

“How to Know Your Beliefs Are Right (and others are wrong!)”

By The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones on September 2, 2007

For The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough

How accepting are we of people whose beliefs are different from ours? I ask because I've known people in other UU churches who said the reason they didn't join was that they didn't feel accepted. A man in my California church told me “I'm not entirely comfortable with my beliefs here. From things that people have said to me I'm not sure if it's okay to be a Christian in this church.”

I wonder if some people might feel like that here. The man had found the Achilles heel of Unitarian Universalist tolerance. We mean to be accepting without judging people's beliefs, but we can be undercut by arrogance. It's as if we said “you can hold any beliefs that work for you as a UU, as long as you believe like us.” Rather like Henry Ford who once said “I don't care what color a car is as long as it's black.”

After hearing the man's concerns I learned another member said he was going to quit if our church kept having speakers like the two we had had recently whom he disliked. It appeared our vaunted respect for freedom of belief had found a limit and I was sorely disappointed.

I'll tell you what I told that church that I served for nearly a decade. I trust you to disagree strongly with me sometimes, and disagree with guest speakers too, but not to stay away because of that.

If you don't disagree strongly at times we're not doing what we should. Either speakers (including me) are too cautious or some members are avoiding ideas that make them uncomfortable. Like Christianity. One of my goals in ministry is to help the congregation foster caring honesty and openness so that disagreement is respected and considered healthy.

The services that upset the member of my former church were part of a series on diverse theologies held by Unitarian Universalists. Speakers represented five different UU belief systems-- Buddhist, Christian, Pagan, Panentheist and Naturalist. I agreed with only one of the speakers—me. I found value in all the others, in ideas that challenged, stretched and enriched my views. Why would UU's want to listen only to people who agreed with them all the time? How boring! How would we grow?

How do you know your beliefs are right (and others are wrong)? Let's be honest. You do think your beliefs are right and if that's so—some awfully nice people with conflicting beliefs have got to be wrong.

How do you reach the place where you disagree with people whom you respect and who know they are respected? If you're proud of being open-minded and accepting of diversity how do you draw a line between positions you respect and those that are too far out? Be real. How about nuts? Some ideas do sound nuts to us. So do their owners.

We Unitarian Universalists say we believe in “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.... [We affirm] acceptance of one another; [we encourage] spiritual growth in our congregations [and] a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” But some people stretch us farther than we are willing to be stretched. How and where do you draw your line?

Poet Claire Bateman said in her poem entitled “Conspiracy”:

Why is it me they always sit beside
 when rows of empty seats beg
 for the reassurance of human weight?
 I count the shirts he wears
 while he tells me about NASA’s secret plan
 to inject everyone with drugs
 that cancel the need for breath
 in preparation for life underwater
 or on the moon. His mission
 is to warn the nation not to let them do it.
 It’s not God’s plan for people to live
 underwater or on the moon.
 Tell your neighbors.
 Warn your friends.
 Resist while there’s still time.

After he leaves, my breath nudges me
 almost involuntarily, a delicate lover
 that has haunted me since birth
 like a family secret, a middle name, the Holy Ghost--
 the first pleasure of surfacing,
 the last souvenir to be given up to customs
 on departure for some place
 alien as the ocean,
 airless as the moon.

Breath, I put my arms around you
 and seal our pact with an impossible kiss.

Tell your neighbors.
 Warn your friends.
 Resist while there’s still time.

Okay, some ideas sound silly to us. People expressing them sound nuts to us. It doesn’t do you any good to argue with them. It doesn’t help them either. Most of them aren’t dangerous. Be patient, as much as you can be. And then go back to what you believe and hold it as close as your breath. But there are other challenges you need to take seriously.

Contradictory theologies and crazy ideas are easy compared to personal conflicts with people we respect. We don’t burn Servetuses at the stake any more. But in conflicts over other issues close to where we live--in personal relations--we can become dangerous to one another.

How do you know your beliefs are right (and others are wrong) when we talk about personal or political differences? Sometimes we try to avoid them or we say “let’s be reasonable.” (Just whose reason will we follow?) Jesus is supposed to have said “You shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free.” (John 8:32). Sometimes thinking we know the Truth doesn’t make us free, it makes us hurt.

