YIN AND YANG AND THE DANGER OF IDOLATRY

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Take a moment and go back in time with me. Picture we are right here, but it is night and it is 5,000 years ago and there is a canopy of stars above you. We sit around a campfire. A child ten years old or so sits next to you and asks you, the parent, what those lights in the sky are. How did they get there? For that matter, how did we get here? Why do we have to die? What happens after we die? Why do we have to be good? What will I do with my life when I grow up?

Like most adults I’ll bet you would not say, “I don’t know for sure,” but you’d repeat stories you’d been told or embellish them yourself. You would do the best you could. Have you ever been stumped by the innocent “big” questions of a child? Sure you have. When this happens it opens our eyes to our own unreflective complacency, as children tend to ask the big questions with a more open mind than adults who have long histories of settled prejudice.

Today I want to reflect on those big questions; the perennial questions of religion around the campfire; the questions that lead to the ultimate foundations for ourselves and our children around the campfire. These questions underlie all our explanations and guiding principles.

The definitions of religion are varied and it amuses me when I hear the phrase, “real religion is…” as if all the varied religious impulses could be so easily described by catch slogans. Do you have your own phrase?

Many in liberalism today say that religious foundations are both unachievable and unimportant. Tell that nonsense to Tom Delay or Osama Bin Laden. In these anti-foundational, postmodern, neo-romantic times we are told that truth is always subjective, culturally proscribed, relative and without any ultimate basis. In liberal religion of all stripes we are told that religious beliefs are only a matter of personal opinion, that religion should focus on the functional aspects of religion such as community, ritual, ethical teaching, psychological healing, and that pluralism is the ultimate goal of liberal religion. We are told that we should focus on supportive thinking rather than critical thinking and that we are all wounded creatures in need mostly of healing. We are told that we are really in search of love and comfort rather that ideological foundations and looking at the stars, we should make up our own stories and just give each other support.

It is a lie. It was always a lie, but the events of 9/11 forced us to see that some foundational ideas and religions produce evil. The foundational values of truth, reason, justice, beauty, love, civil liberties, and freedom still
stand not as Eurocentric Western inventions as some have claimed, but in fact, as universal attributes emerging from our common human condition.

Liberal religion has been impotent in recent years in supporting the very triad foundations of Liberalism: reason, tolerance, and freedom, has indeed even undermined them. We have developed emotionally healthy, inner directed, and supportive communities, but have hunkered down passive and mute, while the theo-fascists shred our freedoms, ethical values, and foundational strengths.

Our hypocrisy is exposed when in our literature and sermons we promote indiscriminate pluralism while in actuality 90% polled in this very church and in the denomination privately harbor the view that the number one reason for membership is being in a community of like-minded individuals. And we say beliefs don’t matter? Our poetic, inclusive, and tolerant language seems to be a veneer over what we know is true in our hearts. We know foundations matter. We know beliefs do matter. The stories we tell our children at the campfire will ultimately lead to suicide jihadists, polygamists, and Abu Graibe prison, as well as to soup kitchens, polio vaccine, and the civil rights movement. How many of us would be comfortable in a supportive community of fundamentalist Baptists, of really nice folk, who have a policy of freedom of belief, but with a very different focus on the foundation of beliefs than we do? Few I suspect.

Liberals are rightly suspect about foundational ideology. Are ultimate foundations unachievable? Don’t you long for some firm grounding like I do? Let’s first examine this by separating things into the old fact/value distinction that, while imperfect, provides some clarity on the subject.

Our species evolved around 160,000 years ago from a long self-organizing process where we share 75% of our genes with starfish in a universe that is around 13.8 billion years old. These facts of an evolving universe and life forms are backed by indisputable scientific evidence, but are believed by only 12% of people in the United States.

Regarding the foundational facts of life, people generally fall into two categories: those who see the world through a scientific evidence-based lens, or those who base their beliefs on ungrounded faith, be it from religious revelation, intuition, a holy book, or a religious leader. How we explain and make predictions about the world matters. Science is the best method because it is the only self-correcting method, though it is fallible, probabilistic, tentative, and always open to revision. This disturbs many people because it involves work and the lack of certainty. Most of us would rather just guess or be told the answers and have the comfort of certain belief. Science does not offer certainty, but is the greatest communal enterprise in history. Postmodernists say there is no scientific truth and the neo-romantics say intuition offers better knowledge. As Richard Dawkins points out, there are no postmodernists at 40,000 feet, and our intuition tells us the sun revolves around the earth. As Walter Heller of the Federal Reserve Board said, “Never ignore a gut feeling, but never feel it’s enough.”
With anti-intellectualism rampant today, we are like petulant children saying on one hand that if we can’t know anything with certainty we don’t know anything at all, or on the other hand accepting someone’s version of absolute truth. That is why relativism and fundamentalism are both on the rise.

