



Come, Let Us Reason Together

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When I worked in the lumber yard at Winnipeg Supply, nearly twenty years ago now, I used to get off the Portage Avenue bus at the corner of Arlington Street. In those days, it was impossible for a Unitarian Universalist to miss that stop, since the Winnipeg church, only a few blocks away, sponsored the long bench where transit users waited for the bus to arrive. While it was nice to think that our sense of civic responsibility provided sleepy morning travelers with an opportunity to rest their feet on their way downtown, another part of me was always a little disappointed to see wide-bottomed commuters hiding the message painted on the back of the seat. You see, sponsorship of a bus stop bench was one way to get your organization's billboard on the public sidewalk that ran alongside the busiest street in the city. For several years, that bench carried a simple three word message in bold printing above the name and address of the church -- it read, "Freedom, Reason, Tolerance."

In an age of clever slogans and slick marketing, this message may fail to excite the imaginations of most people, but for many in Winnipeg -- and across the continent, I would add -- these words represent three of the philosophical pillars of Unitarian Universalism, three more-or-less permanent religious values which may be interpreted differently from time to time, but which nevertheless convey something of the essence of who we are as religious people.

Unitarians and Universalists have been at the forefront of movements for both secular and religious freedom. Ours is a largely unfettered faith, where free inquiry and liberty of individual thought are cherished and promoted. Tolerance has been the social lubricant that has enabled us to pursue this freedom in community, with the result that Unitarian Universalist thought represents perhaps the widest range of opinion imaginable within a single religious movement. These twin values of freedom and tolerance have attracted and nurtured many searchers through the years, as individuals with honest doubts and unorthodox viewpoints have sought refuge from an often hostile religious and social environment. When Unitarian Universalists speak of the "free church," they mean not only institutions free of outside control, but also

individuals free to pursue their religious quests in an open and tolerant atmosphere. Whether known through this slogan or not, freedom and tolerance are highly valued in our congregations.

Reason, it seems to me, has fared less well -- even though it is a fundamental value in our faith. Perhaps this is because some of us feel that reason often demands more of us, intellectually and morally, than either freedom or tolerance -- at least insofar as we have interpreted these three values in practice. This is unfortunate, since reason is as much a defining and distinguishing value in modern-day Unitarian Universalism as any other. In fact, it could be argued that, of these three (and I will admit that the list should not end with them), reason is the *most* distinctive characteristic of Unitarian Universalism. Ours is not the only religious movement to celebrate freedom -- even historic Calvinism did that! Ours is not the only religious movement to practice tolerance -- even the Roman Catholic tradition is broadly tolerant of considerable diversity (especially if you happen to be male). But few other traditions esteem reason as highly as does Unitarian Universalism. The late process theologian Bernard Loomer pointed out nearly four decades ago, when the estimation of human reason was at its zenith in Unitarian Universalism, that "on the whole reason plays a supporting and not the leading role in most theologies."¹ Well, historically at least, reason has played the lead in our religious tradition. Yet, despite its noble pedigree, gone are the days -- or so it seems -- when most Unitarian Universalists imagined themselves to be committed, first and foremost, to the advancement of "reasonable religion."

Increasingly, if the word "reason" is uttered in a Unitarian Universalist pulpit, it may be accompanied by one of those embarrassed and apologetic smiles that seem to say, "We 'know' this faith in the capacity is human reason is an artifact from our overly confident past. We now 'know' that what is of real spiritual value is 'beyond' reason. In this post-modern age, we have come to see that reason, as an artifact of our humanist past, is not enough." But I, for one, am singularly unprepared to see Unitarian Universalists distance themselves from a reliance on reason, which has, after all, given our faith an unparalleled degree of intellectual honesty and spiritual courage.

As I view with dismay the recent theological trends in Unitarian Universalism -- some of which may turn out to be little more than passing fads -- I am moved to ask, whatever became of reason? It's not as if reason was just another trendy proposition, a discarded artifact from our theological evolution. It's roots in the Unitarian and Universalist heritage are broad and deep. The importance of reason in Western religious traditions runs back to biblical times, at least, albeit in rather embryonic form. "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD ..." (Isaiah 1:18, RSV). Now, as the Hebrew prophet Isaiah uses this expression, he is referring to the way in which arguments are presented in a legal proceeding. He is saying, "Let us argue it out!"

Nonetheless, the kernel is there. It is not such a great leap from this biblical notion to the understanding of reason presented by the great thinkers of the Enlightenment.

The word “reason” itself doesn’t appear among the now familiar seven principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association, although one could argue that it is implied there. It does receive explicit mention among the sources of our living tradition which follow the principles in the bylaws of the association. There we are told that Unitarian Universalism draws on “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” (In point of fact, I don’t think that humanist teachings counsel us to heed the *results* of science so much as they call us to employ the *scientific method* in our religious lives -- but that’s *another* sermon. Suffice it to say that Corliss Lamont writes, “We come nearest to living the life of reason when we approximate most closely the methods of science in our treatment of difficulties and in our solution or attempted solution of problems.”²)

As John Locke describes reason, it stands in contrast to revelation. This distinction between reason and revelation is crucial to understanding how liberal religion differs from the larger religious culture. Whereas other approaches to religion rely on revelation in its varied forms -- as scripture, as the pronouncements of those in authority, or as mystical perceptions of human experience -- liberal religion maintains that reason is a more reliable foundation. It draws upon human experience and observation, tempered through the fire of human thought, to arrive at logical conclusions about the nature of the world and the human condition. It is a radically different approach to religious understanding. For most people around the world -- and our society is no exception -- “being religious” means subscribing to a particular revelation from outside ourselves. Unitarian Universalism long ago abandoned any exclusive devotion to a particular scripture, a particular revelation, or a particular prophet. In place of this, Unitarian Universalism employs reason -- no matter how imperfect our reasoning may be. It makes sense to us to employ in our religious lives the same methods that are demonstrated to be successful or useful in other arenas.

