

A River or a Rock: The Meaning(s) of Religious Truth

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Part One

I want to begin this morning with what has to be one of the most frequently heard statements made about Unitarian Universalism. This statement is offered by some as a reason to celebrate our faith while others make the exact same statement to point out a very serious flaw in Unitarian Universalism.

“In Unitarian Universalism you can believe whatever you want.”

I’m curious, how many here have heard this statement before or perhaps offered it themselves when trying to describe or explain Unitarian Universalism?

For those who offer these words as a compliment, Unitarian Universalism is all about individual freedom – the freedom to seek, to explore, to question, and to believe what your heart and mind tell you is true. And that freedom at the heart of our faith is best exemplified by Unitarian Universalism’s lack of a creed or single test of faith that one must accept in order to be a UU.

For those who offer this same statement as a criticism of Unitarian Universalism, I think it’s fair to say that they view religions like ours as being too individualistic and too subjective. The absence of a creed that we UUs view as being a positive strength is, in fact, a glaring weakness because people need to anchor their lives in a some kind of over-arching certainty and truth about the meaning and purpose of existence.

Now, at this point I could easily launch into one my favorite sermon topics which can be boiled down to “freedom good, creeds bad.” I’ve preached that sermon many times before and will undoubtedly do so again.

But I want to do something a little different today. Rather than simply celebrating our commitment to religious freedom and our rejection of creeds and doctrines, I want to take some time to explore with you the philosophical and theological roots of our approach to religion and especially our understanding of religious truth. Too often in Unitarian Universalism, I think we skip over this step, instead jumping right to “we don’t like creeds” or “we can believe whatever we want” without ever taking the time to understand why.

So let’s begin with this whole question of religious truth. What exactly is it and where does it come from? Is there one truth, many truths, or no truth at all? And why exactly do we Unitarian Universalists reject creeds? Is it because we simply don’t agree with the specific content of existing creeds or is it because there is something about creeds in general that doesn’t fit with our understanding of the nature and meaning of truth?

As we consider these questions, I want to begin with that story you heard a few minutes ago. I first encountered it in a class I took in seminary on the history and development of the Jewish tradition. In that class we learned about the Torah and the Talmud, about the vast body of Jewish law known as Halacha, and about mystical traditions like Kabbalah and Hasidism. But if there is one thing that really stood out for me about the class and that enriched not simply my knowledge of Judaism but also my understanding of Unitarian Universalism, it is the way in which the Jewish tradition approaches the search for religious truth and meaning.

And that approach is beautifully captured by that story from the Talmud. In the story, a legal dispute between two schools of thought has been going on for quite some time. God eventually resolves the dispute by deciding that while both sides have made arguments that are true, one side prevails because it has made its arguments with humility and good will and has listened to and learned from the truths contained in the arguments made by the other side.

Think for a minute about what the story is telling us about truth. Truth is not found in just one argument, in just one belief, or on just one side. Rather, it emerges in the interaction of different ideas and diverse perspectives. God rules on behalf of the

House of Hillel because while the other side only listened to themselves and to their own ideas, the House of Hillel listened to and learned from the wisdom of the other.

And as I came to learn in that class, this spirit of ongoing and continuous argument, commentary, listening, and conversation is at the heart of the Jewish understanding of religious truth. While Judaism recognizes and affirms the sanctity and sacredness of the Torah, the truth in the text only emerges out of continuous exploration and interpretation of its meaning. That is why so much of the Jewish tradition is a vast and voluminous dialogue among different voices and commentators – a dialogue that both reveals the truth as it is understood at a particular moment in time and that is always laying the groundwork for future generations to develop new truths and new ways of understanding God, the world, and ourselves. In Judaism, the search for the truth and the conversation out of which truth emerges never ends.

And it is this understanding of and approach to religious truth that inspires the title of today's sermon – "A River or a Rock." For those faith traditions rooted in a single creed, religious truth resembles a rock – solid, unmoving, and unchanging. Truth is like a piece of property that one faith can claim and own to the exclusion of others. But for traditions like Judaism and, as I will argue, Unitarian Universalism, religious truth resembles a river of continuous and ongoing revelation, interpretation, and conversation – a river that never stops moving and that is always creating great and profound truths out of the interaction of countless ideas and voices. Religious truth, therefore, can never be fully or definitively found in just the words of one person, one sacred text, or even one religion because truth is always emerging, always unfolding, always carrying us along a marvelous journey of discovery and exploration.

Part Two

In the first part of this morning's sermon, I distinguished between two approaches to religious truth – the rock or property model which sees religious truth as being a single belief or set of beliefs that are eternal and unchanging and that belong exclusively to only one religion, and a river or pluralistic model that sees religious truth as a moving and evolving reality that emerges out of the interaction among a wide variety of influences and ideas, experiences and stories, conversation and dialogue.

