Balancing Authority with Reason, Science, and Individual Conscience

Victor Ashear

1/24/21

I think that all who have presented thus far on the theme of Authority and Leadership have in one way or another encouraged us to take ownership of ourselves, and to take responsibility for what we believe and how we practice our faith. Rev. Kali spoke about the need to recover from the trauma of shame that perhaps all of us have endured, by employing resilience and mindfulness. She invited us to be authorities to ourselves. She promoted trust in ourselves and in the practice of self-efficacy. Ian spoke to the question of why our country has taken a dramatic turn towards fascism. He attributed the shift to blindly placing trust in authority as a means of healing from trauma. In the talk Michelle gave last Sunday the focus was on the responsibility for developing personal authority, as opposed to traditional religious authority, through reliance on conscience.

This month’s theme seems very timely to me. Although it is a declining number, about a third of our nation approved of president Trump’s leadership and his authority. Among Republicans about 70% believe that the election was stolen, according to recent polls. Some who blindly followed the lies and conspiracy theories were led to storm our Capital, resulting in lost lives, injury of police, and damage to sacred property. I have been asking myself over the past few years why so many Americans approve of a demonstrably flawed leader. What determines whom we chose to have faith in? How do we go about the process of deciding in whom we place our faith and trust? It has been shown that Trump has lied repeatedly, that he has acted selfishly rather than in the interest of the country, and that he has treated badly people whom he has felt betrayed him, even though they were acting in the interest of the country and following the law. There is something other than truth and reason that appears to motivate many of those who have supported Trump. Is it fear? Is it anger? Is it a barrage of misinformation perpetrated by nefarious profit-driven media? Is it a desire to hold on to “white privilege that lures people to follow?” Are Trump enablers willing to sacrifice truth, justice, democracy, and the law, for the sake of baser motives and objectives?

What do such political questions have to do with how we lead our spiritual lives? Well I think we can ask similar questions with regard to whom and to what do we place authority when we choose to follow a particular spiritual path. Authority and leadership are at least as important in matters of faith as they are in politics. Surely there have been many false messiahs in the religious sphere as in the political. Reverend Moon, Reverend Jim Jones and Elizabeth Clair Prophet come to mind. What motivates us to embrace a particular religious authority?

Some religious people grow up in a particular faith tradition and never question its authority. For them, it is as natural as the kind of foods they prefer, where they choose to live, what kind of work they pursue and whom they marry. Stepping outside of that might feel awkward and anxiety provoking. Their faith is just a familiar part of their lives that is never questioned. The danger here is that when one invests in in an authority and a tradition it becomes more difficult to maintain objectivity even if that tradition veers very far from it’s founding principles. Many fundamentalist Christians have ignored the basic teachings of Jesus in their allegiance to pastors that encourage the support of Trump who obviously falls far from a Christian life. Parishioners in these fundamentalist churches seem to blindly follow what their pastor and some prominent leaders tell them.

A feature of the faith of my early life, Judaism, has a ceremony I see value in, that of bar mitzvah. I assume confirmation in the Catholic faith is similar. A preadolescent or adolescent presumably makes a conscious choice to participate actively in the faith they grew up in. As we are aware, at that tender age, it is less of an informed choice then it would be for an older person. When I had my bar mitzvah I did not at all question the tenets of my faith. The questioning came a few years later. Nevertheless, rites of passage ceremonies at least acknowledge that one needs to make one’s own choice when it comes to religious belief and practice. It is one thing to be brought up in a religion and another to consciously embrace it. To paraphrase, an unexamined faith is not worth believing in or practicing.

So here is the question I would like for us to explore this morning: What should be the balance between thinking for ourselves and relying on “authority?” I am sure that none of us in the fellowship make these decisions blindly following an authority without questioning. UU’s are known for our questioning. You’ve heard the old joke about UU’s and heaven. Upon death, and arriving at a fork in the road with one sign pointing to heaven and the other sign pointing to the place where the existence of heaven is being debated, UU’s would rather join the debate group. On a more serious note, some of you know the introductory primer on UU called “Our Chosen Faith.” A minority of UU’s grew up in UU. Most of us chose UU as adults.

