



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Truth and Faith

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Until I retired several years ago, I was a physicist by profession. And I can remember thinking like a scientist from the time of my earliest memories. At age three I first heard about death, and it scared me, and does still. So it was really important to me that heaven and God exist. But because of the way I think, I needed and expected sound, logical reasons to believe in these things. Then when I was four years old it occurred to me that there was no proof for the existence of god, even though the adults all seemed to believe in one. I was very shaken. But I thought that maybe the grownups knew something that I didn't. I asked some questions, but no clarity was forthcoming. So I decided to wait and watch them and learn. And for at least 20 years after, every year I would check in with myself to see what I thought the "odds for god" were. And every year the odds went down.

Then in 1997 I was sitting in the Unitarian church in Oakland enjoying the service when something happened to me. A warmth enveloped me. It felt like light and great love were pouring over and through me. I felt that I was in the presence of God. I was by that time an agnostic who had hardened without noticing it into an atheist. So I had to take some time to decide what this experience meant to me, and what to believe after it, and why.

We Unitarians believe that "revelation is not sealed." By this we mean that revelation from the divine did not stop with the events of some previous era as related in the sacred books, but rather that any one of us might touch or be touched by the divine at any time. But how do we tell that it is the divine? What happened to me in the church—was it a visit from God? Perhaps. Or was it some kind of unusual hot flash? Was it perhaps a temporary chemical aberration of my brain, maybe in the temporal lobe? Neuroscientists tell us that stimulating the temporal lobe can cause people to have religious visions. To take another tack, think of Star Trek. You see there beings made entirely of energy, with great power. How would I know it was the Divine and not a space alien contacting me? How would I know the difference? How would *you* know the difference? Or maybe I simply felt an empathetic or telepathic connection with the mood or love of the congregation. How would I know the difference? How can we know? This question of truth and proof is of course not unique to personal revelation. How do any of us know whether any of our religious beliefs are true?

I never hear this question discussed, though I know that some of us must be thinking about it. But it is at the heart of everything we do here, where we say we come to pursue our spiritual quests. It is of course as important for the atheist as for the believers in other paths, for atheism itself is a belief system—a very strong belief system. And, of course, proving there is no god is exactly as hard as proving there is one. So the question is an important one for all of us.

But it is a question that can be avoided. Many people simply choose to believe what their families believe, or choose their beliefs because they want to belong to a certain church, or they emulate the beliefs of those they admire, or simply choose what feels right. The famous mathematician, Blaise Pascal, proposed a logical dodge when faced with this the dilemma. He

said to live *as if* there were a god. Then if you died and woke up in heaven, you had chosen the right answer. If you died and did not awake – well, you’ve only wasted a little time and energy in trying to live a good life, and that isn’t so bad. A wager worth making, he said. But you see he did not solve the problem of what was true. He only devised an elegant and logical way to live with indecision.

We Unitarian Universalists have a way of avoiding the dilemma that is not open to other religions. If you read the book on Unitarian Universalism, *Our Chosen Faith*, by Buehrens and Church, you will see a section talking about how many of us believe that every religion has a part of the truth, but none have it all. Borrowing a metaphor from the Buddha, they compare this situation to blind people “feeling different parts of the elephant,” and each describing the animal differently. So we could just proceed with any belief that feels right to us, on the theory that that is as close as we can get to the truth anyway. But of course Buddhism and Christianity, for instance, are not the same at all.

And they give very different answers to what I would call the big questions of religious cosmology—questions of whether there is a divinity and, if so, what is its character and its relationship to us; or whether there is life, or reincarnation, after death; and even questions of how to live a good life. These differences matter. So how do you know which to choose? And of course the atheists among us would say that all of these religions are wrong. So I would say that avoiding the question this way does not give us a solution, but rather, leaves us with the same quandary.

But I believe that if we are to live with clarity and honesty, we do have to face the question. We should not have an unexamined spiritual life. Otherwise we hide from ourselves that we do not know why we believe what we believe. By doing so we lose the opportunity to mature in our beliefs by deeply examining and re-examining their truth. And we run the risk of busying our minds and hearts instead at a more superficial level, or even of having what A. Powell Davies, a famous Unitarian minister, once referred to as “beliefs that disguise the absence of religion.”

There is, of course, a long history of philosophers and theologians who have offered proofs for the existence of their god or gods. Many of these started with the question of “first cause” – what created all of this that we see around us? What created the universe? I will drop something in here, but won’t be talking about it today: Many physicists today believe that a first cause is not necessary—following the laws of physics universes can pop into existence at will.

At any rate, I am not going to go into the arguments of the philosophers and theologians today, because every one of those arguments were shredded by succeeding philosophers on logical grounds—not one held up. But I would like to mention the work of William James, a 19th century American psychologist and philosopher of the pragmatist school. In his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James studied accounts of many people who had had religious

visions or experiences like the one I had in the church, or the one we heard about in the reading earlier from his book. All the founders of the major religions had these experiences, of course, along with many ordinary people like myself. James also looked at many kinds of religious beliefs. From this he derived three criteria for ascertaining that a set of beliefs or a revelation had value and significance. They were “immediate luminousness” – that is, it feels really good and right; “philosophical reasonableness” – that is, it makes sense; and “moral helpfulness” – that is, it leads to a moral life. Feels good, sounds reasonable, leads to good behavior. I suggest that these criteria are a good tool for examining our beliefs. But again, James has not found with them any test of truth.

