

Five Big Theological Questions for Everyone
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The word theology means literally the study of God, but it has come to mean more broadly the study of religious beliefs in general. From last week's talk here is the definition Michelle provided: "Theology is the study of religious faith, practice, and experience." For example, students of theology include Buddhism, a religion that makes no statement about God.

A major attraction of traditional world religions is that they provide certainty to life's five big theological questions with an overarching theology and a framework for living. All the participant must do is accept and follow. In spite of the appeal of certainty people in this country have often been falling away from traditional religions because they reject outmoded dogma that treats women, LGBT's and other minorities as less worthy, that don't stand up to fact and rationality, and for many other reasons. Those who reject traditional religion still have spiritual longings as all humans do.

A former fellowship member and I attended Russell Lockwood Leadership School back in 1996. The curriculum included "theology" and Rev. Robert Latham taught it. Those of you who were in this fellowship then may remember that we promoted the examination of five theological questions when we returned from leadership school. Because the theme for this month is "theological reflection," I thought it would be helpful to present a summary of what I learned in leadership school. It will be new for many of you, and I am hoping a welcome review for those who were here back in 1996.

Like many of us who came to UU from another faith I was glad to be part of a group like this that seeks to find a spiritual life without dogma. In 1983, I started attending discussions at the home of Ronn and Linda Smith. I learned then that UUs are encouraged to undertake a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" (as our fourth principle states) but I didn't know how to do this. Theologically speaking, I could articulate pretty well what I didn't believe but not what I did.

Many who leave organized religions adopt a kind of smorgasbord of practices and beliefs that often don't form a coherent whole. If you happen to be in the smorgasbord camp I offer this message today as a new framework to organize and maybe expand your personal theology. In the absence of a religion with ready-made answers, I believe it is useful to fit one's beliefs into a coherent framework that covers the important bases. And while we can't overstate the importance of being guided by spiritual experiences, I feel they may lose their potential positive influence in our lives if we lack a theological framework in which to interpret and use them. So I offer these theological questions as a means for you to create a framework to build your personal theology. What I offer are not

primarily answers but questions. I encourage you to try to answer these questions even though your answers are likely to change over time, especially if you keep thinking about them.

While attending a large UU church in Asheville, NC from 1986-90 I took a class called “Building Your Own Theology,” from the minister. The class was a survey of liberal traditions within Christianity, Judaism, as well as Existentialism, Agnosticism, etc. That class gave me permission to take the parts I liked best from each tradition, in other words to sample the “smorgasbord.” It was helpful to my journey and it broadened my spiritual understanding but I still felt the lack of a coherent framework for what I believed. I had not yet built my own theological house in which to sort my evolving beliefs. When I attended leadership school in 1996 that changed. I found Rev. Latham’s class to be one of the most inspiring and useful religious educational experiences of my life. The framework he provided has helped my continuing reflection and study to this day. So I am offering the very abridged form of what was covered in over 20 hours of lecture and intense discussion, in the hope that you too will find this theological framework useful to your own “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

Rev. Latham told us that all religious institutions and traditions serve one main purpose; they all offer a “saving way in human relating.” All the traditions seek to “offer the hope of restoring the power of wholeness in human relating.” The mission of any religious or spiritual community is to create the opportunities for “restoring wholeness.” One implication is that without a coherent form of faith and spirituality we humans are not complete.

The role of a religious or spiritual community is to direct its message of salvation to the “total range of human relating...(including) how humans should relate inwardly to themselves, outwardly to other humans, and inclusively to the rest of creation.” Latham also told us at leadership school every system of theology, every religion, serves as a filter through which experience is interpreted. Thus no one religion and certainly no one person can know ultimate truth. All of us like it or not, live with our own “myths” which color our perceptions of ourselves, others, the world. Rev. Forrest Church spoke about imagery of the “cathedral of the world” in which the light passing through the differently colored windows cast different images on the cathedral floor but all the images come from the same light source. It seems worthwhile to be conscious of what our own filter or bias is. As well it is humbling to remember that no single person or group’s theology can rightly claim ultimate truth. Whether recognized or not, we all live with theological uncertainty. Whichever path of faith we choose to follow will bias us. While other theological traditions offer what they regard as ultimate theological truth, we UUs make no such assertions.

With that introduction about the need for a “saving way to wholeness,” the importance of a spiritual community to foster wholeness, and the limits to

theological truth, here are the five big questions: 1. Who am I (spiritually or theologically speaking)? This is sometimes referred to as “ontology,” from the Greek meaning “being.” 2. How do I know (what I know)? This is referred to as “epistemology,” or the study of knowledge. 3. Who or what is in charge (of the universe)? This is called the question of “cosmology.” 4. What is my purpose in life (or How am I saved)? This is referred to as “soteriology,” meaning salvation. 5. What does my death mean? And this is termed “eschatology,” meaning last or farthest.

