

## Come, Let us Reason Together

(OPEN WITH QUOTES ON POWERPOINT PROJECTOR, READ SLOWLY)

**“Come...let us reason together, says the Lord” (Isaiah 1: 18).**

**“Test all things, hold fast what is good” (1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5: 21)**

**“Why do you not judge for yourself what is right?” (Luke 12: 57)**

Religious fervor and independent thought are often portrayed in the popular press as polar opposites. So-called “religious fanatics” are portrayed as being blind in their faith, and adamant in avoiding any questioning of their faith or scripture. *“God said, I believe it, and that settles it”* is the bumper sticker that sums up the stereotype.

No doubt that stereotype is true in some cases, but is that truly the religious viewpoint? Is that the stance we are encouraged to take if we seek out a religious or spiritual path? The quotes I began with, taken from the Old and New Testament, would seem to argue against that. “Come and let us reason together, says the Lord.”

We need not look very far in either the Old or New Testament to find that blind faith was never the model to be emulated. In the book of Genesis, we find Abraham and God reasoning together, negotiating over the requirements to save Sodom and Gomorrah. In Exodus, Moses and God have some lengthy discussions regarding the people of Israel, a nice give and take. In the book of Jonah, we find God and Jonah having a discussion about the fate of Nineveh, and Jonah being shall we say somewhat cheesed off that God is showing mercy to those Ninevites that Jonah hates so much and God convincing Jonah in word and deed that forgiveness is perhaps a good thing. In the book of Job, we find God appearing out of the whirlwind to give Job a piece of his mind, after Job has been arguing God’s nature with the universe’s three least comforting friends. The words spoken by Jesus throughout the Gospels appeal to human reason. To cite just one example, in Matthew 7:11, Jesus asks us (up on powerpoint): “If you, then, though you are imperfect, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” In this statement, in the parables, indeed throughout his ministry Jesus did not seek to bludgeon or to force belief, but rather to convince! The bottom line, it seems, is that we are called upon to think things through. We’re not just supposed to do it because we were told us to!

Let's switch gears. A standard Unitarian Universalist joke, an anecdote from Religious Education: The teacher asks her class, "what gathers nuts for winter?" None of the kids answer. The teacher goes on. "What has a fluffy tail?" Again, no answer. The teacher, desperation in her voice, tries again. "What runs up trees?" A young girl hesitantly raises her hand. The relieved teacher calls on her, and the girl says "I know you want us to say the 7 core principles of Unitarian Universalism, but it sure sounds like you're describing a squirrel!"

So I guess the argument can be made that UU's are a little fanatical about our 7 core principles. The third core principle is (up on powerpoint) "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." The fourth core principle of Unitarian Universalism is perhaps even more relevant here: (up on powerpoint) "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning". We are expected to use the human faculty of reason to determine what to believe. What should we use as our criterion of truth? The standard answer associated with the religious viewpoint is to look to scripture. We may have a problem when we do this, however. Contradictory religious positions have been drawn from the same scriptures. Let's take three religious viewpoints, all of which are believed to have extensive scriptural support by their adherents (up on powerpoint):

1. God does not want to save all humanity from eternal punishment, only the elect (Augustinian viewpoint)
2. God wants to save all humanity from eternal punishment, but can't force human free will (Arminian viewpoint)
3. God can and will save everyone from eternal punishment (Universalist).

Ayn Rand wrote in *Atlas Shrugged* that if you have a seeming contradiction, you must check your premises. Something is in error. Logically, all of these cannot be true, 1 and 2 contain contradictory premises, and 1 and 2 both contradict #3. Yet, we can find verses in scripture that seem to support each stance. Perhaps the wording is the problem. Considering the issue of eternal punishment we just mentioned, Augustine preached that many, or indeed most, people would be going to eternal punishment. By his own admission, however, Augustine had never learned much Greek. That's just a wee bit of a problem, as he was interpreting scripture that was originally written in Greek. Scholars of the language of the original Bible have pointed out that the term, AION, that is most often translated as "eternal" or "everlasting" in our modern Bibles is actually translated more accurately as "age-abiding," in other words having a specific

beginning AND a specific end. Further, the term for punishment came from the root word KOLASIS, which indicated a process of tree pruning. In every context from literature of the period, it was a corrective and disciplinary punishment that was meant to lead to future behavioral improvement, never a merely retributive form of justice. Both of these simple vocabularic adjustments help us to question at least one of the options.