What do you do when you’re hurt and you feel oppressed? When you feel oppressed by other

people, how should you respond? One good answer common to all great world religions seems to have developed independently in each.

In the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition the answer has been called the Golden Rule since the 18th century. The best-known version in western culture is attributed to Jesus: "Treat others in ways you want them to treat you" (or more commonly translated "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (Matthew 7:12) Rabbi Hillel who died about 20 years before Jesus, said "What is hateful to thee, do not unto thy fellowman; this is the whole Law; the rest is mere commentary." Islamic scripture says: "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself." (40th Hadith of an-Nawawi 13)

In Buddhism it goes: "a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another? (Samyutta Nikaya v.353) Hindu scripture says "This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you." (Mahabharata 5:1517) Socrates said, "Do not do to others that which would anger you if others did it to you." Finally a contemporary Pagan statement goes, "Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill, An* it harm none do what ye will." There are many similar statements.

I like best some simple words by Jesus. When he was asked what the greatest commandment is, he said: "You are to love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:31) That wasn't original with him either. A good Jew, he was quoting the Old Testament: Leviticus 19:18. That was the second half of what Jesus said was the greatest commandment. The first half was "You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." That also was a quotation from ancient Jewish scripture, Deuteronomy 6:5.

Now I'm not Christian or Jewish and as a religious naturalist I don't call on god to solve my problems, but those statements still provide a large part of my answer to the question about how and where to draw the line between positions and people I respect and those I do find unacceptable, and how I know I am right (and others are wrong.)

What authority do I use as my basis? The only one I can justly and wholly claim: myself. I didn't originate those statements but they ring true in my heart and experience. I feel no need for any other authority to justify them though I'm comfortable in acknowledging their source within the Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage and that of all the world's religions.

If I'm a Naturalist how can I say I concur in the demand that I love god as well as my neighbor? For me it is to love life and all its forms and sources, to love the universe and its ways of coming into being, to love the power beneath existence and the creation that has given us life.

This brings me to the second part of my answer about how I know I'm right. Much of my life has been special and unique to me, but none of it violates the laws of the universe that apply to you and me and everything else that surrounds us. There's a lot that I don't know but I'm convinced that it's all natural and unfolding in the only way it can, with equal application everywhere to everyone. I'm convinced that the universe plays no favorites. The laws don't change for people with the "right" beliefs. The universe will do what it will do, and we have to learn to live with it. So get on with the living and live well.

How do I know I am right in my beliefs about everything, about my life and your life and how the world is unfolding? The Truth is that I am convinced that I am NOT right, and cannot be. Convinced! I

know enough about how often and how much scientists have been wrong so that I expect them to be only approximately right and to be open to learning where they find they are mistaken. I hold the same standard to myself.

So I come back to where I started. I think my beliefs are right, approximately, but I'm sure that some of them are wrong and I need to have a community that encourages and supports and celebrates diversity if I have a chance of getting it better when I discover which ones are wrong.

I'll never hear different ideas if I surround myself with people who believe just like me. I'm convinced that it's dangerous for people to live like that. The Golden Rule helps me accept those people I disagree with. They help me grow beyond the comfort zone created by my own ideas.

Is there room here for people whose ideas are very different from those that most of us here hold? There better be. We don't have to agree with everything to learn from others. You and I have freedom here to create our own spiritual views (that's what our faith promises us—not that we will be right but that we will be free.) We can listen to ideas that we might have scoffed at once, and we may find a growing truth in them.

When we escaped old faiths we really didn't go anywhere but to ourselves. I think it helps to listen again to parts of our heritage that still charm us, like loving our neighbors and loving life and loving the God that some of us find in life.

It helps the most when we speak softly the truths that pull us in different directions, and when we choose to listen most carefully to our companions and our neighbors whose voices we need to hear well.

You know the man I started with, who wasn't sure if his beliefs were okay in that UU church? I ran into him at the UUA General Assembly this summer. First time I'd seen him in seven years. He was a voting delegate now from our old church. He knows now he is okay.

Dick Weston-Jones @2007

* The pagan statement form closest to the "Golden Rule" uses an ancient form, "An," that means "if." With "if" in the place of "An" the Wiccan Rede would go "If it harm none, do what ye will."

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