

## “The Sin of Certainty”

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“Certainty is so often overrated.” “Yes, yes, and yes,” I nodded in agreement with Julia Baird, an Australian writer and television personality, in her op-ed piece for a recent issue of *The New York Times*.

“This is especially the case when it comes to faith, or other imponderables,” she continued. My mind strayed to the arena of faith and “other imponderables.” I grew up Presbyterian, reciting the Apostles’ Creed without question. “Of course, this is what I believe,” would have been redundant for me to think or say. If you asked, I could probably recite it this morning. Don’t worry; I won’t. It wasn’t until midpoint in a long and winding journey spiritually, psychologically, educationally, and culturally that I questioned it to the point of becoming Unitarian Universalist. This doesn’t mean I’ve thrown the baby Jesus out with the bathwater. But my turn into Unitarian Universalism was not a change of direction that called me to give up every speck of my prior religious identity. This community of faith and doubt has allowed me to expand my understanding of and appreciation for Christianity with all its riches and flaws and for that matter, my experience of Judaism and Islam and humanism and paganism and other filters for digesting matters intimate and ultimate.

Curious George is one of my favorite figures in the literature for children of all ages, and we’re all simply aging children. It’s hard not to claim him as intrinsically Unitarian Universalist, but that would be assuming ours is the “one true faith of curiosity,” and that puts us at the outer edges of a shaky limb. Curious George is a seeker, and seekers get into trouble because they’re troubled enough to act on their curiosity. “What? Where? Who? Why? What if?” How can these queries NOT get us into trouble of the richest sort?

Consider an episode from Yann Martel’s novel, *Life of Pi*. Piscine Matel, the birth name of the character through whose lens the story is told, changed his name early on to Pi, a term that leapt off the blackboard of a math class as an obvious solution to the relentless teasing from his peers, given their readiness to distort Piscine into...you can guess.

The son of an esteemed zookeeper in the Indian village of Pondicherry, Pi was expected to conform to the secular notions of both his parents. He was a curious child—most specifically, a religiously curious child. What about God? Pi went exploring. Much like our own youngsters do during their Coming of Age journey, he visited a number of houses of worship; but he went further. Pi became friends with the local priest, the local imam, and the local pandit. He became a practicing Christian, a practicing Muslim, and a practicing Hindu.

His parents had no knowledge of their son’s excursions, until...one Sunday afternoon they set off for a seaside stroll with Pi and their younger son, Ravi. “Uh-oh,” thought Pi. Who should be approaching but the trio that Pi called “the three wise men.”?

“My parents looked puzzled to have their way gently blocked by three broadly smiling religious strangers.... My Father saw himself as part of the New India—rich, modern and as secular as ice cream... Mother was mum, bored and neutral on the subject...”

As for Ravi, he was a baby and slept. After the initial greetings, an awkward silence fell on this unlikely gathering.

The priest broke an awkward silence: “Piscine is a good Christian boy. I hope to see him join our choir soon.”

The imam broke in, “You must be mistaken. He’s a good Muslim boy. He comes without fail to Friday prayer, and his knowledge of the Holy Qur’an is coming along nicely.”

“Nonsense!” cried the pandit. ‘Piscine was born a Hindu, lives a Hindu and will die a Hindu!’

Havoc ensued as each of the more or less wise men sought to derail the credibility of the other two:

From the imam: “Hindus and Christians are idolaters. They have many gods.”

“And Muslims have many wives,’ responded the pandit.

It was the priest’s turn: “Piscine, there is salvation only in Jesus.”

Claims and put-downs flew back and forth in the seaside air.

‘Father raised his hands. ‘Gentlemen, gentlemen, please!’ he interjected. ‘I would like to remind you there is freedom of practice in this country.’

Three apoplectic faces turned to him.

“Yes! Practice—singular!’ the wise men screamed in unison.”

... The pandit spoke first. ‘Mr. Patel, Piscine’s piety is admirable. In these troubled times it’s good to see a boy so keen on God. We all agree on that.’ The imam and the priest nodded. ‘But he can’t be a Hindu, a Christian *and* a Muslim. It’s impossible. He must choose...’

“Hmmm, Piscine?’ Mother nudged me. ‘How do you feel about the question?’

‘Bapu Gandhi said, ‘All religions are true.’ I just want to love God,’ I blurted out, and looked down, red in the face.

My embarrassment was contagious. No one said anything. It happened that we were not far from the statue of Gandhi on the esplanade. Stick in hand, an impish smile on his lips, a twinkle in his eyes the Mathatma walked...”