I would like to suggest that choosing a spiritual path might be analogous to buying a car, at least in some ways. You can decide based on what your parents owned. “My dad always bought Chevys so that is what I buy.” Alternatively you can spend time thinking about the aspects that matter most, for example how large, how fuel-efficient, what color, features, and so on. You might look at repair records for different cars, use the Consumer Reports ratings, and talk to your mechanic and your friends. In the latter case you would be relying on a combination of authority based, and fact based, information in addition to personal preference in choosing a car. In the former case, just doing what your parents did would be to rely on authority alone. Some will join or continue in a faith community simply because they like the people there. These folks might care very little about what is being preached and what are the central beliefs. Others will join because they care about the stand the congregation takes on social justice causes and again, they may not care about the beliefs. For me belief is paramount. I strive to have my beliefs guide my behavior. For example, since I believe in the inherent worth and dignity of others, I strive to be respectful and considerate of my fellow humans. That is not so say that I always succeed. I am glad to be part of a faith that holds up the inherent worth and dignity of each person.

The father of American Unitarianism was Rev. William Ellery Channing. He is most remembered for saying that we ought not to take the “miracles” described in the Bible as literally true and that we need to apply logic and reason when it comes to interpreting the Bible. Messages like these from his pulpit resulted in a parting of the ways from the more doctrinaire Congregationalists. That rift is a big part of how American Unitarianism developed in the 1800’s. Today we UU’s cherish our fourth principle encouraging, “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” even though as was stated last Sunday, this is challenging to accomplish. We can thank Channing among other UU leaders of the past for holding up this precious right. We also invoke our fifth principle declaring, “the right of conscience.” Centuries earlier another Unitarian patriarch, Ferenc David, declared this right when he established the Unitarian Church in Transylvania. As you can see, Unitarians of the past were free thinkers and questioned the authority of the established “church.” They relied on reason, logic and science as much as external authority in their beliefs. Above all they regarded faith as something each must come to on our own and not just rely on what is handed down. The right of personal conscience was held in high regard. Many of you are aware that the Buddha held to a similar view.

When Janet and I were married we chose to have an Ethical Humanist Leader officiate. We did not want to marry in a church or synagogue; we did not want a “religious ceremony.” Both of us sought to leave behind the faith traditions we had grown up in, Orthodox Judaism for me, and Methodism for her. I was in my clinical psychology internship at the time and I invited my supervisor, Clyde, to attend. He happened to be a defrocked Catholic priest. His observation to me after the wedding service was that there was “no authority present.” I had enormous respect for Clyde and hung on almost everything he said. This was one of the few times Clyde was wrong in my view. Janet and I and the Humanist leader did not invoke God in the wedding ceremony, but we did invoke the awesome powers of nature, and of love, in the references we used in the ceremony we created, and in our vows to each other. My point here is that appeal to the authority of a “higher power” can take alternative forms. It does not have to be traditional to be valid and personally meaningful.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, another Unitarian leader who profoundly influenced our faith tradition was also an iconoclast. In his famous speech delivered at Harvard Divinity School he admonished those present not to trust in traditional church authority. He was convinced that the dictates of your own conscience rather than an authority, was the path to a truly faithful life. In another of his famous works, his essay on “Self-Reliance” he said this:

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal [traditions] 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. I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make to a valued adviser, who was wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, “What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?,” my friend suggested,--"But these impulses may be from below, not from above." I replied, "They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil." No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it.

As you can see, Emerson was firmly convinced of the power of his “own nature” to guide him. He was not concerned about possibly being influenced by the “Devil.” He just dismissed that concern as if it were nothing to worry about. And yet we can all think of people who have been led to erroneous and in some cases even dangerous conclusions by being too insulated from the input of others. In fact one could make the case that delusional ideas in mental illness stem in part from social isolation and lack of input from others. Therefore I can’t quite go along with Emerson to the degree that I dismiss any guidance whatsoever from an external authority. But we have also seen, especially recently, how blind adherence to evil authority can be disastrous as well.

