

“IN PRAISE OF REASON”

The First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts
The Rev. Ken Sawyer
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I met last week with both of our youth groups in turn, which was a great pleasure. In both cases there was some fun and there was some heady, thoughtful discussion, mostly about religion. In both groups, one of the questions that came up was, Is Unitarian Universalism a religion? And if it is, or if it isn't, is that a good thing?

The high schoolers got to talking about the nature of UUism, what defines us as a religious movement. It was after a while that one of them, Brett Baker, wondered if a high regard for reason isn't a defining characteristic – which of course it is, and always has been. Since 1985 it has been right there in the UUA's statement of Principles and Purposes, as one of the sources our living tradition draws from: “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.”

When the greatest of Unitarian historians of the first half of the twentieth century, Earl Morse Wilbur, published his two-volume history of Unitarianism from the earliest days of the Reformation, cataloging all its various incarnations – as any UU minister can tell you, for we have all been required to read Wilbur -- he said there were three characteristics that recurred in place after place, century after century: freedom, toleration, and reason.

But reason as a distinguishing characteristic had not sprung quickly to the group's mind nor mine, although I know that at Brett's age I would have thought of it right away, and in adult groups I have led here, it is often a priority for many.

But maybe I have come to take it for granted. The last and only time I have preached a sermon about reason before was thirty years ago, and then it had to share the spotlight with individualism, another traditional UU value. It had become popular back then, as it has been since, to say that we had -- and now have -- too much of both. I had probably said so myself, but I did not want either value to lose too much of the honor and respect we have traditionally given them.

I still don't, and so I got out my file titled “Reason,” three or four inches high, to have another go at it, to speak again in praise of reason as a way we have of searching for religious truth, and in favor of an effort for greater reasonableness in society at large that I consider a religious endeavor.

Take the Rapture, when true believers will waft off to Heaven while the rest of us undergo extraordinary unpleasantness. The Rapture is the subject of a series of books that has sold millions of copies. And I don't know for absolutely sure that these visions from the Book of Revelation are not about to come true.

We have a religion that encourages us to think, and to wonder, is that at all likely, does it comport with what I know about how things are? But it is possible that the Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, Scientologists, and others who hold to beliefs that seem especially odd to others may be right. Their track record so is not great when it comes to prediction. But as I said, it may well be, as some of our neighbors believe, that Jesus or some other messiah will come to earth soon and the end of days arrive.

Or maybe, three years from now the world as we know it will come to an end because an ancient Mayan calendar only extended that far, as is the plot of the latest apocalyptic movie, “2012.” It may be a fun movie to watch. I have nothing against imagination, far from it. But we have a religion that encourages us to think, and to wonder, is it likely at all, is that how life works?

It does not take a lot of research to know that messianic and apocalyptic predictions have been made since approximately forever. A classic case was that of the Millerites here in New England back in the 1840s.

William Miller of Vermont had evolved from a Freemason Deist to a Baptist who believed that one Bible passage [Daniel 8:14] foretold when Jesus' return would come. He could not be more precise than that it would be in the year that began on March 21, 1843. Tens of thousands of people were ready and waiting. When it did not happen, it was decided that the wrong Jewish calendar had been used, and the right date was April 18. Still no returning Jesus of the sort predicted in the Book of Revelation.

A Miller follower reworked the numbers, and hordes of people came to Exeter, New Hampshire, for October 22, 1844, which thereafter was known as the Great Disappointment. But the disappointment was not so great but that several denominations survived to carry on the expectation of Jesus' imminent return, including the Seventh Day Adventists, which is a denomination vastly larger than our own.

We are among the other folk, the ones who wonder, is that likely, that some date in some old book, or some old Mayan calendar, is likely to have any predictive power? That does not seem reasonable now, does it? Well, no.

We have been like that for a long time, we First Parishioners. Heirs of a Puritan, seventeenth-century founding, the generations that followed carried the part of that tradition that involved an independent, challenging, and learned intellectual spirit.

But of course there was another part of that tradition, the actual content of their theology, a stern Calvinism that was tinder to the fire called the Great Awakening that swept across England and then in the 1740s the United States. Camp meetings were held and attracted huge crowds. These sessions included terrifying accounts of the torments of Hell that awaited any who did not have a conversion experience, which from Jonathan Edwards on involved extreme emotional manifestations, as one's situation sank in and one grasped the need for salvation in Christ.

Many ministers welcomed the enthusiasm these visits brought to their communities, and the newly converted members in their congregations. But other ministers did not, especially as the Great Awakening had a more and more sordid side, the gatherings increasingly tainted with debauchery.

But from the beginning there were those like Charles Chauncey, minister of the First Church of Boston, who objected to the whole idea of conversion by enthusiasm, salvation by emotional outburst. These people – the religious liberals of their day – said God does not work that way, and salvation is a matter of steady self-improvement and upright conduct. It stands to reason.

Rather than accept the tenets of Calvinism, the liberals went back to the Bible, insisting that it be read in the light of reason. Before you know it, gone were the doctrines of predestination, election, native depravity, the divinity of Jesus, and the trinity. It was perfectly reasonable.

After coffee hour today, newcomers and others are encouraged to stay for lunch and learn more about Unitarian Universalism and the First Parish. The best part of such session for me, though, is the other way around, when I get to hear how it happens that people have come here. And the things to like here are many, people say – the music, the Sunday school, the warmth of the community.

But as often as not the story of how they ended up here begins back in grade school or high school or college or later, whenever it was that they realized, what I am being told in the religion I have been part of does not ring true to me. Again, it is not for me to say that the other religion may not be right – but it wasn't right for me, people say – it did not make sense to me and I needed it to.

