particularly interested in scientific proofs for your faith in the power of prayer, but in how your faithful prayer life actually changes you in the world.

Religious faith can be rational. It can have practical effects on your life. Again, don't allow fundamentalists and self-referentially incoherent philosophers close the door on your religious faith because as Christian theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "In the last resort, one acts from a level which remains hidden from us (Eric Metaxas, "Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy" p336)."

I pray that soon the day will arrive when you will no longer live in fear of Faith.

I pray that soon the day will arrive when you will be brave enough to act from a level of Faith which remains hidden from you.

I pray that soon the day will arrive when you can have the courage to embrace a "Faith Without Certainty" (Paul Rasor).

I pray that soon the day will arrive when you will reclaim the torch of Faith that's been passed to you. And I pray that you will make that Faith your own.

Closing Hymn #146, "Soon the Day Will Arrive"

Benediction

Soon the day will arrive
When we, as Unitarian Universalists,
Will truly live our calling
And celebrate the true freedom of our Faith
Wait and see, what a world there can be
If we share, if we care, you and me.