What follows is brief summary of these questions as a way to evaluate where many UU’s stand now theologically compared to other faiths. I also include some of my personal beliefs. More importantly, you can also use these questions as a means to organize and expand your personal theology.

Let’s explore each of these questions in a bit more detail.

1. Who am I (spiritually or theologically)? What is the important nature of human beings? Are we divided or whole? If we are divided how do we become whole? Where do humans fit in the vast order of the universe? Are humans central to creation or not? Are we inherently good or evil or both? Are we worthy or unworthy? If we are unworthy how do we become worthy? Are we equal or unequal? Are we in control of our lives or not? Do we have free will? Are we eternal or ephemeral? Most importantly to me, what does it mean to be a spiritual being? Each faith tradition gives different answers to these questions about the self but most emphasize the spiritual nature of the self. For me the spiritual self is that part of us that connects to the universal, eternal, and transcendent. When I have some sense of who I might be as a spiritual being, my life has meaning, my values are clear and I tend to act in a way that is congruent with my values. A spiritual identity forms when people, in the course of their own lives, and as part of a religious community, adopt the symbolic religious and spiritual components of a religion and engage its practices. Thus Christians relate to the cross and communion, etc. Jews relate to Shabbat, and their holy days, prayer shawls, etc. In addition to the culture of a faith tradition, a person’s unique life experiences and moments of transcendence, also contribute to a spiritual identity.

I know I oversimplify, but for the sake of brevity, the self in Christian theology is believed to be born of original sin and is saved by faith in Jesus. The self in Judaism begins as a clean slate and grows either towards salvation through following the Laws of Moses, or against salvation by defying the Laws of Moses. For Christians and Jews the soul is the most important part of the self and it is believed to endure forever. In Buddhism the self is an illusion and “no-self” is the ultimate reality to which one strives. The “no-self” embraces all of reality (as opposed to a personal identity). Emerson believed the soul of the individual was identical with the soul of the world and contains what the world contains. Think of Emerson’s “over-soul” here. For UU minister Galen Guengerich, our spiritual selves are defined by all our relationships to people living and dead as well as

our relationship to this world that nurtures and sustains us, and to the cosmos from whence we all came: “If you trace my atoms all the way back in time and my relationships all the way out in space you will eventually account for everything in the universe.” For Guengerich, then, each of us is a synthesis of all that has come before and we are connected to “all that is past, present and possible.” I find Emerson’s and Guengerich’s approach to the spiritual self much more meaningful than the traditional religious approaches. So I now invite you to consider; who are you, spiritually speaking?

2. How do I know what I know? This has been called the question of “epistemology” meaning the study of knowledge. If you took intro philosophy in college you probably covered epistemology. We are living in the age of “alternative facts “ and “fake news.” Because of this, epistemology has become more important than ever, in my opinion. Several religions base knowledge upon a sacred book such as the Old or New Testament, the Koran, the Book of Mormon, etc. In the minds of the fundamentalists every word of their sacred text is taken as absolute truth. But how do you determine religious or spiritual truth for yourself? Which is more important to your personal theology, spiritual knowledge gleaned from sacred texts, or spiritual experiences or scientific knowledge and reason? If you are like me you combine all of those. How much do you rely on the words of theological authorities? How do you decide which authorities to trust? Before the Reformation, Christians relied on the guidance of priests to determine religious truth. After the Reformation, Protestants decided they could read and interpret the Bible for themselves. Our UU tradition references 6 sources. You can read the list on your own if you are not already familiar with them. Basically they include direct personal experience of the transcendent, science and the use of reason, and reliance upon a variety of sacred writings from different traditions. UU’s don’t rely on any single text and everything is open to inquiry and debate. We don’t take any text as ultimate truth. As many of you have stated, we love discussion and learn from it. We decide for ourselves what to believe but we are open. Commonly the views of we UUs evolve with time. We tend to be more interested in the questions than in answers; we live with doubt. So how do you decide what is most nearly true for you theologically? What sources of knowledge do you trust? On what foundations of knowledge have you built your faith? Have your sources changed over time? Has your emphasis on different sources changed over time?