The counter argument can be, but reason, science, that part of your brain is fine for designing widgets and balancing the checkbook but religion does not need to make sense, it is a matter of belief, of faith, of myths and rituals and catechisms where reason needs to back off.

And I am all for myth and poetry and beauty and some ritual in religion. But I like being in a religion that does not expect me to ascribe to things in which I disbelieve, that expects its members from earliest ages to question and think for ourselves.

It is part of our heritage, one that is richer than Christianity alone but also includes the Enlightenment and thinkers back to ancient Rome and Greece. When I was growing up in a Unitarian Sunday school, we had a curriculum that included books we read about Moses; and Jesus, the carpenter's son; and Akhenaton, the pharaoh who is remembered – along with being the husband of Nefertiti – as the first monotheist, who believed there was only one god, the sun; but also one about Socrates. To speak of a heritage that blends classical and Judeo-Christian streams is to speak of a faith of the head and the heart, of reason and compassion. That is who we are, or try to be.

The world needs us, as small a movement as we are, as miniscule as our efforts may amount to. But nuttiness is running rampant in the land, as numerous statistics testify.

“One-fifth of Americans believe that the sun goes around the Earth, instead of the other way around. And only about half know that humans did not live at the same time as dinosaurs.”¹

“Many more Americans believe in the Virgin Birth than in Darwin's theory of evolution.”²

In fact, a sizable group of non-Christians say they believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus. There are otherwise-sensible people who speak of Adam and Eve as if they were people who lived once, rather than characters in an old fable.

I bet I have a few things I believe that I shouldn't. It is hard not to. My favorite headline in my Reason file is, “Your Brain Lies to You.” It is an editorial [by Sam Wang and Sandra Aamodt] that begins, “False ideas are everywhere.” They have political lies in mind. They think dispelling them is hard, because of how memory works.

There is something called source amnesia which “can lead people to forget whether a statement is true.... With time, this misremembering only gets worse.... Even if they do not understand the neuroscience behind source amnesia, campaign strategists can exploit it to spread misinformation. They know that if their message is initially memorable, its impression will persist long after it is debunked.”³ The authors cite the attacks on John Kerry by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and the claim that then-Senator Obama is Muslim.

There are so many other examples out there now. You do not need me to tell you that our society has fragmented into groups that only hear what they already believe, however erroneous it may be. Reason does not always win the day, or even get heard sometimes, certainly not if your main source of information is talk radio or the wackier TV news channels.

That article I just quoted? It concludes, “In 1919, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes of the Supreme Court wrote that ‘the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market.’ Holmes erroneously assumed that ideas are more likely to spread if they are honest. Our brains do not naturally obey this admirable dictum, but by better understanding the mechanisms of memory perhaps we can move closer to Holmes' ideal.”⁴

Perhaps. But reason has to compete with other opponents. As a prime example, “it is human nature to look for meaning where there isn't any.” That is a quote from a book that came out earlier this year, *The Numbers Game*. Having quoted that line, a book reviewer added parenthetically, “(see under: religion),” putting me in mind of something the cartoonist Scott Adams wrote: “Nothing defines humans better than their willingness to do irrational things in

¹ Nicholas Kristof, “The Hubris of the Humanities,” *New York Times*, 12/6/2005.

² Garry Wills, “The Day the Enlightenment Went Out,” *New York Times*, 11/4/2004.

³ Sam Wang and Sandra Aamodt, “Your Brain Lies to You,” *New York Times*, 6/27/2008.

⁴ *Ibid.*

pursuit of phenomenally unlikely payoffs. This is the principle behind lotteries, dating, and religion”⁵ – which, I would admit in modesty, others might say about our own aspirations for a just society and a peaceful world.

The British authors of *The Numbers Game* “devote an entire chapter to chance to explain why the public sometimes sees a pattern where there is no such thing.” The book reviewer [Barry Gewen] writes, “Tattoo this on your arm: a pattern doesn’t always mean a plan. Throw some rice in the air and you will most likely see patterns in the way it lands.

“Statisticians even have a name for the phenomenon: it’s called the Texas Sharpshooter Fallacy. ‘The alleged sharpshooter,’ the authors write, ‘takes numerous shots at a barn (actually he’s a terrible shot – that why it’s a fallacy), then draws his bull’s-eye afterward, around the holes that cluster.’

“Public misinformation and even panic are fed by all sorts of people who draw post-hoc bull’s-eyes: agenda-driven activists, incompetent or demagogic politicians, journalists who like a good story, clueless ‘experts.’”⁶

Reason has much to compete with, but I have got to stop; and alas, with at least three more inches of material still unused, including what I might have said about the book that I thought this sermon was going to be about, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* by Paul Boghossian.

Let me say two more things, though: As I may have said before over the years, a time or two or a hundred, it is of course a matter of balance, or maybe creative tension.

People bemoan a style of sermon or discourse that is overly academic, or a preacher or fellow parishioner who is all in her head, and I do not doubt such people exist; indeed, maybe I qualify myself some weeks, perhaps when I finally preach about relativism and constructivism. But I have heard a lot of UU preaching and conversation in my day, and while I think I rarely heard reason abandoned, or at least not very far or for very long, I do not think it was often oppressive.

And I know there are times when someone is being more imaginative and credulous, or more rational and incredulous, than is in the usual comfort zone of the other person or people there; and we bear with each other, for the most part, I think.

And that’s my final point, how both reason and imagination can flourish in community. I think relationships and interactions can strengthen them both. And I think it happens here, certainly for me, and I hope for you as well.

⁵ Scott Adams, *The Dilbert Principle* (New York: HarperBusiness [sic], 1996), p. 76.

⁶ Barry Gewen, “What Are the Odds a Handy, Quotable Statistic Is Lying? Better Than Even,” *New York Times*, 2/3/2009, C6.