

Synods, Core Values, and Your Beliefs

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One of the principles that attracts me to Unitarian and Universal-ism is the willingness to draw wisdom from many sources. UUs draw wisdom from the 3 monotheistic religions as well as eastern and earth centered religions. Throughout the ages literary, works have been printed, published or passed by oral traditions. There is the Bible, Koran, Talmud even the book of Mormon but I contend the value and wisdom of secular works should not be ignored just because they do not claim divine inspiration.

As the world becomes smaller and cultures encounter or invade each other we are exposed to texts with different spin on correct and moral behavior. At our worst we impose our views on others. At our best we respect other's beliefs. Beyond the sacred texts and other near-ancient writings UU-ism draws for many modern references.

Our 4th principle asks us to embark upon: "a free & responsible search for truth". Part of that search includes articulating ones beliefs. Throughout history this has been done both under duress and freely. One example of freely given beliefs is our coming of age program where graduates present their beliefs based on the work they have done during the year. Given that I found UU-ism later in life I never got that chance. Today I also have the privilege to continue a tradition of both this congregation and generally: that is lay preaching, which in its self is a way of articulating one's beliefs.

Even in our modern secular world, there are accepted beliefs and we too have our heretics. We all believe in "freedom": but we find that the details quickly differ. We all believe in democracy but seem to hate the idea when we don't get our way. In this room if I say I'm for unrestricted gun rights or that the poor are poor because of their moral failings – as Scrooge does in A Christmas Carol - I would probably not be looked upon favorably.

Ancient reading:

The word "[synod](#)" comes from the Greek "assembly" or "meeting", (Wikipedia so you know it is correct):

A **synod** /'sɪnəd/ is a council of a [church](#), usually convened to decide an issue of doctrine, administration or application. In modern usage, the word often refers to the governing body of a particular church, whether its members are meeting or not.

In the book: A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England & America, Earl Wilber describes how many Unitarians were called before synods or diets or inquisitions to testify about their beliefs. Among the martyrs of Unitarian history are:

Michael Servetus

Francis David

George Alvinczi

I will quote and paraphrase the story of Francis David:

Francis David was appointed the superintendent of Unitarians in 1567... This was during the reformation when countries would flip between Catholic and Protestant depending on who was prince or regent. In Transylvania, the transition from John Sigismund to Stephen Bathory in 1571 was one of those flips. Edicts came down to maintain the status quo or not "innovate"

religious doctrine. In this environment, Francis David tested the limits by preaching what were ultimately unacceptable views to the prince and others in authority.

Our characters:

Francis David: ex priest to the king now head of the Unitarian movement

Dr Goirgio Baidrata: Physician and advisor to: Stephen Bathory: ruler of Transylvania

Prior to Bathory taking the throne a synod held in May 1566, presided over by Biandrata and David is the first to express what would become Unitarian doctrine:

Christ is lord of all

Through him we access the father

Through him we invoke the father

This ran counter to the Nicene Creed of 325 especially around the idea of the trinity. You know, the father, son and holy ghost..

Another synod 12 years later, in 1578 passed a resolution which gave all ministers: "liberty without danger to discuss with one another and to investigate matters that have not yet been decided....but which serious consideration might be given."

Thinking he was protected, David began questioning:

Whether Christ was god

Whether he could be invoked in prayers

Whether Jesus could have been Christ if he had not died.

This was – apparently – too much for the church and rulers of the day. To the popular mind it seemed to be the question whether David was following Christian or Jewish tradition.

In 1578 a trial was convened and witnesses called. The issue was no longer if David teaching was true or followed scriptural but whether it was an "innovation". Eventually David was found guilty and sentenced to "perpetual imprisonment" He died in prison 4 months later.

In this and other examples Unitarians, non-conformists, Conversos, and many others that held unorthodox beliefs have been called before many synods, inquisitions and diets and forced to write out points of theology. Michael Servetus - an early anti-Trinitarian – was ultimately burned at the stake for publishing a work titled "On the error of the trinity". Francis David and Michael Servetus, like all Unitarians, were heretics for questioning Jesus' godliness and the trinity. Ultimately Protestantism shed many Catholic beliefs and practices but trinity was not one of them.

Synods are still going on especially in the Catholic church. My Economist magazine of 2 weeks ago spoke of a recent synod called to *discuss* issues splitting liberals and conservatives around sexual orientation and family.

Besides the accepted cannon...

In modern times archeologists are finding ancient and near ancient texts showing there have always been many voices in the search for truth and wisdom. The Dead Seas scrolls - found in 1947 - show that sacred texts have evolved and that many tracts have been edited out. Among the recently discovered are the gospels of Judas and Mary Magdalene as well as many versions of the books that did make it into the bible. My favorite is the mysterious "Q" document of which no record remains but which all the synoptic gospels draw from. In PBS's Frontline documentary "from Jesus to Christ", the contributors explained how Luke / Acts, the first gospel written, was aimed at Jews and Mark written later was aimed at Roman Populi. The range of literature shows much greater diversity than tradition would lead one to believe.

