

The Roots of Reason in UU  
Victor Ashear  
Feb. 5, 2017

The theme for February is reason, and I thought it would be of benefit give an historical introduction to the central role reason has played in our tradition. I intend to show that the use of reason has been a foundation to what we now call UU. Before getting to that history I begin by telling the story of Abraham and Isaac from the book of Genesis because I believe it highlights the danger of “blind faith,” or faith without reason. Reason serves to balance faith. Let’s see what might happen when reason is absent.

From the book of Genesis:

... God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

What moral do you see in this story? What explains why a man of faith would be compelled to murder his beloved son? The contemporary interpretation that I like best is that Abraham was so caught up in his faith in God and so proud of his status as a prophet that he could not distinguish his own ego from God’s will. Abraham was blinded by his need to provide whatever he believed God wanted, that he was prepared to engage in infanticide! It is hard to image what sort of God would tell a man to kill his son as a sacrifice. So perhaps it was not God at all that asked for the sacrifice. If Abraham were using reason he never would have attempted to sacrifice his son. I think this story tells us blind faith can be dangerous!

We can find numerous relatively recent examples of the disastrous effects of blind faith including Islamic terrorism, murder of abortion clinic workers, the Jonestown and Heaven's Gate massacres, to name a few. Just to expand on one of these examples, on March 26, 1997, police discovered the bodies of 39 members of the Heaven's Gate group who had committed mass suicide in order to reach what they believed was an extraterrestrial spacecraft located behind the Comet Hale–Bopp. Members of the group believed once they committed suicide the spacecraft would carry their souls to heaven. Clearly they were practicing a faith without reason.

UU Rev. Lex Crain said, "Unitarian Universalist religion is currently given form, much less by a set of traditional beliefs based on scripture, than it is by personal experience and judgment, by reason, intuition and contemporary knowledge." The UU Commission on Appraisal states, "Reason is a mental capacity that humans use to explore and understand the truth and meaning of the world. It is sometimes contrasted with authority, tradition, intuition, emotion, superstition, and faith." Present day UU's place a premium on the use of reason in our spiritual quest. And as I plan to show, reason has always been a crucial part of UU and its antecedents. The fifth of our 6 sources UU identifies "humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn against idolatries of the mind and spirit."

In a recent article appearing in The New Atlantis magazine UU President Peter Morales described the tension between science and religion. Judaism and Christianity taught that the earth was the center of the universe, humans were at the pinnacle of creation, and meant to have dominion over the world. On the other hand, science has shown that earth is a tiny body in a vast galaxy amid countless galaxies, and that humans are an accident of evolution. While science is devoted to discovering facts, religion and spirituality are about finding meaning. President Morales implies, as others have stated, that we can't just make up our own facts to support our beliefs. Science employs reason and observation to determine objective truth. Our fourth UU principle asks us to engage in a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Unlike other religions that teach that so called "truth" is to be found only in its sacred texts, UU embraces reason and science as the ultimate arbiters of real truth. But as UU's we don't stop there. Instead we seek to find meaning where it doesn't contradict reason, science, and truth. The use of reason as a means of challenging false religious beliefs has been part of UU from its earliest roots.

Here are the words of President Peter Morales on the Fourth Principle:  
...Unitarian Universalists affirm the search for both truth **and** meaning. If we are scientists in search of truth, we are also theologians in search of meaning. While science and religion both arise from our need to cope with experience, science and religion are responses to fundamentally different questions. Science can help us discover the truth about our world, but religion can help us give that truth meaning. Even as science continues to teach us more and more about what is, to penetrate many of the fundamental questions about the universe, people are still searching for a way to apply

those truths to their lives in a way that is emotionally or spiritually fulfilling.... After we know all there is to know about the world, we still must answer the question, "so what?"

I mentioned in a talk I gave here a couple of years ago on faith and reason, that the Dali Lama wrote, where science contradicts his religion of Buddhism he is perfectly happy to amend Buddhism to conform to scientific findings. I wish more religious leaders of all stripes would abide by this stance. We might collectively move from blind faith to faith informed by reason and factual truth. Ancient religions offered explanations about the world before science existed to provide factual information. When science contradicts sacred texts it is simply reasonable to let go of what is proven to be false.

Many in our movement are happy to point out the fact that when we participate in a UU service we don't have to leave our rational brains at the door. UU and its precursors have always incorporated the use of reason in determining what to believe. Our history illustrates the struggle to affirm the rights of reason, conscience and individual determination, in matters of religion and belief. The sources of promoting reason in our heritage are at least three: what came to be known as Unitarianism, Universalism, and Humanism. In the rest of this talk I will highlight the history of these 3 movements regarding reason to illustrate the point that reason has been of central importance to our history and our identity as a religious tradition.

