

The Root of It All

preached by the Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland, September 25, 2011

During the height of the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s the late Gil Scott-Heron, one of the father's of hip hop, released an anti-apartheid track called "Let Me See Your ID." Its' lyrics were prophetic, in the same sense that the words of the ancient Hebrew prophets were prophetic. They denounced the powerful for oppressing the marginalized and warned against the chicanery of false prophets.

One my favorite passages in the song has to do with Scott-Heron's reaction to Jerry Falwell's 1985 visit to South Africa. The visit took place a few years after Falwell had founded the Moral Majority. During the course of his visit Falwell claimed to come as a representative of the American people, met with the apartheid President and denounced Archbishop Desmond Tutu as a "phony." In response, Scott-Heron waxed, "Other night I was watching TV again and I seen that Falwell had been a representative of the American people over in South Africa. Somebody in here, said whatever happened to the separation between church and state? I said, 'Especially this church and that state!'"

I just love that quote, "Especially this church and that state!" It encapsulates some of the central issues at stake in the debates over freedom of religion and religious tolerance. Namely, is religion to be a tool of a repressive state or is it to be something else? Will religion liberate the human spirit or will it dampen it?

With a few exceptions we religious liberals have had firm responses to those two questions. We believe in the separation of church and state. And we claim religion's power to be a force for human liberation. Our beliefs have sometimes placed us on the edges of organized religion.

The 20th century Unitarian Universalist social ethicist James Luther Adams used to argue that everyone has faith. In his opinion, and it is a classical liberal one, everyone has faith because everyone is in some manner religious. All people, even the most devote atheists, believe in something more powerful and grander than themselves. God can be replaced with the laws of physics but only a deluded individual thinks they are the supreme master of the universe. We are all ultimately dependent on those things that are greater than ourselves.

Since the 18th century religious liberals have argued that the experience of dependence is the religious experience. Everyone has that experience therefore everyone is religious. The issue is not whether or not we have faith. Instead the questions are: what do we have faith in? And, are we free to examine our faith? Adams liked to say, "An unexamined faith is not worth having..." It is one of great tasks as a liberal religious community to collectively examine our faiths.

In order to examine our faith throughly it must be freely chosen. It is when we plumb the depths of our own experiences that we find religious truth. Creeds and doctrines are meaningful to the extent that we have tested them against the truth of our own experience. Otherwise they are ossified relics, statements of religious meaning derived not from our own experiences but instead from the lives of and experiences of others. Such statements may be true for some people or for some time

but they are not true for all people or for all time. Religious truth shifts as culture and human knowledge shifts. Creation myths that were once seen as literally true are now best understood metaphorically. Unless we examine our faith it risks because stagnant. Instead of feeding us it will inhibit us.

Part of examining faith is understanding where it comes from. Adams used to joke that there is no such thing as the immaculate conception of an idea. Understanding those who have gone before helps us to understand who we are today. Our religious ancestors, particularly our Unitarian ancestors, have their roots in the left-wing of the Protestant Reformation. When Martin Luther released his Ninety-Five Theses condemning the Catholic Church's sale of indulgences he unwittingly unleashed the pent-up religious dreams of hundreds of thousands of people who wanted more than the Roman Catholic Church offered them. We are the heirs of those who wanted more than either the Roman Catholic church or Luther offered.

Luther felt that the Roman Catholic Church had become corrupt sometime during the Middle Ages. His calls for reform were rooted in a desire to bring the church back to what he thought of as its core teachings. He argued for a theological position known as sola scriptura. This was, and is, the idea that the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament are the only divinely inspired scriptures and that in them rests the divine authority of God. The key to faith is to unlock the meaning of the Bible and follow its teachings. Nothing else is necessary.

That is what Luther claimed but in truth his reading of the Bible was deeply influenced by orthodox Roman Catholic theology. Luther began his career as an Augustinian monk and when he read the Bible he found many of the theological teachings of Augustine and other early church fathers contained within it. He upheld the Trinity, a belief in original sin and human depravity and preached atonement theology--the idea that Jesus Christ died to cleanse the world of human sin. He taught, however, that the hierarchy and authority of the Catholic church was not biblical. As such, it was the work of the Devil and must be resisted.