The foundations of science are not on absolute firm ground. The philosopher Otto Neurath likens science to a ship at sea that leaks from time to time. The ship must constantly be repaired and rebuild itself without the benefit of a firm dry dock and with time it progresses, grows, and becomes firmer. Science reigns supreme as our foundation for understanding the facts of the world.

Much is made of the aspect of mystery in liberal religion, but let’s face it, the so-called “God of the Gaps” has been reduced in size to a pygmy because science has pushed the boundaries of understanding of the universe to immeasurably small differences. In fact, the universe makes complete conciliatory sense all the way back to the first 10 to the minus 42 (10^{-42}) seconds of the universe’s birth. Personally, I will build my religious foundations on what we do know, rather than what we don’t. Doesn’t that just make sense? Mystery, while fascinating and alluring, seems a bit unsubstantial to build a life on.

Commitment to truth, usually in quotes today, needs a revival in a new Enlightenment. Truth is what’s left when we get rid of all the lies. Determining truth is mostly a negative process, which is what makes it problematic in a supportive religious community. Critical intelligence is many times at odds with the supportive community. Still, we need both the yin and the yang of these values in a healthy, balanced dynamic.

Although we do have pretty good foundations and understanding about the facts of the world because of science, for me these are not the really interesting and difficult questions anymore. The really interesting questions around the campfire are about values; how we achieve and promote them.

We have many high values—from freedom to love. Many say our values are only relative. I argue that they are indeed relative, but not arbitrary. High values are emergent properties from a very real human nature and very real world that work in making our lives and societies better. For example, we freely give ourselves civil liberties because history shows what happens when we don’t. Many philosophers and theologians have tried to justify values on rationalistic or religious grounds. There are no ultimate foundations there. Our highest values should only be judged and justified by their effects on us and the world.

The ideology of religions has probably caused more harm to us on balance than any good, but ideology in the secular world has not fared much better. The twentieth century was the century of secular ideology where time after time we gave up the old supernatural gods only to erect a new secular ideology. Communists erected economic justice as the be all and end all,
trashing all other values in the process. Thirty million people died in the Stalinist purges for that secular “God.” Conversely Libertarians erect a secular God around freedom. How could one be against freedom? In this rationalism all other values are consumed and subsumed again in a totalizing and simplistic rational ideology where freedom at its radical end becomes license and compassion is mocked. Ideology kills. In Iraq today we kill people in the name of giving them freedom. The third biblical commandment understood idolatry and the Buddhist saying, “If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him” dramatically points out the danger in grand narratives.

We tend to build idols and that is the danger, be it religious or secular. Have you not at some point in your life latched onto something that you thought was the ultimate foundation? I sure have.

Isaiah Berlin, who coined the phrase pluralism, is one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century and his insights on values are crucial for me. He pointed out that science and reason can help us understand the world—they help to make decisions about potential outcomes—but they cannot provide certain grounding for living our lives as individuals or as a society. The reality is that there are many ways to live the good life. There are indeed many high values, but none of them provide the ultimate answer.

Pat Robertson thinks Christianity is the one and only answer. Communists think social justice is the best answer. Libertarians think freedom is the ultimate grounding. Ayn Rand thought self interest was. But, as Isaiah Berlin points out, Liberalism is a story of tragedy. The tragedy is that there is no one rational right way to live our lives. Not only that, all our high values have deep problems—yes even love, compassion and democracy; moreover, they are in deep radical conflict with one another. There are tradeoffs and compromises with no clear rational way to choose between them and that is the tragedy. Reason and science offer us guiding knowledge, but no ultimate answers. Look at the earlier example of critical intelligence vs. supportive behaviors. There is no “right” way. Still, as Sartre says, we are condemned to the freedom to choose. H. L. Menken understood this when he said, “There is always a well known solution to every human problem – neat, plausible and wrong.”

We all long for some neat, simple answer to living, but as Berlin knew, there is none. There is no rulebook for life. Even John Lennon’s emotionally touching song, “All we need is love” is ultimately wrong. Tell that to a battered housewife. Love is not enough, nor are similar calls by others for justice, freedom, tolerance, compassion, and democracy.

