

## **Reason, Truth, and the Holy**

By Jeffrey Lott

In 2012, when we were doing Mission Possible—our appreciative inquiry into the fundamental values that we share as a congregation—one of the exercises called for two people to partner with each other and to reflect on a time when each of them had found themselves having an “experience of the holy.”

Now this immediately caused some squirming in the chairs. “Holy” is one of those loaded words we tend to avoid in our congregation—and I’ll admit to the same moment of discomfort when I first encountered this exercise. Maybe some of you are probably squirming a bit right now, just because I brought it up again—and because of the title of this sermon: Reason, Truth, and the Holy.

Yet when Laura Park, our Mission Possible consultant, acknowledged our potential discomfort and related the concept of the holy to direct personal experience—without freighting it with God-talk—I began to relax. Just as I hope that you will relax this morning and hear me out.

Here’s how Laura talked about the holy: “Personal experience is absolutely at the center of our UU tradition, as is valuing the unique experiences and perspectives each individual brings to our communities.

“What does it mean then, to talk about an experience of the holy?” she asked. “Ralph Waldo Emerson brings together experience and holy and says it this way: ‘Why should not we have an original relationship with the universe?’<sup>i</sup>

“Emerson is pointing to that which is larger than us, that which expands our hearts and minds, that which we want to set apart and revere for the wonder of it,” Laura explained.

“Or as, the Reverend Forrest Church says when he’s defining God: ‘Call it what you will: spirit, ground of being, life itself; it remains what it always has . . . an awe-inspiring, mind-bending mystery.’”<sup>ii</sup>

Laura is right. Personal experience *is* at the core of Unitarian Universalism; and so is valuing the unique experiences and beliefs that each of us brings to our religious community—even when they are quite different from our own.

Our Unitarian Universalist religious tradition has moved over time from an unquestioned scripturally based theology, to the application of reason to the understanding of scripture, to our modern belief systems based primarily on reason—what some Unitarians 100 years ago called “scientific theology.” We’ve gone from following the dictates of an ecclesiastical hierarchy to independent congregational governance and individual conscience.

In the words of Theodore Parker, we no longer accept a religion in which “Authority is taken for Truth, and not Truth for Authority.”<sup>iii</sup> We no longer accept the authority of a Bible that is, as Parker said, a “miraculous collection of miraculous books ... written by a miraculous inspiration from God.”<sup>iv</sup>

Parker wrote: “It has been assumed at the outset, with no shadow of evidence, that those writers held a miraculous communication with God, such as he has granted to no other man.” Why, he asks, should we believe that God command Abraham to sacrifice his son—“a thought at which the flesh creeps with horror,” Parker says. Should we accept that this actually happened, he asks, “solely on the authority of an oriental story, written down nobody knows when or by whom, or for what purpose?”<sup>v</sup>

In our unison affirmation each Sunday, we say, “the search for truth is our constant star.” This is about as close we get to a creed—but of course we could change it tomorrow.

Reason is the gyroscope of our religious starship, guiding us toward the distant light of truth. Unfailingly, personal experience provides the waypoints along this journey. And we search for truth in those experiences, we all find moments of pure wonder is when we can apply the word “holy.”—moments when, as Emerson says, “we have an original relationship with the universe”<sup>vi</sup>

What did Emerson mean by “original relationship?” Emerson meant an unmediated apprehension of truth, a personal understanding of the cosmos that is not dependent on any outside authority. This was the idea behind Transcendentalism—that each of us can apprehend those things that are larger than ourselves in our own “original” way—and that when we find ourselves bathed in awe and wonder, we are having a personal experience of the holy—that we need no authority beyond our transcendent selves to ascertain religious truth.

When people of the holy, it’s far too easy to jump to the conclusion that they’re talking about God. That’s the way holiness is so often expressed in our Christian-dominated culture—as the immanence of God in our lives, or as behavior or speech that is “like unto God.”

For the next few minutes, I’d like to go a little deeper into exploring the way we have used the word “holy” by showing you an example of how “holy” and “God” were joined in the Episcopal faith tradition that I grew up in, and how we Unitarian Universalists have also used this word—or, in some cases replaced it with other words.

I hope you will excuse me for singing the next part, for this is how I learned these words—and I really can’t think of any better way to say them to you. If you, like me, grew up in a Protestant Christian faith tradition, perhaps this is how you remember them as well:

[sing, with accompaniment]

*Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!*  
*Early in the morning, our song shall rise to Thee;*  
*Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!*  
*God in Three Persons, bless’d Trinity!*

How many of you learned it this way? Singing this me back to my religious roots at the Fox Chapel Episcopal Church in suburban Pittsburgh. As a boy, I sang that hymn as I carried a shiny brass cross down the center aisle. I was an acolyte, robed in red and white, and I knew those words by heart—just as I knew the words to many other hymns, and, of course, our creeds—the Apostles’ and the Nicene—which we recited every Sunday: “I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and Earth....”

The organ boomed as I took measured steps at the head of the procession, singing out the belief that God was three persons—a “bless’d Trinity.” It hadn’t yet occurred to me how unbelievable all that was, how much it flew in the face of reason. It just *was*—a kind of revealed truth that was backed by the authority of the church. It took me a long time to see the difference between “God” and “holy”—that they are not necessarily the same thing. That, although God might be an expression of holiness, the holy in life need not require the presence—or even the existence—of God.

