

The Scope of My Religion

I take a broad and inclusive view of what my religion is.

Some people see religion focused on things outside our worldly experience – often supernatural things. Take the Apostle’s Creed¹ for example. It speaks of God, creation, heaven, hell, the virgin birth, the resurrection, the Holy Spirit, and everlasting life¹.

I agree that is religion, but for me religion has come to include every last assumption I make in respect to everything – not just the supernatural. I don’t see where the Apostle’s creed leaves off and one’s assumptions about human nature begin. And once I start the expansion of faith, I don’t really see a point in excluding any kind of assumption from my religion, including which supermarket I imagine is the best for the groceries I want.

I remember my son getting involved with an ethical buying

¹ Footnotes are not read aloud.

The Apostles’ Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell.

The third day He arose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven

and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.

Amen.

crusade when he was at University – it was very complicated I thought - and I think of books like “The Zen of Motorcycle Maintenance” – and I ask where in our lives can we exclude the possibility of a meaningful spiritual or ethical dimension?

Besides, I value simple and unambiguous definitions – and for me the simplest definition of the boundary of my religion is to include ALL my assumptions as “my faith”.

We are forced to make uncertain assumptions about ALL aspects of life and meaning. So I see all of us as people of faith. The differences between our different faiths, to me, are much less dramatic than the realization of just how utterly dependant all of us are on some form of faith merely to survive.

I think many would consider the Apostles’ Creed to be a tiny part of the total scope of anyone’s beliefs. For some it is the very heart of their religious being, but even in such cases, a vast mechanism of other assumptions is needed to determine how the Creed impacts on daily situations. Thus, some who subscribe to the Creed lead beautiful, loving lives while others in similar circumstances live lives filled with resentment.

A broadly defined religion such as mine is impossible to fully codify, whereas normal creeds can readily be stated. The detachment of normal creeds from mundane things eases the need for daily revisions, which is implicit in my approach.

I want to encourage myself to come to see EVERYTHING as holy, although clearly I fall short on this all the time. And I like the idea of a daily struggle to improve my thinking, which of course is not inconsistent with traditional religious thinking.

The task is to build a better faith – a better system of assumptions and a better framework for making assumptions.

Faith contrasted with Assumption

Now you likely see a big contrast between faith and assumption.

“Assumption” is a term with a more flexible feel to it than “Faith”. Something stated as an “assumption” seems implicitly to acknowledge that differing assumptions may be valid, perhaps even that the stated assumption may be invalid.

In contrast, where there is “Faith” one often finds the notion that there is “only one true faith”, even as this immutability expresses itself in many distinct faiths.

For my purposes I want my beliefs to carry the kind of emotional commitment implied by “faith”, while retaining the willingness of “assumption” to be updated from fresh insights.

Regardless of their differing levels of firmness, both “faith” and “assumption” each provide structurally equivalent starting points for reasoning. I say that:

- reasoning is always based on either points of faith or on points of assumption.

In this sense, I see faith and assumption as equivalent.

With respect to “faith” I’ve consulted various dictionaries and I have always found faith described in part as being something which cannot be proven. If it cannot be proven, then it is similar to an assumption, being a place from which reasoning starts.

Of course there are other legitimate definitions of “faith”. One of my fundamentalist friends explained to me that his faith is far stronger than assumption because it is proven both by the bible and also by miracles which he has witnessed on numerous occasions.

I respect his statement and its logic, but for purposes of this discussion I would like at least some of the time to be consistent in

my choice of terminology. Based on the dictionary definition of “faith” which I have chosen, one would say his actual points of faith are in those unproven things from which he has derived the proof of his faith.

Now he might protest that everything is proven. Indeed he may have a lot of company in this perception, including many who worship reason and repudiate religious faith. They too may be under the impression that all of what we truly know is proven.

But from my point of view, this leaves a false impression of a solid foundation. As I see it all logical reasoning is founded on unproven assumptions: because once an assumption is proven, it is no longer an assumption. This idea can be logically extended into a formal mathematical proof that all logical reasoning that comes to an end must rest on unproven assumptions.

I take the view that arguments which close in on themselves in a circular manner do not provide a good foundation, although they may be logically correct. A standard example of circular reasoning used in the teaching of logic is as follows.

"The Bible says God exists, and the Bible must be right since it is the revealed word of God, so God exists."

Circular reasoning is pretty common, and is generally much less obvious as the number of points on the circle expand. From my point of view it is especially problematic because there are always unstated underlying assumptions which are even less obvious than the circle. The trivially simple example I just gave perhaps depends on the assumption that God hasn't died... and what else?

So if you are like me, and don't accept that a circular argument provides a fully satisfying foundation, you may be interested to know that this implies that any satisfying reasoning which comes to an end must be based on unproven assumptions. Remember: if something isn't proven, it must be assumed.

I also take the view that in matters of reasoning we humans are all essentially frail and this means that the correctness of reasoning I also regard as an assumption. In the finest technical journals we go to great lengths to avoid error by rigorous self checking and by careful peer review, but errors still commonly creep through. The fact that debugging is such a time consuming part of software development is powerful testimony to our limits. Software is said to be debugged when the rate of discovery of errors becomes sufficiently small...not that anyone competent is fully comfortable claiming that even “tried and true” software of any significant complexity is guaranteed totally bug free.