3. Who or what is in charge? This is the question of “cosmology” from Greek meaning order, rulership, or world. Cosmology is “a statement about what is ultimately real in the universe; that for which there is no beyond; the total, the whole, that which is greater than all else (from Latham).” Some questions related to this concept include: What is the most important universal value? What is it that exists beyond or within our existence? Is there a dynamic force, essence, or power at the center of creation? What is the source of meaning? What binds the universe together? In the words of the great theologian Paul Tillich what is the source of “ultimate concern?” Traditional Christians and Jews believe in a God

that sees all, knows all, and directs human activity. This God rewards and punishes based upon how well we abide his rulings. This God is prayed to and is believed to answer prayers. The Buddhists, following the traditions of their Hindu forefathers, see the universe as infinite in time and space, and filled with an infinite number of worlds like our own. It is interesting to note that current scientific thinking is not far off of this concept. Rev. Nancy Bowen spoke about a “unity that holds us all.” Religious naturalists hold that “only natural laws and forces -- those related, to physics, chemistry, geology, and biology [as opposed to godly supernatural ones] -- are in control of our world and the universe.” Our seventh UU principle affirms “the interconnected web of existence of which we are a part.” To me this principle means there is a fundamental and eternal unity to everything. This is similar to Emerson’s view. Who or what do you believe has ultimate organizing influence in the universe and in our lives?

4. What is my purpose in life? Theologians know this as the question of “soteriology” from the Greek meaning, deliverance, or reintegration. What is the payoff for living the life directed by the faith one has chosen? Some associated questions include: Why do humans exist? Who or what is responsible for redeeming our souls? What am I being saved from or for? What brings me happiness, well-being and fulfillment? What is the most important element in my redemption or salvation? Who and/or what make me whole? Is my salvation in my own hands or an outside force? For traditional Christians, Muslims, and Jews one lives one’s life for the greater glory of God. Each of these religions specifies exactly what a person needs to do to attain salvation, and salvation is the purpose of living. All three faiths, in terms of my understanding of them, refer to salvation as a reward that comes in an afterlife to those who have fulfilled the requirements. Buddhism doesn’t use the term salvation but instead talks about overcoming suffering or “samsara,” by avoiding “attachment” and “aversion,” and attaining “equanimity.” Equanimity is accomplished by the practices of meditation and following the “Eightfold Path.” Many UUs tend to think as the Existentialists do, that it is up to each of us individually to determine what meaning or purpose life has. UUs also proclaim that we “stand on the side of love.” Thus we are “saved” by promoting compassion, justice, peace, and democracy, and by caring for our earth. This is what our 7 Principles are about. Karen Armstrong pointed out that all the major religions of the period between 800 and 200 BCE, known as the “Axial Age” shared the same sense of purpose of existence: “Reciprocity, compassion, love, and altruism, the Golden Rule, ending suffering for all human beings, all sentient life or perhaps all life is the proper central orientation of human existence.” So what do you believe is the purpose of your life? How are you saved and made whole? Which matters more to you, making this world a better place, or preparing for an afterlife?

5. What does my death mean? Theologians call this the question of “eschatology” meaning last or farthest. This question concerns the conclusion or end result of human existence. What happens to us at death? What is the state of human beings beyond death? Is there a soul that lives beyond the body at

death? Do heaven and hell exist? Do people get reincarnated? What is the nature of time? When we die can we still impact or connect with life on earth? For the Abrahamic religions the emphasis in this life is to prepare for the next. This life is temporary and the next life is eternal. UU's in general are more focused on this life than on the possibility of a hereafter. Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh compared each individual's life to a single ocean wave. The rise and fall of each wave represents one person's existence. But all the waves are part of the ocean, which is eternal and vast. One of the ways I personally think about death is in comparing it to the light from distant stars. We see light from stars that have burned out years ago. Those stars are gone but their effects linger. Similarly I believe we carry within us the influence and impact on our lives of loved ones that who came before us and have passed. I sense in myself many characteristics of my mother and father both of whom are deceased. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung promoted the idea that each person carries the legacy of humankind's early history in what he called the "collective unconscious." I currently believe even though we die as individuals we live on through others just as others live on through us over millions of years of evolution. Because I see myself as the result of what came before to create me, and because I depend on so many people and things for my continued existence and comfort I feel a debt of gratitude. I try to pay it to future generations. My death represents the end of that opportunity. What are your beliefs about death? What theological significance do those beliefs serve for you? How to your beliefs about your death affect the way you live now?

So there you have the five big theological questions including a bit of the traditional answers, some common UU answers and my answers to them. I would encourage you to take time to expand on your answers. I believe taking this time will help you clarify your beliefs and put them into a more organized form. We you begin a new spiritual practice or consider the ones you do now, or when you think about your spiritual experiences ask yourself how do they fit with your answers to the five big theological questions. Again, I want to emphasize that thinking about these questions is more useful than trying to answer with certainty.

Finally, I leave you with a thought I have shared before. Rev. Forrest Church said the ultimate measure of any theology rests in its ability to transform character and inspire people to lead to more ethical lives, towards improving the well being of others and our world. It is not beliefs that matter most, it is rather what you do with them.