I begin with Unitarianism, whose roots date at least to the Fourth Century and a religious scholar named Arias. Arias taught that Jesus was a special creation of God and a great religious guide, but was not God. A range of views was being promoted about Jesus' nature during the first 3 centuries after his life. Apparently for political reasons, the Emperor Constantine sought to end this diversity of views and establish a single position for the relatively new religion of Christianity. In the year 325 he assembled Christian leaders from throughout the Roman Empire and he required them to decide among other matters of doctrine, whether Jesus was a man or God. As most of you must know the votes came in against Arias. After the voting Constantine vigorously suppressed the Arian view. The Council adopted the Trinity as the official dogma of the Catholic Church in what is known as the Nicene Creed. In this Trinitarian view God is divided into 3 parts, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Arias used reason to decide that if God were one, than Jesus couldn't be part of God. This exercise in the use of reason, innocent as it may appear, had rather profound effects. Many of those who came after Arias in promoting the Unitarian position, i.e. Jesus was not God, suffered greatly. For example, many of you know about Michael Servetus who lived in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Servetus wrote a book entitled, *On the Errors about the Trinity*. In it he reasoned that Jesus was not God, just as Arias had stated. Servetus wrote a second book, *The Restoration of Christianity*, an argument against predestination, opposing the prevailing Calvinist creed. (Predestination means that it is determined at birth whether a person will go to heaven and it makes no difference how one lives one's life.) For these and other heresies Servetus was burned at the stake on the order of John Calvin, in October of 1553

in Geneva. The established Churches, both Protestant and Catholic, were unwilling to tolerate any challenge to their authority and doctrine.

William Ellery Channing became the leading proponent of “Unitarianism” in the US in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He preached a positive view of human nature promoted by a loving God. Humans were endowed with reason, compassion and the ability to distinguish between goodness and evil. These views contrasted sharply with the Calvinist view that humans were by nature depraved due to original sin. Calvinists also viewed God as wrathful and vindictive because of human depravity. Channing taught that reason was the tool to be used for interpreting meaning and intention in the Bible. He also promoted reason as the means by which we are to make sense of our personal experiences of “revelation,” or what we could also call moments of transcendence. Revelation must conform to known reality and scientific truth in order to be meaningful and ethical, he said. Channing’s use of reason obviously challenged some of the core principles of the prevailing Christianity. Channing disputed the Trinity and he proclaimed that Jesus was completely human. Also he attacked the beliefs in original sin and of hell. A loving and morally perfect God would not create a human being with sin at birth without ever having done anything sinful. Neither would a loving God would not condemn people to eternal suffering. Last, the idea that Jesus purpose on earth was to die so that humans could be saved made no sense to him. “I am astonished and appalled by the gross manner in which ‘Christ’s blood’ is often spoken of, as if his... bodily sufferings could contribute to our salvation; as if [anything] else than his spirit, his truth, could redeem us.” Channing proposed that the purpose Jesus’ life was to set an example for ethical living. The label “Unitarianism” was given to Channing’s ideas by his detractors. However Channing liked the term and began to use it himself.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a contemporary of Channing and began his career as a Unitarian minister. In his famous Harvard Divinity School address of 1838, he, like Channing, Servitus, and Arias, challenged the belief that Jesus was God. Emerson also rejected the ritual of communion on the grounds that it was not something Jesus himself would have endorsed. He encouraged ministers and lay people alike to discover the divine for themselves, in nature, rather than to be indoctrinated by authority figures, or by the Bible, or by outmoded rituals. Emerson was condemned as an atheist for these remarks, but he was not an atheist.

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Universalism began as an official movement in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in England and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in America and Europe. Universalism, like Unitarianism, and like Servitus, took issue with the Calvinist idea of predestination. In the 1805 book, *A Treatise on Atonement*, Hosea Ballou, much like Channing, put great stress on the use of reason in interpreting the Scriptures. The core of Ballou’s book, as the

title implies, was his reformulation of the doctrine of atonement. As finite creatures, he argued like Channing, human beings are incapable of offending an infinite God. Therefore, he rejected the orthodox argument that the death of Jesus was designated to appease an angry God. Ballou replaced it with the idea that God is a being of eternal love that seeks the happiness of his created children. He taught it is not God who must be reconciled to human beings, the orthodox Christian position, but rather human beings who must be reconciled to God. Ballou was convinced that once people realized this, they would take pleasure in living a moral life and doing good works.

We have seen how historical figures associated with Unitarianism and Universalism employed reason to challenge some of the basic tenants of the prevailing Catholic and Christian dogma and authority. These revolutionaries sought a more positive and more reasoned faith. Of equal importance, they declared the right of individual conscience and freedom of belief.

