

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

Part II:

**“How Do We Know What We Know?
Exploring Epistemology”**

by

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Consider the following three Creation accounts.

First, from the biblical book of Genesis:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. . . . Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

And, of course, God goes on from there, in this familiar account, to then create sky, and land, and water, and so forth.

Secondly, consider this creation story which comes from the Bantu peoples of Central and South Africa:

Originally, the Earth was nothing but water and darkness.

Mbombo, the . . . giant ruled over this chaos. One day, he felt a terrible pain in his stomach, and vomited the sun, the moon, and the stars.

The sun shone fiercely and water steamed up in clouds. Gradually, the dry land appeared.

Mbombo vomited again, this time the trees came out of his stomach, and animals, and people, and many other things.¹

Thirdly, consider this creation story from contemporary theoretical physicists and cosmologists.

Before space and time even existed, the entire universe, inexplicably enough, was inside a tiny bubble that was a billion times smaller than a proton, which in itself is really, really small. It was hotter and denser than anything we can imagine.

¹ Whittle, Mark, *Cosmology: The History and Nature of Our Universe* (Chantilly, Virginia: The Teaching Company, 2008), p. 11.

Suddenly it exploded and the universe that we know was born with a great inflationary whoosh. Time and space began with this Big Bang, and matter was distilled out of radiant energy. In a fraction of a second, the Universe grew from smaller than a single atom to bigger than a galaxy hundreds of thousands of light years across. And the Universe kept on expanding at a fantastic rate, as eventually stars and galaxies, planets and super-galaxies took shape. Indeed, the universe is still expanding today. Surprisingly, in fact, it is actually picking up speed – that is, it is expanding at an accelerating rate.

II

So, here we have three distinctly different views of our early universe and of how it came to be – the ancient Hebrew and Christian view – as found in the book of Genesis, the ancient African Bantu view, and the contemporary scientific view.

So, if we were to step back from all three of these accounts, how would we decide which view is correct – or which view is closest to the truth? Or are there different *kinds* of truth at play here?

These, I submit, are important *epistemological* questions. These are questions about how do we know what we know? That is, how can we sure of what we know? Another way of framing it is to ask: what is our source of authority for what we know – or for what we *think* we know?

III

A couple of days ago, a news item caught my eye. The title (on the Internet) was “Tiger, Forget Buddhism, Find Christ.” The subtitle explained that this expressed opinion was coming from “Brit Hume on FOX [television].”

And, sure enough, the article quotes Hume predicting that Tiger Woods will recover as a golfer, but

Whether he can recover as a person depends on his faith. He’s said to be a Buddhist. I don’t think that faith offers the kind of forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith. So my message to Tiger

would be, "Tiger, turn to the Christian faith and you can make a total recovery and be a great example to the world."²

In the ensuing commentary following the article (on-line), there were any number of people who quoted chapter and verse from the Bible supporting Hume's view, such as this one: "The truth is that the only way to reconcile with God is through Christ - John 14:6." Continuing, the writer adds: "That is...the truth...based out of the love God has for all of us - John 3:16."

So, what we have here, I would suggest, is an example of how, even today, it is quite common for people to invoke either the church or the Bible as what I would call their epistemological trump card. In other words, when people quote scripture, I think what they are saying here, in effect, is: "Hey, this is not just my *opinion*. This comes from a higher authority. This is the holy Word of God!" That's what I mean by an epistemological trump card -- presumably *God's* opinion trumps your opinion or my opinion.

And needless to say - and we've probably all been there at one time or another - with someone passionately quoting chapter and verse to us - proceeding with the conversation is highly problematic. And it is problematic, because clearly we are starting from fundamentally different epistemological bases. Born-again fundamentalist Christians typically have no doubt that their faith is uniquely built on the foundation of God's word, as literally given to them in the Bible. That's what they've been taught and that's what they believe. And they tend to have a singular interpretation of it that doesn't allow much room for questions or doubt.

Most Unitarian Universalists, on the other hand, are much more likely to use, and to invoke, truth and wisdom that come from a wide variety of sources, and, depending on the context, we are especially inclined to honor the accepted canons of science and reason. At the same time, when it is appropriate, especially with religious views, we are also much more likely to espouse a tolerant and pluralistic approach - an approach which welcomes questions and doubts, and affords multiple interpretations. Thus, in addition to the canons of science, tolerance and a commitment to pluralism are important aspects of our epistemology.

IV

Not so in some other religious quarters, however.

² <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/Religion/post/2010/01/fox-news-tiger-woods-brit-hume-forgiveness-evangelical/1?csp=hf>.

In a book called, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, by Walter Martin, Unitarian Universalists are labeled as a dangerous and heretical cult – along with a number of other faith groups, including the Christian Scientists, the Mormons, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Baha’is. (Interesting company we keep, eh?) The author of the chapter on Unitarian Universalism is Dr. Alan W. Gomes, who teaches at a fundamentalist Christian college. Gomes attacks us for our commitment – for our *epistemological* commitment, let us note – to tolerance and to pluralism. This is what Dr. Gomes has to say about us:

Unitarian Universalists promote religious tolerance and pluralism as a virtue; conversely, [they] eschew religious exclusivism ... because [they believe] religious truth is not absolute but [is] relative and changing [over time].

Continuing, Dr. Gomes says:

Unitarian Universalists tolerate a wide variety of religious perspectives.... [They believe] all people should be tolerant of the religious ideas of others. Unitarian Universalists believe that no religion – including their own – has exclusive possession of the truth. All beliefs ought to be honored and respected for the truths in them. [They believe that] the following of almost any religion can help a dedicated individual find a better and more meaningful life.³

Not bad, eh?! To which I want to say, “Amen! You got it, Dr. Gomes! You got it right! That’s it!”