Liberal religion has historically tended to over focus on one value or another as the ultimate answer. In my thirty years as a Unitarian Universalist, I have seen our focus, for centuries based on the use of reason in religion, shift rapidly in turn from racism, the Vietnam war, the human potential movement, and feminism, to, most recently, radical pluralism, while avoiding discussion of their fundamental ethical grounding. Our most
famous theologian of the twentieth century, James Luther Adams, found living amongst Unitarians in prewar Germany, that a too tolerant, uncritical liberalism was ineffective against the forces of totalitarianism. They didn’t take or fight for their foundations seriously. One of his former students wrote recently in *Harpers Magazine* that 30 years ago he prophetically saw the Fascists of the future wearing crosses rather than swastikas as well as the liberal, paralyzed, insecure and cowardly response we see today.

If you haven’t figured it out yet, this is not a feel good sermon pandering to your pet religious philosophy. I sincerely hope I have gored everyone’s sacred cow, since I subscribe to Abbie Hoffman’s philosophy, “Sacred Cows make the tastiest hamburger.” That is why I have problems with the word “sacred,” not because of the theological implications, but because of the implication that some value or idea or practice is untouchable or above all the others.

On the other hand, we too many times evade our responsibility to find deep grounding of the big questions in our churches relying instead on pop psychology, band-aids of social issues, and emotionally manipulative experiences. We wade in the shallows of religion for fear of disturbing one another and just to get along easily. We need courage to face the issues directly and intelligently without the need for certainty. We need to fearlessly examine our ultimate foundations, the depths of religion.

Somewhere in all this we end up finding that reason and science are indeed the best foundations for understanding the world. However, we must not consider them idols either, in our search for values or more importantly, what works to attain the good life.

It seems to me the foundation for the good life is in using all the tools of effective living. We cannot lose faith in our high values just because they are not the secular gods we might have thought them to be. Truth, reason, compassion, beauty, democracy, love, and science still stand as some of the best fruits of civilization and their foundations are based on whether they actually work in our lives and the world, not in rationalistic ideology. It is also in accepting that they can be inherently antagonistic with one other—the dynamic tension of Yin and Yang.

The religious impulse can be carried to dangerous places and harnessing that power for good is very difficult. There are huge Yin Yang questions to be answered. How can we emotionally enrich our lives without subverting rational truth? How can we enlist the motivating power of feelings of transcendence and still keep grounded in the here and now? How can we find awe and wonder and not create illusions? How do we explore the inner depths of our own experience where intuition does hold value, but not lose our way in our own solipsism? How can we make grounding commitments without falling into idolatry? How can we be empowered to find grounding that we now know is difficult in a society, that on the one hand seeks certainty and absolutes while others draw us to a powerless relativism?
Our lives today really are no different than at that campfire long ago as today we still seek understanding, meaning, nurturance, grounding, community, and a sense of wholeness. Around that campfire and in our own lives we want the inspirational experience that lifts our hearts. We want to know the truth about whether those lights in the sky are just light shining through holes in a giant black curtain. We want to hear the emotionally evocative message that elevates those qualities of character we desire and illuminates and transforms us to new visions that are at once true, beautiful, and good. All of these must be grounded in the best we can know or the religious experience that can also lead us to the transformative experiences seen in the Nuremberg rallies, or the hate-filled Wahhabist Mosques.

It matters whether we ground our knowledge in facts or faith. It matters whether we are motivated by love or hate, the hereafter or the here and now. It matters if we ground ourselves in an ancient book interpreted by those seeking power and control or if we ground ourselves in human and global welfare using the best tools of heart and mind, reason and compassion. Grounding matters. Fighting for our grounding in the culture wars going on matters.

I would like to sit right here at a campfire 5,000 years from now and hear their stories of ultimate grounding. Will we have slipped into another Dark Age or will we be transformed into models of new behavior unthought of now?

One thing I am sure of is that the big religious questions will remain. I hope we can smell the lilac scent of freedom, be driven relentlessly to pursue progressive truth, be excited over finding that truth, find the caress of compassion, lock arms in democratic solidarity, faint in the arms of love, seek justice, taste the surprise of wonder, and find inner peace in the quiet moments where our slow breaths are perfumed by joy and understanding and all wrapped in a dance of life. I don’t think these longings will change for awhile around the campfire.