There was a recent flap because someone found an old scrap of papyrus mentioning Jesus' wife. The Catholic Church pronounced it was a modern fake. Somehow even the idea that someone wrote it long ago is intolerable.

Modern reading

In the 500 years since David we have mostly stopped the search for heretics. But we still are interested in people's beliefs – both for good and for bad – and we are still looking to literature for moral lessons.

Pop psychology has adopted mission statements and core values as ways to articulate “beliefs”. Authors like Steven Covey recommend using them to find your personal beliefs.

In 7 habits of highly effective people, [Steven Covey](#) outlines how to develop your own mission statement. In the chapter “start with the end in mind” (his 2nd of the 7 habit) he states: the most effective way I know to begin with the end in mind is to develop a personal mission statement of philosophy or creed.

He goes on to say:

You could call your personal mission statement your constitution. Like the USA constitution it is the foundation that has enables people to ride through crisis.

The book outlines how to develop you mission statement based on your personal centers such as work, home spouse, money and how these centers affect your

Security: your sense of worth

Guidance: your source of direction in life

Wisdom: perspective on life

Power: you ability to act”

He quotes: Viktor Frankl, psychologist and Holocaust survivor: “we detect rather than invent our mission statements in life.... everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life...”

Core values, like mission statements are a method of arriving at basic beliefs.

Quoting Nat'l park service's web site:

Core values are not descriptions of the work we do or the strategies we employ to accomplish our mission. The values underlie our work, how interact with each other, and which strategies we employ to fulfill our mission. -

Kevin Daum at Inc.com explains how to draft your core values:

Grab a notebook. Give yourself quiet space, no distractions, and at least an hour to reflect on each section.

Step 1--Think through and describe the following in detail:

What have been your three greatest accomplishments?

What have been your three greatest moments of efficiency?

What are any common rules or themes that you can identify?

Step 2--Think through and describe the following in detail:

What have been your three greatest failures?

What have been your three greatest moments of inefficiency?

What are any common rules or themes that you can identify?

Step 3--Identify three or four brief sentences of advice you would give to yourself based upon these commonalities.

Step 4--Next try and reduce them to a few words. For example: If your advice is: "Don't overindulge in food and booze at parties and get in trouble," reduce that down to Keep Control Through Moderation, or even Moderation.

Step 5--Now comes the fun. You need to test the value.

Think of a situation where following your core value hurts you rather than helps you. For example you might think Innovation sounds good until you realize that your life thrives on stability rather than constant change. You have to think it through carefully. If you can't identify a legitimate case where the value steers you wrong, you probably have a good core value. Know that this process requires focused time and thought.

Our core values and mission statements and how we live our lives are an amalgam of what we have read and heard throughout our lives. Modern literature fills that gap by providing morals and parables but TV and movies also fill in the picture. If you are a baby boomer like me you spent many wasted hours watching the twilight zone, star trek, Superman and the lone ranger. These all feed our sense of ourselves and our outlook on life.

Many of these modern sources include warnings about and the consequences of improper behavior. From Thomas Moore and Voltaire to Dickens to the Bronte sisters and more recently JRR Tolkien, HG Wells and AC Clark provide parables and moral lessons through their characters.

Tolkien, in lord of the rings, builds a whole world where good eventually triumphs over evil weaving myths from many cultures.

HG Wells came up with the idea of war of the worlds after the English "settled" New Zealand. He wondered what it would be like to be on the receiving end of such an onslaught.

Dickens penned one of my favorite lines: Are there no prisons, are there no union workhouses?

Movies and television also inform our sense of fairness or irony. In the 1960's series The Twilight Zone the protagonist usually gets what they ask for which they learn is not what they wanted. The end was often unsettling because all did not turn out well. The lone ranger & superman were able to preserve the American way and vanquish the villain in ½ hour. Batman, the green hornet and Marshal Dillon took 1 hour. We are all suburban cowboys, riding the range on our riding mowers and exploring the wilds in our SUVs.

What do I believe:

When I started this project I fully intended to sit down with the notebook and write out core values. I mean, ya sure, I believe in personal freedom and the rule of law and all the classical liberal stuff, but I don't feel that should be MY core value. But then I realized that - as Viktor Frankl says - your values are a feeling not an analytical thinking exercise. This reminded me of the This I believe series on NPR:

This I Believe is based on a 1950s radio program of the same name, hosted by acclaimed journalist Edward R. Murrow. Each day, Americans gathered by their radios to hear compelling essays from the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt, Jackie Robinson, Helen Keller, and Harry Truman as well as corporate leaders, cab drivers, scientists, and secretaries—anyone able to distill into a few minutes the guiding principles by which they lived. These essayists' words brought comfort and inspiration to a country worried about the Cold War, McCarthyism, and racial division.