Our religious ancestors agreed with him, to a point. They shared his view that the Catholic church had become corrupt and that Christians needed to return to their roots. However, they disagreed with Luther over which roots they needed to return to. Unlike Luther, who kept most of the church's orthodox teachings, they discarded anything that they could not find clear support for in either the Hebrew Bible or the Christian New Testament. Much of orthodox Christian theology rests upon shaky biblical grounds. The doctrines of original sin, the Trinity and atonement are all matters of interpretation. When our religious ancestors read the Bible they tossed out the Trinity, which is never clearly mentioned in any biblical text, and, in most cases, teachings about original sin, human depravity and atonement as well.

For both Luther and our religious ancestors the key question was when did the Catholic church become corrupt. For our religious ancestors there was a clear answer, the Council of Nicaea. Christianity became corrupt at that church council for two reasons. The first was that was when the church allied itself with the Roman Empire. The second was that in doing so it began to establish an orthodoxy, and that orthodoxy served the needs of the state more than it served the religious needs of people.

The Council of Nicaea was the birthplace of what Cornell West has called "Constantinian Christianity." He defines that as "Christian faith and practice well-adjusted to greed, hatred, and fear." This makes the council one of the key turning points of human history. Prior to it the mainstream of Christianity was a dissenting faith, a faith that often found itself at odds with the power structures of the Roman Empire. After the council the Christian church emerged with the full weight of the Empire behind it. This allowed bishops to use imperial might to enforce religious orthodoxy. But this support came with a price. It required that Christian clergy support the Roman Empire.

Most gladly did this. For the first three centuries of its existence Christianity had wavered between being begrudgingly tolerated and persecuted. The years leading up to the council saw some of the most brutal repression of Christianity. During what has been called the Great Persecution the Emperor Diocletian demanded that all Christian clergy participate in pagan rituals to demonstrate their loyalty to the Roman Empire. Those that refused to sacrifice to the pagan gods were imprisoned or executed in often gruesome manners.

The Great Persecution lasted about three years and ended when Diocletian abdicated the imperial throne. He was replaced by a college of four Emperors, including Constantine who, about twenty years later as sole emperor would sponsor the Council of Nicaea.

The origins of the council lie in something called the Arian controversy, named after the priest Arius. Arius taught that Jesus was less than God the Father. God had created Jesus and God pre-existed him. Some of Arius's followers went so far as to claim that Jesus was God's son by virtue of adoption. If a person followed Jesus's exemplary moral life then, God might also adopt that person. God could potentially have many children.

These ideas were dangerous to both the church hierarchy and the Empire. As the scholar Richard Rubenstein has pointed out, "If Jesus' life and character were supposed to serve ordinary Christians as a usable model of behavior, the principal mission of the clergy would be to help people transform themselves, not maintain theological and political unity throughout the empire." Jesus was a political radical who advocated for the poor against the powerful. He was executed as a criminal by the Roman state. As moral exemplar he was dangerously subversive.

Constantine preferred the theology of a group of Christians who disagreed with Arius over the nature of the divinity of Jesus. Their principal leader was a bishop named Athanasius. Athanasius taught Jesus and God were essentially one. The immortality that Jesus offered was not to be found by following his example. Instead it was to be gained by accepting him as a savior and, in turn, submitting to the authority of the church hierarchy. If the church was part of the state then submitting to its authority also meant submitting to state authority.

The council took place at the emperor's summer residence and under his direct supervision. It was supposed to be a meeting of religious leaders but Constantine thought fit to personally participate. He sat in the council but, as a sign of respect for the ecclesiastical power of the bishops, he sat a little to the side. This did not stop him from occasionally opining about theological matters.

He was not stopped either by the fact that he was not even formally a member of the Christian church. He found that the moral strictures of Christianity were inconvenient for a Roman Emperor.

Like other emperors before him he was a military leader and frequently at war. Moreover, he often ordered the execution or even assassination of his political opponents. Rather than risk being called a hypocrite or find himself taken to task by Christian clergy he remained a pagan until it was convenient to become Christian. He converted on his deathbed.

During the council Constantine was firmly on the side of Athanasius and the anti-Arians. It is easy to imagine the effect that this had on the debate. Even though Constantine was not officially a Christian he was the most powerful person in the world. And, furthermore, he had a reputation for treating his political opponents unkindly, no matter who they were. He executed one of his sons and probably assassinated one of his wives. It does not seem coincidental that the theological position he backed was the one that carried the day. It was codified into the Nicene Creed, something that most Christians still recite today.