But here is what Dr. Gomes believes. Gomes writes:

God does not tolerate pluralism in religious belief....There is only one true God ... the God of the Bible. [Both Old and New Testaments express] condemnation of religious pluralism.... The Bible is qualitatively different from all other so-called sacred books and *alone* is the word of God....

“On strictly historical grounds,” Gomes continues,

³ Gomes, Alan W., the author of a chapter on Unitarian Universalism in *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Grand Rapids, MI), p. 31, as cited by Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

the Bible is the most reliable book ever penned....Contrary to the UU claim, the Bible – because it is God-breathed – is an infallible book, without error....The Bible does not contain moral errors. In contradistinction to all other religions, Christianity is based on the authority of ... the Lord Jesus Christ ... Jesus Christ is God's [only] way of salvation.⁴

These are the words of Dr. Gomes condemning our commitment, as Unitarian Universalists, to openness and religious pluralism.

Now, I suspect you've experienced this kind of the narrowness and intolerance for anything but the gospel Christian truth before. In fact, I know that some of you have experienced it up front and personally in your own family life – which can be very painful.

So, on a pastoral level, what can we do when confronted with the intolerance of someone who is beating us over the head with chapters and verses from the Bible?

Well, in my experience, all we can do . . . or at least the best thing we can do . . . is just love them. Just do our best to love them – whoever it is and as challenging as that may be. Because trying to argue with them, or reason with them, is not likely to work. Better to just smother them with kindness and love. And try, perhaps, if we can, to civilly and respectfully agree . . . to disagree.

But please know that intellectually what is going on here is that we have two people – a fundamentalist and myself, let's say, or you and your mother or mother-in-law, let's say – trying to engage one another with two fundamentally different epistemologies. Our sources of authority, in other words, for determining what we know to be true are fundamentally different, telling us, in some cases, fundamentally different things.

This is the importance of epistemology, because it looks not just to our *beliefs*, but to the sources of our *authority* for our beliefs – for what we know or for what we *think* we know.

IV

⁴ Ibid.

Now that we have a few examples, let me back up a little bit, at this point, and try to put this epistemological discussion of how do we know what we know, especially in religious matters, into a larger historical perspective.

Here in the West, essentially, I would suggest that there have been three different epistemological notions of religious or spiritual authority.

The first notion of religious authority here in the West was exemplified by the Roman Catholic Church.

For over 1,000 years, the Roman Catholic Church essentially had a lock on religion and on religious authority here in the West. If you wanted to know about the nature of God or Jesus, or the afterlife, or about how the universe was created, or about whether women or gays or lesbians could become priests – if you wanted to know anything at all about religion – you just asked the church and they would be happy to tell you.

To this day, as many of you know, the Roman Catholic Church has a book called, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which is the official explanation and exposition of all of the teachings of the Catholic Church. (And I've got to tell you -- it's pretty comprehensive. My copy runs over 800 pages. And I must add, I'm impressed because it is exquisitely footnoted!)

In any case, this is *one* way of doing religious authority – vesting it in the church.

V

For our second notion of religious authority, let us move forward to the 1500's, to the time of the Protestant Reformation.

Now, the Protestant Reformation was a time when a whole bunch of people – led by Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and some others – broke away from the Roman Catholic Church. Why? They broke away because of the church's corrupt practices at the time – the selling of indulgences and so forth – and they started their own churches. This is where we get the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church, and so on.

Well, in the process of breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestants articulated, in effect, a second notion of religious authority. Essentially they said, "We don't think that religious authority should be vested in the church. Rather,

we think that religious authority should be vested in the Bible. We think religious authority should be vested in the Bible as the Word of God.

This, then, is a *second* way of doing religious authority – vesting it not in the church itself (as the Catholics did, and continue to do), but vesting religious authority in the Bible. So, the Protestant view is that if people want to know about the nature of God or Jesus, or the afterlife, and so forth, they can always turn to their Bibles as their key epistemological source of religious authority.

The *third* notion of religious (or spiritual) authority, here in the West, was best articulated by the transcendentalists, most of the leaders of whom were Unitarians. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Theodore Parker come to mind. The transcendentalists said, in effect, “For us, religious or spiritual authority should not be vested either in the church or in the Bible – or, for that matter, in any other holy book – the Koran, the Dhammapada, the Upanishads, the Tao Te Ching, or whatever. Rather, for us, the transcendentalists said, we believe religious authority ultimately comes . . . from within – from what Ralph Waldo Emerson used to call “the oracle within” – that is, the conscience, or the “still, small voice” within. In other words, for the transcendentalists, religious authority, they said, ultimately comes from deep within us. It comes from our deepest, best, inner sense of truth, and beauty, and wisdom, informed by science, experience, education, and intuition.

Clearly, it is within this third tradition, the transcendentalist tradition, that the Unitarian Universalist epistemology resides today. The church – this church and other churches – certainly may be helpful to us in our search for truth, beauty, wisdom, and goodness. The Bible and other holy books may be helpful to us, as well – along with other secular sources of poetry, history, anthropology, cosmology, and so on.

But, ultimately, within our Unitarian Universalist tradition, it is our own “oracle within” which is finally charged with discerning, for each of us, what is good, and true, and right, and beautiful, and wise. So, the “oracle within” is huge here – appropriately tempered and modified by the wisdom of our community and by the wisdom of our Unitarian Universalist tradition. So, friends, this is why epistemology is so terribly important – it is the bedrock of our decisions. It’s not about our *beliefs* so much as it is about the *source* of our beliefs.

So, especially as Unitarian Universalists, let us pay close and regular attention to the “oracle within,” that inner sense of spiritual authority that lies within each of us, and within us all.