“Father looked at me for a second, as if to speak, then thought better, said, ‘Ice cream, anyone?’”

How rarely do divided loyalties, clashing theologies, and sparring ideologies find common ground in ice cream on the seashore?

How commonly such dynamics escalate through the channels of religious and political and social ideologies that claim God or righteousness or truth in the possessive? And how readily do such dynamics become “us against them?” “God is on my side, so he (and it’s usually a he) isn’t on yours.” “I’m right; you’re wrong.” “I speak the truth; you don’t.” Certainty in its mildest forms reaps alienation. Certainty in its zealous forms reaps suppression. Certainty in its fanatical forms reaps systemic oppression.

Certainty’s undertow is fear.

So what about sin? Omigod, so to speak, the notion of sin is such a lightning rod for the sensibilities of religious liberals, of spiritual progressives, and of any among us who consider ourselves beyond accountability to the rest of life. Maybe it’s because sin is so mired in the quicksand of religions that feed on fear. Like standing shame-faced before a parent with a stern look on their face, knowing we’re about to reap punishment—not simply discipline, but punishment—and our heart pounds with fear.

Sin can also mean simply “offense.” But what or whom are we offending? As for original sin, I commonly say that I don’t believe in original sin because there’s nothing about sin that could possibly be original. This must mean I have some notion of sin. I’m not alone in the company of Unitarian Universalists who talk about it.

Bill Schulz, President of our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, and Executive Director of Amnesty International USA for a dozen years, takes issue with “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” one of our Unitarian Universalist principles that we often spout almost creed-like.

“...is the worth and dignity of every person inherent?” he asks. “No, inherency is a political construct—perhaps a very useful myth but a myth nonetheless—designed to cover up the fact that we are all are sinners and that we are not always certain which sins (and hence which sinners) are worse than others....” He continues by asking how “we decide that something is a sin? How do we know that torture is wrong? What is the basis for human rights?”

Bill’s framework for response is his own experience and theology as a Unitarian Universalist minister. The significance of religious community complements the individual authority of conscience as a baseline for understanding sin, for knowing what is wrong, and for identifying human rights.

In a tradition that not only permits but is grounded in doctrinal freedom, there is ample room for varying perspectives on these matters. The common ground is what my friend and Unitarian Universalist theologian and scholar Thandeka calls “love beyond belief.”

Thandeka observes that “Unitarian Universalists have a Theology of Personal Experience” made up of three elements:

- “1) An uplifting individual change of heart;
- 2) Doctrinal freedom; and
- 3) A religious community’s emotional ethos of caring and compassion.”

“These elements,” she explains, “give us a constructive theology useful when explaining to ourselves and to others why we ‘almost universally’ make personal experience foundational to our liberal faith tradition: We love beyond belief.”

Unitarian Universalist theology is a mosaic of perspectives and beliefs. The adjectives with which we identify ourselves go on and on—Buddhist, Humanist, pagan, atheist, humanist, Christian, Jewish, none of the above. The common ground is relational. We are bound in covenant grounded in love without fear. How many names do we have for the Holy—Spirit of Love, Mystery of Being, the Ineffable, God, Goddess, Spirit of Life. Certainty violates the expansiveness of our theology. That doesn’t mean we stand for nothing. Nor does it mean we stand for everything. We most definitely do not stand for fear or for the religious or social or political conditions that fuel fear. My late friend and mentor and Unitarian Universalist writer and scholar Forrest Church said again and again, “The opposite of love is not hate; it’s fear.”

Certainty gone awry breeds fear. Love dissolves fear.

Op-ed writer Julia Baird brings us deeper into the spiral:

“Certainty is so often overrated. This is especially the case when it comes to faith, or other imponderables...

If we don’t accept both the commonality and importance of doubt, we don’t allow for the possibility of mistakes or misjudgments. While certainty frequently calcifies into rigidity, intolerance and self-righteousness, doubt can deepen, clarify and explain. This is, of course, a subject far broader than belief in God.”

It expands readily to science. Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, as presented by Randy to our youngsters and the rest of us embodies what we might call “the living tradition of science. As is the case with so-called spiritual revelation, scientific discovery is not sealed.

Certainty in terms religious or scientific is an offense of dogma against the holy, the Spirit of Life, the wonder of birth, the mystery of death, and the interconnected web of life in which we are woven.

The sin of certainty is thankfully soluble in the grace of amazing ambiguity, of curiosity that won’t let go, of compassion that becomes conscience, and of love beyond belief.

So may it be, and Amen.

**Sources:**

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