I turn last to Humanism, the third tradition UU has drawn upon in emphasizing the use of reason. Many say Humanism began as a movement in the Renaissance but German scholars coined the term itself in the early 1800's. Because UU has had a traditional aversion to creeds and dogma and an affinity to reason it seemed only natural that Humanism as an ethical movement would take hold there. It did so in the 1930's. Earlier Unitarians debated the merits of a strictly human centered, scientifically minded, ethically focused religion. The "humanist-theist controversy" that troubled the American Unitarian Association had largely ended by 1933, when a group of philosophers, Unitarian ministers, and other religious liberals issued "A Humanist Manifesto" to articulate a coherent statement of humanist principles. The Humanist Manifesto was consciously designed to articulate a religious faith, not just a philosophy of life, and for all its religious failings, it represented a heartfelt attempt to join intellectual integrity with what they termed "religious expression."

Here is a definition of humanism from the American Humanist Association: Humanism is non-dogmatic and open-ended. It is the belief that human beings are the source of meaning and values. It is a scientific search, self-correcting and open to change with new knowledge and new insights. Humanism is deeply concerned with ethics and values, but rather than telling people what they should or should not do, it assists their search for values and attempts to help them achieve their full positive potential as human beings. Humanists see humanity as having the capacity for continued growth and development, and they accept responsibility for encouraging that growth."

Currently there is a branch in our denomination called the "UU Humanist Association" and it promotes, "reason, compassion and community."

In an article appearing in the *UU World* magazine a decade ago UU Humanist Rev. Bill Murray articulated what a 21st century religion based on reason and reverence would look like:

.... any viable future religion must take seriously the implications for religion of the remarkable discoveries of the modern natural and human sciences. The world of modern science is a different world from that of our ordinary perceptions and that of the ancient peoples who gave birth to Western religions. The religion of the future should be a religion that learns from science and adapts its teachings accordingly.... [Also] a humanistic religion will recognize the importance of both **reason and reverence**. The human ability to think critically and constructively has made possible our many artistic achievements and medical and technological advances, but it is only reverence, understood as feelings of respect and awe, that can save us from the hubris that would destroy all the good we have accomplished.

I appreciate Murray's coupling of reverence with reason because reason alone is not sufficient for a fully spiritual life. What Murray says here fits very well with the Morales quote about "truth and meaning," that I mentioned earlier.

In a recent UU publication of Humanist essays Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons wrote:

Humanism encourages those of us who embrace it, to live as fully as we can, in all the authentic wonder and curiosity that the human spirit can generate. It summons us to a persistent obedience to **evidence and reason**, to recognize in our deepest and most beautiful longings not in the world that is, but the world that might be if we, by our courage, intelligence and dedication, will make it so. Humanism invites us into compassionate connection with others, so that we may build the common good and in that enterprise make our own days glad...Humanism summons us to gratitude...because that is how we become most fully human. To live well is to live with intelligence and integrity: With justice and compassion, with wholeness and beauty, and, finally, inevitably, with thanks and praise.

We have seen that our tradition has always placed a value on reason as a tool to challenge religious dogma and blind faith even when it meant paying with one's life. In addition leaders in our movement over many generations have employed reason as a guide to discernment of truth, and to promote justice and compassion. Today in the USA and much of the world we have the luxury of freedom of religion. UUs share with many other seekers the rejection of traditional religions that require strict adherence to dogmatic rules and rituals that no longer seem to make sense the twenty-first century. Those who claim no affiliation with an organized religion (the "Nones") along with rejection of the Bible have been inspired to find meaning through spiritual experiences outside of traditional faith communities. What distinguishes us as UU's is that we subject our spiritual experiences and our spiritual ideas to the discipline and scrutiny of reason. As President Morales put it, UUs focus on truth **and** meaning. Truth without meaning is spiritually empty, but meaning without truth can be misguided or even dangerous. Again think of Heaven's Gate. If we fail to employ reason we run the risk of losing touch with reality. With it we are more likely to be grounded in our spiritual life. Reason also encourages the search for shared meaning and understanding as well as common purpose. I believe none of us alone can fully discern spiritual truth. By being part of a faith community such as ours, we have the opportunity to develop and refine shared beliefs together and to approach

truth more accurately and more productively for the benefit of humankind and our planet. Religion and spirituality will continue to evolve in this century because of scientific advances and the application of reason. Grudgingly perhaps, but inevitably, more religious leaders of other traditions, and the unattached spiritual seekers will have to accept facts when they contradict Scripture or other sacred texts, or their own distorted convictions. Dogma and illusion will be replaced with fact and only practices shown help evoke meaningful connection to others and to the universal whole will continue. Be not afraid to rid yourselves of what no longer makes sense rationally. Hang on to what is true that supports your sense of meaning. As Emerson and Channing expressed, open yourselves to direct experience of the sacred with your rational minds fully engaged.