Now I was taught in my Catholic upbringing another approach to evaluating the truth of spiritual claims – namely, that it is miracles that are the real proof of the touch of the divine. Well, you are in luck today. Because along with my experience in the church that day, a few years later I saw what I considered at the time a miracle. I was attending a UU worship leaders retreat. We had worked hard the night before and then gone to sleep outside under the stars in Northern California. I woke up at dawn. No one else was awake, but I was in turmoil. The night before, just before leaving home, I’d been told that my mother’s cancer was terminal. So I was lying there wishing, asking, hoping for some sign from somewhere that life would be bearable, that something good would happen to my mother in this life or another. Suddenly from the zenith point of the heavens I saw colors descending in streams in all directions. It wasn’t the northern lights—it was daytime. It wasn’t a rainbow; the sky was cloudless. I was stunned. I felt that I had been answered. Other people started waking up, but the colors had faded and no one saw this but me. Did I experience a miracle, or maybe just a rare natural weather phenomenon? I’ve found out since that this is a very rare weather phenomenon. Or did I see a rare natural weather phenomenon sent to me as a sign by god? We are back to the same questions. I have no way to tell. I have decided that if I ever saw an unambiguous miracle, it would be to me unambiguous proof of divinity. But I have been unable to imagine an event that is unambiguously miraculous. As a scientist, I would honestly describe such an event as simply “unexplained.” As with my vision in church that day, for everything that I imagine there are many explanations within or outside known science – the divine being only one – with no way to tell which is correct. So my considered choice, though I feel a bit nervously ungrateful about it, is to remain agnostic. I don’t disbelieve in the existence of god, but I don’t believe in one either. I simply don’t know.

Before I finish, I would like to think for a bit about what not to believe. I have spoken to a many friends who have told me that they believe in what “feels good” to them. This is not a “California feels good,” this is an emotional judgment from people I respect, a sincere attempt to listen to “the still, silent voice within.” Perhaps this is all that any of us really have. But it immediately brings up for me examples of those who listened to that inner voice and went completely astray. Think of any of the religious terrorist murders that we have experienced in the last 20 years. Each of the people who committed these acts listened hard to that inner voice.

But I am going to talk for a moment about an event in the late '90s, at the time when I was thinking hard about everything I have been talking about. At that time, 39 men and women “shed their casings” as they called it – killed themselves – with the expectation of reappearing reborn and immortal on a space ship hiding behind the Hale-Bopp comet, which was visible in the sky at that time. If one of them had been your friend, how could you have convinced him or her that they had not found the way to immortality? These people believed something that had logical consistency and, to them, a kind of beauty. In the comet they saw a sign and a miracle with physical, measurable substance—a sign that has been used before as a religious portent. And we have no proof they were wrong, after all. One way of looking at the question we are examining today is to ask why we are so sure they were wrong. Most of us would surely say that this belief misses on James’s 2nd criterion—it is not “philosophically reasonable”—it doesn’t make sense. We would say that their belief was highly improbable. But was their story so much more incredible than that of a man rising from the dead, or of a man walking up a mountain in New York state and meeting an angel with golden tablets? Millions of people believe these things. “Being improbable” doesn’t seem to be a criterion that we normally apply to religion. And perhaps that is appropriate, since by definition religion is outside the sphere of the ordinary. But at the time I needed to find some guidance to give my intelligent nine year old daughter, who had heard about these deaths. I struggled, going through all the arguments I’ve talked about, and finally arrived at only this: I told her to trust her heart and her experience. But I gave her the one rule I derived from all of my deliberating – *Assume You Could Be Wrong*. Assume You Could Be Wrong. My Golden Rule. And if you are about to do something that could cause harm to yourself or another being, believe anything you want, but don’t act. I have then a protective guideline, but still no test of a vision’s veracity.

So what do I believe is the way to tell true revelation from something else? You probably can tell by now that I believe that we can’t know what is the truth about the divine. We have no way to avoid being subjective. We gather data through five senses that are easily fooled. We think with brains that are powerful, but so easily corrupted by our own emotions, and that analyze their data using axioms that we don’t even know, and never question. With material objects – even to a certain extent with human behavior – we can prove our beliefs with constant tests. We know by now that either all of this that we interact with is there, and behaves as we have constantly seen it behave, or it is all a dream. And even in this material world we can’t know which we have – reality or dream. With the divine, there is no way to even do the tests. We cannot know.

It is at this point in the argument that Cardinal John Henry Newman, in Britain in the 19th century, following Kierkegaard, introduced his “leap of faith.” He said we cannot know what is true, so must blindly make a leap of faith, and believe. But let’s look for a moment at the context. Cardinal Newman was a charismatic and famous preacher and minister in the Church of England. He caused a scandal by converting to Catholicism. His choice was between two closely-related sects of Christianity. We have a much wider range of choices, consisting of every known religion, anything we might invent, and atheism. The instructions are not there on which way to leap.

But it may surprise you to know that I do believe, with the Cardinal, that most of us must choose, without sufficient data, whether and what to believe. Otherwise we pause, dancing on the threshold of religious life, unable to live out at least the closest idea we have to the truth.

There are some, I think, whose gift it is to stand at that threshold and not choose, but instead examine all of the options with rationality and honesty and depth. But that path is difficult and lonely, and requires exquisite honesty. Most of us must go forward with our best guess at the truth – at what is most “immediately luminous, philosophically reasonable, and morally helpful” to us – in order to refine and test it. And *then* we must always *assume that we could be wrong*. Why is this so important? First, because it is the truth. Second, because if we stop questioning ourselves we enslave ourselves to our comforting thoughts and unexamined beliefs, and let go of our freedom to think. And third, because it is important to know that we do not own the truth if we are to be able to listen with appreciation to the insights of others. Because, in short, if we forget that we are only guessing, we have betrayed our Unitarian trinity – reason, freedom, and tolerance. So what I am asking you to do today is to go out from this place with belief, but without faith.

A wise former neighbor of mine and a Unitarian, Phyllis Bishop, once told me that Unitarians are people who don't give answers to questions that don't have any.

Amen, I say, and blessed be.