

PERSPECTIVES ON THE PATH. Our decisions are ours alone.

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June 1, 2003

Bulletin Quote: We say, pronounce, sentence, and declare that you, Galileo, by the reason of the matters which have been detailed in the trial and which you have confessed already, have rendered yourself in the judgment of this Holy Office vehemently suspected of heresy, namely of having held and believed the doctrine which is false and contrary to the Sacred and Divine Scriptures, that the Sun is the center of the world and does not move from east to west and that the Earth moves and is not the center of the world; and that one may hold and defend as probable an opinion after it has been declared and defined contrary to Holy Scripture. Consequently, you have incurred all the censures and penalties enjoined and promulgated by the sacred Canons and all particular and general laws against such delinquents. We are willing to absolve you from them provided that first, with a sincere heart and unfeigned faith, in our presence you abjure, cursed and detest the said errors and heresies, and every other error and heresy contrary to the Catholic and Apostolic Church in the manner and form we will prescribe to you.

Wednesday, June 22, 1633

The Cardinal Inquisitors to Galileo

Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva

Center of Rome

OPENING WORDS:

There is a certainty that pervades our world today about many things. That's normal. Humankind seems to have always been certain about this and that – some of those certainties have been fleeting – some have had traction and stick with us to today. One person's certainty may be another person's myth. Some mock the theology of others, and if you're so inclined, remember it works both ways. God Tracks, or the lack thereof, are in the eyes of the believer. Assume existence, and I will give you challenges to that certainty. Assume absence, and I will challenge you to prove that negative. Certainties of all sorts may be transient. Are we facing an Ice Age or a hot spell – and who's really to blame? As we UU's reach out to all religions for perspective, let's take a minute and read from the documents of the Catholic faith in your bulletin and reflect on our own certainties.

BEGIN: In my view, religion plays two primary roles in the life of humankind. One is both historic and futuristic describing from where we came, how things are (as in the case of Galileo) and where we are going. The second is present focused on how we live our day-to-day lives – our Journey so to speak.

I am satisfied with a sort of Process Theology for the historic / futuristic perspective. Some of you may recall Process Theology from my talk of a month or so ago. The degree of mystical involvement in the process is still up for grabs. But I'll keep that door open just a crack.

A definition of fundamentalism was given in UU World awhile back as "those who are certain". I guess if I closed that door on the possibility of mystic involvement in the process of life that would make me a fundamentalist atheist. And that's just not me. History shows science continues to find new certainties that make old certainties obsolete. Thus my door stays open just a crack.

But certain or not, fundamentalist or not, what do you do with this side of religion, the side that explains history, the physical world, and the future? Makes for fun debates. Makes for nasty wars. But isn't it really a "so what?" if the other guy has a different perspective on the sunlight coming into his room of the cathedral than you do of the sunlight coming into your room? If you could both shinny up the high walls and stick your heads outside, you may both see the light comes from the same sun. Would it still be so important then if you called it Jesus, Yahwah, Allah, Nature, or Evolution?

So let's talk about the present focused role of religion. The Journey. The Path. Some of these words are my own and some of them have been borrowed from a series of presentations at the Paul Carus Symposiums summarized in "Modern Trends in World Religions" in our library. (As you may have noticed, I like to include these caveats in my talks lest you think I write all these words myself. If you start to throw tomatoes, I can always say I was just quoting so and so and slink out the back door. If you're pleased, I can fantasize that you found meaning in my words and those I quoted or plagiarized were merely fillers.)

Back to the Journey, the Path. We say UU-ism is a perspective based on reason. Although that statement may be open to challenge in the case of some of our UU subsets (that's the understatement of the day), we can generally accept that reason is the basis for much of our exploration. Reason enthroned provides little space for vision. Reason despised leaves us without foundation. Reason may be best employed in discerning the Path than in seeking answers to questions that can only be answered at the end of the Path – death, what comes next. There is a rational position steering us clear of various doctrines and religious arguments that, for the most part, seem merely speculative. Maybe we should advise avoidance of such entanglements. We could argue that they are unprofitable, that they distract attention from the Path.

We all go our own way, gaining our own experience. Some of us may be hesitant to even be interested in doctrines and teachings that seem to be speculative, beyond the bounds of present possibility. The Hindu parable that depicts a number of blind men, each in touch with some part of the elephant, results in each giving a different account of what he encounters. Where others conclude each gives a different interpretation of his version of the same reality, each of them true and related to different aspects, we might observe that all the spokesmen are indeed blind.

The Buddhist responded to this concern about the blind by calling the two-year-long Sixth Great Buddhist Council in Rangoon in the middle of the last century. What special reason did the Buddhists have for convening A Great Council in the 2500th year of the Buddhist era? The Buddhists said they must do something before the Christian nations blow up the world. The Buddhists have hopes that Western thought and practice may at least be modified by some acceptance of Buddhist insights. Toynbee writes: “Religion could cease to be an accident of birth and become a matter of choice,” each person selecting from the higher religions what he or she finds valuable and true. What a range of values and truths we all have.