Some years ago, already, Robert Romig lamented that “there is a host of modern-day men and women who rely on reason for daily decision-making, but who revert to unexamined, traditional notions and ancient myths for their deepest personal beliefs. ... But why isn’t reason applied to our questions about the nature of God and human life, the answers to which shape our view of life and relationship to others?”³ It’s a good question -- perhaps unanswerable -- which serves to critique the customary ways in which people deal with religious matters.

“In the rational religious mind,” according to Clinton Lee Scott, “there is a balance of faith and reason. Without faith we lack the spirit of confidence and adventure -- the risk without which there is nothing attempted, nothing done. Without reason religion

degenerates into superstition.”⁴ If there is one thing that has been characteristic of our way in religion, one standard upon which we can judge those matters presented to us for our consideration, one method that transcends the various theological labels that Unitarian Universalists claim -- it is our commitment to the fundamental value of reason and an understanding that reason lies at the heart of our religious tradition. This has been the case ever since the “Baltimore Sermon,” when William Ellery Channing, objecting to “the contemptuous manner in which human reason is often spoken of by our adversaries,” asserted that truth is “decided at the bar of reason.”

Around us we see much evidence of the intellectual drift of Western society. In nearly any bookstore, the “science and nature” section would be crushed under the weight of books in the “astrology and occult” section. If I recall correctly, it was Bernard Shaw who once observed that the average twentieth century adult was about as given to credulity as one from the twelfth century. I fear that his observation was essentially correct, which is why it is so important that Unitarian Universalism reclaim its place as an advocate for reasonable religion. Reason is the tool, the source of knowledge, that mediates our understanding of human experience and scientific discovery; it is the faculty that enables us to fashion meaning in our lives. It stands in sharp contrast to revelation in whatever guise -- ancient literature taken uncritically to be scripture, the authority of religious leaders, or the esoteric claims of supposed occult experience.

Come, let us reason together, so that our faith might rest, as surely as possible, on discernible truth and honest reflection, rather than upon the wishful thinking of those who are either too lazy or too afraid to wrestle with the complexities of the world around them. Let us cherish freedom in our religious seekings, but let us remember that we are not free to believe those things that we know through reason to be untrue. Let us be tolerant of persons and ideas, but let us be intolerant of uncritical thought masquerading as profundity. Come, let us reason together! In a world where so much that passes for religion is both unreasoning and unreasonable, Unitarian Universalists might bequeath the gift of religion grounded in reason rather than a dubious revelation. Come, let us reason together! Reason is still the most valuable tool available to those who would judge wisely the evidence presented for their consideration, whether in the courtroom, the marketplace, or the temple. At a time when the absurd continues to be advanced as revelation, when so much of what passes for faith is little more than superstitious and supernatural belief, reason is the tool with which we may chip away at the idols of the human mind and spirit. While we must remain modest in our claims, recognizing that we are sometimes mistaken in our reasoning, we must also affirm that genuine faith can never be contrary to reason. Faith does not stand in a polar relationship to reason. Quite the contrary -- the most reliable and meaningful faith is *grounded* in reason. Let us Unitarian Universalists commit ourselves, in religious

community, to fashioning a reasonable religion from those experiences and discoveries which have been tempered by critical thought. *Come, let us reason together!*



First Reading: From *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* by John Locke⁵

Reason, as contradistinguished from faith, I take to be the discovery of the certainty or probability of such propositions or truths, which the mind arrives at by deductions made from such ideas which it has got by the use of its natural faculties, viz. by sensation or reflection.

Faith, on the other side, is the assent to any proposition, not thus made out by the deductions of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God in some extraordinary way of communication. This way of discovering truths ... we call *revelation*.

Second Reading: "Reason" by Bertrand Russell⁶

Until the deep conflicts of nations and classes which infect our world have been resolved, it is hardly to be expected that [hu]mankind will return to a rational habit of mind. The difficulty is that so long as unreason prevails, a solution of our troubles can only be reached by chance; for while reason, being impersonal, makes universal cooperation possible, unreason, since it represents private passions, makes strife inevitable. It is for this reason that rationality, in the sense of an appeal to a universal and impersonal standard of truth, is of supreme importance to the well-being of the human species.

References

¹Bernard M. Loomer, "Reason," in *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, ed. Arthur A. Cohen and Marvin Halverson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 293.

²Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, 7th ed., rev. (New York: Continuum, 1993), 191.

³Robert E. Romig, *Reasonable Religion: A Common Sense Approach* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1984), 9-10.

⁴Clinton Lee Scott, *Religion Can Make Sense* (Boston: Church of the Larger Fellowship, 1949), 17.

⁵John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), cited in James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought From the Enlightenment to Vatican II* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 16.

⁶Bertrand Russell, "Reason," in *The Best of Humanism*, ed. Roger E. Greeley (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988), 172.