It is this understanding of religious truth that informs Unitarian Universalism. From our beginnings almost 500 years ago during the Protestant Reformation right up to the present day, Unitarian Universalism has been rooted in an understanding of truth that is open, continuous, pluralistic, and diverse. We see truth as living in and emerging out of all things and all people. Religious truth lives in sacred books like the Torah, the Koran, and the Bhagavad Gita. Religious truth lives in the rhythms, regularities, and processes of nature and the universe. Religious truth lives in the words and deeds of prophetic and spiritual leaders like Jesus, Gandhi, and Mother Theresa. Religious truth lives in the creative imagination – in music, in the visual arts, and in works of literature and poetry. And religious truth most certainly lives in all of you – in your experiences, your stories, your joys and your sorrows, your hopes and your dreams. There is no limit, no end, no boundary or barrier privileging one source of truth over another. In Unitarian Universalism, truth lives in and is revealed in everything.

I don't know if many of you are familiar with what is called the Living Tradition of Unitarian Universalism. The Living Tradition is a list of six sources of religious and spiritual truth lifted up as being especially important for Unitarian Universalists.

Of course, this list of sources is not complete or exhaustive. No perfect or all inclusive list exists or can ever be fully written in Unitarian Universalism. But what matters most is not how complete or exhaustive our list of sources is or can be. Rather, what matters most is that the river is always flowing, always moving, always revealing new sources, new currents, new ideas, new values, and new truths.

And it is this reality of truth as evolving and emerging out of the diversity of life itself that explains why we Unitarian Universalists do not have a single creed or dogma. Reality is simply too diverse, too mysterious, too complex, and too dynamic to be captured by one statement, by one belief, by one text, or even by one religion. Our problem with creeds isn't that they are wrong; a creed, in fact, is one more source of spiritual truth and wisdom. Our problem with creeds is that they are absolute and not reflective of the dynamism and diversity of creation. With a creed, truth is final and the conversation is closed. In Unitarian Universalism, truth is never final and the conversation never ends.

And that leads me back to that statement about Unitarian Universalism being a religion in which you can believe anything you want. I think our commitment to truth as an always unfolding and ever-flowing river, to truth as the living product of the interaction of an infinite number of sources and of an unending conversation has led some, including many Unitarian Universalists, to conclude that when it comes right down to it, Unitarian Universalism is so wide open, so inclusive, and so free that we lack anything resembling shared truth. In Unitarian Universalism, when it comes to truth it is basically every person for themselves.

Well, I'm here to tell you that nothing could be further from well, the truth. You see, in addition to sharing with the Jewish tradition an unending commitment to the search for truth, we also share with Judaism a belief in the existence and authority of a particular kind of religious truth – truth that emerges not from a single creed but rather from the agreements we make with one another. You see, in both Judaism and Unitarian Universalism, truth is covenantal rather than creedal.

When we say that Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal rather than a creedal faith, it simply means that we UUs journey together guided not by a single creed written in the distant past but instead by a set of promises and agreements that we make with each other about what we believe and how we will live. That is essentially what a covenant is – a set of promises or agreements human beings make with one another. Of course, covenants, like all agreements, are subject to review and revision. Covenants change as new ideas, new needs, and new realities emerge. But even though they are subject to change, covenants, and especially religious covenants, are affirmations of deep and profound truths – truths that can be just as meaningful and just as important as any creed.

The truth that lives in our covenants defines and shapes who we are and how we live as Unitarian Universalists. Our covenants lift up and affirm beliefs and values that guide us as people of faith. Think for a moment about the most important covenant in Unitarian Universalism – the covenant that affirms our seven Unitarian Universalist principles.

These seven principles are a reflection of who we are as people of faith. They emerged out of a long and inclusive dialogue among Unitarian Universalists about our

most deeply held beliefs and convictions. The Seven Principles are reviewed from time to time and can be changed. But while the content of these principles will undoubtedly change in the future, today they serve as an affirmation of our deepest truths and convictions and as a stirring call to live our lives as a shared journey rooted in those things we believe and value most - love and freedom, compassion and justice for all people and for this planet.

So the next time you find yourself having a conversation about religion or what church you attend, I hope you'll share something of our approach to and understanding of religious truth. I know that summing up Unitarian Universalism in a sentence or two (the so called "elevator speech") is never easy because we don't have a creed. But don't mistake our lack of a creed for an absence of truth or conviction. We have beliefs, we have convictions - we have deep and lasting truths. Of course, the truths we affirm today may someday change and are never carved in stone. But as people of faith, we find meaning and inspiration in the journey those principles challenge and inspire us to make - a journey that calls us to listen, to learn, and to grow and that challenges us to build a world that is free and fair and just not only for ourselves but for the whole human family. Those are our truths, our principles, our values. May they bring us meaning and purpose, hope and joy this day and every day.