

The Authority We Share

A Sermon Delivered on May 2, 2010
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“I call religion a natural authority,
but it has usually been conceived
as a supernatural authority.”
-- Herbert Read*

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Reading: by the Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams, from an essay entitled “From Cage to Covenant” (*The Prophethood of All Believers*, p. 136)

Liberal religion’s attitude of mind we generally characterize as a critical stance before mere tradition, impatience with creeds once-for-all delivered, the rejection of coercion in religion, freedom of conscience, open-mindedness, tolerance - the liberation of the human spirit from [external] authorities. Beautiful attitudes! But attitudes alone do not make or change history. The road to hell is paved with good attitudes. They require institutional embodiment. Indeed, the liberal attitudes mentioned appeared initially in the seventeenth century in connection with a power struggle undertaken in order to change social structures. This struggle was a revolutionary institutional struggle, a struggle against the cage of centralized power in church and state and economic order.

Reading: by the Unitarian Universalist minister Alice Blair Wesley, from the introduction of *The Cambridge Platform - Contemporary Reader’s Edition* (Peter Hughes, editor)

The Cambridge Platform explains and justifies how congregational churches work... The Platform can be understood to declare that the substance of the free church is the spirit of neighborly love. Everything in its “administration” follows from the primacy of this one experienced, central, holy reality... The one end of everything the gathered members do, says the Platform, is “edification,” that is, mutual learning and teaching concerning the many complex ways of love. The people must gather regularly and often for ongoing mutual learning to take place. Otherwise, the “spirit of love” is just a bodiless abstraction.

Reading: by Mary Caroline Richards from a piece entitled “Centering”

But how are we to love when we are stiff and numb and disinterested? How are we to transform ourselves into limber and soft organisms lying open to the world at the quick? By what process and agency do we perform the Great Work, transforming lowly materials into gold? Love, like its counterpart Death, is yielding at the center... At the center the love must live.

One gives up all one has for this. This is the love that resides in the self, the self-love, out of which all love pours. The fountain, the source. At the center. One gives up all the treasured sorrow and self-mistrust, all the precious loathing and suspicion, all the secret triumphs of withdrawal. One bends in the wind. There are many disciplines that strengthen one’s athleticism for love. It takes all one’s strength. And yet it takes all one’s weakness too. Sometimes it is only by having all one’s so-called strength pulverized that one is weak enough, strong enough, to yield... Do not speak about strength and weakness, manliness and womanliness, aggressiveness and submissiveness. Look at this flower. Look at this child. Look at this rock with lichen growing on it. Listen to this gull scream as he drops through the air to gobble bread I throw and

clumsily rights himself in the wind. Bear ye one another's burdens, the Lord said, and he was talking law.

Love is not a doctrine, Peace is not an international agreement. Love and Peace are beings who live as possibilities in us.

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Last Sunday I was invited to be guest in one of our religious education classes: the sixth and seventh graders, who, this year, have been following a curriculum called "Neighboring Faiths." In the course of the last few months the students have learned about other local churches and religious communities. They have visited the local synagogue, mosque, and Zen center, as well St. Mary's Catholic Church, the Quakers, Church of the Living God, and the Vineyard. And they have been gathering information about how these various groups worship and practice their faith.

On a few sheets of butcher paper posted on the wall, they created a big grid, on which they kept track of the various groups they had met, and what they learned about their holy scriptures, their holidays, their thoughts about life after death, and their beliefs about God.

Last week it was my job to tell them about our faith. As you might expect, I explained that in our congregations we have a wide range of beliefs: some of us believe in God, and some don't. I asked the kids about their own thoughts and experiences. It was a good conversation.

But in the end I was worried that the kids were getting the impression that, because we embrace such a great variety of religious ideas, it means we don't really care about our beliefs. Summarizing what I had said about our holy books, they wrote on the butcher paper, "many/any, whatever you believe is holy." About the afterlife they wrote, "variety => whatever you believe."

So I made a point of telling them, the fact of the matter is our religious convictions are so important to us that we don't want anyone else to tell us what it is we are supposed to believe. We don't want to leave it to some bishop or pope to tell us. We don't want some ancient religious text to be the final authority. Our beliefs are so important we believe each of us has the authority and the responsibility to reach our own conclusions about the crux of our faith.

Now, to some people, this may sound like a recipe for religious anarchy. Looking at how our churches operate, some say, Unitarian Universalism hardly qualifies as an organized

religion. And it's true. We are sometimes a rather disorganized bunch. But this a price we are willing to pay for the sake of religious freedom and self-determination.

We practice our faith in a very particular way and for good reason.

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One way to get a better understanding of why things are the way they are in our churches, is to look at how we got here. It is an interesting story.

I often begin the story with the events that led the creation of the First Universalist Church in Urbana, on May 17th, 1858. But the story actually begins long before that.

Another place to begin our story is with the Pilgrims, who came to this continent in 1620, and the 20,000 Puritans who settled in New England during the Great Migration in the 1630s. By the 1800s many of the originally Puritan churches were Unitarian. Our oldest Unitarian congregations today, are among those founded back in the 1600s.