[THE FOLLOWING WAS OMITTED FROM THE SERMON AS  
DELIVERED]

The words to the original “Holy, holy, holy” were written by Reginald Heber, a bishop in the Church of England, for Trinity Sunday in 1826. About 25 years later, they were set to music by John Bacchus Dykes.<sup>vii</sup> Mostly because of Dykes stirring music, “Holy, holy, holy” has become one of the most popular Protestant hymns, published in nearly 1,300 hymnals<sup>viii</sup>—including the one that’s in the rack in front of you.

(Let me quickly assure you that although it is the very same tune, the words have been changed to reflect the evolving liberal theology of the Unitarian-Universalist movement. This reminds me of the joke about why UUs are not very good at singing hymns: because they are always reading ahead to see if they agree with the words! So let’s see if we agree with the words....)

Take a moment to open *Singing the Living Tradition* to No. 26. I'll read Bishop Heber's original prayer again; if you read along silently as I speak, you'll see how *our* living tradition is radically different from his.

*Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!*

*Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;*

*Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!*

***God in Three Persons, bless'd Trinity!***

[*Holy, holy, holy! Author of creation.*

*Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;*

*Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!*

Who was, and is, and evermore shall be.]

You see? No Lord God Almighty. No God in three persons. No blessed Trinity. American Unitarians, dissenting and splitting from the Puritan Congregational church, rejected the idea of "God in three persons."

William Ellery Channing's seminal 1819 sermon "Unitarian Christianity" asserted that "we believe in the doctrine of God's *unity*, or that there is one God, and one only.... We understand by [this truth], that there is one being, one mind, one intelligent agent, and one only, to whom underived and infinite perfection and dominion belong." ix

In addition, you saw that Heber's God Almighty has become our "author of creation." [As a writer, I love the word "author" here—although this revision of Heber's words is using it to mean "source," not writer.] Note also that this "source"—whatever it is that we call it—remains "merciful and mighty"—and eternal; it "was, is, and ever more shall be." It's also pretty clear that we prefer "eternity" to "trinity!" [They even rhyme.]

Either way, I'm sure that some of you we're still talking about God here—without mentioning her name.

[HERE THE SPOKEN SERMON RESUMED]

My final thought today is that although we may sing loudly of liberty and love—that is, of freedom of thought and the power of love to transform the world—we are not much engaged by holiness. Holiness is too close to God-talk for some UUs, yet I believe that others of us are ready to open our minds and hearts, if not to the holy, then at least to that “original relationship with the universe” that Emerson proposes.

I’ve made just such an effort myself, and this effort is the subject of my last little story. As I conclude, I will speak only for myself. You may see yourself in my experience, or choose another path.

When I began attending First Unitarian Church back about 2002, I bristled every time I heard the word “God.” I had become a Unitarian Universalist in the late 1980s to escape the idea of God, not to discuss it on Sunday mornings. Yet our senior minister at that time, Patrick O’Neill, had a way of talking about the divine that didn’t remind me of the big bad God of my youth. He challenged me to use all of my faculties—and not merely reason—to think about the big questions.

Like many of us, I like the idea that human progress and perfectibility are the inevitable products of reason—and that all we need is more science and more knowledge and more truth to change the human condition. I too was once a full-throated humanist, but I have reconsidered. Over time, the brokenness of the world has caused me to think in ways that I might not have considered before joining this church. So I decided about 10 years ago to make a conscious effort to suppress my negative feelings about the transcendent—and to open my heart to the holy moments.

Although Theodore Parker was referring to scripture when he said that we should accept Truth for Authority and not Authority for Truth, I think there is another way to read this famous phrase—to add another dimension of perception to our reasoning minds.

My friend Bill Schulz (he was actually a high-school classmate in Pittsburgh), former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and now head of the UU Service Committee, was one of the first modern UUs to openly challenge the idea that reason alone can get us to a place of peace. In his book *Finding Time & Other Delicacies*, he declared that “reason is still a cherished standard in our religious repertoire, but reason is coming to be supplemented by our immediate apprehension of the Holy and our conviction that the Holy is embodied in the abundance of a scarred creation.”<sup>x</sup>

Once again, experience provides the waypoints for my journey. As I make my way through life, I experience moments of pure awe, joy, and wonder—as I do now when holding my first grandchild. These are the times when reason fails me and something more sacred and transcendent comes over my consciousness—moments when I might use the word “holy” to describe the surpassing feeling that washes over my mind and opens my heart; moments when I have an original relationship with the universe. And when I find myself bathed in such awe and wonder, I need no authority beyond my transcendent self to know the truth.

#### Notes:

---

<sup>i</sup> Emerson, R.W., quoted from “Nature”

<sup>ii</sup> Park, Laura, *Mission Possible: An Appreciative Inquiry Workshop for First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE*, ©Unity Consulting. Licensed to First Unitarian Church under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 United States License.

<sup>iii</sup> Parker, Theodore, *Discourse on Matters Pertaining to Religion*, Little and Brown, Boston, 1842 (original edition), p. 4.

<sup>iv</sup> Parker, p. 321.

<sup>v</sup> Parker, Theodore, *A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity* (1841) Electronic Texts in American Studies. Paper 14, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/14>

<sup>vi</sup> Emerson, “Nature,”

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.sharefaith.com/guide/Christian-Music/hymns-the-songs-and-the-stories/holy,-holy,-holy,-lord-god-almighty-the-song-and-the-story.html>

<sup>viii</sup> [http://www.hymnary.org/text/holy\\_holy\\_holy\\_lord\\_god\\_almighty\\_early](http://www.hymnary.org/text/holy_holy_holy_lord_god_almighty_early)

<sup>ix</sup> “Unitarian Christianity,” II.1.

<sup>x</sup> Ross, Warren, *The Premise and the Promise*, Skinner House (2001), p. 198.