My view is that we humans *as individuals* have only very modest abilities. After all, we and the slug share over 70% of the same DNA! What makes us special is our ability to work together, and to build on the skills of those who have gone before. But individually we are limited.

Hardly anything in our society seems less advanced or complex than a mere pencil. But is there one single person in this community who completely by him or herself has the means to make a typical modern pencil? The paint, the metal, the eraser, the graphite, the wood: each stand at the top of production chains at least some of which is apt to be a mystery to all of us.

Is our intellectual dependence on others really any less severe than our material dependence? I believe what we believe depends largely on whom we choose to credit as a worthy source of those assumed facts from which we do our very modest reasoning.

So is it really so difficult to see that what we know individually is ultimately derived from unproven assumptions? For me this conclusion suggests there is less real distinction between the worshippers of logic and reason and those who see their religion as being faith-based. We are both anchored to assumptions we have

not personally proven, merely relying upon different authorities.

But is there some difference in open mindedness or emotional attachment to our beliefs? That brings me to the discussion of...

The Emotional Dimension of Assumption

I regard myself as an environmentalist. Saint John supplies abysmal support for recycling yet well over half of what leaves our home goes to compost or recycling. This only happens because of real commitment.

I have a Unitarian friend who is passionately against nuclear power. In contrast I support nuclear power where large scale power generation is required, although I think energy conservation is of the highest priority.

My Unitarian friend has made a veiled comparison between my beliefs about nuclear power and those who once believed slavery was morally justified.

I see her as a rational and sincere person of considerable intelligence. Where we differ is in what we assume we know as facts and how we interpret the significance of those facts. The vehemence with which she expresses her views and how she portrays my views suggests she has no interest in any explanation of my point of view.

This same woman has advised me that there is no point in trying to persuade numerous Unitarians to consider the validity of faith because she says there are lots of Unitarian “fundamentalists” who simply cannot accept the validity of faith for anyone.

I think she’s right in the sense that all human beings of all religious persuasions are capable of forming such powerful emotional attachments to their assumptions that they become closed to seriously questioning those assumptions.

In part, that is why I define my religion to include all my assumptions, rather than limiting my religious beliefs to those spheres traditionally associated with religion.

I look at the terrible conflicts in the world. I see how one community comes to hate and distrust another. And I attribute this to certain regrettable assumptions, which may often be well justified by past personal experience, but which may nevertheless be counterproductive in achieving positive change for the future.

I think the rationalists need to deeply consider the idea that just because an assumption may seem reasonable in light of certain suggestive evidence does not make that assumption wise. The assumption which brings the best and most humane results may be one which appears unlikely relative to historical evidence.

Another area in which most people engage in emotion-charged assumptions is in the selection of a life partner. It says a lot about what you value in other people. And sometimes there are mistakes.

In various spheres of our life all of us make emotional commitments to our assumptions with profound consequences. I regard these as matters of faith. And to me they are indeed part of a person's religion.

The emotional commitment made by religious fundamentalists to their faith is in my mind no different than the emotional commitments others make to their various faiths whether it relates to environmentalism, human conflict, the nature of God, etc.

So again in comparing Unitarian Universalists to Christian fundamentalists there may be less real distinction in their openness to reexamining their faith than is generally perceived. And we may still suffer from the unjustified conceit that our starting assumptions are somehow more reasonable than someone else's assumptions or faith.

Perhaps the real measure of a faith is what it does to help create a more loving, more pleasant, gentler, and a more equitable world.

But what about the search for truth?...which brings me to a discussion of how I see the truth as essentially plural.

The Plural Nature of Truth

Truth is not simply the courage to state one's perceptions. For the sake of understanding, one needs to critically examine the validity of *one's own* views requiring both effort and insight.

Insight sometimes comes from expanding one's view. I may speak and think in an unconsciously narrow context that fails to consider other potentially conflicting views of truth. Then I imagine in haste and in error that there's only one truth, which I happen to know.

Truth in some cases can really be a matter of choice. Consider determining the centre of the universe, which was the old debate that brought Galileo to grief with the Roman Catholic Church.

I find it instructive that the Church had no problem with Copernicus' ideas so long as they were presented merely as a way of simplifying calculations. But when these ideas taken up by Galileo were seen as a challenge to the church's version of truth, then the heavy suppression was on.

Mathematicians commonly position coordinate systems for convenience but that doesn't preclude translations from one coordinate system to another, centered as one pleases. It comes down to user-choice, and so for today I choose my universe to be centered here as the medieval church did, with my family and my world, and I welcome you to make any choice you please as a simple matter of faith, or to suit whatever purpose you may have.

There is often no real requirement for my truth to be the same as

yours. And if we don't need to simplify our calculations, it helps!

The most convincing truth to most people is likely their own perceptions. But perceptions are very tricky, which is why a studied approach is often to be preferred.