The Council of Nicaea was not the final word in the Arian controversy. It lasted for another fifty or so years before the Nicene Christians, as they came to be called, firmly established control of the Christian church. During those years of conflict partisans took to bloody fights in the streets, numerous church councils were convened and bishops excommunicated each other. The ascendance of one side or another frequently depended upon the favor of the imperial throne. Though all but one of Constantine's successors were Christian--the Emperor Julian briefly tried to return the empire to its pagan roots--not all of them were Nicenes. For more than a decade the Arian emperor Valens held the throne and used it to promote a less godlike Jesus.

Victory for the Nicenes finally came at the Council of Constantinople organized by the emperor Theodosius. At the council the Nicene Creed was reaffirmed and adjusted to allow room for the views of the more conservative Arians. The conservative Arians thought that Jesus was not the same as God the Father but that Jesus was God nonetheless. With addition of the Holy Spirit into the Godhead and the formalization of the Trinity they were brought into full communion with their Nicene counterparts. The remaining Arians, the ones who did not see Jesus as entirely the same as God the Father, quickly found their views outlawed. Theodosius made it a crime punishable by death to either espouse Arian views or own Arian books.

It was not until the Reformation that people were able to openly question the Trinity and the nature and divinity of Jesus again. Luther's break with the Roman Catholic Church also created a break between church and state. Some religious communities began to emerge that did not see themselves as part of the official power structure. Instead, they thought their central mission was to help people live religious lives and follow the moral example of Jesus.

These dissenting churches include our religious ancestors. The Unitarians in Europe, particularly those in Poland, were among the first churches not directly tied to state power. It is probably not surprising that they included pacifists and early proponents of religious pluralism. Some of these early Unitarians even hosted interfaith dialogues between themselves and neighboring Muslims and Jews. Freed from the theological baggage of the Trinity they were able to recognize that the God they worshipped was, in essence, the same God that was found in Islam and Judaism.

This suggests that what was really at stake at the Council of Nicaea was not primarily the divinity of Jesus. Rather it was the question of whether or not multiple understandings of the divine were possible within the Christian church. For the three hundred years before the council many different

understandings of Jesus were present within Christianity. One reason why there were so many gospels, and there were hundreds if all of the non-canonical ones are counted, is that there were so many different views of who Jesus was. It is when Christianity started to become the state religion that understandings of the identity of Jesus were limited.

At its heart, then, the Council of Nicaea and the Arian controversy were about the religious imagination. Was the religious imagination to be limited, was there only to be one vision of Jesus, or were there to be many? Creeds like the Nicene Creed inherently limit the religious imagination. They circumscribe what is possible.

Our religious liberal tradition takes the opposite approach. Instead of limiting our understanding of the divine our tradition calls upon us to expand it. We are encouraged to look beyond any single source for religious truth. As you will find in the front of our hymnals, "the living tradition we share draws from many sources." Those sources include our personal experiences, wisdom from the world's religious traditions, the Bible, science and reason.

Those sources provide us with a rich tapestry for the religious imagination. And they call us to stretch ourselves to imagine not only what is but what might be possible. Instead of affirming current orthodoxies we are challenged to examine them and, if they are found wanting, seek out new truths.

This dynamism is subversive, for it always challenges the status quo, but it also liberating. It creates new possibilities and imbues with the hope for better, as yet unforeseen, tomorrows. Diane di Prima rants, "the only war that matters is the war against the imagination."

We are all partisans in that war. One of the ultimate questions in life is whether you think that the imagination should be limited to one truth or expanded to embrace many. We all have to ask: Do I accept what is or yearn for what might be? Do I recognize that each person and each tradition has only a portion of the truth or do I claim truth as my unique property? Is there but one or are there many ways of being? Do I choose heterodoxy or orthodoxy?

Such questions extend beyond the religious realm. Constantine was right to seek theological unity for his state. Theological unity supported his interests. Theological diversity encourages diversity of opinion. Diversity of opinion allows for the questioning of all orthodoxies: religious, political, cultural and economic. That is why di Prima is right, "the only war that matters is the war against the imagination." And we are all partisans in that war. For the imagination leads us to a world of many possibilities, instead of only one.

As di Prima:

There is no way you can avoid taking sides
There is no way you can not have a poetics
no matter what you do: plumber, baker, teacher

May we remember this and in doing so always open our minds to new possibilities.

Amen and Blessed Be.