Maybe you have been told that to make your own choices regarding religious belief is egotistical. In a sense you might be accused putting your will above God’s will. Have some of you heard this kind of accusation? Ok fine. But how do you or I legitimately determine God’s will? And which version of God’s will? Many priests, ministers, imams and rabbis will say their way is the one and only way to salvation. But they offer very different paths. Is it ritual circumcision, bowing to Mecca, or taking communion that gets me to heaven? Well they all can’t be right!

As I said, I personally cannot completely embrace what Emerson said in his essay. I have witnessed too many people, including those with mental illness, who have been led into false and even destructive beliefs because they were too resistant to authority of any kind. Others as we have discussed seem to cling to a pseudo authority not worthy of such respect.

So for me a reasonable approach to the question of which authority to embrace as a guide, is to look at some of the commonalities of all rather than to pick one at random and hope you correctly got your ticket into heaven. The fact that the major religions of the world have been around for a long time suggests that they at least have something of value to offer as a guide to living in my opinion. And the values that are held in common among the major world religions seem to me something worth considering. We can also turn to “authorities” that are renowned scholars of religion for guidance; people who have devoted their lives to studying world religions objectively comparing one to another. My list of scholars of comparative religion would include Houston Smith, Kar~~e~~n Armstrong, and Stephen Prothreo. It is hardly egotistical to approach the question of authority in this way.

Here are some values and practices that are common to most of the major world religions: You need to care for yourself and you need to care for others as much as yourself. You need to practice forgiveness and compassion for yourself and for others. It is worthy to work for justice and to practice mercy. It will be beneficial to see our world and life as sacred. You need to work for the common good. You need to have faith in the future in spite of discouraging events and people with power and evil intentions. You need to transcend your ego to connect to a reality larger than yourself. You need to engage in daily practices that remind you of all of this.

What role should science and reason play in your choice of a spiritual path? Some of the rabbis that I was in contact with as a youth said none! They regarded science as the enemy of religion. They did not want me questioning the idea that the world was created in seven days approximately 6000 years ago. If you did not take the Hebrew Bible literally then you were a sinner and you would go to hell! I believe I can still be a person of faith, adhering to the mutually agreed upon values I mentioned. In my view science and reason are tools to help to assess the legitimacy of what is given by way of authority. The Dali Lama said the same of his religion, Buddhism. If one of the tenants of his faith was contradicted by science he expressed it was fine to let it go.

Finally I agree with many who raise up the right of conscience in our religious convictions. It is part of our fifth principle. What if a religious text tells you to do something that your conscience tells you is wrong? The Hebrew Bible says that if a man lies with another man he should be put to death by stoning. By extension, all sexual activity between consenting adult males is prohibited in Orthodox Judaism as well as in Catholicism and the fundamentalist Protestant sects. In spite of the fact that there is broad consensus among these different religions that queerness is sinful, we UU’s challenge Biblical authority on this point as a matter of conscience. Our conscience tells us that it is wrong to condemn queer love. Instead our conscience tells us quite the opposite; if two people of the same sex love each other and want to share their lives and bed together we want to support and celebrate their bond.

So as Michelle pointed out in the message she read last Sunday, taking UU seriously is not easy. It is challenging to sift though the choices that are before us to decide who we trust as authority and what we select from authority, what the facts are, what we come to believe, and how we determine to act. Even if this task is daunting I submit it is better than any alternative. This work does not have to be done in one week. I consider it the work of a lifetime. More important than arriving at an outcome this work can be considered a journey. Our fellowship’s Mission Statement said it so well:

  We embrace Unitarian Universalism as a dynamic, living

      religion that welcomes change as knowledge advances. We

      cherish the wisdom to be gleaned from our collective human

      history, as well as personal experience. We seek congruence

      between our beliefs and actions. We gather in the spiritual

      community to commit our collective energy and resources in

      support of these principles.

May it be so.