Our eyes take in much more detail than gets seen in images we perceive. The information from the receptors in the retina is distilled in stages. What I'm left with is just an impression of what I'm seeing. Similarly you don't have a tape recorder in your minds recording me. Instead perhaps you'll remember what you think I mean if it makes any sense to you. And your memory of what I specifically say may be limited to phrases which seem to support what you think I mean.

We all need to distill things as best we can because there are limits as to how much we can take in. We all use tricks in distilling that rely on our previous personal and unique experience. Leaving things out isn't careless or dishonest. It's what we are built to do.

Not only are external matters uncertain, but even how accurately we perceive ourselves.

One of the most instructive periods of my life came during the worst of times. Over an extended period of difficulty I developed a pretty negative notion of myself, and came to have a very negative theory about my motives for doing certain good acts. I was later much relieved when I found myself continuing to do this particular good thing after there was no longer any possible ulterior motive.

I was given a rare and utterly convincing proof that I was unable to assess my own motives.

This was just one of a number of incidents in my life where I have come to see self perception as unreliable.

So I ask how much more faulty can my perception of others be?

A Way of Choosing Truth

So if truth involves different possibilities, how might we choose?

I like to choose to believe something because it is useful to do so....useful for ourselves and society as a whole, while at the same time strenuously avoiding personal dishonesty.

The beauty of this approach is that it also suggests a basis for building my faith. I add what helps, and take out or revise anything that is working negatively. But how can I add something if I don't believe it?

Consciously constructing a faith for which there is no perceived factual basis has in millions of instances been of immense value to society.

Addiction recovery is perhaps the most spectacular example of this. Addicts are encouraged to "act as if..." until they "come to believe..." in a mechanism which allows them to recover. This takes work every day. Ingraining new beliefs is vitally assisted by others who support those efforts.

The first of the Unitarian Universalist Principles² is instructive to consider. Some seriously doubt the principle that every person has

² **Footnotes are not read aloud.**

The Unitarian Universalist Principles are:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

inherent worth and dignity. But that misses the point that psychologists generally agree that we get better results when we make positive assumptions. So why not work to make this principle a part of your ingrained beliefs?

Perhaps that would call into question the doctrine of original sin as a useful point of faith. Isn't it a lot more respectful to question a point of faith on its usefulness than to suggest it is ridiculous because you don't accept its factual basis?

To insist everyone's faith be confined to only include ideas which have been factually demonstrated is drastically limiting and possibly self deception. How can my opinions be more solidly grounded in logic than mathematics which realizes unproven assumptions have to be its starting point?

Let us therefore feel appropriate humility in the face of our logical limits, and respect the insight of people who sense that their lives are an act of faith.

Spirituality

One of the key purposes of my religion is to build a better spirituality. I see a strong link between my need for spiritual growth and my need for emotional growth. Simply put, I believe spirituality implies having an appropriate emotional response to everything in life.

We can suppress and manage emotions but we can't *directly* control how we immediately feel. But if we develop the right spirituality then I believe we can respond from the start in a more emotionally appropriate way to everything.

Spirituality for me relates to things such as:

- Serenity – because I have to be at peace with myself if I'm to be at peace with the world,

- Humility – because any contribution by any of us individually is utterly trivial compared to what we vastly gain from being part of the universal community,
- Gentleness – because the world is a rough place with most of us well established as our own most severe (if sometimes silent) critics,
- Gratitude – because we all have much for which to be grateful, and being grateful is so much better for everyone than feeling resentment or jealousy,
- Sharing – because it is vital we give of ourselves what we reasonably can to benefit the universal community and its character. And toward others we need to feel
- Forgiveness – because without forgiveness there can be no serenity.

These are things I'm trying to work toward. They are not things I can simply gain from hard work. It is better to consider any progress to come as a gift.

I've thought about how to include "kindly assertiveness" in my spirituality, but I feel uncertain. It implies a loss of serenity both to include assertiveness and to leave it out. Some guidance is needed on when to call for it and how to limit it. I struggle with that.

I believe that seeking a deeper understanding is helpful in achieving all aspects of spirituality. I can think of someone from my early life that was a problem for me. Now understanding things better, I have sympathy for the suffering behind the behaviors I used to resent, and from that I gained the ability to assert myself in a good humored way with that person. That is spiritual growth.

And now whenever I sense problems within myself, I know I can help myself by addressing these problems through daily spiritual practice.

I have a prayer and meditation that I've worked on for about 7

years. It has gone through many changes as I have adapted it to help with my shortcomings, and to incorporate wisdom from different sources. I continue to adapt it as my needs evolve. My prayer asks that I deal well with specific weaknesses in my thinking and the meditation attempts to reinforce selected positive perceptions such that they evolve toward belief.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I feel I have a way of looking at religion so all of us are viewed respectfully within a common conceptual framework including those who would say they have no faith.

If I'm ever to differ with anyone over matters of faith, let it only be from the standpoint of what is most helpful to them, and to society as a whole.

But it is better for me to always focus more on improving my own faith than critiquing someone else's.

I think an important function of the church is to help people improve themselves, and for me the process of reviewing my thinking for this presentation has been helpful, for which I thank you.