

UU Sermon for Oct 28th, 2007: Faith and Reason, by Dawn Hutchinson

The question I want to talk about today is this: are faith and reason mutually exclusive? In other words, can it be reasonable to have faith? I just hate speakers that leave you hanging until the end, so I'll just come right out and say that my answer to this question is yes—it can be logical and reasonable to have faith. By the way, I think right here I should define what I mean when I use the word faith: “a firm belief in something for which there is no proof.” What I'd like to do is to let you know how I've come to the conclusion that faith is reasonable in my own religious beliefs.

I was brought up in a conservative, Protestant Christian household. My father was a chapel manager for the Air Force and my mother was the Christian education director wherever my father was stationed. Military chapels try their best to serve the religious needs of military personnel, so I was exposed to many religious beliefs at an early age. We had clergy from several different religions over for dinner on a regular basis, I hung out in the offices of said clergy members, and I attended services of other faiths with my parents' blessing. My parents were brought up as Presbyterians, though because of the military background, I was raised as a general Protestant Christian.

Although my parents are both fairly conservative, they taught me to think for myself. (One might think, knowing how liberally religious I turned out, that they live to regret this decision, but they stand by it.) Throughout my childhood and teen years, I asked a lot of (for my parents, potentially disturbing) questions about our religion. The first question I remember asking, was: “If Christianity is the only way that people can go to heaven in the afterlife, does this mean that people of other religions are going to hell?” When my parents answered “yes,” of course I had to ask about the Rabbis and Imams

that I had met over the years. My parents answered that God gives everybody a chance for salvation. I have to admit that I was not satisfied with this answer.

Next, I remember asking about the theory of evolution that I was learning in school. I asked my mom if it wasn't possible that evolution was a process that God put into place at creation. Surprisingly, perhaps, my mother didn't have any problem with this possibility. Though for years, I never understood why this issue polarized Creationists and Scientists. When I asked if God could be a woman, my mother said, "sure, because really God doesn't have a gender, so if it helps you to think of God as mother, that is your choice." (My father, on the other hand, was deeply offended by this idea.) Other questions, like whether it mattered that Jesus was divine, or whether Jesus really intended to start a religion still make my parents concerned for the state of my soul.

When I left home for college, my religious beliefs were drastically different from my parents. I don't want you to think, though, that my questions meant that I lacked faith. Instead, I meant to find the answers to my religious questions. I did question Christian doctrine, though I felt that the teachings of Jesus, apart from the doctrine, made a lot of sense to me. Some time soon after college, I became a Christian education director of a church for a year, based more on my experience as my mom's daughter than any actual job experience. However, the job left me feeling like a fraud. How could I teach children a doctrine I did not myself believe?

What perhaps bothered me more about religions at this point in my life was the seeming discrepancy between religious people's beliefs and their actions. It seemed to me that if one were a Christian, for instance, one should love everybody for who they were.

In my experience, this was not the case. I began feeling like religious people were hypocrites and I became somewhat bitter about religion.

One night, a co-worker asked if I would go with her to a UU church for a “Cakes for the Queen of Heaven” class. I ended up staying for the full 8 week course and the next one, though my friend left after two classes. These classes allowed me to ask questions about my beliefs and ultimately led me to graduate school. This is where I found myself thinking through the reasoning behind my own beliefs.

I was at this place in my life, working as a historical technician for a cultural resource management firm in St Petersburg, Florida, when I had an experience that changed how I thought about faith and reason. A historical technician, by the way, just means that I did stuff no one else really wanted to do. I was the librarian, the technical editor, a graphics artist, and a field technician. At any rate, knowing that my particular interests ran toward churches and cemeteries, my supervisor sent me to interview an aging minister of a small Pentecostal church between Tampa and Plant City. The company was preparing a national register form for the church because it was entirely unique and we wanted to make sure it remained protected from a potential road project that threatened to encroach upon its property. This church was a small, one room building like many rural churches in Florida, but it was unique in two respects: it had an unusual folk art façade and walkway and it had been started by a female preacher in the 1930s. I was sent to interview said preacher about the unique building and her contributions to the small community.

I asked the usual questions: how did the church come to have such unusual architectural features? How did she come to found the church? And so on. But, being a

Pentecostal preacher, the woman laid her hand on mine, and said that to understand anything about her church, I had to hear her conversion story. Mentally, my eyes rolled, but I controlled myself and politely allowed her to speak. She told me that at a young age, she had been sick with what was probably scarlet fever. One day, lying on the couch in a terrible fever, she remembered seeing an angel standing beside her, beckoning her to stand up and follow him. She did, and remembered that they walked up invisible stairs to heaven. He walked with her around the streets of heaven, showing her various sights, and explaining to her that she must fight to live because God had important plans for her life. According to the angel, God wanted her to start a church and be a beacon for her small community, bringing souls to the lord.

During her story, as you might imagine, I was skeptical, to say the least. My thinking was that she had been dreaming during her fever or that her fever had caused her to become delusional. Either way, though, I respected this woman. She remained true to her convictions. Her father gave her the land to build her church; the community donated all the supplies and volunteers to build her church. One day, a drifter came through town, asking if anyone needed a handyman. She allowed him to stay in her home which was on the church's property. During the few months that he stayed with her, he had a conversion experience and as a result, sculpted the unusual architectural features for the church. He smeared concrete on the front of the church and embedded seashells into every spare inch before it dried. Then, he created a Spanish tile walkway from the parking lot to the church door, breaking each tile and creating a beautiful pattern. This was his way of expressing gratitude for the minister's kindness and his newfound faith in

God. This Pentecostal preacher lived her life in service to God based on a dream she had as a child.