Alice Blair Wesley points out that we often think the reason our Universalist and Unitarian ancestors left Europe, was because of theological differences: their opposition to doctrines about innate human sinfulness, and their belief in universal salvation. But this is not really the case. Our ancestors actually left the shores of England, because they disagreed about how churches should be governed. The contentious questions at the time were: how should churches be organized in the spirit of mutual love, and who in these churches should have authority, and why.

For decades English Puritans had been trying to move the Church of England toward accepting a more personal experience of spirituality. They held study groups and conferences in which both lay people and ministers would study scripture. And they pushed the envelope of convention by preaching, not only on Sundays, but on market days, as well. It was because of these practices, that the Puritans were thwarted and persecuted by both the monarchs and bishops of England. So they took their ideas of grassroots religious organization and personal religious experience to the New World.

In the 1640s a civil war broke out in England, King Charles I was beheaded, the rule of Parliament was established, and Oliver Cromwell rose to power. In England at the time, questions of church organization revolved around the difference between episcopal and presbyterian authority. The Episcopalians believed the church should be controlled by a hierarchy of bishops. The Presbyterians, on the other hand, gave greater authority to church elders.

In 1645 there was a meeting of church leaders in London's Westminster Hall, which formally established the presbyterial church order, and published the so-called Westminster Profession.

Now the Puritans in New England were well aware of these developments. So they convened a synod in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in which elected church leaders drafted a response. Overall, they said, they agreed with the Westminster Profession. Their only points of difference had to do with authority in the church. In August of 1649 they published a statement called “The Cambridge Platform,” in which they explained and justified their position.

The Cambridge Platform is a short document. Less than fifty pages, with seventeen concise chapters, that address practical issues of church governance like membership, election of officers, ordination of ministers, and conflict resolution. But it is not merely an organizational manual. It is a theological treatise that shows how congregational church practice is firmly rooted in Holy Scripture. The title of the Platform’s first chapter frames it clearly. It is entitled “Of the Form of Church Government and that It Is One, Immutable and Prescribed in the Word of God.”

The Platform has 308 footnotes that point to specific biblical passages, beginning in the book of Genesis, all the way through to the final book of Revelation. The authors make the case that their understanding congregational life is the same as that of the very first free church, the family of Sarah and Abraham, as well as the nation of Israel, beginning with Moses, as well as Jesus and his followers, as well as the first churches visited by Paul. All of these stories speak of individuals’ direct experience of the holy, their vision of a better world, and their efforts to join together and live accordingly, that they might create that better world, that heaven on earth.

What the Platform says, in a nutshell, is that authority should not rest with the bishops or with the elders, but with the gathered membership - the congregation as a whole. This is what we call congregational polity.

As James Luther Adams put it, congregational polity represents a dispersion of power and responsibility in two senses. On the one hand, there is no ecclesiastical authority above local congregations. On the other hand, all authority within a congregation arises from its members.

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As far as the early New England Unitarians were concerned, the Bible and church history were all about one thing: the free and covenanted practice of social love. The “substance” of a free church, they said, has always been the same: the holy spirit of mutual love.

The purpose of the Cambridge Platform was to formalize how members of the free church would gather to learn and teach about the many complex ways of neighborly love. Churches were organized, because people understood that we must gather regularly and often, for real mutual learning to take place. Otherwise the “spirit of love” is just a bodiless abstraction. Otherwise love is merely a nice idea, a beautiful attitude. But

beautiful attitudes alone cannot change the world. As James Luther Adams points out, the road to hell is paved with good attitudes.

If our good intentions are to amount to anything, they need to be institutionally embodied. This is the revolutionary struggle in which our ancestors were engaged: a revolutionary institutional struggle against the cage of centralized power in church and state and economic order.

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It was the feminist theologian Carter Heyward who wrote, “Love, like truth and beauty, is concrete. Love is not fundamentally a sweet feeling... Love is active, effective, a matter of making reciprocal and mutually beneficial relations with one’s friends and enemies. Love creates righteousness, or justice, here on earth.”

The experience of love begins deep within each of us. At the center of our souls lies the fountain out of which all love pours. This is where our authority begins. But our authority does not end there. Our authority extends to the network of relationships created here, among us, in this religious community. Our authority grows through our actions and interactions guided by holy love - which is justice.

In this community each of us has authority. And with this authority comes responsibility. The responsibility to engage fully in this unprecedented religious experiment we are conducting right here, right now.

We, who are gathered here, give shape to our faith. This particular collection of individuals, at this unique moment in history - we are called to define the substance of our religious tradition authoritatively. And the definition I am talking about is not a matter of choosing beautiful words to describe lofty ideals. We define the substance of our faith in how we live our lives. In how we act. In how we engage with one another. Are truthful? Are we just? Are we generous? Are we compassionate?

“Love is not a doctrine, Peace is not an international agreement. Love and Peace are beings who live as possibilities in us.” Whether these possibilities become realities depends on no one but us. Each of us. And all of us, together.

This is the point I hope our children learn in their religious education classes. This is what our church is all about.

May we be mindful of the love that arises within us.
May we allow this love to take shape among us,
so that, together, we might transform the world, beginning with ourselves.

Amen.