I heard new episodes recently on NPR and the program continues at : thisibelieve.org. I have heard such as “I believe in science fiction” or “I believe in singing badly...” allow people to articulate beliefs from the frivolous to the profound.

If I were to contribute a piece it would be: “I believe in Intellectual curiosity.”

I think all people should be interested in their surroundings: people, the physical world and beyond the world. I am not afraid that knowing how something works – science - somehow reduces my appreciation of the beauty of nature. On the contrary, I am most awed by the night sky and the idea that those small dots are orbs larger than I can imagine, and that there are many more behind them that are only vaguely distinguishable by the Hubble telescope. The wonder of life and the stuff around us should compel you to want to know why things happen. It does not have to be derived algebraically or proven in a double blind test just the interest. I think curiosity can also be applied to our personal relationships. We are often asked to tolerate the view of those whom we disagree. I find that very difficult, but if I convince myself that we don't have to be convinced or agree, just be curious. And who knows, once you both get past the talking points and bombast maybe you can find common ground.

Obviously, curiosity can only go so far. When threatened with violence of repression it has limited effect. And both parties must be receptive or else you never do get past the bombast or talking points. In our modern vernacular anonymous enemies are reduced to “bad guys” implying they are 2 dimensional characters on a ½ hour western. A little curiosity would maybe fill in the back story and maybe invoke some understanding.

To live my creed I try to maintain a wide variety of interests - though it often seems just a bunch of unfinished projects. I am amassing a significant library and am always looking for new reads. Since I work in a politically conservative industry I try and keep my mouth shut and listen. As Steven Covey says: seek to understand before seeking to be understood.

I think intellectual curiosity leads me to be a humanist. Unitarianism was founded on logic and a strict reading of the bible which never mentions the trinity nor portrays Jesus as the “superhero” many would like him to be. Some years ago “the last temptation of Christ” was denounced, boycotted and protested, I think because the main character was not Superman.

I am a Humanist, in part because – whatever happens after we leave this world – I feel we should focus on what is here. And partly - I'll admit - as protest to all the synods, diets, edicts and revelations of the past where religion has shown itself to be intolerant, closed minded, and more interested in preserving its own status. Jesus, Mohammad and the Buda were probably cool dudes but horrible things have been done in their name. The lesson our modern world conveys is that if you live by a code that honors others and promotes humility, one will get to heaven – whatever that looks like.

As a humanist I would like to think we don't need the threat of eternal damnation or the lure of some eternal paradise to motivate us. In “fighting back” a secular humanist publication they tell you how to respond to “what prevents you from raping and pillaging if there is no hell?” Maybe common decency and the rule of law? Also, the belief that I would hate to be responsible for interfering with someone else' spiritual path.

There have been many depictions of life after death and some are not particularly flattering. From Dante to Mark Twain to Kurt Vonnegut to the twilight zone the afterlife is ironic and maybe a little scary. In letters from the earth, Mark Twain points out the irony – or inconsistency of

people that don't like church services and don't like to sing go to heaven to read from the bible and sing – all day long. Kurt Vonnegut describes the afterlife a “the turkey farm” in the novel Slapstick. In the Twilight Zone people are whisked off to various forms of hell - usually involving a parody of what they asked for.

Or maybe, like in the play “Our Town,” we all sit in chairs over our graves, aware of our recent lives but somehow more sensitive and with greater understanding.

The one afterlife that appeals to me is reincarnation. As I have observed in this world there are people who are always optimistic while others are always pessimistic. The idea that we can go to the same place and be punished or rewarded does not seem impossible. In fact with my sense of irony, it seems perfect and very Universalist. It also seems a shame to throw away all the learning and insights of a lifetime. With time to reflect – I'd come back.

In her later years one of my Grandmothers became very religious and took solace in evangelical Christianity that she listened to on the radio. She would tell me that after death one could travel at the speed of thought. I ran with that imagining how great it would be to surf through the atmosphere of Jupiter or stand by a methane lake on Titan. I guess I was never cut out for the heavenly garden described in CS Lewis's The last battle.

But ultimately I like the statement in Houston Smith's tour of the world religion: when the Buda was asked what the afterlife was like he would just say “you can't imagine it”. So, why be limited by your experiences or beliefs.

As one of the commentators on the History channels “history of the bible” shows said: “You can't prove faith.”

You can't prove God exists by excavating at Jericho any more than you can disprove god by deriving the math of planetary motion.