Focusing once again on the Path, some say the test of any statement or of any practice is its relevance to the kind of discipline, intellectual or moral, which enlightens the Path. And one of the first tasks is to form a true estimate of the world around us. We should understand Nature and Human Nature. We must observe our own intellectual processes. We should learn to listen and think analytically about the interrelation of these facts and perceptions. It pays to be interested in a multiplicity of disciplines to help with our own premises or aspects of nature and life.

The religions of the Far East have hypothesized Western Science developments may be associated with a drift toward materialism, which they associate with greed, one of the “roots” of human ill. Some share a version of the story of the village headman in the Shah States who refused to encourage his people to work in the silver mines, saying that while they might earn more that they would only mean that they would want more. That village headman might have been more foreseeing than others. How much is enough? Have you decided? Do you spend enough time enjoying what you have? Is your joy what you have or who you are with?

One of the big contributions of Western Science is the resultant outlook, if not the results. In Christianity, the impact of this outlook has resulted in Biblical criticism, historical skepticism, and other studies. That outlook is valuable to examine the whys and wherefores of our path and, where we find room for improvement, the confidence and courage to adjust.

It might be observed that certain ethical movements in our modern world, especially in the realm of social ethics, weigh in to our path decisions. Moral discipline is certainly no less important than mental discipline. It is noteworthy that some Far East religions have noted especially the Christian medical missions and have responded with social service activities after the pattern of those now familiar in the West. While Buddhists of the early 1900's believed in benevolence towards all, good and bad, they, shall we say, were NOT energetic in working for their welfare. Reason has led to a redefinition where some scholars had interpreted the meaning of Metta (define) as generous mindedness, kind heartedness, or the sending out of thoughts of loving care to others. Internalizing generous thoughts doesn't feed the hungry child. A more appropriate perspective is not the mere feeling but a principle; it is the DOING of charitable actions. Our paths can be Old Buddhist or more Christian as we define our moral discipline.

"The interdependence of all things" are words often used by UU's to emphasize how we are part of the whole. It leads us to a recognition that our actions or inactions have impact outside ourselves. It may be unsettling to reflect on chaos theory where the flitting of a butterfly's wing in China influences the weather in White Stone. However, as we proceed down our respective paths, we know we make more waves than the wings of a butterfly.

Allow me to illustrate an aspect of chaos theory, the butterfly in China stuff, by creating a little chaos of our own. This story starts with a UU member who had resolved that his path would include an exceptionally polite and personal persona to all his casual encounters with others. As a result one day, he thanked the check-out clerk in the super market most graciously using her name which he had noted from her nametag. The clerk was relatively new at her job, had lost her previous higher paying job due to absences because of the needs of her troubled 12-year-old son, all compounded by her own drinking problem. She was seriously depressed. The pleasant words and personal recognition was the first she had heard on what was headed toward being just another lousy day. The courteous UU member was rewarded with a broad smile. When the clerk arrived home that evening, she restrained her usual bark at her soon-to-be teenager and spontaneously decided to attend her AA meeting that evening, which she had previously intended to cut. At that AA meeting, she met ... -- would you please continue this story Cliff -- Susan, please take it from there -- Shirley, what happened next?

Ah, chaos. Where it is common to overestimate our individual importance in some ways, we may tend to underestimate our impact in more subtle ways. Oh, that butterfly in China – he intended to flutter his wings. What intentions do you have along your path?

Professor Kenneth Morgan quoted of Maha Thera U Thittla, “The whole human family is so closely knit together that each unit is dependent upon other units for its growth and development. Life is a mighty wheel of perpetual motion... Within it [are] numberless smaller wheels, corresponding to the lives of individuals... To bring out the goodness in us, each one of us has to try to reproduce in his own wheel of life that pattern which is in harmony with the pattern of the universal wheel... The ideal that is placed before us is that of mutual service and practical brotherhood. To do good for the welfare of humanity is our holiest work.” Hmm-m-m-m. A bit of Process Theology there.

Whereas it is fun to hunt God Tracks among the burning bushes and explore the tree of evolution to see if it is closer to a bush of zillions of extinct species than an ark full of zoo animals waiting for the rain to stop, these issues may have less relevance as we choose and continually modify our path on our Journey.

We may wish to hone our skills of analysis, our devotion to logic and reason, to privately consider our own path as it leads off into the time distance. Our individual path is our choice. No one can answer the question of how much is enough for us. No one can answer for us if we spend enough time doing our most valued activities. No one can make the moral decisions of integrity, devotion, loyalty, and caring for others -- except ourselves. And each of our paths is ours alone. WHAT could possibly be more important to think about?