

Conscience and Democracy in Religious Life

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Today we continue our ongoing exploration of the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism by considering principle number five: We covenant to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. I'll share some of my thoughts on the meaning of this principle and how it might guide our religious – and daily – practice and conduct.

In my experience, most people, of whatever faith, respond positively to our seven principles. A typical response is something like, "I don't see anything really to object to, and the principles seem well and good as far as they go – but. . ." And after the "but" comes some variation on the theme that there seems to be something missing. Something about God or Jesus Christ or some explicitly religious belief statement.

Well, I think the root of that reaction actually lies in this fifth principle about conscience and democratic process. And this principle may be, in fact, the one that really distinguishes us more than any other from most other faith communities. What this principle really addresses is the hugely significant issue of the source of religious authority. For most faith communities, religious authority comes from some combination of scripture, tradition, and a hierarchical religious leadership. There may be some allowance for the role of individual religious experience, but in matters of doctrine and theological dogma, the primary sources of authority are external to the individual believer.

But for us, according to this fifth principle, primary authority would seem to come from within each individual in the form of the conscience, and from the collective religious community through the practice of democratic process. Ours is, in fact, a democratic religion (and that's democratic with a small 'd'). We're democratic not only with respect to such mundane matters as buildings and staffing and scheduling and committee structures and such. We're even democratic when it comes to the task of formulating and articulating our core religious values and principles. In fact, these seven principles that we've been talking about this year were adopted by a vote of the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, a gathering of delegates representing congregations across the continent.

In the course of this sermon series, I've spoken on occasion about the dynamic tension between various pairs of concepts: individual and community, and freedom and responsibility, for instance. That notion comes into play once again when we address conscience and democracy, which are really another manifestation of the individual-community dichotomy. So I'd like to talk a little bit about each of these two concepts, and then spend some time talking about how they interact and bring some kind of balance and wholeness to our religious life together.

What is conscience? My dictionary tells me that conscience is "conformity to one's own sense of right conduct." That is, the conscience is that inner voice that tells each one of us what is right or wrong, what is appropriate or inappropriate. The conscience is sometimes externalized, as in the popular image of a little angel or some such sitting on our shoulder whispering into our ear, guiding us along the "right" path. There is also the notion that our conscience can be developed through external influences – the moral guidance of parents, teachers, preachers, etc. That may well be the case, but when it comes down to it, it's that still small voice deep within our own being that guides us in our moral decision-making. And it's our acknowledgment of the importance of the individual, our recognition of the inherent worth and

dignity of each of us, that leads us to put such faith in the individual conscience as primary religious source.

Of course dependence on the conscience is not foolproof. Some folks seem to have little or no conscience. Or it may seem so twisted and out of step with the rest of us that its value is questionable. That is one important reason for individuals and their consciences to be balanced by the collective wisdom of the community, through some kind of democratic process. But more about that later.

Before I leave the topic of conscience, I want to be clear that we Unitarian Universalists did not invent the concept. We may put more stock in individual conscience than others, but in fact conscience is central in every tradition. The Rev. Kenneth Collier writes that:

Conscience is a manifestation of what Taoists call *Te*, the movement of the unnamable *Tao* that gives each of us our individual strength and power. It is the voice of what Plato referred to as *arête*, the wisdom or virtue of your soul that makes you the unique and precious person you are. It is the upswelling of that which the Buddhists call the Buddha-nature that permits every person . . . to achieve enlightenment. To the Hindu it is the image of that special step in Shiva's dance that brings you into existence and allows you to be.

And in our Judeo-Christian tradition, conscience shows up as the still, small voice that Elijah heard within his soul. "Here for the first time God speaks to the prophet from within his own heart, as the most intimate part of himself. It is the voice of conscience." (Kenneth Collier)

Let's shift our attention now to the other half of our concept-pair this morning, namely democracy, or democratic process. The basic meaning of democracy is "government or rule by the people." The idea is that everyone has a voice, with the result that decisions will benefit from the collective wisdom of the community. Of course, in practice, everyone's voice is seldom given equal weight, even in a nominal democracy, but that is the ideal. And like conscience, this is not simply a secular idea, but a religious one as well. The Rev. Earl Holt writes:

Political and religious ideas interpenetrate. For example, the political notion that a people have a right to self-government grows out of a religious conviction that human beings have the capacity to shape their own destiny, that they are not mere puppets on a divine string.