Certainly I could have dismissed this woman's story entirely. But something stuck with me and still does, about her story. It affects the way that I study religions to this day. Whether or not I believe that she had a vision, for me, is irrelevant. Her vision spurred her to a life of service to others. Her revelation was evidence for her that not only did God exist, but that He had a plan for her life. Because of her, when I research a new religion, I ask myself: how does this religion give meaning for this person/these persons' lives?

There are many ways that I could talk about the relationship between faith and reason, but I think this is a good starting point. Through my years in academia, I have learned that religions and science ask similar questions. Both use logic and reason, but rely on different evidence to reach their conclusions. This has particularly struck me this semester, since I'm teaching a class on Philosophy of Religion. We are studying how different people in different cultures have answered big questions like: Is there an ultimate reality? Can we prove ultimate reality exists? Why do evil and suffering occur? What I have noticed is that scientists and religious folks use the same process to reach their conclusions. However, religious folks allow revelations and personal religious experiences to support their conclusions, while scientists claim that such experiences do not offer sufficient evidence to support belief in an ultimate reality.

Let me offer a couple of examples. In the following example, the argument is between theists and atheists. Interestingly, both sides point to nature to support their conclusions about the origin of the universe. For instance, theists claim that we can know

there is a God because something must have created the world; there must be an original source. They look at the complexity of nature and claim that this could not be a random act, as the Big Bang Theory suggests. St. Thomas Aquinas believed that there were five ways to prove that God exists. Each of these pieces of evidence was drawn from nature. Summarized, Aquinas suggests that because everything in nature is caused by something else and is dependent on something else, there must be a first cause on which everything else depends. Also, looking at the complexity of creation, he determined that something intelligent must direct everything else.

An interesting objection to Aquinas' theist position was posed by a Buddhist scholar named Dharmasiri. He notes that the main problem with the theist position is that this first cause seems to break all natural laws. For instance, if everything must have a first cause, what created the first cause? Likewise, if everything depends on something else, on what does the deity depend? Simply stating that the laws of nature do not apply to the deity, in Dharmasiri's opinion, does not prove its existence. Dharmasiri supported the Buddhist position that there is no first cause. Nature occurs in cycles, thus there are never ending cycles both in the past and the future. Of course, this also poses a concept difficult to grasp—how do the cycles get started?

My purpose in sharing these views is to point out that both sides of this debate use the same principles of logic. Schools of logic generally use about five steps: They first offer a proposition, for instance, "There is a fire on that hill." Second, they offer a reason: "because there is smoke on that hill." Third, they offer an example that relates to this case: "in kitchens, when one sees a fire, one generally sees smoke." Fourth, they offer an application: "wherever there is smoke there is fire." And the conclusion pulls all the steps

together: “Therefore, there is a fire on that hill.” Logic requires evidence that properly supports a particular conclusion. Both Science and Religions use this process. The difference, as I see it, is the type of admissible evidence for each.

Now, clearly I am not a scientist, however, I want to suggest that science, the champion of logic, also requires a certain amount of faith. The faith involved in science includes the faith in the scientific process, the faith that the scientific *interpretation* of evidence is logical; and the faith that science can eventually answer the questions that are currently unexplained.

Finally, I want to share one last observation that has been integral in persuading me that it is reasonable to have faith. In my studies as a teach of world religions, it has really struck me that some form of religious faith occurs in every culture. Why? There are three reasons that scholars have proposed: materialistic, functional and the faith perspective. The materialistic perspective says that there is no such thing as a spiritual realm; there is only this material world. The reason there are religions in every culture is because there are always people in power who wish to manipulate others, and religion is a convenient way to do this. The functional perspective says that religion plays an important role in society. It brings people of common beliefs together, it explains the big questions of life, and it offers moral guides for groups of people. The faith perspective says that there really is an ultimate reality that exists. People of different cultures have found different ways of expressing what it is.

For me, it is reasonable to believe that there exists some ultimate reality. I prefer the faith explanation, that there must be something ultimate that exists that all cultures are trying to understand in their own way. Seeing the similarities in religious beliefs and

religious experiences across cultures has led me to the conclusions that something must transcend the different cultural explanations of God. I could just as reasonably conclude (ala the functional perspective) that people in all cultures need some way to understand the unexplainable. While I think this is also true, I think it fails to take into consideration the human yearning for transcendence beyond this world. Also, unlike Freud, I don't think that such mass phenomena points toward mass delusion.

I started this talk with my parents, and I want to end there too. While I have certainly strayed far from my parents' faith, I have maintained in my own mind, that there exists some form of ultimate reality. This may be because of my education, but I think it is also because I admire my own family's dedication to their faith. My mother has become a United Methodist minister; in fact, she and my brother were ordained on the same day. My brother has a church in North Carolina and my mom has one in Florida. They live their faith every day. They are not hypocrites. I see them live out their principles in their day-to-day lives with a certainty that sometimes leaves me envious. Perhaps for this reason, and those I've already stated, it seems reasonable for me to have a religious faith.