This, it seems, is what we must foster: a *questioning* attitude, where we don't merely accept a story, based upon its surface truth. Forgive the expression, but the devil is in the details. I'm thinking of an infomercial I felt compelled to watch one night in the small hours of the night, one of those train wrecks you just can't look away from. A leader of a motivational seminar said that after completing his program (which included walking on hot coals), a women's high school basketball team beat the team from one of the major university programs, let's just say the team from Ohio State. That is pretty impressive, Ohio State is known for aggressive pursuit of skilled scholar-athletes. That must have been some motivational job for the high school girls to beat the team from Ohio State! The problem was that the video had a date stamp. Subsequent investigation determined that the Ohio State team was away at a tournament and couldn't have played in the game with the high school women. So did the motivational seminar leader lie? No. Notice that when I discussed the game with the high school women, I said the "team from Ohio State." That's different than saying the OHIO STATE TEAM. The women's high school team beat a sorority that happened to attend Ohio State. The moral of our story is obvious. You have to listen carefully. A subtle change in the way words are used can make a huge difference. The seminar didn't add anything to the situation. ANY organized high school team could have beaten the sorority team, whose only cohesiveness was that they all listened to depressing Morrissey CD's. And by the way, do you know how to walk on hot coals? It's very simple. Just walk on them. Dehydrated wood is very porous and conducts comparatively little heat. If you want to show me how spiritually enlightened you are, let's see you walk on some hot iron bars! You'll turn into a chicken McNugget and that will be the end of your seminar.

Let turn our attention to a clinical example. A student diagnosed with autism attended a program overseen by a behavior analyst who was world-famous for his intelligence, athleticism, Steve Irwin-like passion and Richard Dreyfuss good looks. The student was making excellent progress in developing social, academic and language skills. His family had a friend who told them of a wonderful chiropractor who was adjusting the spines of the children with autism and was effecting cures left and right. The student continued to attend the school and saw the chiropractor three times a week. He continued to make progress in the areas noted above. When asked about the methods by which the wonderful gains had been achieved, his parents proudly told

everyone “OH, A COMBINATION OF ABA AND CHIROPRACTIC.” Was the chiropractic helpful? Was it just “background noise” or even counter-productive? How should we decide?

Notice what has happened with these two latter examples. Empirical proof can be provided. We were able to spot the difficulty with the motivational seminar which invalidated its claim, and the issue of the two treatments could be settled with simple experiments that we would call component analysis, trying combinations of treatments, separating them out or doing them at the same time in order to assess interactive and isolative effects. Bottom lining it, once we move into the empirical realm, away from theological discussion and into clinical scenarios, there is a little thing called empirical science. We can subject our premises to predictions, and we can manipulate conditions to assess effects and hopefully arrive at something we can call the truth. This is, of course, not so easily done with theological statements. Our proof can be somewhat more elusive there, and, as we have seen, relying on interpretation of scripture, no matter how traditional or widely held, is no assurance of success. So where does this leave us? Come and let us reason together! There will be times when we can look to empirical evidence, and other times when logic or careful observation will guide us. Other times it is not so simple.

So how about just trying a little faith some time? Can we go too far in this reasoning stance? Maybe we just really love arguing, is that the fun of it? Another standard joke about Unitarian Universalists centers around a newly arrived citizen of Heaven, and a guardian angel that is showing him the lay of the land. To his astonishment, the new arrival discovers that a wide variety of religions and denominations are present, and each has been given their own room. The rooms emphasize the key elements of their religious faiths. The Jews are dovening, the Catholics are holding mass, prayers are being said in the Mosque. There is a terrible commotion from one room, and our new arrival asks just what the heck that noise is. The heavenly tour guide says, “Oh, that’s just the Unitarian Universalists. They are arguing about whether they’re here or not.”

For many of us in this room, there are elements of our lives that require very careful reasoning and logic. I alluded to treatments earlier, and we have a moral and ethical responsibility to assess treatments carefully, avoiding those that would do harm, or waste valuable time that could be used for treatments that would be helpful. Your human reasoning abilities have to be on their best game, sifting through contradictory claims in order to derive the best assessment of effectiveness. We literally can’t be too careful.

Leaving treatment issues aside, and yes, you *do* have other things to consider in your life, even though it sometimes seems not, how are we to proceed? There are

larger issues of life and death and meaning in all our lives. Can you find comfort, support and aid on this path in religion, in a faith-based community? Yes, you can. You're sitting in one now, with a group of people who understand and want to be there for you, there for each other. So does this mean adopting the blind faith perspective that so many associate with religion? Does it mean unquestioning adherence to some dogma or other?

Not a bit. No one is even suggesting that any two of you must all come to the same conclusions about religious issues. All you're being asked to do is to adhere to UU principle #3, acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations, and #4, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. You can believe in God or not, and you can differ on your conceptions of God if you do believe. That's ok. All you have to do is to agree to principles 3 and 4 and to engage in this free and responsible search for meaning together. Come and let us reason together! And it wouldn't hurt to be mutually affectionate and supportive, but that's for another day.