Democracy, to put it another way, is more than a mechanism of governance. It is an expression of faith in the power of human beings to shape their own lives, a faith that is most explicit in the ideals of our religious tradition.

It is that interpenetration of the political and the religious that leads to the call for use of democratic method both within our congregations and in society at large. That is, if democracy is good enough for the highest levels of governance, it should be good enough at lower levels of organization as well. If depending on the collective wisdom of the people is the best way to govern our secular political life, isn't it also the best way to guide our religious life? The alternatives are to either cede our personal autonomy to some totally external source of authority, or to go our own individual way with no checks or balances from others with different perspectives and experience.

So here we see how democratic process itself provides a balance of the individual and the community. The raw material for democratic process comes from the minds and hearts – and consciences – of every individual. These are then forged – through discussion, debate, and compromise – into an expression of the collective will of the people. In order for democracy to work well, each individual must be prepared occasionally to give up a bit of their personal opinions or convictions to the collective will. There must be compromise. As I like to point out occasionally, you can have your say, but you won't necessarily get your way. But at the same time, individuals may have a line beyond which they will not go. Some personal convictions are simply not open to discussion or compromise.

Herein lies the importance of the phrase “right of conscience.” This is an acknowledgment by the community that individual conscience cannot be forced to conform to the collective will. Dissenting opinions are heard and respected. The community may go ahead and act according to its collective decisions, but there is an acknowledgment of honest and sincere dissent based on personal conscience. An example on the national political level is the provision for Conscientious Objection to military service during wartime.

The phenomenon that the right of conscience is designed to address is the tyranny of the majority. One of the inherent problems with democratic process, at least in the form of majority rule, is the possibility of 51% of the community trampling on the rights of the other 49%. That's why the American Constitution, which outlines our national democratic process, also includes a Bill of Rights to protect those who may find themselves in a minority. That's why our Unitarian Universalist Association Bylaws include the disclaimer: “Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any congregation . . .” So even when we make public pronouncements, or take public stands on issues, there is an understanding and acknowledgment that some individuals simply may not agree. Sometimes we must agree to disagree. But as sixteenth-century Unitarian Francis David said, “We need not think alike to love alike.”

One final point I want to make about this principle. I am rubbed the wrong way by one part of its wording. When it refers to “use of *the* democratic process,” it seems to imply that there is only one such process, which for most people probably translates to majority rule. That is, everything is subject to a vote. I would suggest that simple majority rule is *not* the only form of democratic process. In particular, the Quakers, among others have, over a long period of time, developed consensus into a workable process. Like majority rule, consensus has its strengths and weaknesses. It does a better job of addressing concerns about tyranny of the majority, for instance. On the other hand, it gives up some of the efficiency inherent in a simple majority vote. My point is that different situations call for different methods. Thus, when the principles come up for review, I intend to argue vigorously for deletion of the word “the” so that the phrase becomes the more inclusive “use of democratic process”. I can make that argument because we use democratic process.

For those of you who respond better to poetry than to discursive speech, I'd like to close with the following by Kenneth Collier, called “The Center of the Universe”:

Where is the center of the universe?

Is it over there, near the sun?
Is it perhaps off in the stars,
Hidden in the center of the galaxy,
Surrounded by light and energy

And the enormous heat generated by billions of stars?
Or is it somewhere hidden in the middle of nowhere
Away and away from everything else,
Surrounded by nothing more than nothing?

Or maybe it is nearer,
Beside this oak growing alone,
On top of a thousand-foot cliff,
Overlooking the sea. And maybe the osprey
That rests in the tree,
Overlooking the ocean sits
Right in the center of the universe,
And looks out, not at the sea, but at everything.

But no. It is nearer.
Maybe the center of the universe lies
Right inside my own heart.
Maybe it is I who look out at everything.
Maybe the osprey and the oak and even the stars
Circle and circle and seek so desperately
For the gem that lies hidden in my own heart,
Hidden and alone, and I hold the secret.

But no. It is even nearer yet.
The center of the universe is so near
That I cannot ever find it,
So near that it cannot even be lost.
The center of the universe is so near that
Wherever I look, wherever I turn my head
And search, there it is,
 there it is,
 there it is.

So in our religious life together, may we commit to each being true to our own
consciences – our own centers – but at the same time seek the greater Truth and Wisdom that
resides within the greater center that encompasses and engulfs us all.
So may it be.